Examining the impact of the platform economy on Spain's cultural destinations through the lens of free tours

Jorge Rivera-García, Asunción Fernández-Villarán and Ricardo Pastor-Ruiz

Abstract

Purpose – *Free guided walking tours are one of the most successful tourism segments in the digital platform economy. It is beginning to be associated with negative impacts in some of the destinations where it is spreading rapidly. Although the platform economy is generating increasing academic interest, the free tour model remains largely unexplored area in the literature. This study aims to examine how such activity affects cultural destinations.*

Design/methodology/approach – *Focussing on the largest Free Tours platform operating in Spain, GuruWalk, the methodology used analyses its impact in six cultural destinations on two of the sustainability dimensions: the territorial dimension and the governance, through an exploratory study.*

Findings – *The findings help to understand the differences that such activity generates in each destination depending on the phase of its life cycle, and to implement, if necessary, corrective measures. The research confirms that the impacts differ according to the tourist destination's maturity, concluding that such activity contributes to the increase of tourist agglomerations and the overcrowding of cultural destinations in their middle and mature life cycles. The findings highlighted the importance of the role of local governance on free tour activity.*

Originality/value – *The main contribution is the association of the impacts they produce (especially in terms of massification) with destination life cycle phases. There were no similar precedents with a spatial or territorial analysis to reliably demonstrate not only that this activity has an impact on the territory but also what type of impact is produced.*

Keywords *Platform economy, City governance, Free tours, Tourist destination life cycle*

Paper type *Research paper*

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1. Introduction

Free city tours (free tours, free guided tours or free walking tours) have emerged as a growing trend in tourism (Lane & Woodworth, 2016) and have generated an incipient debate due to their potential impact on the sustainability of tourist destinations (Navalón-García & Mínguez, 2021). A free tour is a guided tour that is characterised by two elements:

1. Free tour does not have a pre-established price, but a tip is paid at the end of the tour.
2. The guide does not always have an official certificate as a local tourist guide (García & Ruiz, 2022).

Free walking tours are a widespread phenomenon that occurs mainly in cities where the volume of tourism is quite significant. The distribution of free guided tours through digital platforms has generated increasing interest in the field of tourism (de Waal & Arets, 2022).

One of the impacts of this phenomenon is its contribution to overcrowding and a significant tourist overload in city centres (Klaniczay, 2022). The concept of overtourism is associated

with a sense of discomfort among local people and social opposition to tourism (Smith, Sziva, & Olt, 2019). This social argument is reinforced by the increasing ease of access to novel destinations, the rise of short-term tourist rental services such as Airbnb or by tourists' interest in enjoying authentic local life (Smith et al., 2019). However, free tours have not been studied extensively. Morales-Pérez, Garay, & Wilson (2020) analyse the socio-spatial negative impacts on tourist destinations, such as the increase in rental prices, population displacement and the occupation of public and private spaces, and de Waal & Arets (2022) focus on social impacts. Most studies on the tourism platform economy focus on the accommodation segment and analyse the social, economic and environmental impacts of accommodation type in large cities (Richards, Brown, & Dilettuso, 2020). Currently, we are not aware of any research on the contribution of free tours to spatial impacts (crowding or overcrowding) at tourist destinations.

Academic interest in free guided tours has focussed on large cities where cultural tourism is predominant and where the impact has been greatest, such as Berlin (Nilsson & Zillinger, 2020), Amsterdam (de Waal & Arets, 2022; Koerts, 2017) and Barcelona (Leal Londoño & Font Medina, 2018; Viana-Lora & Nel-lo-Andreu, 2023). As in some of the major cities where short-term holiday rentals have spread uncontrollably, cultural destinations are witnessing a greater proliferation of free tours (García & Ruiz, 2022).

As a result, the main objective of this research is to expand knowledge in an area which has not been studied adequately to date, analysing how this activity affects cultural environments, depending on the phase of the destination's life cycle. The specific objectives are, first, to identify the socio-spatial impacts produced due to the irruption of this type of activity in destinations that are in different phases of their tourism life cycle, according to Butler's (1980) model, i.e. verify the hypothesis that the activity of free guided tours contributes to the increase in tourist agglomerations and the overcrowding of cultural destinations (Milano, Novell, & Cheer, 2019). In addition, it aims to analyse the importance of the role of local governance in the activity of free tours according to each phase of the life cycle of the destination (Avdimiotis & Poulaki, 2019).

Empirically, six eminent cultural destinations in Spain that are at different levels of tourism development and, therefore, at different stages of the life cycle, have been selected, to analyse the socio-spatial impact and tourism governance policies. The results help to understand the differences that this activity generates in each destination, depending on their tourism development as well as the regulatory measures being applied to the activity.

