

#visitlater. The challenges of Tourism in times of COVID-19 pandemic. The case of Catalonia Region, Spain¹



#visitedepois. Os desafios do turismo em tempos de pandemia de COVID-19. O caso da Região da Catalunha, Espanha

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ABSTRACT

This article explores the challenges presented by tourism recovery in times of the coronavirus pandemic. As a starting point, it presents some demarketing strategies (Kotler & Levy, 1971) implemented in March 2020, which urged tourists not to travel, during the pandemic period. Indexed in hashtags #visitedepois, #visitlater, #yomequedoencasa, #fiqueemcasa, #stayhome, among others, the campaigns “Don’t go” shed light on the paper’s main research question: how will tourism activity accommodate the circulation of people searching for an escape from ordinary life (URRY, 2001) strongly affected by COVID-19 threat, and acknowledge the fact that they are potential vectors of contamination, which could prevent the trip from being a form of escape, and transform it into a daily experience of the limits of contact and social isolation. Based on the methodological approach of depth hermeneutics (Thompson, 2000; Nogueira, 2015), the article deals with a multidisciplinary framework and dialogues with authors from areas like Tourism, Social Communication, Social Sciences and Marketing (Harvey, 1996; Urry, 1995; 2001; 2007; Urry & Larsen, 2011; Bessa & Alvarez, 2014;

¹ Revised and expanded version of an article presented in the 44th. ANPOCS Annual Meeting (National Association of Graduate Studies and Research in Social Sciences), in the GT07 – Social Sciences, tourism and territories: challenges, limits and possibilities. 1 to 12/11/2020.



Freire-Medeiros, 2007; Esteves, 2016; among others) to analyse the case of the Catalonia Region, in Spain. The campaign “Visit Catalonia Later” and, afterwards, the global marketing action called “Catalunyaés Casa Teva”, are examples of the challenges faced by tourism in times of pandemic since the success of a destination marketing action can also indicate, as in that case, a sanitary failure that can put at risk the lives of the population.

Keywords: Tourism mobilities, Demarketing, COVID-19 Pandemic, #visitlater, Catalonia.

RESUMO

O presente artigo procura refletir sobre os desafios da retomada do turismo em tempos de pandemia. Como ponto de partida, o texto apresenta algumas ações de demarketing (Kotler & Levy, 1971) veiculadas em março de 2020, que conclamavam os turistas a não viajarem durante o período da pandemia para destinos turísticos. Indexadas pelas *hashtags* #visitedepois, #visitlater, #yomequedoencasa, #fiqueemcasa, #stayhome, as campanhas “para não ir” apontam para a principal questão da investigação: como a atividade do turismo vai dar conta da circulação de pessoas em busca do escape à vida ordinária (Urry, 2001), ao mesmo tempo em que a própria circulação desses sujeitos é vetor potencial de contaminação por COVID-19? Orientado por uma abordagem metodológica hermenêutica (Thompson, 2000; Nogueira, 2015), em termos teóricos o artigo trabalha com um referencial multidisciplinar e coloca em diálogo autores das áreas de Turismo da Comunicação Social, das Ciências Sociais e do Marketing (Urry, 1995; 2001; 2007; Urry&Larsen, 2011; Bessa & Alvarez, 2014; Freire-Medeiros, 2007; Esteves, 2016; Harvey, 1996; entre outros), para analisar o caso da Região da Catalunha, na Espanha. A campanha “VisitCatalonia Later” e, posteriormente, a ação global de marketing chamada “Catalunya és Casa Teva”, mostraram claramente os desafios do turismo em tempos de pandemia, a partir do momento em que o sucesso de uma ação de marketing de lugares pode indicar, como nesse caso, um fracasso sanitário que colocou em risco toda a população do país.



Palavras-chave: Mobilidades Turísticas, Demarketing, Pandemia COVID-19, #visitedepois, Catalunha.

INTRODUCTION

According to the World Tourism Organization (WTO), 1.5 billion of international tourism circulated around the world in 2019, marking a 4% growth in the global tourism movement when compared to 2018. In this same report, the WTO celebrated the maintenance of the growth rate of the activity throughout the last decade and estimated a growth rate from 3% to 4% in 2020 with sports events, namely the Tokyo Olympics and other cultural events, such as the 2020 Dubai Expo, increasing the positive impact in the field (Brito, 2020). The text referred above was published in January 2020 and since February when the coronavirus pandemic started haunting the world, there was a complete suspension of the circulation of people worldwide, consequently, reducing the tourism activity to never-before-experienced levels.

The intense spread of Covid-19 virus all over the world and the subsequent propagation of the disease with high mortality rates caught everyone by surprise. At first, to avoid as much as possible the infection of the population, several countries, both in Europe and in Asia shut their frontiers and prohibited the entry and circulation of foreigners. In addition, they zeroed out domestic tourism and the internal circulation of their citizens. The practice, known as lockdown, forced the tourism industry to experience the worst decline of its history. According to the consultancy *Tourism Economics*, international trips must have fallen 39% in 2020, which is equivalent to 577 million less trips than in 2019 (Reuters, 2020).

