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Cultural tourism development and the impact on local communities: a case study from the South of Italy

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ABSTRACT

Cultural tourism is the idea that a place's cultural perception has enough value to make it a destination for travel. Communities characterized by a high level of cultural development are usually associated with a high level of satisfaction about living conditions and wealth. In this research, we postulate that the creation and development of the cultural attractions of a place to attract tourists also have a positive impact on the life condition of the local community, not only for increased money availability but also for a change of inhabitants' mind-set. Case study methodology has been used to support the hypotheses.

Keywords: Cultural tourism; local communities; culture; tourism.

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INTRODUCTION

The tourism industry is one of the most important economic sectors and also one of the most impactful in today society. It represents 10 % of world GDP (WTTC, 2020), with increasing weight on the total value produced, and employs millions of people worldwide (World Tourism Organization, 2019). The possible impacts on society coming from tourism industry are very diversified and may affect people's lives in more than one aspects, both in positive and negative ways (Diaz-Parra & Jover, 2020; González-Pérez, 2020; Heo, Blal, & Choi, 2019; Sequera & Nofre, 2018; Truong, Nguyen, Trinh, Trinh, & Hens, 2020). Tourism is a broad concept, and there are near-infinite combinations of the composing factors, leading to infinite different combinations of possible consequences, meaning the behaviour of each part of the tourism supply chain may have profound results on the whole community.

Among the existing types of tourism, the cultural tourism is the object of our investigation, since recent literature has highlighted this kind of concept may help in reducing some of the negative downsides and improving the impact on the local community (Brzezińska-Wójcik & Skowronek, 2020; Jeannotte & Duxbury, 2008; Wu, Lin, & Wang, 2020).

The purpose of this research is analyzing cultural tourism benefits on society, intended in terms of living quality as well as economic impact and growth.

Indeed, can cultural tourism improve the life quality of local communities?

The paper continues as follow: in Theoretical background chapter we deepen the concept of cultural tourism, and we state the theory supporting our hypotheses, we then review existing literature about the impacts of tourism and cultural tourism on society. Then we state our methodology, and we report the evidence of our work in the Results chapter. Finally, in the Discussion and conclusion chapter, we express our managerial suggestions, and we list the research limitation.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

As stated in Introduction chapter Tourism industry has a profound impact on society. Among the main possible negative impacts, we recall environment pollution, overcrowded spaces, loss of cultural identity, speculation on the availability of resources. Among the possible positive aspects, we recall economic benefits & better opportunities for the local community, higher circulation of ideas, more considerable attention in how territory is kept (Diaz-Parra & Jover, 2020; González-Pérez, 2020; Heo et al., 2019; Sequera & Nofre, 2018; Truong et al., 2020). Above-listed impacts are dependent on context variables such as public administration actions, characteristics of local communities and geographical location. Above mentioned variables, in fact, determine the kind of tourism attracted by the destination and the characteristics of the supply chain actors involved. Cultural tourism has been indicated by



previous literature as a kind of tourism possibly having a more positive impact than generic tourism (Jeannotte & Duxbury, 2008; Pasaribu, Badaruddin, Santosa, & Purwoko, 2019).

Cultural tourism is not enclosed in a single and straightforward definition, and it is not merely a shade of the definition of tourism. The United Nations World Tourism Organization gives the following description of cultural tourism: “*the movement of persons to cultural attractions in cities in countries other than their normal place of residence, with the intention to gather new information and experiences to satisfy their cultural needs, and all movements of persons to specific cultural attractions, such as heritage sites, artistic and cultural manifestations, arts and drama to cities outside their normal country of residence*” (Greg, 1996).

A more synthetic definition of cultural tourism, given from a marketing perspective, is the one of McKercher and du Cros: “*a form of tourism that relies on a destination’s cultural heritage assets and transforms them into products that can be consumed by tourists*” (Du Cros & McKercher, 2020).

Cultural tourism is strongly linked to a territory, and an area with a powerful cultural identity can be defined as a cultural district. As mentioned in the PhD Thesis by Federica Placenti, a cultural district is a geographical area characterized by the ability to create synergies between businesses and between individuals. The distinctive feature of the cultural district is that the foundation of economic value is culture (Placenti, 2011).

