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Response: Núria Galí is Professor at the Faculty of Tourism at University of Girona since 1999. Member of the tourism research group Multidisciplinary Laboratory of Tourism Research. The principal lines of research are the study and analysis of the visitors' behaviour in heritage cities and sites; the tourism image of destinations; and the role of guides and guiding. ORCID # 0000-0001-6008-1357

Q2 : The reference "Hansen & Mossberg, 2017" is cited in the text but is not listed in the references list. Please either delete the in- text citation or provide full reference details following journal style.

Response: Hansen, A.H., & Mossberg, L. (2017). Tour guides' performance and tourists' immersion: Facilitating consumer immersion by performing a guide plus role. *Scandinavian Journal of Hospitality and Tourism*, 17(3), 259-278.

Q3 : The reference "WTO, 2020" is cited in the text but is not listed in the references list. Please either delete the in- text citation or provide full reference details following journal style.

Response: World Tourism Organization. (2020). *World Tourism Barometer*, 18 (7), p. 10. <https://www.e-unwto.org/doi/epdf/10.18111/wtobarometereng.2020.18.1.7>

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RESEARCH ARTICLE


Impacts of COVID-19 on local tour guides

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ABSTRACT

The COVID-19 health crisis has severely affected the tourism industry worldwide. Some subsectors of the industry have suffered much more than others, particularly the tour guiding profession, which has been damaged considerably. The primary role of the tour guide, which is to interact with visitors' face-to-face, has changed significantly. The purpose of this article is to outline how COVID-19 has affected local tour guides and the guiding profession; and assess the future outlook for the profession. Qualitative data were analyzed using an inductive approach involving 10 in-depth interviews with local tour guides and several virtual guided tours. Results reveal that the current situation in local guiding has highlighted issues such as the fragility of the profession, the lack of legal protection, and guides' vulnerability when faced with the threat of unfair competition from *free tours*. The study also highlights the passivity of many professionals, whereas other, more resilient tour guides have reactivated their profession in new ways. The findings contribute to knowledge on how the pandemic has impacted the tour guiding profession, and sheds light on how local tour guides can cope with the future.

KEYWORDS

- Tour guide
- COVID-19
- face-to-face tour
- virtual tour
- resilient

Introduction

The current COVID-19 pandemic has led to an unprecedented global crisis, which has had a considerable impact on the tourism industry worldwide. The fall in demand for tourism, transport, accommodation, leisure, and cultural activities is one of the most obvious symptoms. Fear that COVID-19 will spread through traveling has led to a drastic reduction in tourist trips (Abdullah, Dias, Muley, & Shahin, 2020).

Tourist behavior patterns have changed as a result, with regional and domestic travel replacing international travel (Song, Lin, Zhang, & Gao, 2010; Wen, Kozak, Yang, & Liu, 2021) and more stays linked to nature (Higgins-Desbiolles, 2020; Li, Zhang, Liu, Kozak, & Wen, 2020) than urban tourism (Qiu, Park, Li, & Song, 2020).

Furthermore, the present health and safety measures are having a major impact on the way we travel (Higgins-Desbiolles, 2020) and how tourists consume services, spaces, and travel programs (Bae & Chang, 2021). These new measures have affected several subsectors of the tourism industry, particularly tour guiding.

New COVID-19 safety measures such as having to wear face masks, use hand sanitizing gels, and maintain social distancing have reshaped the tour guiding industry. Bae and Chang (2021) point out that since the pandemic first began, tourists have had to avoid contact with other tourists, with most preferring to travel alone or in small groups and demanding highly personalized services. This has damaged the guiding profession significantly and altered the primary role of the tour guide, which is to interact with visitors face-to-face. This type of interaction has decreased dramatically, and in certain instances, completely disappeared. Aspects of the profession that have been altered due to the pandemic include personal contact, group dynamics, and visual communication.

To this, we can add the drop in urban tourism, which is much more pronounced than in other areas of the industry (Donaire, Galí, & Camprubi, 2021). Tour guides most commonly operate in cities, where the highest incidences of COVID-19 have been recorded, and lack of tourism most evident with closed hotels, restrictions on restaurant opening hours, cultural spaces operating at half capacity, and tour guides left jobless, unable to guide tourists to see city attractions. This highlights the vulnerability within the tourism sector of both the guiding profession and the guides themselves.

This new context has prompted the tour guiding world to reflect on both the present situation and the future of the profession, and to assess how it can build resilience given the bleak situation tour guides presently find themselves in.

The aim of this article is to explore how COVID-19 has affected local tour guides and the guiding profession, and outline whether local tour guides have, or have not, adapted to the new situation, and to assess the future outlook for the profession. This study explores the following four specific questions:

- Q1. What has been the employment situation of tour guides during COVID-19?
- Q2. What were tour guides doing during lockdown?
- Q3. What have tour guides been doing since the lockdown was lifted?
- Q4. What is tour guides' outlook on the future of the profession?

This article is structured in five sections: Section 1 introduces the study topic. Section 2 gives a brief overview of the role of the local tour guide. Section 3 presents the research method, which takes a qualitative approach, and involved conducting semi-structured interviews with tour guides and participant observation. The results, which are divided into according to themes, are analyzed in section 4. Finally, section 5 discusses the main conclusions of the research.

