

Article

Understanding Residents' Perceptions of Tourism in Major Spanish Cities

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Abstract

This study validates the Sustainable Tourism Attitude Scale (SUS-TAS) in four major Spanish cities—Madrid, Barcelona, Bilbao, and Seville—assessing residents' perceptions of tourism sustainability. A quantitative approach was used, with data collected from 660 residents via an online survey. Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA) with Varimax rotation confirmed a seven-factor structure, and ANOVA tests revealed significant perceptual differences across cities. Results show that residents in Barcelona report the highest perceived social costs, while Bilbao shows greater support for long-term planning, reflecting varying levels of tourism maturity. The study confirms that sociodemographic variables—especially sex and education—shape sustainability attitudes, while age has no significant effect. Findings support the need for context-sensitive policies that integrate resident voices into sustainable tourism planning. This research fills a gap by validating SUS-TAS in mature European destinations, offering a reliable tool for urban tourism governance.

Keywords: sustainable tourism; residents' attitudes; SUS-TAS validation; sociocultural context; community engagement; tourism planning



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1. Introduction

The academic literature published on the impact of tourism in cities is very extensive. According to Deery et al. [1], studies on the impact of tourism have grown to become a very broad and mature field of study, encompassing a wide spectrum of economic, social, and environmental dimensions. The tourism industry has experienced rapid growth in the last four decades, and this trend is expected to continue in the first half of the new millennium despite various regional conflicts, global security issues due to terrorist activities, or the dramatic health situation caused by the COVID-19 pandemic [2]. This rapid growth has caused and is causing a series of problems that require the attention of our governments, their policies, and the involvement of other social participants. Tourism in developed countries has grown so rapidly in the last 20 years that it seems necessary to thoroughly review its foundations [3]. Concerns related to growth have increased since the publication of the 'Limits to Growth' report, mainly due to the effects of human activity on the natural environment [4]. The current situation generated by the impact of tourism is, for many authors, unsustainable and they call for specific measures to mitigate these negative effects as soon as possible. Thus, Higgins-Desbiolles et al. [4] point out the need for a significant change in the way tourism activity is managed. However, they do not believe that tourism should be the way to bring a wide range of products and services to tourists based on the nature of their demand. Focusing on residents and trying to promote equity and justice,

they propose that tourism should be understood as the voluntary hosting of visitors in local communities to primarily benefit the residents (and secondly, the tourists). It is crucial to move tourism away from excessive commercialization and exploitation and return to fundamental values of hospitality and connection. Thus, the authors advocate for current tourism to prioritize the rights of local communities above the rights of tourists to have vacations, and even above the rights of tourism companies to make profits. The objective of our research work is to know, measure, and interpret the perception of the residents of the cities of Madrid, Barcelona, Bilbao, and Seville about the impact of tourism in their city in terms of sustainability. These are cities with different tourist developments that will allow us to obtain a broader and more accurate vision of the residents' opinion on various aspects related to tourism and sustainability. Specifically, the purpose of our research is (1) to validate the SUS-TAS scale through the data obtained; and (2) to evaluate the differences in the perception of sustainable tourism development of the residents of the 4 analyzed cities.

To achieve this, a quantitative cross-sectional research design was employed, based on an online survey administered to a representative sample of 660 residents. The study uses the SUS-TAS instrument, a validated scale comprising 44 items across seven factors: perceived social costs, environmental sustainability, long-term planning, perceived economic benefits, community-centered economy, visitor satisfaction, and community participation. The SUS-TAS scale was originally developed by Choi and Sirakaya [5]. Their work laid the theoretical and empirical groundwork for assessing residents' attitudes toward sustainable tourism. Subsequent studies have validated and adapted the scale in diverse cultural contexts, including Sirakaya-Turk et al. [6] in Turkey, Yu et al. [7] in China, Ribeiro et al. [8] in Cape Verde, and Hsu et al. [9] in an Eastern island context, demonstrating its cross-cultural applicability. These studies confirmed the scale's reliability and validity, while also highlighting the need for local adaptation due to cultural and developmental differences. Additionally, Andereck et al. [10] and Nunkoo et al. [11] provided critical insights into the determinants of residents' support for tourism, reinforcing the importance of perceived impacts and sociodemographic variables. Together, these foundational works informed the design, adaptation, and validation process of SUS-TAS in this study, ensuring alignment with international standards while responding to local realities.

The methodology of our study includes Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA) with Varimax rotation to confirm the factor structure, and Cronbach's alpha coefficients to assess internal consistency and reliability of the scale. All alpha values exceeded the recommended threshold of 0.7, with most above 0.8, confirming high reliability.

