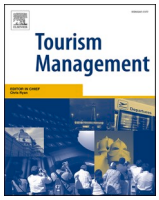
Tourism Management 119 (2027) 105567



Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Tourism Management

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/tourman





The myth of "Overtourism": A Barthesian reading of an elusive concept

Philipp Wassler

Department of Management, University of Bergamo, Via dei Caniana 2, Bergamo 24129, Italy

ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:
Overtourism
Barthes
Myth
Crowding
Policy

ABSTRACT

This paper applies Roland Barthes' theory of myth to overtourism, arguing that the term naturalizes historically contingent tourism problems. Without denying the reality of congestion, environmental degradation, or resident dissatisfaction, it traces how overtourism is constructed through media discourse, governance, and tourism development. Drawing on Barthesian semiology, the paper shows how complex political and economic processes are reframed as the apparently self-evident problem of "too much tourism," whether excess is identified through destination indicators or residents' and tourists' perceptions. It argues that overtourism can obscure competing explanations and interests while shaping what is measured, blamed, and governed. The paper concludes by treating overtourism itself as an object of critical inquiry rather than a self-evident analytical category.

> "By reducing any quality to quantity, myth economizes intelligence: it understands reality more cheaply." — Roland Barthes, Mythologies (1957)

1. Introduction

In *Mythologies* (1957), French literary theorist Roland Barthes (1915–1980) argues that *myth* is defined not by what is said, but by how it is said. Building on Ferdinand de Saussure's semiology, Barthes redefines myth not as falsehood or fiction in the ordinary sense, but as a second-order system of signification that renders cultural values natural and self-evident. In this framework, myth operates by taking an already meaningful sign and transforming it into a signifier for a new ideological message: one that is received as given and unquestioned within the culture it addresses.

Barthes illustrates myth through ordinary cultural forms whose historical conventions come to appear natural. Catch wrestling, for example, becomes mythic when its choreographed gestures are read as a timeless expression of combat and masculinity (p. 5). The point is methodological: myth does not fabricate an object but re-presents a culturally specific sign as immediate and self-evident.

As Umberto Eco (1984) later emphasizes, this elaboration of myth should not be mistaken for conspiracy or deliberate deception. The critic's task is therefore not to unmask falsehoods, but to reveal the semiotic mechanism through which history is naturalized, whereby what is contingent, constructed, and historically situated comes to appear self-evident and natural (Barthes, 1957, p. 238).

This article applies Barthes' conceptual mechanism of myth to the term "overtourism." The argument is not that the phenomena commonly associated with the term are illusory: negative impacts of tourism, such as crowding, displacement, gentrification, and environmental stress are well documented in both historical and contemporary tourism research. Nor does the argument imply that existing scholarship uniformly presents overtourism as an objective condition. Rather, the contention is that overtourism itself functions as a myth in the Barthesian sense, insofar as it naturalizes a threshold of excess whose basis may be physical, social, perceptual, or political, but whose construction is rarely made explicit (Butler & Dodds, 2022; Dodds & Butler, 2019; Gretzel, 2019; Koens et al., 2018; Mihalič, 2020; Wassler et al., 2026). Although media and academic accounts generally present overtourism negatively, different actors use the term to identify different causes and justify different remedies. Residents and activists may invoke it to demand limits or redistribution, public agencies to support visitor-management measures, and tourism businesses to promote higher-spending, lower-volume tourism. It appears neutral and descriptive in the narrower sense that it names a condition, even though its uses carry divergent political and economic implications.

This research therefore examines how overtourism is constructed and mobilized as a Barthesian myth. It treats the concept itself as an analytical object: how it gains legitimacy without an agreed empirical or experiential threshold, how it travels across contexts, and whether alternative framings such as touristification, displacement, or territorial overcommodification preserve causal and historical specificity more

E-mail address: philipp.wassler@unibg.it.

https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tourman.2026.105567
Received 2 October 2026; Received in revised form 27 October 2026; Accepted 3 November 2026
Available online 7 November 2026
0261-5177/© 2026 The Author. Published by Elsevier Ltd. This is an open access article under the CC BY license (http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/).

effectively.

This argument builds on, rather than displaces, the extensive overtourism literature. Existing scholarship already demonstrates the importance of governance, destination-system dynamics, social and ecological impacts, and the fact that tourism itself is not necessarily the problem (Cheer et al., 2019; Milano et al., 2019). Resident attitudes likewise cannot be inferred directly from visitor numbers (Adie & Falk, 2021). The contribution here is narrower: to explain, through Barthes, how a term that presupposes excess remains rhetorically coherent across divergent diagnoses and how that signifying operation may shape what is measured, blamed, and governed.