Literature review

The local tour guides: A brief overview

One of the widely accepted definitions of a tour guide is taken from the World Federation of Tourist Guide Associations (WFTGA) at the 10th convention in Dunblane 2003: 'a person who guides visitors in the language of their choice and interprets the cultural and natural heritage of an area which person normally possesses an area-specific qualification usually issued and/or recognised by the appropriate authority' (World Federation of Tourist Guide Associations, 2021).

Some authors have added further detail to the WFTGA definition, e.g. Cetin and Yarcan(2017, p. 346) talk about 'a professional employee who leads, communicates with and informs visitors about the destination in an efficient and interesting way in the language of their choice'. Yarcan and Cetin (2021) add to this definition, stating that tour guides are usually locals that lead a group of visitors and represent the local culture, area, country and hosts. In their definition, Zhang and Chow(2004) specify the places where guides work: around monuments, sites, and museums of a city or region. In this same line, Galí and Aulet(2019), comment that the 'local tour guide' has two distinctive features. Firstly, the geographic area where the role is carried out; that is, local tour guides operating in a micro-space (a city, a small town, or a site). Secondly, the knowledge and expertise that guides must have of these places. This means that the role of the local tour guide requires both extensive knowledge of the local heritage and related communication and interpretation skills (Quinn & Ryan, 2016; Williams, 2013; Wong, 2013; Yarcan & Cetin, 2021).

Therefore, the tour guide bridges the gap between cultural heritage and potential visitors, catalyzing the visitors' interests and needs, and skillfully linking them to the experience of knowing a place (Yarcan & Cetin, 2021).

The role of local tour guides

Local tour guides play an important role in the tourism industry as they represent the locality, and have a considerable influence over guided tour participants(Yarcan & Cetin, 2021). So, the performance-role of the local tour guide is multi-faceted (Cetin & Yarcan, 2017; Weiler & Black,2015; Zillinger, Jonasson, & Adolfsson,2012) and includes being a mentor, ambassador, mediator, communicator, educator, interpreter, storyteller, and cultural facilitator (Cetin & Yarcan, 2017; Cohen, 1985; Dahles, 2002; Hughes, 1991; Quinn & Ryan, 2016; Weiler & Black, 2015; Yarcan & Cetin, 2021; Zhang & Chow, 2004).

In one of the first academic articles published on tour guiding, Cohen (1985) examined the various roles of the guide, and emphasized that communication is crucial to guiding, and interpretation the most important function of communication. So, as communicators, tour guides interpret heritage and inform visitors about it, thus making it accessible, understandable, and attractive to them (Cetin & Yarcan, 2017; Io & Hallo,2011; Poudel & Nyaupane, 2013; Yarcan & Cetin, 2021). Guides contribute to the sense of place (Williams, 2013; Zillinger et al., 2012), to the construction of the image of the place (Dahles, 2002; Yarcan & Cetin, 2021), and influence visitor satisfaction (Chan, Hsu, & Baum,2015; Hughes, 1991) and the quality of visitor experience (Cohen, 1985; Mak, Wong, & Chang, 2010, 2011).

According to Weiler and Walker (2014), tour guides need to have strong communication and interpretation skills to enhance the visitor experience. Therefore, guides and their services play an important role in creating tourist experiences (Yarcan & Cetin, 2021, p. 23)

The main communication channel for a tour guide is face-to-face, either one-to-one or with a group. In both cases, the communication is bidirectional and feeds off interaction (Weiler & Walker, 2014). Guided tours are a performance practice within a specific space and time, where the guide and visitor meet and interact. This interaction is done by way of verbal and non-verbal communication (Weiler & Walker, 2014).

To sum up, a tour guide's role is carried out in a real space where interpersonal contact and interaction is essential (Weiler & Black, 2015). This means the guides' physical presence is one of the main features needed to carry out their role as a communicator effectively and efficiently.

Local tour guides during COVID-19

The lockdown, together with the restrictions and measures introduced regarding physical contact during COVID-19, has had a significant impact on tour guides, provoking a sharp increase in stress and anxiety in their job (Alrawadieh, 2021).

Local guides have not been able to work face-to-face for many months. First, the lockdown imposed by governments (Hoguane, Priya, Haddout, & Ljubenkov, 2021) left local guides without work. Second, in the post-lockdown period, when guides could restart face-to-face guided tours, there was no influx of international visitors. Therefore, only a very limited number of local walking tours have been conducted with small groups of national visitors. Throughout the pandemic, the supply of tour guides has far exceeded the demand. This situation has caused unemployment for large numbers of local guides, which still continues. This means that guides have had to depend on financial aid from the government, but this has not been granted to all guides in equal measures, leaving many excluded (Pauner, 2020). In addition, guided tours are affected by bubble group restrictions, social distancing, hand washing and having to wear a face mask (Hoguane et al., 2021), which can obstruct essential aspects of their role as communicators.