A key contribution of this study is that it addresses a significant gap in the literature: while the SUS-TAS has been validated in intercultural and developing contexts, its psychometric consistency has not been thoroughly tested in mature, high-tourism European destinations, nor with a focus on comparative urban analysis within a single country. Most prior applications have focused on residents in isolation or in non-European settings [8,9], and few studies have examined how local sociocultural and developmental contexts shape sustainability perceptions across cities with varying tourism intensities. By validating the scale in Spain—a country experiencing overtourism in key urban centers—this research fills a critical void and offers a model for context-sensitive assessment in other mature destinations.

Thus, this study not only contributes to methodological rigor in tourism research but also provides actionable insights for policymakers seeking to align tourism development with community well-being through participatory, equitable, and sustainable strategies.

2. Literature Review

The rapid growth of the tourism sector, together with its negative effects on residents and the environment, demands significant changes in tourism management. The World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) [12] projects that by 2030, global tourism arrivals will reach 1.8 billion, illustrating ambitious growth expectations. However, this expansion, while potentially beneficial for some, results in serious challenges for others. Direct and indirect impacts from rising visitor numbers can generate considerable inconvenience for residents, triggering conflicts with tourists and tourism service providers [13].

Tourism impacts local communities in multiple ways. According to Andereck [14], the effects can be categorized as economic (e.g., tax revenues, job creation, income, fiscal pressure, inflation), sociocultural (e.g., preservation or loss of traditions, intercultural exchange, crime rates), and environmental (e.g., protection or deterioration of parks, overcrowding, pollution, waste management). Given this complexity, it is essential to incorporate residents' perspectives in tourism planning, both in new and established destinations [15,16]. Redefining the tourism allows us to integrate the voices of all stakeholders prioritizes quality of life for residents [17]. Making tourism sustainable requires dialog and a commitment to community consultation—key elements not only in policy making but also in effective marketing strategies [18,19]. According to the World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) [12], sustainable tourism is defined as “tourism that takes full account of its current and future economic, social and environmental impacts, addressing the needs of visitors, the industry, the environment and host communities”. This approach is based on three interdependent pillars: environmental sustainability, sociocultural equity, and economic viability.

Tourism marketing thus goes beyond mere promotion, encompassing product development, service delivery, distribution, and price strategy [20]. It also includes principles of positioning, differentiation, segmentation, and targeting [21]. Understanding residents' perceptions supports the creation of a more sustainable tourism market, as reiterated by King et al. [19], who highlight the importance of sociocultural factors and community engagement in market development. Indeed, the literature emphasizes that residents are fundamental stakeholders in tourism, directly affected by policies and development choices [22–24].

Numerous studies have explored residents' attitudes and perceptions as a foundation for tourism development and improvement programmes [25,26]. However, the exclusion of residents limits our understanding of sustainability in tourism [27]. Resident support remains a central indicator for local sustainable tourism, widely used in assessing attitudes towards tourism [7,11,28–30]. While instruments like the SUS-TAS have been validated across diverse contexts [6–8,31,32], their consistency for mature destinations and for multiple stakeholder groups together has not been fully established [9,33]. Furthermore, few studies examine the role of residents' sustainability perceptions in both mature and emerging cities.

The resident–tourist relationship, especially in high-intensity tourism areas, is now a key focus, highlighting perceived benefits and costs, cultural exchange, and social carrying capacity [22,34]. The World Tourism Organization [12] defines sustainable tourism as that which balances present and future economic, social, and environmental impacts, serving the needs of both visitors and host communities. This is based on environmental sustainability, sociocultural equity, and economic viability. Yet, as Hall [35] notes, unlimited tourism growth is neither feasible nor fair: “there is not enough world for everyone to be the average North American or European long-haul tourist” (p. 53). Balancing tourism's economic contributions [36] with the needs and well-being of local stakeholders requires careful change and stakeholder engagement [13,37]. Stakeholder diversity—including tourists, local communities, and the tourism industry—makes finding consensus a challenge, as

priorities often conflict [38–41]. In this respect, Blancas et al. [42] stress the need for including local agents' perspectives, introducing subjective indicators to assess each destination. As residents are now recognized as key stakeholders, research increasingly measures their attitudes and behaviors [43]. Several validated scales exist for this purpose [10,44,45], but this study employs the Sustainable Tourism Attitude Scale (SUS-TAS) developed by Choi and Sirakaya [5], which incorporates a sustainability perspective and covers environmental, economic, sociocultural, community-based, visitor-oriented, planning, and participatory dimensions. There are some studies that have demonstrated collectively that SUS-TAS is adaptable:

- (1) Sirakaya-Turk et al. [6], who validated SUS-TAS in Turkey and Northern Cyprus, confirming the seven-dimensional structure and demonstrating its cross-cultural applicability despite item reduction from 44 to 33. Their work justified the need for local adaptation while preserving core constructs.
- (2) Ribeiro et al. [8], who tested SUS-TAS in Cape Verde, reinforcing its validity in African island contexts and highlighting the influence of cultural and developmental stages on scale performance.
- (3) Hsu et al. [9], who examined SUS-TAS in an Eastern island context, using competing models and cross-validation to confirm its reliability and construct validity, thus supporting its use in mature tourism destinations.

