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**Dr. Elanur Mutlu**
https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4157-9245
Independent Researcher, Giresun / TÜRKİYE

# Certified Slowness, Accelerated Change? Destination Value Co-Creation and Co-Destruction Across Türkiye's Cittaslow Network

## Sertifikalı Yavaşlık, Hızlanan Değişim mi? Türkiye'nin Cittaslow (Yavaş Şehir) Ağında Destinasyon Değerinin Ortak Yaratımı ve Ortak Yıkımı

## ABSTRACT

The Cittaslow (Slow City) movement aims to protect the identity, heritage, gastronomy, and ways of life of small towns against the homogenising forces of globalisation. Yet membership may increase visibility, tourism demand, investment, and development pressure. This tension raises a question: can a place-based sustainability certification designed to protect local distinctiveness also contribute to its commodification? Drawing on service-dominant logic and value co-destruction, this study approaches Cittaslow certification as an intervention through which destination value may be co-created, preserved, or eroded in the interactions among residents, visitors, local producers, and public authorities. An exploratory qualitative design combines a synthesis of documentary and published evidence on Turkish Cittaslow towns with an in-depth counter-case analysis of Tirebolu, a town not yet certified, drawing on institutional documents, official statistics, a criteria-based assessment, and a comparison of historical and contemporary photographs. The findings suggest that certification may strengthen place identity, resident participation, and heritage protection, but that where place branding, tourism intensity, and development pressure are not balanced by effective governance and participation, it may also intensify spatial commodification and the erosion of locally created value. The study proposes a framework for identifying the conditions under which certification supports value creation rather than erosion.
**Keywords:** Cittaslow, destination value, value co-destruction, commodification, sustainable tourism.

## ÖZET

Cittaslow (Yavaş Şehir) hareketi, küçük kentlerin kimliğini, mirasını, gastronomisini ve yaşam biçimlerini küreselleşmenin türdeşleştirici güçlerine karşı korumayı amaçlamaktadır. Bununla birlikte üyelik; görünürlüğü, turizm talebini, yatırımı ve gelişme baskısını artırabilmektedir. Bu gerilim şu soruyu gündeme getirmektedir: Yerel özgünlüğü korumak için tasarlanmış yer temelli bir sürdürülebilirlik sertifikasyonu, aynı zamanda bu özgünlüğün metalaşmasına da katkıda bulunabilir mi? Hizmet-baskın mantık (service-dominant logic) ve değerin ortak yıkımı (value co-destruction) kavramlarından hareketle bu çalışma, Cittaslow sertifikasyonunu; yerel halk, ziyaretçiler, yerel üreticiler ve kamu otoriteleri arasındaki etkileşimlerde destinasyon değerinin ortak üretilebileceği, korunabileceği ya da aşınabileceği bir müdahale olarak ele almaktadır. Keşfedici nitel bir tasarım, Türkiye'deki Cittaslow kentlerine ilişkin belgesel ve yayımlanmış kanıtların sentezini; henüz sertifika almamış bir kent olan Tirebolu'nun kurumsal belgeler, resmî istatistikler, ölçüt temelli bir değerlendirme ve tarihsel ile güncel fotoğrafların karşılaştırılmasına dayanan ayrıntılı bir karşı-örnek analizi ile birleştirmektedir. Bulgular, sertifikasyonun yer kimliğini, yerel halkın katılımını ve miras korumasını güçlendirebileceğini; ancak yer markalaması, turizm yoğunluğu ve gelişme baskısının etkin yönetişim ve katılımla dengelenmediği durumlarda mekânsal metalaşmayı ve yerel olarak üretilen değerin aşınmasını da yoğunlaştırabileceğini göstermektedir. Çalışma, sertifikasyonun değer aşınması yerine değer üretimini hangi koşullarda desteklediğini belirlemeye yönelik bir çerçeve önermektedir.
**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Cittaslow, destinasyon değeri, değerin ortak yıkımı, metalaşma, sürdürülebilir turizm.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Place-based certification schemes have emerged as a key tool of sustainable destination governance. Labels claim to safeguard the qualities that make a place unique: its landscape, its culinary heritage, its rhythm of life. Emerging in Italy in 1999 as an extension of the Slow Food movement into urban contexts, the Cittaslow network is among the most established of these schemes: it accepts only towns with populations under 50,000 and assesses members across a suite of rigorous criteria addressing environmental policy, mobility and infrastructure, quality of urban life, agricultural and artisanal initiatives, hospitality and socially inclusive community dynamics (Mayer & Knox, 2006; Miele, 2008; Pink, 2008). At the same time, though, a certificate is never simply a bulwark. It is also a marker in a marketplace where towns are competing with one another. Observers of Cittaslow have noted again and again that towns join for at least partly promotional reasons – to get noticed and attract visitors – and that "local practice often becomes promotional or marketing rhetoric" (Amrhein & Hospers, 2025; Presenza et al., 2015). Where the label effectively becomes a brand, it invites the visitor density, real-estate development pressure, and orchestrated 'authenticity' that slow philosophy purports to defy. This contradiction has been identified in the literature, but has not been studied: certification can help protect a place's uniqueness, turn it into a commodity, or – most likely – do both simultaneously, and to different degrees over time.

