When the tourists flew out

A study about residents' perception of tourism before and since the COVID-19 virus

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Introduction

In 2008, the Malaysian poet Cecil Rajendra wrote a poem slamming tourism with the title "When the tourists flew in." In 2020, since the advent of the pandemic caused by the COVID-19 virus (also referred to as the coronavirus) and the subsequent cessation of most travel, shared public space between hosts and guests has turned into empty space – the tourists flew out. Today, tourist destinations are first and foremost local residents' proverbial backyards. If destination marketing and management organizations are addressing a new target group, it is no longer the long-haul Asian explorer, but the people who live in their destination. Before the coronavirus-induced lockdown, researchers, media, and tourism actors debated a phenomenon scolded as "overtourism" or "imbalanced tourism" resulting from a hyper-mobile society that has loved some destinations, such as European cites, to death (Ioannides & Gyimóthy 2020; Higgins-Desbiolles 2020). In May 2020, an article in The Guardian titled "We've reclaimed our city but inherited a ghost town" (Burgen 2020) reported about non-tourism in Barcelona. Residents see, smell, and hear their city completely differently (ibid.) when they walk through its empty streets, which used to be the prime example of the loathed mass tourism in European urban destinations. The present research draws inspiration from this article to analyze how the disruption of the travel industry and the current phenomenon of "tourism over" has influenced the perception of tourism among residents of trendy urban destinations in Europe.

Immediately before the first lockdown mid-March 2020, the researchers involved in this study conducted qualitative image-based focus groups with residents of Copenhagen, the Danish capital, to learn about their perception of tourism – independently of the pandemic. Afterwards, the researchers wondered what the focus group participants thought about tourism three months after the unthinkable happened – there were no more tourists to be found on bike lanes in front of Nyhavn. Thus, a quick-shot post-lockdown quantitative survey was arranged and sent to the participants. The present epistemological study aims to analyze if the perception of tourism among residents of Copenhagen has changed due to the global COVID-19 virus pandemic. This snapshot delivers unique data, which will be helpful for future planning and the renaissance of the travel industry.

Tourism development before and since COVID-19

These days, as the second wave of the coronavirus pandemic is lurking over Europe in close connection with the onset of fall, the short gasp of relief in (late) summer has been quashed. Nonetheless, governments have handled the situation differently and more thoughtfully than the first time round. At the same time, scholars currently doubt that the tourism industry has actually used the break in travel to rethink future plans and approaches (Ioannides & Gyimóthy 2020; Higgins-Desbiolles 2020). Instead, the short rebirth of tourism in July-August 2020 showed that the industry has aimed to get back to business as usual as quickly as possible, and perhaps with even more aggressive growth than experienced before the industry ground to a halt (Gössling et al. 2020). Even if this perspective is slowly appearing to be outdated, tourism success will soon again be identified with growing numbers of bed nights and other such tourism quantifiers (ibid.). Ioannides and Gyimóthy (2020, p. 626) even fear that "the sector will gradually revert to the pre-crisis unsustainable growth-oriented trajectory." Even if some organizations, researchers, and tourism planners declare this to be the perfect moment for responsible tourism and more sustainable development of the travel

industry (UNWTO 2020), one has to realize that tourism stakeholders are battling for their (economic) existence in the first place. It is in this light that Higgins-Desbiolles (2020) has argued that ideas about responsible tourism are insufficient, and instead a concept of *"socialized"* tourism should be the future goal, "meaning to make tourism responsive and answerable to the society in which it occurs" (Higgins-Desbiolles 2020, p. 617). She criticizes neoliberal transformations that caused the attempt to diminish society in favor of the economy (Higgins-Desbiolles 2020), which has been supported by other researchers (Ioannides & Gyimóthy 2020). To achieve this "socialized" tourism that focuses on the local community and "the public good form of tourism" (Higgins-Desbiolles 2020 p. 619), it is inevitable that tourism planners and governance actors need to enter into a dialogue with the local residents.

