

Heritage Tourism and Local Prosperity: An Empirical Investigation of their Controversial Relationship

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DESCRIPTION

The work explores the intricate relationship between cultural heritage, tourism, and local prosperity. It highlights the significance of material culture in attracting visitors and fostering a sense of identity and pride among locals. At the same time, the study considers that, while cultural tourism contributes positively to local economies and supports heritage preservation, concerns about over-tourism and its associated costs are legitimate. The paper employs a structural regression model to analyze Italian provincial data and examines both the (expected positive) direct impact of cultural tourism on economic development and its (potentially negative) indirect effects.

The work aims at shedding light on the (potentially controversial) relationship between cultural heritage, tourism, and local economic prosperity, emphasizing both the positive and negative aspects. Over the past two decades, in fact, culture has been increasingly viewed as an asset for economic growth, particularly through tourism, which is a vital sector supporting local economies. Tourism not only generates direct revenues but also stimulates intersectoral relationships, benefiting entire local systems. Heritage tourism, in particular, holds promise for local development by generating funds for preservation and leveraging intangible cultural aspects for sustainable regional growth.

However, the risks associated with excessive tourist pressure, including congestion, loss of authenticity, and environmental degradation, must be acknowledged. Despite tourism's potential economic benefits, indeed, uncontrolled tourist flows can strain local resources, disrupt communities and increase costs for heritage conservation and management. Moreover, crime and environmental damage are recognized as significant challenges linked to tourism, including heritage tourism, impacting local economic conditions and sustainability.

To consider empirically both the positive and negative aspects highlighted above, the study employs a structural regression model. In fact, this type of model allows analyzing the different

(direct and indirect) links. This is done at the provincial level in Italy, considering that such degree of geographical disaggregation is particularly suitable for the purposes of the paper since it allows capturing local specificities while also identifying generalizable mechanisms. Additionally, the potential differences between heritage tourism and overall tourism in terms of their effects on local economies and sustainability are examined.

To suitably carry out the econometric analysis, a novel methodology is proposed to estimate heritage tourism, taking advantage of the information on the physical presence of material cultural heritage and using this to determine the share of overall tourism that may be considered as "heritage tourism". The results show that heritage tourism has both beneficial and negative effects on local prosperity. In fact, while it is associated with higher levels of crime and environmental damage, it also has a positive relationship with local GDP per capita. However, excessive tourism pressure (studied through the inclusion of a squared term for heritage tourism in the econometric specification) leads to diminishing returns on local prosperity. Overall tourism also positively affects local prosperity but contributes to increased crime and environmental damage, as well.

Despite these thought-provoking outcomes, further research is needed to explore additional mechanisms affecting the relationship between heritage tourism and local development. Particularly, future research should be devoted to investigating more sophisticated and intangible channels determining such relationship. Improving data availability on cultural heritage and tourism is also a priority in this respect. On the whole, the study underscores the need for balanced development strategies that harness the economic potential of heritage tourism while mitigating its adverse impacts on communities, the environment, and cultural integrity. By considering these complexities, policymakers can better understand and manage the dynamics between heritage tourism and local prosperity, fostering sustainable growth and preservation of cultural heritage, potentially through sustainable tourism policies.

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