

Academic Research Paper

Improving tourism resilience through Cultural Routes. An exploratory analysis of the Italian case "Via Francigena"

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Abstract: Cultural routes have been recognized as effective social innovation projects to promote tourism development in marginal areas. However, the resilience of these routes, particularly in the face of external shocks and disruptions, remains a critical area of investigation. This study examines the role of cultural routes (as social innovation projects) in improving the resilience of these marginal areas after pandemic crisis. The research draws upon a combination of secondary data provided by ISTAT for assessing the marginality of the study areas and primary data on the impact of the "Via Francigena" project obtained through 32 interviews with managers of accommodation facilities (B&Bs, hostels, farm stays, hotels) located along the route itself. The findings of this study reveal that cultural routes offer significant opportunities for tourism development in marginal areas. Firstly, they serve as unique selling points, showcasing the cultural heritage and authenticity of these regions. Cultural routes provide a compelling narrative that attracts tourists seeking immersive experiences, promoting sustainable tourism practices and economic growth in these areas. Secondly, cultural routes act as catalysts for local community engagement and empowerment. By involving residents in tourism-related activities and initiatives, cultural routes foster a sense of pride, ownership, and entrepreneurship among the local population. The socio-economic benefits of the project determine a diversification of income sources and increase the resilience of communities located in the most marginal areas of the Apennines. However, a successful implementation of cultural routes to develop tourism and community resilience in marginal areas requires overcoming various challenges. These include limited resources, the need for a cultural change and the need for collaborative efforts among multiple

stakeholders, including government bodies, local communities, tourism operators, and cultural organizations. This research contributes to the understanding of cultural routes as a powerful tool for tourism development in marginalized areas. The findings provide valuable insights for policymakers, tourism planners, and destination managers in leveraging the potential of cultural routes as social innovation projects. By capitalizing on the cultural heritage of these areas, cultural routes can drive economic growth, improve community well-being, preserve environmental heritage and thereby increase the economic resilience of communities. In conclusion, this research enhances our understanding of tourism resilience through the case of Via Francigena, demonstrating its relevance as a model for other cultural routes. By identifying key strategies and factors that contribute to resilience, this study informs effective planning and management approaches for the long-term sustainability of cultural tourism destinations and the preservation of cultural heritage. Future research should focus on evaluating the long-term impacts of cultural routes on tourism development, assessing visitor satisfaction, and investigating the potential replication of these projects in different marginal areas.

Keywords: *Social Innovation; Cultural Routes; Cultural Tourism; Slow Tourism; Tourism Development; Tourism resilience.*

JEL Codes: M2; M3

1. Introduction

Cultural routes (CRs) have emerged as powerful tools for promoting social innovation and revitalizing marginal areas (Aquino et al., 2018; Altinay et al., 2016). Recent tourism literature (Splendiani et al., 2023) has demonstrated the multifaceted benefits of the cultural routes as a social innovation project for marginal areas. Firstly, the cultural route, like the Via Francigena, provides opportunities for economic development by stimulating tourism (Altinay et al., 2016), creating employment, and fostering entrepreneurship in local communities (Laeis & Lemke, 2016). Secondly, it enhances social cohesion by promoting cultural exchange, intercultural dialogue, and community engagement (Kato & Prozano, 2017; Cardia, 2018). Thirdly, the cultural routes contribute to the preservation and valorization of cultural heritage, promoting a sense of identity and pride among local residents (Jimura, 2016).

As highlighted by Forlani et al. (2021) several challenges and limitations must be addressed for the successful implementation of cultural routes. Among these factors, poor route design, weaknesses in attractiveness factors, lack of hospitality services (dedicated accommodation facilities such as pilgrim hostels), insufficient investments in basic infrastructure (signage, water access points, etc.), and lack of collaboration among different stakeholders, including public authorities, local communities, and volunteer organizations, are notable.

While the benefit of well-designed and managed CRs to local development is recognised, an assessment of their impact in terms of resilience, particularly in the face of external shocks and disruptions, remains a critical area of investigation.

Resiliency is the ability of a system (or a subject) to absorb disturbances and to learn and to adapt to the turbulence in order to grow and become more dynamic (Magnano et al., 2022; Pechlaner et al. 2018;

Walker & Salt, 2012, Plodinec, 2009). Increasing the adaptability of economic systems and the capacities of communities, and hence, the growth of resilience, are necessary conditions in the light of fluctuating economies and global threats (Martini & Platania; 2021; Berkes et al., 2008). As Becken (2013) clarified, the goal of resilience is to increase robustness in a dynamic sense, rather than to support stability.

This study explores the Italian case of the "Via Francigena" to investigate the potential of cultural routes for promoting tourism development and resilience in marginal areas. The Via Francigena, an ancient pilgrimage route connecting Canterbury to Rome, traverses diverse Italian territories. Some areas are developed for tourism and have world-famous cities (Rome, Siena, Lucca), while other areas (small municipalities in the Po Valley or the Apennines) are classified by ISTAT - Italian National Institute of Statistics - (2019) as marginal and/or non-touristic areas.

The case of the Via Francigena is particularly significant as a successful example that has managed to overcome these problems, creating significant flows of pilgrims with noticeable economic, social, and environmental impacts for both operators and the local population (Splendiani & Forlani, 2023).