The discussion about tourism perceptions among residents is not new in tourism research, but gained more attention as the protests against tourism growth swelled over the last three to five years (Almeida-García et al. 2020; Bello et al. 2017; Nunkoo and So 2016; Boley et al. 2014). Even before the global disruption of the travel industry, researchers had already speculated about how the inclusion of local communities could make tourism more (socially) resilient (Almeida-García et al. 2020). Such studies often analyzed the perception of tourism among destination residents and ultimately categorized the resulting attitudes according to demographic structures as well as aspects such as local rootedness and place attachment (ibid.). The present study in Copenhagen was inspired by previous studies, yet extended the pattern analysis based on demographic characteristics with lifestyle types following Otte's typology from 2005, as the sections below discuss. In addition, as a quick reaction to the disruption, the researchers tried to capture how the pandemic influenced this perception, thus building on existing research results with "the new normal" for future tourism governance strategies.

Methodology

To gain insight into the pre- and post-lockdown situation, a mixed-method data collection was deployed in February-March 2020 as well as in June-July 2020.

First, a qualitative in-depth method called "image-based focus groups" was designed specifically for this research project. As the name indicates, it consisted of focus group discussions combined with a photo elicitation. The focus groups were semi-structured and were a useful method for investigating various topics at once (Cater and Low 2012; Daniels et al. 2018). The spontaneous (semi-)public opinions and reactions of the discussants reveal how individuals were influenced by others (Cater and Low 2012; Daniels et al. 2018; Mattissek et al. 2013; Mayring 2016). Furthermore, values, stereotypes, and implicit knowledge, which are usually hard to reveal and non-reproducible, were elicited by the debate (Mattissek et al. 2013; Mayring 2016; Beurskens and Montanari 2018). On top of that, pictures taken by the participants were used as additional stimuli for emotions and as a means to facilitate articulation on a deeper level of human consciousness (Abascal et al. 2018; Janusz et al. 2017; Harper 2002). The image-based focus groups took place in Copenhagen in the first two weeks of March 2020. The participants were selected based on a purposive sampling method aiming for high diversity and therefore an information-rich perspective (Flick 2018). Out of the 57 people who signed up for the focus groups, 22 individuals (RES2 - RES23) showed up and actually participated. The majority of the individuals, who ranged from 26 to 70 years old, were female (64%), had completed higher education (75%), and were working full-time (50%). In total, five groups, each with three to seven participants, discussed the issue for 120 minutes. The day after the fifth focus group, the government of Denmark announced the lockdown of the country due to the COVID-19 virus. For the analysis, the audio data of the focus groups was transcribed and analyzed together with the photographs, using well-

structured and progressive qualitative content analysis (Mayring 2016; Schreier 2014). MAXQDA, a computer-based QDA program, was deployed for the analysis, as this increased the validity and reliability of qualitative research (Hilpert et al. 2012; Schreier 2014). The coding system was based on three levels: sub-codes, codes, and categories, and was created inductively as well as deductively (Saldana 2013; Schreier 2014). This coding process was based on Saldana's (2013) structure of grammatical, elemental, and affective coding. After the first coding cycle, new inductive codes were created, and a second axial coding process took place (Mayring 2016; Schreier 2014).

Second, three months after the lockdown and the image-based focus groups, the 22 participants were contacted via email and asked to fill in a quantitative online survey about their current situation and their perceptions of tourism in Copenhagen. One month later, 14 people (64%) had replied to the 21 questions, of which nine were specifically related to the pandemic, and the rest about lifestyle and demographic information. The majority were closed, single-choice questions, while there was one multiple-choice question, one three-point Likert scales, and two open questions. The results of the quantitative survey were examined with the help of SPSS and subsequently compared with the findings from the first round of data collection.

Findings

"Overtourism" perceived by residents of Copenhagen

The focus groups proved that the perception of tourism is highly focused on visual aspects. The most common symbols for tourists named during the discussion were rental bikes, red tourist buses, cruise ships, trolley suitcases, and crowds of people. Additionally, according to the residents, strangers stand out due to their clothing, language, and/or behavior. Extensive photographing, partying on the streets, and the way they ride a bike were especially obvious indicators of foreign behavior, according to residents. If tourists blend in with the local society, they are not noticed as tourists and therefore do not disturb the locals:

> So I think when I told you before that I actually love meeting the tourists in the church Absalon because they sort of blend in with the local community, how it lives and how *we* live. Then I think it is very positive. But, when they enter as tourists and make noises and also because of the increase of tourists and tourism in general, lots of more bars and restaurants has opened and that makes a lot of noise. And in that way, especially in the summertime, I am affected by that. But I like it when they come, you know, by bike, on foot, like *we* do, like *the locals* do." (RES17 2020).

