From Tourism as an Opportunity for Growth to the Discomfort of Overtourism: The Erosion of Public Space and the Need to Rethink Coastal Cities

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Abstract. The growth of tourism in coastal cities, once heralded as a catalyst for economic prosperity, has increasingly revealed its darker consequences in the form of overtourism. This study critically examines how unregulated tourism-driven urban development in Mediterranean Italian coastal cities of Taormina, Scilla and Tropea has led to the commodification and degradation of public spaces, social polarization, and environmental strain. Drawing from urban theory, historical context, and case analysis, the research explores the transformation of public space from a collective civic asset to a contested arena dominated by market interests. The paper argues that the pursuit of short-term economic gains has undermined urban habitability and inclusivity, necessitating a paradigm shift in urban planning and tourism policy. A rethinking of coastal city governance is urgently needed to prioritize public interest, spatial equity, and long-term sustainability.

Keywords: Sustainable Tourism · Overtourism · Territorial Vulnerability

1 Introduction

For some decades now, there has been an increasing awareness that tourism is indeed an opportunity for economic growth, but if it is not properly managed through suitable policies and measures, it generates the discomfort of the so-called Overtourism in the cities most affected by the phenomenon. The risks and critical issues are related to the urban load (consumption of resources, production of urban waste and emission of pollutants), the erosion of public space due to the progressive loss of land to be used for services and the optimization of flows. Hence the need to rethink cities.

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It is necessary, in many Italian cities, with regard to the tourism phenomenon, a rethinking and in some cases almost a healthy reversal of course.

In order to illustrate the criticalities and effects of an (uncontrolled) explosion of the phenomenon, some cases of southern Italy, near the Strait of Messina, on both shores, the Calabrian and the Sicilian shores, are analyzed.

The choice of the three cities, Scilla, Tropea and Taormina, depends on the fact that they are coastal tourist cities united by some basic characteristics:

- Geographical aspect: they overlook the Tyrrhenian Sea and the Strait of Messina channel;
- Morphological-orographic conditions: the three selected cities have a "touristy" historic centre located on a rocky ridge overlooking the sea and a part connected to the coast, with sandy shores and beaches equipped for bathing; they have a small port and seabed of particular naturalistic interest;
- Multi-seasonal tourist offer. As summer holiday destinations, they are affected by diversified flows of visitors thanks to the presence of factors that exert a strong territorial attraction, such as: coastal landscape, nature, historical-cultural heritage, identity connotation of the sites linked to anthropological/identity aspects, food and wine and elements of material culture.

2 In-Depth Study, Materials

Overtourism refers to the excessive number of tourists visiting a destination, leading to negative impacts on the environment, local communities, and the overall tourist experience. This phenomenon has gained significant attention in recent years, particularly in popular destinations like Barcelona, Venice, and Dubrovnik [1]. The rapid growth of tourism, driven by factors such as low-cost airlines and the rise of short-term rental platforms, has exacerbated the issue. "Se "tutti" vogliono godere lo stesso panorama, la stessa spiaggia bianca e deserta, lo stesso rifugio di montagna, "nessuno" potrà più goderne" (If 'everybody' wants to enjoy the same panorama, the same deserted white beach, the same mountain hut, 'nobody' will be able to enjoy it any more), summarizes Elena Granata well when speaking of a phenomenon that, if it gets out of control, risks plundering territories, emptying them of their most intimate and profound meaning. "Tourists by chaos," as one column titles it, highlighting how this also changes the essence of travel.

Key impacts of overtourism include such issues as environmental degradation, increased pollution, waste, and damage to natural habitats; social tensions such as conflicts between residents and tourists, often due to overcrowding and the strain on local resources and economic effects such as the rising living costs and displacement of residents [2, 3].

Doxey's Irritation Index, also known as the Irridex, is a model developed by George Doxey in 1975 to describe the changing attitudes of local residents towards tourists as tourism development progresses [4]. The model outlines four stages such as euphoria which refers to an initial excitement and enthusiasm about tourism, with residents welcoming tourists and the economic benefits they bring; apathy referring to residents who become more indifferent, viewing tourists as a source of income rather than guests, as

tourism grows; irritation which relates to how over time, the negative impacts of tourism become more apparent, leading to frustration and annoyance among residents; antagonism which is the final stage where residents may openly express hostility towards tourists, blaming them for various problems in the community [5].

Understanding these dynamics is crucial for developing sustainable tourism strategies that balance the needs of both visitors and local communities. Addressing overtourism requires a multifaceted approach, including better tourism management, regulation of visitor numbers, and efforts to distribute tourism more evenly across destinations. By models like Doxey's Irritation Index, policymakers and stakeholders can better understand and mitigate the negative impacts of tourism, ensuring a more sustainable and harmonious relationship between tourists and host communities.