In times of normal circulation and tourism mobility, marketing activities focused on tourism are designed with the purpose of developing and disclosing the whole infrastructure net related to the act of traveling, and the



communication emphasizes the invitation to the public to visit of places considered, for several reasons, as tourism destinations. When the World Health Organization (WHO) determined that the world was going through the new coronavirus pandemic, some tourism promotion campaigns shifted its usual approach to a completely extraordinary tone: instead of calling out travelers to visit the attractions, the campaigns stressed that the doors of the destinations would be open, but only after the COVID-19 pandemic was over. Then, in March 2020, the world of tourism marketing was taken by surprise with the broadcasting of a series of tourism destination campaigns – such as Salvador, in Brazil; Bariloche, in Argentina; Catalonia, in Spain, besides other places outside from the traditional touristic circuit, such as Estonia and the Faeroe Islands – with the purpose of discouraging local visitation. In the tourism industry, which represents over 10% of the global gross domestic product and employs around 320 million people worldwide (Reuters, 2020), such activity generated surprise and presented itself as a great challenge after years of business managing of cities (Harvey, 1996) and/or places called touristic, some of which economically dependent on such activities, as, for instance, the Faeroe Islands. Those campaigns caused a stir with the release of hashtags like #visitedepois, #visitlater, #stayhome, #yomequedoemcasa, #fiqueemcasa, #dreamnowvisitlater and #nãoaagora #notnow to name a few, which made clear the promotion of a not-demand, an action in the administration area known as “demarketing”.

According to Kotler & Levy (1971), demarketing is an aspect of marketing that deals with any attempt to discourage the acquisition or the use of something, in a temporary or permanent way, by a specific group of clients. This almost unknown strategy is normally used when it is necessary to reduce the use of products that cause harm to health, such as illegal drugs or products like drinkable water and electricity in periods of shortage. Campaigns for conscientious and sustainable consumption of goods may be mentioned as current examples of demarketing actions, although they are not named as so



by professionals from the area. In the specific case of Tourism, the approach of #visitedepois in the Salvador campaign (YouTube, 2020), in Brazil, and the actions #stayhome and #visitlater in the Catalonia region (Maia, 2020), a tourism region in the South of Spain, may be recognized as examples of such practice. This fact raises interesting issues because the campaigns articulate social and economic challenges that involve the area of Tourism, in this global moment when the trip means “not to go”.

Focusing especially on the communication and marketing actions developed in the Catalonia region, the purpose of this article is to reflect on the challenges presented by the recovery of tourism in places where there has been discouragement of the consumption of places, due to the media of demarketing campaigns. The issue which is raised here is how the activity of Tourism, understood as a practice that involves “They are consumed because they supposedly generate pleasurable experiences which are different from those typically encountered in everyday life.” (Urry, 2001, p.28), will be able to handle the administration of circulation and displacement of people searching for ways to escape from their ordinary life in a moment strongly hit by threats of a highly contagious disease, such as COVID-19. Diving deeper into the issue, we want to investigate how tourism will be dealt within a situation of immobility, yet partial, of a big group of travelers.

In relation of this aspect, it is important to mention that from the disclosure of the campaign “*Visit Catalonia later*”, in March 2020, to the writing of this article, in October 2020, two waves of contamination by COVID-19 happened throughout Europe, especially in Spain. During this seven-month period, the country went back into lockdown, in the months of March and April, and in May, it launched its plan of measures for the new normalcy (Ajuntament de Barcelona, 2020), a document in which the gradual opening of social, commercial and tourism activities was predicted. For the Catalonia region, the opening was urgent since, in the months of July and August, a great flux of tourists (and currency) come to the region with the purpose of



enjoying the European summer. It is right at this moment of recovery that the local Tourism Official Department launches the campaign "*Catalunya és casa teva*" (Turisme, 2020), in English, "Catalonia is your home", urging national and international tourists to return to the region because the complete tourism chain would be prepared to welcome them.

METHODOLOGY

To understand the challenge proposed here, a timeline was drawn from the first local lockdown, in March, to the second lockdown in October, covering the recovery of tourism in the Catalonia region, in June, followed by the effects of tourism resumption on the cases of COVID-19 contamination in the region. The methodological approach used in the present case study was the Depth Hermeneutic (DH), which considers that the interpretation of social phenomenon, - i.e. tourism activities – and their symbolic forms may not waive the analysis of contexts and processes socially structured, which are their constitutive part (Thompson, 2000). According to Nogueira (2015), communication efforts, with emphasis on the publicity of brands, may be considered as symbolic forms, as a meaningful construction in which it is possible to foresee the cultural, space and time conditions in which it was built with its target-public. As previously mentioned, the campaigns "*Visit Catalonia Later*" and "*Catalunya és casa teva*" will be analyzed based on the social-historical context of Spain's situation and, more precisely, of the region of Catalonia, with emphasis on the city of Barcelona.

To support the hermeneutic analysis and, therefore, contextual analysis, of the case study presented here, we used the notion of Immediate History (SCHURSTER, 2015), which allows us to analyze a current event, even before such event is over, "not having, therefore, a detachment from the subject producer of the historical knowledge and one's object (fact) of the research" (SCHURSTER, 2015, p.425). We understand that the demarcation of the epistemological boundary with the research in Journalism is still being defined,



but our choice of Immediate History to reflect on the purpose of marketing actions carried out during full pandemic was due to the fact that the investigation was performed remotely and simultaneously with the events, both in relation to the circulation of the disease as well as the tourism activity and government efforts towards recovery.

Thus, the interpretation of the context and of the object of the research itself could only be carried out through media update and mediated by the local Spanish situation, which was monitored from secondary sources such as local newspapers websites – *Elpais.com, Catalan News* and *El Punt Avui*. We also referred to newspapers from different countries that are the main tourism clients in the region, such as *bbcnews.com, theguardian.com* and *anddw.com*, as well as Brazilian websites, such as *oglobo.com, estadao.com.br* and *uol.com.br*, among others, which will be presented throughout the text. Still as secondary sources, we collected data about Tourism global industry and about the activities in the region in institutional reports from the World Tourism Organization (WTO) and *Statista.com* and official local tourism organizations – *Barcelona.cat* and *barcelonaturism.com* We also followed the measures against the COVID-19 pandemic in the website of the European Union (EU), of which Spain is a member.

