

## COVID-19 as a paradigm shift? Insights from the degrowth debate in tourism

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### Abstract

For years, Barcelona has been a city torn between economic success in tourism through increasing numbers of tourists and protest against the rising pressure on the city due to tourism. Resistance to the increasing social and ecological pressure exerted by intensive tourism in the city grew especially in the last ten years prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, and voices emerged that actively demanded a degrowth transition of the tourism sector. This paper studies the influence of the COVID-19 pandemic on the quest for a sustainable degrowth transformation of Barcelona's tourism model. In this regard, the central developments in Barcelona's tourism sector since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic are analyzed and the implications of these developments for the degrowth movement in the city are outlined. Within the context of the qualitative content analysis, the different social and economic perspectives of the degrowth debate in tourism in Barcelona are contrasted and classified. The central research results outline that the measures taken so far for a more sustainable tourism since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic are mainly of a technical nature and do not have systemic-transformative components. Accordingly, there are reasons to believe that a return to the growth-oriented tourism model is prioritized, and so far, no indications point to the initiation of a degrowth transition.

**Keywords:** Degrowth Tourism; Urban Tourism; Quality Tourism, Barcelona; Transition; Sustainable Tourism; Overtourism.

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## 1. Introduction

In current times of great uncertainty in which massive societal challenges and upheavals are imminent, hegemonic ideas are beginning to be questioned. Western lifestyles have caused fundamental ecological and social problems, that can no longer be ignored (IPCC, 2022). At this point of transformative situations such as the COVID-19 pandemic proves to be, it is essential to look at a sector that has strongly shaped the way of life in the Global North pre-COVID-19 and that is particularly in crisis: the tourism industry (Gössling *et al.*, 2023; Hall *et al.*, 2020). The time since the start of the pandemic dealt a major blow to the global tourism industry (Fotiadis *et al.*, 2021; Škare *et al.*, 2021). The current debate in the industry therefore revolves around the question of how to manage tourism within the current pandemic situation and what the lasting consequences of the pandemic will be in the sector. Higgins-Desbiolles (2020) emphasizes that this historic, transformative and globally unique moment offers a great opportunity to break new ground in tourism. This somehow contrasts with the UNWTO's (2020) mainstream argument for 'green growth' and a speedy recovery of the industry. Already before the pandemic, the organization stressed that the growth or quantity of tourism was not the problem, but that more efficient management was needed (UNWTO, 2018). These views and demands are for example also reflected in statements by the WTTC (2020). Even though these prominent industry proponents identify sustainability as a key challenge for the recovery of the tourism sector, the capitalist growth logic of the sector is not being questioned (Gössling *et al.*, 2023; Ioannides & Gyimóthy, 2020).

In the literature, on the other hand, a critical discussion has developed in recent years about the nature of the tourism industry and in particular about the approach to the recovery of the sector after the pandemic (Everingham & Chassagne, 2020). Gössling *et al.* (2021) highlight that the pandemic confronts the tourism industry, policy makers and tourism researchers with the systemic challenges of globalized tourism, while offering an opportunity to accelerate the transformation towards a more sustainable tourism. Furthermore, it is urgently necessary not to return to 'business as usual' after the crisis. Lew *et al.* (2020) and Brouder (2020) concur, that the crisis could prove to be a turning point for rethinking a formerly unsustainable sector. Approaches to date to considering external hazards as a stimulus for change in tourism have been discussed above all in the 'build tourism back better' discourse (Mannakkara *et al.*, 2018). In the current context, demands for socialized or post-capitalist perspectives for tourism were raised (Fletcher *et al.*, 2021; Higgins-Desbiolles *et al.*, 2021). However, a practical approach to transforming the sector remains relatively unclear until this moment.

The degrowth discourse, which is steadily gaining in popularity, is pursuing an alternative economic paradigm that is not based on exploitation and environmental destruction for the sake of economic growth and capital accumulation (Kallis *et al.*, 2018). These ideas were also increasingly discussed in tourism in the last years before the pandemic (Fletcher *et al.*, 2019). Under the current circumstances, the attempt to transform to a degrowth tourism model in certain destinations struggling or having struggled with overtourism phenomena seems more relevant than ever.

The aim of this research is to provide insights into this endeavor, using the case of the iconic urban tourism destination Barcelona, by analyzing the questions of how the existing transformational degrowth approaches in the city have been impacted by the COVID-19 crisis and what the altered context implies for the initiation of a sustainable degrowth transition of urban tourism. Thus, the current situation of the pandemic, with unprecedented developments to date, is framed in the context of a degrowth turn in tourism. Accordingly, the following research builds a bridge between community-based action and global transformation perspectives in tourism with a focus on urban tourism.

This paper is structured as follows. First, the literature review and the research context introduce the degrowth debate in tourism and the case of Barcelona. Second, the research and analysis methods are described in the methodology section. Subsequently, in order to answer the research questions

regarding the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the degrowth movement in Barcelona, the findings section is divided. Primarily, the central developments regarding tourism in Barcelona since the beginning of the pandemic and their influence on the degrowth movement are outlined. Thereafter, the implications of the given context are presented, resulting in the identification of five proposals for the successful initiation of a degrowth-transformation. The following section conflates the findings and discusses the proposition that no turn away from the growth-oriented tourism model is to be expected post-COVID-19 and that instead, the vaguely defined concept of quality tourism is receiving increasing attention. Finally, the contributions and limitations of this study, as well as needs for future research, conclude the paper.

