Exploring community stakeholders' perceptions of mass tourism: the case of Bruges

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Abstract:
In the last years, there have been protests by residents against tourism in several destinations around the world. Tourists have also increasingly complained about destinations being overcrowded. At the same time, visitors are looking for more authentic experiences. Our research has been conducted in Bruges, one of the major tourist destinations in Belgium to analyse stakeholder's perceptions of mass tourism and how destinations can ensure a more sustainable development. One of the major findings from this research is the importance of locals' support to promote a sustainable tourism. Residents and local entrepreneurship could have a more positive attitude towards tourism if the positive impact outweighs the disadvantages of tourism. Practical and managerial implications are suggested.

Keywords: *mass tourism, overtourism, mature destination, sustainable tourism*

INTRODUCTION

Throughout last century, tourism has shown an exceptional growth, that experts expect to continue. One of the reasons of this rapid progress is the increasing economic and cultural globalization (Bramwell & Lane, 1993; Mowforth & Munt, 2003; Sharpley & Harrison, 2017; Theng, et al., 2015; UNWTO, 2004), which has transformed tourism. Indeed, the democratization of travels, the development of information technologies and the free movement of resources, people and goods (Christou, 2002; Čerović et al., 2015; Küçükaltan & Pirnar, 2016; George, 2017; Mombeuil, 2018) have changed the way tourists behave before, during and after their trips. Tourism, as one of the principal economic activities worldwide, is considered as a global force capable of promoting innovation, peace and sustainable development.

However, negative connotations also arise from globalization and tourism. First of all, mass tourism may lead to the over usage of the host destination's natural and socio-cultural environments (Lupoli, 2013). Furthermore, literature explains how tourism transforms the socio-economical relationships to bring into market exchange attractions that were not market-based before, such as landscape, culture, fragile ecosystems, and even ethnic minorities, social problems and poverty (Jeannite & Lapointe, 2016). This can lead to the *commodification* of community resources with an unfavourable reaction of residents and negative effects on local customs and sense of identity (Greenwood, 1977; Moscardo & Pearce, 2003; Ryan & Aicken, 2005; Chatzigeorgiou et al., 2017). Furthermore, increased visitors' flows could reduce the *authenticity* of the tourist offer (MacCannell, 1973), and transform it into a form of *staged or pseudo authenticity* (Cohen, 1988).

Although in the last years a great number of tourists is looking for new, experiential (Pine & Gilmore, 1999), authentic, and sustainable forms of tourism, away from famous places and from other tourists (Hyde & Lawson, 2003; Mowforth & Munt, 2003), many destinations worldwide are increasingly struggling with problems such as mass tourism, overtourism, commodification of local culture and loss of authenticity, that can destroy those same local characters that attract tourists (Colomb & Novy, 2016; Harvey, 2001; Sorkin, 1992; Zukin, 1995; Volgger et al., 2017; Zwegers, 2018). For example, cities like Barcelona, Berlin and Venice, are facing some of these issues, that clearly overshadow the advantages of tourism development.

This paper explores different stakeholder's perceptions on the impacts of tourism in a mature destination. The aim of our research is to understand how a sustainable long-term development is possible, adapting the offer to trends which are stirring tourists away from standardized and massive tourism activities onto more personalized and unique tourism experiences. The research has taken Bruges, the second most visited destination in Belgium, as a case-study (FPS Economy, 2017; Toerisme Vlaanderen, 2017).

LITERATURE REVIEW

Mass tourism

The phenomenon of mass tourism started in the mid-twentieth century and was very popular until about two decades ago. It is mainly defined by the (high) number of tourists visiting a certain area compared to the location dimension and inhabitant's density (Theng, et al., 2015). The amount of tourist arrivals worldwide evolved in the last decades from 25 million in 1950 to more than 1.3 billion in 2017 (source: UNWTO). Furthermore, globalization has pushed people to look for urban tourist experiences (Ashworth & Page, 2011; Thrift, 1997). As a consequence of this, in post-modern cities, frequently previous industrial centres now in crisis, tourism and leisure are increasingly part of urban offer, and frequently they are dominant. However, cities, which are now becoming places for entertainment, are not planned to be tourist destinations (Llewelyn-Davies et al., 1996). This situation often leads to the offer of standardized products and services, and the McDonaldization of historic city centres (Mc Neill, 1999; Ritzer, 1999; 2009).

