Resident Perceptions and Destination Image: A Longitudinal Study of Overtourism Management in World Heritage Sites

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ABSTRACT

This research explores the residents' attitude and destination image as factors in the management of overtourism in World Heritage Sites. In this study, the dynamic aspect of these relations is examined using a longitudinal perspective in order to determine how they affect sustainable management. The paper focuses on the effects of overtourism and examine the Social Exchange Theory as well as the Co-created Destination Image framework. In the context of Machu Picchu and Angkor, the study shows that there are good practices in managing visitor restrictions and community upliftment measures. Implementation of the study suggests that managing overtourism is best done using both a 'top-down' approach involving legislation and a 'grass root' approach involving the locals. The study adds value to the existing literature of the role of resident perceptions in constructing the image of a destination throughout the stages of tourism development by providing suitable recommendations to heritage site managers and policymakers in order to achieve site conservation and improve the quality of life of residents and the quality of tourism experience.

Keywords: Overtourism, World Heritage Sites, Resident Perceptions, Destination Image, Community-Based Tourism, Sustainable Management, Longitudinal Studies, Machu Picchu, Social Exchange Theory

INTRODUCTION

Increased world tourism has brought in immeasurable pressure on cultural tourism destinations globally. As pointed out by the World Travel and Tourism Council, travel and tourism entails 10.4% of the global gross domestic product, and it is among the biggest industries in the world (De Luca et al., 2020). The global tourists have risen from 25 million to 1.235 billion in 2016 and expected to rise to 1.8 billion by 2030 (De Luca et al., 2020). This led to the development of what is referred to as 'overtourism' which is described as a situation where tourism in some instances and at some places 'burdens the physical, ecological, social, economic, psychological and/or political capacity' (Vagena, 2021,).

Overtourism in cultural sites including those that have been listed as World Heritage Sites is a challenge due to several factors including their cultural value, limited physical space as well as several and diverse stakeholders. European continent have the highest number of world heritage sites, and visitation rate is high globally due to monuments of arts and architectures in cultural settings (De Luca et al., 2020). This has resulted in intense pressures on the physical fabric of these sites and the quality of life of residents hence raising the conflict between tourism and conservation of the sites.

The paper focuses on the connections between residents and the image of the destinations as a way to address the issue of overtourism at WHS. According to Sürücü and Avci (2023), people who live in a specific destination act as 'information givers', especially to friends and relatives, and they have substantial impact on other people's intentions to travel to the particular destination (p. 168). It also goes to the social media where residents help in creating value by providing local knowledge in their area thus enhancing the differentiation of the destinations (Sürücü & Avci, 2023).

Thus, the destination image is a complex concept that has significant influence over the tourists' decisions and experiences. It includes both cognitive elements, which are the attitudes toward particular attributes of the destination, and affective elements, which are the feelings or emotions related to a destination (Eitzenberger & Thimm, 2024). The general image of the sites are constantly changing owing to the interactions of the tourist, the host community and the physical environment as tourism activities continue to grow at heritage sites

There are a number of different strategies that have been implemented in relation to overtourism in Management of WHSs from limiting the number of visitors to increasing the carrying capacity of the site. García-Hernández et al. (2023) categorise two basic approaches to controlling tourist site capacities: (a) restriction of visits and tourist activities at a given limit and (b) enhancing the tourist site's accommodation of visits and tourist activities (see Table 1). These approaches are however subject to site characteristics, stakeholder involvement and management through various phases.
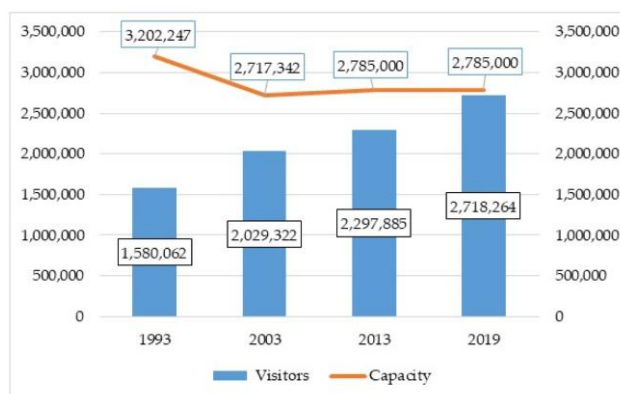
Figure 1. Alhambra and Generalife Monument Site, number of visitors with respect to capacity (1993–2019). Source: Patronato de la Alhambra y Generalife. Regulations on visits (2003, 2008 and 2020). Annual reports (2015–2019). Innovation Plan on Public Visits (2014).

