Residents’ Perceptions of Socio-Economic Impacts on Pilgrimage Trails: How does the community perceive pilgrimage tourism?

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Abstract: Many of the studies on pilgrimage tourism have focused on aspects related to visitors, such as travel motivation, visitor experience or visitor typologies. However, it is also vital for tourism destination management to understand the local community’s perceptions towards impacts brought by tourism. While some research has been conducted on the subject, the tourism impacts in communities along pilgrimage trails remain surprisingly under-researched. In order to contribute to this research gap, this study provides a qualitative approach on the host community’s economic and social impacts of pilgrimage tourism. Analysis is made based on Krippendrof’s categorization, which divides community members into four types based on their economic dependence on tourism activity. As a case study site, Chikatsuyu community, located along the pilgrimage routes of Kumano Kodo, is selected. Results show that, although economic impacts were regarded as comparatively minor, small-scale tourism was generally perceived as positive across the participants. In particular, the participants had an overall positive perception of social impacts. The presence of international tourists was welcomed across the four types of participants, who perceived them as polite, friendly and interesting because of the novelty they brought to their daily lives. Awareness towards tradition and its conservation, as well as an increase in events, were also positively influenced by tourism development. Almost no negative impacts were perceived by the participants. Finally, in comparison to other communities located along the pilgrimage route, the participants recognized that Chikatsuyu was less developed and received less benefits from tourism because of its location as a waypoint place. However, they were satisfied with the level of development achieved by Chikatsuyu and had no ill feelings towards more developed communities. The study’s results have implications for tourism management on pilgrimage routes, especially for a sustainable development of it as locals favor small-scale growth rather than mass tourism.

Keywords: pilgrimage, Japan, tourism impacts, community
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Introduction

Pilgrimage has become an important resource in tourism as spirituality has become a major tourism market (Timothy and Conover 2006; Attix 2015), with traditional pilgrimages being renewed and new ones emerging around the world (Stausberg 2011). Substantial literature also exists on the pilgrims’ subjective aspects, such as their motivation, behavior, travel patterns and impacts on their personal wellbeing (Collins-Kreiner 2010; Nakai 2011; Stausberg 2011; Olsen 2013; Lois-Gonzalez and Santo 2015; Blom, Nilsson and Santos 2016). Government authorities expect pilgrimage tourism to help revitalize communities, in particular rural areas with limited economic prospects. However, there are relatively few studies on how the host communities perceive the impacts that pilgrimage tourism brings, especially regarding communities along pilgrimage routes that tourists traverse to reach their destination. This is particularly surprising given that it is understood that tourism development brings substantial social change to host communities and that communities’ perceptions towards tourism impacts should be of importance for tourism planning and management (Ap 1992). As pilgrimage tourism continues to grow in a globalized world, a closer analysis of the community’s perceptions towards it should be addressed.

Considering the given research gap, the aim of this research is to produce an exploratory study on residents’ perceptions of socio-economic tourism impacts in pilgrimage routes through a qualitative study. In order to conduct fieldwork, the Chikatsuyu community of Nakahechi town, located on the Japanese pilgrimage routes of Kumano Kodo, was chosen. Case study’s selection was based on three premises: Firstly, the area has experienced important tourism development in recent years based on its pilgrimage sites and routes. Secondly, Nakahechi town is not the final destination of the pilgrimage route and based on previous research (Lois-Gonzalez and Santos 2015), it is hypothesized that perception of tourism impacts may differ from localities where the pilgrimage ends, which often have religious buildings or sites that attract a bigger number of visitors. Therefore, by focusing on a community located on the mid-way of a trail, new data can be obtained that can be valuable for both researchers and destination managers. Thirdly, its geographical proximity and the researcher’s familiarity with the area, having traveled to it many times and having contacts among the local community, which facilitates fieldwork.
Literature review

Previous research on residents’ perceptions on tourism impacts

Early studies on tourism impacts carried out during the 1960s mostly focused on the positive economic effects brought by tourism development. However, during the 1970s, different studies carried out by anthropologists and sociologists focused on the negative impacts. During the 1980s and 1990s, this field of study achieved a more balanced stance, researching both positive and negative effects (Ap and Crompton 1993; Easterling 2004). In literature research, the predominant theoretical basis utilized for analyzing residents’ perceptions is social exchange theory (Nunkoo, Smith and Ramkisoon 2013; Almeida, Balbuena and Cortes 2015), which explains the exchange of resources between individuals or groups during an interaction (Ap 1992). In a tourism context, the exchange takes place between the host community and the tourists, who possess resources that are desirable to each other. The community in particular is often driven to tourism because it wants to improve its socio-economic situation. By evaluating the costs and benefits of the exchange, the host community will perceive tourism impacts in a positive or a negative light, and then decide to support tourism development or not (Jurowski, Uysal and Williams 1997). Research has been built on the social exchange theory to further analyze tourism impacts through qualitative and quantitative approaches, such as power theory (Kayat 2002) and path model (Jurowski, Uysal and Williams 1997). Other frameworks that have been utilized include tourist area life cycle, irridex model, theory of reasoned action and carrying capacity theory (Nunkoo, Smith and Ramkisoon 2013). Behavioral reactions towards tourism have also been studied (Ap and Crompton 1993).