Although these studies demonstrate SUS-TAS adaptability, its psychometric properties must be re-evaluated in each new context—especially in mature European destinations where overtourism and resident resistance are prominent. This justifies the current study's focus on Spain, a country experiencing significant tourism pressure in cities like Barcelona and Madrid.

Finally, in recent years, the phenomenon of overtourism has become particularly relevant in urban tourism studies, as emphasized by García-Buades et al. [46]. Overtourism emerges when visitor numbers surpass the sustainable carrying capacity of a destination, leading to a range of adverse effects: diminished resident quality of life, heightened social tension, conflict over public resources, and even threats to the long-term competitiveness of the destination. The authors highlight the crucial role of local government in mitigating these impacts and advocate for greater resident participation in tourism planning as a strategy to counteract overtourism and foster urban sustainability. In cities such as Barcelona, recent research has shown that overtourism triggers social tensions, anti-tourism protests, increased housing prices, and strains on public services, ultimately contributing to a decline in the quality of life for local residents [47,48]. Similarly, in Seville's historic centre, overtourism has produced significant social and spatial consequences, including resident alienation and the erosion of their "right to the city" [49]. Meanwhile, Hospers [50] highlights Bilbao as an example where tourism has played a pivotal role in revitalizing the economy post-industrial restructuring, but it has also introduced important challenges related to visitor management and urban crowding.

To guide the empirical analysis, this study formulates three hypotheses that reflect key dimensions of the research framework. These hypotheses aim to validate the psychometric robustness of the SUS-TAS scale, explore the influence of individual sociodemographic characteristics on residents' attitudes toward sustainable tourism, and examine contextual differences across urban destinations with varying levels of tourism development. Each hypothesis is grounded in theoretical and empirical considerations and is designed to deepen the understanding of how sustainability perceptions are shaped within diverse urban contexts. These are the three hypotheses of our study:

H1. *Dimensional Validation of the SUSTAS Scale*

The SUSTAS scale demonstrates a coherent latent structure and satisfactory psychometric properties, as identified through exploratory factor analysis (EFA), supporting its construct validity and internal consistency across the sample.

H2. *Sociodemographic Influences on SUSTAS Factors*

The underlying dimensions of the SUSTAS scale vary significantly across individual sociodemographic characteristics. Variables such as sex, age, years of residency, education level, and job status are hypothesized to exert measurable effects on respondents' SUSTAS factor scores.

H3. *Contextual (City-Level) Differences in SUSTAS Factors*

Differences in SUSTAS factor scores across cities reflect their respective levels of tourism maturity. Residents of more consolidated tourism destinations (e.g., Barcelona or Madrid) are expected to perceive higher social and environmental sustainability costs of tourism compared to residents of less saturated destinations (e.g., Bilbao).

By addressing the psychometric validity of the SUSTAS scale, the sociodemographic influences, and the contextual differences among urban destinations, the study aims to offer a comprehensive perspective that enables a more accurate interpretation of residents' perceptions of sustainable tourism.

3. Materials and Methods

3.1. Type of Research

To conduct the research, the authors considered quantitative research as the best option to fulfill their objective. Quantitative research is a research strategy that focuses on quantifying the collection and analysis of data [51]. A cross-sectional study has been carried out, which involves obtaining information from any given sample of population elements at one time only [52]. In this research, we have chosen a single sample of respondents from the target population and have obtained information from this sample only once.

3.2. Research Instrument

The instrument used was a survey, which allows for the systematic collection of quantitative information from a representative sample taken from a broader population [53]. Surveys can be conducted through various means, and in this case, we have opted for an online questionnaire, distributed through the Gaia research agency during the month of June 2023. There are many benefits to conducting this type of survey. For the authors Van Selm and Jankowski [54] online surveys allow: (1) to maintain anonymity, which favors the exchange of experiences and opinions; (2) to achieve higher response rates in the younger audience; and (3) to obtain cost and efficiency advantages. The residents' survey was translated into Spanish by two bilingual Spanish and English professors and then back into English by the researchers. The translated version was reviewed by two research assistants to verify accuracy, correct discrepancies, and ensure semantic agreement. Respondents were informed about various aspects of information collection: responses would be anonymous, their participation voluntary, and the results would be used solely for scientific and research purposes.

The survey has two parts. The first part of the questionnaire (seven questions) was related to sociodemographic characteristics and other issues of the respondents: sex, age, number of years residing in the city, classification by level of education, type of employment

and relationship with tourism as a source of income and finally, the existence or not of holiday apartments in their housing community. The second part of the questionnaire was structured according to the validated Sustainable Tourism Attitude Scale (SUS-TAS) Choi and Sirakaya [5]. (Appendix A shows the details of the survey).