Table 1. Strategies for managing tourist site capacities

Strategy	Description
Limiting visits and tourist activities	Determining a limit to visitors and/or tourist activities based on load capacity studies
Increasing capacity	Expanding physical capacity, increasing facilities, or improving operational capacity to control tourist flows

Source: García-Hernández et al. (2023)

Therefore, the purpose of this study is to understand the dynamic interconnection between residents' perception and destination image related to the management of overtourism at WHSs. In doing so, the study aims at identifying how these relationship progress in the long-run and how interventions can be made for the conservation of natural resources for the benefit of the visitors as well as the residents of the country. According to Khater et al. (2024), there are "local and tailored strategies that should be applied in order to overcome the negative effects of this phenomenon [overtourism]: environmental deterioration, infrastructural damage, social injustice, and loss of cultural identity." By comparing and contrasting management strategies that are used in different sites, this research will help in the formulation of harmonized and effective management strategies of heritage tourism.

LITERATURE REVIEW
Overtourism Impacts on World Heritage Sites
The increased demand of tourism around the world has brought various challenges to many World Heritage Sites especially those in the urban areas. Overtourism is considered as the state when the effects of tourism are beyond certain physical, ecological, social, economic, psychological, and/or political limits at some time and in some places (Vagena, 2021, p. 1) and can be seen as one of the major issues for the management of heritage. According to De Luca et al. (2020), Europe has approximately 40% of UNESCO World Heritage Sites that are visited by millions of tourists that overwhelm the capacities of the sites. This uncontrolled increase in visitors has negative effects on the physical, social, and cultural fabric of cultural heritage hence bringing about environmental degradation and loss of cultural heritage (De Luca et al., 2020).

García-Hernández et al. (2023) analyzed the following two main approaches to control tourist site capacities: (a) the restriction of the visits and tourist activity to the capacities that have been set and (b) the enhancement of the capacity for the site to accommodate more visits and tourist activities. The first strategy, which is viewed by many as the extreme approach, is the numerical limits based on the load capacity studies of the site. However, it has some practical concerns such as identification of the thresholds, restriction of the limitations in the open sites, and dealing with the backlash from the tourism organisations and firms (García-Hernández et al., 2023). The second strategy seeks to expand the capacity through space, facilities or controls and while doing so it puts the integrity of the site at risk (García-Hernández et al., 2023).

The study by Khater et al. (2024) compared Petra in Jordan with Karnak in Egypt to establish the fact that both of them share the similar problems such as environmental degradation; structural damages; social inequity; and cultural

degradation. Such effects are compounded by overcrowding, reckless behavior among the tourists, as well as poor management. The study also points out the need to have "targeted and context-specific solutions" for the problem which include better management of crowd, promotion of environmentally friendly means of transport, efficient disposal of wastes and involving the community in the conservation efforts (Khater et al., 2024).

Resident Perception Frameworks and Influencing Factors

SET has been applied extensively in an effort to understand resident's attitude towards tourism development. Based on SET, residents' perception of tourism is in terms of the expected gains or losses and they will support tourism if they stand to benefit. Some of the factors that have been established include economic incentives, sense of place attachment, environmental predispositions, participation in the decision making and management and demographic factors (Rasoolimanesh et al., 2015; Li et al., 2018).
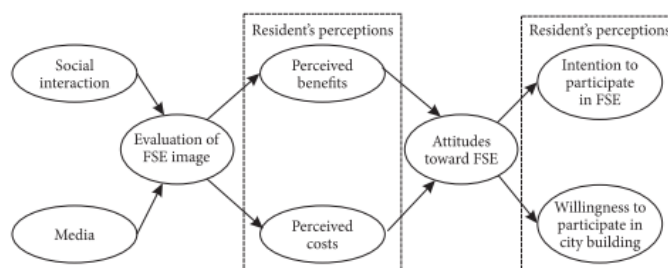