Barthes' two-order model directs attention to the passage by which an already meaningful description or experience of tourism pressure becomes the signifier of a naturalized threshold. It therefore separates material harms and lived experiences from this second-order operation and asks what historical relations are emptied from the sign when a contingent threshold appears to speak for itself.

2. Literature review: A genealogy of overtourism

For Barthes, myth is historically produced: the critic reconstructs how a contingent formation comes to appear self-evident (1957, p. 228). This perspective is useful for analysing overtourism because the material conditions associated with the term, tourism pressure, crowding, and strain on destinations long predate the term itself (Dickinson, 2018; Dodds & Butler, 2019; Goodwin, 2017; Koens et al., 2018). Veríssimo et al. (2020) suggested that the term is a modern evolution of sustainable tourism, addressing some of the issues that tourism literature has discussed for decades. What requires explanation, therefore, is not simply the existence of these conditions, but the historical and discursive process through which they became legible as "overtourism."

Overtourism offers a particularly clear case because its development is recent enough to trace and sufficiently documented to examine. Although the problems it names are not new and the term originated several years earlier, the compound noun "over-tourism" entered widespread public circulation only in the late 2010s. Google Trends and other indicators of diffusion suggest that the term gained significant traction from approximately 2017 onward, driven primarily by media coverage and industry reports rather than by prior academic theorisation (Perkumienė & Pranskūnienė, 2019). A rhetorically effective label thus circulated in public discourse before scholars began to define and operationalise it.

This sequence is theoretically and methodologically significant. Rather than following the more familiar path from scholarly concept to public adoption, overtourism moved from media discourse into academic debate. Once it entered tourism research, scholars retrospectively defined the term in different ways and began to develop measures and management responses (Butler & Dodds, 2022; Cheer et al., 2019; Wassler et al., 2026). Koens et al. (2018) similarly note that the term's media origins preceded its incorporation into tourism scholarship through special issues and thematic collections. By the time overtourism reached academic journals, it had already acquired rhetorical force and an implicit threshold logic: tourism could apparently be identified as having become "too much." Academic research consequently inherited a partially stabilised discourse that it had to clarify, qualify, or reproduce.

Existing research on overtourism can be organised into five overlapping lenses (Table 1). First, conceptual reviews examine the term's emergence, definitions, implications, and future directions (Capocchi et al., 2019). Second, destination-management and carrying-capacity approaches focus on visitor volumes, congestion, thresholds, and management tools (Peeters et al., 2018; UNWTO, 2018). Third, resident-impact and quality-of-life studies examine housing pressure, displacement, everyday life, resilience, and visitor–resident relations (Koens et al., 2018; Cheung & Li, 2019). Fourth, critical accounts link overtourism to touristification, platform-mediated accommodation, commodification, gentrification, and the right to the city (Celata et al., 2020; Díaz-Parra & Jover, 2020; Milano et al., 2019). Fifth, sustainability and degrowth scholarship connects overtourism to ecological limits, activism, and post-growth tourism futures (Buitrago-Esquinas et al., 2023; Milano et al., 2019).

Table 1
Overtourism research, limitations, and representative sources.

Lens	Core focus	Approach	Representative sources
Conceptual reviews	Origins, definitions, impacts, and future directions	Largely descriptive in nature	Capocchi et al. (2019)
Carrying capacity/ destination management	Visitor volumes, congestion, thresholds, and management tools	Treats overtourism primarily as a technical or managerial problem	Peeters et al. (2018); UNWTO (2018)
Resident impacts/ quality of life	Housing pressure, displacement, everyday life, resident–visitor relations, and resilience	Often examines local impacts without explaining the external drivers	Koens et al. (2018); Cheung and Li (2019)
Critical urban political economy and social-movement perspectives	Touristification, short-term rentals, commodification, gentrification, and the right to the city	Emphasizes material, spatial, economic, and institutional processes, while also attending to political struggle	Celata et al. (2020); Díaz-Parra and Jover (2020); Milano et al. (2019)
Sustainability/ degrowth	Ecological limits, activism, responsible tourism, and post-growth futures	Gives relatively less attention to why growth-oriented tourism remains compelling	Milano et al. (2019); Buitrago-Esquinas et al. (2023)

While these lenses provide valuable accounts of overtourism's definitions, measurable impacts, governance challenges, social inequalities, and ecological consequences, they largely treat the phenomenon as an existing condition to be explained or managed. A Barthesian approach extends this literature by asking how overtourism becomes meaningful and persuasive in the first place. It examines how discourses transform complex and historically specific relations into the apparently natural problem of too much tourism. In this way, Barthesian analysis complements the existing five lenses by revealing the ideological and semiotic processes through which overtourism is constructed, normalised, and contested.

