

Article

From Iceland to the Canary Islands: Understanding the Appeal of Mass Tourism in the Age of Over-Tourism

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Abstract: The Canary Islands have long been a major European destination for mass tourism, often associated with ‘sun-and-beach’ vacations. Critiques of mass tourism have intensified in recent years, as reflected in the 2024 protests in the Canary Islands, which linked mass tourism to economic inequalities and concerns about sustainability. Through the case example of Icelandic tourism to the Canary Islands, this research asks two questions: (a) why mass tourism destinations are appealing, and (b) how these reasons can be more fully understood within a broader geopolitical and structural context. The research methods include a survey conducted in Iceland in 2022 and an analysis of media coverage in Iceland related to the Canary Islands from 2017 to 2022. Survey data indicate that the islands are primarily perceived as an easily accessible, well-established holiday destination. Simultaneously, an analysis of media discussions reveals a limited discourse on the islands in Icelandic media, mainly focusing on tourism. The results illustrate how specific destinations become desirable by prioritizing infrastructure associated with mass tourism, where tourism’s impact on host communities, economies, and environments tends to be invisible.

Keywords: mobilities; mass tourism; overtourism; touristification; geopolitical inequalities; Canary Islands; Iceland

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1. Introduction

The Canary Islands have long been a prominent destination for ‘sun-and-beach’ tourism in Europe, strongly associated with mass tourism (Scherrer et al., 2009). The concept of mass tourism has faced extensive criticism from scholars for its vagueness and for assuming too much homogeneity in travelers’ experiences (Vainikka, 2013). Other scholars have emphasized the need to address inequalities in the tourism economy and the limitations of tourism studies in addressing these issues (R. Bianchi, 2018). Debates about mass tourism have intensified, particularly following large-scale protests in the Canary Islands during the spring of 2024, where protesters blamed mass tourism for many of the islands’ problems (see, for example, [Thousands Rally in Spain’s Canary Islands, 2024](#)). This growing discontent aligns with the increased usage of concepts such as ‘overtourism’ and ‘touristification’ during the 2010s, which aim to highlight not just the volume of tourism but also the multiple inequalities associated with it (Milano et al., 2024). In the Canary Islands, many residents face precarious living conditions, with the intense tourism also resulting in significant environmental costs (Armas-Díaz et al., 2020, p. 255). Despite these various challenges, the Canary Islands have long emphasized diversity in their tourism offerings, an approach deemed necessary by marketing research for destinations to sustain their appeal to potential travelers (Scherrer et al., 2009; Alonso, 2009).

Part of the scholarly and critical discussion on mass tourism has focused on the assumption that uniformity characterizes tourists' experiences (Vainikka, 2015; Vainikka, 2013). Scholars have stressed the need to account for the complexities of interlinked activities within tourism spaces (Larsen & Urry, 2011). These critics argue that mass tourism is often depicted as too standardized, and tourists are portrayed as uniform, undifferentiated consumers, thus advocating for a move from such perspectives (Vainikka, 2015). Mobility literature, in particular, has advocated for a more complex understanding of space as created through habitation and mobilities of different actors, residents, and tourists, as well as the flow of products and ideas (Sheller & Urry, 2006). This perspective highlights that these objects and people are not static or acted upon by outside actors, challenging narratives that portray external factors as acting on passive subjects. Vainikka (2015) importantly called for an understanding of how different actors understand the concept of mass tourism. More recently, scholars have shifted their attention from the experiences or viewpoints of various actors to stressing relations between them and the effects of the tourism economy on space, the natural environment, and people's lives. The post-COVID era has further intensified critical questions about tourism, raising questions about who benefits, who defines it, and who sets the agenda (Higgins-Desbiolles, 2020), drawing attention to the need to examine structural issues, such as environmental impact and effects on local people (for example, Armas-Díaz et al., 2020). In this light, the crisis that tourism is facing can be linked to other challenges facing the 21st century, where crisis has been a key organizing concept (Loftsdóttir et al., 2018). The concept of polycrisis captures the interconnectedness of multiple crises that interact at different scales and levels (Matlovič & Matlovičová, 2024).

This article focuses on the continued appeal of mass tourism destinations, using travels from Iceland, a Northern European country, to the Canary Islands as a case study. What are the primary aspects that motivate people from Iceland to visit the islands, and what characteristics do those who travel there share? Furthermore, what insights can the aspirations of these visitors provide about mass tourism, contributing to a better understanding of why mass tourism prevails? The research question can thus be posed as twofold: (a) What are the primary reasons why people in Iceland choose the Canary Islands as their destination? (b) How can these reasons be better understood in a broad geopolitical and structural context that the critical perspectives on touristification call for? These questions are examined using quantitative analysis, as explained in the Methodology section.

Several critical perspectives inform our approach. The first is the re-evaluation of the concept of mass tourism through recent scholarship on touristification and over-tourism, which sheds light on the limitations and application of the term. Milano and Koens (2022) note that calls for degrowth are often dismissed as radical forms of anti-tourism, a simplification that depoliticizes tourism as both a social and economic issue (p. 227). Skinner (2021) suggests that the problem should be about "sufficiency" rather than "growth" (p. 186), emphasizing the need for good governance in the marketing of places (p. 185). Milano et al. (2024) propose an analytical distinction: mass tourism as a phenomenon, touristification as a process—thus involving a temporal aspect—and over-tourism as a regime, a structural issue rooted in a specific historical era (p. 7). Their framing of overtourism as a regime highlights its entanglement with space, nature, and policies, thus not only positioning it as centering on the tourists' experiences, as often characterized in academic discourse on mass tourism. This approach underscores overtourism as a systemic issue that reflects broader historical, spatial, and ecological conditions. The focus of the second research question, on geopolitical and structural context, draws attention to issues such as how particular mobilities are facilitated and made desirable and how tourism is also linked to relations of power on different scales that affect local people and their lives.

