TOURIST USE REGULATION IN OVERCROWDED HISTORICAL CENTRES IN SPAIN. IN SEARCH OF GOOD PRACTICES

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Abstract

Overtourism management plays an important role in the sustainability of historical and cultural heritage assets. Tourism has been growing very fast and many places have suffered from the pressure of tourism. This situation has led to problems in heritage conservation. There are cities whose historical centres have been overcrowded for years –Venice is a paradigmatic case–. However the problem is now reaching a greater number of destinations: in Spain it is especially intense in the historical centres of large cities such as Madrid, Barcelona, San Sebastian, Malaga or Palma de Mallorca. The spread of tourism in these central spaces threatens the sustainability of those values that had previously motivated the application of certain categories of heritage protection.

Tourism management strategies and measures on an urban scale are particularly important in this context. For this reason, this paper presents the partial results of an ongoing investigation into the local tourism policy. The work focuses specifically on the strategies for containing and regulating tourist activities, which are being adopted on a historical centre dimension in Spain. The conclusions of the first phase of the study are presented, focusing on the identification of the measures adopted in different particularly overcrowded destinations. The methodology used is based on the compilation of secondary sources, mainly academic literature, plans and programmes related to local tourism policy. The results obtained so far indicate that in the chosen cities the concern for overtourism already occupies an important role in the local political agendas.

Keywords: urban tourism, historical centre, tourism policy, overtourism

1 INTRODUCTION

International tourism is constantly growing. Many cities are experiencing very high rates of tourism growth, especially those European cities blessed with a rich historical and cultural heritage and good airport connections. This growth not only affects the big capitals and the traditional historical cities but also extends to cities that until a few years ago were not part of the international map of urban tourism destinations. According to the report *City Travel & Tourism Impact 2018* [1], in the last decade, urban tourism has grown faster than the total international demand. In fact, according to the European Cities Marketing Association, tourism in European cities grew by a remarkable 7.7% in 2017. This growth is beginning to pose specific problems of tourism overcrowding that affect multiple dimensions of urban management and also have important economic and functional repercussions. In this context, the term overtourism emerges as one of the major problems that the most popular tourist destinations are currently facing.

Tourism overcrowding management is an important part of the sustainability of historical and cultural heritage assets, on which to a large extent depends the tourist attractiveness of urban centers. For years, many attractions have been subjected to situations of stress and tourist pressure that have led to problems of heritage conservation. But currently, the sudden and accelerated growth of urban tourism is transferring the problem of tourist overcrowding to the historical centres. Overcrowding management and tourist use regulation in museums and heritage sites have been widely studied. Nonetheless, these studies have mainly focused on the management of delimited, monofunctional and unitary spaces, with the manual *Managing Tourism Congestion in Natural and Cultural Sites* [2] being a clear example on

the subject. However, as urban tourism grows rapidly, current studies and manuals such as *Coping with Success: Managing Overcrowding in Tourism Destinations and Overtourism'?* [3] - *Understanding and Managing Urban Tourism Growth beyond Perceptions* [4] seem to support the idea that tourism management strategies and measures on an urban scale are particularly relevant to achieve the sustainability of urban destinations and consequently the preservation of their cultural heritage.

This paper presents the partial results of an ongoing investigation about the local tourism policy and strategies for containing and regulating tourism activities in historical city centres. The ultimate objective of the research is to evaluate the success of these measures in relation to several key parameters for protecting the heritage values of these spaces. In this context, this work aims to identify, compile and classify different strategies and specific measures that are being adopted in some of the main urban destinations in Spain, the third most visited country in the world according to the World Tourism Organisation. Barcelona (5.5 million tourists in hotels 2017) is one of the most documented examples, but there are other Spanish cities whose historical centres are also suffering the negative consequences of excessive tourism and also deserve research attention: Madrid (7.3 million), San Sebastian (471,782), Malaga (719,471) or Palma de Mallorca (1.6 million).

