

# Overtourism and underemployment: a modern labour market dilemma

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## Abstract

This paper is the first of its kind to analyse the relationship between overtourism and employment. Despite frequent claims of the importance of employees to organisational success, poor working conditions in the tourism sector continue to be widely reported. In light of the severity of the impact of poor working conditions on individuals and by extension communities, the paper argues this is an aspect of responsible tourism that remains under-researched. In fact, there is a danger that overtourism will exacerbate what is already a key and growing concern in modern economies characterised by a slow trudge to the bottom for some sectors and occupations in terms of pay, and working conditions. From an employment perspective, the paper looks at the implications of overtourism on three groups of stakeholders: employees, employers and tourists.

## Introduction

This paper reviews working practices in tourism. It does so with reference to wider changes in modern economies that pose significant challenges to the wellbeing of individuals, and societies. From an employment perspective, overtourism can be regarded as the epitome of dilemmas facing modern labour markets, which themselves reflect a form of winner-takes-all capitalism. In its extreme manifestation, this form of capitalism sees profit as the card that trumps all others, growth is not inclusive, and where from a tourism perspective destinations are simply a resource to be exploited.

The paper begins by setting the scene in terms of clarifying the term 'overtourism'. It goes on to look at the restructuring of the labour market in modern economies, specifically the move towards an hourglass economy. It then considers, in general terms, how tourism, and specifically overtourism, might be exacerbating concerns surrounding this shift. In an attempt to prevent a race to the bottom, the paper then discusses how policy makers are now focussing not solely on job creation but also on decent work, while acknowledging that despite much rhetoric to the contrary, decent work is still far removed from the realities of tourism employment. The paper then offers an explanation for why, despite much rhetoric that extols the importance of employees to the firm, there are still so many concerns about tourism work. Literature in the areas of CSR, Legitimacy Theory and Stakeholder Theory assists this analysis. The final sections of the paper provide a theoretical discussion as to how overtourism is likely to affect employment, and by implication employees, employers and tourists.

### Literature review

As a relatively new concept, overtourism is still in the early stages of being defined. As a starting point, we refer to the definition provided by Weber (2017, p. 315): "the phenomenon of overcrowded tourism destinations, where the (mainly social) carrying capacity is exceeded." This conforms largely to the definition provided by the Responsible Tourism Partnership (2017): "Overtourism describes destinations where hosts or guests, locals or visitors, feel that there are too many visitors and that the quality of life in the area or the quality of the experience has deteriorated unacceptably." Both definitions imply a limit and with it the acknowledgement that this limit can, by definition, be exceeded. The point of concern then is where the limit should be set, which should accord with how the impacts of exceeding these limits are judged. This paper offers some insights into possible impacts of overtourism on employment, thereby assisting policy makers and destination management/marketing organisations in ensuring tourism development addresses the needs of key stakeholders, most notably the local communities in which tourism takes place.

The negative consequences of overtourism have not to date been associated with employment. From a social impact perspective the negative consequences tend to focus on,

for example, inflation, unaffordable housing, crime and congestion. It is the contention here though that the poor working conditions often associated with tourism are likely to be exacerbated by overtourism. There are implications for the social fabric of communities but we draw in this paper on the immediate impacts on the employee, employer and tourists rather than the distal impacts on the wider community.

Arguably, there are currently a number of crises facing developed economies, one of which is a polarization in the occupational hierarchy at its top and lower ends, a phenomenon frequently referred to as the hourglass economy (Anderson, 2009). Bell's (1973) predictions for a post-industrial society populated by white-collared knowledge workers have not materialised. Until fairly recently at least the UK government was keen to jump on the knowledge economy bandwagon in its educational policy, specifically expansion of higher education (Wolf, 2011). This thesis argued there was to be an increasing demand for knowledge workers, particularly in the service sector where complexity and a lack of standardisation would lead to reduced demand for lower-skilled work, and an increase in demand for higher-level competencies (Frenkel, Korzcynski, Shire, & Tam, 1999).

Notwithstanding variation in what might be termed interactive service work (Thompson, Warhurst, & Callaghan, 2001) much tourism employment undoubtedly falls within what would traditionally comprise low-skilled employment (Baum, 2006; Riley, Ladkin, & Szivas, 2002). It is recognised that this characterisation may be the result of a narrow definition of skills, i.e. focussing heavily on cognitive (hard) rather than social (soft) skills (Burns, 1997; Walmsley, 2015), but it is not these latter skills that are generally referred to in the context of the knowledge economy (Thompson et al., 2001).