In their validation process, the authors reviewed published studies to measure residents' attitudes towards tourism and sustainability issues. Subsequently, the authors suggested improving current tools by developing and validating a scale of residents' attitudes as a subjective indicator. These indicators included the beliefs, cognitions, and behavioral intentions of residents towards the development of sustainable tourism. The final scale of sustainable tourism development by Choi and Sirakaya [5] contains 44 items within seven groups or seven factors that include the following: Factor 1: *Perceived social costs*; Factor 2: *Environmental sustainability*; Factor 3: *Long-term planning*; Factor 4: *Perceived economic benefits*; Factor 5: *Community-centered economy*; Factor 6: *Ensuring visitor satisfaction*; and Factor 7: *Maximizing community participation*. Responses were measured on a five-point Likert scale (where 1: strongly disagree and 5: strongly agree)

3.3. Sample Description

Firstly, we will describe the cities analyzed and secondly the details of the surveyed sample. According to data from the National Institute of Statistics [55], Spain achieved a new record in 2023 surpassing 85 million tourists, which represents an 18.7% increase compared to the previous year. From the entire national territory, we have chosen for our analysis the three Spanish cities that received the highest amount of tourists last year (hotel occupancy survey: INE [55] final data of 2022, published in September 2023 and the city of Bilbao, which despite being number thirteen on the list, is a city that is experiencing one of the highest tourist growth at the national level. In Table 1, we collect the most relevant data from each of them.

Table 1. Main data of the analyzed cities.

Cities	Population (2022)	Number of Tourists (2022)	Number of Hotels (2023)	Number of Vacation Homes (2021)
Madrid	3,286,662	8,668,682	872	14.686
Barcelona	1,639,981	7,375,275	665	12.930
Bilbao	340.455	1,024,953	91	1.800
Seville	681.998	2,640,729	242	4.634

(Source: Cities Council website, INE, Epdata) (A 'tourist' is considered to be all those national or foreign persons who make one or more consecutive overnight stays in the same accommodation).

The four cities chosen for the research have excellent connections and communications (airport, train, and bus). We highlight that in all cases, the number of passengers at the airports grew in 2023 compared to 2022. Thus, the figures for the Adolfo Suárez Madrid-Barajas Airport, considered one of the most important airports in Europe, amount to 55.2 million travelers in 2023 compared to 50.6 million in 2022. The Prat de Barcelona airport received 46 million passengers in 2023 compared to 41.6 in the previous year 2022, Seville had 7.3 million compared to 6.7 in 2022, and Bilbao airport added 5.8 million travelers compared to 5.1 in 2022.

In terms of accommodations, all four cities have also experienced strong growth. According to forecasts from the report prepared by JLL Hotels and Hospitality [56], Madrid and Barcelona closed 2023 with about 7000 luxury hotel places after a growth of 67% in the last decade. A couple of years ago, the Seville and Province Hotels Association reported the launch of 25 hotel projects that would add more than 1000 new rooms. In the case of Bilbao, since 2018, the offer in the hotel sector has experienced a 'significant' growth in the town

with the addition of 12 new hotels in the city. In addition, the number of tourist homes has also experienced significant growth in recent years. In fact, Madrid is one of the cities with the highest Airbnb growth rate among the main European cities. According to data from Exceltur, it is the city that has grown the most in terms of the offer of tourist apartments, occupying the first place in the ranking of cities with more short-stay homes for tourists. According to data from the National Institute of Statistics (INE) [55] published in August 2023, Barcelona experiences its first growth since 2020. According to data from the same source, in Seville there are a total of 6152 apartments with this qualification that offer a total of 26,997 places, 11% more than in 2022. In the case of Bilbao, the number of tourist apartments has shot up by 25% in these last three years due to the boom in visitors and private properties now offer more than 11,000 places throughout Bizkaia on the Internet compared to the 16,000 of the hotels.

Regarding the sample of respondents, a total of 660 online questionnaires were completed among a population over 18 years old residing in Madrid, Barcelona, Seville, and Bilbao. Quotas were established by sex and age groups in each of the cities, according to the demographic data of the Spanish population. Table 2 shows the information on the sociodemographic variables of the sample.

Table 2. Details of the sample.

Socio Demographic Variables	Category	N	%
Sex (N = 660)	Female	336	50.9
	Male	324	49.1
Age (N = 660)	18–29	96	14.6
	30–39	117	17.7
	40–49	121	18.3
	50–65	205	31.1
	+65	121	18.3
City of residence (N = 660)	Barcelona	204	30.9
	Bilbao	102	15.5
	Madrid	204	30.9
	Seville	150	22.7
Residential status (N = 660)	0–3 years	33	5.0
	4–10 years	54	8.2
	11–20 years	68	10.3
	+20 years	505	76.5
Educational status (N = 660)	up to 10th	41	6.2
	up to 12th	92	13.9
	College	256	38.8
	Postgraduate, PhD	123	18.6
	Vocational training	148	22.5
Job status (N = 660)	Inactive population	173	26.2
	Unemployed	57	8.6
	Employed	430	65.1

Comparing the distribution of our sample with the Spanish population, we observe some differences. Thus, regarding age distribution, our sample shows a higher proportion of older age groups (over 50) than the Spanish population (31% vs. 26% 50–65 years old and 24% vs. 18.3% over 65 years old). Concerning the level of education, the differences between our sample's representation and the national statistics differ significantly in almost all levels of education. Our sample has a higher representation, above all, in the university

and postgraduate education groups. And finally, as far as employment status is concerned, our sample does not differ much from the national statistics.

