

Research at the Crowding and Tourism: Insights

Abstract

This study aims to conduct a bibliometric analysis of existing literature on crowding in tourist destinations and its effects, thereby recognizing areas for further research. The authors evaluated 421 Scopus-indexed documents related to the subject of crowding. This study involved analysing the annual publications on the topic and the past trends to suggest solutions for better management of the destinations in the future. The results reveal a noticeable rise in the academic literature on crowding, especially about popular tourist destinations. The findings also indicate that unmonitored tourism and subsequent media coverage have significantly contributed to this upswing in scholarly work. The problem of crowding disappeared for a short period during the COVID-19 pandemic. This research note explores a possible solution to the problem to be utilised in the future and comments on the changing nature of the psychological concept after COVID-19. This study offers a comprehensive review of the current state of research on crowding, thereby helping to guide future research in this area. Moreover, it underscores the need for strategies to manage crowding to promote sustainable tourism.

Keywords: crowding, overcrowding, tourism destinations, destination management, sustainable tourism, tourism impact

1. Introduction

While the growth in the number of tourists at a destination can be understood as a measure of its popularity, it also stresses the destination. The increasing footfall does not necessarily imply sustainable growth (Seraphin & Ivanov, 2020) and is often accompanied by inevitable adversities. The issue of crowding/overcrowding gained more popularity in academia when popular destinations like Thailand, Croatia, Italy, and France began facing 'too many tourists' (Tiwari et al., 2020). Cities like Venice, natural sites like Hanging Rock, Victoria (Morgan & Lok, 2000), and islands like JeJu (Kim et al., 2020), tourist sites like Taj Mahal (Kainthola et al., 2021a) and even small organisations like restaurants (Cakici et al., 2021) are affected by crowding in their peculiar ways. Major tourist attractions, irrespective of whether they are big cities or small cities, often face the threat of crowding, especially during peak season.

The first known paper on crowding was published in 1974 (Sinclair & Reid, 1974), and until 2006, it sporadically gathered the attention of scholars (Arnberger & Brandenburg, 2007; Gramann & Burdge, 1984; Needham et al., 2004; Noe et al., 1997; Shelby et al., 1988). Scholars have studied crowding or overcrowding under different circumstances. From the perspective of the host community (Kim & Kang, 2020), concerning tourist experiences (Yin et al., 2020), the economy of the destination (Dwyer et al., 2000), and the overall impact on the place are the major categories of the research in crowding (Zhao et al., 2018).

While various approaches to the study of crowding are available, the literature still does not have a concrete definition of the topic (Kainthola et al., 2021b). Crowding is an issue that leads to a bigger problem of over-tourism, one of the biggest enemies of a destination. Before COVID-19, most famous places globally faced overtourism and crowding, especially at peak seasons, leading to deteriorating living conditions for the residents and poor tourist experiences. Thus, if we can work around crowding, we can make tourism

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sustainable. Through this research note, the authors aim to amplify the importance of the subject in academia. Also, since the study is still at its dawn, a wide range of research approaches can be applied. With the help of the bibliometric analysis, the authors also wish to highlight the crucial role research in crowding plays in management and destination development.

2. Crowding

Scholars understand crowding as a subjective concept. It is a multivariate complex phenomenon (Stokols, 1972) influenced by several factors (Vaske & Shelby, 2008). Internally, crowding is affected by human behaviour, psychology, nationality, and culture, and externally, it can be affected by the weather, behaviour of the crowd, infrastructure, and other contextual factors (Dogru-Dastan, 2022; Stokols, 1972; Vaske & Shelby, 2008). Also, crowding at a destination is a seasonal effect and is not present throughout the year (Kainthola et al., 2021b). Crowding is a psychological construct where the tourists react to the number of other tourists at a destination (Vaske & Shelby, 2008).

While a crowded destination can be a marker of its popularity (Shi et al., 2017), the lack of management leads to tourist stress (Kainthola et al., 2021a). When the tourists feel their personal space is being encroached on, their experience is hampered, and their satisfaction with the tourist site is degraded (Maeng et al., 2013). Therefore, a focus on studying crowding is essential to allow effective management and efficient development of the place.