One respondent used the following statement, which was supported by other participants, to clarify that the crowds were bearable if residents could avoid them, e.g. by taking a detour: "No, it doesn't affect me, but I make different choices in the high season. I never go to the center." (RES7 2020). Nevertheless, if a crowd behaves in a way that is noticeably different to local behavior, residents begin to reach their tolerance limit: "It's a bigger city so you'll expect crowds too. But suddenly you have *clumsy* crowds and *that* is the difference." (RES4 2020). As the discussions show, these direct spatial and social encounters interfere with residents' perception of safety and freedom to move around. The focus groups pointed out that many residents only notice tourist-based conflicts when they are on bikes. As RES10 summed it up: "I really don't notice the tourists unless they go on my bike lane." (RES10 2020). On the one hand, residents appreciate visitors who use bicycles to protect the environment and live the local lifestyle. On the other hand, tourists who ride their bike for leisure do not follow the specific cycling rules, obstruct traffic, and thereby exceed the limits of tolerance of the vast majority of residents.

Hence, the consequences of crowds, pollution, foreign behavior, and the neglect of traffic rules bother residents. This in turn means tourism begins to test their patience when they perceive an invasion of their privacy, harm to their health, threats to their physical safety, and the alienation and "disneyfication" of the (inner) city and local culture. Residents do not want their collective identity and personal freedom to be affected by tourism, but there have been a few initial signals showing that this has started to become reality – pre-lockdown: "I never go to Nyhavn because it's packed with tourists. I don't feel like it's *my* place anymore." (RES17 2020).

Nevertheless, these perceptions differ depending on the residents' lifestyles. The research results prove that many different factors influence an individual's perception of tourism. One factor is the origin of the survey participant. People who immigrated to Denmark exhibited a very high level of tolerance, empathy, and understanding towards the guests of the city. In contrast, residents who feel a strong rootedness in Copenhagen were more skeptical and perceived their culture to be at risk due to the strange behavior of tourists. Nevertheless, RES 6, RES7, and RES17, all of whom had lived in Copenhagen for at least 30 years, showed a very welcoming and open-minded attitude. Hence, classic demographic data is not the most crucial factor for the perception of tourism. It was for this reason that participants were categorized according to Otte's lifestyle typology (2005), which encompasses nine different lifestyle types (see Figure 3) based on their openness to modernity versus consciousness of tradition on one axis, and the availability of resources on the other. Ultimately, individuals with a more modern lifestyle as well as those with a large amount of resources perceived tourism more positively and seemed to be more resilient to the negative side effects of tourism than those residents with a low standard of living and a traditional lifestyle.

