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King Faisal Center for Research and Islamic Studies

Crowds on the Horizon: Is Saudi Arabia Prepared to Tackle Overtourism, a Downside of Tourism in the Digital Era?

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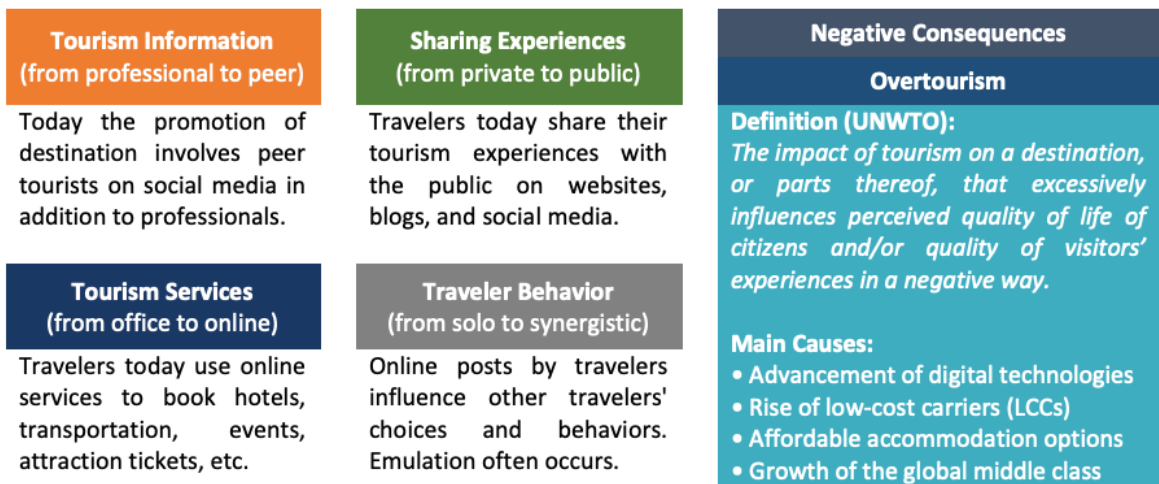King Faisal Center for Research and Islamic Studies

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Executive Summary

- This policy proposal recommends that Saudi tourism policy makers conduct a study about "over-tourism," which is deemed a downside of tourism in the digital era, and start preparing to tackle it or prevent it.

- Digital technologies have brought about the transformation of tourism, which creates opportunities to tourist destinations, but also invites some negative consequences, such as overtourism.
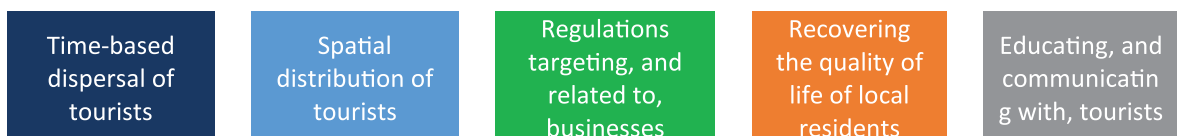
Transformation of Tourism in the Digital Era

Tourism Information
(from professional to peer)

Today the promotion of destination involves peer tourists on social media in addition to professionals.

Sharing Experiences
(from private to public)

Travelers today share their tourism experiences with the public on websites, blogs, and social media.

Tourism Services
(from office to online)

Travelers today use online services to book hotels, transportation, events, attraction tickets, etc.

Traveler Behavior
(from solo to synergistic)

Online posts by travelers influence other travelers' choices and behaviors. Emulation often occurs.

Negative Consequences

Overtourism

Definition (UNWTO):
The impact of tourism on a destination, or parts thereof, that excessively influences perceived quality of life of citizens and/or quality of visitors' experiences in a negative way.

Main Causes:
- Advancement of digital technologies
- Rise of low-cost carriers (LCCs)
- Affordable accommodation options
- Growth of the global middle class

Negative Impacts of Overtourism on Destinations and Local Residents

Impacts on destinations
- Environmental degradation
- The drain of natural resources (water, energy, wood etc.)
- The overuse of infrastructure leading to damage or closure

Impacts on local residents
- The feeling of inconvenience, unpleasantness, insecurity
- The prioritization of tourists over local residents in spaces and services
- Higher living cost and property prices

- Some governments in tourist destinations suffering from overtourism problems have begun to adopt policies addressing these problems. The Saudi government will benefit from analyzing these solutions in detail.

Policies Addressing Overtourism

Time-based dispersal of tourists	Spatial distribution of tourists	Regulations targeting, and related to, businesses	Recovering the quality of life of local residents	Educating, and communicating with, tourists

- Saudi tourism policy makers can be aware of the country's own advantages, too: one is the Saudi government's advanced level of deployment of digital technologies, such as smartphone applications; another is an experience of the Hajj and Umrah authorities on handling crowds of pilgrim visitors.

- Overtourism is not far "over the horizon" for Saudi Arabia. Even with the modest numbers of incoming tourists, if the carrying capacity of the tourist destination is underdeveloped or the area is already crowded with local residents, overtourism will occur easily. The emulation effect of social media on tourist behavior should also never be underestimated. Tourists from some populous countries, such as China, may also head to the same destination if that destination is featured in popular films, for instance.

Introduction

In recent years, the global demand for tourism has been rising significantly. According to some statistics, the number of annual global tourist arrivals more than doubled in the last two decades, from 639 million in 1999 to 1.5 billion in 2019.[1] This increase is attributable to a variety of factors, including the rise of low-cost carriers (LCCs) in the aviation industry, the increasing availability of affordable accommodation options, and the growth of the global middle class as a result of economic globalization. Another major factor is the advancement of digital technologies that has brought about marked changes to the tourism industry itself. Today, it is far easier and faster for tourists to book services such as transportation and accommodations online and to collect information and share experiences through websites, blogs, and social media using smartphones, which creates a considerable emulation effect on tourist behaviors.

Such a transformation of tourism matters a great deal to the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, too. Tourism has been adopted as an essential element of Vision 2030, the Saudi government's reform plan announced in April 2016 for achieving an economic diversification away from oil.[2] In order to build a tourism sector as one of the major pillars of a post-oil economy, a series of key actions have been taken in the past years, such as the launch of tourist visas in September 2019,[3] and the creation of the Ministry of Tourism in February 2020 (through upgrading the previous Saudi Commission for Tourism and National Heritage),[4] which took place right before the spread of the global Covid-19 pandemic into the Kingdom.

That said, the transformation of tourism is likely to provide great post-pandemic economic opportunities to Saudi Arabia, which has a strong comparative advantage of already attracting millions of Islamic pilgrim visitors annually. What Saudi tourism policy makers need to bear in mind, however, is that this tourism transformation has also invited negative consequences. One of these is *overtourism*, which encompasses a variety of problems caused to local residents in tourist destinations by the influx of visitors beyond the destination's carrying capacity, which had begun to be seen globally pre-pandemic.

What are the key causes of overtourism and its typical problems? What policies have the governments in tourist destinations affected by overtourism been adopting to protect local communities from these problems? What are the current situation and future prospects in Saudi Arabia? And how can Saudi tourism policy makers prepare for this now or prevent it? This paper will seek answers to these questions.

The paper consists of three sections; the first section discusses the transformation of tourism brought about by digital technologies, identifying four main changes in the industry. The second section highlights overtourism, including its definitions, causes, and impacts on destinations and local residents, while also exploring some representative policies adopted globally so far to address overtourism. The third section analyzes the growth of the tourism industry in Saudi Arabia, reviewing the aspects of religious tourism in

1. "International Tourism Growth Continues to Outpace the Global Economy," United Nations World Tourism Organization, January 20, 2020, https://www.unwto.org/international-tourism-growth-continues-to-outpace-the-economy; Max Roser, "Tourism," Our World in Data, https://ourworldindata.org/tourism.

