



‘Málaga for living, not surviving’: Resident perceptions of overtourism, social injustice and urban governance

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ABSTRACT

Research on overtourism has often treated it as an issue of excessive visitor numbers or sustainability shortfalls, giving limited attention to how social injustice and governance failure shape its impacts. This study addresses this gap by examining how overtourism in Málaga, Spain, reorganizes urban life for long-term residents. Guided by social justice theory and critical urban theory, this qualitative research identifies distributive, recognitive, procedural, and restorative harms manifested in housing displacement, cultural loss, exclusion from governance, and failure of repair. The findings show that governance neglect, through weak regulation, tokenistic participation, and lack of accountability, converges with tourism growth to intensify resident precarity. Overtourism thus emerges not as a technical or managerial challenge but as a political process that deepens structural inequalities. By centering resident perspectives, the paper calls for governance approaches that place inclusion, recognition, and repair at the center, offering a justice-oriented roadmap for more liveable urban futures.

1. Introduction

Tourism remains a significant force in shaping urban economies, infrastructure, and everyday social life (Almeida-García et al., 2025). Yet in recent years, the rise of urban tourism, especially in destinations with high visitor demand, has generated concern about its unequal social and spatial effects (García-Buades et al., 2022; Milano, Koens, & Russo, 2024; Shahrads et al., 2025). The concept of overtourism is now widely recognized as reflecting these challenges, highlighting how excessive visitor numbers can undermine residents' quality of life (Almeida-García et al., 2016; Seraphin et al., 2018) and fuel local resistance and protest targeting tourism activities, visitors, policy-makers, and businesses (Gonçalves et al., 2025; García-Buades et al., 2022; Milano et al., 2024b). Such tensions have become especially visible in destinations like Spain and Italy but have also surfaced in places such as England and Croatia (UNWTO, 2018; García-Buades et al., 2022).

Importantly, the challenges tied to overtourism often extend beyond mere overcrowding or ecological degradation. In many urban contexts,

they expose long-standing conflicts over residents' rights to the city, urban identity, and the governance of public and private spaces (C. M. Hall, 2011; Seraphin et al., 2018; Shahrads et al., 2025; Novy & Colomb, 2016; Žemla, 2024; Milano et al., 2024b). Recent research has shown how unregulated tourism growth can aggravate housing pressures, sometimes displacing local communities or even driving forced international migration as short-term rentals proliferate (Mikulić et al., 2021). Meanwhile, Srhoj and Mikulić (2025) highlight how the perceived economic benefits of tourism can be overstated, with leakages and indirect imports weakening local economies and deepening inequalities within regions. These insights support calls from critical tourism and urban planning scholars who argue for a shift away from static measures of 'impact' towards examining how tourism shapes and is shaped by broader urban struggles around housing, spatial rights, and democratic governance (Amrhein & Langer, 2025; Butler & Dodds, 2022; Mihalic, 2020; Milano et al., 2019; Žemla, 2024).

While overtourism has received significant attention in both public and academic debate, much of the existing research remains dominated by quantitative studies that measure physical congestion, environmental

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impacts, or broad economic trends. Far less attention has been paid to the governance structures, institutional arrangements, and power relations that shape and sustain tourism-led urban transformation (Seraphin et al., 2018; Sibrijns & Vanneste, 2021; Saarinen & Hall, 2025; Novy & Colomb, 2019). Moreover, the normative dimensions, particularly questions of social justice, remain relatively underdeveloped. Where justice is addressed in tourism studies (Albrecht & Torabian, 2025), it is often narrowed to distributive issues: who benefits and who bears the costs. Yet the procedural and recognitive aspects, how local communities are included in decision-making, or how cultural identities are commodified and displaced, frequently receive less scrutiny (Shahrad et al., 2025; Jamal & Camargo, 2014; Seyfi et al., 2023).

Research that places justice at the center of tourism scholarship is still emerging (Torabian & Albrecht, 2025; Rastegar et al., 2023; Rastegar, 2025), with much early work focused on defining its core principles (Jamal & Higham, 2020). However, the conflictual relationships between justice, overtourism, and governance remains relatively underexplored. To move these debates forward, it is not enough to develop justice concepts in isolation (Jamal & Higham, 2020; Dangi & Higgins-Desbiolles, 2022); there is a need for empirical research that shows how questions of justice shape, and are shaped by, the daily lives of communities in tourist cities. Such work can demonstrate that overtourism is not only an environmental or economic issue but also a deeply political and moral challenge embedded in urban life.

To address these gaps, this study draws on social justice theory and critical urban theory to examine how tourism-driven urban transformation is experienced and contested by residents in a major tourist destination. Social justice theory places questions of fairness, recognition, and participation at the center of analysis (Harvey, 1973; Rawls, 1971), while critical urban theory situates these everyday experiences within the wider historical and structural forces that shape urban governance, including capital accumulation, gentrification, and place-branding (Brenner et al., 2012; Roy, 2016).

The city of Málaga, located on Spain's Costa del Sol, provides a timely and revealing case for exploring these questions. Once a quieter coastal destination, Málaga has experienced rapid tourism-led changes, particularly in the years following the COVID-19 pandemic. While the city's international profile and economic performance have grown, long-term residents increasingly face rising housing costs, the loss of local businesses, and a growing sense of cultural and social displacement (Miguel-Barrado et al., 2024). According to the property platform Idealista, average rents in Málaga rose by 16.5 % in just one year, driven largely by the spread of short-term tourist rentals. In response, local activists have mobilized around slogans such as "Málaga for living, not surviving," highlighting urgent concerns around affordability, governance, and the erosion of social belonging (Hedgecoe, 2024).

Guided by the above-mentioned theoretical frameworks, this study addresses two main research questions: (1) What forms of socio-spatial (in)justice do residents in Málaga associate with rapid urban tourism development? and (2) How do tourism-related governance and planning practices contribute to perceived inequalities and exclusion?

The paper is structured as follows. The next section reviews how questions of justice and injustice have evolved in tourism research, paying particular attention to the political-economic forces that sustain overtourism's social impacts. The theoretical framework then explains how social justice theory and critical urban theory are combined to interpret resident narratives. The methodology section outlines the study context in Málaga, the research design, and the approach to data collection and analysis. The findings section presents residents' narratives of how tourism is reshaping urban life, followed by a discussion that connects these perspectives to broader debates on urban governance and social justice. Finally, the paper concludes by reflecting on the implications for future research and for more equitable approaches to governing urban tourism.

2. Literature review

2.1. Justice and injustice in tourism

Justice has long been recognized as a foundational concern across the social sciences, yet its role within tourism research has often been limited or treated as secondary (Dangi & Higgins-Desbiolles, 2022; Higgins-Desbiolles, 2008). This gap becomes especially visible when considering how tourism governance structures shape residents' everyday lives through unequal access to rights, urban space, and decision-making power (Almeida-García et al., 2020; Garau-Vadell et al., 2014). As Albrecht and Torabian (2025) point out, justice is not a singular, fixed concept but a multi-layered one, with meanings that range from universal principles to more situated, place-specific interpretations. Rawls' (1971) influential notion of "justice as fairness", with its focus on equal basic liberties and the difference principle, continues to provide a useful starting point for examining whether tourism development benefits those who are most disadvantaged. However, the limits of this liberal framework become clear in contexts where overtourism reinforces deep-seated inequalities that cannot be resolved through redistribution alone.

Building on these early engagements, the past decade has seen a notable shift towards framing justice not as a normative add-on but as a lens for critically exposing how tourism contributes to structural inequalities, spatial exclusion, environmental harm, and postcolonial power relations (Albrecht & Torabian, 2025; Higgins-Desbiolles, 2008; Jamal & Camargo, 2014; Rastegar, 2025; Rastegar et al., 2023; Wang et al., 2022). Rather than functioning as an unqualified driver of development or peacebuilding, tourism has frequently operated as a mechanism of accumulation by dispossession, often reproducing rather than redistributing wealth and power (Higgins-Desbiolles, 2008). These dynamics are especially evident in the Global South, where large-scale resort developments and urban regeneration projects have displaced marginalized communities, appropriated communal lands, and commodified local cultures (Seyfi & Hall, 2020). Such transformations are frequently legitimized through narratives of sustainability, beautification, or modernization, which can conceal the violence and exclusion they produce (Scheyvens, 2002; Higgins-Desbiolles & Bigby, 2022; Saarinen & Rogerson, 2021; Zubair et al., 2015).

Empirical examples illustrate these tensions. In the Maldives, for instance, luxury resort developments have boosted national income but have also curtailed Indigenous islanders' access to traditional coastal commons and undermined local livelihoods (Zubair et al., 2015). Similarly, Wan's (2024) study in Macao shows how urban planning decisions often prioritize marketable heritage narratives over residents' lived cultural practices, reinforcing spatial and cultural hierarchies within the city. In response to such critiques, a growing body of scholarship calls for a more comprehensive understanding of justice in tourism. Dangi and Higgins-Desbiolles (2022), for example, identify four interrelated approaches: (1) solidarity tourism, which seeks to tackle systemic injustices by empowering communities and groups historically marginalized by tourism development; (2) equity and fairness, which emphasizes equal access to and use of resources for all community members, including future generations; (3) responsible and ethical tourism, which calls on both tourists and the industry to act in more socially and environmentally responsible ways; and (4) an ethic of care, which urges all tourism stakeholders to respect and safeguard the social, cultural, and natural heritage of destinations, while showing care and consideration for the people and places they encounter.