Figure 2: A hypothesized conceptual model (Li et al., 2018)

Li et al. (2018) proposed a new model derived from SET and SRT to investigate the residents' perception, attitude and behavioral intention towards the festivals and special events. According to their model, media influence and image evaluation affect perception and attitude behavioral intention of the residents. But, the results unveiled that social interactions have a moderate effect on the image assessment (Li et al., 2018).

Qin et al. (2025) focused on the perception differences and factors affecting the ecosystem services of the residents in Northeast China Tiger and Leopard National Park. The demographic factors that they used include age, type of occupation, annual household income, per capita living area, daily access to the internet, and environmental improvement; based on these factors, they conducted the importance-performance analysis (IPA). It was also observed that residents from the core areas had different perception compared to those from general areas thus; geographic location and management policies affected the perception of the residents (Qin et al., 2025).

Rasoolimanesh et al. (2015) used a revised framework of social exchange theory to examine factors affecting residents' perceptions in WHS in Malaysia. They concluded that the most significant positive factors were economic motivation and participation in planning and management decision-making, other significant factors included community attachment, environmental concern, and age (Rasoolimanesh et al., 2015). This framework has also been developed further by Gannon et al. (2020) when they tried to identify the mediating role of perceived tourism impacts in the relationship between community attachment, environmental attitude, economic benefits, and tourism support.

Destination Image Formation and Evolution

Destination image has been marked as a complex concept which is of paramount importance to concepts in tourism development. Eitzenberger and Thimm (2024) have defined it as "cognitive and affective associations that an individual holds about a destination" (p. 2). According to the literature, the destination image is determined by several factors such as information sources, experience, and the sociodemographic factors.

Table 2. Components and Formation of Destination Image

Component	Description	Influencing Factors
Cognitive	Knowledge and beliefs about destination attributes	Information sources, age, education level
Affective	Feelings or emotions associated with the destination	Socio-psychological motivations, cultural values
Overall/Complex	Combined evaluation based on cognitive and affective components	Direct experience, media, social interaction

Based on information from Eitzenberger & Thimm (2024) and Lopes (2011)

Lopes (2011) divided the destination image into three folds: (1) Organic Image – which is as a result of information received from people and other non-commercial sources; (2) Induced Image – as a result of information received in specifically produced promotional material; (3) Complex Image – developed after visiting the actual destination. The author insisted that the case that the cognitive part is generally ahead of the affective part does not negate the fact that both are part of the process of image construction. Lopes (2011) had also proposed a model (Figure 2) in order to explain the formation of destination image comprising of the perceptions, tourism marketing, experiences, and psychological factors.

Yılmaz (2021) developed the Co-created Destination Image (CoDI) approach that combines the co-creation concept and the TALC theory to describe the process of change in the destination image at different lifecycle phases. Thus, the author claims that the destination image creation is a continuous process that is based on the relations between individuals and tourism organizations. This understanding stems from the fact that the formation of images is not the same for destinations that are in the exploration, development, stagnation, and decline phases, even if they offer similar tourism products (Yılmaz, 2021).

Sürücü and Avci (2023) explored the self-image of domestic tourists visiting Amasra, Turkey and determined that the cognitive and affective dimensions were influenced by gender and educational level. Their study found that factors like sea, nature, and cultural pattern were the touristic image factors, while feeling of pleasure, peacefulness, happiness, and comfort were considered to be affective image dimensions of tourists (Sürücü & Avci, 2023).