We interpret the results of the study through the lens of Creative economy theory. Two components make the traditional economic model of cultural production and distribution: funded culture and commercial culture; Creative economy theory states that there is a third component, social production, related with both the previous components: “*Creative production now navigates three territories, not two. Publicly funded culture and online social spaces both feed commercial activity. Both social production and funded culture, which themselves overlap, are experimental spaces and testing grounds. ... One effect of this change from a public/commercial model to an integrated public/commercial/social model has been to alter working practices, career paths and business strategies for individuals and organizations*” (Holden, 2007). So the theory highlights the role and the evolution of the contribution to the creative economy coming from society. One of the problems in studying the contribution to the cultural economy coming from an independent individual is how to measure the value produced (Shorthose, 2004). In our qualitative research, we aim at capturing the value created by an individual’s actions in the context of the cultural economy, with a focus on cultural tourism.

Past literature has already extensively analyzed the relationship between the impact of tourism on destination communities, but there is more uncertainty

regarding the relationship between cultural tourism and local communities.

Impact of tourism on society

Tourism has both positive and negative effect, on one side it is a well-known economy enhancer, on the other side it has a profound impact on residents life, like the touristification and airification of city centres, leading to speculation over those areas because of higher tourists willingness to spend with respect to residents and exponential growth of short term rental solutions like Airbnb listings (González-Pérez, 2020; Oskam, van der Rest, & Telkamp, 2018).

In developing countries, tourism can represent a great source of income, able to improve socio-economics indicator and quality of life if well managed. Pasaribu *et al.* found in Samosir Regency, Indonesia, positive correlation between tourism development and many indicators, the main ones being per capita income, poverty reduction, improvement in education and public health levels (Pasaribu *et al.*, 2019).

By the way, another research that took place in Ly Son Island, Vietnam, found out that many people are not satisfied by the level of tourism of the country, evidencing perceived negative impacts on economics, on the culture of the society and on the environment (Truong *et al.*, 2020). In this case, the authors underline that investments and decisions mostly came from abroad, while in cultural tourism, the local population is more involved in shaping and making decisions about the touristic attractions.

Impact of cultural tourism on society

Culture, tourism and society are strongly related: a cohesive and peaceful society can enhance tourism, as well as tourism can bring individuals and human communities into contact; both of them contribute to local cultural development and, thereby, an improvement of the quality of life (Amin, 2020). As Mike Robinson & David Picard demonstrate, tourism also can assist the world’s inhabitants to live better together and therefore it contributes to the development of a more peaceful and cohesive society (Robinson & Picard, 2006).

Supporting this reasons, we bring as an example the impact of cultural tourism on Indonesian society: Wu *et al.* study revealed that people living around the Suku Temple were impacted economically, socially, and culturally. Besides the economic impact, people experienced a social impact too (Wu *et al.*, 2020). This means changes in society’s mind-set, knowledge, and increased tolerance. As a consequence, it was observed a cultural impact: an increase in people’s awareness to cooperate in preserving local culture and historical heritage.

The second example of a cultural heritage working for the community is the Historical Stonework Centre in Brusno Stare in the Roztocze Area (SE Poland), where

nowadays the attractiveness of this unique heritage site acts as a mechanism for tourists to get knowledge about other local cultural traditions, like craftsmanship and the handmade products (Brzezińska-Wójcik & Skowronek, 2020).

The reasoning expressed above leads us to formulate the following hypotheses: “*Cultural tourism is a mean local communities can use to improve their quality of life*”.

METHOD AND DATA

In order to support the hypotheses, we aimed the effort towards qualitative research based on a case study methodology. Precisely, we have followed an interpretative approach based on deductive reasoning, since we aim at finding evidence to support a theory. The framework of analysis is a holistic single case study with explanatory purpose.

The team started to focus on cultural tourism as a tool to improve the condition of life of local communities following in particular SDG 8.9: “*By 2030, devise and implement policies to promote sustainable tourism that creates jobs and promotes local culture and products*” (<https://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/sustainable-development-goals/>).

The team approached the exploration of this challenge aiming at defining the problem and subproblems related to the geographical area of interest, that is the Apulia region, in the south of Italy. We conducted interviews with stakeholders who belong to the field of culture and tourism in order to understand better which problem to address. This led to problem statement definition, that is more concerned about the quality of tourism flows, instead of the quantity.

