



Hosts and guests' social representations of nudism: A mutual gaze approach



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ABSTRACT

Based on the mutual gaze concept and social representations theory, this study explored locals and nudists' perceptions of social nudity and each other. Interviews with locals and nudists at a beach destination in Mexico revealed that both groups' representations of naturism's ideals, practices and benefits differ considerably. While nudists conceive nudism as a way of life, locals see it as a practice that outside the nudist space is morally unacceptable. Locals' acceptance of nudists is largely conditioned by their economic significance, and residents have been active subjects in decisions about nudists' use of local spaces. Nudists have positive perceptions of locals but are dissatisfied with spatial sanctions of nudism. Practical implications are presented.

Introduction

Tourism perceptions have become one of the most studied areas in tourism research (Sharpley, 2014). The economic, social and environmental significance of tourism for destinations has attracted academics' attention since the 1970s, at least in the English-speaking world. These tourism impact studies have been largely host-centred, so the impacts of tourism on destinations have been studied primarily from local residents' perspectives. Although a consensus on definitive conclusions has not yet been reached (Ribeiro, do Valle, & Silva, 2013), various studies have revealed that tourism brings both benefits and costs for local residents and that these perceived impacts strongly shape hosts' attitudes towards guests (Aguiló & Roselló, 2005; Akis, Peristianis, & Warner, 1996; Brunt & Courtney, 1999; Getz, 1994; Murphy, 1981; Ross, 1992; Var, Kendall, & Tarakcioglu, 1985; Weaver & Lawton, 2001).

The existing literature supports the idea that locals' economic and sociodemographic characteristics, as well as their interactions with tourists, are likely to influence their attitudes towards tourists and tourism in general. Researchers have confirmed, for example, that locals who are economically dependent on tourism have more positive attitudes towards the industry (Haralambopoulos & Pizam, 1996). In addition, more highly educated locals are less favourable towards tourism's impacts (Andriotis & Vaughan, 2003), but residents frequently in contact with tourists tend to perceive tourism and tourists more positively (Akis et al., 1996).

The knowledge gained thus far about tourism's impacts has significantly influenced the current understanding of how tourism development induces changes in local communities and how the industry's benefits can be optimised and its costs minimised. However, because existing studies on tourism perceptions have predominantly focused on hosts' perspectives, what is currently known about tourism impacts can be regarded as a unilateral assessment. Despite the importance of incorporating other stakeholders' voices into tourism impact analysis (Sroyetch, 2016), tourists' voices, in particular, have been largely excluded from tourism impact and host-guest interaction studies. Given that various stakeholders' support is necessary to manage tourism sustainably, their perceptions and attitudes can lead to conflicts when tourism development is attempted in particular areas (Sánchez Cañizares, Castillo

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Canalejo, & Núñez Tabales, 2016). Therefore, to gain a more integrated, comprehensive view of the significance that tourism has for various social groups, both residents and visitors' voices need to be considered.

To achieve this purpose, perceptions of tourism can be approached through the concept of 'mutual gaze' (Maoz, 2006). This concept recognises the existence and importance of the well-established 'tourist gaze' concept (Urry, 2002) for social interactions, but the mutual gaze also acknowledges that hosts are not merely passive subjects that are acted upon by tourists. The mutual gaze concept emphasises the power that locals have through their interactions with visitors, which can be called the 'local gaze'.

Tourism's sociocultural interactions place both locals and tourists in reciprocal relationships. While locals act according to tourists' views and behaviours, tourists act according to locals' perceptions, attitudes and behaviours. According to Maoz (2006), gaze does not refer necessarily to ocular perceptions but to complex mental processes. The mutual gaze refers to 'the ways guests and hosts view, grasp, conceptualise, understand, imagine and construct each other' (p. 222). Thus, the mutual gaze concept is a useful way to obtain a more complex, double-sided picture of the significance that tourism has for both tourists and visitors. More importantly, the mutual gaze is quite useful for understanding host-guest interpersonal and intercultural relationships.

While not necessarily applying the mutual gaze concept, various studies have explored tourism perceptions from both locals and tourists' perspectives. However, the findings are far from conclusive. Studies such as Dowling (1993) research in Western Australia indicate that a close level of agreement exists between both residents and tourists' views as both view tourism as environmentally harmful. Similarly, Sánchez Cañizares et al. (2016) found virtually no differences among residents, tourists and business owners' perceptions of tourism development since the three groups tend to have a positive view of tourism.

In contrast, after comparing residents and tourists' preferences for public beach access and related amenities, Oh, Draper, and Dixon (2010) concluded that balancing both groups' beach access needs is a major challenge because residents and tourists have different views about resource access and requirements. In another study, Sroyetch (2016) found different perceptions of the sociocultural impacts of backpacker tourism for locals and visitors. While locals tend to agree that tourists have both positive and negative impacts, backpackers generally tend to be neutral about their own sociocultural impacts on the communities visited.