Research indicates that three factors influence residents’ perceptions: economic, socio-cultural and environmental, which can have positive and negative impacts (Ap and Crompton 1998; Jurowski, Uysal and Williams 1997; Almeida, Balbuena and Cortes 2015). Almeida Garcia, Balbuena Vazquez and Cortes Macias (2015) point out that beneficial economic impacts include employment opportunities, creation of a local business environment as well as improvement of living standard, local infrastructure and public facilities. The importance of economic impact is often recognized as a valuable benefit for the host community (Krippendorf 1987; Ritchie and Inkari 2008; Prayag et al. 2013). However, over-emphasis on economic growth can potentially lead to
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negative social impacts, causing conflict between host and guests, as well as between the hosts themselves (Mansfeld 1992). Negative economic impacts include an increased cost of living, raising prices of goods and services, inflation, lowering of living standard, raising cost of housing and property value.

Social impacts include services offered by the community, opportunities for leisure activities, increase in cultural activities, raising awareness on local heritage and an increase in cultural identity (Almeida, Balbuena and Cortes 2015). On the other hand, negative social impacts include drug abuse, prostitution, crime, gambling, parking problems and traffic congestion (Haralambopoulos and Pizam 1996; Almeida, Balbuena and Cortes 2015).

Finally, positive environmental impacts derived from tourism development include the preservation of natural resources and improvement on the urban landscape. Still, tourism can bring negative outcomes such as pollution, rubbish, overcrowding, and agglomeration in public facilities and resources (Almeida, Balbuena and Cortes 2015). Research also discovered that host communities may have difficulty for evaluating negative environmental impacts caused by tourism (Amuquandoh 2010) and do not evaluate environmental impacts equally due to different variables (Kuvan and Akan 2005).

It is often recognized that there are multiple sub-groups in any given communities which may have different perceptions on tourism development (Krippendorf 1987; Mansfeld 1992; Ap and Crompton 1993; Brunt and Courtney 1999; Williams and Lawson 2001). Studies employ different socio-economic variables that can modify the host’s perception or attitudes in order to analyze intra-group differences among the community. These variables include economic dependency on tourism (Krippendorf 1987; Mansfeld 1992; King, Pizam and Milman 1993; Haralambopoulos and Pizam 1996; Korca 1998; Kuvan and Akan 2005), income (Ritchie and Inkari 2006), age (Haralambopoulos and Pizam 1996; Sheldon and Abenoja 2001; Terzidou, Stylidis and Szivas 2008), length of residency (Sheldon and Abenoja 2001), residents’ place image (Stylidis, Biran and Szivas 2014) and ethnicity (Besculides, Lee and McCormick 2002). Distance between the individual and community’s tourism zone is another variable that influences resident perceptions (Mansfeld 1992; Korca 1998; Ritchie and Inkari 2008). Other researchers instead only take the perceptions towards tourism as the main
variable to carry out cluster analysis and classify the community in different groups (Aguilo and Rossello 2005).

Most of the research done on residents’ perceptions is carried out through quantitative approaches employing questionnaires (King, Pizam and Milman 1993; Jurowski, Uysal and Williams 1997; Korça 1998; Williams and Lawson 2001; Besculides, Lee and McCormick 2002; Tosun 2002; Aguilo and Rossello 2005; Ritchie and Inkari 2006; Thyne, Lawson and Todd 2006; Terzidou, Stylidis and Szivas 2008). Likert-type scales are often used to gauge the communities’ perceptions on different statements related to tourism impacts (King, Pizam and Milman 1993; Korca 1998; Sheldon and Abenoja 2001; Besculides, Lee and McCormick 2002; Ritchie and Inkari 2006; Terzidou, Stylidis and Szivas 2008). The data obtained from them is often analyzed through a variety of statistical techniques, including regression analysis, ANOVA, t-tests and correlation analysis, among others (Nunkoo, Smith and Ramkisoon 2013; Sharpley 2014; Almeida Garcia et al. 2015). On the other hand, qualitative research utilizes in-depth structured personal interviews (Brunt and Courtney 1999; Kayat 2002), sometimes coupled with informal interviews (Lepp 2007). Fieldwork data is occasionally analyzed with software assistance (Lepp 2007). Although the number of qualitative studies on the subject has increased over the years (Nunkoo, Smith and Ramkisoon 2013), the prevalence of quantitative analysis led to a lack of understanding on how the perceptions on social impacts are formed and how they could change (Deery, Jago and Fredline 2012).

Resident’s perception of socio-economic impacts in pilgrimage tourism

As Collins-Kreiner (2010) explains, since the 1980s the study of pilgrimage tourism underwent a shift in focus, changing from analyzing the sites and their characteristics or the overall sociological process of liminality to the subjective experience of the visitors. Since then, research focused on the guests’ travel motivations and attitudes (Winter and Gasson 1996; Olsen 2013; Lois-Gonzalez and Santos 2015; Blom, Nilsson and Santos 2016), the guiding received by visitors, (Collins-Kreiner and Gatrell 2006), pilgrim typologies (Ron 2009; Damari and Mansfeld 2016) and authenticity in pilgrims’ experience (Belhassen, Caton and Stewart 2008), among other subjects related to the visitors. However, this left the host communities’ perceptions on tourism impacts comparatively understudied. Nevertheless,
some studies on pilgrimage tourism addressed the host communities. For example, Terzidou, Stylidis and Szivas (2008) found that hosts’ religiousness is an important influence in the perception of tourism impacts. Pourtaheri, Rahmani and Ahmadi (2012) conducted a study on the different impacts that pilgrimage tourism brings to rural communities in Iran and found that social impacts were the most prevalent. The study also showed that the impacts varied across the different analyzed communities. Other studies, although not focusing on social impacts, mention the subject in relation to pilgrimage tourism such as Joseph and Kavoori (2001), on a study of Western tourism impact on the pilgrimage town of Pushkar, India. While not specifically a study on perceptions of social impacts, through their analysis on the local discourse of resistance to tourism, the researchers mentioned different social impacts, including changes in religious ceremonies, local facilities, cultural commoditization, Western acculturation, notions on sexuality, drug use and lifestyle. The study also showed that the support for tourism is not equal across the community members.

