

Slow tourism as a driver for tourism development: the case of Italian walking routes

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Extended abstract

In recent years, and particularly after the 2020 pandemic, the world of tourism has undergone important changes and, consequently, new forms of tourism emerged as an alternative paradigm to “mass tourism” (Klarin et al., 2023; Manthiou et al., 2022; Serdane et al., 2020; Moira et al., 2017; Oh et al., 2016). Eco-tourism, green tourism, and heritage tourism are just some examples of these new forms, which are increasingly attracting the attention of scholars, but also of tourist and tourism providers themselves.

Among these different forms, this paper specifically focuses on “slow tourism” and, especially, on the walking routes, in Italy. In fact, this specific kind of slow tourism is particularly relevant in Italy, where the Cultural Ministry had proclaimed the 2016 as “Year of the Cammini” intending to enhance the rich heritage composed of the network of Cammini – historical, naturalistic, cultural and religious – that, from north to south, cross the country representing a slice, perhaps little known but fundamental in the Italian slow tourism offer.

The slow tourism idea has its antecedent in the slow food movement (Le Busque et al., 2022), with which it shares the relevance of slowness as a way to escape from the frenzy of daily life in the modern world (Klarin et al., 2023; Manthiou et al., 2022; Serdane et al., 2020; Howard, 2012). In this sense, slow tourism can be conceived as the product of the current fast and frenetic modern society, characterized by speed, lack of time, fast communication through ICT technologies, limited human relations and disconnection from the surrounding environment (Klarin et al., 2023; Moira et al., 2017; Howard, 2012). In this context, slow tourism gives the possibility to “take a rest” from the chaotic daily routine and reconnect with people and with the environment (Manthiou et al., 2022; Oh et al., 2016). Not surprisingly, Dickinson et al., (2010) identify two key characteristics of slow tourism: “doing things with the right speed”, i.e. changing how time is managed and “connecting with the place”, i.e. favoring a different connecting and approach with surroundings, including the local communities, culture and the environment.

As slow tourism is becoming a growing paradigm of alternative tourism, studies on this topic are also growing (for a recent review, see Klarin et al., 2023). In 2017, Moira and colleagues pointed out four approaches to slow tourism that can be recognized in the extant literature: i) the concept and value of time during the trip; ii) activities at the destination; iii) the meaning of the journey for travelers and iv) the environmental awareness. Very recently, Klarin et al. 2023, in their systematic literature review, identified four main research areas: *i)* “slow travel and sustainable development” focused on low-carbon travel and the environmental impact of travel, *ii)* “slow tourism and social aspect”, dealing with the offering for tourists (e.g. culture, heritage, landscapes); *iii)* “slowness and Cittàslow”, connected with the philosophy of slowness and *iv)* “tourists’ perspectives on slow tourism and travel”, aimed at understanding slow travelers’ behaviors and perceptions.

However, in this growing literature one key aspect of slow travel is still under investigated: the socio-economic impact on destinations where slow tourists pass through. We claim this is a relevant gap to be addressed for two reasons. First, at the more general level, it is widely recognized that tourism is an important driver for socio-economic development destinations places (Alcalá-Ordóñez, 2024; Albaladejo et al., 2023; Ady et al., 2022; Dritsakis, 2012). Second, slow tourists are said to have anti-consumerist practices, preferring, in turn, local arts and crafts, as well as local food and culture (Serdane et al., 2020), generating, in turn, revenues for local businesses and communities.

Starting from this premise, this paper aims to investigate if the Italian walking routes are a driver for the socio-economic development of the destinations where they pass through. In Italy there are a total of 42 Cammini some of which are distributed nationwide (e.g., the “*Sentiero Italia*”), others are interregional (e.g., the “*Via Francigena*”; “*Il Cammino di Sant’Antonio*”; “*La Via della Lana e della Seta*”) and some others pass in different provinces of the same region (e.g., the “*Via Celeste*” and “*Via dei Mori*”). To achieve this research objective a panel data is constructed, using multiple sources: specific data on the Italian “cammini” (geographical routes, year of start, whether it is spiritual or not), ISTAT official data concerning the number of tourist arrivals and accommodation, and GDP at the provincial level. From a methodological perspective, the Tourism-Led Growth Hypothesis (TLGH) (Balanguer and Cantavella-Jordá, 2002) is applied. The TLGH is quite a conventional approach to test the relationship between tourism and economic development but, to the best of our knowledge, this relationship has not been tested in the case of slow tourism. Furthermore, this methodology is particularly suitable for two reasons. First, since the validity of TLGH depends on a set of country-specific characteristics, it fits country-level studies. Second, as suggested by Albaladejo et al. (2023), “*TLGH can be tested more effectively in a panel context because cross-sectional information can improve the power of the test*” (Albaladejo et al., 2023, p. 2).

The results of this study will highlight relevant policy implications, particularly for policy makers to support and strengthen slow tourism through devoted financial backing, both to increase such form of tourism, as well as to support local businesses.

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