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MIRDEC & GLOBECOS  
International Academic Conference  
Contemporary Discussions and Social Science Studies  
(Virtual/Online conference)

## CONFERENCE PROCEEDINGS ROME 2020-2, ITALY

Conference Proceedings  
Full papers & abstracts

Editors

Slagjana Stojanovska  
Tanu M. Goyal

Rome, Italy  
6-8 October 2020

MIRDEC-GLOBECOS Rome 2020-2 - International Academic Conference on  
Contemporary Discussions and Social Science Studies  
6-8 October 2020, University of Washington Rome Center, Rome, Italy  
**Masters International Research & Development Center**  
Global Community of Social Science

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CONFERENCE PROCEEDINGS – ROME 2020-2

ISBN: 978-605-80074-8-2

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Editors:

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ISBN: 978-605-80074-8-2

6-8 October 2020  
University of Washington Rome Center  
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**Demography & Population:** Migration studies, demography, population studies.

**Economics:** Microeconomics, macroeconomics, economic growth, fiscal and monetary policy, finances, public regulations, sustainable development, agro-economics, climate change.

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**Health:** Public health, health policies, hospital management, public and private health services, economic, social and political aspects of health services.

**International Business:** Culture and business, regional-global business, entry modes, strategy, expansion, mergers & acquisitions, trade, franchising strategies.

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**Management:** Human resources, cultural problems in labor mobilization, international human resource, mobility of human resource, business, cross cultural, corporate governance, financial resources, gender issues, technological resources, natural resources, knowledge.

**Marketing:** New media, social media marketing strategies, international, consumer research, market research, policy research, sales research, pricing research, distribution, advertising, packaging, product, media.

**Philology, Language & Translation Studies:** Historical study of language, aspects and research of speech production, transmission reception, linguistics, translation studies.

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**MIRDEC-GLOBECOS Rome 2020-2 Conference Proceedings, Full papers & Abstracts**

Masters International Danismanlik Arastirma Yayincilik  
Masters International Consultancy Research and Publishing

**ISBN: 978-605-80074-8-2**

MIRDEC Publishing

**Editor:**

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**Publisher:** Masters International Danismanlik Arastirma Yayincilik  
Masters International Consultancy Research and Publishing

**ISBN: 978-605-80074-8-2**

MIRDEC Publishing

Address: Cinarlicesme sk. No: 21/13 PK: 34303 Kucukcekmece

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Tel: +90 532 525 23 95

**Publisher certificate no: 35822**

**Publication date: 30 November 2020**

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VALERIA COCCO<sup>1</sup>

## DIGITAL EXPERIENCE TO RE-START TOURISM

### Abstract

The pandemic phenomenon strongly marked the Italian territory since the beginning of March 2020. It had consequences, as it is clear, not only in the healthy sphere, but also referring to the social, tourism and economic fabric. In order to re-start tourism sector, tour operator and tourism enterprises' resilience made the online experiences rise up. In fact, given the need of physical distancing, necessary in order to limit the contagion, and waiting for the recovery of a "new tourist normality", certainly, the offer of experiential tourist products should be inadequate. Yet, in a digitalized and hyper-connected world, a new type of experience seems to emerge: the digital experience. Anyway, when the offer of experience is digital, so the main travel factor is lacking, it is natural to wonder if it is still possible to talk about tourism, or rather if the digital experience could be instead a new form of information and communication of tourist products.