## 2. Literature review

The theoretical origins and basic ideas of degrowth can be traced back to the 1960s and 1970s in the fundamentals of then emerging scientific discourses such as political ecology and ecological economics (Kallis, 2018). Within the context of neoliberal economic crises in the late 2000s in the global North, voices critical of economic growth intensified and the degrowth discourse was concretized and institutionalized. Kallis (2018, p.9) provides a general, yet frequently cited definition of the concept: 'degrowth refers to a trajectory where the 'throughput' (energy, materials and waste flows) of an economy decreases while welfare, or well-being, improves'. Degrowth is thus seen by its leading proponents as a proposal to reorganize political and economic conditions in such a way that energy and resource consumption is drastically reduced in order to be compatible with the given planetary boundaries (Demaria *et al.*, 2013). The focus is deliberately placed on turning away from economic growth, as this focus is seen as the reason for the ecological and social transgressions that characterize Western societies (D'Alisa *et al.*, 2015). At this point, however, it is important to emphasize that this is not a recession or uncoordinated economic collapse, as provoked by the COVID-19 crisis for example, but a planned policy to downscale economic activity (Hickel, 2021). A much-discussed question is whether degrowth, with its growth-critical position, is hence a post-capitalist theory. Kallis (2018) concludes that growth is the central driving force of capitalism, and thus the attempt to break through the need for continuous growth means overcoming capitalism.

With regard to tourism, Hall (2009) was one of the first authors to link the general aspirations for a more sustainable sector with the degrowth movement. He connects degrowth principles with the existing debate whether to focus on qualitative development instead of aggregate quantitative growth overexploiting the environment. The most profound analysis thus far of what degrowth means in tourism is provided by Andriotis (2018). He defines degrowth in a tourism context as a deliberate transition in tourist destinations and their local economies, ending the overexploitation of resources as well as the overproduction, respectively overconsumption, to bring the tourism system back within the given planetary boundaries. Additionally, the tourists themselves are explicitly included in the definition, which advocates more responsible and fulfilling, slow, low-carbon travel. Furthermore, he expands the understanding of degrowth in tourism in a sense that it encompasses the aspect of the equitable distribution of profits from the sector for the sake of all involved stakeholders. At this point, Fletcher (2019, p.11) postulates the essential prerequisites for the understanding and the implementation of a post-capitalist degrowth-system in tourism. It has to entail: 'forms of production that are not based on private appropriation of surplus value; and forms of exchange not aimed at capital accumulation; that fully internalize the environmental and social costs of production in a manner that does not promote commodification and are grounded in common property regimes'. This implies that degrowing tourism requires the sector to evolve from a mainly private economic structure to one that serves the commons (Euler, 2019).

Hall *et al.* (2021) identify two main clusters within the literature on tourism and degrowth. One centers around the topic overtourism and deals particularly with issues concerning economic development, while the other encompasses themes such as sustainable tourism development, ecotourism and tourism management. The discussions within these clusters mostly concentrates on two goals, that have received the greatest share of attention in the literature so far (Fitzpatrick *et al.*, 2022). The first concrete goal is to limit or reduce tourism activity (Hall, 2009). This refers specifically to fossil fuel-based travel, which should be subject to certain regulations (e.g. moratoria on tourism developments (Navarro-Jurado *et al.*, 2019), quotas to visit sensitive areas like World Heritage Sites (Amore & Adie, 2020); restrictions on mega-cruise ships (Renaud, 2020)) and be included in just tax schemes to cover the environmental costs (Fletcher *et al.*, 2019). The second goal is a rethinking or reconceptualization of the way we approach tourism and redirection of the current neoliberal globalized organization of the tourism system towards principles of slow and local tourism (Higgins-Desbiolles *et al.*, 2019). Central to these discussions is a prioritization of the 'right to live' over the 'right to travel' (Gascón, 2019). This encompasses favouring residents' rights and respecting environmental carrying capacities or limits over tourists' short-term wants (Higgins-Desbiolles, 2020). Further topics being developed are the expansion or introduction of low-impact modes of transport (Moriarty & Honnery, 2013) (e.g. (night)trains, public transport, cycling, walking) and the promotion of alternative forms of ownership in the tourism industry (Renkert, 2019) (e.g. cooperativism).

Regarding the geographic scope and scale of the tourism degrowth literature, it gets apparent that so far the discussion has been mostly held in urban spaces or coastal destinations, with a strong European and especially Spanish focus (e.g. Blázquez-Salom *et al.*, 2019; Mansilla & Hughes, 2021; Navarro-Jurado *et al.*, 2019). This can partly be explained due to the general euro-centrism of degrowth and also the mature state and popularity of many Spanish mass tourism destinations leading to overtourism debates, which evoked the interest in degrowth by scholars and social movements alike (Fletcher *et al.*, 2019; Milano *et al.*, 2019a). Furthermore, tourism degrowth literature has mainly discussed community-led initiatives (Higgins-Desbiolles *et al.*, 2019; Mowforth, 2016). However, the global operational level and the multinationality of the decisive tourism players have not yet been considered strongly enough (Hall *et al.*, 2020). The issue of the level at which tourism should be transformed leads to the debate about top-down or bottom-up action to initiate a degrowth scenario (Fletcher *et al.*, 2021). D'Alisa and Kallis (2020) note the paradox that degrowth authors seemingly favor bottom-up grassroots action but still also rely on governmental top-down policy interventionism. They resolve this issue with a neo-Gramscian model of the integral state, demonstrating that transitions require changes of common senses. This happens through the creation of alternative spaces and institutions and the generalization of these changes through governmental interventions. Hence, bottom-up action and top-down policies together enable transitions (D'Alisa & Kallis, 2020). A striking example of activism seeking to transform a dominant tourism system and the impact this confrontation has on the political and societal landscape is the object of this study: Barcelona. Resistance and protest from civil society against the effects of mass tourism is a global phenomenon (Colomb & Novy, 2017). Unlike other urban tourism destinations suffering from overtourism symptoms (Amore *et al.*, 2020), such as Venice or Amsterdam with protests against inter alia cruise tourism or anti-social behavior of tourists, the case of Barcelona is unique in the sense that there the struggle against mass tourism is directly linked to the holistic degrowth debate. Nowhere are the calls of turning away from the dominant tourism model more clearly tied to demands of an urban transformation taking into account the principles of degrowth than in Barcelona.

