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COVID-19: Any Future Perspectives for Tourism in Italy?

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ABSTRACT

The pandemic has strongly marked the Italian territory and had had consequences in the healthy sphere, as it is clear, and also in the social and economic fabric of the countries. The lockdown, the adoption of health safety measures and the closure of borders had immediate consequences in economies and territories. Thus, the health emergency became also a tourism and socio-economic issue. In particular, in Italy, tourism has been one of the pillars of the economic system, and certainly the impact of COVID-19 on the national tourism market has been dramatic. The tourism crisis highlighted some of the rooted tourist issues in Italy, involving, in particular, the tourist management of territories. In order to restart the design of a healthy tourism system, capable of promoting the survival of tourism and territories, had to be considered as necessary elements to restart Italian tourism such as the role of high education for quality tourism, the design of a hybrid offer to favor the development of domestic tourism and the exploration of the digital and technological field as a support tool for territorial, tourism and communication policies.

Keywords: Tourism; pandemic; domestic tourism; high quality education; digital experience

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Introduction

The pandemic has strongly marked the Italian territory since the beginning of March 2020 and had had consequences in the healthy sphere, as it is clear, and also in the social and economic fabric. The lockdown, the adoption of health safety measures and the closure of borders immediately create consequences also in the economic sphere. Thus, the health emergency became tourist, economic and social emergencies. In fact, although Governments offered economic aid, in several cases, such aid has not been sufficient to protect the tourist business (tour operators, hoteliers, etc.) from collapse and to avoid a global tourism crisis.

In fact, the pandemic and the tourism crisis involve the whole world, and it is considered a global phenomenon. In some territories, for example, in Italy, the pandemic had a stronger impact on the tourist market: if it is considered that till 2019 Italy had a leadership role in international tourism, it is clear that the pandemic impact on direct and indirect tourism activities had had drastic consequences. Indeed, the tourism crisis was exasperated in the Italian territory by some factors rooted in the tourism system of the country such as the strong preponderance that tourism market, and in particular international tourism market, had had in recent decades on the Italian territory and economy - in terms of tourist arrivals flows, tourist spending and economic impact on national GDP, etc.-. Thus, also the presence of small and micro enterprises in the Italian territory and the frequent family management of *hotellerie* and accommodations struggle to survive, worsened by the persisting pandemic emergency and paralysis of the international tourism system that, for example, impacted in the avalanche of cancellations of reservations.

In a nutshell, the tourism crisis highlighted some of the Italian tourist offer and management issues: i) a shadow tourism system linked to the seasonal and over-specialized offers; ii) a lack of professionalization as a symptom of a not-qualified tourist offer; iii) a level of information, technology, communication and digitization that is not adequate to the global and European standards.

From another point of view, it was evident that the crisis suddenly empty the overcrowded tourist destinations – i.e. the main cities -. Therefore, although the pandemic seems to be a solution to the over tourism problems in the main cities and cultural tourism destinations, of course, the paralysis of the tourism system cannot be the solution to one of the most long-standing issue that obsessed geographers, sociologists and marketing researchers for many years. Likewise, as a result of the health emergency, the pouring of flows in favor of unexplored destinations – i.e. marginal territories, small municipalities, internal areas, mountain and seaside areas, etc. – cannot be considered as a solution to the promotion of new tourist places.

Thus, albeit the efforts in trying to search a benefic impact of the pandemic on territories, for example, as the less consumption of territories in a sustainable point of view, it would certainly be forced to consider the pandemic as an opportunity. Tourism and pandemic cannot coexist. It is evident, in fact, that empty cities are not the solution to the overtourism issue, and that the tourism paralysis leads to a greater collapse of the tourism market. So, in order to re-start and re-design the tourism system, it would be appropriate to look to the past and avoid the main mistakes already done. Therefore, the path for a healthy tourism system, capable of promoting the survival of tourism and territories is linked to some factors, such as the design of a hybrid offer to favor the development of domestic tourism, the role of high education for quality tourism and the exploration of digital and technological field as a support tool for territorial, tourism and communication policies that have been lacking in the current tourism system and that highlighted an extremely fragile tourist reality.

