

New Tourism Dynamics Along The Way of St. James. From Undertourism and Overtourism to the Post- COVID-19 Era

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In light of the COVID-19 Coronavirus pandemic and the shock to global tourism that this poses, the aim of this present contribution is to discuss the scenario of The Way, introducing present reflections and future perspectives. In the first section, we introduce the tourism dynamic along The Way before the global tourism crisis. After this, we present the methodological procedure (based on a combined quantitative and qualitative methodology) and the materials. We then introduce two discussion sections; one concerns the results regarding fears and hopes that pilgrims have posted on online communities and a further discussion section talks about the post-COVID-19 future of The Way. As undertourism is likely to be the alarming trend in the short- and medium-term, we conclude by reflecting on the forthcoming dynamics along The Way, suggesting a management principle and some measures for tourism planning.

Keywords: *The Way of St. James, COVID-19, Fears, Overtourism, Undertourism, Netnography.*

NUEVAS DINÁMICAS TURÍSTICAS EN EL CAMINO DE SANTIAGO. DEL *UNDERTOURISM* Y *OVERTOURISM* A LA ERA POST-COVID-19. A la luz de la pandemia de Coronavirus COVID-19 y la consecuente caída del turismo mundial, el objetivo de la contribución es analizar el escenario del Camino de Santiago, introduciendo reflexiones actuales y perspectivas futuras. En la primera sección, retomamos las dinámicas turísticas a lo largo del mismo antes de la crisis turística mundial. Luego, presentamos la metodología (resultado de una combinación entre metodología cuantitativa y cualitativa) y las fuentes de investigación. Introducimos dos secciones de discusión; una se refiere a los resultados de la netnografía, en la cual se indican temores y esperanzas que los peregrinos manifiestan en las comunidades virtuales. En otra sección se reflexiona acerca de la era post-COVID-19 para el Camino. Puesto que probablemente el subturismo será la tendencia alarmante a corto y medio plazo, concluimos analizando un posible futuro para el Camino, sugiriendo un principio de gestión y algunas medidas para la planificación del turismo.

Key words: *Camino de Santiago, COVID-19, Miedos, Overtourism, Undertourism, Netnography.*

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Introduction

Over the last decade, one of the most relevant tourism research lines has been “overtourism”, meant as a set of unsustainable mass tourism practices, which increasingly nurture a feeling of unease produced by tourist saturation (Colomb and Novy, 2016; Milano, 2017). The UNWTO (2018) defines overtourism as the impact a tourist has on a destination, which influences the quality of life perceived by citizens and, at the same time, negatively affects the quality of tourist experiences. This concern about the sustainability of a tourist destination also reinforces the concept of degrowth, which has evolved due to its use in multi-disciplinary academic theoretical and empirical research and is meant as regulation and control of the rate of growth within a destination (Canavan, 2013; Weiss and Cattaneo, 2017). Considering these premises, this work had been originally conceived to investigate the dynamics of movement on The Way of St. James¹ and introduce a necessary debate about the eventual “symptoms” of overtourism on it. But in effect, overtourism might not be a problem in light of the pandemic Coronavirus COVID-19, and so we consider it improper not to refer to the shock to global tourism that this poses (Benjamin *et al.*, 2020; Gössling *et al.*, 2020). We believe that this unprecedented moment for self-assessment of the whole tourism industry needs to be mentioned into the present contribution. Thus, we structure it as follows. In the first section, we introduce the tourism dynamic along The Way before the pandemic. Then, we present the methodological procedure, based on a combined quantitative and qualitative methodology. We introduce two discussion sections; one regarding pilgrims’ expectations about changing values and experiences of The Way. A further discussion section points out the post-COVID-19 future of The Way. As undertourism is likely to be the alarming trend in the short- and medium-term for the tourism industry (Fletcher *et al.*, 2020), we conclude reflecting on the forthcoming scenario of the tourism dynamics along The Way, suggesting a management principle and some measures for tourism planning.