### 3. Research context

As one of the world's leading urban tourism destinations, Barcelona's tourism sector has and continues to have remarkable impact on the urban economy, which also has strong industrial and manufacturing sectors as well as a dominant service industry (Ayuntamiento de Barcelona, 2022). It is estimated that the tourism sector contributes 14% percent to the local GDP (Ayuntamiento de Barcelona, 2023b) and

has a share of about nine per cent of all employment (Ayuntamiento de Barcelona, 2023a). The hotel industry alone employs almost 180.000 people in the province of Barcelona (Servicio Público de Empleo Estatal, 2022). Due to the importance of the tourism sector and its enormous economic success since the city hosted the 1992 Olympic Games, Barcelona plays a special role in discussions about the tourism economy (UNWTO, 2019). Hardly anywhere else has the debate about the place and influence of tourism in the urban space been conducted as passionately and with such a high public profile as in Barcelona. As the inhabitants were increasingly critical of tourism in the city before COVID-19, the governance of tourism in the urban context became one of the key political issues (Blázquez-Salom *et al.*, 2019; Zerva *et al.*, 2019). In 2019, more than 60% of the respondents of a survey conducted by the municipality of Barcelona stated that the city had reached its maximum carrying capacity of tourists (Ajuntament de Barcelona, 2019). Furthermore, another survey among citizens by the Barcelona City Council in 2017 indicated that tourism had 'become Barcelona's biggest problem', displacing unemployment to second place for the first time since 2008 (Mansilla & Hughes, 2021, p. 45). Especially the old town districts and the immediate surroundings of the most popular attractions, such as Sagrada Familia or Parc Guell felt the effects of the massification of tourism, such as rent increases, displacement on the housing market, overcrowded public space, privatization of public space and a multitude of precarious jobs in the tourism sector (UNWTO, 2019). The municipality of Barcelona affirmed that these community disputes between tourists and residents generally associated with overcrowding and concentration problems seemed to be on the rise, even despite the management efforts the municipality already took (Ajuntament de Barcelona, 2017b). The most notable measure was the implementation in 2017 of the Special Urban Plan for Tourist Accommodation, the first intervention of this kind in Europe, which regulates all different kinds of tourist accommodations (Ajuntament de Barcelona, 2017a; Blanco-Romero *et al.*, 2018). The PEUAT (*Pla Especial Urbanística d'Allotjaments Turístics* – Special Tourist Accommodation Plan) urban plan was designed based on intensive citizen participation and ultimately enacted to defend the right to housing as an extension to the right to the city (Marcuse, 2016; Russo & Scarnato, 2018).

Due to the enormous pressure of tourism on the city, both socially and ecologically, social movements emerged that actively demanded a change from the growth-oriented tourism model of the city (Milano *et al.*, 2019a). In other words, a debate around degrowth in tourism arose in Barcelona. Milano *et al.* (2019a) identify the Universal Forum of Cultures in 2004 as one of the foundational events to debate the controversial relationship between the citizens of Barcelona and the growing tourism in the city. In the following years, diverse protests emerged from civil society. The protest was particularly related to the gentrification of certain neighborhoods and the resulting sharp rise in housing and living costs in the city (Milano *et al.*, 2019a; Zerva *et al.*, 2019).

From 2015 onwards, the organization ADBT (*Assemblea de Barris pel Decreixement Turístic* – Assembly of Neighborhoods for Tourism Degrowth) was established out of the discourse critical of tourism in the city. The grassroots organization, which was founded out of thirty-five Barcelona-based social movements, associations and entities, has since been one of the central bodies regarding demands for a more socially fair and ecologically sustainable tourism in the city. Important starting points for a transformation of the tourism model on the part of the ADBT are refocusing on the right to the city, taking up the housing and cost of living issue politically and generally reducing the number of tourist arrivals in the city. In particular, a limit on flights and cruise ships has been repeatedly called for in the public discussion (ADBT, 2021). In 2018, the Network of Southern European Cities against Touristification (SET Network) emerged from the second Neighborhood Forum on Tourism organized in Barcelona. In this network, social movements from 16 southern European cities joined forces to fight against the dominant growth-oriented tourism model (ADBT, 2021). Through this protest, Barcelona became one of the pioneer cities regarding the debate about degrowth in tourism (Milano *et al.*, 2019a).

Meanwhile, the demands of the social movements have provoked a wide public response and have also been taken up by political parties (Mansilla & Hughes, 2021).