The methodology used for the study of the selected cases and the approach to the context of the research (state of the art) is based on the documentary review of three types of sources: A) academic publications, B) statistical records of urban tourism and C) grey literature: reports, plans and programmes of destinations, institutional documents and press articles. This documentary information is being contrasted with the compilation of the opinions of urban managers (through conducting several semi-structured interviews).

This text, which gathers the preliminary results of the research, is structured under four sections. This first section includes the introduction to the subject, the objectives and the methodology. The second section deals with the context of growth and change in urban tourism associated with the debate raised by overtourism and the change in the cycle of public policies related to urban tourism management. In the third section, the strategies and measures to contain tourism adopted in the studied cities are described. And the last section presents the conclusions of the work.

2 URBAN TOURISM AND OVERCROWDING

2.1 Growth and changes in the tourist inflow

Just like it has happened in other cities in Europe, Spanish cities have experienced strong growth in the inflow of visitors in recent years, especially after the end of the economic recession. Between 2007 and 2017, the number of tourists staying in hotels has increased by 86.22% in Málaga, 38.47% in Barcelona, 37.73% in San Sebastián, 28.58% in Madrid and 24.08% in Palma. There are many reasons for this tourist growth. The demand for urban tourism is, according to Pearce [5], multidimensional and often multipurpose in nature, which makes cities appealing destinations for a wide range of tourists with diverse interests. Besides, urban tourism has become cheaper due to the proliferation of low-cost flights and housing for tourist use. Also, insecurity problems that have affected several competitive destinations have also favoured the growth of this tourist inflow.

These destinations have not only been facing a growth in the demand, but also a change in the tourist supply with the emergence of new business models based on platform economies. Just as in other European cities, formulas such as free tours, bike and segway tours, rickshaw, beer bikes, etc. appear all over the historical centre. Nevertheless, the most significant change has occurred in the accommodation supply with the spread of housing for tourist use driven by the activity of platforms such as Airbnb or HomeAway. Although there are no exact figures, this is a fast-growing supply that concentrates on the historical centres of the cities. In fact, different local estimations suggest that the number of places in dwelling for tourist use already exceeds the capacity of accommodation in hotels and other traditional tourist establishments.
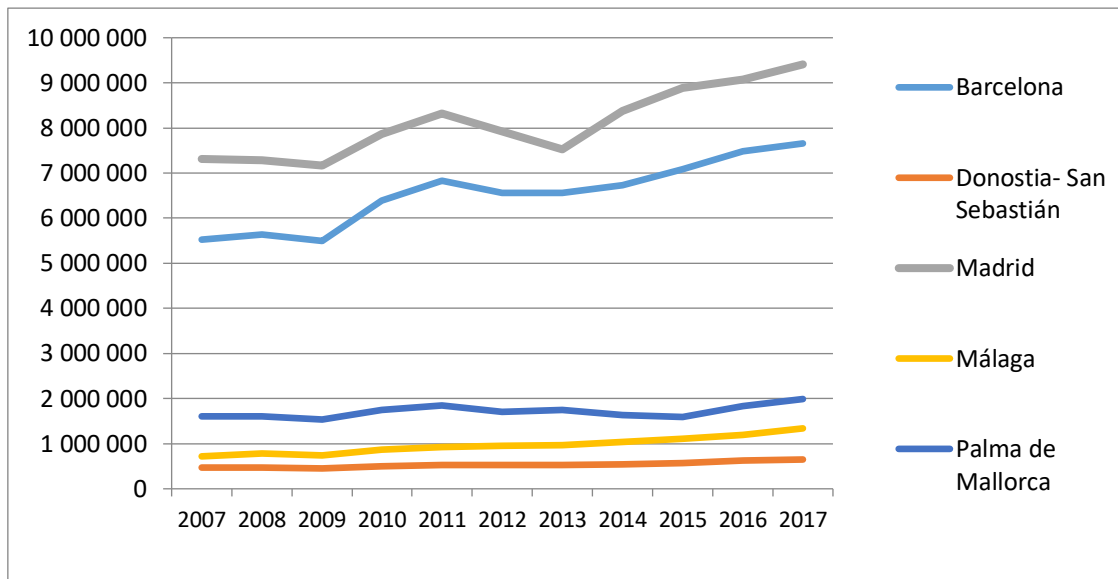
Figure 1. Trend in tourists in hotels. 2007-2017
(Source: authors, based on data from the Spanish Statistical Office)

