

Article

Approach to Impact of Tourism on Quality of Life: Case Study of the Magic Town of San Sebastián del Oeste, Jalisco, México

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Abstract: Magical town designation is a distinction granted by the Mexican government to different areas that meet certain requirements that favor tourist activities. Some of these magical towns, as in the case of San Sebastian del Oeste, in Jalisco, have had different outcomes because of this distinction, and a very important one is the quality of life (QOL) of the local inhabitants, who have modified their traditional lifestyles oriented to rural activities by including tourism and all that it implies. For this reason, it is necessary to ask the following question: What has been the impact of tourism on the QOL of the local inhabitants of San Sebastian del Oeste? To answer this question, a qualitative–phenomenological methodology was used, based on interviews with local inhabitants to identify the impact of tourism on their QOL. This study found that tourism has answered some of the needs of the local population, such as economic and public services, but it is not the solution for all areas considered in QOL.

Keywords: Magic Town; quality of life; public policy; tourism; Mexico



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1. Introduction

Mexico is a country where tourism is one of the most important economic branches, given its natural assets that allow for the creation and promotion of various tourism products internationally; as proof of this, international tourist arrivals reached 11,222,000 in the first quarter of 2024, an increase of 6.9% compared to 2023 [1].

The tourism sector contributed 7.6% of the gross domestic product (GDP) in 2022. Other benefits were also obtained in the same year by the Mexican territory; these are documented in the Statistical Compendium of Tourism in Mexico prepared by the Mexican Ministry of Tourism (SECTUR) [2] and include the following: (1) it is ranked 6th in the world in terms of arrival of international tourists, below Turkey and Italy; (2) it is ranked 9th in terms of foreign exchange earnings; (3) passenger arrivals by air increased by 33.7% compared to the previous year, and 215.9% annually in the case of maritime transportation.

These indicators allow us to determine that tourism is an extremely important sector to the Mexican economy, and this is a primary justification for the strategic actions taken by the government to develop and promote tourism based on offerings that seek to encourage opportunities and provide benefits to the social sectors present in each of the existing geographic delimitations throughout the country.

In Mexico, one of the most relevant states in the tourism sector is Jalisco, which, based on 2023 figures, had 2736 hotel establishments, 82,216 available rooms, an economic revenue of MXN 78 billion, and an influx of 34.3 million visitors, while in 2022, it contributed 8% of the national tourism GDP, behind only Ciudad de México, Estado de Mexico, Quintana Roo, and Guanajuato states [3].

Global tourism growth trends are expected to reach approximately 1.8 billion tourists by 2030 [4], making this economic sector one of the most prominent and with the potential

to boost the progress of communities and improve living conditions at the local level, as outlined in the 2030 agenda [5].

In addition to the above, not only is tourism of utmost importance for Mexico, as shown in the previous paragraphs, some states promote it and, through this activity, are more competitive than others. The search for greater interaction in the tertiary tourism sector has the potential to impact different locations in different ways, generally as a possible answer to poverty; however, this is not necessarily synonymous with a better QOL, as the World Tourism Organization (WTO) and the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) point out that people at different socioeconomic levels aspire to find satisfaction in jobs that provide them with security and economic stability, as well as the possibility of developing both personally and collectively [6–8].

The impacts above can be studied from a perspective more in line with their context rather than only through statistics issued by the official sector, such as the perception of local inhabitants, which can be positive in terms of better economic conditions, employment, infrastructure, or services, or negative with the inherent repercussions of tourism, such as pollution, culturalization, gentrification, and increase in the cost of living, among other things [9–11].

There is a significant number of previous studies [12–14] that indicate the types of impacts of tourism. These can be cultural, economic, or social. Tourism can also have an impact on public policies, affecting physical changes in the region and its existing social relations [15]. It can also act as an element for recovery from adverse periods [16], together with other factors such as sustainability and its conjunction with knowledge centers, companies, society, and the governmental sector as factors that can work through synergies to face difficult or adverse times caused by unexpected contingencies.

The Magical Towns Program (MTP) is one of the aforementioned efforts by the government sector to improve local conditions in municipalities that meet the requirements for such distinction oriented to tourism promotion, and the municipality of San Sebastián del Oeste is one of them. It is of utmost importance to analyze the changes in the living conditions of the local inhabitants due to the arrival of tourism, that is, the identification of the impacts that the arrival of such activity has had on the place.

Based on the above contextual review, many possible repercussions are identified for the municipalities that are selected for the distinction of MT; thus, the objective of this research is to identify the impact of tourism on the QOL of the local inhabitants of the MT of San Sebastián del Oeste as a result of this tourist distinction. In addition, understanding the ways in which the inhabitants perceive the changes in their environment in the face of the MT allows for better decision making by the various sectors involved.

The research question that motivates the present study is as follows: what have been the impacts of tourism on the QOL of the local inhabitants of San Sebastian del Oeste? The importance of this question lies in the fact that the economic vision of the governmental sector must have a social impact on local inhabitants so that the public policy of MT responds to national development guidelines. To answer this question, the information provided by local inhabitants of the MT was compiled, analyzed, and discussed, allowing for the generation of conclusions, implications, and future lines of research.

This research explores the interrelation between QOL, public policy, local development, and sustainable tourism in the context of San Sebastian del Oeste, a small MT in Mexico. The QOL of residents is seen as a comprehensive indicator that reflects the impact of tourism in various aspects such as economics, society, culture, and the environment. Understanding tourism's effects on residents' quality of life is believed to guide sustainable tourism management. Public policies are crucial in maximizing socioeconomic benefits and minimizing negative impacts for residents. This study highlights the importance of active participation from residents and stakeholders in decision-making processes to create a tourism development model that improves QOL while preserving the authenticity and resources of the destination. This research aims to serve as a model for similar destinations seeking sustainable integration between tourism and community wellbeing.

