Missione 4 Istruzione e Ricerca

H-SMA-CE: a decision support system for circular economy transition

Analysing Italian Historical Small Towns: A Cultural and Geographic Mosaic of Identity

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Theoretical framework

❖ **Tourism** represents a fundamental driver of global economic growth, contributing to 9.1% of worldwide GDP (Statista, 2023). Within this framework, Italy ranks among the top five international tourist destinations with 57.3 million arrivals in 2023 (ISTAT, 2024).

❖ Tourism constitutes a pivotal force in **driving economic growth and job creation** while serving as a social need (Agovino et al., 2017; Streimikiene et al., 2021).

❖ An emerging phenomenon of particular interest is the growing trend toward rediscovering Italian **Historical Small Towns (HSTs),** responding to increasing demand for authenticity, local traditions, and rural landscapes (Garau, 2015).

❖ **Italian HSTs ("Borghi")** typically have no more than 5,000 residents. Defined by **MIBACT** as possessing "*a valuable cultural heritage, whose preservation and enhancement are highly significant for the national system, as they embody authenticity, uniqueness, and beauty distinctive qualities of Italy's tourism appeal*" (Bizzarri & Micera, 2021).
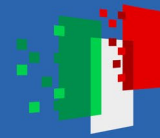
Research Gap

Our study contributes to existing literature (Bizzarri & Micera, 2021; Biconne, 2020) by **filling a gap in the systematic identification and categorization of Italian villages**, providing a comprehensive framework of their tourism potential and challenges.

Research Methodology

This research analyzes this trend through a **mixed methodology** combining quantitative descriptive analysis and qualitative SWOT analysis (Dawadi et al., 2021). We examine the geographical distribution of 363 Italian historical towns, categorizing them as mountain, coastal, and rural boroughs to inform strategic planning for sustainable tourism development.

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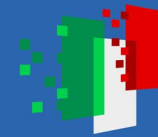
Results and Discussion

Geographical Analysis of HSTs (n=363)

•Central Italy hosts the highest concentration (149 villages)

•Northern regions follow with 131 villages

•Southern Italy and Islands show fewer HSTs (50 and 33 respectively)

Region	Number of HSTs
North of Italy	
Aosta Valley	3
Piedmont	19
Lombardy	26
Veneto	11
Trentino-South Tyrol	16
Friuli Venezia Giulia	13
Liguria	27
Emilia Romagna	16
Central Italy	
Tuscany	30
Marche	31
Umbria	32
Lazio	26
Abruzzo	26
Molise	4
South of Italy	
Campania	13
Apulia	13
Basilicata	9
Calabria	15
Islands	
Sicily	24
Sardinia	9

Table 1 - Distribution of villages in Italy, Source: I Borghi più belli d'Italia, Elaboration: Authors
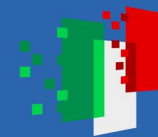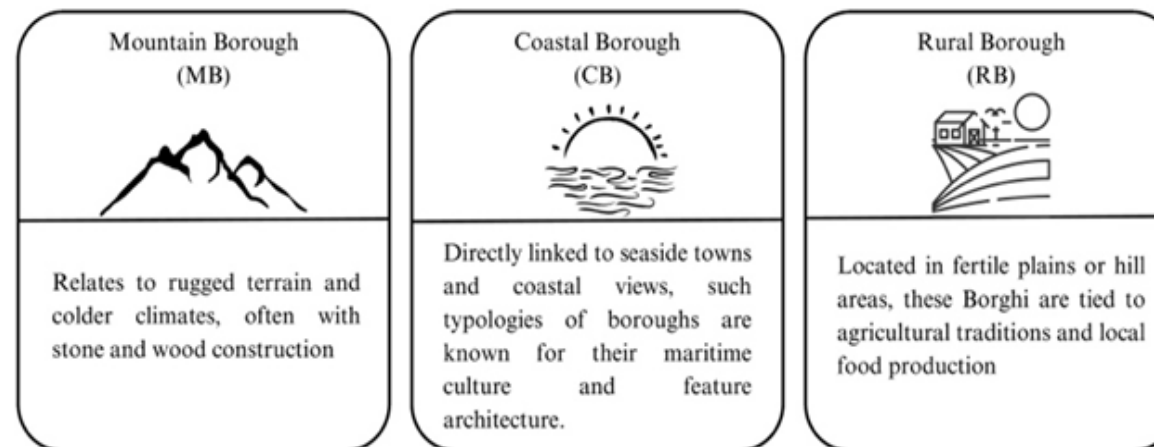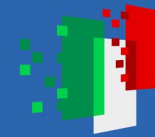
Results and Discussion