Depending on the type of job being replaced, growth in tourism may result in a move away from the traditional notion of the knowledge economy, and simultaneously offer a shift towards the hourglass economy. While we are not arguing there is anything inherently wrong with interactive service work, indeed, many tourism workers get a great deal of satisfaction from their jobs, it remains open to debate as to whether policy makers might consider structural shifts towards low paid, low skilled work aligned with longer term national growth strategies.

## Overtourism and Decent Work

Maintaining a high level of employment continues to be a key policy objective for governments around the world. Today though, policy makers are being questioned about the nature of the jobs that are being created. This is evident, for example, in the International Labour Office's promotion of a Decent Work Agenda which seeks to ensure policy makers focus on job quality as well as job creation. The United Nations have similarly adopted the notion of Decent Work, which features as one of its seventeen sustainable development goals. The UN highlights the paradox of employment not guaranteeing an escape out of poverty as a reason for this focus. Within a British context there is certainly much evidence that supports this view as as many as 1 in 5 workers earn less than the living wage (Savage, 2011) and where within a decade the figure of in-work poor had risen from 2 to 2.5 million (Cooke & Lawton, 2008).

Staying within a British context, but one that is hardly unique amongst advanced economies, the Taylor Report (Taylor, 2017, p. 9) makes very clear the challenge facing work this century: "Our national strategy for work – the British way - should be explicitly directed toward the goal of good work for all, recognising that good work and plentiful work can and should go together." Whereas full employment as a policy objective remains at the forefront of government agendas, there is evidently a recognition that work should be 'decent', which we would argue includes paying a living wage (a wage that is high enough to maintain a normal standard of living, i.e. that covers basic living costs at a minimum). The fact that tourism is a low wage sector is hardly contentious (see for example Walmsley, 2012) and there is concern that, as noted above, wages no longer suffice to cover basic costs of living (this is particularly the case in the UK where housing costs continue to rise).

Decent work extends beyond wage concerns and comprises working conditions. Here too tourism has frequently been criticised for, for example, not providing employees with formal training, for requiring excessive amounts of overtime (often not remunerated), for physically demanding and often dangerous work as well as for providing short term, part time contracts (precarious work). Baum (2007) established the lack of any notable progress in human resource management in tourism despite much rhetoric to the contrary, echoing earlier concerns about tourism work (e.g. Riley et al., 2002; Wood, 1997).

As Baum (2007) intimated, there frequently exists a discrepancy between the rhetoric around tourism employment, and what is done on the ground, the reality, for workers. Font et al. (Font, Walmsley, Coggoti, McCombes, & Häusler, 2012) in a study of CSR in global hotel chains compared company policy with company practice and saw major discrepancies for many of the hotel chains that were reviewed. At the same time, tourism firms frequently remind us of the importance of staff to their success; pronouncements about the value of their staff are indeed commonplace. To cite just two examples, RIU Hotels' (2017) website declares: "Since the company began, RIU has considered the people to be its main asset as the service fully depends on the direct relationship between the customer and the staff". Similarly, Iberostar Hotels and Resorts (2017) suggests one of the CSR principles it is governed by is "An optimal work environment which promotes professional development, equal opportunities and a plurality as well as functional diversity in the workplace."

The academic literature is equally not short of examples that explain the 'direct' relationship between staff satisfaction and business performance. The following quotation is taken from a core textbook on tourism marketing:

"The progressive company creates a high level of employee satisfaction, which leads employees to work on continuous improvements as well as breakthrough innovations. The result is higher-quality products and services, which create high customer and stakeholder satisfaction. Growth creates opportunities for employee advancement. Profits from satisfied customers means we can pay our employees a fair wage. There is always a synergistic loop between satisfied customers and satisfied employees. Satisfied employees create satisfied customers." (Kotler, Bowen, & Makens, 2014, p. 98).

At an empirical level there is little evidence to support some of Kotler et al.'s (2014) claims, despite their apparent theoretical appeal. Specifically, unless we think of a cooperative form of organisation where a share of profits is distributed amongst all staff, the hypothesised positive relationship between profits and salary levels simply does not hold. It remains a fundamental economic insight (of Keynesian economics) that nominal wages are sticky (Fan, 2007; Solow, 1979), they neither fall nor rise in proportion to shifts in demand for labour or profit levels (at least not in the short term). A cursory glance at wage levels demonstrates this: In the UK, the average worker earned just £10 more in 2013 than in 2001 (a real

reduction in income if one were to calculate in inflation) and in the US real buying power of the average American worker's wage peaked in 1973 (Collinson, 2015).

