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# Swedish travellers' perceptions of urban overtourism with link to social density theory: conceptualisation and solutions

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## ABSTRACT

This paper aims to conceptualise Swedish travellers' attitudes towards urban overtourism, linking these perceptions to Social Density Theory (SDT), and exploring their proposed solutions. The research used online surveys for data collection. A content analysis method was employed to analyse the quantitative data (answers to closed-ended questions) and qualitative data (answers to open-ended questions, and comments) in the survey. The analysis tool NVIVO 12 was used. The data comprised 370 completed online questionnaires. The respondents identified numerous urban destinations worldwide, mostly European, as suffering from overtourism. Their interactions with these destinations and with other tourists are often described as less pleasant. Most respondents viewed overtourism as a problem, while a minority perceived it as an opportunity. Both groups suggested a range of soft and hard measures to address this issue. This research offers theoretical and practical implications for tourism stakeholders and scientists who should consider travellers' attitudes and propose solutions. It extends SDT by emphasising travellers' perceptions of overcrowded urban environments and includes their solutions. The authors concluded that all involved actors need to approach the multifaceted problem of overtourism. The lack of insight into respondents' behavioural patterns during and after their visits has been a limitation of this research.

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## SUBJECTS

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## 1. Introduction

Over the past decade, overtourism has been a hot topic in tourism research, associated with the negative impacts of tourism (cf., Dodds & Butler, 2019; Martínez-García et al., 2017; Milano et al., 2019a). The focus has been mostly on European cities and towns (e.g. Amore et al., 2020), but over the years, many other urban places worldwide have also received attention (e.g. Insch, 2020; Jamieson & Jamieson, 2019). Overtourism is generally linked to seasonality and carrying capacity. By seasonality authors (Abbasian et al., 2020; Martín et al., 2019) mean that overtourism occurs mostly during the peak season (mostly in the summer) and not year-round, although overtourism may also occur off-season (Butler, 2019). Carrying capacity refers to the number of tourists a destination can host at a certain time, without triggering negative experiences for either tourists or residents (Mihalic, 2020).

Most earlier studies on overtourism dealt with stakeholders in receiving destinations and their attitudes (e.g. Yrigoy et al., 2024). Other stakeholders, such as tourists, are less visible, with a few exceptions (e.g. Šenková et al., 2022). The same is true for suggested solutions that mostly have had a focus on stakeholders in tourist destinations (see e.g. Peeters et al., 2018) while tourists' perspective has been absent. In particular, travellers from Nordic countries have been invisible in research on urban overtourism, although several Nordic studies on rural or island overtourism have been conducted (e.g. Ioannides, 2019; Jóhannesson & Lund, 2019; Lundmark et al., 2020; Tverijonaite & Sæpórsdóttir, 2024). Swedes were one of the most travelling nationalities in the world before the pandemic (UN Tourism, 2023), a pattern that seems to continue (Europeiska ERV, 2024; Pew Research Center, 2023). A problem with such descriptive statistical reports is that they either have figures on overnight stays per nation, or number of travels

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abroad per nation and year without specification on overnight stay, and they say nothing about how Swedish travellers indeed contribute to increased overtourism in the places they visit. Therefore, research on Swedish travellers and their perceptions of urban overtourism would be relevant to conduct. As they are frequent travellers they have ascended their tourism career ladder, and hence should be rather knowledgeable, and motivated by ‘*host-site involvement*’ (Pearce & Lee, 2005, p. 230), which is why their view of the situation is interesting.

Thus, this research attempts to fill these gaps by studying the attitudes of Swedish travellers toward urban destinations worldwide to gain an understanding of how these travellers portray overtourism in urban areas, how they reason around their own experiences, and what solution suggestions they offer. In this regard, a link to Social Density Theory (hereafter SDT) is sought to conceptualise these attitudes. SDT has a good function here since it is roughly about how people perceive crowded/overcrowded urban places and how their reactions, emotions and behaviours would look like due to this perception (Winsborough, 1965). Overtourism from the perspective of SDT is thus not an issue of quantity, i.e. the number of tourists a place can receive, but perhaps rather an issue of a psychosocial condition that is often perceived as unpleasant by both tourists and the local population (Jacobsen et al., 2019). Therefore, there is a rationale to use this theory here and in the context of urban overtourism. Despite the fact that overtourism nowadays is a global problem, earlier studies on the issue that used SDT (e.g. Gössling et al., 2020) did not address solutions especially suggested by tourists. This is the final gap the authors of this paper aim to help fill through addressing Swedish travellers’ suggested solutions. This research will provide new knowledge, a theoretical and empirical contribution to the existing body of research on the issue, and by investigating the subjective views of Swedish travellers. The research purpose will be achieved by answering the following questions:

**Q1.** How do Swedish travellers perceive overtourism in urban destinations worldwide?

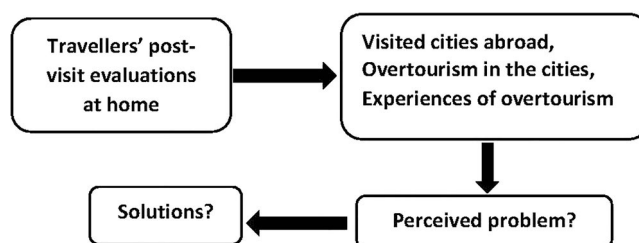
**Q2.** What suggestions do they offer to deal with the phenomenon?

Q1 is an attempt to explore travellers’ emotional responses as a component of SDT, while Q2 seeks to expand SDT towards travellers’ corrective behaviours as solutions, although we never asked them specifically any question about their behavioural patterns at the place and after the visit. All these aspects are included in the tourists’ overall experiences of the place (Yu & Egger, 2021) and when they return to their countries of origin, they may reflect upon them as a post-travel evaluation (see Figure 1).

