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From overtourism and climate change to recessionary pandemics and resilience:

a conceptual discussion on modeling spatial impacts

Abstract:

As an activity strongly relying on mobility and personal interactions, tourism received a strong negative impact from the covid-19 pandemic, with severe implications on local and regional economic performances, with the related social implications. On the other hand, the role of tourism contributing to reinforce the negative consequences of the pandemic is also documented in recent studies. These bi-directional effects have different magnitudes in different locations, thus requiring a comprehensive approach that considers a wide range of factors in order to be quantitatively assessed, both in terms of the past and current negative impacts, and mostly in terms of the potential paths for recovery.

In spite of the limited time passed since the emergence of the pandemic, a large number of studies recently addressed these problems, eventually contributing to support adequate straggles for the resilience of tourism dependent regions. In the case of this activity, it is noteworthy that we could witness a sudden shift from a discussion highly influences by the idea of "over tourism" and the related social and environmental problems on destinations, to a situation of "no tourism", with other type of social and economic impacts.

Although the environmental questions related to climate change or the scarcity of non-renewable resources (like fuel, an especially important input for tourism), the economic recession imposed by the pandemic in many tourism-dependent local economies reinforces the pressure for a recovery of mass tourism, rather than a reorientation of tourism activities for less harmful practices. In this perspective article, I critically assess and systematize the recent contributions on these topics, with the aim of providing relevant insights and inputs for modeling the relations between tourism dynamics, the covid-19 pandemic and the resilience of tourism-dependent regions, in a context where the calls for climate action meet the pressure for urgent economic recovery.

Keywords:

Tourism;
Covid-19
Resilience
Climate Change
Modeling

JEL codes:

R11 Regional Economic Activity: Growth, Development, Environmental Issues, and Changes;
Z32 Tourism and Development

Extended abstract:

Assuming a central role within contemporary creative economies, tourism activities registered a significant growth over the last decades, despite the concerns often raised regarding environmental impacts and sustainability, in particular when observing problems of “overtourism”. Amidst global recommendations for reducing CO2 emissions, international tourism - and related high consumption of fossil fuels, energy, water and other resources - was continuously registering new records every year.

This growth also implied the emergence of new and highly qualified jobs in the tourism sector, regarding the design and management of services and facilities, business and territorial planning, advanced marketing and communication techniques or the integration of digital technologies into different aspects of tourism activities, in particular those related to cultural heritage and creativity. These new forms of economic and labour specialization clearly constitute a path dependent process that must be taken into account.

However, problems and concerns with global impact, like those related to climate change or the recent covid-19 pandemics, clearly question this process of continuous growth. “Overtourism” became a common and fancy word, while setting a new research agenda in tourism studies and other social sciences. On the other hand, Covid-19 would impose sudden transformations, with severe restrictions to mobility implying a new “no-tourism” world - and also a new research agenda, including the study of the relevant impacts of tourism on covid-19.

As an activity strongly relying on mobility and personal interactions, tourism received a strong negative impact from the covid-19 pandemic, with severe implications on local and regional economic performances, with the related social implications. On the other hand, the role of tourism contributing to reinforce the negative consequences of the pandemic is also documented in recent studies. These bi-directional effects have different magnitudes in different locations, thus requiring a comprehensive approach that considers a wide range of factors in order to be quantitatively assessed, both in terms of the past and current negative impacts, and mostly in terms of the potential paths for recovery.

The economic recession and increasing social inequalities observed during the pandemic will certainly change both demand and supply of tourism services, but the claims for a “degrowth” of tourism that takes into account the urgency of climate action were quickly replaced by the claims for the resurgence of mass tourism to boost global and local economies. Although the environmental questions related to climate change or the scarcity of non-renewable resources (like fuel, an especially important input for tourism) are still highly relevant, the economic recession imposed by the pandemic in many tourism-dependent local economies reinforces the pressure for a recovery of mass tourism, rather than a reorientation of tourism activities for less harmful practices.

In spite of the limited time passed since the emergence of the pandemic, a large number of studies recently addressed these problems, eventually contributing to support adequate strategies for the recovery and resilience of tourism dependent regions. In the case of this activity, it is noteworthy that we could witness a sudden shift from a discussion highly influenced by the idea of “over tourism” and the related social and environmental problems on destinations, to a situation of “no tourism”, with other type of social and economic impacts.

In this perspective article, I take into consideration this complex context in order to critically assess and to systematize the recent contributions on these topics, with the aim of providing relevant insights and inputs for modeling the relations between tourism dynamics, the covid-19 pandemic and the resilience of tourism-dependent regions, in a context where the calls for climate action coincide with a strong pressure for urgent economic recovery.