2. Literature review

This section provides an overview of current research on free tours, highlighting the impacts on overtourism and the role of governance to regulate the negative impacts of free tours.

2.1 Free tours and overtourism

Incorporated into the academic glossary and public discourse in recent times, along with concepts such as tourismphobia or overexploitation, overtourism is seen as a turning point for a tourism destination, a new stage in the understanding of the impact of tourism (Namberger, Jackisch, Schmude, & Karl, 2019). Conceptually, the term overtourism is used to describe certain types of problems at destinations because of the high and increasing number of visitors (Blázquez-Salom, Cladera, & Sard, 2021). There is some confusion among researchers regarding the terms related to overtourism. It is necessary to differentiate among density, crowding, saturation and overtourism. Density refers to an indicator used to measure tourism activity. Crowding is a psychological response to density, that is, an excess of people in an area that puts pressure on resources or has an impact on wider economic or social objectives and can affect both mature and emerging destinations. Saturation is the existence of a negative impact, understood as a change

perceived as undesirable by tourists and citizens (Peeters et al., 2021). Overtourism describes a situation in which the impact of tourism at certain times and places exceeds the threshold of physical, ecological, social, economic, psychological and/or political capacity (Peeters et al., 2021).

The literature review shows that research on the impact of the platform economy has primarily focussed on two aspects of overtourism. First, overtourism is associated with the number of visitors. This aspect is related to tourist density, as discussed above. Tourist density is considered to be the main cause of overtourism and is the most relevant indicator for its measurement (Peeters et al., 2021). In our case, the number of guided tours offered is the basic reference for measuring the density of this activity. Second, although density is usually a necessary precursor of saturation, according to Stokols (1972), it is not sufficient. Thus, we find that alongside the number of visitors in terms of tourism congestion, we demonstrate the relevance of other aspects related to travel, such as seasonality, spatial-temporal concentration, type of use and tourist behaviour (Koerts, 2017; UNWTO, 2019). That is, the magnitude of impacts caused by tourism activities not only depends on the number of tourists visiting the area, but also, and perhaps more significantly, on their behaviour and on the characteristics of the local supply. Thus, tourist concentration in the main tourist attractions (Koerts, 2017; Nilsson, 2020) emerges as the main indicator for measuring spatial-temporal concentration.

2.2 Role of tourism governance

Some of the quantitative effects of the growth of tourists in city centres and downtown areas are congestion, noise and waste generation, exploitation of environmental resources, consumption of potentially scarce resources such as water, electricity and gas, real estate speculation or an increase in the cost of living (Morales-Pérez et al., 2020).

According to Pasquinelli & Trunfio (2020) and Morales-Pérez et al. (2020), three governance approaches coexist to reduce the negative impact of overtourism in cities. First, the regulatory approach includes action taken by the public administration that can take the form of taxation, control of activities and licencing or limited access to certain places. Second, the management approach, which includes actions aimed at the development of destinations without being coercive, limits the pressure on the most affected areas. The aim is to involve all stakeholders in the co-creation of a destination and the development of alternative itineraries or experiences. Finally, the marketing approach includes communication actions aimed at promoting a responsible attitude and reducing the pressure on the city.

3. Methodology

3.1 Destinations analysed

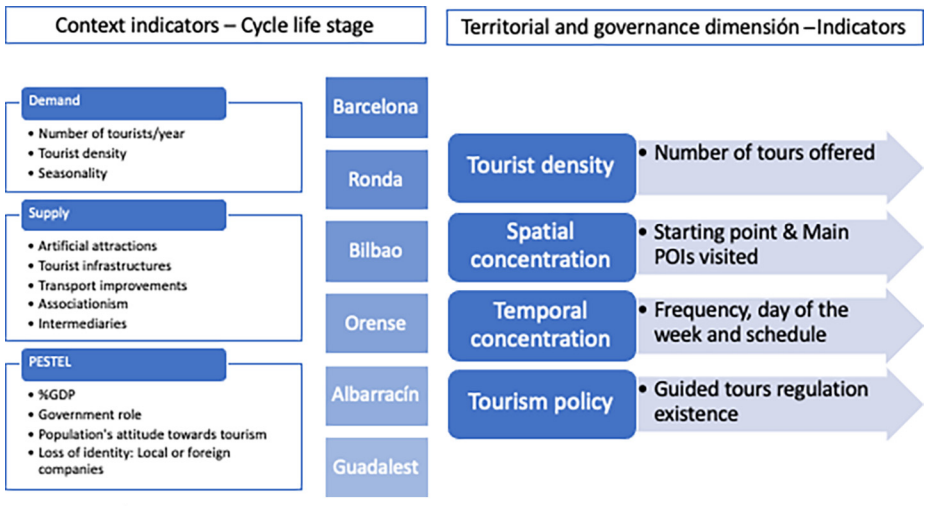
Six Spanish destinations were selected according to the following criteria:

- all destinations with heritage and cultural attractions;
- balance between urban and rural destinations;
- ensuring that all phases of the life cycle are represented; and
- seeking a certain territorial balance.

