

## Social Sustainability and Touristification: The Case of Querétaro's Historical City Centre

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**Abstract:** The pressure of heritage tourism is leading to processes of touristification in historical city centres. This phenomenon is presently occurring in Latin America, resulting in gentrification and increasing depopulation. These changes reduce the residential and heritage value of these areas, thereby jeopardising the social sustainability of tourism. A case study was conducted in Querétaro to analyse residents' perceptions of the positive and negative impacts of tourism in their UNESCO World Heritage historical city centre. Using a quantitative approach, a questionnaire based on previous academic studies was applied. The findings reveal that the Social Exchange Theory holds, as residents prioritise the benefits of tourism over its costs. Economic dynamism and job creation are particularly valued, and tourism is perceived as essential to the city's future. However, concerns arise regarding issues such as vehicle traffic, pedestrian congestion, waste accumulation and rising housing costs. The results provide empirical evidence to enrich the academic debate and offer valuable insights for heritage tourism policymakers.

**Keywords:** Touristification; Historical city centre; Cultural heritage tourism; Urban tourism; Social sustainability.

### **La sostenibilidad social en los procesos de turistificación de los centros históricos latinoamericanos: una evaluación desde el caso de Querétaro (México)**

**Resumen:** El turismo patrimonial está impulsando la turistificación en centros históricos de América Latina, provocando gentrificación y despoblación. Estos procesos afectan al valor residencial y patrimonial de estas áreas, poniendo en riesgo la sostenibilidad social del turismo. Este estudio analiza las percepciones de los residentes del centro histórico de Querétaro, Patrimonio de la Humanidad por la UNESCO, sobre los impactos del turismo. A través de un enfoque cuantitativo, se aplicó un cuestionario basado en estudios previos. Los hallazgos confirman la Teoría del Intercambio Social, ya que los residentes priorizan los beneficios del turismo sobre sus costos. Valoran especialmente su impacto económico y la creación de empleo, considerándolo esencial para el futuro de la ciudad. No obstante, se identifican preocupaciones como el tráfico, la congestión peatonal, la acumulación de residuos y el aumento en los precios de la vivienda. Los resultados contribuyen al debate académico sobre la turistificación de centros históricos y brindan información relevante para diseñar estrategias sostenibles que equilibren la actividad turística con las necesidades de las comunidades locales.

**Palabras clave:** Turistificación; Centro histórico; Turismo cultural patrimonial; Turismo urbano; sostenibilidad social.

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## 1. Introduction

Heritage tourism has become an increasingly significant component of global tourism. In heritage spaces, such as historic centers, it contributes to generating economic growth and employment. In return, these areas are experiencing a process of touristification, which involves infrastructures and spaces intended for residential purposes—including housing, public spaces, and commercial facilities, among others—suddenly being converted to tourist uses (Cocola-Gant, 2023). This pronounced touristification leads to the displacement of traditional commerce, gentrification, and increasing depopulation of historic centers, significantly diminishing their living and heritage content.

Historic centers in Latin America are currently undergoing strong processes of touristification (Jover & Rongvaux, 2024). This primarily occurs in those declared UNESCO World Heritage Sites, a recognition that usually increases tourist flows (Hawkins et al., 2009). The universal values that led to their designation have triggered a growth machine based on tourism and residential speculation in the form of gentrification (Costa, 2018).

However, neoliberal capitalism has expanded commodified and consumerist leisure, along with tourism, creating serious contradictions (Fletcher & Neves, 2012). In this context, heritage policies in the neoliberal arena generate spaces of exclusion and gentrification in urban heritage sites (Soccali & Cinà, 2020). Latin American historic centers are subject to these forms of commodified production common in heritage tourism (Zhu, 2021). This touristification of heritage jeopardizes the preservation of its social and spatial identity (Timothy, 2020).

Cities—particularly their urban cores—have become the principal geographical locus of concern in recent overtourism scholarship (Milano et al., 2024a). Rather than a simple quantitative excess of visitors, overtourism can be understood as a regime: a deeply entrenched, multidimensional system that reshapes urban landscapes, economies and social dynamics, in which tourism becomes the dominant source of revenue and transforms cities into perpetual holiday destinations (Milano et al., 2024b). This regime produces an excessive presence of visitors that converts public space from a shared commons into a rapidly consumed commodity, thereby eroding its sense of place and—paradoxically—its very attractiveness (Frigerio et al., 2024). Recent conceptual advances emphasize that overtourism's significance lies less in absolute visitor numbers than in its repercussions for socio-economic fabrics such as social cohesion, diversity and inclusion (Milano et al., 2024b). The proliferation of overtourism across multiple urban contexts in recent years starkly illustrates the inability of existing policy and management mechanisms to moderate the relentless growth of visitor flows (Butler & Dodds, 2022).

With the aim of attracting as many tourists as possible and gaining their approval, there is a loss of identity and the homogenization of historic spaces where a plurality of activities used to take place not long ago. However, historic centers are more complex realities than just spaces for tourism. Tourism alters the life of many historic centers, distorting their traditional residential function into a commercial tourism one, leading to a loss of identity that directly affects the local community and becoming a risk to the social sustainability of historic centers (Landorf, 2011). This can lead to situations where the identity and uniqueness of historic centers are destroyed, and alienation occurs among their residents (Nost, 2013). For this reason, empirical academic studies are needed to analyze the problem and provide innovative reflections. When discussing the threats of tourism, this means, first and foremost, being in contact with local communities (Lopez et al., 2019).

We propose a case study in the Mexican city of Querétaro. Its historic center was designated a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 1996 due to its well-preserved colonial architecture, architectural harmony, and contribution to the history and culture of Mexico. Based on this designation, local authorities have adopted a paradoxical posture, acknowledging the need to protect the center while simultaneously stating that the historic center should be dedicated to tourism (Hiernaux-Nicolas & González-Gómez, 2018). These values have attracted the growing phenomenon of touristification.

