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## Social sustainability of tourism in Iceland: A qualitative inquiry

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### ABSTRACT

Sustainability research in tourism increasingly focuses on social issues such as the relationship between resident quality of life and community resilience through adaptive capacity. This study of resident and tourism relations in Iceland contributes to this growing body of literature. The research was supported by the Icelandic Tourist Board to meet the need to monitor the social sustainability of tourism in Iceland. Observation in public spaces showed disruption in daily routines for residents as physical infrastructure filled with tourists and the activities of tourism enterprises. In-depth interviews revealed residents' awareness of potential benefits and problems with tourism, but a positive experience of and attitude toward tourists. A concern for the well-being of tourists was a theme in the interviews. However, residents were critical of the tourism industry and tourism management in both the private and public sector and questioned the sustainability of tourism growth. This leads us to consider the concepts of quality of life and resilience and responsible tourism as aspects of how communities experience and cope with tourism. We conclude that social sustainability, understood as both procedural and substantive, is a useful concept in addressing issues in tourism development.

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Quality of life; resident-tourist interactions; attitudes toward tourism; resilience; substantive and procedural sustainability

## Introduction

The impacts of tourism have been a prominent topic in recent Western media reporting dissatisfaction of residents in various European cities (Bershidsky, 2019; Hunt, 2018). This is in the tradition of problematising mass tourism, described in early tourism studies as “hordes” of tourists descending upon communities (Turner & Ash, 1975). It is increasingly clear that tourism management and governance are key factors in mediating impacts and creating premises for sustainable tourism development. Collaboration is needed between the scholarly community, which coins concepts such as sustainable tourism, overtourism and resilience, and the travel industry, tourism authorities and the public to put in practice what is known about the multifaceted topic of sustainability (Lane, 2018).

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This study was conducted in Iceland (103.000 km<sup>2</sup>), an island destination in the North Atlantic where about 358.000 residents (Statistics Iceland, 2019) received 2.300.000 international tourists in 2018. The bulk of arrivals is through Keflavík airport, close to the capital Reykjavík, making the city centre one of the most visited sites in the country. The visitation is less the further away from this hub (Óladóttir, 2018, p. 5). In recent years Iceland has deliberately forged a future based on tourism (Burns, 2018) and the need to consider social sustainability here has become acute due to the tourism boom, in particular after 2010 in the wake of the 2008 financial collapse (Jóhannesson & Huijbens, 2013), such that tourism is now the country's largest industry. The Icelandic Tourist Board monitors the development and reported an average yearly growth rate of 24.3% international visitor arrivals 2010–2017, with a peak of 39% increase in the period of this research, between 2015 and 2016 (Frenč, 2016, 2018; Óladóttir, 2018, p. 5). This growth rate is neither sustainable nor feasible (Jóhannesson, 2015; Kristjánsdóttir, 2016; OECD, 2017) as it puts pressure on destination infrastructure and leads to concerns about the sustainability of the industry. This context leads us to the following research questions:

- (1) How do residents interact with tourists and what are their attitudes toward tourists and tourism?
- (2) How do residents experience and perceive destination development?
- (3) What concerns do residents voice about the development of tourism?

To date, research on the effects of tourism in Iceland has primarily focused on the natural environment, particularly the highlands and the main nature attractions (e.g. Cságoty, Sæþórsdóttir, & Ólafsdóttir, 2017; Marschall, Granquist, & Burns, 2017; Ólafsdóttir & Runnström, 2013; Schaller, 2014). Destinations towns in Iceland are, however, under studied, particularly regarding the impact of tourism and tourists on the residents.

Public discourse on tourism in Iceland is no longer characterised by near unanimous optimism about positive economic, social and cultural impacts. The media regularly reports on the negative impacts of tourism and bad behaviour of tourists such as off-road driving, defecating al fresco, camping on private property, vandalism, defrauding their hosts, and putting themselves at risk of physical harm through ignorance of the dangers in Icelandic nature (Ćirić, 2019; Morgunblaðið, 2019a, 2019b; Sigfúsdóttir, 2017; Sykes, 2014).

Following this introduction, the theoretical background of the study is outlined. Key concepts are identified and international research in this field discussed. The section on research methods describes and discusses the selection of methods for data collection and analysis. Results are summarised and discussed from a theoretical perspective, and the conclusion offers a brief summary of the lessons learned from the study for the future development of tourism in Iceland.