The destinations analysed were Albarracín, Barcelona, Bilbao, Guadalest, Ourense and Ronda.

The context indicators of the destinations analysed, which will, in turn, determine the phase of the life cycle of each destination, are based on those developed by Diedrich & García-Buades (2009); Fernández-Villarán, Espinosa, Abad, & Goytia (2020); Martín, Aguilera, & Moreno (2014) and Soares, Gandara, & Baidal (2012) (Figure 1). Data were obtained from

Figure 1 Contextual indicators of destinations



Source: Authors

the Barcelona City Council, Diputación de Alicante, Barcelona City Council, Ronda City Council, Eustat, INE, Instituto Galego de Estadística, Junta de Andalucía and Observatorio de Turismo de Bizkaia and from the tourist offices of Albarracín and Castell de Guadalest.

Despite the difficulties in clearly establishing the phases (Díez, 2020), we can affirm that Albarracín and Guadalest are in an incipient phase of the destination life cycle. The number of tourists, the main indicator for determining the stage of the life cycle, offers very high figures in relation to the number of inhabitants. However, as these are towns with a population of less than 1,000 inhabitants (990 and 240, respectively), we cannot rely exclusively on this figure and must look at other indicators, linked to the supply and development of tourism infrastructure that affect the destination, as proposed by Soares et al. (2012). Both destinations are characterised by the existence of some cultural tourist attractions and a lack of infrastructure; tourism activity has an impact on the economy, local population and environment, and tourism policies are focussed on promotional activities. Bilbao and Ourense are in an intermediate phase, characterised by an increase in the number of visitors (tourists and/or excursionists). Intermediaries include destinations in their campaigns and external companies. The economic impact is greater, although tensions between locals and visitors may emerge. Tourism policies focus on digital promotion actions, improvement of transport infrastructure, development of tourism offers, increasing overnight stays and spending per visitor, deseasonalising, reordering land use and improving accessibility (Díez, 2020). Ronda and Barcelona can be considered mature destinations, where negative economic, environmental and social impacts begin to emerge (Diedrich & García-Buades, 2009). Therefore, tourism policies focus on avoiding negative social, cultural, environmental and overcrowding effects (Díez, 2020).

3.2 Data collection

In this research, we included free guided tours, based solely on the GuruWalk platform, for the following reasons:

- It concentrates all its activities on offering only free tours and no other type of tour.
- It covers all selected towns.

- It is a large multinational platform and is by far the platform that provides the most information on how it operates (Gutiérrez-Duarte & Roldán-Martínez, 2020).

The next step is to identify the variables and indicators to analyse each of the previously identified variables and indicators (Figure 1):

- Tourist density is measured by the number of tours offered.
- Spatial concentration is measured by Main POIs visited.
- Temporal concentration is measured by frequency, day of the week and schedule.
- Tourism policy is measured by guided tours regulation existence.

For each destination, the context indicators, defined in the previous section, help interpret the data obtained. For each city, a data file was created that collected the spatiotemporal variables of each route:

- frequency/day;
- days of operation;
- departure times; and
- points visited (POI) (geolocated).

The Microsoft Excel program was used to filter the data, so that we could know: the frequencies of the different meeting points and points visited in each town, for the spatial concentration; and the number of visits offered each day and hour of the week, for the temporal concentration. Owing to the use of Geographic Information Systems (GIS), particularly ArcGIS 10.8.1 and ArcGIS Pro software, the entire set of records on meeting points and points visited at each destination was geopositioned by assigning geographic coordinates (latitude and longitude), obtained from Google Maps for subsequent conversion to vector data, using the typology of points and referring to the WGS-84 datum (Macomber, 1984). Geographic coordinates allow the geolocation of the points visited where there is a higher concentration of visits (Pettit et al., 2012). After this process, vector information with the density of points was generated in the shapefile (.shp) format.

For the generation of the heat maps, we used the field data obtained by referring to the number of free tour visits (frequency) in geographical coordinates for certain selected points of tourist interest (POI) in the following cities: Barcelona, Bilbao, Orense, Ronda and Albarracín. The Kernel Density of the geoprocessing tool is used. This tool calculates the magnitude per unit area from point or polyline entities by using a kernel function to adapt a smoothly narrowed surface to each point. The cartographic result represents the spatial density of points, reflecting their distribution, wherein the areas in red colour have a high spatial density, whereas blue colour represents the areas with a lower density of frequencies. The results are presented in the Raster format.