Research on residents' attitudes toward tourism has been a fixture of the academic landscape for nearly half a century (Sharpley, 2014) and continues to appear frequently (Stevic et al., 2024), reflecting sustained interest in how tourism affects destinations and local communities. Yet, within Latin America's historic centers the literature remains surprisingly thin. After an early landmark study by Belisle and Hoy (1980), only a handful of investigations have examined how residents assess tourism's impacts on these heritage districts. By contrast, studies explore tourists' perceptions of such spaces (Pérez-Sánchez et al., 2024) or analyze resident attitudes in natural settings (Escudero-Gómez & Martínez-Fernández, 2023) and sun-and-beach resorts (Sánchez-Fernández et al., 2019). Apart from a few notable exceptions (e.g., Blasco-López et al., 2018), research on resident evaluations in Latin-American historic centers is

scarce. This article seeks to fill that gap. Although the broader literature on tourism's social impacts is substantial (Deery et al., 2012), the specific perspectives of heritage-district residents in the region remain largely undocumented.

Thus, the aim of this article is to analyze the social sustainability of touristification in Querétaro City's historic center by examining the evaluations of two resident groups: those who live directly within the historic core and those who, although residing elsewhere in the city, are frequent users and visitors of the area. Consequently, the fieldwork will be carried out in the historic center, surveying all city residents encountered there, irrespective of their place of residence. The study addresses the overarching research question: How do residents evaluate the impacts of touristification? From this, four subsidiary questions are derived:

1. How do residents assess tourism's positive impacts?
2. How do they assess its negative impacts?
3. Which impacts receive the highest ratings?

To address these questions, we will administer a structured questionnaire based on survey instruments that have been validated in peer-reviewed and published research (Escudero-Gómez, 2019; Escudero-Gómez & Martínez-Fernández, 2023; Perdue et al., 1990; Snaith & Haley, 1999). The instrument was specifically adapted to the case of Querétaro through the authors' expert knowledge and has already been used successfully in previous studies. Accordingly, it constitutes a well-established methodology that uses questions on the positive and negative impacts of tourism in the historic center to gauge residents' evaluations.

The results and conclusions hold both theoretical and practical relevance. Theoretically, it is a contemporary case study in a geographic context where existing studies do not comprehensively consider the residents' perspective, contributing to the ongoing debate on whether sustainable urban tourism is a reality or a utopia (Kaczmarek & Kaczmarek, 2022). By focusing on social sustainability, the results are expected to be practically useful for policymakers and public managers, not only in the studied case but also in historic centers undergoing similar developments in Mexico and the rest of Latin America. Public managers must consider the opinions of residents if they want tourism to have a future (Nunkoo & Ramkison, 2012), and in tourism planning, knowledge of residents' attitudes and their possible reactions to future developments is fundamental (Williams & Lawson, 2001).

This study makes a significant contribution to tourism research by addressing a critical gap in the literature: residents' perceptions of touristification in Latin American historic centers, a topic that remains understudied compared to other tourism contexts (Blasco-López et al., 2018). While previous research has predominantly focused on nature-based or sun-and-beach destinations (Escudero-Gómez & Martínez-Fernández, 2023; Sánchez-Fernández et al., 2019), this work delves into the social impacts of touristification in urban heritage settings, aligning with calls by scholars such as Timothy (2020) and Landorf (2011) to examine the social sustainability of tourism in historic areas. By employing a methodology validated in prior work, this article not only enriches the academic debate on touristification but also offers a framework applicable to other historic centers at risk of homogenization and identity loss.

The structure of the article, after this introductory section, continues with a theoretical background on the touristification of historic centers in Latin America and the social sustainability of urban tourism. Following this, the material and methods section details the study area and methodology. After that, the results of the research are explained. Finally, there is a discussion section and a conclusions section.

## 2. Theoretical background

This study rests on two theoretical pillars: (1) the touristification of historic centers—particularly UNESCO World Heritage sites in Latin America—and (2) the social sustainability of urban tourism, examined here from the standpoint of the local community.

### 2.1. Touristification of Latin American historic centers

Urban tourism is rapidly growing, and in many cities, the flow of visitors is concentrated in their historic centers (Martínez-García et al., 2018). For the tourism industry, heritage cities have become destinations that offer visitors a combination of cultural and leisure attractions in a unique setting (Pine & Gilmore, 1999). Thus, in recent decades, historic centers have increased their number of tourists due

to their heritage resources (Dickinson & Peeters, 2014). Already in 1997, it was noted that this created a process of touristification with a risk of imbalance in the urban system due to the predominance of the tourism function (Jansen-Verbeke, 1997).

The touristification of historic centers is not a recent phenomenon; it has been unfolding since the late 20th century and particularly affects those designated as World Heritage Sites by UNESCO. This designation, while intended to promote protection and conservation, has often been embraced uncritically by authorities and certain residents, especially those not directly impacted by the pressures of displacement caused by increased tourism (Cáceres-Seguel, 2023; Durán, 2015; Santamarina & Del Marmol, 2020). The recognition serves as a powerful draw for visitors, who associate the UNESCO label with a mark of tourism quality (Ruiz-Lanuza & Alvarado-Sizzo, 2018). This phenomenon, known as the 'UNESCO effect' (Gravari-Barbas et al., 2015), has driven heritage tourism while simultaneously fostering processes of commodification and gentrification (D'Eramo, 2014). In Latin America, examples like Valparaíso, Chile, illustrate how tourism-driven real estate renewal often follows a UNESCO designation (Cáceres-Seguel, 2024).