Considering that the flow of tourists generated by the Via Francigena traverses both well-developed tourist areas and areas that are marginal from a tourism and/or economic perspective, the object of the study is twofold: firstly, understanding how the economic, social, and environmental impact of tourist flows generated by the Via Francigena varies across different areas; secondly, to assess the impact of Cultural Routes on the resilience of marginal areas and their capacity to respond to the pandemic crisis. Based on this aim, the article is structured as follow: in the second paragraph, we first introduce the perspective of social innovation, with a particular focus on the tourism dimension. Subsequently, we define the capabilities of cultural routes to activate economic and development and resilience within a territory. The third paragraph describes the methodology employed, while the fourth presents and discusses the findings that emerge from the empirical research. The article concludes by providing an overview of the main implications for future research and policy.

2. Theoretical background

2.1. Social innovation in tourism

A theoretical perspective that can be used to define the development, the organizational approach and the social and economic effects of the paths is represented by Social Innovation. As noted above, the paths not only produce economic values, relating to the development of services and structures addressed to the reception of tourists, but also have clear social implications. This "social role" emerges at least from a double point of view. On the one hand, in terms of territorial attractiveness, local communities contribute, with their traditions, habit and cultural heritage to the construction and animation of tourist destinations. On the other hand, in terms of governance, the peculiarity of the tourist development model of the paths lies in the ability to aggregate different actors (public and private, profit and non-profit), to generate inter-organizational architectures based on involvement and on the participation of entire local communities and to activate economic and social development in marginal areas. For these reasons they could be considered as social innovation practices, like other experiences emerged in the tourism industry (Aquino et al., 2018; Altinay et al., 2016; Malek & Costa, 2015). In this perspective, the cultural routes represent an archetype

of sustainable development capable of activating the participation of local community, the protection and improvement of the quality of life and the creation and diffusion of new entrepreneurship and employment.

It then becomes necessary to understand what is the meaning of social innovation and, subsequently, to establish whether and how this theoretical perspective can be applied to the tourism industry and, in particular, to the Cultural Routes. In order to establish the content of social innovation, it is possible to recall the definition proposed by the European Commission (2013) on the basis of which the Social Innovation is "the development and implementation of new ideas (products, services and models) to meet social needs and create new social relationships or collaborations. It represents new responses to pressing social demands, which affect the process of social interactions. It is aimed at improving human well-being. Social innovations are innovations that are social in both their ends and their means".

Considering the content of this definition, some aspects assume the role of distinctive components of Social Innovation.

The first element is represented by the output of social innovation which can be different as it can give rise to the creation of new products (goods, services and experience) and new processes that did not previously exist or that, although existing, they were unable to adequately satisfy certain needs. The second element is the goals of social innovation. It is aimed at identifying and satisfying social needs or social problems, considering with this term the needs of contemporary society, relating to both poverty, marginalization and exclusion conditions of specific categories of people, and to new social needs as sustainability and quality of life. The third element is the organizational methods through which social innovation initiatives are implemented which are essentially based on collaborative architectures and relationships. Finally, the last distinctive element is the typology of the actors. The proposed definition assumes that any subject, whether for profit or non-profit, public or private, can undertake Social Innovation initiatives, highlighting, also in this case, the existence of an extreme heterogeneity of solutions and the possibility of activating different organizational configurations.

Considering this definition, the dimension most evoked by the concept of social innovation is the social change in its different forms and levels of manifestation. Therefore, innovating means trying to identify and provide solutions to the new needs of people and communities; it means planning, developing and introducing transformations in the relationships between individuals and between institutions; it basically means redefining the aims and priorities of economic and social development.

This orientation towards social innovation was already established in the past, mainly in the academic field, with the foundation of various specialized research centers (Edwards-Schachter et al., 2012) but it has particularly spread especially over 2000s. Currently, on the one hand, there is the emergence of numerous initiatives launched by large sectors of society that seek to generate experiences of social innovation or that, at least, are inspired by this approach (Howaldt & Schwarz, 2010) and, on the other hand, there is a growing tendency by policy makers to consider social innovation as one of the main inspiring criteria of future economic and social development policies (for example, the creation of the OSICP - Office of Social Innovation and Civic Participation - and the establishment of the related fund, the SIF - Social Innovation Fund - in 2009, by the American government and the launch of the initiative called "This is European Social Innovation" in 2010 by the European Commission, which gave rise, in the following years, to the financing of different research projects, also within the 7th Framework Program, directly or indirectly assigned to the theme of Social innovation).

However, despite having similar characteristics, social innovation has not been adequately explored by tourism studies. The research carried out so far are limited and extremely heterogeneous, both in terms of approaches and contents. In particular, in order to define the main declinations that the concept of social innovation has in the tourism industry, three distinct research trajectories are generally identified in the scientific literature (Mosedale & Voll, 2017).

A first trajectory has a technological nature. In this perspective, the introduction and dissemination of new technologies, based on the sharing economy approach, allow the generation of new benefits and the satisfaction of individual and collective needs. This is the case, for example, of some online tourism platforms through which users can share their time and skills and offer their services to visit and stay in different locations, developing networks of relationships that tend to generate and self-strengthen over time (Walker and Chen, 2019). Or it is the case of other important online operators such as Airbnb which decided to introduce activities in its business model aimed at the enhancement of some territories and the regeneration of particular locations or architectural buildings. The value generated by such initiatives, undertaken with the collaboration of local communities, remains and is reinvested in the territories, assuming not only an economic but above all a social meaning (Presenza et al., 2021).

A second trajectory explores the issue of governance of participatory processes. The works included in this research field try to define new and adequate methods and approaches to involve local communities in decision-making processes aimed at planning and implementing tourism programs. For example, some studies underline the need for each region to create and support innovation contexts that are based on the characteristics of the territory and that provide mechanisms and tools for community participation, in order to guarantee the shared definition of scenarios, objectives and actions (Malek and Costa, 2015). Other works, on the other hand, try to define the contents and systems of incentives and monitoring of social innovations that are aimed at the reconversion, also in a tourism development perspective, of rural or forest areas (Secco et al., 2019).

