

Conceptual clarification of overtourism, undertourism, overuse, and underuse from a resource studies perspective

Yuma Akaho (Otaru University of Commerce, Japan)

INTRODUCTION

The term "overtourism" has been defined as the adverse effects resulting from exceeding carrying capacity thresholds. Conversely, "undertourism" has been understood as a condition in which tourist destinations fail to achieve expected outcomes (Mihalic, 2020). Gowreesunker and Thanh (2020) argued that both phenomena are fundamentally failures of destination planning and management. Drawing explicitly on resource studies and Service-Dominant logic (S-D logic), Akaho (in press) argued that sustainability is threatened not by the sheer volume of tourism but by mismatches between resources and capital, and emphasized that overtourism and undertourism can be conceptualized on a single analytical continuum. In contrast, Japan has witnessed an emergence of "underuse" phenomena, attributable to labor shortages and associated constraints. However, despite extensive research in tourism studies, a significant theoretical gap remains regarding the conceptual distinctions between overtourism and overuse, as well as between undertourism and underuse. This study aims to elucidate the definitions and theoretical underpinnings of these four concepts through a comprehensive examination of resource studies.

METHOD

This study adopts the "stages" of resource studies (Figure 1) proposed by Sato (2008) as its analytical framework. First, the four terms co-occurring with each target keyword in Google search data over the past decade (2015–2025) were grouped, and word maps were constructed based on their relative frequencies to verify that these terms are neither antonyms nor synonyms. Subsequently, the analysis was limited to academic articles that explicitly define each term in both English and Japanese. A qualitative analysis was then conducted to examine whether these terms have consistent meanings within the academic community and to identify which "stages" of tourism phenomena they have been used to describe. In analyzing the discourse of this prior research, particular attention was paid to how operant and operand resources, as conceptualized in S-D logic, combine (or fail to combine) to give rise to each phenomenon.

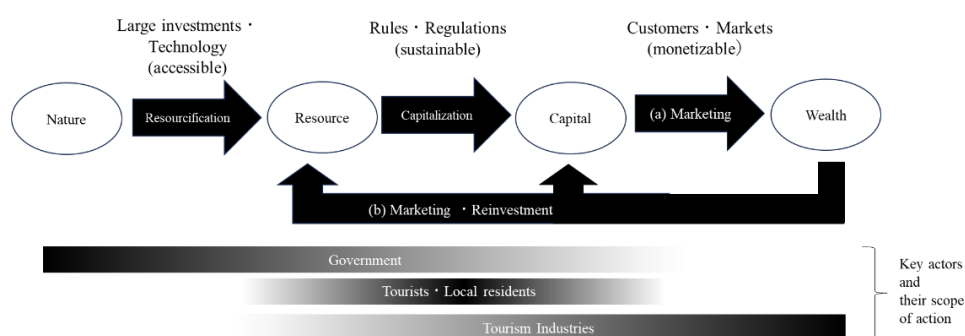


Figure 1. The Process of Transforming Tourism Resources

Note. Created and translated by Akaho (2026), based on Sato (2008, p. 18)

FINDINGS

The analysis indicated that the four concepts were applied at different stages. The phenomenon of overuse can be attributed to deficiencies in the institutional management of accessible resources, which are conceptualized as capitalization problems. For instance, in national parks, the absence of permanent residents means that the situation is not described as overtourism; however, the widening of hiking trails

or vegetation degradation is commonly framed as overuse. The term "overuse" is seldom employed to denote errors in market selection (marketization). Conversely, "underuse" signifies the deprivation of access to resources and exemplifies a failure of resourcification. For instance, it has been employed to describe circumstances such as the disappearance of hiking trails due to vegetation overgrowth, resource loss, or persistent non-utilization.

Additionally, it is noteworthy that in instances of resource failure, or underuse, as termed, the operant resource does not possess the effectivity to access the operand resource, rather than the converse. Even when the operant resource possesses the effectivity to access the operand resource, if the operand resource itself becomes inaccessible—that is, in cases of depletion or extinction—it is also recognized as a form of "overtourism" in a broad sense.

A synthesis of the aforementioned phenomena reveals that, in contrast to their conventional connotations, overtourism and undertourism encompass asymmetrical stages. Similarly, overuse and underuse indicate failures occurring at different stages (see Table 1).