Tourism research provides a language to describe this ambivalence that has yet to be applied to slow-city certification. Service-dominant logic reconceptualized value as co-created through an interaction, rather than something delivered as an output (Vargo & Lusch, 2004, 2008); tourism research extended this to the destination, arguing that value emerges from interactions between visitor practices and place resources (Prebensen et al., 2013; Prebensen & Xie, 2017). Its counterpart emerged more recently: the same interactions can negatively affect the well-being of one or more actors—the process known as value co-destruction (Lumivalo et al., 2024; Plé & Chumpitaz Cáceres, 2010). Running alongside (and largely independent of) this service-theoretic debate is a long anthropological tradition critiquing how tourism transforms lived culture into staged and saleable experience (Cohen, 1988; MacCannell, 1973; Shepherd, 2002). Commodification is, arguably, how co-created destination value spills into co-destruction— but these three literatures rarely intersect.

Research on Cittaslow has chronicled the movement's shift towards marketing practices and consequences for authenticity and local economies; however, it has not theorized destination certification as a process which intervenes in the formation of destination value. On the other hand, value co-destruction literature has focused on urban contexts, digital environments, and service-encounters and favoured the tourist's point of view, while overlooking small rural towns themselves, their inhabitants, and place-based certification programs. Researchers have not yet asked if sustainability certification programs can themselves act as a mechanism for value co-destruction.

Contributing research fills that void through a multiple-case comparison of Türkiye's network of Cittaslow towns. Türkiye presents a compelling context: beginning with the admission of Seferihisar to the network in 2009 Türkiye has risen to the ranks of world leader in terms of number of slow cities, and there has been a burgeoning of Turkish scholarship on the movement (Çiçek et al., 2019; Ekinci, 2014)—but Turkish scholarship has been predominantly descriptive, and focused on single towns. This study pursues the following research questions: RQ1: How, and by which actors, is destination value co-created in Cittaslow towns? RQ2: Through which mechanisms does certification contribute to the co-destruction of that value? RQ3: How do observable indicators of value creation and erosion change before and after membership? RQ4: Under which conditions does the label protect, and under which does it commodify?

The paper contributes to theory, empirical evidence and practice. Conceptually, it is the first to study place-based sustainability certification as a site of value co-destruction, building on prior work that has introduced this idea for service encounters to examine territorial and spatial modes of governance. Empirically, instead of another single-town evaluation, it provides a first network-scale account of Türkiye's slow cities. Professionally, it highlights the circumstances under which certification programmes might unintentionally exacerbate the pressures they seek to ameliorate, raising questions relevant to every place brand, from geographical indications to UNESCO listing.

## 2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This chapter reviews prior literature which serves as the foundation for this study. Literature streams including co-created destination value, value co-destruction and commodification are traced from their origins through to the most recent contributions before being integrated in the context of slow-city certification.

### 2.1. From Perceived Value to Co-Created Destination Value

Value entered tourism through consumer behaviour. In Zeithaml's (1988) landmark article, it is defined as "the consumer's overall assessment of utility based on perceptions of what is received and what is given" (p. 14). Multidimensional operationalisations soon followed; Sweeney and Soutar's (2001) PERVAL scale and its tourism adaptation (Sánchez et al., 2006) separated functional, emotional and social assessments of tourism purchases' value. This stream generated expansive destination literature relating perceived value to satisfaction and loyalty; its basic logic however remained transactional: the destination provides value which the tourist assesses. Service-dominant logic challenged that idea by defining value as always co-created with the beneficiary, never embeddable in an output (Vargo & Lusch, 2004, 2008). In the destination context, it repositions place from a bundle of traits to a backdrop where value emerges through interaction (Prebensen et al., 2013; Prebensen & Xie, 2017). Application of the co-creation lens to Cittaslow itself is recent: Huang et al. (2025) explored how tourists and stakeholders co-create slow-food and slow-city experiences in Sonoma (California). That work establishes slow destinations as environments for co-creation—but, like the rest of the literature, stops short of co-destruction.

### 2.2. Value Co-Destruction

Ideas about value co-destruction evolved along two lines. Plé and Chumpitaz Cáceres (2010) coined the term within service-dominant logic in 2010, defining it as "an interactive process occurring between service systems which results in diminishing well-being for at least one of the service systems involved, typically through resource misuse." Independently, Echeverri and Skålén (2011) examined co-destruction using a practice-theoretical perspective in 2011, integrating co-creation and co-destruction on a continuum of 'interactive value formation' and demonstrating how value emerges depending on whether actors enact congruent (co-creation) or incongruent (co-destruction) practices. Lumivalo et al. (2024) revisited the construct in 2024, offering a framework organised around actor–actor interactions and the individual actor across temporal phases of an encounter and arguing that only the focal actor can know whether value has been destroyed or not—a consideration of direct relevance here, as residents and visitors may judge the same change negatively or positively. Applications within tourism have increased but have focused primarily on online communities, technology-mediated experience, and instances of service failure. Territorially situated, resident-facing, and policy-induced forms of co-destruction are significantly understudied.

### 2.3. Commodification and Authenticity

A second literature can be read forwards or backwards that details how tourism develops places. MacCannell (1973) theorised how tourist environments become organised into front/back regions, allowing him to explain the production of 'staged authenticity'. Cohen (1988) argued that commodification did not inevitably destroy meaning because producers might find new meanings in the cultural products they helped market. Wang (1999) moved beyond the debate by differentiating objective/constructional/existential authenticity, proving that experienced authenticity is not an attribute of an object but rather a mode of engagement. Shepherd (2002) went further yet by reading commodification as translation instead of collapse. The issue is therefore not whether tourism commodifies, but under what circumstances does commodification deplete or replenish the worth of place — exactly what a certification programme purports to solve.

