

## EXTENDED ABSTRACT

# PUBLIC POLICIES AND OVERTOURISM IN URBAN DESTINATIONS: A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS BETWEEN BARCELONA AND PALMA

*Víctor Picó Gutiérrez*

Universitat de les Illes Balears  
victor.pico2@uib.cat

<https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3069-5424>

*Dolores Sánchez Aguilera*

Universitat de Barcelona  
dsanchez\_aguilera@ub.edu

<http://orcid.org/0000-0002-4022-491X>

*Miquel Àngel Coll Ramis*

Universitat de les Illes Balears  
miquelangelcoll@uib.es

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8485-8789>

## INTRODUCTION

Urban tourism has become in recent years an important source of economic activities and employment. However, it has also caused an intensification of the flow of visitors in historic centers, developing situations of overtourism that may cause negative effects in cities. From the bibliographic review, it has been observed how the concept of overtourism is very recent, despite the fact that, as some authors warn (Dodds and Butler, 2019b), this one is a new term for an old problem such as tourist saturation. In recent years, numerous studies have analyzed overtourism in cities (Marín *et al.*, 2017; De la Calle *et al.*, 2018; Dodds and Butler, 2019a; Zemla, 2020) and the possible strategies for its management (González, 2014; Peeters *et al.*, 2018; Bouchon y Rauscher, 2019; García *et al.*, 2019; Eckert *et al.*, 2019; De Luca *et al.*, 2020; Goodwin, 2021).

Undoubtedly, after several diagnoses of the phenomena of overtourism in various urban environments (Peeters *et al.*, 2018; Pechlaner *et al.* 2019), the biggest current challenge for the political class, the private sector and academics is to propose strategies to solve this social discomfort. For several decades, possible measures have been debated in order to improve and make a touristic destination more efficient, as well as to optimize the tourist's experience and improve the competence of specific products and services. However, rarely have these strategies been aimed at improving the quality of life of locals, as they don't obtain a direct and tangible benefit from this economic activity. Within tourism governance, the economic interest has prevailed over the rest of social and environmental interests of the destinations. This fact has put in a priority place the agents and sectors

directly involved into tourism at the moment of designing and developing public policies (Ávila and Barrado, 2005). On the other hand, overtourism has contributed to highlighting the growing social unrest, protest and resistance against mass tourism in most of the cities affected by this phenomenon (Colomb and Novy, 2016).

These social reactions are forcing local policy agendas to be reoriented towards questioning the limits of tourism growth, and so as the need to incorporate citizen participation in tourism governance (Goodwin, 2019; Mihalic and Kuščer, 2021), with a view to guaranteeing that the various stakeholders are represented in the process of formulating, making decisions and implementing tourism policies, in accordance with a true public-private-community approach. However, as pointed out by Peeters *et al.* (2018), the transfer of the implications of overtourism to the spheres of tourism planning and management is still very limited.

## OBJECTIVES

The main objective of this paper is to analyze the application and effectiveness of the policies and strategies promoted by the public administration to manage the effects of overtourism, taking the cities of Barcelona and Palma as case studies. In this way, the successes and failures obtained in each case will be known by comparing the approved measures and their results, getting to see broadly how this process is faced in urban destinations.

## METHODOLOGY

The methodology used combines the use of different techniques: firstly, the review of literature on the concept of tourist saturation and overtourism. Then, the documentary compilation of initiatives and measures contained in tourism planning documents in Barcelona and Palma. Finally, qualitative techniques have been applied with semi-structured interviews. Specifically, 16 individual interviews were conducted with stakeholders involved in tourism, including members of public tourism promotion and management institutions (4), members of the private sector (4), researchers and academics (4), and local interest groups (4).

The interviews were made between the months of June and September of 2020, based on a structure of eight topics. The approximate duration of these interviews was between 30 and 45 minutes, there were questions about the perspective of tourist saturation and the arguments that supported the statements, which facilitated the collection of general perceptions about overtourism and its impacts, the identification of the factors that most influence this situation, the possibilities of action for its management, and the challenges of urban tourism after the COVID-19 crisis.

