

Understanding tourists' reactions to overtourism: a netnographic analysis of online discourses

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Abstract

This study explores tourists' perceptions of overcrowding in a nature-based destination and the role of overtourism in shaping the sustainability-related experiences shared online. Drawing on the perceived destination adaptation and tourists' psychological reaction behaviors (i.e. approach, avoidance, and tolerance) theoretical fundamentals, this study investigates the tourists' online discourse related to the triple bottom line dimensions of sustainability (i.e. environmental, socio-cultural and economic). The study adopts a novel qualitative methodological approach in the sustainable tourism landscape by running a netnographic analysis on a sample of 1027 TripAdvisor reviews. The main findings confirm the negative impacts of overtourism on the tourists' experience, indicating the presence of other tourists at the attraction as one of the main reasons of online complaints. However, while results exhibit the presence of tourists' avoidance reaction (i.e. the negative reaction to mass tourism), tourists did not show an approach reaction (i.e. positive feelings about crowding places) in their reviews. Instead, a compromise reaction was found among respondents, with some reporting great experiences even on busy attractions and others suggesting how to avoid the crowds. Results also exhibit how the paradoxes of sustainable tourism are not fully recognized by tourists, with reviewers complaining online about overtourism tending to never acknowledge to be part of the problem, and often suggesting their peers to visit the attraction on a less busy time, thus contributing to increased crowding. Destinations suffering of overcrowding are thus advised to actively monitor their reviews and respond to try mitigating the potential negative effects of peers' suggestions.

Keywords: overtourism; overcrowding; netnography; sustainability; reaction behaviors; online reviews; Iceland.

1 Introduction and theoretical background

Overtourism is defined as an the “acceleration and growth of tourism supply and demand, the use of tourism destinations' natural ecological goods, the destruction of their cultural attractions and negative impacts on their social and economic

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environments” (Mihalic, 2020, p.1). Such high concentration of visitors in a given area has the potential to become unsustainable, with significant impacts on local resources and populations, and the tourists’ overall destination evaluation. This situation gives rise to concerns regarding the sustainability of tourism growth (e.g., Papadopoulou et al., 2023; Ramkissoon, 2023). Sustainable tourism aims at achieving a balanced approach to the triple bottom line dimensions of economic, environmental, and socio-cultural of tourism development (Mihalic, 2020). Among the three dimensions, the environmental one has been mainly explored, while the socio-cultural dimension is also gaining prominence, particularly in the context of destinations facing challenges due to overtourism (Helgadóttir et al., 2019; Mihalic, 2020). In this vein, research in the field of sustainability in tourism has increasingly focused on social issues, primarily examining the perspectives of residents (e.g., Scarpi et al., 2022), host communities (Zhang et al., 2017), and small tourism enterprises (Zhang & Zhang, 2018). However, it is noteworthy that the tourist perspective has been largely absent from the existing literature on the social dimension (Aydın & Alvarez, 2020). Despite a few exceptions that encompass the three dimensions of sustainability for tourism, there is a need for more in depth-research that includes the socio-cultural dimension together with the well-explored environmental one, as perceived by tourists. While residents are typically the initial parties to voice concerns regarding the detrimental impacts of elevated tourist densities on their quality of life and the surrounding environment (Gössling et al, 2020), tourists have also begun to express similar sentiments, discussing online the unfavourable consequences of overtourism on their own destination experiences (Satorsdottir & Hall 2021). Integrating the tourists’ perspective may help develop key insights on enhancing end user engagement (i.e., tourists) in sustainable tourism, which is key as for any kind of sustainable consumption. The concept of perceived destination adaptation by tourists is defined as the mental state in which an individual assesses the acceptability of change to a particular destination's features (Jacobsen et al, 2019). An extensive tourists’ destination adaptation to fit mass tourism can trigger positive (i.e., approach) and negative (i.e., avoidance) psychological reactions from tourists depending on either the confirmation or disconfirmation of prior place beliefs (Papadopoulou et al., 2022). Building on the conceptualization of the sustainability paradoxes of tourism (Power et al., 2024) and the theoretical fundamentals elucidating the psychological factors influencing how tourists cope with and manage their perceptions of overcrowding (e.g. Papadopoulou et al., 2022) this study aims at evaluating the subsequent impacts on tourists’ post-consumption online behaviors such as sharing sustainability-related reviews.

