

## Tourist guides and free tours: a controversial relationship

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# TOURIST GUIDES AND FREE TOURS: A CONTROVERSIAL RELATIONSHIP

## Abstract

Like other tourism subsectors, guided tours have been affected by the emergence of the sharing economy. Although this subsector of tourism is not as well known, it constitutes an interesting scenario for studying these new business models and it is also generating debate. This article analyses the uniqueness of the tourist guide services provided through online platforms under the name of free tours. The study includes a bibliographical revision and it is carried out from a qualitative methodology based on a survey conducted among tourist guide professionals and in-depth interviews. The study analyse the point of view of professional of guiding sector, to determine how they are affected by the sharing economy and observe what their relationship with this new activity is like, a complex relationship with many controversial elements in terms of labour, tax and organization. It will be shown that the free tours respond to the trends of contemporary society but are not an expression of the collaborative consumption among equals, but rather an effective marketing strategy.

## Keywords

Tourist guide, collaborative consumption, tourist volunteering, free tour, *Freemium*.

## 1. Introduction

Since the appearance of the Internet, there has been a development and expansion of activities related to the sharing economies and consumption that have been studied from different sectors (Botsman & Roger, 2010, Belk, 2014a; Koopman et al., 2015). In tourism the increase has been motivated by the development experienced on an international level arising from the change in the economic paradigm based on use, access and enjoyment but not on ownership (Dervojeda et al, 2013); the prominence of the social networks, as they encourage interactions between peers (P2P) (Munar et al., 2013; Figuerola, 2016; Kuo et al., 2016); and the severe economic crisis that has fostered the development of new strategies and business models which generate complementary income for traditional companies (Gansky, 2010; Souto, 2015, Alaminos & Penalva, 2018). Furthermore, changes may be observed in types of consumption and the behaviour of postmodern tourists, who seek experiences that go beyond banal activities and are attracted by authenticity and living alongside the residents (Dredge & Gyimóthy, 2015). There has been an increase in the search for less expensive options observed (Meged & Zillinger, 2018) either due to limited economic resources or to the desire to see more on the same budget.

The emergence of the sharing economy in different tourism subsectors, such as accommodation, transport, gastronomy, experiences and, even what we could call communication services (WiFi and roaming) (Guttentag, 2015; Díaz et al., 2016; Cesarini & Nechita, 2017; Gutiérrez et al., 2017; Zervas et al., 2017) has generated controversy, due to the implementation of payment mechanisms in exchange for services which are developed in a different way, taking advantage of legal and administrative loopholes. This gives rise to the concept of the “pseudo-sharing economy” (Karlsson et al., 2017:3), which has features of the traditional economy, such as the maximisation of supply, but which is associated to a philosophy of sharing, the use of social networks and trust generated by peer contact (Botsman & Rogers, 2010, Gansky, 2010, Meged & Zillinger, 2018). This has aroused the interest of tourism researchers in the last decade (Erkus & Eraydm, 2010; Belk, 2014b; Dredge & Gyimóthy, 2015; Karlsoon et al., 2017; Brochado et al., 2017).

Researchers have highlighted the main challenges and opportunities of collaborative tourism related to aspects that range from the values that underlie this modality and that connect with the motivations and decision-making process of tourists (Alonso-Almeida et al., 2020), to the perception of the local population and the effects on businesses (Tussyadiah & Sigala, 2017).

This generates a critical intellectual debate focused on the relationship between sharing

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2 economy firms and customers, and that addresses this phenomenon as a business model, hence  
3 aspects such as trust in platforms are analysed (Kim et al, 2018), the importance of rates (Gibbs et  
4 al, 2018; Liang et al, 2018), their impact on marketing strategies (Eckhardt et al., 2019). The  
5 controversy of the shared economy is also approached from the perspective that the shared  
6 economy creates new impacts on tourist destinations (Moreno-Gil & Coca-Stefaniak, 2020) or  
7 exhausts existing ones, due to overtourism (Koens et al., 2018). It is understood that in many  
8 cases it is a model that is based on the co-option of market principles and the absence of  
9 regulation (Collier et al., 2018; Ahsan, 2020).

10  
11 Even though the tourist guide presents interpretive keys similar to the rest of tourism  
12 activities the social and the academic interest aroused in the analysis of this activity has been  
13 scarce (Black et al., 2019), the most recent and relevant contributions being those of Zillinger et  
14 al. (2012); Weiler & Black (2015) and Meger & Zillinger, (2018). They focus their studies on the  
15 relationships between 1. Guide's relationship with the places they visit and their communities; 2.  
16 Its interaction with other activities and with tour operators; 3. Their interaction with consumers;  
17 4. The incorporation of technology and 5. Its orientation to market niches. But the relationship of  
18 the tourist guide with the new formulas of collaborative economy and with the free tours are still  
19 scarce (Bryon, 2012; Zillinger et al., 2012; Navalón-García & Mínguez, 2016; Leal & Medina,  
20 2018; Meged & Zillinger, 2018). This opens a new field of research that must be addressed since  
21 this growing practice highlights some considerably important issues.

22  
23 With this article we contribute to the literature with a revision of the scientific texts and  
24 the concepts related to the free tour phenomenon. This way, by identifying and presenting the  
25 different points of view so as to determine whether this activity is actually collaborative and of  
26 social value or simply a disguised business. Also this research seeks to determine the perception  
27 that the guides have of this new model, their relationship with it and the reasons for assessment of  
28 its impact on the profession.

29  
30 For this purpose, the article is structured into five sections. After this introduction, the  
31 second part focuses on the principal conceptual and operational elements of these types of  
32 services and their evolution in relation to the sharing economy. Subsequently, the third section  
33 shows the sources and methods used in our research, highlighting the survey and the interviews.  
34 The fourth section introduces the results we obtained, and the fifth discusses them and presents  
35 the final conclusions of the research.