2. Theoretical Background

2.1. Understanding Tourism

As mentioned above, tourism is one of the most important economic activities worldwide, with a significant growth projection for the year 2030. This was affected by the COVID-19 pandemic [16,17], generating adverse repercussions during the contingency, while for a recovery scenario, the people living under confinement generated a growing need to communicate and move around, which led to the rapid recovery of the sector [5,18].

The origins of the study of tourism from its conceptualization and theorization as a category of analysis begin due to its importance in the balance of payments in countries, and this was already considered by Schullern zu Schattenhofen in his work *Tourism and National Economy* in 1911 [19]. In this sense, Fernández Fuster [20] in Acerenza [19] indicates that tourism is the concept that includes all the processes, especially the economic ones, related to the affluence, permanence, and return of the tourist to, in, and out of a determined area, which can be between countries or smaller-scale delimitations.

Several classic sociological scholars have tried to understand tourism in a comprehensive manner with great force since the 1970s, such as Cohen [21–25]; Young [26]; Gaviria [27]; MacCannell [28]; Turner and Ash [29]; De Kadt [30]; Dann [31,32]; Lanfant [33]; Pearce [34]; Machlis and Burch [35]; Graburn [36]; Krippendorf [37]; Urry [38]; and Dann and Cohen [39], who analyzed the impact of tourism on the communities where it took place. The previous set of contributions allowed the author of [19] to describe tourism as a complex phenomenon in which different dimensions of the field of social sciences must be considered to understand it. An interdisciplinary, multidisciplinary, and transdisciplinary approach between sociology, psychology, anthropology, and economics has generated important contributions to the knowledge of this activity [40], which can have an impact even from the governmental vision to put it into practice along with its benefits throughout the territory under its jurisdiction employing public policies.

Some previous research in the tourism MT of San Sebastián del Oeste addresses economic development and tourism resilience [41,42]; however, no previous studies have demonstrated the significance of the impact of COVID-19 on tourism activity. Some authors [16,17,43] point out that the generalized impact of the pandemic was high and adverse on tourism, the economy, and daily life, so in this particular MT, there were no elements that would allow us to consider a different impact.

2.2. Quality of Life

QOL is a process in which individuals and collectives seek to satisfy psychosocial and conversion needs through the alternatives available to them in the environment and public policy in which they find themselves, and, at the same time, by the degree of importance and meaning that people give to the achievement of their goals [44,45]. For this reason, it is a good parameter or catalyst to weigh the impact that tourism generates in the communities or localities in which it takes place [46].

There is a large body of theory related to QOL and tourism, which seeks to generate indicators that allow weighting or assessing the willingness of residents to accept, maintain, and promote tourism activity. This phenomenon is considered in the theory of social exchange, applied in previous studies [47] that explore how residents perceive tourism's economic, social, and environmental impacts in their respective communities and the relationship with QOL. Other studies analyze the relationship between tourism development and life satisfaction of residents in tourism communities by analyzing domains of QOL (such as material wellbeing, community wellbeing, emotional wellbeing, and health and safety wellbeing) and overall life satisfaction [48].

In the context of tourism, previous research proposes indicators to measure QOL in a general way with potential for tourism application and others that generate indicators directly oriented to sustainable tourism and community participation in tourism development. Numerous theoretical contributions are in the first type, including 13 different models [49] in which 5 to 16 dimensions or domains of QOL are identified.

In the second type, Moscardo [50] examines some specific indicators in common with several QOL models, among which common coincidences are generated, summarized in four important points:

- Basic physiological needs, including food and water, good health, and physical protection from harm;
- Security, including a stable place to live and work and ongoing opportunities to work and earn;
- Belongingness, including links to supportive social networks and opportunities to participate in social, cultural, and political activities;
- Self-esteem, including knowledge and confidence, and the ability and freedom to make choices.

Sustainability is present in QOL and tourism research, so authors such as Woo et al. [51] combine aspects of theory in the practical field to demonstrate the perceived economic benefits of tourism and its influence on the support that residents provide to tourism development, determined by their QOL. For such support to exist, the positive impacts of tourism by local inhabitants must exceed the negative impacts, so some authors [52] explore the balance between the perception of both characteristics, for which they propose six general determining domains in the conditions of the community and its QOL: (1) community opportunity (entertainment opportunities, recreation opportunities, infrastructure, job opportunities); (2) quality of the environment in the community (conditions of wildlife habitats, conditions of natural areas, clean air and water); (3) cost of living in the community (prices for goods and services, cost of living, property values); (4) community security (crime level, traffic conditions, personal safety); (5) public services (fire and police protection services, garbage collection services, medical availability and services); and (6) private services (restaurant, recreational and shopping facilities and services).

It is also necessary to cite some research in which the importance of measuring QOL in different contexts is manifested; thus, the need to have adequate indicators for it arises, as in the case of Phillips [53], when describing how the theory is the basis for the development of community indicators, which is a multifaceted concept depending on the context and situation where it is sought to be applied, highlighting descriptive and diagnostic indicators and their influence for forecasting purposes. This is directly related to the development of measurement systems for economic development planning, emphasizing the importance of local citizen and stakeholder participation as a determinant in prospective governance processes.

Other research, such as that developed by Andereck and Nyaupane [54], developed a questionnaire that considers three sets of scales combined with an index for the measurement of perceived QOL referring to tourism impacts, where eight QOL domains were identified: (1) recreation amenities; (2) community pride and awareness; (3) economic strength; (4) natural/cultural preservation; (5) community wellbeing; (6) way of life; (7) crime and substance abuse; and (8) urban issues.

The present study was based on the contribution of previous studies [55–57], which provide 15 indicators with which QOL can be analyzed: health, cost of living, job opportunities, housing, family, friends, tourism, shopping, transportation, holidays, water, air, noise, peace, and quiet, as well as education. Understanding these factors affecting people's daily lives and their QOL is crucial for identifying the repercussions of environmental changes.