٢.   «رؤية المملكة العربية السعودية ٢٠٣٠»، الرياض، (٢٥، أبريل، ٢٠١٦م)، https://www.alriyadh.com/1149983.

3. "Saudi Arabia Opens Its Home and Heart," *Saudi Gazette*, September 27, 2019, https://saudigazette.com.sa/article/578391.

4. "Saudi Arabia Creates Ministries for Investment, Tourism and Sport," *Arab News*, February 26, 2020, https://arab.news/jtpkc.

Makkah (Mecca) and examining the policies adopted in the city to manage crowds from Islamic pilgrimage. Finally, based on the analysis from these three sections, the paper concludes with hinting at steps for Saudi tourism policy makers to take with regard to how to handle the problems of overtourism when it occurs in the future or what to do to prevent these problems before they happen.

1. Digital Technologies and the Transformation of Tourism

The advancement of digital technologies and their broad social application has brought about significant changes to a number of industries. Tourism has been no exception. The growing use of social media and smartphones has transformed the nature of tourism, altering the style of a variety of services, the method of promoting destinations, the form in which information is generated and accessed, and even how tourists behave. This paper identifies the changes regarding the following four issues: the sources of tourism information, sharing tourist experiences, tourism services, and traveler choices and behaviors.

### The Sources of Tourism Information: From Professional to Peer

First of all, the sources of tourism information, which inspires tourists in their making decisions such as where to visit, how to organize their itineraries, and what to do at the destination, have been affected by digital technologies.[5] In the past, these sources were limited to traditional media such as guidebooks, brochures, magazines, newspapers, television, radio, and outdoor advertisements. In addition to these sources, today's tourists also benefit from online media, such as websites, smartphone applications, and social media. One recent survey shows that 90% of travelers do their travel planning research online.[6]

The increasing use of these digital sources has been driven by their advantages, namely, the supply of a variety of supportive information, including mapping services, weather conditions, and even local news. In traditional media, these pieces of information were provided separately, and it took much longer for tourists to collect them. For instance, while guidebooks give some basic maps and climate data of destinations, tourists had to obtain additional maps for detailed information of the destination and catch television or radio news to know the latest weather. Today, a smartphone connected to the network enables tourists to collect these different pieces of information almost instantly. In other words, the information available from digital sources is characterized by its accessibility, immediacy, and diversity.[7]

In addition, promotion of destinations today not only is done by professionals but also involves peers.[8] While tourism information was previously almost exclusively provided by tourist destination parties or by third-party marketers, this information is today also generated by a myriad of travel bloggers and lay

5. Orhan Icoz et al., "Social Media and Consumer Buying Decisions in Tourism: The Case of Turkey," *Revista de Turismo y Patrimonio Cultural*, 16:4, 2018, 1051-1066, http://dx.doi.org/10.25145/j.pasos.2018.16.073.

6. Steve Deane, "Over 60 Online Travel Booking Statistics (2021)," *Stratos Jet Charters*, April 18, 2021, https://www.stratosjets.com/blog/online-travel-statistics.

7. Tom van Nuenen and Caroline Scarles, "Advancements in Technology and Digital Media in Tourism," *Tourist Studies*, 21:1, 2021, 119-132, https://doi.org/10.1177/1468797621990410.

8. Lauren Siegel et al., "Does Social Media Help or Hurt Destinations? A Qualitative Case Study," *E-Review of Tourism Research*, 17:4, 2019, https://journals.tdl.org/ertr/index.php/ertr/article/view/541.

reviewers. Tourists tend to see such peer-produced tourism information as more up to date, credible, and even enjoyable.[9] They tend to trust in the reviews of peer travelers, which are in most cases written without particular commercial interest,[10] while more critically accepting official or commercial advice.[11] One survey indicates that 72% of travelers spend time reading other traveler reviews before they book.[12]

90% of travelers do their travel planning research online

72% of travelers read reviews before they book
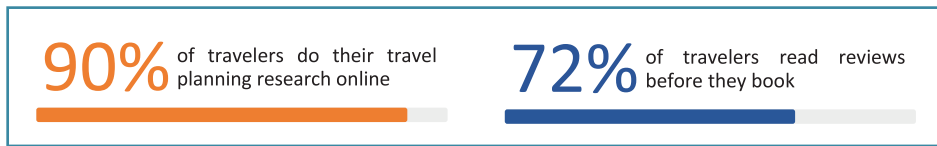
Sharing Tourist Experiences: From Private to Public

Digital technologies have also changed the way in which tourists share their experiences. In the past, travel narratives were, in most cases, shared only with the tourist's private circle—family, friends, and neighbors. Many tourists today share their travel experiences online, using websites, blogs, and social media, where information is presentable in a variety of formats such as text, image, audio, and video, extending the boundaries of the user's social circle and often sharing the content in the public sphere.[13] These publicly shared tourist experiences are also communicative as the digital media provides users with opportunities to interact with the content posted by others, including sharing it and reacting to it with like buttons, emoji, and comments.[14] Such interactions have also become part of the greater tourist experience—which now happens in cyberspace too. A study about travelers' utilization of social media in 2018 shows that 60% of travelers and 97% of millennials among them share photos on social media while they travel.[15]

60% of travelers share photos on social media while they travel

97% of millennials share photos on social media while they travel
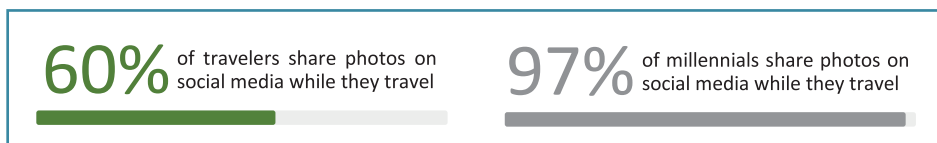
Tourism Services: From Office to Online

Many aspects of tourism services have already been digitized. In particular, reservation services have shifted to online. Today more tourists book hotels through online travel agency websites such as Booking.com or Trivago than call hotels or use a travel agency's in-person services.[16] Transportation, including

9. Ulrike Gretzel and Kyung Hyan Yoo, "Social Media in Hospitality and Tourism," in *Routledge Handbook of Consumer Behaviour in Hospitality and Tourism*, edited by Saurabh Kumar Dixit (London: Routledge, 2017), 339-46.

10. Daniel Leung et al., "Social Media in Tourism and Hospitality: A Literature Review," *Journal of Travel & Tourism Marketing*, 30:1-2, 2013, 3-22, http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/10548408.2013.750919.

11. Radmila Živković et al., "The Impact of Social Media on Tourism," in *Proceedings of Sinteza 2014 - Impact of the Internet on Business Activities in Serbia and Worldwide*, (Belgrade:2014), 758-761, http://dx.doi.org/10.15308/sinteza-2014-758-761.

12. "Online Travel Booking Statistics 2020-2021," *Condor Ferries*, https://www.condorferries.co.uk/online-travel-booking-statistics.

13. Tonino Pencarelli, "The Digital Revolution in the Travel and Tourism Industry," *Information Technology & Tourism*, 22:5, 2020, 455-476, https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s40558-019-00160-3.

14. Živković et al., "The Impact of Social Media on Tourism."

15. Douglas Karr, "Statistics on How Travelers Utilize Social Media before, during, and after a Vacation," *Martech Zone*, June 14, 2018, https://martech.zone/social-media-statistics-travel-vacation.