The result of the above discussion is that many aspects of tourism employment continue to cause concern. From wages to working conditions, there is still some way to go before we are able to describe tourism work as decent. The question we now turn to is what are the impacts of overtourism on tourism employment specifically? This question is answered in three parts. Firstly a discussion of the cause of overtourism is offered as this provides the foundation for understanding overtourism's impact on tourism employment. Secondly, we will review albeit in a largely theoretical manner given the as yet absence of empirical evidence, the relationship between overtourism and employment and impacts on the employee. Finally, we will also briefly look at the impacts on employers and tourists.

### Overtourism and Poor Working Conditions in Tourism: Causes

Although it is recognised that responsibility in tourism rests on many shoulders, not just those of the business community (Goodwin, 2011) the focus here is on the businesses that provide tourism services. The extent of business' responsibility for the nature of tourism development can be debated, and will vary by destination, and yet few would argue the business community bears no responsibility for overtourism.

Looking at business' responsibility, the cause of overtourism is the profit motive compounded by a narrow view of wealth creation in firms. Maximisation of profits, or shareholder value, is not the only thing driving tourism businesses (many small businesses in tourism are driven by lifestyle considerations, e.g. Ateljevic & Doorne, 2000; Shaw & Williams, 2004) but the profit motive does drive rapid and excessive tourism development. Particularly the desire for short-term gains, and possibly the fear of losing out to competitors, results in expansion at any cost. The dilemma is that the costs are not borne by the businesses that retain profits, but largely by the local community primarily who endure the worst of overtourism's excesses (we recognise that it is too simplistic to write of 'the' local community as though this were some homogeneous group of stakeholders (Timothy, 2007), but our analysis does not permit a more detailed review of this issue here, and it does not detract from the key point being made). The age-old problem of the tragedy of the

commons (Hardin, 1968), i.e. the exploitation of a common resource to the detriment of all is apparent.

The history of tourism development is one where the local community, and the destination that they call home, have frequently been regarded as a resource to be exploited (Moscardo, 2008). Although the emergence of sustainable development, leading to the notion of sustainable tourism, shed a more critical light on tourism as an economic activity (Jafari, 2001), tourism still operates within a profit-driven system and needs to be recognised as such (Britton, 1991).

Theories that question in particular a laissez-faire form of capitalism, one that emerged de force in the 1980s, are not new. Even in the early days of academic interest in the business-society relationship (e.g. Bowen, 1953) it was recognised that the social responsibilities of businesses “refers to the obligations of businessmen (sic) to pursue those policies, to make those decisions, or to follow those lines of action which are desirable in terms of the objectives and values of our society” (Bowen, 1953, p. 6). From the very outset, what business did had to conform not just to legislation, but also to the moral standards of society as confirmed in Carroll’s (1979, p. 500) much used definition of corporate social responsibility: “The social responsibility of business encompasses the economic, legal, ethical, and discretionary expectations that society has of organizations at a given point in time.” This ethical dimension finds repercussions in discussions taking place at that time around Legitimacy Theory, where organizational legitimacy was defined as the congruence between the values associated with the organization and the values of its environment (Dowling & Pfeffer, 1975). Stakeholder Theory (Blair, 1998; Freeman, 1984) similarly stresses business’ responsibility towards a range of stakeholders (including employees).

The modern era of capitalism, by that we are referring to the post 1980s period, is characterised by a ‘decoupling’ of business and society, where the mantra of ‘the business of business is business’ holds sway. Milton Friedman’s (Friedman, 1970) much quoted dictum ‘The social responsibility of business is to increase profit’ is equally indicative of a form of capitalism desiring to be unfettered by government constraints. It would be disingenuous to impute to adherents of such a neo-liberal free market ideology a total disregard for society, of which Margaret Thatcher nonetheless famously suggested such a

thing did not exist. Business and society can never be entirely decoupled of course. What we are referring to here is business' focus on its own immediate needs, with those of its other stakeholders, including its own employees, being of secondary importance. The idea was, that business focussed on its own needs would thereby maximise its contribution to society.