"Tourism over" perceived by residents of Copenhagen
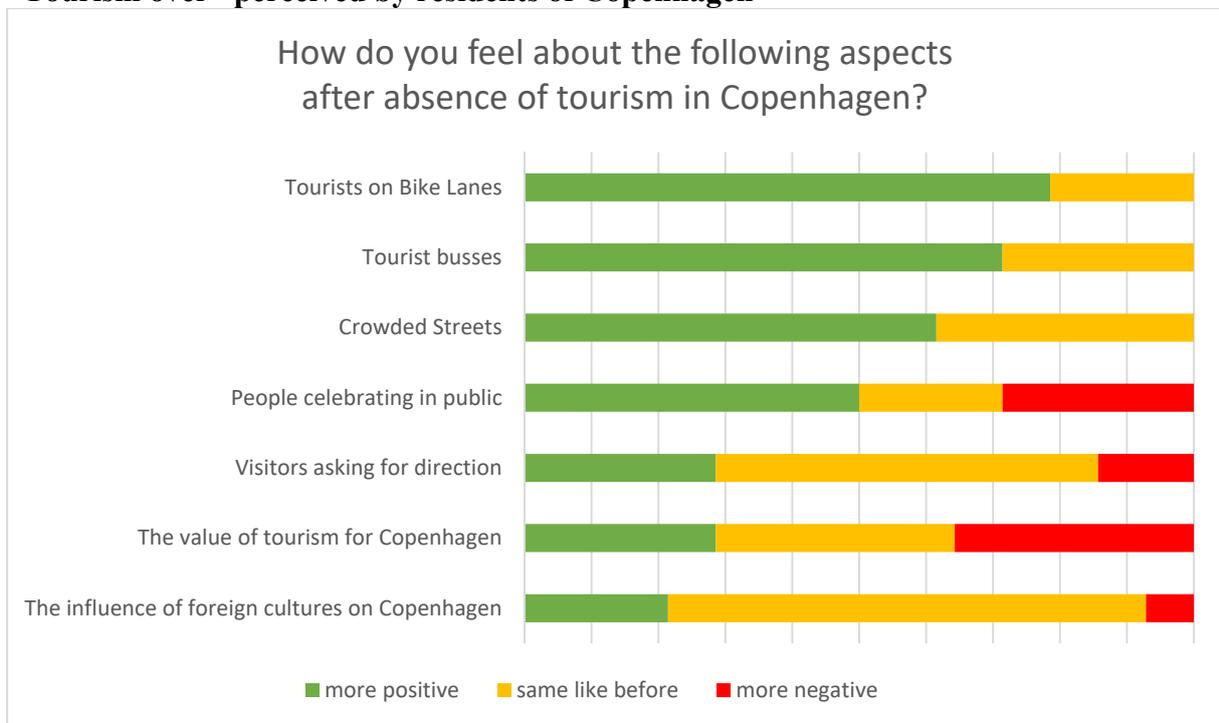
The results of the online survey showed that almost 30% of the participants had changed their feelings about tourism in Copenhagen due to the outbreak of the pandemic and the global stoppage in travel since mid-March 2020. As Figure 1 depicts, residents felt most positive about the absence of tourists on bike lanes, tourist buses and crowds in streets as a consequence of the absence of tourism in the city. In contrast, the residents felt more negative

about the value of tourism for Copenhagen and about people partying in public than before the lockdown.

A few of the residents responded that they visited places that they used to avoid because of tourists, such as the "Kastellet" Castle, the Little Mermaid, and "Strøget," the main shopping street. Before the borders were opened again in July, 93% of the respondents expected fewer tourists over the next year than there had been before the lockdown. When asked if their tolerance towards tourists would change after this experience, two-thirds of residents responded with "No." The remaining 30% who expected their tolerance to change stated that their tolerance would be lower than before. Next to this alarming prognosis, 43% of the residents came to the realization that tourism lowered their personal quality of life in Copenhagen, while the rest felt unaffected by it; no one perceived an improvement. When asking the residents what they heard, saw, and smelled when they walked through the empty streets of Copenhagen, the most common answers were birds singing in the city, the empty bus parking spaces, and fresh air respectively.

Overall, during lockdown, the attitude of Copenhagen's residents towards tourism seems to have remained largely the same. However, a minority who claimed that their perception of tourism changed due to the events showed a more *negative* attitude towards tourism. To more thoroughly evaluate these findings, respondents were categorized based on the lifestyle typology too and showed that groups with a medium standard of living and resources, which we call the conventionals, the adaptive mainstream and hedonists, were the ones who claimed that their tolerance towards tourism would be lower than before the pandemic. In addition, the middle groups with a partially modern lifestyle were the ones who perceived tourism to lower their quality of life.

Discussion – how the pandemic influences the perception of residents

Many of the results of the residents' perception before the pandemic are in line with previous research (Almeida-García et al. 2020; Andereck et al. 2005; Boley et al. 2014; Nunkoo and So 2016). However, the present study does not only cover earlier research, but also adds a first idea on the influence of the ongoing global pandemic on these perceptions.

"*So nice without all the tourists – it feels like I have got my city back again.*" (Anonymous, 2020)

As outlined in the findings and depicted in Figure 2, the key fears of the residents about the increase of tourism in Copenhagen are a loss of local identity, safety issues, and interference with their privacy and their freedom, even though hardly any of the residents are aware of the *direct* influence of tourism on those factors. Tourism only exists for residents where they believe to *see* or *hear* it. Yet, it is important to emphasize that this perception is very vague and subjective – for example, a person speaking English is not automatically a tourist.

