

SOCIAL ASPECTS OF THE OVERTOURISM PHENOMENON

Assoc.prof. PhD. SÎNZIANA PREDA
West University of Timisoara, Romania

ABSTRACT: *The overtourism is a relatively little-known concept in Romania, despite being related to one of the most dynamic industries in the world, the tourism industry. Overtourism has been increasingly highlighted in recent years, in the context of changes in the hospitality industry and in connection with fluctuations in tourists' interest in certain destinations. The article outlines some key aspects of this phenomenon, strongly influenced by economic and cultural developments worldwide. Our focus is to provide a conceptual framework for a social analysis of overtourism.*

Keywords: *overtourism; tourists; locals; values; conflict;*

Introduction

“A neologism, but not necessarily a new concept”, the overtourism represents “a complex phenomenon associated with the liveability of a place, the well-being of residents, visitor experience and the extent to which stakeholders have a direct or indirect involvement in tourism (Postma, 2013; Bellini et al., 2016; World Travel & Tourism Council, 2017; Milano, 2018)” (Milano, Cheer, Novelli, 2019, 1). It is worth noting that the definition, elaborated by some of the most knowledgeable researchers in the field, doesn't primarily focus on tourists (as the triggering agents of overcrowding) but rather on the well-being of the locals. Many times, tourism emphasizes the type of tourist, the thrill-seeking tourist, offers, and bargains. Therefore, at a conceptual level, the main markers of overtourism are represented by overcrowding and the indefinite or permanent disruption of the lives of residents in an extremely visited area.

The term “overtourism was first used on Twitter way back in August 2012. [...] Overtourism exists where all stakeholders like tourists, service providers, and the local community feel that there are too many activities over and above the limitations of the destination. As a result, the quality of life local community and tourists' quality of experience have deteriorated unacceptably. (Sharma, Yedla, 2022, 34).

The overconcentration of tourism is symptomatic of global consumer culture. It can be encountered worldwide. At first glance, we

are tempted to define the hyperconcentration of tourist flows in connection with metropolises, famous cities, and areas whose culture has become a brand. However, overtourism affects both rural and natural areas as well, where there is flora and fauna more or less protected.

Within overtourism phenomenon we find the sum of all the quantitative and qualitative advancements made by tourism after World War II. Applications of technological advances in transportation, communication, home appliances, and civic amenities restructured the post-world war civic lifestyle making civil society experienced better comfort in life, living, and leisure-recreation pursuit (Ray, 2022, 19). However, what has effectively caused the hospitality industry to explode was the democratization of tourism. Thus, the preference for well-known destinations was encouraged by entrepreneurs in the field, for individuals and groups who traditionally were not attracted to tourism services (or, in any case, not to international tourism). Consequently, tourism's growth entered into the mass-mobility era marked by the vertical escalation of tourist footfalls at mass scale and horizontal expense of tourism-entrepreneurial activity at a mass magnitude. And mass-mobility turns to be an economic success indicator in many destinations (Ray, 2022, 20).

The catalyst for change, as in many other cases, is represented by technology. Information technology has enabled real-time information and virtual shrinking of distances. The internet, social networks, and smartphones have transformed static tourism information into a

dynamic one. The rapid communication and ever-increasing standards in the service industry, in general, have expanded the offering in the tourism industry and exacerbated competition.

Overtourism main characteristics

The first indicator of hypertourism is quantitative, focusing on the concentration of a significant number of tourists in a well-known and widely promoted tourist destination. From a temporal standpoint, it involves a rapid influx of tourists over a short period, such as a weekend. These tourists show (almost) exclusive interest in a particular destination, neglecting other points of interest in the visited region or country. Importantly, this influx contributes to the continuous deterioration of the quality of life for local residents, evident in factors like fluctuations in the real estate market.

