



Residents, overtourism and tourism phobia: a psychological perspective

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Abstract

Overtourism is a phenomenon that is affecting various tourist destinations: until a few years ago, attention was focused on the possible environmental damage that it could cause, also in light of the growing sensitivity to the issue of sustainability. In more recent years, the excessive presence of tourists has fueled the development of spontaneous movements of rejection of the tourist presence that have clearly manifested what Delgado (2008) has indicated as tourism phobia. Tourism phobes attribute this attitude to the changed living conditions of residents due to the increase in the cost of living, the reduction of social spaces totally occupied by tourists and the changed real estate market with an artificial increase in prices and a substantial reduction in rental homes, all factors that are not compensated by the presumed economic advantages deriving from tourism, advantages that fall only minimally on residents. Without wanting to underestimate the purely economic aspects, at the basis of tourism phobia there are subtle psychological aspects that this article intends to explore in the belief that any actions to contain the anthropic impact of overtourism will not be sufficient to reduce tourism phobia without a combined action that addresses the identity system and the need for belonging of residents.

Keywords: overtourism, social media, tourism phobia, mass psychology, anthropic impact

1. Introduction

That tourism represents one of the engines of the economy for Italy is an established fact: in 2023 the tourism sector produced an added value equal to 18% of GDP (Source: Italian Ministry of Tourism, Press release of 8-11-2024). That the 2000s witnessed an increase in tourist flows worldwide, probably caused by the birth of low-cost airlines and the transformation of cruise tourism from an elite segment to mass tourism, is equally well established. One phenomenon, associated with this panorama of increasing global tourism, has attracted the attention of scholars due to its possible negative economic, social and psychological effects: we refer to so-called *overtourism*. The term, coined in 2012 as #overtourism, has increasingly entered common usage to the extent that it has been named one of the words of the year 2018 by the Oxford English Dictionary (Staniscia, 2020). *Overtourism* refers to those conditions, temporary but repeated over time, in which the impact of the tourist presence on the territory becomes unsustainable from several points of view: environmental, economic, social and psychological, to name the main ones.

In this article, we will attempt to frame the phenomenon of *overtourism* by analysing its effects on the resident population and the psychological causes that have been

largely behind some popular movements against tourism, as recently occurred in the Canary Islands and other parts of Spain.

2. The roots of overtourism

Mass tourism was born with the economic boom of the post-war reconstruction years: it is characterised by the movement of large numbers of individuals, in limited periods coinciding with holidays, to holiday resorts generally easily accessible by ordinary means of transport such as trains and cars. The most popular tourist destinations were able to respond to the increase in demand by increasing the availability of accommodation, and the impact on the environment and resident populations was partly mitigated by the limited period of exposure: the summer holidays and, to a much lesser extent, the winter holidays. The changes that have taken place have brought about substantial changes in both the demand and the supply of tourism. The entry onto the market of low-cost airlines has enabled a wider public than in the past to reach tourist destinations that were once unreachable in terms of both distance and cost. The transformation of cruise tourism from elitist to more popular, thanks to the introduction of large cruise ships and a more popular pricing policy, has helped to shift large numbers of travellers to certain coveted destinations. The increasing popularity of the Internet has not simply given rise to do-it-yourself tourism but has fostered the success of certain tourist destinations thanks to word of mouth and online reviews, taking control away from the tourist agencies that to some extent helped to redistribute the flows, albeit within the circuits linked to them. All this was further complicated by poor management of social media. Before the advent of this new, effective and capillary means of communication, the tourist offer was mainly conveyed through travel agencies, thanks to dedicated news reports and documentaries, indirectly through television and film productions set in particular locations and thanks to word of mouth. Nowadays, the main vehicle for promoting tourism are social media: cheap and widespread, they have made it possible to make many little-known tourist resorts known to the public and to raise the profile of some already well-known destinations whose fame has increased exponentially. Unfortunately, the use of social media for advertising purposes has, more often than not, followed the same rules as traditional advertising, underestimating its effects. The combination of the increased tourist audience, attributable to the reduction in travel costs, and media overexposure has led to an unsustainable increase in demand for some destinations due to their limited accommodation capacities and environmental characteristics (limited space, impossibility of expanding residency, constraints caused by undersized infrastructure, etc.). In other words, it has created the conditions for the occurrence of the phenomenon of *overtourism*.