3 Case Studies

3.1 Taormina

Taormina is the tourist destination by excellence in Sicily. It is an Italian municipality of over 10,000 inhabitants in the metropolitan city of Messina, on the eastern side of the island. It is known as the Pearl of the Ionian Sea and has always been one of the most well-known and loved places on the island by travelers from all over the world.

Characteristics of the territory, include culture, history and environment.Taormina boasts an enchanting position on the sea, a flourishing and luxuriant nature, a past capable of seducing and telling Greek myths, Arab influences, Spanish and Norman contaminations. It is a concentration of architectural, artistic, cultural and natural beauties in the heart of the Mediterranean, which has always inspired poets, writers, travelers, actors and internationally renowned celebrities.

The ancient history of Sicily has passed through here and Taormina has been able to jealously guard its signs, legacies, architecture. "The greatest masterpiece of art and nature", Johann Wolfgang Goethe defined Taormina in his "Journey to Italy" which contains the account of the Grand Tour that the famous German writer made in Italy between 3 September 1786 and 1788 [6]. Guy de Maupassant also spoke of Taormina in the following century. "Un homme n'aurait à passer qu'un jour en Sicile et demanderait: «Que faut-il y voir?» Je lui répondrais sans hésiter: «Taormine»". The historic French travel reporter emphasizes its beauty by highlighting its features, those of "un paysage où l'on trouve tout ce qui semble fait sur la terre pour séduire les yeux, l'esprit et l'imagination." [7].

The "Touristy" Urban Centre and the Neighbourhoods Most Affected

Tourism in Taormina has origins as old as the city, it is a phenomenon that has always grown over time until it has become the favorite destination of European nobles and artists of the nineteenth century and since 1900 becoming famous all over the world as the most elegant city in Sicily, the place where movie stars spent their holidays.

Corso Umberto I is the most important pedestrian street in the historic center and still the most affected by tourist flows. It is named after Umberto I of Savoy, King of Italy from 1878 to 1900, it was an integral part of the ancient Via Valeria that in ancient

times connected Messina with Catania. Even today, two imposing gates, Porta Messina and Porta Catania, mark the entrances.

Along Corso Umberto I there are several squares, which have always represented the meeting place and the pulse of numerous recreational activities, especially Piazza IX Aprile with a breathtaking view of the sea with Mount Etna in the background, but also Piazza Santa Caterina, an ancient Greek agora then the Roman forum, or the center of political and social activities of the Greek-Roman civilization, overlooked by Palazzo Corvaja, owned by the municipality, used as a venue for exhibitions and cultural events, which in 1411 was the seat of the Sicilian Parliament and in the kingdom of Sicily elected the King. Although the tourist flow in the town generally decreases in winter, around February, the main street is confirmed all year round as a lively pedestrian promenade full of cafes, restaurants, and shops. However, it becomes almost unsustainable to travel in the summer months, especially close to August, when the tourist flow and concentration increase even for the arrival of groups coming in the same day such as those of cruise ships.

A few steps from Corso Re Umberto I, in an extraordinary panoramic area from which you can admire the bulk of Mount Etna and the Ionian Sea, is the Greek-Roman Theater "situated in such a wonderful position that there is probably no other comparable place in the whole world" [7] (Fig. 1).



Fig. 1. Taormina. Teatro Greco Romano with views of the sea and Mount Etna. Credit: Clara Stella Vicari Aversa

In the seaside part, Isola Bella is one of the symbolic places of Taormina, a very small island in a nature reserve in a protected area, full of exuberant vegetation between rock and transparent sea. A small islet, known as the Pearl of the Mediterranean for its unique characteristics, where it is easy, at certain times, to be able to walk from the beach, being connected to it by a narrow strip of land that is, depending on the timetable, more or less covered by the tides (Fig. 2).

Tourist flows, always growing steadily for the city, have increased after covid, also amplified by filming and TV series such as "The White Lotus 2", shot entirely in Taormina during covid and which brought and then multiplied US tourism. This has led many hotels to reposition themselves and some of the most historic have been purchased by international luxury groups, such as the Four Seasons Hotel group which bought the



Fig. 2. Taormina. Isola Bella, with umbrellas all the way on the strip of land that connects it to the mainland. Credit: Clara Stella Vicari Aversa.

San Domenico hotel and LVMH which bought the Grand Hotel Timeo and the Villa Sant'Andrea.

In line with this trend, even along Corso Re Umberto, especially around Piazza IX Aprile, an unstoppable race seems to have started between luxury companies to carve out a space. If on the one hand it is celebrated as an extremely positive fact, on the other, even just walking through the streets of Taormina, whose gait has always been a continuous immersion in beauty, lately, on some days or months of the year risks becoming difficult, devoid of the authenticity that distinguished it, becoming almost a hellish path.

Roads and Connections

The nearest airport is Catania Fontanarossa, the fifth busiest airport in Italy, from which it is easily connected by bus and train. Another airport that can guarantee the connection is in Reggio Calabria, beyond the Strait of Messina reachable by 40 km of motorway or railway. You can get to the city by car or bus (there are various lines from the main cities in the surrounding area) via the motorway exit of the same name on the A18 Messina-Catania motorway. The city has a railway station, the Taormina-Giardini station, one of the main stations of the Messina-Syracuse railway.