## 2. Literature review

### 2.1. The urban context

Major urban areas represent a major part of international arrivals (Amore et al., 2020; Koens et al., 2018). These areas are attractive to diverse types of tourists because of their multifunctionality and because many important tourist attractions and activities are located there (Diaz-Parra & Jover, 2021; Nilsson, 2020; Zemla, 2020). The consequence of such a concentration of attractions and activities is that when too many tourists gather in these areas (i.e., overtourism), this in turn results in a series of negative experiences for city dwellers and tourists. Examples of such experiences are traffic congestion, pollution, noise, higher prices, increased risk of tension, gentrification of the local population, deteriorated service quality, safety and security, time loss in long queues, damage to natural, cultural, and historical heritage,



**Figure 1.** Conceptual model of travellers’ post-visit evaluations of urban places with overtourism.

increased waste production, and loss of authenticity (cf., Diaz-Parra & Jover, 2021; García-Buades et al., 2022). Many European cities and towns are continuously being touristified in urban spaces (Amore et al., 2020). At the same time, there are other urban places in Europe that, despite good tourism infrastructure and potential, suffer from under-tourism (Gowreesunkar & Vo-Thanh, 2020).

In an urban context, it is relevant to discuss which part (hosts, tourists, or the industry) pays a higher price for overtourism or receives more benefit from it. Tourists, however, are part of the problem, along with the travel industry, cruise companies for coastal cities, low-cost air carriers, and booking platforms (e.g. Airbnb) that look for more unsustainable profit and growth (Celata & Romano, 2022; Gonzalez, 2018). Peeters et al. (2018) mean that tourists visiting overtourism environments also pay a higher price because of the reduced service and their negative experiences in these areas, while Phi (2020) means that city inhabitants, despite the benefits of tourism, pay higher prices for this uncontrolled growth.

## **2.2. Earlier perception studies among tourists**

Relatively few studies have focused on tourists and their attitudes towards overtourism. A survey by Szromek et al. (2019) on generations X-Y-Z in Poland showed a good level of awareness among 386 Poles (mostly women in the Z generation) about overtourism, its consequences for different destinations, and on their own role as tourists in this regard. A similar survey in Slovakia (Šenková et al., 2022) with 110 respondents (predominantly young women) visiting overcrowded European destinations, showed a relationship between age, number of destination visits, and perceptions of overtourism among tourists. Papadopoulou et al. (2023) in their survey with 582 tourists (predominantly young men) investigated the relationship between tourists visiting overcrowded Mediterranean coastal destinations, their perception of the overcrowding, their reactional behaviour towards it, satisfaction, and future intentions. Kainthola et al. (2021) studied 27 tourists' (predominantly young men) perceptions of overcrowded destinations after the pandemic and how they negatively impacted travel decisions. The perception of overtourism in a small town in the Czech Republic (Krajickova et al., 2022) based on 174 surveys (with domestic tourists) showed that they did not believe that overtourism occurred there, nor that their presence negatively impacted residents' quality of life.

The strength of these studies is that they shed light on the issue in different ways and focus on both reputed and less known overtourism places. The weakness is that they partly deal with domestic tourism, less experienced/younger travellers, have limited or biased data, and are strongly hypothesis-driven and less explanatory. Furthermore, only two (Šenková et al., 2022; Szromek et al., 2019) discussed problem solutions in their literature review or as recommendations without including solutions in their empirical investigations.

## **2.3. Problem solutions**

In the literature, authors have also come up with diverse solutions to this problem. The measures are mostly suggested to be taken from destinations and their stakeholders, while solutions from tourist-generating regions and their stakeholders are rare. For example, Avond et al. (2019) consider that due to the complexity of the phenomenon, each challenge of overtourism should be separately addressed by host stakeholders with specific knowledge. Milano et al. (2019a) discuss whether the degrowth politics of tourism in a destination can be a sustainable solution. Peeters et al. (2018) present many measures used by local authorities, but they conclude that the problem needs to be solved by more active intervention by policymakers in systematic cooperation with local stakeholders at the destinations.

Other authors (e.g. Benner, 2020a, 2020b; Koens et al., 2018) suggest that owing to the variation between destinations, it is impossible to suggest a common solution to all important stakeholders (e.g. DMOs or the industry) in the destinations. Blázquez-Salom et al. (2023) provide a series of practical solutions that address, among other things, increased tourist taxes, regulation of seasons and number of flights, tourism prevention, and so on. Gowreesunkar and Vo-Thanh (2020) suggest the diversification of destinations, a better role for DMOs, Creative tourism, and better use of modern technology. Goodwin (2021) believes that solutions are in the hands of city governments, who know what to do and have the skills to tackle the problem. Nevertheless, Butler and Dodds (2022) claim that, to prevent

overtourism, the most important tourism stakeholders (e.g. politicians) worldwide should seriously consider the number of tourists as a problem.

## **2.4. The theoretical and conceptual framework**

SDT deals with crowding and the number of people in physical spaces as well as people's psychosocial reactions to it (Ruback & Riad, 1994; Stokols, 1972; Winsborough, 1965) is the theoretical point of departure here. The theory has been used in different contexts of social sciences, but has recently received attention in research on overcrowded tourism spaces. These authors (e.g. González-Reverté, 2022; Gössling, et al., 2020; Jacobsen et al., 2019; Papadopoulou et al., 2023) developed it from the perspectives of both residents and tourists. In their theoretical contributions, the number of tourists has been used as a criterion to assess overcrowding as something either problematic or non-problematic, depending on the subjective perception levels of residents' and tourists. They are also linked to residents' and tourists' experiences, their satisfaction levels, and their positive or negative emotional/behavioural responses to overcrowding. Despite actively dealing with the consequences and negative impacts of overtourism, no problem solutions were treated in their investigations. In addition, only Papadopoulou et al. (2023) treated respondents' long-term behavioural patterns in terms of loyalty to the destination i.e. re-visitation and Word of Mouth (WOM). Based on these four works, the SDT from the tourists' perspective means that tourists in overcrowded places might experience negative or positive touristic experiences depending on how well the crowding is managed. The outcome may also negatively or positively impact emotional responses, attitude, behaviour, and satisfaction with the visit and loyalty to the destination (González-Reverté, 2022; Gössling et al., 2020; Jacobsen et al., 2019; Papadopoulou et al., 2023).