These changes should be considered so that the social sector, universities, government, and companies [16] can orient their actions to improve in each of the indicators mentioned in the preceding paragraph, and any alteration or change functions as a basis for the generation or updating of public policies that guide local development.

2.3. *Quality of Life, Tourism, and Sustainability*

The sustainability approach is central to this research, as the new face of tourism can function as a mechanism with the potential to positively impact the QOL of the inhabitants in local communities, if it is carried out by involving them in such a way

that sustainable tourism can occur. Therefore, public policies must guide the interaction between individuals and their environmental activities to sustainable tourism management to maximize socioeconomic, environmental, and cultural benefits. For such public policies to be implemented, it is important to carry out tourism impact studies related to QOL at the local level.

In addition, previous studies on resident–tourist interaction and economic, sociocultural, and environmental factors complete the idea that sustainability in tourism depends on how local inhabitants perceive these benefits and costs. The relevance of conducting tourism impact studies on QOL at the local level underscores the importance of sustainability in tourism for policy decision making.

Previous research related to local resident–tourist interactions has been conducted from various perspectives, such as the impact on residents' quality of life [48,58,59], residents' attitudes towards tourists or tourism development [60,61], tourists' image/loyalty to the destination [62,63], and perceptions of quality of life in tourism work [64], as well as the quality of interactions perceived by residents [65]. However, this field of research is limited and highly fragmented [58], and also scarcely put into practice in a qualitative way in the face of specific public policies in tourism and their repercussions from the point of view of local inhabitants in a post-COVID-19 scenario.

Whether tourism is perceived as sustainable or not will largely depend on how local inhabitants experience three categories of benefits and costs in the progress of tourism development, according to various authors [54,66–70], that allow evidencing multiple cases in which tourism management in a sustainable manner influenced by public or governmental policies impacts QOL. These categories are (a) economics, where additional investment, infrastructure, taxes, and inflation in products and services are contemplated; (b) sociocultural, such as improvement in cultural facilities and promotion of cultural change; and (c) environmental, such as congestion and pollution.

The perception of residents cannot be expected to be homogeneous, as, from the individual perspective, it may have both positive and negative impacts [71–73]. This may impact people's QOL more strongly in smaller locations and improve it if tourism activity attracts more perceived benefits to locals [54,74].

Some authors [48,59,75–78] emphasize the importance of developing studies that assess the impact of tourism on the QOL of local residents to contribute to the sustainable development of the tourist destination. This is necessary given the activity's capacity to impact the territories from various perspectives, such as those mentioned above, generating social, economic, environmental, cultural, and territorial changes [16].

Government entities do not always have the capacity or resources to carry out such studies, which are essential for decision making, implementation, and evaluation of public policies and to help tourism leaders and government agents identify concerns that should lead to better policies and actions that help residents [74,79–81]. Knowledge or research centers and educational institutions are some suitable agents to carry out these investigations.

2.4. Public Policies on Tourism and Quality of Life

It is essential to understand the MT program from its origins, that is, from public policy, which is a field of knowledge that must be understood from different perspectives as it can be understood as a concept, perspective, and instrument of action, coinciding with democratization processes in Latin American political systems in general, especially in Mexico [82,83].

The term public policy arises from the need of human settlements to establish a form of government for joint improvement, and it should be noted that this origin is the same that provides different forms or lines of action to be taken by the rulers; all this is under the rule of law, as indicated by Massam, who states the following: "The civic state is defined as a territorial unit with *de jure* boundaries in which the government operates by agreement, contract and agreement with the citizens who choose to be members of the state" [84].

In this sense, it should be considered that there is a specific relationship between the inhabitants that are within a given geographical area. Because of this, it is also possible to find the presence of government sector actors or agencies that play the role of regulatory agents of this environment, which must be integrated democratically by active participants in society, and this brings to light the need to have the government figure as a fulfiller of the demands and needs of the population. This can be achieved through the promulgation, implementation, and evaluation of various programs generated for the common benefit called policies.

It is worth mentioning that not all actions implemented by these government agencies are public policies as such, as there is a clear difference between specific actions and their impacts, where Espinoza indicates the following:

“Differentiating public policy from government policy prevents us from making the mistake of mixing concepts that are in vogue. This leads to misinterpretations that further confuse the actors involved. Therefore, public policies should be understood as those courses of action in response to social demands and needs, triggered from and by social participation, an obligatory subject for popular representatives, but also for the authorities at the different levels of government. . .” [85].

Other authors indicate that public policies are “government decisions that incorporate the opinion, participation, co-responsibility, and money of private citizens, as voters and taxpayers” [86]. From both contributions, public policies can be considered strategies put into practice by governmental figures that seek to influence the common benefit of the population under their jurisdiction.

The correct functioning of public policies and the achievement of their established goals requires the implementation of evaluation mechanisms or the generation of indicators for their follow-up, as a large part of government programs fail due to the lack of information generated on the actors and the modifications that policies undergo as they are implemented. This, together with the lack of interest or attention given to the wrong causal scheme, technical errors, or bureaucratic inefficiency, can lead to a lack of impact on the target population, or to results that do not meet the established expectations of social programs [87].

To achieve the stated objectives that give rise to public policies, it is necessary to identify the actors in them, mentioned by Delamaza and Flores [88] as the legislative and executive powers, social sector, business sector, and national and international technocracy, among others, that influence the various stages for the design and implementation of policies, and their analysis is completed with studies on the effects of such policies on society to modify a situation previously defined as problematic.

A significant barrier for public policies to effectively attack the problems for which they were raised is precisely to awaken the interest of the target population to participate in contributing to the proposed solutions, as mentioned by Treviño and Tolentino [89]. History indicates that in Mexico and in other parts of the world, serious political, social, and economic problems have been present, intensely experienced by various sectors of the population in the form of distrust in government institutions, poverty, inequality, impoverishment of public services, social and political exclusion, and violation of human, social, and civil rights, so that government initiatives must be adequately presented to the population in such a way as to gain their trust and participation for the resolution of current problems that afflict society.