#### 4. Materials and methods

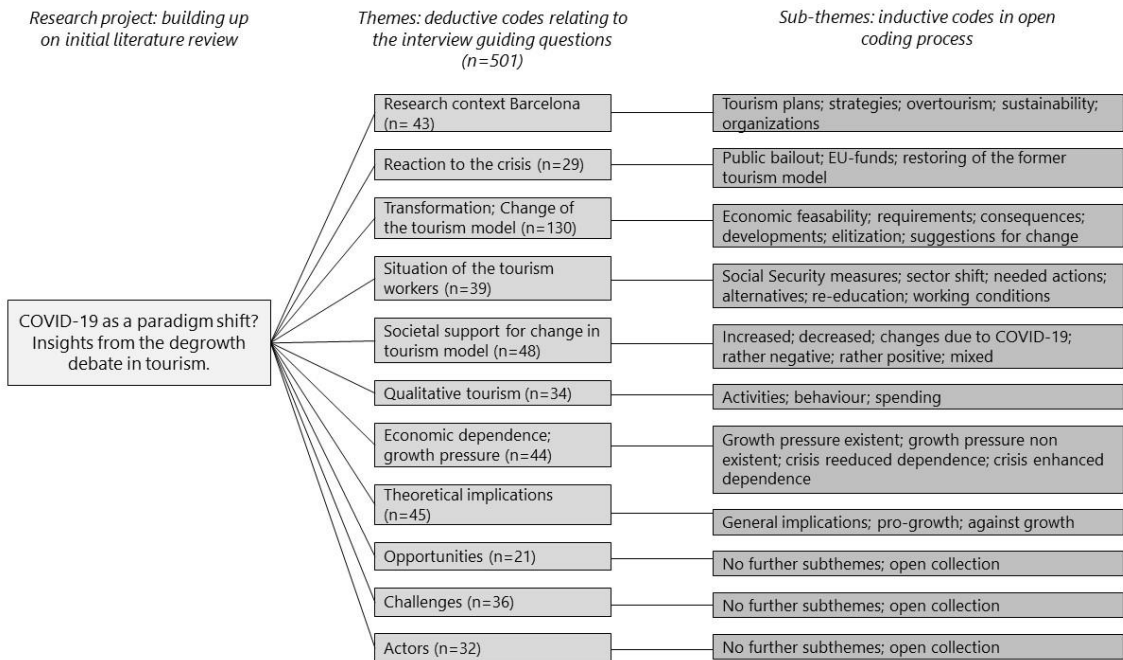
In order to investigate the impact of the pandemic on the degrowth discourse in tourism, it is reasonable to choose an urban destination, in which the discourse was already represented in the public discussion before the pandemic, as much as in hardly any other city worldwide. Qualitative case studies are identified as one of the most suitable methods to analyze social phenomena (Yin, 2010). The use of case studies can encourage the perpetual tacking back and forth between provisional theoretical remarks and the empirical analysis on the specific case (Barnes *et al.*, 2007). As Bramwell (2011, p. 475) demonstrates, case studies are therefore especially helpful when exploring the diverse interactions between dimensions of tourism, sustainable development and governance and thus making it: 'possible to explore the context-specific character of sustainable tourism'.

The first part of the research process consisted of desk research, conducting an extensive literature review on tourism degrowth and the general impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on the sector, as well as the examination of secondary data sources such as social movements homepages and press releases, official reports from public authorities of different levels, websites of main tourism stakeholders and social media discourses.

Following up on the literature review, this study uses an interpretative research paradigm in order to better understand the underlying phenomenon. Through the interviewees' perspectives, interviews can help to discover interrelationships, structures and patterns within cases and in this way elucidate the functioning of systems and contexts (Patton, 2015). Hence, the selected qualitative method for the described case comprised semi-structured explorative interviews. Based on the conducted interviews, it was possible to gain a deeper insight into the lived experiences and knowledge of experts and stakeholders (Creswell & Poth, 2016). To reach an enhanced understanding of current developments and underlying dynamics, a variety of qualified perspectives and opinions were taken into account. In total, 13 interviews were conducted between April and June 2021, with tourism stakeholders ( $n = 7$ , labelled STA<sub>1-7</sub>), complemented by social movement activists ( $n = 3$ , labelled ACT<sub>1-3</sub>) and academic experts in the field of tourism ( $n = 3$ , labelled ACA<sub>1-3</sub>). The targeted stakeholders were officials from regional or local authorities as well as public-private entities, or in management positions of local tourism businesses of different kinds. The academics were from several public universities in the region and the activists from different social movements, all being directly engaged in the cause of urban tourism development in Barcelona. All of the respondents were selected based on their direct involvement within the debate revolving around tourism in the city, their expert knowledge of the topic and through snowball sampling once the data collection process began. The sample size of this research followed the concept of saturation as a guiding principle during the qualitative data collection (Boddy, 2016; Glaser & Strauss, 1967). The majority of ten interviews were held personally in Barcelona, two – at the request of the interviewees – took place online, using the software Zoom, and one interviewee answered the guiding questions in written form. All interviews took place between May and June 2021, were conducted either in English or Spanish, according to the preferences of the interviewees, were recorded after permission was given and lasted between one and two hours. Subsequently, the interviews were transcribed, resulting in 225 pages of transcribed material, which constituted the primary research data.

The examination and analysis of this data, followed the concept of analytic induction as elaborated by Patton (2015). This means that following up on a deductive phase of analysis, the researcher strives to explore the data anew for undiscovered patterns and emergent understandings. The coding, which was conducted using the software MAXQDA, follows this scheme. The themes of the guiding questions of

the interviews, which were deductively obtained from the literature research, form the basic deductive coding of the data. In the further course, inductive categories emerging from the data were added to the coding scheme, in line with direct content analysis as an attempt to identify core consistencies and meanings (Patton, 2015). Figure 1 illustrates the theme-based code structure of this research with respective deductive and inductive levels.