Figure 1 below is a basic model to conceptualise urban overtourism from the Swedish travellers' perspective, based on theoretical discussions by Gössling et al. (2020) and Yu and Egger (2021). Gössling et al. (2020) through their conceptualisation of place-person interactions, analyse residents' reactions, attitudes, and emotional responses to overtourism and to facing too many tourists in their habitat. Yu and Egger (2021) conceptualised tourists' experiences in overcrowded destinations through the interaction between tourists, destinations, surrounding environments, other tourists, and residents to understand how they perceive this interaction. Depending on the degree of overcrowding in the destination, tourists may experience problems such as poor service, high prices, safety and security issues, wasted time in the queues, and lack of satisfaction, while socialisation with other tourists can be considered as positive aspects (Yu & Egger, 2021). All these factors, however, are counted in tourists' final post-travel evaluation of their visit to the destination.

Based on the two conceptual models above, Swedish travellers who visited certain urban places with attributes of overtourism experienced the destination by roaming the localities and interacting with residents and other tourists. These experiences, in turn, shaped their attitudes both positively and negatively. When returning to their homes, they reflected upon their visits to the places: How was the experience of the overcrowded city or town? Was it problematic? If so, what solutions should be suggested? These aspects are illustrated in Figure 1 and will be elaborated upon in the paper.

## **3. Materials and methods**

### **3.1. Approach**

Online surveys can be used as tool for quantitative research (Pecáková, 2016), qualitative research (Braun et al., 2021) and for a mixed-methods approach with both closed-ended and open-ended questions (Kelley-Quon, 2018). This exploratory study collected data through an online survey containing quantitative data along with answers to qualitative questions that provide perceptions, ideas, and alternative patterns. This approach has many advantages, such as the possibility to include many individuals for generalisations but also through qualitative data to gain deeper insight into the topic (Creswell, 2012; Taherdoost, 2022). The study uses an inductive approach in which data are collected without prior hypotheses to prove but posterior attempts to contribute to the existing theories or elaborate a new theory (Saunders et al., 2009; Walter & Ophir, 2019). This means that the research design and survey

questions were not based on previous studies. The authors developed their theoretical and conceptual framework only after the data had been collected and analysis was completed. This is neither an ethnographic study scheduled by researchers directly participating with the study object in a natural setting (Hammersley, 2018), nor a systematic case study with a close qualitative examination of a specific group, topic, or issue with a relatively limited number/area (Gerring, 2004; Hays, 2003). This is an exploratory research survey to obtain new insights on the issue (Saunders et al., 2009) based on Swedish travellers, who are expected to contribute valuable information.

### **3.2. Sampling and data collection**

The procedures for this study were reviewed and approved by the university's Ethics Review Board in December 2022. Prior to the commencement of the survey, participants were informed of the study's purpose as well as their right to decline participation or withdraw at any point. The authors confirmed that the study complied with relevant ethical guidelines concerning research involving human subjects and that participants' anonymity and confidentiality were maintained throughout. The survey included both closed- and open-ended and follow-up questions presented in Swedish. This dual approach aimed to provide an indication of representativeness while offering deeper insights into the issue. The university's proprietary survey tool was used and was programmed to allow only one complete response per device. The completion of all questions was mandatory. The respondents confirmed being older than 18 and consented in writing to participate voluntarily in the research by giving their answers anonymously.

Convenience sampling was employed using an online survey to reach the respondents. Convenience online surveys are associated with a series of advantages (e.g. ease and speed) and disadvantages (e.g. risk of bias) (Ball, 2019). The questionnaire with its link was sent to over 100 tourism-related Facebook and LinkedIn platforms, and the platform administrators were requested to publish them. The platforms were travel-and holiday-focused, community groups of Swedes abroad, and general groups. Ultimately, approximately 30 platforms accepted and published the survey between February and March 2023. The questionnaire was also published on the authors' own Facebook or LinkedIn pages, and their contacts were requested to distribute it. In very few cases, the authors or admins provided a brief definition of overtourism to platform members as guidance. All data were received in an SPSS report in PDF file from the survey centre, with quantitative data in bar charts and figures and qualitative data in running text.

The adequate sample size depends on rigor, random or non-random sampling, type of data, research purpose, researchers' time, number of qualitative and quantitative questions in the sample, etc. (Ball, 2019; Braun et al. 2021). Braun et al. (2021) claimed that the richness of a dataset is more important than the number, and even with samples around +100, this richness can be achieved. Our ambition was to facilitate representativeness, minimising sampling error (Ball, 2019) but also to gain deeper insights into the issue. After several reminders, 370 questionnaires were completed at the deadline, while the survey's bar charts showed that more than 400 incomplete questionnaires remained. At this point, we determined that both quantitative and qualitative data were adequate and rich enough for this exploratory research, and we did not need to make further efforts to obtain more data.