4. Results

First, Cronbach's Alpha coefficients have been calculated to measure the reliability of the scale. In this case, Cronbach's Alphas were calculated for each of the subdimensions of the scale, highlighting that the raw alpha value is above 0.7 and in some of them, it is above 0.9, which has allowed the authors to verify the reliability of the used scale and the consistency of the factors. Table 3 shows the domain descriptors, the number of items within each one, and the corresponding alpha reliability coefficients.

Table 3. Factors and Alpha coefficients.

Factor	N° Items	Cronbach's Alpha
F1. Perceived social costs	8	0.94
F2. Environmental sustainability	9	0.95
F3. Long-term planning	7	0.90
F4. Perceived economic benefits	7	0.92
F5. Community-centered economy	5	0.83
F6. Ensuring visitor satisfaction	4	0.76
F7. Maximizing community participation	4	0.74

4.1. Varimax: Factor Analysis of Local Communities' Attitudes Towards Sustainable Tourism Development

The Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) coefficient showed a very high value (0.95), indicating the suitability of the data for this analysis. An Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA) was carried out to validate the scale, taking the correlation matrix and applying a varimax rotation of the 44 items that comprise it, in order to identify the dimensions of the SUS-TAS. Our exploratory factor analysis (EFA) yielded seven factors with eigenvalues greater than one, in accordance with the Kaiser criterion. This finding was further supported by the results of the parallel analysis and the scree plot, both of which indicated a clear inflection point consistent with a seven-factor solution. Together, these criteria converge to suggest that a seven-factor structure provides the most appropriate representation of the data, aligning with the dimensional configuration proposed in the original SUS-TAS scale.

The seven factors solution retains 68.2% of the variance and there is no communality below 0.4. Thus, we find that 21 of the 44 items have a communality above 0.7, 19 items have a communality greater than 0.6, and only four items have communalities between 0.4 and 0.6. In order to enhance the interpretability of the factors, we applied VARIMAX rotation. Table 4 reports the percentage of variance explained by each factor. And Table 5 presents the item loadings, displaying only those with absolute values above 0.40 to clearly illustrate the association and structure of each factor.

Table 4. Percentage of Variance accounted for by each factor after varimax rotation.

Factor	Factor Name	% Variance
F1	Perceived Social Costs	13.7%
F2	Environmental Sustainability	18.8%
F3	Long-term Planning	6.7%
F4	Perceived Economic Benefits	10.9%
F5	Community-centered Economy	7.1%
F6	Ensuring Visitor Satisfaction	4.8%
F7	Maximizing Community Participation	6.2%
TOTAL		68.2%

Table 5. Cont.

Items Scale	F1	F2	F3	F4	F5	F6	F7
** Sometimes, it is acceptable to exclude a community's residents from TD decisions	—	—	—	—	—	—	0.43
I think residents must be encouraged to assume leadership roles in TP committees *	—	—	—	—	—	—	0.39

* Although 0. below 0.40 is the highest correlation with the rest of the factors so we decided to include it. ** 44. is expressed inversely to the scale. The exact formulation should be: 'Sometimes, it is acceptable to exclude community residents from tourism development decisions'. This means that if you strongly agree with this statement, you are indicating a negative value for the Community participation factor. All other items are expressed positively.

After the rotation, we have observed that our results validate the original scale of Choi and Sirakaya [5]. The number of factors resulting from our analysis is the same as in the original scale (7), and the items that comprise each of the factors are also the same, although we have detected two differences.

The Varimax-rotated loading matrix (Table 4) shows how each of the 44 items correlates with the seven extracted factors, with factor loadings representing the strength and direction of the relationship between each variable and its underlying factor. Loadings with an absolute value equal to or greater than 0.40 are considered meaningful for interpretation.

A key finding is that Factor 3 (*Long-term planning*) shows cross-loadings with Factor 2 (*Environmental sustainability*). For example, items such as "I believe that successful management of tourism requires advanced planning" and "TD plans should be continuously improved" load not only on F3 but also show moderate associations with F2. This suggests that residents perceive long-term planning and environmental sustainability as interrelated concepts, reflecting a growing awareness that sustainable development requires both forward-looking governance and ecological responsibility.