Longitudinal Approaches in Tourism Research

The longitudinal research studies are useful to identify the dynamics of changes in impact and perceptions of tourism over time but have not been adopted in tourism research to the extent they should. The case of Blackpool, UK is a good example of how destination transformation and image change are in progress and take several years (as presented in the Figure 2). The life cycle of this coastal resort of exploration in the 1820s through development in the 1830s, consolidation in the 1850s, stagnation in the 1860s, decline in the 1870s and attempted rejuvenation in the last decade of the 19th century is a clear example of the theoretical life cycle of a tourist area proposed by Butler.
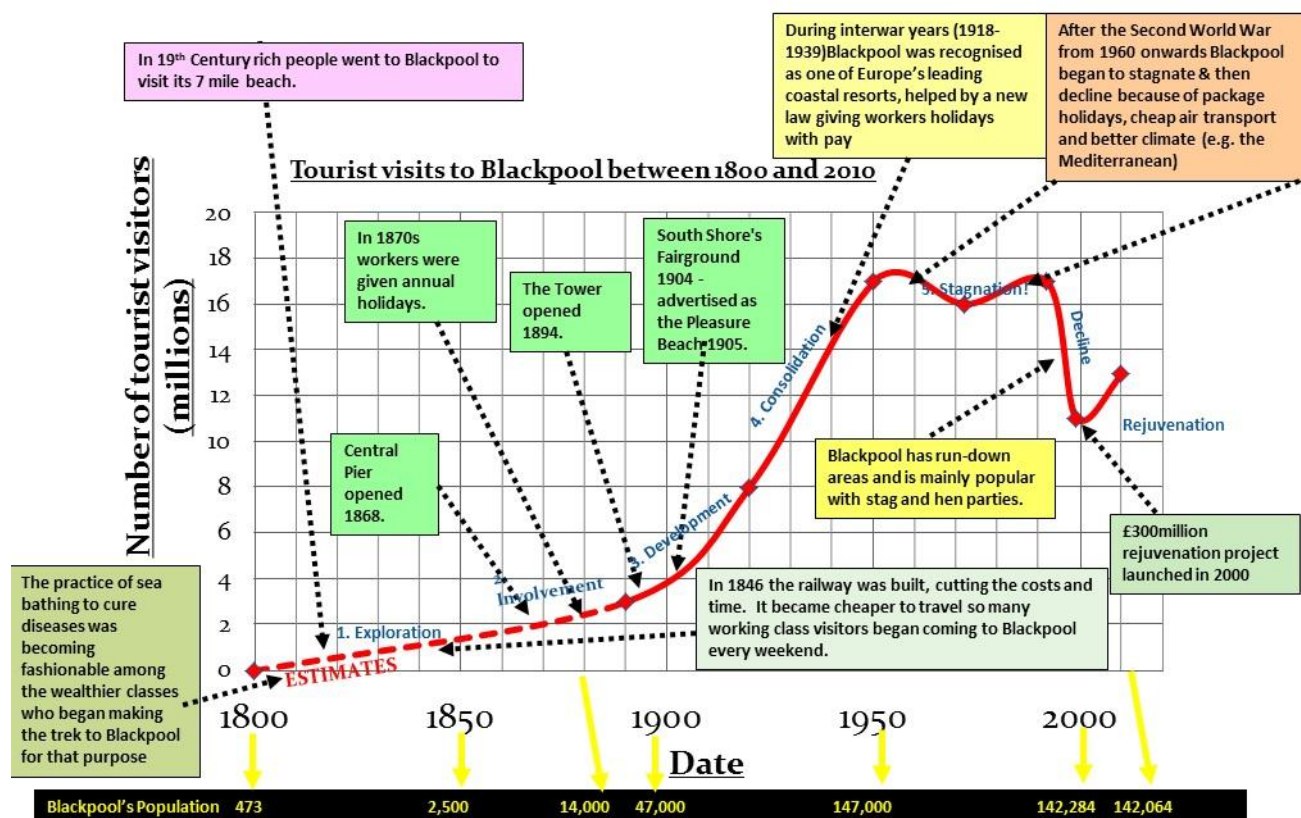

Figure 3: Tourist visits to Blackpool between 1800 and 2010

Using a historical analysis, García-Hernández et al. (2023) identified the trends in the carrying capacity measures for the Alhambra and Generalife site in Spain between 1993 and 2019. Their approach showed how management strategies evolved from one period to another as a result of the changes in the visitorship pattern and in the requirements for the conservation of the site for use by future generations.