The need for this perspective becomes especially clear in debates over definition. Existing scholarship can be broadly differentiated between objective and subjective approaches. Objective approaches seek destination-specific thresholds using indicators such as visitor density, congestion, carrying capacity, infrastructure pressure, or environmental stress. They do not necessarily seek a universal threshold applicable across all destinations; in many cases, they aim to identify limits based on local infrastructure, ecological conditions, governance priorities, or stakeholder needs.

Subjective approaches centre on how residents and tourists perceive and experience excess, including perceptions of crowding, disruption, loss of control, or declining quality of life. These approaches may reveal differences between residents, tourists, workers, officials, and other groups. Such differences do not invalidate the concept of a threshold; rather, they show that thresholds may be plural, situated, and contested. Overtourism is commonly described as the point at which tourism becomes "too much," yet scholars do not agree on how that threshold

should be identified, measured, or experienced (Dodds & Butler, 2019; Gretzel, 2019; Koens et al., 2018; Mihalič, 2020; Wassler et al., 2026). Mihalič (2020) incorporates ecological, cultural, social, and economic impacts; Dodds and Butler (2019) emphasise overcrowding and disruption to residents; and the European Parliament's broad capacity-based formulation includes physical, ecological, social, economic, psychological, and political limits (Butler & Dodds, 2022). The range of these formulations demonstrates the concept's operational and experiential instability.

The disagreement also concerns what should count as evidence. Dodds and Butler (2019) emphasise visitor numbers overwhelming local services, whereas Veríssimo et al. (2020) foreground stakeholder perceptions. Milano et al. (2024) and Wassler et al. (2026) interpret crowding as the visible expression of deeper governance and development dynamics, while Gössling et al. (2020) focus on residents' perceived loss of control over place identity. These differences show that overtourism is not a single, consistently observable or consistently experienced condition. It can refer to a measured pressure, an experience of crowding, a political conflict, or a perceived transformation of place.

Empirical studies caution against drawing conclusions from visitor volumes alone. In Budapest, Smith et al. (2021) find that tourism accounts for only a marginal share of dissatisfaction with urban development. Studies in Krakow and Munich likewise situate perceptions of overtourism within wider local disputes rather than objective overcrowding alone (Szromek et al., 2020; Namberger et al., 2021). These cases do not establish a universal pattern, but they demonstrate why governance, planning, distribution, and situated experience cannot be reduced to visitor counts.

Institutional responses can reinforce a technical understanding of the problem. UNWTO (2019), for example, proposes visitor redistribution, alternative itineraries, regulatory adjustments, stakeholder engagement, and monitoring. Such measures may alleviate particular pressures, but they can redistribute visitors without questioning ownership, urban purpose, distribution, or the growth-oriented assumptions that shape tourism development.

The analytical task, then, is not only to measure tourism intensity or identify effective management responses. It is also to historicise the emergence of the term and examine how actors use it to frame problems and solutions. The next section applies Barthes' two-order model to the threshold logic embedded in overtourism, showing how a historically specific and politically contested relation can be presented as a natural limit.

3. A semiological analysis: the myth of overtourism

In his essay "myth, today", Barthes (1957, p. 191) argues that myth operates through a two-stage semiological process in which language functions simultaneously as a system of description and as a vehicle for ideology. At the first level of signification, a signifier is linked to a signified, producing a sign that appears to describe an empirical reality or an experience of reality. At the second level, this completed sign is appropriated and transformed into the signifier of a broader ideological message (Table 2). Through repetition and circulation, this second-order meaning gradually comes to appear natural, objective, and self-evident rather than historically contingent. Myth therefore does not invent reality - it reorganises existing signs so that particular interpretations of the world appear as common sense.

Barthes' model operates at two levels. At the first order, the signifier is the material form (a word, image, statistic, or statement), the signified is the concept associated with it, and their relation produces a sign that appears to describe an object or experience; signification is this meaning-making relation. At the second order, the completed first-order sign becomes a new signifier, whose mythical signified is a broader cultural or ideological concept. Second-order signification is the process through which this historically situated meaning appears natural, self-evident, or common sense. In the case of overtourism, a description or experience of tourism pressure can therefore become the signifier of a wider assumption about the threshold between acceptable and excessive tourism (Barthes, 1957, pp. 191, 197, 222).

Table 2
The myth of overtourism.

