

**To cite this article, please use the following format:**

Moreno-Gil, S. and Coca-Stefaniak, J.A. (2020), "Overtourism and the sharing economy – Tourism cities at a crossroads", *International Journal of Tourism Cities*, Vol. 6, No. 1

# **Overtourism and the sharing economy – Tourism cities at a crossroads**

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## **Introduction**

The tourism industry is fiercely competitive at all levels. While the sector has witnessed a considerable number of new destinations emerge and bid for a share of the market, established and arguably more mature destinations compete to consolidate existing markets and develop new ones. Tourism companies are also facing the arrival of new competitors from other industries. However, this evolving pattern is as applicable to the offer as it is to the demand side of the spectrum. In today's globalised world, tourists have an international range of choices when it comes to tourism destinations and tour operators.

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It is against this highly competitive backdrop that the concept of the sharing economy has arrived, initially as a philosophical alternative to more mainstream travel and hospitality options and, more recently, as a convenient - and even personalised - choice in the search for more authentic experiences by tourists with a wide range of disposable incomes (Paulauskaite *et al.*, 2017). This breakthrough innovation has changed the tourism ecosystem as well as tourism destinations at all levels. New players have arrived, redefining relationships among stakeholders and creating new impacts in tourism cities or exacerbating existing ones, including the contested phenomenon of overtourism (see, for instance Koens *et al.*, 2018; or Szromek *et al.*, 2019, among others). Examples of these newcomers can be found in online platforms that range from accommodation (e.g. Airbnb, HomeAway, CouchSurfing) to transport (e.g. Uber, BlaBlaCar), and also include customer reviews (e.g. TripAdvisor), general information (e.g. Wikipedia, Wikitravel), travel guiding (e.g. Tours by Locals) and food & beverage (e.g. EatWith), among others. In fact, the advent of the sharing economy has had a profound impact on the hospitality and tourism ecosystem over the last decade, affecting almost every single one of its components (Almeida-Santana and Moreno-Gil, 2017). The rapid development of the sharing economy and particularly some of its more negative impacts have led to a number of global tourism destinations taking measures to regulate it and, in some cases, limit it considerably. These have included Barcelona (Spain), where local government stopped issuing new licenses for short-term rental accommodation nearly three years ago (Burgen, 2017). Since then, key tourism destinations globally have sought to limit the expansion of Airbnb and other short-term accommodation service platforms (Guttentag, 2018). In Europe global tourism cities such as Krakow, Amsterdam, Berlin, Paris and Vienna, among others, have also sought help from the European Union to tighten up existing regulatory frameworks in this respect (Henley, 2019). However, this reaction by tourism cities is not limited to the accommodation sector. London, for instance, revoked Uber's license to operate as a private transport provider in November 2019 as a result of irregularities found in its service provision – a decision that is currently subject to appeal by Uber (Topham, 2019). One of the issues this situation inevitably raises is the extent to which the initial ethical principles of the sharing economy have evolved over time and what role can operators such as Fairbnb play in today's sharing economy spectrum of services and operators (Petruzzi *et al.*, 2019).

## **The sharing economy: background and present challenges**

Although there is a growing body of research on the sharing economy (Belk, 2014), this concept has often been alluded to using synonyms, which include “collaborative economy” (Dredge and Gyimóthy, 2015), “peer economy” (Bauwens, 2012), “platform economy” (Kenney and Zysman, 2016), “gig economy” (Friedman, 2014) and “on-demand economy” (Gurvich *et al.*, 2016). This special issue of the *International Journal of Tourism Cities* adopts a broad approach to the analysis of changes generated by this phenomenon in tourism cities and includes, arguably, one of its key negative impacts – overtourism (Gutiérrez-Taño *et al.*, 2019; Gretzel, 2019).