The effects of mass tourism on destinations have been a broadly researched topic over the last few decades. Butler (1980; 1990; 2006) is one of the pioneers and most well-known authors in this field. Researchers such as Archer, et al. (2005), Russo (2002), Vainikka (2013b), Van der Borg, et al. (1996), and others have written about the effects of mass tourism on mature destinations and about the levels of tourist arrivals that can be considered acceptable and sustainable. Two valid indicators of local capacity related to tourism development are the *tourism intensity* (the visitor to resident ratio) and the *tourism function index* (ratio of tourist beds to residents) (Van der Borg et al., 1996; Vargas-Sánchez et al., 2011). The first indicator is related to the carrying capacity and indicates residents' perceptions of tourism. According to UNWTO, carrying capacity is "the maximum number of people that may visit a tourist destination at the same time without causing destruction of the physical, economic or socio-cultural environment and an unacceptable decrease in tourist satisfaction" (1997:5). The second indicator relates the residents' attitude to the level of tourism development. It is related to *social carrying capacity*, which refers to residents' impact perceptions (Graefe & Vaske, 1987; Muler Gonzalez et al., 2018; Van der Borg, 1992 Chatzigeorgiou, 2017; Anestis Fotiadis, Nuryyev, Achyldurdyyeva, & Spyridou, 2019; A. Fotiadis & Williams, 2018).

The *Doxy Irritation Model*, or Doxey's Irridex, created in the mid 1970's, shows the evolution in locals' attitudes towards tourism, on the bases of the levels of tourism development in a place. According to this model, there are four stages in the attitudes of locals towards tourism: euphoria, apathy, annoyance and antagonism. Mass tourism is seen as a very positive phenomenon at its early stages, getting progressively as a negative one. Indeed, as some authors have pointed out, not every tourist destination passes through all phases. It depends on circumstances, tourist behaviours, differences in culture, etc. (Abdool, 2002; Mowforth & Munt, 1998). Besides, residents' attitude towards tourism in heritage cities depends also on the type of tourist development and the tourist's length of stay (day trip, short or long-stay) (Muler Gonzales et al., 2018; Murphy, 1981).

In the first stage of euphoria, the destination improves infrastructures and employment opportunities increase for locals. Subsequently, external companies enter in the market and locals start to get less input from the tourism activity. Thus, tensions can arise between the local population and the external companies developing tourism and changing the area (Abdool, 2002; Butler, 2006). Now is when phase 2, apathy, takes place. In the consolidation stage (Butler, 2006), there are more tourists than local permanent inhabitants and locals are likely to start feeling more dissatisfied with tourism. They move to phase 3, annoyance. Saturation points are approaching and residents experience the pressure put on their daily life by the high season (Abdool, 2002). After that, carrying capacity levels are reached or exceeded. When destinations reach the stagnation stage, they are referred to as 'mature destinations' and have difficulties in differentiating themselves from other similar destinations. This is usually the point when locals reach phase 4, antagonism, being tired of the pressure of tourism. Tourists will get blamed for making daily life unpleasant and the relation between residents and tourists will go from bad to worse (Abdool, 2002). In these phase often tourism is no more sustainable in economic, social or environmental terms, creating considerable problems such as building speculation, increase in housing prices and gentrification, deterioration of physical and social environment, traffic and so on (Manning & Powers, 1984; Van der Borg, et al., 1996). Besides, excessive arrivals also affect tourists' perceptions of the destination. In conclusion, negative consequences that arise from mass tourism affect locals as well as tourists, making the destination less attractive for both parties (Mowforth & Munt, 1998).