Semiological level	Content
First-order signifier	The prefix over- + tourism, together with the discourses and experiences through which tourism is identified as excessive
First-order signified	Measured tourism pressure and/or experienced or perceived excess
First-order sign (complete)	A description of a material condition or socially situated experience
Second-order signifier (mythical form)	The word *overtourism* as it circulates in media, policy, and advocacy
Second-order signified (mythical concept)	A destination- or stakeholder-specific threshold is treated as self-evident once established, even though its criteria and authority remain contestable
Signification (the myth)	A locally constructed threshold appears neutral, settled, and transferable without further examination

3.1. First-order signification: overtourism as description

3.1.1. The signifier

At the first level of signification, the signifier consists of the compound lexical form "over-tourism". Morphologically, it combines the prefix over-, conventionally associated with excess or the transgression of a limit, with the noun tourism, referring to practices of travel and visitation. Although this level appears purely linguistic, Barthes (1957, p. 197) reminds us that signifiers are never entirely neutral. Their material form predisposes certain readings by activating certain culturally familiar associations. The prefix "over-" evokes concepts such as overpopulation, overconsumption, and overload, each of which presupposes that a limit has been exceeded. Consequently, the linguistic form encourages the interpretation of tourism through a threshold of excess, although that excess may subsequently be defined quantitatively, experientially, or politically.

3.1.2. The signified

The corresponding signified is "excessive tourism," which may refer either to measurable concentrations of visitors and their material effects or to residents' and tourists' subjective experiences of crowding, disruption, loss of control, or declining quality of life. These conditions can be examined through indicators such as visitor density, accommodation occupancy, transport pressure, or environmental measures, but also through reported perceptions, narratives, and experiences.

Yet, even this apparently descriptive meaning is less objective and less universal than it first appears. Describing tourism as "excessive" presupposes a judgement regarding what constitutes an acceptable level of visitation or an acceptable experience of place. Such thresholds are unlikely to be universal and are not agreed upon in the aforementioned literature. They vary across destinations, historical periods, institutional priorities, and stakeholder perspectives. A number of visitors regarded as problematic in one locality may be welcomed in another, while the same destination may be experienced differently by different groups. Thus, even the first-order signification contains implicit assumptions about normality and excess.

3.1.3. The first-order sign

Together, signifier and signified produce a first-order sign in which overtourism appears to describe a measurable condition, a shared experience, or both. Images of crowded streets, visitor-density statistics, overloaded transport, or resident complaints reinforce this appearance of objectivity or immediacy, even though the relation between these

signs and a threshold of excess remains interpretive.

Once stabilised through repeated use, however, this sign becomes available for incorporation into the second-order system in which Barthes locates myth.

3.2. Second-order signification: overtourism as myth

3.2.1. The mythical signifier

For Barthes, the completed first-order sign can itself become the signifier of a second-order semiological system, which gives birth to the myth. This transformation is precisely what occurs with overtourism. As discussed above, detached from its original descriptive or experiential context, the term begins to circulate through newspaper headlines, policy documents, destination management strategies, NGO campaigns, political speeches, and industry reports. Within these contexts, overtourism no longer functions merely as a description of tourism intensity or a report of lived experience; instead, it becomes a condensed symbol through which wider concerns about urban change, environmental degradation, local identity, sustainability, and social conflict are articulated.

Repeated circulation across these institutional and media settings gradually stabilises the concept as what Barthes calls "common sense" (1957, p. 223). Rather than requiring justification, the existence of overtourism becomes an assumption shared across diverse actors. The empirical sign is transformed into a symbolic form capable of carrying potential ideological meaning.

3.2.2. The mythical signified

The ideological concept attached to this mythical signifier is the belief that a threshold separating acceptable from excessive tourism has been adequately established once it is expressed through an indicator, model, or shared perception. This threshold may be destination-specific or stakeholder-specific. The critical issue is not whether it is universal, but whether the social, political, and historical choices involved in constructing it become invisible.

This framing subtly relocates attention from the organisation of tourism to the quantity of tourists themselves. Structural processes, including housing financialisation, destination marketing, urban planning, transport investment, platform capitalism, labour markets, or governance choices, are silently displaced by a focus on visitor numbers. Political questions concerning how tourism is produced become technical questions concerning how many tourists can be accommodated.

In Barthes' terms, this is the defining operation of myth. Historically contingent interpretations are "emptied of their political origins" (1957, p. 222) and presented as if they were natural properties of reality itself.

3.2.3. Mythical signification

The resulting myth is the apparently self-evident proposition that overtourism exists as a condition in which a threshold separates "acceptable tourism" from "excessive tourism". Rather than inviting debate over how a destination- or stakeholder-specific threshold is defined, measured, experienced, negotiated, or contested, the concept may encourage the assumption that the threshold has sufficient authority to guide interpretation and intervention without further discussion of how it was constructed, whose interests it reflects, or to whom it applies.