3. Bibliometric analysis

It is an analysis that has been widely used across all disciplines and genres of research. The method has gained more popularity as many research areas have matured, significant interest has been placed in their evolution, and future trends have risen (Koseoglu et al., 2016). Bibliometric analysis is the scientific mapping of the current publications on a given subject to monitor its development (Zupic & Čater, 2015). It is a statistical method of sorting out the available data to comprehend the contribution of authors, countries, their pattern of discourse, themes of interest, and methodology (Köseoglu et al., 2023).

Bibliometric analysis helps the authors investigate the cumulative available literature on the subject effectively and smoothly (Zhang et al., 2022). This method of analysis allows a one-stop place for the authors to evaluate the development of research in the subject matter, work through relevant literature, find research gaps, comprehend the current knowledge, and comment on further trends (Agapito, 2020; Zupic & Čater, 2015; Kaurav & Gupta, 2022; Çıkkı & Tanrıverdi, 2023).

The Scopus database was selected for its comprehensive coverage and user-friendly functionalities. The search terms encompassed "crowding" or "overcrowding" in the title, abstracts, and keywords. On 18 March 2023, the search yielded around 455 documents. The search was confined to pertinent topic domains, encompassing social sciences, business, management, accounting, environmental science, economics, econometrics and finance, arts and humanities, multidisciplinary, Earth and Planetary Sciences, and psychology. By excluding specific document types and language, the search yielded 421 items. Subsequently, the selected articles were thoroughly examined, evaluating their pertinence, methodology, conclusions, and contributions to overcrowding in tourism and hospitality.

4. Literature on crowding

The bibliometric analysis was conducted on the popular Scopus-indexed journals as it provides a wide array of publications and allows a robust meta-analysis (Falagas et al., 2008; Zhao & Strotmann, 2015). The keywords used for the search were, ("crowding" or "overcrowding",) and, as the research is centred around tourism, other keywords were, ("tourism" or "hospitality") on 18 March 2023. Further, the subject areas were social sciences,

business, management, and accounting, environmental science, economics, econometrics and finance, arts and humanities, multidisciplinary, Earth and Planetary Sciences, and psychology. Only the English language was selected, and editorials and letters were removed from the sources. A total of 421 documents were left.

Figure 1
Growth in the literature on crowding (YoY)

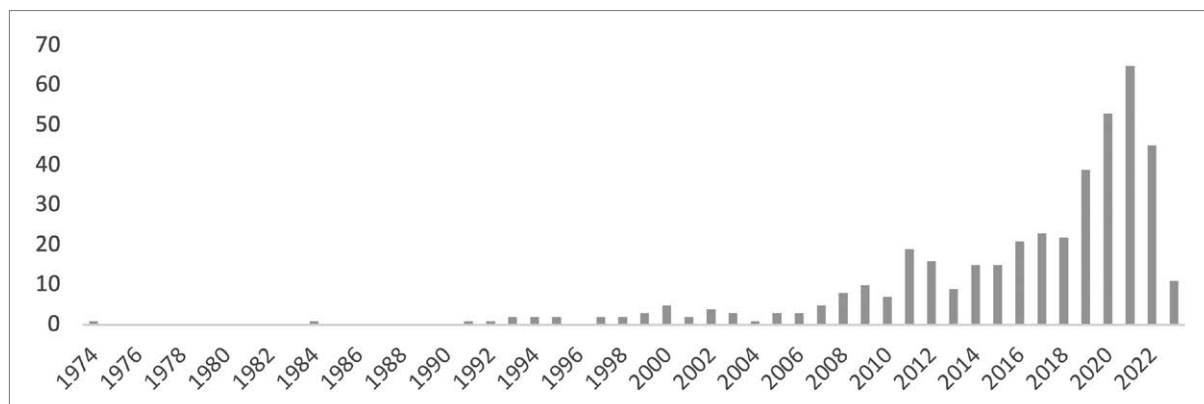


Figure 1 shows the annual publications on the subject of crowding. After a slow start to the subject, with only 17 publications from 1974 till 1999, the year 2000 alone sees the publication of 6 articles and a sudden rise in the subject. Until 2006, the sporadic interests of the scholars were visible in the crowding. It is from 2007 that the real impetus in the subject is visible.

The COVID-19 pandemic briefly halted over-tourism concerns, offering responsible tourism opportunities. Still, as travel restrictions eased, the resurgence of crowding persisted, with inadequate efforts by countries for a sustainable and well-managed tourism reboot.