Residents and tourists' perceptions have also been examined in research on the significance that particular resources have for each group. Zhang and Ryan (2018) investigated tourists and residents' perceptions of a Chinese film site and found that, while the site is an attraction for tourists, it is a recreational asset for residents. Therefore, both groups may have different interests in and concerns about the same resource. Residents are more concerned about recreational services and facilities, but tourists attach more importance to the site as this relates to the quality of their travel experiences.

The argument can be made that studies incorporating both residents and visitors' perceptions suggest that locals are generally more concerned about the environmental and sociocultural impacts of tourism than guests are. However, researchers need to bear in mind that tourism's social and cultural impacts depend largely on the magnitude of cultural differences between hosts and guests (Reisinger, 1994) and that gaze varies by social group and time (Urry, 2002). Further studies need to be undertaken in sociocultural contexts not yet incorporated in the literature to gain a broader understanding of host-guest relationships and tourism's impacts. Only by examining tourism-related changes and host-guest interactions in contexts so far excluded from academic research can a more comprehensive understanding of tourism's social dimensions be gained.

The present study thus sought to explore residents and tourists' perceptions of a particular social phenomenon – nudism – in a developing country. By applying the concept of mutual gaze, this research explored hosts and guests' social representations of nudism and each other as different yet interacting and mutually dependent social groups.

Social representations

Social representations are considered both a theory for explaining various aspects of social life and a phenomenon that can be studied in its own right. These representations can be defined as the concepts, statements and explanations originating in the inter-individual communications of everyday life (Moscovici, 1981). Social representations theory is concerned mainly with understanding everyday knowledge, including how individuals create this to understand their world and, more importantly, how this knowledge guides their actions and decisions. Social representations are thus viewed as significant properties of social groups. These groups are based on the existence of a shared set of beliefs among their members, and beliefs can substantially define individuals' social identity (Pearce, Moscardo, & Ross, 1996).

Social representations theory seeks to show how attitudes and beliefs are formed and derived from social interactions (Potter & Litton, 1985). It recognises plurality and diversity in society in terms of how reality is constructed and postulates that social representations are developed and changed through conversations and participation in everyday social activities. Social representations are, therefore, not static since they can be altered and influenced by knowledge systems such as religion and science, as well as by individuals' interactions with other groups, causing these representations to differ considerably across and within cultures (Pearce, 2005). This theory assumes an emic, contextual and process-oriented perspective to understanding social actors' reality. Social representations help to define reality and function as critical components of group and individual identity, thereby guiding both actions and thoughts (Pearce et al., 1996).

According to the social psychologist, Moscovici (1988), three types of social representations exist, each of which depend largely on the relationships among group members. The first type is hegemonic representations, which are those maintained and shared by all members of highly structured groups without these representations having been produced by these groups. The representations tend to be uniform and coercive.

The second type is emancipated representations, which are concepts and ideas belonging to subgroups that interact more or less closely. Each subgroup creates its own version of representations and may share this with other subgroups. These representations

have a certain degree of autonomy with respect to the interacting segments of society.

The last type is polemical representations, which are generated in the course of social conflicts and controversies, and the societies in question as a whole do not share these representations. They are determined by the antagonistic relationships between members of society and intended to be mutually exclusive. Because tourism implies interactions among different cultural groups – each with its own beliefs and culturally defined representations – all three types of representations are likely to develop through and be shaped by host-guest interactions.

Pearce et al. (1996) state that, in the context of tourism, a social representations framework focuses on systems of benefits, values, attributes and explanations that individuals and groups create in association with tourism. Thus, this theory has been mainly used to understand how local individuals view and react to tourism development. According to Fredline (2006), locals make representations of tourism based on social interactions and other sources such as the media, and these representations underpin residents' perceptions of tourism's impacts.

Studies such as those by Fredline and Faulkner (2000), Andriotis and Vaughan (2003), Monterrubio and Andriotis (2014) and Shakeela and Weaver (2018) have confirmed that a consensus exists in residents' perceptions of social representations in local communities. This finding demonstrates the theory's usefulness when researchers seek to understand diverse collective beliefs and attitudes towards tourism and tourists. Pearce et al. (1996) suggest that '[w]hat communities think tourism is, what they expect it will bring and how they respond to tourism are all aspects of the social representation of tourism' (p. 31).

However, social representations theory has also proved to be useful for understanding tourists' representations. In research on tourists, the theory has not been adopted to understand tourists' ideas of locals. Instead, it has been used to explore issues such as tourists' representational framework of managed realignment (Schliephack & Dickinson, 2017) and to categorise their online visual representations of landscapes (Pearce, Wu, & Chen, 2015).

Thus, social representations theory has demonstrated not only its value for understanding locals' perceptions of tourism and tourists (i.e. local gaze) but also remains a largely unexplored option for explaining tourists' beliefs, attitudes and behaviours towards locals (i.e. tourist gaze). Within a host-guest interaction framework, this theory has the potential to go beyond unilateral approaches and gain a more integrated understanding of how both locals and tourists view each other (i.e. mutual gaze) and interpret shared tourism phenomena.