The impact of this situation on the emotions of tour guides is a delicate issue, as according to Alrawadieh, Cetin, Dincer, and Istanbulu Dincer (2020), quality of work life is directly related to life satisfaction.

However, the situation has not been entirely negative, as the pandemic has given local guides the opportunity to explore virtual tours.

According to de La Harpe and Sevenhuysen(2020), museums were the first cultural entities to experiment with different types of virtual tours; although monuments, tourist attractions, and even cities were soon added to the growing number of virtual tours. With a computer and Internet connection, anyone can visit a museum collection, walk along the Great Wall of China, or get a 360° view of a city. However, many of these virtual tours are done without the support of a tour guide. At best there may be a static tour guide, but they are unable to interact with tourists, answer questions, anticipate reactions, or add meaning to the tour (de La Harpe and Sevenhuysen (2020)). In a communication process there must be feedback, and feedback is only possible with personal interaction. Since the pandemic, tourists have begun to explore virtual tours, and have employed local tour guides they can interact with, and thus have a richer experience.

This has brought dramatic changes for many tour guides on a professional level, and so far this has not been sufficiently explored in the literature.

Study method

The study context

Catalonia, in the northeast of Spain, receives the highest number of tourists in the country. According to data from the Instituto Nacional de Estadística (INE), in 2019, Catalonia received 19,375,152 tourists (43.14% of the total number of tourists in Spain), making it the autonomous region with the most tourists in the country (INE, 2020). Catalonia offers visitors a wide range of cultural and natural tourist attractions. Its capital, Barcelona, is highly popular with travelers worldwide and one of the most visited cities in Europe. Several other sites in this region are also noteworthy; namely, the Tarraco archaeological site, the Romanesque churches in the Boí Valley (both declared World Heritage Sites by UNESCO), and world-class art galleries such the Dalí, Picasso and Miró museums, as well as small, charming medieval towns, ancient Jewish quarters, monasteries, palaces, castles, and military fortresses, in a number of artistic styles. This is in addition to Catalonia's beaches, natural parks, and nature trails. Catalonia has the most UNESCO World Heritage Sites in Spain, and ranks amongst the highest number of sites in Europe.

This rich Catalan heritage has given rise to a large group of licensed tour guides who accompany the millions of tourists who visit Catalonia every year. According to data from the Government of Catalonia, in 2020, there were 1,324 licensed guides operating (Generalitat de Catalunya - Departament d'Empresa i Coneixament, 2021).

In Catalonia, since March 2020, and in line with the Bolkestein European Directive (Directive123/2006CE), guides are no longer required to pass an examination in order to gain official recognition (to have an official Guiding license) as is the case in other European countries and regions. However, a university degree, foreign languages, and having completed specific official training in guiding are required.

Prior to March 2020, to obtain a license, local guides had to pass an exam with written, and oral language components. All guides in the sample have had to pass this exam to gain their official guiding license.

In the specific case of Catalonia, other types of guides such as those operating as tour leaders on package tours, or those on hop-on hop-off buses do not have an official license (and therefore cannot act as local guides). These are excluded from the sample.

Local guides in Catalonia work freelance and are may be hired by travel agencies, companies, associations, entities, museums, cultural spaces, local and regional governments, public and private institutions, educational schools, universities, and individual clients directly (couples, families, groups of friends).

Data collection and analyses

Qualitative research was carried out to study how the job of local tour guide has been affected by the COVID-19 pandemic, and how tour guides have responded to the crisis.

Following Quinn and Ryan(2016) and Gustavsson and Hallin(2013), the study employs an ethnographic approach, gathering data through interviews with tour guides and participation observation of virtual guided tours.

Data collection includes 10 semi-structured conversation-interviews with Catalan tour guides, and participant observation was also carried out on three different virtual guided tours.

The interviews enabled the researcher to collect information on the opinions, attitudes, motives, behaviors and expectations of the local tour guides before the crisis generated by COVID-19. Thus, the guides could express their opinions openly, without restrictions or have to choose predefined answer options.

Participant observation of the virtual tours facilitated knowledge on how tour guides develop the tours and interact with visitors. Participating in the activity enabled the researcher to gather a considerable amount of information from each tour.

Concerning the interviews: Purpose sampling criterion was used to select the Catalan tour guides. Tour guides were recruited by the researcher through contacts made while working as a tour guide in Catalonia in the past.

The sample involved tour guides that are especially knowledgeable about, or experienced in guiding. In addition to their knowledge and experience, the selected tour guides had the ability to communicate experiences and opinions in an articulate, expressive, and reflective manner.

All the subjects interviewed were aged between 35 and 60. All have worked exclusively as tour guides for at least 10 years, have a university degree and hold the title of official guide from the Government of Catalonia (Table 1).

Table 1. Guides profile.