While there has been important progress in broadening justice frameworks within tourism research, many studies still tend to focus on distributive or procedural aspects, for example, who benefits, who loses, and who gets to participate in planning processes (Shahrad et al., 2025). Far less attention is paid to the deeper institutional arrangements or enduring colonial legacies that determine whose voices count and whose interests are prioritized. Perspectives that draw on decolonial,

Indigenous, or posthumanist ideas of justice (Guia, 2021) also remain underrepresented in applied research, where justice is often narrowed to managerial solutions such as stakeholder consultation or benefit-sharing mechanisms. At the same time, empirical work continues to show how these exclusions remain. Bianchi and Stephenson (2013), and more recently Bianchi and Milano (2024), demonstrate how neoliberal governance models in tourism often privilege transnational elites and investors over the livelihoods and well-being of local communities. In many cases, narratives of sustainability or modernization are used to justify projects that displace marginalized groups and commodify their cultural practices (Scheyvens, 2002; Higgins-Desbiolles & Bigby, 2022; Saarinen & Rogerson, 2021).

Against this backdrop, the idea of “justice tourism” has emerged both as an analytic lens and a practical framework for reimagining tourism’s role (Hultsman, 1995). Justice tourism draws attention to the power imbalances between tourists and host communities, advocating for community agency, fair redistribution of benefits, and meaningful local participation (Scheyvens, 2002; Guia, 2021; Higgins-Desbiolles, 2018; Jamal & Camargo, 2014; Jamal & Higham, 2021). Scholars have increasingly conceptualized “just tourism” through multiple, interrelated dimensions, distributive (fair sharing of resources and burdens), procedural (inclusive and meaningful participation), recognitive (respect for cultural identities and local knowledge), and restorative (addressing past and ongoing harms), to show how fairness, participation, cultural respect, and repair should guide both theory and practice (Becken & Rastegar, 2025; Rastegar et al., 2023; Seyfi et al., 2023; Shahrad et al., 2025). For instance, Isaac’s (2017) research in Palestine frames justice tourism as a form of resistance to occupation, while Yang (2023) explores how grassroots mobility initiatives in China can disrupt dominant tourism flows and reclaim space for local communities. However, critics such as Guia (2021) and Luh Sin et al. (2015) warn that justice tourism can easily be co-opted by market-friendly narratives or reduced to individual acts of “virtue signaling”, shifting responsibility away from deeper structural changes.

Taken together, recent research has repositioned justice from a peripheral concern to a central framework for rethinking tourism governance and its consequences.

2.2. Overtourism, social injustice and poor governance

Overtourism, broadly understood as the excessive concentration of visitors that overwhelms a destination’s carrying capacity, has become a defining concern for urban governance debates in recent years (dos Anjos & Kennell, 2019; Kramer et al., 2024; Saarinen & Hall, 2025; Milano et al., 2019). Whereas high visitor numbers were once celebrated as indicators of economic success, emerging research shows that unchecked tourism growth can transform cities into sites of social, spatial, and cultural injustice. In response to escalating pressures on residents’ daily lives, local governments have introduced various management strategies (Russo & Scarnato, 2018; Seraphin et al., 2018). However, as experiences in cities such as Barcelona, Venice, Amsterdam, and Lisbon illustrate, residents and grassroots movements have increasingly resisted the commodification, displacement, and erosion of neighborhood life that often follow tourism-led urban growth (Novy & Colomb, 2019; Russo & Scarnato, 2018).

The effectiveness of governance responses depends not just on whether action is taken, but on whether policies are proactive, locally grounded, and inclusive. Research suggests that when tourism revenues are meaningfully reinvested in local needs, social tensions can be reduced; yet when decisions are imposed top-down, they often deepen residents’ sense of marginalization and injustice (Novy & Colomb, 2016; Strzelecka et al., 2025). Earlier studies on overtourism tended to focus on visible impacts like congestion, environmental stress, or the strain on urban infrastructure. More recent work, however, has emphasized how overtourism generates profound social justice concerns that reach far beyond the physical environment. As Amrhein and Langer (2025) argue,

rapid tourism growth can intensify structural inequalities, drive housing crises, and undermine social cohesion, displacing long-term residents and weakening neighborhood ties.

The distributive dimension of these injustices is perhaps the most widely studied. Tourism’s profits tend to benefit a relatively small group of investors and property owners, while vulnerable residents, including working-class families and older people, carry the costs through rent inflation, noise pollution, and reduced access to public services (Milano et al., 2019; Kuhzadi et al., 2024). Recent findings by Mikulić et al. (2024) further highlight that the impacts can extend well beyond local displacement, showing how housing pressures linked to short-term rentals can even drive forced economic emigration, revealing the ‘long arm’ of tourism’s social costs. Yet distributive issues are only part of the story. Growing evidence also points to serious procedural and recognitive injustices embedded in tourism governance. Local communities are frequently excluded from meaningful participation in decision-making, while planning processes often privilege developers and external investors (Cocola-Gant, 2018). In Majorca, for example, Yrigoy et al. (2024) show how stakeholders can strategically co-opt residents’ concerns about overtourism to serve their own interests, reproducing existing power imbalances. Even when consultation processes are in place, they are often more symbolic than substantive, providing little real influence over outcomes (Füller & Michel, 2014). Meanwhile, the cultural practices and everyday attachments that shape community identity are increasingly commodified or erased to align with tourist expectations (Isaac & Farkic, 2024).

Recent concepts such as ‘urban tourism hypertrophy’ help to explain how these processes emerge. Kowalczyk-Anioł (2023), for example, demonstrates how tourism can become an autonomous force that reshapes urban space with little regard for residents’ social needs or cultural continuity. Similarly, Diaz-Parra and Jover (2021) illustrate how overtourism in historic city centres, like Seville’s, can alienate long-term residents from their right to the city, displacing everyday life in favor of visitor-centered redevelopment. A growing body of empirical work adds depth to this picture. Research in cities like Krakow and Seville shows that tourism-driven gentrification does not simply displace residents materially but also generates deeper socio-cultural and psychological distress (Kowalczyk-Anioł, 2023). Lalicic’s (2020) use of the concept of solastalgia, the distress people feel when unwanted changes disrupt their sense of home, highlights this loss of belonging as neighborhoods are transformed into tourist enclaves. Even well-meaning sustainability initiatives, such as creating urban green spaces, can end up displacing vulnerable residents, turning environmental improvements into new forms of exclusion (Mullenbach & Baker, 2020). Similarly, studies by S. Kim and Kang (2020) and Kim et al. (2022) show how residents can develop anti-tourist attitudes when they perceive unfairness, exclusion, and disregard for local values, reminding us that communities are not ‘passive hosts’ but ‘active agents’ with their own rights and interests.

Across these studies, governance failures repeatedly emerge as structural drivers of injustice (Milano et al., 2019; Saarinen & Hall, 2025; Strzelecka et al., 2025). The rise of unregulated capital flows, pro-gentrification urban policies, and platforms such as Airbnb have transformed housing into speculative assets, intensifying precarity for those with the weakest tenure (López-Gay et al., 2021). Recent research by Srhoj and Mikulić (2025) adds further insights, showing that the economic benefits of urban tourism are often overstated when indirect imports and firm-to-firm spending leakages are accounted for. Despite widespread public discontent and the growth of anti-tourism movements, reflected in slogans like “The city is not for sale” in places such as Barcelona and Lisbon, attempts to regulate short-term rentals or manage tourism flows more equitably have often proved insufficient (Almeida-García et al., 2025). As Milano, Novelli, and Russo (2024) point out, these movements demonstrate how the inequitable patterns of mass tourism continue to produce new forms of local resistance, demanding deeper recognition of the structural inequalities that tourism regimes sustain. Residents’ perceptions of justice are shaped by their

lived experiences of displacement, restricted access to shared urban spaces, and the commodification of culture (Almeida-García et al., 2020; Garau-Vadell et al., 2014). When tourism is experienced as unfair or exclusionary, it fuels social tensions and undermines support for tourism development. Recent work suggests that putting residents' rights and voices at the center of decision-making is key to strengthening social justice and sustainable urban tourism (Kramer et al., 2024).

Yet, despite these critical insights, parts of the literature still frame overtourism as a managerial issue that can be resolved through improved visitor management or marketing, downplaying its structural roots (Novy & Colomb, 2019). In contrast, more radical perspectives argue that dominant sustainability narratives risk obscuring the political-economic forces that underpin these injustices (Higgins-Desbiolles, 2021). The concept of restorative justice in tourism remains especially underdeveloped, with few concrete examples of how communities harmed by overtourism might be genuinely compensated or supported (Becken & Rastegar, 2025; Isaac & Farkic, 2024). Taken together, this body of research suggests that overtourism cannot be adequately understood or addressed without confronting the governance regimes, economic logics, and policy frameworks that treat urban spaces primarily as commodities for external consumption. Building on these critiques, the present study situates the case of Málaga within this ongoing debate, asking how residents' narratives make visible the multiple injustices generated by overtourism and what they reveal about the institutional conditions needed for more equitable urban futures.

2.3. Theoretical frameworks

This study draws on critical urban theory and social justice theory to interpret the socio-spatial transformations produced by overtourism in Málaga. Together, these frameworks offer a lens for situating residents' everyday experiences within broader structures of urban governance, inequality, and contested rights to the city (Díaz-Parra & Jover, 2021). Critical urban theory emerged as a response to the limitations of purely technocratic or managerial approaches to urban questions. Grounded in Marxist traditions and the Frankfurt School's critique of ideology, this perspective highlights those cities are not passive backdrops for economic or social activity but dynamic arenas shaped by power-laden struggles (N. Brenner, 2009). Rather than treating urban space as neutral, critical urban scholars conceptualize it as produced and constantly reshaped through cycles of capital accumulation, investment, and dispossession (Harvey, 2008).