1. A hybrid offer to favor the development of domestic tourism

The fluid and dynamic nature of tourism and the tendency to start a quality tourism, as well as the urgent need to create a path of tourism rebirth, pushed the tourist stakeholders to build new offers for the post COVID-19 period; offers that can respond to the renewed needs of the tourism market. Of course, it is not a simple task for stakeholders, local administrators and tourism operators the role of drawing up guidelines aimed at restarting tourism, moreover considering the uncertainty and the considerable spread of the COVID-19 disease.
For sure, the pandemic produced negative impacts on international tourism, and it also seems to affect the lifestyle of the populations, the needs and choices of individuals and consequently the needs and choices of the new tourist. In other words, pandemic affected the tourist market as a whole. For example, the reduction in income and the increase in unemployment, and the fear of a new contagion are just some of the factors that could contribute to change the choices of destinations in new tourists; in addition, the need of distancing to stem contagion and the border closures, as in the case of the "red zones", transform the habits of individuals who are pushed to postpone international travel, for economic and safety reasons, or, otherwise, to choose travelling in territories that are close to their residence area. Thus, tourists in the pandemic period are looking for a well-known and safe location as a comfort zone tourist destination. For these reasons, potential tourists during and after the pandemic period could be mainly prepared to travel to already known places or proximal destinations – considering the proximity both from a physical and cultural point of view -.
Furthermore, another consideration involves the tourist destinations that, before the pandemic, were mainly dependent on international tourist markets, and that, as it is clear, will be certainly the most affected destinations by the negative impact of COVID-19; as in the case of the Italian tourism economy that was heavily dependent on international flows. To trace a brief picture of international and domestic tourism in Italy before to COVID-19, it is sufficient to consider that between 2000 and 2010 the tourist flows were divided fairly equally between domestic and international tourists, while in the last ten years there was a prevalence of arrivals of foreign tourists compared to Italian tourists at an increasing rate from year to year. In 2018, in fact, the flows of foreign tourists in Italy (50.5%) exceeded the flows of Italians, even with a growth rate compared to previous years. According to some authors (Aa.Vv., 2019), the increase in flows of foreign tourists is certainly linked to the use of the common currency, considering, among other things, that a significant increase in the last ten

years has concerned the flows of tourists from the Euro area, in particular from France and Germany. Also from the point of view of tourism spending, the greatest impact on the Italian tourism balance of payments was linked to international flows. In particular, in 2018 Italy recorded a positive net balance of 16.2 billion euros, confirming an increase of around +11% compared to the previous year. The relevant part of the tourist expenditure contribution in Italy is given by the expenditure of foreign travelers which in 2018 amounted to over 40 billion euros, almost double compared to the contribution of domestic tourism (about 25 billion euros), despite the number of presences of residents in Italy it is around 80 million nights in 2018, recording a significant increase compared to the previous year (+ 19.5%). According to EUROSTAT data (2019), as part of the expenditure of foreign tourists in Italy, a significant contribution was made by travelers from the European Union who contribute to the tourist balance of payments with a value of approximately 25 billion euros, of which 7.1 billion euros spent by tourists from Germany, which were confirmed as the European top spenders in Italy. Instead, in the extra-EU countries a significant contribution was given by American tourists with 8.3 billion euros spent in 2018. These data of the last years and the growth in foreign tourist flows - even more evident if evaluated in terms of expenditure – highlighted that the main tourist and territorial strategies of the last decades have been aimed, in particular, at encouraging international tourism on the Italian territory.

According to ISTAT (2020), the tourist flow growth seemed to be confirmed also for 2020, since the pandemic and the measures to contain the emergency made the tourist activities collapsed. In particular, in the two months of lockdown in Italy the decrease in tourist flows was between - 95% and - 100%, and in the following months (June, July, 2020) – emergency with no lockdown -, the decrease was attenuated and estimated between -77% and -79% (ISTAT, 2020); but more acute for the foreign component of demand, with a decrease of around - 90%, compared to the domestic component around - 61%.

Therefore, it is clear that Italy suffered a very negative impact by pandemic, considering that the greatest negative impacts generated by COVID-19 are precisely to be attributed to those destinations that had international flows as their backbone – i.e. in terms both of tourist arrivals and tourism expenditure -. In the forecasts of some of the main European statistic institutes (WTTC, 2020; ENIT, 2020; ISTAT, 2020), a counter-trend of flows emerges as a possible tourist opportunity in the short run (2021-2023).