Rizzello and Trono (2013) carried out a study of the tourism impacts brought by the pilgrimage site of San Nicola Shrine, located in Bari, Italy. Their analysis found that the tourism sector has a minimal economic impact on the community due to numerous factors, with the geographical position of the shrine being the most important one. Other factors were the prevalence of day-trippers and inadequate promotion policies.

Knight (1996), for his analysis of Japanese rural tourism, studied the communities in Hongu village, Japan, which are part of the Kumano Kodo pilgrimage. It was noticed that, although tourism development brought prosperity to the area, its benefits were perceived to vary by the local population, creating ‘winners’ and ‘losers’ inside the host community and producing social divisions. For example, employment benefits were restricted as recruiting happened through social connections. Also, public funding was perceived not to be distributed equally, as tourism-related areas were given priority over the rest. Locals also mentioned that visitors have negative impacts on the community through pollution, competing for gathering of mountain plants, road congestion and overcrowding leisure facilities.

Lois-Gonzalez and Santos (2015) noticed that visitors’ spending along the Santiago de Compostela pilgrimage trails was uneven due to the nature of
pilgrimage itself. Because visitors were encouraged to walk the trails, they diminish their spending during their travel to avoid cluttering themselves and only when they reach their goal at Santiago de Compostela, their spending normalizes again. Accommodation spending was spare because of the availability of cheap public shelters which offer not only a place to rest, but also a space to socialize with other pilgrims. Also, pilgrims preferred to keep on their travel rather than staying in one specific area and many accommodations only allowed one-night stays. Therefore, it was observed that a same pilgrimage may impact each community differently. At the same time, it was noticed that, beyond physical limitations, the reasons for undertaking the pilgrimage may not be conductive for the consumption of material goods. These considerations are of importance as the pilgrimage trails pass through different communities which expect a positive economic impact from tourism activity. However, the study did not examine how the communities perceived the economic impacts described by the authors. Research conducted by Fernandes et al. (2012) on the Portuguese route to Santiago de Compostela reached similar conclusions. The researchers observed that the visitors’ consumption patterns along this particular route brought little economic impact, and therefore it did not contribute to the improvement of the locals’ quality of life. However, this study did not research the perceptions of tourism impacts by the host community.

The methodology applied in said studies employed quantitative tools such as questionnaires (Terzidou, Stylidis and Szivas 2008; Fernandes et al. 2012; Pourtaheri, Rahmani and Ahmadi 2012; Rizzello and Trono 2013), in a similar note to the ones utilized in host perceptions of tourism impacts’ literature in general. Qualitative approaches utilized interviews and in-site observations (Knight 1996). Other studies (Joseph and Kavoori 2001) did not specify their methodological approach.

To conclude, while studies are scarce, the following three points can be raised. Firstly, the perceptions of the community itself is a particularly under-researched field in pilgrimage tourism, while visitors’ subjective aspects are extensively studied, leading to a research misbalance. Secondly, tourism impact (and by extension, the host community’s perception of it) is hypothesized to vary along the different communities that exist in a same pilgrimage route largely due to geographical factors, posing challenges to tourism managers on how to balance the benefits and distribute the costs equally while promoting
the destination as a cohesive product. However, no study seems to explore this area in depth. In relation to the second point, communities located within the pilgrimage routes are assumed to have limited benefits from tourism in comparison to communities located at the pilgrimage’s end point. Finally, studies that focus on perceptions of tourism impacts mostly take a survey-based quantitative approach, in a similar note to the general literature on the subject.

**Case study’s outline**

**Outline of Kumano Kodo**

![Figure 1. Map of Kumano Kodo routes, highlighting Nakahechi route. Source: Tanabe City Kumano Tourism Bureau, reproduced with permission.](image)

Kumano Kodo is a multi-site pilgrimage route structured around three main pilgrimage sites, which constitute the travelers’ final goals: the Kumano Hongu Taisha (in Hongu town, Tanabe city), the Kumano Hayatama Taisha (Shingu city) and the Kumano Nachi Taisha (Nachikatsuura town). Each of these grand shrines is dedicated to one of the three deities of Kumano (Kumano Gongen), which are also associated with three different Buddhas. These main pilgrimage
sites are linked through three main routes. The Kiji route is sub-divided into three sub-routes: the Nakahechi route, the Kohechi route (which links Kumano Hongu Taisha with the Buddhist complex of Koyasan) and the Ohechi route (which goes along the southern coastline). The Iseji route connects the Kumano region with the Ise Grand Shrine located in Mie prefecture. Finally, the Omine Okugake route connects the Kumano Hongu Taisha with the Yoshino region, located in Nara prefecture. In this way, Kumano Kodo forms a circuit of pilgrimage routes along the Kii peninsula that not only links to its own sites, but also connects with three other important sacred sites. Kumano has been utilized since the Nara era (710 - 794 CE) as a site for religious practices in the mountains and has also been travelled by Emperors and aristocrats from the Heian period (794 - 1185). During the Muromachi period (1336 - 1573), the Kumano Kodo flourished in all sectors of society, coining the term “Ants’ Pilgrimage to Kumano” (Ari no Kumanomode) as an expression for the great numbers of pilgrims. However, during the Edo period (1603 - 1868), Kumano Kodo started to lose its position as other pilgrimage sites prospered, such as the Shikoku Henro and the Ise Grand Shrine.