The Pre-COVID-19 Way of St. James

The Way is the First European Cultural Itinerary, and one of the most important medieval pilgrimage routes in the world. The expression, The Way, is used to refer to a network of routes that large number of pilgrims walk or ride to get to the city of Santiago de Compostela, the final destination. The urban historical centre of Santiago and some of The Ways have been appointed UNESCO World Heritage Sites (WHS); firstly, in 1993 the French Way was declared a WHS, then in 2015 the Northern Ways received the same international accolade. Since 1993, The Way has strongly been promoted by the regional government, thus in recent years there has been continuous growth in the number of pilgrims arriving to Santiago: from 99,436 in 1993 to 347,578 in 2019 (Pilgrims’ Reception Office). These transformations can be explained by the concept of “inclusiveness” that refers to: 1) International markets; 2) Confessions and religions; 3) Motivations; 4) Forms

¹ Henceforth we will use the expression The Way.

of mobility; 5) *Caminonization*² of the creative industries. Many different factors have contributed to the internationalization, characterized by the increasing number of different nationalities (Lois and Santos, 2015). Thanks to the opening to the international markets, traditional markets have been replaced by new emerging ones. Consequently, pilgrims do not only come from Catholic countries; with the opening and the interest of the route in far Asian markets, the traditional Catholic route has become a multi-confessional one, and a route along which non-believers enjoy being close to nature and seeking spiritual peace (Farias *et al.*, 2018). The acknowledgment of this change is evident in the existence of two types of certificates from which a pilgrim may choose when arriving at Santiago de Compostela; a religious one, written in Latin, and a secular one written in Spanish (Chemin, 2011). As a result, the sacred space of The Way proved its polysemy by receiving pilgrims who completed it for different reasons; reasons that moved far from religion and paved the way for a post-secular space (and all the benefits this might involve) (Lopez *et al.*, 2017; Nilsson and Tesfahuney, 2019). These motivated enthusiasts are able to proceed by the various forms available to them; in this sense it is worth making a distinction in terms of general motivation (that is due to pilgrimage or tourism), or means of travel, that is on foot, horseback or by bicycle. And no less important is the fact that The Way has become a hot topic in the creative industries, including literature, cinema and the arts, in response to the trend for spatialization in the arts and humanities (Lois and Lopez, 2020).

The resulting combinations of the above mentioned factors have created an international and multiconfessional space of The Way, in which pilgrims and tourists have interacted to co-create a post-modern identity and personality of the route. The continued increase in the number of pilgrims and tourists can be considered either a territorial opportunity or a threat due to the pressure that these visitors exert on natural and cultural resources (Coccosis and Tsartas, 2004; Martín-Duque, 2017). Concerning this second interpretation, during the International Foro “El Legado de Elías Valiña”, which was held in Villafranca del Bierzo on 14th of December 2014, the participants warned about the impacts on heritage and environment that this eruption of the culture of leisure was having on the main routes, clearly reporting the massification, trivialization, and a loss of the unique and historical values of The Way. This might also reduce the personal and inner enjoyment of the pilgrimage experience, thus producing feelings of disappointment and dissatisfaction. Moreover, in the manifesto they warned that the requirement of walking the last hundred kilometres to get the *Compostela* is one of the causes of problems such as overcrowding, devaluation and confusion in these last stretches of the Jacobean itineraries. Consequently, pilgrims start to show feelings of frustration, disenchantment and demotivation.

Materials and Methodology

Following the mixed and multiple approaches in contemporary tourism research (Richards and Munsters, 2010), we adopt a combined quantitative and qualitative netnography methodology (Aitamurto, 2013). Quantitative inputs come from the exploitation of primary data which refers to the statistical series published by the Cathedral

² With this expression, Peter Margry refers to the “worldwide rise in sacred or spiritual pilgrimages, primarily stimulated by the success of the Camino” (2015, p. 185).

of Santiago de Compostela (recording the number of pilgrims collecting the *Compostela*³ at the Pilgrim's Reception Office in the Diocese of Santiago). The resulting reports by the Cathedral of Santiago which were regularly published on its webpage before the interruption of the regular activity due to the COVID-19, provided different kinds of information, but here we have selected the ones regarding the routes chosen by pilgrims over the last ten years in order to appreciate any imbalances in pilgrims' preferences.

The netnography method is based on the six steps by Robert Kozinets (2002):

1. *Research planning*: the research topics refer to the post-COVID-19 Way. A further decision concerns the role that netnography will have as an observational and participatory model (Costello *et al.*, 2017; Kozinets, 2002, 2015; Trainor, 2018).
2. *Entrée*: once the online communities were identified, we set the research questions and selected those ones which presented more detailed or descriptive data.
3. *Data collection*: the textual data collected is from ten online forum conversations, including a total of 311 participants, who published their entries between 24 February and 3 June 2020 (Table 1). Their entries were posted in English and Spanish. We opted for an observational method of collection.
4. *Data analysis*: has been based on a penetrating metaphoric, hermeneutic, and symbolic interpretation that requires a deeper involvement from the researchers.
5. *Ethical standards*: we consider the web content as public published content, protecting individuals' names (Kozinets, 2015; Langer and Beckman, 2005).
6. *Research representation*: we introduce the data analysis according to three main interpretative topics.

