

# **PERCEPTIONS OF TOURISM: A STUDY OF RESIDENTS' ATTITUDES TOWARDS TOURISM IN THE CITY OF GIRONA**

## **ABSTRACT**

Socio-cultural impacts of tourism have been widely researched within a Social Exchange theoretical framework, yet it seems that this theory could be neglecting those more emotional elements, which at the same time could be considered key to understand how tourism affects the society. Therefore, this thesis looks at the Social Exchange Theory from a different perspective and focuses on those less rational influencing factors that could be shaping residents' attitudes towards tourism.

Based on six main constructs, a quantitative survey-based research is developed in the small city of Girona with the purpose to broaden the versatility of the theory, with the support of in-depth exploratory interviews. Thus, an exhaustive study of the influences that attachment to communities, involvement in the tourism industry and personal benefits derived from tourism could have on residents' perceptions is developed. This research suggests that those smaller tourism destinations might mirror themselves in those close big tourism destinations and thus, residents' opinions and attitudes seem to be influenced by the situations lived in these larger tourism destinations. Moreover, this research stresses the importance of interactions and relationships between tourists and residents to boost personal benefits from tourism. Finally, results show how those attached citizens tend to support tourism development, which could be explained by the proudness they feel when others value what for them is home.

## **INTRODUCTION**

Tourism is proven to be very important for the global economic development (UNWTO, 2017; WTTC, 2017), yet it does not only affect the economy of a destination, but also its environment, its culture, and its society. This thesis focuses on those socio-cultural aspects of tourism as it aims at contributing to generate knowledge on the residents' perceptions of tourism. Several studies focused on socio-cultural impacts of tourism (e.g. Andereck, Valentine, Knopf, & Vogt, 2005; Gursoy & Rutherford, 2004; Nunkoo & So, 2016) are underpinned by the Social Exchange Theory (here and after referred to as SET), which states that in any interaction, there will be an exchange of resources only if individuals perceive that they will gain something from it (Andereck et al., 2005; Gursoy & Rutherford, 2004). However, this theory has been criticized for neglecting those more emotional elements of relationships (e.g. Andereck et al., 2005). Therefore, while this research uses SET as a theoretical framework, it aims at turning the attention towards how residents feel and think regarding tourism.

While some authors argue that research is overly done in rural areas (e.g. Gursoy, Jurowski, & Uysal, 2002), tourism in small European cities is expected to experience a continuous tourism growth in the following future (Bellini & Pasquinelli, 2017), which stresses the need for developing more studies in small urban destinations. With this purpose, this research is developed in Girona, a small city located in the north-east of Spain.

While in some destinations, residents' have express their unrests caused by tourism (e.g. Burgen, 2017; Coldwell, 2017); Girona does not suffer from major conflicts between residents and tourism. However, some voices of concern have aroused and few banners against tourism have appeared in centric neighbourhoods of the city (e.g. Carreras & Pastells, 2017; Pastells, 2017).

With the purpose of generating knowledge on why these manifestations might be happening, the following research question is formulated:

***How do residents of Girona perceive tourism? And what are the possible reasons behind these perceptions?***

This paper aims at contributing to a deeper understanding of some of the possible reasons influencing residents' attitudes towards tourism in a small tourism destination. Moreover, it aims at expanding the existing literature on SET, as it pursues at incorporating more emotional elements.

## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

As it will be further developed in the methodology section, this study is conceptualized as a quantitative survey-based research. Therefore, the theoretical background supporting the survey needs to be very strong to be able to measure concepts in the most accurate manner (validity). According to this, the theoretical framework is designed as the construction of each of the theoretical blocks sustaining the survey. Moreover, qualitative interviews are used to assist in identifying those elements that might be more relevant for the residents of Girona.