At the core of the sharing economy concept, there is the intention by people to share and trading ownership, use, access, information, finance, etc. This new and constantly evolving paradigm has major implications for the tourism industry where tourists, residents and service providers interact under different sets of “rules”. In fact, this phenomenon affects tourism’s entire value chain, starting with tourists’ pre-travel decision-making process, much of which is influenced today by research carried out online directly by the customer (Baggio and Del Chiappa, 2014). Moreover, the sharing economy has enabled tourism operators to change the way in which they conduct their business through an enhanced understanding of their customers, thus allowing for services and products to be personalised and adapted to customers’ needs. Similarly, destinations and tourism enterprises can take advantage of these sharing economy platforms to improve their understanding of tourist behaviour before, during, and after their trips.

However, the recent arrival of new typologies of non-tourism sharing economy platforms into the tourism industry has radically changed many processes. Among these, the process of searching for information has become more complex (David-Negre *et al.*, 2018), and the experience of the customer as well as the post-trip experience have been re-designed with important implications for the tourism ecosystem (Amaro and Duarte, 2017). Consequently, destinations, tourism enterprises, tourists and residents will need to adapt their behaviours to face this new scenario (Sigala, 2015).

The sharing economy has emerged as an alternative that challenges the traditional role of suppliers of goods and services, which were often provided by long-established enterprises (Schor, 2016). Since its inception, the tourism industry has portrayed itself as a sector

supportive of the sharing economy, which may explain why it has grown faster and achieved a bigger impact on tourism than on other sectors of the economy. As a result of this, more traditional aspects of the tourism industry, such as the balance of power between supply and demand, flexibility of delivery, the role of mystery shopper services in the service-review process or micro-segmentation have all changed radically (Dolnicar, 2017). As the sharing economy becomes more prevalent and mainstream, its challenge to traditional structures in tourism is becoming increasingly noticeable. Examples of this include changes to the communication dynamics between suppliers and tourists (Kietzmann *et al.*, 2011) and a marked empowerment of tourists to make their own travel and accommodation decisions without the need for intermediaries (Li and Wang, 2011). In fact, online peer-to-peer communication processes offering information through user-generated content such as photos, videos and comments are not only having a major impact on customer decision-making – they are leading to a fundamental re-think of destination image management processes by tourism practitioners and academics. In turn, this new and evolving ecosystem continues to generate new innovative products and services.

### **Overtourism and the sharing economy as overlapping phenomena?**

This special issue of the *International Journal of Tourism Cities* on overtourism and the sharing economy offers a wide range of articles exploring these two inter-related topics from a variety of different perspectives. The impact of the sharing economy on local communities in Barcelona (Spain) is investigated by Richards *et al.* (“*The Airbnb phenomenon: the residents’ perspective*”) to discover that the proliferation of unregistered Airbnb rentals throughout the city has created impacts that go well beyond those of anti-social behaviour by tourists. In fact, the resulting longer-term neighbourhood gentrification processes initiated by this form of service delivery have not only contributed to a rising feeling of ‘tourismphobia’ among local residents but, crucially for visitors, a significant degradation of the authenticity of the experience they came in search of and, ultimately, one of the main reasons why many tourists engage with the sharing economy (Paulauskaite *et al.*, 2017). An added dimension of the peer-to-peer accommodation experience is explored by Souza *et al.* (“*Tourist experience, perceived authenticity, place attachment and loyalty when staying in peer-to-peer accommodation*”) who highlight the important contribution that hospitality-based experiences (e.g. dining, interior design, etc.) provide to forge customer loyalty and longer-term place attachment among

visitors. Similar research findings emerge from a study carried out in a more regional context in Australia by von der Heidt *et al.* (“*Airbnb in the Byron Shire, Australia – bane or blessing?*”), though participants in this study are unanimous in their consensus with regards to the need for a higher level of regulation of Airbnb properties in this part of New South Wales.

