

Responsible tourism issues and solutions based on pre-pandemic data: comparison between Barcelona and Budapest

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Abstract

In recent decades rising sustainability issues highlight the inappropriateness of a growth-led economy and irresponsible approach to tourism planning resulting in the overuse of destinations. This paper intends to compare overtourism trends in Barcelona and Budapest, the first city already suffering from overtourism, while the latter shows an increase in this direction. Analysis of historical and COVID-19 pre-pandemic data in Barcelona is expected to reveal similar weaknesses in the tourism planning and marketing of Budapest's inner city. Sustainable solutions such as a rational approach regarding tourists flowing into the city center or responsible tourism strategies are supposed to enhance livability in Budapest inner city.

Keywords: sustainability, overtourism, responsible tourism, tourism planning

Introduction

According to the statistics published by the United Nations World Tourism Organization, there was an ongoing increase (pre-pandemic) in the number of tourists from 25 million to 1.4 billion in 2018. This trend will continue after the post-pandemic recovery of the world economy. Along with this, there are expectations that mass tourism will continue to grow. Specifically, the number of visitors is expected to reach 850 million in 2030 (UNWTO, 2018), signifying a 60% growth compared to 2010 (Kester 2016; Croce, 2018 in Frey, 2021, p.11). Tourism is one of the fastest-growing sectors of the world economy where the increase is boosted by a growing middle-class population. Therefore, a rapid rise in tourist numbers is expected from China, India, the Arab Countries, Indonesia, Vietnam, etc. Especially, the Chinese market will contribute more to this increase as hundreds of millions of people will have the opportunity to travel abroad (Frey, 2021, p.11). Interestingly, the length of stay in urban destinations has been decreasing over the years. Thus, we experience a trend when tourists in general choose to stay for shorter periods (Gössling et al. 2018). All these factors positively influence the economy as tourism has a multiplier effect on other sectors of the economy. As a result, mass tourism had been appreciated for a long time and many countries were trying to attract as many tourists as possible. Consequently, some European destinations are already suffering from the impacts of overtourism, e.g. Amsterdam, Lisbon, London, Stockholm, and Barcelona leading the list. In this paper, the author compares two European destinations, namely Barcelona and Budapest, in terms of overtourism, and provides some solutions based on Barcelona's negative experience with overcrowding and overuse.

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Literature review

Tourism impacts

There are several ways how tourism affects society in general, they are identified as the Economic, Socio-Cultural and Environmental impacts. Direct impact – in terms of economic gains – refers to the actual cash inflows that are the result of money spent by tourists. This income is distributed through hotels, other accommodation facilities, tourism agencies, transport means food and beverage services, local souvenir shops, etc. (Lundberg, 2014, p. 25). Apart from such direct income, tourism also causes indirect and induced economic effects: higher salaries in local tourism establishments, increased demand for local food supply and transportation services, and also caused an increase in the spending patterns of locals.

When it comes to socio-cultural impact, they lead to changes in beliefs and cultural practices of the local community. Social impact has its effect in the short run, however, cultural influence lasts for a comparatively longer period (Lundberg, 2014, p. 27). Undoubtedly, the interaction between locals and visitors is the main basis for tourist experiences. In certain cases when locals experience negative effects of tourism, hospitality can also be negatively affected (Ap and Crompton, 1993; Lundberg, 2014, p. 28). If such a negative impact persists and locals do not want to cope with the issues anymore, the situation will result in opposition to tourism. There are many examples where such factors led to public protests and demonstrations against further tourism development. This borderline is the Social Carrying Capacity and reflects the local community's ability to cope with tourism-related changes (Yoel, 1992; Lundberg, 2014, p. 29). The degree of the capacity changes depending on the perceived impact of the tourism-related negative effects.

Finally, the environmental impact is assessed by emissions of CO₂ - greenhouse gases, energy use, land use, water use and amount of waste (Lundberg, 2014, p. 30).