2.2 Tourism impacts and Overtourism

The growth of tourist activity in the city has very positive economic effects. Among other aspects, it generates a high number of jobs, a crucial issue in times of more pronounced economic recession. However, it is also producing a series of negative social, functional, environmental and landscape impacts. Among others, Spanish cities are facing the following problems:

- Changes in trade and hospitality, with a general reorientation towards the foreign public;
- Loss of residential function due to the housing transformation into dwellings for tourist use [6];
- Problems of coexistence between residents and visitors, leading to the loss of quality of life of local communities;
- Overcrowding of road mobility;
- Overcrowding of public space: banalisation and uniformity of the urban landscape [7] with an increase in tourist iconography.

Although tourism is not the ultimate cause of all these problems, there is no doubt that the tourist inflow's growth and the recent changes in the sector favour a whole series of processes that have a negative impact on the city life. Besides, these problems are particularly intense in historical centres where most visitors and tourist activities are still concentrated. Therefore the very protection of these centres, understood as a special type of urban cultural asset, is threatened [8].

The reaction to these processes is increasing. Traditional tourism businessmen raise the need to manage tourism success sustainably and emphasize the negative consequences of the proliferation of tourist housing and other business formulas associated with the platforms of the supposed collaborative economy. Social movements defend the right to the city in opposition to tourist interests. The atmosphere of 'tourism-phobia' grows, with very spectacular actions that attract wide diffusion in mass media.

The interpretation of these phenomena is complex. Sometimes it is proposed in terms of tourist gentrification [9] [10]: tourism as an additional vector of gentrification that implies a displacement of the popular classes out of the city centre neighbourhoods that they have inhabited for generations. In other occasions, it is proposed as touristification, a general process of functional change that implies a reorientation towards leisure and tourism activities. In any case, the existence of overtourism situations is recognized, situations of an excess of tourism that supposes an increasing deterioration of the urban life and even implies a possible loss of competitiveness of certain cities as tourist destinations.

2.3   Change in the tourism policy cycle

Tourism planning and policies are possibly one of the main influences on the development of tourism in the destination [11]. It could be said that the way tourism is managed has a direct impact on the resilience of a destination to overtourism [12]. Generally speaking, local public action in the field of tourism has been oriented towards the growth of the activity, with important marketing campaigns addressed to traditional markets (Western Europe, United States, Latin America, Japan, etc.) and emerging markets (China, India, etc.). The focus on growth has been particularly significant in the recession years when tourism was perceived as one of the few sectors of activity able to generate employment.

In opposition to the crisis situation, the current tourism context is characterised by the growth in the number of visitors and the proliferation of housing for tourist use. The new problems caused by this situation and the social response have led to a change in the orientation of local tourism policies. This change implies the adoption of strategies to control tourism growth: containment of the most crowded areas of historical centres and redistribution of the tourist footprint through other areas of the urban space [13]. According to Koens et al. [14], this change of mind contrasts clearly with the perspectives of 'hands-off and self-governance that have dominated tourist discourses for several decades', especially at the DMO level. Therefore, we find ourselves in a new political scenario in which many authorities manage their destinations based on a paradigm of growth control, trying to identify and mitigate the problems arising from overtourism. The management of these problems plays a fundamental role in the protection of the historical centre and the sustainability of the tourist destination.