### ***Social sustainability of tourism***

The social, the people or equity pillar of the sustainability concept, is conceived in both substantive (ends) and procedural (means) terms. The substantive dimension refers broadly to the needs, rights and well-being of people, while the procedural concerns the means of achieving those ends such as access to information, democratic decision making, empowerment and democratic governance (Boström, 2012). Roca-Puig (2019)

highlights reciprocity and trust between business and society as fundamental to social sustainability, generally, which adds weight to responsible tourism and corporate social responsibility in tourism as a positive factor in resident quality of life (Mathew & Sreejesh, 2016).

The substantive dimension, that is the social impacts of tourism has been researched using quantitative methods, and correlations with various social variables such as gender, age, class, status and economy have been reviewed (Deery, Jago, & Fredline, 2012). Findings generally support the Social Exchange Theory tenet that positive attitude to tourism relates to perceived benefits, particularly economic benefits (Andereck, Valentine, Knopf, & Vogt, 2005; Garau-Vadell, Gutiérrez-Taño, & Díaz-Armas, 2019). While income from tourism is the most obvious social exchange factor contributing to resident satisfaction with tourism, factors such as resident subjective well-being and resident image of place are also important (Rivera, Croes, & Lee, 2016; Styliadis, Biran, Sit, & Szivas, 2014). Given this we focussed on residents who do not directly benefit economically from tourism.

Studies often postulate impact on the quality of life for residents in tourist destinations based on studying their attitudes concerning impacts on communities and the environment. Findings indicate as important that the residents experience increased quality of life through tourism development (Lundberg, 2017; Ribeiro, Pinto, Silva, & Woosnam, 2017). Quality of life is an inherently subjective experience of individual life satisfaction of which there are many indicators that must be weighted for their relative importance to residents to draw conclusions about the impacts of tourists and the tourism industry (Andereck & Nyaupane, 2011).

Ridderstaat, Croes, and Nijkamp (2016) describe the connection between quality of life and the development of tourism as a complex and mutual relationship of quality of life, tourism and economics criticising previous studies for not taking into account that quality of life influences the development of tourism. Resident experiences of sharing public space and public goods with tourists and tourism are highly relevant here. This refers to infrastructure and services developed for a community by taxpayers, such as transport system, police, search and rescue services, health services and cultural institutions and the built environment as a shared resource (Helgadóttir, 2018). Another issue is housing and the effect of tourism on the destination real estate market (Martin, Martinez, & Fernandez, 2018; Perles-Ribes, Ramón-Rodríguez, Vera-Rebollo, & Ivars-Baidal, 2017).

The issue of crowding has been a recurrent topic in tourism research since at least the early 1970s (Oklevik et al., 2019) and is currently treated as synonymous with the newer term of overtourism (Milano, Cheer, & Novelli, 2018; UNWTO, 2017). This focus leads to the assumption that society has certain tolerance limits, beyond the capacity for adaptation, that the development of tourism will inevitably reach, swinging the attitude of local residents from positive to negative (Canavan, 2014, p. 128). Milano et al. (2018) define overtourism "as the excessive growth of visitors leading to overcrowding in areas where residents suffer the consequences of temporary and seasonal tourism peaks, which have enforced permanent changes to their lifestyles, access to amenities and general well-being". This emerging critical debate on overtourism is not short on examples of conflicts between residents and tourists (e.g. Oklevik et al., 2019) emphasising the need to further research and address what is happening at this interface. One avenue to

understand this is through resilience. In this regard, the findings of Nunkoo and Ramkissoon (2012) showing the importance of residents' trust in the balance of perceived benefits and cost, their trust in government and empowerment in the face of tourism development, are important.

Tourism resilience refers to maintaining a destination community's overall quality of life at a desirable level (Lew & Cheer, 2018). Discussion of community resilience in relation to tourism is often in terms of decline, that is the negative impact of tourism industry decline for communities dependent upon tourism (Bec, McLennan, & Moyle, 2016). While the terms resilience and the social sustainability of tourism may seem synonymous, their differences and synergies are critical to understand. Resilience is procedural, as a means to the broader goal of sustainability (Farrell & Twining-Ward, 2005), while social sustainability equates with more substantive aspects (Adger, 2003). More recent discussions focus on resilience as the capacity to cope with change and sustainability as the more normative desire to mitigate or prevent change (Burns, 2018). The two terms clearly share goals and research perspectives (Lew, Ni, Wu, & Ng, 2018) that are pertinent to the discussion of tourism growth and quality of life for residents.