Among the other infrastructural endowments, there has been talk of a tourist port for years and there would be foreign groups that would look with interest at the initiative of the Municipality of Taormina. The attention, as is understandable given the enormous attractiveness of Taormina, goes beyond European borders.

Dynamics of Tourism

Much of the area of tourist interest is concentrated around Corso Re Umberto I, the main street of the city, which is a pedestrian area and therefore can be visited on foot.

If in some months Taormina seems to govern tourism well, in others it suddenly appears unprepared for overtourism, becoming more and more urgent to further strengthen public services, those of proximity, adapting the mobility system to the diversified demand for travel. The municipal administration, in recent months, in order to cope with ever-increasing tourism, has made several changes and innovations regarding the use and deseasonalization of the shows or the construction of new parking lots.

In some months, the number of visitors exceeds the city's carrying capacity, causing problems such as overcrowding of streets, squares and means of transport. There is an increase in the cost of living and pressure on rents. The risks of damage to the historical and natural heritage are increasing, but also a saturation of public services and a distortion of the local identity. It is no longer conceivable to overload the city only in certain months of the year but, on the contrary, also to avoid an urban load oversized compared to the capacity of the historic center, it seems inevitable to have to deseasonalize, reduce hit-and-run tourism, but also identify new strategies. In too many Calabrian and Sicilian cities, mass tourism is risking transforming and obscuring precious little pearls on the sea like Taormina. Several villages, once authentic, are now facing the challenges of out-of-control tourism, with an exponential increase in B&Bs, second homes for tourists and a progressive loss of the local population. This is the case of the phenomenon taking place in ancient villages such as Cefalù, between Messina and Palermo, investigated by Marcello Panzarella, so indignant as to call it "a city for sale", describing the dark side of mass tourism. "The so-called and trumpeted new plan of the historic center… Consists of the simple introduction of adjustments to changes in legal regulations… But it is totally devoid of a vision, of a purpose of service to the community of inhabitants, whose existence is forgotten. There is no project in it, just as there is none in the general urban plan". Panzarella, who already in the 80s, together with a group of young people, friends and intellectuals, including the sociologist Carlo Doglio and the architect Pasquale Culotta, found themselves reasoning together on the corrosive drift of tourism in Cefalù, argues that if Cefalù does not have an urban plan equipped with adequate infrastructural provisions (roads, rest areas, escape routes, intermodal connections) and is oppressed by overtourism the responsibility lies with the political and administrative choices of the government junta, and that a powerful commitment to description and knowledge of the sack of Cefalù is needed, preliminary to any act aimed at recovering what can now be feared irretrievable [8].

The intensification of tourism flows poses complex spatial challenges that touch on sustainability and the quality of life of residents. There is a need to explore sustainable management models that can mitigate the impact of mass tourism and preserve the cultural and environmental resources of destinations [9]. It is necessary not only to ensure that Taormina acts in time not to suffer the sack of cities like Cefalù but also that it tries to start becoming a model of response to the increasingly frequent phenomena of overtourism. A key issue, but also discussed, is the adoption of an entrance ticket as a regulation measure, already active in the parking lots in Taormina for cars and buses. Above all, strategies are needed to be able to transform Taormina into a smart city to be able to monitor tourist flows. This is also to maintain control of pollutant and CO2 emissions, the production of urban waste and the water cycle, as well as their reuse. These also seem to be the strategies in which the city seems to want to move, whose goal, as underlined by the Councilor for Tourism Jonathan Sferra, is to become an example of a destination attentive to the environment and the quality of life, in which technology to monitor flows can become a fundamental ally to balance tourism and livability. Taormina could become a model of sustainable tourism, aiming to extend the offer even outside the summer season, also involving neighboring municipalities with the "Area Pact" and

developing alternative tourist routes. It is necessary to work by analyzing and cross-referencing challenges and solutions to balance the influx of visitors with the livability of cities.

3.2 Scilla

In Calabria, Scilla is a few kilometers from Villa San Giovanni (bridgehead for the connection with Messina, then Sicily). Known for the myth of Scylla and Charybdis, it is closer to Bagnara Calabra (a maritime center with a port) and develops along the Costa Viola. It is morphologically similar to Tropea, but has a small fishing village called Chianalea, very characteristic, and a small port.

Characteristics of the Territory, Between Culture, History and Environment
Scilla represents the synthesis of history, myth and nature. It reserves for the visitor the story of a historic place through the particular morphology composed of urban fabrics that follow the orographic trend opening towards the coastal landscape, the panorama of the Strait of Messina and the archipelago of the Aeolian Islands, with the last slopes of the Aspromonte side behind it. The coast, closed between the vineyard terraces of the Costa Viola and the charming village of Chianalea, is among those most reached by the inhabitants of the neighboring cities and by tourists who flock to the beach of Marina Grande for 8 months a year. The crystal-clear water covers seabeds rich in biodiversity [10].