If there has been a noticeable change in perceptions since the absence of tourism in Copenhagen, the mood seems to be rather negative. Since borders almost all over the world were closed, and human movement was minimized to avoid spreading the highly contagious virus, residents for once found out how their city looked without tourists – but of course also with hardly any outdoor and social life due to the pandemic. As Figure 1 showed, in June and July 2020, residents felt more negative about the value of tourism for Copenhagen and about people partying in public compared to before the lockdown. This is reasonable, since both aspects were worsened by the pandemic and the lockdown. However, these days, it is not the visitor who uses the streets to mingle, but the locals themselves. On top of that, the realization

of how much economic damage the absence of tourists caused in the city is of course painful and frustrating, but at the same time eye-opening for the broader society.
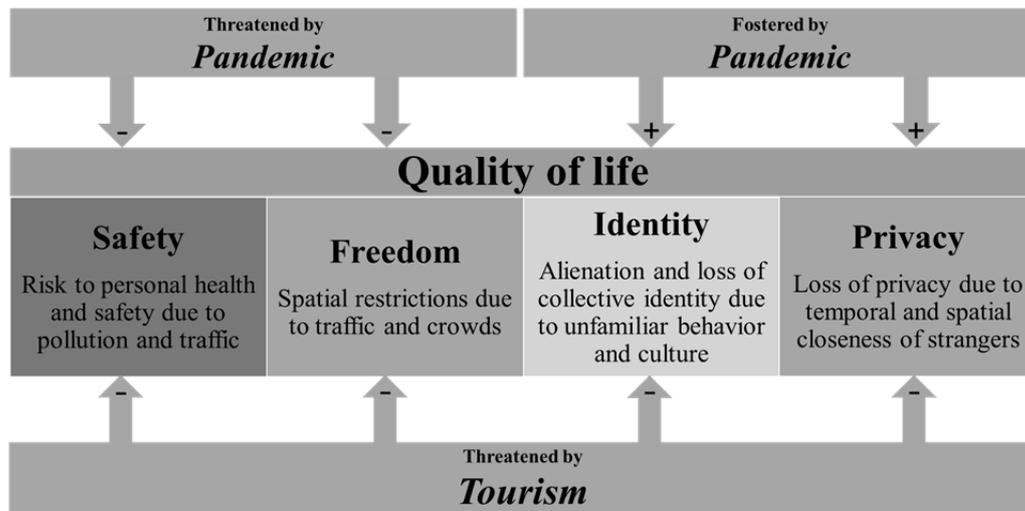

Figure 1: Perceived influence of tourism and the pandemic on the quality of life, source: own design

Hence, just like the effects of tourism, the consequences of the pandemic has influenced the residents' quality of life. It has also threatened the freedom and safety of these people. However, based on these findings, we hypothesize that the pandemic seems to have strengthened the desire for collective identity, either directly by "being strong together" or indirectly by the absence of foreign influences. Moreover, the feeling of privacy seems to have been fostered by the COVID-19 pandemic and the lockdown. Therefore, identity and privacy, which were threatened by tourism but have been strengthened by the current situation, are the aspects that strike residents the most; they are the aspects where they perceive a difference and appreciate the shift to the current circumstances. This assumption is supported by the fact that residents claimed to feel more negative about tourists asking for directions (privacy), people partying in public (privacy), and the influence of foreign cultures (identity) since the absence of tourism (see Figure 1). Of course, this hypothesis is based on limited data and needs to be further examined in the future, and it should be supported with qualitative data.

Furthermore, the lifestyle typology analysis corresponds to the assumption that the high tolerance of Copenhagen's residents is related to the above-average level of wealth in the Danish capital. Hence, the present findings confirm Sonnenberger et al.'s conclusion (2012) that lifestyle factors are more relevant for a person's resilience to tourism than demographic data. The global outbreak of the COVID-19 virus tested this resilience more quickly than anyone had expected.