Nudism

Nudity is a normal, natural condition that has prevailed throughout most of humankind's existence (Goodson, 1991). As an organised social practice, public nudity has been and still is widely practised worldwide, and its popularity is increasing around the globe (Egger & Egger, 2015). Certainly the acceptance and popularity of nudism have not been homogenous in different parts of the world. While in countries like Germany, France, Croatia and Spain, nudism has been widely accepted, in other countries such as India, Morocco, or Thailand, social nudity is illegal or at least confidential (Jaurand, 2006). In the case of Mexico, nudism has been growing in popularity, particularly in the last two decades; associations such as Vidanud (www.vidanud.com.mx) and the Nudist Federation of Mexico (www.federacionnudistademexico.org) have sought to openly promote the practice of nudism as a way of life in the country. Social nudity is often referred to be based on two concepts: nudism and naturism. Nudism, particularly for the general public, can simply refer to not wearing clothes, and thus it lacks the fundamental ideals of naturism. Naturism was conceived as a social movement with its own philosophy (Bell & Hollyday, 2000). It is regarded as a leisure activity but, most importantly, naturists see it as a lifestyle. Naturism practices are founded on the idea that nature is always medically beneficial to people (Barthe-Deloizy, 2003).

Although in theory these concepts are different, in practice, they are interchangeable. As the International Naturist Federation (2016) claims:

You may call it naturism ... or perhaps you've heard it called nudism. No matter which term you use, nude recreation is a great way to unwind and get back to basics. Without clothes, people tend to rely on their personalities to make a statement and accept others for who they are, rather than what they might be wearing. (n/p)

In the present study, no distinction was made between these concepts.

Naturism's philosophy considers clothing a metaphorical vehicle for division of humans into categories since humans have used clothing to define our species and differentiate themselves from other individuals. From a naturism perspective, clothing has divided humans into types or gradations, such as 'civilised' or 'savage', 'sane' or 'insane' and 'normal' or 'deviant', among other categories (Barcan, 2004). For naturists, social nudity has medical, social, psychological and political benefits not only for practitioners but for all societies as nudity can weaken gender, class and racial divisions (Barcan, 2015). Empirical studies in the field of psychology have revealed that naturism's benefits also include improvements in body image, self-esteem and overall life satisfaction (West, 2017).

Social nudity has often been associated with sexual activity. However, the emphasis put by the naturism movement on being nonsexual is an important component in its discourse (Bell & Hollyday, 2000). The International Naturist Federation (2016) is an organisation consisting of member federations in over 40 countries and seeking to enhance and improve naturist experiences and promote the benefits of naturism to the general public. The cited source states, '[n]aturism is a way of life in harmony with nature characterised by the practice of communal nudity with the intention of encouraging self-respect, respect for others and for the environment' (n/p).

Social nudity takes place in different settings, and various naked activities are promoted. These include, among others, cooking, cycling, hiking, picnicking, volleyball, nude bathing, yoga, sailing, camping and body painting (Mac, 2015). Nude bathing on beaches

has been and remains particularly common among nudists. In countries such as England, for instance, nudity was the norm for bathers on many beaches before the nineteenth century as the body's exposure to sea and sun was regarded as therapeutic rather than pornographic (Bell & Hollyday, 2000). Nude bathing on beaches remains popular among naturists and non-naturists in some countries. As a matter of fact, it is on the beaches that nudism has become more widespread, and it is as a beach tourist segment that nudism has been partially integrated by societies (Jaurand, 2006). This is not only because the combination of sea, sun, sand, wind and the human body is attractive and medically beneficial but also because beaches offer opportunities for relaxation, liminality and socialisation with other nudists (Douglas, Rasmussen, & Flanagan, 1977).

The etymology of the words 'naked' and 'nude', as well as the naturism philosophy, has nothing to do with sex, but, in reality, nudism can be connected with sex and eroticism. In the popular imagination, the link is practically self-evident and automatic (Barcan, 2004). The presence of sexual activity in nudist settings has been repeatedly reported by sociological studies. Beaches with a nude component and outdoor sex scenes and sites have been central to both heterosexual and, more particularly, homosexual populations (Andriotis, 2010; Bell & Hollyday, 2000; Barcan, 2001; Douglas et al., 1977; Jaurand, 2005; Schoemaker, 2006).