4. Results

4.1 Spatial-temporal concentration

The main objective of this first analysis was to conduct a study of the spatial-temporal concentrations caused by free tours. For this purpose, the guided tours offered through the GuruWalk platform between 18 and 22July 2022, were analysed.

The profiles of the tours analysed are listed in Table 1. The first refers to the number of visits offered on the platform. Given that each offer includes several visits throughout the week and at different times, the second row shows the total number of groups offered per week.

Among the offers provided by GuruWalk's free tours for the selected destinations, there are cultural routes through the historic centres and the main POI, night tours, gastronomic tours

Table 1 Visits analysed

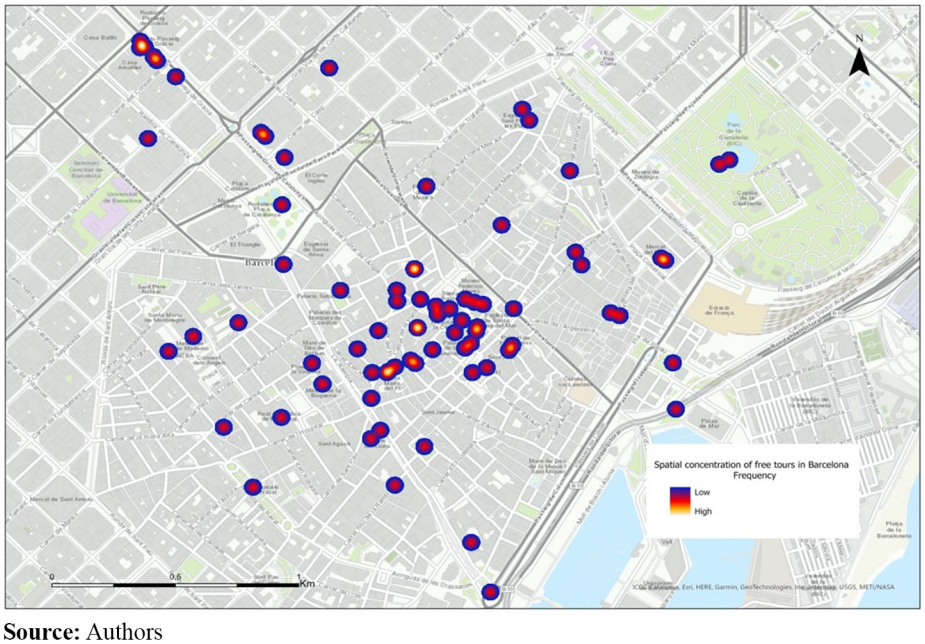
Variable	*Albarracín*	*Barcelona*	*Bilbao*	*Guadalest*	*Ourense*	*Ronda*
Number of offers analysed	3	61	17	1	7	13
Total weekly groups offered	5	479	212	1	59	140

Source: Authors

and tours to discover the life and work of some personalities (e.g. Maradona in Barcelona). These tours are offered in several languages, such as Spanish, English, French, Polish, German, Russian and Italian.

The spatial concentration of free tours in Albarracín shows a higher concentration in the Plaza Mayor and the Cathedral. The spatial concentration of free tours in Barcelona shows that practically all concentrations are around the historic centre of the city (Gothic Quarter). For this reason, we zoomed this area (Figure 2) to show the points with the highest concentration. It can be seen that the most marked hot spots are in Plaça del Rei, Plaça de Sant Jaume, the Cathedral, the Roman ruins and the city wall, Plaça Felip Neri and Paseo de Gracia near Casa Batlló and La Pedrera (both buildings by the modernist architect Gaudí, one of the main tourist and cultural attractions of the city of Barcelona). This phenomenon is identified from the fact that all these points have frequencies of more than 10 groups of Guruwalk free tours in the same time slots of the day, reaching up to 16 groups in the case of Plaça del Rei or Plaça Sant Jaume. Bearing in mind that the distance between the two squares is approximately 200 m, and that the cathedral is only 180 m from Plaça del Rei, it is clear that there is too much crowding during the day-time slots in such a small area of the city. The meeting and starting points for the visits, most of which are well-known commercial points around Plaça Catalunya and in front of the Cathedral, represent an important added impact to the afore-mentioned focal points of concentration.

Figure 2 Spatial concentration of free tours in the historic quarter of Barcelona; frequency



Source: Authors

Figure 3 shows the spatial concentration of free tours in Bilbao. In this city, the highest concentration occurs in Old Town, specifically in Plaza Nueva and the Ribera Market. There is a significant concentration in a small area of the city. On the other hand, considering that the Guggenheim Museum is one of Bilbao's main tourist attractions, it is striking that it is not included in the itineraries of the free tours analysed. In the hot spots of Ourense, the Plaza Mayor and Mercado de Abastos stand out, as they are located at a distance of approximately 350 m from each other. The concentration of free tours in Ronda shows two areas stand out: the bullring and the New Bridge, on the one hand and the historic area on the other.