This naturalisation has consequences for policy and public debate. If the problem is defined primarily as an excess of visitors, solutions centre on carrying-capacity models, tourist dispersal, reservation systems, congestion pricing, destination quotas, or behavioural regulation. Such interventions may alleviate particular pressures, but they can also make visitor-flow control appear more central than the institutional and political arrangements shaping tourism development.

Myth therefore does not deny overcrowding, environmental stress, or experiences of disruption. Instead, it can make the interpretation that these problems signify excessive tourism appear natural or politically neutral, while explanations centred on property relations, speculative investment, urban governance, infrastructure, or the commodification of place become secondary (see Wassler et al., 2026). In Barthes' formulation, "history is transformed into nature".

This threshold can also be rhetorically stabilised through mechanisms Barthes associates with tautology and moderation: "too many tourists" may merely redescribe overtourism, while formulas such as "not against tourism, only overtourism" preserve the assumption that a legitimate threshold already exists (Barthes, 1957, pp. 232–233).

4. The myth in circulation

Having identified the semiological structure of overtourism, the next step is to consider how the same threshold logic may travel across different institutional settings. For Barthes, myth is reproduced through repeated communication rather than created by a single author or institution (1957, p. 213). The three arenas below—media, governing bodies, and luxury tourism—are illustrative sites of public representation, administrative operationalisation, and market differentiation, not an exhaustive stakeholder sample.

The cases are not representative of all stakeholders. Residents, activists, labour organisations, platforms, transport providers, industry groups, and actors who reject the category can articulate competing narratives. The purpose here is narrower: to compare how the overtourism sign operates across public representation, policy administration, and commercial positioning, not to establish the prevalence of any narrative.

Circulation is therefore a theoretical proposition rather than a frequency claim. It is supported where different arenas retain the presupposition of a crossed threshold while assigning different causes, harms, and remedies, and weakened where that structure is absent or rejected.

The question is whether overtourism continues to imply a measurable boundary between normal and excessive tourism, shifting debate from how that boundary is constituted toward how it should be managed and who is responsible for crossing it.

4.1. Media

Media constitute one important site through which the myth may be reproduced. News reporting often translates complex social processes into narratives intelligible to broad audiences (Milburn & McGrail, 1992), and social media can intensify this process (Kitchens et al., 2020). Overtourism is well suited to this journalistic function because it condenses multiple urban, environmental, economic, and political tensions into a single explanatory category.

Media representations typically rely upon highly visible signs, for example, crowded streets, queues outside attractions, cruise ships dominating historic skylines, congested airports, overflowing public transport, or residents protesting. These images function as first-order signs of congestion, but through repeated association they become visual confirmation of overtourism itself. The audience is encouraged to recognise excessive tourism immediately through familiar iconography rather than through sustained analysis of underlying structural conditions.

This process exemplifies Barthes' observation that myth transforms contingent social arrangements into apparently natural realities. A photograph of a crowded square provides evidence of congestion and of a group's experience of disruption, but it cannot by itself establish that the destination as a whole has crossed a threshold. Through repetition, such a situated sign can become evidence of a destination-wide condition. The argument is therefore not that overtourism is merely one subgroup's grievance, but that a partial sign can be made to stand for a wider claim about the destination.

Moreover, media narratives frequently personalise conflict by presenting tourism through the opposition between tourists and residents. Such framing privileges immediately observable interactions, while

leaving urban planning, housing policy, destination marketing, infrastructure investment, and real estate dynamics largely outside the frame. Consequently, the problem appears to reside primarily in visitor numbers rather than in the political and social organisation of urban space.

4.2. Governing bodies

The myth also circulates through governmental institutions, destination management organisations, and international agencies responsible for tourism governance. Within these settings, overtourism functions as an administrative category through which complex social issues are translated into measurable policy problems (see regulations and cases mentioned above).

Policy documents may operationalise overtourism through destination-specific indicators such as visitor density, carrying capacity, accommodation occupancy, congestion levels, transport demand, or resident satisfaction. Such measures can be appropriate and useful when their scope, population, time period, and normative assumptions are made explicit. A Barthesian analysis therefore does not oppose contextualised thresholds. It asks how a locally constructed threshold acquires administrative authority and whether its contingent basis remains visible when it is used to define problems and justify interventions.

Governance discourse can naturalise historical arrangements when acceptable tourism levels are framed chiefly as matters of optimisation. Carrying-capacity models, visitor dispersal, reservation systems, and flow-management tools may be useful, but their technical presentation can obscure competing economic, environmental, and social priorities, as well as wider issues such as housing speculation and planning choices.