Finally, a last trajectory, particularly relevant for the purposes of this work, considers social innovation as a process capable of activating dynamics of economic and social development consistent with the intrinsic characteristics of local communities, dynamics that counteract the impoverishment of the most fragile areas and increase their resilience to external shocks. These studies show how the collaboration between subjects with different nature and purposes, including the emergence of new actors guided by exclusively social aims, can cause positive effects on territories in terms of generating new products, creating new entrepreneurship and new employment, contributing to the regeneration of entire marginal areas. A study on some rural development initiatives shows how the joint activities of university, industry, government and civil society lead to the creation of new leisure activities, to development of new tourist destinations and the generation of new entrepreneurship oriented towards tourism (Nordberg et al., 2020). Other research shows how the social innovation process can generate new entrepreneurship and employment opportunities in the tourism industry in the context of the underprivileged community (Quandt et al., 2017). Finally, even in more advanced economic and social contexts, various researches show how the implementation of collaborative processes can both improve the management of natural resources and strengthen tourism activities from an environmental sustainability perspective (Batle et al., 2018), and constitute the prerequisite for the development of new business models oriented towards greater social sustainability through the inclusion of disadvantaged people in tourism activities (Alegre & Berbegal-Mirabent, 2016).

On the basis of these studies, it is therefore possible to argue that the perspective of social innovation, even if not adequately explored, can represent an effective field of research, able to explain the ways in which entire local communities are organized and able to activate bottom-up processes to produce new solutions and creative spaces (Trunfio & Campana, 2019).

2.2 Cultural Routes, local development, social value and resilience

Over the last few years there has been a constant growth in the forms of tourism that are included in the category of Slow Tourism (Losada & Mota, 2019; Guiver & McGrath, 2016; Conway & Timms, 2012; Heitmann et al., 2011; Fullagar et al., 2012). The characteristics of slow travel have been well identified by Lumsdon & McGrath (2011): slowness and time value; authenticity of the destination; travel arrangements and travel experience; environmental awareness and sustainability. From the tourists' side, this kind of tourism is considered able to offer authentic experiences and intensive emotions through the self-rediscovery (Soulard et al., 2019; Fernandes et al., 2012; Murray & Graham, 1997) transforming the holiday in a mental journey with representative values, meanings and expectations. A kind of tourist fruition that is clearly opposed to mass tourism, promoting the experience quality and the relationship with the host community (Oh et al., 2014; Dodds, 2012; Zago, 2012; Heitmann et al., 2011; Murray & Graham, 1997; Briedenhann & Wickens, 2004). A journey that includes sustainable consumption approach and contain various practices such as participating in local traditions, eating and drinking local products while exploring the area on foot or by bike (Guiver & McGrath, 2016).

Among the Slow Tourism perspective, that of the Cultural Routes is acquiring an increasingly important role (Denstadli & Jacobsen, 2011), in particular in the less touristic areas (Meyer, 2004). These initiatives, mainly aimed at the economic and social regeneration of peripheral rural areas (Briedenhann & Wickens, 2004), begin to spread to various areas of the world.

One of the first definitions of route as a tourist proposal can be referred to the concept of "Heritage route", developed by UNESCO on the occasion of the Meeting of Experts on Routes as a Part of our Cultural Heritage in Madrid in 1994: "A heritage route is composed of tangible elements of which the cultural significance comes from exchanges and a multi-dimensional dialogue across countries or region, and that illustrate the interaction of movement, along the route, in space and time".

Recognized as cultural resources, themed routes have been defined by the Council of Europe (2015, p. 15) as "routes crossing one or two more countries or regions, organised around themes whose historical, artistic or social interest is patently European; any route must be based on a number of highlights, with places particularly rich in historical associations".

The Cultural Routes are therefore consisting of a set of ancient roads that include art, architecture and religious sites under a unified theme (Fernandes et al., 2012). The CRs creating an intangible heritage made up of history, traditions and local culture (Cardia, 2018; Kato & Prozano, 2017; Jimura, 2016) with a great power to valorise both cultural and spiritual aspects of life (Lourens, 2007; Briedenhann & Wickens, 2004). They have the possibility of uniting territorial systems, often very different from each other (Vada et al., 2023), giving the possibility of combining more resources that independently would not have the capacity to generate the necessary critical mass to attract tourist flows (Murray & Graham, 1997).

Meyer (2004, p. 3) added that “by combining the attractions or a number of attraction providers into regional packages, thus creating greater access to a variety of products while at the same time increasing the product’s appeal, routes are important tourism development strategies”.

The tourism of the paths therefore represents an alternative and sustainable development practice, not only from an economics point of view but also from a social point of view, thanks to the involvement and promotion of the host communities (Cardia, 2018; Kato & Prozano, 2017; Jimura, 2016; Božić & Tomić, 2016).

Although the literature shows a general recognition of the potential of the Paths to generate value for the territory, there are few studies that, through empirical analyses, measure the multidimensional impact of these tourism enhancement initiatives.

According to Meyer (2004), the most relevant opportunities are linked to the development of services for pilgrims along the routes, capable of encouraging tourist spending and extending the average length of stay. Further advantages are linked to the possibility of providing additional employment and income, both directly and indirectly, through the creation of new business opportunities (Fernandes et al., 2012).