### 2.4. Cittaslow: Protection, Promotion, or Both?

Published work on Cittaslow is bifurcated by similar themes that have rarely been brought into dialogue with each other, once again developing along historical lines. Studies that take up the first thread have focused on demonstrating protective impacts. Mayer and Knox (2006) first framed slow cities as slow places and sustainable alternatives within an accelerated world. This same duo (Mayer & Knox, 2010) later expanded upon the work to discuss the initiatives under the broader concept of small-town sustainability within what they term 'second modernity'. Miele (2008) and Pink (2008) evaluated the slow movement for its slowness and sensory, quotidian aspects respectively, and Pink and Servon (2013) applied experiential expertise to understanding slow-city growth three years later. Taking a qualitative approach, Radström (2011) found Cittaslow to provide a locally sustaining scaffolding for place identity. Çiçek et al. (2019) interviewed

residents from across multiple slow cities in Turkey, finding membership conveyed a heightened sense of place authenticity which translated to entrepreneurship and economic development.

The second thread is more sceptical. Presenza et al. (2015) found evidence of governance tensions in Cittaslow destinations in 2015 and Perano et al. (2019) analysed the movement's entanglement with fast-growing SMEs in 2019. Investigating the Turkish case, Aygün et al. (2021) analyzed slow-city branding's impact on urban space in the example of Sığacık (Seferihisar), and found that migration and tourism pressure rising after designation changed land use patterns (one of few Turkish studies where co-destruction indicators are empirically measured). For the same region—the Eastern Black Sea—Mutlu and Keleş (2024) found, by comparing old and new photographs of the region that overtourism in the Ayder and Uzungöl highlands created problems of concrete-oriented development, unauthorised construction and environmental degradation, proving that co-destruction can be shown visually and spatially. Most directly related, Amrhein and Hospers (2025) asked whether Cittaslow represented degrowth practice or place promotion and decided it was neither, concluding that it is an open-ended concept whose interpretation is defined largely by local stakeholders. In Turkey, Ekinci (2014) conceptualized Cittaslow as an instrument of sustainable tourism development, Öztürk et al. (2023) evaluated its sustainable local development in the case of Şavşat, and Özcan Alp (2024) compared towns in Italy and Turkey to evaluate certification's role in fostering sustainable urban development.

### 2.5. Synthesis: Certification as a Value Mechanism

Taken together, these bodies of literature suggest a hypothesis we've yet to test. If destination value is created relationally, and if commodification is the process by which that value is destroyed, then a certification program is not simply a neutral force field: it intervenes in who gets to participate in value creation, under what conditions, and with what visibility. Certification might bolster co-creation by legitimizing place-specific practices and giving residents a stake; alternatively, it might catalyze co-destruction by turning those practices into commodifiable signals, encouraging levels of visitation the town cannot support, and shifting power away from residents and towards visitors and investors. Which dynamics win out is an empirical question—but one best answered not by studying any single place, but by comparing many communities at different stages of certification.

## 3. MATERIALS AND METHODS

### 3.1. Research Design

This research uses an exploratory qualitative design consisting of two interrelated components: a comparison of documentary/published evidence across Turkish Cittaslow towns and an embedded, in-depth counter-case study focused on one Turkish town currently awaiting Cittaslow certification, Tirebolu. Turkish Cittaslow towns in general provide context for this study, with Tirebolu serving as a temporary pre-certification control case against which to compare the existing Cittaslow towns. The goal is to determine conditions that lead to value protection and value erosion, not to causally estimate the effect of certification.

### 3.2. Data Sources

Table 1 presents an overview of the four datasets and baseline material of the counter-case.

Official Cittaslow and municipality records, official statistics, published empirical research, selected newspaper articles, historic and present-day photography were reviewed. Material pertaining to aspects of local identity, resident participation, tourism pressure, physical transformation, destination branding, and commodification was prioritised. Published studies of space (Aygün et al., 2021) including analysis of post-certification land-use change and building pressure in Sığacık helped confirm the appropriateness of these indicators within the Turkish Cittaslow context. The counter-case research in Tirebolu also consisted of a criteria-based evaluation, SWOT analysis, official population data, and photography compiled by the author.

**Table 1.** Data sources and what each evidences.

| Source | What it evidences | Access |
|---|---|---|
| Cittaslow application and criteria documents; municipal strategic plans and activity reports | Declared commitments; how a town narrates its own value | Municipal and Cittaslow sites; open access |
| Official statistics and published spatial studies (population, land use, bed capacity) | Physical and demographic pressure before and after membership | TurkStat; open data; peer-reviewed publications |
| User-generated content: review platforms and geotagged social media | How the place is consumed and represented by visitors | Open web |
| Press coverage (local and national) | How the label is marketed and debated | Press archives |
| Researcher's photographic records of the counter-case town | Pre-certification spatial baseline conditions | Author's archive, 2026 |

**Source:** Compiled by the author.

### 3.3. Analysis

Evidence was sorted using an analytical framework built around three themes: value co-creation, value co-destruction, and commodification. Variables evidencing value co-creation were resident participation, heritage protection, continuation of local practices, supporting local production, and locally distributed benefits. Variables evidencing value co-destruction were congestion, spatial pressure, displacement, price pressure, over-branding, cultural staging, and decreasing resident control.