Latin American historic centers, particularly those recognized as World Heritage Sites or possessing significant heritage attractions, are experiencing an intensifying process of touristification within a broader global trend (Janoschka & Sequera, 2016). Numerous academic studies have documented this phenomenon, with extensive evidence in Mexican historic centers (Barrera-Fernández & Hernández-Escampa, 2016; Cortés-Matías & Rivera-López, 2023; Delgadillo, 2018; Hernández-Cordero & Fenner-Sánchez, 2018; Hiernaux-Nicolas & González-Gómez, 2018; Méndez-Ravina et al., 2020; Yescas-Sánchez, 2018), as well as in other countries like Argentina (Bertoncello, 2018), Brazil (Tarsi, 2009), Chile (Cáceres-Seguel, 2024), Ecuador (Hayes, 2020), Guatemala (Trivi et al., 2023), Peru (Blasco-López et al., 2018), and Uruguay (Yanes-Torrado, 2018), among others. These studies highlight how heritage tourism contributes to profound transformations in historic urban spaces across the region.

Touristification transforms land use in Latin American historic centers by displacing popular forms of inhabiting and appropriating urban space, replacing them with tourist-oriented, commercial, and symbolically revalorized uses that favor capital and privileged actors (Janoschka & Sequera, 2016). The key actors in this process include municipal, regional, and national public administrations, tourism and real estate developers, and service-sector enterprises (Barrera-Fernández & Hernández-Escampa, 2016). While touristification has brought about economic revitalization that benefited the aforementioned stakeholders, as well as visitors and tourists who enjoy a beautified, heritage-enhanced city equipped with tourism infrastructure and services, it has also produced negative social effects for the local population—such as exclusion, displacement, and the loss of cultural authenticity. This authenticity has been commodified, idealized, and stereotyped, giving rise to an ambivalent process of urban transformation, as studied by Cortés-Matías and Rivera-López (2023) in the case of Oaxaca de Juárez, Mexico.

Building on this dynamic, touristification in Latin America is intrinsically linked to a framework of pro-business policies, where the central state uses the UNESCO designation as a tool to promote tourism renewal plans, prioritizing them over housing programs aimed at addressing depopulation in historic city areas (Cáceres-Seguel, 2023). This process entails the commodification of urban life—traditions, social relationships, gastronomy, and the built environment—in these cities, generating profits through the tourism economy (Trivi et al., 2023).

The touristification of historic centers is related to phenomena such as their museification, the tertiarization of their economy, changes or underuse of residential areas, and the loss of social life (Martínez-Pino, 2018). This leads to the destruction of the identity and uniqueness of the place and to alienation among its residents in Latin America (Nost, 2013). Mexican historic centers, such as Guanajuato, are becoming museum-like spaces used almost exclusively by visitors or by residents only when they behave as such (Barrera-Fernández & Hernández-Escampa, 2016). These spaces are turning into theme parks for tourists and higher-income consumers (Delgadillo, 2018).

This results in a symbolic and material dispossession of the residents caused by the rapid touristification of an urban space that, for them, is simply their neighborhood. A themed area is generated, and there is a tendency to empty historic centers of urban life (Hernández-Cordero & Fenner-Sánchez, 2018). Additionally, tourist overcrowding has brought about problems stemming from acculturation (Méndez-Ravina et al., 2020).

With the current expansion of heritage tourism, Latin American historic centers are being configured as leisure and elite residential spaces that exclude local inhabitants and pressure residents to relocate (Cáceres-Seguel, 2024). Evidently, this affects the issue of social sustainability of tourism in these areas.

## 2.2. Social sustainability of urban tourism

Tourist appeal and local well-being seldom advance in tandem (Nijkamp & Kourtit, 2023). As cities market their heritage districts and cultural assets, rapid visitor growth has generated acute pressures on housing, public space, and everyday life, prompting international bodies such as the UNWTO (2018) to call for urban-tourism strategies that temper growth with social safeguards. Crucially, the resident community possesses the leverage to facilitate—or to hinder—tourism development: without their endorsement, destinations can lose their social license to operate, and visitor flows may stall. Accordingly, a growing body of research highlights residents' perceptions as a linchpin of tourism sustainability (Blasco-López et al., 2018). Securing community consent is therefore not a cosmetic exercise but a strategic prerequisite; when inhabitants perceive the benefits of tourism as outweighing its costs, they are more likely to cooperate with planners, tolerate visitor pressure, and participate in co-creating a hospitable urban environment (Fredline et al., 2013).

It is evident and academically proven that tourism has both positive and negative impacts (Archer et al., 2005), which affect the cities where it takes place (Postma & Schmuecker, 2017). Local communities often embrace tourism for its job creation and economic benefits (Dodds & Butler, 2019). However, these benefits require residents to view tourism positively (Álvarez-Sousa, 2018). Attitudes depend on balancing economic benefits with sociocultural costs (Sánchez-Fernández et al., 2019).

Research on residents' attitudes toward tourism is grounded in several theoretical frameworks. Weber's theory of formal and substantive rationality posits that human decision-making balances economic (formal) against non-economic (substantive) motivations (Mody et al., 2020). A second strand prioritizes sociocultural impacts, arguing that residents' support hinges on the economic, social and cultural effects they perceive (Deery et al., 2012; Meimand et al., 2017). Most prominently, Social Exchange Theory (SET)—introduced by Homans (1958) and later applied to tourism by Ap (1992)—suggests that residents evaluate tourism through a cost–benefit lens: they adopt favorable attitudes when perceived benefits outweigh costs and unfavorable ones when the reverse is true (Andereck et al., 2005; Moraru et al., 2021). Empirical studies consistently show that the greater the economic benefits residents associate with tourism, the stronger their support (Boley et al., 2018; Styliadis et al., 2014; Teye et al., 2002). Numerous case studies, including those by Escudero-Gómez and Martínez-Fernández (2023) and Gannon et al. (2020), further validate SET as a robust model for explaining host-community reactions to tourism development.