All the contextual information was then articulated with a theoretical framework that facilitated the dialogue between authors from the fields of Tourism, Social Sciences, Communication and Marketing (Urry, 1995; 2001; 2007; Urry & Larsen, 2011; Bessa & Alvarez, 2014; Freire-Medeiros, 2007; Esteves, 2016; Harvey, 1996; among others). This exchange of ideas raised important issues on the phenomenon of tourism and voluntary circulation of people during pandemic times, establishing new challenges for the global Tourism industry.

Having a timeline as a conducting thread, this article is organized into three parts: the first one covers the period from March to June 2020, when Spain went through its most severe *lockdown*, with all tourism, commercial and



business activities in the country paralyzed. Spain had the lowest numbers of Coronavirus infection cases and deaths in this period. The second part covers the period from June to October, the European summer, in which the Spanish government suffered a lot of pressure from local businessmen for the recovery of the economy. In an effort to establish a difficult balance between health and economic activity, the country opened its frontiers to the circulation of domestic and European tourists, as well as to those of countries that followed EU sanitary control rules. As it will be seen later on, as a result of such flexibilization and opening of the frontiers, Spain, especially the region of Catalonia, suffered a considerable increase in the number of cases of the disease. It was even considered the possibility of the appearance and circulation of a new coronavirus Spanish summer variant.

Before its brief final consideration, the article still focuses on the search for alternative tourism activities located and experienced by the own Catalonia population, because, since October 2020, there were other frontier shutdowns, as well as new *lockdowns* and a second state of emergency, with curfew, declared throughout the Catalonia region.

PANDEMIA AND DEMARKETING: LOCKDOWN AND “VISIT CATALONIA LATER”

On March 14, 2020, three days after the World Health Organization (WHO) had defined as pandemic the contamination by the novel coronavirus, one of the main Spanish newspapers, *El País*, published in its website an article on the government decree which formalized the “state of alarm”, or state of emergency, against the pandemic in the country. By establishing the restraint of circulation by the population all over Spain (Cué, 2020a), the measures taken by the government of President Pedro Sánchez put 47 million people in isolation, with the traffic of citizens being reduced to shopping in grocery stores, pharmacies, trips to the hospital and to work, but only, when the work activity could not be performed from home.



As a member of the “hard core” group responsible for the management of the crisis caused by the pandemic, the Ministry of Transportation, Mobility and Urban Agenda defined that the total offer of travelers' transportation operations submitted to public contract in the country would be cut in, at least, 50% over the board: road, train, airplane and by sea. Such restriction measures were effective starting at 8 am on March 16. In Europe, before Spain, France and Italy had already taken restrictive in relation to internal circulation and had closed their frontiers and, soon after, Germany followed the same path. On March 23, it was the United Kingdom's turn to start its isolation plan. By the end of that month, the continent had been closed out to tourists and to travelers.

Just as other countries in Western Europe, between the first and the second outbreak of the pandemic, the country experienced a period of recovery with the opening of frontiers, commerce, education (schools and universities) and circulation of travelers with the controlled release of all businesses related to tourism activities. In Spain's case, the gradual opening of business activities started in the middle of May and continued until June 21, when the summer season started in the European continent, with beaches, hotels, restaurants, monuments, museums, tourism sites, everything, open, even if, at first, the social distancing and sanitation protocol was seriously implemented.

However, almost eight months after the first *lockdown*, on October 9, the Spanish government decreed a new “partial *lockdown*” in the capital, Madrid, to overcome a second outbreak of COVID-19 contamination in the city, considered to be one the main sources of the disease's growth in Europe (Cué, 2020b). According to the crisis management plan, on October 25, the government of Sánchez reaffirmed a second State of Emergency, which remained for the following six months – until April 2021 – all over the country. This extreme decision taken by the government, according of the website G1, was a consequence of the fact that Spain had become the first country in the European Union to reach 1 million deaths by COVID-19 (G1, 2020).



“Among the measures established by Sánchez are nationwide overnight curfews (the Canary Islands were exempted), between 11 pm and 6 am, The decree also permits regional governments to apply other movement restrictions, such as prohibition of meetings with more than six people and the closing of commerce activities”, stated the website.

As one of the main tourism cities in Spain, Barcelona, capital of the Catalonia region, had suffered severely with the shutdown of the frontiers. With data varying from 19.4 million international visitors (Diaz, 2020) in the region of Catalonia to 30 million tourists only in Barcelona in 2019 (Burgen, 2020), it is clear how much the Southern part of the country is valued in terms of tourism and, consequently, how important the travel industry is to the local economy. Data from the site *statistic.com* state that, in 2018, the amount of money spent by international tourists in the city of Barcelona reached up to 7.86 billion dollars. In addition, even to domestic tourism, the region of Catalonia is also one of the favorite Spanish destinations, along with the regions of Andalusia and Valencia.

Immediately after the first coronavirus outbreak that shut down Spain, the Department of Tourism from Catalonia launched the campaign “*Visit Catalonia later*” in social media (Figure 1). The text informed that “Please stay safe for you and your loved ones. Catalonia is your home, we will be waiting for you when the situation has normalized. #stayhomeVisit Catalonia Later”.

Geographically, the provinces of Barcelona, Girona, Lerida and Tarragona form the Catalonia region, but for tourism, the region is organized into seven locations: Barcelona and its beach coast, Costa Brava, Costa Dourada, Pirineus, Terres de L'Ebre and Terres de Lleida. However, due to the importance of Barcelona to local tourism, even the text is focused on Catalonia, the image that appears on the advertisement is the “Arc of Triumph”, an iconic monument constructed in 1888, in Barcelona, when the city hosted the Universal Exposition, establishing, since then, its vocation for tourism.