## 2. Regarding the free tours phenomenon

### 2.1 The free tour guide service

The reference texts on collaborative consumption by Botsman and Rogers (2010) and Gansky (2010) reveals the diversity of the fields in which this approach can be developed, including the provision of services linked to tourism. Going beyond product and re-distribution systems, basically focused on the possibility of sharing or exchanging material goods and knowledge, the central idea of this text is based on the service that connects people with common interests and, for the case in hand, those who share a similar concept of the travelling and tourist special experience with a local people.

From this perspective, collaborative consumption in tourism, and more specifically in free tours, constitutes a value for users, enabling them to develop connections with the destination and with the people residing therein, providing a richer and more authentic experience (Dredge & Gyimóthy, 2015; Meged & Kristensen, 2017) which leads him to travel and know the less known spaces (MacCannell, 2003).

Tourist guides form an essential piece of the tourism experience and are fundamental in the interface between the host destination and the visitors (Cohen, 1985; Ap & Wong, 2001). Therefore, they must adapt to the global trends in demand and the circumstances of the context (Zillinger et al., 2012). There are different classifications of tourist guides (Bryron, 2012) according to the organisation formula, the target groups or the content that they offer and how they present it. Of these, the so-called relational guide is associated with the free tours, which have been proliferating for about a decade in the principal urban destinations of Europe and parts of America and Asia.

Free tours visits are given by people who, altruistically, provide a service to the visitors who request it. The initial premise is to provide a different experience to the traditional tours conducted by host volunteers who show the visitors places of interest and customs of the local life, in exchange for a tip “if the quality of service deserves one”, as indicated at the end of each tour.

The combination of all of this has given rise to the free guided tours formula, which connects a tourist who is looking for a different style of tour with a more informal and cheerful guide. Operating from online platforms, they take advantage of the widespread use of technology and social networks and have established themselves as a new form of business with variable income that is earned through tips. Initially, the objective of the free tours is to foster a cultural

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2 exchange between equals, but, in practice, they are a commodification of the sharing economy.  
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4 The emergence of these companies through platforms means that they can be considered as a  
5 disruptive activity (Yu & Hang, 2010; Meged & Zillinguer, 2018), drastically affecting the  
6 operations of the traditional tourist guide services where they set up.  
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8  
9 The study of free tours connects several different current and interesting topics: 1) It  
10 reveals how the guided tours sector is adapting to the experience economy (Pine & Gilmore,  
11 1998) by offering a more emotive and interpersonal service provided by local people, based on a  
12 relationship between equals, which is typical of the sharing economy (Dredge & Gyimóthy,  
13 2015). 2) This type of service connects with the principles of host volunteering (Uriely et al.,  
14 2003; Lockstone-Binney et al., 2010a). The knowledge that these volunteers have of the place  
15 generates satisfaction and a positive perception which is spread through social networks by  
16 electronic word of mouth (Smith & Holmes, 2012; Hanbeger, 2012). 3) We should also add that  
17 the administrative regulations of guided tour services are scarce and disperse and regulated by a  
18 continually evolving national and international legal framework (Pérez, 2013; Touloupa, 2010;  
19 Martínez, 2017).  
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## 30 31 2.2 Precedents of collaborative consumption in guided tours

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33 Although the term “collaborative consumption” was not coined until the first decade of  
34 the 21<sup>st</sup> century it is an activity which began to be developed in the tourism sector in different  
35 ways much before then. Especially, in relation to the guided tour services, it has long been known  
36 that spontaneous or “cicerone” tours also exist. These were conducted by volunteers in the  
37 surrounding areas of the most emblematic monuments of the traditional tourist destinations  
38 offered either free of charge or, in the majority of cases, in exchange for tips. The quality of this  
39 type of tours, which has not been officially verified, has always been criticised by the licensed  
40 guides, defending their field of work and the solvency of the service provided. The main  
41 difference between free tours and “cicerone” ones is based on the fact that the objective of the  
42 activity is, above all, rooted in the motivation to share and not only in a desire to make money,  
43 although this cannot be dismissed.  
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52 In fact, the nature of these services can be related to volunteering activities in recreational  
53 environments, provided by hosts episodically or steadily (Holmes, 2014), for example, in  
54 museums, heritage sites, information centres, natural parks, at sports events or other occasions  
55 (Lockstone-Binney et al., 2010b). The reasons for this volunteering can be diverse depending on  
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2 the age and personal situation of the individuals, but, in general, they are related to the sharing  
3 economy concept of a desire to share values and the idea that the exchange of knowledge implies  
4 a personal and social improvement (Holmes, 2014) which contributes to the common benefit and  
5 the improvement of the community in general. Volunteering and free tours share the common  
6 characteristics described by Handy et al. (2000): no formal link with the entity, the receipt of a  
7 reward, the existence of an organisational structure and the proximity to the beneficiaries. The  
8 voluntary relationships with the organisation can vary in strength, depending on prior  
9 expectations and the type of relationship in which both parties benefit. What seems clear is that  
10 there is a tendency to use volunteers or similar figures as a means to compensate the deficiencies  
11 in the hiring of services, in both the public and private sectors (Pick et al., 2011).

12  
13 From a fundamentally altruistic point of view, the clearest precedent of this activity is set  
14 in 1992 in the city of New York, with the development of the *Big Apple Greeter* project. This  
15 initiative was developed around a group of non-professional volunteers who received no financial  
16 gain but had the desire to show visitors a more real, friendly and authentic city which was far-  
17 removed from the tourism clichés and, very close to the principles of collaboration and  
18 experience in contact with the local (Espeso et al., 2005). The Greeter organisation emerged with  
19 the objective of offering accompaniment and guided tours to visitors, conducted by volunteering  
20 New Yorkers free of charge and with no public or private economic support. Therefore, it kept its  
21 operating costs (mainly related to coordination) to a minimum, covered by donations or the  
22 participation of other companies which could benefit from an improved and more diverse image  
23 of the city (Holmes & Smith, 2009). For its characteristics the *greeter* movement is the precedent  
24 that reflects the organisation principles of collaborative consumption in the guided tour sector,  
25 because, for the first time, work areas were established based on the new proposals: volunteerism,  
26 diffusion and informal financing for organising the structure.