The hypothesis of a turnaround of international and domestic tourist flows in the next 3 years could be conditioned by some factors: i) first of all, the fear of contagion induced people to cancel reservations and not to book new ones in the short run; ii) the management of regional and national borders for the pandemic measures containment on the one hand contributed to discourage international tourism flows, in particular long range travels, and on the other hand, favored domestic tourism, at least in the short term and with reference to 2020 summer; iii) foreign tourists, in particular from extra-EU, are used to book even one year in advance long range travels, therefore, the organization of a long-range trip were not compatible with the emergency situation and the health uncertainty, both for times and costs reasons; iv) the possibility of a second pandemic wave, in the following winter, pushed tourists to

choose a safe destination, which was already been visited or which was linked to a physical or cultural proximity with their residential areas; v) the dramatic economic crisis as a consequence of the pandemic and the lower income of individuals has certainly conditioned potential tourists in the choice of not travel, or move to short trips, or to second homes holidays.
In this context, ENIT forecasts (2020) expect international tourism would have a slower recovery, while domestic tourism recovery could act in a shorter time and could be a driver for a tourist restart path. However, it is unlikely that domestic tourism will have the strength to compensate the decline of international tourist flows, particularly in destinations that are highly dependent on international markets, such as the main Italian cities of cultural tourism – i.e. Rome, Venice, Florence, etc.-.
If it is true that pandemic changed individuals' needs and habits, the tourist supply system had to face the future tourist needs by adapting the offer to a renewed need for health security, in the respect for territories and communities. In order to restart the Italian tourist system, it would be appropriate to hypothesize possible strategies for promoting domestic, local and proximity tourism.
Therefore, actualizing the thought of Archer (1978), that considered domestic tourism a possible starting point to provide an impetus in terms of economic growth in holiday destinations, and a valid tool for solving the issues and problems connected to the international tourism of a destination, domestic tourism could be a valid tool for reactivating the Italian tourism market during and after the pandemic period.

1.1. New tourist protagonists: from domestic tourism to local tourism

The forecasts of domestic tourist growth during and after the pandemic highlight a deviation of flows from the main cities – i.e. Rome, Venice, Florence, etc. –, to small destinations – i.e. countryside, mountain, seaside, etc.–. As it emerges from the data (AirDNA, 2020), the summer 2020 flows were directed to destinations different from cities – i.e. mountain, lake, seaside, etc. –, that became the tourist protagonists in the pandemic times. Yet, in order that the new tourist protagonists could be affirmed as new destinations in the long period, it is necessary to base the offer on the creation of a hybrid product, able to attract tourists between the plurality of destinations and offers. In fact, for a long time these destinations were unexplored, and they were discovered during the pandemic period, because the restrictive measures made a constraint for long-haul travels and the need of physical distance induced tourists to look for not crowded place, un-tourist destinations, relax and safe destinations not far from home.
Thus, many of the small villages of Italy and rural areas were discovered during the pandemic, and this was a huge occasion for unexplored territories to get visibility. Yet, from a tourist point of view, these destinations were unripe places: they had few activities and experience to offer, few services, few entertainments. Therefore, to take advantage of the renewed visibility and to introduce an integrated and quality tourist path to these places, capable of emerging even when the health emergency situation no longer will constitute a constraint on the tourist's choices, it is necessary to plan a tourist offer able to attract flows in the long time and to respect territories and communities. Certainly, it is not easy for villages and marginal areas to establish

themselves as new tourist destinations for local tourism. In fact, to be defined as a tourist destination, there must be attractiveness of the territory capable of attracting flows of people (visitors and workers), goods and services, capital and information. The value of the territory, in fact, arises from the action and interaction that is formed from the fusion of the relationships that animate the space and that generate a form of territorial identity that expresses the quality of the territory and its fragility, both in terms of environmental and anthropogenic elements.
Therefore, the extraordinary resources of unexplored destinations such as villages, inland areas, etc. could be the pillar of the rediscovery, re-evaluation and rebirth of places. Yet, the environmental and cultural resources without an appropriate tourist strategy, territorial governance and professionalization of local stakeholders would not be able to support the restart path after the crisis caused by the pandemic, neither to drive those flows of domestic visitors in medium and long times.
In a nutshell, small villages and marginal areas and their local communities could start an inclusive, accessible, responsible and sustainable tourism path by strengthening a part of domestic tourism, perhaps with even long-term benefits. At the same time, however, without adequate health safety planning, they could risk creating new emergency stress and, consequently, they could have economic repercussions, also in terms of image. The issue, therefore, is not to choose between tourism and health, but it is the challenge to design a safe restart path for tourists, through the creation of an attractive product and an appropriate promotion, in line with the needs of potential future tourists, and to become new protagonists in the context of Italian tourist destinations.