### **3.3. Quantitative and qualitative data**

The quantitative data in the survey came from questions to 1-7 with closed-ended options (Gender; Age; Occupation; Educational level, and number of times per year do you usually travel abroad? How many trips have you made abroad in the past 10 years? How would you describe your knowledge of overtourism?) Also question 11 'Do you consider overtourism to be a problem?' have closed-ended options. The qualitative data in the survey consisted of answers to questions 8 (Define the phenomenon of overtourism in your own words), 9 (Describe, in your own words, a situation of overtourism that you have personally witnessed), 10 (Name a few cities around the world that you have experienced as suffering from overtourism), 12 (If YES, please briefly explain why it is a problem and how serious you think it is), 13 (If NO, please briefly explain why you do not consider it a problem), 14 (If you consider overtourism to be a problem, please suggest one or more solutions), and 15 (Do

you have anything else to add?). The scales used in closed-ended questions are nominal, except for the age-range question, which is on an ordinal level.

### 3.4. Data analysis

Content analysis was used for both qualitative and quantitative data. It facilitates flexibility for the researcher and provides the opportunity to choose depth and abstraction levels in the analysis (Vaismordai & Snelgrove, 2019). The analysis procedure is similar to thematic analysis, and both methods can be applied simultaneously in data analysis. The difference is the abstraction level: content analysis treats more surface data or categories, whereas thematic analysis treats more in-depth latent themes that need to be interpreted (*ibid*). It focuses on manifest content that is descriptive and visible by the researcher and the latent content i.e., underlying meanings that will be discovered and subjectively interpreted by the researcher (Kleinheksel et al., 2020; Lindgren et al., 2020; Vaismordai & Snelgrove, 2019).

The analysis of qualitative data followed the usual steps of repeated review of data, condensing, creating units of meanings and coding them, categorising and theming, and formulating conclusions (Figure 2). Codes are keywords that capture information appearing in the answers to the survey questions. They create meaning, form themes/categories, and are linked to research purposes and questions.

The quantitative descriptive data were analysed first. Then, all the codes in qualitative data (e.g. higher prices) were identified and then placed under subthemes (e.g. negative impacts on locals), and finally placed under main themes (e.g. consequences). All authors participated in repeated reviews to identify both obvious recurrent patterns and discover the latent underlying meanings for interpretation. However, this part of the analysis was more clearly connected to the research purpose and questions, but also to the conceptual model in Figure 1. Some responses to the qualitative questions were considered irrelevant and consequently omitted from the analysis. The analysis tool NVIVO 12 was used, but all the authors reviewed the results several times manually for verification. Connection to SDT and previous research was sought, and quotes were used to highlight important findings. Through the analysis of qualitative data, four main themes with their associated subthemes and codes were generated: Negative emotional responses, Consequences; Sense of responsibility, and Solutions. These four themes are functioning in a logical sequence, as presented in the next section.

## 4. Results

As is clear from Table 1, most of the respondents were women over the age of 50. The majority had academic education, and 70% were employed. As is clear from the number of trips abroad, the majority are experienced travellers. Those who answered 'no trip' commented that they either travel abroad once every second or third year, travel mostly in their jobs, travel nowhere during the pandemic, or travel more domestically. This group can be included among those who have travelled abroad up to five times last ten years (question 6 in Table 1). A predominant majority also confirms that they have good knowledge of overtourism and believe that overtourism is a problem. Based on this manifest content, the first conclusion is that there can be a relationship between age and higher education of the respondents, number of trips, level of knowledge on overtourism, and negative attitudes towards overtourism (*cf.*, Šenková et al., 2022). Further, the fact that a predominant majority of them believe that overtourism is

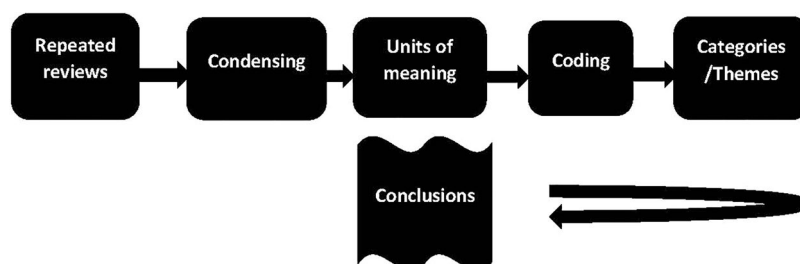


Figure 2. Content analysis' steps.

**Table 1.** The respondents' answers to closed-set questions.

Gender	55% women, 45 % men
Age	Age 18-29 (11%), 30-39 (14%), 40-49 (11%) 50-64 respectively 65+ (32% each)
Occupation	46% employed by public or private sector, 31% retired, 10% self-employed, 9% student, 4% other
Highest educational level	University education 66%, Secondary school 15%, post-secondary school 13%, Elementary school 2%, Other including PhD studies 4%
Number of trips abroad/year	3 or more (45%), 2 trips (26%), 1 trip (22%), no trip (7%)
Number of trips abroad done last 10years	16 trips or more (54%), 10-15 trips (21%), 6-9 trips (16%), up to 5 trips (10%)
Your knowledge level of overtourism	Moderately 37%, rather much 28%, much 9%, little 14%, non-existent 12%
Do you think overtourism is a problem?	YES 75%, NO 25%

Source. Authors' data.

a problem means that they show negative emotional response to the phenomenon in line with SDT (González-Reverté, 2022; Gössling et al., 2020; Jacobsen et al., 2019; Papadopoulou et al., 2023). The question that remains is what the answers would look like if people with other socio-demographic or socio-economic backgrounds were responding.

#### 4.1. Theme 1: negative emotional responses

Overtourism is defined, perceived, and described by a predominant majority of the respondents as an almost entirely negative phenomenon and problem. Too much tourism/too many tourists at the same time and at the same place; beyond the place's carrying capacity, tourists' invasion of the place, overexploitation of local resources, unsustainable tourism, touristification of the place, pressure on residents, alienation and invisibility of locals, and tourism associated with problems have been most frequently mentioned by the respondents. In line with quantitative data in Table 1 question eight, and in agreement with SDT (González-Reverté, 2022; Gössling et al., 2020; Jacobsen et al., 2019; Papadopoulou et al., 2023) they showed negative emotional responses to overcrowded tourism spaces with lower satisfaction levels as outcomes.