	Gender	Age	Place of residence (into Catalan region)	University degree	Years of experience
Guide 1	Female	35	Girona	History Tourism	10
Guide 2	Female	59	Barcelona	Hispanic Philology	30
Guide 3	Female	56	Girona	Translation & Interpreting	28
Guide 4	Male	50	Girona	Tourism	18
Guide 5	Female	32	Barcelona	Tourism	10
Guide 6	Male	49	Girona	Art History	15
Guide 7	Male	54	Barcelona	Philosophy & the Arts	20
Guide 8	Female	46	Tarragona	Tourism	12
Guide 9	Male	51	Tarragona	Translation & Interpreting	13
Guide 10	Female	48	Barcelona	Law	10

Data collection reached criterion of saturation, meaning interviews were conducted until additional data provided no new insights (Matteucci & Gnoth, 2017). The researcher conducted face-to-face individual interviews with the tour guides by videoconference, which were recorded and transcribed. Local tour guides were interviewed between March 2021 and April 2021. Each interview lasted between 1 and 1.5 h approximately.

Concerning participant observation: To complement the interviews, participant observation of virtual guided tours was conducted. In this case, the author participated in three guided tours between April 2020 to April 2021. Each virtual guided tour lasted 1 h.

According to other studies on guiding, empirical data collection of virtual tours was carried out using an ethnographic approach (Dahles, 2002; Hansen & Mossberg, 2017[Q2]; Ong, Ryan, & McIntosh, 2014). Ethnography is an inductive research method in which the researcher is immersed in the activity. That is, during the virtual tours the author assumed the role of a virtual-tourist and participated in three different tours. On each of the tours, the researcher took notes on both the tour and the role the guide played. After each virtual guided tour, the researcher wrote a diary so as to have an accurate description of each visit. This opens up the opportunity to develop knowledge on how these tours have materialized.

In ethnographic research, the researcher's experience is especially relevant in order to deepen the analysis (Wise, 2018). The author's practical and academical experience in guiding provides good insights into these types of tours and the performance of local guides. This expertise and familiarity with the area of research offers a critical perspective and enhances reliability.

Data analysis used an inductive analysis of diaries, voice notes and transcripts of the semi-structured interviews. All the information gathered were put into thematic categories using axial coding and then compared with each other until common patterns emerged. Axial coding had four different categories: (1) the professional and personal situation of local tour guides during the pandemic, (2) the return to face-to-face guided tours, (3) the emergence of virtual guided tours, and (4) challenges and mitigation strategies for the future. Quotes from guides' original narratives are used to support key findings. To guarantee credibility and validity, the interpretations and conclusions were shared with the participants. This enables participants to clarify information and correct errors.

Furthermore, the profession and the region are both well known to the author, who has been working as a local guide in Catalonia for over 15 years. The author is also a University professor, and researches and lectures on this topic.

As the role of local tour guides during the COVID-19 has been little researched, this study is of an exploratory nature.

Results

Qualitative data were analyzed and studied using an inductive approach. Axial coding involved the following areas: (1) the professional and personal situation of local tour guides during the pandemic, (2) the return to face-to-face guided tours, (3) the emergence of virtual guided tours, and (4) challenges and mitigation strategies for the future.

The professional and personal situation of tour guides during the pandemic

The impact of the COVID-19 crisis on tour guiding has been devastating. Tour guides, guiding associations and guiding companies have found themselves in a highly vulnerable situation. For example, the long-standing Barcelona Guide Bureau (BGB), one of the first companies in Barcelona to specialize in one-day tours in the city has been forced to close after thirty years in the industry.

Tour guides have lost their jobs and therefore their source of income, which implies lost purchasing power and social status. Many have become impoverished due to the lack of financial aid from the government and have had to seek other ways to survive.

All the local tour guides interviewed agree that the situation they find themselves in at the moment is difficult and harrowing. Other adjectives the tour guides used to describe the guiding industry at present were negative: harsh, disastrous, catastrophic, sad, and despicable. The adjectives they have used to describe the current context of the profession are all pejorative. Some of the negative adjectives used in the interviews to describe the reality of the situation are 'harsh', 'disastrous', 'catastrophic', 'sad', and 'infamous'.

The loss of income has meant that many tour guides live off the temporary financial aid provided by the government, or in many cases, the financial support that their family can provide. According to Tour Guide 2:

The current situation is dire. The pandemic has left us with no income. We are totally dependent on state aid, savings and help from family and friends.

Along the same lines, Tour Guide 3 states:

I live on state aid and have had to cut down on a lot of expenses. My pace of life has been affected by the situation, I no longer go to restaurants or bars for a coffee, I haven't used the car for months, I have unsubscribed from all the associations I belonged to. I live very frugally.

Not all tour guides, however, have been able to access government financial aid, and each guide has been affected by the pandemic differently (Pauner, 2020). The conditions imposed by the state and regional governments have been harshly criticized by various tour guides. Tour Guide 10 reports:

The financial support from the Catalan government is 600€ a month. It is impossible to live in Barcelona on 600€ a month. This support package excludes some guides, so many have chosen to not apply for it to avoid having to go through all the paperwork. Besides, most guides are unable to prove their financial status to the Government of Catalonia (such as having rented premises or being a worker on a payroll) in order to be eligible for the pay-out.

Tour Guide 1 adds:

The government subsidises expenses such as renting premises, paying for supplies, salaries, and suppliers. We are self-employed, have no office, and work on the go. This means that we have no access to this sort of financial aid.