Given the complex nature of this industry, the problem definition phase took a considerable amount of effort to be disentangled, and the result has not been a single clearly defined problem. Instead, the team recognized a pool of problem categories and sub-problems, whose relative importance has been updated during the whole program, based on the results got by the experimentation through interviews performed. More precisely, the team started brainstorming about all possible sources of problems related to the relationship between tourism and culture, then the first possible problems have been assessed through interviews with stakeholders. The team regularly met in order to be updated about the possible problems, so that the interviews evolved with time until we felt confident about the problems we were able to collect and their impact on the region. The result of this process led the team to focus on a few macro problems.

Once clarified that, a long, iterative brainstorming and validating phase followed, intending to elaborate possible ideas to address the problem. In this phase, the team adopted the same strategy made by listing ideas,

proposing them to the stakeholders and regularly updating the list based on their feedback and comments.

The entire process has been affected by the pandemic outbreak since all team meetings have been conducted online. On the one hand, the online meeting demonstrated a noticeable efficiency advantage due to the time saved by avoiding the necessity to meet in person. On the other hand, despite this advantage, in the beginning, the efficacy of the communication was very low, due to the difficulties in transferring non-verbal communication and, consequently, the difficulty of expressing the team’s different perspectives. Communication efficacy is increasing while the team is getting to know better its components, even if all agree that face to face meetings allow transferring more complex messages more quickly.

The following step consisted in thinking of the possible solutions. Again, iterative brainstorming and validation phase occurred, market analysis and more in-depth research on demand and offer have been conducted to define the solution, which revolves around the target of giving local cultural creators the tools necessary to communicate their culture to the tourists. Further interviews with stakeholders have been performed to validate the solution, in order to get insights from experienced people in the field of cultural tourism or that have been part of realities very similar to our solution. One of the interviews is the one taken into consideration by this research.

Specifically, the team had the chance to interview Florinda Saieva, co-founder, together with the husband Andrea Bartoli, of “Farm Cultural Park”, in the city of Favara, in Sicily (<https://www.farmculturalpark.com/>), and other social initiatives. Sicily shares many common aspects with the Apulia region, in terms of population, touristic flows, values, traditions and cultural heritage.

Following the case study methodology, we coded each sentence with tags, and we collected the tags in the following categories: goals, critical issues, consequences and network.

RESULTS

The case of Favara describes a successful urban regeneration project, able to increase from 0 to 120000 the yearly tourist flow, thanks to the willingness of 2 members of the local community. These two members of the community, deciding to share with the society the benefit coming from the touristic flows act as the “Social production” mentioned by the Creative economy theory, creating and pushing the generation of cultural contents without being “funded culture” or “commercial culture”.

Hereunder, after a brief summary of the project characteristics, we describe the motivations and the requisites necessary to create cultural tourism, as well as the critical issues encountered, and the impact on the local community, as explained in Dr Saieva interview. In

the last part of the chapter, we outline the categories stemmed from the interview.

The model is simple: Farm Cultural Park started by renovating a structure with the target of hosting temporary art exhibitions, then begun inviting artists to spread art and culture in the city in order to involve the citizens. Then they started to educate children and young people funding different scholastic institutions in the city. Currently, the population can propose projects of urban regeneration, and they can take place.

The path for building this environment started with the following targets: *“We want Favara to be the second touristic attraction in Agrigento province, after the Valle dei Templi”* and *“a place where the impossible becomes possible [...] thanks to activities related to culture and innovation [...] with the target of generating cultural growth on the citizens”*. In the beginning, these noble targets had to overcome some obstacles, that are: getting the trust of the citizens, since *“it is tough to imagine a private entity taking the place of the public administration duties”* and communicating with the population, since the used language was *“not easy and innovative”*. The public administration itself, in the beginning, did not collaborate with *“policies to favour the process”*. In order to be able to survive the project had to gain the trust and interest of the local community. Two are the main leverages to put in place to be trusted, *“it is important to have a horizontal leadership and community involvement”* and *“letting many people to be entrepreneurs”*, and even applying these principles the process took years. A curious element highlighted as an essential point is the fact that one member of the couple comes from the city while the second does not: *“it may seem silly, but foreign accent has a particular attraction for the people of Favara”*. The social production role of the project is evident because many of the artists are not paid for their work; after all, the project is not a commercial activity: *“the artists contact us, they know we do not commercially exploit their work”*.