16. Van Nuenen and Scarles, "Advancements in Technology and Digital Media in Tourism."

airlines, trains, buses, ferries, and rental cars, is also booked online. Globally popular services include Expedia, Wego (for airlines), and Uber (for taxi services). Tickets for events and attractions are often purchased online, too. An increasing number of tourists favor these online services for various reasons, such as their ease of use; the availability of coupons; and the speedy access to a wide range of options and the convenience of filtering results and comparing them. These services are even handier to use through smartphone applications.[17] In 2018, 82% of travel bookings were made online.[18]

In addition, the digitalization of tourism services has also brought about new styles of services, such as peer-to-peer accommodation platforms. In particular, Airbnb has revolutionized the lodging market by allowing people to offer their properties, in whole or in part, to tourists as accommodation.[19]

Traveler Choices and Behaviors: From Solo to Synergistic

Today, more people are motivated by posts that they find online when deciding on a travel destination.[20] Moreover, owing to the wide availability of Wi-Fi at popular destinations, digital media also influences the choices that tourists make during their trips.[21] For example, one can look for popular restaurants in the area using Tripadvisor or checking reviews on Google Maps, or see if there are any special daily or seasonal offers. Moreover, the behavior of tourists (i.e., what they do at travel destinations, and how) is affected: we see a lot of tourists emulating other travelers, such as tourists being inspired by their peers to take photos in certain spots.[22] Such a synergistic effect of social media on tourist behavior sometimes leads to an influx of large numbers of tourists within a short period of time to certain destinations or certain spots. On the positive side, this brings sizable economic and employment benefits to the selected destination.

Negative Consequences of the Tourism Transformation

Such transformation of tourism has, however, invited some negative consequences too. In particular, because the information and the services are more widely and instantly accessible and tourists' choices and behaviors are broadly shared and emulated through social media, overcrowding of tourists and a variety of problems caused by this have emerged and beset the local residents and local communities of popular tourist destinations. This issue is increasingly known as *overtourism*.

17. Pencarelli, "The Digital Revolution in the Travel and Tourism Industry."
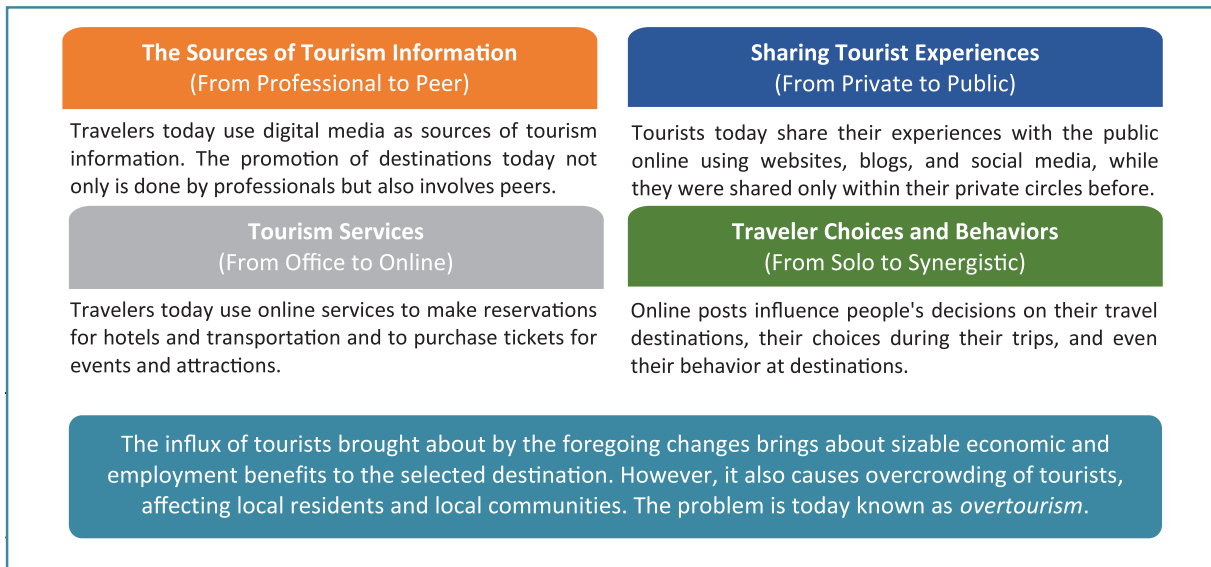18. "Online Travel Booking Statistics 2020-2021."
19. Dina Gerdeman, "The Airbnb Effect: Cheaper Rooms for Travelers, Less Revenue for Hotels," *Harvard Business School Working Knowledge*, 2018, https://hbswk.hbs.edu/item/the-airbnb-effect-cheaper-rooms-for-travelers-less-revenue-for-hotels.
20. Ulrike Gretzel, "The Role of Social Media in Creating and Addressing Overtourism," in *Overtourism: Issues, Realities and Solutions*, edited by Rachel Dodds and Richard Butler (Berlin: De Gruyter Oldenbourg, 2019), 62-75.
21. Pencarelli, "The Digital Revolution in the Travel and Tourism Industry."
22. Siegel et al., "Does Social Media Help or Hurt Destinations? A Qualitative Case Study."

Figure 1. Digital Technologies and the Transformation of Tourism

The Sources of Tourism Information (From Professional to Peer)	Sharing Tourist Experiences (From Private to Public)
Travelers today use digital media as sources of tourism information. The promotion of destinations today not only is done by professionals but also involves peers.	Tourists today share their experiences with the public online using websites, blogs, and social media, while they were shared only within their private circles before.
Tourism Services (From Office to Online)	**Traveler Choices and Behaviors** (From Solo to Synergistic)
Travelers today use online services to make reservations for hotels and transportation and to purchase tickets for events and attractions.	Online posts influence people's decisions on their travel destinations, their choices during their trips, and even their behavior at destinations.

The influx of tourists brought about by the foregoing changes brings about sizable economic and employment benefits to the selected destination. However, it also causes overcrowding of tourists, affecting local residents and local communities. The problem is today known as *overtourism*.

2. Overtourism: Its Definitions, Causes, Impacts, and Policies Addressing It
Definitions

Overtourism is defined by the *Oxford English Dictionary* as "an excessive number of visitors heading to famous locations, damaging the environment and having a detrimental impact on resident's lives,"[23] while the World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) describes it as "the impact of tourism on a destination, or parts thereof, that excessively influences perceived quality of life of citizens and/or quality of visitors' experiences in a negative way."[24]

The term allegedly first appeared on Twitter in 2012,[25] and the hashtag #overtourism became popular in 2016 after Skift, a media company focused on the travel industry, published in the same year an article entitled "Iceland and the Trials of 21st Century Tourism," which highlighted the negative consequences of tourist overcrowding in Iceland using this term.[26] Overtourism became a buzzword thereafter, with the *Oxford English Dictionary* choosing it as one of its Words of the Year for 2018.[27]

The term has also been receiving the attention of tourism studies researchers since the Responsible Tourism Partnership, a global initiative to support the development of responsible tourism businesses,

23. Joe Minihane, "Destination Trouble: Can Overtourism Be Stopped in Its Tracks?," CNN, July 2, 2019, https://edition.cnn.com/travel/article/how-to-stop-overtourism/index.html.
24. World Tourism Organization (UNWTO), Overtourism? *Understanding and Managing Urban Tourism Growth beyond Perceptions*, (Madrid, Spain, 2018), https://www.e-unwto.org/doi/pdf/10.18111/9789284420070.
25. Harold Goodwin, "Overtourism: Causes, Symptoms and Treatment," *Tourismus Wissen – Quarterly*, 2019, 110-114, https://responsibletourismpartnership.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/TWG16-Goodwin.pdf. The hashtag #overtourism appeared in 2013.
26. UNWTO, *Overtourism? Understanding and Managing*;" Andrew Sheivachman, "Iceland and the Trials of 21st Century Tourism," Skift, 2016, https://skift.com/iceland-tourism.
27. Greg Dickinson, "'Overtourism' Shortlisted as Word of the Year Following Telegraph Travel Campaign," the *Telegraph*, November 15, 2018, https://www.telegraph.co.uk/travel/news/overtourism-word-of-the-year-oxford.

held its 13th international conference in 2017 in Iceland with the title "Tackling Overtourism—Local Responses."[28] The number of research publications including this term exponentially rose in recent years (figure 2).