The same process was repeated with the Tirebolu counter-case. Old and recent photographs were comparatively described to determine visible evidence of change to settlement density, coastal use, the built environment, and heritage landscapes. This update of the old–new photographic comparison previously conducted on the overtourism-induced spatial effects in Ayder and Uzungöl (Mutlu & Keleş, 2024) is necessary because these photographs do not share the same date, camera position, or scale. For this reason, these comparative descriptions are interpreted qualitatively rather than quantitatively understood as a metric indication of change. Finally, evidence from this comparative synthesis and the qualitative interpretation of the Tirebolu case study was triangulated to form preliminary propositions about both protective and commodifying trajectories.

### 3.4. Trustworthiness and Ethics

Trustworthiness was assured through triangulation of sources, a clearly stated analytic strategy, and differentiation between original case data and published secondary sources. Assertions grounded in limited or case-bound evidence were presented tentatively. Data were drawn from publicly available organizational documents, official statistics, published scholarship, newspaper articles and photographs. Interviews were not conducted, no surveys or private data/information were collected, and no identifying information was used. As such, this study did not require institutional approval or informed consent.

## 4. RESULTS

Evidence presented includes two types. First are directly validated facts: the slow city list and years of membership from the official network (Section 4.1), as well as the author's fieldwork primary data regarding the Tirebolu counter-case study: document review, criteria evaluation, SWOT analysis, and photographs (Section 4.3). Second is synthesized evidence-based analysis (Section 4.2) that reviews published empirical scholarship on Turkish and global slow cities using the framework of co-creation/ co-destruction. Calls for network-wide longitudinal primary data are offered as future research (Section 5).

### 4.1. Describing the Network

Türkiye's first Cittaslow city was Seferihisar, admitted in 2009. Since then Türkiye has built up significant momentum in the Cittaslow movement and now ranks among the top countries in the world by number of slow cities. The following list is compiled from the official Cittaslow International member page (last accessed 26 July 2026). It includes 29 member towns in Turkey, not including metropolitan İzmir (Table 2). The list will change over time - for instance, Taraklı (Sakarya) was admitted in 2011 but had their membership revoked by the Cittaslow network in 2022. This shows that Cittaslow membership is not a designation achieved permanently, but rather one that needs to be maintained.

**Table 2.** The Turkish Cittaslow network—member towns verified from the official network page (29 towns, excluding the İzmir metropolis), with province, region, and membership year. Accessed 26 July 2026.

| Town (Province) | Region | Membership year |
|---|---|---|
| Seferihisar (İzmir) | Aegean | 2009 † |
| Foça (İzmir) | Aegean | — |
| Akyaka (Muğla) | Aegean | — |
| Köyceğiz (Muğla) | Aegean | — |
| Yenipazar (Aydın) | Aegean | — |
| Çameli (Denizli) | Aegean | — |
| Gökçeada (Çanakkale) | Marmara | — |
| Vize (Kırklareli) | Marmara | — |
| Şarköy (Tekirdağ) | Marmara | — |
| İznik (Bursa) | Marmara | — |
| Perşembe (Ordu) | Black Sea | 2012 † |
| Şavşat (Artvin) | Black Sea | 2015 † |
| Gerze (Sinop) | Black Sea | — |
| Safranbolu (Karabük) | Black Sea | — |
| Daday (Kastamonu) | Black Sea | — |
| Göynük (Bolu) | Black Sea | — |
| Mudurnu (Bolu) | Black Sea | — |
| Güdül (Ankara) | Central Anatolia | — |
| Ortahisar (Nevşehir) | Central Anatolia | — |
| Eğirdir (Isparta) | Mediterranean/Lakes | — |
| Yalvaç (Isparta) | Mediterranean/Lakes | — |
| Finike (Antalya) | Mediterranean | — |
| Demre (Antalya) | Mediterranean | — |
| İbradı (Antalya) | Mediterranean | — |
| Halfeti (Şanlıurfa) | Southeastern Anatolia | — |
| Arapgir (Malatya) | Eastern Anatolia | — |
| Kemaliye (Erzincan) | Eastern Anatolia | — |
| Uzundere (Erzurum) | Eastern Anatolia | — |
| Ahlat (Bitlis) | Eastern Anatolia | — |

**Source:** Compiled by the author from the official Cittaslow International network page (accessed 26 July 2026).

*Note.* † Cross-verified anchor years. The official network page does not publish accession years in consolidated form; per-town years are recorded on each town's individual official Cittaslow page, and publicly available secondary sources differ on both the total (27–29) and some years. Only verified anchor years are therefore reported here. İzmir was additionally designated the world's first Cittaslow Metropolis in 2021.

By way of background, this descriptive table sets up our basis for comparing cases: duration of membership (e.g., Seferihisar: 15+ years; Şavşat: ~10 years; aspiring town: Tirebolu, 0 years) provides a natural timeline against which change can be measured. We can plot town-level statistics such as population and bed-capacity onto this axis using official figures.

### 4.2. Value Co-Creation, Mechanisms of Erosion, and Conditioning Factors (RQ1–RQ4)

From the municipal reports/Cittaslow documents and published evidence synoptically, towns tell the story of their value being communicated through shared set of 'repertoire' across towns (local food and gastronomy, landscape and nature, tradition and heritage, hospitality) that is produced through lived practice of residents and producers—where the visitor plays a role but not one that wholly determines that practice alone (Huang et al., 2025; Çiçek et al., 2019). This mode of value co-creation by residents can be seen in the counter-case of Tirebolu (Section 4.3). Tirebolu sustains its value through food/agriculture (production of hazelnuts, Black Sea cuisine), quotidian hospitality of the Black Sea, and history that traces back to the 7th century BCE, among other things. In short, the ensemble of relations lived and sustained by residents, rather than a 'product' that has somehow been inserted in place.