3. Consequences of tourist concentration

The increase in tourist flows, particularly the difficulty of distributing these flows among the many available locations, is therefore at the root of the phenomenon of *overtourism*: the increased possibility of travelling in itself is not sufficient to explain the high concentration of visitors that we can observe in some particularly popular

locations. Some locations have become part of the collective imagination because of their history, their charm, their association with relevant moments in a person's life, others have gained notoriety thanks to communication campaigns that nowadays are not always concerted. Just as, thanks to the network, groups of individuals can get together to stage, say, a flash-mob, so bloggers and influencers can make the scenic, historical and cultural beauties of some destination known to a wide audience. Unfortunately, the extraordinary communicative effectiveness of social media is not easily governed and can end up introducing distortions into the demand for tourist offers, influencing the choice of location to visit. It could be argued that mass tourism has existed for a long time and that the great cities of art or European capitals have always been invaded by millions of tourists throughout the year without fear of *overtourism*, but in those cases the size of the cities has cushioned the feeling of overcrowding by limiting the negative effects to more or less long waits to visit places of interest.

People started talking about *overtourism* when some destinations were no longer able to accommodate the growing tourist flows and the topic of sustainability was extended to several areas including the tourism sector. The most striking example is Venice, a city of art that with its narrow 'calli' and many bridges attracts millions of visitors with its charm, also thanks to the many cultural and costume occasions it offers such as, for example, its very famous Carnival. The insular part of the municipality of Venice counted 79,000 inhabitants in March 2024 [Venezia Today, 2024] against an average daily presence of non-residents (tourists staying in accommodation facilities and excursionists visiting the city but not staying there [Day Visitors]) equal to one and a half times the resident population, a ratio that tends to increase on the occasion of major events that cause, in parallel, the temporary flight from the city of 6-7% of residents [Baldin et al., 2024]. It is estimated that in one year Venice is visited by more than 30,000,000 people, 2/3 of whom are Day Visitors, causing a decidedly unsustainable anthropic load on the city and its inhabitants.

In Italy, only Rome can boast a greater number of visitors, but the size of the two cities, in terms of population and road facilities, is not comparable. The Cinque Terre National Park is another example of a situation where *overtourism* risks permanently altering an already precarious balance between nature and human presence. Against 4000 residents, scattered over an area that due to its characteristics has little space to accommodate large flows, there is an average daily presence of more than 9000 tourists and day tourists with higher concentrations at weekends and in the April-October period [Ansa, 2024]. But the problem of *overtourism* does not only concern UNESCO World Heritage areas (<https://whc.unesco.org/en/list/>) like the two examples just mentioned. Art cities as well as 'seasonal' tourist resorts experience periods when the massive presence of tourists puts a strain on the territory, infrastructure and residents.

4. The anthropic impact of overtourism

In the collective imagination, the greater the number of tourists who attend a location, the greater the volume of business and the consequent economic impact on the territory. Often political decision makers base their choices on these considerations by pushing tourism promotion into the belief that the increase in presences in the area involves only economic advantages for local economies. This type of equation can probably work when a non-tourist location becomes touristy, that is, when it goes from almost non-existent flows to substantial flows. But the ability of a destination to absorb consistent tourist flows depends on a series of factors such as the conformation of the territory, the hotel receptivity, the availability of infrastructures capable of enduring a substantial increase in the resident population, even if for a period of time relatively limited. If the presence of 10,000 tourists in a certain territory means an economic advantage for that territory equal to X it is not said that 100,000 tourists on the same territory produce an economic advantage for that area equal to 10 times X. In fact, the economic relapse depends on the actual possibility given to the tourist to stay in a certain area for a sufficient time to determine purchases of goods and services. Bitten and run Tourism and what moves groups of tourists who visit places with pre-established itineraries and very often marked by particularly fast rhythms, they do not represent an effective source of income for the territories they visit. Therefore where there are no sufficient accommodation facilities to accommodate a large number of tourists or in those landscape destinations fascinating but structured, from an environmental and orographic point of view, so as not to have large surfaces available (think, for example, of most of the Riviera location of the Italian peninsula but the example can be extended has many locations scattered all over the world) the concentration of tourists is excessively impactful and economically no longer virtuous. For example, the port of Genoa, in Italy, hub of one of the most important maritime companies worldwide, has cruise traffic of over 2 million passengers per year that produces economic advantages almost solely for the receptive sector (foreign cruise passengers starting from Genoa frequently stay for one night before sailing) while sectors such as catering and trade do not benefit from the passage through the streets of the historic center of large groups of tourists who carry out guided tours of the city. That the overcrowding determined by the *overtourism* can produce relevant damage to the environment, the landscape and the ecosystems present there is not a surprise, but often we focus to study the ways to reduce the impact on the environment by forgetting that of that environment the residents are also part, that is, those who live that environment for 365 days a year and who suffer firsthand the damage caused to the places where they live. The anthropogenic impact determined by the *overtourism* also involves the daily life of residents, upsetting their rhythms of life, forcing them to no longer live their city, determining collateral economic damage as an excessive increase in retail prices, creating difficulty in looking for housing for rent due to the tendency to transform homes into bed and breakfast, to end with the difficulties in buying a home due to the increase in the prices of the