In Spanish cities, public policies to contain tourism and mitigate its effects include a broad set of measures and actions. Figure 2 shows how it is possible to classify these actions into a series of major strategies related to the regulation of mobility at the destination, the control of visitor arrivals, the regulation and control of accommodation supply, the activation of peripheral points of attraction, the restriction of the inflow in tourist resources and public spaces, among the most frequent. Different instruments are used to implement these strategies: urban planning plans focused on accommodation, strategic tourism plans, and others. It is assumed that a correct tourist destination management implies the participation of a wide range of work areas (urbanism, housing, environment, heritage...) beyond the traditional heads of the DMO.
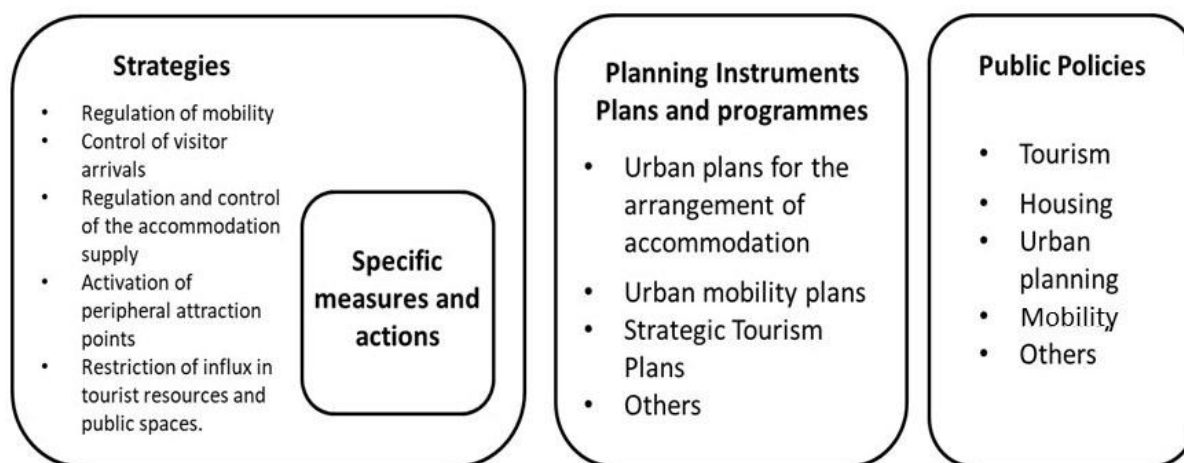

Figure 2. Urban policies and overtourism
(Source: authors)

3   MANAGING OVERTOURISM. STRATEGIES AND MEASURES IMPLEMENTED IN SPANISH CITIES

Some urban destinations are beginning to address overtourism management through the implementation of various actions that respond to strategies of different scope and meaning. However, in a context of very rapid growth of tourist inflow, most measures are aimed to solve urban management problems arising from this massive inflow of visitors. The review of existing documentation (some publications, reports, plans, press releases, etc.) has made it possible to identify actions relating to various strategies being carried out in the destinations under study (Barcelona, Madrid, Málaga, San

Sebastián and Palma). Broadly speaking, the actions respond to five typical strategies related to the following issues: regulation of mobility, control of excess tourist use activities, decongestion of spaces, control of tourist behaviour at the destination and dissuasion.

The strategies related to the regulation of mobility include two groups of actions in the cities studied: those that try to regulate the mobility of motorized vehicles and those that regulate non-motorized vehicles. The first is mainly aimed at the regulation of parking. Examples in this regard can be found in Barcelona, where the parking of tourist coaches has been banned in Via Laietana, the street that connects the Ensanche with the port through the historical centre, and in the surroundings of the Basilica of the Sagrada Familia; or in Palma, where restrictions have been imposed on access and parking in crowded areas. On the other hand, actions related to the mobility management of non-motorized vehicles are aimed at regulating new forms of tourist and urban mobility that have emerged in recent years, such as segways or electric scooters. In this sense, a decree was approved in Barcelona in 2017 prohibiting the circulation of small electric scooters, platforms or wheels, large electric scooters or segways, and vehicles with more than two wheels for the transport of passengers in the historical centre, as long as they are rented or used for commercial purposes. And in Madrid, a new Sustainable Mobility Ordinance was passed in 2018 that also limits and controls the use of electric scooters, electric bicycles and segways in the city [15].