This has resulted in some tour guides being forced to look for new jobs in order to support themselves and their families. Several explain how they have looked for work in education, others in bars, supermarkets, greengrocers, hospital administration (as explained by Tour Guides 1, 5, 6, 8 and 9), or even bicycle repair workshops (Tour Guide 5):

My husband and I decided to open a bicycle repair shop in the town where we live. He is a bicycle mechanic and there is considerable demand in our area. We have had to reinvent ourselves workwise.

All the interviewees commented that the perplexity of the situation has meant that most tour guides are in a permanent state of shock and feel unable to react. According to Alrawadieh et al. (2020) the impact of this situation on tour guides is directly affects their emotions.

Their inability to handle the situation makes them passive and expectant as they wait for the tourism industry to recover so they can return to face-to-face guided tours, as they were in the past. They are also aware, however, that the situation will not be the same as it was pre-pandemic, nor will they.

Concerned about their critical work situation, some tour guides (only a few) refused to stop working during lockdown. These guides have begun a process of personal and professional transformation. As in so many other professions, these guides have explored the online world, which was the only way they could stay connected to work during lockdown. They wanted to take a step forward and reinvent the guiding world by exploring new ways to create tours. These tour guides are the resilient ones. Tour Guide 9 explains:

Our organization has over 50 members, but only 4 have ventured into the online world to create new

products. The vast majority have not even known how to react.

The return to face-to-face guided tours

Scaling down of lockdown measures in Spain began on June 21, 2020, a date that traditionally marks the beginning of the summer season. Although this was a first, incipient boost for tourism, particularly in July and August, the sector registered an overall, all-time low.

Returning to work has enabled tour guides to resume face-to-face guided tours, but in a very different way to the past, and almost of a testimonial nature. This is primarily due to the lack of international tourism, which is the main market for tour guides. In 2020, official data registered a 76.9% fall in international tourism (WTO, 2020[Q3]) in Spain. There have been practically no tourists visiting from other countries, and guided tours previously directed at international tourism have been replaced by guided tours for national tourists, as Tour Guide 6 states:

I hardly work now because there is no international tourism. The tours I did at the Sagrada Familia were basically for international tourists. Visits from domestic tourists have been, and still are, very scarce.

Furthermore, only tours for individual participation have managed to continue to some extent, while tours conducted in cooperation with tour operators, travel agencies, or cruise companies have ground to a halt. Along these lines, Tour Guide 9 comments:

I have been able to do some tours because I work with individual, national clients, but I have a lot of colleagues who only work with clients through travel agencies and tour operators, and they haven't been able to do any guided tours for months.

COVID-secure measures (social distancing, use of masks and hand sanitizer), and the reduction in the number of visitors in groups have also brought changes. In the case of Catalonia, groups of tourists have been reduced to 6 people, all from the same bubble. In certain periods of the pandemic, government guidelines permitted visits for groups of up to 10 people which could be two different groups from two different households (one of the groups with a maximum of 6 people), with the visitors always maintaining 2-meter social distancing. However, the tour guides gave conflicting information in this regard, which suggests that government information on limits of visitor numbers in face-to-face tours have not been clearly transmitted. In relation to this, Tour Guide 8 explains:

Legal gathering limits for tourist groups have been changing constantly. Every time a new guideline came out I called the relevant government body, but very often even they didn't know what to tell me because the situation of guides had not been taken into consideration.

In addition, the consumer's own distrust has meant that guided tours are usually kept below 10 people. As Guide 4 point out:

The maximum number of people in a group is 10. People who sign up for a guided tour by themselves are not comfortable if there are too many people, so groups are usually very small. There is considerable concern about the risk of getting infected.

Tour guides are still happy to work with small groups even though they are aware that this is less profitable. They appreciate the fact that these groups are more personalized and of a higher quality. In addition, working with small groups has meant that communication difficulties that may arise due to using face masks have been perceived as insignificant. Tour Guide 5 says:

Working in small groups has been much more rewarding, although it is much more demanding. Communication problems can be avoided, and you establish a stronger link. I prefer working with small groups even if I make less money.

Finally, a recurring theme that came up in almost every interview was the guides' concern about *free tours*, which have resurfaced and even gained strength post-lockdown. According to Nilsson and Zillinger(2020, p. 3) 'free tours resemble ordinary tours, but with the difference that participants give tips instead of buying an official ticket'.

In the specific case of Catalonia, official guides perceive *free tours* as unfair competition within the profession. The various Catalan guiding associations and groups have often complained to the authorities about these *free tours*. As a rule, these tour guides are university students, or visiting on an Erasmus exchange, or other foreigners living in the country temporarily. They have no in-depth knowledge of the destination, and only do this work to earn extra money, with no other motivation. In contrast to other cities around the world, as Nilsson and Zillinger(2020) comment, *free tours* in Catalonia are perceived as business conducted without tour guides undergoing the proper training to lead groups, and without professional expertise or official accreditation, and is limited to following written instructions, without departing from a pre-determined script. In this line, the research conducted by Navalón-García and Mínguez (2021) concluded that three basic ideas generate controversy between free tours and professional guides: (1) free tours are not really free, (2) earnings are not transparent, and (3) free tour guides are not required in order to have accreditation, which puts the question of their professionalism into doubt.