Sustainable tourism

The commodification of nature (Katz, 1998) and cities increase over the years as a result of a significant tourism impact (Sørensen and Grindsted, 2021). The process signifies a growth-lead prosperity approach dominating over a sustainability concept. As consequences of such expansion lead to local and global environmental challenges the need for sustainable approaches becomes evident (Sørensen & Bærenholdt, 2020; Sørensen and Grindsted, 2021). Therefore, environmentally friendly tourism modes are proposed: green growth, steady-state and degrowth (Fletcher et al., 2019). In this vein, it is vital to adopt environmental policies, and management measures to change tourists' practices and attitudes. Sustainable tourism is described as “that does not destroy the resources on which the future of tourism will depend, notably the physical environment and the social fabric of the host community” (Swarbrooke, 1999 p. 13, in Sørensen and Grindsted, 2021). UNWTO defines it as: “Tourism that takes full account of its current and future economic, social and environmental impacts, addressing the needs of visitors, the industry, the environment and host communities”. In line with the definition, sustainable tourism should make optimal use of environmental resources, maintain essential ecological processes and contribute to conserve natural heritage and biodiversity. Similarly, it should respect the socio-cultural authenticity of host communities and conserve their built and living cultural heritage and traditional values, eventually contributing to inter-cultural understanding. At the practical level, sustainable tourism is supposed to ensure viable, long-term economic operations, providing socio-economic benefits (including stable employment) to all stakeholders and social services to host communities, and, in overall, contribute to poverty alleviation.

To sum it up, sustainable tourism development consists of high-quality experiences for tourists while maintaining and improving the quality of life of host communities (Flagestad & Hope, 2001).

According to the classification used by Sørensen and Grindsted, 2021 these are the definitions of the main modes of sustainable tourism. Green growth tourism de-links economic growth and environmental

degradation (Panzer-Krause, 2019) in the pursuit of increased economic growth while becoming more sustainable (Hall, 2013). Steady-state tourism emphasises qualitative developments – instead of equating development with economic growth – including the quality of life and wellbeing of residents and tourists (Fletcher et al., 2019). De-growth tourism works with principles based on commons creation and conviviality to reduce tourism's material and energy flows and the intensity and impacts of tourists on local populations' lives and environments (Fletcher et al., 2019). Circular economy tourism aims at reducing resource use, emissions and waste without implying a steady-state or de-growth of tourism activities or economic benefits (Sørensen and Bærenholdt, 2020).

Overtourism

The effects of tourism have been examined in recent years and the outcome of the research was defined as the concept of overtourism. One of the main questions, in this case, considers the benefits for host communities: how can they be elaborated and what can be the drawbacks of tourism? According to (IPOL in *TRAN Committee Authors, 2018*) “Overtourism describes the situation in which the impact of tourism, at certain times and in certain locations, exceeds physical, ecological, social, economic, psychological, and/or political capacity thresholds.” Among the challenges, there are some alienated residents, degraded tourist experiences, an overloaded infrastructure, damage done to nature, or threats to culture and heritage (*TRAN Committee Authors, 2018*). The increasing number of house prices and rentals are the outcomes of the tourism pressure on the real estate market. Currently, many cities around the globe such as Berlin, Prague, Santa Monica, Hong Kong, Belfast, Venice, Rio de Janeiro, Barcelona, Shanghai, Amsterdam, Palma de Mallorca, Lisbon, Reykjavik and Dubrovnik (Colomb and Novy, 2016b; Milano, 2017b, 2018 in *TRAN Committee Authors, 2018*), have been reported having negative effects from overtourism phenomena.

The psychological capacity describes the capacity of locals to resist crowding. The political capacity relates to administration problems that are not capable to deal with tourism growth diminishing local communities' quality of life. The overtourism phenomenon refers to all groups of issues caused by the high number of visitors – social, physical, economic, and ecological facets. According to research for the TRAN committee (2018) stakeholders identified the following problems: Social, economic and environmental impacts should be assessed more systemically and interdependently, also by taking into account the voice of residents and their understanding of the phenomenon. Academia should bridge the gap between business studies and social sciences perspectives to forge a better understanding of tourism impacts. Tourism impacts should not be seen as a unidirectional phenomenon but as an encounter that is continually changing because of the interaction between tourism and the destination. Postma (2013) suggested the term „critical tourism encounters”. It can be interpreted as one or more thresholds being crossed, resulting in negative effects. Such impacts signify the depopulation of the city centre; protests organized by grassroots movements, loss of heritage and authenticity in different settings. Findings from the TRAN committee study (2018) includes tourism density (bed-nights per km²) and intensity (bed-nights per resident), the share of Airbnb bed capacity of the combined Airbnb and booking.com bed capacity, the share of tourism in regional GDP (Gross Domestic Product), air travel intensity (arrivals by air divided by number of residents) and closeness to the airport, cruise ports and finally, UNESCO World Heritage Sites as relevant indicators for overtourism.