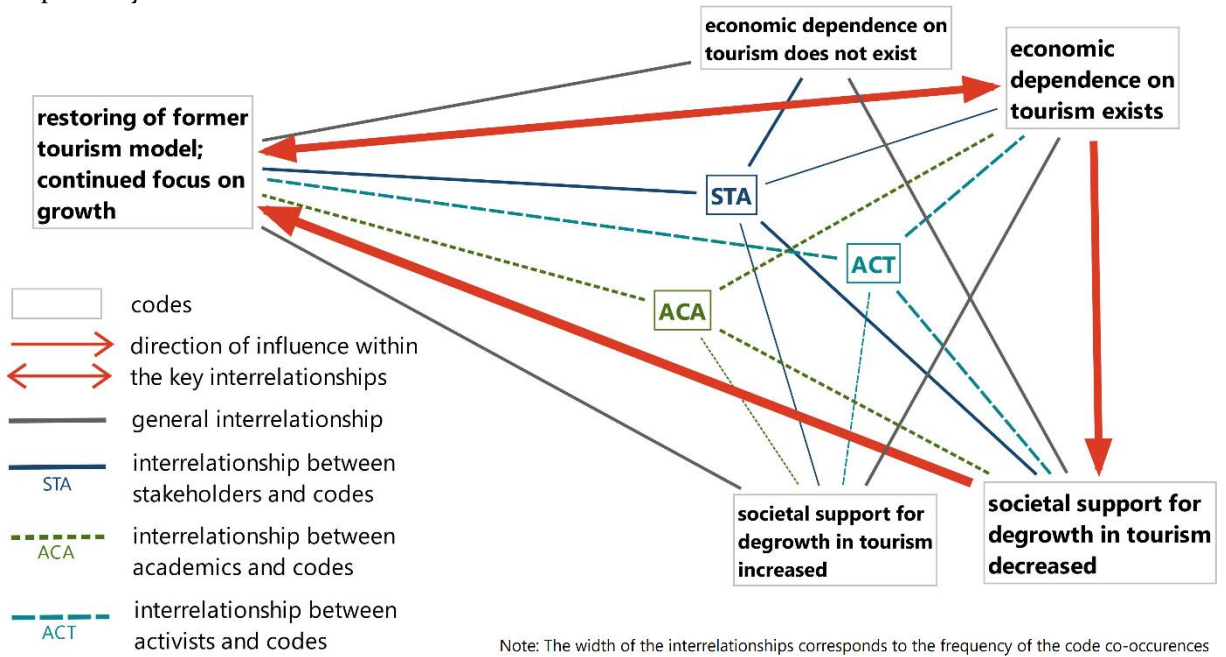
**Figure 1.** Coding scheme. Source: Author.

## 5. Findings

### 5.1. Impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on Barcelona's urban tourism

Figure 2 highlights the key observations from the interviews through a visualization of the essential interrelation between the economic dependency on tourism, diminishing social support for the discourse critical of tourism and the prioritization of a return to the growth-driven tourism model in Barcelona. The data-based 'code co-occurrence model', created using the MAXMaps tool of MAXQDA, maps out the intersections of the five selected codes as well as the connections to the three interviewee groups in a network structure. The model evaluates how many documents, in this case the 13 interview transcripts, contain the selected codes. The width of the connecting lines between the codes in the model indicates the frequency of the code co-occurrences within the 13 interview transcripts and therefore the significance of the given interrelationship between the codes (Kuckartz & Rädiker, 2019). The thicker the connecting line, the more often the codes occurred together in the documents. The five displayed codes are all sub-themes represented in the broader coding scheme of the research, visualized in figure 1. 'Restoring of former tourism model; continued focus on growth' is the most frequently mentioned expected reaction to the COVID-19 crisis. The four other visualised codes are the interviewees' assessments of whether there is a dependence on tourism and whether societal support for degrowth in tourism has shifted. The figure shows that all academics (light green) and activists (light blue) recognize an economic dependence on tourism in Barcelona, whereas the majority of stakeholders (dark blue) question this. Furthermore, the majority of all three interviewee groups state that the social

support for the degrowth movement has decreased since the beginning of the COVID-19 crisis. There is a strong interrelationship between economic dependency and diminishing societal support, as well as between both codes with the code 'restoring of former tourism model; continued focus on growth' respectively.



**Figure 2.** Code co-occurrence model highlighting the impact of the COVID-19 crisis in Barcelona.  
Source: Author with MAXQDA 2022.

The Spanish government reacted to the disruption of the COVID-19 crisis with a massive public bailout of the tourism sector, the first of its kind for this industry. The total sum, which amounts to over 20 billion euros, was distributed in three packages, through different channels (Mansilla & Hughes, 2021). The public bailout is criticized as (ACT<sub>3</sub>):

*‘The tendency [...] to rescue companies using the argument of labor. And what should be done is to rescue people directly in terms of work, forgetting the companies. And if companies have to go bust, let them go bust.’*

This is a recurring theme in interviews with actors of civil society and academia (ACT<sub>2</sub>, 3; ACA<sub>2</sub>, 3). It can be identified that the crisis leads particularly to the absorption of small tourism enterprises by international chains (ACA<sub>2</sub>). Through a Marxist perspective, these ongoing processes in the tourism economy can be identified as accumulation by dispossession (ACA<sub>3</sub>). In this concept, Harvey (2004) argues that neoliberal capitalist policies support the accumulation of capital through the (i. a.) dispossession of private entities and the public sphere.

Another development that could be observed in Barcelona, as in many other destinations worldwide, were more local and domestic forms of tourism (Schmude *et al.*, 2021) due to strict mobility regulations in Catalonia. The enhanced interaction between the local population and touristic businesses stands out particularly in this respect. Hotel owners emphasize that (STA<sub>2</sub>):



*'Yes, we are open, but thanks to the population of Barcelona, as the restaurants were closed, people come here to dine and sleep, they can be neighbors and this gives us a bit of joy. Because people are aware that the hotel is part of the neighborhood. I think this is the beautiful thing, that people say no, it can't be that the hotel that was next to us is closing.'*

It could therefore be argued that the pandemic created an increased mutual understanding and even interest between tourism stakeholders and parts of the local population (STA6). In particular, the stakeholders emphasize the need for smoother coexistence between tourists and the respective tourism businesses and the local population, and refer to this under the term 'Convivencia' (STA2, 5, 6).