2.5. *Magic Town Designation as a Public Policy*

The MT program is one of the most relevant Mexican governmental initiatives within the 2001–2006 presidential period, generated from the need to ensure the use of cultural heritage, which seeks this objective by linking the use of localities whose cultural attributes are identified as representative elements of the national identity distinguished by its pre-Hispanic and Spanish roots [90,91].

According to the SECTUR website [92], the magical towns distributed throughout the Mexican Republic are understood as follows:

“A Magical Town is a locality with symbolic attributes, legends, history, transcendent facts, daily life, and magic emanating from each of its socio-cultural manifestations, which means it is a great opportunity for tourism development. The Magical Towns Program of the Ministry of Tourism contributes to revaluing a group of towns in the country that have always been part of the nation’s collective imagination and that represent fresh and different alternatives for national and foreign visitors.”

The strategies to be developed with the MTP in the areas that have this distinction are set out in the National Development Plan 2013–2018, seeking a prosperous Mexico in which the tourism sector is strengthened to take advantage of its benefits, such as diversifying the tourism offer and effectively promoting tourism destinations and promoting sustainability [46]. There are 177 MTs in Mexico, distributed in all states, which have obtained this distinction between 2001 and 2023 [92–95]. The states with the most significant number of magical towns are the Estado de México, Puebla, and Jalisco, with 12 MT each, which shows a growing trend of development of this type of public policy in the country’s center.

In this way, it is possible to understand that the program referred to above is constituted in its planning as an element to revalue cultural heritage, which implies the emergence of relations between governmental and nongovernmental actors linked to tourism and heritage to obtain economic, social, environmental, and cultural benefits with the heritage [96].

It is important to point out that this type of program must be carefully planned and designed according to the target population; otherwise, it can generate various evils and raise doubts as to whether the tourism use is achieved to favor the preservation of cultural heritage or if this affects the identity that gives meaning to the inhabitants, since, under certain conditions or interests, the use of heritage as a tourist offer responds merely to an economic orientation of mercantilization and not the preservation of cultural heritage [97], which may even imply the creation of differentiated spaces, segregating some original inhabitants of the place [98].

2.6. Sustainable Tourism and Local Development

The fact that the MT addressed in the present research is important in terms of analysis requires alluding to a theoretical foundation that starts from the perspective of one of its expected results, such as local development, for which it is necessary to refer to some authors who state that it can be identified as follows:

“A process of economic growth and structural change leading to an improvement in the standard of living of the local population, in which three dimensions can be identified: an economic one, in which local entrepreneurs use their capacity to organize local productive resources with sufficient productivity levels to be competitive in the markets; a socio-cultural one, in which values and institutions serve as a basis for the development process; and, finally, a political-administrative dimension in which territorial policies make it possible to create a favorable local economic environment, protect it from external interference and promote local development” [99,100].

On the other hand, Palafox [101] in Espinoza et al. [102] refers to local development as a complex process where there is a concentration of different agents, sectors, and forces that interact within a territory to promote a common project, which in this case are the governmental entities that promote initiatives such as the MT program, to achieve joint benefits for tourism operators and local inhabitants, including cultural preservation, as mentioned above, as long as the economic variable of generating returns is not the priority motivation in the collaboration of this type of project.

In summary, the concepts of quality of life, public policy, local development, and sustainable tourism are fundamentally interrelated in this research, offering an integral

perspective that responds to the needs of San Sebastian del Oeste as a small tourist destination and MT. The quality of life (QOL) of residents, as a multifaceted indicator, reflects the effects of tourism in the economic, social, cultural, and environmental spheres, providing essential information to guide sustainable tourism management. In this sense, the role of public policies is crucial, as through their proper implementation, they can maximize socioeconomic benefits and minimize negative impacts for local inhabitants.

This research contributes to a deeper understanding of how these factors interact and how the active participation of residents and stakeholders in decision making can favor a tourism development model that improves the quality of life and preserves the authenticity and resources of San Sebastian del Oeste. Therefore, a distinctive and practical approach is presented to serve as a model for similar destinations striving for sustainable integration between tourism and community wellbeing.

3. Materials and Methods

3.1. Study Area: The Municipality of San Sebastián del Oeste

San Sebastián del Oeste, known this way since 1983, is located to the west of the state of Jalisco (coordinates $20^{\circ}39'45''$ to $21^{\circ}02'30''$ north latitude and $104^{\circ}35'00''$ to $104^{\circ}51'00''$ west longitude) at an altitude of 1480 m above sea level, with a territorial extension of 140,013 square kilometers. It is bordered to the north by the state of Nayarit; to the south, the municipality of Mascota; to the east, the municipalities of Guachinango and Mascota; and to the west, Puerto Vallarta [103,104], as seen in Figure 1.