**Keywords:** Digital tourism, Covid-19, experience.

**JEL Codes:** Z30, Z31, Z38, Z39

### 1. Introduction

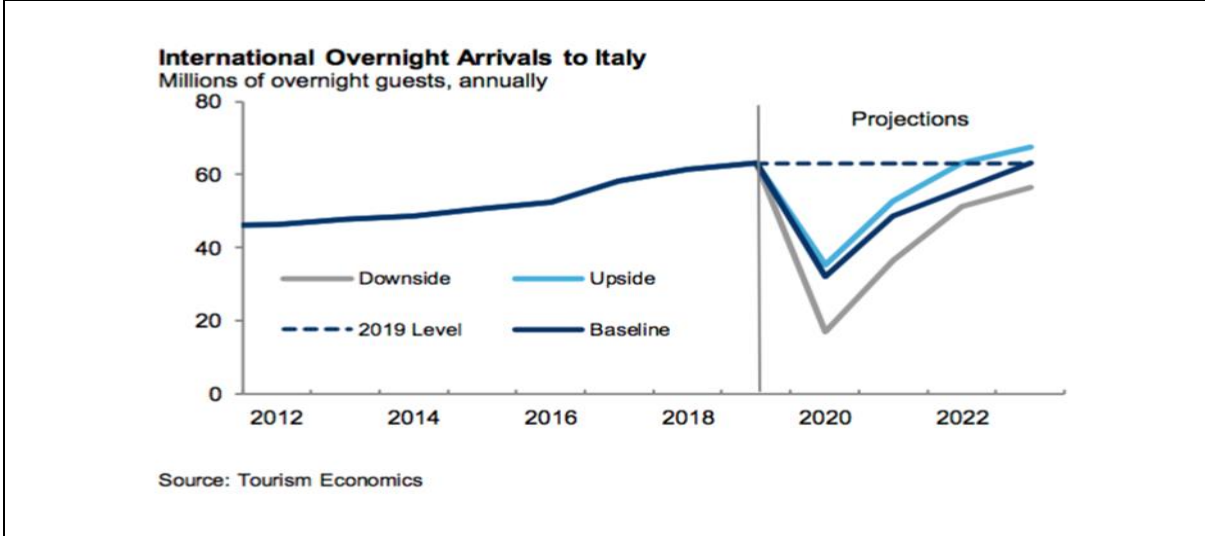
The fluid and dynamic nature of tourism, the tendency to move forward a social and quality tourism, as well as the pressing need to re-start a touristic path induce tourist operators to build a new offer that can respond to the renewed needs of the tourism market certainly modified by COVID-19, without forgetting the main issues and opportunities identified before the pandemic times. Of course, the task of stakeholders, local administrators and tourist operators in drawing up guidelines aimed at restarting the tourism sector is not simple, moreover considering the uncertainty and the considerable spread of the new COVID-19 disease (WTTC, 2020).

The pandemic is producing dramatic impacts on international tourism, in Italy, in Europe and in all the world. The pandemic affected also lifestyle, individuals' needs and choices and consequently it impacted needs and choices of tourists, and tourist market as a whole. The reduction in incomes, the unemployment increase and the fear of a new contagion contribute to change destinations' choices and re-draw tourist market. According to experts (ENIT, 2020), the post COVID-19 tourist could look for a confident tourist destination, a well-known and safe place, a comfort zone. So, the potential tourists in the post COVID-19 could travel in confident places - i.e., already known or close destinations – (Archer, 1978). In this scenario, the concept of physical and cultural proximity of places would acquire an important value in terms of travel and tourism and contribute to stimulate the domestic tourism.

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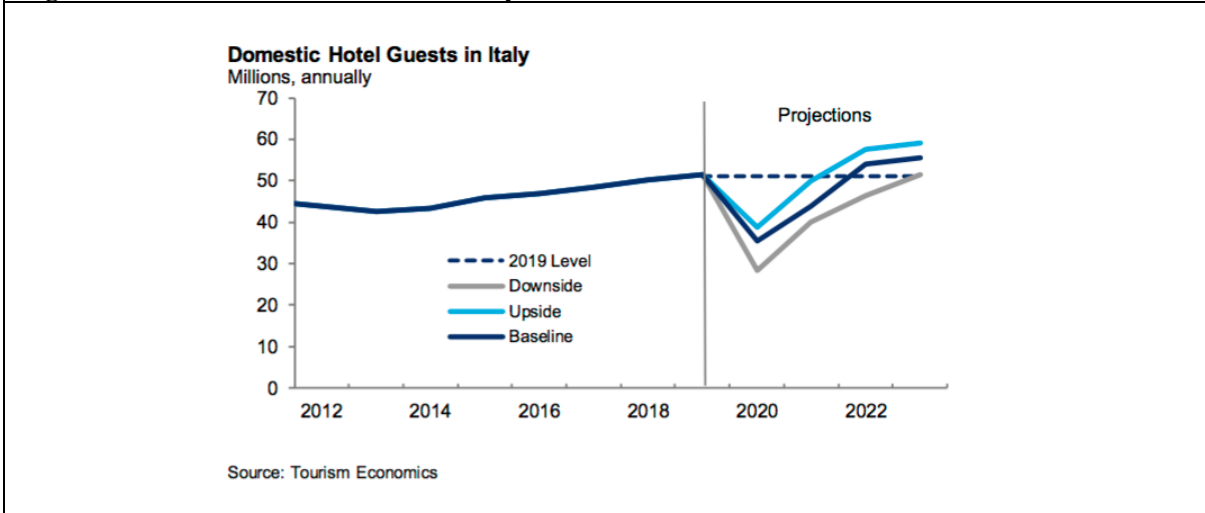
<sup>1</sup> La Sapienza University Rome, Italy, valeriaccoco23@gmail.com.

**Figure 1. International overnight arrivals to Italy**



Source: Tourist Economics, 2020.