Lefebvre's (1996) foundational idea of the right to the city is central to this perspective, arguing that urban inhabitants should have the capacity to shape the spaces they occupy. This remains highly relevant today, especially as urban redevelopment driven by tourism often displaces marginalized communities and weakens local social fabrics (Díaz-Parra & Jover, 2021). Harvey (2008) extended Lefebvre's ideas by examining how cycles of investment and disinvestment produce structurally imbalanced urban landscapes and fuel processes such as gentrification, ultimately displacing working-class populations in favor of more profitable land uses. Brenner et al. (2012) and Roy (2016) further argue that critical urban theory is vital because it challenges dominant logics that frame cities as commodities to be packaged, branded, and consumed, a logic that tourism development often exemplifies. From this viewpoint, the theory insists that more democratic, equitable, and socially grounded urbanization is possible, but only if research and policy confront the underlying dynamics of power, exploitation, and everyday lived experience.

In parallel, social justice theory, rooted in normative political philosophy, has also been adapted to examine how urban transformations can reproduce or challenge inequalities. Rawls' (1971) influential idea of justice as fairness provides an entry point, asserting that social and institutional arrangements should work to the benefit of the least advantaged. Harvey's (1973) early work extended this principle into urban contexts, showing how planning and investment strategies often

direct resources toward affluent areas while marginalizing vulnerable communities. This connection between spatial arrangements and questions of fairness remains central today. More recent scholarship emphasizes that fairness, recognition, and meaningful participation must be foundational if urban development, including tourism, is to avoid repeating old patterns of exclusion (Jamal & Camargo, 2014). Within tourism studies, critical researchers have shown how the economic benefits of urban tourism frequently accrue to private investors, while the hidden costs, from housing pressures and rising living costs to cultural commodification, fall on local residents (Isaac & Farkic, 2024). Rastegar et al. (2023) argue that these patterns must be understood not only through economic data but also through moral and political questions about who benefits, who is harmed, and whose voices are prioritized in governance, echoing the argument made by Shahrad et al. (2025).

By applying these theories to the case of Málaga, this study responds to calls for more historically grounded and resident-centered perspectives that move beyond measuring tourism's visible impacts. Instead, it asks how governance structures and policy choices can be reimagined in line with principles of fairness, recognition, and shared urban futures (Sequera & Nofre, 2018; Milano, Novelli, & Russo, 2024). In doing so, the study aims to show that overtourism is not an isolated problem but deeply connected to broader structures of urban inequality and contested claims over who has the right to shape the city.

3. Methodology

3.1. Study context

Málaga, located on Spain's southern coast in Andalusia, is the region's second most populous city and the sixth largest in Spain, with 591,637 inhabitants in 2024. In 2023, the city received 1,524,290 tourists, 59 % of whom were international visitors, surpassing pre-pandemic levels and continuing an upward trend seen since 2010. Between 2010 and 2023, tourist arrivals rose by 76.7 % (INE, 2010–2023). Málaga now ranks as Spain's seventh urban destination by tourist volume and fourth in short-term rental capacity, exceeding larger cities such as Valencia and Seville. In 2023, Málaga had an annual average of 13,428 hotel beds across 144 hotels and 7496 STR properties providing 32,123 beds (INE, 2023; INE, 2024). Tourist rentals are heavily concentrated in the historic center, which holds over 50 % of hotel beds and more than 70 % of short-term rentals, with saturation rates between 20 % and 40 % of total housing stock (Almeida et al., 2024). Peripheral and coastal expansion areas show moderate to high short-term rental growth, while other zones remain less affected (see Fig. 1). This tourism boom has placed intense pressure on the housing market, contributing to steep rises in rents and purchase prices. While tourism has brought economic benefits, jobs, investment, and infrastructure, it has also accelerated gentrification, displaced long-term residents, and reshaped neighborhood life (Liang & Bao, 2015; Milano, Novelli, & Russo, 2024). Many locals describe their city as becoming a theme park for tourists, with activist groups warning that mass tourism threatens community cohesion and housing security. Slogans such as "Málaga for life, not survival" reflect this contestation (Hedgecoe, 2024).

3.2. Research design and data collection

This study adopted a qualitative design to explore how residents understand and deal with the social and spatial impacts of tourism-driven urban transformation in Málaga. The focus was on examining how people interpret changes to housing, public space, everyday services, and opportunities for local participation. To achieve this, semi-structured interviews with open-ended questions were conducted, allowing participants to share rich, detailed perspectives in their own words (Creswell & Poth, 2016). This approach helped ensure that patterns of perceived harm, exclusion, or marginalization could emerge

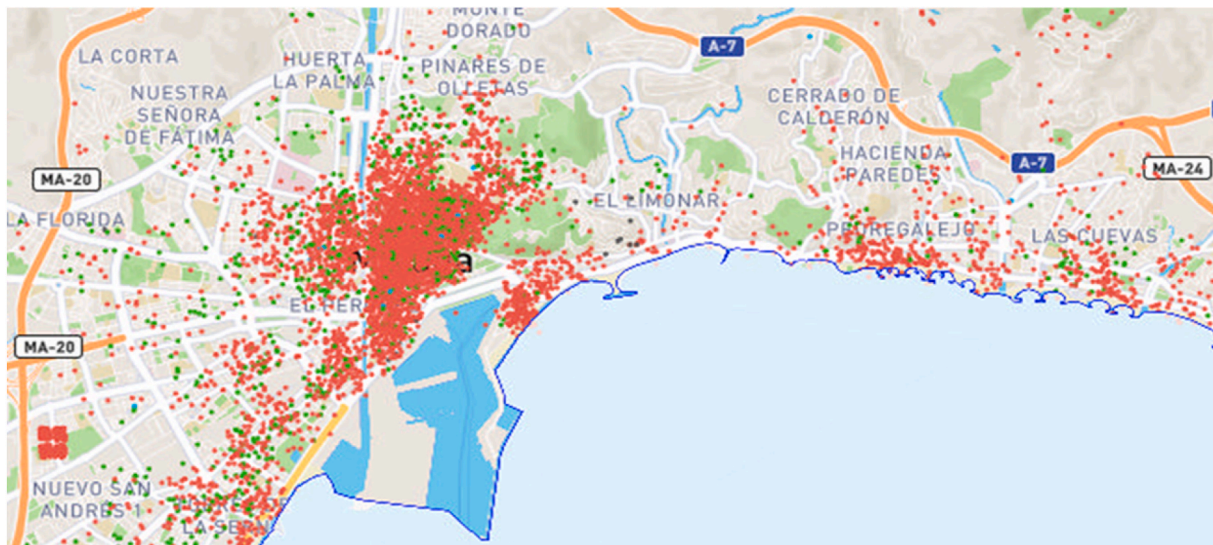


Fig. 1. Distribution of the short tourist rental offer offered by Airbnb
Source: Inside Airbnb, 2024.

organically rather than being shaped by overly rigid researcher assumptions. While social justice theory and critical urban theory guided the overall interpretive framework, they were used only as sensitizing concepts during the interview and coding process. This balance was important for avoiding leading questions and for ensuring that participants’ narratives shaped the thematic structure, rather than forcing their experiences into predefined categories. The full interview guide, included in Appendix 1, shows how each question was linked to key study objectives, inviting participants to describe issues in their own terms, for example, by sharing everyday stories about fairness, loss, or exclusion in the neighborhoods they call home.

To ensure participants could speak meaningfully about the lived consequences of overtourism, recruitment focused on residents who: (a) were over 18 years old; (b) had lived in Málaga for at least five consecutive years; and (c) currently resided in neighborhoods such as El Centro Histórico, Cruz de humilladero, La Malagueta, Churriana, El Perchel, Malagueta, Teatinos, areas experiencing visible tourism-driven change (see Table 1 for the profile of interviewees). This focus aligns with earlier research showing that those living in central areas tend to feel the impacts of overtourism most acutely (Zemia & Szromek, 2021). Participants were recruited through a mix of outreach strategies, including neighborhood associations, public noticeboards in community centres and cafés, and snowball sampling. Initial contacts were made through community groups and informal local networks, with referrals helping to build a diverse sample in terms of age, gender, and neighborhood. This ensured that voices from different parts of the city could reflect on both shared and place-specific aspects of tourism-led urban change (Creswell & Poth, 2016; Hosseini et al., 2022).

Between January and March 2024, a total of 32 in-depth interviews were conducted in Spanish. Each interview lasted between 40 and 70 min, was audio-recorded with participants’ informed consent, and transcribed verbatim. All transcripts were anonymized using pseudonyms and securely stored, and only the final thematic findings were translated into English to retain the detail in participants’ original expression (Nunkoo, 2018). The study received full ethical approval before fieldwork began. All participants were briefed on the aims of the research, their right to withdraw at any point, and the measures taken to protect their confidentiality, in line with established ethical standards for research involving human participants (Orb et al., 2001).

Data collection and analysis proceeded iteratively. Initial coding began after the first few interviews, allowing early insights to inform the focus of subsequent conversations. This concurrent process helped

Table 1
Profile of interviewees.