In the context of Lisbon (Portugal), and specifically in neighbourhoods with a high proportion of Airbnb-listed lodgings, Petruzzi *et al.*'s quantitative study (“*Airbnb and neighbourhoods: An exploratory study*”) analyses different dimensions of economic, social, cultural and environmental sustainability and recommend that rent prices are monitored and, wherever possible, regulated and that a private-public partnership approach is adopted to the management and marketing of these areas in order to alleviate the more negative impacts of peer-to-peer accommodation services. This collaborative area-based marketing and management theme is adopted by Grimmer and Vorobjovas-Pinta's exploration of the links between the sharing economy and the visitor economy adopting a retail-based perspective (“*From the sharing economy to the visitor economy: the impact on small retailers*”). The authors conclude that local small retailers could represent an innovative catalyst in the integration of the sharing economy with more traditional services, whilst helping to preserve the authenticity of the visitor experience. On the other hand, Agyeiwaah's literature review (“*Over-tourism and sustainable consumption of resources through sharing: the role of government*”) points out that there is a growing consensus among scholars about the cause-effect relationship between the growth of accommodation platforms linked to the sharing economy and the magnification of overtourism's negative effects on destinations. Crucially, the author argues that in order to return to the original ethical stance of the sharing economy as a force for good, a multi-stakeholder co-creation and co-development approach should be adopted by destinations, where residents, tourism service providers and destination management organisations, among others, promote and deliver more sustainable forms of consumption among visitors. This is a recommendation that echoes Grimmer and Vorobjovas-Pinta's suggestion for the creation of area/neighbourhood-based public-private partnership management schemes. One of the key areas to be addressed in this respect would certainly be liveability, which is explored by Amore *et al.* (“*One visitor too many: Assessing the impact of overtourism in established European urban destinations*”) to quantify the degree of overtourism in European urban destinations by developing an indicator-based ranking, which could support the co-development and co-creation processes advocated by Agyeiwaah.

However, as Żemła *et al.* point out in their literature-based analysis of externalities affecting the development of the sharing economy in tourism destinations (*“Externalities in the development of the sharing economy in tourism cities”*), the majority of solutions implemented by local government continue to be patchy at best and generally focused on the short-term without tool-kits at their disposal and generally with little understanding of how to evaluate the effectiveness of interventions implemented on the ground. Although the latter is certainly one of the limitations of the case study presented by Park in the context of Charleston in the United States (see *“The sharing economy, regulations, and the role of local government”*), Park’s analysis remains a very valid review of the process followed by this city in setting up a regulatory framework for short-term rentals through the sharing economy, whilst adopting an inclusive approach that involved input from key local stakeholders. On this front, and specifically with regards to destinations’ accommodation offer, perhaps local governments considering regulatory practices or at least a more active management of the more negative impacts of the sharing economy, would do well to consider why consumers engage with it in the first instance as that would help to gain a broader understanding of the entire ecosystem on this front at the level of the destination. For instance, a quantitative study by Tiamiyu *et al.* (*“To switch or not to switch ... The role of tourists’ psychological engagement in the context of Airbnb Malaysia”*) found that price unfairness has a key level of influence on tourists’ intentions to engage with services offered by Airbnb instead of those tendered by more traditional hospitality providers in Malaysia. Inevitably, the old adagio of ‘providing local solutions to local problems’ (even if some of these local problems are influenced by global trends) would appear to ring true here. For instance, in the context of overtourism, Navarro-Ruiz *et al.* (*“Cruise tourism: the role of shore excursions in the overcrowding of cities”*) find that the engagement of local shore tourism operators in cruise tourism can act as catalyst for solutions to overcrowding - and arguably negative impacts of overtourism - in coastal tourism cities as local shore tourism operators tend to more prone to encourage cruise tourists to explore ‘hidden gems’ away from the more crowded harbour and city centre areas.