Classification of the Territory and Relations with the Context
Scilla is located on the rocky spur of the same name, the Scillèo Promontory, jutting out over the Strait of Messina, which rises north-east of the capital [11] at 113 m above sea level. The municipal territory occupies an area of 44.13 km^2, mainly for agricultural use and only minimally urbanized. As of 2023, there were 4,513 inhabitants [12].

Peculiarities: Scylla, Between History and Myth
The imposing cliff houses the Ruffo Castle, while the stretch of water that separates the Calabrian side from the Sicilian one [13] was the scene of the events of Ulysses and his crew on their way to Ithaca, grappling with the anthropophagous monster, Scylla, capable of grabbing and devouring six men, and the force of the whirlpool, Charybdis created by Zeus, capable of swallowing anything. Pirate assaults have marked these waters since the fifth century BC, such as the Tyrrhenians, skilled sailors, while there are widespread signs of the presence of the Greeks and Romans. The village of Chianalea houses the fishermen's boats in the basement, the port houses the swordfish used since ancient times for the hunting of swordfish, the "touristy" urban centre and the neighbourhoods most affected. The points of greatest tourist interest are the promenade named after Columbus, located in the Marina Grande -which in summer is reached by thousands of daily users and which is a meeting place until late at night-, the marina area and Chianalea with the internal axis that can be traveled on foot along Via Annunziata. The panoramic street of San Giorgio is the one that skirts the upper part of the city [14]. Four different parts of the territory define the urban layout of Scilla, characterized by their own social connotation. The San Giorgio district in which the church of San Rocco, patron saint

of Scilla, and the town hall are located, which encloses the historic center, from Piazza San Rocco to the ancient town of Bastìa, with the characteristic terraced houses that overlook steep alleys and which still retain some typical architectural elements of the place, including the lowered arch and the circular window. Jeracari, on the other hand, completes the upper part of Scilla and is exclusively residential. Marina Grande, which houses the sixteenth-century church of the Holy Spirit, acts as a backdrop to the coastline between the Belvedere Morselli and the gigantic fortress of the Ruffo Castle. Chianalea (in Chjanalèa) or Plain of the Galleys, from the name of an ancient swordfish fishing boat, is an ancient seaside district with typical alleys and houses lying on the sea and is included in the list of the most beautiful villages in Italy. Seasonal attractions, events and user base. For Scilla, the summer season represents the time when the beach of Marina Grande welcomes many tourists interested in the sea but also in the villages of Chianalea and San Giorgio. The food and wine tradition, linked to swordfish, takes shape in the numerous restaurants, typical bars, street food activities and in the refreshment places of the bathing establishments. The Ruffo Castle hosts the Scilla Jazz Festival, an event of great appeal for its artistic and cultural value, and is home to various public initiatives, and exhibitions. Naturalistic experiences can be enjoyed in Punta Pacì, a place with crystal clear and deep waters, ideal for diving enthusiasts and divers specialized in diving in the depths of the Strait; Cala delle Rondini is a difficult to access area, reachable by boat, it preserves an uncontaminated environment. A little further north, there are the beach of Favazzina and the Tremusa Caves, covered with marine fossils, of presumed karst origins.

Roads and Connections

The nearest airport is that of the Strait based in Reggio Calabria, but that of Lamezia Terme can also be reached; another airport that can guarantee the connection is that of Catania if the tourist chooses to continue from there by other means (train, bus or car) to Messina ferrying from Villa San Giovanni. Visitors can arrive in the city mainly via the A2 motorway exit of the same name and from the lower Tyrrhenian state road, which has been affected several times by landslides due to the widespread hydrogeological risk affecting the area. The city has a railway station; the trains that stop there are almost all regional, originating in Reggio Calabria, Paola or Cosenza, Rosarno, Lamezia Terme. Other infrastructural features include the Vico II Spirito Santo tourist-fishing port with 100 berths: it houses fishing boats and, during the summer, small and medium-sized pleasure boats.

Dynamics of Tourism

Much of the area of tourist interest is concentrated on the seafront, so it can be visited on foot. There is a pedestrian area in Chianalea. To go up from the seafront to the upper part there is a public lift. By car you can get around, there is a large area to park is the promenade with paid parking. Some local bus companies make scheduled stops departing and arriving in the city. There are a dozen restaurants by the sea between the marina and Chianalea, and as many kiosks in the seasonal beaches. A dozen hotels and 30 B&Bs [15], as many apartments offered with the AirBnB formula [16].The tourist-accommodation activities are unable to meet the demand for accommodation, so much so that the historic buildings in the center, even if they are not perfectly restored, are rented to tourists weekly