Another significant observation is the reclassification of one item: "I think residents must be encouraged to assume leadership roles in TP committees". Originally placed under F3 (*Long-term planning*) in the original SUS-TAS scale [5], this item loaded more strongly under F7 (*Maximizing community participation*) in our analysis (loading = 0.3935, the highest among all factors). Although slightly below the 0.40 threshold, it was retained due to its conceptual alignment with civic engagement and participatory governance. This reallocation suggests that residents associate leadership in tourism planning more with community empowerment than with technical planning, reinforcing the importance of bottom-up decision-making in sustainable tourism.

Additionally, the item "Sometimes, it is acceptable to exclude a community's residents from TD decisions" (F7) is reverse-coded, meaning that agreement with this statement reflects lower support for community participation. This item had a low but meaningful loading, indicating that most residents reject the exclusion of community voices, a finding that aligns with calls for inclusive and democratic tourism governance [4]. These findings confirm that the SUS-TAS scale is robust and adaptable, but also context-sensitive.

4.2. The Influence of Socio-Demographic Characteristics on Attitudes of Local Communities

To determine the different perceptions of the local community towards the SUS-TAS factors influenced by their sociodemographic characteristics, mean-comparison tests for sex have been conducted, and analysis of variances (ANOVA) for the rest of the variables. Table 6 presents the main statistical differences in the control variables set by the researchers resulting from our analysis.

Table 6. *p*-values Factors and variables.

	Sex	Cities	Age	Residency	Education	Job Status
	Scores	Scores	Scores	Scores	Scores	Scores
F1. Perceived social costs	52.47%	0.00%	0.01%	3.46%	0.51%	0.58%
F2. Environmental sustainability	0.07%	58.01%	40.32%	66.27%	0.33%	24.74%
F3. Long term planning	7.67%	3.49%	0.14%	79.31%	0.11%	24.65%
F4. Perceived economic benefits	8.90%	21.70%	54.01%	1.44%	52.52%	23.66%
F5. Community-centered economy	2.27%	1.75%	10.80%	28.61%	12.32%	40.70%
F6. Ensuring visitor satisfaction	1.58%	67.53%	0.36%	32.38%	37.76%	7.82%
F7. Community participation	42.03%	6.86%	54.35%	30.01%	4.90%	42.27%

The table presents data on various metrics related to different factors such as sex, cities, age, residence, education, and employment status. The metrics include the seven factors of the SUS-TAS scale, and scores are provided for each metric within different socio-demographic categories. For F1 (*Perceived social cost*), all the sociodemographic variables used in our analysis show variations in the perception of the factor, except for the sex variable. In contrast, for F7 (*Community participation*), the only variable that shows variation in the perception of the factor is the residents' education, and the rest of the variables do not show significant variations. The most important findings of the analysis will be presented in the conclusions section.

5. Discussion

Regarding the dimensional validation of the SUSTAS scale (H1), a key contribution of this study to the sustainable tourism literature is the validation of a multidimensional scale tailored to the local context, which confirmed the presence of seven distinct factors. The differences observed in comparison to the original SUS-TAS instrument underscore the importance of adapting standardized measurement tools to the specific sociocultural realities of each destination. These findings support existing calls for further psychometric evaluation of sustainability-attitude scales, particularly in mature tourism contexts and across diverse stakeholder groups [8,9].

Regarding the sociodemographic influences on SUSTAS factors (H2), our findings partially confirm the second hypothesis: only sex and education level emerged as significant determinants of residents' attitudes toward sustainable tourism, while age, years of residency, and job status showed no measurable effects. Sex differences are particularly pronounced. Women express stronger pro-environmental and supportive attitudes toward sustainable tourism than men—a pattern consistently documented in previous research [30,57]. This suggests that sex-sensitive communication strategies may be effective, either by enhancing awareness among male audiences or by leveraging the environmental engagement of women to promote sustainable practices.

Education level also plays a significant role. Individuals with higher educational attainment are more likely to recognize economic benefits, value environmental sustainability, and prioritize long-term planning [30,58]. Education thus appears to strengthen cognitive understanding of sustainability trade-offs and fosters the capacity for coordinated planning [59]. Consequently, residents with higher educational backgrounds may serve as strategic allies in promoting responsible tourism, whereas targeted initiatives are needed to engage populations with lower educational levels, ensuring that sustainability messages remain accessible and inclusive [60].

In contrast, age did not emerge as a significant predictor of attitudes, aligning with recent studies indicating that sustainability perceptions are not strongly segmented by generation [61]. This reinforces the view that sustainability communication should address

all age groups equally, focusing instead on more influential factors such as education and local context.

Regarding the contextual (City-Level) differences in SUSTAS factors (H3), the analysis also supports the third hypothesis concerning contextual variation across cities. Perceptual differences were observed in three key factors—perceived social costs (F1), long-term planning (F3), and community-centered economy (F5)—reflecting each destination's level of tourism maturity.