From the same documentary/published evidence base, we can identify the mechanisms through which certification contributes to that value's erosion. Aygün et al.'s (2021) study of Sığacık/Seferihisar shows that post-certification migration pressure, tourism pressure, and land use/construction reordered urban space in ways antithetical to slow principles—providing direct evidence that co-destruction indicators identified in the theoretical framework (price pressure, displacement, congestion, staging) are empirically evident in Türkiye, and that the theorized 'post-certification acceleration' has happened in at least one case town. In contrast, Öztürk et al.'s (2023) assessment of Şavşat shows a trajectory oriented around protection and development. Therefore, the before/after pattern is conditional, rather than uni-directional; constructing a complete town-level pre-/post-series across the network is a major goal for future work (Section 5). Cross-case comparison helps us see what conditions protect towns from falling into this cycle. Those near centers of high-intensity coastal tourism; that have high accessibility and were aggressively promoted or branded (the Sığacık/Seferihisar case; Aygün et al., 2021) appear more prone to indicators of co-destruction whereas

towns with less access to coast/tourists, stronger local governance, and development-oriented priorities (the Şavşat case; Öztürk et al., 2023) take more protective paths. Length of membership, tourism intensity/accessibility to major markets, local governance capacity, and resident participation are therefore candidate conditioning factors. The Tirebolu counterfactual (Section 4.3) provides baseline against which member towns' histories can be compared to empirically assess these factors.

### 4.3. Counter-Case: A Town Before Certification (Tirebolu)

This subsubsection analyses candidate town Tirebolu, located in Giresun province, but not currently a member of Cittaslow due to being pre-certification baseline. Sources include the author's own document analysis, criteria analysis, SWOT analysis, as well as aerial photographs. Tirebolu is a small historic district on the Black Sea coast which traces its roots to the trading colony of Tripolis, founded in the 7th century BCE. Tirebolu's population is 32,720 (Source: TurkStat, 2024), less than the maximum population of 50,000 allowed for Slow Cities and has an economy primarily driven by hazelnut cultivation, fishing, and small-scale animal husbandry (due to geography/topography). Thus Tirebolu can be considered an archetypal slow-city candidate. The assessment of documents against the Cittaslow criteria listed in Table 3 reveals that the value of Tirebolu is strongly co-created along the environmental-policy axis, agricultural–touristic axis, and hospitality–education axis – which aligns with the co-created values identified above (food culture, heritage, hospitality) and is reflected in visual form in the author's 2026 aerial photographs. Figure 1 showcases the agricultural/natural landscape surrounding the town (namely, the Harşit Valley, hazelnut covering depicted in fall and winter, and Bedrama Castle crag), while Figure 2 depicts Tirebolu (Saint Jean) Castle, most overt symbol of the town's historic identity.

**Table 3.** Assessment of Tirebolu against the main Cittaslow criteria (document analysis, 2026).

| Main criterion | Compliance level | Explanation (co-created value) |
|---|---|---|
| Environmental policy | High | Natural structure preserved; hazelnut groves support the ecosystem |
| Infrastructure policy | Medium | Transport network present but requires improvement |
| Urban quality of life | Medium–High | Historic fabric preserved; strong presence of green space |
| Agricultural–touristic policy | High | Hazelnut, local food, gastronomy potential significant |
| Hospitality and education | High | Black Sea hospitality; presence of a university |
| Social cohesion | Medium | Out-migration present; limited access for the young population |
| Partnerships | Medium | Municipality–university cooperation can be developed |

**Source:** Author's document analysis, 2026.

**Figure 1.** The Harşit Valley, hazelnut cover, and the Bedrama Castle crag: environment- and agriculture-centred co-created value **Source:** Photograph by the author, 2026.

**Figure 2.** The Tirebolu (Saint Jean) Castle: symbol of the town's historical heritage value **Source:** Photograph by the author, 2026.

### 4.3.1. Temporal Transformation of Value: An Old–New Photographic Comparison

To better emphasise the counter-case's analysis, current images of Tirebolu are contrasted with past photographs. This method derives from Mutlu and Keleş (2024) who used historical–present photographic comparisons to examine Ayder and Uzungöl, two mountainous destinations in the Eastern Black Sea region of Turkey. Their research recorded the physical impacts stemming from overtourism; amplified construction and development (both authorised and unauthorised), rubbish build-up, and environmental damage. The same rationale is used to portray Tirebolu. Figure 3 displays images of the castle and peninsula in the past, with no date of photography noted in the source.