During the 1930s, the Kumano area suffered from population decrease and a low point in its forestry industry, so the idea to revitalize the area by tourism spread because the Kumano Kodo pilgrimage routes include different natural and cultural resources that could be used to attract tourists. After negotiation with the local forestry and mineral industries, the Yoshino-Kumano national park was designated in 1936. However, tourism development did not take off until the 1970s, when domestic tourism's needs became more varied (Nakai 2011). As a way to attract tourists in this new context, Kumano Kodo, was selected as a potential touristic destination. From 1977 to 1983, the ‘Historical Roads Survey Operation’ was undertaken in different historical areas of Wakayama, including the Kumano routes. Through this examination, different historical areas were designated as Historical Sites. In 1978, the Agency for Cultural Affairs started restoration works in different sections, which were later designated in 2000 as the Historical Site of Kumano Pilgrimage Route by the former Ministry of Education, Science and Culture. Finally, an important step in the area’s tourism development took place during the 28th session of the World Heritage Committee, which was held from June 28 to July 7, 2004, when the Kumano Kodo pilgrimage routes and main shrines were inscribed as a UNESCO World Heritage Site as part of the “Sacred Sites and Pilgrimage
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Routes in the Kii Mountain Range” cultural landscape. The designation provided local communities with a new way to strengthen its tourism industry in order to revitalize the regional economy and attract both national and international tourists. It also changed the community’s perception of the pilgrimage routes. The area contains other tourism attractions, with its hot springs being one of the main ones along with local cuisine, health tourism and cultural resources (Tanabe Commerce and Industry Council 2009; Tanabe City 2013).

Outline of Nakahechi town

Nakahechi town is situated in the middle of the mountainous Nakahechi pilgrimage route, between the coastal area of Tanabe city and Hongu town, where the Kumano Hongu Taisha is located. It covers an area of 211.95 km². Nakahechi was originally formed through the merging of three villages (Chikano, Kurisugawa and Futakawa) in 1956. In 2005, Nakahechi town itself was merged with Tanabe city and three other towns (Hongu, Oto and Ryujin) to form nowadays Tanabe city. According to 2016 official statistics, Nakahechi town has a population of 2,902 (down from 4,343 in 1985) with a considerable elderly demographic according to 2010 data (population below 15 years old: 279; between 15 and 64 years old: 1,545; over 64 years old: 1,216). Employment distribution is composed mostly of third sector activity (51.6%), followed by the second sector (27.5%) and first sector (20.7%), showing a general decline of traditional industries such as farming and forestry. In this context, which also extends to the Kumano region in general, the tourism industry is expected to play an important role in community development (Tanabe Commerce and Industry Conference 2009).

Nakahechi town’s tourism development

As mentioned before, Kumano Kodo’s main pilgrimage routes and shrines were registered as UNESCO World Cultural Heritage Site, providing the regional communities with a new way to strengthen the tourism industry in order to revitalize the regional economy, as well as an opportunity to attract visitors from overseas. In order to capitalize on this opportunity, different initiatives were undertaken. After the 2005 merge, the Tanabe City Kumano Tourism Bureau (the Bureau hereafter) was established on April 2005 as a regional DMO with the objective to promote sustainable tourism development.
in Tanabe city. The tourism associations of each of Hongu, Oto, Nakahechi and Ryujin towns are still in function after the merge, and the Bureau collaborates with them by coordinating the general tourism development with different stakeholders, and marketing strategies for domestic and international visitors. The Bureau aims at attracting low-impact visitors, such as individual and small-group travelers, and to develop the local tourism activity through sustainable growth and preservation. As part of its tourism policies, it also decided to increase its number of inbound Western tourists by promoting its World Heritage Sites.

While tourism developed in the whole Tanabe city, its impact is not equally distributed among the five communities that compose it. According to data registered by the Wakayama Prefectural Government, Nakahechi town registered a total of 371,073 visitors during 2016, ranking as the fourth most visited town in Tanabe, only above Oto town (80,794) and below Ryujin town (691,757), former Tanabe city (1,007,280) and Hongu town (1,499,684). Visitors also tend to day-trippers, with only 10,785 tourists staying in lodging facilities, mostly between April and October. Because of its low number of lodgers, it is hypothesized that economic impacts brought by tourism are also low as they spend less on accommodation, and they do not have time to spend their money in the community. This low number of lodgers is presumed to be because of the geographical location of Nakahechi town in the Kumano Kodo pilgrimage as a transit place for visitors heading to the Kumano Hongu Taisha, located in Hongu town. While no official data exists, based on the previous studies (Fernandes et al. 2012; Lois-Gonzalez and Santos 2015), it is hypothesized that the visitors’ general spending is also lower in Nakahechi town when compared to Hongu town. Regarding travel motivations for visiting Nakahechi town, tourism facilities (223,956), shrines and temples (115,000), sports and hiking (12,301), hot springs (5,816) and local festivals (5,300) are the main motivations. Finally, most of its lodgers come from Osaka prefecture (2,116), Kanto region (862), Wakayama prefecture (814) and Hyogo prefecture (356). However, the largest numbers of lodgers are international visitors (5,272). Because of the high number of day-trippers, it can be assumed that, while international visitors consist of almost half of the total lodgers, the majority of day-trippers are Japanese citizens from nearby cities.
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Methodological approach