## RESULTS

The scenario of analysis takes place between two cases that are certainly similar, regarding the causes that have led to an overtourism context. Some of the most notable common factors are the existence of an old quarter, which concentrates most of the points

of tourist attraction, the strong growth of cruise activity and the phenomenon of housing for tourist use (HUT).

In both cities there is a certain saturation in a given space and time; but it is not possible to speak of overcrowded cities in their entirety and throughout the year. This fact has a special incidence in the historic centers of both Barcelona (Domínguez and Crespí, 2021) and Palma (Gonzalez, 2019). It is in these areas of the city where a greater rejection of the resident population towards tourist activity is perceived.

As a consequence of growing social discontent, Barcelona and Palma have begun to change the course of their tourism policies from promotion to management based on tourism governance. This has been accompanied by an increase in measures of a restrictive nature, each time more important; although, as the actors interviewed point out, it has caused a certain social division between those sectors more inclined to promote tourist activity and those who pointed out its negative effects. This debate in both cities has moved to the judicial sphere, as it has been the case with the regulation of VUTs. However, in each case analyzed, the position of the public administration has been to maintain restrictive regulations against the growth of this type of accommodation in city centers.

Furthermore, both destinations are *Smart Cities*, with which they have promoted a *Smart Destination* model, in such a way that, in addition to the regulatory route, they have opted for technology to act on tourist massification, promoting different initiatives based on a smart approach and the use of *Business Intelligence* tools and strategies. These practices allow big data to be obtained, for example, on the volume of visitors, which facilitates the adoption of destination management strategies that are more adjusted to the reality of tourism (Marine-Roig & Antón, 2015). With the crisis generated by COVID-19, both cities have applied some measures based on intelligent management to control capacity in public spaces, through the use of cameras. However, progress in this area is still insignificant and often limited to technology, leaving a long way to go to promote an integrated vision of the territory, which includes all management areas and all the actors that influence and participate in every destination.

Regarding the differences observed between both destinations, the main one is found in the different degree of involvement and participation of locals in the touristic governance system. Thus, Barcelona has more developed mechanisms for the incorporation of citizen participation in public policies in order to face the challenge of overtourism. In this way, it is worth mentioning the existence of a public opinion survey on tourism and a structured survey with information on the sector that gives voice to multiple agents involved, also allowing a more precise study of issues such as overtourism in the city. In addition, Barcelona has the Tourism and City Council, an institution for citizen participation created to debate the tourism model that best suits the city. On the other hand, in Palma the main tourist bureau is the Tourism Palma de Mallorca 365 Foundation, a non-profit public entity with public and private management, composed by the Palma City Council, the Balearic Port Authority and private companies in this sector, which aims to promote and boost tourism in the city. Therefore, unlike Barcelona, in this case, citizen entities do not have a specific forum to be able to share reflections and make proposals on the city's tourism model. Therefore, this city's tourism management is still far from a model that promotes social participation and bottom-up initiatives, prioritizing a more technocratic approach.

Opposing these purely technical approaches, new paradigms have emerged, focusing on intelligent tourism planning, which allows to face proactively challenges posed by structural changes in this economic activity and their effects (Ivars and Vera, 2019); including those derived of overtourism. On this issue, it should be noted that the interviewees in this study conceive saturation dynamics as a shared responsibility between the different stakeholders and, in particular, city authorities and destination managers, who can considerably influence the modeling of this activity and its coexistence with other uses in the city. Therefore, it is essential to continue advancing towards a smart tourism governance model, characterized by public and private cooperation and the use of open data (Gretzel *et al.*, 2015), which contributes to guaranteeing the sustainability of the destination (Ivars *et al.*, 2019) in the face of the challenges posed by overtourism.