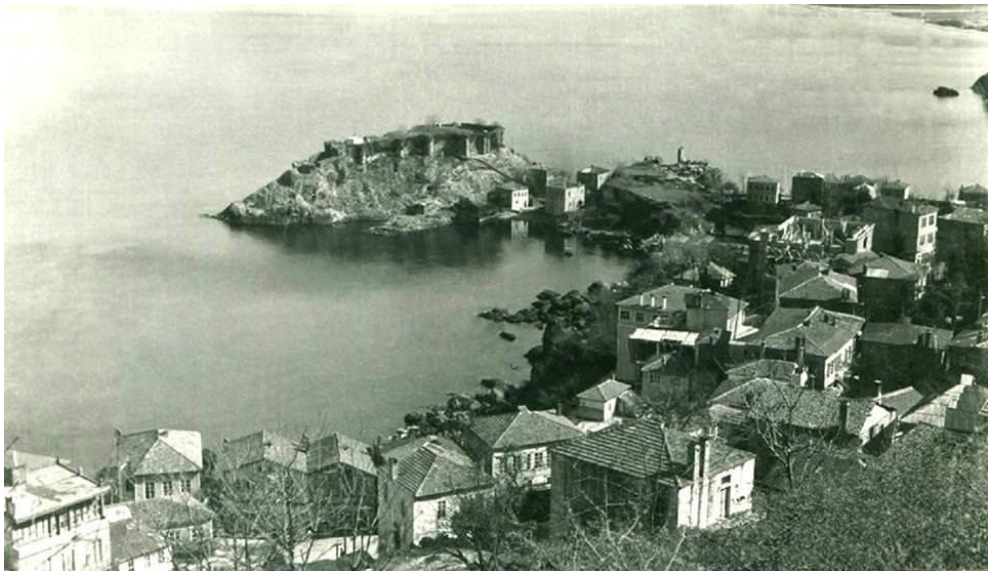

**Figure 3.** The Tirebolu (Saint Jean) Castle and its peninsula **Source:** Old Turkey Photographs Archive (n.d.), eskiturkiye.net; the source gives only the title 'Tirebolu' and states no date of capture or photographer.

Comparing Figures 2 and 3 we can see that overall, the profile of the castle and peninsula has remained relatively intact which would indicate the heritage value of these as co-created over time is continuing. However, the density of building coverage on the slopes has intensified, and the shoreline dramatically reordered. So while key heritage elements are still visible, incremental pressures from development and nature are taking their toll.

Latent VC-D. Tirebolu's analytical value as a counter-case stems from value co-destruction being latent rather than fully realized. SWOT already makes this clearer by separating internal vs. external factors (Table 4 and Table 5). Strengths and threats identified in the SWOT (cultural heritage, hazelnut and food traditions, local hospitality; overtourism, cultural erosion) correspond to realized vs. potential value co-destruction

mechanisms. Opportunities ("brand value through Cittaslow" and "growing demand for sustainable tourism") suggest another possible VC-D mechanism. Visibility gained through certification creates a tipping point at which protectionist branding starts incenting commodification and erosion. Perhaps the most spatially obvious manifestation of this underlying pressure, and certainly the most visually dramatic example for purposes of historical–contemporary juxtaposition, is along the coastline. Figure 4 shows multi-storey apartment buildings, parking lots, and regimented shoreline as they exist today along the coast. Figure 5 shows an undated historical photo of the same bay. Figure 6 is an Ottoman-period postcard of the early twentieth century.

**Table 4.** SWOT analysis of Tirebolu as a Cittaslow candidate—internal factors (through the co-creation/co-destruction lens).

| Strengths (existing value) | Weaknesses |
|---|---|
| Rich historical and cultural heritage (7th c. BCE); strong hazelnut agriculture and local food culture; natural beauty and ecological diversity; Black Sea hospitality; presence of a university; compliance with the population criterion (32,720) | Rugged terrain and transport difficulties; youth out-migration; infrastructure deficiencies; limited tourism infrastructure; lack of institutionalisation; low level of awareness |

**Source:** Prepared by the author.

**Table 5.** SWOT analysis of Tirebolu—external factors; Opportunities represent the triggering mechanism, Threats the latent co-destruction.

| Opportunities (triggering mechanism) | Threats (latent co-destruction) |
|---|---|
| Brand value through Cittaslow; rising demand for sustainable tourism; potential for geographically indicated products; EU rural development funds; growth of Black Sea coastal tourism; cooperation with the Slow Food network | Acceleration of rural out-migration; agricultural effects of climate change; risk of overtourism; global economic fluctuations; natural-disaster risks; cultural erosion |

**Source:** Prepared by the author.

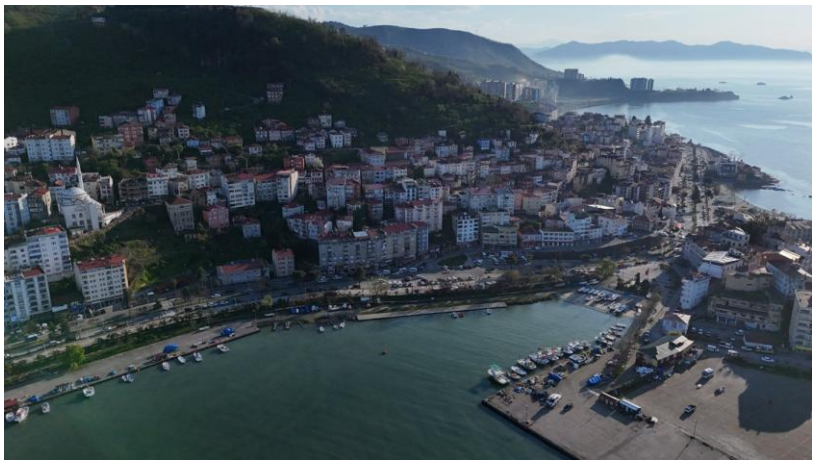

**Figure 4.** The Tirebolu coastline, 2026: apartment blocks on the slope, harbour and parking arrangement—the urbanisation pressure already present before certification **Source:** Photograph by the author, 2026.