Figure 2. The Use of the Term "Overtourism" in Research Publications
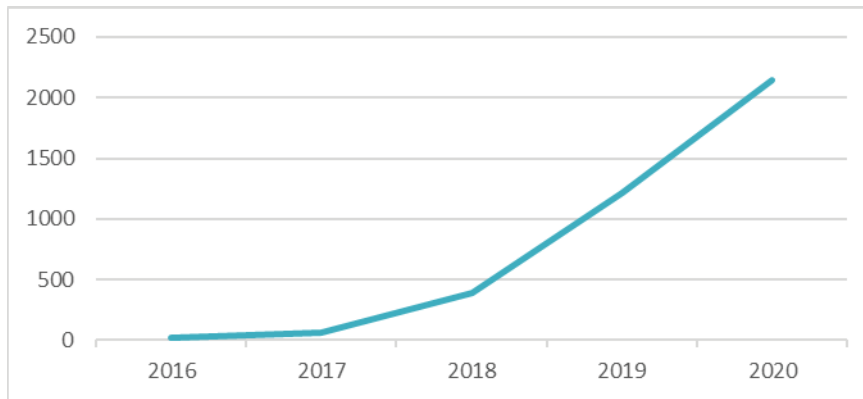
Source: Google Scholar.

Causes

The problem of congestion at certain tourist destinations itself is not new. Indeed, many places have long been suffering from overcrowding caused by tourists. Previous literature framed the phenomenon as tourism congestion, overcrowding, or visitor pressure. However, today's overtourism has some distinctive new sources (figure 3), such as the effects of digital technologies (mentioned above), changes in the transportation industry, particularly the rise of low-cost carriers (LCCs), and the increasing availability of affordable accommodation options, including new platforms such as Airbnb, which share part of the responsibility for the increase in the global demand for tourism in recent years.[29] Another factor is the global rise of the middle class, driven by economic globalization and their growing propensity to be consumers of travel services.[30] According to one estimate, the global middle class doubled between 2000 and 2015 to more than three billion people in 2015 and is forecasted to increase annually by 160 million people through 2030.[31] Most of this increase will likely be seen in Asia, suggesting the growth of new groups of tourists such as Chinese and Indians.[32]

28. Harold Goodwin, "The 13th International Conference on Responsible Tourism in Destinations: Tackling Overtourism - Local Responses," *Responsible Tourism Partnership*, October 22, 2017, https://responsibletourismpartnership.org/conferences/rtd-13-iceland.

29. UNWTO, *Overtourism?* Understanding and Managing.

30. Goodwin, "Overtourism: Causes, Symptoms and Treatment."

31. Homi Kharas, "The Unprecedented Expansion of the Global Middle Class: An Update," Global Economy and Development Working Paper 100, Brookings Institution, 2017, https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2017/02/global_20170228_global-middle-class.pdf.

32. Rachel Dodds and Richard Butler, "The Enablers of Overtourism," in *Overtourism: Issues, Realities and Solutions*, edited by Rachel Dodds and Richard Butler (Berlin: De Gruyter Oldenbourg, 2019), 6-21.

Figure 3. The Main Causes of Overtourism
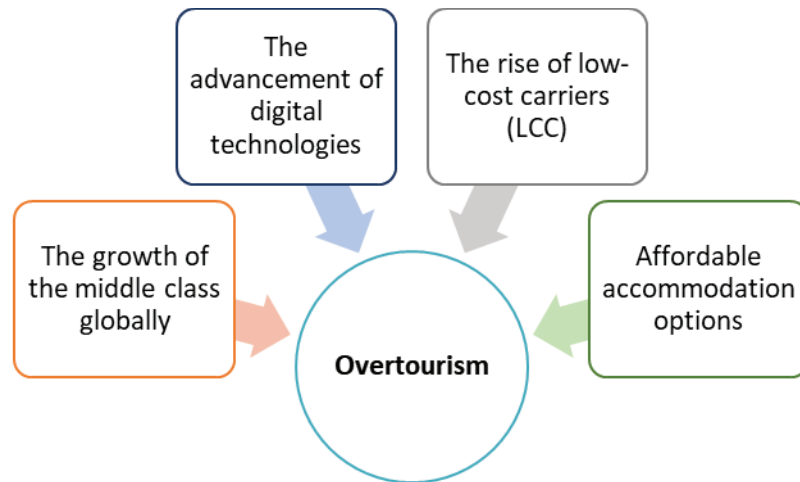
Impacts

Overtourism occurs when large numbers of tourists visit the same destination at the same time or in the same season in numbers beyond the carrying capacity of the place. Overtourism causes various problems to a destination, including environmental degradation, the drain of natural resources such as water, energy, and wood, and the overuse of infrastructure. It sometimes even leads to the unavailability of the destination. For example, as a result of over 3,000 tourists visiting daily, Maya Bay beach in Thailand was closed by authorities in 2018 to rehabilitate its damaged facilities and allow its ecosystems to recover.[33]

Moreover, overtourism affects local communities in and around destinations in many ways. First, local residents are inconvenienced when the glut of tourists causes heavy traffic, occupies public transportation, and crowds into commercial and recreational facilities such as cafes, restaurants, public baths, parks, squares, natural sites, and entertainment venues. Local residents also find the noise and litter caused by tourists unpleasant. The increase in outsider vandalism and crime can also lead to a sense of insecurity among local residents.[34] After 2020, concern about the pandemic became a consideration too.

Second, tourists are sometimes prioritized over local residents when the latter become the minority in the area and the former's economic contribution grows. As a result, services begin to target tourists rather than local residents, and competition for space between local residents and tourists intensifies. Even the language commonly spoken in the area becomes something other than the local language. This may lead to local residents losing their sense of belonging to the place.[35] Moreover, local communities feel that their values and culture are at the risk when tourists' behaviors do not comply with local rules, customs, or traditions.
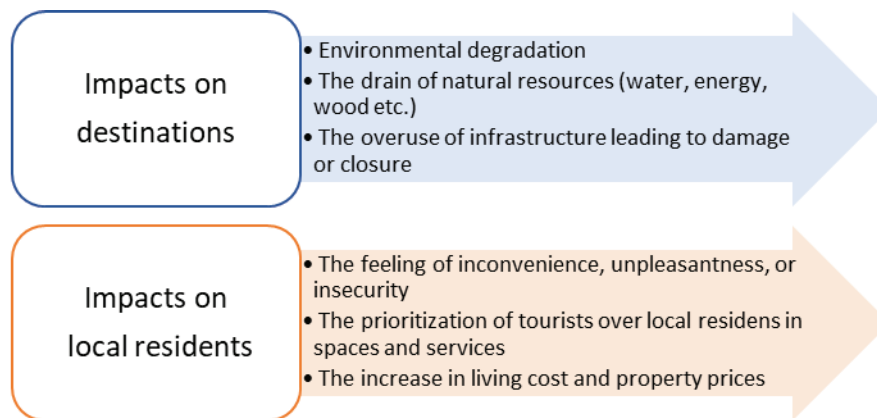
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33. "Saving Maya Bay," *Nation Thailand*, May 22, 2018, https://www.nationthailand.com/thai-destination/30346026.

34. Hugues Seraphin et al., "Over-Tourism and the Fall of Venice as a Destination," *Journal of Destination Marketing & Management*, 2018, 374–376, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jdmm.2018.01.011; Ko Koens et al., "Is Overtourism Overused? Understanding the Impact of Tourism in a City Context," *Sustainability*, 10:12, 2018, https://doi.org/10.3390/su10124384.

35. Claudio Milano et al., "Overtourism and Tourismphobia: A Journey through Four Decades of Tourism Development, Planning and Local Concerns," *Tourism Planning & Development*, 16-4, 2019, 353-357.

Finally, as seen in places such as Barcelona and Venice, local residents may even be displaced.[36] Such displacement is sometimes a result of the decline in quality of life for local residents, mentioned above, but is also caused by the rising cost of living or an increase in real estate prices.[37] Local residents move out of the area in search of less expensive places to live, or lease or sell their properties to earn a profit by converting them into accommodations or commercial sites that serve tourists. Even if local residents remain, some live with "tourismphobia" or engage in protests against tourism.[38] The aggravation of tourist-resident relations are today more salient in many popular tourist destinations than before.