Residents experience various effects that should be considered in tourism planning and marketing (Andereck & Nyaupane, 2011; Canavan, 2014; Kim, Uysal, & Sirgy, 2013; Ridderstaat et al., 2016). Furthermore, residents are most affected by tourism "... in countries where tourist arrivals (as a percentage of country population) are large and rapidly growing" (Ivlevs, 2017, p. 608), suggesting that Icelandic residents are particularly likely to experience significant effects of tourism in line with the exponential growth in tourist arrivals in the post-crisis period 2008–2018.

### *Attitudes of Icelanders to travel and tourism*

Tourism was predicted to be crucial for diversification of the Icelandic economy in response to declining fisheries in the late 1990s (Baum, 1999). Local actors supported by municipal governments drove tourism development growth in the 1990s, while the national government adopted a laissez faire approach (Jóhannesson, 2015). Consequently little national infrastructure development took place, despite public funding of destination marketing for Iceland in collaboration with the travel industry (Jóhannesson & Huijbens, 2013).

Views differ on the extent locals benefits of the economic effects of tourism. Comparison of tax revenue from tourist arrivals in Iceland shows that the municipalities received far less revenue than the state and that only the largest and most visited municipalities had higher revenue than cost associated with tourism arrivals (Karlsson, Jóhannesson, & Pétursson, 2017). This may impact resident attitudes toward tourists and tourism as the municipality is the local government responsible for services and facilities that are important to the quality of residents' daily life and also used by tourists such as public swimming pools, outdoor recreation areas and public transport.

In recent years, the need to measure the attitudes of Icelanders to tourism growth and its impacts has become more recognised and in 2014 the Icelandic Tourism Board initiated the first research of this kind with a nationwide survey of resident attitudes toward tourists and tourism. The research question was: "What is the public opinion in Iceland to foreign tourists?" (Huijbens & Bjarnadóttir, 2015, p. 6). The respondents were 1200 people

throughout the country and Huijbens and Bjarnadóttir (2015, p. 55) concluded that “The picture emerging ... of the attitudes of Icelanders towards tourists and tourism is positive”. A third of the respondents, however, believed that the number of tourists in Iceland is too high (Huijbens & Bjarnadóttir, 2015), which called for further investigation.

This study goes beyond surveying attitudes to address two crucial indicators of social sustainability identified by Ridderstaat et al. (2016): Residents’ support of tourism as displayed in their behaviour toward tourists and the provision of amenities and access to facilities and services in their daily environment as well as potential concerns. Understanding the complexity of social sustainability means examining a dynamic situation where social situations and the tourism industry constantly evolve (Buckley, 2012). This calls for attention to the procedural dimension of social sustainability (Boström, 2012). A question is, therefore, how do local people relate to tourists and the tourism industry; that is, what is their interaction, experience and expectations of these two distinct but connected phenomena?

## Research methods and methodology

Attitudes are commonly measured quantitatively with satisfaction scales from applied social sciences and marketing (Tonge & Moore, 2007). The axis of satisfaction-dissatisfaction gives only a limited indication of the complex cultural and social effects so the subject must be approached from multiple angles, bearing in mind that there is no facit answer to the tolerance limits of society and culture (Kristjánsdóttir, Ólafsdóttir, & Ragnarsdóttir, 2018). This research was informed by phenomenology and follows qualitative research traditions. The effects of tourists and tourism on local people are, as previously mentioned, complicated and involve more factors than attitude. Thus, the research project addressed residents’ ideas of, and experiences with tourism.

Data were collected by observation and interviewing during field visits to four towns in the period from May to July 2015. The scope of data collection; that is, the sites, the number of observations and interviews was predetermined by contract with the sponsor, The Icelandic Tourism Board. Twenty-five randomly selected residents were invited to participate in an interview about their experience of the tourism industry and tourists. Interview questions were inspired by previous studies on the topic in Iceland (Huijbens & Bjarnadóttir, 2015) but were aimed more at resident’s interactions with tourists, and their view of tourists, tourism and their hometown as a destination.

## Research sites

Based on the main findings of a nationwide survey from 2014 (Huijbens & Bjarnadóttir, 2015), it was evident that the neighbourhood 101 in Reykjavík, the capital city, stood apart regarding resident attitudes toward tourism and was therefore chosen as a study site. Study sites outside Reykjavík were selected with a view to cover destinations at different stages in their development, different levels of visitation and including end-destinations as well as destinations characterised by through traffic. Hella on Route 1, the Ring road around Iceland, is a destination that large numbers of tourists pass through. Ísafjörður is a cruise destination but peripheral in terms of tourists travelling by car. Húsavík is an

end-destination with a well established key attraction and a large number of arrivals by car even though it is not on route 1 (Figure 1).