In this last phase is most likely to happen the phenomenon of *overtourism* originate*;* it represents a state in which tourism flows are too high with reference to local situation (size of the interested area, number of residents, etc.). In case of overtourism, local community often manifests its negative attitude towards visitors by means of public initiatives such as protests, banners against tourists, etc. For example, in 2017 there have been protests in Spain, Italy and Croatia. Unless such tourism destinations rejuvenate, many of them will enter the Butler's Life Cycle phase of decline (Custodio Santos, et al., 2014). This phase will occur in case of increasing competition or irreversible environmental damages with infrastructures abandoned (Cole, 2007). If no action is taken, interest in the destination will keep declining. In case of re-launch, the destination should put a lot of energy into rejuvenating the offer, repositioning it and re-involving local inhabitants to attract new and unique niche markets (Kozak & Martin, 2011; Patoski & Ikeda, 1993; Sheldon & Abenoja, 2001; Christou, 2003; Del Chiappa, 2018; Martins, 2018). In the last time, numerous researchers have analysed overtourim and how destinations should manage it. For instance, Milano (2018) suggests some strategies called '5Ds' to face the phenomenon: deseasonalization, decongestion, decentralization, diversification, deluxe tourism. However, tourism and social conflicts are still a reality and deeper studies on this issue are needed (Nella & Christou, 2014; de Almeida Ramos & Fernandes, 2016 Milano & Mansilla; 2018b).

The role of local community

Local community is one of the most important stakeholders and is crucial in a tourist destination. Locals help to determine both the quality of the tourism experience and the image of the destination (Ferrari & Gilli, 2018; Kotler et al., 2003; Peng et al., 2014; Wearing & Wearing, 2001). Indeed, tourism success is function of the "goodwill of local residents" and their levels of hospitality (Gursoy et al., 2002) as well as their involvement in processes of planning, marketing and management of tourism (Jamal & Getz, 1995). A positive attitude on the part of residents towards tourists increases the levels of satisfaction, improving the capacity to welcome tourists and creating a favourable climate towards visitors (Harrill, 2004; Ritzer, 1999; Perdue et al., 1990).

This attitude depends also on objective and subjective factors, in particular on costs and benefits perceived in reference to economic, social and environmental aspects (Gursoy et al., 2002) and above all on the impact of tourism on the place; in addition, it is influenced by the *community attachment* of each host, in other words by the level of involvement and social integration in the life of the community and the emotional attachment to the community itself (Mc Cool & Martin, 1994). The success of tourism is based, therefore, on the goodwill of local residents and their hospitality. The discussion so far shows the need to involve the main stakeholders, firstly the residents, which leads to a favourable attitude on the part of residents towards the tourism phenomenon (Ryan, 2010; Christou, 2010; Almeyda-Ibáñez & George, 2017). In the last decades, the negative effects of mass tourism on local resources have determined an increasing importance of sustainability in tourism.

Sustainability in tourism

A movement away from mass tourism started in the early 1990's, when the Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro pressured the tourism industry to focus more on sustainable forms of development (Pigram & Wahab, 2005). Many destinations are now working on programs to limit the impact of tourism (Edwards, 2017). The challenge is to keep working on tourism growth but respecting ecological, social, economic, and political sustainability. The term "sustainable tourism" came into use in the late 1980s as a result of the growing awareness of the impact of tourism development and was mainly seen as the exact opposite of "mass tourism" (Butler, 1999; Clarke, 1997; Mowforth & Munt, 2003; Swarbrooke, 1999). Yet, the concept has evolved over time. Today it aims to promote the expansion of an area without destroying its resources for future generations, minimising environmental negative aspects, maximising the positive ones and distributing value in a balanced way (Miller, 2001; Molina-Azorín & Font, 2015; Spangenberg, 2000; 2002; Spangenberg & Valentin, 1999; Stoddard et al., 2012; Chami & Kaminyoge, 2019). Today the term sustainable tourism "encompasses an approach to tourism which recognises the importance of the host community, the way staff are treated and the desire to maximise the economic benefit of tourism for the host community" (Swarbrooke, 1999: 19).