Figure 1: Instagram post of the campaign “Visit Catalonia later”
 Fonte: <https://www.instagram.com/p/B91WLW7HnRi/>.

According to the report *Euromonitor Top 100 Cities Destination: 2019 Edition* (Yasmeen, 2020), in 2018 Barcelona ranked 33rd in the preference of international tourists and ranked 7th on the list of most visited cities in Europe, after London, Paris, Berlin, Rome, Istanbul and Madrid (Statista, 2020). Having this in mind, the campaign “Visit Catalonia later” aimed directly at the public from outside Spain and received a strong push from Public Relations and Global Press Office to promote the campaign in articles in newspaper tourist sections, as it was in the case of the newspaper *O Globo* (Maia, 2020).

The region of Catalonia was not the first one to carry out a demarketing action in Europe. According to the already mentioned article from the Brazilian newspaper *O Globo*, the Faroe Islands, an Scandinavian archipelago, may have been the first place to add the hashtags *#stayhome* and *#visitalater* in the same campaign. In a publication of March 12 called “We are requesting tourists to refrain from visiting the Faroe Islands”, the Visit Faroe Island website says no one should go to the Islands “this month and next” [March and April], and that visitors postpone their travel plans for later this year”. Another less common destination in the European circuit, Estonia acted fast and asked tourists to visit the country later. In a very emphatic first



moment, the communication used the hashtag *#stayfuckinghome*, which was later on replaced by *#stayhome*.

For the sake of illustration, at the same time, in Brazil, the Tourism Department of Salvador launched in social media the campaign “Salvador: *#visitedepois*” with the same appeal that international destinations were using: the city will be open for visitation, but only after the pandemic is over.

Catalonia may not have been the first tourism destination to make use of this type of campaign, but it is the most important in the context of tourism and destination marketing due to its relevance both in the industry of Spain, responsible for 12% of the GDP of the country, as well as for Barcelona, which, as already mentioned, is a quite frequent destination for domestic and international tourists. This is the reason why the campaign “Visit Catalonia later” has been chosen as the object of analysis for us to understand the purpose of demarketing actions in pandemic times and the challenges to tourism recovery when travel restrictions are still present worldwide.

As already mentioned in the introduction of this article, demarketing is about marketing actions focused on the stimulation of non-demand. The article “Demarketing, yes, demarketing”, by Philip Kotler and Sidney J. Levy (1971), brings to the discussion the role of marketing as an activity for the control of demand when the commercial scenery demands an adjustment and, not only, as an activity that would only work in moments of sales' stimulation. According to the authors, there are situations in the market in which the unbalance between offer and demand leads companies to work with the opposite model that encourages sales: discourage shopping. This is the perfect scenario for demarketing. The examples studied in the article are related to the situation when demarketing should be employed. On the one hand, there is an increasing demand and, on the other hand, there is lack of the product in question. Based on such scenario, the authors aim at clarifying which activities, practices, and methods – in their own words, a little unusual,



but infallible – should be applied so that the demand is regulated and adjusted into the situation.

If we understand marketing activity as a practice of demand adjustment, then it is possible to think about the tourism campaigns mentioned here as demarketing actions. However, since tourism is an industry of service providers, when the local Tourism Departmentasked people to “visit Catalonia later”, it took the control of the demandaway from the situation of not having the product, and focused on the impossibility of clients to live the experience of the trip due to a scenario of global tourism (i) mobility. In this case, the problem is not the product, in other words, the city, region, or country, butthe fact that tourism and travel market have been globally stopped by the pandemic.

The campaign was launched between March and April, and, in June, a new publicity communication was disclosed. As it will be seen next, the purpose of this second campaign was to call visitors to return to Catalonia, which, without tourism, had a drastic loss of receipt in local economy.

TOURISM (I)MOBILITY AND THE CHALLENGES OF THE RECOVERY: “CATALUNYA ÉS CASA TEVA”

According to data published on the Barometer (2020, p.3) of the WTO (World Tourism Organization), in the period from January to June 2020, the global number of arrivals of international tourists had a downfall of 65% compared to the same period in 2019. The downfall reached its peak in June, with around 93% less international trips, which represented a 460 billion dollar loss to the industry, five times more than in the global crisis of 2009. Besides that, according to the same report, the European continent had a mean overall loss of 66% in the first trimester, right below Asia and the Pacific (it is important to remind that the first cases of the disease were registered in Wuhan, China). However, it was specifically the area called by the WTO “Southern/Mediterranean Europe”, where Catalonia is located, whichlost the



most in international tourists' traffic: 72% less than the first semester of 2019. Such loss was greatly due to the period in which Spain was under severe *lockdown*.

The practice of social isolation, restrictions on daily circulation and domestic and international tourism traffic, in other words, tourism (i)mobility, was relatively successful and made the coronavirus circulation and the resulting contamination by COVID-19 diminish in the region (Catalan News, 2020). It is not strange, then, that June was the month with less confirmed cases of COVID-19 in Catalonia (Figure 2).