Most non-naturists, who in nudist-speak are known as 'textiles', have an erroneous understanding of naturists and naturism (Egger & Egger, 2015). Nudism may be labelled as offensive and inferior behaviour (Andriotis, 2016; Goodson, 1991). In particular, the church has historically played an important role in confronting nudism; the nude has been considered as a matter of shame and guilt (Clarke, 1982). According to Barcan (2001), public nudity has the potential to be considered not only demeaning, deviant, perverted, criminal or transgressive but also exhilarating. Therefore, public attitudes towards nudism generally range from embarrassment, suspicion and condemnation to hostility, so naturists shroud themselves in secrecy and silence for their own protection (Egger & Egger, 2015). Public perceptions and attitudes towards nudism have changed over time, and they are shaped by the specific cultures in which these develop (Goodson, 1991). Existing research has confirmed the idea that it is difficult to obtain a general consensus about public nudity (Monterrubio & Jaurand, 2009).

Therefore, further studies are needed on the perceptions of social nudity in contexts not yet studied and its associations with other social phenomena such as tourism. Andriotis (2016) specifically acknowledges a need to explore nudism as an alternative form of tourism, but nudism as a leisure and tourism practice has been practically ignored in tourism research (Monterrubio & Jaurand, 2009). Given that the nature of a gaze depends on the object of the gaze (Moufakkir, 2011), analysing both locals and tourists' perceptions of a controversial practice such as nudism can foster a broader understanding of its social meaning and importance for tourism management in destinations popular among nudists.

Study description

Study area

This study was carried out in Zipolite, a beach destination located in southeast Mexico. Tourism is the main economic activity of the destination, which by 2010 had slightly just over 1059 inhabitants (SEDESOL, 2013). With its 1.5 km long beach, Zipolite is one of the few clothing-optional beaches in Mexico and reportedly quite popular with both international – mainly European – and domestic nudists (see Fig. 1). This destination is also characterised by small scale tourism development and tourists in search of opportunities to meditate (Sectur, 2016), as well as backpackers and hippie-style visitors (Brenner & Fricke, 2007). Nudism, the hippie lifestyle and the use of soft drugs have been part of Zipolite since the 1970 (Brenner & Fricke, 2007). Due to the lack of



Fig. 1. West side of Zipolite clothing-optional beach.

accurate information provided by local accommodation companies, the exact number of visitors to the destination is unknown (García, 2017). However, it is estimated that the Ventanilla-Puerto Angel area, where the destination is located, received a total of 239,527 visitors in 2017 (88% domestic tourists), with an average stay of 1.7 days and an average expenditure of 725 Mexican pesos (38 USD) (Sectur, 2018).

Zipolite hosted the VI Latin American Nudist Encounter in 2016 and, in 2017 and 2018, the Nudist Festival. This festival is a three-day event that seeks to promote internationally nudism and Zipolite as the primary nude beach in Mexico. The festival also seeks to foster greater acceptance of the human body and a rejection of the idea that nudism is perverse. The festival's activities include traditional folk dances, theatre plays, volleyball, football, yoga, talks, photographic exhibitions, body painting and live music. The event has attracted a considerable number of visitors – many of them nudists – which has been reflected in accommodation establishments' full occupancy levels (Laguna, 2018). In the 2018 edition of the festival, a total of 3500 tourists were estimated, of which approximately 30% were nudists (J. M. Castañeda, personal communication, November 6, 2018). Notably, only nudists participate in nudism activities, and locals do not join these either during the festival or at other times.

Methods

This study sought to explore Zipolite residents and tourists' perceptions of nudism and the social representations that each group has of nudism and each other. To achieve this objective, a qualitative approach was adopted. According to Ritchie (2003), qualitative methods provide opportunities for studying what lies behind attitudes, beliefs and perceptions associated with specific contexts. A total of 25 locals (14 females and 11 males) and 24 nudists (11 females and 13 males) were interviewed in late January and early February 2017 in Zipolite. The fieldwork coincided with this destination's 2017 Nudist Festival from 3 to 5 February.

Both locals and nudists were selected through convenience and snowball sampling. The sample included locals with a job directly associated with tourism and individuals with no direct relationship to tourism overall and nude tourism specifically. In the case of the nudists, several were contacted through the Federación Nudista de México (Mexican Nudist Federation). The study's details were given to all participants, who were then asked to give their consent to be interviewed and audio recorded. For locals, all interviews were in Spanish and, for nudists, in Spanish or English – depending on the participants' native language. Direct observation during the festival was used as a complementary technique as this is particularly useful when investigating social interactions, in which an understanding of non-verbal communication is likely to be important (Ritchie, 2003).

Bearing in mind that a gaze study needs to uncover not only the *hows* but also the *whys* of attitudes and perceptions (Moufakkir, 2011), the interview guide for locals sought to identify residents' perceptions of nudism and nude tourists, these locals' own notion of nudism and their opinions and attitudes towards nude tourists, as well as nude tourism's benefits and costs. For nudists, the instrument included questions to uncover nudists' perspectives on social nudity, their reasons for being a nudist and for attending the festival and their opinions of locals.

