

Tourism Acceptance Score:

A validated scale to measure residents' sentiments and perceived tourism impact on their quality of life

Background and rationale

Despite global economic, political, social and environmental crises, the tourism industry is proving resilient. The insatiable demand for leisure travel is reflected in continued growth and record levels of international tourist arrivals. While this is in line with the growth aspirations of the tourism industry and the economic benefits are being realised, a triple bottom line sustainability imbalance is emerging and the desired transformation towards more balanced and inclusive destination development post COVID-19 is still lagging behind. As tipping points are discussed and growing imbalances between guests and residents are observed, discussions on overtourism continue and questions on social carrying capacity gain further momentum (Milano et al., 2022). These (perceived) imbalances and the associated negative impacts on the quality of life of local communities have recently led to anti-tourism attitudes among local residents, developing into social unrest and ultimately *tourismphobia*. Residents feel neglected in the development of the destination and worry about, among other things, resource exploitation (e.g., living space, housing prices, water shortages), *Disneyfication* and, ultimately, loss of identity. Social movement activism and riots that started before the COVID-19 pandemic, especially in historic centres and large European city destinations such as Venice, Barcelona or Amsterdam (Koens et al., 2018; 2019), have moved in recent years to more rural and coastal areas (e.g., Balearic and Canary Islands) (Rejón-Guardia et al., 2020). Emerging overtourism tendencies in rural areas were particularly evident during the COVID-19 pandemic, when lockdowns and restrictions were lifted and residents yearned for nature experiences in open spaces with little human interaction.

Sustainable destinations require strong communities and residents' unanimous commitment to tourism development (Eisenstein & Schmücker, 2021; Muler Gonzales et al., 2018). This does not mean that residents conditionally accept tourism for economic purposes, but rather understand the tourism industry's positive contribution to their own quality of life (e.g., infrastructure development, nature and culture conservation). While previous research has mostly considered residents from an economic perspective (e.g., labour market conditions and potentials), the lens has turned to residents' sentiments and their perceived impacts of tourism on their places of residence (Eisenstein & Schmücker, 2020; Rasoolimanesh & Seyfi, 2020; Šegota et al., 2022). Although academic interest in issues related to overtourism and residents' sentiments is not new, empirical studies have been scarce and a reliable indicator to measure residents' acceptance of tourism has been lacking (Seeler &

Eisenstein, 2024; Milano et al., 2022). The overall aim of this research was to contribute to filling this research gap by developing and validating a scale that allows the measurement of tourism acceptance among residents. The study also aimed to achieve spatial and temporal comparability through a high degree of standardisation and practical applicability. Thus, the research contributes theoretically to the debate on overtourism, methodologically through the development of a standardised and validated scale, and practically through the identification of patterns and influencing factors.

Research methods and scale development

Following theoretical scale development and pilot testing, a first nationwide study was conducted in June / July 2019 among Germans aged 16-74 to measure the status quo of tourism acceptance. Since then, the study has not only been repeated annually nationwide to validate the scale, but has also been introduced at other destination levels (regions, cities, municipalities) to test its applicability. Since its introduction in 2019, the scale has been tested in more than 100 German destinations, and time comparisons are possible for around 30 German destinations. Each study employed a non-probability quota sampling strategy, with web-access and telephone panels used to gain access. The interlocked quota was slightly adjusted over time to achieve the most representative samples possible for each destination. Age, gender, regional distribution and highest level of education were used as interlocked quota criteria. While web-access panels are sufficient to obtain representative samples at national level, they have limitations at regional and city level. For this reason, hybrid survey methods were used and telephone interviews (landline and mobile) were conducted in addition to online surveys. This approach also made it possible to reach the German population aged 16 and over without age limitation.