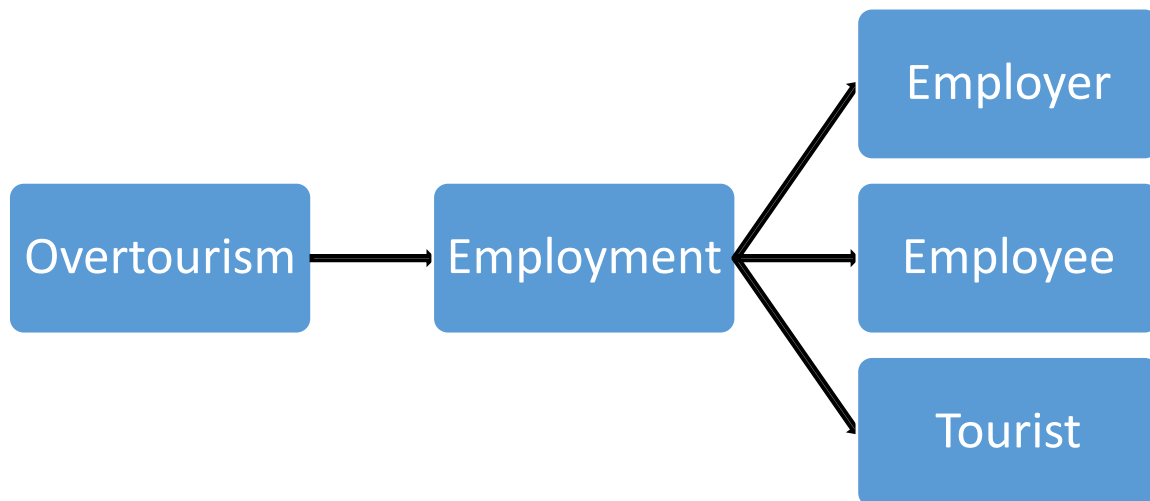
It was upon this backdrop that literature in the fields of CSR, Stakeholder Theory and Legitimacy Theory started to unfold. Notable to our review as it focuses on employees as stakeholders of the firm is Blair's (1998) work. Blair (1998) challenges the traditional view that owners of the firm are entitled to its profits (surpluses) as they carry the risk associated with the enterprise. Rather, she argues that employees are also invested in the firm and carry some of the risks associated with its affairs. Although firm-specific human capital, which will carry with it a wage premium, is less dominant in tourism (Walmsley & Partington, 2014) tourism employees do share risks associated with the fortunes of their employer. Blair (1998) goes on to argue that management and board of directors should seek to maximise the total wealth-creating potential of the firm, i.e. to include disbursements to its employees. At present, the view of employees solely as a cost, and therefore to be minimised in the search for profit maximisation, remains the basis of poor working conditions in tourism. Indeed, we argue that the problems associated with overtourism more generally are associated with a too narrow view of wealth creation, one that sees business' operations as distinct from the societies and communities within which it operates.

### [Consequences of Overtourism on Tourism Employment](#)

This section, admittedly, remains largely theoretical given the lack of empirical research on the impact of overtourism on employment. On the basis of the understanding that overtourism comprises an excess of tourism experienced by those involved, we focus here on individuals who come into contact with tourism employment first hand: tourists, employers and, of course, employees themselves (see Figure 1).



**Figure 1: Impacts of overtourism via employment**



As was noted above, even under less invasive forms of tourism, working conditions in the sector cause concern. One can assume therefore that overtourism exacerbates existing characteristics of tourism employment. However, this would be jumping to premature conclusions. Theoretically, for example, where demand for tourism labour outstrips supply the price of labour might increase which would be good for the tourism employee. The relationship between overtourism and tourism employment, and in turn subsequent impacts on employees, employers and tourists is certainly worth considering in some detail to explore, and avoid inaccurate claims.

Starting with the impact of overtourism on employment, we suggest that total demand for tourism labour is a function of number of tourists. As the number of tourists goes up, so will the need for tourism workers. The relationship does not have to be linear, and indeed is unlikely to be as shall be discussed further below, but the overall positive relationship (in the sense that when one variable increases so does the other) is a given. There are then three immediate possible outcomes of this increased demand for labour:

- a) It is met by recruiting more staff

- b) It is met by increasing the productivity of staff
- c) A combination of a) and b)

To a): The assumption is that more workers are available in the local labour market to take up tourism employment. Thus, tourism provides more jobs for locals. This is in principle a good thing, particularly if tourism can provide decent work. Tourism is not renowned though for providing decent work.

Employers in tourism are used to frequent, and often unpredictable, fluctuations in demand and respond by hiring staff on short term, temporary contracts. For example, according to data from the Office for National Statistics in the UK (Clegg, 2017), the percentage of workers on zero hours contracts has more than trebled in the last ten years, with one in five of those employed in 'accommodation and food' being on such a contract in 2017 (zero hours contracts are contracts where there is no guaranteed minimum amount of work). It is possible to argue that, if the local labour market is tight, tourism wages may rise (unlikely though given the stickiness of wages, see previous discussion). It is more likely that tourism then causes an influx of workers from other communities/regions who come to take up employment while wage levels remain constant. This can lead to social problems (housing shortages, excessive demand for local infrastructure, e.g. schools, hospitals etc.). We are not here focussing on social impacts though so leave this discussion to others.