Because of the exploratory nature of this research, a qualitative investigation was deemed to be more appropriate as it would yield a substantial amount of in-depth data in comparison to a quantitative approach, which would offer limited information, although with a larger number of respondents. A qualitative study would also contribute to the scarce number of qualitative-based studies done on the area of host’s perceptions, which is largely dominated by quantitative studies, as the literature review showed. As few qualitative studies exist, selecting a reliable framework was of great importance. This study’s framework utilizes the four residents typology formulated by Krippendorf (1987), which has been previously utilized on qualitative research about host perceptions of sociocultural impacts (Brunt and Courtney 1999). Krippendorf classifies community members in four categories based on their economic dependence on tourism, thus following other studies that point out the great importance of economic factors when evaluating tourism impacts (Ritchie and Inkari 2008; Prayag et al. 2013). Because of these factors, Krippendorf’s typology was deemed suitable for the present study.

Krippendorf classifies community members in four types. Type 1 is made up by locals who have constant contact with visitors and depend on tourism. They tend to work in areas such as catering, transport, travel agencies, shops or accommodations. Type 2 includes locals who possess business which are unrelated to tourism, such as the building industry or estate agents. They tend to view tourism as a mostly commercial matter. Type 3 are locals who, while only partially dependent on tourism, have frequent contact with visitors. They tend to reside near or inside tourist areas. This group may see some of the benefits derived from tourism but are also more critical about its disadvantages. Finally, Type 4 is formed by locals who have little or no contact whatsoever with tourists.

Based on the literature review (Haralambopoulos and Pizam 1996; Brunt and Courtney 1999; Easterling 2004; Deery, Jago and Fredline 2012; Fernandes et al. 2012; Almeida, Balbuena and Cortes 2015; Lois-Gonzalez and Santos 2015), a questionnaire was devised for the interview with its contents divided into two sections. The first section dealt with residents’ perceptions of economic
impacts and consisted of seven questions. The second section, centered on perceptions on social impacts, was comprised of ten questions. Some social impacts were not included in the questionnaire as they were regarded as irrelevant in small Japanese mountain communities, such as gambling, drug abuse and prostitution.

Respondents were selected with assistance of locals related to tourism in the Chikatsuyu community in Nakahechi town, who had extensive contacts among the community. Snowball sampling was also carried out on a number of occasions. Following previous research that utilized Krippendorf’s typology (Brunt and Courtney 1999), three community members for each resident type were interviewed, amounting to a total of 12 interviews. Participants who accepted to be interviewed were first read an interview protocol, which detailed the interview’s general aim, in order to obtain their consent. As previous research pointed out, the language used by the participants is critical (Dibley and Baker 2001). Therefore, all the interviews were carried out in the interviewees’ native language, Japanese, in order to let them voice their thoughts utilizing their own words and expressions. The researcher himself is also fluent in this language. The interviews were fully recorded and the researcher took notes as well. After fieldwork was concluded, recorded interviews were transcript into digital files and analyzed utilizing CAQDAS.

**Results**

Fieldwork was carried out during a one week stay in Chikatsuyu from February 19th to 26th, 2018. Type 1 participants consisted of a minshuku (a family-run small accommodation) owner, a travel agent and a luggage transport worker. Type 2 consisted of a construction employee, a gas station manager and a forestry worker. Type 3 participants were a grocery shop owner and two coffee shop owners. Finally, Type 4 involved a retired public employee, a local farmer and a retired housewife.

Type 1 participants had an overall positive view of tourism impact and a greater knowledge of it when compared to other types, as they could talk in detail about it, in particular the minshuku owner and the travel agent. As Type 1 participants, they tended to economically depend on tourism, but reported only social improvements in their quality of life, mostly connected to friendly interactions with overseas visitors, but also to an increase in the number of
cafeterias. Still, the travel agent mentioned that there must have been an income increase in businesses directly related to tourism¹.

As I mentioned before, people (the tourists) are coming so the shops profit. Only because of that profits are increasing. (Type 1 – Travel agent)

They also recognized that other sectors in the community benefited economically from tourism, such as the local supermarket and small grocery shops.

Regarding social impacts, they were perceived as generally positive and sometimes neutral, mostly related to events aimed at both the tourists and the locals, and the different opportunities to interact with foreigners. Interestingly, only the travel agent mentioned positive impacts on public services in relation to local bus services. The minshuku owner and the travel agent mentioned positive impacts on local tradition’s awareness and conservation, while the luggage transport worker did not.

No negative impacts were mentioned. However, the luggage transport worker mentioned that he believed that land and housing prices went up due to tourism development. The minshuku owner also mentioned some negative impressions about the Japanese tourists.

Type 2 participants had an overall positive image of tourism, although their knowledge on the subject was smaller compared to Type 1. Except the gas station manager, they did not recognize positive economic impacts related to their occupation as most of the impacts were connected to accommodations, cafeterias and souvenir shops.