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## 2.3 The free tour: between the sharing and experience economy

Due to the fact that tourists want experiences (Pine & Gilmore, 1998), the tour guide companies respond with the design and explicit promotion of proposals that invite participation and even immersion (Hansen & Mossberg, 2017). It is a response of postmodern tourism that has transferred the economic value from products and goods to services and experiences, fulfilling its four dimensions: education, escapism, aesthetics and entertainment (Pine & Gilmore, 1998). Free

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2 tours are products that promote a close relationship between those who give the guided service  
3 and their clients, through a style of communication and a context that invites an exchange. We  
4 can identify characteristics that are considered to be basic in the creation of the experience  
5 (Hansen & Mossberg, 2017): 1) it is an active and dynamic process; 2) it has a strong social  
6 dimension; 3) there is interaction between the participants in a joyful and dynamic context; 4) the  
7 interaction generates knowledge; and 5) the process depends on a certain level of uncertainty  
8 associated with something new (expectations of fun and experiences are generated in the tours).  
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14 This cultural framework is combined with a population sensitive to economy issues, with  
15 an extensive digital literacy culture and a widespread presence of technology. This combination  
16 of factors fosters the emergence of proposals in the tourism sector related to collaborative  
17 consumption which can generate different benefits. First, objective advantages are obtained  
18 related to price, which is perceived as being lower, and can even be close to zero, which attracts  
19 new users to this type of consumption. Furthermore, this model is identified with other emotional  
20 advantages (Cañigueral, 2014) derived from participating in a system able to generate the feeling  
21 of mutual collaboration, a sense of belonging to a community or the feeling of acting intelligently  
22 in order to make a more efficient use of time and resources. Therefore, the free tour offer, which  
23 was initially aimed at young clients with a low purchasing power, has also captured the broader  
24 principal market of guided tours (Meged & Zillinger, 2018; Leal & Medina, 2017).  
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33 Within this context, the use of social networks in free tours acquires a relevant role, both  
34 in terms of their operation and communication and in setting an ideological context within which  
35 information is shared and a not-for-profit activity is carried out (Botsman & Rogers, 2010;  
36 Gansky, 2010). The contact provided by technology between tourists and guides eliminates, or  
37 reduces, one of the weaknesses of the traditional institutionalised activity: the redundant  
38 intermediation (user-administration-company-guide), which is more complex and slower than a  
39 direct relationship (guide-user) which occurs with the free tours, offered simply and through  
40 websites or directly in the street.  
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## 49 2.4 Elements for controversy

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51 The emergence of the free tours has stimulated innovation in three different areas: the way of  
52 acting, the relationship between the actors and the functioning of the organisations that cooperate  
53 and act in the space, so much so that we can refer to a disruptive process (Christensen, 2006).  
54 These changes have drastically affected the tourist guide service market and changed the rules of  
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2 the game, for example, in terms of price, competition or organisation. These mutations can be  
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4 observed in the following elements:

5 First, the use of the Internet and Web 2.0 facilitates the visibility of products, interaction  
6 and the exchange of knowledge between the agents involved and also free promotion through  
7 electronic word of mouth. It encourages potential visitors to contact the suppliers directly, based  
8 on recommendations of other users in the best positioned websites. In general terms, free tours  
9 are linked to powerful online marketing platforms and this generates tension between the  
10 competition and changes in the tourist guide services market (Hanberger, 2012; Bryon, 2012,  
11 Meged & Zillinger, 2018).  
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17 These new ways of operating clash with the inertias of the tour guide sector, on the whole  
18 organised in professional associations which negotiate and contact the tourism administration of  
19 the destination (Navalón and Mínguez, 2016; Leal and Londoño, 2018; Meged & Zillinger,  
20 2018). To date, the administration-guide-user relationship has worked in a coordinated way based  
21 on collaboration patterns and mutual recognition. The traditional structure is characterised by the  
22 control of the administration, the associations and the predominance of small companies. This  
23 favours the control of the procedures and the way in which the service is provided; for example,  
24 establishing stipulated minimum prices in detriment to the user, or using mechanisms that limit  
25 the incorporation of new professional guides into the market in the form of permits or  
26 accreditations.  
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34 This relationship between the guides, the administration and the users has been affected  
35 by the emergence of the free tours which differ somewhat to the traditional model. On the one  
36 hand, given that there are no initial fixed prices, the visitors perceive the free tour model as a  
37 cheaper and fairer formula, as they decide the amount to tip at the end of the tour in accordance  
38 with the perceived quality. On the other hand, given the informal nature of the free tour, the  
39 guides can work without being officially accredited in some places, in accordance with the  
40 legislation of each destination (Meged & Zillinger, 2018). In this respect, the Directive of the  
41 European Parliament and of the Council (123/2006/CE), colloquially known as Bolkestein,  
42 introduced changes, facilitating the free presentation of services in the internal market. Its  
43 application in different states and regions has generated different interpretations and regulations.  
44 This Directive has created a legal framework that legitimizes the conduct of guided tours by EU  
45 professionals in any member state, regardless of where they have obtained their license, provided  
46 they comply with the different accreditation and validation procedures. The issue was  
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2 creating tension among professionals in the sector, until some countries requested the exemption  
3 from labour market liberation (Touloupa, 2010).  
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5 Consequently, considering the context of the economic and social change, it seems  
6 evident that the collaborative economy and the traditional tour guide companies are obliged to  
7 interact, although this is not easy. Friction arises from the perception of a new and powerful  
8 competitor that obliges them to change the way that they work. The following pages address the  
9 study of the perception of tour guide professionals of the free tour phenomenon.  
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### 17 3. Objectives and methodology