Interwoven with this discussion—i.e., our second critical inspiration—is the recognition of contemporary tourism’s fluid and dynamic nature, where the boundaries between various forms of mobilities have become increasingly blurred (Domínguez-Mujica et al., 2011; O’Reilly, 2003). Scholars have long emphasized the complexity of the distinction between guests and hosts, as well as the tourist category, which intersects with criticism of the mass tourism concept. As Obrador Pons (2003) argued, tourists are not only passive occupants of particular spaces but must be seen as actively ‘involved with the place’ (p. 51), meaning they have diverse encounters and engagements with it and others occupying the same space. Similarly, Larsen and Urry (2011, p. 1122) conceptualize tourists as navigating a multidimensional space where their subjectivity is shaped by—and in turn shapes—others around them. These perspectives align with a broader emphasis on the complexities of mobilities in the 21st century. Bauman’s (2013) metaphor of liquidity is particularly apt to capture how the phenomenon constantly changes its form, refusing to remain in a fixed shape. This metaphor has been particularly relevant for travelers from northern Europe to tourism areas in Southern Europe, where it has proven difficult to distinguish between lifestyle migrants and tourists. In addition, the boundaries between residents and tourists can be blurred, as those who travel as tourists can also work fully or part-time at their destinations (O’Reilly, 2003; Parreño-Castellano & Domínguez-Mujica, 2017).

Lastly, overlapping with the first point, we stress that tourism studies have often neglected the political economy of tourism (R. Bianchi, 2018; Milano & Koens, 2022). This neglect includes examining the power relations and exploitations on various levels, including a large-scale transformation of natural environments and the social conditions that extensive tourism mobilities create at destinations. Despite nuanced critiques of a simplistic understanding of mass tourism, it remains essential to acknowledge that tourism is a global industry upon which many national economies rely—a dependency that became even more apparent during the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020–2021 (World Travel and Tourism Council [WTTC], 2022). Recent perspectives emphasizing overtourism and touristification shift the focus from individual tourists to structural aspects of tourism’s impact on residents’ natural environment, spaces, and lives in places of intense tourism activity. As Milano et al. (2024) argue, overtourism highlights how tourism “exerts control over urban landscape, economies, and social dynamics,” often becoming the dominant source of income in particular areas (p. 6). Tourism has led to the extensive displacement of long-term residents from certain areas or parts of cities, as well as massive environmental destruction. Even when tourism is booming in a particular national or regional context, it does not necessarily create revenues for the general population living in the areas it affects (R. V. Bianchi, 2004). Tourism extractive logic is often overlooked, whereby those with capital exploit the labor, environment, and cultural resources of others for leisure or profit (Azcárate, 2020). While we agree with Vainikka’s (2014) caution against assuming that the concept of mass tourism is self-explanatory (p. 321), we also emphasize the need to move beyond a subjective understanding of the concept. Instead, combining these critiques within a political economy perspective that foregrounds historical interconnectedness and contemporary power relations is critical. As R. Bianchi (2018) emphasizes, understanding tourism necessitates an examination of the interplay between state interests and market forces within a globalized and neoliberal context, where multiple actors have competing interests.

To ground our discussion, we first briefly contextualize tourism in the Canary Islands and then provide a historical overview of tourism from Iceland to the Canary Islands. This overview lays the groundwork for examining how Icelandic travelers perceive the Canary Islands as a destination, drawing on survey data and an analysis of Icelandic media coverage.

2. Methodology

The article examines the research questions through a quantitative survey conducted in Iceland in 2022. We also conducted a preliminary media coverage analysis of the Canary Islands in Iceland, examining the extent to which the Canary Islands have been featured in Iceland and the degree to which the discussion has focused on Icelanders in the Canary Islands versus local news or events. In addition to these data sets, quantitative data collected by national institutions in Iceland and the Canary Islands provide insights into the extent of travel from Iceland to the Canary Islands. For two reasons, Iceland is a particularly intriguing case for exploring perceptions of the Canary Islands: The country, due to its small population, facilitates sampling, and the immense increase in the popularity of the Canary Islands over the last thirteen years, especially in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The survey on Icelandic travelers to the Canary Islands was conducted in March 2022 by the Social Science Research Institute of the University of Iceland for the project CERM (Creating Europe through Racialized Mobilities). The survey is part of a panel within the institute consisting of 1970 people. The panel, launched in 2010, has members recruited from the National Register. When necessary, the sample is rebalanced; therefore, it provides a good representation of Icelandic residents.¹ Approximately 42% (N = 831) of the participants responded to the survey. This response rate is comparable to the average rates reported for online surveys, with the data set providing reliable estimates (Wu et al., 2022). The questionnaire covered topics related to respondents' visits to the Canary Islands and their frequency, travel motivation, and demographic characteristics.

The survey compared the differences in gender distribution (unfortunately, the Social Science Research Institute only collected data on men and women at that time), age, place of residence, and education among the survey respondents and the general Icelandic population. This comparison is presented in Table 1. The data were weighted according to these four criteria. These weights were applied during the data analysis, which was conducted using IBM SPSS Statistics Version 29.0.2.0 (20).

Pearson's chi-square tests of independence were used to analyze the relationship between the demographic characteristics of the respondents and having visited the Canary Islands. Pairwise differences in proportions were measured using Z-tests with Bonferroni correction. The same statistical tests were used to investigate the relationship between respondents' characteristics and the frequency of their visits to the Canary Islands, as well as characteristics of those respondents who have not been to the islands and their willingness to visit them.