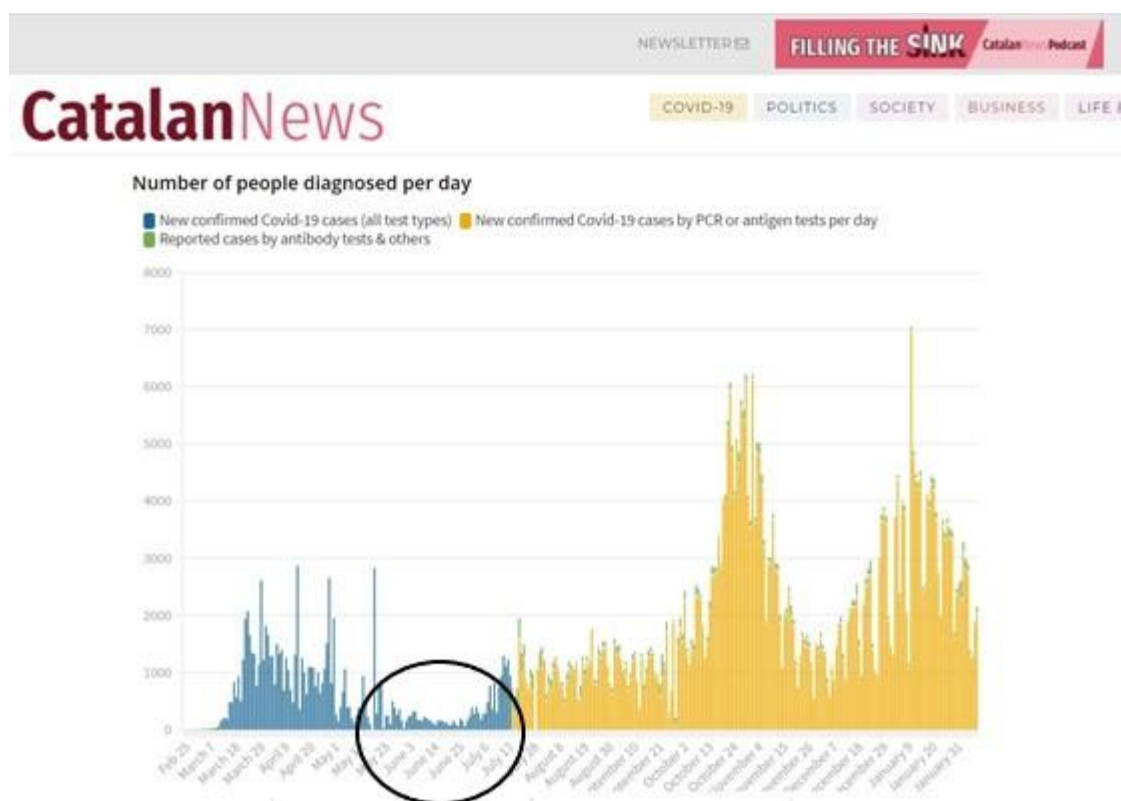


Figure 2: infographic of confirmed cases of Covid-19 per day in the region of Catalonia, with emphasis on the month of June.
Source: <https://www.catalannews.com/covid-19/item/coronavirus-in-catalonia-daily-figures-explained-in-graphs>

However, despite having carried out a successful action in sanitary and health terms, the Spanish government suffered a lot of pressure to act

promptly to recover commercial activities. The political debate on how to keep a balance between economy and health of the population was present not only in Spain. Actually, with summer in Europe getting closer and closer, the discussion between government, political parties, civil society and private initiative, especially companies related to tourism, took central stage and forced the opening of the doors to the flow of visitors into the country.

Then, as part of the planning for “measures for the new normalcy”, from May to June, restrictive measures were laid down and restaurants, hotels, historical monuments, parks, malls and street commerce started a gradual opening process following local social isolation and hygiene measures. Based on the recommendations of the European Union Council (EU) (European Council, 2020), issued on June 30, the Spanish government opened the frontiers to international tourists from countries outside the EU, where the pandemic was under control. Such measures made tourism traffic to traditional destinations grow, as in the city of Barcelona, among other locations in Catalonia. However, at the same time, such opening was not complete: citizens from countries such as Brazil, Montenegro and Serbia were not allowed to enter Spain, by the same token, ship cruises were not allowed to moor on the pier, although Barcelona had received 3.1 million tourists through maritime modal in 2019 (Diaz, 2020b)

At this point, it is interesting to raise an important dilemma, especially in locations in which the circulation of tourists ranges from 20 to 30 million annual tourists: local discontent with the growing number of visitors, side-by-side with commercial workers (and the whole business chain that depends on the tourism economy) asking for more public and private investment. In an article published in the English newspaper *The Guardian* (Burgin, 2020) in Barcelona during the pandemic period, such dilemma is made quite clear with local population happy to have their city back, but, at the same time, claiming that “it does not seem right” to have a city with no one in the streets. This



an interesting issue because in Barcelona, as well as in other cities popular to global tourist groups, there was a movement against massive tourism. Such anti-tourism feeling or “tourismphobia” had even spread throughout the city with sentences like “*tourists go home*”, “*tourists are ruining our lives*” and “*death to tourists*” painted on the wall of popular tourism sites. Usually, this type of phenomenon appears when places like a neighborhood, city or region become overcrowded by visitors that move along “visually appropriating everything around them” (Urry, 1995, p. 166). Such phenomenon would make people feel that they have lost their place: visitors are seen as “the others” who have invaded and messed with their daily lives, even though those same tourists are an important source of revenue for the economy of the place.

The hard balance between the pros and cons of a rich cultural and tourism life and the maintenance of historical neighborhoods and the local memory, the gentrification of places and migration of residents to peripheral areas because of the “airbnb-nification” of spaces, has already been widely discussed by Tourism researchers and would not fit in this article. However, it is important to point out the fact that the pandemic more than ever has put under the spotlight all the critical variables, both social, as well as economic and political, related to tourism mobility, and has brought to light all the problems and dilemmas, as well as benefits, which the volunteer circulation of citizens around the world reveals.