18 This research seeks to confirm whether the free tour phenomenon implies the real adaptation of  
19 this tourism sector to the new trends of the sharing economy or, on the contrary, whether it  
20 constitutes a new business strategy to capture clients. Furthermore it was attempted to  
21 demonstrate whether or not there is a competitive conflict between guides who are employed in  
22 the traditional manner and those who are involved in this new form of tours. In order to do this,  
23 the following premises will be addressed:  
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- 29 1. Whether the agents of the sector are adapting to the current trends of tourism demand with  
30 the proposal of new, creative and experiential models.
- 31 2. Whether the free tours is a pretext to establish initial contact and therefore offer other  
32 guided services under traditional parameters and guidelines.
- 33 3. If there is a difference between the tours which are conducted in the usual way and those of  
34 free tours.
- 35 4. Whether their relationship is conflictive or symbiotic and whether it causes impacts on the  
36 profession.  
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44 The activities carried out within the sharing economy receive media attention and  
45 generate a significant social impact. However, in this case, the opinion of the experts who  
46 directly participate in the activity is sought as they have the best knowledge about the reality  
47 affecting their professional development. Experts are considered those professionals of the  
48 guiding sector, whether they did free tours or not, without distinguishing between those how are  
49 licensed and those how are not. They have been contacted through guiding associations, which  
50 have distributed the questionnaire to its members.  
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2 The study was conducted using fundamentally qualitative methods, considered the most  
3 appropriate given the exploratory nature of the study and the limited availability of information  
4 on this topic. For the first part of the study, closed-ended questionnaires online were distributed  
5 among the professional guides through the digital media. The survey was answered by 55  
6 professionals, during the months of July, August and September 2018. They work in different  
7 European cities (Madrid, Barcelona, Valencia, Lisbon, Coimbra, Prague, Budapest, among  
8 others), because all operated in the EU and they are subject to the same normative framework.  
9 The consultation was directed to these professional guides, whether they did free tours or not.

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11 The research did not focus on choosing a numerically representative sample, but on  
12 presenting different points of view of professionals from different places, experiences and cases  
13 (Jennings, 2005). These professionals were asked about different  
14 aspects of practising their profession, grouped into two blocks: 1) About the performance of the  
15 profession & 2) About the perception of the free tour.

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17 For the second part, the study is completed by ten in-depth interviews of professional  
18 guides who operate with free tours and traditional tours, in order to qualify and corroborate  
19 certain aspects, especially those linked to exercising the profession in different countries, with an  
20 emphasis on the freedom to practice and taxation. These professionals were asked about the  
21 relationship of collaboration or competition between the different types of guides; and if there are  
22 collaboration strategies between them. They were also asked about how they attract employees  
23 and customers, how payment is made, and how commission payments and tax benefits  
24 declarations are made. The interviews were conducted between the Spring and Summer of  
25 2019. Of the ten guides that were interviewed three currently work in free tours, two others have  
26 collaborated occasionally with free tours and five work strictly as licensed guides.

27  
28 In addition, the study was completed with an analysis of the five websites of the main  
29 entities that give free tours in European cities. Thus the characteristics of the tours that are  
30 offered have been compared in detail.

## 31 32 33 34 35 36 37 38 39 40 41 42 43 44 45 46 47 48 49 **4. Results**

### 50 51 52 **4.1 The exercising of the profession**

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54 Most of the guides consulted have the administrative accreditation which authorises them to  
55 exercise the profession at sites declared as heritage of cultural interest. This can be carried out in  
56 many different ways, the free tour being one of them. Although some guides are exclusively  
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1 engaged in providing these types of tours, there are also professionals who combine this with  
2 other activities such as being tourist guides for the municipal authorities or guides who work for  
3 their own companies or other companies.  
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9 “The majority of guides who take part in free tours activities wear their official credentials  
10 where they can be easily seen.” (Guide 1. Alicante)  
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14 Some professionals even work on a freelance and individual basis with no business  
15 structure. The results of the query reveal that those guides who exclusively work in the free tour  
16 sector are a minority. According to the answers, these are mainly young people with less than ten  
17 years of experience in the profession and many of them do not have any official accreditation.  
18 In general terms, the participants of the study consider themselves to be free tour guides just  
19 when this is their only employment possibility. Those who combine it with other forms of guided  
20 tours do not feel identified with this practice or consider it occasional and irrelevant in their  
21 employment context, possibly as they have other more stable sources of income. From the  
22 interviews and comments, a certain level of embarrassment can be detected in those who have  
23 worked as a free tour guide and some admit to even omitting this work from their CV.  
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33 "So far there is little collaboration. Personally, I've been tempted to do free tour, I think  
34 they do a good job and put a lot of passion into what they do (...) but I haven't dared do it  
35 for fear of generating problems" (Guide 2. Valencia).  
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40 First, because they believe that this practice is reviled by the professionals in the sector  
41 and second, because they feel ashamed that their earnings from this activity are in the form of  
42 tips.  
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45 Free tour guides earn an average of €150 per tour in the high season and use specific  
46 platforms such as Trip4real, Vayable, TriperOne or Yuniqtrip to which they pay a fixed amount  
47 (usually 15%) for each client. This payment is made in exchange for a promotional framework in  
48 the market and receiving formal backing which guarantees their professionalism, given that the  
49 platforms generate trust and security in the user. Furthermore, they offer a commitment to quality  
50 and supervision of the contents of the service before making it available to the public.  
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55 Most of the guides interviewed use a combination of different tools to promote their  
56 service and capture clients. The most common formula is that of a website (own or institutional)  
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and the use of leaflets and social networks. The latter enable the generation of feedback between the agents and the clients and also between the users [Table 1].

**Table 1.** Summary of the questionnaire conducted among tourist guides (%)

	Leaflets	Social networks	Websites			Combined formulas			Nothing
			Platform free tour	Institutional	Own	Website+ Leaflets	Website + Social networks	Website + Leaflets + Social networks	
Works only for free tour platform			1.9					3.8	
Local guide hired by municipal bodies (self-employed)		9.6		1.9	1.9	1.9	9.6	1.9	5.8
Owner of own business		1.9			11.5		7.7	13.5	1.9
Works for another company	1.9	1.9		1.9	1.9			7.7	
Overall total	<b>1.9</b>	<b>13.5</b>	<b>1.9</b>	<b>3.8</b>	<b>15.4</b>	<b>1.9</b>	<b>17.3</b>	<b>26.9</b>	

*Source:* Own elaboration based on the data of the survey

The guides consider themselves to be a very collaborative group and highlight the importance of networking, to the point that they acknowledge that some of their clients are facilitated by other colleagues in the same company or even other companies. The relationship of trust between colleagues is noteworthy. They do not regard each other as competitors and hold great respect for the person who provides them with contacts.