The part of the questions analyzed here focused on why people selected the Canary Islands as their destination. The respondents were asked to reflect on Spain and the Canary Islands; however, the results for the Canary Islands were derived by including only those who had visited only the Canary Islands. A hierarchical cluster analysis was conducted to investigate whether distinct groups of respondents existed based on their reasons for choosing Spain or the Canary Islands over other destinations. Such groups were not revealed; therefore, descriptive statistics were used to investigate the reasons for selecting the Canary Islands and other destinations in Spain.

Regarding the media analysis, the primary goal was to gauge the extent of information published about the Canary Islands in Icelandic media and to determine the degree to which it focused on the Canary Islands or Iceland. Thus, we limited the analysis to media published in Icelandic, which does not cover all the information people have access to. Although Icelandic is the national language, people consume media in various languages and mediums. The Icelandic language media are still strong in Iceland, and although print media is being consumed less and less, most have widely read online versions of their

newspapers. For example, on average, almost 200,000 people access visir.is and mbl.is daily in a population of 360,000 people (Jóhannsdóttir et al., 2021, p. 281).

Table 1. Respondent characteristics and their comparison with the general Icelandic population. (Table prepared by the Social Science Research Institute of the University of Iceland).

Respondent Characteristics	Number of Respondents	Proportion of Respondents	Number in the Population	Proportion in the Population
Gender				
Female	412	49.6%	140,450	48.7%
Male	419	50.4%	147,748	51.3%
Age ***				
18–25 years	31	3.7%	41,764	14.5%
26–35 years	73	8.8%	59,484	20.6%
36–45 years	153	18.4%	50,926	17.7%
46–55 years	157	18.9%	45,222	15.7%
56–65 years	189	22.7%	41,928	14.5%
66–75 years	142	17.1%	29,920	10.4%
76 years or older	86	10.3%	19,019	6.6%
Place of residence *				
Capital area	513	61.7%	187,793	65.1%
Countryside	318	38.3%	100,470	34.9%
Education level ***				
Primary school	108	13.6%	79,263	27.5%
High school	299	37.5%	105,751	36.7%
University	390	48.9%	103,249	35.8%

Note: Significant differences between the proportions of respondents and the general Icelandic population are indicated by the following *p*-values: * *p* < 0.05 and *** *p* < 0.001.

The data analyzed were collected with the assistance of a free language processing software called Greynir (Þorsteinsson, 2024). Greynir’s database includes all major Icelandic online newspapers. While the primary purpose of Greynir is to identify language structure, it can also be used to identify articles where specific words appear and to conduct simple frequency analyses of particular words in major Icelandic online media.

The words “Gran Canaria” and “Tenerife” were searched for in the range of 2017–2022, as reliable data were unavailable for previous years. The name Canary Islands was also searched, resulting in fewer articles and an apparent overlap with those already discovered. The search reveals that one or both words (Tenerife and Gran Canaria) appeared in 1345 articles, which were subsequently categorized by theme. For the analysis presented here, the central focus was categorizing the material into two categories: material that did not discuss Iceland and Icelandic issues and material that did.

3. Analysis of Travels from Iceland to the Canary Islands

In 2019, the year preceding the COVID-19 pandemic, the Canary Islands welcomed over 15 million visitors, with more than 4 million traveling to Gran Canaria and 5.7 million to Tenerife (Turismo de Islas Canarias, n.d.). An estimate suggests that 30% of the island’s GDP comes from tourism (Hernández-Martín et al., 2016, p. 771). The challenges faced during the COVID-19 pandemic from 2020 to 2022, mainly due to travel restrictions, underscored the islands’ heavy reliance on tourism (Hernández Sánchez & Oskam, 2022). Nevertheless, a post-pandemic recovery saw record-breaking tourism numbers in 2023 (González et al., 2024). The Canary Islands were first built up as an affordable destination in the 1960s, starting with Tenerife and Gran Canaria, followed by Lanzarote and Fuerteventura. During this period of expansion, the increase in tourist arrivals was directly linked to

the improvement of the islands' prosperity (Armas-Díaz et al., 2020, p. 255). The Canary Islands are generally viewed as leaders in mass tourism due to the emphasis on low airfares and 'sun and beach' marketing strategies (Herrera et al., 2007). Coastal resorts, in particular, are often seen as emblematic of mass tourism (Vainikka, 2013, p. 279). The islands also have a more extended history as a destination for affluent northern Europeans seeking the health benefits of the islands' warm climate. This favorable environment and year-round 'sun and beach' tourism have set the Canary Islands apart from other Southern European destinations (Hernández Sánchez & Oskam, 2022). These historical and environmental advantages have solidified the Canary Islands' position as a premier destination for mass tourism while highlighting their economic dependence on the industry.

Scholars have noted that the concept of 'destinations' in tourist studies can be ill-defined, as it encompasses a range of scales simultaneously used to refer to countries, cities, or specific areas. Gran Canaria and Tenerife exemplify this complexity, particularly in their southern regions, which attract the highest numbers of tourists due to their warmer climates and facilities specifically designed for tourists. For instance, in Tenerife, 66.5% of the island's tourism accommodations, measured by bed capacity, are concentrated within 1% of the island's surface area in the south (Hernández-Martín et al., 2016, p. 774). Within the tourism areas, a clear segregation emerges, both spatially and economically. Different places, or micro-destinations, exhibit significant variations in tourist spending (Hernández-Martín et al., 2016, p. 784). The labor market in these regions is also highly segregated by nationality. In Gran Canaria's Maspalomas, one of the island's most intensive tourism areas, Moroccans often work in leather goods stores, Indians tend to be involved in electronics, and staff from Germany or the United Kingdom are frequently found at reception desks. This segregation extends beyond employment to residential patterns, where individuals from the Global North are more likely to live in the southern part of the island (Domínguez-Mujica et al., 2011).