Figure 4. The Negative Impacts of Overtourism on Destinations and Local Residents

Impacts on destinations
- Environmental degradation
- The drain of natural resources (water, energy, wood etc.)
- The overuse of infrastructure leading to damage or closure

Impacts on local residents
- The feeling of inconvenience, unpleasantness, or insecurity
- The prioritization of tourists over local residens in spaces and services
- The increase in living cost and property prices

Policies to Address Overtourism

In recent years, some local authorities in tourist destinations have begun taking steps to address the problems of overtourism. Some policies aim to restrict the number of tourists, and others focus on regulation, awareness campaign, and investment. The following are some representative policies that have been practiced at tourist destinations:

a. Time-Based Dispersal of Tourists

Dispersing tourists based on time alleviates visitor pressure during peak tourist times. This policy distributes the flow of tourists throughout the day or the year by using timed ticketing, instituting dynamic pricing, and/or promoting events in non-peak times or off-seasons.[39] Machu Picchu in Peru developed a system for timed entry tickets that can be purchased in advance through the official website or a travel agency.[40] In some museums in London, entry prices are time-adjusted and discounted tickets are

36. The statistics indicate a decrease in the population of Venice by 22% between 2000 and 2020 ("Popolazione Residente dal 1871 al 2020," *Città di Venezia*, https://www.comune.venezia.it/it/content/serie-storiche); يورونيوز، «١١٪ من سكان المدينة القديمة ببرشلونة هجروها بسبب السياح»، «٧، أغسطس، ٢٠١٩م»,
https://arabic.euronews.com/2019/07/24/europe-spain-barcelona-mass-tourism-issues-residents-council-mediators-400-cases.

37. Alessandro Capocchi et al., "Overtourism: A Literature Review to Assess Implications and Future Perspectives," *Sustainability*, 11:12, 2019, http://dx.doi.org/10.3390/su11123303.

38. Milano et al., "Overtourism and Tourismphobia."

39. Goodwin, "Overtourism: Causes, Symptoms and Treatment."

40. Will Coldwell, "Machu Picchu to Trial Timed Entry Tickets in Bid to Control Tourist Numbers," the *Guardian*, June 20, 2017, https://www.theguardian.com/travel/2017/jun/20/machu-picchu-tickets-peru-timed-entry-control-flow-of-tourists.

offered to early morning visitors.[41] Geirangerfjord in Norway promotes visiting in seasons other than summer by requesting that the harbors where tourist cruise ships berth increase their prices sharply in summer and also by raising the profile of events and attractions in other seasons.[42] Such policy also contributes to the creation of sustainable, rather than seasonal, job opportunities for local residents.

b. Spatial Distribution of Tourists

The spatial distribution policy spreads tourists across various places within the destination or navigates them to spots outside it so as to avoid their overconcentration in hot spots. Local authorities may promote alternative spots, offer organized tours, or create new attractions and events in less visited areas. Iceland worked on shifting visitors away from the overburdened capital, Reykjavik, by promoting Akureyri, the second-largest city in the country. The Icelandic authorities also established a fund aimed at increasing the number of tourist sites by helping municipalities and the private sector invest in new attractions.[43]

c. Regulations Targeting, and Related to, Businesses

When the number of visitors mushrooms and grows out of control, authorities may create additional regulations targeting, or related to, the commercial sector, including limitations and licenses. For instance, in Copenhagen, the capital of Denmark, the authorities prohibited the establishment of new restaurants in certain areas and placed a cap on the number of nights visitors may stay at an Airbnb in order to restore the quietness to the concerned local communities.[44] Santorini, a popular tourist destination in Greece, established a daily cap on the number of cruise passengers who could land on the island, which in past years has forced businesses operating cruise tours to reduce the number who arrive.[45]

d. Recovering the Quality of Life of Local Residents

Good strategies are needed to make tourism development benefit *both* local residents and tourists.[46] It is desirable, for instance, to ensure the availability of services responding to local residents' needs well. The municipality of Bled in Slovenia developed a strategy that emphasizes the role of tourism in enhancing the local residents' quality of life through improving public services including security and creating greater recreational opportunities.[47] Some destinations have doubled their effort to col-

41. Ko Koens and Albert Postma, "Understanding and Managing Visitor Pressure in Urban Tourism," *Centre of Expertise Leisure, Tourism and Hospitality*, 2017,
https://www.celth.nl/sites/default/files/2018-09/Voorkomen%20van%20bezoekersdruk%20in%20Europese%20steden.pdf.

42. Richard Orange, "Norway Stops Promoting Tourism as It Is Overwhelmed Thanks to 'Frozen Effect'," the *Telegraph*, September 16, 2016, https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2016/09/16/norway-stops-promoting-tourism-as-it-is-overwhelmed-thanks-to-fr.

43. "Coping with Success: Managing Overcrowding in Tourism Destination," McKinsey and Company, and World Travel and Tourism Council, 2017,
https://www.mckinsey.com/industries/travel-logistics-and-infrastructure/our-insights/coping-with-success-managing-overcrowding-in-tourism-destinations.

44. Harold Goodwin, "The Challenge of Overtourism," Responsible Tourism Partnership Working Paper 4, 2017,
https://haroldgoodwin.info/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/rtpwp4overtourism012017.pdf.

45. "Santorini to Limit Cruise Traffic, Visitor Numbers," *Greek Travel Pages* (GTP), February 29, 2016,
https://news.gtp.gr/2016/02/29/santorini-limit-cruise-traffic-visitor-numbers.

46. Paul Peeters et al., "Research for TRAN Committee - Overtourism: Impact and Possible Policy Responses," European Parliament, Policy Department for Structural and Cohesion Policies, 2018.

47. Tina Šegota et al., "The Impact of Residents' Informedness and Involvement on Perceptions of Tourism Impacts: The Case of the Destination Bled," *Journal of Destination Marketing and Management*, 6:3, 2017, 196-206, http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.jdmm.2016.03.007.

lect information about the concerns of local residents. Amsterdam now offers a 24-hour hotline for its residents where they can raise complaints regarding the overuse of Airbnb, one of the major factors causing overtourism in the city.[48]

e. Educating, and Communicating with, Tourists

Some tourist destinations attempt to educate tourists and communicate with them by way of awareness campaigns, using tools such as signboards, brochures, and posters, with the goal to alleviate the discomfort tourists may cause for local residents and local communities. This policy aims to induce tourists to adopt certain "locally desirable" behaviors by informing them of destination rules and regulations, local values, customs, and traditions.[49] Echternach, the oldest town in Luxembourg, distributes brochures to help visitors adjust their behavior at certain types of events such as religious ceremonies.[50] The Vatican authorities have long practiced communication campaigns to inform tourists of the dress code, which requires people of all genders to cover their shoulders and knees (figure 5).[51]

Figure 5. Signboard Telling the Dress Code in Vatican City

Source: Sightseeing Tours Italy.

3. Overtourism in Saudi Arabia

In Saudi Arabia, the leisure tourism industry has just begun to grow. Targeting tourism as one of the pillars of its economic diversification away from oil under the Vision 2030 reform plans, the Saudi government began issuing tourist visas in 2019.[52] This resulted in a jump in the number of international visitors to the Kingdom: in five months between the end of September 2019 and the end of February 2020 (Saudi Ara-

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48. "Amsterdam Residents' AirBnB Rentals Capped at 60 Days per Year," *Reuters*, December 1, 2016, https://www.reuters.com/article/airbnb-netherlands-idUSL8N1DW1G5.

49. UNWTO, *Overtourism?* Understanding and Managing.

50. Nina Lamparski, "Luxembourg's Hopping Heritage," BBC, September 16, 2013, https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/magazine-23927021.