real estate market determined by the increase in the demand caused by those tourists who, in love with the destination, have decided to buy a second home for your holidays. Strictly connected to the distortion of the real estate market is the phenomenon of *gentrification*, that is, the trend of the native population to move to the suburbs or to the less attractive tourist areas of their city where there is still the possibility of finding a rental house or buying it at a reasonable price. The anthropic pressure determined by mass tourism therefore involves several aspects, some exquisitely ecological others more anthropological with potential consequences from a psychological point of view and possible negative reactions to the phenomenon of *overtourism*. Any visit to a tourist resort in the high season allows us to observe large concentrations of means of transport, with consequent atmospheric pollution, large quantities of people who move in the area and who do not always show the respect due by producing significant quantities of waste, which travel naturalistic areas causing damage for their passage, heavily affecting existing infrastructure, first of all the sewage networks and waste water purification systems. This peaceful invasion limits the freedom of movement of the residents, many of whom choose, in periods of maximum turnout, to abandon their residence to escape the chaotic climate determined by the excessive presence of tourists. But the possibility of moving away is not for everyone and often residents develop forms of aversion and hostility towards the touristic phenomenon which, in principle, should be advantageous for the territory and its inhabitants. A part of the reason for these high concentrations is determined, except in the cities of art, by the seasonality of tourism which sees, in a limited period of the year, the greatest inflows due to organizational problems of the world of work and particularly favorable climatic conditions of the locations chosen as a destination. This means that many of the most popular destinations are released during the period not in favor of tourism allowing residents to regain possession of it. But this fact is also the basis of the infrastructure problems where the available structures are sized according to the resident population and are faced with a temporary population that in some cases can also be more than 10 times higher than the resident population. Among the causes of *overtourism* we cannot forget the use of social media to direct the tourist choice. Social media, beyond any consideration can be done on the topics covered, represent a very powerful communication tool through which it is possible to direct the choices of thought and consumption of billions of people. Spreading the image of a tourist location through social media means making it known to a multitude of people without being able to predict repercussions in terms of arrivals. The *overtourism* episode that involved Roccaraso, a small tourist resort in Abruzzo in Italy, is a clear example of how much social media can guide people to choose one location rather than another. On Sunday 26 January 2025, Roccaraso, with a population of less than 1500 inhabitants and about sixty kilometers of ski slopes, has been invaded by 10,000 tourists, coming mostly by Campania, which were suggested by a popular Tiktokker and encouraged by extremely cheap offers (bus trip with packed lunch for only € 20). Since people had been incentivized by the particularly low price,

Roccaraso was invaded by a mass of tourists with little financial availability, not able to face the expenses of the ski lifts and therefore largely concentrated on the valley fund instead of dispersing on ski slopes determining an unprecedented anthropic impact for the small town. This episode demonstrates the incredible ability of social media to influence people's choices and their potential danger: once the "advertising" mechanism is triggered, it is not possible to evaluate their effects or give them a brake. In fact, while traditional advertising concentrates messages in limited advertising campaigns over time, information conveyed through social media maintains its effectiveness over time, emphasized by the comments, replicas and assessments of users while remaining potentially available forever.

5. Psychological causes of tourism phobia

Associated with *overtourism* we find a growing hostility of resident populations towards tourists, a phenomenon that anthropologist Delgado [2008] has termed *tourism phobia* and to which we can trace the birth of a series of popular movements such as *No grandi navi*, which achieved in 2021 that large cruise ships would no longer sail in the Giudecca Canal in Venice [ANSA, 2024a], or the one that inflamed the Canary Islands and a series of cities in Spain and beyond in 2024. The motivations behind the protests seem to be mainly related to economic aspects and environmental sustainability, however, contrary to other environmentalist initiatives, the above-mentioned ones seem to have gathered an unprecedented number of consensuses, across the different strata of the population.