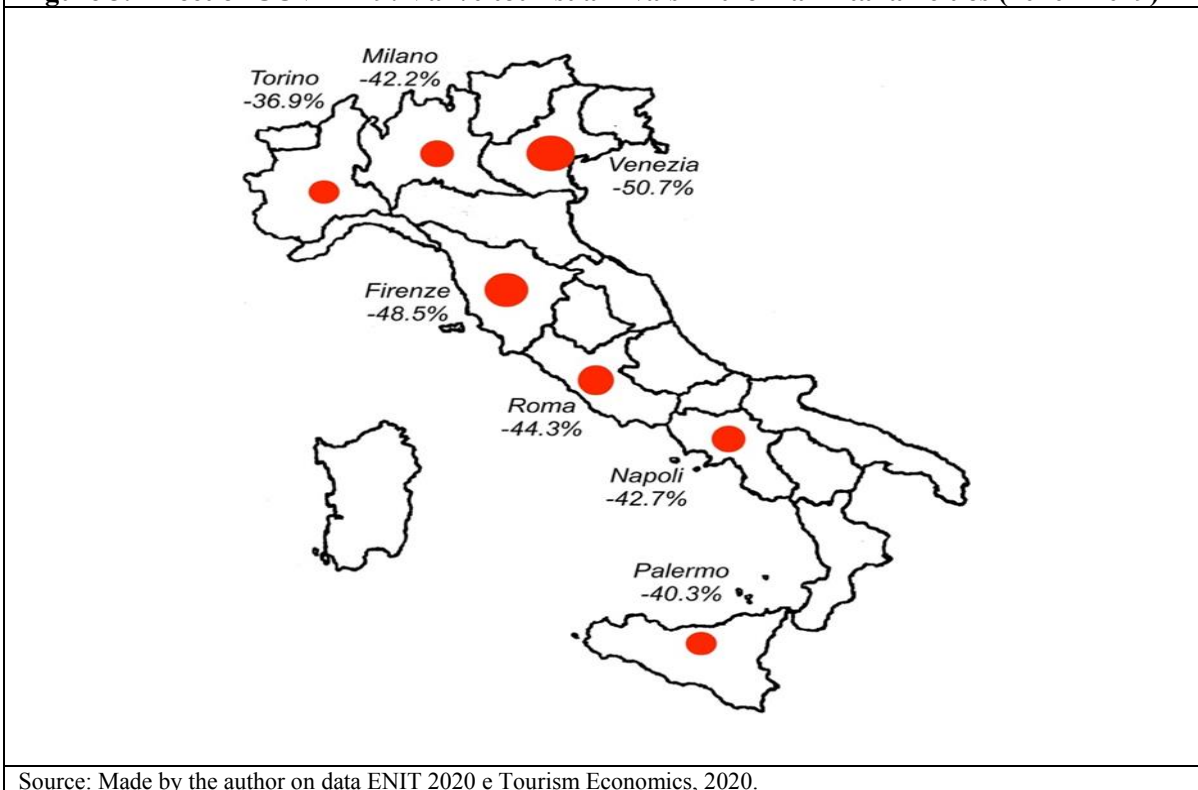
**Figure 2. Domestic Hotel Guests in Italy**



Source: Tourist Economics, 2020.

According to OECD (2020) “the economic consequences of the COVID-19 crisis are likely to affect regions within countries very differently, depending on their areas of economic activity and the policies in place to support workers and firms. Some regions may suffer more than others from containment and social distancing measures, facing initially a steeper economic recession and with larger shares of jobs at risk. The importance of tourism and local consumption – including retail stores and restaurants along with culture and entertainment – partially explains the relatively higher number of jobs potentially at risk in tourist destinations and metropolitan areas” (OECD, 2020).

**Figure 3. Effect of COVID-19: Var% tourist arrivals in the main Italian cities (2020 - 2019)**



The leadership of Italy in the tourism sector in the pre COVID-19 caused great suffering for Italy. In 2019, Italy had about 5 million beds and more than 4% of the employed were directly employed in tourism, of which about 1% employed in the hospitality sector. These data therefore provide an overview of the order of magnitude relative to the impact of the tourism phenomenon on the Italian territory in direct terms; to this, it had to add the indirect effect of tourism on the Italian economy and market, thus tourism was about the 13% of Italian GDP (Aa.Vv., 2019; Eurostat, 2019).

It is clearer that the pandemic had a strong impact in tourism on the Italian territory not only in the short time, but it will be - according to the forecasts of expert (ENIT, 2020; Tourism Economics, 2020) – also in medium and long times. In fact, in the main cities (Rome, Florence, Venice, etc.) it is possible to see a huge percentage variation of tourist arrivals from 2019 to 2020. According to Confturismo data (2020) in Italy was registered a cancellation of 200 million bookings in Italian accommodation facilities in the month of March, and around -70% in June. In economic terms this lack of tourists was approximatively estimated in 2.7 billion euros (Confturismo, 2020), referring just to the value of the cancellation of trips and overnight stays, and not also including the lack of tourist spending by travelers, which therefore would probably have led to doubling the loss.