The interviews with both groups were conducted in various places, including the beach, homes, hotels and restaurants. Different sociodemographic backgrounds were incorporated in the sample to obtain as many perceptions and experiences as possible. The 49 interviews were transcribed verbatim and analysed individually as explanatory accounts. Following Ritchie, Spencer, and O'Connor (2003) suggested procedure, each interview was analysed independently, and, depending on the type of informant (i.e. resident or nudist), data with similar content or properties were grouped into higher-order categories. Some categories were obtained from the literature, especially from the existing research on attitudes towards, and benefits of, nudism and tourism in general. From an emic perspective, new categories were also allowed to emerge from the interviews themselves.

The overwhelming majority of the locals interviewed were over 30 years old and either native to the community, from surrounding areas or from other parts of Mexico. Most were Catholic, and they had resided over 30 years in the destination. Since educational level can influence tourism perceptions (Andriotis & Vaughan, 2003), an important feature of the sample was that, while almost half of participating locals had only finished elementary school, the majority of participating nudists had at least a university degree. An additional point of contrast was that, while most locals had three or more children, almost half of nudists did not have any offspring. Most residents worked for the tourism industry. Most nudists interviewed (20) defined themselves as nudists and reported that they are often involved in nudist activities. Although two interviewees had been nudists for less than a year, the rest had practised nudism for various years or decades – even, in the case of one informant, his entire life. The youngest nudist participant was in her 20s, while the oldest was in his 70s. The nudists interviewed came mainly from cities such as Mexico City and Guadalajara and also from Canada and the United States. Unlike the locals, the nudists had professions such as lawyer, teacher, translator, photographer, fashion designer and psychologist (see Table 1).

Findings

Perceptions of nudism

Both locals and nudists reported similar perceptions of nudism, but their understanding of the reasons behind the practice of nudism and the significance that it has for each group differs considerably. In general, locals regard nudism as something 'normal' and 'natural'. Humans come into this world without clothes, and that is why, for residents, nudism is normal. Many local interviewees stated that nudism not only consists of taking one's clothes off but also 'a lifestyle', 'an expression of freedom', 'a way to get rid of taboos', 'a way to show who you really are' and 'the way God sent us to earth'.

The notions that locals have about nudism are closely associated with their encounters with nudists. In particular, locals who

Table 1
Informants' characteristics.

| Locals | n = 25 | Nudists | n = 24 |
|--------------------------|--------|---------------------------|--------|
| <i>Gender</i> | | | |
| female | 14 | female | 11 |
| male | 11 | male | 13 |
| <i>Age</i> | | | |
| 18–30 | 3 | 18–30 | 3 |
| 31–45 | 7 | 31–45 | 11 |
| 46–60 | 9 | 46–60 | 7 |
| over 60 | 6 | over 60 | 3 |
| <i>Place of origin</i> | | | |
| Zipolite | 10 | Mexico City | 11 |
| other parts of Mexico | 12 | other parts of Mexico | 10 |
| abroad | 3 | abroad | 3 |
| <i>Educational level</i> | | | |
| postgraduate | 0 | postgraduate | 4 |
| university | 4 | university | 17 |
| high school | 6 | high school | 3 |
| middle school | 3 | middle school | 0 |
| elementary school | 12 | elementary school | 0 |
| <i>Marital status</i> | | | |
| married | 15 | married | 8 |
| single | 10 | single | 16 |
| <i>Children</i> | | | |
| none | 6 | none | 11 |
| 1–2 | 7 | 1–2 | 9 |
| 3 or more | 12 | 3 or more | 4 |
| <i>Occupation</i> | | | |
| tourism industry | 14 | professional | 17 |
| housewife | 5 | teacher | 4 |
| fisher | 2 | retired | 2 |
| other | 4 | housewife | 1 |
| <i>Residence length</i> | | | |
| 0–10 | 6 | <i>Time in nudism</i> | |
| 11–30 | 5 | 0–10 | 17 |
| over 30 | 14 | 11–30 | 5 |
| | | over 30 | 2 |
| <i>Religion</i> | | | |
| Catholic | 15 | <i>Sexual orientation</i> | |
| Christian | 2 | heterosexual | 16 |
| none | 8 | bisexual | 2 |
| | | homosexual | 1 |
| | | other | 5 |

In subsequent sections, informants' names have been changed to maintain anonymity.

work in tourism have learnt about the nudism philosophy from nudists themselves and not necessarily from the residents' own lifestyle or from their own view of the naked body. Nudism, according to locals, is 'the tourists' thing', and it is not practised by residents. Pedro, who is native to the community, said:

We've talked to many nudists, and most of them claim that, in nudism, there is the closest possible contact with nature. Nudists accept themselves and their bodies the way they are. Nudism is not about showing off. It's about feeling good about yourself.

Thus, some locals are knowledgeable about nudism but not necessarily convinced about its philosophy and benefits. As a local homemaker said, 'they [the nudists] say it's their lifestyle, but getting naked does not make any sense to me.'