The Catalan tour guides criticize the rise in foreign companies offering *free tours* in all cities around the country, but particularly Barcelona. According to Tour Guide 10:

There are a dozen businesses offering free tours in Barcelona alone, and they are all foreign companies paying taxes outside Spain. Apart from making the guiding industry more precarious, these companies make their tour guides work for tips, rather than offering them a proper job contract.

The Government of Catalonia's Tour Guide Association regrets that the COVID-19 pandemic has added to a problem (*Free Tours*) that has beset the guiding guild for months. Tour Guide 9 states:

Free tours have returned after the lockdown even stronger, worsening our situation even more. In the face of free tours, we feel more unprotected, insecure, and vulnerable than ever.

Tour Guide 6 adds:

Free tours have little to do with quality tourism. Just as we demand that a hotel, restaurant, or airport works to a standard and offers quality products, we also need to demand the same from tour guides.

The emergence of virtual guided tours

Today's world is characterized by our online connectedness, which has become part of everyday life. Since the beginning of the pandemic, many professionals and professions have exchanged working face-to-face for online or semi-virtual workspaces. The commercial expansion of the internet during this period has been limitless. Technologies even shape many social relationships.

In this context, some tour guides have tried to reinvent themselves through virtual tours, although these are a clear minority, giving the profession a new direction. These are the resilient ones of the profession.

In addition, virtual tour guides believe that the profession has entered a new era, and there is no route back from virtual guiding, which needs to exist alongside face-to-face guiding.

The virtual visit model has been evolving from the beginning of the pandemic and continues to evolve. Most guides who have taken this direction comment that the first visits were quite simple and rudimentary, but over time they have become more technically advanced and sophisticated. As Tour Guide 3 reports:

At first, we connected to visitors on a platform and showed images, videos and maps of the places while giving explanations. Selecting the material was a complicated task, as everything that we showed had to be high quality. It was a way to add value. The first visit involved collecting images of various moments in the history of the places we were showing. To make the visit more enjoyable and entertaining we interacted with the audience, using good intonation to give a rigorous, but entertaining talk. We didn't want to seem like lecturers, we wanted to act as guides.

Tour Guide 5 also comments:

I was uploading old videos of recordings I had of many monuments in Barcelona, and other places in Catalonia onto social media. They were 10-minute videos, where I sometimes explained a painting in a museum, a Gaudi building, a town square, etc.. When I saw that the videos got a lot of hits, I was pleasantly surprised.

Virtual tours have radically changed in a very short time. The first forays into the virtual world offered high quality products, but using very simple technology (de La Harpe & Sevenhuysen, 2020). Current virtual visits have improved technically (through using camera stabilizers, microphone windbreak protectors, light hoops, more sophisticated recording equipment, and so on), and above all, in format, opening up a world of many possibilities. For example, in some tours multiple tour guides work together on a single tour. While one is on site, another is online connected with customers. In reference to virtual tour of Game of Thrones in Girona, Tour Guide 4 explains:

On this visit, while I give a tour of the places in the city that have appeared in various scenes in the series, another guide is online showing the scenes I am talking about from their home. Meanwhile the scenes are projected, I move from one place to another around the city.

The first visits were offered free of charge, basically due to the uncertainty of whether they would be successful or not, and the predisposition of potential consumers to pay for an online service which was much shorter than a face-to-face visit (the length of a virtual visit is around 1 h). As the tour guides saw that they had potential demand, they began offering these tours for a fee. Sometimes the price was symbolic, or they just asked for a tip. Currently, payment for virtual tours must be via an e-commerce pre-payment system.

Marketing strategies have also changed to include advertising to friends and acquaintances, using social media and corporate websites, and sales platforms with extensive international visibility such as 'Airbnb Experience' or 'Amazon Explore'. As Tour Guide 3 explains:

After ten days into lockdown, we (different tour guides working together) started with a first free

visit, which we offered to friends and acquaintances. However, over a 100 people immediately signed up, and we had to divide the people over three different days. That made us reconsider everything. Today we are selling some of our tours through international platforms such as "Amazon Explore".

Tour Guide 7 adds:

The first thing I did was record live videos on Instagram as it is a well-known social network and I found it an easy environment. But I soon saw that guided tours were being offered through "Airbnb Experience," so I decided to explore this option in order to reach a larger audience.

Finally, in line with Weiler and Black (2015), all the guides (virtual or not) agreed that there are positive aspects to virtual guided tours. First, they can form part of the pre-trip and the post-trip experience. Second, they enable people who cannot physically travel to a destination to do so virtually with a tour guide. Finally, some visits can only be conducted virtually and not in person, such as places that are impossible to access physically, or places that are prohibited. Tour Guide 5 explains:

A virtual tour allows you to show people the place prior to a face-to-face visit. In addition, some virtual tours can show details that we cannot see with the naked eye or take you to places that we cannot normally access physically.

Tour Guide 9 says:

I believe that a virtual tour cannot compare with what we offer on a face-to-face visit, but it is certainly an option for all those people who are unable to travel for economic or physical reasons.