Table 1. Terminology and Failure Situations for Each Stage

	Resoucification	Capitalization	Marketization
Overtourism	Failure	Failure	Failure
Overuse		Failure	
Undertourism		Failure	Failure
Underuse	Failure	Failure	

Note. Created by Author

Akaho (2026) also noted that in cases of failed capitalization, either only operant resources or only operand resources are capitalized, or both remain linked as resources. This results in a fleeting connection that never reaches the stage of market transformation into wealth. Regions engaging in sustainable tourism, as illustrated in Figure 1(Marketing), have been observed to prepare meticulously for successful marketing endeavors. This preparation involves the strategic selection and guidance of operant resources that can be capitalized, a process that is initiated from the perspective of wealth generation (Figure 1 (a)Marketing). Alternatively, regions may choose to capitalize on their own operand resources for the benefit of such customers (Figure1 (b) Marketing), as shown in Figure 2. Undertourism is not merely a state where the market cannot generate wealth. It is a negative term because it sometimes causes external diseconomies through transactions outside the market. For example, when an inadequately skilled skier (an uncapitalized operant resource) skis off-piste (an uncapitalized operand resource), it can lead to accidents such as getting lost, thereby generating external costs in the form of rescue efforts and expenses.

IMPLICATIONS OR CONCLUSION

According to the findings of resource studies, this study delineates the concepts of overtourism and undertourism as problems of capitalization and marketization, respectively. The study further posits that overuse can be considered a failure of capitalization, and underuse can be regarded as a failure of resourcification.

In accordance with resource studies, it is posited that the presence of specific actors who are expected to assume a primary role at each stage is a fundamental assumption of the model (see Figure 1). However, a thorough review of extant research on these four concepts indicates that the scope of application and usage contexts assumed for each term are not necessarily identical; each has a distinct range of applicability. Moreover, by directing our attention toward the characterization of actors who are expected to exercise agency in each phenomenon, the challenge of resource conversion—or, more specifically, resolving underuse—requires a perspective that views humans as Homo Economicus. Conversely, the capitalization of operant resources necessitates the conceptualization of humans as

Homo Sociologicus. Furthermore, the capitalization of operant resources indicates the necessity for a theoretical framework that considers humans as Homo Symbolicus.

Empirically substantiating these theoretical assumptions through a mere literature review is inherently limited. However, given the inherently interdisciplinary nature of tourism studies, which integrates a diverse array of academic disciplines, this issue can be posited as a significant research topic that merits further exploration.

By elucidating these conceptual distinctions and their stages of emergence, the study facilitates a more precise identification of the targets, timing, and responsible actors for policy intervention.

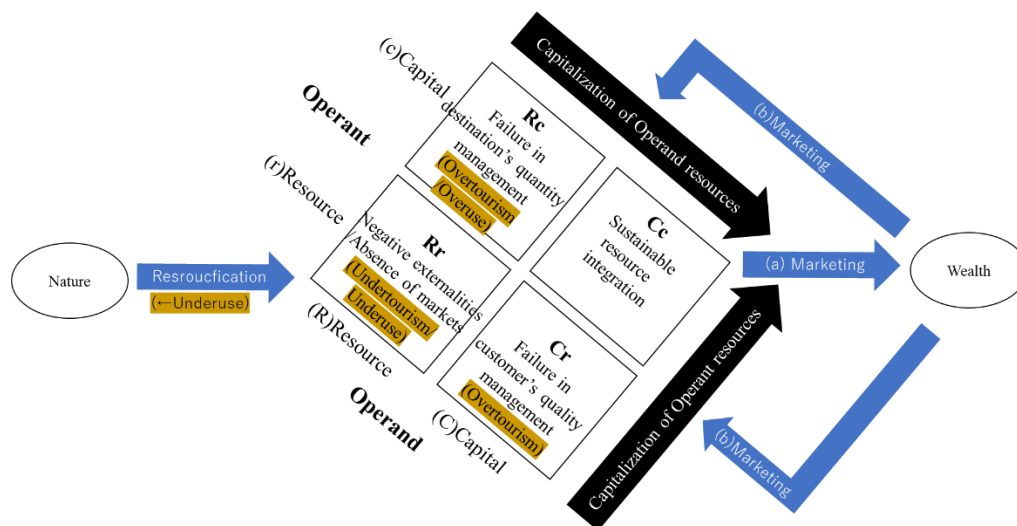


Figure 2. Resource-Capital Nexus Framework for Capitalization

Note. Created by Author based on Akaho (2026)

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