The second group of tourism containment strategies is related to the control of excess tourism use activities. This line includes all measures aimed at preventing the spread of tourist activity. The aim is to avoid displacement and even expulsion from urban centres of uses and functions such as housing or traditional commerce. These measures have been developed with different levels of intensity in all the cities analysed. In Palma, for example, a working group has been set up to preserve emblematic trade. Particularly relevant, however, is the Ordinance passed in 1994 in San Sebastián implementing a moratorium on catering establishments in the historical centre. The relevance of this action is not given by the content, but by the date on which it was approved: the term *overtourism* has become popular in recent years, but the problems it raises have been present in some destinations for more than two decades. In San Sebastián, this ordinance does not grant a license to open new establishments in the classified overcrowded areas (the historical centre among them).

Finally, in this group, we find above all measures for the regulation of tourist accommodation, one of the main problems that urban destinations are facing today. In Barcelona, the *Special Urban Plan for Tourist Accommodation* (PEUAT) was approved in 2017. This plan regulates the implementation of tourist accommodation establishments, youth hostels, collective residences for temporary accommodation and housing for tourist use. The PEUAT distinguishes four specific zones with their own regulation depending on the number of places offered and the current resident population, the relationship and conditions in which certain uses occur, the incidence of activities in the public space and the presence of points of tourist interest [16]. Also, in 2018 an *Ordinance* for the regulation of tourist accommodation and the rental of rooms for tourist purposes was put into effect in San Sebastian. This Ordinance divides the city into three zones according to its overcrowding and establishes a moratorium for 'zone A', that is, the most saturated zone [17]. That same year, the *Special Plan for the Regulation of Tourist Accommodation* was approved in Madrid. It establishes a new regulation for the implementation of lodging uses and tourist accommodation in residential buildings, depending on the area, the use of the building and its protection. It also divides the territory into three concentric rings ('anillo' in Spanish) established according to the congestion of tourist accommodation in each of Madrid's neighbourhoods (Fig. 3) [18]. Also in 2018, the Consell de Mallorca approved the *Plan of Intervention in Tourist Areas* (PIAT), which establishes a maximum capacity for tourist accommodation, 430,000 places specifically: 115,000 for vacation rental and 315,000 hotel beds. This measure of course also affects the city of Palma. Finally, in addition to the measures for the regulation of tourist accommodation, since 2016 in Barcelona massive inspections have been carried out to detect illegal flats with the imposition of sanctions, both on owners of homes for tourist use and on the online platforms that advertise them. The first balance of this plan of inspections (from July 2016 to July 2017) was positive: 6,197 files were opened (twice as many as in the previous two and a half years), 3,473 sanctions were imposed and 2,332 illegal flats were closed, a figure that coincides with the number of homes removed from the platforms last year.
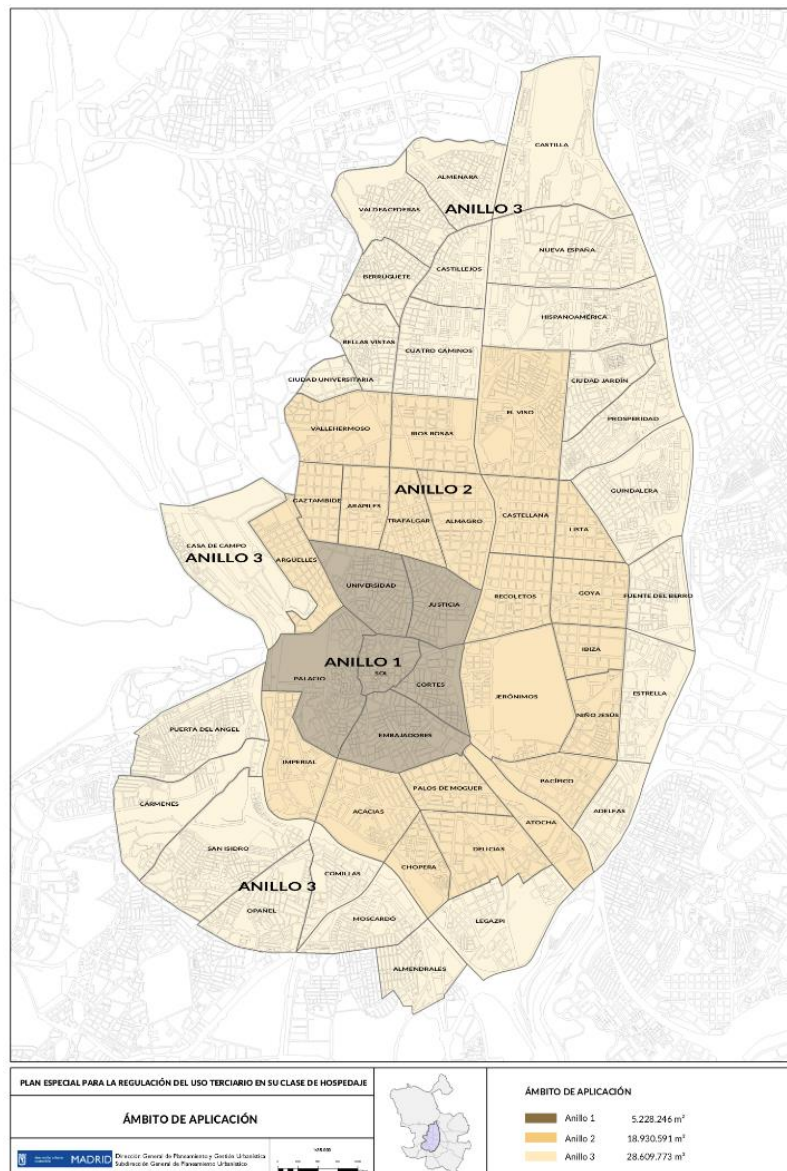
Figure 3. Zoning map of Madrid.
(Source: Madrid City Council)