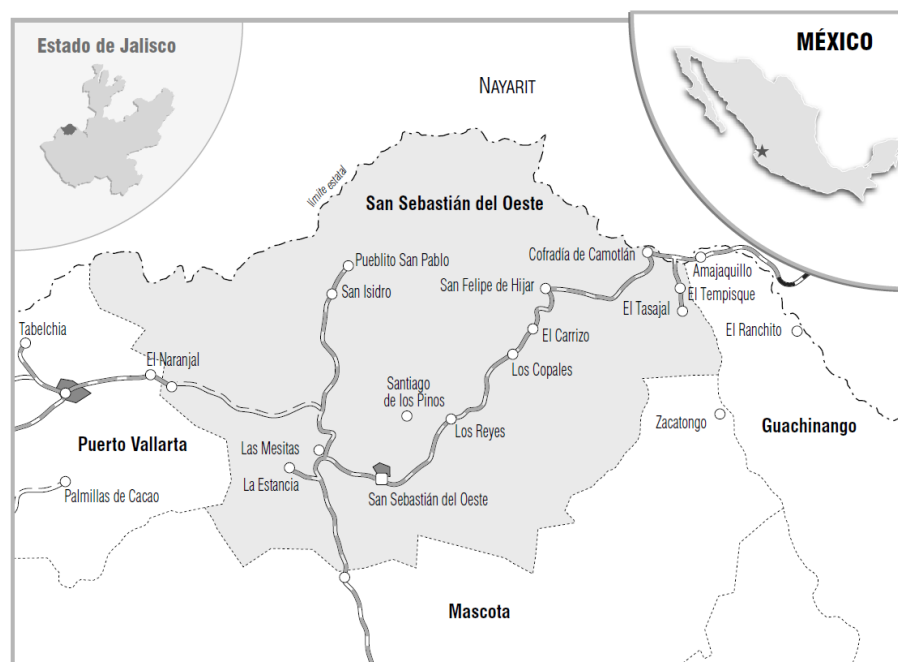


Figure 1. Map of San Sebastián del Oeste. Source: [104].

According to SECTUR [92], this municipality was incorporated into the MTP in 2011, thanks to the various attractions present in its territory, such as the road to la Escondida; the main square; Hacienda Esperanza de la Galera; Hacienda Jalisco, a 19th-century construction; Casa Museo Doña Conchita; San Sebastián Church; and Rancho Ecoturístico Potrero de Mulas. This Magic Town (MT) also has the following festivities. (1) Fiesta de San Sebastián: On January 20th, the inhabitants of San Sebastián celebrate their patron saint with charreadas and a traditional fair. (2) Fiesta de la Virgen de la Asunción: On August 15th, processions and religious rites are held to honor the Virgin. (3) Independence Festivities: The most important of the year, these are celebrated with a Mexican Night on September 15th and a parade on the 16th. (4) Christmas Festivities: The celebration of the

Christmas festivities are very colorful in San Sebastian because here, colorful pastorelas are held and nativity scenes are installed in the area of the portals.

Regarding its tourism economic indicators, it is possible to appreciate in Figure 2 that the municipality had a significant growth rate in terms of its GDP and state contribution in terms of tourism, increasing from 2018 to 2019, which allows us to identify the importance of tourism for this MT. It experiencing a slowdown in 2020 when the pandemic caused by COVID-19 occurred [105]. This MT achieved a significant recovery from the pandemic; due to its reduced size, it was able to implement more effective actions in the control of cases of COVID-19, allowing it to recover quickly by 2021 and even obtain significant growth by 2022, which is the year where it achieved a more substantial contribution in terms of the municipality's contribution to the state in this area, higher than prepandemic levels.

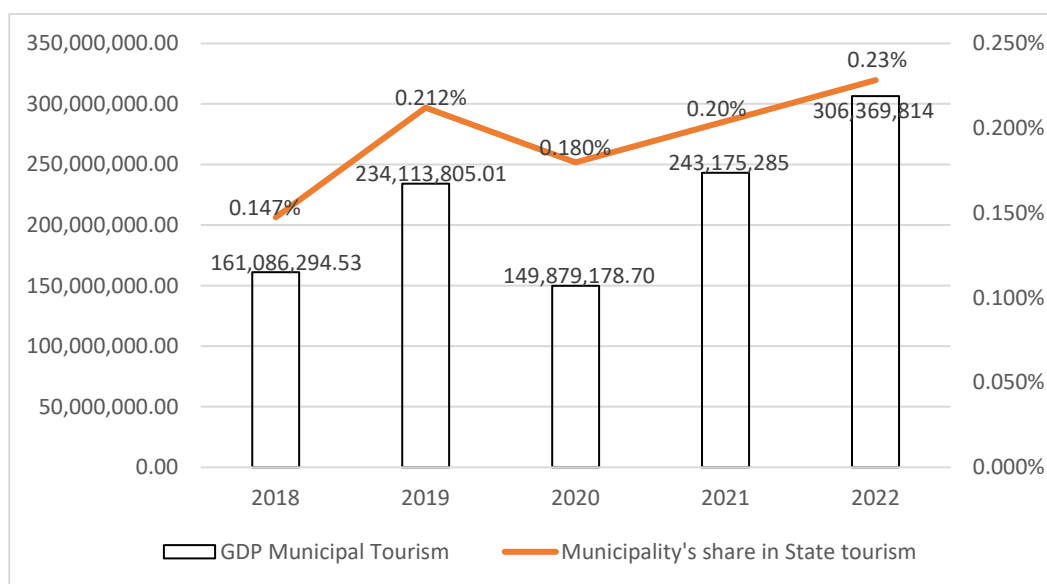


Figure 2. Indicators of tourism in San Sebastian del Oeste. Source: Authors based on [105].

It should be noted that the attractions of the municipality of San Sebastián del Oeste as an MT are not only based on its geographic attractions and infrastructure, since most of it has a significant cultural value and traditions around which the tourist activity is sustained and developed, which is why it is essential to preserve this cultural heritage to maintain its main strength in tourism. At the same time, tourism products should be designed based on this vital resource and, thus, respond to the reduction in poverty of local inhabitants.

3.2. Research Methodology and Data Acquisition

This research was conducted using a phenomenological approach with supplementary documentary analysis, suitable for capturing the lived experiences and perceptions of the inhabitants of San Sebastian del Oeste regarding the impact of the MTP on their quality of life (QOL) and conducting discussions between theory and the empirical field. This methodology allows us to identify qualities and perceptions without testing specific theories, capturing the narrative and contextual richness inherent in participants' experiences [106–108].

To obtain this deep understanding, semistructured interviews were conducted with 43 informants described in Appendix A, Table A1, selected through purposive sampling and the snowball method. Data were obtained until a saturation point was reached where no new information emerged from subsequent informants [109,110], starting from the MT hotel managers (purposeful sampling) and then turning to subsequent informants referred by the initial informants (snowball).