“On some occasions, companies that advertise as free Tours have hired our services (certified guides) for private groups when necessary.” (Guide 1. Alicante)

When comparing the way in which the guided tours are carried out, whether through companies, the local administration or free tour services, large differences cannot be observed. There are obvious similarities with respect to the size of the groups (average of 20 people), the origin of the clients (the majority claim that more than 75% of their clients are foreign tourists), the ages of the group (the majority are over 31 years of age) and even the amount earned per client (between 8 and 10 euros), irrespective of how the guided tour service is organised.

These results contrast with the theories that attribute differentiated characteristics to the users of the sharing economy (Meged & Zillinger, 2018). The first of these unsubstantiated attributes is that these consumers are young people belonging to the millennial generation. The second

1  
2 unproven fact is that in a highly competitive context, the emergence of organisation formulas of  
3 collaborative consumption foster the creation of initiatives of volunteers who wish to conduct  
4 guided tours and provide special tourist services. Therefore, according to the survey, no large  
5 contrasts or drastic changes in the way in which the service is offered and received can be  
6 observed. Although there has been a common response that the differentiating element between  
7 these forms of service could be the use of a more informal communication style in the case of  
8 free tours.  
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16 "The client who takes a free tour repeats in another city. And, that's because the style is  
17 different, the way of communicating, the things that are told, the informal tone and the  
18 closeness." (Guide 4. Prague)  
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22  
23 The principal differences found between the two types of guidance are related to rates and  
24 the philosophy of the service and consumption. The flexibility to join the group and to leave it,  
25 forces free guides to work in a different way so that the group remains engaged which is essential  
26 since payment is handled at the end. In addition, while in traditional tours the price is established  
27 a priori, in the free tours the payment of the service is made through voluntary tips and, therefore  
28 is variable; although the amounts earned, as previously indicated, are almost identical. The most  
29 relevant aspect is that the service in the free tours is characterised by voluntary payment, while in  
30 the normal visits there is a fixed price and the tourists know what they are going to pay for the  
31 service when they hire it. In this way, the taxation of the work carried out in paid guided tour  
32 services is clearer. This issue is more complex and opaque in the case of the free tours.  
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42 "Usually, the greater the effort a Free Tour guide makes, the more money they will earn.  
43 Other contributing factors include if they have pictures to show, if they use technology  
44 and if they take the adequate time to answer their clients' questions." (Guide 5. Alicante)  
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## 50 4.2 The perception of free tours

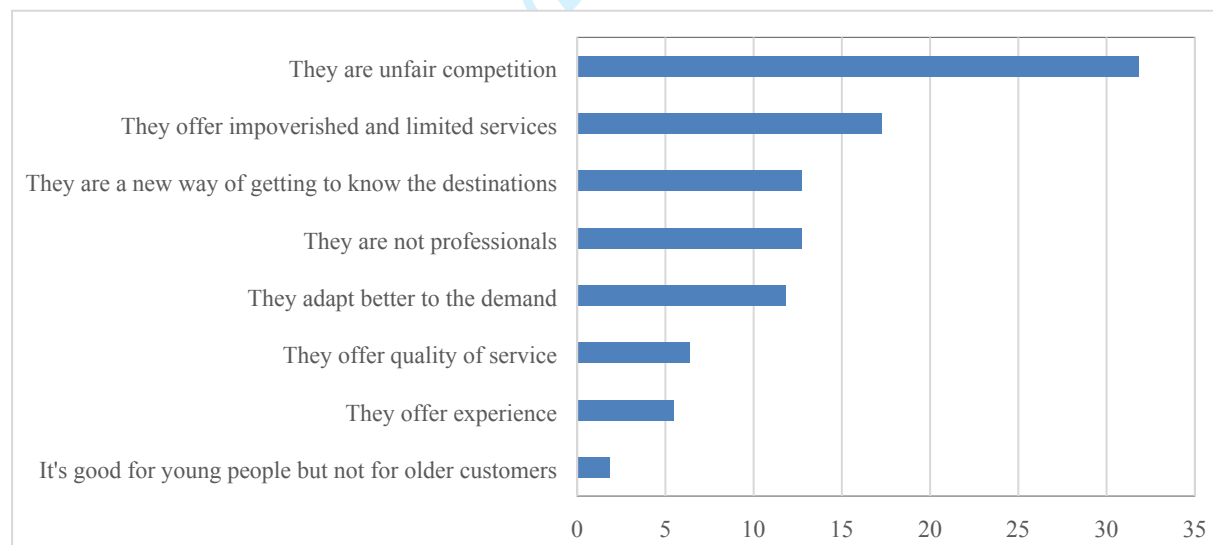
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52 It is relevant that although the guides interviewed worked for free tour companies, they do not  
53 consider themselves as free tour guides. This shows that their opinion as professionals is realistic,  
54 but this subjective positioning also reveals that they are critical of the activity. In general terms,  
55 these types of tour are perceived as unfair competition (32%), assuming that the people who  
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conduct them do not always have the official accreditation, although is not a mandatory requirement for offering their services on online platforms.