According to Božić and Tomić (2016) themed routes can play a pivotal role in encouraging local community to participate in cultural activities raising awareness of the local heritage importance.

Jimura (2016) in his exploratory study of the Kii mountain routes in Japan highlighted their impact on: management and conservation of heritage (environmental, religious and cultural); involvement of local communities (employment of workers, rediscovery of local culture, etc.); tourism development (increases in tourist flows, creation of new businesses).

From the analysis of the literature on Slow Tourism and Cultural Routes, it emerges that these projects (both top-down and bottom-up) can be classified as typical processes of social innovation, as highlighted in paragraph 2. Cultural routes are indeed initiatives of tourist-cultural promotion designed with social purposes, through collaborative and horizontal logics among actors of different nature (public, for-profit, non-profit), which activate economic and social dynamics that characterize slow tourism (Splendiani & Forlani, 2023; Losada & Mota, 2019; Guiver & McGrath, 2016; Fullagar et al., 2012). Like other slow tourism projects, cultural routes also increase the resilience of local communities (Splendiani et al., 2023; Sheldon & Daniele, 2017; Cheer & Lew, 2017). Slow tourism focuses on promoting local economies by encouraging visitors to engage with local businesses, artisans, and services. By supporting local enterprises, slow tourism helps diversify the economic base of an area, reducing its dependence on a single industry. This diversification enhances economic resilience, making the area less vulnerable to economic shocks or downturns. Slow tourism emphasizes sustainable practices, such as minimizing environmental impact, conserving natural resources, supports the development and maintenance of environmental infrastructure (including walking and cycling paths) and promoting eco-friendly transportation options. By prioritizing environmental sustainability, slow tourism helps protect the natural beauty and resources of an area. Preserving the environment is crucial for the long-term resilience of an area, as it ensures the availability of natural attractions and resources for future generations. Slow tourism promotes authentic cultural experiences and interactions with local communities. By encouraging visitors to immerse themselves in the local culture, traditions, and ways of life, slow tourism fosters social cohesion and mutual understanding between tourists and residents. This connection and engagement can strengthen the social fabric of a community and promote social resilience in the face of challenges or crises. Slow tourism values and

promotes the preservation of cultural heritage sites, traditions, and local knowledge. By recognizing and protecting the cultural heritage of an area, slow tourism contributes to the resilience of its identity and sense of place. This preservation of cultural heritage not only benefits local communities but also enriches the tourism experience for visitors seeking authentic and meaningful encounters.

In summary, slow tourism's emphasis on economic, environmental, social, and cultural resilience makes it a valuable contributor to the overall resilience of an area. By prioritizing sustainability, authenticity, and local engagement, slow tourism helps create more robust and adaptable communities that can better withstand and recover from challenges and disruptions.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research design and case selection

Given the explorative nature of this research, the methodological approach used is the case study (Eisenhardt, 1989; Yin, 1994). In particular, a multiple-case study analysis has been carried out because of its robustness and generalizability, greater than the single case study research (Baxter & Jack, 2008; Eisenhardt & Graebner, 2007). Moreover, this method has been previously adopted in hospitality studies (Paniccia & Leoni, 2019; Peters & Kallmuenzer, 2018). The multiple-case study method is proper to the aim of the research as it provides an in-depth description of the cases and seeks to advance the theoretical understanding of the phenomenon.

The experience studied in this article is the Via Francigena, a historical-cultural itinerary represented by a bundle of roads that connects Canterbury Cathedral to Rome, passing through England, France, Switzerland and Italy and following in the footsteps of ancient medieval pilgrims. The motivations behind the choice of this experience are manifold, encompassing both theoretical and empirical factors. In particular, the Via Francigena is the most important pilgrim way of Italy with the high number of pilgrims (17,092 credentials distributed in the 2018¹), as well as the second for number of hikers in Europe. Via Francigena is a "Council of Europe cultural itinerary" certified in 1994, the second in chronological order after the Santiago de Compostela Pilgrim Routes, certified in 1987.

Given its relevance, from a theoretical point of view the case of the Via Francigena has already been the subject of numerous studies that highlighted its virtuosity in management and performance perspective (Forlani et al., 2021).

The territories crossed by the Via Francigena represent contexts in which it is possible to assess the effects of policies and interventions of social innovation (such as the Via Francigena) aimed at activating dynamics of revitalization in rural areas. The initiative to revive the Via Francigena, along with other historical pilgrimage routes in Italy, emerged during the Jubilee of 2000 and is linked to the establishment of the European Association of the Via Francigena (AEVF). After more than 20 years, this project has achieved significant results: "By the end of 2020, AEVF networks 189 local authorities and 64 nonprofit organizations in England, France, Switzerland, and Italy, along with over 400 private actors in the hospitality, tourism, and technical equipment sectors."² It is therefore interesting to define

¹ www.percorsiditerre.it/Cammini-in-italia-ecco-tutti-i-numeri/ (Access 25/07/2023)

² <https://www.viefrancigene.org/en/about-us/> (Access 25/07/2023)

the economic and social effects that the construction of an attraction like the Via Francigena has been able to generate in the territories it traverses.

The following sections provide a detailed description of the data collection and analysis activities, as well as the specific methods that were adopted to ensure the validity and reliability of the results (Lindgreen et al., 2021).

3.2. Data gathering

The information used in the empirical investigation was of various types and derived from both primary and secondary sources. The main source consisted of in-depth interviews conducted with managers and owners of accommodation facilities located along the section of the Via Francigena that traverses Italy, comprising 45 stages spanning approximately 1,000 km. The key informants were identified by researchers from the list provided in the Via Francigena Official Guide.