Tourism in Bruges

Bruges is one of the seven art-cities in Flanders, Belgium, that are the main tourism destinations in the area. Since the year 2000, the entire inner city centre of Bruges has been recognized as a World Heritage Site by UNESCO. Nevertheless, tourism has mainly been focused on a four square-kilometres area, named the 'Golden Triangle'. It has been actively promoted to alleviate tourism pressure in the rest of the city. In the period 2011- 2015, in there was an average yearly growth of tourists of 2,8% (Toerisme Vlaanderen, 2017). In 2015, Bruges welcomed 3.079.720 day-visitors. Compared to 2014, there was a decrease of 3,3%, that was the first decrease in the visitors' number. The tourism department of Bruges differentiates between three types of tourists for their statistics: recreational visitors, excursionists and tourists (Brugge, 2016). *Recreational visitors* are people who live within 20 kilometres from Bruges and are mostly attracted by urban facilities, rather than pure tourism. In 2015 Bruges welcomed 1,27 million recreational visitors, about 3.500 on a daily basis (Brugge, 2016). *Excursionists* are those people who live outside a range of 20 kilometres around Bruges and who visit the city purely for recreational purposes. They stay for at least one hour in the city but do not spend the night. In 2015 there were 5,27 million day-tourists in Bruges, about 14.000 to 15.000 on an average daily basis. About half of them were foreigners (Brugge, 2016). *Tourists* spend at least one night in Bruges. In 2015, there were 1,28 million stay-tourists who accounted for 2,2 million nights in total. The average stay was 1,75 nights (Brugge, 2016). About 80% of the total visitors in Bruges are foreigners. Most of them come from France, Germany and The Netherlands but also from the United Kingdom (Neuts & Nijkamp, 2012).

Bruges is vulnerable to the (negative) effects of tourism because the city has relatively few inhabitants compared to the number of tourists that they receive on a yearly basis. According to Van der Borg, et al. (1996), Bruges has a *tourism intensity* of 23,4. This means that for every inhabitant, there are 23 tourists. Compared to the ratios of cities like Amsterdam (5,9 ratio), Florence (9,8 ratio) or even Oxford (11,5 ratio), it is a high ratio. This indicates that the pressure created by tourism on Bruges is much higher than i.e. on Amsterdam, reaching a sensitive social carrying capacity level. Indeed, Bruges already has problems with locals and economic activities moving away from the city centre due to tourism (Van der Borg, et al., 1996). Thus, negative impacts arise from mass tourism on Bruges such congestion, overcrowding, mobility problems, rising living cost and touristification (Peeters et al. 2018).

METHODOLOGY

A qualitative study was conducted to explore stakeholder's perceptions, attitudes and practices towards mass tourism and their impact on the destination. Through a qualitative method people involved in a situation are best placed to express their world-view in their words, obtaining in-depth insight into the social reality of subjects (Veal, 2006). Fifteen in-depth interviews, each of approximately 60 to 80 minutes, were conducted with different tourism stakeholders of Bruges between January and February of 2017. Interviewees were chosen based on their current activities in tourism related areas, such as hotels, restaurants, information offices, museums (both private and public sector) and their willingness to take part in the study. They were 9 men and 6 women between 20 and 60 years old, living and working in Bruges.

The snowball technique was used to contact them, because it enables the researcher to use other people's networks. All interviews were recorded and transcribed the same day to ensure minimal information loss. A subsequent step was to structure meanings using narrative, leaving the stories of participants as they were told. The narrative gives more in-depth information about participants' experiences (Saunders, et al., 2009). As in previous qualitative studies on tourism (Hernandez et al., 2018), Nvivo software was employed to examine and categorize data, using open, axial and selective coding (Gibbs, 2002). The number of interviews was decided according to the principle of saturation, which states that data collection should end when no new categories emerge from the data (Silverman, 1998).

