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**IMPORTANCE OF  
SOCIOCULTURAL  
SUSTAINABILITY  
FOR THE TOURISM  
DEVELOPMENT OF A  
DESTINATION: DOES  
THE PERCEPTION  
OF OVERCROWDING  
AFFECT POST-VISIT  
BEHAVIOR?**

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**Abstract:** In recent years, the development of sustainable tourism has become a major challenge for tourist destinations. One of the types of tourism that generates the greatest problems of mass tourism is cruise tourism, given the large number of people who disembark at a port of call to visit the destination. However, the study of the perception of overcrowding from the point of view of the cruise passenger is still scarce, requiring further research in this area. For this reason, and based on a sample of cruise passengers, this paper analyzes the perception of tourist massification that this tourist has and its influence on post-visit behavior. The results indicate that the perception of overcrowding is moderate, not directly influencing their post-visit intentions. The results suggest relevant implications for destination tourism managers.

**Keywords:** Tourism sustainability, tourism massification, sociocultural impacts, cruise tourism, post-visit intentions.

## INTRODUCTION

The development of sustainable tourism has become a major challenge for tourist destinations in Europe in recent years (Cisneros-Martínez and Fernández-Morales, 2018). As a result of the rapidly increasing global economic impact of tourism, and in the context of the international debate on sustainable development in which the socio-economic interests of the sector are harmonized with the environmental and social constraints of destinations, it is increasingly necessary to reflect in depth on a sustainable form of tourism (Neutsch and Nijkamp, 2012; Tahiri and Kovaci, 2017).

Sustainable tourism activities mainly cover the environmental, economic, social and cultural aspects of development, requiring a holistic balance between these four dimensions to guarantee the development of

the sustainability of the tourism sector in the short, medium and long term (Pan et al, 2018; Tahiri and Kovaci, 2017). Thus, sustainable tourism seeks to reduce the negative effects of tourism activities on the environment, society and the economy to achieve ecologically sustainable, economically viable, as well as ethically and socially equitable tourism (Tahiri and Kovaci, 2017; Tanguay et al., 2013). Taking this into account,

Therefore, the challenge of sustainable tourism is to mitigate the negative impacts by increasing the benefits of tourism in the right directions (Pan et al., 2018; Ecological Tourism in Europe, 2009). For example, an economically profitable and ecologically sustainable industry can provide satisfying visitor experiences and increase the quality of life for local communities (Hritz and Cecil, 2008; Lim and McAleer, 2005).

The exponential growth of tourist flows in the last decade has meant that certain destinations have experienced serious consequences derived from these higher volumes of visitors, which are normally concentrated in a short period of time (Li et al., 2017). Both the massification and the seasonality inherent to tourism include several negative effects that affect the social and environmental sustainability of destinations, beyond the purely economic (Cisneros-Martínez and Fernández-Morales, 2018; Martins, 2018).

Among the negative environmental impacts, the overexploitation of natural resources and the massive production of waste stand out; among the sociocultural: the loss of the quality of life of the residents and dissatisfaction of the tourists and, finally, among the economic ones, it is necessary to point out the instability of employment, the lower competitiveness and the difficulties of profitability in the long term (Martín et al. , 2014; Martins, 2018).

Despite the fact that all the negative impacts are important (environmental, sociocultural or economic), the literature has not given them the same attention. Thus, when sustainable tourism has been applied to the industry, more emphasis has been placed on the effects of tourism on the environment and the economy, rather than on factors related to its effect on communities and tourists (socio-cultural). . For this reason, further research is necessary to analyze the socio-cultural facet of sustainable tourism and to further study the perception of mass tourism by tourists and residents. Although the existing research on the tourist-resident mass relationship (local community) is more abundant (Garau-Vadell et al., 2018; Jani, 2018; Su et al., 2019), The literature that analyzes the tourist-tourist massification relationship is scarce (Buzova et al., 2019; Sanz-Blas et al., 2019). The study of the perception of overcrowding by tourists is of special interest since it can affect their satisfaction with the visit made and influence their behavioral intentions (Buzova et al., 2019; Jin et al., 2016; Sanz -Blas et al., 2019), all affecting the tourism development of the destination.

Taking into account the above, the present work aims to explore the perception of overcrowding of cruise tourists who visit the main European ports of call, analyzing the effect that this perception has on their post-visit behavior, using a methodology for this purpose. quantitative. The choice of cruise ship tourists as a study sample is due to the fact that it is one of the tourist typologies that generates the highest levels of crowding (Buzova et al., 2019; Sanz-Blas et al., 2019).