The nudists evidently have a wider notion and different understanding of nudism and its benefits. This was demonstrated by their detailed explanations of and rationales for nudism. For nudists, nudism is a lifestyle, and thus it is part of their everyday life. Most of the interviewees participate in nudism activities not only during their holidays but quite often during their daily life (e.g. meetings, events, parties, yoga and cooking). One nudist stated, 'to me, nudism is a lifestyle, it is the freest and most beautiful lifestyle because we are in contact with nature. To me, nudism is total freedom' (Natalia, 42, 10 years as a nudist).

In addition, nudism is considered a life philosophy – a way to feel free and get rid of social constraints, labels and prejudices. Several nudists said they perceive nudism as a way to avoid social, gender and economic differentiation among individuals. Some believe that, at a personal level, nudism allows individuals to have a healthy perception of the human body and to live in freedom, as well as to feel confident about themselves and, therefore, to interact better with others. The nudist interviewees claimed that, socially, nudism has helped them accept other people, break stereotypes and change their negative image of the nude body. For many, nudism is clearly an important part of their personal identity. A nudist explained, 'in nudism, I have found a collective sense of



Fig. 2. Locals' gaze is constructed upon encounters with nudists.

belonging with other people who share a common interest with me. It enriches my life to know that nudism unites us' (Humberto, 43, 25 years as a nudist).

Locals' perceptions of nudists

Locals have been exposed to nudist visitors since the earliest tourism activities appeared in Zipolite (Pérez, 1978). The presence of nudists and their behaviours has, therefore, become something to which locals are accustomed. Locals construct their present gaze upon previous encounters with tourists (Maoz, 2006), and the present analysis's results suggest that locals' continuous and frequent contacts with nudists has shaped residents' perceptions in positive ways.

Locals' interactions with nudists basically serve commercial purposes (see Fig. 2). Given that locals will tend to support tourism development if they perceive the industry as providing benefits (Zhang, Inbakaran, & Jackson, 2006), Zipolite locals unsurprisingly have positive attitudes towards nudists, in part due to these tourists' economic importance. A restaurant owner said, 'in Zipolite, we all make a living from tourism. ... Over half of tourists come to practise nudism.' However, while locals have apparently reached a consensus in their perception of nudism as something 'normal' and its economic significance for the community, local attitudes towards nudists are far from homogenous. Perceptions and attitudes within the community can also be somewhat antagonistic.

Locals thus have both positive and negative perceptions of nudists. On the one hand, some feel nudists are people who like to be in contact with nature and have no prejudices. Nudists accept themselves the way they are, and they are open-minded and respectful to local people. For these locals, nudists are welcome to the destination, and their lifestyle needs to be respected by locals. On the other hand, some locals disagree with nudism and feel uncomfortable among nudists. These residents claim that one's body should be kept private, and they would feel uncomfortable being nude in front of others or seeing others' naked bodies. Some stay away from the beach in order to avoid meeting naked people.

These locals regard nudists' behaviour as morally incorrect and thus undesirable for the destination. Teresa, a 48-year-old Catholic who has lived all her life in the community, stated:

They [the tourists] don't care. They don't have principles. A person who goes bathing nude doesn't have principles. They don't have morals. ... The world is upside down, and giving them this type of freedom [social nudity] makes it worse.

She later added, 'we want to get other types of tourists. We want people to see Zipolite as a family beach, not as a private beach for nudism.' Thus, these interviewees also blame nudists for driving away other type of tourists, in particular families with children. Viviana, a 43-year-old homemaker said, 'I don't like naked people, but I have no choice. I depend on tourism.' Although nudism is accepted – or at least tolerated – an interesting finding is that it is tolerated as long as this behaviour belongs to tourists and not to locals. The majority of locals strongly asserted that, because of their principles and morals, they would never for any reason go nude in public.

Locals' perceptions of – and agreement or disagreement with – nudism and nudists are heterogeneous. However, on other issues such as restrictions on nudism's spatial spread, the results show a strong community consensus. Public nudity is permitted only on the beach, and, in turn, nudists are aware of, though they do not agree with, this regulation. Locals do not allow visitors to go nude outside the beach, so visitors must be clothed in community spaces where locals' daily lives are conducted, such as the main street, stores, schools and most restaurants and hotels. This places the residents in a position of power; according to Kayat (2002), in the context of the impacts of tourism and local attitudes, power refers to the ability of locals to control the resources needed for tourism and guarantee a benefit in return for the presence of tourists in their locality. In this case study, the power that locals have over the beach allows them to control not only the use of space but also nudists' conduct.

For locals, the main reason for restricting nudism to the beach is to protect local children and their moral values. Saúl, a 24-year-

old waiter, said:

While nudism is the main attraction for visitors, nudists aren't allowed off the beach. ... I don't like it when nudists come to the main street. There are children [there]. ... Yesterday, for example, a visitor came nude to the main street, and a local told him that there were children here in the street and he needed to put on clothes. That's why there are exclusive zones for nudism.