FINDINGS & DISCUSSION

When participants were interviewed on their perceptions regarding tourism activity in Bruges, most of them mentioned that tourism in the city had never been as 'good' as in the last years, as the number of tourists has increased. Reports from the tourism department of Flanders (Brugge, 2016; Nella & Christou, 2016; Toerisme Vlaanderen, 2017) confirmed this trend. Interviewee E declared: "I think Bruges will stay a popular tourist destination. I think it will probably even increase its popularity because it is doing a lot of promotion".

Respondents also expressed their concern on two socio-political issues that influence in the number of tourists received by Bruges. As literature explains, tourism in Europe declined as a result of terrorism (Teoman, 2017) and one of the participants agree with this: "With the terrorist attacks, we lost 10% occupancy and we belong to the lucky ones. The average hotel in Bruges lost about 20%" (Interviewee A). On the other hand, some interviewees claimed Bruges could lose a lot of tourists as a direct consequence of the Brexit in UK. British tourists are crucial for Bruges, as they account for over 20% of total stay over tourists (WES, 2012). The Brexit may cause insecurity for British people and a higher exchange rate, leading them to travel more within their own country (Lim, 2017; Pappas, 2017). Interviewee B said about this: "Brexit is very negative for us. Americans are slowly starting to come back but there are many fewer British people".

Thus, we can see how the number of tourists and the strategies to increase/ maintain those figures are key topics for respondents. They associate a greater number of tourists with a positive development of the tourism activity. At first, this general support to mass tourism seems to be in sharp contrast with what literature on sustainable tourism explains: a greater number of arrivals do not always suppose an appropriate development of tourism. Growth is not always a synonym of sustainable development. In addition, this general support is contrary to locals' attitudes in other mature destinations such as Barcelona, Amsterdam and Venice, where an increasing number of public protests can be seen against tourism (Edwards, et al., 2017). However, Flemish Tourism Board claimed that about 76% of locals in Bruges support tourism and for 70% of Bruges' inhabitants the benefits of tourism still outweigh its negative impacts (Nijs, 2016).

Nevertheless, contradictions emerged from participant's discourses. Although currently respondents recognized no signs of any protest against tourism, not all participants agreed with the numbers provided by the Tourism Board. About that, Interviewee E explains: "Studies claiming that everyone loves tourism are often written by government and people who benefit from it. However, it is true that there are no protests or groups specifically against tourism". Some of the respondents also clarified that most locals support tourism because they understand it is key for the economic development. For instance, Interviewee E commented that without tourism the city would be literally dead: "Everyone realizes that the real negative situation would be if we do not have tourists. If we think only about hospitality, we have about 3000 direct employees. You can count about 1500 extra jobs surrounding hospitality".

Some interviewees recognized negative impacts of tourism on the destination. They explained that locals are regularly annoyed by the effect of tourism on their daily life. They claimed that the city is starting to feel like a theme park: there has been an enormous increase in the number of excursionists, due to the expansion of the cruise port. Visitors come in big groups and put extra pressure on the city without spending enough time and money to generate a positive impact. Interviewee A explains: "For every cruise ship that arrives, there are 3,000 people who are going to go through the city centre at the same time and not spend a dime". Research on this issue has also indicated that cruise tourism has a low and unequal economic impact on destinations (Klein, 2011). Indeed, these tourists spend less than 30% of what other tourists spend on a daily basis (Brida & Zapata, 2010).

Residents deal with the negative consequences of this short-term flood of people, such as overcrowding. As Klein (2011) explains, when talking about cruise tourism, is necessary to consider communities and stakeholders, ensuring an equal distribution of economic benefits in the community and minimizing sociocultural impacts. Regarding overcrowding in Bruges, some stakeholders interviewed explained that they receive complaints or remarks from locals,

that, especially during the high season, try to avoid the city centre in busy times. Interviewee B said about this: "Sometimes it is impossible to go around the city centre. It is plenty of tourists and mobility there is limited".