However, the continuous growth of tourism development cannot be sustained without eventually breaking the tourism-community balance (Martínez-Pino, 2018). Therefore, an important moderator is society's carrying capacity (Álvarez-Sousa, 2018), which measures the extent to which a community can accommodate a large number of tourists without adverse consequences (Woo et al., 2018). When the problems generated by tourism persist and worsen, this carrying capacity can be exceeded, fracturing the social sustainability of urban tourism. Then, increasing conflicts may arise as residents' antagonism towards tourists and tourism grows (Matteucci et al., 2022).

In the business model that leads to the touristification of Latin American historic centers, quantity consistently takes precedence over quality, economies of scale over economies of scope, and the destination's tourism industry over the inhabitants' well-being (Van der Borg & Gravari-Barbas, 2022).

## 3. Methodology

This section presents the study area, the historic center of the city of Querétaro, a UNESCO World Heritage Site, and the methodology used in this research.

### 3.1. Study area

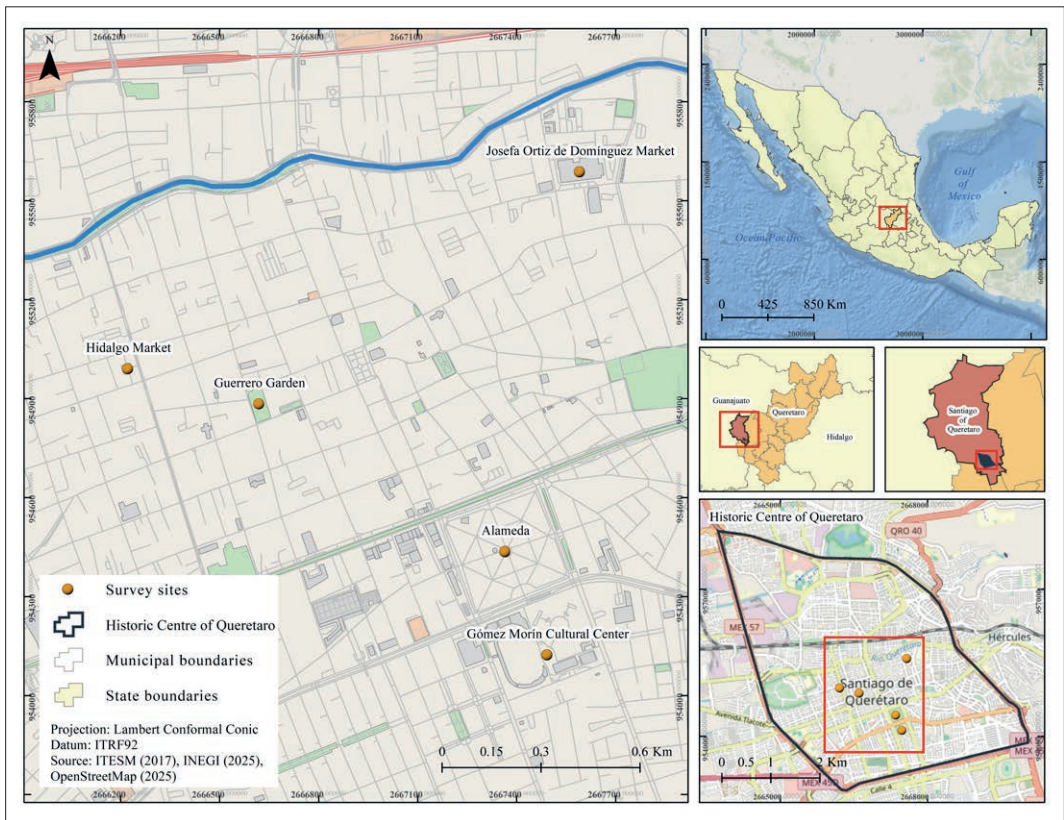
There is broad consensus on considering the tourist destination as the unit of analysis when studying the tourism sector (Barbosa et al., 2010). In UNESCO World Heritage destinations, the current trend focuses on conducting detailed case studies to explore the specific characteristics of tourism integration at each site (Pulido-Fernández & Ruiz-Lanuza, 2017). More in-depth case studies, with precise concepts and clear theoretical frameworks across different locations, are essential for understanding the complex interactions between tourism and heritage (Su et al., 2013).

In this research, the case was purposefully selected, as tourism has invaded the historic center of Querétaro (Hiernaux-Nicolas & González-Gómez, 2018), leading to a process of gentrification (Ayala-

-Galaz & Vázquez-Estrada, 2023). Furthermore, according to local press reports, the community has expressed dissatisfaction with the process of touristification (Gallardo, 2024).

The city of Querétaro, located in the Mexican state of the same name and situated in the center of the country, stands out as one of the main urban centers in the region known as the Bajío (Figure 1). Founded in 1531, it acquired a prominent role as an administrative and commercial center in the Viceroyalty of New Spain. Its strategic location on the trade route between Mexico City and the north of the country promoted its development and prosperity. This city was the site of significant historical events such as the birth of the independence movement, the proclamation of the 1917 constitution, and the first performance of the Mexican national anthem (Garrido del Toral, 2018). The urban landscape of Querétaro showcases colonial architecture, particularly in its historic center, where cobblestone streets and main squares blend with colonial buildings. Its heritage values led to the inscription of the historic center of Querétaro on the UNESCO World Heritage list in 1996. Its well-preserved state offers an exceptional testimony to the fusion of Spanish architectural traditions with indigenous techniques and styles.

**Figure 1: Location of the Historic Centre of Santiago de Querétaro and Survey Sites.**



Source: Own elaboration.