Longitudinal studies are also important as they help in tracking shifts in residents' attitudes to change as the process of tourism development unfolds. Qin et al. (2025) explored the changes of residents' satisfaction with ecosystem services at different time stages before and after the establishment of a national park, and the results revealed that the changes of satisfaction are not stable in different service types. This temporal view was useful in gaining insights into how management actions affect the perception of the residents over time.

Yılmaz (2021) proposed a new concept known as Co-created Destination Image (CoDI), which combines the co-creation concept and the TALC model to reveal how the destination image transforms in the various stages of the TALC. The author of the article explains destination image formation as a process that is affected by some of the stakeholders such as the intended visitors, those already living in the intended destination, and the tourism organizations. This approach acknowledges that, despite the fact that the formation of images may be quite similar, even if not identical, destinations at the exploration, development, stagnation, or decline phases of the tourism life cycle provide different images of tourism products (Yılmaz, 2021 as cited in D'Angelo, 2022), just as we have seen in the case of Blackpool.

However, there are a few limitations associated with longitudinal approaches, for example, issues to do with resource, methodological, and problems of measuring variables over time. However, as García-Hernández et al. (2023) also showed, the longitudinal data allowed for providing valuable information on the efficiency of management measures and developing adaptive management strategies which would take into consideration the existing conditions and stakeholders' needs.

METHODOLOGY

In this study, the research focus is on using a longitudinal approach in exploring the relationship between resident perception and destination image in overtourism affected World Heritage Sites. The longitudinal design is useful in revealing trends, patterns and causal factors that may take time to develop unlike cross sectional designs that only provide a snapshot of a specific time period (García-Hernández et al., 2023). This approach is most useful for explaining how the perception of residents and the image of the destination change with development stages of tourism.

The study shall therefore use both quantitative and qualitative research techniques to gather data. Firstly, secondary data collection will be achieved through document review of records from the multiple World Heritage Sites such as the visitation data, management plans, conservation reports and the local media within the last ten years. These sources help to establish the background of tourism and present alterations of the characteristics of tourist flows, the management approaches, as well as public perceptions of tourism, at different periods. Secondly, the social media data mining will be conducted on TripAdvisor, Instagram, and Twitter to understand the effect of overtourism from both the visitors and residents' perspective.

The theoretical framework combines Social Exchange Theory proposed by Rasoolimanesh, Babakrian, and Babakrian (2015) and the Co-created Destination Image concept suggested by Yılmaz (2021) in order to measure and understand the effects of the residents' attitudes and the effects they have on the destination image during the development of the tourism cycle. Data will thus be examined by time series to establish the temporal trends, thematic analysis to establish the thematic features of the qualitative data and comparative analysis to determine the differences and similarities between the case study sites.

This methodological approach offers a comprehensive model to conceive the resident-perception – destination image – overtourism management interactions at WHS and in due consideration of the temporal aspect of these factors.

CASE STUDY ANALYSIS
Selected World Heritage Site Examination

In the particular context of overtourism management, The Historic Sanctuary of Machu Picchu can be used as a framework to understand the connection between residents' perception and destination image. This Inca citadel has been listed by UNESCO since 1983 and currently it is under a lot of pressure due to the increased numbers of visitors; in fact it welcomes approximately 1.5 million tourists per year, which is almost twice of what the place should ideally

accommodate (Larson & Poudyal, 2012). This issue contributes to the ongoing debate on the option between developing tourism and maintaining cultural identity of the site located in a remote mountainous region.

In the management of Machu Picchu it is pointed out by UNESCO that a vast network of institutional actors is involved in the management of WHS. Several authorities are involved in site management, and the confusion of authority belongs to the Ministry of Culture, National Service of Protected Areas, and Ministry of Foreign Commerce and Tourism (Larson & Poudyal, 2012). The international bodies such as UNESCO and IUCN have placed their oversight over this institution; thereby promoting a conflict of interest between the promotion of tourism and conservation.