Figure 1. Categories of HSTs Source: Authors

Results and Discussion

Classification by Geographical Features

• Mountain Boroughs (MB): 249 villages, predominant in North/Central Italy

• Coastal Boroughs (CB): 52 villages, valued for maritime heritage

• Rural Boroughs (RB): 62 villages, recognized for agricultural traditions

Area	MB	CB	RB	Total
North	92	17	31	140
Centre	95	16	26	137
South	42	14	3	59
Islands	20	5	2	27
Total	249	52	62	363

Table 2 - Numerical distribution of Italian HSTs, Source: Authors

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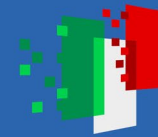
Results and Discussion

•**Strengths**: Natural landscapes, cultural heritage, local products

•**Weaknesses**: Limited infrastructure, demographic vulnerability, seasonal instability

•**Opportunities**: Sustainable tourism, eco-friendly accommodation, digital innovation

•**Threats**: Climate change impacts, depopulation, overtourism pressures

STRENGHTS			WEAKNESSES		
MB	CB	RB	MB	CB	RB
• Mountain landscapes appeal • Cooler climate and mountainous terrain promote unique flora, fauna, and outdoor activities	• Coastal view, Landscapes and Sunsets • Maritime Culture, Food and Lifestyle • Identity tied to the sea, fishing and nautical heritage	• Fertile land support local agricultural production • Strong connection with nature	• Limited agricultural land • Restricted local food production	• High Vulnerability to sea-level rise, storm and coastal erosion • Seasonal Tourism can lead to economic instability • Dependence on tourism and fishing	• Scarce infrastructures due to rural setting • Lack of modern facilites • Vulnerable demographic trends
• Expansion of adventure tourism • Potential to satisfy the sustainable tourism demand	• Growth in marine ecotourism • Sustainable food and culinary tourism • Increased demand for waterfront properties	• Expansion of agro-tourism and rural cultures • Eco-friendly accommodation • Growing interest on 0km food	• Natural Disaster and related risks • Risk of depopulation • Economic dependence on seasonal tourism	• Overfishing and marine pollution • Increasing cost for coastal defenses and infrastructure • Competition from other seaside destinations	• Depopulation of young people • Traditional agricultural based economy • Irregular weather patterns
MB	CB	RB	MB	CB	RB
OPPORTUNITIES			THREATS		

Figure 2. SWOT Analysis of Italian HST. Source: Authors

Conclusions

Harnessing the potential of Italian HSTs has emerged as a significant catalyst for national tourism, connecting local communities with global visitors.
Our analysis reveals:

•The heterogeneous distribution of 363 Italian villages reflects the nation's historical development, with concentration in central and northern regions
•The typological classification (mountain, coastal, rural) provides critical insights for targeted tourism strategies
•Despite unique cultural and landscape assets, HSTs face significant challenges including climate change impacts, depopulation, and infrastructure limitations

Strategic recommendations:
•Enhance digital solutions for local businesses and tourism management
•Develop collaborative frameworks among stakeholders for resource pooling
•Implement sustainable tourism practices that preserve cultural heritage

This research provides valuable information for public and private stakeholders to improve decision-making processes, effectively position these areas as attractive destinations, and preserve Italian traditions as integral components of international tourism.

Limitations and Future Research

A significant limitation of this research is the absence of an **econometric analysis** that could have provided statistical validation of relationships between variables and quantitative measurement of impacts. This limitation stems from several data constraints:

❖ **Insufficient Quantitative Data**: The study relies primarily on categorical data for classification rather than continuous variables suitable for regression analysis
❖ **Absence of Time Series Data**: The lack of longitudinal data prevented us from conducting trend analyses or employing time series econometric models to assess dynamic relationships

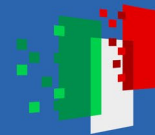**Future research directions** should enhance the **theoretical foundation** underpinning HST analysis through:
• **Systematic Literature Review**
• **Bibliometric Analysis**
• **Meta-Analysis of Case Studies**

Contact information

Thank you for your attention!

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