Between 2014 and 2024, Querétaro welcomed 1,222,512 international visitors, ranking it among the ten Mexican states with the highest volume of foreign tourist arrivals. Most of these travelers came from the United States, Canada and Japan (Datatur, 2025). During the same ten-year span, the total number of tourists—both domestic and international—who spent at least one night in Querétaro city reached 25,219,445 (Datatur, 2025), placing the city among the five most visited non-coastal destinations in Mexico. By the end of 2024, Querétaro city offered 28,398,494 hotel room-nights (Datatur, 2025),

and ongoing construction projects continue to expand this capacity. These figures do not include the substantial supply of short-term rentals observed during fieldwork; no statistical data are currently available for Querétaro. Nationwide, only Mexico City reports information on *insideairbnb.com*, and even there no official data are published.

Since its inscription on the World Heritage List, Querétaro has undergone a rapid tourism-driven transformation. Numerous heritage buildings have been converted into boutique hotels, restaurants, and cultural venues, reshaping the historic center's fabric (Sánchez-Aguirre & Martínez, 2024). During the decade preceding the COVID-19 pandemic, the city consistently posted the Bajío region's highest hotel-occupancy rates and overall visitor numbers (Datatur, 2025). This sustained influx—together with the systematic reuse of heritage structures for visitor services—firmly establishes Querétaro as a tourist-historic city.

### 3.2. Material and methods

To address the research questions, we implemented a quantitative survey that targeted two sub-groups of Querétaro residents: (i) those who reside inside the historic core and (ii) those who live elsewhere in the city but use and visit the area frequently. Focusing on these groups is essential because they constitute the local population most exposed to the effects of touristification—directly in the case of permanent residents and indirectly in the case of habitual users of the center. In line with Ouyang et al. (2017) and Ribeiro et al. (2017), the questionnaire asked respondents to rate tourism's impacts as either benefits or costs, thereby capturing the spectrum of positive and negative evaluations that collectively form what the literature terms residents' attitudes toward tourism (Sánchez-Fernández et al., 2019).

The questionnaire was derived from instruments validated in peer-reviewed studies (Perdue et al., 1990; Snaith & Haley, 1999; Escudero-Gómez, 2019; Escudero-Gómez & Martínez-Fernández, 2023) and was carefully adapted to Querétaro's context through the authors' expertise. A pilot test confirmed the clarity of all items before full deployment. Accordingly, the survey offers a robust, well-established methodology for assessing residents' views on the positive and negative impacts of tourism in the city's historic center.

The questionnaire's second section—its core component—contains 30 items: 15 addressing the positive impacts of tourism and 15 addressing the negative impacts. Respondents rate their level of agreement with each statement on a five-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree, 2 = disagree, 3 = neutral, 4 = agree, 5 = strongly agree). Factor reliability was assessed with Cronbach's alpha; the resulting coefficient of 0.944 indicates excellent internal consistency, well above the commonly accepted threshold of 0.70 (Hair et al., 2018). It should be noted, however, that such a high alpha may also imply some redundancy among the items. In the last section, basic demographic, social, and economic characteristics of the respondents are requested.

Data collection relied on an on-site intercept survey with simple random sampling. Between 13 February and 26 March 2024, trained interviewers approached passers-by at five locations in Querétaro's historic center—the Gómez Morín Cultural Center, Guerrero Garden, Hidalgo Market, Josefa Ortiz de Domínguez Market and the Alameda—and invited them to participate. Following Styliadis et al. (2014), the approach was strictly non-coercive, allowing respondents to express their evaluation freely. All questionnaires were administered face-to-face by the pollsters.

The universe for this survey is the entire resident population of Querétaro (1,049,777 inhabitants in 2020; INEGI, 2024), because any resident can potentially use the historic center and no official data indicate how many do so regularly.

The minimum sample size was calculated with the standard formula for large populations:

$$n = Z^2 \times p \times (1 - p) / e^2$$

where  $Z = 1.96$  for a 95% confidence level,  $p = 0.50$  (the most conservative assumption), and  $e = 0.05$ . Substituting these values yields:

$$n = (1.96^2 \times 0.50 \times 0.50) / 0.05^2 = 384.16$$

rounded to 384 respondents. A total of 401 questionnaires were collected; 20 were discarded after data cleaning, leaving 381 valid cases. With 381 observations, the final margin of error is  $\pm 5.02\%$ , practically identical to the target  $\pm 5\%$ .

The data were analyzed using descriptive statistics, which allow results to be summarized and presented in a meaningful way. All computations were performed with IBM SPSS Statistics, version 24. The mean served as the measure of central tendency, while the standard deviation was reported to highlight the extent of variability in responses relative to the mean. Additionally, the median and interquartile range (IQR) were calculated to provide a more robust understanding of the data distribution.

#### 4. Results

The methodology used has allowed us to obtain the research results. Firstly, in Table 1, we present the frequencies of the demographic and socioeconomic variables of the respondents.

**Table 1: Demographic and socioeconomical variables of the questionnaire sample.**

Gender	Men	Women	
n=381	43.6%	56.4%	
Age	18-29 years	30-55 years	+55 years
n=381	43.0%	45.0%	10.8%
Place of birth	Querétaro	Rest of Mexico	Foreign
n=381	62.7%	35.4%	1.8%
Place of residence	Historic center	Residential areas	
n=381	27.8%	72.2%	
Distance from residence to historic center	1-5 km	6-10 km	+10 km
n=275	17.1%	30.5%	52.4%
Length of residence historic center	1-5 years	6-15 years	+15 years
n=106	17.9%	29.2%	52.8%
Length of residence residential areas	1-5 years	6-15 years	+15 years
n=275	32.4%	23.6%	44.0%
Home ownership	Yes	No	
n=381	72.2%	27.8%	
Employed in the tourism industry*	Yes	No	
n=380	16.8%	83.2%	
Importance of tourism to occupation	Yes	No	
n=377	52.5%	47.5%	
Income	0-7000 Mex\$ monthly	7001-20999 Mex\$ monthly	+21000 Mex\$ monthly
n=339	26.0%	53.7%	20.4%

\* Employed in the tourism industry' denotes respondents who work directly within the tourism sector (e.g., accommodation, restaurants, travel services, visitor attractions).