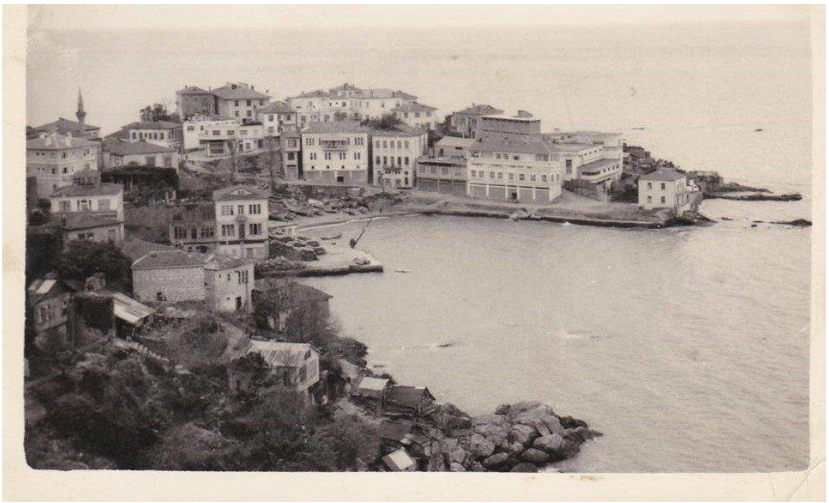

**Figure 5.** The Tirebolu coast and bay: a two-to-three-storey masonry/timber fabric and a largely open shoreline **Source:** Ö. Öztürk (2018), History of Tirebolu, ozhanozturk.com; the source gives only the title 'Tirebolu' and states no date of capture.

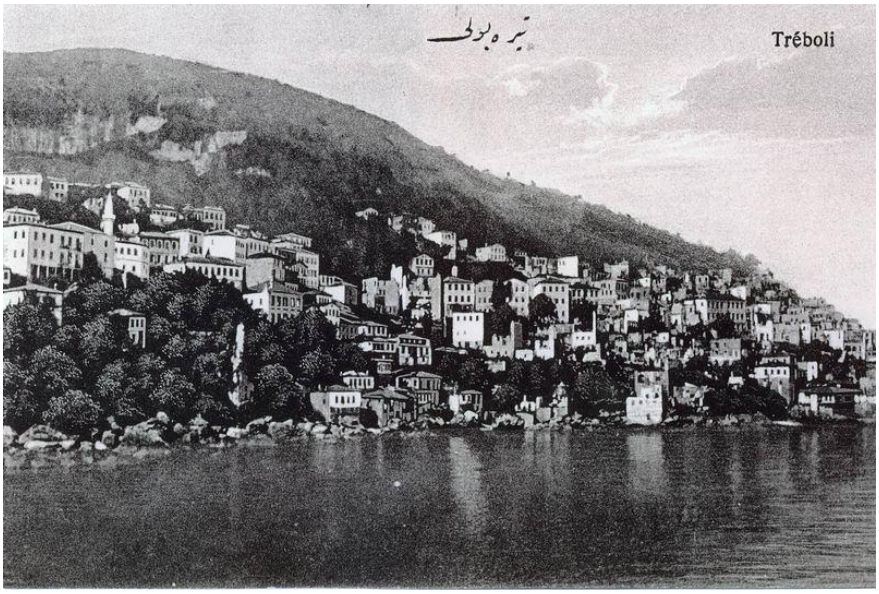


**Figure 6.** General view of Tirebolu from the sea; source title: 'Tirebolu, Giresun in the early 20th century'. A period postcard inscribed in Ottoman Turkish ('Tirebolu') and French ('Tréboli') **Source:** Ö. Öztürk (2018), History of Tirebolu, ozhanozturk.com.

Figures 4–6 together highlight the scale of the spatial transformation that has occurred. The early twentieth-century postcard (Figure 6) and undated historical photograph (Figure 5) depict a settlement dominated by two-and three-storey timber and masonry buildings with an undeveloped shoreline. The contemporary photograph (Figure 4), by contrast, shows multi-storey reinforced-concrete apartment buildings, shoreline infill to extend the coastal front, parking areas, and other changes to the shoreline. Similar processes appear to have been at work here to those that Mutlu and Keleş (2024) found were causing construction pressure and illegal development in the Eastern Black Sea highland towns of Ayder and Uzungöl.

The important thing is that Tirebolu is not yet a Cittaslow member town. The urbanisation and developmental pressures seen here therefore represent a baseline phenomenon which pre-dates certification. The historic–present comparison serves to make visible Tirebolu's baseline level of value erosion pre-certification and acts as a point of reference against which to measure change going forward. The same approach could be used with photos of before and after certification in towns which are members in order to see if certification correlates with increased, reduced, or simply rerouted development pressures. However, photographic evidence by itself cannot prove causation between certification and changing landscapes and should be weighed along with documents, statistics, and governing history.

In conclusion, Tirebolu can be understood as a "time-zero" situation where co-created value is high and potential value co-destruction still remains latent. Measuring this baseline against future progress of Seferihisar, Perşembe, Şavşat, and supported by historical–recent photos allow us to empirically answer RQ4: When does certification lead to local protectionism, when does it lead to commodification?

## 5. DISCUSSION

The findings provide an empirical basis for examining the proposition introduced in the theoretical framework: slow-city certification does not function as a neutral protective shield but as an intervention that may influence the formation and transformation of destination value. Considered together, the published evidence and the Tirebolu counter-case reveal three main patterns. First, destination value is largely co-created through the everyday practices of residents (Çiçek et al., 2019; Huang et al., 2025). If certification bolsters these activities, it may buttress value co-creation. Second, when those same activities become tradable destination assets, certification can escalate tourism demand, in-migration, and development pressures that change urban space (Aygün et al., 2021). Third, neither of these two outcomes are inevitable. In places like Şavşat, it seems the Cittaslow model functions foremost as a vehicle for protection and locally controlled development (Öztürk et al., 2023). This suggests that whether certification supports protection or contributes to value erosion depends on contextual conditions, particularly the quality of local governance, community participation, tourism intensity, and accessibility.