This observation does not imply that such management tools or perception measures lack practical value. Rather, a Barthesian analysis asks how the language within which these tools operate constrains political imagination. Once overtourism is accepted as an objective administrative category or as an apparently self-evident description of dissatisfaction, alternative ways of conceptualising tourism-related conflict become increasingly difficult to articulate within policy discourse.

4.3. The luxury tourism industry

The luxury tourism industry provides a contrasting commercial arena. High-end hospitality and premium destination brands frequently draw on narratives of authenticity, exclusivity, sustainability, and quality over quantity. Tourism has long relied on semiotic distinctions of status and privilege (Thurlow & Jaworski, 2012); the question here is how such distinctions can articulate with overtourism rather than whether they characterise the industry as a whole.

Within this discourse, excessive tourism is implicitly associated with mass visitation, congestion, and standardised tourist experiences. Luxury tourism is presented as the opposite: fewer visitors, greater expenditure, personalised experiences, environmental responsibility, and higher-quality destinations. The problem is therefore framed not as tourism itself but as the wrong form of tourism.

From a Barthesian perspective, this constitutes a characteristic operation of myth. The ideological message does not challenge the broader tourism economy but differentiates between legitimate and illegitimate forms within it. The quantitative threshold assumed by the myth remains intact; only the preferred composition of visitors changes. The solution becomes selective visitation rather than questioning the institutional arrangements through which tourism landscapes are produced, which may disadvantage low-budget travellers.

Consequently, the discourse of quality tourism derives persuasive force from the prior acceptance of overtourism as an objective condition, which distinguishes between “good, high-expenditure, low-impact tourism” and “bad mass tourism”. Without the myth of excessive tourism, the distinction between desirable and undesirable tourists would arguably possess considerably less rhetorical coherence.

Taken together, these arenas illustrate how a stable threshold logic can be appropriated by institutions with different objectives. Their narratives differ, but the proposed underlying form remains similar; establishing its prevalence would require systematic analysis of a defined corpus.

5. Conclusion: what the myth conceals

Barthes' central claim is that myth transforms history into nature. Applied to overtourism, the critical task is therefore not to decide whether congestion or tourism pressure are real, but to reconstruct how a historically contingent category came to appear self-evident. The term's movement from media and policy discourse into tourism research is important in this respect because its rhetorical stabilisation preceded theoretical consolidation (Koens et al., 2018; Perkumienė & Pranskūnienė, 2019; Butler & Dodds, 2022).

The analysis suggests that overtourism may naturalise the idea that tourism becomes problematic once a threshold of “too much” is crossed, whether that threshold is established through physical indicators or through socially situated perceptions and experiences. Definitions differ considerably in how they construct and apply thresholds, which may be destination-specific, stakeholder-specific, objective, subjective, or combined. A threshold logic may nevertheless structure particular uses of the term by directing attention toward identifying, managing, or legitimising a boundary between acceptable and excessive tourism. The argument is therefore not that overtourism scholarship seeks a universal threshold, but that even context-specific thresholds can appear neutral when the criteria used to establish them, the stakeholders privileged by them, and the alternatives excluded by them are not examined.

What can become less visible are the processes producing tourism landscapes: housing financialisation, short-term rental platforms, low-cost aviation, destination marketing, infrastructure investment, speculative real estate, and place commodification, among others. Recent research locates conflict within such dynamics: Milano et al. (2024) emphasise unequal destination development, Wassler et al. (2026) emphasise governance structures, and Gössling et al. (2020) emphasise residents’ perceived loss of control. Studies of Budapest, Krakow, and Munich likewise show that dissatisfaction cannot be reduced to tourism intensity alone (Namberger et al., 2021; Smith et al., 2021; Szromek et al., 2020).

These processes are not denied by overtourism discourse, but they can become secondary when visitor quantity is treated as the central variable. Questions of ownership, governance, planning, investment, regulation, inequality, and benefit distribution may then be displaced by technical questions of measurement and destination management. From a Barthesian perspective, this displacement is how history may be rendered less visible: overtourism itself becomes an object of inquiry rather than solely an analytical instrument.

First, tourism thresholds should be treated as socially and politically constituted rather than universally given. This applies both to objective approaches, which establish destination-specific limits through indicators and models, and to subjective approaches, which identify excess through residents' and tourists’ experiences and perceptions. Such thresholds may be plural, situated, and stakeholder-specific rather than universally applicable. Definitions vary across authors and institutions, so any designation of excess necessarily reflects assumptions about acceptable development, distributional priorities, and desired futures for particular destinations.