Once again, the article from *The Guardian*, by demonstrating such contradictory feelings, sheds light on a very important aspect for place marketing, which is exactly the issue of “place”. The concept of place changed throughout time and carry several possible definitions. However, generally speaking, “places are spaces which are meaningful to the individuals” (ESTEVEZ, 2016, p.161). For place marketing activities meaning is central, once all the resources and efforts – granted any possible criticism directed to the idea of cities for profit presented by Harvey (1996), among other authors – are applied in the transformation of such space into a “*place*”



of attraction” (Urry, 1995). The notion of an “attractive place” makes reference to a place with its own personality, differentiated; a place made to be first desired and later on consumed; a “*loci of affect*” which presents itself, therefore, ready to be synesthetically felt and experienced by the tourist *in loco* (Urry, 2007). In lockdown, Barcelona loses what makes it to be what it is: the “tourist gaze” (Urry, 2001). “We’ve reclaimed our city but inherited a ghost town”, summarizes The Guardian article title – “Right now [May 2020] we’re enjoying the peace and quiet, but soon we’ll look back to all the times we wanted the tourists to go away and leave us alone and think, be careful what you wish for”, is the article’s last statement.

In the specific case of Barcelona, the idea of the tourist view as something constructed and mediated by the marketing that becomes the image of the place (and the soul of the business) is a very strong concept. Since the 1990s, the strategy of cities for profit has been used by the government and, according to the numbers already mentioned in the article, we may state that the results have been quite positive for the image of Barcelona as a tourism destination (Bessa & Alvarez, 2014, p. 70-71). The business strategies adopted in the last decades have included patrimonial interventions and restorations of cultural monuments in the city, in order to transform the urban landscape and create a vanguard city image; improvements in urban infrastructure –mainly transportation and technology,– both in historical/central neighborhoods as well as in coast neighborhoods; and, mainly, the organization of mega sports events, such as the 1992 Olympic games, known as the turning point for Barcelona to become a global city, an investment and tourism destination.

However, no place marketing action is complete without an intense communication. It is important to reinforce the historical articulation between Tourism activity and Communication in the construction of what the sociologist John Urry calls the look of the tourist (Nogueira, 2017; 2018). The role of media was didactic in building an image of the place as a tourism and



travel destination. In this sense, the look of the tourist was naturally related to new technology and media, specially photography, through which images were medialized and posted in circulation, giving visibility to places (Urry & Larsen, 2011, p.14). This way, “places are chosen to be gazed upon because there is an anticipation, especially through daydreaming and fantasy, of intense pleasures either on a different scale or involving different senses from those customarily encountered” (Urry, 2001, p.15). And such expectation, as well as as the dreams, is built by a series of media and non-tourism practices such as publicity, movies and other audiovisual products, literature, magazines, guides and postcards, in addition to, eventually, social media and the travelers themselves with their images posted on *vlogs, blogs and Instagram stories* (FREIRE-MEDEIROS, 2007; 2009; OLIVEIRA e FREITAS, 2016) which build, keep and reinforce the dream in the “look”. And even when the publicity campaign focused its discourse on the idea of “not going”, Catalonia was presented in a positive way – “you will have a chance to see all the wonderful destinations once this atypical situation passes” – reaffirming the importance of the tourist’s look by praising the image of the region as a place to be personally seen and experimented and later, medialized in the social media of the visitors.

However, once again, it is relevant to draw the attention to the narrow connection between tourism activities and the idea of a city for profit and the social experience of those who live in it. This kind of transformation– from a place into a product/tourism destination – does not happen without tension points, of power and resistance, between all the actors involved in the process. The business logic that intends to transform the city into a place/object of consumption is speculative, and in the case of Barcelona, the high cost of real state and services led part of the population to move to peripheral regions of the city, which, eventually, was the origin of the already mentioned anti-tourism movement. However, it is necessary to stress how much the city, its inhabitants and businessmen, direct or indirectly, have



benefited from the flow of tourists in the region, establishing a dependency link with the activity, which makes the recovery challenge even harder.

It was due to that dependency from the money coming from tourism, that the Government of Catalonia and the local Official Tourism Department joined forces and launched the campaign “*Catalunya és casa teva*” – in English “Catalonia is your home” (Figure 3). After having asked tourists to stay at home and “visit Catalonia later”, marketing and communication efforts in this second campaign were developed based on the more experiential appeal for tourism: “*gaudeix de Catalunya amb els cinc sentits*” or “enjoy Catalonia with your five senses”. By asking the tourist to use their five senses to enjoy the visit, the campaign combines in one piece culture, history, nature – from the Mediterranean coast to the Pyrenees – and the diverse culinary of the region, drawing attention to the performative side of the tourism activity (Urry & Larsen, 2011).



Figura 3: final frame in the film “Catalunya és casa teva”.

Source: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pMZUZfnJYgM>

In a YouTube presentation, the Director of the Catalonia Agency of Tourism (Turisme), Mr. David Font, stated that the campaign was launched in two

fronts: internally, focused on tourism by proximity, having as target the Spanish public; and externally, directed to French, German, English and tourists from "Benelux" (Belgium, Netherlands and Luxembourg), main local tourism clients (Turisme, 2020).

Planned to go on until the Winter 2021, for the first phase – from June 15 to September 15 – 3 million Euros were invested in the campaign which foresaw media planning with disclosure in radio and TV networks, press media in newspapers and magazines, train publicity, digital media and posts in social media, with all the pieces in Catalan, Spanish and English.

Besides, actions were planned based on data and artificial intelligence that would be used in micro-segmented campaigns, whose focus would be on the re-activation of potential markets that were being less used. In the words of the Business and Knowledge Advisor of the Region, Ms. Àngel Chacón, "proximity tourism is essential for the continuity to one of the key-sectors of Catalonia" and, for that reason, the main idea of the campaign was to communicate that everyone was "welcome to Catalonia, a safe destination, prepared to welcome them".