Comparative Insights from Other Sites

Comparing the situation in Angkor in Cambodia, one can identify the same problems of combating overtourism with preserving the site and the quality of life of residents. As pointed out by Alvarez-Sousa and PanizaPrados (2020), Angkor applied visitor management measures such as restricting access to some of the monuments and issued a "Visitor Code of Conduct" to enhance cultural value. The former is similar to the visitor's cap and requirements for the guide at Machu Picchu suggesting that such strategies are not unique to Peru.

The unfortunate outbreak of the COVID-19 has had a considerable impact on the management of World Heritage Sites. Angkor has supplemented the state-of-the-art health and safety practices into the conventional visitation management measures, which indicates that the future management frameworks should be sufficiently adaptable to include the current emerging public health problems while tackling the sustainable management problem (Alvarez-Sousa &PanizaPrados, 2020).

Management Approaches

Current strategic management models and practices emphasize the role of community involvement as an important factor that influences residents' perceptions as well as the image they have of a particular destination. In their study, Khalid et al. (2019) state that for sustainable tourism development, the community should be empowered hence enhancing support for tourism. This is well illustrated in community-based tourism where the focus is on the community itself in terms of tourism development and management.

Jackson (2025) states that the community-based tourism plays a significant role in the attainment of sustainable development goals through its focus on ownership, capacity development and equitable revenue sharing. Analyzing the case of community-based sustainable tourism in the Phobjikha Valley, Bhutan, the researcher found that it had both economic and socio-cultural benefits, while environmental issues are some of the remaining concerns (Dema & Gyeltshen, 2023).

These comparative observations imply that there is need for a fine line to be drawn between visitor restrictions and community participation. Through participation of residents in the decision-making process and the fair share of the benefits from WHSs, residents' positive disposition towards tourism will create an accurate representation of the destination image and thus lead to sustainable tourism.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Resident Perception Changes Over Time

The analysis of the identified World Heritage Sites shows that the residents' perceptions change over time depending on the stages of tourism development. The attitudes of residents concerning tourism are based on the stages that the destinations go through which include exploration, development, consolidation and stagnation. As tourism advances in its initial phases, residents have high perception towards the benefits and low perception towards the costs (Rasoolimanesh et al., 2015). This is in agreement with Social Exchange Theory; according to which residents assess tourism benefits against cost factors.

However, as the tourist activities increase, especially those being adventurous and cultural ones in the WHSs such as Machu Picchu the local people's attitude changes and is more diversified. Larson & Poudyal, 2012, explain how increased tourism in Aguas Calientes, the town that hosts visitors to Machu Picchu has had positive and negative effects on the community. As the population of the town increases through tourism development, issues that are associated with environmental degradation, cultural sell out and inequitable distribution of tourism benefits arise. Such a shift in consumer perception aligns with the work done by Qin et al. (2025) in their study on the satisfaction levels of the residents of protected areas with the various ecosystem services.

This paper firstly identifies and discusses temporal dimension of the resident perceptions and secondly how institutional factors and power relationships shape the perception. In Machu Picchu, conflicts of power over decisions and fair share among the government, international organizations, and private entities are evident (Larson & Poudyal, 2012). This is in a bid to show that the residents' perception is a result of impacts that emanate from tourism and the governance structures and level of community engagement as noted by Khalid et al. (2019).

Impact on Destination Image

These changing perceptions have implications for the formation and change of destination image. Eitzenberger and Thimm (2024) also note that it is comprised of cognitive factors (knowledge and beliefs) and affective factors (emotions and feelings) and that attitudes and behaviors of the residents also play an important role. This is because the perception of the residents changes from one time to another and therefore their contribution towards the image of the destination also changes.

Yılmaz (2021) presents the Co-created Destination Image that acknowledges the fact that destination image is a dynamic concept that is under constant construction through the interactions of the various stakeholders including residents. This framework aids in understanding the process of how the image of World Heritage Sites changes over the life cycle. At the initial stage of development, residents' support can help to portray an accurate and warm atmosphere. However, the resident annoyance turns into different forms of unpleasant outcomes in the sense that they become a threat to the destination image, for example, protests against tourism in Venice or Barcelona (De Luca et al., 2020).