Overexploitation where local residents are given secondary priority, or places where the carrying capacity is not for the amount of tourism, in terms of infrastructure, public spaces, waste management, etc. (Respondent # 6)

So many tourists that the local population suffers, e.g. queues, prices, that it is not possible to get hold of 'ordinary' goods. In natural areas, it can disturb precisely what the tourist is there to look at. A type of mass tourism that destroys more than it adds. (Respondent # 138)

The negative connotation is also clear in their description of own experiences/witnessing of scenarios, easily interpreted as not-worth-remembering experiences (Jacobsen et al., 2019) and a rather negative place-person interaction between them and the place, including tourists and hosts (Gössling et al., 2020; Yu & Egger, 2021).

Thailand. Many tourists visit a small area, especially the island of Kho Tao, which is only 7 km long and 3 km wide. (Respondent # 16).

I have personally experienced how Santiago de Compostela in northwestern Spain, where pilgrims reach their destination after their journey, has so many visitors during the summer that it is difficult to visit restaurants as well as the cathedral and other attractions in the city in a quiet way. Therefore, the quality of visits was reduced. (Respondent # 111)

Experienced overtourism in Venice. There were too many tourists at once. You had to crowd and most of the places we visited had long queues. The locals looked annoyed, which was understandable. (Respondent # 30)

These scenarios contained hundreds of cities, capital cities, towns, and city districts/attractions, mostly in Europe, which in their words is associated with overtourism. To a lesser extent, islands and rural areas were also mentioned. In Table 2, only cities, towns, and islands that have been mentioned at least five times up to 115 times (for Barcelona) are included. Barcelona, Venice, Rome, Paris, London, Malaga, Palma, and New York were the cities most frequently mentioned. Marbella, Dubrovnik, Benidorm, Nerja, and Visby were the most frequently mentioned towns. Mallorca, Phuket, the Canary Islands, and Santorini have been mentioned more than other islands. Spain stands out mostly followed by Italy.

**Table 2.** Cities, towns and islands mostly associated with overtourism by the respondents.

Destination type	Frequency
Cities	Barcelona (115), Venice (89), Rome (77), Paris (75), London (60), Malaga (40), Palma (30), and New York (30). Amsterdam, Bangkok, Florence, Prague, Berlin, Copenhagen had frequencies between 11-17 each. Other major cities had frequencies less than 10.
Towns	Marbella (16), Dubrovnik (11), Visby (8), Benidorm (6), Nerja (6).
Islands	Mallorca (25), Phuket (11), Canary Islands (8), Santorini (6).

Frequencies in parenthesis.

Source. Authors' data.

In agreement with SDT (González-Reverté, 2022; Gössling et al., 2020; Jacobsen et al., 2019; Papadopoulou et al., 2023) that confirms variation in perception of overcrowding, a minority of respondents, both in quantitative data question eight and in qualitative data, did not perceive overtourism directly as negative or as a major problem and showed rather positive emotional responses and satisfaction level to overcrowded places. On the contrary, they saw potential benefits in overtourism such as cultural encounters between tourists from the whole world, between them and their hosts (cf., Yu & Egger, 2021), and economic incentives for host destinations. By the latter, it is meant that overtourism, through increased revenues during peak seasons, can support a good standard of living for host destinations throughout the year, helping to compensate for the low tourist numbers and reduced income during the low season. This minority group with such attitude might most probably show a loyalty to these places in term of returning and WOM about the places (cf., Papadopoulou et al., 2023). SDT in general (Winsborough, 1965) and particularly in tourism context (Jacobsen et al., 2019) considers overcrowding as a social pressure and burden while this minority in contrast to the theory considers it as an opportunity. This might be a challenge to the theory if more travellers have this perception. Concerning the opportunity of cultural encounters in these overcrowded places (Yu & Egger, 2021) one should believe that such social interactions with both locals and other tourists would be very short-lived and superficial due to the circumstances around.

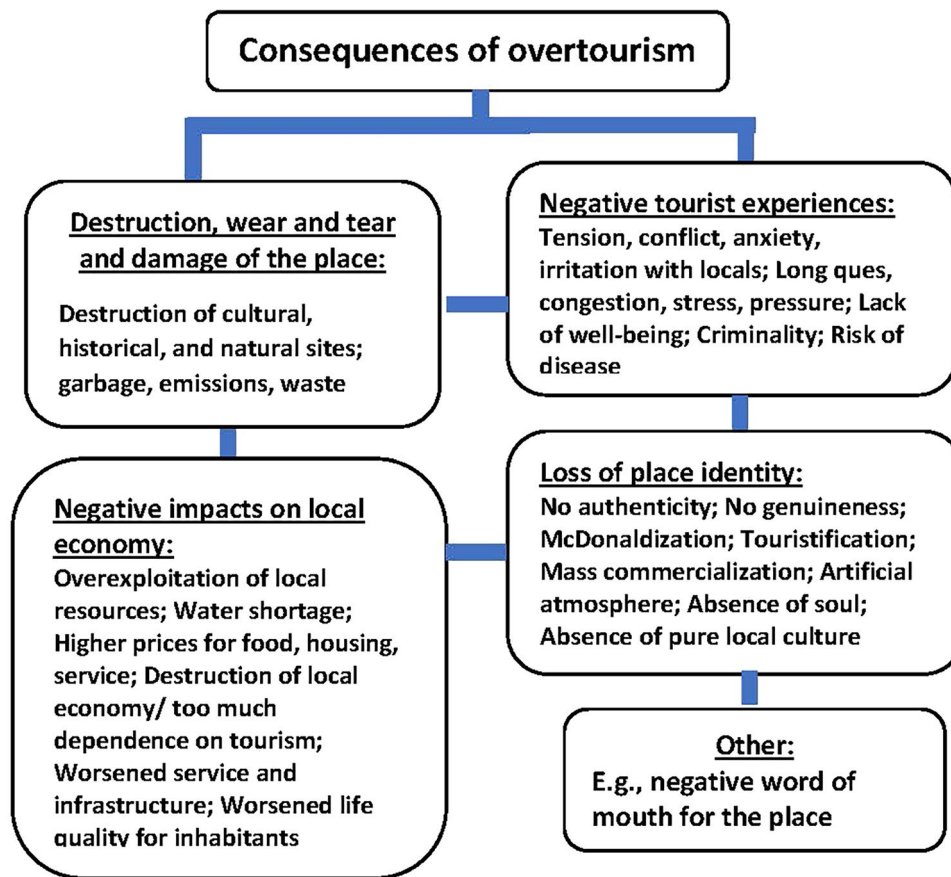
Answering no was difficult or given. Overtourism was not a major problem. Tourism is useful for creating relationships and cultural exchanges between people, and, in my opinion, it outweighs the disadvantages in certain places. (Respondent # 285)