The third type of strategies is aimed at decongesting the most crowded public spaces, one of the main concerns of destinations in recent years that has important implications even in terms of citizen safety. In this regard, cities are taking steps to redistribute the flow of visitors and the benefits of tourism throughout the city and not just through the historical centre which is a more vulnerable space. One of the most common ways to achieve this goal is through the promotion of less visited areas. In this sense, a 360º virtual tour of the city has been developed in San Sebastián to promote other neighbourhoods and cultural resources; in Malaga new points of tourist interest have been created outside the historical centre, such as *the Collection of the Russian Museum* to promote activities outside the main tourist attraction centres; and in Madrid, the programme *Madrid 21 distrito*s [19] has been developed, which aims to promote each district that shapes the city as a destination in itself and thus disperse tourist flows throughout it.

We can also find measures that try to change the routes established to mitigate the overcrowding of spaces. These are the cases of Malaga, which has disseminated bus stops so that regular line buses do not coincide with the tourist coaches hired by cruise companies. Also, Palma has enabled four new starting points for cruise excursions to alleviate overcrowding around the cathedral. Furthermore, in order to alleviate the tourist overcrowding of spaces, restrictions on access to certain tourist resources are becoming more frequent. This is a very common practice in monuments and museums -such as the

case of Park Güell in Barcelona- but which now also applies to public and open spaces, such as Puerta del Sol, square in Madrid where a maximum capacity of 20,000 people per square kilometre has been established during certain dates when the space receives special affluence, such as New Year's Eve.