The impact on the local community can be split into two components: economic growth and cultural growth. The first component is the easiest one to measure and to understand: tourism means people's needs to satisfy and needs to satisfy means services that can be sold, with a precise price tag and a clear set of resources invested: *“In Favara there were six beds, and now there are 250; in 2012, while in Italy all commercial activities were closing, here they created many of them. From zero to 120000 visitors per year”* and *“many young people come back to Favara. [...] an artist with a passion for the vintage collected textiles from shops in difficulties and started selling Papillons online”*.

On the other hand, cultural growth is more challenging to measure but equally important, because it is the correct complement to manage the economic growth, respecting ethics and morality. The better culture of the community is reflected in a different perception of the community from the external *“if you look for Favara*

on google the first articles are related to the Farm and not to the mafia” by new education possibility *“we founded the architecture school for children [...] and a politics school for young women, and then many other activities”*.

Following the case study methodology, the interview has been divided into sentences, and each sentence has been given a tag. Hereunder are listed both the categories and the tags.

The first category is the one about the goals, which collects two tags: motivation and target. The main takeaway is the focus of the project, which is, since the beginning, the community; even if private citizens fund the project, they act for benefitting what is around them.

In the category of the critical issues, we collected the following tags: initial perception, local characteristics and education. Here the takeaway revolves around the lack of trust from the population, due to the mind-set of locals; reshaping the education system is the long term action chosen to change the mind-set of future generations.

The consequences category collects the following tags: urban regeneration, external perception, sharing of benefits, replicability and new activities. The central concept is that the impact of the project is shared with the community. The local community can replicate the model, becoming part of it, or create new complementary activities, which reinforce the project.

The category network is made by the coherence and involvement tags. The networking capability has been fundamental in order to develop the entire process, getting the trust of the people required an extended time, during which the founders never lost the trajectory, showing their dedication to selected targets. Without such perseverance, the network of helper would not have been involved in the project.

The interview categories related to goal and consequences explain and verify the role of *“Social production”* as cultural makers based on private resources and willingness, able to produce a positive economic and cultural impact on the local community, as theorized in Creative economy theory.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

Our contribution lies in the disentanglement of motivations upon which the social production activity is based, not only economic reasons but mainly the desire of improving the living condition of the local community. The case study allowed the team to reach this conclusion, and now we are basing our solution on the creation of a tool able to transform people into *“Social producers”*.

In fact, notwithstanding the great economic flows generated by the dream of the founders, it is essential to underline that Farm Cultural Park has not reached economic sustainability yet, because the first intended

beneficiary of the project is the community around, making it a perfect example of the Social production role described by Creative economy theory. Being able to behave differently has been the trigger of the trust from the population, that soon became part of the Social production role, enhancing even more the process of urban regeneration and cultural valorization started by the project.

Another important takeaway of the research has been to observe the effects of the not-necessarily-refundable connotation of the initiative. Specifically, the innovation brought by the two citizens has been recognized as genuine because it is dedicated to improving the lives of the entire community. In this way, it has been able to attract spontaneous support to the initiative of artists and creators of cultural content.

The case study methodology has been useful for the team to have a deeper understanding of the domain of cultural tourism and its consequences. Specifically, having access to the insights and the first-hand experience of people working in the field allowed us to gain a perspective impossible to grasp from the outside. The reached results in understanding the mechanism of involvement of population and cultural diffusion pave the way to research in similar contexts to explore similarities and differences. Moreover, the case study was helpful because few data and quantitative studies are available, we hope reached results may inspire other researchers to continue exploring this exciting topic with a quantitative approach, hypothesizing structured constructs and measuring the impact on stakeholders.

COVID-19 outbreak at the beginning of the process did not revolutionize the team working model since the components were already located in different places, and most of the meetings already happened online. What the team missed the most has been the time spent reinforcing the relationship out of working time. This essential element has been partially covered with private calls side to the joint meetings, which helped the team components to build a stronger relationship, which in turn allowed a better mutual understanding.

This research is limited in the generalizability of the results and their applicability to different contexts, and it takes into consideration only a single point of view on the project.

We hope in future work to have the possibility to analyze further the impact coming from cultural tourism on local communities in different geographical settings, and we want to compare the success cases with the failure cases, in order to understand better what are the mechanisms and the causal relationships.

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