Second, greater attention should be paid to the genealogy of the term: which actors promoted, rejected, or modified it, how it travelled across media, policy, industry, activist, and scholarly contexts, and how those movements altered its meaning. Reconstructing this history returns contingency to a category whose rhetorical force depends on appearing obvious (Barthes, 1957, pp. 228, 238).

Third, analyses should identify the historical processes that become

less visible when tourism conflict is framed primarily through visitor numbers. Governance, property relations, labour markets, infrastructure investment, planning, financialisation, platform economies, and urban entrepreneurialism are not merely contextual variables but constitutive dimensions of tourism development. Recent research on governance failures and unequal destination development (Milano et al., 2024; Wassler et al., 2026) supports giving these processes greater analytical prominence.

Finally, alternative concepts such as touristification, tourism-led displacement, destination commodification, tourism gentrification, or platform urbanism may sometimes preserve causal specificity better than a generic language of excess. They foreground distinct mechanisms of power, ownership, governance, and uneven development rather than beginning from an assumed quantitative threshold.

Barthes' methodological contribution is therefore reflexive: concepts should be examined not only for what they describe but also for what they foreground and obscure. The claims here remain conceptual. Comparative analysis of media, policy, industry, activist, and scholarly corpora is needed to test when the proposed threshold logic travels, when it is resisted, and whether it affects explanation or intervention.

Statement of significance

This research note advances tourism management by questioning the assumption that overtourism is a self-evident condition defined primarily by excessive visitor numbers. Using Barthes' theory of myth, it shows how the term can naturalise contested thresholds and shift attention away from the governance, planning, property, infrastructure, and distributional processes that shape tourism pressures. The study therefore offers managers and policymakers a more reflexive way to diagnose tourism-related conflict: rather than beginning with how many tourists are ‘too many’, interventions should first identify the specific mechanisms producing congestion, resident dissatisfaction, or environmental stress in each destination. This perspective can improve problem definition, reduce reliance on generic flow-management solutions, and support more context-sensitive decisions about tourism development, regulation, and destination governance.

References

Adie, B. A., & Falk, M. (2021). Residents' perception of cultural heritage in terms of job creation and overtourism in Europe. *Tourism Economics, 27*(6), 1185–1201. https://doi.org/10.1177/1354816620943688

Barthes, R. (1957). *Mythologies*. Éditions du Seuil.

Buitrago-Esquinas, E. M., Foronda-Robles, C., & Yñiguez-Ovando, R. (2023). A literature review on overtourism to guide the transition to responsible tourism. *Revista de Estudios Andaluces, 45*, 71–90. https://doi.org/10.12795/rea.2023.i45.04

Butler, R. W., & Dodds, R. (2022). Overcoming overtourism: A review of failure. *Tourism Review, 77*(1), 35–53.

Capocchi, A., Vallone, C., Pierotti, M., & Amaduzzi, A. (2019). Overtourism: A literature review to assess implications and future perspectives. *Sustainability, 11*(12), 3303. https://doi.org/10.3390/su11123303

Celata, F., Hendrickson, C. Y. A., & Sanna, V. S. (2020). Overtourism and online short-term rental platforms in Italian cities. *Journal of Sustainable Tourism*. https://doi.org/10.1080/09669582.2020.1788568

Cheer, J. M., Milano, C., & Novelli, M. (2019). Tourism and community resilience in the anthropocene: Accentuating temporal overtourism. *Journal of Sustainable Tourism, 27*(4), 554–572.

Cheung, K. S., & Li, L.-H. (2019). Understanding visitor–resident relations in overtourism: Developing resilience for sustainable tourism. *Journal of Sustainable Tourism, 27*(8), 1197–1216. https://doi.org/10.1080/09669582.2019.1606815

Díaz-Parra, I., & Jover, J. (2020). Overtourism, place alienation and the right to the city: Insights from the historic centre of Seville, Spain. *Journal of Sustainable Tourism, 29*(2–3), 158–175. https://doi.org/10.1080/09669582.2020.1717504

Dickinson, G. (2018). *Is tourism killing skye? We visited during the busiest month of the year to find out*. The Telegraph. https://www.telegraph.co.uk/travel/destinations/europe/united-kingdom/scotland/articles/tourism-skye-crowded/.

Dodds, R., & Butler, R. (2019). The phenomena of overtourism: A review. *International Journal of Tourism Cities, 5*(4), 519–528.

Eco, U. (1984). *Semiotics and the philosophy of language*. Indiana University Press.

Goodwin, H. (2017). The challenge of overtourism. *Responsible Tourism Partnership, 4*(2017), 1–19.