Furthermore, a change in societal support for the tourism degrowth discourse could be observed during the pandemic. A degrowth activist explains that the affinity for the discourse critical of tourism decreased as (ACT3):

*'The main problem for the people is not that there is no tourism, the problem is that there is no work.'*

This development is very much connected to the dependency on tourism in the city, an academic adds (ACA2):

*'I think that the question is also that when you have a real dependency on just one sector, the opinion about that sector is always mediated by many contradictions.'*

As long as no real feasible alternative to the given urban economic model heavily dependent on tourism is presented to the local population, the only viable option for many is the rebuilding of the former tourism model (ACA2):

*'I mean, you can criticize an economic activity, but if you don't have an alternative? You may accept that you need it.'*

The touristic stakeholders are very much aware of the necessity of their sector and hence focus on technical solutions to avoid reaching another overtourism situation that persisted in the city pre-COVID-19 (STA4, 5, 6; Milano *et al.*, 2019b). The focus lies especially on deconcentration strategies through digital solutions, such as the recently introduced Check Barcelona App, and strategic promotion for certain markets (STA3, 4, 5, 6). Accordingly, the dogma is that a reduction in tourist numbers compared to pre-pandemic levels is not necessary, but that better management of tourist flows is essential. As one stakeholder points out (STA4):

*'I think, I really think that if we manage, if we manage them well, it is not necessary to reduce the number of tourists. On the contrary, I think that if we reduce the number of tourists, we will have a major economic problem.'*

Following up on this assumption, it becomes apparent that within the debate on how to build tourism back better, tourism stakeholders increasingly use the notion of qualitative tourism and call for a switch from quantitative to qualitative indicators in tourism management. However, the concept quality tourism is not defined more precisely. Emphasis is put on the fact that (STA3):

*'Quality tourism is not related with money, it is related with what kind of visitors and why they come to the city. It has to do with the motivation, with concern for sustainability, for the environment, for the city itself.'*

Meanwhile, another stakeholder argues that growth in international tourism businesses means more qualitative tourism (STA5):

*'I think if we grow in especially the international markets, that will bring us more business, probably to the city, this is going to bring us more interest in international chains. And I think that gives us a quality tourism.'*

Additionally, cruise tourists are being labeled quality tourists (STA7):

*'Cruise tourists represent quality tourism, as they spend more than a normal tourist.'*

Hence, it appears that the profile of the new quality tourists is characterized by high spendings, cultural and gastronomy orientation, and origin from international markets, especially from the North-American, and Asian continents (STA3, 5, 6). In order to attract this clientele, the city has meanwhile resumed its promotional activities, after the management of tourism had been prioritized by the tourism authorities since 2010 and promotion had even been discontinued since then, according to an official of the tourism council (STA3). Regarding the turn from quantitative to qualitative indicators, an academic states (ACA2):

*'I don't know if this means that the intention is to get more tourists or more arrivals, but to get more benefits. And if you can have the same benefits or more benefits by having less tourists, that's also an option.'*

Insofar as the focus of a degrowth transition is purely on the reduction of quantitative indicators such as arrivals or overnight stays for the sake of quality tourism, it remains questionable to what extent and through which policies a pending elitization of tourism in the city could be contained.

## 5.2. Implications for the degrowth tourism debate in Barcelona

The significantly changed context of urban tourism in Barcelona, due to the influence of the COVID-19 pandemic, results in five key implications for initiating an effective degrowth shift in tourism. First is the acknowledgement, that the current situation is a unique and essential moment for the necessary reduction of dependence on tourism in the city (STA2):

*'From a political point of view, it is absolutely the right moment. We will never again see a reset like we have at the moment, a forced stop.'*

Accordingly, several respondents point out that the capability of politics, especially at the municipal level, in confronting the powerful economic interests in the city will be crucial for a change in the urban tourism model (ACA1, 2, 3; STA2). In this respect, there are in particular concerns about the role of the semi-private and semi-public consortium Turismo de Barcelona, which is responsible for the city's tourism marketing (ACA1, 3). The incumbent pressure for this confrontation between politics and the tourism lobby comes mainly from the social movements arguing for a different future of urban tourism and the protests from civil society (ACT1, ACA3). Problematic in that sense is that often, executive power imbalances between the different political levels (municipal, state, national) prevent progressive policies at the municipal level, as the main legislative power in terms of tourism is the Catalan state (STA2, ACT1, ACA2).

The second important aspect of a degrowth shift in tourism is to provide the tourism workforce currently affected or threatened by unemployment with new employment opportunities and prospects for professional reorientation (ACT3):

*‘Tourism activity must be reduced, and it cannot be at the expense of workers, who were already the most exploited and most of whom have been left in the street with nothing.’*

While one stakeholder emphasizes that the current labor situation in tourism is natural and in line with market mechanisms after an external shock like the pandemic (STA6), an academic argues that social security measures are needed for the workers during the phase of professional reorientation (ACA1):

*‘We have to redirect support for these people, adequate training, but at the same time readapting the economic system and the economic structure so that once they are trained, they can be absorbed by the labor market. It is true that the economy has its own private and internal dynamics, but there have to be social security measures, otherwise these people, out of fear and the reality of not having an economic and social cushion to protect them during this time of transition, will continue to do what is easiest, which is to return to the tourist sector under whatever conditions.’*