## 2. Digital experience

The search for experiences and emotions by the tourist represent a consolidated reality of the new tourist demand trends analyzed till the pre COVID-19 studies (Gilmore, Pine, 2000; Hetzel, 2002). At the same time, before the pandemic emergency, the digital context in the tourism sector was considered something to improve. So, the resilience of tourism sector in the emergency situation mixed the two trends digital and experience, offering a new kind of tourist product: the online experience.

There are not a few cases in which the main world OTAs (i.e. Airbnb) offer online experiences. Yet, in the pandemic context that in a few months paralyzed the international tourist market, the creative spirit and resilience of tour operators supported by digital tools create new kind of tourist experiences that everyone could live from the sofa. Virtual tours and online experiences have provided populations in the period of the lockdown with a form of entertainment and have allowed the spread of the culture of distant places and traditions.

It is certainly difficult to imagine that these digitalized experiential proposals were able to limit the devastating economic impact caused by the pandemic in the 2020. Certainly, the new online experiences will not be able to make up for the lack of tourist and economic flows in tourist destinations. Indeed, the online experiences have probably focused the attention of tour operators in strengthening an alternative product through the use of digital and technology.

**Figure 4. Online experiences' scenario**



Source: Made by the author, 2020.

In this context, 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 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, in a safe way, comfortably from the sofa, and with a lower cost compared to a real experience. 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?

**Figure 5. Airbnb Online Experiences**



Source: Screenshot Airbnb Online Experiences (2020).

### 3. New form of tourism or new communication tool?

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 lived experiences (McCabe, Foster, 2006). Therefore, assuming digitalized tourism without including the movement of flows from one place to another would certainly tend to appear forced, 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. Therefore, this approach based on digital experience would completely overturn the concepts underlying tourism that necessarily imply a move from a residence place to another destination. 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.

By the way, some reflections emerge. Is it possible to talk about tourism from the sofa? Could the tourism sofa be considered as a possible tool for the future of tourism? Could the tourism sofa be considered as a new form of tourism when it destroys the main concepts of tourism itself? Could the tourism sofa negatively affect the traveler's motivation? Or instead, the virtual experience could spread the knowledge of new places by representing, rather than a form of tourism, a form of communication and information? Could it be a valid tool for tracing the foundations for a mental map of the tourist and to inspire the potential user of the virtual experience in the decision to travel in those places, when international travel will be possible again? In the context of sustainable tourism, the virtual experience could be translated into an alternative form of information to promoting unexplored places and new destinations? Could it favor the preservation of fragile territories, acting as a deterrent for overtourism? In the context of tourist accessibility, the use of an online experience could promote a path of awareness, thanks to the integration of all potential virtual users without barriers?

It is not easy to answer all these questions, but certainly, the pandemic phenomenon renewed interest in the digital world. Therefore, it could be interesting to reflect on the practical opportunity of the digital experience as a tool to re-start tourist and promote new tourist activities in the unexplored destinations,

respecting the safety code that implies a physical distance. In the effect, the digital experience could act not as a new tourist product, but rather as an information and communication alternative tool characterized by awareness, comprehension and empathy. In fact, the experience stimulates and involves the senses, it is linked to tradition and to what the flavors of the territories are best able to tell. 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. In this scenario, the online experience as an alternative tool of communication and information of territories could take the place of storytelling, representing an evolution of it. The online experience, in fact, would strengthen the basic elements of the narrative communication tool such as awareness, comprehension and empathy between the tourist and the territories and it could promote a wider dissemination of knowledge of 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; Tamma, 2002; Rispoli, Tamma, 1995); 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.

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Thanks to all our participants for their academic and social contributions.

**MIRDEC-GLOBECOS Rome 2020-2 Conference Proceedings, Full papers & Abstracts**

Masters International Danismanlik Arastirma Yayincilik  
Masters International Consultancy Research and Publishing

**ISBN: 978-605-80074-8-2**

MIRDEC Publishing

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**Publisher:** Masters International Danismanlik Arastirma Yayincilik  
Masters International Consultancy Research and Publishing

**ISBN: 978-605-80074-8-2**

MIRDEC Publishing

Address: Cinarlicesme sk. No: 21/13 PK: 34303 Kucukcekmece  
Istanbul Turkey  
Tel: +90 532 525 23 95

**Publisher certificate no: 35822**

**Publication date: 30 November 2020**

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