This thesis adopts a reductionist approach (Ratner, 2012), as it tries to explain those attitudes of residents through few very carefully selected factors that are expected to have greater explanatory power. Following this line of thought, and based both on existing literature and the exploratory interviews, the six constructs under study and their expected relationships are outlined in Figure 1 and exhibited in the following:

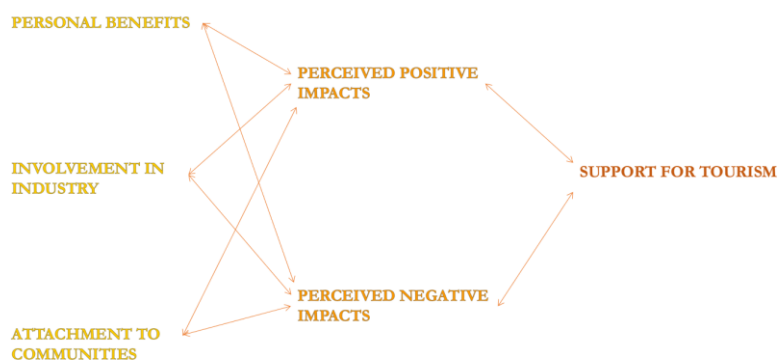


Figure 1 Expected relationships between constructs

Support towards tourism is considered key for a sustainable tourism development (Deery, Jago, & Fredline, 2012; Gursoy et al., 2002; Williams, Penrose, & Hawkes, 1998). Literature suggests that support towards tourism is positively influenced by the perceived positive impacts of tourism (e.g. Gursoy & Rutherford, 2004; Jurowski, Uysal, & Williams, 1997; Nunkoo & So, 2016). On the other hand, while existing studies find a negative relationship between perceived negative impacts and support, it is not statistically significant, and thus, not conclusive (e.g. Gursoy et al., 2002; Gursoy & Rutherford, 2004; Nunkoo & So, 2016).

Regarding to elements that could influence these perceptions, existing studies found a positive relationship between personal benefits derived from tourism and perceived benefits of tourism (e.g. Andereck et al., 2005; Jurowski et al., 1997; Kayat, 2002; Perdue et al., 1990). Moreover, it is suggested that there is a negative relationship between personal benefits from tourism and support towards tourism (e.g. Nunkoo & So, 2016; Perdue et al., 1990).

Involvement in the tourism industry is built as a combination of knowledge about tourism, contact with tourists, and participation in the tourism decision-making process, as Andereck et al. (2005) suggested that these elements could be considered involvement in the tourism industry. Based on literature on these three elements and on the exploratory interviews, it is expected that the construct positively relates with perceived positive impacts, and negatively relates with perceived negative impacts.

Finally, attachment to communities is expected to be positively related with perceived positive impacts (e.g. Gursoy et al., 2002; Gursoy & Rutherford, 2004; Jurowski, Uysal, & Williams, 1997), although results are not conclusive regarding to its relationship with perceived negative impacts.

With the purpose of building an accurate and theoretically grounded questionnaire, each construct was itemized into relevant and specific questions. Table 1 shows how each variables is operationalized.

*Table 1 Variables and Indicators*

<b>VARIABLES</b>	<b>INDICATORS</b>
<i>SUPPORT FOR TOURISM</i>	Tourism is one of the most important industry for my community Tourism helps my community grow Tourism helps my community grow in the right direction Tourism plays an important economic role in my community I am proud that tourists are coming to my community I support the development of tourism as it is vital to my community My community should try to attract more tourists
<i>PERCEIVED NEGATIVE IMPACTS FROM TOURISM</i>	Increased prices of goods and services Increased prices of rents

	<p>Increased noises</p> <p>Increased congestions</p> <p>Arousal of souvenir shops and cafes aimed at tourists instead of establishments aimed at locals</p>
<i>PERCEIVED POSITIVE IMPACTS FROM TOURISM</i>	<p>Increased employment opportunities for locals</p> <p>Increased opportunities for local businesses</p> <p>Improved appearance of the city</p> <p>Increased opportunities for leisure</p> <p>Increased opportunities for socializing</p>
<i>ATTACHMENT TO COMMUNITY</i>	<p>Length of residence</p> <p>Feelings of moving away</p> <p>Feeling of being “at home”</p> <p>Interest on what is going on</p>
<i>INVOLVEMENT IN THE TOURISM INDUSTRY</i>	<p>Level of knowledge about tourism development in Girona</p> <p>Level of knowledge about tourists in Girona</p> <p>Level of knowledge on tourism impacts</p> <p>Development of friendship with tourists</p> <p>Frequency of visitation to tourism areas</p> <p>Involvement in decision-making process</p>
<i>PERSONAL BENEFITS FROM TOURISM</i>	<p>Meet more people and learn from other cultures</p> <p>There are more bars and restaurants I can go to</p> <p>Employed thanks to tourism</p> <p>Tourism contributes to household income</p>

The indicators selected to measure each of the constructs are based on literature and on the interviews, which were used to see which questions were more clearly understood by interviewees as well as which specific topics could be of more relevance for the specific case of Girona.