The discussed labor issue already makes it apparent, and indeed, tourism stakeholders as well as activists and academics agree that the analysis of the tourism model in the city actually requires a holistic approach. Hence the implementation of degrowth in tourism is an overall urban issue with severe spatial implications connected with topics such as housing, infrastructure or mobility. This leads to the third implication, that the degrowth movement needs to be at the forefront of promoting and guiding a citizen’s debate not only about the role of tourism in the city, but about a holistic and sustainable urban governance approach. An activist emphasizes that (ACT3):

*‘Above all, we have been promoting a citizens’ debate, free of pressure from lobbies and self-interested opinions. Let them [citizens] choose not only how much tourism or tourist activity we want, but what economic model we want for the city?’*

An academic adds that the endeavor of a degrowth transition in tourism is in fact a question of (ACA1):

*‘What kind of city model do you want? And then, how do you integrate tourism as a part of it?’*

In a degrowth scenario, issues such as the reconversion of parts of the tourist-infrastructure for the locals or the decarbonization of urban mobility, to name just two matters with an urgent need for action, need to be approached in a democratic, inclusive and unbiased way. Hence the fourth assumption, that a further strengthening of participative governance tools, such as the already implemented Tourism Council or the Decidim Platform, will be essential to guarantee more horizontal decision-making processes as well as more pro-active forms of civil engagement in urban policymaking (ACA3; Erdmenger, 2022).

Finally, respondents identify the diversification, cooperativization and localization of the urban economy as the key developmental steps towards opening up the space for degrowth in urban tourism (ACA1, 2, 3; STA3; ACT2, 3). Activists and academics specify that, in order to succeed in this regard, a further regulation of the touristic market in the city will be inevitable in the future (ACA2):

*‘the question is that if you have a free market, whoever has the power on that free market is going to benefit. So you have to control it. You have to impose rules, to place clear limits on what you can do and what you can’t do [...] you have to let citizens be free and control the market. Now, what we have is that we leave the market free and we control the citizens.’*

The stakeholders agree to certain regulations, but only in the case of competitor markets, such as AirBnb from the hotel industry's point of view, or day-trip tourism which is not as beneficiary as overnight stays (STA4, 5). Suggestions on how to regulate the market include an immediate termination of subsidization of polluting businesses, raising the general tax level on tourism businesses, financial and fiscal relief measures for environmentally and socially responsible enterprises and imposing general caps on overnight stays and arrivals in the city (ACA1, 2, 3; ACT3).

## 6. Discussion

The aim of this paper was to provide insights into the impacts the COVID-19 crisis had on the degrowth debate in tourism on the basis of urban tourism in Barcelona along the lines of the two given research questions. Regarding the influence of the COVID-19 crisis on the tourism degrowth movement in Barcelona, it becomes apparent, that the tourism industry discovered the credo of quality tourism as a means of justification to be building tourism back better (Colmekcioglu *et al.*, 2022; Gössling & Schweiggart, 2022). As a consequence of the dependency on tourism, the local population on the other hand, especially the tourism workers, couldn't be offered viable alternatives to the tourism industry. The signs for a shift towards a degrowth tourism in the city, which does not operate at the expense of the local population and the environment, are therefore conceivably bad (Mansilla & Hughes, 2021). It appears that it will not be possible to seize the unique opportunity to rethink tourism within the context of the COVID-19 crisis (Brouder, 2020; Higgins-Desbiolles, 2020; Lew *et al.*, 2020).

Necessary steps towards the initiation of a degrowth shift in Barcelona's tourism, arising through the presented context, would have been a reduction of dependency on tourism by diversifying and localizing the urban economy (Euler, 2019; Higgins-Desbiolles, 2020), leading to the creation of alternative employment opportunities for tourism workers with fair wages and working conditions (Cañada, 2018). But instead of developing a holistic urban approach to confront the crisis, the measures taken so far aiming towards the creation of a more sustainable tourism are mainly of a technical nature. Soft solutions such as decongestion apps are being prioritized over systemic and political consequences such as controlling the sector through market regulations like caps on arrivals or overnight stays in the city (Fletcher *et al.*, 2019; Fletcher *et al.*, 2021). This leads to the assumption, that returning to the growth-oriented tourism model is being prioritized over systemic-transformative changes. Accordingly, one activist concludes that Barcelona's society is generally far away from reaching consent about the appropriate urban economy model and the extent of tourism (ACT3):

*'[We need] to be able as a society to think effectively and collectively about another economy. Which is something that in some areas, a few of us are capable of doing, but which we are obviously not capable of bringing to society as a whole. Just to be able to imagine it collectively. It would be a fundamental first step. And it is not happening.'*

In the course of this argument, it is worth mentioning that during the severe tourism crisis, the construction of two prominent large-scale projects were discussed in Barcelona. The expansion of the airport and the construction of the Hermitage Museum were under debate, but were ultimately not realized after heavy protests from civil society (ACA2, STA5). The latest data from Barcelona, which shows that various tourism-specific metrics, such as cruise ship arrivals and hotel reservations, are already back in the range of 2019 or even surpassing the last year before the pandemic, confirms the perception that no turn away from the growth path is to be expected (Observatorio del Turismo en Barcelona, 2022). This is line with literature indicating that also on a global scale, evidence for a COVID-19 rebound in the tourism industry is emerging, while future high growth rates can be expected (Gössling *et al.*, 2023; UNWTO, 2021). Following up on this, an academic expects that in the case of Barcelona (ACA1):

*'The administration is going to look for ways to give everyone permission to do almost anything they want. Employers want to continue or achieve pre-crisis levels. Employees want normal work, they have to survive. And the general population? We have an enormous desire to travel and to go back to tourism. So all social strata of the population are going to be on the same line towards growth, as we understood it before.'*