with on-site reservations and are difficult to census through search engines dedicated to the supply/demand of tourist accommodation and short-term rentals. To improve the tourist offer (Hassan et alii, 2024) [17] and the ordinary management of the town, it is necessary to network the different locations and sort the flows to the external areas, in the surrounding area the cities that can be visited in Calabria are Reggio Calabria, Tropea and Bagnara and the system of foothill centers of Aspromonte, while in Sicily the cities of Messina and Milazzo are destinations of tourist interest; at a greater distance we find Capo d'Orlando, Taormina and Giardini Naxos, as well as Catania and the system of Etna centers. Implementation and urban transformation projects in progress. Chianalea has been the subject of widespread urban recovery interventions. The current General Regulatory Plan approved in 2005, is adapted with the amendments and limitations imposed by art. 65 of Regional Law no. 19/2002, has provided for three implementation plans that intervene only on the housing stock and historical recovery: Recovery Plan for the "A1" area in the Chianale Scilla district; Recovery Plan "A2" Spirito Santo Scilla district; Recovery Plan "A3" San Giorgio Scila district. Many private interventions have involved the recovery and maintenance of individual buildings which, if on the one hand, have contributed to improving urban quality, on the other hand have encouraged the process of gentrification [18] by replacing the old residents dedicated to fishing with seasonal users, almost always housed in short-term rental accommodation.

The supply of small accommodations rented even weekly has increased dramatically, the Structural Plan in Associated form, provided for by the Regional Urban Planning Law 19/02, is still being developed, consequently the city is unprepared to govern the process of overtourism by strengthening public services, those of proximity, adapting the mobility system to the diversified demand for travel [17] (Fig. 3).



Fig. 3. Borgo di Chianalea. Credit: Clara Stella Vicari Aversa, Celestina Fazia

The lack of an urban planning tool and an environmental monitoring plan (linked to the SEA, Strategic Environmental Assessment) does not allow us to assess the effects induced by a growing demand for housing, which does not correspond proportionally to the reorganization of network infrastructures, primary and secondary urbanization works. The result is an urban load that is oversized compared to the capacity of the

coastal center of Scilla, a lack of control of pollutant and CO2 emissions, the production of urban waste and the water cycle, as well as their reuse.

3.3 Tropea

Tropea, located on the renowned Costa degli Dei in Calabria, is a city that represents a perfect synthesis of natural beauty, historical heritage and cultural richness. Perched on a rocky promontory overlooking the Tyrrhenian Sea, Tropea offers breathtaking views that embrace the Aeolian Islands, the Gulf of Gioia Tauro and the immense blue expanse of the Mediterranean [14]. Its golden sandy beaches, lapped by clear waters, are framed by lush Mediterranean vegetation, which adds a touch of authenticity to the landscape. The historic center of the city is a veritable treasure trove of architectural treasures: narrow, winding alleys lead to hidden squares and noble palaces dating back to the 17th and 18th centuries, many of which are decorated with family coats of arms and loggias that tell a story of prestige and influence [19].

The city is deeply linked to myth and history. According to legend, Tropea was founded by Hercules on his return journey from the Pillars of Hercules. This tradition, although mythical, underlines the strategic and symbolic importance that the place has had over the centuries. The Church of Santa Maria dell'Isola, located on a rocky outcrop, is an iconic symbol of the city and represents a meeting point between spirituality and nature. Other notable monuments include the Norman Cathedral, which houses important works of sacred art, and numerous smaller churches, which testify to the religious fervour of the local community over the centuries.

Tropea is also one of the most visited destinations in southern Italy, recording over 500,000 tourists in 2023 [20]. This success, while confirming its international attractiveness, raises concerns related to overtourism. During the summer months, the resident population of around 6,000 multiplies exponentially, putting significant pressure on local infrastructure and services. The streets of the historic center, designed for limited foot traffic, are often congested with intense tourist flows. The lack of parking spaces and the lack of an integrated public transport system further aggravate the situation, creating inconvenience for both residents and visitors. This tourist pressure is also reflected in basic services, such as waste management, water consumption and accommodation capacity. During the high season, waste production grows exponentially, putting the urban collection and disposal system in crisis, which is often inadequate to cope with seasonal overload [21]. In addition, coastal erosion, aggravated by intensive beach use and climate change, poses a real threat to the territory. At the same time, the proliferation of unregulated short-term rentals has encouraged a process of gentrification: many historic buildings have been converted into accommodation facilities, often without adequate renovation interventions, altering the social and cultural fabric of the historic center [22]. Events such as the Tropea Blues Festival and the Red Onion Festival represent an opportunity to enhance local traditions and promote the food and wine of the area. The red onion of Tropea PGI is a symbol of Calabrian excellence and a strong identity element, which contributes to strengthening the image of the city as a quality tourist destination. However, the lack of strategies to seasonally adjust tourism limits the potential of these initiatives, concentrating flows in specific periods and leaving the city less active in the winter and spring months [23]. The need to distribute tourist flows