The research protocol involved sending an email to all 270 accommodation facilities listed in the guide, explaining the purpose of the research and requesting their participation. The emails were sent in groups of 30, allowing for interviews to be conducted in subsequent steps. After the initial phase, a second round of emails was sent only to the facilities that had not responded positively to the first invitation. Overall, information was obtained from 32 accommodation facilities (11.8% of the total), as presented in Table 1, specifying their profile (type and nature of the activity) and their location (region and municipality).

The researchers did not continue with other interviews because no new information or issues emerging in the data were noticed, as the 'saturation point' had been reached (Guest et al., 2006).

Table 1. The hospitality subjects interviewed.

Accommodation Category	Company profile	N. interviews	Region	Municipalities
Camping	Profit	1	Valle d'Aosta (1)	Etroubles
Bed & Breakfast	Profit	13	Valle d'Aosta (1); Piemonte (4); Lombardia (2); Emilia Romagna (2); Toscana (3); Lazio (1)	Châtillon; Borgofranco di Ivrea (2); Santhià (2) Palestro; Mirandolo Terme; Piacenza; Berceto; Pontremoli; Santo Stefano di Magra; Lucca; Viterbo
Private room	Profit	2	Toscana (2)	Pontremoli; Camaiore
Guest houses	Profit	1	Toscana (1)	Altopascio
Farmhouse	Profit	1	Piemonte (1)	Sant'Ambrogio di Torino
Hostel	Secular non-profit	3	Valle d'Aosta (2); Piemonte (1);	Verres; Pont-Saint-Martin; Santhià;
	Religious non-profit	4	Toscana (4)	Aulla; Camaiore; Monteriggioni; Ponte d'Arbia
	Profit	2	Lazio (2)	Montefiascone; Campagnano di Roma
Holiday house	Religious non-profit	3	Toscana (1); Lazio (2)	Monteriggioni; Montefiascone; Viterbo
Hotel	Profit	2	Lazio (2)	Vetralla; Capranica

Source: Author elaboration

The individual interviews lasted from 30 to 60 minutes and were conducted using a structured guide developed by the researchers. The guide aimed to explore, in addition to demographic variables, the following themes: history/description of the business, significance of the Via Francigena (VF) for its establishment/development, analysis of the pilgrim profile, and perceptions regarding the benefits brought by the VF to the territory.

The interview protocol was developed based on theoretical considerations derived from a literature review, with the aim of identifying the main conceptual areas to analyze. It was progressively adapted according to the results obtained during the investigation, following a logic of interaction between

theory and empirical feedback (Gephart, 2004). Indeed, given the breadth and complexity of the topics addressed, open-ended questions were asked, allowing the interviewees to also delve into other relevant issues. This approach helped to clarify some of the initially vague concepts during the data collection process, leading to new insights that had not been considered before (Flick, 2004). The interviews were conducted by two authors between August and December 2020. To preserve all the acquired information, the interviews were recorded and subsequently transcribed. Additionally, during the meetings, the authors took notes to capture ideas and impressions that arose during the discussions. After each interview, the authors discussed the obtained information and revised the questions to include aspects that had not been previously considered but emerged during the meetings (Eisenhardt & Graebner, 2007).

During the research, information was also gathered from secondary sources. Initially, data were collected from articles on the Via Francigena published in national and international specialized journals, reports available on the website of the European Association of the Vie Francigene, which provided insights into the functioning of this pathway, and from websites dedicated to pilgrimage routes and social media groups of walkers. This preliminary study on pilgrimage routes allowed for a deeper understanding of the case under study and helped define the positioning of the Via Francigena in this context.

Subsequently, once the accommodation facilities were identified, additional secondary data were acquired. This included company information available on websites and social media profiles, as well as data related to the territories where the facilities were located, such as tourist flows and indicators of tourism demand.

The use of secondary sources was valuable as they provided essential background information to comprehend the context and reality of the businesses. The obtained information allowed for the identification of topics that required further exploration and the modification or introduction of new questions concerning aspects that had not been previously considered. This supported the authors in conducting direct interviews.

Following this approach, all the collected information from interviews and secondary sources that could lead to misinterpretations or highlight critical situations was shared with the interviewees to enhance the rigor of the research (Creswell & Miller, 2000).

3.3. Data Analysis

With this activity, a logical and conceptual reconstruction of the collected data and information was carried out, followed by the construction of an interpretative framework.

Firstly, an analysis of the interviews and documents from secondary sources was conducted. To increase the reliability of the research, each author independently read the interview transcripts and examined the information. On one hand, they identified the decisions and behaviors adopted by the individual accommodation facilities, and on the other hand, they identified the main changes that occurred in the territories, providing their own interpretation of events. In cases where one author's perspective differed from that of the other authors, the topic was further explored through additional verification of the correspondence between the information from the interviews and the data from secondary sources, following a triangulation logic (Eisenhardt, 1989).

Secondly, in order to assess the impact of the Via Francigena on the areas it traverses, the municipalities included in the study, where the individual accommodation facilities were located, were divided into four categories based on their degree of economic marginality and level of tourism. Economic marginality was determined by intersecting two different indicators: the list of depressed areas in 2001 (Yes: present; No: not present) and the classification of Italian municipalities according to the methodology of internal areas in 2014 (A: Pole; B: Inter-municipal Pole; C: Belt; D: Internal Area). Municipalities with at least one positive indicator were classified as marginal areas. In cases where the Via Francigena passes through peripheral areas of the municipality (hamlets), their additional level of marginality was evaluated using data from ISTAT regarding population and economic activities in the area. The level of tourism was obtained from the 2019 Tourist Classification of Italian Municipalities provided by ISTAT, which categorizes municipalities based on tourism density and assigns a score on a scale from 1 (low density) to 5 (high density). By cross-referencing these indicators, different types of municipalities emerge, each with its own characteristics, as presented in Table 2.