"I have worked in Budapest with the Spanish clearance. Now I'm in Portugal, and here it's not required (...) but in my company, 80% of the guides are official." (Guide 6. Lisbon)

Almost all of the guides consulted have the official accreditation and their hiring and the payment of taxes are regulated which is not always the case for the free tour guides. In this respect, most of the licensed guides question the quality of the information given by the free tours and even claim that they provide a poor, limited and unprofessional service. However, a minority of them, (7.3%) consider that they better adapt to the demand and that they offer better experiences than the traditional tours, enabling visitors to learn about the destinations in a different way. [Figure 1]

**Figure 1.** Controversial elements with respect to the practice of free tours (%)



*Source:* Own elaboration based on the data of the survey

In relation to the previously mentioned points, particularly the differences regarding the legal and taxation requirements, the tourist guides consider that the emergence of the free tour phenomenon is the source of considerable conflict between professionals. They point out that this new model denigrates the profession, favours the infiltration of unauthorised or unqualified workers and undermines their social rights and recognition as professionals for which they have worked so hard to achieve. Furthermore, they believe that it is a practice that introduces and

1  
2 promotes the informal economy. They consider that it is fair to regulate the prices of the services  
3 in order to prevent unfair competition and to achieve a level of wages and rights similar to those  
4 of other professions.  
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9 "The system is not sustainable from the point of view of work, you can earn a lot of  
10 money as a free tour guide, but you are completely unprotected in every way." (Guide 8.  
11 Coimbra)  
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13

14  
15 They also feel that these guides and platforms should offer a concise and clear service  
16 proposal from the beginning for the good of the clients. There is a degree of distrust with respect  
17 to whether the free tour guides work for tips (sometimes referred to as alms) and the majority  
18 highlight the problems derived from the opacity of the overall remuneration received and the  
19 obligation to pay taxes for the activity.  
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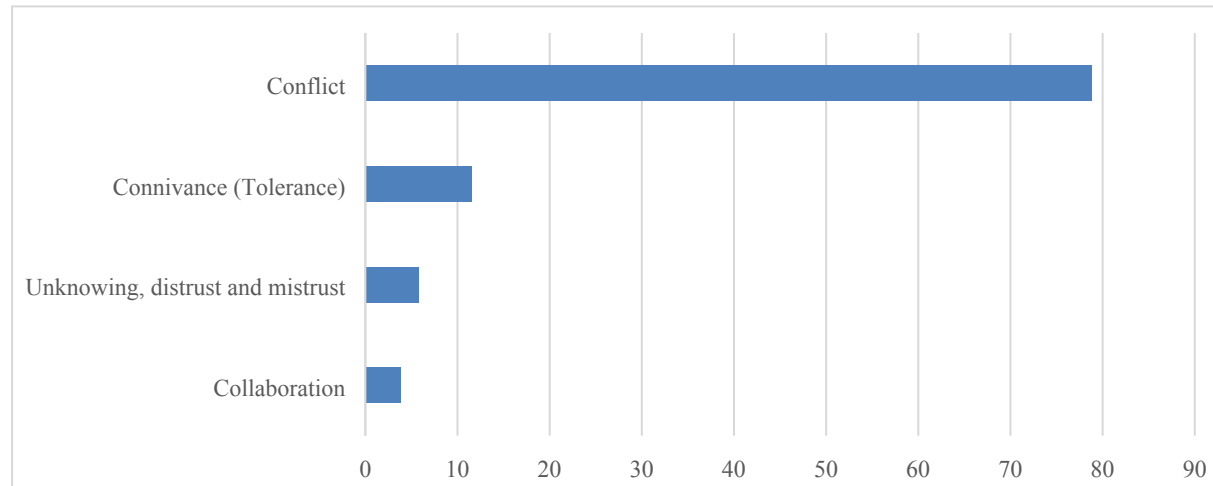
22  
23 An important part of the criticism is rooted in the fact that the free tour platforms capture  
24 clients, initially attracted by the promise of a free service, and then offer other lucrative activities  
25 such as themed tours or routes for closed groups, which generate the most profit for the business.  
26 This reduces the capacity of the traditional suppliers to compete in the market and this is one of  
27 the key elements of the confrontation.  
28  
29

30  
31 The idea of conflict is not only expressed by the certified guides but is also shared by  
32 those who operate as free tour guides (78.9% of responses). These point out that they are not  
33 understood and that their work is not respected by their colleagues. They indicate that sometimes  
34 they are even verbally harassed in front of their clients. They feel upset because the accuracy of  
35 their information is questioned and they are accused of being illegal, when they are actually not  
36 undertaking any activity which is not allowed by law. In this respect, they effusively underline  
37 the fact that, partly due to the European directive, the profession is currently de facto liberalised  
38 and therefore their activity may be considered to be legitimate.  
39  
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41  
42 A minority of the respondents (15.4%) consider that there is connivance or collaboration  
43 between the free tours and the licensed guides. Generally speaking, these responses coincide with  
44 guides who work as free tour guides full or part time and who are the same as those who in the  
45 previous question valued this activity as a good alternative with respect to offering new  
46 experiences and ways of getting to know a destination. [Figure 2 near here]  
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**Figure 2.** Perception of the relationship between traditional and free tours (%)



*Source:* Own elaboration based on the data of the survey

All these opinions reinforce the debate about the necessary regulation of the free tour platforms called for by the traditional professional companies and associations. For some, this economic exchange does not correspond to a collaborative consumption; however, this argument has been the driver of many of these types of platform.

## 5. Discussion

Every day, free tours are offered as a solidarity-based, fair activity comprising the coexistence of residents and visitors in accordance with the new models of the so-called sharing economy. Taking into consideration the responses of those surveyed and interviewed regarding the analysis of the demand, the composition of the groups and the routes that were done, the results of the survey and the interviews reveal that this activity is very similar to the usual guided tour service activities.

Although the free tours are considered as an altruistic and even free activity, in reality they are a type of cheap product subject to a variable price which represents a promotional lure for the supply of other traditional proposals. Therefore, the free tour platforms, in the same way as those dedicated to transportation or tourist accommodation, use this argument in order to attract demand and increase their economic profits (Meged & Zillinger, 2018; Collier et al, 2018; Kumar et al, 2018). These are exclusively based on putting users and guides into contact with one another with no investment in any goods, services or product design (Cañigüeral, 2019).