51. "What Should You Wear to the Vatican City?," *Sightseeing Tours Italy*, https://www.vaticancitytours.it/blog/what-should-you-wear-to-the-vatican-city/.

52. "Saudi Arabia Opens Its Home and Heart."

bia closed its borders in late February to prevent the spread of the Covid-19 pandemic into the country), more than 400,000 tourist visas had been issued.[53] The number was still modest, and signs of overtourism were yet to be seen. Nevertheless, the country's so-called "religious tourism" has already been recording enormous numbers of visitors. Because of administering Makkah (Mecca), the holy city in Islam, Saudi Arabia hosts millions of global Muslim pilgrims every year. Religious tourism visits accounted for 62.7% (9.4 million visits) of the total number of international visits to Saudi Arabia in 2018.[54]

Islamic pilgrimage is divided into Hajj, which occurs on specific days of the Islamic calendar, and Umrah, which can occur any time of the year. The number of total Umrah pilgrims in 2019 was around 19 million (19,158,031), including 7,457,663 international pilgrims and 11,700,368 domestic ones.[55] Nevertheless, because it is deemed desirable to perform Umrah in Ramadan, the ninth month of the Islamic calendar, large numbers of Umrah pilgrims gather in Makkah in this particular month. In 2019, the number of Umrah pilgrims in Ramadan was slightly less than eight million (7,953,850), which represented 42% of the total Umrah pilgrims in that year.[56] The number of average daily Umrah pilgrims in this month calculated from this figure (over a quarter million) is more than twice that in Venice, the icon of overtourism, on its busiest days (figure 6).[57] On the other hand, Hajj, one of the largest religious tourism events in the world, attracts more than two million pilgrims to Makkah in just five days. The number of Hajj pilgrims in 2019 was 2,489,406 (1,855,027 international and 634,379 domestic).[58]

Figure 6. Daily Umrah pilgrims in Ramadan vs. daily visitors in Venice in summer
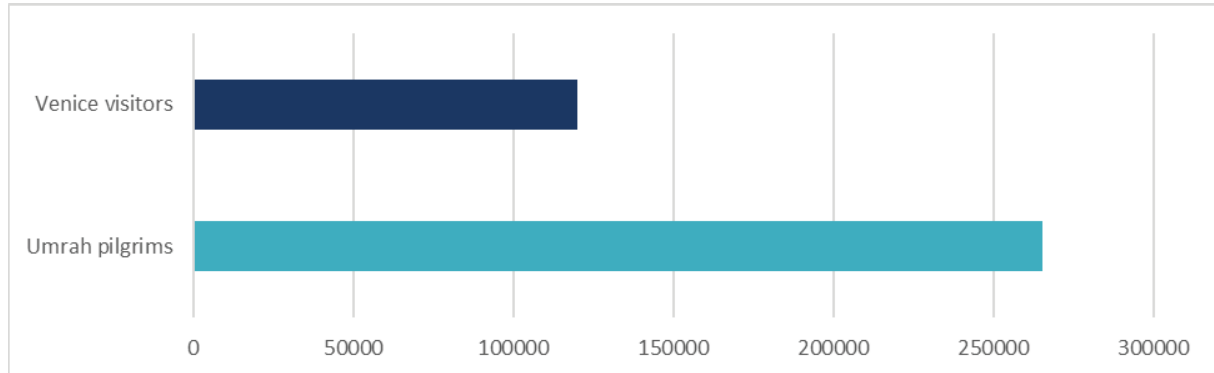
Sources: Responsible Travel; Saudi General Authority for Statistics.

53. Hala Tashkandi, "Saudi Arabia Issued More Than 400,000 Tourist Visas in Six Months," *Arab News*, December 14, 2020, https://arab.news/8khgy.
54. Saudi Commission for Tourism and National Heritage, *National Tourism Strategy 2019-2030*, (2019), 48.
55. Saudi General Authority for Statistics, *Umrah Statistics Bulletin*, (2019), 1.
56. Saudi General Authority for Statistics, *Umrah Statistics Bulletin*, (2019), 1-2.
57. Around 120,000 people visit Venice per day on its busiest days. ("Overtourism in Venice," *Responsible Travel*, https://www.responsibletravel.com/copy/overtourism-in-venice).
58. "Statistics Authority: Total Number of Pilgrims of Hajj 1440 H. Reached 2,489,406 Pilgrims," *Saudi Press Agency*, August 10, 2019, https://www.spa.gov.sa/1957234.

Umrah and Hajj

Umrah mainly includes *ṭawāf* (the circumambulation of the Holy Kaaba) and *saʿiy* (walking between the hills of Safa and Marwah) inside *Al-Ḥaram* (the Grand Mosque), and can be performed within three hours. On the other hand, Hajj takes at least five days and requires, among other rituals, traveling between *Al-Ḥaram* and the holy sites (Mina, Arafat, and Muzdalifah) at specific times (the distance of each trip between them ranges within 5-17 kilometers), in addition to the above.

The overcrowding of pilgrims has already posed challenges that cost human lives. During the Hajj in 2015, the flows of pilgrims overlapped while they were going to perform *jamarāt*, one of the rituals where pilgrims throw stones, causing a stampede and resulting in the death of more than 700 and the injury of about 800 others.[59]

Saudi Arabia currently plans to further increase the number of pilgrim visitors, targeting 30 million Umrah pilgrims and five million Hajj pilgrims annually by 2030.[60] It also aims to broaden tourism packages targeting these pilgrims. In May 2019, the Doyof Al Rahman Program was established, objectives of which include the enrichment of the pilgrims' spiritual and cultural experience in the Kingdom through offering them opportunities to visit Islamic historical sites and attend cultural events. The program intends to enhance the level of integration of efforts of all parties working in the service of pilgrims for this purpose, involving public, private, and non-profit sectors.[61] Many pilgrims, too, wish to have such an extended experience. In a survey conducted in 2019 by the Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques Institute for Hajj and Umrah Research with over 1,800 international pilgrims, 92.6% of the respondents answered that they wished to visit Islamic historical sites; 58%, museums; and 32.5%, natural sites.[62]

Such ambitious religious and related tourism expansion plans, on the other hand, are likely to place high visitor pressure on the city of Makkah, and possibly on Madinah, the second-holiest city, north of Makkah, too. A significant proportion of international pilgrims visit Madinah before, or after, Makkah.[63] A study on Umrah pilgrims during Ramadan in 2018 revealed that 44.4% had plans to visit Madinah after Makkah and 43.1% had already visited it before arriving at Makkah.[64] Moreover, these expansion plans are only part of Saudi Arabia's tourism ambition, which aims to make the country one of the top

٥٩. «٧١٧ وفاة و٨٦٣ إصابة في حادث تدافع بمنى»، الرياض، (٢٤، سبتمبر، ٢٠١٥م)، https://www.alriyadh.com/1085293.

٦٠. عبدالله الدهاس، «الحج تبدأ أولى خطوات ٢٠٣٠.. لاستهداف ٣٠ مليون معتمر»، عكاظ، (٢، سبتمبر، ٢٠١٨م)، https://www.okaz.com.sa/local/na/1668102

٦١. «وثيقة برنامج خدمة ضيوف الرحمن»، برنامج خدمة ضيوف الرحمن، https://darp.gov.sa.

٦٢. «حج / تقرير / الحج مستقبلاً .. موسم يربط وجدان الحجاج بالتاريخ الإسلامي»، وكالة الأنباء السعودية، (٢١، يوليو، ٢٠٢١م)، www.spa.gov.sa/2262813؛ «إنتاج مؤشرات حول اتجاهات حجاج الخارج نحو المشاركة في البرامج والأنشطة الإثرائية خلال رحلة الحج»، معهد خادم الحرمين الشريفين لأبحاث الحج والعمرة، (١٤٤٠هـ).