BETWEEN HEALTH AND LOCAL ECONOMY: THE RESULTS OF THE FIRST ATTEMPT TO RECOVER TOURISM IN THE REGION

After some months in social isolation, tourism as an escape of daily life became a reality. The opening of the frontiers authorized the population to search for enjoyable experiences that characterize tourism activities. In addition to the normal flow of tourists to the Mediterranean Coast – the beach is traditionally crowded in the European summer – the beach is one of the most meaningful destinations for tourism performance: the feeling of the body in contact with local nature, the experience of seeing and being seen, as a space for trip medialization, in addition to, historically, being a place for healing and searching for health (Urry, 1995; 2001; 2007; 2011). This way, as expected, the campaign appeal "*Catalunya és casa teva*" was



immediately accepted: the dream proposed by marketing to “experience the region of Catalonia through the five senses” resulted in trips, meetings and visitation, by domestic as well as for international tourists.

It seems that, in relation to the aspect place marketing, the communication effort by the Government of Catalonia was very successful. Between June and July, tourism activities returned to the region, not in the same pre-pandemic levels, but with a growing flow of European and domestic visitors, gradually reactivating local economy. On the other hand, hygiene and social distance rules were unable to handle tourism mobility when one of the main agents of contamination are the travelers themselves: almost immediately after the opening of the frontiers in June, July and August, there was a significant increase of COVID-19 cases in Madrid and Barcelona, the main tourism destinations in the country (figure 4).

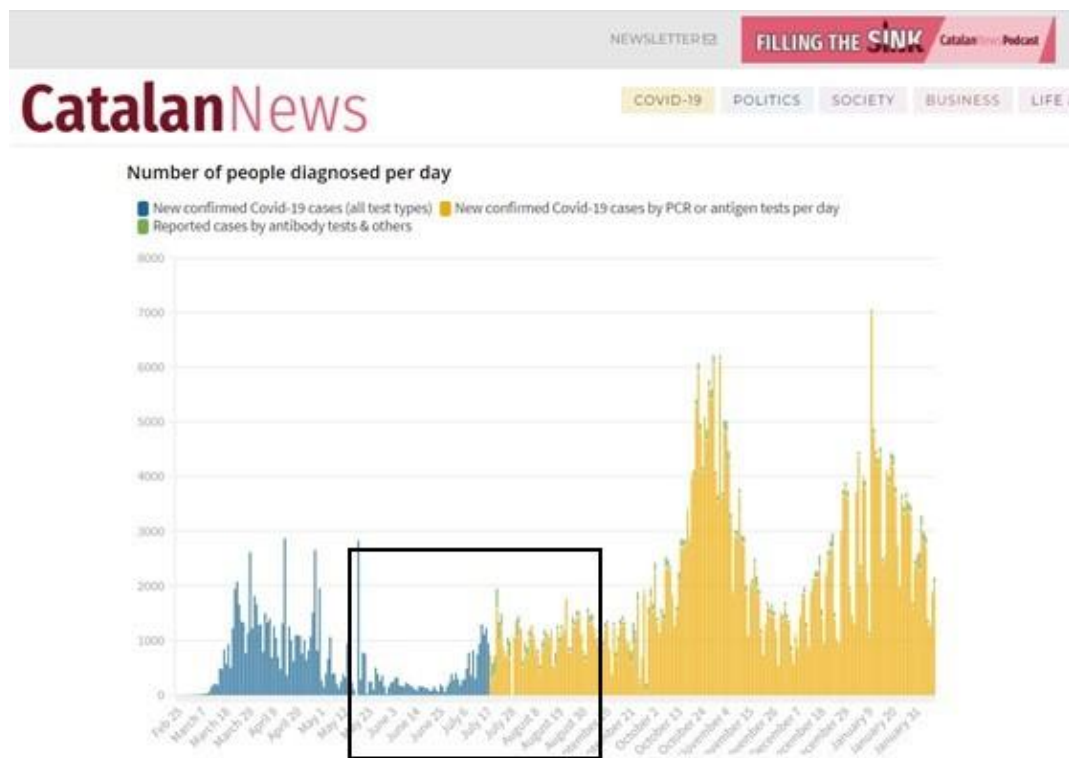


Figure 4: infographic of confirmed Covid-19 cases per day in the region of Catalonia, with emphasis on the months of June, July and August. Source: <https://www.catalannews.com/covid-19/item/coronavirus-in-catalonia-daily-figures-explained-in-graphs>

The moment new cases were confirmed, neighbor countries started closing their frontiers to Spain or prohibiting trips to such destinations and, domestically, new internal measures were taken, aiming at restricting, once again, the circulation of the population (France Press, 2020). While the Spanish president, Pedro Sánchez, tried to negotiate with the British Prime Minister Boris Johnson to cancel the banning on trips from the United Kingdom to Spain (O Globo, 2020), the president of the Catalonia government, Quim Torra, announced that a whole area with 200 thousand people, around the city of Lerida, 150 kilometers West of Barcelona, would be isolated from July 4 on: “a hard decision” in his own words, but necessary to control the virus spread in the region (Deutsche Welle, 2020).

Based on such scenario, it is possible to affirm that, no matter how economically successful they were, flexibilization and tourism recovery represented a sanitary failure for the region of Catalonia, because the traffic of visitors – both domestic as well as from outside of the country – was strongly responsible for the problem. Then, despite the planning of “measures for the new normalcy” developed by the federal government, the recovery of tourism in the summer in the region of Catalonia and in the surroundings of the city of Barcelona, did not go as expected.