This interpretation makes two theoretical contributions to the literature on value co-destruction. First, it broadens empirical settings where value co-destruction has been observed beyond interpersonal service

encounters and online environments to include territorial and spatial governance arrangements in which institutional intervention can unintentionally lead to the destruction of locally created value (Echeverri & Skålén, 2011; Lumivalo et al., 2024; Plé & Chumpitaz Cáceres, 2010). Second, it reconceptualizes commodification as a process through which value co-destruction may occur (Cohen, 1988; MacCannell, 1973; Shepherd, 2002; Wang, 1999). In doing so, it does not assume that commodification inevitably leads to loss of local value. Depending on contextual conditions, commodification can alternatively lead to gradual erosion of local forms, reproduction of selected cultural elements, and reinterpretation/renewal of local culture (Cohen, 1988; Shepherd, 2002). This conceptualisation allows us to empirically observe consequences of commodification within place-based certification.

There are a number of caveats which should be made at this juncture. Firstly, since the study draws heavily on documentary and secondary sources, it is unable to capture residents' lived experiences and interpretations first-hand. Secondly, while changes observed in space may be suggestive of processes related to commodification they cannot be assumed to measure commodification itself. Thirdly, user generated content may be skewed towards certain visitor types and does not necessarily represent wider visitor or resident experiences. Lastly, changes associated with Cittaslow membership cannot be disentangled from wider processes of regional tourism development, urbanisation and economic restructuring. These limitations are addressed through the triangulation of documentary, statistical, visual and published evidence. However, results should be viewed as indicative rather than causal.

These limitations point to an obvious direction for future research endeavors. Specifically, a town-level network-wide longitudinal dataset would need to be created concerning building permits granted, population change, property/accommodation prices, tourism bed capacity, land-use change and visitor intensity before and after accession into Cittaslow for each town. With such data in hand, relationships proposed in this study and conditioning factors could be quantitatively tested. Ideally, such analyses could be paired with systematic historical–contemporary photographic comparisons like those used throughout the present study but could also include interviews with residents, local producers, and public authorities.

## 6. CONCLUSIONS

This study examined how a certification scheme designed to protect local distinctiveness may, under identifiable conditions, contribute to its commodification. The findings relating to the four research questions reveal several interconnected patterns. Destination value is co-created primarily through the everyday food, heritage, and hospitality practices of residents and local producers (RQ1). Certification can erode this value when branding causes increased visitation, in-migration, development pressure, and morphological change, as has occurred in Sığacık (RQ2). Comparison between pre-existing and existing destination trajectories demonstrates the conditional nature of these processes and outcomes, and can lead to either increased development pressure or increased protection efforts (RQ3). The prevalence of protection vs. commodification appears to depend on the length of membership, intensity of tourism development, accessibility, governance capacity, and resident voice and may vary by case, like Tirebolu serves as a “time-zero” or baseline (non-certified) example (RQ4).

Overall, these results bolster the premise advanced throughout this study: Certification by Cittaslow is neither inherently defensive nor automatically offensive. Instead, it is a policy intervention with the potential to shift who contributes to destination value production, how and when that value becomes visible, and how quickly it can change. The key policy question is not if certification should be awarded, but how the visibility and demand created by award can be stabilized through defensive measures.

First, the study’s contribution is not limited to Cittaslow towns. In fact, the resulting framework can inform research on other place-based labels such as geographical indications and UNESCO certifications or, more broadly “slow” brands. It highlights the conditions under which intended protective efforts from a certification scheme may lead to unintentional commodifying outcomes. Second, building on the existing value co-destruction literature that has primarily focused on service encounters, this paper provides a conceptual contribution by discussing spatial value co-destruction (i.e., the intersection of place, policy, stakeholders, and change over time). The Turkish Cittaslow network consists of towns that joined at different times and have been members for different lengths of time. This allows for a comparison of these towns to better understand our framework.

Arguably, the most actionable recommendation emerging from this paper is for a coordinated historical–contemporary research programme across the broader Cittaslow network, following Tirebolu’s “time-zero”

logic. This could encompass visual/spatial comparisons of past and present imagery (building upon Mutlu and Keleş (2024) and the present study) alongside longitudinal data on building permits, demographic flux, property/accommodation pricing, tourism bed capacity, patterns of land-use and visitor intensity. It could also include an analysis of local policy discourse and whether/how its emphasis changes over time from one of protection towards branding and marketing. Non-member comparator towns should also be identified and included.

Where adequate longitudinal data exist, interrupted time-series analysis might be undertaken to determine whether accession appears to be associated with shifts in the level or trend of selected indicators. Paired member/non-member towns could offer another basis of comparison, if towns are chosen based on objective and transparent criteria (population size, accessibility, type of tourism, economic base, development pressure, etc. ).

In addition to supplementing existing results with primary longitudinal data, such a research programme might also act as an early-warning system. Controls on development, assistance or protection for locally owned businesses, visitor-management programmes and participatory monitoring could be implemented in towns that begin to show signs of fast tourism growth and spatial change (as seen here in Sığacık) before such pressures reach crisis proportions. Candidate towns could likewise set environmental, spatial, economic and social baselines at the outset of the certification process, against which change can be more systematically tracked.

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