### Data collection

#### Observations

Field notes and photographs formed the observational data. Preliminary observations were made in each town to select locations where it was possible to monitor the traffic of tourists and locals in shared public spaces. Two researchers independently observed for one hour at a time, three times (morning, midday and evening) over two days giving a total of six hours of observations at each site. They noted the traffic and behaviour of people present in public spaces, the mode of travel, number of people and their activities, including usage of space and interactions.

A checklist was used to register situations where traffic was hindered or people could be considered endangered in some way. Photographs were taken from selected points of view every ten minutes during the observation. To safeguard anonymity in the analysis and dissemination of results, care was taken to ensure data was not traceable to individuals.

#### Interviews

Interview participants were selected among adult residents using the National Register for the relevant postcode. A simple random sample (Bernard, 2011) was obtained by listing all eligible residents alphabetically and assigning them numbers starting from 1 before



**Figure 1.** A map of Iceland showing the four research sites in relation to Keflavík airport, which receives 98.7% percent of international arrivals, and Route 1 (the “ring road” that circumnavigates the island and is the most popular tourist itinerary for self-driving). (Map made by Siti Amri, 2017)

selecting 30 random numbers using unsorted random integer sets (Random.org, 2019). This generated a call list, from which non-respondents were deleted after three attempts at contact by phone. For Reykjavík, the random list had to be enlarged twice, first by 20 additional random numbered listings and then again by 15 in order to fill the required number of participants. The highest rule-out was due to potential participants turning down participation, then due to lack of contact information available, and a few due to non-response.

In the initial call, the researcher explained the project, and the rights and obligations of the participants and researchers, before consent was obtained for participation and the practical arrangements for the interview made. Screening occurred at this stage to establish that the potential interviewee was not working in or directly engaged in tourism since our aim was to bring out the resident's voice rather than the tourism industry voice. Twenty five residents were interviewed; ten from the most populous location, Reykjavík, and five each from the smaller towns of Hella, Ísafjörður and Húsavík. Participants age range was from 18 to 74 years, and included 14 women and 11 men. All participants signed an informed consent letter at the time of the interview. The interviews were conducted in the residents' homes or another location of their choice. The interviews were semi-structured and open-ended, allowing the interviewees to construct their narratives (Berg, 2007; Spradley, 1979).

### **Data analysis**

The observers and lead researcher carried out independent content analyses of the field notes and visual material. A moderation process of comparing results followed. In this process triangulation was important; that is, comparison of coding of transcripts and field notes with visual data from the observations to see if these supported or contradicted each other.

The interview schedule addressed resident's experience of tourists in the daily environment, experience of the tourism industry in the daily environment, awareness of local tourism policies and plans, and reaction to two future scenarios; growth or collapse of tourism in the town. The interviews ranged from 30 to 120 minutes and were transcribed verbatim including field notes.

Content analysis was made of the interview transcripts, field notes and photographs. In addition to predefined themes, new themes were extracted if one of the following conditions were met; discussed by at least three residents, observed in more than one location, triangulated and/or offered an illuminating insight into the topic of the research. Also, comments that were emotionally charged were noted and considered of importance. Four researchers coded the interviews separately, the lead researcher, the two interviewers and a fourth, independent researcher. A moderation process then took place to compare results from this process and ensure reliability between coders.

### **Findings**

The findings based on interviews and observations revolve around whether, and then how, residents and tourists interact, and what the residents feel about the tourists and the tourism industry. The findings about resident access and sharing of public space



are based on desk research, observation and how the interviews address the management of tourism regarding traffic, housing pressure due to tourism and how tourism affects the appearance and experience of public space. Resident concerns emerged in the interviews and were compared with observation data and desk research. Emergent themes from content analysis were infrastructure issues, identification with the tourists, concern for tourist safety and wellbeing, and feelings of pride and/or shame over the tourism industry and tourism policies, and concern over the sustainability of the tourism industry.

### **Resident interaction with and attitude toward tourists**

Although the interviewees were not engaged in tourism they were quite knowledgeable about the tourists in their daily environment, suggesting that they observe them closely. Residents at all four sites expressed care for the wellbeing of tourists. They felt they should be helpful and hospitable and were positive about conversing with tourists. In Húsavík a resident felt that there was insufficient signage in town *“so I try to tell them some things and explain where they can go”* (Interview 03, Húsavík). One Reykjavík resident said *“I just love adopting wayward tourists”* (Interview 06, Reykjavík) while another said *“but sometimes I just think when I see someone with a map looking lost, I don’t have time for this, better cross the street”* (Interview 02, Reykjavík).