throughout the year is one of the most urgent priorities for Tropea. The introduction of new attractions or events that enhance cultural and natural heritage during less frequented seasons could help reduce pressure on the environment and infrastructure. For example, hiking routes that explore the surrounding rural areas or cultural events related to local history and myths could attract visitors even in the cooler months. In addition, collaboration with tour operators to promote travel packages in the low season would represent an additional lever to mitigate the problem of overtourism. From the point of view of planning, the Municipality of Tropea has already started important interventions, such as the restoration of the Church of Santa Maria dell'Isola and the redevelopment of the seafront. However, the effectiveness of these interventions depends on the ability to integrate them into a broader and more coordinated strategy. The recent Municipal Structural Plan (PSC) includes measures to promote sustainable mobility, including the introduction of electric shuttles and the creation of cycle paths. However, it is crucial to ensure that these initiatives are accompanied by constant monitoring to assess their impact and optimize their results [24]. Another crucial aspect concerns raising awareness of the local community and visitors on the importance of environmental sustainability. Education and awareness campaigns, together with incentives for virtuous practices, such as waste recycling or the use of ecological means of transport, could help improve the management of tourist flows and preserve the authenticity of the territory.

Therefore, Tropea is an emblematic example of the challenges and opportunities related to contemporary tourism. Preserving its landscape and cultural uniqueness requires integrated strategic planning, which balances economic development with environmental and social sustainability. Only through a long-term vision, which actively involves institutions, tour operators and local communities, will the city be able to consolidate its role as a destination of excellence, ensuring a better quality of life for residents and an authentic experience for visitors (Fig. 4 and Table 1).



Fig. 4. Tropea in high season: between coastal charm and overtourism challenges. Source: Alamy Stock Photo – https://www.alamy.com/stock-photo/tropea-italy.html

Table 1. Case studies. Credit:Celestina Fazia, compiled: C.Fazia, C.Vicari Aversa e G.F.G. Catania

Criteria	Cities, case studies					
	Taormina		Scilla		Tropea	
Urban area "touristified"	Medium in relation to 13.13 km^2 of municipal surface		Minimal in relation to 44.13 km^2 of municipal surface		Minimal in relation to 3.66 km^2 of municipal surface	
Resident population	10.465 to 2024		4.513 to 2023		About 6.000 to 2023	
Tourists per season	0–70.000	70.000–1.300.000	0–5.000	5.001-–20.000	0–20.000	20.001–250.000
1 - Autumn		x		x	x	
2-Winter	x		x		x	
3-Spring		x		x	x	
4-Summer		x		x		x
Greatest seasonal increase compared to resident population	□1 □2 □3 X 4		□1 □2 □3 X 4		□1 □2 □3 X 4	
Most lacking type of public service	Parking Undersized connections		Parking Local public interest		Public transport and parking	
Actual offer of tourist infrastructure (qualitative-quantitative performance)	High		Low		Low, insufficient for peak tourist demand; predominance of unregulated short-term rentals	
Misure previste dall'amministrazione per la sostenibilità ambientale	Low		Very low		Recent interventions: electric shuttles, seafront redevelopment, cycling paths. However, measures remain limited compared to increasing tourist flows	
Emerging issues in managing tourist flows	Traffic pressure at some internal road junctions Shuttle bus services exist but are insufficient		Unresolved road network nodes Lack of shuttle bus services		Congested narrow streets in the historic centre Parking shortage Lack of integrated public transport	
Sectoral criticalities (priority order, from 1 to 5)	- Urban congestion (1) - (In)urban safety (4) - Environmental pollution (2) - Vehicular traffic (3) - Insufficient services (healthcare, culture, leisure, sports) (5)		- Urban congestion (2) - (In)urban safety (5) - Environmental pollution (1) - Vehicular traffic (3) - Insufficient services (4)		- Urban congestion - (In)urban safety (2) - Environmental pollution (1) - Vehicular traffic (3) - Insufficient services (4)	

3.4 Overview of the Three Case Studies

3.5 Methods. Irridex Concept (Doxey's Irritation Index) and Launch of Interviews

The current paper used the survey as a means of primary data collection which was applied online to Romanian and Italian markets and which got a response rate of 42

respondents of which 24 respondents are of Romanian and 18 respondents are of Italian origin. All respondents are aged over 18 years old and the period when the survey was applied was during the month of January 2025. The survey comprised 16 close and open-ended questions referring to overtourism introductory questions for defining overtourism terminology; visitation of Italian cities background and context; particular questions referring to the case studies of Tropea, Scilla and Taormina towns; overtourism analysis questions (overvisitation concerns, authenticity loss); strategy and measures to mitigate overtourism (mitigation practices, role played by decision-makers) and concluding questions referring to the willingness to collaborate with stakeholders to address overtourism challenges. The survey is both addressed to tourists as well as to residents from the three analyzed case studies of Tropea, Scilla and Taormina. For the resident respondents it is meant to highlight the visitation stage according to Doxey's Irridex concept. For the latter Irridex case studies few residents have provided their response so that there's barely 1–2 residents providing answers which comes as a study limitation.