**Source:** Own elaboration.

The results obtained strengthen the validity of the Social Exchange Theory (SET) regarding the opinions of the resident population about the development of tourism activity. In Querétaro, the effect

of the benefits is rated higher than the costs of tourism. The resident population values the economic effect and job creation that tourism generates in their city. And although problems arising from the touristification of the historic center are identified, the benefits outweigh the drawbacks, and these are tolerated, as will be seen in the following statistical analysis of the questionnaire.

Regarding the evaluations of Querétaro residents about tourism—which always refers to the two sub-groups we surveyed: those who live within the historic center and those who reside elsewhere in the city but visit the area regularly—we begin with the questions related to its positive impacts (Table 2). The final average rating on the 5-point Likert scale is 3.43, with a standard deviation of 1.09—this represents the deviation of each respondent's individual mean. It is therefore evident that the standard deviation of the overall mean is considerably lower than the standard deviations calculated for the individual items.

The highest mean scores were observed for items P1, P4, P13, P3 and P14. Each of these items also shows a median of 4, indicating that respondents agree with the corresponding statements. The interquartile range is 2 in every case except P13 and P14, where it rises to 3, signaling greater variability of evaluation on whether tourism helps preserve and promote Querétaro's traditions and festivals and on whether the city should strengthen its position as a tourist destination—even though the median still indicates agreement. It is worth noting that a median of 4 was likewise obtained for item P7 (“Querétaro should try to attract more tourists,” IQR = 2), item P9 (“Tourists should stay longer and spend more in Querétaro,” IQR = 2), item P10 (“Vacation-rental properties are a great business opportunity in Querétaro,” IQR = 2) and item P12 (“Tourism increases cultural and leisure opportunities in Querétaro,” IQR = 3). Overall, these results reveal broad agreement on the positive—primarily economic—impacts of tourism.

Looking at the means, residents believe that tourism improves the historic center's economy (3.75); provides jobs in Querétaro (3.70); helps conserve and showcase intangible heritage, traditions, and festivals (3.65); plays a vital role in the city's future (3.62)—this item shows the highest proportion of maximum scores, with 42.3 % of responses rating it 5—and that Querétaro should enhance its standing as a tourist destination (3.59). The highest standard deviation, 1.43, again appears in P13, confirming the greater variability in assessments of tourism's contribution to preserving traditions and festivals.

Conversely, no item obtained a mean below 3.0 or a median below 3—thresholds that would indicate disagreement. The lowest scores correspond to P2, which asks whether the benefits of tourism outweigh its negative impacts on the historic center (mean 3.05; median 3), and P15, which asks whether tourism increases the city's quality of life (mean 3.06; median 3).

In sum, Querétaro's residents—both core dwellers and frequent city-wide users—register a clear consensus that tourism benefits the local economy, job market and future prospects of the historic center. Median scores of 4 across most items, coupled with no mean below 3, indicate broad agreement, while slightly higher variability in heritage-related questions suggests only moderate debate on cultural effects. Overall, the data portray a community that strongly endorses tourism's primarily economic gains, with few reservations about its wider impact.

Regarding Querétaro residents' assessments of tourism's negative impacts (Table 3), the overall mean score is 3.13 with a standard deviation of 0.89—again, this is the deviation of respondents' individual means and is lower than the standard deviations for the separate items. Only five items score above 3.5: N1, N2, N3, N8 and N9. Median values reveal strong agreement (median = 5; IQR = 2) that tourism increases vehicle traffic in the historic center and makes parking more difficult. The other three high-scoring items show a median of 4 (Agree) with a wider interquartile range of 3; these relate to tourist-induced pedestrian crowding on certain streets and greater waste generation. Item N4—“Querétaro's historic center has become a museum for tourists”—also records a median of 4 (IQR = 3).

**Table 2: Findings for residents' positive evaluations of tourism development impacts.**

Question items	Likert scale (%)						Median	IQR	Mean	SD
	1	2	3	4	5	No answer				
P1. More tourism improves the economy of Querétaro's historic center.	10.2	10.2	16.8	19.7	42.8	0.3	4	2	3.75	1.37
P2. The benefits of tourism outweigh its negative impact on the historic center of Querétaro.	16.3	17.1	30.7	17.1	18.9	0.0	3	2	3.05	1.32
P3. Tourism plays a vital role in the future of Querétaro.	10.8	12.3	19.7	18.6	38.6	0.0	4	2	3.62	1.38
P4. Tourism provides jobs in Querétaro.	13.1	8.1	16.8	19.9	42.0	0.0	4	2	3.70	1.42
P5. Tourism provides good jobs in Querétaro.	11.8	18.1	36.5	13.6	19.9	0.0	3	2	3.12	1.26
P6. Tourism provides jobs for residents in the historic center of Querétaro.	14.4	17.1	22.6	17.8	28.1	0.0	3	3	3.28	1.41
P7. Querétaro should try to attract more tourists.	13.9	10.8	22.0	19.4	33.9	0.0	4	2	3.49	1.41
P8. Querétaro should increase the number of tourists who stay overnight.	14.2	15.2	24.7	18.1	27.6	0.3	3	3	3.30	1.39
P9. Tourists should stay longer and spend more in Querétaro.	10.5	13.1	20.5	19.7	36.0	0.3	4	2	3.51	1.37
P10. Vacation rental properties are a great business opportunity in Querétaro.	10.5	13.1	20.5	19.7	36.0	0.3	4	2	3.58	1.37
P11. Tourism improves the appearance of Querétaro.	15.5	12.6	22.6	22.6	26.5	0.3	3	3	3.32	1.39
P12. Tourism increases cultural and leisure opportunities in Querétaro.	13.6	11.3	21.8	17.8	35.4	0.0	4	3	3.50	1.42
P13. Tourism helps preserve and promote the traditions and festivals of Querétaro.	12.9	9.7	19.7	15.5	42.3	0.0	4	3	3.65	1.43
P14. Querétaro should strengthen its position as a tourist destination.	11.8	12.1	20.5	16.3	39.4	0.0	4	3	3.59	1.41
P15. Tourism development increases the quality of life in Querétaro.	16.5	17.8	28.3	17.1	19.9	0.3	3	3	3.06	1.35
<b>Mean for the scale</b>									<b>3.43</b>	<b>1.09</b>

Source: Own elaboration.