It is difficult to answer this question with yes or no. Tourists bring money and jobs to the region which everyone wants. (Respondent # 99)

.....However, undertourism is also a problem, much like overtourism is. In cases of undertourism, for example, employees lack job security, family-run businesses may disappear, and people's ability to sustain their livelihoods is reduced, both socially and economically...(Respondent # 59)

#### 4.2. Theme 2: consequences

SDT (González-Reverté, 2022; Gössling et al., 2020; Jacobsen et al., 2019; Papadopoulou et al., 2023) and other studies (e.g. Szromek et al., 2019; Yu & Egger, 2021) have suggested that overtourism results in a series of negative consequences for host destinations and tourists. These aspects were confirmed by a predominant majority of the respondents, as illustrated in Figure 3 and can be another sign of their negative emotional responses to overcrowded places. These consequences can be classified into four sub-themes with their associated codes: destruction, wear and tear, and damage of the place; negative impacts on the local economy; negative tourist experiences; and loss of place identity. A small number of answers were also placed under 'Other'. They believe that e.g. 'tourists' takeover/invasion' of places causes destruction of cultural, historical and natural sites, increasing environmental problems, destruction of local economy including dependence of tourism, higher prices for locals, gentrification and worsened quality of life for inhabitants, worsened service levels and degrading infrastructure, a series of negative experiences for tourists including long queues and congestion, tension and conflicts with locals besides increased criminality and risk for disease, absence of place identity and authenticity due to touristification and mass-commercialisation, and finally negative WOM for destinations. Through their explanations, one understands this as a serious problem.



**Figure 3.** Respondents' description of the consequences of overtourism.

It is not good for residents as it means a high flow of people, dirt, noise, emissions, and higher prices, nor for tourists who are forced to be in crowds. The list is long. (Respondent # 24).

It displaces local people and reduces the value of the experience of visiting a visitor's place. The larger the problem, the smaller the resort is, and the whole city can be eaten up by tourism-oriented activities. But it's not something I particularly care about; it's just a matter of letting it go in order to go there. (Respondent # 41)

The earlier mentioned minority, either consider overtourism a minor or no problem but indirectly confirming that the problem exists, through addressing overcrowding or suggesting solutions, taking it to be something the destination has to put up with, in order to preserve their jobs, income, and keeping their good living standard the rest of the year. They believe it is transient, appearing during peak season and then disappearing by itself. Either one should not go to these places but to other places, or if one is already there just move to the next neighbourhood or go to these places off-season. Still, the latter that a small minority despite rather positive attitude, showed reactions such as avoidance to visit overcrowded places or neighbourhoods is in line with SDT (Jacobsen et al., 2019; Papadopoulou et al., 2023) and its negative impact on behaviour.

If one moves a few hundred metres away from a large number of visitors, it is almost deserted. (Respondent # 48)

In a free world, you have the right to travel wherever you want. If you think it is a hassle with too many tourists, you can go to another city. For example, in Spain there are many nice cities to visit with fewer tourists, such as Valencia, Alicante, Bilbao, etc. (Respondent # 266)

### 4.3. Theme 3: sense of responsibility

Partly in line with earlier studies (e.g. González-Reverté, 2022; Szromek et al., 2019) a latent theme that has been extracted from qualitative data is the sense of responsibility for the problem among many of the respondents. Although they have mentioned other actors (at host destination, and in

tourist-generating regions) as accessories in excessive destruction, they would not ignore the responsibility that all tourists, including themselves, have, meaning that the problem must be systematically solved to decrease the number of tourists everywhere and find a balance between demand and supply. They also show feelings of sympathy and empathy with the people of host destinations that they believe are powerless and have much higher costs than themselves in terms of higher prices for food and housing, displacement/gentrification of locals, destroyed traditional local economy, damaged cultural, historical, and natural sites, etc. These problems become even more severe when many tourists behave disrespectfully and inconsiderately towards destinations, their residents, nature, and animals.