Concerns with environmental degradation and the rapid expansion of tourism in the late twentieth century prompted increased regulations within the tourism sector, leading to some limitations on constructing new areas. However, these regulations often allowed exceptions for projects deemed to be of high-quality construction or considered of exceptional quality (Santana-Jiménez & Hernández, 2011; Inchausti-Sintes & Voltes-Dorta, 2020). Growth, as an end in itself, was not problematized (Armas-Díaz et al., 2020, p. 256). Concerns about the environmental impact of tourism have continued, with demonstrations held against the building of hotel areas (Armas-Díaz et al., 2020, p. 256) and calls for increased recognition of the heritage value of beaches that have been altered significantly by the tourism industry (Peña-Alonso et al., 2018). Efforts have also focused on improving the management of tourist mobility to alleviate pressure on beaches (González et al., 2024) and to promote the Canary Islands as having more to offer than sun and beaches, as reflected by the promotion of wine tourism (Scherrer et al., 2009; Alonso, 2009). A survey conducted in Gran Canaria in 2012 on residents' views toward different aspects of tourism revealed that people were quite ambivalent, with individuals perceiving tourism as having both positive and negative effects. Many factors shaped people's perspectives, including where they lived, the length of time they had worked in the tourism industry, and their age (Moreira Gregori et al., 2022). The vast protest—earlier mentions—against what was labeled mass tourism in the Canary Islands indicates changed perceptions since the survey was conducted, even though it would be simplistic to assume that the protest implies uniformity in views.

Research on tourism to Iceland has grown significantly in recent years (Jóhannesson et al., 2010; Loftsdóttir et al., 2021; Lund et al., 2018). However, limited research exists on travels from Iceland to other countries. While extensive public data exists on travels to

Iceland, there is minimal and fragmented public data on travels from Iceland (Sigurjónsson, 2019).² The Canary Islands and Spain hold a central place in the history of mass tourism in Iceland, which began in the 1960s with the introduction of affordable flights to these destinations (Loftsdóttir et al., 2021). A key milestone occurred in 1959 when people from Iceland no longer required a visa to travel to Spain, significantly easing travel to that country (Svavarsson, 2017, pp. 77–78).

Despite a long history of travel from Iceland to the Canary Islands, no stable Icelandic-specific infrastructure, such as churches or schools, has been established. This lack is unlike that of other Nordic countries, but the absence of it is perhaps unsurprising, given Iceland's much smaller population compared to the other Nordic countries. For decades, restaurants have been popular meeting places for Icelanders in Gran Canaria and Tenerife (Salvarsson, 2006; Tryggvadóttir, 2021, p. 2).

The Icelandic Tourist Board data show a steady increase in flights to Spain and Portugal (including the Canary Islands and Madeira) since 2012 (Icelandic Tourist Board [Ferðamálastofa], 2022). However, the entry to all these destinations is calculated jointly in their data.³ The board's data show that in 2021, around 45% of their respondents reported having traveled to Spain or Portugal, compared to 23% in 2012 and 34% in 2015. This shift marks a considerable change from 2012, when the US was the most common destination, with 26% of travelers going there, followed by the UK/Ireland, Denmark, and Spain/Portugal, jointly in second, third, and fourth place, respectively (Icelandic Tourist Board [Ferðamálastofa], 2022). Given the availability of several direct flights to the Canary Islands and Spain but relatively few to Portugal, it is likely that the growth in this category primarily reflects increased travel to the Canary Islands and Spain.

Information from the Instituto Canario de Estadística (ISTAC) provides a detailed insight into the increase in flights to the Canary Islands, showing that travel to these two islands has grown proportionally more than the broader category of Spain and Portugal, as reported by the Icelandic Tourist Board. Figure 1 illustrates a sharp rise in the number of trips in 2015, followed by a significant surge after the COVID-19 pandemic ended. It is essential to note that these data represent the total number of trips rather than the number of individual travelers. This distinction is crucial as one person may make multiple trips to the same destination within a single year.