Tourists are increasing so I think that accommodations and souvenir shops receive a positive influence in business. (Type 2 – Construction employee)

However, they did recognize that tourism development contributed to transport infrastructure such as roads and highways.
Certainly, since the World Heritage registration, the conditions of roads have improved. But I don’t think that it will continue only because of tourism. Tourism was just a chance for road improvement. Now that the roads look so good, I think we can develop them sufficiently. (Type 2 – Gas station manager)

Regarding social impacts, they had an overall positive perception. Participants pointed out positive impacts on events, local tradition’s awareness and conservation, contact with tourists and public services (linked to bus and Wi-Fi services).

Increasingly, I have been listening to lots of information from tourists, as well as giving them. I wish they come again to see the local festivals. (Type 2 – Forestry worker)

Regarding tradition’s awareness, there is a sense of wanting to continue them. Festivals and such. I think that feeling has gotten stronger. It was due to tourism. (Type 2 – Gas station manager)

However, while recognizing the positive impacts of international tourists regarding cultural exchange and social opportunities, Type 2 participants had less chances to interact with them.

I don’t know if it had a direct impact on daily life but I can of course get to know and experience foreign cultures. I don’t know if it is a plus in my life or not. I suppose it’s fun. (Type 2 – Construction employee)

No negative economic or social impacts were perceived overall.

Type 3 participants recognized that tourism growth had an indirect positive impact on their sales, but not in the creation of employment, which was mostly regarded to occur in accommodations or tourist guiding.

My place doesn’t receive much impact regarding employment creation. We are different from accommodations. (Type 3 – Coffee shop owner n1)

Life quality improvements were connected to social aspects such as more chances to interact with foreigners. As in Type 1, overseas visitors were more positively perceived than Japanese ones.
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Regarding foreigners, it has been very positive. Even when everyone is working they say ‘hello and we respond ‘hello’. (Type 3 – Coffee shop owner n1)

They also tended to have a generally positive perception of social impacts. The opportunity to interact with tourists, in particular from overseas, was especially seen as positive. An increase in events and awareness towards local culture were also mentioned. Only the coffee shop owner and the grocery store owner noticed improvements in public services related to Wi-Fi and buses. The three participants did not perceive negative impacts, except some misbehavior from Japanese visitors such as utilizing shops’ parking without doing any purchasing or greeting the locals.

On average, Type 4 participants displayed a lesser knowledge on tourism development, except the retired public employee who, because of his past job, had a general understanding of the community’s development, especially on transport infrastructure. They also tended to have little or no interaction with overseas tourists, but they did have an overall positive image of them.

I don’t understand much English so even if I want to ask them, I can’t. I want to ask them where are they from, what kind of lifestyle they have, what things they like. The children have that opportunity to interact with foreigners. With the Japanese, not that much. I just greet them. (Type 4 – Local farmer)

Sometimes I do a part-time job at the art gallery. Naturally, foreigners also come. They ask many things. They have good manners. They also say ‘hi’. The Japanese just leave quickly. Those people (the foreigners) always say ‘thank you’. Sometimes, if we meet in the street, they greet me. (Type 4 – Retired public employee)

Though they received little or no direct economic benefits from it, they tended to have an overall positive perception of tourism impact in Chikatsuyu. They recognized, however, that tourism had economic benefits for other community members.
I think that of course there was an economic impact. But not much for me. It has little relation to my daily life, but it’s good that it benefits my friends and acquaintances, who work in accommodations and cafeterias. (Type 4 – Retired housewife)

Regarding social impacts, as it was mentioned before, they had an overall good image of tourists, especially foreigners. Other positive impacts were perceived in tradition’s conservation and awareness, and to a lesser degree, public services, in relation to Wi-Fi and bus services.

As with the last three categories, no negative impacts were perceived overall.

**Discussion**

Across the four types, accommodations were perceived to be the main economic beneficiaries, with cafeterias, luggage transport and small shops being mentioned as well. This offers a contrast to observations done in Santiago de Compostela, where cheap accommodations restricted spending (Lois-Gonzalez and Santos 2015). Type 2 and 4 participants seldom recognized any direct economic impact, neither positive nor negative. Changes in infrastructure were usually associated with tourism such as renewed public toilets, trails or signboards. Other participants, such as the retired public employee and the gas station manager, however, mentioned how tourism has accelerated road repairs, and contributed to the establishment of the Nakahechi Art Gallery and other tourism facilities in Chikatsuyu and nearby areas. Even though direct economic benefits were usually perceived by Type 1 and 3 participants, all participants mentioned that the community’s social harmony has not changed at all due to tourism development, differing from the findings by Knight (1996).