## METHODOLOGY

This thesis is guided by a post-positivism standpoint. Hence, it is acknowledged that reality exists but cannot be known in a perfect manner (critical realism) and that, even if the researcher aims at being objective, there can always be not controlled interferences between what is analysed and the researcher (modified objectivism), which will inevitably lead to some degree of subjectivism. Following this line of thought, it is acknowledged that not all the variables can be controlled, and hence, the methodological standpoint guiding this research is the modified/manipulative. In accordance to these considerations, the research is designed as a correlational research based on a survey.

Therefore, with the purpose of developing a theoretically grounded survey, exploratory interviews were first aimed at identifying those more relevant elements for Girona residents, which jointly with

an in-depth literature review were the main inputs for building a questionnaire. Moreover, before distributing the survey, a pilot test was run to assess validity issues. Finally, the survey was distributed and analysed as it is described in the following chapter. The research process followed can be seen outlined in Figure 2.

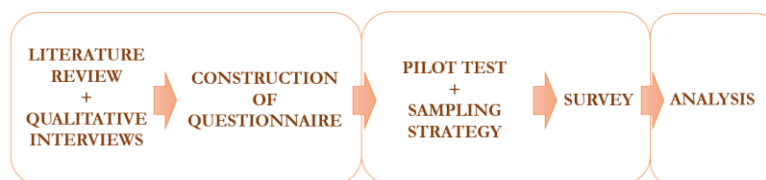


Figure 2 Outline of the research

The design of the questionnaire was aimed at obtaining high rates of response and at achieving high degrees of validity and reliability. As the questionnaire was distributed in Catalan, Spanish and English, efforts were made to reduce language biases. Since the literature in which the questions are based is in English, the questionnaire was first build in this language and then translated to Catalan and Spanish by the researcher using the inputs obtained from the qualitative interviews, considering also those emotions and connotations that questions may convey. Moreover, to reduce validity and reliability issues, questions were formulated in a very clear and simple manner and an attention-check question was incorporated for validity reasons.

Due to the knowledge on statistics of the researcher, the statistics methods used are simple. In this manner, Factor analysis is run to assess the validity of the measurement scales, and Cronbach alpha to assess their reliability. Finally, bivariate analyses are run to assess the relationships between variables.

## ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

The analyses of data are based on 253 completed surveys. Demographics showed an overrepresentation of women and of some neighbourhoods, such as Centre or Girona Sud, which could bias the external validity of the results. Each item was individually evaluated before running the analyses and it was observed that the item on length of residence could not be included in the analyses because the scale of measurement was not well constructed. Moreover, after running a factor analysis, the item measuring frequency of visitation to tourism areas appeared to be loading with more than one factor, and thus, it was disregarded.

After running a final factor analysis, six factors explained the 67,8% of the variance. However, the scale measuring involvement in the tourism industry resulted to be invalid, as it appeared to be formed only by those items measuring knowledge and involvement in the decision-making process. Moreover, friendship with tourists resulted to be measuring personal benefits instead of involvement in the tourism industry; and the item “I can go more to bars and restaurants” resulted to be measuring

perceived positive impacts instead of personal benefits. A decision was made not to disregard these two items because, even if they appeared to be measuring something different from what was expected, they were still measuring something relevant for the research. Finally, Cronbach alpha stated that the resulting constructs were reliable.

Descriptive statistics of each of the resulting variables showed how the respondents tend to be supportive towards tourism and to perceive high levels of benefits from it, yet perceptions relating to costs seem to be more disperse. Moreover, most of the respondents appeared to be attached to their communities; and only few claimed to be personally benefited from it.