The importance of managing issues related to overtourism adopting a local focus that involves proactively stakeholders is emphasized by Guizi *et al.* (*“How are overtourism and host-guest relationships portrayed by the Portuguese print media?”*) in their content analysis of regional and national press media in Portugal, which illustrates how an issue that remains seasonal can be magnified even further due to negative press coverage. Additionally, Park and Jang (*“Social media, media, and urban transformation in the context of overtourism”*) in their big data-led

case study analysis of the village of Ihwa in Seoul (South Korea) highlight the role of social media - at least from a visitor perspective – in acting as a positive ‘counterweight’ to the more negative portrayal of issues related to overtourism, which tends to dominate media coverage. The authors also echo the arguments of other authors in this special issue in pointing out the need for a change in mindset by Destination Management Organisations (DMOs) away from destination marketing activities and towards visionary, effective and proactive destination management involving more participatory leadership styles that involve key stakeholders. In a wider global context where, if anything, DMOs’ influence and resources appear to be under a constant state of review and flux with a generalised downward average trend due to often conflicting political and economic agendas, it would be perhaps unfair to lay the blame solely with these organisations. Instead, it would seem perhaps altogether more productive to learn from the experiences of different destinations and advance our understanding of the complexity of how overtourism and the sharing economy interact, even when this often happens on parallel - though at times overlapping - levels. Once again, this emphasizes the timeliness and importance of the theme chosen for this special issue of the *International Journal of Tourism Cities*.

### **Future research avenues for the sharing economy in tourism**

Research on the digital economy and its impact on the tourism system continues to grow and evolve (Leung *et al.*, 2013), including the contribution of the digital economy to the creation and capture of value (Kenney and Zysman, 2015). More specifically, the sharing economy has been analysed through a myriad of lenses, including its legal (Aloisi, 2016) and financial implications, its impact on consumer behaviour (Hamari *et al.*, 2016) and business models, the motivations for consumers to engage with it (e.g. sustainability, value for money, convenience), as well as tourism destinations (Belk, 2014; Cheng, 2016; Decrop *et al.*, 2018; Guttentag, 2013; Lambertson and Rose, 2012; Möhlmann, 2015). Similarly, research in this field has also analysed the impact of the sharing economy on specific sectors (e.g. Zervas *et al.*, 2017), its wider externalities (Malhotra and van Alstyne, 2014), potential cases involving discrimination on ethnic grounds (Edelman and Luca, 2014) and purchase processes involving consumers (Ert *et al.*, 2016). However, scholars have argued that several lines of enquiry related to the sharing economy remain rather unexplored to date (Drahokoupil and Fabo, 2016). Similarly, the building of research-informed theory in this context remains an issue to be addressed. This

includes the testing of applicable theories and models as well as applied research related to the sharing economy in the context of the tourism sector.

The research articles that form this special issue of the *International Journal of Tourism Cities* make a valuable contribution to our understanding of the changes taking place in tourism as a result of the growth of the sharing economy and its contested links to overtourism. However, inevitably, the research showcased here raises various questions, which may provide fruitful avenues for future research. These include, among others, what is the exact nature of the impacts (positive and negative) of the sharing economy on tourism destinations and what is the degree of interdependence between these variables. Similarly, what are the physical, social, economic and experiential dimensions of the sharing economy in tourism cities? Also, how widespread is the influence (intrinsic and extrinsic) of the sharing economy on new hospitality services, new generations of employees in the sector and new tourists (young and older) adopting the sharing economy as part of their decision-making system? Moreover, should new regulatory frameworks and guidelines be developed by key tourism destinations for the sharing economy to function within a level playing field where more traditional forms of service provision can operate on an equal footing? Ultimately, the findings discussed in this special issue of the *International Journal of Tourism Cities* come at a time when many tourism cities, their key decision makers, stakeholders and service providers find themselves at a crossroads with regards to their stance on the sharing economy, overtourism and the way future marketing strategies should be formulated in this respect. This includes the closely related and yet untapped role of smart tourism thinking in this respect, which was discussed from a marketing perspective in an earlier special issue of this journal (Coca-Stefaniak, 2019).

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