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2 It is a growing trend, precisely because it has such a positive image. For this reason, the  
3 companies use this altruist rhetoric, although only partially, in order to appear attractive in a  
4 changing market, where client rotation and service providers is high (Kumar et al, 2018). This is  
5 the case of some of the guided tour agencies and tour operators, such as Sandemans, Feel the city,  
6 Ogotours, Freewalkingtour, Guruwalk, among others, which offer free tours. Under this name,  
7 they offer high quality guided tours on foot for any person and any travel budget. In these cases,  
8 the idea of sharing experiences in a different way is the central focus of the advertising, although  
9 this attraction is only one part of the proposal as the key to the offer is fundamentally profit  
10 based, in the same way as other services.  
11

12  
13 Most of the supply of free tours can be found on large online platforms that offer a  
14 diverse portfolio of services, free tour or paid, which really make up the largest percentage. The  
15 formation of the groups and the characteristics of the users of the free tours are very similar to  
16 those of the users of traditional tours. In addition, it can be said that many of these online  
17 platforms operate in the same way as traditional companies in the sector, offering tours with  
18 similar characteristics and including the same star attractions of the locations. These basic tours  
19 are complemented with the offer of other options with differentiated features, which, in this case,  
20 have a controlled price. Therefore, the free tours adopt a *Freemium* business model (Pujol, 2010).  
21

22  
23 The principal difference with respect to other collaborative consumption platforms resides  
24 in the fact that these are guided tour companies that recruit freelance or contract workers who  
25 have an appropriate professional profile, who are extrovert and passionate about heritage and  
26 wish to work with a younger and more open demand. In this case, following management patterns  
27 similar to those mentioned for the sharing economy platforms, they take on guides who request to  
28 be signed up as voluntary collaborators of the company (Zillinger et al. 2012). But they don't  
29 develop personalized tours for a client in a peer relationship, they just make the guided tour  
30 proposals that the company designs and promotes. This is because the standardisation of services  
31 facilitates management and minimises any possible incidents derived from diversity. Despite this,  
32 the marketing of these proposals targets a different type of demand, offering an informal rhetoric  
33 and seeking to promote different experiences.  
34

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36 The affiliation of these guides, (freelance or contract workers), to online platforms in  
37 exchange for a percentage of the income earned through the tips received cannot be associated  
38 considered a part of the sharing economy, even though that is the image they try to convey. The  
39 business definition and its approach do not have the same structure of delegated and shared  
40 responsibility as collaborative consumption platforms. The differential factor of these guided tour  
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2 companies with respect to other traditional agencies resides in the fact that their portfolio of  
3 products includes certain tours that are offered free of charge for anyone (Meged & Zillinguer,  
4 2018). For these tours, the guides only receive tips from the users depending on the perceived  
5 quality and a percentage of these tips is given to the reference company. This the most  
6 controversial aspect of these types of business proposals between the agents involved in the  
7 sector, as the tax declaration of the tips and random income subject to the assessment of the  
8 clients is evidently not transparent.

9  
10 Interestingly, many of the people interviewed do not indicate that the same problems of  
11 fiscal opacity found in the free tour platforms can occur in the traditional guided tour sector,  
12 possibly because they are all legally registered and pay their taxes as self-employed workers. The  
13 fact that the collaborative consumption platforms receive a percentage from the private guides  
14 who can charge for their services is not perceived as a topic for debate, provided that this is  
15 managed transparently to guarantee the legality and the good quality of the experience.

16  
17 The leaflets and social networks influence the perception and assessment of the  
18 destinations and services and also help tourists make decisions (Miguéns et al., 2008). Tourists  
19 value very highly the ability to express their opinion (Goldsmith & Horowitz, 2006) and obtain  
20 information from sources other than tourism companies (Schindler & Bickart, 2012). The fact  
21 that those who provide this information are people similar to themselves offers them greater  
22 security and trust. However, they do not realise that free Tour guides actively encourage social  
23 media activity and request favourable reviews given that, on occasion, their earnings are directly  
24 tied to positive comments on the online search engines.

25  
26 Another point of contention is the low quality attributed to the guides who give the free  
27 tours. They are reproached for their lack of professionalism, low-quality content, and, most of all,  
28 not being officially authorised to practice the profession. However, many accredited guides who  
29 were interviewed collaborate, or have done occasionally, with companies operating under the free  
30 tour formula. All of this indicates that there is a propensity for confrontation between the two  
31 groups and a superficial approach to the real element of confrontation: maintaining the market  
32 prominence of guided tours in tourist destinations.

## 33 34 35 36 37 38 39 40 41 42 43 44 45 46 47 48 49 50 51 52 53 54 55 56 57 58 59 60

61 From the results of the research it can be observed that free tours are not experiences of  
62 collaboration between peers, but a provision of a service in exchange for a discretionary and

1  
2 irregular economic amount which depends on the disposition of the demand. Therefore, although  
3  
4 some tours are offered free of charge, a payment for the service is always established albeit  
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6 through tips, which constitutes a relatively regular amount, to the extent that the revenue from the  
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8 free tours is similar to that of the traditional tours.

9  
10 Thus, it appears that no major changes have been made in the supply of guided urban  
11  
12 routes to indicate an adaptation to the new trends of demand with creative and experiential offers.  
13  
14 The only real change is the fact that in order to operate free tours young and informal guides may  
15  
16 be recruited who do not necessarily have to have the official accreditation for working in the  
17  
18 profession. This leads to the free tour guides being perceived *a priori* by professionals as being of  
19  
20 a lower quality but by the users as being more attractive.

21  
22 The controversy generated between the free tour and professional guides is based on the  
23  
24 perception of a situation of unfair competition. This is essentially due to three basic ideas: the  
25  
26 first is that the so-called free tours are not really free and act as bait for offering other traditional  
27  
28 products. The objective, therefore, is to capture the attention of the demand rather than to offer a  
29  
30 different service. The second is the opacity of the revenue earned, as this is based on voluntary  
31  
32 tips. Therefore, there is a situation of voluntary collaboration with a variable amount which  
33  
34 makes fiscal control difficult. Although the earnings are not transparent, according to the  
35  
36 individuals interviewed in the survey, the free tour guides were working in the profession legally  
37  
38 as self-employed or contract workers who paid taxes on the revenue earned. The third idea is that  
39  
40 the free tour guides do not require official accreditation, which gives rise to the questioning of  
41  
42 their professionalism. But in many cases this procedure is fulfilled or is not necessary for the  
43  
44 places where the routes are carried out.