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

After running the bivariate analyses among the variables, those statistically significant relationships are described and discussed. Figure 3 outlines the statistically significant correlations found between variables. As it was expected, perceived positive impacts were positively related with support towards tourism, while perceived negative impacts were negatively related with tourism. While existing research (e.g. Gursoy et al., 2002; Nunkoo & Gursoy, 2017) found the latter relationship to be non-significant, in this research it appeared to be significant. This suggests that the influence that perceived costs of tourism have on support towards the industry may be stronger in Girona than in other communities. Based on the qualitative interviews, it is suggested in this research that a possible influencing factor for these relationships to be stronger could be the perceived impacts of tourism in close popular tourism destinations, as interviewees tended to compare the situation of Girona with those lived in tourism destinations such as Barcelona.

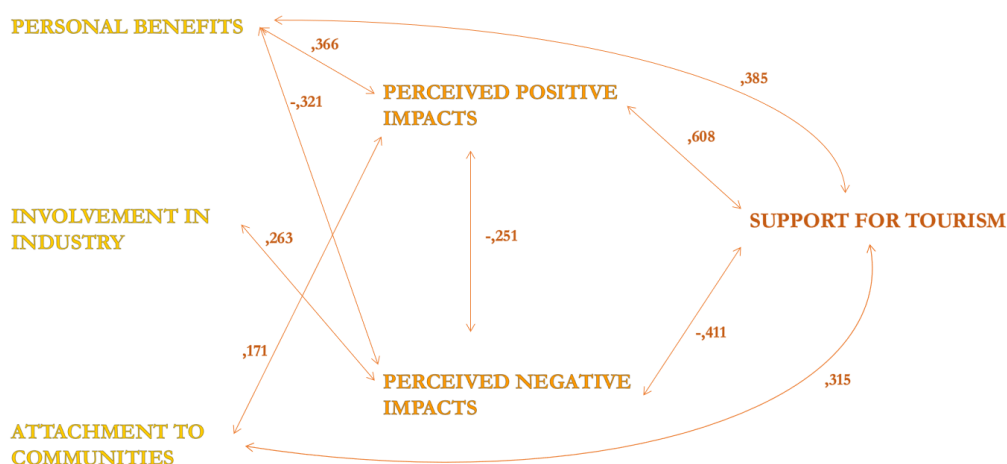


Figure 3 Statistically significant correlations between variables

Personal benefits appeared to be negatively related with perceived negative impacts, and positively correlated with perceived positive impacts. Moreover, it was directly correlated with support towards tourism. As mentioned above, friendship with tourists resulted to be a defining element of personal

benefits. The importance of this finding is stressed because economic personal benefits seem to be easily operationalized (Wang & Pfister, 2008) while it seems blurrier to operationalize those non-economic ones. Thus, friendship is suggested as a possible personal non-economic benefit to measure the variable in a more holistic and accurate manner.

On the other hand, knowledge about tourism and participation in the decision-making process were positively correlated with negative impacts and not significantly related with positive impacts. Although interviews were not very conclusive, it could be the case that those citizens with less knowledge on tourism are well informed about its positive impacts, but not aware of its costs. However, more research should be done, as these results are not sufficient for making any suggestion.

Finally, attachment to communities appeared to be positively related with positive impacts and directly positively related with support, which seems to be supported by literature (e.g. Gursoy et al., 2002; Gursoy & Rutherford, 2004). Based on the qualitative interviews it is suggested that these relationships could be caused by both the willingness of attached residents to see their city progress (Andereck et al., 2005), and also by the proudness they experience when they see that their city is being valued and recognized by others.

This research has contributed to expand the knowledge on SET, especially relating to covering those more emotional elements, as it is suggested that friendship with tourists could be a good measurement for personal benefits; that proudness could be a possible explanation for the positive relationship between attachment and support; and that costs in close popular tourism destinations could intensify the relationship between perceived costs of tourism and the support towards it.

Moreover, this study also contributes in generating knowledge about those small urban destinations that seem to be neglected by existing literature. This research suggests that communication efforts should consider specific concerns for Girona residents, such as the relevance that the impacts in close destinations for residents; as well as more spaces of interaction could be beneficial for the city as more personal relationships could arise, yet the authenticity of Girona should not be neglected, but rather promote it.

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