It is worth asking whether such participation can be attributed to a solid environmental awareness or whether other factors may have contributed to it. Indeed, one must consider certain specificities of humans and attitudes that are frequently observed in populations and that, in certain situations, may condition the type of reaction when faced with specific events. Man has become a social animal because organising himself into groups (family, tribe, village, city, nation) is the best way to preserve the species, ensure subsistence, protect offspring and, more generally, prosper. But this type of social structure is only compacted at the highest level, that of the nation, in the face of common dangers or on events that titillate national pride: in everyday life we feel part of a family, a neighbourhood, a village. This sense of belonging can lead one to look with suspicion at any initiative or person outside the social group to which one considers oneself to belong. This attitude of closure fosters even aggressive rejection reactions towards what is new, different or far from our expectations. This natural propensity to mistrust events and people who do not 'culturally' belong to our group, the same propensity that is largely responsible for homophobic or anti-migrant attitudes, is generally concealed by citing a series of rational reasons: environmental hazards brought about by excessive human presence in restricted territories, traffic congestion, rising retail prices, the artificial rise in the real estate market, to name but a few, are all justifications for the assumption of Sanfedist attitudes towards the tourist phenomenon.

The sense of belonging represents the third level of Maslow's theory of needs [1954] according to which the realisation of the various levels would depend on the achievement of the previous ones. Specifically, we must first have satisfied our physiological needs indispensable for survival before we can satisfy our need for security; we must have satisfied our need for security before we can try to satisfy that of belonging and only then can we try to satisfy the need for self-esteem, an indispensable condition for satisfying the last level, the need for self-fulfilment. The invasion, brought about by the indiscriminate influx of tourists, induces residents to recompose themselves around their own identity characteristics, to see the tourist as 'other', to emphasise the disadvantages (crowding, less easy access to services, increased prices of primary goods, inaccessibility of the real estate market) and minimise the advantages (increased GDP, spin-offs on job opportunities, spin-offs on the productive chain).

It is no coincidence that the promoters of the protest in the Canary Islands have countered, to the usual justification of mass tourism with the economic benefits derived from it, considerations regarding the reduced economic benefits for residents as evidenced by the high percentage (33%) of people at risk of social exclusion [Ansa, 2024b]. But among the characteristics that unite residents is also the territory, a territory that must cope with a hardly sustainable presence of humans concentrated in relatively small areas and not necessarily endowed with sufficient ecological culture and respect for the environment. And so, the tourist becomes a 'predator' of the resident community's asset, the environment: he/she uses it, causes damage and leaves, and no matter how much money he/she has spent for the benefit of the residents' activities, it will never be enough to 'repair' the damage to the environment.

It should also not be forgotten that, where the phenomenon of *overtourism* occurs, the daily activities of residents can also undergo major upheavals: locations, for a more or less long period, no longer seem to belong to their year-round inhabitants but to unknown people, who do not belong to the communities of those places. Queuing up to buy groceries or medicines, not finding a parking space for one's car, struggling to get around in pedestrian zones because of the crowds are just a few examples of the challenges residents face, of changes in their daily routine. The combination of concrete elements and more subtly psychological aspects results in the phenomenon of *tourism phobia*, an aversion to travellers considered as nuisances: a potential danger for the functioning of many tourist resorts crushed by anthropogenic pressure.

6. Reducing overtourism to stem tourism phobia.

To combat *tourism phobia*, which would end up damaging local economies in an attempt to eradicate tourism, it is necessary to act on different levels, both factual and immaterial. Some locations have already undertaken initiatives aimed at reducing tourist flows, for example by raising tourist taxes, the proceeds of which should be donated to the benefit of the resident community and not to advertise the

location further increasing the phenomenon of *overtourism*, or by introducing a limitation on access. These are actions that are easy to implement but are limiting and non-inclusive and penalize less well-off tourists in one case and hit-and-run tourism, which if properly educated can contribute to tourism revenues, in the other. It would be useful to intervene in a more structural and concrete way by modifying the conditions that trigger resistance to tourism in residents, starting with a rationalization of the bed & breakfast accommodation offer whose effects on the real estate market have already been described. The capacity of the infrastructure should be commensurate on the one hand with the capacity of the infrastructure to support a tourist population much higher than the resident one, on the other with the availability of properties for continuous and non-seasonal rental. This would likely lead to a decrease in seasonal presences, making the location more livable, while guaranteeing adequate profit margins for those who live off tourism and would introduce corrective measures in the real estate market by acting on the supply to satisfy demand. Furthermore, an intervention to calm the proliferation of accommodation facilities would favor the reduction of the phenomenon of gentrification, thus ensuring a greater presence of residents throughout the year with positive effects on commercial activities. Another way to reduce the human impact consists in redirecting the flows by improving services in areas close to the tourist attraction and enhancing the attractiveness of smaller locations. The reduction of the human impact leads to a reduction in the feeling of annoyance and invasion that residents often complain about. But, as has been said, the material causes that can trigger *tourism phobia* are not independent of purely psychological aspects: feeling deprived of one's identity belonging to a community is the feeling most frequently experienced by residents who experience the phenomenon of tourism as external and in contrast with their daily lives. To combat this feeling, it is necessary to encourage the involvement of the resident population in activities and events organized and designed for tourists, but which must become the common heritage of all the people who gravitate towards an area: tourists, tour operators, traders and residents. Organizing events that reflect the history and traditions of the localities, preferably involving residents in the planning and implementation of such events, is a way to bring together guests and locals and to find a minimum common denominator capable of encouraging encounters and sharing between those who spend a short holiday and those who live their lives in a specific environmental and cultural context. In other words, it is a matter of changing an exclusive attitude (tourists are strangers to the resident population and are seen as elements to be expelled because they undermine the sense of belonging) into an inclusive one (tourists want to know the local customs and traditions and are elements to be welcomed so that they become part of the local group, reinforcing the sense of identity). This paradigm shift, in addition to easing any friction between tourists and residents, is synergic with actions to repopulate villages that are frequently quite close to the most attractive tourist locations, both through commercial operations such as widespread hotels, and through real estate operations that aim to transform