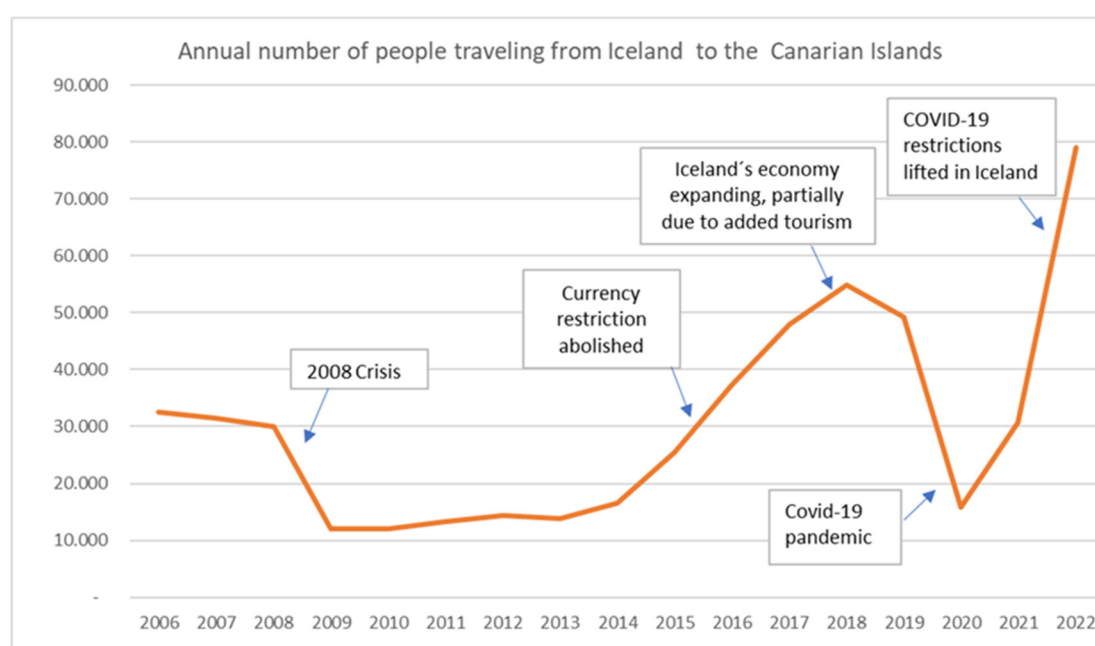


Figure 1. Development of travel from Iceland to the Canary Islands (ISTAC, n.d.).

The increase in travel to the Canary Islands in 2015 can be partly attributed to the lifting of currency restrictions imposed after Iceland suffered a severe economic downturn in 2008. Additionally, the budget airline WOW started offering cheap flights to Gran Canaria and Tenerife that same year ([WOW hefur flug til Gran Canaria, 2015](#)), which, in some cases, were below the actual cost ([Fargjöld til Kanarí undir kostnaðarverði, 2015](#)). These factors made travel more affordable, coinciding with Iceland's gradual economic recovery and enabling more people to take leisure trips abroad. The sharp drop in 2020 was a direct result of COVID-19 travel restrictions. However, as restrictions eased again in 2021 and 2022, the Canary Islands experienced a remarkable resurgence in popularity among Icelandic travelers, cementing their status as a favored destination in the post-pandemic era.

3.1. The Canary Islands as a Desirable Destination

The survey results highlight the significance of the Canary Islands as a destination for people living in Iceland. When asked whether they had traveled to the Canary Islands during the last 10 years (2013–2022), 44.5% of the survey's respondents answered yes. No significant difference was observed between men and women ($\chi^2(1) = 0.64, p = 0.424$), with 45.8% of the surveyed women and 43.0% of the men reporting that they had been to the islands (Table 2). The likelihood of having visited the Canary Islands increased with age ($\chi^2(3) = 18.24, p < 0.001$). More than half of respondents aged 60 years or older (55.2%) had visited the islands compared to somewhat lower numbers of respondents who were 30–44 years old (40.5%) or 18–29 years old (34.5%). In line with these findings, retired people (65.7%) had been to the Canary Islands in relatively large numbers in the past ten years compared to employed respondents (45.9%), self-employed respondents or business owners (39.5%), and respondents with other positions in the labor market (29.8%) ($\chi^2(3) = 33.19, p < 0.001$).

No significant association was observed between the level of education and having visited the Canary Islands during the past 10 years ($\chi^2(2) = 2.61, p = 0.271$). The likelihood of having visited the islands was still significantly higher among those with higher household income ($\chi^2(4) = 21.06, p < 0.001$). A significantly lower proportion of respondents with a household income not exceeding 500 thousand Icelandic krona (ISK) per month (31.4%) had visited the Canary Islands in the past ten years, compared to 58.8% of respondents earning over 1.5 million ISK per month. It is not surprising that those with the lowest incomes are unable to visit the islands. Still, the links with those of high income and the lack of association between education and travel to the islands suggest that mass tourism is not always class-based but instead segmented into different types of activities and niches, thereby catering to differently positioned tourists. Additionally, married respondents and those living with partners were significantly more likely to have visited the Canary Islands ($\chi^2(2) = 23.92, p < 0.001$).

Respondents who had visited the Canary Islands in the past ten years were also asked how often they had visited them. A little over half (52.5%) of the respondents said that they visited the Canary Islands less often than every five years. In total, 24.1% of respondents visited them every three to five years, 13.5% visited every second year, and 9.9% visited the islands once a year or more frequently (Table 2). As can be seen in Table 2, even though there was no significant difference in the number of men and women who visited the Canary Islands, the frequency of travel did differ ($\chi^2(2) = 6.34, p = 0.042$), with a significantly higher proportion of men visiting them every three to five years compared to women.

Table 2. Respondent characteristics and their visits to the Canary Islands. The table presents the weighted counts of respondents who answered each question positively, their percentage within each characteristic category, and the *p*-values of chi-square tests.