With the purpose of maintaining the minimum balance between local economy and health of the population, the “new normal” in the region had to turn to the proximity tourism (Jeuring and Haartsen, 2017) even more strongly. As mentioned before, in the presentation of the campaign “*Catalunya és casa teva*” in Youtube (2020), the Counselor for Business and Knowledge of the region, Ms. Àngel Chacón, had already mentioned the importance of proximity tourism to increase the activity in the region. However, in the specific case of Barcelona, the incentive to the tourism practice focused on its own population, in an action of incentive towards the *staycation* phenomenon.



Introduced in the literature and in the studies of tourism after the global economy crisis of 2008, the staycation phenomenon has been defined as "the practice of 'vacationing at home'." (GermannMolz, 2009). Therefore, *staycation* means local traveling, not just proximity tourism since it includes local activities, such as bicycle trips, concerts, trips to museums and parks of the city (ROSU, 2020). It is worth mentioning that the practice of tourism in one's own city is different from the other categories of domestic tourism, such as, for example, the residential tourism which refers to the property and frequency of visitors.

In an article published in the newspaper O Estado de São Paulo (Mazzucco, 2020), the practice of the strategy of *staycation* in Barcelona is made clear in the statement that "in an empty Barcelona, it is the inhabitants' duty to occupy its spaces". In this sense, initiatives were carried out in order to make the local public visit tourism attractions between August and October. Places such as the Basilica Sagrada Família, the monument most visited by tourists in the city, offered free tickets for those who proved to live in Barcelona. Another masterpiece, symbol of the city, by Gaudí, the Casa Bartló, opened for music concerts in October and inhabitants of the city received discounts in those events. According to the publication, the "new normal" also included *walking tours* through historical neighborhoods and stimulus to urban mobility by bicycle and not by public transportation.

In addition, as to of urban mobility, Barcelona was one of the first European cities in which there was investment in the increase of bicycle paths. During the pandemic period, 21 temporary kilometers that go through the center of the city were added to the path, in addition to other 7 km, planned as permanent additions to the existing path (El País, 2020).

In this sense, the local stimulation of staycation, or to spend one's vacation or do tourism in its own place of origin in a more economic and sustainable way, may have been, even temporarily, the way out for the region of Catalonia, in the moment in which the country tried to overcome the challenge of a



second outburst of the pandemic in Europe, in which, apparently, Spain was the epicenter (Azevedo, 2020).

BRIEF FINAL CONSIDERATIONS: THE CHALLENGE REMAINS IN 2021

How will tourism handle the management of visitors' displacement in search of pleasure and for the extraordinary, when voluntary people circulation around the world is a potential vector of contamination and pandemic maintenance? With such issue as an original reflection point, the initial purpose of this essay was to reflect on the challenges faced by tourism activity during the pandemic times. With the voluntary circulation of people reaching 93% lower levels in June of 2020, compared to the previous year, the coronavirus pandemic put tourism mobility in the center of the discussion along with all problems, dilemmas and gifts that the activity of tourism reveals in several levels and areas, in this case, specially, regarding economy and global health.

The initial idea for the article was the extraordinary approaches of the demarketing actions developed in different tourism destinations, such as the campaign "*Visit Catalonia later*" among other, which urged people to visit the locations only when the pandemic was over. *Hashtags* such as #visitlater, #visitedepois, #agoranão, #stayhome, #yomequedoencasa were spread around the world and pointed out in its objectivity the moment of global tourism (i)mobility. The case of the region of Catalonia was considered to be quite interesting for the analysis due to its importance in the business of tourism to Spain and to the Southern/Mediterranean Europe as a whole (OTM, 2020). Data on the increasing presence of tourists in Catalonia, especially in the city of Barcelona, were presented in the article and have shown to be particularly astounding when analyzed in a timeline, together with the local contamination data by COVID-19.

Between the months of March and October 2020, the time period analyzed in the present article, Spain and the region of Catalonia were under the spotlight



of global media due to two both complementary and opposite events,: 1) to the well-succeeded effort of communication and marketing in the launching of the campaigns “*Visit Catalonia later*” – which prevented local visitation – and “*Catalunyaés casa teva*” – which called the tourists back; 2) as well as, due to the crescent number of contamination cases by COVID-19 in the country, immediately after the opening of the frontiers for external and domestic tourism, and for the flexibilization for the opening in all types of businesses which are directly and indirectly related to tourism in the country.

With the title “Second European outburst”, the article published in O Globo on October 30, 2020, puts Spain as the epicenter of a new strain of the coronavirus, which spread throughout Europe, starting in the months of June and July: “Europe is paying a high toll for the opening of the frontiers during the summer”, states the article. In this sense, the answer to our initial question was more difficult to be answered than we expected in the beginning of the investigation. The challenge proposed by the pandemic to tourism activities remains, even when initiatives such as internal tourism practices, proximity or sustainable practices, such as *staycation*, are being, in some way, implemented.

In the case of Catalonia, the second moment of the campaign “*Catalunhaés casa teva*”, planned for the European winter, will not be happening. Still under the state of emergency, with street commerce and shopping malls closed and with a curfew between 10 pm and 6 am, in addition to circulation restrictions and with reduced mobility between the region and other parts of the country and even among different nearby cities (Barcelona, Girona, Lerida, Tarragona), the ‘casa’ is still closed for visitors. Just as in other countries of the world, Brazil, for instance, the vaccination campaign has already started and we hope that by 2021, tourism can leave the crisis behind and recover its activities. However, for the time being, the challenge remains in 2021. #stayhome, #staysafe e #visitedepois.



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