Residents of Barcelona reported the highest perceived social costs, likely reflecting the city's prolonged exposure to mass tourism and the accumulation of related externalities. This suggests that sustained tourism pressure can heighten public sensitivity to its negative impacts. In contrast, in Bilbao, where tourism expansion is more recent, perceived social costs were significantly lower, indicating a delayed recognition of such impacts. Differences in long-term planning and community-centered economic values further suggest that local governance traditions, civic participation, and historical tourism trajectories shape residents' sustainability perceptions.

These findings highlight the importance of place-based strategies that account for local priorities and experiences when designing sustainable-tourism policies. In mature destinations, strategies should emphasize mitigating social and environmental costs, whereas in emerging destinations, early planning and community engagement can prevent similar conflicts from arising as tourism intensifies.

6. Conclusions

This study provides a robust validation of the Sustainable Tourism Attitude Scale (SUS-TAS) in the context of four major Spanish cities—Madrid, Barcelona, Bilbao, and Seville—offering a methodologically sound and context-sensitive tool for assessing residents' perceptions of tourism sustainability. By confirming the seven-factor structure of the scale through Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA) and demonstrating high internal consistency (Cronbach's $\alpha > 0.7$ in all dimensions), the research reinforces the reliability and applicability of SUS-TAS in mature European urban destinations, a context previously underrepresented in the literature.

A key scientific contribution of this work lies in its comparative urban analysis, which reveals significant perceptual differences across cities shaped by their distinct tourism trajectories. Residents of Barcelona, a long-established mass tourism destination, report the highest levels of perceived social costs, reflecting accumulated sensitivity to overcrowding, gentrification, and quality-of-life deterioration. In contrast, Bilbao, with a more recent tourism development model, shows lower concern, suggesting a delayed recognition of negative impacts. These findings underscore the importance of local context in shaping sustainability attitudes and support the need for place-based policies that respond to the specific realities of each destination.

Furthermore, the study identifies two methodological novelties. First, the item "I think residents must be encouraged to assume leadership roles in TP committees," originally classified under Long-Term Planning (F3), demonstrated stronger loading under Maximizing Community Participation (F7), suggesting a conceptual shift toward civic engagement. Second, the observed overlap between Long-Term Planning and Environmental Sustainability factors indicates that residents increasingly perceive sustainability and forward-looking governance as interdependent, a reflection of growing environmental awareness in urban communities.

The research also confirms the influence of sociodemographic variables: women and individuals with higher education levels express stronger support for sustainable tourism, while age does not significantly affect attitudes. These results reinforce the need for targeted

communication strategies and inclusive policy design that engage diverse population segments. In scientific and practical terms, this study fills a critical gap by validating SUS-TAS in a high-tourism European setting and demonstrating its adaptability to local sociocultural contexts. The findings provide a solid foundation for future research and offer actionable insights for policymakers, destination managers, and urban planners seeking to align tourism development with community well-being, equity, and long-term sustainability.

Finally, the study supports the call by Higgins-Desbiolles et al. [4] to reframe tourism as a model of voluntary hospitality that prioritizes residents' rights and quality of life over commercial interests. By centering community voices and validating tools to measure their perceptions, this research contributes to a more democratic, equitable, and sustainable future for urban tourism. It also reinforces the importance of the resident–tourist relationship as a central axis of sustainable tourism development, echoing the foundational work of Ap [22] and Gursoy and Kendall [34], who emphasized the need to understand residents' perceptions of tourism impacts as a basis for fostering social cohesion, mutual respect, and long-term destination viability.

6.1. Implications for Policymakers and Industry

Overall, this study underscores the relevance of incorporating sociodemographic and geographic variables into tourism-planning processes, as resident engagement remains a key predictor of support for sustainable initiatives. Recognizing the diversity of resident perceptions—shaped by education, sex, city context, and lived experience with tourism—enables policymakers and destination managers to design context-sensitive and participatory sustainability strategies. When residents are actively involved in decision-making, they develop a sense of ownership and trust, which fosters long-term community engagement and strengthens support for tourism policies. Such participatory governance not only enhances the legitimacy of planning processes but also ensures that strategies align with local priorities, mitigate negative impacts such as gentrification, and promote equitable, sustainable development. Therefore, institutionalizing community consultation and co-creation mechanisms should be a cornerstone of sustainable-tourism management, particularly in mature destinations.

To sum up, the study provides valuable insights for policymakers, destination managers, and communication strategists seeking to foster sustainable tourism practices. Future research could further explore the role of cultural and institutional factors in shaping public attitudes toward sustainability.