٦٣. «حج / وصول أكثر من ٨٥٢ ألف حاج إلى المدينة المنورة»، وكالة الأنباء السعودية، (١٨، أغسطس، ٢٠١٨م)، www.spa.gov.sa/1799103؛ «حج / وصول أكثر من ٧٨٦ ألف حاج إلى المدينة المنورة بعد موسم الحج»، وكالة الأنباء السعودية، (١٩، سبتمبر، ٢٠١٨م)، www.spa.gov.sa/1815426.

٦٤. «الخصائص الديمغرافية للمعتمرين ١٤٤٠هـ»، معهد خادم الحرمين الشريفين لأبحاث الحج والعمرة، (١٤٤٠هـ).

five global tourist destinations that accept 100 million visits annually by 2030,[65] compared with 41.2 million in 2018.[66]

The Saudi authorities have already adopted policies aimed at managing crowds for Hajj and Umrah. Some are similar to the globally used approaches. The following is an exploration of how overtourism policies mentioned above were implemented (or not implemented) in Makkah:

a. Time-Based Dispersal of Pilgrims

Although it is not realistic to think of dispersal of the pilgrims across different seasons, the Ministry of Hajj and Umrah sets timetables for each ritual of Hajj and distributes pilgrim groups into visits at different hours of the day to prevent overcrowding. Timetables are also used to regulate the movement of pilgrims between the holy sites (Mina, Arafat, and Muzdalifah) and *Al-Ḥaram* (the Grand Mosque).[67] Following the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic, Umrah became even more organized: since September 2020, pre-reservation has been required through a smartphone application called "Eatmarna" (meaning "Let us perform Umrah") (figure 7).[68]

Figure 7. The Circumambulation Paths and the Eatmarna Application
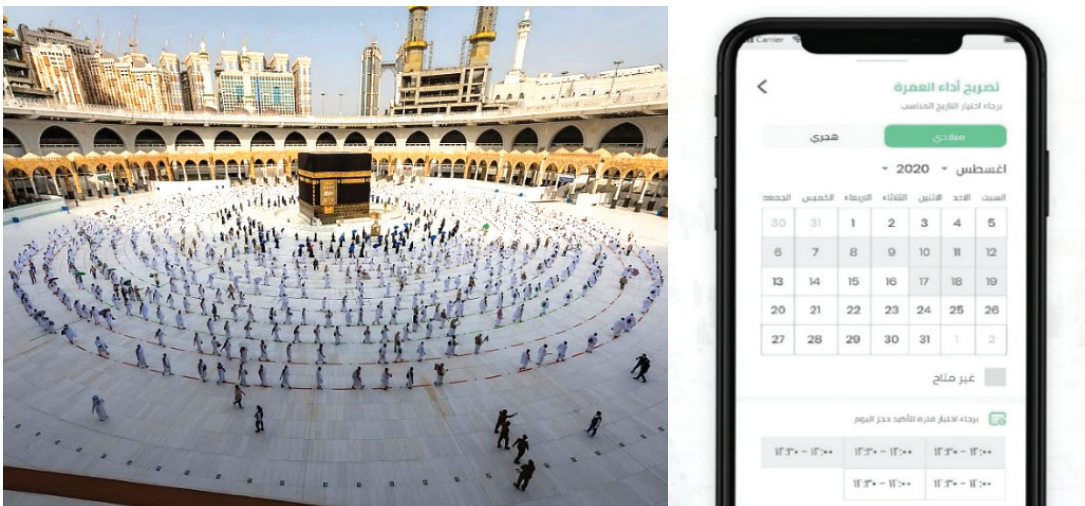
Source: Saudi Press Agency.

b. Spatial Distribution of Pilgrims

This policy does not apply to Hajj and Umrah, in which the places for pilgrims to visit are religiously fixed.

65. Vicky Karantzavelou, "Vision 2030 Plan Aims to Make Saudi Arabia a Top Five Global Destination," *Travel Daily News*, October 1, 2019, https://www.traveldailynews.com/post/vision-2030-plan-aims-to-make-saudi-arabia-a-top-five-global-destination.

66. Of these, 15.7 million were for leisure, 15.7 million for religious purposes, 6.2 million for VFR (visiting friends and relatives), and 3.6 million for MICE (meetings, incentives, conferences, and exhibitions) (Saudi Commission for Tourism and National Heritage, *National Tourism Strategy 2019-2030*).

٦٧. «الحج والعمرة تعتمد الأنظمة الإلكترونية والجداول الزمنية لإدارة الحشود»، الرياض، (١٩، أغسطس، ٢٠١٦م)، https://www.alriyadh.com/1527044.

٦٨. عبدالله الدهاس، «تفعيل تطبيق «اعتمرنا» اليوم.. وكاميرات حرارية لخطة فتح الحرمين»، عكاظ، (٢٧، سبتمبر، ٢٠٢٠م)، https://www.okaz.com.sa/news/local/2042684.

c. Regulations Targeting, and Related to, Businesses

The authorities impose fines and penalties on companies or individuals who have transported pilgrims without permits.[69] In addition, the Ministry of Hajj and Umrah recently took a step to regulate businesses related to the pilgrimage and improve the quality of services provided to pilgrim visitors by transforming the Arbab Al-Tawaif Establishments, a network of nine non-governmental entities that offer services to pilgrims, into joint stock companies.[70] Among these nine entities, some are specialized in specific services, such as providing Zamzam water and serving those who visit Madinah in addition to Makkah, while others serve pilgrims arriving from particular countries or regions. Together, these entities offer comprehensive visitor experiences, including guidance, transportation, and accommodation, and help manage pilgrims' itineraries. The provision of pilgrim services is authorized only to these entities, which are supervised by the coordination committee that harmonizes efforts between them and the Ministry of Hajj and Umrah.[71]

d. Recovering the Quality of Life of Local Residents

The authorities have set a number of regulations to ensure that the traffic of pilgrims does not affect the lives of local residents.[72] During the Hajj season, non-residents' vehicles are not allowed to enter the city of Makkah; the Makkah Municipality instead prepares parking areas at the city's entrances and allots buses to transport pilgrims from there into the city.[73] The authorities also developed public transportation infrastructure, including Al-Mashaaer Al-Mugaddassah Metro line in Makkah and the Haramain High-Speed Railway, which runs between Makkah and Madinah (figure 8).[74] Furthermore, the Royal Commission for Makkah City and Holy Sites was established in 2018, with one of its aims being an improvement to the quality of life of Makkah residents. The commission's "Life in Makkah" (Al-Ḥayāt fī Makkah) program focuses on enhancing the quality of life, improving the hospitality sector, and increasing entertainment services.[75]

Figure 8. Parking Area, Buses for Pilgrims Transportation, Al-Mashaaer Al-Mugaddassah Metro


Source: Saudi Press Agency.

٦٩. فهد اللويحق، «لائحة عقوبات أمام من يحاول الحج بلا تصريح»، الرياض، (٢٣، أغسطس، ٢٠١٥م)، https://www.alriyadh.com/1075566.

70. "Arbab Al-Tawaif Establishments Transformed into 9 Joint-Stock Companies, Hajj Ministry Announces," *Saudi Gazette*, July 02, 2021, https://saudigazette.com.sa/article/608407.

71. "Coordination Committee for Arbab Al-Tawaif Establishments," Ministry of Hajj and Umrah, https://www.haj.gov.sa/en/InternalPages/Details/82.

٧٢. عبدالرحمن العصيمي، «الجميعي: الحركة المرورية للحجاج لم تؤثر على سكان مكة»، العربية، (١٨، يوليو ٢٠٢١م)، https://ara.tv/4qzqd.

٧٣. عبدالله الذبياني، «منع دخول السيارات الصغيرة لمكة المكرمة بعد ٥ ذي الحجة»، عكاظ، (٠٦، أكتوبر، ٢٠١٣م)، https://www.okaz.com.sa/article/612661؛ «١,٥ مليون م ٢ لسيارات المعتمرين»، مكة، (٠٢، مايو، ٢٠١٩م)، https://makkahnewspaper.com/article/1102310.