While the tourists were often wayward and misplaced, residents spoke fondly of them and felt connected to them on a personal level:

It was amazing, this winter I almost hit a tourist who was just standing in the middle of the road gazing at the sky and I just like; what is this tourist doing! And I realized that there were northern lights, the sky was blazing and I thought when did I last look at the sky?. (Interview 06, Reykjavík)

A clear identification with tourists was this comment: *“The tourists, they are just doing what tourists do, they stop and gawk. Just like we do abroad”* (Interview 02, Ísafjörður).

In Ísafjörður, large groups of cruise passengers go for walks and board buses in the oldest part of town. This causes friction, for example a tour guide who blocks traffic by stopping with the group on the street and the congestion when several large groups are in this small area simultaneously. This was described in interviews, and observed tourism traffic was clearly concentrated in the small centre of the town. A resident described the situation: *“When you’re going through town you can see the stream of people downtown. You clearly notice it because you have to be well aware when driving because people tend to walk straight into the street”* (Interview 05, Ísafjörður). This was a theme also in Húsavík: *“You need to be alert when driving through, because people are just rushing into the street”* (Interview 02, Húsavík).

A similar situation occurs in Reykjavík where the travel industry is evidently the core activity in the public space of postal code 101, with accommodation, restaurants, transport and entertainment and crowded with tourists. Tourism operations, such as transport, guiding and accommodation, in the residential streets cause traffic jams. Observations were made of tourists stepping into vehicle traffic while focussing on a motif to photograph and of walking groups causing congestion. These observations were supported in

the interviews; *"there are tourists all over the place, they're everywhere!"* (Interview 10, Reykjavík).

Hella experiences a regular flow of tourists on Route 1, but the town is sheltered as the main shopping area blocks the village from the highway. The services; gas station, and shops are located between the highway and the village which makes the parking area of the businesses along the highway the main public space shared by tourists and residents. Here the tourist traffic mainly passes through, as the interviews and observations confirmed. The shops in this tourist area are crowded and so is the swimming pool.

The responses to crowding differed from adaptation, *"I go to the shop before the cruise ship docks"* (Interview 03, Ísafjörður) and *"I don't go swimming in the middle of a sunny day, it's too crowded, I go in the morning"* (Interview 05, Hella), *{You have to shop in the morning"}* (Interview 05, Húsavík) to frustration *"I get frustrated when I just can't get through somehow, can't access"* (Interview 02, Reykjavík).

All interviewees agreed that the presence of tourists brings life and action to the town centres even in Reykjavík: *"... gosh, remember how boring Reykjavik was? Now it is just full of people"* (Interview 07, Reykjavík). Increased presence of tourists even attracts newcomers. *"I have only lived here for five years, and what I regarded most exciting about the town was this lively downtown ... "* (Interview 05, Húsavík).

### **Residents' experiences and attitudes toward destination development**

The municipalities governing all four of our research sites included tourism development in their policies and plans (Ísafjarðarbær, 2009; Norðurþing, 2010; Rangárþing ytra, 2010, 2011; Reykjavíkurborg, 2014a). Tourism policies (Atvinnuþróunarfélag Þingeyinga, 2008; Atvinnuþróunarfélag Vestfjarða, 2014; Reykjavíkurborg, 2014b; Þorleifsdóttir, 2010) and marketing strategies existed (Smárasón, 2014; Markaðsstofa Norðurlands, n.d.) and promotional materials had been published (Visit Húsavík, n.d.; Markaðsstofa Suðurlands, 2015a, 2015b). Less prominent in these policies were area plans and planned physical infrastructure for tourism.

Residents were generally not very familiar with the contents of these policies and plans. Some believed there were no existing policies, while others assumed they existed but were not aware of their details. This quote from an interview in Ísafjörður was typical: *"I just expect that there is some sort of a policy, there must be one since they're putting money and staff into it"* (Interview 03, Ísafjörður). In Hella, residents wanted policies to support tourism and increase visitation while in 101 Reykjavík the concern was lack of policy measures to deal with too many tourists and the neighbourhood becoming too touristy. As summed up in interview 05 Reykjavík: *"I think we're missing a policy here. Quantity is not the same as quality"*.