Respondent Characteristics	Have Traveled to the Canary Islands in the Last Ten Years			Frequency of Visits						Would Like to Visit the Canary Islands			
				Every Second Year or More Often		Every Three to Five Years		Less Often					
	N	%	<i>p</i>	N	%	N	%	N	%	<i>p</i>	N	%	<i>p</i>
Total	368	44.5		83	23.4	85	24.1	186	52.5		103	40.6	
Gender			0.424							0.042			0.878
Female	185	45.8		40	22.5	34	19.1	104	58.4		45	40.2	
Male	182	43.0		43	24.6	51	29.1	81	46.3		58	41.1	
Age			<0.001							0.026			<0.001
18–29 years	50	34.5		11	23.4	12	25.5	24	51.1		8	14.0	
30–44 years	102	40.5		16	16.0	30	30.0	54	54.0		40	50.0	
45–59 years	89	44.5		16	18.0	20	22.5	53	59.6		29	54.7	
60 years and older	127	55.2		41	34.7	23	19.5	54	45.8		25	40.3	
Place of residence			0.137							1.000			0.146
Reykjavik	125	44.8		28	23.0	29	23.8	65	53.3		32	43.2	
Neighboring municipalities	123	48.8		28	23.7	29	24.6	61	51.7		33	48.5	
Countryside	119	40.3		27	23.5	28	24.3	60	52.2		38	34.2	
Education level			0.271							0.203			0.205
Primary school	82	39.4		15	19.7	23	30.3	38	50.0		31	34.8	
High school	138	46.3		37	28.0	32	24.2	63	47.7		38	43.7	
University	131	45.3		26	20.3	26	20.3	76	59.4		33	48.5	
Employment status			<0.001							0.002			0.513
Employed	217	45.9		38	18.0	61	28.9	112	53.1		61	44.5	
Self-employed/business owner	32	39.5		7	23.3	8	26.7	15	50.0		9	30.0	
Retired	65	65.7		25	41.0	10	16.4	26	42.6		8	38.1	
Other	48	29.8		13	28.3	4	8.7	29	63.0		24	40.0	
Household income			<0.001							0.106			<0.001
500 thousand ISK or less	48	31.4		13	30.2	9	20.9	21	48.8		19	25.0	
501–700 thousand ISK	59	50.9		13	23.2	11	19.6	32	57.1		11	28.9	
701–1100 thousand ISK	82	46.6		13	16.5	16	20.3	50	63.3		27	60.0	
1101–1500 thousand ISK	58	46.4		16	27.6	21	36.2	21	36.2		18	60.0	
More than 1500 ISK	60	58.8		11	19.0	14	24.1	33	56.9		14	66.7	
Relationship status			<0.001							0.025			<0.001
Cohabiting with a partner	71	45.2		12	17.6	11	16.2	45	66.2		30	57.7	
Married	208	51.7		57	28.46	51	25.4	93	46.3		41	48.2	
Not cohabiting and not married	82	32.3		13	16.5	22	27.8	44	55.7		32	28.3	
Children in household			0.365							0.033			<0.001
Have children	132	42.6		22	17.2	39	30.5	67	52.3		44	56.4	
No children	231	45.8		61	27.5	46	20.7	115	51.8		59	34.5	

Note: A significant relationship exists between the variables at $p < 0.05$. The number of responses varies across the three questions.

Among the respondents who had not visited the Canary Islands, 40.6% said they would like to visit them (Table 2). The youngest respondent group, aged 18–29, was significantly less interested in visiting the Canary Islands, with 14% expressing a willingness to visit them, compared to 40.3% to 54.7% of older respondents ($\chi^2(3) = 24.01$, $p < 0.001$).

Furthermore, no relationship was observed between the level of education and interest in visiting the Canary Islands ($\chi^2(2) = 3.17$, $p = 0.205$). Similarly, employment status was not associated with interest in visiting the islands ($\chi^2(3) = 2.30$, $p = 0.513$). No differences were observed in men's and women's willingness to visit ($\chi^2(1) = 0.02$, $p = 0.878$). However, a significantly higher proportion of respondents from households with a monthly income

exceeding ISK 700 thousand (60–66.7%) were willing to visit the Canary Islands for the first time compared to respondents with a household income of ISK 500 thousand or lower (25%) ($\chi^2(4) = 26.82, p < 0.001$). Married respondents and those cohabiting with their partners were significantly more interested in visiting the Canary Islands than those who were neither married nor cohabiting ($\chi^2(2) = 15.32, p < 0.001$). A substantially higher proportion of respondents with children in their household (56.4%) were willing to visit the islands compared to those without children (34.5%) ($\chi^2(1) = 10.60, p < 0.001$).

3.2. Choosing the Canary Islands and Spain as Travel Destinations

The respondents were asked why they chose Spain or the Canary Islands as their destination. They were given a list of 14 items and asked to rank the four most essential items in order of importance. To better understand the responses of those traveling to the Canary Islands, those who had visited only the Canary Islands were explicitly analyzed. Their numbers were low, so we compared them to those who had visited the Canary Islands and other places in Spain. Pearson's chi-square tests did not reveal significant differences between the two respondent groups (i.e., those who had been to Spain and the Canary Islands, and those who had only been to the Canary Islands) for most items. However, the comparison showed that the order of the most important reasons for their visit differed somewhat.

Both groups listed good weather, family-friendly destinations, and comfortable and frequent flights among their top four reasons for visiting these places (see Figure 2). Additionally, those who had only visited the Canary Islands mentioned traveling there with others as the third most common reason, while people who had traveled to both Spain and the Canary Islands cited affordable prices. Interestingly, the most important reason for travel (first place) was identical between the two groups, with the majority choosing good weather. In the ranking for the second most crucial reason, both groups cited good weather most often, but differed in what came second. Those who had only traveled to the Canary Islands chose a family-friendly destination over comfortable and frequent flights, while those who had traveled to both Spain and the Canary Islands opted for the latter. Both groups displayed a preference for comfortable and frequent flights, as well as affordable prices, which they ranked as the third most important reason for traveling. However, they differed in the distribution of proportions, with most people who had traveled only to the Canary Islands favoring comfortable and frequent flights. In contrast, people who had traveled to both Spain and the Canary Islands favored affordable prices.