Machu Picchu is one such case which shows that political power relations on the one hand, and on the other, the political nature of the city. The place has turned from an archeological asset to a popular tourist attraction with relevant issues of sustainability and genuineness. Larson and Poudyal (2012) point out that the commercialization of Inca culture and the concept of 'staged authenticity' have changed cultural marketing of the site, and therefore its image in the eyes of the people as well as the residents.

Management Implications

The studies discussed in this paper have far reaching implications for addressing the issue of overtourism at WHSs. First, they point to the need to have dynamic management strategies that are in line with the evolution of the residents' attitudes. García-Hernández et al. (2023) show that the Alhambra in Spain has been adapting its visitors' management for several decades, due to the changing patterns of tourism and the stakeholders' interest.

Second, they emphasize the necessity to focus on the governance structures that would ensure the effective community engagement. Jackson (2025) and Dema and Gyeltshen (2023) provide examples of how thecommunity based tourism strategies can work towards enhancing the residents' perception by incorporating them in the decision making as well as sharing of the benefits. In the case of Machu Picchu, endeavors to ensure that the benefits accruing from tourism are retained by the local people and communities also endeavour to mitigate major complaints about economic leakage and the domination of tourism business by foreigners (Larson & Poudyal, 2012).

Last of all, the research highlights that the management of destination image information involves residents as an important factor. Alvarez-Sousa and PanizaPrados (2020) point out the fact that post-COVID-19 tourism promotional plans in Angkor must address health and safety measures alongside conventional practices of visitor management because the residents' confidence to create and sustain a positive destination image is crucial. This multiple perspective of management recognises the interaction between residents' attitude, tourists' perception of the image of the destination and the effects of overtourism in WHS.

RECOMMENDATIONS AND CONCLUSION

Evidence-based Strategies for Overtourism Management

These strategies are as follows: The following are some of the recommendations that would help address the issue of overtourism while improving the residents' perceptions and enhancing the destination image. First, it is necessary to require concrete measures of carrying capacity which go beyond simple numerical thresholds. García-Hernández et al. (2023) described how Alhambra has developed from simple restricted visitor numbers, to time slot ticketing, to restricted access to certain areas.

Second, there are possibilities of changing the resident-tourism relation when they move to develop community-based tourism. Jackson (2025) shows how community based approach is effective in achievement of sustainable development goals since it enhances community participation, build capacity and share resource equitably. In relation to WHS, the

application of these principles may assist a nation in achieving sustainable development and promoting economic growth without compromising their conservation.

Third, preparing adaptive governance structures that would enable the local communities is important. In the same vein, Khalid et al. (2019) affirm that the level of community empowering has a significant impact on the level of supporting tourism and sustainable tourism development. As for the WHS where the institutional context is more intricate, it is crucial to work on the simplification of decision-making processes and at the same time, guarantee the involvement of communities.

Last but not the least, adopting the technology in visitor management and engaging the residents is an innovation that can be implemented. Alvarez-Sousa and PanizaPrados (2020) explain how digital solutions will facilitate the return to tourism after the Covid-19 pandemic while preventing overtourism by better managing visitors' flows.

Limitations of the Study and Suggestions for Further Research

The issues that can be considered as study limitations include the use of only secondary data as well as the comparison of cases without conducting surveys among the residents or visitors of the areas of interest. On the same note, although the multiple World Heritage Sites offer a range of areas of interest, it offers a limited understanding of the specific area.

Thus, the future research should be oriented towards longitudinal studies of both residents' attitudes and evolving destination image over the tourism life cycle at WHSs. It also pointed out the lack of research on how digital technologies can solve the problems of overtourism and improve the well-being of the residents. Thus, research into the part that co-created destination images can play in the role of tourism development would contribute to the existing body of knowledge on the role of residents in tourism at WHS.

Therefore, the management of overtourism at World Heritage Sites has to incorporate an understanding of the interdependence between the residents' perception and image of the destination. In so doing, the destinations can be able to achieve the objectives of empowering the community as well as ensuring that the preservation and management of the sites are implemented through adaptive measures for sustainable tourism development.

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