Participant ID	Gender	Age	Neighborhood
1	Female	35	Centro
2	Male	40	Teatinos
3	Male	48	Centro
4	Male	71	Huelin, carretera de cádiz
5	Female	54	Malagueta - monte sancha, este
6	Male	44	Centro
7	Male	54	Centro
8	Male	50	Malagueta - monte sancha, este
9	Female	50	Perchel
10	Male	42	Perchel
11	Male	29	Malagueta - monte sancha, este
12	Female	67	Huelin, Carretera de Cádiz
13	Male	71	Pedregalejo
14	Male	51	Centro
15	Male	52	Perchel
16	Male	49	Perchel
17	Female	30	Pedregalejo
18	Male	47	Malagueta - monte sancha, este
19	Female	28	Huelin, carretera de cádiz
20	Female	57	La malagueta
21	Male	60	La malagueta
22	Female	36	Pedregalejo
23	Male	63	La malagueta
24	Male	22	Huelin, carretera de cádiz
25	Male	68	Centro
26	Male	29	Pedregalejo
27	Male	67	La malagueta
28	Male	73	Teatinos
29	Female	66	Teatinos
30	Female	58	Churriana
31	Female	53	Churriana
32	Male	45	Churriana

maintain conceptual rigor and ensured that emerging themes could be explored more deeply in later interviews (Creswell & Poth, 2016). Data collection concluded when saturation was reached, that is, when no new substantive themes or perspectives were emerging and key interpretive categories appeared consistently across neighborhoods and social groups (Guest et al., 2006; Saunders et al., 2018).

3.3. Data analysis

A thematic analysis was carried out to understand how residents

perceive and interpret the socio-spatial injustices arising from tourism-driven changes in Málaga. The aim was not to determine whether participants explicitly spoke of ‘justice’ in theoretical terms, but rather to explore how they made sense of disruptions, exclusions, or losses in their everyday lives, and how these were experienced as legitimate or illegitimate (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Hosseini et al., 2024). While the interviews themselves were not structured around predefined categories,

the core justice constructs, distributive, recognitive, procedural, and restorative, were later used to help interpret recurring patterns in residents’ narratives. The analysis followed an inductive, grounded approach, guided by the methodology proposed by Gioia et al. (2013). This approach suited the study’s interpretive focus, which centres on residents’ lived experiences and the co-construction of meaning, while staying alert to how these stories reflect broader urban governance

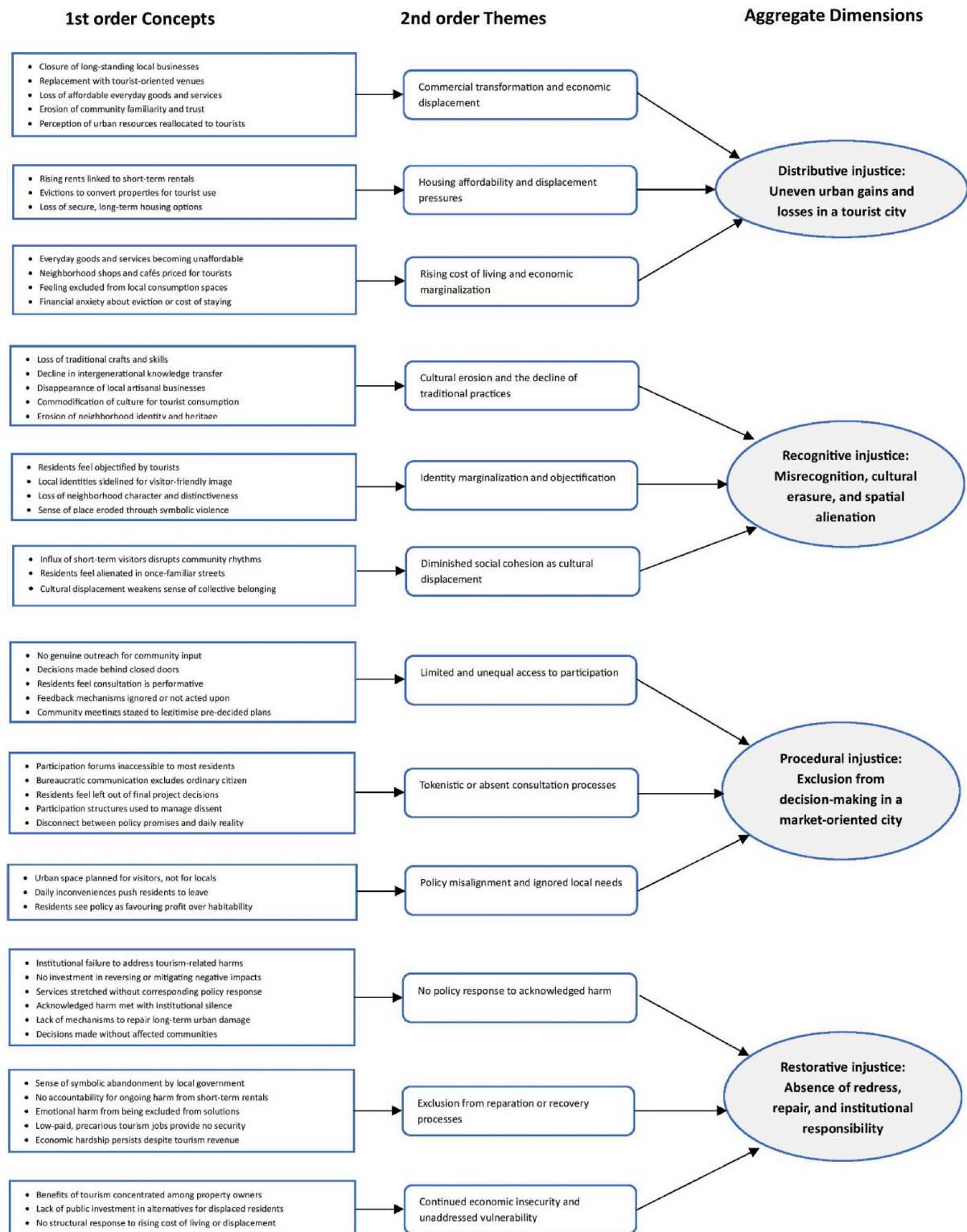


Fig. 2. Data analysis structure.

structures and entrenched inequalities. Rather than starting with a rigid coding frame, the process was shaped by the research questions and the study's broader aim: to understand how people in Málaga make sense of overtourism's social, spatial, and cultural impacts.

The analysis proceeded in three main stages. First, open coding was conducted. Transcripts were read and re-read, with close attention paid to the language participants used to describe urban inequality and governance such as housing pressures, neighborhood change, commercial displacement, feelings of exclusion, or a loss of belonging. *First-order codes* were generated inductively, staying as close as possible to residents' own words and framings. This helped ensure that interpretation remained grounded in participants' narratives rather than imposing theoretical ideas too early (Gioia et al., 2013). In the second stage, these first-order codes were compared, refined, and grouped into *second-order themes* that reflected broader patterns emerging across the dataset. This stage involved identifying where individual accounts converged or diverged, and where tensions or contradictions were visible, for example, how pride in local identity coexists with frustration over perceived failures in governance (Strzelecka et al., 2025). In the final stage, these second-order themes were synthesized into *aggregate theoretical dimensions*. It was at this point that the justice framework, including distributive, procedural, recognitive, and restorative aspects, was used to interpret how residents' stories mapped onto different forms of perceived injustice. This sequencing ensured that the justice dimensions emerged from the data, rather than being imposed in advance, and reflected how residents themselves framed questions of harm, fairness, and marginalization (Fraser, 2008; Schlosberg, 2007).

The analysis remained iterative throughout. Although the coding and theme development were managed manually, the underlying logic of the Gioia et al. (2013) method, moving systematically from first-order concepts to higher-level abstraction, was maintained. The final data structure (see Fig. 2) shows how theoretical insight was developed from residents' grounded narratives. Consistent with the study's wider aims, participants' perceptions are treated not just as data but also as discourse, fragments of lived experience that reveal how urban inequality is sustained and challenged in everyday life under conditions of overtourism.

4. Findings

The findings of this study are organized around four dimensions of justice: distributive, recognitive, procedural, and restorative, as reflected in participants' narratives (see Fig. 2). Although closely connected in practice, these categories serve distinct interpretive roles. Distributive justice concerns how material resources and burdens are shared; recognitive justice attends to whether cultural identities and local values receive respect; procedural justice asks whose voices are included or excluded in decisions about tourism; and restorative justice highlights residents' expectations for redress, community healing, or broader structural repair.

4.1. Distributive injustice: inequitable urban gains and losses in a tourist city

Distributive injustice, as conceptualized in this study, refers to the unequal allocation of tourism's material benefits and burdens (Rastegar, 2020). Drawing on social justice theory, we frame distributive justice not simply as income equality, but as fairness in access to essential resources, such as housing, public services, and commercial infrastructure, especially for those with fewer means. Critical urban theory expands this concern spatially, linking urban injustices to capitalist modes of accumulation that privilege elite interests while externalizing costs onto the urban poor and working classes (N. Brenner, 2009; Harvey, 2008). The participants' narratives reveal that tourism-led urban change in Málaga has resulted in distributive injustices across three interrelated domains: the commercial transformation of the city, housing insecurity, and

cost-of-living pressures.

Commercial transformation and economic displacement

Participants described how long-standing, community-serving businesses have been replaced by establishments catering primarily to tourists. While such changes are often presented as economic revitalization, residents interpreted them as a reallocation of urban resources away from local needs and towards visitor consumption. This process illustrates what Harvey (2008) critiques as market-led urban redevelopment, where capital seeks higher returns by displacing low-profit uses in favor of ventures that yield greater gains. From a critical urban theory perspective, this is not simply about business closures but a reordering of urban space that deepens class and power asymmetries (Harvey, 2008). As one resident observed:

"I remember Zulaica Sports, right on Granada Street. The owner retired and had to leave. And what's opening there? Bars, restaurants ... places where tourists are the main customers. There were places that had a certain something that they no longer have. Traditional spaces are vanishing, and what's left is either overpriced or inaccessible for locals." (Participant 1)

Another resident described the loss in more personal terms:

"They sold the bakery ... Sure, they might open another one there, but it won't be the same. Not the same prices, not the same familiar faces. It breaks a chain of tradition, of quality, of people you know. For us, it's almost traumatic." (Participant 15)

Housing affordability and displacement pressures

Tourism has also intensified housing precarity. Multiple participants linked rising rents and evictions to the growth of short-term rentals, particularly Airbnb. Participant 12 shared:

"I live in a rental in Plaza de Viñeros, and the owner is already thinking about selling ... to build tourist apartments."