Gössling, S., McCabe, S., & Chen, N. C. (2020). A socio-psychological conceptualisation of overtourism. *Annals of Tourism Research, 84*, Article 102976.

Gretzel, U. (2019). The role of social media in creating and addressing overtourism. In R. Dodds, & R. Butler (Eds.), *Overtourism: Issues, realities and solutions* (Vol. 1, pp. 62–75). Walter de Gruyter.

Kitchens, B., Johnson, S. L., & Gray, P. (2020). Understanding echo chambers and filter bubbles: The impact of social media on diversification and partisan shifts in news consumption. *MIS Quarterly, 44*(4), 1619–1649. https://doi.org/10.25300/MISQ/2020/16371

Koens, K., Postma, A., & Papp, B. (2018). Is overtourism overused? Understanding the impact of tourism in a city context. *Sustainability, 10*(12), 4384.

Mihalič, T. (2020). Conceptualising overtourism: A sustainability approach. *Annals of Tourism Research, 84*, Article 103025.

Milano, C., Cheer, J. M., & Novelli, M. (Eds.). (2019). *Overtourism: Excesses, discontents and measures in travel and tourism*. CABI.

Milano, C., Novelli, M., & Russo, A. P. (2024). Anti-tourism activism and the inconvenient truths about mass tourism, touristification and overtourism. *Tourism Geographies, 26*(8), 1313–1337.

Milburn, M. A., & McGrail, A. B. (1992). The dramatic presentation of news and its effects on cognitive complexity. *Political Psychology, 13*(4), 613–632.

Namberger, P., Jackisch, S., Schmude, J., & Karl, M. (2021). Overcrowding, overtourism and local level disturbance: How much can munich handle?. In *Travel and tourism in the age of overtourism* (pp. 100–120). Routledge.

Peeters, P., Gössling, S., Klijs, J., Milano, C., Novelli, M., Dijkmans, C., Eijgelaar, E., Hartman, S., Heslinga, J., Isaac, R., Mitas, O., Moretti, S., Nawijn, J., Papp, B., & Postma, A. (2018). *Research for TRAN committee—overtourism: Impact and possible policy responses*. European Parliament. https://doi.org/10.2861/919195. Policy Department for Structural and Cohesion Policies.

Perkumienė, D., & Pranskūnienė, R. (2019). Overtourism: Between the right to travel and residents' rights. *Sustainability, 11*(7), 2015.

Smith, M. K., Sziva, I. P., & Olt, G. (2021). Overtourism and resident resistance in Budapest. In *Travel and tourism in the age of overtourism* (pp. 24–40). Routledge.

Szromek, A. R., Kruczek, Z., & Walas, B. (2020). The attitude of tourist destination residents towards the effects of overtourism: Kraków case study. *Sustainability, 12*(1), 228.

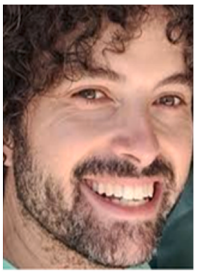
Thurlow, C., & Jaworski, A. (2012). Elite mobilities: The semiotic landscapes of luxury and privilege. *Social Semiotics, 22*(4), 487–516. https://doi.org/10.1080/10350330.2012.721592

Veríssimo, M., Moraes, M., Breda, Z., Guizi, A., & Costa, C. (2020). Overtourism and tourismphobia: A systematic literature review. *Tourism: An International Interdisciplinary Journal, 68*(2), 156–169.

Wassler, P., Herrero-Crespo, Á., & Rialp-Criado, J. (2026). Understanding overtourism: What do Barcelona residents really think? *Tourism Management Perspectives, 63*, Article 101495.

World Tourism Organization. (2018). ‘Overtourism’? Understanding and managing urban tourism growth beyond perceptions: Executive summary. UNWTO (World Tourism Organization). https://doi.org/10.18111/9789284420070.

World Tourism Organization. (2019). ‘Overtourism’? Understanding and managing urban tourism growth beyond perceptions: Volume 2, case studies. *Executive summary* (p. 12). Madrid: UNWTO (World Tourism Organization). https://doi.org/10.18111/9789284420070. https://www.unwto.org/global/publication/overtourism-understanding-and-managing-urban-tourism-growth-beyond-perceptions-volume–0



Philipp Wassler (PhD at the Hong Kong Polytechnic University) is Associate Professor at the University of Bergamo (Italy). As a passionate traveller, his primary research interest is in tourism management with a particular focus on sociological perspectives. He has also worked on other tourism-related subjects, among which marketing and sustainable development.