4 Discussion of Results

The survey results reveal that, for the introductory questions related to the general awareness of overtourism's challenges and diverse patterns of visitation to Italian destinations, the majority of respondents associate overtourism with its negative impacts on local communities (88%). While most participants are at least somewhat familiar with the term, only a third (33%) are highly knowledgeable about it. In terms of travel habits, 50% of respondents visit Italian cities occasionally, with a smaller yet significant portion visiting either rarely (24%) or frequently (26%).

For the questions related to recent visitation of Italian cities, the respondents indicated Bergamo, Venice, Florence, Verona, Taormina, Sicily, Rome, Milano, Bologna showed that 85.7% of respondents noticed overcrowding or infrastructure strain, while 9.5% did not, and 4.8% were unsure. These findings highlight significant overtourism challenges in iconic destinations, emphasizing the urgent need for sustainable tourism solutions.

Awareness of the case study cities varied significantly, with low recognition for Tropea (68% not aware) and Scilla (61% not aware), while Taormina stood out with higher familiarity (28.5% very aware). These findings highlight Taormina's stronger visibility compared to the other two tourist destinations like Tropea and Scilla.

Respondents identified key challenges faced by Italian cities due to tourism, including impacts on public spaces (32%) and infrastructure limitations (29%), alongside rising accommodation demand. A significant 74% believe overtourism affects city authenticity, and 64% are somewhat concerned about overtourism in Italian cities, highlighting strong awareness of its potential negative effects.

Respondents identified key challenges faced by Italian cities due to tourism, including impacts on public spaces (32%) and infrastructure limitations (29%), alongside rising accommodation demand, no free parking, prices rise, waste and pollution as well as overcrowding (Fig. 5). A significant 74% of respondents believe overtourism affects city authenticity (Fig. 6a), and 64% are somewhat concerned about overtourism in Italian cities (Fig. 6b), highlighting strong awareness of its potential negative effects.

Respondents suggested key strategies for sustainable tourism management, with the most popular being promoting off-peak travel and limiting visitor numbers. Additionally,

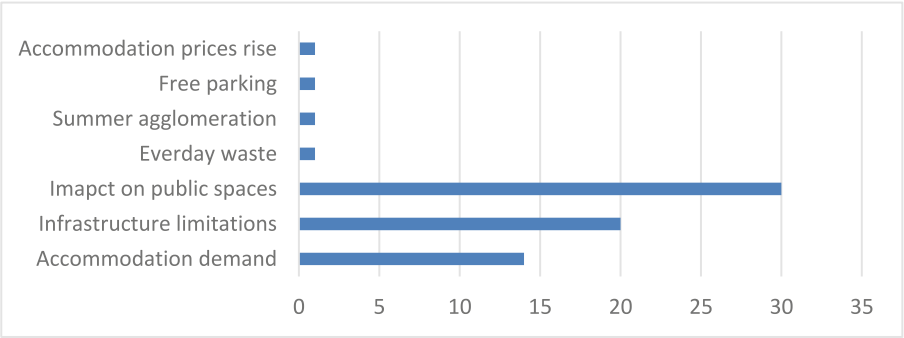


Fig. 5. Respondents' opinion survey with reference to the challanges faced by the Italian towns of Tropea, Scilla, Taormina due to overtourism. Source: Online survey applied by the authors in January 2025

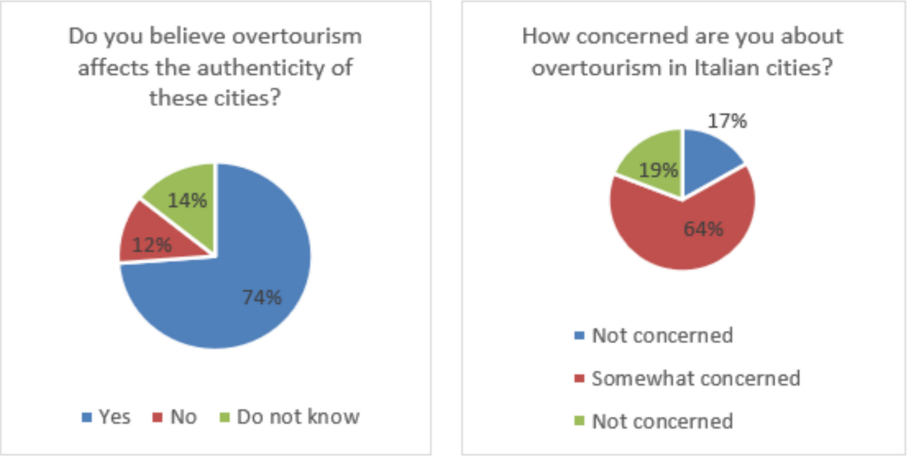


Fig. 6. a. Right: Respondents' opinion with reference to authenticity loss in Tropea, Scilla, Taormina.; b. Left: Respondents' opinion with reference to overtourism concern in Italian cities. Source: Online survey applied by the authors in January 2025

many supported enhancing public transport, cycling paths, and pedestrian-friendly areas (Fig. 7a). An overwhelming 83% agreed that informed decision-making should play a critical role in managing tourism effectively (Fig. 7b).