Referring to Otte's lifestyle typology, which is depicted in Figure 3, the 30% who stated that they would have a lower tolerance towards tourism in the future were generally people with a medium level of living and resources. This could be because they are not as (economically) independent as the people with a high level of living, but they are also not as concerned about their (economic) existence due to the lockdown as the ones with low levels of resources are who are more likely to embrace any economic activity. Looking at the typology matrix reveals that it is the group with the "partially modern" lifestyle who now perceives that tourism lowers their quality of life. This might be caused by the fact that the "adaptive mainstream," who are also called the "high achievers" or the "social climbers," perceive a loss of (economic) potential for the city and therewith their personal life. According to the comments in the survey and the results shown in Figure 1, the adaptive mainstream

appreciates having less traffic on the roads (especially the red tourist buses) and on the water, which might have been stress factors that lowered their quality of life. But the "established liberals" and the "domestically centered" also reported that they were able to see the beauty of their city again and could explore the wildlife, silence, and peace due to "no confused tourists on bike lanes" (Anonymous, 2020).

Figure 2: Lifestyle groups that perceive tourism more negatively since the lockdown, source: the authors, based on Otte 2005.

Hence, Figure 3 depicts the "adaptive mainstream" lifestyle group as seeming to perceive the effect of tourism on Copenhagen the most critically since the lockdown. Considering that this lifestyle group is one of the biggest, the mood and attitude of the residents needs to be monitored closely to see if this skepticism continues to increase, or if this new situation merely rendered a temporary change. For example, one could assume that, after a longer period without tourists, residents might start to miss the city's guests. But it is also possible that residents increasingly come to value their privacy.

Thus, the final words of Rajendra's poem may have a completely different meaning today: "Hell, if we could only tell them where we really want them to go!"

Conclusion

The aim of this research was to reveal if the lockdown caused by the COVID-19 virus has influenced the perception of tourism among Copenhagen residents compared to pre-lockdown perceptions bordering on "overtourism," and if so, how. Therefore, the research team followed up with a group of residents who were interviewed in image-based focus groups before the first lockdown in March 2020, and asked them to fill in an online survey about their thoughts about tourism three months later.

The results revealed that most residents felt that their quality of life had not been greatly influenced by tourism either before or after the outbreak of the pandemic. Nevertheless, during the focus groups they expressed how they felt affected by tourists with respect to their privacy, freedom, safety, and identity. This revealed that residents were indeed influenced by tourists in their city, but they were hardly aware of this direct connection; only after giving it a second thought and discussing real-life examples did they realize the overlap of their personal space with the space of tourism.

After the lockdown, only a few residents stated that the pandemic had changed their perception of tourism. However, this small group thought more negatively about tourism than before, and they appreciated the fact that the problems caused by tourism, such as traffic issues on bike lanes, had dissipated. It was especially the aspects of privacy and identity that have been strengthened by the current situation, and where the residents began to realize that they appreciated the absence of tourism.

Breaking the cohort down by lifestyle, we found that people with a partially modern lifestyle and medium level of living in particular expressed a more negative perception. Nevertheless, before the pandemic, it was hard to differentiate who was a tourist and who was not. Now it is hard to distinguish what is caused by the absence of tourism or by the absence of public life generally. The COVID-19 virus has clearly affected residents' privacy, identity, freedom, and safety, too. While this study has been able to offer a snapshot of sensitive groups of society and crucial aspects of their quality of life, it remains unanswered how the pandemic and the absence of tourism will affect the attitude of residents in the long term.

Finally, it is important to emphasize that the present findings were based on a very small sample, and that the online survey three months after the lockdown only captured one phase of a long period of the ongoing global COVID-19 pandemic. By now, the perception might be very different again, and therefore further research is needed to monitor the development.

There are many further questions that remain open for future research since the current situation has caused a huge change in the travel industry across the globe. We want to suggest two aspects in particular that would offer fertile ground for future in-depth research: first, the strategy of tourism governance actors based on the shifting perception of tourism among destination residents; second, forecasts of future tourism development. Will we experience a phenomenon like "Overtourism 2.0" as a consequence of the second wave of government support for the tourism industry over the next few months or even years? To avoid overtourism tomorrow, we need to find smart solutions, such as the combination of hygiene and cultural education for tourists, a redefinition of host-guest space, which may be more divided in the near future, and the deployment of high-tech solutions at all levels, including participatory e-governance of destinations. As painful and dramatic the current situation is, the tourism industry has become the subject of a great deal of attention, and this might be the right time to rethink socially responsible and resilient tourism for tomorrow.

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