loyal tourists into new residents and not just for vacation periods. The participation of the resident population in initiatives to transmit local culture not only strengthens the sense of belonging to the community but also involves that portion of residents who do not receive direct benefits from tourism (hoteliers, tenants, staff employed by accommodation and catering facilities) but have indirect advantages such as the permanence or new activation of commercial activities that can be used by the entire population for the entire calendar year, thus avoiding moving to other inhabited centers or shopping centers and favoring the use of local labor. In other words, it is a question of transforming, through the involvement of residents, an event experienced passively into an opportunity for both parties involved, tourists and locals.

Conclusions

The phenomenon of *overtourism* should not be underestimated, not to adhere to an eco-sustainable current of thought, but to safeguard on the one hand the possibility of offering tourists stays in highly sought-after locations, on the other to respect the needs of those who live in those locations all year round. Implementing actions to contain *overtourism* means safeguarding the investments made by reversing the process of stagnation (the phase that, in the life cycle of a tourist location, sees the birth of forms of aversion to tourism (Butler, 1980)) and avoiding the risk of slipping into the phase of decline of the tourist location, a phase that not only involves economic damage for investors but also a decline in the quality and quantity of services and commercial activities present in the area with the consequent risk of encouraging the depopulation of the area. It is therefore essential to abandon the illusory equation of *more tourists more earnings* based on which various municipalities implement communication campaigns on social media aimed at making the landscape and cultural beauties of their territories known to an increasingly wider and globalized public. Contrary to what has been stated by eminent politicians (see the statements of the President of the Liguria Region Marco Bucci (Di Pietro, 2024)) *overtourism* is not an opportunity in itself but leads, in the medium term, to the decline of the tourist location hypothesized by Butler (1980); avoiding *overtourism* can instead produce a reversal of the trend leading to that rejuvenation that Butler (1980) hypothesizes as an alternative to the decline. Having the opportunity to visit wonderful and iconic places such as Venice, the Cinque Terre or the Canary Islands, and not being able to visit them to appreciate their beauty due to the excessive presence of tourists does not induce people to reschedule the visit hoping to have more luck but diverts them towards other destinations, currently perhaps less iconic but no less attractive, which are truly explorable without having to queue or find themselves stuck in the crowd. At the basis of tourism is vacation and vacation is first of all relaxation combined with, for the most part, seeing new places and learning about different customs and habits by visiting attractive places: if vacation becomes a source of stress due to the particular conditions that *overtourism* creates then the main reason for the drive to spend time away from one's place of residence

disappears. The reduction of the negative effects of *overtourism* can be achieved by acting inclusively on tourist flows, limiting the rush to transform residential accommodation into tourist residential accommodation, calming the real estate market but also involving the local population in initiatives that transform the current passive attitude of those who suffer tourism into an asset rather than directing it and including it in their social and cultural fabric. The demonstrations that have occurred in recent years find justification in the exasperation of the local population and in the limited economic repercussions on the local fabric but are fueled by the psychological discomfort determined by feeling impoverished of one's own identity characteristics, that is, belonging to a community and a territory. If this liberal drift that sees *overtourism* as an opportunity is not stemmed, demonstrations will multiply, the risk of infiltration by antagonistic groups characterized by possible violent actions will increase and the probability that the most popular tourist destinations will move from a phase of stagnation to a phase of decline will increase exponentially with negative economic repercussions for investors and for the protesting communities themselves.

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