## CONCLUSIONS

For a few years it has been observed that the classic bubble in which visitors were has been broken, who go on to explore areas traditionally destined for residential uses, in such a way that tourists and residents compete for the same spaces and resources (Stors and Kagermeier, 2013). Consequently, new tensions have arisen, putting tourism in the focus of public debate, which have turned this issue into a topic on which various social associations/organizations have taken sides, and have forced to introduce the issue of overtourism within the political agenda of touristic cities.

Barcelona and Palma are a good example of the overtourism that more and more cities in the world are experiencing, especially in their old quarters. However, unlike other European cities, they present certain peculiarities that justify the interest in investigating the causes that boost their tourist saturation. In both cases, it has been observed how the excess of tourism is accentuated by three key factors: the strong growth in the offer of tourist accommodation through the proliferation of houses for tourist use and boutique hotels; the great development of the cruise industry, which has made these cities two of the most important destinations in the Mediterranean; and the intensification of the pressure exerted by its coastal areas of influence, which are consolidated as major tourist attraction poles on an international scale. To these factors, it is worth adding another unrelated to tourism, such as the fact that both cities have capital status (on an insular, regional and even state scale), which generates centripetal forces that also contribute to saturation. On the other hand, the mentioned factors show the strong influences of the private sector in the tourism management process of these cities, a fact that makes strategic leadership and coordination between destination agents very difficult, meaning that tourism dynamics are not governed by a clear criteria and that there can be cases of saturation or lack of control.

All of this has generated a series of conflicts over the control of the space of the historic center, pitting tourist interests against residential ones, which has resulted in a growing aversion to anything related to tourism (Aledo, 2020). Both in Barcelona and in Palma, the increase in housing prices and rents is one of the issues that has generated the greatest concern among the local population, who have sometimes been forced to leave the areas of the city with the biggest pressure. This impact has favored a growing public interest in tourism policy (Schenkel, 2019), forcing a rethink of traditional tourism management in both cities.

In this way, the analysis of the initiatives taken reflects how public management has focused on acting on the housing market to improve the quality of life of residents, with regulations on the price of rent, the improvement of the housing stock or restrictions on housing for tourist use. However, other notable impacts should not be forgotten, such as the progressive transformation of commerce or the saturation in urban mobility (Tapia, 2018). Despite the fact that both cities have adopted measures to deal with the negative effects generated by overtourism, the truth is that there isn't any case where an integrated plan to face this issue has been observed. As some authors such as Palomeque (2015) point out, the massification of tourism forces authority to redesign the city's tourism planning to overcome a type of neoliberal management based on promotion and encouragement of the activity (Dredge, Jenkins and Whitford, 2011), also including tourism in the management of the city as a structural component, an approach that according to Ivars and Vera (2019) requires comprehensive management along the lines of so-called smart tourism planning.

Moreover, the fact that both cities are Smart City and Smart Destination, means that they have an intelligent digital ecosystem that can be an opportunity to move towards a real tourism governance process, promoting fundamental principles such as administrative coordination, public and private collaboration, social participation, transparency and monitoring and control of policies; projects that the state administration has also supported for a few years, putting *know-how* as one of the mains in the near future (Ivars *et al.*, 2021). However, the real scenario observed so far, in both cities, is that this approach does not go beyond a few specific initiatives.

On the other hand, some people interviewed point out that there is a risk that the drastic drop in tourism derived from the COVID-19 crisis could lead to a reinforcement of traditional tourism policies based on growth, which could aggravate the tourist overcrowding in both cities, once the pandemic is over. Thus, this crisis must be seen as an opportunity to commit definitively to an innovative paradigm that contributes to improve sustainability and competitiveness of these destinations. This aspect requires further progress in the rethinking of tourism management and the pernicious effects that may arise from overtourism, approaching actions from a structural and not conjunctural perspective, taking into account new parameters when managing tourism (Lew *et al.* , 2020), such as climate emergency and social welfare, based on public policies that emerge from the participation of all the stakeholders in the city.