Given online communities strongly influence tourists and their decision-making processes (Volo, 2010) they deserve attention from destination marketers. This study adopts a netnographic approach to explore the sustainability-related online discourse of tourists reviewing their experience after visiting an overcrowded destination.

Netnography is getting increasingly attention from social scientists, including marketing and sociology (Bartl et al., 2016). Nevertheless, it has still to be fully legitimized by tourism scholar (Mkono and Markwell, 2014; Tavakolia & Mura, 2018). Netnography is less obtrusive and more naturalistic than traditional ethnographic

methods, helping providing information about consumers' patterns of online behavior (Tavakoli & Wijesinghe, 2019).

2 Research method

Context of the research: Iceland has been chosen as the context of analysis as a destination now suffering from overtourism (Helgadóttir et al., 2019; Sæþórsdóttir & Hall, 2021), although being long considered a destination with difficult access (Sæþórsdóttir & Hall, 2021). Iceland has experienced an exponential growth in tourism arrivals, starting from 303,000 arrivals in 2000 and reaching 2 million in 2019 (Icelandic Tourist Board, 2023). This growth had negative consequences not only for residents' quality of life but also on overall tourists' satisfaction (Sæþórsdóttir & Hall, 2021).

Data collection: To get an in-depth understanding of tourists' opinions, meanings and feelings, a netnographic analysis of online reviews was conducted (Kozinets & Gretzel, 2024; Mkono & Tribe, 2017; Yang et al., 2023). The procedure developed by Kozinets (2019) and Kozinets and Gretzel (2024) was followed. In the investigation phase, the aim of the research was defined, after a detailed review of the literature with the definition of the research question. In the immersion phase in the reviews of TripAdvisor that lasted from June to July 2024 the perceptions and opinions of the authors were recorded in an immersion journal, that was kept throughout all the phases, i.e. also during the analysis. We selected those categories of attractions in line with the ecotourism and naturalistic context of Iceland. We further select a 12-month seasonality, choosing reviews from 2023, and with pictures attached. In the end, the sample totaled 1027 reviews. After that, results were transferred to Nvivo and a thematic analysis was conducted (Gioia et al., 2013).

Preliminary findings

Preliminary results show that the presence of other tourists in the attraction is one of the main reasons of complaints from users.

The analysis revealed also that tourists have different ways to react to overtourism. On the one hand, some reviewers describe the excessive presence of other people as underwhelming, with a negative impact on the overall experience. For instance, a visit to a renowned hot spring spa goes from a promised relaxing experience to a very stressful one because of a perceived excessive presence of people.

Other reviews not only complain about too many tourists, but actively suggest to avoid visiting that attraction, that has been spoilt by mass tourism and is thus not worth the visit. On the other hand, users mention the presence of "too many tourists" but they also recognize that the attraction "is worth to visit" nonetheless, whereas others, even though they didn't really appreciate the excessive presence of tourists, also expressed an understanding of the reason why the attraction is popular.

Therefore, many users accept the excessive popularity of Icelandic attractions, but use their reviews to suggest future tourists to visit these attractions at unusual times, when fewer people are present.

Other social sustainable topics that were discussed on TripAdvisor regard the accessibility of destinations, mainly criticizing the lack of attention to people with disabilities in some attractions. The cultural aspect of sustainability was mentioned in the reviews analyzed, but especially in relations with museums or attractions with a high cultural significance. Particularly appreciated was the possibility to experience and learn more about the local culture.

Finally, the mention of other people also touches upon issues of environmental sustainability, like the spoiling of the ecological variety in the attraction. In this case, reviewers especially criticize other tourists for their irresponsible behavior.

In a limited amount, the presence of garbage in the attraction is also mentioned in the reviews.

Interestingly, however, the problem that an increasing number of tourists could cause to fragile environments, like glaciers, has sometimes been neglected, in line with the so-called Last Chance Tourism (Lemelin et al., 2010).

5. Discussion and conclusions

The preliminary results of this study confirm previous studies showing the negative impact that overtourism has on the tourist experience (Sæflórsdóttir & Hall, 2021). Moreover, the preliminary analysis interestingly showed that paradoxes of sustainable tourism are not recognized by tourists (Power et al., 2024). This preliminary research, thus, contributes to sustainable tourism literature, through an in-depth understanding of tourists' perceptions and reactions to overtourism.

The main limitations of this study are related to the nature of the methodology employed. Moreover, the choice of a single community could have limited the interpretation of the phenomenon. Other social media, like e.g. Instagram, could capture the opinions of younger generational cohorts.

References are available upon request