6.2. Scientific Contributions

This study makes a significant contribution to sustainable tourism research by validating the SUS-TAS scale in four Spanish cities, allowing for a more accurate understanding of local perceptions. It also reveals meaningful perceptual differences across destinations with varying levels of tourism maturity, reinforcing the need for context-sensitive policy approaches. The research confirms the influence of sociodemographic variables such as sex and education level on attitudes toward sustainable tourism, offering practical insights for inclusive strategy design. Finally, it introduces methodological refinements that enhance the understanding of attitudinal factors, including the reclassification of specific items and the observed overlap between environmental sustainability and long-term planning dimensions.

This study makes a significant scientific contribution by addressing an existing research gap. Although the SUS-TAS scale has been validated in various international contexts—primarily in developing countries or non-European cultural settings—its psychometric consistency has not yet been tested in mature urban European destinations

experiencing high tourism pressure. Moreover, comparative studies within the same country were lacking, particularly those examining how sociocultural context and the level of tourism development influence residents' perceptions of sustainability. This study addresses that gap by validating the SUS-TAS scale in four Spanish cities with differing levels of tourism maturity, and by confirming its reliability within an urban European context.

6.3. Limitations and Future Lines of Research

The research is carried out progressively, and recognizing its scope helps to define future lines of investigation. In this context, we outline the contributions and possible extensions of this study. One of its strengths lies in the measurement and analysis of residents' perceptions in four Spanish tourist cities with very different local and cultural contexts. While the study focuses exclusively on Spain, we do not consider this a limitation, given the relevance and intensity of the phenomenon in the national tourism landscape. In fact, this focus allows for a deeper understanding of the dynamics affecting Spanish destinations, which have been particularly impacted by tourism-related challenges in recent years. Nevertheless, future research could consider expanding the analysis to other geographical areas within the country, as well as increasing the number of cities included. It would also be valuable to explore in greater depth the differences between the selected cities, especially in relation to their varying levels of tourism development, and to conduct a more detailed analysis of the influence of sociodemographic variables. Additionally, examining the interaction between generational effects and control variables could offer further insights. These future investigations may provide useful lessons for other cities, policymakers, and the tourism industry.

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Appendix A

Sustainable Tourism Attitude Scale (SUS-TAS) (Original version)
Choi and Sirakaya [5]

Factor 1: Perceived Social Costs

1. I often feel irritated because of tourism in my community
2. Tourists in my community disrupt my quality of life
3. My community is overcrowded because of TD

4. Community recreational resources are overused by tourists
5. I believe the quality of the environment in my community has deteriorated because of tourism
6. Tourism is growing too fast
7. My quality of life has deteriorated because of tourism
8. I do not feel comfortable or welcome in local TB

Factor 2: Environmental Sustainability

9. The diversity of nature must be valued and protected
10. Tourism must protect the community environment
11. Proper TD requires that wildlife and natural habitats be protected at all times
12. Community environment must be protected now and for the future
13. TD must promote positive environmental ethics among all parties with a stake in tourism
14. Tourism must be developed in harmony with the natural and cultural environment
15. I think tourism developers should strengthen efforts for environmental conservation
16. I believe tourism must improve the environment for future generations
17. Regulatory environmental standards are needed to reduce the negative impacts of TD

Factor 3: Long-Term Planning

18. I believe TD needs well-coordinated planning
19. When planning for tourism, we cannot be shortsighted
20. I believe that successful management of tourism requires advanced planning
21. I believe we need to take a long-term view when planning for TD
22. TD plans should be continuously improved
23. TI must plan for the future
24. I think residents must be encouraged to assume leadership roles in TP committees

Factor 4: Perceived Economic Benefits

25. I believe tourism is a strong economic contributor to community
26. Tourism benefits other industries in communities
27. I believe tourism is good for communities' economies
28. Tourism diversifies the local economy
29. Tourism creates new markets for our local products
30. I like tourism because it brings new income to communities
31. Tourism generates substantial tax revenues for the local government

Factor 5: Community-centered Economy

32. I think TBs should hire at least one-half of their employees from within community
33. Communities' residents should receive a fair share of benefits from tourism
34. The TI should obtain at least one-half of their goods and services from within the community
35. TI must contribute to community improvement funds
36. Communities' residents should be given more opportunities to invest in TD

Factor 6: Ensuring Visitor Satisfaction

37. TBs must monitor visitor satisfaction
38. TI must ensure good quality tourism experiences for visitors
39. It is the responsibility of TBs to meet visitor needs
40. Community attractiveness is a core element of ecological 'appeal' for visitors

Factor 7: Maximizing Community Participation

41. Tourism decisions must be made by all in communities regardless of a person's background
42. Full participation in TDM, by everyone in the community, is a must for successful TD
43. Communities' residents should have an opportunity to be involved in TDM
44. Sometimes, it is acceptable to exclude a community's residents from TD decisions

Notes: TD = tourism development; TB = tourism business; TI = tourism industry; TDM: tourism decision-making. All items are measured on a 5-point Likert-type scale anchored by 1 = 'strongly disagree' and 5 = 'strongly agree'.

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