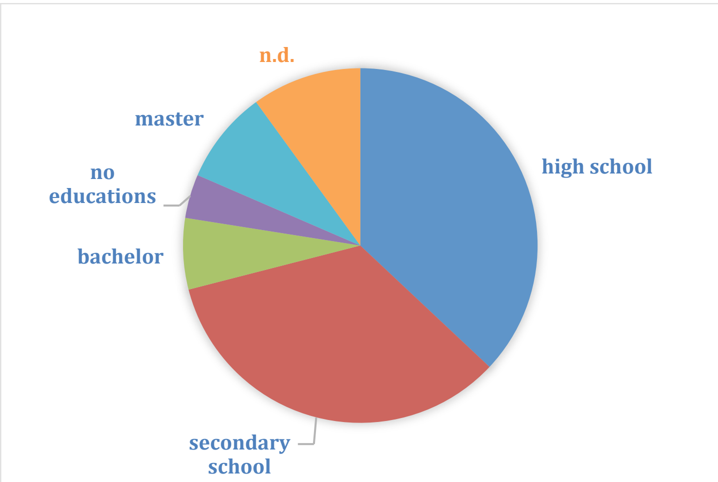
2. The role of high education for quality tourism

In the context of tourist planning and product creation, the high education assumes an important role. In fact, considering the economic and social changes affected by the pandemic and the necessary tourism re-planning strategies, it has to be considered the influence of high education on tourism planning and the correlation between the needs of professionalization in tourism compared to the actual tourism offer. Indeed, in order to offer tourism products able to respond to the international quality standards, high education in tourism plays a key role in structuring a quality tourism offer. In particular, the Italian labor market system brings out critical data regarding the professional qualification and high education of tourist employees. According to the Global Human Capital Report published by the World Economic Forum (2017), in 2017 Italy occupied the lowest position in the ranking for the number of qualified staff and labor market conditions compared to European countries with the highest tourist attractiveness – in detail, the main elements of Human capital considered to evaluate the countries by the WEF are i) Capacity: the level of formal education of younger and older generations as a result of a past education investment; ii) Development: formal education of the next-generation workforce and continued upskilling and reskilling of the current workforce; iii) Deployment: skills application and accumulation among the adult population; iv) Know-how: breadth and depth of specialized skills used at work -

(Aa.Vv., 2019). In fact, in the screening of 187 countries, Italy was in 35th position within the world overall rank prepared by the WEF (2017) on human capital endowment and labor market conditions and in 107th position for "Deployment". According to the WEF (2017), in fact, the trend in many countries is to adopt low-cost and unskilled labor. In order to create economic value, however, a highly specialized work system is required for advanced economies.

In particular, in tourism, the analysis of the structural data (Foundation for Subsidiarity and CRISP, 2019) showed a less qualified staff average in the tourism sector than in other sectors, and in particular, in Italy, this aspect was particularly pronounced, as the share of graduated workers operating in tourist sector were in the lowest position. The issue takes on even greater relevance, if it is considered that the scarce supply of qualified employees in tourism in Italy does not only involve areas that do not require specific qualifications, but it also involves leadership positions (for example, managers of *hotellerie* and accommodations, etc.). In other words, in Italy, those who occupy leadership roles in the tourism sector are less qualified compared to the European peer. To get a clear picture of the lack of high education in tourism, just consider that only 15% of tourist employees in Italian hotels got a master's degree. Thus, the percentage value of skilled employees in the hotel sector is significantly lower than European peers - i.e. in France, they are approximately 33% - (Foundation for Subsidiarity and CRISP, 2019).

Figure 1: Employee's qualifications in *hotellerie* in Italy



Source: Foundation for Subsidiarity and CRISP, 2019

Moreover, the lack of professionalism in tourism can generate a negative return from various points of view, first of all, by stimulating the sedimentation of illegal phenomena, with consequent prices flattening; and, without adequate qualification, there is a real risk of providing a low-quality service that is inadequate to the expectations of tourists.