<i>Forum Titles & Sources</i>	<i>Language</i>	<i>Participants</i>	<i>Dates of analysed entres</i>
1) COVID-19: Coronavirus (Round 6)	English	34	26/4/2020- 25/5/2020
2) COVID-19: Coronavirus (Round 7)	English	26	27/5/2020 -03/06/2020
3) Thinking about tents	English	58	25/5/2020-03/06/2020
4) When would you consider going back on the Camino?	English	97	6/5/2020-03/06/2020
5) El Coronavirus y el Camino de Santiago	Spanish	7	24/2/2020-10/5/2020
6) Reflexiones desde el confinamiento	Spanish	4	4/5/2020-10/5/2020
7) Pues oye , con este tema del virus la caravana es una opción a tener en cuenta	Spanish	3	23/4/2020-25/4/2020
8) ¿El fin de la Hospitalidad?	Spanish	4	8/4/2020-11/4/2020
9) Para cuando estará viable el Camino?	Spanish	40	8/5/2020-20/5/2020
10) Como nos va a afectar el Camino post-coronavirus.	Spanish	38	31/03/2020-14/05/2020

Table 1. Sources details.

Data analysis (I): From Overtourism to the Post-COVID-19 Era

According to the data published by the Cathedral of Santiago (Fig. 1), until the present historical break due to COVID-19, a growing number of *Compostelas* have been presented

³ It is a certificate stating the completion of The Way and it is used as an "indicator" of the numbers of pilgrims arriving at destination.

over the last ten years (Pilgrim’s Reception Office, 2009-2019). As indicated in the legend, pilgrims can choose from eight options, not including “others”. The French Way is the busiest route, as well as being the main route that is undergoing a process of rehabilitation. Until a few months ago, it was overcrowded with problems regarding its carrying capacity and saturation of public hostels (long queues and no availability) and putting its heritage at risk (Fraternidad Internacional del Camino de Santiago, 2014; Martin-Duque, 2017; Porcal *et al.*, 2012). This has been followed by another cross-border route: the Portuguese Way; one of whose routes is the Portuguese Way of the Coast, which was first introduced as an option on the questionnaire in 2016. In four years, it has overtaken other routes such as the Northern Way, the Primitive Way, and the English Way. Thus, a consequence of the massification of the main route has been the progressive diversification of pilgrims’ choices. Although this might help relieve pressure on overcrowded routes it can put other less touristic routes in danger.

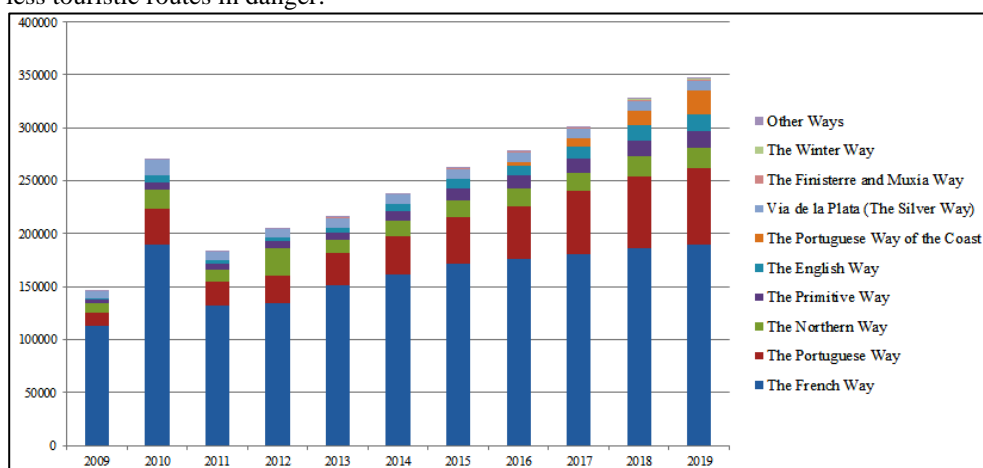


Fig. 1. Evolution of the numbers of Compostelas delivered according to the route. Source: Pilgrim’s Reception Office (2008-2019) (Oficina del Peregrino, 2009-2019). Own work.