It appears then, that virtual tours are, and will be, a complement to face-to-face tours. A combination of face-to-face and online service that the industry will surely continue to offer in the future.

Challenges and mitigation strategies for the future

As mentioned above, the tour guides felt that in the short-term, the outlook is not promising. Uncertainty regarding the pandemic and the economic situation are the main barriers to recovery for the profession. In the short term, it is considered essential to first contain the virus, and then reactivate the economy. Tour Guide 10 comments:

I see impending doom. The situation in the coming months will be very serious and desperate. If the virus is not controlled and the economy is not reactivated, 90% of the guides will disappear.

Perceptions of outcomes in the long run are a little more hopeful, although the guides were not unanimous in how they saw the future. In this context, opinions ranged from conservative to more optimistic. While some guides seem to believe that they will no longer be able to make a living from the guiding profession exclusively, others believe that in the long run, everything will return to as it was pre-pandemic. Tour Guide 3 remarks:

I see the future as being complicated. Future generations are much more aware of the environmental costs of mobility. In the future, people will not travel so much. I feel we won't be able to make a living from tour guiding again, at least not as far as we can tell. We will need to do many different things to make a living. Combine face-to-face tours, virtual tours, sell pre-recorded tours, and engage in many other activities.

In contrast, Tour Guide 8's viewpoint is more optimistic:

I want to believe, and I have hope that everything will return to normal, or something that looks a lot like normal. We don't want mass tourism, we are convinced that tourism must be more sustainable, but we want to return to the profession as we've known it. I want to make a living from tour guiding. I'm not contemplating any other options.

In the future, rates for guided tours will also change significantly, one of the issues to emerge from the interviews was the cost of future guided tours. Here the guides coincided in believing that the cost of a guided tour will be much cheaper.

Tour guides believe that tours will be priced much lower than they have been up to now and will barely cover costs. They give several reasons for this. Firstly, because groups will be much smaller, and tour guides consider that few visitors (maximum 10 persons per group) cannot afford the price they were paid for a standard tour, before the COVID-19 crisis. Secondly, because virtual tours have a much lower selling price, which will make many tourists choose them over face-to-face guided tours. Thirdly, because there is less demand than supply of guides (at least in the short term). Lastly, due to the fierce competition from *free tours*, which are becoming more widespread. Tour Guide 5 says in that sense:

Prices will change. Tourists will come in dribs and drabs. There will be no demand for such a large supply of guides. There will be a price war, and we will have to start offering products at ridiculous prices in order to work.

Tour Guide 7 also comments in this regard:

The enormous virtual and face-to-face offer will cause prices to drop radically, triggering an unprecedented price war.

Another aspect of the future that worries guides is the need for greater administrative protection and safeguarding given the vulnerability of the profession, and lack of legal protection they receive. Among the various groups of guides, the COVID-19 crisis has given rise to a feeling of helplessness amongst public administrations. Given the circumstances during these months, this lack of safeguarding tour guides has prompted them to demand a change in policies regulating the profession. Tour Guide 10 comments:

The tourism sector has completely forgotten about us. We need better protection from public administrations and more of it. Governments only care about companies and we feel helpless. The tourist image of a country often depends on what its guides convey, and we should receive greater consideration from those in power.

Tour Guide 6 also adds:

We need minimum and maximum regulations. Faced with another crisis, we don't want to find ourselves in this helpless situation again. Many guides have already disappeared from the profession. This cannot happen another time.

Also, concerning political regulations, another challenge in the near future will be the regulation of virtual tour guides. The crisis has accelerated the development of virtual tours and as a consequence the number of virtual tour guides. Virtual tour guides and spaces are within a new dimension that will need to be regulated. Worldwide, currently there is no legislation to regulate virtual guides when they enter a physical space. When this new reality becomes a livelihood, new regulations will be required to cover it.

In any case, the future of the profession remains uncertain. Months after the first lockdown and state of alarm, tour guides are still unable to see the light at the end of the tunnel. The future still holds many different scenarios: From semi-virtual or semi-face-to-face tours, to totally face-to-face or totally virtual; from recording live videos, to pre-recorded tours; from standard tours with small groups and health and safety measures, to themed tours from the sofa at home; from the most romantic and nostalgic views, to the most pragmatic and resilient.

However, one thing everyone agrees on is that they see the future as an opportunity to make things better. Tour Guide 8 expresses in this way:

The current crisis could be an opportunity to put things back together. Tourist excellence also depends on the story we tell about the city, and many people are involved in making this story. However, it largely depends on our tour guides, and this is our chance.

Conclusions and discussion

Tour guiding is one of the areas of the tourism industry most affected by the COVID-19 health crisis (Alrawadieh, 2021). Guides are often left unsupported, with no access to financial aid from the government and no visibility (Hoguane et al., 2021). In essence, they have been completely overlooked by the tourism industry.

Qualitative research based on in-depth interviews with tour guides was carried out in order to examine how guides have experienced the pandemic, how it has affected their job, and how they have reinvented themselves. In addition, participant observation of several guided tours was carried out.