Sampling began with the selection of local hotel managers (purposive sampling), who then referred other local informants, allowing us to capture a diversity of narratives and

perspectives in line with qualitative methodologies from previous studies in tourism [64,65] through an instrument composed of 29 questions oriented to the QOL, poverty, and tourism development from the MT program in San Sebastian del Oeste. Face-to-face interviews were conducted with informants in hotels, main square, stores, and some principal streets of the MT, which lasted approximately 20 to 45 min. The application was based on the informant's prior authorization to record the information for subsequent transcription and translation into English.

Data collection covered the period from August 2022 to June 2023. Some relevant topics considered in the collection of information based on elements of QOL, tourism, public policies, and development were as follows:

- Age;
- Type of employment;
- Job opinion;
- Schooling;
- Opinion on current economic level;
- Opinion about housing;
- Access to basic electricity service;
- Access to basic water services;
- Local infrastructure;
- Health services;
- Transportation services;
- Position before the arrival of tourism;
- Government support.

The data collected in this study were analyzed using a thematic approach widely used in qualitative research to identify patterns and meanings within the participants' narratives. This process was developed in the following stages:

1. Transcription and familiarization: All interviews were fully transcribed and reviewed to ensure fidelity. Subsequently, the researcher familiarized himself with the data through repeated and reflective reading, identifying key points and initial observations.
2. Initial coding: An inductive approach was used to code the data, generating descriptive labels for text fragments that addressed relevant elements related to quality of life, tourism, and public policy. This stage allowed us to identify emerging concepts directly from participants' narratives rather than starting from predefined categories.
3. Grouping into themes: The coding was reviewed and grouped into broader themes, reflecting recurring patterns in participants' experiences and perceptions. Themes generated included the following:
 - Perceptions of the economic impact of tourism.
 - Changes in local infrastructure associated with the MT program.
 - Opinions on the role of government in improving quality of life.
 - Challenges and benefits of tourism on social cohesion.
4. Review and refinement of themes: Each theme was reviewed in detail to ensure that it was supported by sufficient evidence and accurately captured participants' perspectives. At this stage, redundancies were eliminated and connections between themes were more clearly defined.
5. Interpretation and connection to theory: The final themes were interpreted, considering the theoretical framework of the study, connecting the experiences narrated with concepts such as quality of life, local development, and sustainable tourism. This allowed the generation of a contextualized and in-depth analysis, which integrated the participants' perspectives with broader theoretical discussions.

In this research, the researcher's role was dual: on the one hand, as a facilitator of the data collection process and, on the other, as an analyst of the information collected,

interpreting the narratives and experiences of the participants within the framework of the phenomenological approach. This process is summarized in Figure 3.

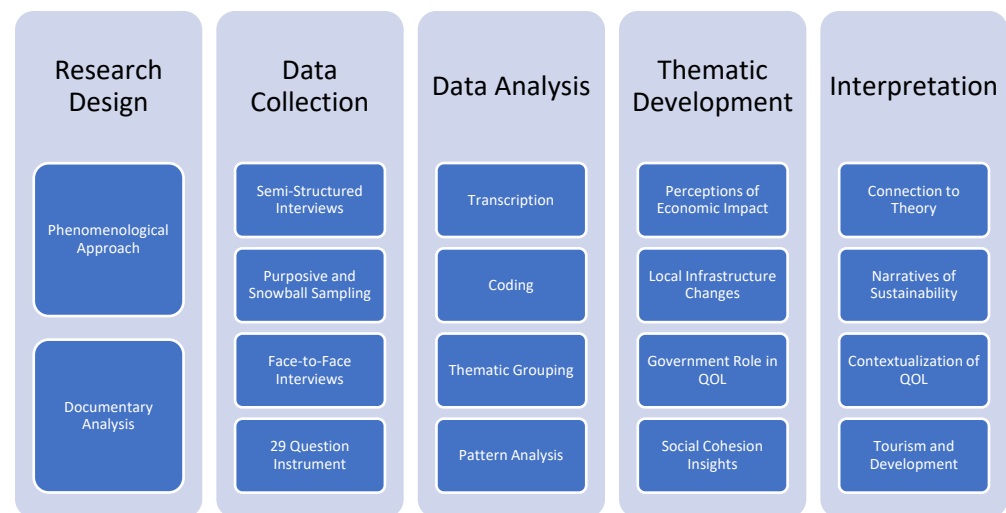


Figure 3. Diagram of the research process. Source: Authors.

By residing outside of San Sebastián del Oeste, the researcher adopted an external posture, which allowed him to approach the participants' experiences with a critical approach and being less influenced by the everydayness of the local context. However, the importance of building trust with the informants was recognized, establishing an atmosphere of open and respectful dialogue, which helped to minimize possible biases related to the interaction.

The researcher's interaction with the participants was primarily professional and respectful, seeking to avoid influencing the informants' responses. To ensure a faithful interpretation of the narratives, strategies such as data triangulation and constant reflection on the impact of the researcher's perspectives on the analysis were applied. This process ensured that the experiences and perceptions of the inhabitants were captured as faithfully as possible, focusing on their experiences and not on the researcher's assumptions.

4. Results and Discussion

Most of the population addressed in the region of San Sebastián del Oeste had an age ranging between 25 and 35 years, representing 30% of the interviewed population, followed by individuals aged between 36 and 45 years, with a total sample of 49% corresponding to women and 51% to men. Regarding the occupation of those interviewed, it stands out that business employees in the municipal capital accounted for 37%, followed by merchants, accounting for 28% and 23%, with a population that is dedicated to other activities, such as nurse, musician, tenants, town hall, and site, among others.

In that sense, touching on the subject of schooling, the degree of study of most of the people addressed is high school, with 42%, followed by a bachelor's degree with 26%, meaning that, in most cases, the interviewed population complies with basic education but is not prepared at a professional level, especially, to talk about the tourism industry. In addition, 67% consider their employment acceptable, and 26% good. In turn, 63% believe their socioeconomic level to be acceptable and 23% as good, even though the professional level of training does not predominate, since 46% of those interviewed consider their education deficient and 33% consider it acceptable. Still, the inhabitants are satisfied with their economic conditions.