Figures 4 and 5 show the temporal concentration of visits analysed for Barcelona, Bilbao and Ronda. They are based on the assumption that all tours offered by GuruWalk operate on the dates and times mentioned. The number of GuruWalk groups that operate at the times indicated on the *x*-axis is shown on the ordinate axis. The situations in Albarracín, Guadalest and Orense are not included because they are not significant.

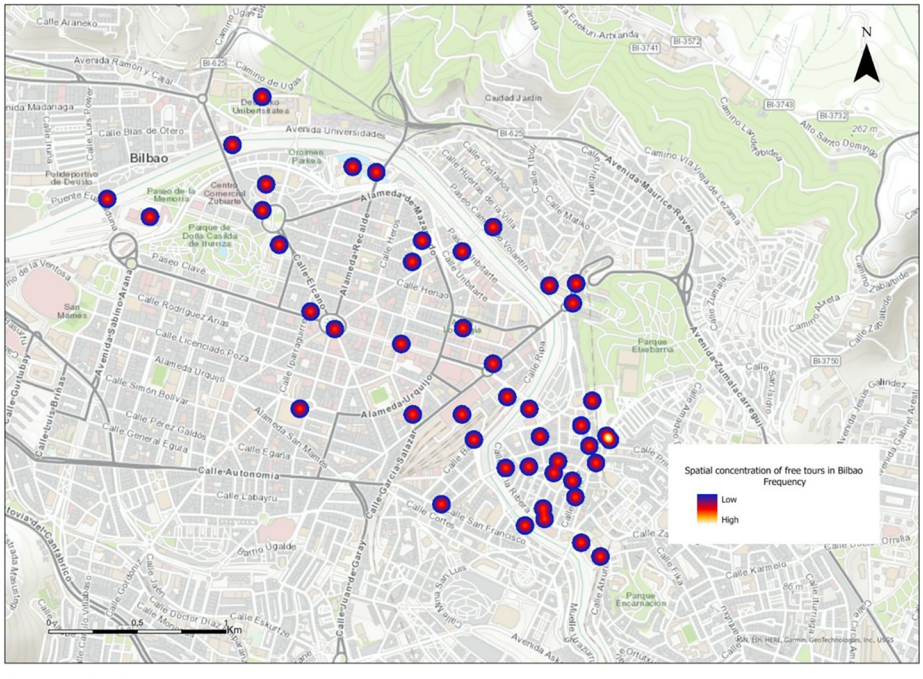
In Barcelona (Figure 4) and Bilbao (Figure 5), it can be observed that the highest concentration occurs daily between 10:30 and 11 a.m., with up to 15 journeys being offered by this operator in that time slot only. Also noteworthy are the 15:30 and 18:00–18:30 time slots in Barcelona, and the 17:00 time slot in Bilbao.

It is worth noting that the supply concentration in Barcelona on Wednesdays at 13:30. In the case of Ronda (Figure 6), the concentrations are in the early and late hours of the day, which is reasonable, given the high temperatures during the period analysed.

4.2 Regulation of guided tours

In Spain, the regulation of guided tours is the responsibility of city councils in each territory. Barcelona has taken the lead in legislating and regulating guided walking tours, including