Here, distributive injustice takes the form of exclusion from a basic urban entitlement: the ability to remain in one's home. From a social justice theory perspective, this violates Rawls' difference principle, as tourism-driven housing policies disproportionately burden those already disadvantaged, while benefiting landlords and investors. Critical urban theory offers further insight by framing this as the commodification of shelter, transforming homes into speculative assets rather than social goods (Lefebvre, 1996; Marcuse, 2009).

Rising cost of living and economic marginalization

Participants described how tourism-driven development has intensified the cost of everyday life, pushing neighborhood cafés, markets, and other essentials beyond the reach of many locals. This is not only about individual affordability but reflects a deeper reorientation of urban space away from residents' daily needs. Such inflationary pressures reflect what critical urban theorists note: urban space is actively shaped to serve certain interests, often privileging visitors and investors over those who live and work there (Brenner et al., 2012). Here, distributive injustice emerges not simply through unequal incomes but through structural barriers that undermine people's capacity to remain and live with dignity in their own city. As one participant put it:

"You walk past these cafés and stores every day, but you can't actually buy anything It's like the city's no longer designed for you ... you end up feeling like a servant to those who come from outside." (Participant 1)

Another spoke of the direct impact on housing security:

"Many people here have been forced out of their homes. Landlords prefer tourists because they pay more in short terms renting contracts. We've lost neighbors, people who had lived here for decades, because they just can't afford it anymore." (Participant 8)

The fear of eviction further strengthens this sense of exclusion

“Basically, you do live with increasing fear that at some point they’ll evict you ... I have that feeling, that in the end, they’re going to evict me. I live in a rental now, in Plaza de Viñeros, and the owner is already thinking about selling, which means evicting us ... to build tourist apartments.” (Participant 12)

4.2. *Recognitive injustice: misrecognition, cultural erasure, and spatial alienation*

Recognitive injustice concerns the denial or marginalization of the values, identities, and symbolic claims of certain social groups (Rastegar, 2025). Unlike distributive injustice, which centres on access to resources, recognitive injustice is grounded in misrecognition, a failure to acknowledge the legitimacy of certain cultural expressions, ways of life, or local knowledge systems (Fraser, 2008). In the context of tourism, this includes not only who benefits materially but also whose cultural presence is made visible, respected, or erased. From the perspective of critical urban theory, urban space is not a passive backdrop but a contested terrain where meaning, identity, and legitimacy are constantly redefined (Lefebvre, 1996; Roy, 2016). The tourism industry, particularly when aligned with urban redevelopment, often imposes dominant imaginaries that serve visitor interests at the expense of local cultural memory and identity (Harvey, 2008). When these representations exclude or distort resident identities, the result is not just symbolic harm, it is a structural injustice embedded in the cultural production of the city. In Málaga, recognitive injustice emerged in three principal forms: cultural erosion, identity marginalization, and diminished social cohesion.

Cultural erosion and the decline of traditional practices

Participants highlighted how tourism-led urban change has hastened the disappearance of cultural practices once rooted in everyday life. These losses go beyond the visible aesthetics of a neighborhood; they erode intergenerational ties, artisanal skills, and the intangible heritage that gives a place meaning. From a social justice perspective, this reflects a recognitive failure, a systematic devaluation of local traditions in favor of commodified, tourist-oriented versions of “culture.” (Langemeyer & Connolly, 2020). Critical urban theory further suggests that this is not an accidental side effect but an outcome of how urban cultural space is reorganized to meet external demand (N. Brenner, 2009). One participant observed:

“We are losing our traditional crafts. Young people no longer want to keep them alive ... Old residents are leaving, and with them, the sense of community ... We’re losing our roots, the connection we had to the places that defined our daily lives.” (Participant 10)

Another described the visible impact of this loss:

“The city has lost its identity because of mass tourism ... I’ve had guests ask me to take them to local craft shops, but surprisingly, there’s almost nothing ... there are people who believe all tourism aspects are bad!” (Participant 8)

Identity marginalization and objectification

Residents described the psychological burden of feeling that their city no longer belongs to them, culturally, visually, or socially. This is not simply a matter of perception but a form of structural misrecognition, where local identities are sidelined to produce a visitor-friendly image. From a social justice perspective, this reflects recognitive injustice, while critical urban theory highlights how symbolic violence works through everyday spaces, rendering residents’ part of the scenery rather than active agents (He & Sikor, 2015). Tourist desires become legitimate, while local meanings and representations are made expendable. One participant captured this sense of dislocation:

“The tourists see us as objects ... That’s how I feel. They turn everything into an object. There’s a loss of identity. As I said, we feel more alone, and I’m noticing more and more that the people who gave me that sense of identity are disappearing.” (Participant 27)

Another reflected on the erasure of neighborhood character:

“... It’s like we’ve lost our sense of place. For example, the Atarazanas market used to be a local market, but now it’s crazy. You can’t walk around there because it’s full of tourists taking photos, and you say, ‘This is no longer our market!’” (Participant 11)

Another recurring concern was the flattening of spatial identity, as formerly distinct neighborhoods are remade to fit a generic “tourist city” image. This is not mere nostalgia but a critique of how place is redefined through top-down urban branding. Critical urban theorists argue that such homogenization reflects ideological projects that erase local differences to maximize legibility and profitability (Marcuse, 2009). From a social perspective, these symbolic transformations reproduce inequality by undermining residents’ everyday spatial attachments and sense of place. As one participant explained:

“Each neighborhood had its own soul. Now everything is blending into the same tourist-friendly image ... This is no longer our market!” (Participant 11)

Diminished social cohesion as cultural displacement

Participants described how tourism disrupts the everyday ties and shared rhythms that bind neighborhoods together, resulting in a subtle but significant form of recognitive harm. This is not only about physical displacement but also the loss of affective belonging, a cultural claim to place sustained through routine interactions and social memory. Critical urban theory reminds us that belonging is actively produced and maintained (Whitehead, 2013); when tourism unsettles these connections without space for continuity or negotiation, it creates symbolic exclusion that weakens the social fabric. One participant captured this loss:

“I get the feeling that the people of Málaga are moving away. We used to know everyone on our street. Now, it’s just strangers coming and going every weekend. It’s hard to build any kind of community like that.” (Participant 15)

Another pointed to the pressures driving people out:

“People who grew up here are leaving because they can’t afford to stay ... some prefer to go to places with less noise and crowd ... without them, the ties that held us together are breaking.” (Participant 17)

These reflections highlight that when neighborhoods lose their social anchors, cultural displacement follows, deepening feelings of alienation and weakening residents’ capacity to sustain a sense of shared place.

4.3. *Procedural injustice: exclusion from decision-making in a tourist-oriented city*

Procedural injustice occurs when individuals or groups are denied the right to participate meaningfully in decisions that affect their lives (Rastegar, 2020). In the context of urban tourism, it concerns how policies are made, who is consulted, and whose knowledge and priorities are considered valid (Strzelecka et al., 2025). While distributive and recognitive injustices highlight the outcomes of tourism growth, procedural injustice focuses on the political and institutional processes through which those outcomes are produced (Shahrad et al., 2025). In Málaga, procedural injustice emerged through three interrelated patterns: exclusion from governance, ineffective or symbolic consultation processes, and misalignment between policy goals and local priorities.

Tokenistic or absent consultation processes

Participants described how decisions about tourism and urban development are often made without genuine resident input. This is not simply a matter of poor outreach but demonstrates a deeper situation in which participation processes exist to perform inclusion while preserving institutional control. From a social justice perspective, this reflects procedural marginalization, when communities are nominally consulted yet have no real influence on policy outcomes (Fraser, 2008). Critical urban theory helps interpret this as part of a broader governance logic: consultation processes function to legitimize pre-decided agendas rather than open them to genuine contestation (Strzelecka et al., 2025; Shahrad et al., 2025). As one resident put it:

“The feeling we have is that we’re being tricked, that we’re just there to pretend we’re being taken into account. But when it comes down to it, they do whatever they want with us.” (Participant 3)

Another echoed this lack of meaningful input:

“No survey is sent here, neither from the city council nor from the district that corresponds to us, nor anything.” (Participant 10)

Others described the absence of any real responsiveness:

“I haven’t been asked ... I don’t think the City Council is very interested in public consultations.” (Participant 9)

Another resident noted that:

“The city council presents itself as very supportive of residents’ associations. But in reality, when we share our concerns with the council, or even the mayor during meetings, they listen, but it’s like listening to nothing! They hear the words, but they don’t really pay attention or take any meaningful action.” (Participant 16)

Limited and unequal access to participation

Residents described how existing participation opportunities often remain exclusive or dominated by a few organized groups. Rather than strengthening broad democratic engagement, these forums are frequently reflected by neighborhood associations or politically active elites, leaving many voices unheard. From a social justice perspective, this reflects procedural injustice in the form of restricted access, formal channels may exist, yet they remain inequitably distributed or inaccessible to most. Critical urban theory suggests these selective processes serve to manage dissent while preserving the extractive logic of tourist-led development (Marcuse, 2009). As one participant explained:

“Only a few people participate in such a process those who are the heads of local neighborhood associations get involved. They’re the ones with a lot of free time, and all they end up doing is sabotaging the projects or turning them into political tools, creating divisions and making things politically charged ... Citizen participation should reach more residents, not just the associations, because those associations often end up becoming political instruments.” (Participant 27)

Others highlighted how procedural barriers further weaken genuine input:

“Once a project was already made public, I feel like our opinion hasn’t really been considered, unless it was something that bothered them aesthetically, in which case they tried to convince us. But when it comes to defending heritage, I’ve never seen a politician say: ‘Alright, let’s bring in the experts and see how we can solve this issue.’ The project is usually already finalized, and since these are often managed by external firms, there’s no interest in changing anything at that point.” (Participant 7)

The use of inaccessible or bureaucratic communication channels strengthen this sense of exclusion:

“I believe there’s a serious lack of collaboration. I’m aware that not everything can be consulted with citizens otherwise nothing would move

forward. But when there are public consultation periods that are only published in official bulletins, no one reads them ... it’s like playing a trick. There should be more of an effort to genuinely take citizens’ opinions into account.” (Participant 17)

Another echoed this:

“There should be more of an effort to genuinely take citizens’ opinions into account ... not just publish it in the Official Bulletin of Andalusia and call it a day.” (Participant 19)

Policy misalignment and ignored local needs

Beyond limited access to participation, residents described a stark disconnect between policy priorities and their everyday realities. While the city continues to pursue tourism-led growth, participants pointed to growing pressure on infrastructure, public services, and the basic habitability of urban life. This is not simply a failure of planning but reflects a deliberate privileging of tourist access over resident wellbeing, justified through growth-focused narratives. Critical urban theory interprets this as urban entrepreneurialism, cities compete for investment and visitors at the cost of democratic accountability and social needs (N. Brenner, 2009; Harvey, 1989). From a social justice perspective, this exposes a failure to align governance with long-term resident welfare, undermining the procedural legitimacy of tourism development (Shahrad et al., 2025). One participant shared how daily life became untenable for a family member:

“My sister-in-law lived in Málaga near Plaza de la Merced. She loved the center, but she couldn’t stand it anymore, the noise, the crowds, the tourism, and all the hassle. She couldn’t find a place to park when she needed to ... Eventually, she left and moved to the countryside. It just became unbearable.” (Participant 6)

Another resident questioned the relentless pursuit of events and expansion without regard for how this shapes urban life beyond peak tourism:

“They’ve changed the city into an event hub ... expanding the number of hotel rooms to the maximum possible. But I don’t think it’s necessary. For that, you need infrastructure, but what happens the rest of the year when the events are over? Things should be done with that in mind.” (Participant 12)

4.4. Restorative injustice: absence of redress, repair, and institutional responsibility

Restorative injustice, as defined in this study, refers to the failure of institutions to acknowledge and address the harms caused by tourism-led urban development. It differs from distributive injustice (which focuses on how burdens are shared) and procedural injustice (which concerns participation in decision-making). Restorative justice requires that harms, once recognized, be addressed through processes of repair, accountability, and systemic redress (Isaac & Farkic, 2024; Jamal & Camargo, 2014). It also involves emotional and symbolic elements: acknowledgment of wrongdoing, validation of loss, and inclusion in reparation processes. From a social justice theory perspective, restorative justice involves recognizing historical and structural inequalities and actively working to correct them, not just through material redistribution, but through affirmation, redress, and reparation (Fraser, 2008). Critical urban theory, in turn, situates restorative injustice within broader systems of urban dispossession, where cities are organized around accumulation and spectacle rather than repair or care (Harvey, 2008; Marcuse, 2009). In this framework, restorative failure is not merely institutional neglect, it is a political choice that privileges future investment over present repair (Becken & Rastegar, 2025). In Málaga, restorative injustice was evident in three domains: the absence of targeted redress policies, symbolic abandonment by governing bodies, and

the persistence of unresolved economic harms.

No policy response to acknowledged harm

Participants described not only the multiple harms caused by overtourism, displacement, rising costs, overburdened infrastructure, but also a striking lack of institutional effort to address or reverse these impacts. This sense of abandonment lies at the heart of restorative injustice: when harm is clear yet no meaningful attempt is made to repair it. From a critical urban theory perspective, this reflects a pattern of accumulation by dispossession (Harvey, 2003, 2008), where cities extract value through tourism while externalizing social costs and denying responsibility for the damage inflicted. One participant made this disconnect explicit:

“The city profits from tourism, but what do we get? Higher rents, fewer services, and no help ... Our streets are crowded, our services are stretched, but there’s no investment in fixing the problems we face.” (Participant 22)

Another highlighted the absence of any process for redress:

“I think there’s no real control over the actual capacity the city center can handle. They talk about tourism absorption capacity ... nothing comes back to fix the damage or help the people who live here.” (Participant 18)

Exclusion from reparation or recovery processes

Restorative justice requires that communities harmed by tourism-led transformation are not only compensated but also included in identifying harms and shaping solutions (Becken & Rastegar, 2025). Yet participants described a governance context where recovery measures are either absent or completely detached from community voice. This produces what might be called a double absence: not only is there no compensation, but residents are excluded from the processes that could produce it. Social justice theory emphasizes that repair must include symbolic recognition, especially when harms are collective, spatial, and enduring (Fraser, 2008). The failure to include residents in shaping reparative frameworks deepens their marginalization. One participant highlighted this sense of disconnection:

“It’s not just about money ... it’s about feeling like we matter. Like this city is still ours ... decisions are made behind closed doors, and we’re left to deal with the consequences.” (Participant 15)

Others highlighted how unregulated tourism expansion continues unchecked:

“Every year, another local shop closes and another Airbnb opens, one by one, without any new regularity laws.” (Participant 21)

Continued economic insecurity and unaddressed vulnerability

For many participants, the legacy of tourism-led transformation perceived as sustained economic hardship. Jobs generated by the tourism sector were described as low-paid, precarious, and lacking basic protections. This is not simply a distributive problem of who benefits and who does not, but a clear instance of restorative failure: institutions that profit from tourism have not invested in repairing what has been lost or creating stable, secure alternatives. Critical urban theory helps clarify that restorative injustice here stems not just from the absence of compensation but from a refusal to see recovery as a collective responsibility (Becken & Rastegar, 2025). One participant described how the promised benefits rarely reach those who bear the costs:

“They talk about how much money tourism brings in, but most of us are just struggling to get by ... the big benefits go to others.” (Participant 14)

Others pointed to the lack of support for those forced to relocate or adjust their lives:

“It’ll mostly benefit those with high status who own properties. They must be thrilled, but ordinary people have to move elsewhere. Either they commute by car and spend more on gasoline, or pay to park every night ... sometimes it’s ten euros just to park near home ... no subsidy for us who suffer from this issue.” (Participant 16)

This sense of abandonment was sharpened by the perception that institutions do little to curb the drivers of insecurity:

“I don’t see that the authorities, the Town Hall or the Provincial Council, or whoever is supposed to take care of it, are putting any limits on things like Airbnb accommodation or anything like that. Here, for every three doors, two are almost Airbnb’s. And I also think that half of them is not owned by Spanish people.” (Participant 14)

5. Discussion

This study sought to explore how residents in Málaga perceive and interpret the social (in)justices associated with overtourism and inequitable urban governance, using a justice-oriented lens grounded in social justice theory and critical urban theory. While much of the existing literature has extensively investigated overtourism’s environmental and infrastructural consequences (e.g., Milano, 2017; Hall & Page, 2017; Seraphin et al., 2018; Russo & Scarnato, 2018), the findings here present overtourism as more than just a managerial problem of congestion or resource strain. Instead, they highlight it as a process of urban injustice, a systematic reordering of urban life that privileges external interests and undermines local well-being. The four dimensions of justice, distributive, recognitive, procedural, and restorative, emerged organically in residents’ narratives, lending empirical weight to recent calls for broader, more integrated justice frameworks within tourism studies (Becken & Rastegar, 2025; Shahrad et al., 2025).

Echoing the critical literature on neoliberal urbanism (N. Brenner, 2009; Harvey, 2008), residents described distributive injustices in the form of housing precarity, the loss of community-serving businesses, and a steady rise in daily living costs. Yet this study goes further by illuminating the collective psychological toll these processes create a sense of fear, stress, and deep dislocation that shapes how people see their place in the city. Rather than simply recording material losses, participants spoke of how these transformations diminish their sense of dignity and their right to remain in the city, resonating with Rawls’ (1971) difference principle and Lefebvre’s (1996) notion of the right to the city. This perspective deepens critiques of narrow, technocratic solutions that treat overtourism simply as a matter of numbers to be managed, rather than a question of who benefits and who bears the cost.

Consistent with previous research showing how short-term rentals can fuel housing insecurity (Almeida-García et al., 2016, 2021; Gurrán & Phibbs, 2017; Sequera & Nofre, 2018), participants described intense pressures on affordability and tenure security. However, the findings here extend those insights by showing how residents link the commercial transformation of local high streets and rising costs of living to a wider reallocation of urban resources, a shift from sustaining local livelihoods to catering primarily to visitors. This reinforces recent evidence by Mikulić et al. (2024) and Almeida-García et al. (2025), who demonstrate how unchecked tourism growth can push local housing markets to crisis levels, sometimes forcing residents to migrate elsewhere when local conditions become untenable. Whereas previous studies often treat housing displacement and business turnover as parallel but separate processes (Kuhzadi et al., 2024), participants in this study described them as deeply intertwined outcomes of the same speculative logic. Neighborhoods are not just physically transformed; they are remade to maximize returns for property owners and investors, often at the cost of social cohesion and a sense of belonging. This mirrors Cocola-Gant’s (2018) observations of gentrification and rising costs in other southern European cities like Barcelona and Lisbon. Yet the present study adds a new layer by highlighting the emotional and

psychological burden that accompanies this process, a burden many described as “traumatic” and reflective of a city that feels less and less like home.

