

SUMMARY OF ARTICLE: [HTTPS://DX.DOI.ORG/10.12795/REA.2023.I45.04](https://dx.doi.org/10.12795/rea.2023.i45.04)

## A literature review on overtourism to guide the transition to responsible tourism

**Eva María Buitrago-Esquinas**

*esquinas@us.es*  0000-0003-4113-5836


*Facultad de Ciencias Económicas y Empresariales. Universidad de Sevilla.  
Avenida Ramón y Cajal, 1. 41018 Sevilla, Spain.*

**Concepción Foronda-Robles**

*foronda@us.es*  0000-0002-3632-2410

*Facultad de Turismo y Finanzas. Universidad de Sevilla.  
Avenida San Francisco Javier, s/n. 41018 Sevilla, Spain.*

**Rocío Yñiguez-Ovando**

*ovando@us.es*  0000-0002-7370-6632

*Facultad de Ciencias Económicas y Empresariales. Universidad de Sevilla.  
Avenida Ramón y Cajal, 1. 41018 Sevilla, Spain.*

### KEYWORDS

Overtourism  
Conceptual framework  
Literature review  
Responsible tourism  
Covid-19

Although the pre-pandemic tourism debate was led by overtourism, when the pandemic erupted, the increasing literature on this topic was still in an initial stage. The mobility restrictions derived from Covid-19 stopped overtourism, but the problem is still far from being eradicated. There is an increasingly need for a solid body of knowledge on which to build recovery to avoid making past mistakes.

A comprehensive pre-pandemic literature review is carried out, by proposing an overtourism conceptual framework that integrates its causes and consequences. How the pandemic could become an opportunity to transition to a responsible tourism model is discussed carried out in order to contribute towards the development of a systematic and integrated conceptual framework that can guide the post-pandemic tourism model. Specifically, the following objectives are set out:

1. Determine the limitations of the research carried out on overtourism and establish future lines of work.
2. Distil the essential elements that are hidden behind the term overtourism and bring to light the new nuances that it introduces, thus contributing to building a conceptual framework that captures the complexity of the phenomenon and integrates its causes and consequences.
3. Systematize the actions that have been applied and/or proposed for the management of pre-pandemic overtourism. Mark the changes that are being produced in the sector as a consequence of



the pandemic and outline how this can become an opportunity to transition towards a post-pandemic model of responsible tourism.

This paper shows results through the collection, assessment, and integration of pre-pandemic scientific literature on overtourism. A qualitative interpretive meta-synthesis (QIMS) of the existing literature on overtourism was carried out in order to bring to light the elements that characterize this complex and multi-dimensional phenomenon. Data for QIMS was collected through the use of purposive sampling to select relevant papers on overtourism. These studies were found using scientific databases, mainly those of the Web of Science and Science Direct. The search was then completed with Google Scholar. In addition, relevant publications were identified as they were cited in the publications under scrutiny. Keywords used in the search included different forms of writing 'overtourism' and, given its multidisciplinary character, the search tackled various areas of knowledge (sociology, geography, economics, politics, ecology and psychology). The search period ranged from 1990 to the onset of the covid-19 pandemic (early 2020).

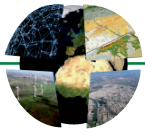
Although the literature on overtourism has grown exponentially in recent years, most research deals with the subject in a very indirect and partial way. The research studies that tackle overtourism as their main topic are mostly exploratory case studies focused on specific cities (mainly European), which carry out partial analyzes of only a certain dimension of the phenomenon. The main limitations found involve the partial focus and the deficiencies in the measurement of the studies. Although overtourism is an eminently quantitative term (it refers to an excessive amount of tourism), most of the work analyzed assumes the existence of overtourism without offering new tools and/or measurement methodologies to corroborate this supposition. Likewise, the causes or consequences of overtourism are addressed theoretically and in isolation, with few empirical studies that provide solid methodologies to demonstrate causality among the factors analyzed. Furthermore, these studies do not focus on the underlying causes or drivers of overtourism.

We propose a multidisciplinary conceptual framework that systematizes in pictorial form the different dimensions of overtourism, centres on its driving forces, and integrates its causes and consequences by focusing on new nuances that explain the emergence of the phenomenon. In this way, we extend the approach offered by most of the authors who have negotiated with the conceptualization of the phenomenon and who have focused solely on the consequences or on the causes. In doing so, we have been able to reveal a major contradiction that may explain the difficulties in overcoming overtourism. Although the driving forces and causes are in the global context, the negative impacts are primarily concentrated in destinations.

According to Mihalic (2020) and Burrai et al. (2019), the analysis framework in which we have developed the conceptual model is that of (ir)-responsible tourism. The existence of situations of overtourism provides empirical evidence of the lack of implementation of the ideas of sustainability. Hence, to overcome overtourism, it is also necessary to consider facilitators of responsibility, understood as the step towards action. Therefore, in addition to integrating causes and consequences into the conceptual framework of overtourism, we have considered the role of tourism governance by analyzing both the management alternatives that have been proposed and the opportunities that may arise from the pandemic for the change of model.

Despite the emergence of the aforementioned approaches to management, the pre-Covid tourism reality continued to be dominated by situations of overtourism (Butler & Dodds, 2022). Although recent awareness of the problems derived from this phenomenon and the apparently broad consensus that responsible tourism must be the model to follow (Burrai et al., 2019; Koščak & O'Rourke, 2021), the problem lay in the implementation of the changes necessary for the transition, in the actors involved, and in the different roles assumed by the public administration. The global geopolitical context and the dynamics of the tourism system itself, conditioned by multiple conflicting interests, explain that breaking the existing inertia and reprogramming the sector when it is running is a practically impossible task.

Furthermore, the pandemic has modified individual and collective attitudes and behaviours that are inducing not only relevant changes in society and in the business sector, but also political-institutional transformations (Brouder, 2020). Much of these changes are in line with the characteristics of responsible tourism (Brouder, 2020), which also presents an exciting opportunity to regain control of spaces and societies.



Even if the pandemic has opened up a favourable scenario for the change of model, it could also carry serious risks. The urgency for a rapid recovery and to compensate for the losses caused during periods of confinement can lead to strategies that revert to focusing on increasing the number of tourists without worrying about the externalities they generate (Hall et al., 2020). This second scenario, defended by a part of the tourism industry and certain governments, could lead to new situations of overtourism: re-overtourism.

In the pre-Covid stage, the problems derived from overtourism (gentrification, degradation, and touristification) and their damaging impacts on the quality of life of the resident and on the satisfaction of the tourist were unmasked and revealed the urgent need to promote a change of model; however, it remained impossible to implement. Most of the proposed measures have to date remained within the existing tourism growth paradigm and have not addressed the true driving forces behind overtourism. These measures are at the local level and deal with some of the consequences of overtourism but, by themselves, have insufficient capacity to modify its global underlying causes. The very inertia of the neoliberal economic system and the acceleration in ICT together with the loss of control over destinations explains the difficulties in changing the model.