Government intervention is crucial in addressing the negative impacts of crowding at tourist destinations, as witnessed during COVID-19 restrictions. While crowding is both spatial and psychological (Shelby & Heberlein, 1984), effective management can solve the problem. Strategic measures, such as price increases and demarketing strategies, can mitigate both spatial and psychological crowding, exemplified by initiatives at the Taj Mahal and Giza pyramids (Kainthola et al., 2021a; Soliman, 2010).

With the help of the bibliometric analysis, the authors examined the most cited papers and the most influential authors in the field as per their citations. The investigation of the articles showed that a significant focus was on the residents' attitude towards crowding. A substantial part of the study demonstrates that crowding harms the lives of the destination's stakeholders, but feeble measures are advocated for management. Thus, extensive research must be undertaken to find numerous customised ways to suit the said destination and deal with the problem. Specific papers demonstrated that technology has made our lives easier, and thus, it can play a crucial and significant role in maintaining a destination, too (Tiwari et al., 2022). The authors of the paper suggest that apps can be developed to provide a real-time number of people at a destination so that the tourists can make a well-informed decision and their experiences are not hampered by surprise, or they can disperse to other destinations that have a lower number of tourists and can plan their trip accordingly. Crowding is not a year-round phenomenon and does not happen throughout the day. The visitors should be encouraged to travel at times which are less crowded if possible.

The keyword citation analysis also revealed that overcrowding is considered a destination management issue, and papers suggested that it can be taken care of with the help of marketing tools (Beeton & Benfield, 2002; Inglis et al., 1999; Tiwari et al., 2020). Further, marketing can play a crucial role. Popular destinations do not require marketing as they already face a significant tourist load. However, alternate destinations should be

marketed more aggressively, dividing some footfall. Education and awareness play a crucial role in responsible tourism. A vocational subject needs to be introduced in schools to promote responsible and healthy behaviour of the students even outside their homes, especially during travel to treat destinations with care. Further, a destination should strictly lay down the rules at the beginning and even at the ticket counter or the entry to alert the tourist to enjoy the destination without affecting its essence. There can be hundreds of solutions to the crowding problem, and the authors advocate they all have a deep connection to management, implying that solid research needs to be done along those lines.

5. Conclusion

The rising interest of the authors in crowding is visible in the publications. After COVID-19, the definition and tolerance toward crowding have evolved. The topic is receiving considerable attention, visible in the publication of 11 documents in the first three months of 2023. The keyword research highlighted that it is widely used with words like tourist experience, destination development, and management, implying that the scholars acknowledge the importance of the subject in the management of a tourist destination and in moulding the experience of the tourists. Hence, the authors of this research note highly advocate for further comprehensive research on crowding and detailed recommendations on the efficient development of tourist destinations to mitigate the negative impacts of tourism.

6. Implications and future directions

Given the study of literature directs to lead with the following future research directions:

- *Impact of Crowding on Tourist Experiences:* The existing body of research does not sufficiently prioritize investigating the effects of crowding on the visitor experience. Subsequent research should examine the impact of overcrowding on tourists' satisfaction, their overall experiences, and the probability of their returning to or endorsing a particular place. Furthermore, research might investigate solutions to alleviate adverse experiences resulting from congestion.
- *Development of a Universal and Customizable Scale:* The difficulty in developing a universal scale to measure the impacts of crowding reflects its distinctive nature. Future research might focus on creating a universal yet customizable scale for varying socio-cultural contexts. This would provide a more holistic and adaptable tool to assess and compare the impacts of crowding across different destinations.
- *Focus on Sustainable Tourism Development:* The aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic has brought sustainable tourism development to the forefront of discussion. Future research should explore strategies for managing tourism to avoid harm to the destination and preserve natural resources. Studies could investigate best practices, policy recommendations, and practical models for sustainable tourism management in crowded destinations.
- *Comparative Studies of Crowding Management:* Given the higher citation rate of U.S. publications due to stronger international linkages, future research could compare and contrast crowding management strategies across various countries. This could illuminate the most effective practices and identify international collaboration and knowledge transfer opportunities.
- *Integration of Quantitative and Qualitative Analysis:* Though quantitative research garners more citations, qualitative insights could provide a more nuanced understanding of overcrowding. Future research might employ mixed-method approaches to understand the crowding dynamics fully.
- *Exploring Crowding Beyond Spatial Aspects:* Since crowding is recognized as being more psychological than spatial, there's room for future research to explore the psychological and social impacts of overcrowding. This could help to develop more effective and human-centric management strategies.

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