Nudism is, therefore, tolerated in assigned spaces in the destination. However, even on the beach, some nudists' behaviours are unacceptable to the community. Although they are a small segment, some nudists have been labelled exhibitionists and associated with sex in public spaces. Viviana argued that 'it's okay if they come and behave properly, but it's bad when they come to indulge in sexual morbidity and exhibitionism or to have sex on the beach'. Jacinto, a 63-year-old business owner, said, 'this is a nudist beach, and that's okay, but it shouldn't be used to have sex. At night, you can find people having sex, and, in the mornings, particularly at the ends of the beach, you can find condoms.' Margarita, a 72-year-old business owner, summarised this idea succinctly: 'this is a nude beach, not an exhibitionist or a sex beach.'

Nudists' perceptions of locals

Although most nudists visited the destination during the nudist festival, attending the festival was not their main reason for travelling to Zipolite. For most, the main reason was to practice nudism and, most importantly, to meet other nudists and spend time with them sharing the nudism philosophy. Most had visited the destination previously and reported that, besides Zipolite's nudist component, the beach and the area's rustic style, beauty, cleanliness and uncrowded character, as well as the food and weather, are all extremely important attractions of the destination.

For most nudist interviewees, commercial transactions are the main reason for interacting with locals. Nudists regard locals as kind, friendly, attentive and respectful people. José, a 41-year-old male, reported, 'the locals have always been very kind and respectful. I've never felt harassed. They have their own way of thinking and that needs to be respected, too.' Rebecca, a nudist for eight years, said, 'they're very kind people. ... They look at my eyes. They don't look at my body, and that's very important to me. I don't feel harassed here.'

Although nudists have a positive perception of locals as hosts, these visitors feel dissatisfied with the limited spatial sanction of nudism in the destination. Observations and interviews with both locals and nudists revealed that nudity is permitted only on the beach and residents strongly disapprove of nudism in other parts of their town, including the majority of hotels and restaurants. This is something with which the nudists disagree as they would like to practise nudism in other parts of the destination and they believe that, by 'opening their minds', the community would attract more tourists and thus more income.

Many nudist informants expressed this opinion. Jessica, who had visited the destination twice, said:

I think in this regard local people are still very traditional and conservative, and they don't understand what nudism is really about. ... It doesn't make sense to allow you to be naked on the beach but not in the town. I don't like having to put on my clothes every time I need food or to buy something outside of the beach.

In the same vein, an informant involved in nudism all his life compared the destination with other nude destinations:

Zipolite is not like a nudist town in France where you can do everything naked. Here there are several hotels that don't allow you to be naked on their premises, so local people should open their minds a bit more.

Francisco, who had been a nudist for seven years and visited the destination three times, also said, 'it would be great if nudism was permitted everywhere in the town. It would be the first entirely nudist town in the Americas, and I think that would attract more tourists to the destination.'

The lack of locals' openness is seen as partly related to some residents' religious and moral conservatism. Many institutions, particularly the Catholic Church, have raised considerable objections to nudist activity (Ross, 2005). The practice of Catholicism is a common feature among many Mexicans; it is not only part of their identity but also defines the construction of, and relations with, other racial and social groups (Vila, 1996). Mario, who had visited the destination at least once a year for over 30 years, asserted, 'in the community, there are some religious groups that don't agree with nudism. They don't understand that nudism doesn't only affect but, on the contrary, benefits their economy.' While this perception is shared by several nudists, other perceptions of the spatial restrictions on nudism exist within the nudist group. Although quite few in number, some nudists think that local social and cultural conditions should be considered in the spatial practice of nudism, so nudism needs to be restricted to certain parts of the destination. For example, Arturo, who had performed nudism for over 10 years, said:

I may sound pedantic, [but] I think there must be rules. Locals need to set limits on tourists. They [the residents] need to state clearly when nudism is allowed and when it is not. There are places that are considered private by locals in their everyday life, and those places need to be taken care of by locals. Places for local intimacy must be decided by locals, not by tourists.

Discussion and conclusion

This study explored hosts and guests' social representations of nudism and each other. From the perspective of social representations theory, the results have significant implications. Both positive and negative representations of social nudity can coexist among local community members. Nudists, in turn, clearly share well-established representations of their practices.

According to the theoretical framework applied, a shared set of beliefs is extremely important for social groups' conformation and identity (Pearce et al., 1996). Thus, the conviction that naturism is a life philosophy that can contribute to a better society is quite significant for nudists as a social group. Given that hegemonic representations are necessarily shared by all group members (Moscovici, 1988), the argument can also be made that Zipolite locals have created hegemonic representations of nudists – but only in their role as tourists. Nudists are accepted and welcomed by most residents mainly because of the economic benefits these visitors bring to the community. Acceptance may prevail despite locals' negative perceptions of nudism at a highly individualised level. The idea that public nudity must take place only on the beach and not in other parts of the community can also be regarded as a hegemonic perception of community members.