The fourth group of measures relates to strategies aimed at raising awareness among tourists to avoid conflicting behaviour in the city. In Palma, in order to put an end to drunken tourism, the consumption of alcoholic beverages in public spaces has been restricted through the *Municipal Ordinance for the Civic Use of Public Space* (ORUCEP). This Ordinance only allows the sale of alcohol for consumption inside the establishment or on the duly authorized terrace and during opening hours. On the other hand, in San Sebastián a campaign has been developed to ask tourists to live in the city, but also to respect it, in short, the campaign prays for coexistence in the city. In Barcelona, it was a local initiative the one to take action on the matter: in 2017 the merchants of the axis of the Creu Coberta undertook a campaign to place posters and stickers in their shop windows demanding silence at night to the passers-by in this area. Its objective is to make visitors aware of the need to preserve the peace at night, in order to respect the rest schedules of the city's neighbors.

Finally, there are dissuasion strategies that try to prevent the tourist from reaching the destination or that only those who belong to a tourist segment interesting for the objectives of the city do so. Thus, it is possible to find measures such as the budget cut in tourism promotion of more than 30% that Barcelona carried out between 2016 and 2017 [20]; but above all it is recurrent the application of all kinds of tourist taxes that have the dual function of discouraging the arrival of certain tourist segments and that tourism activity also collaborate in some way to the conservation and maintenance of services and infrastructure necessary for the development of life in the city. In Málaga, for example, since 2109, a new industrial waste collection tax has been applied to tourist dwellings. In Palma, a regional tourist tax is imposed, which doubled in 2018. This tax also applies to cruise passengers. Different regional tourist taxes are applied in Barcelona. Since 2012, a tourist tax has been in effect intending to revert positively to the destination, for the maintenance of infrastructures, the conservation of heritage and the promotion of tourist activities. Furthermore, in 2017 two new taxes were applied: one for short-stay cruisers (less than 12 hours in the city), meaning those who do not pay the tourist overnight tax; and another for hikers imposed on tourist tour operators, whose objective is to regulate public space.

4   CONCLUSION

Although tourist inflow figures show a notable increase in tourist pressure on the destinations analysed in this research, problems related to overtourism are subject to conflicting readings. On the one hand, there are local actors very favourable to the increase in visitor arrivals and the direct consequences this has on the local economy in terms of direct income and employment generated. But on the other hand, the social response in these same cities is driving a change in the orientation of local tourism policies, opening a new cycle in which they begin to propose measures to control and contain tourism.

The partial results of this research indicate that in the cities analysed the concern for the management of the problems posed by overtourism is making its way onto local political agendas. Among the measures adopted, those related to strategies to control the excess of tourist use activities (shops, restaurants and accommodation) and to the decongestion of spaces stand out. The number of measures adopted is not representative of the magnitude of the problem, but it is an indicator of the concern raised by these two problems within the management of overtourism.

However, well-articulated global strategies are not detected. As a whole, it is only possible to trace a series of measures of a very diverse nature. Preven et al [21] differentiate two types of measures related to overtourism management: measures with a reactive approach (focused on activity regulation, active management of the collaborative economy and access limitations) and measures with a proactive approach (focused on the adjustment of city and destination strategies, development of tourism infrastructure in areas of low affluence, the search for a segment of visitors with greater purchasing power, and distribution of tourists in space and time). The review of the list of measures adopted in Spanish cities shows a predominance of measures with a reactive approach. There is an absence of long-range strategic approaches, the measures undertaken are marked by the need for rapid response to problems of tourist pressure that occur suddenly in a very short period of time. Furthermore, the scope of these strategies to guarantee the heritage sustainability of historic urban spaces in the medium and short term is still unknown. The short lapse of time since the adoption of these measures makes it impossible to make a diachronic value-relevant reading and to draw up a catalogue of good practices in this field.

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