The exacerbation of mass tourism can be attributed to various factors, some general and others specific to the hospitality industry. In the general category, a recent factor is the post-pandemic situation, prompting a desire to return to normal economic life after the global financial crisis. Concerning the second category, we posit that internet access has played a fundamental role in shaping and directing interest towards various destinations. Furthermore, the internet has enabled individuals with limited financial means to explore possibilities for affordable flights and economical accommodations.

After the lockdown, tourism industry promotion was strongly resumed. The phenomenon of overtourism has entered a new stage through social media's overwhelming influence. Blogs and especially vlogs have enhanced the image of already famous places and have shown that they can be visited with (much) less money. Social media has undoubtedly contributed to the overcrowding of several destinations and has altered/steered the tastes and interests of social media consumers. In addition to cheap transport (especially by air), one has to mention the increasing availability of entrepreneurs, the extended accommodation offer, and the low demands of

some tourists categories, willing to accept minimum conditions, just to spend a few days in their dream destination (the role played by city break concept).

“Commercial gentrification and loss of residents’ purchasing power” (Peeters, 4) complete this picture. Also in relation to locals, the lack of involvement by the authorities should be pointed out in order to prevent these situations from happening (indifference in defending the local community interests, suffocated by large numbers of tourists and the consequences of their presence).

A social perspective on overtourism

Hyper-tourism describes not only an aspect of the tourism industry but must be analyzed from the perspective of social interaction. It brings together mainly two groups of individuals whose interests, size, and potentialities differ. The groups, unequal in all respects, come into contact in a confined territory, which they associate with different meanings and feelings. The large group, that of tourists, does not impart deep meanings to the places visited. This is understandable, as these places are associated with a short, temporary, and transitory experience. Tourists do not develop attachment to their destinations but often associate them with a fairy-tale, idyllic, ideal, and idealized image.

The places and areas where overtourism occurs are not places of residence but rather escape spaces. In other words, for the tourist, it doesn't matter (or matters very little) that their vacation destination is someone's residence. The visitor feels entitled to break free from constraints, as this is the goal they set out for and paid for. The visited place is seen as a space of freedom, in contrast to home, where rules and routine apply. That's why vacation or city break destinations generate feelings of joy, relaxation, happiness, sometimes extravagance, or even excess. Thus, in a series of cases, the unleashing of energies turns into socially disruptive behavior for the locals and becomes a source of conflict between groups.

For locals, the spaces visited by tourists are their birthplaces, spaces of permanent

residence. They have built deep, lasting feelings, an entire memory infused with various experiences spanning a long period of time. However, the progressive and rapid increase in the number of tourists tends to distort local memory and the image locals have about the community in which they grew up. The intrusion of strangers is bothersome, disturbing, and distorts. The overcharging of tourism has come to be assessed as an invasion, a violation of a way of being, in a word, of a normality.

The main way in which the memory of these places is affected is through their transformation into theme parks. In several cities, we witness their conversion into tourist-oriented parks where visitors are particularly interested in the landmarks that made the city famous, reducing it to these attractions. The city is not explored in its entirety but rather reduced to the tourist spots that must be checked off. Spatially, this means waves of tourists and visitors congesting traffic and making certain places inaccessible for permanent residents who used to access them easily in the past. It's not only about blocking specific routes but also about noise, noise pollution, garbage, in general, affecting the quality of life for people living in the area, and beyond.

The forced evolution of some metropolises and cities into theme parks not only impacts their local existence but also leads to a long-term process of museification. They end up being reduced to heritage sites, obsessively promoted by the tourism industry. However, localities, whether urban or rural, have their own metabolism, independent of the mass tourism industry. The attraction exerted by famous landmarks goes beyond just congesting traffic; it also modifies the local economy. In neighborhoods with tourist attractions, numerous souvenir shops, restaurants, and bars emerge. Small local businesses concentrate in those areas, to the detriment of non-touristy neighborhoods.

Another more severe consequence is the suffocation of indigenous enterprises by large corporations or businesses. The impact is evident in the local job market. Despite the tourism industry being one of the most dynamic and profitable globally, we question whether the concentration of jobs in a single sector is

beneficial or normal for the evolution of the local community.