For this, the work has been structured in four parts. A first part of theoretical content that allows understanding the problem of tourist massification from a sociocultural perspective and in the context of cruises. A second part in which the methodology

used in the study is explained. The third part contains the results of the investigation. Finally, the main conclusions, future lines of research and management implications are presented.

## **MASS TOURISM: PERCEPTION OF CRUISE SHIP TOURISTS**

Overcrowding problems arise because tourist destinations do not correctly manage tourist flows. In this sense, tourist massification or crowding occurs when carrying capacity is violated, exceeding the maximum number of people who can visit a tourist destination at the same time, causing destruction of the physical, economic, and sociocultural environment (Jurado et al, 2013; Neuts and Nijkamp, 2012; Vaske and Donnelly, 2002).

From a sociocultural perspective, mass tourism can harm the quality of life of the resident, increase their insecurity and generate problems of coexistence with tourists (Brida et al., 2012a; Brida et al., 2012b; Su et al., 2019). . From the tourist's point of view, overcrowding problems affect their experience in the destination and, therefore, their satisfaction with the visit made and behavioral intentions (return and recommend the destination visited) (Buzova et al., 2019; Popp, 2012; Sanz-Blas et al., 2019).

The studies carried out in relation to the perception of tourist overcrowding by tourists have allowed the identification of two different types of overcrowding: human and spatial, affecting differently tourist behavior (Machleit et al., 2000; Popp, 2012). The perception of human overcrowding refers to the number of people that tourists can find during their visit to the destination, while spatial overcrowding refers to the possible impediments to movement during the visit, leading in some cases to having to change the itinerary, waiting in long lines, or mobility

problems, among others (Kim et al., 2016; Machleit et al., 2000).

One of the types of tourism most affected by the problems of mass tourism is cruise tourism. The social impact of mega-cruises is not negligible, making it difficult to manage the simultaneous disembarkation of thousands of tourists (Garay, 2015). However, the review of the literature shows very few studies that have worked on mass tourism in the field of cruises, whether it is the perception of residents or of the tourists themselves, and there are also very few that have focused on a behavioral facet. . Thus, we can find, among others, studies based on economic impacts (Bresson and Logossah, 2011), perception of brand value (Hyun and Kim, 2015) or attractiveness of a destination (Jacobsen et al., 2019), only three studies have been developed so far in cruise tourism focusing on a behavioural facet (Buzova et al., 2019; Sanz-Blas et al., 2019; Shoal et al., 2020).

In relation to the effects of overcrowding on tourist behavior, the literature shows very different results. Part of the reviewed literature shows that the perception of overcrowding negatively affects the probability that tourists return to the destination and recommend it to other people (Ávila-Foucat et al., 2013; Jurado et al., 2013). Other studies have shown that there is no direct relationship between tourist massification and behavioral intentions (Zhang et al., 2017), and in some cases the relationship between both variables is mediated by the satisfaction obtained by the tourist with the visit made (Zhang et al. al., 2017). Research has also led to the conclusion that the effects of overcrowding are not always negative, observing a direct and positive relationship between perception of tourist massification and recommendation of the destination (Abubakar and Mavondo, 2014). Given

the lack of agreement regarding the results obtained, in the present investigation we formulate the following question to be investigated:

*CI: Does the perception of mass tourism affect the post-visit behavior of the cruise passenger?*

## **RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

The target population of the study were cruise tourists who had visited one of the main Spanish cruise ports: Valencia. The information collection method was the personal interview using a structured questionnaire, obtaining a total of 467 valid interviews.

The tourist massification construct was measured by adapting the scale of Kim et al. (2016). The future behavioral intentions of the cruise tourist, in terms of intention to return and to recommend the destination, were measured with the Andriotis and Agiomirgianakis (2010) scales, adapted to the cruise context.

For the analysis of the data, the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS version 22.0) was used, which offers several statistical procedures for the descriptive analysis of the information. Specifically, frequencies, percentages, means and correlations have been calculated in order to analyze the variables considered individually and as a whole.

## **RESULTS**

### **CROWDING PERCEIVED BY THE CRUISE TOURIST**

In relation to the perception of tourist overcrowding, Table 1 shows this perception, differentiating between human overcrowding (number of people) and spatial overcrowding (mobility problems), since both types can have a different effect on tourist satisfaction and behavior. .

