

EUGEO 2021

8TH EUGEO CONGRESS ON THE GEOGRAPHY OF EUROPE
June 28 – July 1, 2021 | Prague, Czechia

Book of Abstracts



FACULTY OF SCIENCE
Charles University





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ID: 232

Session: Impacts of Covid-19 on Tourism: Territorial and Labour Implications

Do “tourists consume and destroy”? The perception of tourism before and during COVID-19 in Salento

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In the last 15 years Salento, a sub-region in the southern part of Apulia (Italy), has faced a significant tourist development, moving from being a destination for proximity tourism or holiday houses in one of the most appealing destinations at global level. Because of the sudden and unexpected notoriety, the governance of tourism in the area still shows, albeit not evenly, a wide range of criticalities. These can be interpreted using the lenses of the market laws, according to which, given an increasingly wider and diversified demand, territorial supply is not always appropriate. From a geographical point of view, such a poorly adequate/inadequate supply concurs to overcome territorial carrying capacity, determining an overtourism condition. As a consequence, among local community is likely to increase a negative perception of tourism and, in particular, of the tourists who “consume and destroy”, as a writing on a wall claimed in Lecce, the main city of Salento. In the face of such tourismophobia, also the positive effects of tourism on the economic development of Salento have to be evaluated. Such an aspect has become as more crucial as the COVID 19 spread. Indeed, in Summer 2020 the perception of local community towards tourist is dualistic: if, on one hand, negative perception remains – tourists as infection carriers – on the other hand, a salvific narrative of tourism is taking root with reference to the economic crisis following pandemic restrictions, also in the light of the regional marketing strategy based on the idea of Apulia as “safe destination”.

The case study will be carried on using two approaches: visual methodology and opinion mining methodology. They will be useful to answer to the research question: is tourism perception during the first phase of the pandemic similar through time, or can COVID-driven variations be detected?

Keywords: tourism, perception, Salento, covid