Residents were knowledgeable about the business of tourism in their daily environment, perhaps a factor of the closeness of networks in small communities. Pride in their local tourism entrepreneurs and initiatives was evident in Húsavík, where respondents mentioned awards of excellence that local business had received. Residents in Ísafjörður and Húsavík experienced tourism marketing positively, seeing it as in line with their own perception of what is attractive and of interest in their vicinity, mainly closeness to beautiful and sublime nature experiences and the rural lifestyle. *"Yes I am very satisfied*

*with it*" (Interview 01, Húsavík) and *"It tells people what they need to know"* (Interview 01, Ísafjörður) were typical comments about marketing in these two communities.

Opinions on tourism marketing varied more in Reykjavík, where there was a call for greater linking between strategic planning and marketing. Residents criticised marketing that focused on some areas while ignoring others. For example, most notably the seemingly single-minded focus on the city centre that is already perceived as crowded. The issue of marketing the capital city for its nightlife was also raised, particularly the allusion to the city as a place for sex tourism, which was seen as negative by residents. They were more positive about marketing the city for culture and arts, as well as closeness to nature.

In contrast, residents in Hella were dissatisfied with what they saw as too little effort to market their town as a destination and that the development of infrastructure for tourists was limited. They complained about the invisibility of Hella as a destination, and that interesting local natural phenomena were neither promoted nor made accessible. One resident summed it up: *"It is as if this isn't an interesting place!"* (Interview 05, Hella).

### **Resident concerns about tourism development**

Concerns over the economic sustainability of the tourism industry were common in the interviews, with the term "bubble" used to suggest that the extreme growth would end in a bust or a collapse, with reference to previous boom and bust scenarios in Icelandic economic history. Two scenarios drawn up in the interviews, either tourism stops or the number of tourists doubles, were expressed as extremes. The no tourism scenario would be *"simply disastrous!"* according to a resident in Hella (Interview 01) and *"I don't want to think the thought, it would be so depressing"* (Interview 01, Húsavík). Double the number of tourists in the high season did not seem feasible in any of the cases, a typical comment in Reykjavík was *"I would seriously consider moving to the suburbs"* (Interview 06, Reykjavík).

Concerns about the touristification of public spaces were mentioned, particularly in regards to 101 Reykjavík experiencing an explosion in the accommodation sector and in what residents felt was the very visually aggressive presence of souvenir retail outlets. *"Not another Puffin shop"* one resident exclaimed, speaking for many about the abundant souvenir shops where a toy puffin made in Taiwan or China is a signature product for sale (Interview 01, Reykjavík).

Whale watching is the main attraction in Húsavík and thus tourist traffic accumulates at the waterfront. The main road through town runs parallel, and adjacent to, the waterfront. People need to cross this thoroughfare which is also the main shopping street, with restaurants and the church, one of the main attractions, also located on this street. Jaywalking and even walking along the street in the vehicle lanes was observed. Residents expressed concern about this as a safety issue and an inconvenience as it slows down the traffic of buses, rental cars, private cars, trucks, trailers and motorhomes.

Residents in all cases had observed and/or experienced instances where they felt that the tourism industry or tourism workers had placed a strain on their relationship with tourists. Guides being rude to residents in an attempt to further the interest of their customers, buses blocking residential traffic, and excessive pricing in restaurants were examples mentioned as negative experiences. Residents displayed indignation and concern over the impact on the reputation of their communities and also drew the line around their

personal space: “*I don’t want to be a prop for some guide who takes 15 people for a walk in my neighbourhood*” (Interview 02, Reykjavík).

Many residents wondered about tourist safety and questioned whether tourists receive enough information on road safety and where to get medical help for instance. Concerns were voiced over how well equipped the police, rescue squads, ambulances and hospitals were for emergencies: “*What if a cruise ship foundered here?*” asked a clearly concerned resident in Ísafjörður (Interview 03, Ísafjörður). Winter closure of roads and facilities, provision of information for tourists about weather conditions, and equipping rental cars for winter conditions, were all concerns mentioned by residents in the rural communities. The road system, restrictions on vehicle traffic in urban areas and location of basic services such as rest stops, latrines, and waste disposal were also of concern. Many residents emphasised that the tourism industry and government should be responsible for solving the infrastructure issues.

The issue of housing conflict, particularly the pressure on the real estate market resulting from tourism demand, was raised in Reykjavík and Ísafjörður where residents noticed a trend to convert residential housing to short-term rentals for tourists. This was not only discussed as a matter of concern for housing shortage for residents but also as impacting the social fabric of the neighbourhoods for lack of “*real neighbours, people you know*” (Interview 02, Ísafjörður) and premises being empty in the low season. In Reykjavík the danger that the competition for accommodation with tourism would force residents out of the city was mentioned by several respondents.