Fig. 1. Evolución de los números de peregrinos llegados según la ruta. Fuente: Oficina de Recepción de Peregrinos (2008-2019) (Oficina del Peregrino, 2009-2019). Elaboración propia.

We hereby present the results of the netnographic exploration of pilgrims’ online communities. The textual data collected have been interpreted and classified according to three criteria that correspond to three main features of the The Way: firstly we introduce reflections about the economic impacts of the pandemic; secondly, we present the concerns regarding the hostels and how the “new normality” might alter their original meaning and finally, we record pilgrims’ considerations about the changing experience of The Way.

- a. *Economic impacts:* one of the pilgrims’ main concerns is the economic damage that the pandemic will cause to villages and activities dependent on the pilgrimage, especially

considering the recent improvements with an eye on the Holy Year Xacobeo 2021⁴. They find that it is an incalculable disaster whose effects will be felt over time if proper decisions are not taken. Indeed, pilgrims are more concerned about the difficult recovery of these activities, rather than with the temporary closure of The Way⁵. In their opinion, workers from hostels, hotels, bars, restaurants, shops, backpack carriers, taxi drivers and other businesses as well as people offering fruit or drinks for a donation will not make enough money to carry on. The issue of donations also reminds us of the possible difficulties that associations might face, since for them, the incomes from their hostels are important as they also benefit from merchandising, credentials, guides, scallops, pins, etc. To manifest their solidarity and to contribute to the reactivation of “The Way economy” with a “tiny grain of sand”, half of the pilgrims taking part in these conversations look forward to walking again and thus helping to sustain the economic recovery of these territories, spending their money on accommodation and the small supermarkets that mark The Way.

- b. *Hostels*: pilgrims question the possibility of The Way to return to as it was before. They believe that in the short-and-medium-term, it will undergo a dangerous metamorphosis that might completely change its essence and charm. As an example, they conceive the hostel as a point of contact and proximity between pilgrims, something that might not be compatible with the present distancing measures and recommendations. In the pilgrims’ opinion, social-distancing and the obligation to reduce capacity will hinder their survival due to the costs of adaption. It will not be profitable for hostels to host fewer pilgrims, especially when taking the increase in costs coming from the added requirements surrounding cleaning and hygiene measures into account⁶. In addition, these conditions might also put at risk the profile of the volunteer *hospitaleros*, who might feel additional pressure and decide to no longer volunteer. This may be especially so for those who are older and are advised not to go on The Way for health reasons. Furthermore, all of them will have to be trained and educated in hygiene measures to prevent the spread of the coronavirus, and, international volunteers might find it especially difficult to travel. A similar negative prediction can be recorded for private hostels, although based on different models and aims. Some of them have undergone significant renovation works in order to capture “clients” (thus transforming the value of hospitality into a business in pilgrims’ words) and the measures of the escalation plan required before opening the hotel establishments warn that, for them, it is totally unfeasible to reduce capacity to 30%. In fact, the same Federación Española Amigos del Camino advises that the hostel sector requires the collaboration of public institutions and a package of specific measures to maintain its viability, as some hostels will be able

⁴ The Holy Jacobean Year is essentially a Jubilee year which only covers the city of Santiago de Compostela. It is also called Jacobean Years and is celebrated every 6, 5, 6 and 11 years when the feast of Saint James (25th July) falls on a Sunday.

⁵ As the other activities, The Way was closed on March 14 when the state of alarm for the coronavirus was declared in Spain. From that date hostels and lodgings were closed and the walkers disappeared from the numerous routes.

⁶ As stated by FEACCS (Federación Española de Asociaciones de Amigos del Camino de Santiago) (2020), hostels will have to incorporate a series of extra security measures: bags to store the pilgrims’ boots, backpacks and canes, hydro-alcoholic gels, hand-drying paper, disinfecting rugs, disposable sheets, thermometers to take pilgrims’ temperature and other measures that guarantee the safety of the pilgrim.

to adapt more easily than others, all these requirements entail an financial cost that some will be able to assume easier than others (FEAACS, 2020). A final remark concerns suggestions about alternative forms of accommodation, namely caravans or tents. Pilgrims would like more “tent-friendly spaces” (even in the same albergues to help them with their recovery) or spaces for caravans, in order to reduce the risk of contagion in the hostels; the main problem with camping will remain water (for drinking, washing clothes and showering). In the future, it will certainly be interesting to consult the statistical occupancy data to evaluate changing trends in accommodation preferences.