Frey (2021, p. 23) also emphasizes housing issues. There are growing number of issues regarding availability of affordable housing in major urban destinations. The locals more and more struggle to stay in their original communities. Another factor here is closing traditional businesses that were originally focused on serving the needs of nowadays decreasing number of local populations. These causes overall increase of living costs. It includes increase of food and beverage services especially in touristic hotspots where international tourists are main clientele. As a result, growing numbers of local residents are forced to leave inner city areas and relocate to the outskirts. For instance, Venice is the bright example of such changes (Frey (2021, p. 23) considerable number of local dwellers have left the historic city centre; currently just over 50,000 people remained. However, Airbnb rentals offerings has increased significantly. The problem here is in unequal distribution of income as the number of individual real estate owners offering several apartments has increased noticeably.

The drivers of the overtourism are specific to urban, rural and coastal areas as much as to islands, attractions and heritage sites. To date, most studies have focused on causes and drivers, mostly in urban settings. According to a study on Managing Tourism Growth in Europe (Jordan et al., 2018) overtourism can be induced on one hand by the accessibility and affordability of travel and as a consequence the increase in international arrivals, the proliferation of unregulated tourist accommodations, and the concentration of large groups of tourists in certain places of the cities in concern and by the gentrification and increasing prices in city centres and new neighbourhoods, the traditional policy focused on promoting the increase of the volume of the cities and the urbanisation pressure in general on the other hand. Equally, according to the same study, the overtourism consequences of tourism growth might also be identified as the threshold which may cause overtourism. Some of them may be related to the frustration of those who live in a host destination, which can result from: the increased congestion, the pollution, the pressure on infrastructure, the environmental degradation, the growth in energy and water demand, the visitors' behaviour, the damage to historical sites and monuments, the loss of identity and authenticity, the increases in living costs for residents, and the increasing inequality among residents' (Jordan et al., 2018).

Milano (2017a, 2018) based on qualitative research in three EU cities, Barcelona (field research), Berlin and Venice (desk research), provides several elements and causes of discontentment for overtourism comprising of the congestion and privatization of public spaces in city centres and the rise in real estate prices leading to the commercial gentrification of urban areas and eventually to the loss of residents' purchasing power. On the other hand, the unbalanced number of inhabitants compared to visitors, for example, due to the increase in cruise ships and high numbers of cruise passengers in a short time, can also result in environmental deterioration, including waste, noise and air or water quality problems.