Another aspect that reinforces overtourism is the interference of companies in the local real estate market. A series of properties have been "confiscated" by Airbnb, Booking.com, Agoda, or Vrbo. In major European capitals, categories such as students or young couples can no longer afford to rent houses that were available before their integration into the mentioned platforms. We can observe that this phenomenon not only affects urban residents but also natives from neighboring or more distant areas who face difficulties in finding residence in cities overcrowded with tourists.

Airbnb's rise can be analyzed through the impact it has on local tourism operators. In comparison to a giant company like Airbnb, these operators did not pose much competition, especially concerning attracting and retaining property owners.

Communication technology is another aspect in which they were surpassed by the competition. "Although space listed on Airbnb was initially booked primarily by a small niche segment of alternative travelers, its popularity increased quickly, leading to the widespread adoption of Airbnb's booking platform by mainstream tourists all over the world." (Briel, Dolnicar, 2021).

In fact, this scenario raises not only the issue of existing housing but also that of those to be built. The issue of intravilan and extravilan lands is also added. "The rent gap between actual and potential land rents determines the use of real estate, and its conversion from existing use into what economic agents view as highest and best use (Smith, 1979, Smith, 1987, in Josip et al., 2021). We are talking about a "tourism-induced sociospatial restructuring, as the rise of post-industrial societies diminishes the existing uses of many land rentals, and calls for alternative opportunities with higher returns and better possible uses (Clark, 1995; Kauko, 2001, in Josip et al., 2021). Ultimately, the entire local population is affected by this, as theoretically, most real estate investors are local. Thus, investments in a highly popularized tourist area tend to accumulate towards foreign companies, to the detriment of local entrepreneurs.

Last but not least, time must be mentioned as a source of conflict among the complex equation of overtourism. We can talk about a temporal incongruity between them, as each group attributes different meanings to time. The tourist's time is one of leisure, while the local's time is rhythmically structured by daily activities. Spending a vacation or city break unfolds a time outside of time for visitors. They do not take just any break but engage in a time of leisure, entertainment, and pleasure. In contrast, the time of city residents is planned, measured in well-established sequences, and deadlines. The classic scenario of locals stuck in traffic jams caused by the crowd of tourists is a common occurrence in places affected by overtourism.

Therefore, mass tourism has come to generate cultural and inherently social conflicts. Paradoxically, in several places invaded by waves of tourists, they come precisely to find authenticity, to experience traditions. But the authenticity sought by them is the authenticity of other places and cultures. In other words, the notion of tradition in the tourists' imagination does not always correspond to the daily practice of the (old) customs that the natives had. Not always do the locals respond to this desire of strangers, or they have ceased to respond once they observed the violation of an intimate space. In other cases, traditions have disappeared, and tourist agencies organize reenactments in which some locals are hired to perform customs of the past.

Conclusions

As a phenomenon that fundamentally marked the tourism industry, hyper-tourism has distorted the meaning and sense of "traditional" tourism. The '90s, with the advent and expansion of the internet and later on low-cost flights, created a favorable framework for what would later become mass tourism. However, the explanations for overtourism are not solely external: where local culture has not been sufficiently considered a strong value, various intrusions have become possible.

In this article, we have examined the phenomenon through a socio-cultural lens. There is already a rich body of specialized literature dedicated to the massification of tourism, but fewer analyses from the perspective of the values that hypertourism confronts. Today, we know that overtourism is unsustainable, harms the environment (both inhabited and natural), and is non-ecological. However, we analyze it too little as a complex network of individuals and interests. The divergence of values delineates a space where stakeholders can negotiate the future of overtourism. Tourists, local communities, people in the industry (decision-makers in ministries, global and local entrepreneurs, local owners) are characterized by different interests. However, for all these entities, there is a core of common values that can be negotiated for a *modus vivendi*. These values remain to be identified.

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