Figure 3 Spatial concentration of free tours in Bilbao; frequency



Source: Authors

Figure 4 Temporal concentration in Barcelona

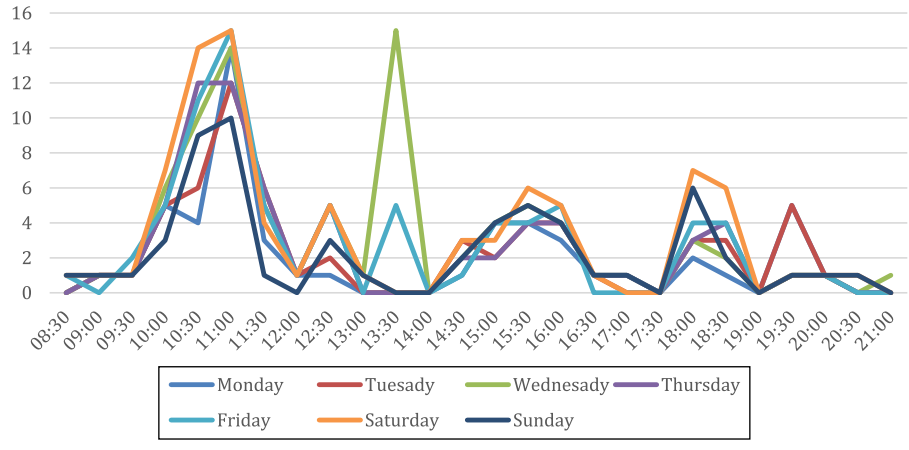


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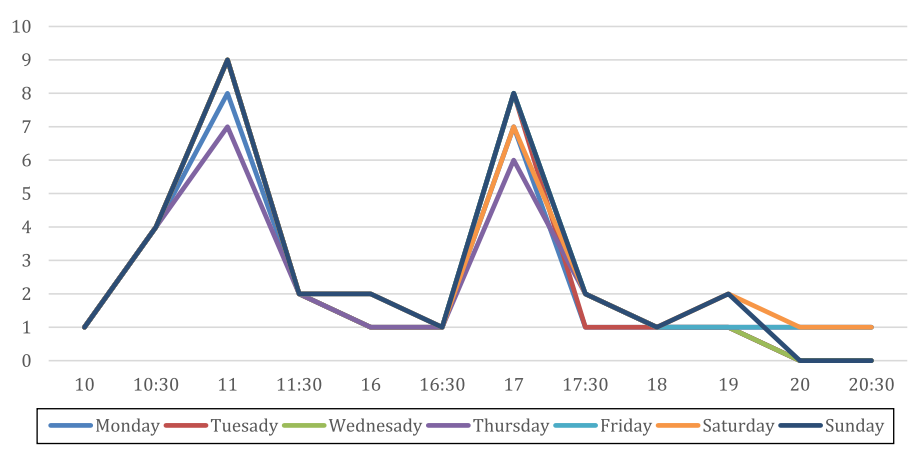
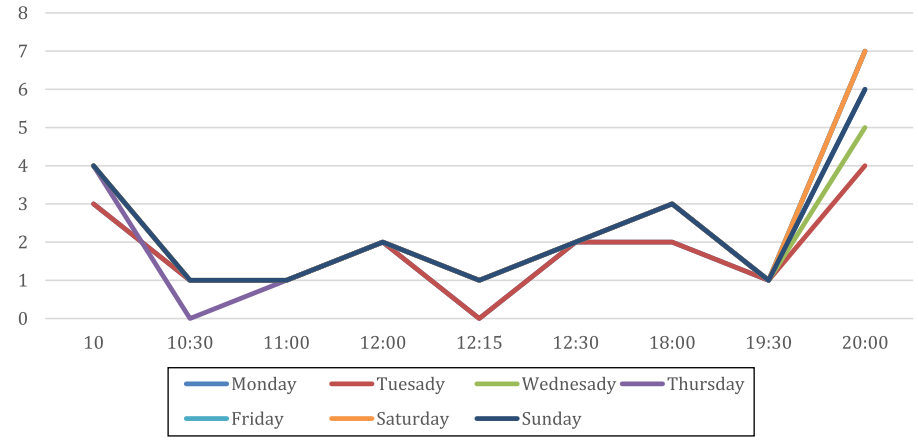
Figure 5 Temporal concentration in Bilbao



Source: Authors

free tours (Ayuntamiento de Barcelona, 2022a). It is not surprising that Barcelona is trying to find a balance between professional activity and the daily life of the local residents of certain areas of the city based on its tourism statistics; between 2000 and 2019 only, the number of tourists visiting the city doubled, reaching almost 8.8 million people. In addition to this figure, there are also the 21 million "passing through" tourists (cruise and excursionists) who only make one-day stops in the city (Bourliataux-Lajoinie, Dosquet, & del Olmo Arriaga, 2019). Gutiérrez, Aguilera, & Ramis (2022) attributed this saturation to three key factors: the strong growth in the supply of tourist accommodation through the proliferation of holiday homes (e.g. Airbnb), the significant development of the cruise industry and the intensification of the pressure exerted by its coastal areas of influence, which are consolidated as major poles of tourist attraction, on an international scale.

Figure 6 Temporal concentration in Ronda



Source: Authors

To avoid further deterioration of the city's damaged tourist image, in June 2022, the Barcelona City Council established a series of rules on guided walking tours in the old part of the city, limiting each group to a maximum of 15 people, regulating the direction of traffic and banning public loudspeakers in favour of audio guides or other less aggressive systems that avoid noise pollution. Likewise, the Barcelona City Council itself promotes a declaration of good practices for the guidance of groups on public streets in which, through 18 points, it tries to balance the lives of citizens with the visits of tourist groups to the city, protect public space and achieve a safer and more accessible city (Ayuntamiento de Barcelona, 2022b). Other cities such as Bilbao, following in the footsteps of Barcelona, are studying how to regulate the growing demand for guided tours of the city (Atxutegi, 2022), trying to reconcile the lives of the residents of the most visited old town, with the tourist groups visiting the city. Recently, a motion has been approved to analyse the impact of free tours and the need for a regulatory ordinance; it is currently under study. The rest of the destinations analysed do not have specific regulations governing guided tours in their territories.