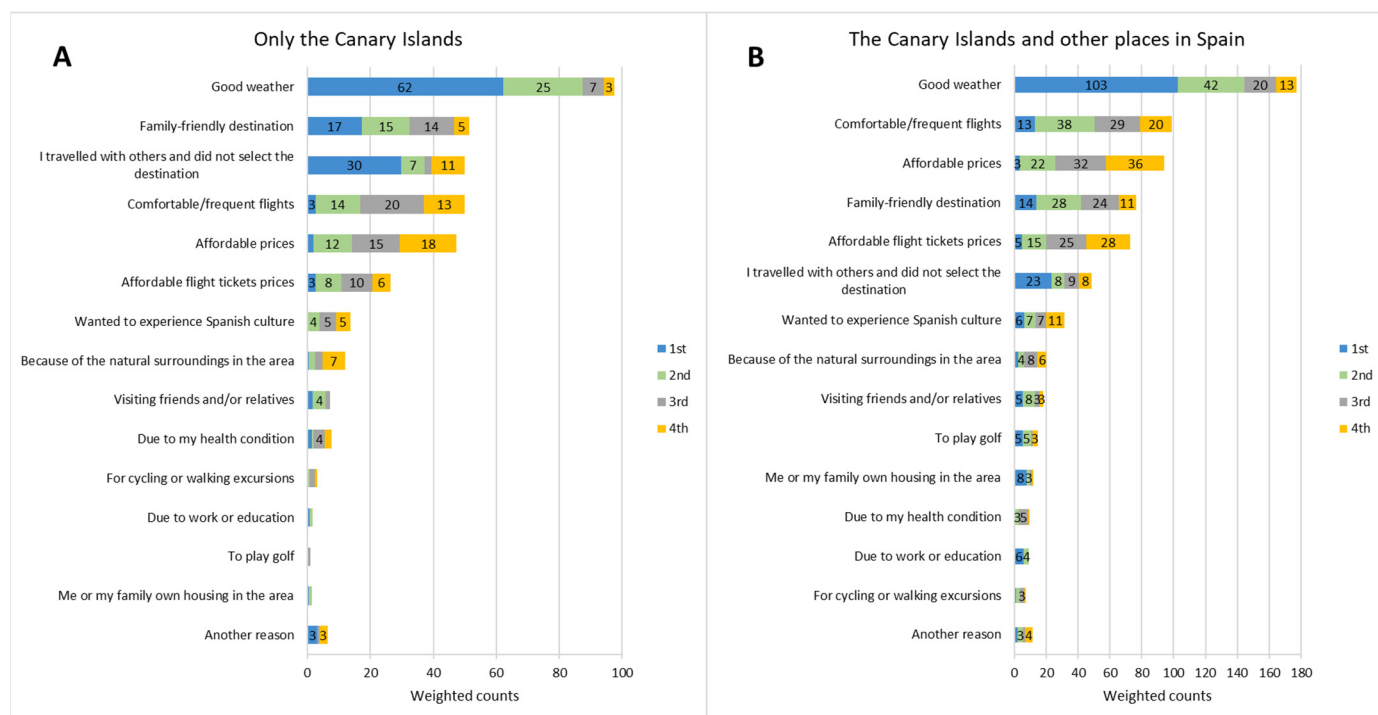


Figure 2. Reasons for choosing Spain/the Canary Islands over other destinations: (A) Respondents who visited only the Canary Islands and (B) respondents who visited both the Canary Islands and other places in Spain.

3.3. Media Discussion of the Canary Islands

To better understand why the Canary Islands are a popular destination for people from Iceland, we conducted a preliminary analysis of the frequency with which the Canary Islands appear in Icelandic media. Icelandic media discussion of the Canary Islands is a large part of the mediascape—to use Appadurai’s (1996) term—of how the Canary Islands appear in Iceland, as previously discussed, even though they are certainly not the only ones. For this article, we were primarily interested in the number of articles focusing on the Canary Islands as a destination for Icelandic people and the extent to which the discussion was concerned with the Canary Islands as interesting in themselves or only as related to Iceland and Icelandic issues.

Branding is a crucial topic when discussing the image of specific places. Still, branding can increase the risk of overtourism, although it is a simplification to view it as the only factor (Séraphin et al., 2019). Skinner’s (2021) discussion of place branding emphasizes the importance of sustainable branding in this context, aiming to avoid the cycles of overtourism or undertourism that occurred during the COVID-19 global pandemic. The mediascape analyzed here comprises various types of presentations, including news stories, interviews, opinion pieces, and paid advertisements from travel agencies. Some of these features promote the Canaries as a destination in Iceland, but all exist beyond the control of the branding mechanism in the Canary Islands. A place or area’s reputation is more complex than market branding or media images. It can be seen as existing in a triad of complex, intersecting, and interacting relations among different voices and images on various scales (Matlovicová, 2024, p. 84). In this limited analysis, we gain only limited insight into the appearance of the Canary Islands in Iceland and the extent to which the discussion focuses on the islands.

As stated earlier, 1345 articles discussed Gran Canaria and/or Tenerife (see Figure 3) during the period analyzed. The visibility of Gran Canaria and Tenerife in Icelandic media has grown considerably since 2018. Figure 3 shows that the number of articles was similar

in 2017 and 2018; however, it almost doubled in 2019 and again in 2020. The number of articles increased in 2021 and 2022, indicating an increased interest in the Canary Islands. Comparing these numbers to Figure 1, the rise in 2020 is interesting, as the number of travelers to the Canary Islands dropped considerably during that year, while the Canary Islands continued to be mentioned in the Icelandic media.

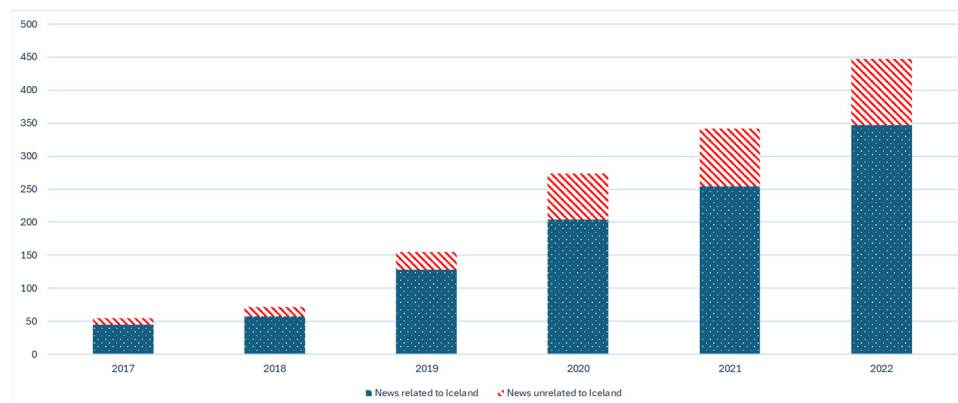


Figure 3. The frequency of news articles by category and year. The dotted section shows the number of news articles related to Iceland, while the strip section shows news articles unrelated to Icelanders on the islands.