## **7. Conclusion**

Before the outbreak of the COVID-19 crisis, there was a plethora of publications on the theorisation of degrowth in tourism and the practical implications of the discourse (Andriotis, 2018; Fletcher *et al.*, 2020). At the beginning of the pandemic, comments were made on what opportunities the pandemic "break" could hold for a sustainable transformation of the tourism industry. The actual impact on the degrowth debate, however, is as yet largely unexplored. In order to understand the prospects that lie in a profound degrowth debate towards more sustainable tourism, it will be essential to understand the impacts of the past years in order to be able to turn towards the future. First, this paper makes an important contribution respectively extension to the academic degrowth debate, as it is the first (to the authors' knowledge) to explicitly examine the influence of the current COVID-19 crisis on the degrowth discourse in tourism on a case basis. In this respect, it provides a first reference for the influence of external shocks with far-reaching impacts on tourism, on the degrowth debate. A perspective for possible developments regarding the growth debate in a future post-pandemic time in tourism is opened up, which enhances the conceptual discussions on degrowth in tourism around the context of the most recent global crisis. It is to be expected that with the indicated return to growth-oriented management in tourism, the degrowth debate will soon regain prominence in the academic and also public discussion. Second, the five identified proposals for the initiation of a degrowth transition add conceptual value to the theorization of degrowth in tourism within the academic debate. In the tourism degrowth literature, there is a lack of research on how the intended sustainable transformation can actually be initiated. The identified proposals extend the debate around this aspect and provide first concrete suggestions to foster change. Both the temporal context of the study with strongly increasing tourism figures after the pandemic-related mobility restrictions, as well as the geographical setting in one of the central destinations with overtourism problems and protest against the dominant tourism model is highly topical and therefore of particular relevance. Furthermore, the proposals can be of special interest for governance actors and policymakers in destinations with the need to degrow and generally for all stakeholders and social movements committed to degrowth in tourism. The overall findings can provide a first reference since the beginning of the COVID-19 crisis for the situation of the degrowth debate in destinations characterized by overtourism and tourism dependency.

However, a limitation of this study is the question to what extent the results are generally transferable to other urban tourism destinations that do not share immediate similarities. Consequently, this is also a call for comparative studies to analyse the development and future perspectives for the tourism degrowth discourse in other destinations. The results of this study cannot be fully exonerated from the assumption that they are a social construct of the selected interviewee groups, which is also influenced by a certain unavoidable subjectivity of the researchers in the analysis process. In order to increase the validity of the study, it could have been beneficial to extend the scope of the research to the residents through a survey of their assessment of the situation.

The need for further research on the degrowth agenda in tourism should above all propose ways out of the dependence on tourism that exists in many destinations, to enable the exploration of regional, slow and decarbonized alternative forms of tourism. In order to counter the lack of alternatives to tourism within the context of the dominant capitalist growth logic, two questions that have received little attention so far seem essential. On the one hand, how, in a coordinated degrowth scenario, specific

tourist infrastructure, for example hotels, could be repurposed for the local population in a constructive way, enhancing the general wellbeing in the destination. On the other hand, the degrowth discourse must not forget the precarious situation many tourism-workers find themselves in and point out paths to alternative employment opportunities with better working conditions. This paper illustrated that the unique opportunity to reform the sector during the pandemic has seemingly been missed. A more socially and ecologically sustainable model of tourism in an urban context will only be feasible in conjunction with other sectors such as urban transport & mobility, housing and the general infrastructure. Short-sighted, vague and singular approaches like quality tourism that do not imply systemic changes are ultimately not helpful and mainly conceal the underlying problem. Furthermore, it should be made more clear which existing approaches, probably not necessarily called degrowth tourism but following resembling principles, already offer successful alternatives to the dominant neoliberal tourism model. Examples are inter alia social enterprises, cooperative ownership schemes, common property regimes, slow tourism initiatives or community-based tourism projects. Degrowth needs to forge broader alliances at this stage to enhance the profile and feasibility of a sustainable transformation. In order for degrowth to be increasingly perceived as an alternative in tourism, it must become more evident what such a far-reaching transition would mean in practice for an urban tourism destination and its citizens, and through which actions a degrowth scenario could be realized in a coordinated manner. The collective understanding or notion that such a scenario would be beneficial for cities struggling with overtourism and tourism dependency issues is still largely missing.

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### **Appendix**

Interview-guideline Stakeholder Interviews (semi-structured):

How long have you been in your position and to what extent do you deal with the overtourism & degrowth debate, what experience do you have in the overtourism & degrowth debate?

Currently, due to the developments of the Covid crisis, there is a discussion about a potential reduction of the economic dependence on tourism. What is your position in this debate?

What is your position in the discussion regarding growth pressure in tourism?

To what extent do you think it is economically feasible that a destination like Barcelona, after the covid crisis, no longer focuses on tourism growth (compared to pre-covid level) in the long run/therefore strives for degrowth in tourism?

How do you perceive the societal support for a shift away from the current, strongly growth-oriented tourism model?

What would be the most significant consequences of moving away from the current tourism model in Barcelona at this point in time?

Who among the current actors do you see as crucial change-agents/co-creators for a future growth-independent tourism model?

What political and economic preconditions are needed for the covid crisis to become an initiator for a growth-independent future in Barcelona's tourism? How could the transformation of the tourism model be implemented after the crisis? (through which legal guidelines)

From your point of view, what could a growth-independent tourism model that is oriented towards the needs and interests of Barcelona's local community look like in the future?

In your opinion, what are the most important obstacles or challenges for a transformation of the tourism model at the present time?

What key opportunities do you see for the development of a growth-independent tourism model in Barcelona in the future?

What do you wish for the future of tourism in Barcelona? Are there still aspects of the development that we have not addressed but that are essential from your point of view?

Do you have any questions you would like to ask me?

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