٧٤. «مشروعات في خدمة ضيوف الرحمن»، وزارة الحج والعمرة، (٢٩، مارس، ٢٠١٩م)، https://www.haj.gov.sa/ar/News/Details/2268.

75. "Strategic Programs," *Royal Commission for Makkah City and Holy Sites*, https://rcmc.gov.sa.

e. Educating, and Communicating with, Pilgrims

Every year, the Ministry of Hajj and Umrah raises awareness campaigns and educational initiatives before the Hajj season in order to educate pilgrims before their arrival to the Kingdom.[76] The Ministry also provides several educational smartphone applications, such as "Maqsad," (meaning "destination"), a navigation app to help pilgrim visitors know their way in *Al-Ḥaram* (the Grand Mosque),[77] and "Manasikana" (meaning "our rituals"), which offers various services for pilgrims in seven languages, including prayer times, emergency numbers, maps of the holy sites, tracking companions for groups, direct communication with the Ministry, and awareness and guidance messages (figure 9).[78]

Figure 9. Manasikana and Maqsad Applications
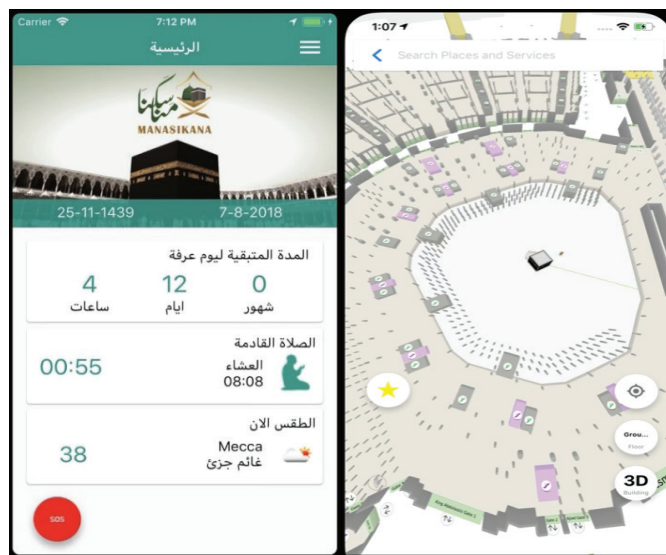
Conclusions and Recommendations

As overtourism has begun to beset major global tourist destinations, policies to address the problems it brings have also been evolving. Although the tourism sector is still new to Saudi Arabia, the country already shares some of these policies, particularly in the city of Makkah, which has been witnessing crowds of Islamic pilgrim visitors. The Saudi solution also offers some advanced advantages, including the proactive use of smartphone applications, which implies a possibility that, although digital technologies have caused overtourism, they also render effective solutions to the problems it causes. Some globally seen policies, such as spatial distribution, have so far been irrelevant to Saudi religious tour-

٧٦. «الحج والعمرة تدشن حملتها التوعوية لضيوف الرحمن»، الوطن، (١٣، يوليو، ٢٠٢١م)، https://www.alwatan.com.sa/article/1081439.

٧٧. محمد الحمزة، «رقمنة الحج»، الرياض، (٢٢، يوليو، ٢٠٢١م)، https://www.alriyadh.com/1897478.

٧٨. «تطبيق وزارة الحج والعمرة على الأجهزة الذكية «مناسكنا MANASIKANA» يعد ثاني أفضل تطبيق متوفر لخدمة ضيوف الرحمن»، وزارة الحج والعمرة، (٢٢، يناير، ٢٠١٨م)، https://www.haj.gov.sa/ar/News/Details/2040.

ism, which already has religiously fixed visit destinations. However, as the Saudi government aims to further increase the number of pilgrims and also attract them to tourist destinations and cultural events, learning fully from other countries' overtourism policy experiences shall be useful: for instance, applying the spatial distribution policy and strategically developing tourist destinations in places between Makkah and Madinah, and spots nearby, will help alleviate the heavy pressure from visitors on these two cities.

Moreover, although currently overtourism is still not present outside Makkah, it may occur in other areas in the near future as Saudi Arabia is currently implementing its ambitious tourism expansion plans beyond religious tourism under Vision 2030. Major tourist destinations in the Kingdom include Riyadh and Diriyah, the current and previous capital of the Saudi kingdom, respectively; Madinah and Al-Ula, the second destination for the religious tourism and the place that hosts Mada'in Saleh, an ancient Nabatean ruin and the first Saudi site on UNESCO's World Heritage list; and the Eastern Province facing the Gulf, which includes Al-Ahsa oasis. These destinations have been popular among Saudis, especially in winter.[79] In summer, many head to mountainous regions in the south, such as Asir, to avoid heat (figure 10).[80]

Some may still believe that overtourism will remain far "over the horizon" for Saudi Arabia, at least for a while, but it can, in fact, happen any time, even outside the tourism sites in the Hejaz region, which now attracts pilgrim visitors. This is because overtourism is a relative phenomenon: even if the absolute number of tourists remains at modest levels, if the carrying capacity of the tourist destination is underdeveloped, or if the area is already crowded with local residents, then overtourism will occur quite easily. The emulation effect of social media on tourist behavior also should never be underestimated. Furthermore, tourists from some populous countries, such as China, may head to the same destination, as happened to Hokkaido, Japan, which saw a sudden surge of Chinese tourists after the place had appeared in a popular Chinese film.[81]

This indicates the need for further studies and plans to be ready to handle overtourism when it occurs or to prevent it before it happens. In so doing, Saudi Arabia has an advantage of benefiting from internal knowledge transfer—learning from the experience of handling crowds of pilgrim visitors in Makkah—and of analyzing cases of global policy and their transferability to the Saudi context.

79. In the winter of 2019, the number of trips to Riyadh Province and Madinah Province was around three million each, and the number to the Eastern Province was 2.6 million. In 2020, while the number of trips to Madinah and the Eastern Province remained almost the same, the number in Riyadh increased by 13% (Tourism Intelligence Center of Ministry of Tourism, *Provinces Trips Data*).

80. Asir Province was the fourth most visited region in the summer of 2019 after Riyadh, Makkah, and Madinah (Tourism Intelligence Center of Ministry of Tourism, *Provinces Trips Data*).

81. Du Juan, "Movie Locations Big Draw for Chinese Tourists," *Economic Times*, September 2, 2011, https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/movie-locations-big-draw-for-chinese-tourists/articleshow/7793678.cms.

Figure 10. Tourist Destinations in Saudi Arabia That May Experience Overtourism

• **Makkah (Mecca)**

In addition to Makkah, the center of religious tourism, this western province facing the Red Sea includes Jeddah, the second-largest city in the Kingdom, which hosts a UNESCO World Heritage Site—Historic Jeddah, the Gate to Makkah, known as *Al-Balad*—as well as Taif, a popular destination for Saudis in summer.

• **Madinah (Medina)**

The city of Madinah serves as the second destination for religious tourism. The province also includes Al-Ula, which hosts Mada'in Saleh, the first UNESCO World Heritage Site in the Kingdom, as well as the coastal town of Yanbu.

• **Riyadh**

The Saudi capital hosts a myriad of events through a leisure campaign "Riyadh Season," which attracted 11.4 million visitors within three months in the winter of 2019. The province includes Diriyah, the home of a UNESCO World Heritage Site (At-Turaif District), has been redeveloped as the cultural capital, aiming to attract 25 million visitors annually by 2030.

• **Eastern Province**

The province is home to Al-Ahsa oasis, another UNESCO World Heritage Site, and serves as a gateway to the inner Arabian Peninsula for visitors from other Gulf countries.

• **Asir**

Being the fourth-most-visited province in summer after Riyadh, Makkah, and Madinah, Asir Province is developing a number of tourism projects to attract eight million visitors annually by 2030.

About the Author

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