Table 2. The types of territories crossed by the Via Francigena.

	High tourism density	Low tourism density
Geographical peripherality and economic marginality	Type A	Type B
Geographical centrality and economic development	Type C	Type D

Source: Author elaboration

Finally, the last activity consisted of overlaying the results derived from the empirical research (primary and secondary data) with the territorial typologies identified along the Via Francigena route. This allowed for the definition of the economic, social, and environmental effects that, according to the operators' perception, the Via Francigena has generated for the territories and the accommodation facilities.

4. Findings and discussion

Below (Table 3), the ISTAT data describing the locations crossed by the Via Francigena under study and their classification based on the typologies proposed in this study (Table 4) are presented.

Table 3. The degree of economic and touristic marginality of the areas crossed by the Via Francigena.

N.	Location or hamlets	Municipality	Region	N° of inhabitants	List of depressed areas (2001)	Internal areas (2014)	Level of tourism density (1-5)	N° int.	Type
1	Etroubles	Etroubles	Valle d'Aosta	493	No	D	5	1	A
2	Châtillon	Châtillon	Valle d'Aosta	4,631	Yes	C	4	1	A
3	Verres	Verres	Valle d'Aosta	2,633	Yes	C	3	1	B
4	Pont-Saint- Martin	Pont-Saint- Martin	Valle d'Aosta	3,683	Yes	D	3	1	B
5	Borgofranco d'Ivrea	Borgofranco d'Ivrea	Piemonte	3,672	Yes	C	3	2	B
6	Santhia	Santhia	Piemonte	8,468	No	C	2	3	B
7	Sant'Ambrogio di Torino	Sant'Ambrogio di Torino	Piemonte	4,707	Yes	C	1	1	B
8	Palestro	Palestro	Lombardia	1,897	No	C	1	1	B
9	Miradolo Terme	Miradolo Terme	Lombardia	3,733	No	C	3	1	B
10	Piacenza	Piacenza	Emilia	103,942	No	A	5	1	C
11	Berceto	Berceto	Emilia	1,990	Yes	C	4	1	A
12	Previdé & Toplecca	Pontremoli	Toscana	(22) 7,182	Yes	B	3	2	B
13	Aulla	Aulla	Toscana	11,067	Yes	C	3	1	B
14	Ponzano Superiore	Santo Stefano di Magra	Toscana	(432) 7,182	Yes	C	3	1	B
15	Camaione	Camaione	Toscana	32,283	No	B	5	1	C
16	Valpromano	Camaione	Toscana	(200) 32,283	No	B	5	1	B
17	Lucca	Lucca	Toscana	88,824	No	A	5	1	C
18	Altopascio	Altopascio	Toscana	15,532	No	C	3	1	B
19	Monteriggioni	Monteriggioni	Toscana	10,033	No	B	4	2	C
20	Ponte d'Arbia	Monteroni d'Arbia	Toscana	9,070		C	3	1	B
21	Montefiascone	Montefiascone	Lazio	13,387	Yes	C	3	2	B
22	Viterbo	Viterbo	Lazio	67,681	Yes	A	4	2	C
23	Vetralla	Vetralla	Lazio	13,978	Yes	C	2	1	B
24	Capranica	Capranica	Lazio	6,442	Yes	D	1	1	B
25	Campagnano di Roma	Campagnano di Roma	Lazio	11,533	Yes	D	4	1	A

Source: Author elaboration

Table 4. The types of municipalities crossed by the Via Francigena.

	High tourism density	Low tourism density
Geographical peripherality and economic marginality	Type A: Etroubles; Châtillon; Berceto; Campagnano di Roma	Type B: Verres; Pont-Saint-Martin; Borgofranco d'Ivrea; Santhia; Sant'Ambrogio di Torino; Palestro; Miradolo Terme; Pontremoli; Santo Stefano di Magra; Camaiore; Monteroni d'Arbia; Montefiascone; Vetralla,
Geographical centrality and economic development	Type C: Piacenza; Camaiore; Lucca; Monteriggioni; Viterbo	Type D: No municipality

Source: Author elaboration

In Table 5, the main results obtained from the interviews conducted with the tourist operators of the analyzed locations are presented.

Table 5. The impact of the Via Francigena on the perception of tourism operators divided according to the type of area crossed.

Types of territories crossed	Economic implications;	Socio-cultural implications;	Environmental implications
Type A	• Territory awareness; • Increased flow of tourists (Variability: in some establishments, pilgrims constitute 60% to 90% of the clientele, while in others it ranges from 10% to 20%); • Support to the local microeconomy by boosting the revenue of small shops, bars, and restaurants; • Emergence of new B&B accommodations.	• Cultural exchange • Contribution to preventing depopulation of more peripheral areas	• Restoration and maintenance of trails; • Increased attention to environmental aesthetics in the areas traversed;
Type B	• Territory awareness; • Increased and, in some areas, emerged of tourist flows (Variability: in many establishments, pilgrims make up almost 100% of the clientele, in many it ranges from 40% to 60%, only in some cases they are a minority but not insignificant, around 10% to 20%); • Support to the local microeconomy by boosting the revenue of small shops, bars, and restaurants (a fundamental contribution for their existence); • Emergence of new activities: B&Bs, guesthouses, hostels, bars, new services (luggage transportation, river crossing), and dedicated small shops (bicycle repair and rental).	• Cultural exchange and enrichment and greater openness of the population; • Improvement of the hospitality of the local community towards tourists; • Increased appreciation of local resources by citizens; • Promotion of sports activities (hiking); • New residents in areas at risk of depopulation	• Restoration and maintenance of trails; • Increased attention to environmental aesthetics in the areas traversed;
Type C	• Territory awareness;	• Cultural exchange and greater	