Often, tourists do not respect the city's inhabitants or nature. They are often loud, littering, impatient, and egocentric. (Respondent # 29)

The litter that affected me was paper, plastic, and tin cans thrown on roads and in pastures where animals grazed. Sharp pieces of sheet metal that animals ingest are very painful for the animal and lead forces their euthanasia. Trash in nature is animal cruelty, I think. (Respondent # 135)

We will never again travel to Hurgada in Egypt, which was all about housing and entertaining as many tourists as possible in as small a space as possible with maximum use of resources and massive devastation of the few remaining coral reefs through marine tourism. The most ironic thing was that we passed the coral reefs with that very comment; 'here you can see how badly worn and faded the reefs are!' (Respondent # 121)

#### 4.4. Theme 4: solutions

The fact that a predominant majority of the respondents are well-experienced travellers with good knowledge of overtourism (see Table 1) might explain their willingness to express feeling of responsibility on the issue but also their eagerness to offer suggested solutions. At odds with other authors using SDT (González-Reverté, 2022; Gössling et al., 2020; Jacobsen et al., 2019; Papadopoulou et al., 2023) that did not mention any suggestions for problem solutions, but in part in line with other studies (Šenková et al., 2022; Szromek et al., 2019) here the respondents have come up with extensive suggestions for solutions (Figure 4). Although the solutions are directed towards different stakeholders, they mostly target the supply side, that is, stakeholders and authorities in host destinations (cf., Avond et al., 2019; Goodwin, 2021; Peeters et al., 2018) which are believed to be able to solve the problem in the first place. The solutions can be classified as hard solutions (Strict regulation; Impose taxes and fees) (cf., Blázquez-Salom et al., 2023) and soft solutions (Tourists' own efforts; Information/education; Better marketing; Other) (cf., Gowreesunkar & Vo-Thanh, 2020). Three sub-themes (Better marketing, Strict regulation, Impose taxes, and fees) are directed towards local authorities and local and international tourism stakeholders to be used as their measures. The sub-theme Information contained measures directed towards tourists, local inhabitants, and authorities as potential receivers. The last two sub-themes concern tourists' own tips and advice to other tourists, and other measures suggested to local and national authorities. Here, even those who would consider overtourism an opportunity suggested solutions to the problem.

Promote other cities in the same country so that tourists can spread throughout the country. (Respondent # 12)

Create a booking system for particularly vulnerable areas, so that the number of visitors can be regulated. Possibly, entrance fees may be earmarked to protect and preserve the area. (Respondent # 109)

Limit the number of visitors per day. Stop buying apartments that will be used solely for Airbnb. Do not adapt the offer to tourists, but to locals. You do not travel to feel at home; you travel to see how others are doing. (Respondent # 246)

Marketing needs to be reduced. If you do not put advertising in front of people's eyes, you will not arouse their desires. In addition, the government should enact laws on how tourism should be shaped so that it takes into account nature, society, and the economy. In addition, I think it would be good to inform tourists and people in general about sustainable tourism, how to think, what consequences their actions lead to, and so on. In my opinion, change will not happen if you put all the responsibility on consumers because they are selfish hedonists who are too lazy to examine what they contribute. Society must take more responsibility to regulate tourism and spread information. (Respondent # 51)



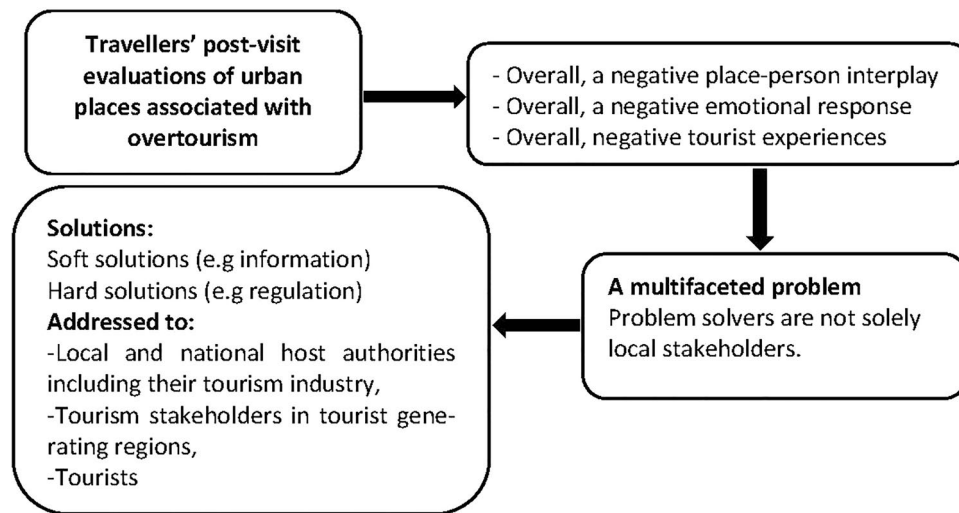
**Figure 4.** Respondents' suggestions for solutions.

In our questionnaire we did not ask the respondents any question about their behaviours on the overcrowded sites and their post-travel behavioural patterns. To link this final theme with SDT and its impact on tourist' long-term behaviour (Papadopoulou et al., 2023) we might consider that these respondents still indicate, through their solution suggestions, that they would adopt them and thereby adapt their future behaviours to them.

## 5. Discussion and conclusions

This study conceptualises urban overtourism with a link to SDT in an interplay between 370 Swedish travellers and their visited places abroad on one side, and their experiences in encounters with hosts, other tourists, and the surrounding environments on the other side. Figure 5 shows a synthesis of the earlier presented theory and an elaboration of the conceptual model of the study based on the obtained results.

With a link to SDT, these respondents develop mostly negative reactions and attitudes to place-person interactions with overcrowded urban places, and negative emotions to facing too many tourists there (Gössling et al., 2020). Following Yu & Egger (2021) the respondents in their interaction with the surrounding destinations, their residents and other tourists, mention mostly negative tourist experiences. They lay the responsibility for overtourism on the shoulders of different stakeholders in tourist generating regions, host destinations, but also blame themselves as tourists. They admit that tourists like themselves are perpetrators and problem contributors, while, as consumers, they receive worsened quality of service and experiences (Peeters et al., 2018). This result is also in line with many earlier studies (e.g. Diaz-Parra & Jover, 2021; García-Buades et al., 2022; Mihalic, 2020). To the list of consequences (Diaz-Parra & Jover, 2021; García-Buades et al., 2022), this study adds a colonial-style treatment of residents in terms of prioritisation. In contrast to other studies, a smaller part of respondents views the economic benefits of overtourism as outweighing the downsides as it helps host community maintain a decent living



**Figure 5.** Elaborated conceptual model based on the achieved results.

standard and lasts for a limited time. This may in our view be valid for rural and small-town destinations having seasonal tourism but seems odd in larger towns and cities. Whereas Papadopoulou et al. (2023) find that for their whole sample, there are significant levels of perceived destination adaptation negatively influencing tourist satisfaction and positively influences reactive behaviours of approach, avoidance, and tolerance, our study suggest that different cohorts exhibit either approach, avoidance or tolerance.