5. Discussion

The main objective of this study is to identify the socio-spatial impacts, especially those produced by tourist overcrowding, caused by the irruption of free tours in the central city districts. It also analyses the response offered by governance to these impacts, in the different phases of the life cycle of destinations.

Despite the accelerated boom of the collaborative economy and the role played by the internet in tourism distribution, the literature review yields an analysis that coincides with the statement of Navalón-García & Mínguez (2021), who attest that such activity, emerging in the tourism sector, has not been researched to date. Hence, this work is original and contributes to the literature on the subject.

5.1 Theoretical implications

The first theoretical implication of this work is significant because there were no similar precedents with such an exhaustive spatial or territorial analysis to reliably demonstrate not only that this activity has an impact on the territory but also what type of impact is produced.

Therefore, the main theoretical contribution of this research is the association between the impact of free tours and the different stages of the life cycle of destinations. In the absence of previous research on the impact of such a specific activity, it is useful to compare them with similar analyses of other segments of the tourism platform economy, such as short-term vacation rentals (mediated by platforms such as Airbnb). On the one hand, and unlike the research conducted by Adamiak (2020), in which there were no major discrepancies in the relative presence of Airbnb in the regions across different life cycle stages of their destinations, the results of this study show important differences in terms of the number of people and visits offered through the platform, along the different stages. In general terms, the data show that the offer grows in the same proportion as the tourist development of the destination. On the other hand, in relation to the impact of free tours on spatiotemporal concentrations, important differences are also observed depending on the degree of tourism development of each destination analysed. First, it was not observed that the activity adds additional overcrowding in destinations that are in a more incipient stage. Moreover, coinciding with the model developed by Sheng, Li, & Wang (2017), higher externalities, positive and negative, are an inevitable price of rapid growth in tourist cities, with no reinforcement of their overall infrastructure. This situation leads to a dichotomy in which tourism authorities themselves encourage this type of activity. In this way, they try to increase tourist flows to destinations that are yet to attain the limit of tourist arrivals that will disrupt local neighbourhoods. As Avdimiotis & Poulaki (2019) demonstrate for Airbnb, which is a low-cost service provider, free tours generate demand that would otherwise not have existed, which is beneficial for lesser-known destinations. As the same authors indicate, these platforms offer the possibility of affordable guided tours, marking the starting point for the tourist development of the destination and generating income for a small group of companies associated with tourism (Avdimiotis & Poulaki, 2019). Second, as the destination consolidates touristically, growth in the number of visits offered through the platform is appreciated, coinciding with previous studies (Buhalis, Andreu, & Gnoth, 2020). The increase in the number of visitors implies that the destination's infrastructure should be aligned with the growth in tourism in the near future. The negative impacts of agglomeration in certain areas of the destination (basically in the iconic POIs and historic centres) are beginning to be seen, and voices are beginning to be heard calling for regulations to regulate this activity.

The concept of the Janus-faced character of tourism, as discussed by Sanchez & Adams (2008), is relevant in the context of free walking tours within the tourism platform economy. While they contribute to economic development, they also raise concerns that must be carefully considered and managed. Stakeholders in the tourism platform economy must recognise and address these contradictions to achieve a more sustainable and balanced approach that aligns with the broader goals of destination development and the well-being of local communities (Navalón-García & Mínguez, 2021).

Finally, although the platform analysed (GuruWalk) declares to review, daily, the included tours so that different schedules are offered to the various groups, to share visited points and avoid agglomerations, the results of the empirical research confirm that the activities of these tour companies, with business models similar to Airbnb (Koerts, 2017), add congestion to the analysed destinations that are in a mature phase of their life cycle. The results of the Barcelona case study correspond with those of the spatial analysis of Airbnb rentals by Morales-Pérez et al. (2020), who highlight the socio-spatial inequalities and residential displacement produced in this city because of short-term rentals and the platforms that mediate them. Along similar lines, Avdimiotis & Poulaki (2019) state that the most popular tourist destinations, characterised by congested historic neighbourhoods that are in the stage of consolidation and/or maturity, experience a growth in their tourist traffic due to the increase in capacity caused by residential rental platforms.