- Increased tourist flow openness of the population;
(Variability: in some establishments, pilgrims are highly significant, accounting for 50% to 80% of the clientele, while in others they are marginal, ranging from 10% to 25%; for a minority, they are almost irrelevant (1%);
- Benefits for small businesses (grocery stores, bars, restaurants);

Source: Author elaboration

In general, it can be stated that the Via Francigena produces direct impacts in all the territories it crosses:

- 1) Creation of new tourist flows with the main motivation of the journey being the pilgrimage. This type of tourism has been referred to by interviewees as "sober" as walkers require essential services for their experience and while walking, they are moderate consumers. There are two main profiles of walkers: the pure pilgrim and the hiker. The pure pilgrim covers a long stretch of the Francigena (at least 15 stages), prefers spartan and shared hospitality structures (hostels), focuses on the pilgrimage itself, and consumes the essentials (food and beverages, medical care) with an average expenditure of 30-35€. The hiker covers shorter sections (from 3 to 14 stages), uses professional yet authentic and typical hospitality facilities (B&Bs, small hotels, farmhouse, etc.) as they seek a connection with the territory, social interaction, as well as comfort and privacy. Along the route, they take the time to discover the local culture and gastronomy by dining in typical restaurants at each stage point.
- 2) Increased awareness of the places crossed by the pilgrimage due to communication efforts by various stakeholders and word-of-mouth generated by the walkers.
- 3) Increased revenues for small businesses located in the historical centers along the route (bars, grocery stores, pharmacies), particularly at the stage points (restaurants, bars, tobacco shops, grocery stores, pharmacies, accommodations).
- 4) Socio-cultural benefits for the local community generated by the exchange facilitated by the slow travel and the passage of walkers. The interaction between pilgrims and locals has resulted in greater openness towards foreigners and diversity in all the communities crossed, leading to an increased capacity for hospitality within the entire territorial system.

In marginal areas type A, in addition to the previous four points, the following additional direct benefits are clearly perceived:

- 5) Improvement of the maintenance of the Francigena route and increased attention to the environmental quality of the places crossed. This attention is certainly directed towards the safety and healthiness of the route but is increasingly focused on aesthetics as well, as communities have recognized the importance of a well-maintained territory that "looks good."
- 6) Creation of tailored tourist services to meet the demand expressed by pilgrims. Firstly, new

non-profit organizations (and some for-profit cases) have been established for the management of hostels and new B&Bs have been developed in response to the increased influx of pilgrims. Secondly, existing profit and non-profit organizations in the area have expanded their services, such as hospitality and catering specifically for pilgrims (pilgrim menus, adapting parts of their operations to hostels, etc.), luggage transportation, bicycle repair and rental services, river crossing services, and so on.

In marginal areas type B, unlike those located in more developed areas, especially from a tourism perspective, interviewees also perceive significant indirect and induced impacts:

- 7) Cultural change among the populations in the areas crossed, with a progressive openness and increased hospitality of the citizens, contributes to the improvement of the territory's tourism offerings. A better tourism culture promotes not only an enhancement of services aimed at walkers but also prepares the area for other tourism offerings.
- 8) Creation of new jobs (hostel staff, B&B managers, etc.) and improvement of community income.
- 9) Preservation of small businesses (and/or non-profit organizations) that characterize the microeconomy of small towns with fewer than 1000 inhabitants (shops, bars, restaurants, etc.) that are no longer sustainable with local demand alone. The survival of these businesses is not only important for the number of jobs and related employment but also because it ensures the preservation of basic services for the community itself (bars, grocery stores, pharmacies, etc.).
- 10) Maintenance of the population in small villages crossed by the Francigena. The income generated by pilgrimage tourism has allowed some interviewees to keep their struggling businesses alive and continue living in challenging and marginal areas with high environmental quality. Among the interviewees, there are also individuals who, after discovering the places as walkers, decided to change their lifestyle and moved to depopulated small villages, opening B&Bs and related businesses catering to pilgrims.
- 11) Particularly in underdeveloped marginal areas prior to the introduction of the Via Francigena, a slow but significant process of economic and social revitalization has been observed. Without pilgrimage tourism, these areas would have embarked on an irreversible path of decline.

These effects, considered collectively, clearly demonstrate the overall benefit that a community and a locality can derive from the inclusion and location of their territory within the Via Francigena route. From a theoretical standpoint, considering the nature of such benefits (economic, social, and environmental) and, above all, the ways in which they are achieved (involving and activating a plurality of public and private, profit and non-profit actors), it is equally evident how the Via Francigena project exhibits the characteristics and can be considered a "successful" social innovation experiment.

Table 6. The impact of the Via Francigena on tourist flows in different types of accommodation facilities, categorized by area.