## Discussion

The quality of life literature (Andereck & Nyaupane, 2011; Kim et al., 2013; Ridderstaat et al., 2016) calls attention to the importance of policy and management of tourism. This study reveals that poor organisation and planning can inhibit the smooth co-existence of residents, the tourism industry, and tourists in public spaces. That certain sites in towns are overcrowded is a concern for planning and construction of both the built environment and tourism enterprises. Vehicle traffic, the conduct of group tours, and mixed traffic of residents and tourists needs organising for the security and quality of life of both tourists and residents. Concerns over limited access to public spaces, as well as to commodities and services due to inflated prices, were voiced. The tourism industry’s use of public goods and services created and maintained by taxpayers such as road infrastructure, policing and health care as well as other shared natural and cultural resources, can lead to a negative perception of tourism taking more than it gives (Andereck & Nyaupane, 2011). This highlights the need to consider the procedural aspect of social sustainability, that is the way in which social sustainability can be achieved rather than remaining with the definition of the substantive aspects. Rather than arguing about what is or is not sustainable we should focus on how we can work towards sustainability, or stay with the trouble and mess (Boström, 2012; Haraway, 2016).

Andereck and Nyaupane (2011) analysed quality of life aspects such as emotional and psychological well-being, networking and personal development attributable to positive interaction between residents and tourists and to how well tourism target groups correspond to the residents to maintain resident quality of life while accommodating tourism. Andereck et al. (2005) hypothesise that the more connected residents are with

tourists and tourism, the more positive their disposition toward them. The residents in this study showed an interest in, and concern for, tourists and compared the tourists' travel experience with their own. In terms of actual interactions, residents saw it as their civic duty to help and accommodate visitors. Tourists are part of the cultural landscape of the residents and welcomed as individuals. This attitude is positive for the development, and long-term continuation, of tourism in the country, as well as for social sustainability and resilience to tourism's impacts.

Large variations are apparent between the four locations in terms of the social exchange experienced or the substantive aspect of social sustainability or lack thereof. Residents in the city centre of Reykjavík felt much greater impact and experienced more infrastructure strain than residents in more rural locations, supporting the claim by Oklevik et al. (2019) that overtourism is an issue for residents in Reykjavík. Respondents in Reykjavík for instance more frequently mentioned price inflation in the housing market, identified by Perles-Ribes et al. (2017) as an issue. In the tiny town centre of Ísafjörður, where tourists also pass under kitchen windows in large groups, residents have a different experience from those in Húsavík where tourist traffic are often observed at a distance from the residential areas. The experience differs again for the residents of Hella whose view from the kitchen window is unlikely to include any of the thousands of tourists passing through the town on the highway. This concurs with the results of two national surveys conducted 2014 and 2017 that asked Icelanders about their attitudes and experiences of tourists and the tourism industry in their community. Both surveys revealed that local circumstances play a substantial role when people evaluate the impacts of tourism (Bjarnadóttir, Arnalds, & Víkingadóttir, 2018; Huijbens & Bjarnadóttir, 2015).

Kim et al.'s (2013) findings that residents generally experience the social impacts of tourism as positive, due to increased revenue and services and strengthening of their community, is supported by the interview data in this study. The near unanimous belief in generally positive social impacts of tourism, and concerns that tourism may collapse, also supports the results of Canavan (2014) that residents experience the decline of tourism as a crisis. The residents in this study state that it would be a terrible shock if tourists stopped coming to their communities. The interview data also suggest that residents set limits in situations when their interests do not match with the interests of the tourism industry, demonstrating a capacity for adaptation that reflects the resilience of rural Icelandic communities (Burns, 2018).

Tourism is a major contributor to Iceland's economy (Landsbankinn, 2017), fuelling the intent of the country's destination marketing organisations to continue maximisation strategies to increase the number of annual arrivals. Although the residents in this study are not directly engaged in the tourism industry, they are well aware of its economic value and often referred to the role of tourism in recovering the Icelandic economy after the collapse in 2008. This matches the findings of an extensive literature review by Brida, Cortes-Jimenez, and Pulina (2016) that tourism leads economic growth. However, residents showed limited trust and confidence in industry and government ensuring sustainable development of tourism, which is a serious threat to the social sustainability of tourism (Roca-Puig, 2019). Despite, or perhaps due to, the substantial and rapid development, a boom and bust scenario, reminiscent of Butler's (1980) cycle of tourism, was often evoked. This supports Ivlevs (2017) on the increased community impact from rapid growth.

