

TOURISM AND THE COLLABORATIVE ECONOMY: THE CASE OF FREE WALKING TOURS IN BARCELONA

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Aimed at avoiding a uniform, mass-generated travelling experience, the collaborative economy is becoming an increasingly more valuable source of new products and activities for travelling and tourism, and consumers have already shown the interest and a certain demand for tourist experiences that are more *authentic and unique*. Currently, the collaborative economy already forms part of our daily lives and it is re-formulating the way in which we travel and live. Rental platforms such as Airbnb or Uber are popularly known as exchange methods; however, there are other types of collaborative economy that have arisen and that have not yet been explored by scientific literature on tourism. This is the case of free walking tours.

As Belk stated (2014), there are two common points in these collaborative practices: 1) The models of use and non-ownership for temporary access for use of the consumer goods and services and 2) Their dependence on Internet. In fact, one of the main drivers of the transition towards the collaborative economy is information and communication technology, which today allow us access to a world market at the click of a mouse. As an example, some of the success reached by the free walking tours in European cities is precisely due to the fact that Internet, as a marketing tool, allows information to be spread and accessed all over the world, at any time.

Technology plays a particularly important role, not only because Internet is essential as a source of information for tourists, but also because Internet has *restructured* the tourist experience. As tourists become more mobile, the way in which they travel becomes more mobile as well. However, technology, far from reducing the paying guided tours in cities has encouraged the appearance of free or *pay-what-you-want* walking tours, increasing and making the business variations even more complicated. This does not only involve traditional city walking tour companies, but also small and medium-sized tourism enter-

prises (SMEs) and organisations that are involved in the field of guided walking tours. At the same time, new business models and marketing strategies are being created that contribute to feeding the *collaborative market*.

Generally designed to be circular, walking tours allow participants to obtain an appreciation of the aspects of an urban landscape, both past and present, using a system of signs and symbols to interpret them. An interpretative tour does not only offer the chance to aid the learning and to improve the appreciation of an urban landscape, but it also can improve the experience that the actual visitor has of this place (Markwell et al. 2004).

In this context, the concept of a free tour, where in principle there are no expenses involved and the tourists show their gratitude by leaving a tip for their tourist guide, is becoming more and more popular throughout Europe and around the world. An increase in travelling and the ease of word of mouth marketing, along with the empowerment of tourists through Internet, is helping to drive the trend forward (*The Guardian online Journal*, 2013). The tourists themselves are contributing to the expansion of the free walking tours all over the world, sharing their experiences on social networks.

This article, inspired by the wish to understand tourism companies within the framework of the collaborative economy, explores the phenomenon of free walking tours. This is an important topic within the field of tourism due to the fact that the walking routes play a growing role in the marketing, image and visibility of the destinations. Within the context of the financial crisis, it is believed that the exchange processes between pairs of goods, services or transport, amongst others, will transform and/or alter the current structures. This is related to a social change where people demand new business and access models for clients with preference over those established in the more traditional models (Owyang et al. 2014). Without forgetting that, within this collaborative economy framework, the empowerment of the consumers through product qualification and reviewing systems allows them to contribute in some way to a regulation of the business behaviour and the competition.

This article¹ attempts, from this point of view, to firstly describe and explain the business models regarding the free walking tour companies and their potentialities, based on the concepts and principles set forth by the evolving economic geography such as knowledge and innovation and applying them to the tourism sector. In the second place, the article gives a critical analysis of the free walking tours and whether this phenomenon could fit in with the collaborative economy practices. Finally, it explores the future prospects of the free walking tours in Barcelona within the framework of the collaborative economy and the opportunities and challenges involved for future research.

In this way, in the following section a theoretical approach is presented that analyses the development of the free walking tours within an evolving framework. In order to do this, the basic principles of the evolving economic geography are covered, such as knowledge, innovation and dependence of the route to apply them to the analysis of the business models of free walking tours, paying particular attention to the dynamics of the

1 This article forms part of wider-reaching research carried out within the GRIT-Ostelea research group and centred comparatively on tourism and the collaborative economy in relation to the free walking tours in Barcelona and Berlin. The data we present here corresponds solely to the field work carried out in Barcelona and presents the results available to date within the framework of the abovementioned project.

companies and how these dynamics affect both the tourist guides and the destinations. Following this, we will explore the characteristics of the free walking tours linked to the characteristics and to the definitions of the collaborative economy, giving a critical analysis of the alteration or the transformation of this phenomenon in the practices of tourism on primary and secondary databases.

As part of the conclusions it is worth emphasising that the free tours are shown as an innovating and disruptive model in the traditional model of paying tourist tours because there no money changes hands. It can be said that the free tours are based on an exchange of information (collaboration) that can be compensated (or not) economically by the person who receives the information, that is to say, the tourist. The exchange of knowledge appears as a non-profit making exchange model, an aspect that reflects the principle of the collaborative economy; however, aspects such as the professionalization of the guides, the marketing of the tours or the alliances with bars and restaurants, show aspects belonging to the traditional market economy.

There is a certain overlapping between the traditional capitalist economy and the collaborative economy carried out by the tourism companies, as is shown by the case that is being studied. The identification of this process of the traditional capitalist economy and the collaborative economy carried out by the tourism companies in our analysis, shows a process of dependence on the development of the tourism companies, as a result of business competition. The individual companies compete within one or more selection environments, each of them facing up to different pressures (Essletzbichler and Rigby, 2010), and therefore they cause different marketing and sales alternatives.

The free walking tours can be seen as an innovation of a business concept aimed at attracting new clients. This process started, in the case of Barcelona, with a company engaged in marketing and established in the city of Berlin, and this was subsequently reproduced successfully by others operating in the local area. This new concept and practice is transforming the tourist panorama and has a direct impact on the marketing of the tourism destinations.

The cases analysed in Barcelona illustrate the fact that the free walking tours are a localised phenomenon mainly arising in the cities where the impact of tourism is quite significant. Local and non-local tourism companies identify the free walking tours as a lucrative market niche where entry and profit-making possibilities have yet to be quantified in a real way. Therefore, the companies, which can be catalogued within the framework of the collaborative economy, have roots in the traditional capitalist market, where the creation of economic value forms an important driver for their operation, although the companies do not set it forth in this way. This empirical study on the free walking tours could be useful for a future analysis and particularly, for the understanding of the behaviour of the tourism companies in new social and economic contexts.