Regarding social impacts, events were regarded to have received a positive impact by almost all participants, who mentioned the creation of new festivals or an increase of participants. In particular, the Marukajiri Taiken, which is a local festival that takes place in November, was mentioned. During the festival, there are markets offering local products and different events. Community’s awareness and conservation of their own traditions, such as the lion dance and other activities, was regarded as positive in relation to tourism, although not all participants perceived it.
I don’t think that big events increased, but Australian students from Wakayama University came, and art people came, and made art with us. Three years ago… last year too. More near Kurisugawa river… Oh, Marukajiri Taiken became the matsuri (word for Japanese festival) event of Chinako (referring to both Chikatsuyu and nearby Nonaka communities). Locals sell their products like sweet potatoes and crafts. (Type 4 – Local farmer)

I think events increased. I perform the lion dance. (Type 2 – Forestry worker)

I believe they increased in Chikatsuyu. For example, it’s done every year but there’s the Marukajiri Taiken, which is an activity that the region does. Many people are coming to that activity. Participants increased. (Type 1 - Luggage transport worker)

I think there is an effect on it tradition awareness. Everybody in the local community noticed that they must be proud of their nationality. They are very happy. The lion dance is famous so there are groups who dance it. (Type 3 – Coffee shop owner n2)

The positive effect of tourism in local events, tradition awareness and its conservation differed from previous studies, in which an overwhelming influx of international visitors disrupted the local culture (Joseph and Kavoori 2001). Chikatsuyu’s situation may be attributed to the small number of international tourists and their low impact on the community.

As mentioned in the findings, the presence of international tourists was noted to be particularly positive, even among Types 2 and 4 participants who have less contact with them. However, some members pointed out that initially there were some conflicts, usually caused by cultural differences, shyness and language barriers.

The growth of international tourists is a good influence. They used to enter the guest houses without taking their shoes off, so there was a bit of a negative image. Nowadays, you don’t hear about that at all. (Type 3 – Coffee shop owner)
Nonetheless, the fieldwork showed that they are now perceived as a positive presence, giving the locals a chance for economic benefits and intercultural exchange. Interestingly, the presence of Japanese tourists was mentioned as negative at times. They were seen as uninterested in interacting with locals and prone to having bad manners, such as closing doors causing unnecessary noise, littering, using shops’ parking spaces and not greeting the locals.

The Japanese visitors don’t have very good manners towards the locals. They litter more than average. I can only say negative things. The foreigners have better manners. On the contrary, the Japanese have bad manners. When they enter the shop they don’t speak at all. Without greeting, they just come and go ... It is shameful. (Type 3 – Coffee shop owner n1)

About the Japanese’s manners… In the past, they used to silently close the sliding doors. But then foreign culture entered and the doors changed. On that moment, the manners regarding doors got very bad … So in my place, the Japanese have the worst manners. (Type 1 – Minshuku owner)

This may be because, although Japanese visitors are the most numerous tourists in Tanabe city, they do not stay overnight and choose mainly day-trips. This travel pattern may limit their interactions with locals. Also, Japanese tourists were perceived to have colder attitudes when compared to international tourists, even considering the language barrier. This realization was surprising to the participants themselves, who seemed to expect the opposite situation. Previous research has showed that cultural differences between host and guests can generate difficulties (Reisinger and Turner 1998; Joseph and Kavoori 2001). However, the present research showed that the Japanese host community perceived positively presence of international tourists, which are mostly Westerns and have limited Japanese knowledge, but had some negative perceptions of domestic tourists. The Bureau’s efforts on grassroots tourism development aimed at hosting international visitors could be another factor affecting the overall positive image of international visitors as they helped the host community to be prepared for their arrival and efficiently interact with them (Tanabe Kumano Tourism Bureau n.d.).
Finally, it was observed almost unanimously that no negative impacts were perceived by the participants. Social problems related to tourism such as parking problems or increases in crimes were not apparent to the interviewees. Parking space was regarded to be sufficient in Chikatsuyu. Also, because walking is emphasized by the local authorities, the use of automobiles is not promoted. Economic problems such as increases in land, products or housing prices were rarely perceived. The relationship among the community members did not seem to have changed due to tourism development. During his stay, the researcher also did not perceive any major socioeconomic differences in the community. These results may be explained by the small scale of tourism development in Chikatsuyu. Indeed, while the tourism sector, especially accommodation, was universally seen as the main beneficiary from tourism, these establishments are small-scale minshuku and cafeterias. Therefore, they are not earning great economic benefits that may cause socioeconomic differences inside the community and change the relationships between its members. This is supported by the fact that no mentions of economic impacts were made when participants were asked about changes in their quality of life. This is similar to previous research, which suggested that economic impacts may be low along pilgrimage trails (Fernandes et al. 2012). Also, the small number of rooms available may have limited their impact in the community. The accommodation capacity at Nakahechi town is the lowest in Tanabe city, with 15 establishments and a capacity for 510 guests. In comparison, Hongu town has 39 establishments and can accommodate a total of 6,116 guests (Wakayama Tourism Agency 2017). Also, as the minshuku owner commented, because accommodations are usually family-managed, they do not generate new employment opportunities. Similar observations were made on the Kumano Kodo’s accommodations by Knight (1996), who noted that accommodations tended to function as family businesses and therefore had a small impact on employment creation. The dominance of day-trippers may also be a factor, as mentioned in previous studies (Rizzello and Trono 2013). These characteristics limit the overall economic impact of the Chikatsuyu’s accommodation sector.