The lack of high education in the Italian tourism market could be a symptom of the absence of public policies for the development of local economies, the absence of collaboration between the labor market and the high education, the absence of tourist strategies, and the absence of interest of companies in hire qualified employees due to

some factors such as the “craft vision” (Ferri, 2016, p. 88) of small and micro family enterprises.
The pandemic triggered an economic and financial crisis that upset activities and services of the territories, generating bankruptcy of many businesses and entrepreneurs and forced the companies to adopt a policy of lowering prices, just for the survival aim. Those low-price policies contributed to reinforce the phenomena of shadow tourism and induced to hire no qualified employee to reduce the costs, impacting on quality and competitiveness of the tourist market.
Thus, in order to re-designing a tourist offer after the pandemic emergency, high education could play an important role in the reorganization of the offer in terms of quality and innovation. According to Ferri (2016), in fact, preparing a restart strategy for the future of tourism from the quality point of view requires the strengthening of two aspects of particular importance: qualified employees and improvement of information and communication technologies. In a few words, the role of high employees assumes an important position to offer a quality tourist product. Therefore, to be competitive and adequate to international standards, strengthening the interaction between companies and educational institutions could represent a step towards the professionalization of the entire sector and could favor the creation of a tourist path based on the quality of the offer thanks to the best knowledge and capacity of tourist workers.
Thus, it is clear that the opportunity of achieving a high level of training is not immediate, neither zero costs. Furthermore, tourism businesses in Italy, as already mentioned, are generally family-run, small or micro-sized. Therefore, the family dimension generally is linked to a “craft” vision, not focused on highly specialized workers, and with not solid economic basis to undertake expenses for staff training, even more in the pandemic, that was dramatic for many tourism businesses, big and small-size, family or not. So, it certainly would not be possible to refer to the company’s funds to start a training course. Furthermore, considering that high training has its roots in multi-year courses, it is certainly not possible in the very short period to imagine obtaining adequate and high training for every kind of worker. Therefore, the short-term strategies that could be implemented to face the pandemic crisis and to lay the groundwork for a high tourist professionalization system could become part of the public policies for react to the pandemic and could be addressed to the raising awareness of the needs for high qualified workers in small and micro tourism businesses through a sensitization and a targeted professionalization.

3. Digital and technology as a support tool for territorial, tourism and communication policies

The spread of digital and technology had great consequences in many economic sectors, and certainly also in tourism. The application of the so-called 4.0 industry in the tourism sector determined the birth of 4.0 tourism: the revolution due to the digital use of information and new technologies (i.e., gaming, 4K, etc.) contributed to modify products and services offered to satisfy the demand of a more aware tourist.

Through the digital tools, information can be distributed, stored, retrieved and purchased very quickly. Thus, digital tools contributed to modifying the tourist market and tourist's behavior acting as a support for territorial, tourism and communication policies. In other words, the reorganization of the tourism system through the digital landscape involved the whole tourism chain, involving information, organization and booking of the trip and influencing the way of thinking, interacting, relating and perceiving the tourist destination.

The digital-tourism binomial is a global phenomenon and according to some researches (Gelter, 2017), the digital revolution transformed the behavior of global tourists. In fact, according to the White Paper on The American Travelers Digital Landscape published by Phocuswright in 2017, about 167 million users per month consume digital content related to travel and vacations, interacting with their device, and the average of user visits travel sites is about 140 times in the 45 days preceding the booking, with an increase of +88 % in the booking week. Furthermore, according to Google data (2019), 20% of the world population uses applications at every stage of planning a trip and 2/3 of the population has a travel application on their smartphone. According to the Observatory on Digital Innovation in Tourism in Milan (2019), then, the incidence of smartphone purchases on digital tourism spending exceeds 18% and its value is about 2.5 billion euros. In few words, the value of digital tourism is estimated around 14 billion euros and the percentage of tourists who use and consume digital content related to travel and holidays is constantly growing, and in particular, it is increasing the booking of last minute travels and tourist experiences from mobile or via application (Phocuswright, 2017).

These data confirm the dynamic nature of tourism in the digital world and lead to a continuous updating of the offer of digital activities and services by tour operators. In fact, in recent years, tour operators have tried to exploit the opportunities offered by Internet and social media to create direct communication between companies and their reference market, to increase the level of interactivity and degree of personalization of the communication itself, embracing the digital evolution not only to be able to respond promptly to the needs of the tourist (for example, to manage a reservation in the hotel, to change the date of a flight, etc.), but also to offer tourist experiences enriched by technology (for example, experiences with virtual reality or 4K applied to archaeological parks, etc.).