45  
46 It may be considered, therefore, that the free tour phenomenon does not imply the real  
47  
48 adaptation of the tourism sector to the new trends of the sharing economy, but constitutes a new  
49  
50 business strategy for capturing the demand more simply in a competitive environment.

51  
52 Lastly, it should be highlight that the study provided new challenges and opened up new  
53  
54 lines of research. These can further study how free tours are perceived from various perspectives,  
55  
56 such as demand and other stakeholder involved in tourism management and development.  
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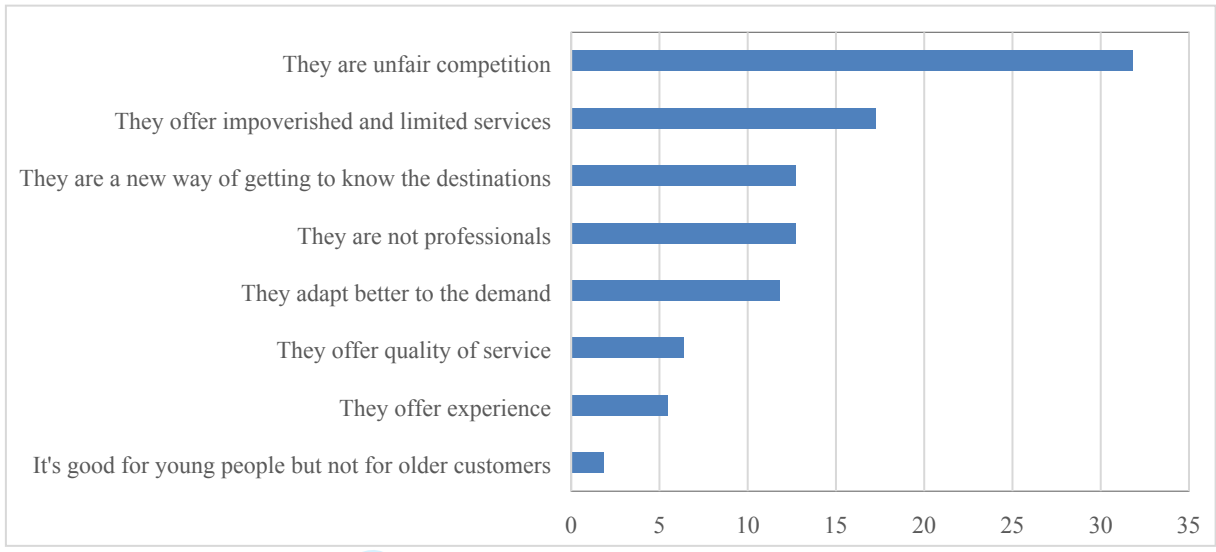
## Summary of the questionnaire conducted among tourist guides (%)

	Leaflets	Social networks	Websites			Combined formulas			Nothing	Overall total
			Platform free tour	Institutional	Own	Website+ Leaflets	Website + Social networks	Website + Leaflets + Social networks		
Works only for free tour platform			1.9					3.8		5.8
Local guide hired by municipal bodies (self-employed)		9.6		1.9	1.9	1.9	9.6	1.9	5.8	32.7
Owner of own business		1.9			11.5		7.7	13.5	1.9	34.6
Works for another company	1.9	1.9		1.9	1.9			7.7		26.9
Overall total	<b>1.9</b>	<b>13.5</b>	<b>1.9</b>	<b>3.8</b>	<b>15.4</b>	<b>1.9</b>	<b>17.3</b>	<b>26.9</b>		<b>100.0</b>

Source: Own elaboration based on the data of the survey

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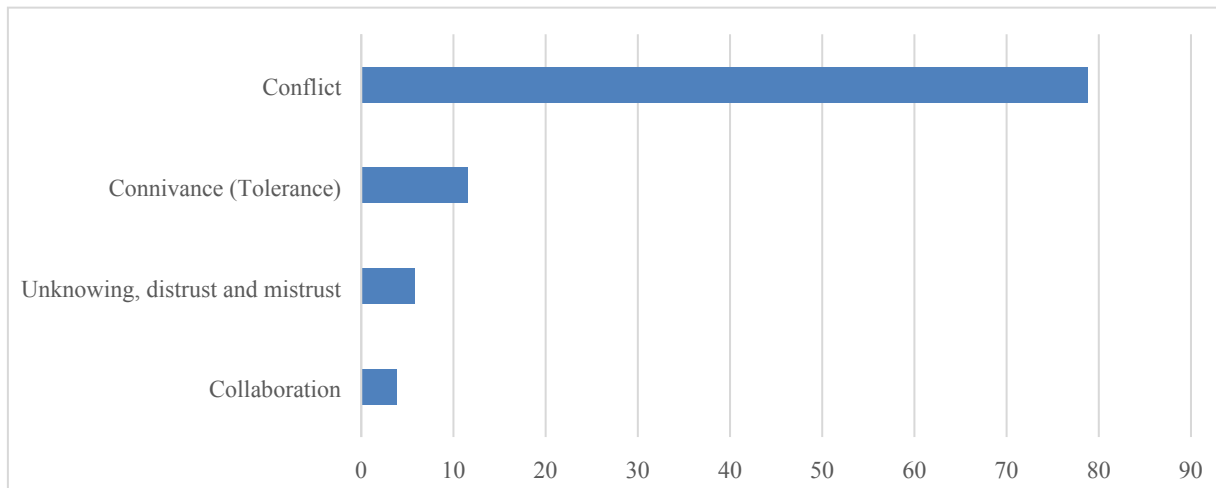
Controversial elements with respect to the practice of free tours (%)



Source: Own elaboration based on the data of the survey

Peer Review

## Perception of the relationship between traditional and free tours (%)



Source: Own elaboration based on the data of the survey