Additionally, while existing literature often highlights the commodification of cultural spaces (e.g., Harvey, 2008; Richards & Wilson, 2006), our findings build on this by showing how residents perceive these changes as a direct affront to their sense of identity and belonging. The concept of recognitive injustice is particularly salient here, as it draws attention to the failure to acknowledge, value, and sustain local narratives and cultural practices in tourism governance. The study found that residents in Málaga view their exclusion from tourism-related decision-making as a critical form of procedural injustice, extending the insights of Saarinen and Hall (2025), Strzelecka et al. (2025), and Novy and Colomb (2016), who argue that top-down governance structures often marginalize community voices. Participants described official consultations as superficial and largely symbolic, echoing similar frustrations reported in studies of cities such as Amsterdam and Seville (Milano et al., 2019).

Our findings extend the concept of recognitive injustice (Fraser, 2008; Rastegar, 2025) further by demonstrating how overtourism drives the systematic misrecognition and erasure of local cultural identities. Tourism does not simply “use” urban space, it actively redefines the meanings and uses of place, imposing commodified, visitor-friendly images at the expense of lived heritage (Isaac & Farkic, 2024; Zukin, 2010). These transformations are not accidental by products but are structurally produced through governance models that prioritize place-branding and marketability. This reinforces critical urban theory’s critique of urban entrepreneurialism (Harvey, 1989; Marcuse, 2009) and illustrates how symbolic violence is enacted in everyday spaces. While existing critiques identify these trends, this study adds novel insights by showing how residents themselves interpret not only the visible commodification of local culture but also the more subtle erosion of everyday practices, traditional crafts, and intangible forms of heritage that rarely attract market value. These findings resonate with Diaz-Parra and Jover’s (2021) observations that overtourism in historic centres can alienate residents from their right to the city, echoing Lefebvre’s foundational notion that urban life should belong first to those who inhabit it daily. Participants’ reflections on the homogenization of neighborhoods similarly align with concerns about “urban tourism hypertrophy” (Kowalczyk-Anioł, 2023) and support Kim and Kang’s (2020) findings that repeated experiences of cultural erasure can encourage anti-tourist attitudes when residents feel their identities are made invisible. By showing how these cultural losses are actively shaped by governance choices rather than being inevitable side-effects, this study strengthens calls by Jamal and Camargo (2014), Rastegar (2025) and Rastegar et al. (2023) to pay closer attention to the symbolic and recognitive dimensions of tourism justice.

A central contribution of this study also lies in its detailed examination of procedural injustice. While participation is often enshrined in tourism governance frameworks, residents’ narratives reveal that consultation processes are widely experienced as tokenistic, exclusive, and ultimately unresponsive. This exposes the limitations of procedural justice as it is currently practiced, echoing earlier critiques (Healey, 1997; Saarinen & Hall, 2025; Strzelecka et al., 2025; Shahrad et al., 2025), but with sharper empirical evidence of how exclusion operates in practice. Participation, in this context, does not enable meaningful power-sharing but instead serves to legitimize decisions that have already been made, an insight that highlights the need for a more radical rethinking of democratic accountability in urban tourism governance. These findings also reinforce Yrigoy et al.’s (2024) observation that discourses of overtourism can be co-opted by supply-side actors to protect their interests, further silencing community claims and maintaining unequal power relations. The evidence suggests that these failures are not isolated, but deeply embedded within a governance model that prioritizes urban entrepreneurialism over genuine community accountability (Strzelecka et al., 2025; Harvey, 1989). When

participation remains the preserve of a handful of local elites or neighborhood associations, rather than an inclusive process that elevates diverse community voices, the result is not just weak engagement but the sustained reproduction of unequal influence, echoing Marcuse’s (2009) argument that state-led participation can function as an instrument for containing dissent and managing resistance.

Another distinctive contribution of this study lies in its articulation of restorative injustice, a dimension that includes repair, redress, and institutional responsibility yet remains almost entirely absent from Málaga’s approach to managing overtourism. While existing literature has long called for stronger redistributive and participatory mechanisms (Becken & Rastegar, 2025; Jamal & Camargo, 2014), much less attention has been paid to how the harms of overtourism are actually acknowledged, compensated, or healed over time. Our findings reveal a deep sense of abandonment among residents, who feel excluded not only from material compensation but also from the symbolic recognition that validates their loss. This extends the justice debate in tourism by emphasizing the politics of repair as a critical, yet neglected, element. Participants described how the burdens of overtourism, housing pressures, cultural erosion, economic precarity, are widely felt but rarely addressed through any systematic reparation or community support. This “double absence” of material repair and symbolic recognition echoes Fraser’s (2008) insistence that true justice must combine redistribution with recognition.

Importantly, the finding that tourism-related jobs are often precarious and poorly paid reinforces what Milano, Koens, and Russo (2024) term the “inconvenient truths” of mass tourism: the same growth that drives urban economic gain often entrenches structural inequalities and strips communities of their capacity to sustain stable livelihoods. In this way, the study adds empirical weight to critiques of urban governance models that externalize social costs while pursuing growth at any cost (Harvey, 2008). These insights suggest that if the goal is to tackle overtourism comprehensively, then restorative justice must be seen as equally central as distributive or procedural justice, addressing not only who gains and who loses, but also how affected communities are supported to reclaim their cultural and social spaces and heal from harm.

Overall, the findings of this study reinforce the argument that overtourism must be understood not merely as an economic or environmental problem, but as a layered justice challenge with interconnected distributive, recognitive, procedural, and restorative facets. The evidence suggests that calls for more sustainable urban tourism will remain superficial if they do not confront how power circulates through governance structures, whose voices shape planning processes, and who is meaningfully included in processes of reparation and repair. These results affirm that genuine inclusion, protection of cultural identity, and institutional responsibility for harm are not optional add-ons but necessary conditions for more equitable urban futures.

In line with this, Perkumienė and Pranskūnienė (2019) argue that the challenges of overtourism can only be addressed effectively through collective action and a clear commitment to sustainable tourism goals. Such an approach must balance the right to travel with the right to live well, ensuring that tourism development respects the needs and well-being of local communities alongside those of visitors. Scheyvens (2002) similarly described justice tourism as an equitable and ethical form of travel that “builds solidarity between visitors and those visited; promotes mutual understanding and relationships based on equity, sharing and respect; supports self-sufficiency and self-determination of local communities; and maximizes local economic, cultural, and social benefit.”

Building on these ideas, this study proposes (see Fig. 3) that a justice-oriented perspective is essential for addressing overtourism holistically. Social justice broadens the focus beyond sustainability alone, by explicitly integrating the right to mobility and the right to remain in place, while highlighting the critical role of governance in mediating these rights. By bringing together social justice, governance, mobility justice, we offer a more robust framework for urban tourism planning

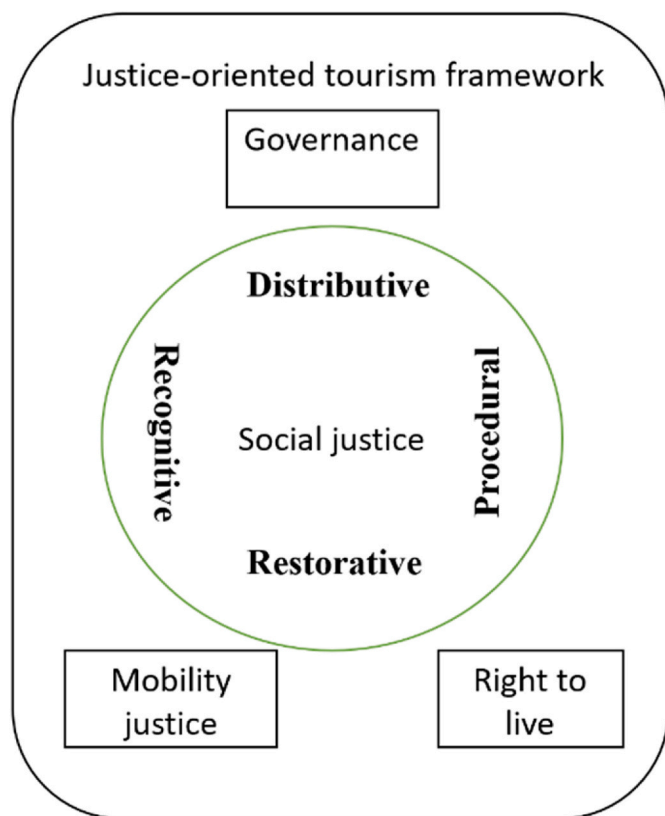


Fig. 3. Justice-oriented framework for urban tourism planning.

that is not only viable but also equitable, inclusive, and responsive to the everyday realities of those most affected. This perspective aims to tackle the systemic drivers of overtourism while fostering long-term balance among visitors, host communities, and urban environments.

6. Conclusion and implications

Theoretical implications

Recognizing that “understandings of justice are diverse” (Dangi & Higgins-Desbiolles, 2022, p. 14), this study places residents’ perspectives at the center, adding empirical depth to the emerging justice-oriented framework in overtourism research. It also invites scholars to consider how urban theory might better reflect the lived realities that abstract models often overlook (Roy, 2016; Sequera & Nofre, 2018; Whitehead, 2013).

This study offers several theoretical contributions: First, the findings demonstrate that overtourism is not simply a problem of excessive visitor numbers or urban sustainability shortfalls, but a layered process of urban injustice that systematically redistributes risks and benefits in ways that reinforce structural inequalities. By empirically showing how distributive, recognitive, procedural, and restorative dimensions shape residents’ everyday experiences, the study responds to recent calls to move beyond a narrow focus on material redistribution (Fraser, 2008; Jamal & Camargo, 2014; Schlosberg, 2007). While past research often emphasizes who gains and who loses economically from urban tourism (Shahrad et al., 2025), these findings show that residents interpret tourism-led change through symbolic and procedural lenses as well, for example, through cultural erasure and exclusion from decision-making. This extends theoretical debates by evidencing that justice in overtourism is not one-dimensional but shaped by overlapping harms that require an integrated approach.