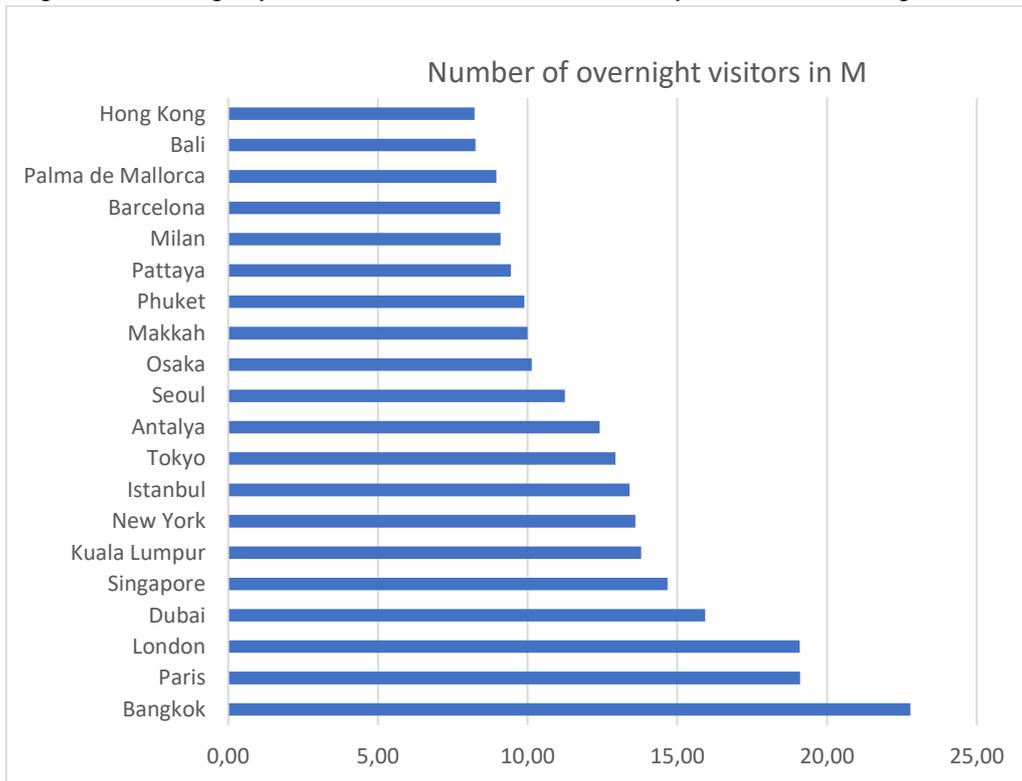
Methodology

This study uses the descriptive research method that describes the characteristics of a phenomenon, namely overtourism. Particularly, the trend is analysed with the help of secondary data available on Eurostat, Statista.com, the Hungarian Statistical Office, and the official website of the Barcelona city council (Barcelona.cat). Barcelona is among global leaders in terms of inbound tourism's. Therefore its practices in sphere of coping with overtourism are valuable for other growing urban destinations. Both Barcelona and Budapest have similar population numbers respectively 1.621 and 1.741 million (Worldometers.info, 2022). According to the research conducted by TravelBird both cities were among top five European cities ranked worst for overtourism. Considering mentioned factors it would be valuable to learn the experiences of Barcelona in order to cope better with growing overtourism in Budapest. Factors such as Overnight stays and Tourism Intensity are compared between two cities, Barcelona and Budapest. Furthermore, a comparison between the cities is provided based on the additional factors causing overtourism. The deficiencies in sustainable tourism planning in Budapest are discussed by comparing factors contributing to overtourism in Barcelona.

Findings

Due to its cultural, built and natural resources, Barcelona became one of the globally well-known hotspots of urban tourism. Undoubtedly, the remarkable architecture and design, and the comparatively high-level service along with tourism placemaking contributed to a great extent to establishing one of the examples of European commodified cities (Milano et al., 2019). Iconic locations such as Sagrada Família, Park Güell and the Montjuïc Fountains; the hotspots such as La Rambla; and neighbourhoods such as La Barceloneta, El Barri Gòtic and El Born became exceptionally popular among tourists. From the below chart it can be observed that Barcelona was among top ten destinations in terms of international overnight visitors - 9.09 millions.

Figure 1. Leading city destinations worldwide in 2018, by number of overnight visitors



Source: (Statista.com)

Below the research results conducted by TravelBird regarding overtourism issues are presented. The chart reveals the worst cities in terms of overtourism in Europe. Cities with smaller score like Barcelona experience more issues in regard to overtourism. The ranking includes factors such as number of accommodation beds (per square kilometer); number of tourists during the peak season compared to number of residents; surveying residents about overcrowding. Considering mentioned indicators, final ranking shows the score that represents the extent of coping with overtourism.