- c. *Towards a new experience*: pilgrims try to find the few positive aspects of this shutdown. For instance, they consider the aging population of the villages along the route, the temporary limitations put in place to protect the vulnerable populations along The Way, and prevent their possible contagion. Another lesson concerns the consciousness of relevant values, such as respect or solidarity. Regarding peoples’ intentions and willingness to walk The Way in summer 2020, these depend on fear (contagion, availability of a vaccine, lack of proper control measures, trust in the system, etc.), motivations and, obviously, on nationalities. In this last case, while, the removal of border restrictions might enable EU pilgrims to walk again, even along international routes, non-European pilgrims would find it difficult to do the pilgrimage due to border and entry restrictions. Pilgrims consider that it will be possible to respect the measures that will be in place, keeping in mind the need to show solidarity with the hostels and help them lose as little as possible. In their opinion, it will be especially relevant to observe the social distancing both in the hostel and within small towns. As far as social distancing is concerned, there are opposing positions. On the one hand, some pilgrims are concerned with the possibility that The Way will never be the same again, because of the social distancing measures required for isolation, and that this might alter the social and historical essence of the route. On the other hand, half of the pilgrims of the virtual communities state that “thanks to social distancing” more pilgrims will walk alone and will have more time for their introspective and reflective exercise. A prediction that is shared by the President of the FEAACS (2020), according to whom The Way will become a more interior, more spiritual and more cultural experience. A vision that suits the mindfulness-driven tourism that U. Stankov *et al.* (2020) defend as a long-term sustainable form of post-pandemic tourism. Moreover, pilgrims point out the expected reduction of international pilgrims and tourists in favour of national and local pilgrims, at least in the beginning, will be an historical opportunity to reintroduce themselves to the traditional French Way. In fact, as recently stated by A. Galvani *et al.* (2020), there will be a sort of tourism degrowth towards more meaningful and less hedonistic trips. Indeed, pilgrims believe that the fear of the virus will discourage many of them for health and economic reasons (travel and insurance expenses will increase), thus restoring the uniqueness of the space of The Way and offering the chance to walk alone on less crowded routes. Thus, it is possible that The Way enters a new phase, as at first, pilgrims foresee a short-and-medium trend of undertourism along The Way, or at least the reduction of massification, and secondly, in this same period, pilgrims’ profiles will be inevitably determined by the restrictions and limitations, which span from age to accommodation.

Discussion (II): The Post-COVID-19 Future of The Way

The five key factors of the inclusiveness of The Way that we mentioned before have reinforced its hyper-mobility that the global COVID-19 pandemic abruptly stopped. But taking into account the fact that person-to-person contact and international connections are highly risky for transmission and contagion (Harvey, 2020), if before the pandemic they were considered in positive terms as they enhanced tourism along the route, now they are a danger to the same “safety”, precisely due to this global dimension. These diverse pilgrims’ profiles might have serious impacts on The Way’s vulnerability if not properly managed. Thus, during the last few months a participatory model has been adopted to involve the different territorial agents in “planning the future”. The result is a *Plan de reactivación dos sectores cultural e turístico fronte aos efectos derivados da COVID-19* (Xunta de Galicia, 2020). Among its working groups, one specific group has been involved in defining the strategy of The Way, which will record a potential reduction in the number of pilgrims, especially international arrivals but which will gradually recover towards the end of 2020. In fact, in the short- and medium-term tourism future, pilgrims and tourists will probably choose to travel to destinations closer to their place of residence as nearby destinations could be considered less risky, reconfiguring the dynamics of domestic market proximity tourism (Ioannides and Gyimóthy, 2020; Lew, 2020).