A fully standardised survey was used and the questions were asked identically over time. At the heart of the survey are two questions that measure the acceptance of tourism among residents on two dimensions: The first dimension measures the perceived impact on the place of residence, the so-called Tourism Acceptance Score place of Residence (TAS-R); the second dimension measures the perceived impact of tourism on the residents personally, the so-called Tourism Acceptance Score Personally (TAS-P). Inspired by the well-known Net Promoter Score (Reichheld, 2003), respondents were asked to rate these perceived impacts on a scale from 1 (mostly negative) to 5 (mostly positive). A 'don't know' option was also included. A simple formula is used to calculate the two TAS scores. Here, the *detractors* (Low-2 = sum of scores 1 and 2) are subtracted from the *promoters* (Top-2 = sum of scores 4 and 5). The score can range from +100, in which case all residents would perceive the impact of tourism as positive, to -100, in which case no support for tourism in the place of residence would be reported. Additional questions were asked to allow a deeper analysis of potential patterns or influencing factors. These include, among others, socio-demographic factors, frequency of contact

with guests, economic benefits from tourism, attitudes to numbers of guests by type of guest. It is important to note that all questions refer to the exact place of residence, not the region or only to destinations with high tourism intensity. This approach allows for representative samples covering entire regions or countries and a more realistic and comprehensive picture of the perceived impacts of tourism.

Selected key results

The results of the population representative studies at different destination levels show that there is no nationwide problem with tourism acceptance among Germans and positive TAS scores were derived. However, the spatial and temporal comparisons since 2019 in more than 100 German destinations reveal the following key findings:

- TAS-R scores are (significantly) higher than TAS-P scores. This shows that tourism is understood as an important economic driver, but not as a supporter of the quality of life of local residents. Further insights into the perceived negative and positive impacts support this finding. While the majority of residents in all destinations surveyed consider tourism to be an important driver of economic well-being and a contributor to the image of the destination, a much smaller proportion of the population is aware of tourism's contribution to (leisure) infrastructure, local supply or quality of life in general.
- The time comparison shows a strong decrease in relation to TAS-R, while TAS-P remains relatively stable. This is particularly interesting given that the first measurement at the national level was carried out in 2019, before the COVID-19 pandemic, when there were discussions about overtourism and low tourism acceptance was often associated with high tourism intensity. However, during the COVID-19 pandemic, when tourism intensity was also lower, tourism acceptance was lower and there was actually little tourism. A stabilisation of the TAS-R score was found in the 2024 study and further studies are needed to monitor the development over time.
- Although there is no evidence of nationwide problems with the acceptance of tourism, there are large regional differences and local overtourism tendencies. Coastal regions in particular suffer from low levels of tourism acceptance, with TAS-P scores being negative in some coastal regions and on some islands.
- Empirical results show that the acceptance of tourism is significantly higher among German city dwellers than among those living in rural areas. This finding contradicts

previous (popular) scientific discussions and media presence on overtourism tendencies and impacts, which focus on (European) urban destinations.

- Overall, the results show that there are no one-size-fits-all solutions to mitigate negative impacts and increase local acceptance of tourism. Instead, destination-specific methods and tools are needed to support inclusive and sustainable tourism destination development in line with urban and regional development.

Conclusions

The success and competitiveness of a destination depends heavily on the satisfaction of local residents and their attitudes towards tourism infrastructure and demand in their place of residence (Seeler & Eisenstein, 2024). Recent events and tensions, expressed in anti-tourism movements among local residents, arising from (perceived) imbalances and negative impacts of tourism, demonstrate the urgent need to ensure that tourism development is in harmony with local populations. Although research interest in understanding residents' sentiments has increased and destination management organisations are considering participatory approaches and the involvement of different stakeholders, such interest has been mainly economically driven or conceptual in nature (Eisenstein & Schmücker, 2021). The introduced Tourism Acceptance Score (TAS) is the first standardised measurement tool that empirically advances the understanding of local residents' perceptions of tourism development and impacts. The standardised tool not only facilitates spatial and temporal comparisons, thus supporting the understanding of patterns and the identification of influencing factors on a methodological and theoretical level, but also provides important insights and added value to destination practitioners. Understanding the status quo of tourism acceptance within the own destination and identifying influencing factors to derive appropriate measures to mitigate (perceived) negative impacts supports sustainable destination development. With the progression from destination marketing to management and finally to stewardship organisations (Høegh-Guldberg et al., 2021) comes a new understanding and expansion of responsibilities. From a tourism perspective, destinations are no longer reduced to visitor experience spaces, but rather living spaces where guests become temporary residents. This also requires a better understanding of tourism's contribution to the quality of life of local residents and comprehensive destination development approaches that simultaneously ensure urban and tourism destination development. While the Tourism Acceptance Scale has been comprehensively tested in Germany, future research is needed to validate the scale in an international context. In addition, qualitative approaches may be useful to gain a deeper understanding of destination-specific and subjective issues that influence tourism acceptance.

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