In recent times, in fact, experience has become one of the main competitive tools for companies (Gilmore, Pine, 2000) and one of the main ways to increase cultural background for tourists. Thus, the continuous experience and emotion demand by tourists forced tourist operators to adopt new forms of experiential tourism, becoming producers and sellers of memories and emotions (Valdani, Guenzi, 1998). Contemporary tourists have not only looked for new destinations, but they also want to travel to grasp the most authentic aspects of the destination and the local population and they want to establish direct relationships with the territory, discovering its identity and experiencing a journey made of emotions and new sensations. Some authors (Buhalis, 2000; Prentice, Witt, Hamer, 1998) show that the tourism industry is based on the creation of unforgettable experiences that are able to produce emotions and memories for the tourist. Therefore, offering high quality services and unforgettable experiences is a central element in the tourism industry.

Tourists travel to different places, interact with people from different cultural backgrounds and bring back travel memories, and these travel activities are integrated into the totality of the experiences lived (McCabe, Foster, 2006). The experience has no time limits and does not end at the very moment in which it is carried out, but it continues living in the form of emotions and memories, through an involvement that stimulates and involves tourists.
Certainly, in the health emergency that requires physical distancing in order to limit the contagion, the experiential products may not appear adequate. Yet, through technological and digital innovation, a new inclusive and digitized experiential tourism market could be reached, which may be coherent with the health needs required by the pandemic emergency, and at the same time could be able to provide virtual direct contact with local identity and culture respecting host communities and territories. Therefore, in the pandemic context, the travel experience could be transformed, not only on the basis of the renewed needs of tourists, but also through the dissemination of experiences on digital platforms.
The search for experiences and emotions by the tourist is a consolidated reality of the new tourist demand trends, as well as the strengthening of the digital context in the tourism sector and in relation to the experiences offered. There are not a few cases in which the main OTAs (Airbnb, Booking, etc.) offer territorial experiences. Yet, on the occasion of the pandemic, that in a few months paralyzed the global tourist market, the creative energy and the resilience of tour operators, supported by digital tools, have given life to virtual experiences. Virtual tours and online experiences provided populations in the lockdown as a form of entertainment and spread of the culture of distant places and traditions. Certainly, it is difficult to imagine that these digital experiences were able to limit the devastating economic impact caused by the pandemic, neither they were able to make up for the lack of tourist flows and therefore economic flows on the territory; but, they have focused the attention on an alternative product through the use of digital technology (i.e. Airbnb, as well as other OTAs that provide experiences, proposed online experiences).
Thus, the digitization of experiences could find a new space as a tool to restart a tourist path promoting an accessible, responsible, inclusive and sustainable tourism. From some points of view, the offer of a digital tourist experience could be considered naturally inclusive and accessible, as it is aimed at everyone – i.e. it does not create distinctions between those who have walking problems and those who do not, due to the fact that there are not physical barriers –, and it could be considered responsible and sustainable, as it would not lead to the erosion of the territories due to the increasingly tourist flows.
In this regard, some reflections had to be open: could the digital experience be actually inclusive, even if there is a digital generation gap? Considering that in the digital experience the stringent relationship between experience and territory disappears, is it still possible to talk about tourism?
The virtual experience could highlight opportunity and risks for the tourist market. In particular, it is possible to hypothesized a triple scenario: i) a "no effect" scenario: the online experience could be a possible alternative proposal to a traditional tour, with no significant impacts on the future of the tourism market; ii) a "positive" scenario: the online experience could be a stimulus for the discovery of new and unexplored

territories and destinations, thus acting as a promotional tool, as well as a service offered, and stimulating the user's interest in making a trip on the territory that are virtually explored; iii) a "negative" scenario: the online experience could turn into a risk for the tourism market, discouraging the potential tourist from exploring a certain territory because it was already virtually explored safe and comfortably from the sofa, and with a lower cost compared to a real experience of travel. As it is clear, there are many doubts highlighted by the tourist operators about the opportunity linked to the new kind of digital experiences offered. Precisely, tour operators fear a distortion of the way of doing tourism, they fear a loss of interest of potential visitors, who in this way would never become really tourists on the territory.

In a nutshell, the virtual experience allows an exploration and knowledge of territories and cultures comfortably from home, even in the case of distant populations and areas, so, is it correct to speak of tourism?