Social representations theory recognises that reality is constructed in multiple and diverse ways (Pearce et al., 1996). With regard to nudism, emancipated representations take place among and within both social groups. Emancipated ideas belong to interacting subgroups and tend to be shared by these groups. While both locals and nudists may conceive of nudism as a lifestyle or life philosophy, each group's understanding of the reasons for practising nudism differs considerably.

Locals have learnt that nudism in terms of nudists' discourse is a way to be in closer contact with nature, so, on this basis, residents can develop an acceptance of this practice. This finding reinforces the idea that interactions between groups can alter perceptions of stigmatised subjects (e.g. nudists) and the stigma itself (e.g. social nudity) (Corrigan & Kosyluk, 2013). However, nudism's philosophical ideals, meanings and benefits are not really understood or shared by locals. While nudists believe that, through nudism, social differentiation can be reduced, many residents perceive nudism as going against local and family values, thus perceiving it as morally incorrect.

The ideas of the spatial demarcation of public nudity in the destination can be understood as a polemical representation for locals and nudists. Residents are convinced that nudism must take place only on the beach, but nudists believe that, by 'opening their minds' and allowing nudism beyond the beach, the community could receive more economic benefits. Although these ideas appear antagonistic, the interviews with both locals and nudists failed to find evidence that this issue is seen as an actual social conflict, though its potential for generating conflict should not be underestimated.

This research also produced further insights by applying the concept of mutual gaze. Of particular relevance is how this concept emphasises the power that local communities have to determine their interactions with tourists (Maoz, 2006). The present study revealed that community members are actively protecting their own economic and sociocultural interests (e.g. family values), and locals are capable of making decisions about their physical or social environment and influence tourists' behaviours for the community's sake. This provides empirical evidence for Moufakkir's (2011) assertion that '(w)hen two close cultures come into contact, each does not accept everything indiscriminately from the other, and the tolerance of misbehaviour can be limited' (p. 84).

Naturism's ideals and understanding of nudism are clearly not truly shared by locals and nudists. Nonetheless, their interactions have contributed to a mutual cultural understanding. Tourism is about cultural interactions; it brings into contact individuals with contrasting cultural and moral values that may assign different significance to behaviours (Reisinger, 1994). Locals do not see social nudity as nudists do, and they would not be involved in public nudity themselves, but they respect or at least tolerate nudism in their locality. Nudists, in turn, do not understand why locals are not more 'open-minded', but these visitors still respect and adhere to community restrictions on their behaviours. In this context, the argument can be made that intercultural interactions contribute to reducing social prejudices, promoting a better understanding of cultural differences and generating positive social change (Wall & Mathieson, 2006).

However, the reduction of negative attitudes and misconceptions of tourists may be due to other factors. Moufakkir (2011) observes that various factors interact to shape locals' gaze, including the type of tourist and the nature, duration and intensity of residents' contact with visitors. In nudist tourism contexts, locals perceive overt sexual behaviours and other expressions such as voyeurism and exhibitionism as nudism-based behaviours, which residents dislike and reject. These nudist behaviours not only reinforce locals' stereotypical association of nudism with sexual activity but also create a predisposition to have negative perceptions of nudists. In this way, unfavourable relationships and even conflicts may arise. Moufakkir's (2011) and Monterrubio's (2018) results similarly showed that negative stereotypes of tourists can be accentuated by interactions and perceptions and that these may affect host-guest interactions negatively.

The practical implications of the present findings need to be clarified. Clearly, both locals and nudists are benefiting from tourism activities in Zipolite. For locals, nudism represents an extremely important source of income, and, for nudists, the destination is one of the few options for performing their lifestyle in a sea, sand and sun holiday context. However, locals perceive not only the economic benefits of tourism as important but also their social and cultural values (e.g. family, children and their own conception of the naked body) as perhaps equally imperative.

In the locals' gaze, the spaces connected to their daily life are socially significant to them, so this must be respected in terms of how these spaces can be used. Effective communication between community representatives and, for example, the Nudist Festival's organisers needs to take place to raise nudists' awareness of the significance that local values and spaces has for the community and the locals' desired family-destination image. At this point the relations between locals and nudists are not tense, and therefore do not require immediate intervention by key actors such as local authorities. In general, and from the perspective of both locals and nudists, relations are respectful and mutually beneficial. More socially harmonious relationships are likely to be achieved if both locals and nudists are convinced of the important role their attitudes and behaviours play in host-guest relationships. Furthermore, the promotion of the destination as a nudist destination depends largely on the tourism development plans designed by the local and state government; however, this promotion must be harmonious with the values and customs of the local population.

Due to this study's qualitative methods, the findings cannot be considered fully representative of either the local population or nudist community. The convenience sampling technique adopted and the fieldwork undertaken before and during the nudism festival

could also be deemed limitations. Further research would benefit from collecting data at different times of the year from larger samples of both groups, using quantitative methods and thereby enriching the present findings and conclusions.

Declarations of interest

None.

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