In comparison to other communities in Tanabe city, participants recognized that Chikatsuyu was comparatively smaller and less developed overall than other destinations such as the former Tanabe city or Hongu town. This was attributed to the role of Chikatsuyu as a middle point between Tanabe and Hongu:
Around Kiitanabe station in former Tanabe city, guest houses have increased recently, and there are places for eating. But there’s nothing like that here… this is place for passing. It is a place that must be passed when going from Tanabe to Hongu so people will necessarily come. So there are a lot of accommodations … Compared to Hongu, in Hongu there are many people but there are more ryokan and hotels so maybe the capacity is bigger, but here it is small. I think there is a lack of accommodations. (Type 1 – Travel agent)

When compared to other places, Nakahechi is a waypoint town, but I think it is not only the authorities but many of locals who have a striving feeling. (Type 2 – Gas station owner)

However, they tended to have a positive perception of tourism development and that each of the communities developed according to its own situation:

I think that here and Hongu are almost the same. There’s a similar result, but of course there are more people at Hongu. But comparatively they are the same. (Type 3 – Café owner)

There are results in Chikatsuyu, Takahara, Hongu, Nonaka... Everybody is striving forward. (Type 4 – Local farmer)

As it can be seen, the participants recognized that Chikatsuyu’s tourism development is comparatively small but seemed to be satisfied with both its scale, growth speed and overall quality of life. The Bureau has taken a similar stance in their tourism planning, prioritizing sustainable tourism development based on small groups and individual visitors (Tanabe City Kumano Tourism Bureau n.d.). These approaches seem reasonable as popular destinations in Japan such as Kyoto are already experiencing over-tourism and a resulting hostility towards tourism (Hagi 2017), following similar cases elsewhere (Seraphin, Sheeran and Pilato 2018). While simple numeric conceptions of carrying capacity have come under criticism (McCool and Lime 2001), developing effective coping strategies for tourism development is vital because hosts’ attitudes towards visitors are a central part of any successful tourism product (Smith 1994). Therefore, it could be argued that a slower tourism growth could be positive for both the host community and the visitors, in particular because the host community did not mention any wish for an
accelerated tourism development and emphasized their appreciation for face-to-face, close interactions with tourists, which are more likely to happen in small-scale tourism. This kind of interactions seemed to happen frequently with international visitors in particular. This paradigm shift towards a balanced tourism growth that prioritizes quality of life over fast economic development has been observed in previous studies (Rivera, Croes and Lee 2016). In this regard, a slow tourism approach (Lumsdon and McGrath 2011; Caffyn 2012; Kato and Progano 2017) could be a valid alternative as slow travel already exists in Kumano Kodo because visitors are encouraged to walk rather than to speed through to the main shrine in Hongu town.

**Conclusions**

Tourism development was perceived as positive across the four types overall, with few mentions about negative impacts. In particular, socio-cultural impacts such as interaction with tourists, events and promotion of local culture were perceived as being positive by most participants. Results also partially confirmed what previous studies mentioned about economic impacts being low along trails because of the characteristics of pilgrimage tourism itself (Fernandes et al. 2012; Lois-Gonzalez and Santos 2015), although participants who were related to tourism (Types 1 and 3) did perceive a positive impact in their activities. As pilgrimage tourism is focused on walking, intangible tourism products such as experience programs may increase positive economic impacts on communities located in the trails. The Bureau mentioned that it aims to increase these programs to extend visitors’ stays and increase revenues for locals. This approach may be an alternative to selling souvenirs, which was deemed as impractical due to the fact that visitors are walking and thus avoid carrying more luggage (Lois-Gonzalez and Santos 2015). This alternative can potentially generate profit by not depending on accommodations, a sector that has limited impact on the community regarding job opportunities.

It also supported the hypothesis that tourism impacts may differ across communities’ pilgrimage trails, as members of the Chikatsuyu’s community were aware that other places along the pilgrimage trail, particularly Hongu, had a greater degree of tourism development. However, the community was satisfied overall with the scale of tourism development carried out in Chikatsuyu. They perceived that, considering the role of Chikatsuyu as a middle point in the pilgrimage route, the tourism development’s scale was acceptable.
These findings are similar to the ones in previous studies, that pointed out that tourism impacts are greater at the pilgrimage’s final destination, where consumption increases (Lois-Gonzalez and Santos 2015).

As spirituality-related tourism continues to grow in contemporary society, studies regarding its impacts on host communities are of great importance for both tourism researchers and policymakers. The present study, while exploratory in nature, contributes to the understanding of communities’ perceptions of tourism impacts in pilgrimage trails, as well as to suggest potential alternatives towards a small scale, slower tourism development in the areas that capitalizes in the characteristics of pilgrimage tourism. This approach can be an alternative development strategy (Koens and Thomas 2015) in contrast to recent cases of over-tourism (Hagi 2017; Seraphin, Sheeran and Pilato 2018). As the residents seem to prefer an overall small development that favors close interactions with visitors, a balance in development may be of utmost importance for sustainable tourism policies.

**Limitations**

The following limitations of this research should be addressed. First, the present study only focused on one community at a mid-point on the pilgrimage trail. A study that includes other geographical locations such as the final destination, would shed more light on how perceptions of tourism impacts vary between communities inside a pilgrimage route. Future research may also examine how communities perceive the distribution of costs and benefits among them. This information could be of valuable use for tourism policy makers, managers and planners to avoid conflicts between communities and facilitate even development. Secondly, although this research only took into account the socio-economic impacts, literature (Shinde 2007; 2012) has pointed out that pilgrimage tourism may also bring environmental impacts. Such investigation may be made on pilgrimage routes such as Kumano Kodo located in protected areas. Finally, since the area is declared as a UNESCO Heritage Site, further research could be done on the impacts this declaration has had on the local community. However, this dimension was not deepened in order to maintain the paper’s focus.
Notes

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1 All the quotations were translated by the researcher

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