



Covid-19 crisis as an unexpected opportunity to adopt radical changes to tackle overtourism

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Introduction

As an issue faced for years by the tourism industry worldwide (Singh, 2018), overtourism is merely highlighting three things: (1) tourism is not a socio-economic panacea for all socio-economic problems faced by destinations (Sanchez & Adams, 2008); (2) sustainability in tourism is yet to be achieved (Burrai, Buda, & Stanford, 2019), and (3) there is the persistent reluctance from the industry to adopt radical changes or innovations, as opposed to incremental changes, despite the fact they have been identified as necessary for the sustainability of the industry (Brooker & Joppe, 2014).

Radical innovations are complex and long-term strategies requiring a high level of risks to be taken, while incremental strategies are short-term strategies requiring a low level of risks to be taken, and are easier to implement (Martínez-Ros & Orfila-Sintes, 2009). Criteria to evaluate the level of risks of a strategy include the economic impacts and the number of stakeholders involved in the decision process. Looking at overtourism, it appears that suggested strategies so far, such as higher prices or taxes, the closure of popular sites or the education of tourists (Séraphin, Sheeran, & Pilato, 2018) are incremental strategies. These short-term, reactionary strategies which are characterised by the fact they are localised and involve a small number of stakeholders have limited impacts.

The reason why strategies adopted to tackle overtourism are incremental is due to the fact that overtourism is internal to the tourism industry, as caused by poor destination management, which include pricing strategies, crowd management and destination management skills (Séraphin et al., 2018). However, when a variable or factor (such as the Covid-19 breakout) is external to the tourism industry, radical changes are no longer challenges (Greenwood & Suddaby, 2006), and opportunities to review the ideology and management of the tourism industry are made possible. This research thus investigates the extent to which the Covid-19 crisis can trigger radical measures to tackle overtourism.

Methodology

This research is based on a single case study (Eisenhardt, 1989), namely the Lourdes pilgrimage for two reasons: (1) Lourdes, as a major tourism destination, has been strongly impacted by the Covid-19 crisis, and (2) with three million pilgrims per year, Lourdes is

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3 confronted with overtourism issues. We collected all the newspaper articles on Lourdes
4 pilgrimage on Factiva between January 1, 2020 and October 1, 2020. This represents 95 articles
5 and 199 pages of data. We also collected the official press releases from Lourdes Sanctuary
6 over the same period.
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10 The data was analyzed manually and iteratively in three steps. First, we performed a
11 floating reading of the data in order to get a good understanding of the situation. Second, we
12 characterized all the decisions taken by Lourdes to tackle the Covid-19 crisis in terms of main
13 purpose. Third, we analyzed the implications of each decision on two dimensions: is it a radical
14 decision or not and are the implications of the decision limited to the Covid-19 crisis or not.
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20 **Results**

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22 Lourdes is the third pilgrimage in the world. However, the lockdown has stopped the
23 happening of all types of events, thus putting the Sanctuary (the body in charge of the Lourdes
24 site) in a difficult situation as explained by the official Website: “In spite of its partial reopening,
25 the Shrine can only welcome a very limited number of pilgrims, according to a strict sanitary
26 protocol. Lourdes without pilgrims [means] Lourdes without [the necessary] resources [...], to
27 guarantee its durability [...]. The Sanctuary expects a historic loss of 8 million euros”.
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32 To cope with the Covid-19 crisis, the findings of the study indicate that the Sanctuary
33 has taken three types of measures: health, marketing and economic measures. The most
34 significant measure taken was the online delivery of the event which could be considered as a
35 radical management decision. With the virtual pilgrimage titled “Lourdes United”, Lourdes has
36 moved away from the traditional ‘face to face’ delivery of religious events. Organized on July
37 16, 2020, this first virtual pilgrimage in the world was a 15 hours-live marathon with
38 celebrations in five languages, live broadcasts, and discussions on social networks.
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44 As explained by the Sanctuary, Covid-19 represents “an unprecedented situation”, and
45 as a result, ‘Lourdes United’ constitutes “an unprecedented initiative”. The Sanctuary has
46 benefited from this radical strategy as 80 million followers attended the event. On the long term,
47 online attendees might turn into regular supporters. Interestingly, the findings also reveal that
48 while the decision to deliver the event online was initially taken to overcome the negative
49 impacts of the breakout of Covid-19, it has broader implications. By switching to a virtual event,
50 Lourdes also found an unexpected solution to the problem of overtourism. What the data
51 highlights here is that exceptional circumstances such as the Covid-19 crisis enable managers
52 to adopt exceptional strategies that could not have been taken in normal times.
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Conclusion

From a theoretical standpoint, this case study demonstrates that radical changes in tourism can come from an external shock (Table 1). Many scholars such as Greenwood and Suddaby (2006) provided evidence that breaking out with existing practices are often driven by external forces, because actors within the industry are too closely involved to make such changes. Because of its importance, the Covid-19 crisis provides a unique ground for experimenting and changing the rules of the game. From a managerial standpoint, this research is calling for a more pragmatic approach to be adopted by tourism bodies. The Covid-19 crisis gives stakeholders of the tourism industry an opportunity to implement radical strategies when it comes to tackling overtourism (Spalding, Burke, & Fyall, 2020). Furthermore, this paper shows that crisis, whether internal or external, should be dealt with using an ambidextrous management approach (Seraphin & Yallop, 2019) in order to be able to both manage the crisis, while having what it takes to learn from it. Finally, based on this work, future research (longitudinal study) could investigate at what stage destinations went for radical strategies; what triggers the decision; and finally, the perception of visitors to these radical changes.

Table 1. Incremental versus radical strategies to tackle overtourism: The case of Lourdes United

	Incremental strategies	Radical strategies
Origin	Internal	External (Covid-19 crisis)
Level of risks	Low	High
Temporal orientation	Short-term	Long-term
Examples	Higher prices or taxes, closure of popular sites, education of tourists	Creation of the first virtual pilgrimage “Lourdes United” which has moved away from the traditional ‘face to face’ delivery of religious events
Implications to tackle overtourism	Limited	Important

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