



Living in Smaller UNESCO Sites – Paradise or Hell? Factors Influencing the Perception of Residents

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Abstract: UNESCO sites are objects of extensive research. Generally, research concentrates on the tourists' perspective. The small UNESCO sites are specific in several ways (smaller towns, seasonal demand, lower capacities, lower staff capacities in municipalities and DMOs, lower budget, etc.). Tourism is often the most visible phenomenon in these towns despite not being a major employer or income generator. Tourism's impacts are divided into three areas – the economic, socio-cultural, and environmental ones. There are a total of 16 items representing them in the research. The Likert scale was used for impact evaluation. Research collected 258 questionnaires in 5 smaller UNESCO sites in the Czech Republic. Correlation analysis, reliability tests, and structural equation modelling (SEM) are applied to the dataset. The research results can help the municipalities and DMOs argue tourism's positive impacts and focus on and manage the relevant aspects of being a tourism site.

1. INTRODUCTION

UNESCO sites are objects of extensive research. Generally, research concentrates on tourism development and the tourists' perspective. Tourism intensity grew in the last few years before the pandemic. This growth returned after the pandemic and shows that residents' perceptions play a more and more crucial role in the destination image (not only in UNESCO sites).

Many papers and case studies are studying the impact of tourism also on residents (Adie & Falk, 2020; Escudero-Gomez, 2019; Rua, 2020; Ruiz et al., 2019), their attitudes and perception of tourism, especially in sites rich in heritage. There are also studies studying residents' quality of life linked with tourism development (Amin, 2020; Wu et al., 2020). According to Destefanis et al. (2020), cultural tourism can be used by the local community as a means of improving their quality of life. The local population's attitudes must be one of the tools to assume resilience towards tourism developments (Linderova et al., 2021). This context is important as many of the UNESCO sites, even small ones, suffered from overtourism before 2019, and even more in 2019 when international tourism reached the highest numbers. After the COVID-19 pandemic, it is time to rethink pre-pandemic tourism, a massive and generally damaging tourism destination, towards more sustainable and inclusive approaches for the local community and their residents (Hall et al., 2020). Empowering the residents is important for the sustainability of tourism destinations (Kamata, 2021). This author emphasises the importance of communication with residents, which might affect their attitude toward tourism after the pandemic. Some authors (e.g., An et al., 2021) are investigating the influence of residents' perceived tourism impacts on their attitudes towards tourism growth, the effects of proximity to tourism centres, and how their effect is moderated by residents' demographic features (age, gender, length of residence). Recent research (Soares et al., 2022) also deals with implementing measures that

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can contribute to improving, among other things, the quality of the tourism destination for both visitors and residents.

The research aims to identify the factors relevant to the perception of the influence tourism has on the quality of life in small UNESCO sites in the Czech Republic.

2. FACTORS INFLUENCING LIFE IN SMALL UNESCO TOWNS

The small UNESCO sites are distinct from larger, more urbanised areas in several ways. They are smaller towns with seasonal tourism demand, they have lower tourism capacities and lower staff capacities in municipalities and Destination Management Organisations (DMOs), and lower budgets, etc. Tourism is often the most visible phenomenon in these towns despite not being a major employer or income generator. Many key factors influence life in these towns. Any negative tourism impact or even an impact not positive enough for anybody is visible. It can cause dissatisfaction in the local community.

Life in small UNESCO towns is influenced by various factors, including socio-economic dynamics, tourism, urbanisation, environmental sustainability, and the preservation of cultural heritage. These factors affect life in small UNESCO towns, focusing on the interplay between preservation and modernisation.

2.1. Cultural and Heritage Preservation

According to Wang and Zhang (2016), these towns serve as living monuments, where the preservation of local traditions, craftsmanship and architectural forms is maintaining their unique character. Duxbury (2014) emphasises the need for local communities to be engaged in heritage management to ensure that cultural integrity is preserved without negative influence on contemporary living standards. Nordin and Svensson (2017) discuss maintaining the historical sites and adapting them to modern use.