Figure 2. Ranking of the worst cities for over-tourism in Europe in 2017



Source: Statista.com

All this extensive use of territory and facilities caused a decrease in the quality of life for local dwellers (Barcelona Tourism Strategy, 2020). The “Barcelona model” (Delgado, 2007, in Milano, 2019) and related growth in visitor numbers boosted grassroots activism. Such movements evolved into organized resistance with their action programmes demanding stronger regulations of tourism in the city. Particularly, ABTS (an NGO in Barcelona) mobilized the voices of local communities against consumption growth models of tourism development. The central topic of their agenda was suspending real estate speculations parallel with tourism degrowth (Milano et al., 2019). These demonstrations caused a snowball effect in other Mediterranean destinations and concluded as the first Neighbourhood Forum on Tourism organized in Barcelona in 2016. The main agenda was the acknowledgement of overtourism-related issues and bringing together activist groups from Venice, Mallorca, Camp de Tarragona and Malaga. In 2018 the assembly of neighbourhood associations resulted in the establishment of the Southern European Cities against Touristification (SET) network – the expansion of the previous format. The central idea of the convention was to set the goal to promote degrowth and influence policy makers (Milano et al., 2019). The data below show the perception of the local population on incoming tourism. In 2019 around 28 % of the respondents (representative sample) would rather accept degrowth policies to cope with the situation (Tourism Activity Report, 2020).

Table 1. Need for attraction of more tourists. (%)

	2019	2020
Yes	69	64.1
No	27.7	33.3
Don't know	3.3	2.6

Source: Barcelona tourism activity report 2020 (p.158)

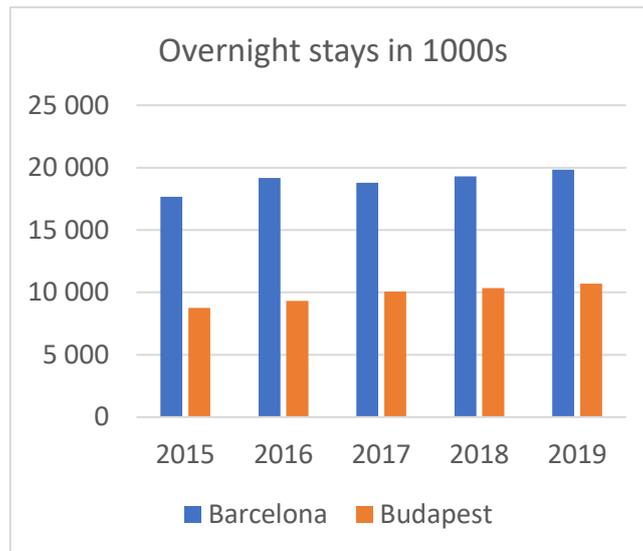
Table 2. Perception regarding the needed degrowth in tourism. (%)

	2019	2020
Yes	27.7	32.5
No	68.3	62.6
Don't know	3.9	4.9

Source: Barcelona tourism activity report 2020 (p.158)

One of the indicators of overtourism is considered to be the number of overnight stays. According to data, we can highlight that before the COVID-19 pandemic there was substantial growth in tourism in Barcelona. Between 2015 and 2019 overnight stays increased by 12,4%. By comparing these figures, we can see that there was a 1.94 million overnight stays increase in Budapest, making a 22% difference for the same period.

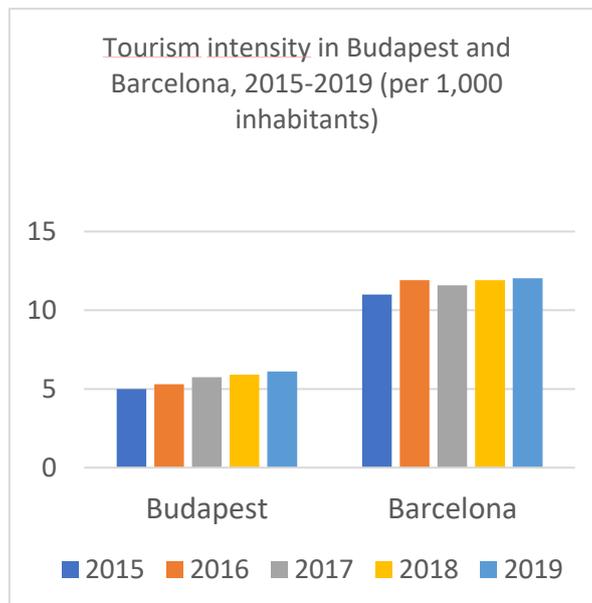
Figure 3. Overnight stays in Barcelona and Budapest, from 2015-2019 (own elaboration)