The majority of respondents were not residents of Taormina, Tropea, or Scilla, with minimal engagement from local perspectives, being one of the study limitations.

Among the few self-identified residents, reactions to tourism activity varied slightly but were predominantly negative, with sentiments like apathy, annoyance, or aggression reported by at least one respondent in each city. Enthusiasm for tourism was notably absent, reflecting potential concerns about its impact on local communities.

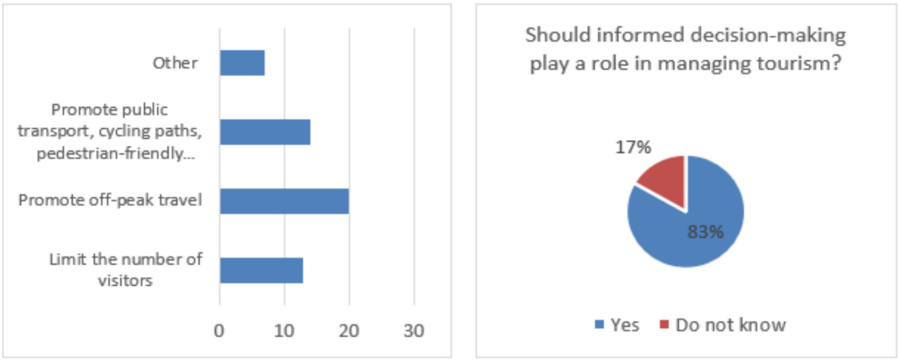


Fig. 7. a. Right: Respondents' opinion with reference to possible sustainable practices to mitigate overtourism in Tropea, Scilla and Taormina.; b. Left: Respondents' opinion with reference to informed decision-making role in tourism management. Source: Online survey applied by the authors in January 2025

5 Conclusion Outcomes

The current study has shown how the once-celebrated potential of tourism as a driver of urban and economic development has, in many Italian coastal cities, given way to a more problematic reality characterized by overtourism, privatization, and spatial injustice. The Italian case studies of Taormina, Scilla and Tropea illustrate how aggressive commodification of public space, driven by the interests of capital and governance models favoring growth, erodes the social fabric and threatens the character of the urban environment. This analysis underscores the need to move beyond growth-centric planning toward more inclusive, participatory, and ecologically responsible approaches to tourism development. Rethinking public space not as a secondary concern but as a central component of urban resilience and social equity is crucial. Only through this shift can coastal cities reclaim their role as spaces of shared life and collective identity, rather than mere assets in a global tourism economy. The survey results highlight significant challenges associated with overtourism in Italian cities, including impacts on public spaces, infrastructure strain, and concerns about authenticity loss. Awareness of overtourism varies, with iconic cities like Taormina receiving more recognition than the destinations of Tropea and Scilla. Respondents emphasized the need for sustainable practices, such as promoting off-peak travel and limiting visitor numbers, while strongly advocating for informed decision-making in tourism management. Local residents of Taormina, Tropea, and Scilla exhibit predominantly negative or indifferent attitudes toward tourism (i.e. apathy and annoyance according to Irridex concept), highlighting concerns about its impact on their communities. These results align with broader studies on overtourism, which consistently identify overcrowding, environmental degradation, and cultural authenticity as critical issues, emphasizing the urgency of implementing sustainable tourism policies in Italy's most visited cities [25–27]. These cases underscore the urgency for sustainable tourism policies to preserve Italy's cultural heritage and ensure the well-being of local communities.

Contribution Authors. Although the research is the result of the work carried out jointly by all the authors, which Clara Stella Vicari Aversa and Celestina Fazia and are the supervisor, the drafting of the essay is to be attributed differently to each of them: § Abstract by Clara Stella Vicari Aversa, Giulia F. G. Catania, Celestina Fazia; § 1. Introduction by Clara Stella Vicari Aversa and Celestina Fazia; § 2. In-depth study, Materials by Giulia F. G. Catania and Tatar Corina; § 3. Case studies: § 3.1. Taormina by Clara Stella Vicari Aversa; § 3.2. Scilla by Celestina Fazia, § 3.3. Tropea by Giulia F. G. Catania; § 3.4 Overview of the three case studies by Clara Stella Vicari Aversa, Giulia F. G. Catania, Corina Tatar, Celestina Fazia; § 3.5 Methods. Irridex concept (Doxey's Irritation Index) and launch of interviews by Clara Stella Vicari Aversa, Giulia F. G. Catania, Corina Tatar, Celestina Fazia; § 4. Discussion of results by Corina Tatar; § 4. Conclusions Outcomes, by Celestina Fazia, Corina Tatar and Clara Stella Vicari Aversa.

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