2.2. Economic Impact

Tourism is a major economic driver in many small UNESCO towns. It can have both positive and negative effects. Tosun and Timothy (2001) argue and show, based on examples, that tourism can bring economic benefits such as job creation and increased revenue for local businesses and the population. Tourism is a source of income and boosts the economy and infrastructure development. Bramwell and Lane (2000) highlight that the high volume of tourists in UNESCO towns can lead to overcrowding, increased cost of living, and a shift in the local economy towards catering to visitors rather than residents. Perkin (2020) in his study on historic towns in the Mediterranean notes that towns face significant challenges in balancing the needs of residents with the influx of tourists, particularly in terms of maintaining affordable housing and local services.

2.3. Socio-Economic Factors

Small UNESCO towns often face the dual challenge of preserving heritage while fostering economic development. Jenkins (2015) discusses how gentrification can arise in these towns as tourists, wealthy individuals, or developers invest in property, driving up housing prices and displacing long-time residents. This process can cause a shift in the social fabric of these towns, as local communities may struggle to keep up with rising costs, and local traditions can be eroded. On the other hand, Healy and Quigley (2016) emphasise that economic development in UNESCO towns can also result in improved infrastructure, increased services, and enhanced community

welfare. Some towns have implemented models of sustainable tourism that integrate local economic development with the preservation of cultural heritage, ensuring that residents benefit from the UNESCO designation while maintaining their way of life.

2.4. Environmental Sustainability and Urbanisation

The urbanisation process in small UNESCO towns can lead to increased demand for land, resources, and infrastructure. [Swyngedouw and Keil \(2014\)](#) suggest that while UNESCO towns are often seen as cultural havens, they are not immune to the pressures of modern urbanisation, including pollution, waste management, and the degradation of natural landscapes. Environmental sustainability becomes a critical issue in maintaining the balance between growth and preservation. In some towns, the development of tourism infrastructures such as hotels, restaurants, and transport networks put pressure on local ecosystems. According to [Leask and Fyall \(2006\)](#), sustainable tourism initiatives—such as eco-friendly accommodations, waste-reduction strategies, and the conservation of natural spaces—are essential for the long-term viability of UNESCO towns.

2.5. Community Engagement and Governance

Effective governance and community participation are crucial in managing the development of UNESCO towns. [Cicerchia \(2019\)](#) argues that local communities must be actively involved in decision-making processes to ensure that development projects respect both heritage and the interests of residents. Involving local populations in heritage management and urban planning fosters a sense of ownership and can lead to more sustainable outcomes. [Duxbury and Jeannotte \(2010\)](#) advocate for the establishment of community-driven initiatives to address the challenges posed by tourism, infrastructure changes, and socio-economic pressures. The introduction of visitor management strategies, sustainable tourism initiatives, and active community involvement in tourism planning has been shown to mitigate negative perceptions ([Blackstock, 2005](#)). According to [UNESCO \(2015\)](#), community-based tourism, which actively involves local people in planning and management, helps to mitigate negative impacts. By ensuring that tourism development aligns with the needs and desires of residents, small UNESCO towns can achieve sustainable growth that benefits both visitors and the local community/residents.

2.6. Technological Advancements

Technological innovations play an increasingly important role in the management and life of small UNESCO towns. [Müller and Schwanen \(2019\)](#) discuss the concept of “smart heritage management”, where digital technologies are used to monitor, manage, and preserve historical assets. Technologies such as augmented reality, virtual tours, and digital mapping tools offer new opportunities to educate visitors and enhance the tourism experience while maintaining the town’s integrity. However, the implementation of these technologies must be done thoughtfully to avoid disrupting the character of these towns. As [Buhalis and Law \(2008\)](#) suggest, there is a growing need for digital platforms that allow for the controlled dissemination of information to tourists, providing educational experiences without overwhelming local resources.