If tourism wages were to rise in response to a rise in demand for tourism labour, this would initially be a good thing for those already employed in the sector. The sector would then also become relatively more attractive to those already in the destination who might migrate into tourism work from other sectors. Overall then wages in the destination might increase as non-tourism sectors are put at a relative disadvantage in relation to attracting staff, and consequently raise their wage levels in attempt to woo workers away from tourism. Overall, wage levels rise across sectors, and in the absence of a similar rise in inflation workers should be better off. As we have discussed earlier, and in the absence of empirical evidence to support this thesis, wage increases in tourism as a response to increases in demand for tourism workers is an unlikely scenario (but one that should still be contemplated). Even what might look like initially positive outcomes (wage increases) bear some drawbacks however. So, for example, there is a danger that youth who work

disproportionately in tourism give up education that may enhance their productivity and earning power in the long run, for the sake of immediate gains from tourism work (see Walmsley, 2015).

To b): As with a) the initial effects might be regarded as positive, after all, an increase in productivity is a good thing: in theory the more productive an employee the higher their wages should be. The individual tourism worker is certainly unlikely to earn less in an overtourism scenario. S/he might earn more if additional work (be that being more productive, or simply working more hours) is paid accordingly. There are two problems here, the first and most obvious is that not all employers pay for additional work in tourism. Secondly, even if the additional work is being paid, it might not be sufficient to offset the foregone leisure time s/he has had to give up (again, there are potential implications for others e.g. the tourism workers' families). Tourism workers may face pressure to undertake additional work for their employer even if they would rather not.

The individual tourism worker may increase his/her productivity not by extending working hours but simply by getting more done in a given period of time (the common understanding of labour productivity). The benefits hereof accrue to the employer unless the worker's pay increases in accordance with his/her increase in productivity (a very unlikely scenario). Rather, what can already be a very emotionally (Bolton & Boyd, 2003; Burns, 1997) and physically demanding (Aksu & Köksal, 2005) form of employment just becomes even more emotionally and physically demanding. This, it appears, could be the real downside of overtourism on employment, i.e. where the demand for labour does not go up in proportion to the increase in tourists, and, all else being equal, results in worse working conditions for the tourism worker (longer hours, more physically, emotionally and mentally demanding work, lower real per hour wages given non-payment of overtime).

The consequences of overwork (stress, especially when it becomes chronic) are well documented, from physiological (e.g. headaches, weakened immune system, high blood pressure, sickness etc.) to cognitive (e.g. mental slowness, confusion, forgetfulness, anxiety etc.) and emotional (e.g. irritation, frustration, apathy etc.). These are very likely to negatively affect both the employer and the tourist. The employer would have to deal with less committed and engaged staff, higher rates of absenteeism and labour turnover. For the

tourist, the service encounter will be negatively affected and from the list of above impacts it is not just front-line staff in customer facing roles whose performance will be damaged. We can see then that overtourism not only shapes tourism employment, but that the way employment is shaped has direct implications for tourists and employers.

Finally, we feel we should reiterate why we believe the hiring of new workers to meet demand and/or an increase in tourism wages to match increases in productivity are unlikely. This comes back to our discussion of the relationship between firms and society, specifically the view that the purpose of the firm is to maximise shareholder value. Within this form or economic rationale disbursements to employees are not regarded as part of the wealth-creation process. Rather, employees are regarded as a cost to be minimised. In the extreme, everything can be sacrificed for the sake of profit, which ultimately leads to the exploitation of workers. The problem is exacerbated by short-term thinking, themselves driven by short-term performance targets.

## Conclusion

This is the first paper of its kind to look at the phenomenon of overtourism and how it relates to tourism employment, and then by extension to employees, employers and tourists. Overall the conclusion is reached that the absence of decent work in tourism is exacerbated by overtourism. This is primarily because wages do not shift in line with the demand for and scarcity of labour. Furthermore, the demand for tourism labour does not increase in proportion with the demand for tourism services, which also aggravates poor working conditions. Together, these effects also negatively impact the employer and the tourist. The reason for these circumstances is the ongoing separation of business and society, of seeing the wealth creation of the firm only in terms of profits (or shareholder value). Recent shifts in society, i.e. the increasing questioning of a free-market form of capitalism since the financial crisis of 2007/08 (Küng, 2010), might lend more credence to Legitimacy Theory which suggests that to survive organisational values need to reflect society's values. Based on our analysis, at present, overtourism simply seems to support a further entrenching of the hourglass economy, and a move away from decent work.

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