

Beyond the Mainstream: Tourism Development and Visitor Perceptions in an Emerging Tuscan Destination

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Abstract

This study analyzes the tourism positioning of Quarrata, a small destination in Tuscany (Italy), through a mixed-method approach combining tourism statistics, online review analysis, and SWOT analysis. The findings highlight positive tourism dynamics, increasing overnight stays, and high levels of visitor satisfaction, particularly regarding gastronomy, cultural heritage, and hospitality. The study also identifies challenges related to accommodation capacity and tourism fragmentation. From a broader perspective, the paper suggests that integrating statistical and sentiment analysis may provide a useful framework for assessing the attractiveness and development potential of small tourism destinations.

Keywords: Tourism development; Destination management; Sentiment analysis; Small tourism destinations.

1 Introduction

In recent years, small and medium-sized destinations have increasingly sought to enhance their tourism competitiveness by developing more tailored strategies that focus not only on increasing tourist flows but also on improving visitor experiences and encouraging repeat visits [1]. Indeed, currently, tourism development is understood not only as quantitative growth but also as the ability to create authentic experiences [2]. In this context, statistical tourism analysis and online reviews serve as valuable tools for understanding tourists' expectations, satisfaction levels, perceptions of the quality of local attractions and services [3], and the sustainability issue [4].

Against this backdrop, the municipality of Quarrata, situated in the province of Pistoia, Tuscany (Italy), represents an interesting case study. Despite its relatively limited tourism profile compared to neighbouring destinations, Quarrata shows significant tourism potential, particularly through its historical heritage, natural landscape, gastronomy, and slow tourism experiences.

Therefore, this study aims to analyze the tourism positioning of Quarrata and to provide strategic insights for local tourism development.

2 Materials and methods

The study adopts a mixed-method approach combining tourism statistics with sentiment analysis. The analysis mainly focused on 2023, but comparisons with 2015 (the earliest year for which comparable data from all the selected sources were available) were conducted in order

to examine the main changes over time.

First, official tourism data provided by ISTAT, the Tuscany Regional Statistical Office, and the Tourism Office of the Municipality of Pistoia were analyzed to investigate the main characteristics of Quarrata's tourism market and its wider territorial context. The collected information covered both accommodation supply and tourism demand and proved particularly useful for identifying the destination's structural characteristics and competitive positioning.

Second, a sentiment analysis was conducted using 12,731 online reviews published between January 2015 and December 2023, collected through the Qtourism platform developed by Affective, a startup and spin-off of the University of Florence. The reviews referred to restaurants, accommodation facilities, and local attractions located in Quarrata and were used to investigate how tourists perceive the destination and its main attractions. To achieve this objective, the study combined word-frequency analysis with sentiment analysis of reviews published in 2022 and 2023.

Finally, the results from the two previous stages were used to conduct a SWOT analysis to identify the main strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats affecting the tourism development of Quarrata.

3 Results and discussion

Compared to neighboring municipalities, Quarrata appears to be a less established tourism destination, both in terms of accommodation supply and tourism flows. However, several indicators reveal positive development trends.

Similar to the surrounding area, the local accommodation system is mainly characterized by extra-hotel establishments. Hotel accommodation is primarily represented by small three-star hotels, while the extra-hotel sector consists mainly of agritourisms, guesthouses, and bed and breakfasts. It is also noteworthy that Quarrata hosts the only hostel and the only mountain shelter operating within the surrounding area. Unlike neighbouring municipalities, Quarrata's tourism demand remains mainly domestic, though international tourism has grown significantly in recent years. Compared to 2015, overnight stays increased by almost 9%, resulting in more than 1,000 additional stays. A positive trend also emerged in average length of stay, which increased from 2.5 to 4.3 nights in 2023, the second-highest among neighbouring municipalities. This evidence suggests that Quarrata has significant potential to attract tourists, especially those interested in slower, more experiential forms of tourism.

The analysis of online reviews revealed a clear appreciation for Quarrata's historical and cultural heritage, as well as for the quality of food and beverages offered by local tourism and hospitality businesses. Visitors also positively evaluated the welcoming atmosphere, professionalism, and value for money of local services. Overall, the sentiment analysis suggested a generally positive perception of the destination. Between 2022 and 2023, tourists' satisfaction remained both high and stable, with an average rating of 4.4 out of 5. Similarly, visitors showed a strong propensity to recommend the destination to others, with the *Net Promoter Score* consistently remaining well above the critical threshold of 50 (77.2 in 2022 and 76.9 in 2023).

4 Final remarks

The combined use of statistical tourism analysis and sentiment analysis enabled the identification of both the structural characteristics of Quarrata's tourism system and tourists' perceptions of the destination. Overall, the findings suggest that, despite its still-limited tourism dimension, Quarrata has significant development potential, particularly for slow, experiential, and nature-based tourism.

The SWOT analysis highlighted several strengths, including the increasing average length of stay, the growth of international tourism, and the high level of visitor satisfaction emerging from online reviews. In particular, tourists positively evaluated the authenticity of the destination, the quality of gastronomy, the cultural heritage, and the welcoming atmosphere of local tourism businesses. At the same time, several weaknesses and threats emerged. The destination still suffers from limited accommodation capacity, a relatively fragmented tourism offer, and strong competition from neighbouring destinations with more structured tourism systems. Additional critical issues concern the marked seasonality of short-term rentals and the limited digital engagement of visitors, reflected in the recent decline in online reviews. Nevertheless, the study also identified important development opportunities. The growing demand for sustainable, experiential tourism, together with the increasing interest in authentic rural experiences, may represent a strategic opportunity for Quarrata. In this perspective, strengthening cooperation with neighbouring destinations, improving digital communication strategies, and developing integrated tourism itineraries focused on local culture, gastronomy, and natural heritage could enhance the destination's competitiveness and visibility.

From a broader perspective, the study suggests that the integration of tourism statistics, online review analysis, and SWOT analysis may provide a useful framework for assessing the attractiveness and development potential of small tourism destinations, supporting both destination management and strategic tourism planning.

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