2.7. Psychological factors

UNESCO status often elevates a town’s cultural significance, leading to a heightened sense of pride among residents. This can foster a strong collective identity tied to the town’s historical and cultural uniqueness ([Iorio et al., 2015](#)). Residents feel proud to be part of a globally recognized community, contributing to improved mental health and a positive sense of belonging.

2.8. Remarks

All these factors influence life in small UNESCO towns. Balancing these elements requires careful planning and active engagement from local communities, authorities, and external stakeholders. Life in these towns depends differently on them.

The impact of tourism on residents' lives is mostly divided into three groups: economic, socio-cultural, and environmental. This also follows the logic of the three-pillar conception of sustainability (Purvis et al., 2019) and most theories of CSR. Therefore, also in this research, the logic of the three essential factors will be respected.

3. RESEARCH METHODS AND DATA

The impacts of tourism are divided into three areas based on previous research: (1) economic, (2) socio-cultural, and (3) environmental. In each of these factors, there are a lot of indicators (WTO, 2004; ETIS, 2016), which can be monitored and measured. In this research, 16 items (indicators) were chosen: (1) economic ones (Employment, Income for inhabitants, Income for community, Investments (into restaurants, hotels), Cost of living), (2) sociocultural (Quality of public services (transportation, libraries, ..), Entertainment and relaxation, Preservation of historical and cultural monuments, Local culture and crafts, Contact with other cultures, Crime, Customs and traditions, Self-confidence), and (3) environmental (Noise, Garbage, Use of the city center for housing).

The Likert scale was used for impact evaluation from 1 (tourism has a very negative impact) to 5 (tourism has a very positive impact). For the analysis, 258 questionnaires in 5 smaller UNESCO sites in the Czech Republic were collected between April and May 2022. Questionnaires were distributed via inhabitants' Facebook groups and on-site research. The 5 small UNESCO towns were Český Krumlov, Kutná Hora, Třebíč, Telč and Litomyšl.

After the data were checked, correlation analysis, reliability tests, and structural equation modelling (SEM) were applied to the dataset, and a model of factors influencing the perceived impact of tourism on life quality was created. SPSS was used for correlations, factors, and Cronbach's alpha and SPSS Amos was used for regression weights and model creation.

3.1. Short description of small UNESCO towns

In the Czech Republic, there are altogether 16 historic sites listed on the UNESCO World Heritage Site list (České dědictví UNESCO, 2024). The research concentrated only on 6 small UNESCO towns.

- Český Krumlov, with an area of 2,216 hectares and 12,788 inhabitants (CSU, 2024), is a town located in the South Bohemian Region and on the Vltava River. Its historical centre and the State Castle and Chateau have been included on the UNESCO World Heritage Site list since 1992. In addition to the monuments, the town has a Baroque theatre and a castle garden including the Bellaire Summer Palace with a revolving auditorium.
- Kutná Hora, with an area of 3,307 hectares and approximately 21,000 inhabitants (CSU, 2024), is in the Central Bohemian Region. The historic centre of the town's conservation area with the church of St. Barbara and the Church of the Assumption of the Virgin Mary in Sedlec, has been listed as a UNESCO World Heritage Site since 1995.
- Telč is a town with an area of 2,487 hectares and 5,224 inhabitants (CSU, 2024). It is in the Vysočina Region. In 1992, the historic center of the town was inscribed on the UNESCO World Heritage List.

- Třebíč is a town of 5,760 hectares and 34,797 inhabitants (CSU, 2024). It is in Vysočina Region, located on both banks of the Jihlava River. Jewish Quarter and St. Procopius Basilica were listed as a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 2003.
- Litomyšl is a town of 3,300 hectares and 10,493 inhabitants (CSU, 2024). It is located in Pardubice region. The town is associated with the famous composer, Bedřich Smetana, who was born in the Renaissance chateau to a family of maltsters. The entire castle complex has been listed as a UNESCO World Heritage Site since 1999.