Source: Statista.com or Hungarian Central Statistical Office (HCSO)

According to Barcelona’s Tourism Activity Report (in Martin et al., 2018) only 50.5% of the visitors stayed in hotels, while the rest of the tourists preferred private apartments that could be booked through services similar to Airbnb. Undoubtedly, this was the main reason behind the increase in the rentals market, thus, during 2015-2016 the average price of the apartment rentals in Barcelona has climbed by 37.2% (Martin et al., 2018). This in turn initiated local activism against tourism growth. One of the indicators of overtourism is the high level of Tourism Intensity which is defined as total overnight stays per resident.

Figure 4. Tourism intensity in Budapest and Barcelona, in 2015-2019 (own elaboration)



Source: Statista.com or HCSO

When we compare overtourism in both mentioned cities, Barcelona has two times higher tourism intensity than Budapest with approximately similar resident numbers, cca. 1.6-1.7 million. It can be concluded that the situation in Budapest is not as advanced as it is in Barcelona, however, some parts

and facilities of the inner city are already suffering from overtourism. The reason behind Barcelona having comparatively more visitors is due to its geographical location and natural assets. The city is on the seashore and is a famous destination for cruise ships. Definitely, cruise ship tourism is one of the main contributors to overcrowding in central areas and main touristic hotspots. Barcelona and its surrounding areas are also popular for sea, sun and sand tourism which is also a factor contributing to the extensive use of the city's resources.

On the other hand, Budapest is famous for its ruin pubs in recent years. These pubs are located in the central area of the historic 7th district which is also called the Jewish district. There are some dilapidated buildings and streets that were abandoned, however, some of them have been revitalized. It started as an individual initiative of placemaking to have them reused temporarily. As time passed, they attracted many entrepreneurs who wanted to outstand from other food and beverage businesses. As a result, initial place-making initiatives became widespread and eventually, mainstream. This in turn brought many international visitors shortly to cause overtourism in the rather densely populated area. This phenomenon already reached its peak before the pandemic. There were organized protests and a district-level referendum on regulating overtourism took place in 2018. According to research (Smith et al, 2019) residents were complaining about overcrowding, litter, night noise, price increases, street crimes and higher rental prices. In addition, there were overcrowding issues in some centrally located thermal baths, that were even targeted promotion for international tourists.

All these factors contributed to the lessening of the quality of life in the inner part of Budapest. To ease overtourism issues Milano (2019) suggested the 5D Degrowth approach as a preventative measure. It consists of Deseasonalization, Decongestion, Decentralization, Diversification and Deluxe tourism. Below it will be elaborated in the Budapest context.

Conclusion

The elaborated secondary data and the case of Barcelona showed weaknesses in facing overtourism in urban areas. Examples from Budapest illustrated the same problems, although on a smaller scale. Certain solutions for Budapest coming and benefiting from the extensive research on the Barcelona case can be presented. According to the above-mentioned 5D Degrowth approach, Deseasonalization should be applied. Seasonality is not a critical issue in Budapest as it is the case in Barcelona. Budapest boasts of different types of water resources, namely thermal springs, that can be visited all year round. Because of this, the city could be promoted for winter stays, which will help to achieve Deseasonalization. Regarding the 2-4 elements of the approach, it should be mentioned that congestion is the actual problem in the city. Moreover, limited areas of the inner city are frequented by international tourists. On top of that, local dwellers also benefit from recreation in the same areas of the city. Therefore, congestions can be solved with dispersion and diversification of touristic paths within the whole area of the city, as well as building and promoting more facilities outside the central area. According to earlier research, luxury tourism is very much appreciated by a variety of stakeholders of a bigger urban community. In this vein, a higher level of cultural programs and events can contribute to this goal. As the tourism value chain is a complex economic phenomenon, to facilitate the suggested changes governmental support is desired.

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