The clearest expressions of discontent over tourism were with the actions of tourism workers, tourism enterprises and tourism authorities. Recognising the attitude of tourism workers toward residents as an issue suggests that the ambiguity guides feel toward social sustainability of tourism reported by Einarsdóttir (2017) may indicate a serious concern. Making money from tourism without corporate social responsibility is in the grey or even black zone of business ethics, which in turn has a negative effect on the tourist experience and the development of a destination (Mathew & Sreejesh, 2016; Ridderstaat et al., 2016). Residents were concerned and embarrassed that demand for a quick profit occurs at the expense of quality, organised and efficient development. They expressed fear this will lead to the downfall of the tourism industry, indicating a level of distrust with tourism authorities and the industry's commitment to the sustainability of tourism in Iceland. Given the importance of trust and reciprocity in social sustainability (Ajmal, Khan, Hussain, & Helo, 2018; Roca-Puig, 2019), these findings should be taken seriously as a warning signal of lack of responsibility in tourism.

Another potential point of contention between residents, tourism authorities and the travel industry lies in the image projected of destinations. In two of the cases in this study, respondents agreed with the destination marketing and felt that it matched their sense of place. In one case residents felt their place was not promoted enough. In the fourth case, residents opposed certain campaigns as misrepresenting and potentially harmful for the subjective well-being of community. Because destination marketing is connected to resident pride of place, such conflict can negatively affect resident quality of life (Ribeiro et al., 2017; Styliadis et al., 2014).

### *Limitations and further research*

The scope of funding limited the number of sites, travel distances and number of interviews possible in this study. Hence, it was not financially possible to keep interviewing until until saturation was reached or to include other locations, such as the East fjords. Some work on monitoring of social sustainability of tourism development in Iceland is ongoing, see for instance Bjarnadóttir et al. (2018) and this should be a long term research plan. In addition to this monitoring the substantive aspects of tourism sustainability such a research plan should focus on better understanding of the procedural aspects, that is how and to what extent residents engage with tourism sustainability.

### **Conclusions**

Despite the threat of what has come to be called overtourism, this study revealed an adaptive capacity of communities that is likely to lead to resilience to the inevitable fluctuations in tourism over time. Residents speak well of tourists, who add a lively ambience, and appreciate the tourist interest in their hometowns, suggesting that this enhances emotional well-being (Andereck & Nyaupane, 2011). Residents identify with the tourists and expect that tourists are like themselves when travelling; curious, somewhat erratic and disoriented, and not always informed enough to make good decisions about where to go and how to behave.

Residents recognise the economic and social importance of tourism and are proud of their place as a destination. However, participants in this study monitored the tourism

industry closely, adding credit to the findings of Roca-Puig (2019) that reciprocity is an important aspect of social sustainability. Concern and criticism was levelled at the industry and governments at local and national levels rather than the tourists themselves. This supports the UNWTO (2017) claim that 'growth is not the enemy, it is how we manage it'. Residents expect, and want, initiatives by public authorities and the industry for strategic planning and organisation of tourism; that is, their call is not for fewer tourists but for stronger infrastructure for tourism to deliver the hospitality they would like to extend.

Despite the rapid growth of the tourism industry in Iceland, or perhaps because of it, residents were clearly sceptical about whether tourism offers a solid economic pillar, or whether it represents an economic bubble that will burst when too many people try to make their fortune out of it. This supports the importance of trust, identified by Nunkoo and Ramkissoon (2012) and Roca-Puig (2019). However, the few instances of expressed discontent were directed at the industry and should in light of theory on social sustainability be taken seriously. It should be noted that the emotional tenor of these kinds of comments in the interviews was strong. Hence, it is an important challenge for the tourism industry to build a greater degree of trust and confidence among the public as part of its management strategy.

This study contributes to the development of tourism theory and governance by showing how the substantive and procedural aspects intertwine, leading us to agree that the concept of social sustainability is "a promising channel for communicating more broadly and playing a constructive part in wider sustainability debates, both locally and transnationally" (Boström, 2012, p. 13). Focussing only on the impacts or the substantive aspect is reductionist in that it neglects the procedural dimension where resident agency and empowerment come into the complex play of values and actions needed to achieve social sustainability. The trouble with the term overtourism is therefore that the focus shifts from procedural aspects that are the responsibility of policy makers, destination managers and tourism businesses, to the tourists. Our findings suggest community resilience in the face of increasing tourist numbers and that impact on quality of life is, with few exceptions, considered positive. However, the concerns voiced raise serious questions about whether the procedural aspect of social sustainability and the beneficial impacts of tourism will be maintained.

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