Type A			Type B			Type C		
N.	Accommodation category	% pilgrims	N.	Accommodation category	% pilgrims	N.	Accommodation category	% pilgrims
2	B&B	40%	8	B&B	50%	3	B&B	12%
1	Hostel	90%	7	Hostel	96,5%	1	Hostel	80%
0	Private room	---	1	Private room	100%	1	Private room	50%
1	Other (Camping, Farm house, ecc)	10%	1	Other (Camping, Farm house, ecc)	10%	0	Other (Camping, Farm house, ecc)	---
0	Hotel	---	2	Hotel	40%	0	Hotel	---
0	Guest houses	---	1	Guest houses	60%	0	Guest houses	---
0	Holiday house	---	1	Holiday house	10%	2	Holiday house	37,5%

Source: Author elaboration

Focusing on the impact on tourism from the analysis of the incidence of walkers on the total number of tourists in the interviewed businesses (Table 6), it is possible to observe that a successful pilgrimage-cultural route produces:

1. The establishment of dedicated hospitality facilities (hostels). The interviewed facilities state that they were specifically created because of their location on the Via Francigena and primarily accommodate pilgrims (at least 80% of guests), even in areas with a higher level of tourist development.
2. Essential support for small tourism businesses (B&Bs, hotels, guest houses) in marginal areas. Numerically, pilgrimage tourism represents between 40% and 60% of the total guests in such establishments. Additionally, walkers distribute themselves over a period from April to October, making a significant contribution to the deseasonalization of these businesses (otherwise, they would only operate during July and August).
3. The emergence of tourism facilities in areas previously unaffected by the phenomenon due to a lack of attractive factors capable of capturing other tourist flows.

5. Conclusions

The purpose of this study was to examine how the implementation of a tourism social innovation project contributes to the development of tourism and, consequently, enhances the economic, environmental, and socio-cultural resilience of the areas involved. Specifically, the objective was to assess whether and how the perceived impacts on operators vary as the project traverses territories with increasing levels of tourist and economic marginality.

From the interviews, a highly varied picture emerges, in which the Via Francigena is recognized as playing an important role, particularly in terms of its ability to enhance the conservation and

valorization of natural and environmental resources. Additionally, it enables the revitalization of peripheral areas that would otherwise be excluded from traditional tourist routes and at risk of abandonment and depopulation. The impact in terms of increased tourist flows and the emergence of new businesses linked to the passage of pilgrims, although observed, is less evident and becomes more pronounced as the area's marginality grows.

This conclusion represents a significant theoretical contribution as it allows for a relevant consideration of the level of knowledge and progressive construction of the concept of social innovation. In particular, the initiatives undertaken in each territory crossed by the Via Francigena take on all the typical characteristics of social innovation. In other words, it is as if each community self-organizes to respond to the increased flow of visitors that this project manages to attract to all territories, especially those that exhibit marginality compared to major tourist attractions. Therefore, this represents a first-level social innovation that produces its effects on a local scale. At the same time, these individual initiatives also serve as essential components of a comprehensive, second-level innovation that produces its effects on a much larger, national, and international scale, constituted, in the specific case, by the Via Francigena project. Based on such evidence, it is possible to argue that the Via Francigena represents an experiment in social innovation as it acts as an innovation platform, promoting development and incorporating widespread experiences and practices of innovation.

Another characteristic that is emerging is the importance of the role of the walker in shaping the supply system. As a result, key aspects of this type of hospitality are focused on human relationships, authenticity, and a connection to the territory. From a structural perspective, several key points emerge, such as the identification and recognition through symbols of the Camino, the respect for the simplicity of the offer, and the efficiency of services that can be useful to tourists (quick laundry service, packed breakfast preparation, proximity to religious and emergency facilities, etc.). Other important parameters in the selection and formation of the accommodation are related to more social and psychological aspects, such as openness to multiculturalism.

In summary, the overall results of this study reveal that cultural routes offer significant opportunities for the development of marginal areas and to increase their resilience to external shocks as happened with Covid 19. Firstly, they allow for the integration of communication among small territorial realities, showcasing the cultural heritage and authenticity of these regions. Cultural routes offer engaging narratives that attract tourists seeking immersive experiences, promoting sustainable tourism practices and economic growth in these areas. Secondly, cultural routes act as catalysts for the involvement and empowerment of local communities. By involving residents in tourism-related activities and initiatives, successful cultural routes foster a sense of pride, ownership, and entrepreneurship among the local population. This leads to greater community resilience and numerous socio-economic benefits. However, creating social innovation projects (cultural routes) for tourism development in marginal areas requires overcoming several challenges. These include limited resources, lack of infrastructure, and the need for collaborative efforts among multiple stakeholders, including government bodies, local communities, tourism operators, and cultural organizations. Additionally, effective destination management, marketing strategies, and sustainable practices are crucial for long-term success.

The findings of this study provide valuable insights for policymakers, tourism planners, and destination managers, demonstrating the potential of cultural routes as social innovation projects. By

enhancing the cultural and environmental resources of these areas, cultural routes can stimulate economic growth, improve community well-being, and preserve the cultural heritage of marginal areas, thereby fostering the development of a tourism economy. The benefits are most evident in Type B areas, where not only economic benefits but also social benefits, such as increased community openness and interaction with walkers, and environmental benefits related to greater attention to urban aesthetics and the natural landscape, are perceived.

Implications for trail managers are related to the design of routes, which should consider both aspects of tourist attractiveness and those related to community involvement. Lastly, there are implications for the tourism businesses involved in the project, who must understand the importance of participation and sharing in such projects, as the competitiveness of their offerings is closely linked to the competitiveness of the cultural route. Future research should focus on evaluating the long-term impacts of cultural routes on tourism development, assessing visitor satisfaction, and exploring the potential replication of these projects in different marginal areas.

Acknowledgments

None.

Conflict of interest

None.

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