Second, the study contributes to critical urban theory by grounding

abstract critiques of urban entrepreneurialism in detailed, place-specific narratives. It shows how neoliberal urban governance does not simply produce inequitable development but normalizes everyday misrecognition and the absence of institutional repair. This supports and extends arguments by scholars such as Brenner et al. (2012), Harvey (2008), and Marcuse (2009), who long theorized the city as a site of commodification and accumulation by dispossession. By focusing on how these processes manifest in residents’ fears of displacement, loss of cultural identity, and lack of recourse, the study gives theoretical and empirical depth to claims that tourism-led urbanism reorders social and spatial relations in ways that are not accidental but structurally embedded.

Third, the research adds clarity to the relatively underdeveloped concept of restorative justice in tourism studies. Prior work has typically combined repair with distributive concerns or treated it as an implied outcome of sustainability (Isaac & Farkic, 2024). This study, however, shows that residents see the absence of redress, both material and symbolic, as a distinct form of harm. This aligns with Fraser’s (2008) argument that justice must include recognition and repair alongside redistribution. It also complements emerging studies (e.g., S. Kim & Kang, 2020; Milano et al., 2019, 2024a, 2024b) that suggest unresolved harms fuel ongoing community resistance and anti-tourism sentiment. By positioning restorative justice as an explicit dimension, this work refines how scholars can theorize the moral and institutional responsibilities of tourism governance in contexts of long-term urban dispossession.

Finally, the study’s holistic justice framework demonstrates how social justice theory and critical urban theory can be usefully combined to make sense of overtourism as a lived experience of multiple, entangled injustices, rather than as an isolated planning issue. This adds weight to calls for tourism research to be more historically grounded and resident-centered (Roy, 2016; Sequera & Nofre, 2018) and provides an example of how theoretical models can better reflect the micro-politics of everyday urban life (Whitehead, 2013).

Practical implications

This study demonstrates that overtourism in Málaga is not simply a sustainability challenge or a question of visitor management, but a profound form of urban injustice. Addressing it therefore requires governance responses that move beyond technical adjustments toward structural reform. The findings highlight four domains where destination management organizations (DMOs), urban planners, and policy-makers must act decisively if cities are to remain liveable for residents while accommodating tourism. First, distributive injustice must be tackled by rebalancing access to housing, services, and everyday urban resources. Rising rents, evictions, and the displacement of essential businesses show that tourism has made daily life increasingly precarious for many residents in Málaga. Stronger regulation of short-term rentals, robust tenant protections, and restrictions on speculative conversions are not optional but essential to protect the right to remain in one’s home. At the same time, fiscal incentives should be used to sustain community-serving businesses, while conversions that privilege tourist consumption over resident needs must face clear disincentives. These measures are critical to preventing the erosion of everyday urban life.

Second, recognitive injustice demands urgent attention to the preservation of cultural practices and neighborhood identities. Tourism-led redevelopment has accelerated cultural erosion and flattened distinct neighborhood characters into homogenized tourist landscapes. Municipal governments and DMOs can counter this by funding community-led cultural initiatives, regulating commercial uses that displace traditional practices, and supporting local crafts and intergenerational knowledge transfer. These actions do more than protect heritage; they sustain the social fabric that binds neighborhoods together and affirm residents’ cultural legitimacy within their own city.

Third, procedural injustice requires transforming how decisions

about tourism are made. Tokenistic consultation that treats residents as symbolic participants has only deepened mistrust. To restore legitimacy, decision-making processes must move toward genuine power-sharing. Mechanisms such as participatory budgeting, citizen assemblies, and co-governance with neighborhood associations can expand democratic input and ensure that tourism planning reflects resident priorities. Crucially, these processes must be designed not to contain dissent but to strengthen deliberation, so that participation becomes an avenue for real influence rather than a performance of inclusion. Finally, restorative injustice highlights the need for visible commitments to repair. Residents' testimonies reveal not only material harms but also a profound sense of abandonment. Addressing this requires governance frameworks that embed accountability into tourism growth. Community benefit agreements with major investors, tourism levies earmarked for affordable housing or neighborhood infrastructure, and transparent monitoring of how these funds are spent can all signal that institutions are willing to repair past harms. Yet symbolic promises will not suffice; without enforceable accountability, restorative measures risk becoming hollow gestures. Overall, these actions provide more than incremental fixes: they outline a justice-oriented roadmap for DMOs and urban governance actors. By addressing distributive, recognitive, procedural, and restorative injustices in an integrated way, tourism governance can move toward cities that are not only attractive to visitors but also fair, liveable, and sustainable for residents.

Limitations and directions for future research

This study has several limitations that offers directions for future research. First, although the qualitative design provided deep insight into how long-term residents interpret overtourism and local governance, the findings are context-specific. Málaga's unique historical, economic, and institutional dynamics shape how residents understand and narrate these issues. As such, the results are not intended to be statistically generalizable. Urban tourism plays out differently in other cities, and future research could explore whether similar patterns of distributive, recognitive, procedural, and restorative injustice emerge in other tourism-intensive contexts, especially in non-European or post-colonial settings where governance structures and power relations may differ.

Second, the study focused intentionally on long-term residents with at least five years of local experience. While this allowed us to examine deep place attachment and knowledge of neighborhood change, it necessarily excluded other perspectives, such as those of newer residents, seasonal workers, or mobile populations who may both experience and contribute to tourism-driven urban transformation. Future studies could broaden this lens to consider how different social groups, including tourists, digital nomads, recent arrivals, or people with insecure housing, interpret their own roles in sustaining or resisting urban inequalities. Third, although in-depth interviews provided rich, contextualized narratives, qualitative research alone cannot map the full scale or distribution of these injustices. Future research could use quantitative or mixed-methods approaches, such as surveys, spatial analysis, or econometric modeling, to test hypotheses, measure the extent of harm, or evaluate how specific interventions work in practice. Such methods would complement the lived accounts reflected here and strengthen the evidence base for policy change.

Finally, this study used a justice-based theoretical framework that emphasizes normative and political questions. While this lens proved valuable for understanding how residents frame exclusion, marginalization, and claims to urban space, it does not exhaust the ways overtourism might be studied. Future research could explore how justice-based perspectives connect with other frameworks, such as urban resilience, post-growth planning, or mobility justice, to examine how cities can balance social equity with ecological constraints and economic transitions. Such work could help advance the conversation about what more equitable, inclusive, and sustainable urban tourism governance

should look like.

CRedit authorship contribution statement

Abolfazl Siyamiyan Gorji: Conceptualization, Methodology, Formal analysis, Writing – Original Draft, Writing – Review & Editing, Visualization. **Syedasaad Hosseini:** Conceptualization, Formal analysis, Writing – Review & Editing. **Siamak Seyfi:** Conceptualization, Writing – Original Draft, Writing – Review & Editing, Project administration. **Fernando Almeida-García:** Conceptualization, Resources, Supervision, Funding acquisition. **Rafael Cortes Macías:** Conceptualization, Resources, Supervision, Funding acquisition. **Alfredo Mena Navarro:** Conceptualization, Methodology, Formal analysis, Investigation.

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Declaration of competing interest

None.

Appendix 1. Interview protocol

Introduction:

Thank you for agreeing to participate in this research. We are studying how urban change associated with tourism has affected everyday life in Málaga. This includes changes in housing, neighborhood character, access to services, and involvement in decision-making. The aim is to understand how residents perceive these changes, in their own words. Your identity will be kept confidential, and pseudonyms will be used in any publication. You are free to skip any question or stop the interview at any time.

Do you agree to this interview being recorded for accuracy? If not, we can proceed with written notes.

Section A: Background

- Can you tell me a little about yourself and how long you've lived in Málaga?
- Which neighborhood do you currently live in, and how would you describe it to someone who doesn't know the city?

Section B: Neighborhood changes and tourism

- Have you noticed any changes in your neighborhood in recent years? What kinds of changes stand out to you?
- How, if at all, has tourism affected your area—either positively or negatively?
- Have any of these changes affected you or your household directly?

Section C: Housing, services, and daily life

- What is your experience of finding or keeping housing in the city? Has this changed in recent years?
- Have any shops, services, or facilities you used to rely on closed or changed?
- Has the cost of living changed where you live? How has this affected your daily routines?

Section D: Culture, identity, and belonging

- Do you think the character or identity of your neighborhood has changed? In what way?
- Are there any local traditions, cultural places, or social spaces you feel have been affected by recent changes?
- How do you feel about the way the city presents itself to outsiders, like tourists?

Section E: Decision-making and participation

- Have you or your neighbors ever been asked to give input on changes or developments in your area?
- Do you feel that local authorities listen to what residents want or need?
- Are there any neighborhood groups or associations you are involved in? If so, what role do they play?

Section F: Responses and solutions

- Do you think anything should be done to address the effects of tourism or recent changes in the city?
- Are there any policies, programs, or actions you would like to see introduced?
- Do you feel supported by local institutions in dealing with these issues?

Follow-up prompts (used as needed):

- Could you give an example of that?
- How did that situation affect you personally?
- What happened after that?
- What would you have liked to happen instead?

Closing questions:

- What do you think would improve life for people living in your neighborhood?
- Is there anything else you'd like to share that we haven't covered?
- Would you be open to a follow-up conversation or like to receive a summary of the study findings?

Thank you for your time and for sharing your experiences. Please feel free to contact us if you have any questions.

Data availability

No data was used for the research described in the article.

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