**Table 3: Findings for residents’ negative evaluations of tourism development impacts.**

Question items	Likert scale (%)						Median	IQR	Mean	SD
	1	2	3	4	5	No answer				
N1. Tourism increases vehicle traffic in the historic center of Querétaro.	10.5	9.7	13.4	11.5	54.6	0.3	5	2	3.90	1.42
N2. Tourism makes it harder to find parking in the historic center of Querétaro.	13.6	8.4	14.7	11.5	51.7	0.0	5	2	3.79	1.48
N3. Tourism in Querétaro creates crowds on some streets, making it difficult to walk.	14.4	12.9	16.8	16.5	39.1	0.3	4	3	3.53	1.47
N4. The historic center of Querétaro is a museum for tourists.	13.6	13.1	21.8	21.0	30.4	0.0	4	3	3.41	1.49
N5. There are too many tour groups in the historic center of Querétaro.	15.0	25.5	33.9	16.0	9.7	0.0	3	2	2.80	1.17
N6. There are too many tourist shops in the historic center of Querétaro.	11.8	20.2	28.6	16.3	23.1	0.0	3	2	3.19	1.32
N7. Tourism generates more trash in the historic center of Querétaro.	13.9	12.3	18.9	15.2	39.4	0.3	4	3	3.54	1.46
N8. Tourism development increases municipal taxes.	17.6	16.5	26.8	15.0	23.9	0.3	3	2	3.11	1.40
N9. Tourism unjustly increases the prices of housing and rentals in the historic center of Querétaro.	12.3	10.8	17.8	12.1	46.5	0.5	4	2	3.70	1.45
N10. Tourism causes noise and coexistence issues in the historic center of Querétaro.	19.4	18.9	26.5	16.8	18.4	0.0	3	2	2.96	1.37
N11. Tourism negatively affects the cultural heritage of Querétaro.	30.2	25.2	26.5	8.9	8.9	0.3	2	2	2.41	1.25
N12. Tourism causes the traditions and festivals of Querétaro to lose their original identity.	39.9	24.4	18.9	8.7	8.1	0.0	2	2	2.21	1.28
N13. Tourism businesses are too politically influential.	21.0	20.5	31.5	12.9	13.6	0.5	3	2	2.78	1.30
N14. Tourism increases the amount of crime in the historic center of Querétaro.	20.2	22.8	29.4	13.1	14.2	0.3	3	2	2.78	1.30
N15. The historic center of Querétaro is increasingly less used by residents due to tourism.	21.3	21.0	27.0	12.3	18.4	0.0	3	2	2.86	1.38
<b>Mean for the scale</b>									<b>3.13</b>	<b>0.89</b>

Source: Own elaboration.

Looking at the means, residents believe that tourism increases vehicle traffic in the historic center (3.90)—the item with the highest proportion of maximum scores, as 54.6 % of respondents rated it 5—makes parking difficult (3.79), drives up housing and rental prices (3.70), generates more waste (3.54), and creates crowds on some streets, hindering pedestrian movement (3.53).

However, several items fail to reach the “passing” average score of 2.5, and others fall below 3.0, with medians of 3 (neutral) and even 2 (disagree). Residents therefore do not believe that tourism negatively affects Querétaro’s cultural heritage (N11: mean = 2.14, SD = 1.25; median = 2, IQR = 2) or causes a

loss of cultural identity (N12: mean = 2.21, SD = 1.28; median = 2, IQR = 2). They also adopt a neutral stance on items N5, N10, N13, N14 and N15 (median = 3 with lower means) as well as on N6 and N8 (median = 3 with slightly higher means). In other words, respondents do not substantially agree that tourism businesses wield excessive political influence, that tourism increases crime in the historic center, that there are too many tour groups, that tourism generates noise and coexistence problems, or that residents are abandoning the historic district because of visitor pressure.

In sum, Querétaro's residents identify a limited set of tangible drawbacks—especially heavier traffic, scarcer parking, higher housing costs, added waste and occasional crowding—yet they largely reject deeper cultural or social harms. Most do not believe tourism threatens the city's heritage, erodes local identity, or disrupts daily life through crime, noise or displacement. The overall average of 3.13 and several neutral or disagreeing medians indicate that negative perceptions exist but remain moderate and highly issue-specific rather than widespread or systemic.

Taken together, the two sets of results depict a community that clearly perceives tourism's benefits—chiefly economic growth, job creation and future prospects—while recognizing a narrower band of costs centered on traffic, parking, housing prices, waste and crowding. Residents largely dismiss deeper cultural or social threats: mean and median scores fall below neutral on heritage damage or identity loss and remain neutral on crime, noise and political influence. This asymmetry between salient gains and more limited, issue-specific drawbacks fully aligns with SET, which predicts resident support when perceived benefits outweigh costs.

## 5. Discussion

The main research question—*How do residents evaluate the impacts of touristification?*—was answered with a significantly higher rating of positive impacts than negative ones. This finding supports Social Exchange Theory (SET), which posits that people adopt favorable attitudes when they perceive benefits and unfavorable attitudes when they perceive costs. The results are consistent with previous research conducted in other touristified historic centers, such as Kashan and Tabriz in Iran (Gannon et al., 2020), Toledo in Spain (Escudero-Gómez, 2019), and York in the United Kingdom (Snaith & Haley, 1999). Accordingly, this article contributes to the empirical validation of SET within the Latin-American context of historic-center touristification.