The impacts of the pandemic are starker if we consider that next year is the Holy Year *Xacobeo 2021*, when an increase of up to 500,000 pilgrimages had been estimated (Xunta de Galicia, 2019). Ten years since the last Holy Year (celebrated in 2010), *Xacobeo 2021* was and is awaited as a unique occasion for national and international promotion. It is an event representing one of the most far-reaching recovery pillars of the future Galician economy, thus different institutions are working to extend this celebration to two years. Although this proposal is a good chance for economic and cultural recovery, it will require more attention to be paid to the sustainability of the routes. The *Plan de reactivación dos sectores cultural e turístico fronte aos efectos derivados da COVID-19* (Xunta de Galicia, 2020) states that The Way must be subject to special monitoring regarding the application of hygienic-sanitary measures. In fact pilgrims can escape crowds and enjoy different resources along the route: being in the open air helps avoid massification and there will be an increasing appreciation of the natural environment (Galvani *et al.*, 2020). However, the problem of carrying capacity starts to appear when dealing with accommodation (for instance in public hostels where rooms host many beds), restaurants (usually small ones) and places of worship. All of them should be trained and provided with the necessary knowledge and equipment to comply with these hygienic conditions and with carrying capacity control measures. This might require the redistribution of and need to control the fluxes of pilgrims along the network of routes, thus we propose that it be rethought according to the “principle of communicating vessels”, based on filling the vessels with an equal quantity of fluid. Along this network of routes, pilgrims and tourists could be equally distributed along the various Ways to prevent overtourism and undertourism, and redistribute the benefits over a wider area. In this sense, we propose the following measures: 1) *Implementing some sort of booking system which refers to the route selected*: pilgrims and tourists would need to confirm the route selected as a measure to control the carrying capacity before their departure. A further more complicated debate concerns the

carrying capacity of each route and the implementation of interactive systems of control; 2) *Reinforcing the use of Big Data*: this is one of the axis announced to plan future tourism, indeed it should be used to create an interactive information system that allows pilgrims to control the carrying capacity of the spaces and places they are going to access along the same route, avoiding those which are crowded. As for instance the creation of an App advising about the availability in hostels and the possibility to make reservations; 3) *Introducing social distancing control systems*: The Way is based on flows, so to prevent clusters it might be useful to adopt “bracelets to manage social distancing”. We are aware that these suggestions might seem to limit the freedom of movement and of choice, but the reset of the tourism industry needs a more sustainable and equitable era and, thus, new forms of appropriation and allocation of spaces for the future prioritizing the physical, mental and social health of the host communities (Benjamin *et al.*, 2020; Fletcher *et al.*, 2020; Gössling *et al.*, 2020; Tremblay-Huet, 2020).

Conclusive Remarks

The general economic crisis and the more specific tourism fall prove that the economy of a territory should be based on diversified sectors. While economies are called upon to reinvent the logic of capitalism (Harvey, 2020), this pandemic has proved the fragility of tourism dependent territories, requiring future planning to review priorities in order to ensure sustainable development. The Way offers an alternative form of sustainable traveling, far from crowded centres and in full contact with the rural, contributing to the improvement of local economies in a positive way. To sum up the future directions of the The Way, we should start from this current unexpected historic transformative moment⁷. Until a few months ago the weight hung on the side of overtourism, while today this plate is empty and undertourism is the menace of this abrupt degrowth, or more accurately, global recession (Fletcher *et al.*, 2020; Harvey, 2020). In spite of all its negative impacts, the COVID-19 shock offers the chance to re-establish the priorities and directions that are required to create a balanced future development, reset the short- and medium-term vision of the future and make a profitable and active review of former studies and reports about unsustainable tourism practices in order to prevent their repetition (Benjamin *et al.*, 2020; Edelheim, 2020; Higgins-Desbiolles, 2020; Nepal, 2020). The planning frenzy we are witnessing responds to the urgency to plan the future tourism economy, far removed from past practices and realities that created overtourism, gentrification and, evidently, tourism dependence; it is a new chance to do things better, to search for new sustainable values, such as equity, ethics, inclusivity, sustainability, responsibility, social and environmental justice and, especially, resilience (Benjamin *et al.*, 2020; Fletcher *et al.*, 2020; Gössling *et al.*, 2020; UNWTO, 2020). It is undoubtedly difficult to foresee what the future holds. Against any expectation, we moved from hyper-mobility to staying at home and in a state of quarantine (Ioannides and Gyimóthy, 2020). However, this physical immobility has its counterpart in the constant, virtual flow of information and knowledge. The COVID-19 crisis has magnified the potentialities of virtual spaces; so the post-COVID19 Way has

⁷ Thomas Friedman (2020) suggested that: “there is the world B.C. - Before Corona and the world A.C. - After Corona”.

inevitably also become a topic of online pilgrims' conversations. Here they share their fears and their hopes, finding an alternative to the inaccessible physical space of The Way, creating new social relations and practices. We are aware of the limitations of the study; however it does deal with the debate that is currently taking place. It would, in fact be interesting to contrast the results discussed in this preliminary stage with the actual facts and behaviours at some stage in the future.

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