In total, 81% of those interviewed consider the place where they live acceptable since, in terms of their services, all of them have water and electricity, 41 people have sewage, 31 have medical attention, and only 10 people perceive that the area where they live is safe. Based on the results obtained, it can be observed that the locality has the basic

requirements for living and that they are satisfied with their housing. Still, there are areas of opportunity for improving services to increase the quality of housing and educational training services [55,57].

The interviewed population considers tourism activity acceptable, with 58% and 30% considering it good. Most inhabitants are satisfied with tourism in the locality because it has provided them with more benefits than disadvantages. This is related to the fact that 58% of those interviewed believe there are enough tourist attractions, while 42% think there are not. Among the comments regarding this question, the main one is that there are enough tourist products, but that they were not well promoted, and, because of this, people did not stay more than one day.

In contrasting between positive and negative aspects of tourism [9–11], 40 people mentioned that services such as electricity and employment had improved, emphasizing that there was no light in the main square before. Now, there is an improvement in the infrastructure for the promotion of social relations [15], in addition to the fact that, thanks to tourism, more employment has been generated, and that is where the town earns money. On the other hand, 29 people indicated that health services have not improved since they only have one health center, and not all medicines are available. Similarly, 27 people say that transportation has not improved, as there are only cabs to leave town, and this is a product they cannot afford to pay for.

Additionally, 37 people agree that the infrastructure has improved. Regarding poverty and tourism, 70% affirm that there has been a reduction in poverty thanks to tourism because there are more sources of employment, which generates an economic benefit for them. On the other hand, 30% said that it has not decreased, indicating that tourism only benefits those who work in it and that not everyone makes a living from it.

In the next question, 74% think that tourism has benefited the town a lot, 14% consider that it has benefited the town only a little, and 12% consider that it has benefited the town too much, directly affecting the fact that 68% of the population addressed say that income has increased thanks to tourism. In comparison, 23% say that it has increased only a little. Regarding governmental participation, 53% of the people who participated in the questionnaire mentioned little support from the authorities, and 23% stated that support is deficient, which is directly related to the coverage of support and incentives from the official sector [16]. Regarding improvements in infrastructure and economy generated by the tourism activity strengthened by the denomination of the MT public policy, some inhabitants perceive the following:

“The main square, parks, and streets are better taken care of, and this has changed the town’s image. Now we have more tourists.”

“There are more jobs and businesses. Now locals work in restaurants and hotels and as guides; this has allowed growth that we didn’t have before.”

“Thanks to tourism, the town’s economy has improved quite a bit. Now there are more services, such as transportation and better food and lodging options.”

The above comments allow us to identify that the arrival of tourism has positively impacted the infrastructure and economy of San Sebastian del Oeste. Participants noted that, thanks to the resources brought in by tourism, the main square, parks, and streets have been improved, which has also attracted more visitors. Residents mention that there are more employment opportunities in hotels and restaurants, and that they are now able to develop small businesses in tourism. These improvements have given many residents economic stability that they did not have before, reducing the need to migrate to other towns in search of work. On the other hand, in the framework of sustainability and social aspects, tourism has had an impact on cultural identity and local traditions; as an example of this are the following comments:

“Tourists come and enjoy our culture, but sometimes they do not respect the traditions of the people.”

“I like that tourism has put San Sebastian on the map, but at the same time I feel that we are losing a bit of our customs.”

“Now that there is so much commerce and new people, some of our values and traditions seem to be diluted.”

While residents appreciate that tourism has increased recognition of the town and attracted more income, some express concern about the impact on San Sebastian’s cultural identity. Residents feel that, with the increase in commerce and influx of visitors, certain local traditions and values are being displaced or disrespected. This internal conflict between modernization and cultural preservation is an important issue in the perception of tourism impact. In addition, within the framework of environmental and social problems related to tourism, the residents identify some negative aspects, which they manifest with the following comments:

“Tourism has brought us garbage; it is sad to see how some people do not respect the town.”

“The tranquility we had has been lost a little. Now there is more noise, especially in the main streets.”

“Pollution has increased, and it feels like it’s no longer the same clean and quiet environment we had before.”

The growth of tourism has also generated environmental and social concerns among the inhabitants of San Sebastián del Oeste. One of the most frequently mentioned issues is the garbage left behind by visitors, which affects the cleanliness and natural environment of the town. In addition, many participants highlight the increase in noise and loss of tranquility, a fundamental part of the local way of life. Visual and noise pollution and the disorder in some public spaces are challenges that residents associate directly with the influx of tourists. As discussed above, an important part of QOL is related to the availability of public services and government support, so some comments related to these issues were collected:

“Even though tourism has improved the economy, we still lack good health services.”

“Government support is little, and resources are not enough to cover all our needs.”

“The lack of infrastructure in health and transportation continues to be a problem; we need the government to get more involved.”

Although residents appreciate the economic benefits that tourism has brought, they feel that public services, especially in health, remain deficient. Most interviewees highlighted the lack of adequate government support, which limits San Sebastian del Oeste’s ability to take full advantage of the tourism boost. Underinvestment in infrastructure and basic services, such as transportation and health, hinders sustainable community development and tourism. Based on what has been studied, it is possible to synthesize the information collected in Figure 4.

Public policies play a fundamental role in local development by establishing guidelines to solve social and economic problems [85–87]. In the context of San Sebastian del Oeste, the MT program has been designed as a strategy to preserve cultural heritage and promote sustainable tourism, contributing to the QOL of its inhabitants.

These policies promote economic development by generating jobs, improving infrastructure, and diversifying local economic activities. However, the success of these strategies depends on factors such as citizen participation, transparency in their implementation [88,89], and adequate evaluation of their impact on the QOL of residents [75–78].



Figure 4. Synthesis of research results in San Sebastian del Oeste. Source: Authors.