With respect to the subsidiary question—*How do residents assess tourism's positive impacts?*—Querétaro's residents, much like those of Punta del Este, Uruguay (Sánchez-Fernández et al., 2019), attach high value to tourism's economic benefits. This finding corroborates Maxim's (2017) proposition that tourism is a strategic sector for cities. Although Querétaro has clearly undergone touristification (Hiernaux-Nicolás & González-Gómez, 2018), tourism has become a crucial economic driver. As Méndez-Ravina et al. (2020) observe for several Mexican historic centers—including San Cristóbal de las Casas—the local population recognizes and appreciates the income and employment generated by tourism; the same holds true in Querétaro.

The absence of social unrest or anti-tourism movements is therefore linked—again, as in San Cristóbal de las Casas (Hernández-Cordero & Fenner-Sánchez, 2018)—to the fact that tourism has become an important economic activity. For the vast majority of residents, tourism is viewed as a normal, unproblematic phenomenon, an evaluation also reported by Méndez-Ravina et al. (2020). Indeed, in Querétaro it is regarded as pivotal to the city's future.

Regarding the opposite subsidiary question—*How do residents assess tourism's negative impacts?*—, several problems arising from touristification are already clearly perceived by Querétaro's population. Residents' needs increasingly clash with the tourist occupation of the main streets, producing feelings of congestion and overcrowding—a phenomenon noted more than two decades ago by García-Hernández (2000) and recently confirmed for Toledo by Escudero-Gómez (2019). The mobilities paradigm, which highlights the considerable overlap between tourists and residents in cultural tourism (Richards, 2018), is especially evident in vehicular traffic and the shortage of parking spaces.

Concerns are also mounting over the impact of touristification on housing, as rising property and rental prices in Querétaro's historic center cause significant discomfort among locals. This issue has been examined in depth by Janoschka and Sequera (2016) in their analysis of gentrification and displacement geographies in Latin America. The present study in Querétaro uncovers these latent yet critical problems, underscoring the social challenges tied to the ongoing transformation of the city's historic core.

The variety of ways of inhabiting Querétaro's historic center is progressively being levelled out by concurrent processes of gentrification and touristification, echoing the assessment of Ayala-Galaz and Vázquez Estrada (2025). One of residents' chief concerns is the impact of touristification on housing: rising purchase and rental prices in the historic core are causing growing unease, representing one of the most significant negative effects of touristification on real-estate resources (Kowalczyk-Anioł, 2020).

Another worry is the accumulation of solid waste, a problem already documented in San Martín de los Andes, Argentina (Escudero-Gómez & Martínez-Fernández, 2021), and common in urban-tourism contexts (Sommer & Helbrecht, 2017).

By contrast, other issues frequently highlighted in studies of historic-center touristification were not observed here. Unlike the situation described by Istoc (2012), tourism use of Querétaro's historic core does not generate hostility or drive residents away from this emblematic space. Likewise, no evaluation suggested cultural commodification, heritage trivialization, or loss of identity, despite numerous studies—particularly in World Heritage cities—that report such impacts (Hafstein, 2004; Landorf, 2009; Pedersen, 2002; Pinheiro & Paulino, 2022). It should be noted, however, that responses concerning heritage trivialization and identity loss exhibit considerable variability: although the overall mean and median indicate that most respondents believe tourism helps preserve and promote Querétaro's traditions, a segment of residents disagrees. In fact, the majority reject the notion that tourism harms the city's cultural heritage or causes its traditions and festivals to lose their original identity.

As in other geographical contexts, it is likely that—should the trend towards touristification continue—social tension surrounding tourism will intensify. This hypothesis can be extended to other Latin American historic centers, where similar dynamics may already be unfolding. In line with Jover and Rongvaux (2024), the present study supports the argument that something is fundamentally flawed in current touristification processes affecting historic cores. It underscores the urgent need to move towards cities that are more socially just, cohesive and democratic, ensuring a sustainable coexistence between tourism and local communities. Echoing Martínez-Pino (2018), the study concludes that active involvement of resident communities in policy-making and management decisions is crucial for addressing these challenges.

## 6. Conclusions

This study makes an original contribution by analyzing quantitatively, for the first time in Querétaro's historic center, the evaluations of resident groups connected to this space in the face of touristification, thereby providing empirical validation of Social Exchange Theory in this context. The findings show that, although specific problems—traffic, pedestrian overcrowding, waste accumulation and rising housing costs—are acknowledged, the community assigns greater weight to tourism's economic and employment benefits and regards the activity as pivotal to the city's future. The research underscores a broadly homogeneous set of resident attitudes and, overall, reveals no dominant evaluations indicating cultural commodification or identity loss—although a minority of respondents do express such concerns, in contrast to the more widespread negative perceptions reported in similar cities. In doing so, the article advances the debate on the social sustainability of urban tourism in Latin America and offers empirical foundations for policies that balance tourism development with community well-being.

Looking ahead, ensuring the social sustainability of heritage tourism in Querétaro requires preventing further touristification and avoiding the exacerbation of existing challenges—issues already noted in other Latin American historic centers. Strategic measures are essential to safeguard the historic center so that local residents and visitors alike can continue to appreciate its heritage value and maintain a sense of ownership over this unique urban space. Achieving this balance calls for ongoing planning, regulation, and monitoring of tourism development by policymakers to effectively reconcile competing interests.

Finally, this study acknowledges certain limitations that may affect the broader applicability of its findings. Nonetheless, the same methodology has previously been employed by the authors in other settings, producing consistent results. While these findings may be generalized to some extent, future research is necessary to further validate this hypothesis. In particular, continued examination of residents' evaluations in tourist destinations remains crucial to fostering the social sustainability of tourism.

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