When it comes to solutions, they provide a series of suggestions to the problem that, to a high extent, is consistent with earlier studies (e.g. Avond et al., 2019; Blázquez-Salom et al., 2023; Goodwin, 2021; Gowreesunkar & Vo-Thanh, 2020; Milano et al., 2019b; Peeters et al., 2018) consisting of soft solutions, for example, information activities, and hard solutions, for example, regulations. This means that there is a consensus between tourists and tourism scientists. In contrast to most earlier studies that have been supply side oriented (e.g. Goodwin, 2021; Peeters et al., 2018), this study, partly in line with Blázquez-Salom et al. (2023), also includes solutions directed towards the demand side, that is, tourists and travel agencies from tourist generating countries.

Overtourism is a multifaceted phenomenon involving both local destinations and international actors, including tourists. The problem needs to be addressed by all involved actors, particularly the local tourism industry at the destination, in collaboration with the global tourism industry. The authors also recommend that locals in host destinations should be given more initiative in order to deal with the problems impacting their everyday lives. The sense of the locals' powerlessness and alienation was expressed by many respondents with latent meanings in the data. Finally, the travellers investigated in this study, similar to other travellers, are also part of the problem themselves. Although they provide suggestions to solutions and are also against overtourism, this should be considered both an issue and a limitation of this study. However, as the results show, tourists can also act as problem-solvers if they get the chance.

### **5.1. Theoretical and practical implications**

This study has theoretical implications for the research community and strengthens the base of research on sustainable urban tourism. One theoretical contribution of this study is that SDT has been extended with tourists' perspectives by including aspects of real overtourism scenarios witnessed by them. Furthermore, SDT has been elaborated by adding suggestions to solutions given by the tourists themselves, something that was lacking before. It also brings the perspective of notions of fair treatment of residents. In contrast to mainstream research that mostly deals with measures from host communities, tourists come with their own perception of the problem and their own problem solutions to policymakers, international tourism stakeholders, the tourism industry, authorities in host destinations, and tourists

themselves. These are not top-down solutions imposed by local policymakers or DMOs towards tourists, but tourists' suggestions. Finally, this study contributes to parts of earlier research on tourists' attitudes towards overtourism (Papadopoulou et al., 2023; Šenková et al., 2022; Szromek et al., 2019) by widening their demographic perspectives, thereby including older, more experienced travellers, and by obtaining respondents' subjective views and not through ticking-off closed answer options. Tourists are important stakeholders in the issue, a part of the problem, and potential problem solvers. Thus, it is necessary to include them and their solutions in future research.

This study also has practical implications for tourism stakeholders, particularly policymakers and DMOs in European destinations. The results showed that these stakeholders would benefit from including locals in collaboration and all decision-making concerning sustainable tourism growth. In addition to all soft and hard measures, these stakeholders should also systematically provide necessary information to all tourists visiting their places on how to behave and make the visit pleasant both for themselves and for the locals. Our results also show the respondents' willingness to pay a price to tackle problems of overtourism and to create pleasant experiences for both locals and tourists. Perhaps these values are shared with many tourists from many other countries. This should motivate stakeholders to take initiatives and measures more seriously to tackle overtourism through tourists' ideas. Therefore, it would be a good idea that stakeholders in these destinations, through regular attitude investigations with tourists, for example, at hotels or city attractions, get a better understanding of their ideas and wishes when it comes to typical tourism-overcrowded places. In addition, the respondents clearly indicated that most measures must be taken by stakeholders in host destinations.

## **5.2. Limitations and suggestions for further research**

Like many exploratory studies based on surveys, our investigation was affected by bias. For example, a predominant majority of well-educated elderly people participated in the survey. Further, one part of the respondents answered rather extensively to the open-ended questions, while the other part answered rather sparsely, which means that the level of knowledge between them might vary. Another shortcoming of this study is that no questions were asked about respondents' behavioural patterns during and after the visit to overcrowded destinations in terms of loyalty, intention to revisit, and WOM. It is also possible that some of our own LinkedIn contacts who distributed our survey in their networks also answered our questionnaires. Therefore, our results should be interpreted with caution.

One immediate suggestion for further research would be to conduct a larger study including travellers from nations with a high rate of international travel (e.g. other Nordic nations, Germans, Americans, Dutch, and Brits). Further, it would be of relevance to conduct more in-depth investigations on the issue of overtourism as an opportunity and whether it is possible to make it possible with less harm to the destinations, host people, and cultural, social, and natural heritage.

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## **Ethical approval**

The research received Ethical Approval on 2022-12-07 from the school board's ethical review at Södertörn University in Stockholm with protocol number 08/22.

## **Author contributions**

CRedit: **Saeid Abbasian**: Conceptualization, Data curation, Formal analysis, Investigation, Methodology, Project administration, Resources, Software, Validation, Visualization, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing; **Gustaf Onn**: Conceptualization, Data curation, Formal analysis, Investigation, Methodology, Project administration, Resources, Software, Validation, Visualization, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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## Data availability statement

The data that support the findings of this research are available from the corresponding author [SA], upon reasonable request.

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