5.2 Managerial implications

These results also have implications for policymakers and destination managers. Instead of a single model that applies to any destination, policymakers should be able to segment the market according to the stage of the life cycle of their territory, and thus apply the regulations that best fit at any given time. However, the issue of guided tours and their impact on agglomerations has begun to be analysed in recent years, being at the beginning of its political cycle. Policy cycle theory states that policies develop along the following stages: agenda-setting, policy formulation, decision-making, implementation and evaluation (Wegrich & Jann, 2006). As this study demonstrates, among those destinations where the increase in negative impacts is most evident, only Barcelona has recently issued specific regulations limiting tourist walking tours in the city centre and affecting free tours. This is in line with the findings of Sheng et al. (2017), who state that larger tourist cities with well-developed infrastructure and mature urban governance may be in a better position to undertake the necessary measures to manage the massive influx of visitors and other external tourism shocks. For the remaining destinations, there is no evidence to date of similar actions, except for nascent initiatives in Bilbao.

These results coincide with the conclusions of Avdimiotis & Poulaki (2019), who consider that tourism governance, in relation to the activity of platforms, evolves to the same extent as the destination does, from the so-called initial *laissez-faire*, through regulations that limit these activities to a greater or lesser degree, to the prohibition of the activity when we talk about destinations in decline. In short, the impact of guided tours and overtourism has just begun to set the agenda at the mature destination level. Although Buhalis et al. (2020) point out that Barcelona is an example for other destinations in terms of how it manages and regulates the platform economy, it is not possible to offer much more than indications for policy development in this area. Indications that include aspects such as authorisation or permits to act as a guide to ensure the quality of services, setting limits on the number of people per group, protection of residents related to the provision of rules and directives on social behaviour, the provision of taxes for an equivalent tax burden, or the control of the legality of the guides who advertise through these platforms. This research needs to be further advanced to be more precise and definitive. It is worth mentioning the work of Fiorentino & Bartolucci (2021), who state that regulation can limit innovation, data availability and the ability to track users. They propose the application of blockchain technologies to collaborative economy services for political governance purposes, to maximise their positive multiplier effects.

6. Conclusions, limitations and future lines of research

This work contributes to the understanding of the practices and impacts of the tourist activity of free guided walking tours in six Spanish cultural tourist destinations, distributed through the main digital platform of free tours operating nationally, GuruWalk. The spatial impacts that such activity produces on the territory have been analysed, as well as the management or governance response in the different phases of the life cycle of the destinations.

This study confirms that the impacts differ greatly depending on the volume of the activity itself and its relationship with the tourism maturity of the destination. Destinations in more mature life cycles are associated with greater impacts on tourist overcrowding in the central areas of cities and a greater social response that triggers specific regulations or norms on this activity. For the Barcelona City Council, the solution is to seek the involvement of the local population in the management of urban tourism, thus betting on a quadruple helix model that favours dialogue and enhances the values of society, its inclusion and democratisation (Viana-Lora & Nel-lo-Andreu, 2023). However, destinations in an incipient state of tourism activity are not associated with significant impacts on their territory nor with

a relevant concern on the part of the authorities, that would result in specific regulations on any particular activity of guided tours. Moreover, it has been shown that in some of these destinations that are at an early stage of their tourism life cycle, it is the authorities themselves that positively associate the activity of free tours with the attraction of tourist flows and, therefore, promote it from their tourism institutions or organisations.

It is shown that this activity can serve as an incentive to attract tourism in the initial phase, although it is necessary to understand the necessary adjustments in the regulation of free tours and distribution companies as the destination advances in its tourist maturity, so that this activity fits in with the lifestyle and habits of the local population and improves its image. Therefore, a more detailed analysis of how platforms engage in destination sustainability is needed.

Despite having the necessary scientific, methodological and ethical rigor, the researchers are aware of the limitations of this study with regard to the sample size, as only six destinations have been empirically studied, as well as the specific choice of a single platform (GuruWalk), which, despite being the largest in volume, is not representative of the total existing offer in this field nationally. It is not possible to adjust the results to other possible samples because there are no similar studies.

This study highlights the challenges that tourism will encounter in the future, emphasising the importance of investigating the dynamics of the platform economy within the visitor segment. The influence of the collaborative economy on the traditional tourism industry necessitates further exploration to uncover new opportunities and hypotheses. It is essential to note that this study provides a snapshot, underscoring the need for qualitative and longitudinal research. In light of these considerations, future investigations should prioritise the development of measures and actions aimed at enhancing the social responsibility and inclusivity of free tours platforms. Drawing inspiration from successful initiatives such as Fairbnb (Petruzzi, Marques, & Sheppard, 2021), research can focus on the formulation of guidelines for fair labour practices, transparent pricing structures and equal opportunities. Additionally, exploring an inclusive business model for this activity, along with evaluating the effectiveness of existing regulations and policies, will contribute to the establishment of sustainable and ethical standards. Engaging local communities and involving them in decision-making processes should also be a significant area of exploration. Strategies for community participation in the design, implementation and management of free tours will ensure their voices are heard and their interests are considered.

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