As to sustainability of tourism development aspects, respondents highlighted the lack of real collaboration between the tourism board and the stakeholders in tourism planning and management. This holds in line with outcomes provided by the Belgian Federal Tourism Board, which says that only 6% of locals feel that they have a voice in tourism planning and 42% of the locals would like to have more to say about the tourism policy in Bruges (Nijs, 2016). Alliances and inclusive partnership between public and private sector and local community could be a key instrument for social sustainable development (Hernandez et al., 2018). However, most participants are confident that tourism will, at least, be sustainable in the long run. Bruges is starting to change its strategies, identifying most beneficial target groups with promotion strategies towards those selected groups. Interviewee G said about this: "We do not work with markets anymore. We work with target groups. Our target group is the cultural value seeker...".

Another of the city main concerns in terms of tourism sustainability is the protection of the residential function. According to the tourism board, a city without inhabitants loses its attractiveness. Interview A explains: "Visitors are looking for authentic activities, they want to see the 'real' Bruges, but sometimes they are disappointed caused they only see more tourists. Locals are moving to other areas". In order to achieve this goal, besides targeting the 'right' kind of tourists, the city wants also to spread tourists through space and time by creating individual and authentic experiences, avoiding overcrowding. Interviewee G explained that the new tourism policy of Copenhagen 2020 'The end of tourism as we know it' (Wonderful Copenhagen, 2017) is a good example of the creation of individual programs for different types of tourists, giving in the same time locals more input in tourism policies: "It's a new policy which focuses mostly on what they call localhood. They have taken a step back from existing hotels and attractions and they want to focus on authentic experiences in cooperation with local inhabitants." As previous studies suggest, there are several examples of organizations that facilitate the interaction between residents and customers, where visitors create their own experiences (Binkhorst & Dekker, 2009; Guimont & Lapointe, 2016).

CONCLUSIONS & RECOMMENDATIONS

After more than 40 years of research on the consequences of tourism on destinations, debates on this complex and dynamic issue are still needed. Nowadays, mass tourism and overtourism are problems for many cities worldwide. Both public and private stakeholders of destinations can't ignore the negative impacts of this phenomenon. Protests against tourism are starting to become more common and destinations must take charge of the situation and suggest solutions. Overcrowding is a complex issue that needs an early detection and long-term planning with all stakeholders involved. It is not enough to just analyze the number of visitors that arrive. Deeper analysis of what is really happening in the community are needed to anticipate negative consequences. Different stakeholders of the destination analyzed express they are willing to support tourism if the benefits, for them personally or as a community, outweigh disadvantages provoked by the tourism industry.

Thus, to ensure sustainable tourism in the long run, it is suggested to (1) protect the need of residential areas of a destination, (2) target the right tourists, (3) offer authentic experiences (4) include locals in tourism policy making. For mature tourism destinations like Bruges to ensure that they will remain an attractive destination amongst all the competition, they need to market themselves in new ways. One of the main recommendations is to focus more on individual marketing. Destinations should define their specific tourist target groups. Note that it is just as important, if not even more important, to define which tourists are interesting for the destination and to design strategies to attract them. Added to this, the destination should be prepared to offer personalized, unique and memorable experiences. Getting locals involved in activities for tourists, i.e. co-creating tours, will not only improve the feeling of authenticity, it will also give locals a possibility of more participation which will improve their support for tourism development.

As other authors suggest (Milano, Novelli & Cheer; 2019), this study has also shown the importance to include locals in the policy making to ensure a sustainable tourism. Bruges should plan and manage tourism according to recommendations for cruise port cities (Klein, 2011).

Governance in Bruges should ensure regional articulation of different stakeholders and local agents, establishing a win&win relationship between cruise lines, the port and the community (Gui & Russo, 2011). Considering community and local ambassadors in tourism activities contribute to a greater understanding and better promotion of the benefits of tourism for a destination. More thorough research on similar destinations could have an added value to this research. It would be necessary for further research to repeat the study a later point in time to see if outcomes differ. Comparing results of this research with possible results obtained during the high season can offer new insights.

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