3.2. Data

The respondents' structure is 58.5 % females and 41.5% males (151 and 107 respondents, respectively). Table 1 presents the age structure of the research sample.

Table 1. The age structure of the respondents

Age	Number of respondents
18 - 29	85
30 – 45	110
46 – 55	38
56 – 64+	25

Source: Own research

42.6% of respondents are high school graduates, 48.8% are university or college graduates, 8.1% are apprenticeship field graduates, and 0.4% (1 person) didn't want to say.

4. RESULTS

First, the correlation matrix between the individual items and life quality is created. The correlation analysis confirms a significant correlation between life quality and the items. Table 2 presents the results.

Table 2. Average values and correlation matrix

	Average	Pearson Correlation	Sig. (2-tailed)
LIFE QUALITY		1	
Employment	3.68	.457**	<.001
Self-confidence	3.61	.450**	<.001
Income for community	3.70	.425**	<.001
Investments	3.75	.418**	<.001
Entertainment	3.67	.413**	<.001
Income	3.44	.412**	<.001
Living in the center	2.96	.383**	<.001
Contact with other cultures	3.85	.315**	<.001
Monument preservation	4.27	.308**	<.001
Public services	3.36	.286**	<.001
Costs of living	3.09	.255**	<.001
Customs and traditions	3.34	.239**	<.001
Crime	2.85	.226**	<.001
Culture and crafts	3.51	.223**	<.001
Noise	2.76	.114	0.067
Garbage	3.06	.074	0.244

** . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

* . Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

Source: Own research

Except for noise and garbage creation, all the items are correlated to life quality, and we can conclude that there are some relationships. The strongest correlation from all the factors is with employment. Now, we can approach factor creation.

Cronbach's Alpha for the economic impact reached the value of 0.764 and is on a satisfactory level. A similar value has the reliability for socio-cultural impact (0.738). It is possible to create the factors. From environmental factors, only the usage of the centre (depopulation vs. attractiveness for a living) is correlated with quality of life, and we will take only this factor into account, as the others are not correlated on a significant level.

After the factor creation, the correlation matrix is created, and the relationships between quality of life and individual factors are confirmed.

Table 3. Correlation matrix for the factors

		SOC_CUL1	ECO1	DEPOP
LIFE Q	Pearson Correlation	.518**	.526**	.383**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	<.001	<.001	<.001

Source: Own research

The SPSS Amos was used to create a model and to test the significance of the effect of the factors on life quality. All factors are statistically significant.

Table 4. Regression weights for the factors

	Estimate	PLabel
LIFEQ \leftarrow SOC_CUL1	.508	***
LIFEQ \leftarrow ECO1	.310	***
LIFEQ \leftarrow DEPOP	.174	***

Source: Own research

Considering the regression weights, the socio-cultural impact is the most significant. Whereas the depopulation of the center has the least effect on perceived quality of life.

5. CONCLUSION

The results confirmed the importance of both economic and socio-cultural factors on the perceived quality of life. A much lower impact is assigned to the usage of the centre but is still statistically significant. The average values of the perceived impact of tourism are, in most cases, not significantly different from the neutral position. This can be given by the individual perception, and thanks to the fact of collecting the data in more UNESCO sites. However, individual people live in the towns, and therefore it is important to analyse relationships with a paired-sample analysis and see the effects.

The main contribution of the research is twofold. The academic benefit lies in the fact that we contribute to the body of knowledge in the field of tourism effects, specifically from the perspective of inhabitants' perception of tourism. The second kind of benefit is managerial contribution. The research results can help the municipalities and DMOs argue the positive impacts of tourism and can help with focusing on and managing the relevant aspects of being a tourism site. This research may be an important input in the discussion about bringing tourism and local life into balance.

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