The COVID-19 pandemic significantly impacted tourism in San Sebastian del Oeste, as in many other tourist destinations, reducing visitor arrivals and affecting the income of local families and businesses that depend on this activity. This decline highlights the vulnerability of rural communities that focus their economic development on tourism while also highlighting the need to diversify income sources and promote sustainable strategies that strengthen resilience in the face of global crises.

Despite these difficulties, the pandemic also generated opportunities to rethink public policies towards tourism, underscoring the importance of designing more inclusive and sustainable public policies that guarantee economic recovery and lasting improvements in the inhabitants' QOL.

5. Conclusions, Implications, and Future Lines of Research

5.1. Conclusions

This study provides a modern perspective on the interrelationship between tourism and QOL in specific rural contexts such as San Sebastian del Oeste. Unlike previous studies that focus primarily on the economic benefits of tourism, this research adopted a phenomenological approach that emphasizes the subjective perceptions and experiences of residents. The results highlight that while residents perceive economic and social improvements from tourism activity, they also point to persistent challenges such as lack of quality education and limited government support, which hinder comprehensive development.

As can be seen in the results, the inhabitants interviewed in the town of San Sebastián del Oeste feel satisfied with the tourism activity they are currently involved in since it generates employment, allowing the town to achieve local development and better satisfy their basic needs. According to local comments, before the arrival of tourists, the municipality did not have the necessary elements to achieve a better QOL, which forced its inhabitants to migrate in search of better conditions, which can now be perceived in the region.

On the other hand, in the results found on the topic of QOL, the population considers that education is deficient and that there is a lack of support from the government, which hinders local development. Despite this situation, the inhabitants see their standard of living as good.

It is worth mentioning that public policies, in this case the MTP, as well as the implementation of tourism, are not perfect actions that solve all the existing problems where tourism activity is promoted, and whose negative impacts are present when the needs of local inhabitants are not considered, as well as pertinent planning considering the specific context of each population.

Additionally, discussing the epistemology of tourism is crucial for identifying the impacts generated by this activity since it is a highly changing phenomenon, and understanding its origins makes it more possible for a precise review to study the new trends and generate more theory on the subject. From a theoretical perspective, this research contributes to QOL theory by highlighting the need for a multidimensional approach that considers economic, social, and cultural aspects.

The findings suggest that the impact of tourism on QOL should be studied not only from the point of view of economic benefits but also from the subjective experience of residents. This phenomenological approach provides a framework for future research on the interrelationship between tourism and QOL in similar contexts.

5.2. Implications

From a practical point of view, important lessons for tourism managers are derived. The active participation of residents in tourism policy development is critical to ensure that the benefits of tourism are equitably distributed. In addition, it is crucial to prioritize infrastructure improvements, especially in health services and transportation, to enhance resident satisfaction and the tourist experience.

It is also necessary to develop promotional strategies that encourage longer stays in the locality, which could increase the community's income. A review of the evolution of the MTP and the continued incorporation of new municipalities offers a valuable contribution to knowledge that can guide future research and public policies, adapting to the specific needs of each municipality.

5.3. Future Lines of Research

Based on the study conducted, there are multiple lines of future research, such as longitudinal research that analyzes changes in the QOL of local inhabitants as tourism consolidates to contrast the benefits and disadvantages caused by this activity to appreciate its intensification or equilibrium over time. This would also allow for comparative studies with other MTs based on specific values such as infrastructure, community size, or government support.

Other future research lies in the analysis of future tourism development policies and the best distribution of the benefits of tourism to local inhabitants. In addition, studies on the impact of tourism on cultural preservation and tangible and intangible heritage can also be considered, evaluating whether tourism helps conserve or, on the contrary, alters the cultural identity of the community. Finally, the evaluation of sustainable tourism is identified as pending future research by including the possibility of studying sustainable tourism strategies that integrate residents in decision-making processes and the planning of tourism activities, ensuring that future tourism policies are aligned with community needs.

Some limitations of the study are related to the availability of informants; given that an essential proportion of the local inhabitants do not work in tourism but in rural activities, it was not possible to approach them in the TM, so it was not possible to reach a more significant number of informants from San Sebastián del Oeste.

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Informed Consent Statement: Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study.

Data Availability Statement: Data are contained within the article.

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Appendix A

Table A1. List of informants. Source: Authors.

#	Sex	Main Occupation	Studies Degree
1	Male	Hotel manager	Bachelor
2	Female	Hotel manager	Bachelor
3	Male	Merchant	Bachelor
4	Male	Merchant	-
5	Female	Employee	Bachelor
6	Female	Public servant	Bachelor
7	Female	Merchant	High school
8	Male	Employee	Secondary school
9	Male	Employee	High school
10	Female	Merchant	High school
11	Male	Employee	High school
12	Female	Nurse	Bachelor
13	Male	Student	Bachelor
14	Male	Musician	High school
15	Male	Public servant	High school
16	Male	Public servant	Bachelor
17	Male	Employee	-
18	Male	Employee	High school
19	Female	Housewife	High school
20	Male	Employee	High school
21	Female	Accountant	Bachelor
22	Male	Doctor	Bachelor
23	Male	Mason	High school
24	Male	Merchant	High school
25	Female	Employee	High school
26	Female	Employee	High school
27	Female	Merchant	High school
28	Male	Employee	High school
29	Female	Merchant	High school
30	Male	Teacher	Bachelor
31	Male	Employee	High school
32	Female	Employee	High school
33	Female	Merchant	Secondary school
34	Female	Merchant	Secondary school

Table A1. Cont.

#	Sex	Main Occupation	Studies Degree
35	Male	Employee	Secondary school
36	Female	Merchant	Secondary school
37	Female	Merchant	-
38	Female	Employee	Secondary school
39	Female	Employee	Secondary school
40	Female	Housewife	Secondary school
41	Female	Housewife	-
42	Male	Merchant	-
43	Male	Employee	-

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