	Half	Deviation typical
HUMAN MASSIFICATION		
Valencia was very crowded with tourists	3.81	1.70
Valencia was too busy with tourists	3.58	1.65
There were many tourists in Valencia	4.46	1.64
There was a lot of people traffic in Valencia	4.10	1.73
SPACE MASSIFICATION		
I felt suffocated during my visit to Valencia	2.48	1.69
I felt nervous about being surrounded by too many tourists during my visit to Valencia	2.45	1.75
I was bothered by contact with too many people while visiting Valencia	2.40	1.73
I felt a lack of space in the tourist areas due to the large number of tourists in Valencia	2.57	1.75
Getting around the tourist areas of Valencia was a problem	2.53	1.75

Table 1. Perceptions of overcrowding of cruise tourists.

As can be seen, the perception of overcrowding yields results that are not too alarming (the highest mean value is 4.46), although values for human crowding slightly higher than spatial crowding can be observed. Perhaps these results are due to the expectations of the cruise tourists themselves who, prior to making the trip, already know that during their visit to the destinations they will be accompanied by a multitude of people, so it is part of what they expect to find.

### POST-VISIT BEHAVIORAL INTENTIONS (REVISIT AND DESTINATION RECOMMENDATION) OF THE CRUISE TOURIST

Revisit intentions and destination recommendation (see Table 2) are considered

key variables of tourist post-visit behavior (Papadimitriou et al., 2015).

	Half	Deviation typical
INTENT TO REVISIT		
I would visit Valencia again on a cruise.	5.78	1.45
I would visit Valencia again as a tourist destination	5.65	1.53
RECOMMENDATION INTENT		
I would recommend Valencia to my friends and family	6.02	1.26
I would recommend Valencia for a cruise trip to my friends and family	5.93	1.35
I would recommend Valencia as a holiday destination on social media (eg Facebook, Twitter, Instagram).	4.73	2.19

Table 2. Post-visit behavior.

In general, tourists express their desire to visit again and to recommend Valencia to their friends and family, both as a tourist and cruise destination. Therefore, it does not seem a priori that the perception of overcrowding affects post-visit behaviour. The recommendation through social networks presents a lower value (4.73 on average), perhaps because the average age of cruise tourists is usually higher and, therefore, they are not usually as familiar with the use of new technologies. .

### PERCEPTION RELATIONSHIP OVERCROWDING TOURISM-POST-VISIT BEHAVIOR (INTENTION TO RETURN AND RECOMMEND THE DESTINATION)

Considering the nature of the analyzed variables, we have carried out different correlation analyses, obtaining the results shown in Table 3.

	MASSIFICATION TOUR
INTENT TO RETURN	
Pearson's correlation sig (bilateral)	-0.039 0.287
INTENT TO RECOMMEND	
Pearson's correlation sig (bilateral)	-0.008 0.825

Table 3. Post-visit perception-intention correlations.

We can observe that there is no relationship between the perception of mass tourism and behavioral intentions. Therefore, the perception of moderate levels of tourist massification does not influence the intentions of tourists to visit the destination again or to recommend it to other people.

## CONCLUSIONS AND FUTURE LINES OF RESEARCH

Tourism has become an omnipresent, omnipotent and unsustainable phenomenon, with an important problem to highlight: mass tourism. The literature that supports that mass tourism and sustainability are two opposite poles on a continuum is diverse.

Mass tourism has harmful effects on the daily life of citizens or host communities of a destination. In some cases, it has even generated the majority rejection of the local population, who see how their quality of life deteriorates (Su et al., 2019). But how does it affect the tourist's perception? Can it affect their behavioral intentions?

The results of the research carried out show that cruise tourists perceive moderate levels of tourist overcrowding, perhaps because said overcrowding is part of their expectations, which does not directly affect their behavioral intentions. Perceiving a crowded port of call is not a sufficient condition for not wanting to return to the destination in the future or not wanting to recommend it to other people.

There are, therefore, other factors capable of mediating the relationship analyzed, which will determine post-visit intentions. Bearing this in mind, it is proposed as a future line of research to incorporate into the analysis of the perception of crowding other mediating variables that may directly affect the behavioral intentions of the tourist. Additionally, it is of interest to analyse other variables that precede the perception of overcrowding and may therefore influence this perception.

Although in general the levels of overcrowding are moderate, for some tourists it is a significant problem, which is why destination managers and cruise companies must focus on reducing it. Thus, local authorities must develop strategies for proper management of tourist flows at the destination, while the cruise industry must consider cruise traffic in its itinerary planning. Additionally, all organizations involved in the management of cruise tourism must adopt sustainable innovation practices to avoid the negative consequences of human and spatial crowding that may occur beyond the perceived carrying capacity of a destination.

Although the situation triggered by COVID-19 benefits the reduction of human and spatial overcrowding, this aspect must not be left unattended, as it will return to undesired levels over time and will make destinations unsustainable.

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