Other reflections arise. Could the digital experience be considered as a possible tool for the future of tourism? Could digital experience be considered as a new form of tourism when it destroys the fundamental concepts of tourism itself? Could the digital experience negatively affect the traveler's motivation in the destination where the experience has already been virtually carried out? Or instead, the virtual experience could spread the knowledge of new places by representing, rather than a form of tourism, a new form of communication and information, therefore, a valid tool to inspire the potential user of the virtual experience in the decision to visit those places? In the view of sustainable tourism, the virtual experience could translate into an alternative form of information for the purpose of promoting non-touristy places and new destinations, thus favoring the preservation of fragile territories and acting as a deterrent for overtourism phenomena? In the view of tourist accessibility, could the use of an online experience foster a path of awareness, thanks to the integration of all potential virtual users without barriers?

It is not easy to answer all these questions. Therefore, it could be interesting to reflect on the practical opportunity of the digital experience as a tool to restart tourism and promote new tourist activities in the unexplored destinations, respecting the safety code that implies a physical distance. Assuming that digital experiences are not including the movement of flows from one place to another would certainly tend to appear forced to speak about a new form of tourism. In the effect, the digital experience could act not as a new tourist product, moreover considering that the added value generated by the digital experiences in economic terms would certainly not be able to be neither close to the economic tourism impact in the destinations. The digital experience, as a form of experience, stimulates and involves the senses, it is linked to tradition and to what the flavors of the territories are best able to tell. Thus, the digital experience could act as an information and communication alternative tool characterized by awareness, comprehension and empathy. The promotion and communication of experiences is depopulated on the web, on the main OTAs and on social networks, and this is how the concept of storytelling, or rather the narration of the experience and the territory, merges with the marketing of the experience that attracts tourists to captivating and exciting proposals. The online experience, in fact, would strengthen the basic elements of the narrative communication tool such as awareness, comprehension and empathy between tourists and territories, and it could promote a wider dissemination of knowledge of un-touristy territories. So, if on the one hand, storytelling, as a form of narration directed at the tourist, adapts to the experience (Aaker, Aaker, 2016; McCabe, Foster, 2006; Rispoli, Tamma, 1995; Tamma, 2002); on the other hand, the virtual offer of the experience could create a strong involvement between the users of the experience and the territories, and it could be able to create a stronger empathy compared to storytelling. In this scenario, the online experience as an alternative tool of communication and information of territories could be a form of evolution of storytelling.

Conclusion

The pandemic is producing negative impacts on the global tourism market in the short term, and it has certainly contributed to upset the lifestyle of tourists for the next few years. For this reason, a fast transformation of tourism market it is required that involve the synergic and multilevel management in the territories, the fusion between tradition and innovation, professionalism and entrepreneurial initiative stimulated by culture, and able to define new proposals and respond to a constantly changing market with attractive and quality products. As highlighted before, potential tourists after the pandemic may look for safe travel destinations. Thus, in the view of restarting the Italian tourist market, it would be appropriate to hypothesize possible strategies for promoting domestic, local and proximity tourism. Certainly, focusing on un-touristy destinations it is not easy for them to attract flows of people (visitors and workers), goods and services, capital and information in the territory without an integrated and quality offer.

Indeed, in order to offer safe and quality products and services in the long term, it is necessary to lay the foundations for education that could act in the changing of the rooted cultural approach, to create awareness in tourists and communities, and to plan activities coherent with the specific needs of tourists, both in unexplored territories and in main cities' destination. Among other things, an ever more stringent collaboration between public and private, between business and education could be necessary to avoid the economic and financial crisis triggered by the pandemic could strengthen the phenomena of sedimentation of illegal activities and shadow tourism, already rooted in the Italian territories, which follows lower prices competitions and poor professionalism and quality offer. Therefore, on one hand, to attract flows of tourists in the non-touristy destinations, in the medium and long term, it is necessary, in addition to high education as a main element to plan an attractive product and to guarantee a quality offer, also to take advantage of the renewed visibility of the unexplored territories, discovered during the pandemic and borders' constraint. In this regard, the digital experiences could be a valid communication and information tool to create promotion of unexplored territories and to start an awareness-raising process through a planned construction of the product based on an inclusive, accessible, sustainable, social, ethical and responsible approach, assisted and supported by the design of a quality offer. On the other hand, to guarantee no more overtourism in the main cities' destination could be necessary to re-plan some of the processes, such as the ones that are linked to the creation and promotion of quality and diversified products, the valorization of the qualified workers and at the same time could be necessary lay the foundation to eradicate the phenomena of sedimentation of illegal activities and shadow tourism, through the rethinking of processes of territorial and touristic *governance*.

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