The results of the study have revealed some important aspects of the tour guiding situation. This includes the fragility of the profession, the lack of legal protection available to them, and their vulnerability in the face of competitors who offer the same service at much lower price or even for free (such as *free tours*). However, the study highlights the passivity of many professionals, and their lack of ability to react due to the state of shock in which they have found themselves, and the lack of initiative they have taken in order to be resilient and deal with the situation. In fact, very few tour guides have taken action to explore new ways of conducting guided tours such as virtual tours.

Although the current situation faced by tour guides, and the profession on the whole, has been described as critical (no job, no income, no financial aid, forced to leave the profession), all the tour guides interviewed yearn for a speedy return to face-to-face guided tours as they were before the pandemic.

Despite the nostalgia they feel for past times, they are nevertheless aware that the future of tour guiding will most certainly be different from what it was pre-COVID-19. The future is uncertain but may be an opportunity to make things better.

The main ideas in this study are:

- 1 The total or partial disappearance of many guiding professionals (but not the profession itself). This may be because some guides have moved to other areas of work (education, public administration, own business). Furthermore, many believe the present tourism model will change (fewer international trips, more local travel, and smaller groups), meaning that they will not

be able to live solely from guiding. Diversification, therefore, is the only feasible solution on the horizon. They will have to diversify products (face-to-face visits, thematised visits, live virtual tours, recorded tours, and so on), in addition to combining guiding with other professions.

2 There is an urgent need to suppress the virus and increase consumer confidence in order to speed up the recovery of the profession. Currently, the main barriers for guides are: (1) the failure to suppress the virus, which leads to a high level of distrust the consumer side; and (2) the recession affecting a large percentage of the world's population. The guides believe that these two barriers need to be reversed if mobility is to be activated again, and people can return to a normal work pattern. Despite the fact that recent vaccination has improved tourist mobility, the group size of walking tours in Catalonia remains limited.

3 Face-to-face guided tours are reshaping. According to Hogue et al. (2021), these tours will be conducted with small groups, lower prices, and will be more personalized with a higher quality of service and with all the mandatory biosecurity measures. Guides want to return to face-to-face interaction despite what this entails. The loss of income due to the limited number of people in tour groups will be the most significant element. However, small group visits are thought to add quality to future guided tours.

4 The explosion of semi-virtual tours. Face-to-face will be combined with virtual experiences (de La Harpe & Sevenhuysen, 2020; Weiler & Black, 2015). Online technology has reached tour guiding like so many other professions. Therefore, those who want to make a living from tour guiding will be forced to consider the reality of having to conduct virtual tours (Weiler & Black, 2015). Only tour guides who have been pioneering, resilient, and have ventured into the world of virtual tours, have remained active throughout the lockdown and post-lockdown period. The context of new virtual tours will have to be framed within new legislation regulating virtual guides in real spaces.

5 In line with Pauner (2020), who states that guides have had to depend on government aid, (although this has not been granted in all cases), the need for public administration to provide better and greater safeguarding for tour guides, and the profession on the whole. Tour guides appeal for regulations that enable them to ensure their survival in the face of any other crisis. They also call for policies to regulate *free tours*, which they believe have proliferated disproportionately since COVID-19, and to tax businesses run by people without adequate training, professional expertise or official accreditation, and who are limited to following a pre-written script. This result is in line with research carried out by Navalón-García and Mínguez (2021) on *free tours*.

The findings contribute to the knowledge of the effects of the pandemic in the tour guiding profession, and shed light on how local tour guides can cope with the future, especially as tour guides are amongst the most important actors in the tourism industry (Yarcan & Cetin, 2021). The fact that the pandemic has accelerated the inclusion of virtual tours demonstrates that the way in which visits are executed and consumed is changing both from the perspective of the guides and tourists. Therefore, in the near future, it appears that online tours should be embraced by guides and worked into their role in some way (from semi-virtual tours, to totally virtual guided tours, or recording live videos, ...). In short, to meet the needs and expectations of twenty-first century tourists and the challenges of the new context, tour guides need to become more highly skilled in giving virtual guided tours (Weiler & Black, 2015). In addition, from the point of view of public administration, new regulations should be provided to protect not only local guides, as well as the new ways of experiencing the locality itself.

This research has limitations, however. Interviews incorporate only the local tour guides' perspective, and excludes other viewpoints such as those of tour leaders, tour operators, and administrators. In addition, the results respond to a number of interviews conducted with local tour guides in Catalonia (Spain). Although the results cannot be extrapolated to everywhere, it is clear that many local areas (that depend on international tourism), may find they are in a very similar situation.

Finally, future research should take into account the perspectives of tour operators, tourism administrators, and tourists to achieve a more comprehensive understanding of how COVID-19 has affected local tour guides and the guiding profession. Furthermore, an impact study on the effects of the pandemic over time could provide a better understanding of the emotions of tour guides and how have they faced the future of guiding. Lastly, future studies should address the topic of virtual tours in different ways. On one hand, how local virtual tours are taking shape, and on the other, how visitors perceive virtual tours and the role guides play in them.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s) [Q4].

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