What was surprising in the analysis was how proportionally many articles revolved around Icelandic people or Icelandic issues, or 1034 articles, meaning that relatively few articles focused on the islands as objects of interest in themselves. For 2017–2022, only 310 articles could be classified as news that did not revolve around Iceland or Icelandic people. The islands appear in the Icelandic media primarily as a place to engage in leisure mobilities or for Icelandic people to be and stay. Fewer articles focused on the Canary Islands as a place of interest in their own right due to their history, politics, or other external aspects of the islands or the Icelandic people.

Figure 3 represents the results of the media analysis. Each bar represents the total number of news stories related to the Canary Islands each year. The blue-dotted spaces represent materials focusing on Icelandic people and issues related to Iceland, and the red strip space presents stories unrelated to Iceland. Looking at the yearly increase, it is clear that the blue-dotted spaces, which represent articles focusing on Icelandic people or Iceland, are significantly higher and have been rising more substantially in recent years.

If we look briefly at the content of the materials when the islands were mentioned about Icelandic people in 2020, the content was diverse, while often relating in one way or another to the COVID-19 pandemic, such as concerning flight information, i.e., cancellation of flights due to COVID-19 and a massive movement of Icelandic people from the Canaries due to the COVID-19 pandemic. In all years, topical issues include articles that focus on Icelanders living in the islands and tourism in the islands, which may take the form of interviews, travel stories, or materials from travel agencies. Discussions on Icelandic people living in the islands and tourists often intersect, as scholars have shown that the distinction between tourists and lifestyle migrants is often unclear (O'Reilly, 2003). Some articles focusing on tourism were promotional information from tourism companies, announcing their flight schedules or featuring interviews with spokespersons who reported that the last seats were almost sold out. Materials focusing on influencers from Iceland in the Canary Islands began appearing in 2019 and increased significantly, particularly in 2021 and 2022. News focusing on influencers typically emphasizes luxurious lifestyles, resort hotels, and the Canary Islands as destinations for “beach and sun” tourism. All the material that concentrates on influencers centered on Tenerife.

Some material that reported on current events on the island were still classified as Icelandic-centered. One example is articles on forest fires, which, while discussing urgent problems in the islands, also centered on whether Icelandic people on the islands were safe. Even though such articles did not focus on tourism, they still engaged with the islands as a place where Icelandic people engage in tourism and live, positioning the islands thus as a destination for people from Iceland. In other articles, the Canary Islands are mentioned in passing, without being a central topic of discussion, which reflects that they are becoming more a part of people's everyday reality. The general result of this rudimentary analysis of the media indicates a disjuncture between local lives in the Canaries and the Canaries as a place that revolves ultimately around Icelandic people.

To summarize, the survey results indicate that for most travelers from Iceland, the Canary Islands have primarily remained a destination for classical 'sun-and-beach' tourism. Intersecting mobilities and state-led policies prioritizing international tourism have shaped certain areas of the islands, particularly in the southern parts. As a destination, the Canary Islands have an appeal for people from Iceland due to geopolitical reasons and a well-established infrastructure, which facilitates group travel, ease of access, and a hassle-free experience, positioning the islands as an attractive location for specific tourist activities, such as sun and beach. The media analysis reveals that media discussions on the Canary Islands primarily focus on the islands in relation to Iceland, which tends to revolve around tourism-related issues, with limited attention given to the islands beyond that. The data used for analysis do not provide insights into the actual experiences of those who travel from Iceland to the Canary Islands. Still, it offers valuable information on the factors influencing their choice of destination. Our perspective notably emphasizes the broader structural context of overtourism (see, for example, [Milano et al., 2024](#)) and the need to understand mass tourism beyond the subjective aspirations of people from Iceland or those engaged in mass tourism. As argued by [Kouroupi and Metaxas \(2023\)](#), holistic perspectives are needed, considering different factors.

4. Discussion and Implication for Further Studies

Our discussion has highlighted the increasing importance of the Canary Islands as a destination for travelers from Iceland over the last decade, with Tenerife receiving the majority of visitors from Iceland. Most respondents to the survey cited good weather as the primary reason for choosing the Canary Islands as their destination. 'Good' weather, in the sense of a mild climate, exists in many other places in the world and cannot thus be seen as an explanation. Instead, 'good weather' is made more accessible in specific destinations through particular historical and political processes. First, the Canary Islands, located just off the coast of West Africa, are easily accessible to people from Iceland due to the current mobility regime ([Glick Schiller & Salazar, 2013](#)), where the Schengen agreement facilitates travel for some and restricts access for others. The Canary Islands' ease of access to people in Iceland as a tourism destination is tied to European border politics and the politics of colonialism, which brought these islands forcibly under Spanish rule. Other countries at the same latitude may share comparable climates but are not attractive destinations due to geopolitical reasons, i.e., they are not part of the Schengen or European Union, which makes travel there much more difficult due to logistical reasons. Moreover, favorable weather in particular places can be perceived as more desirable through media stories that highlight specific locations as tourist destinations. We can see in the Icelandic media that the Canary Islands are overwhelmingly portrayed as a site of leisure and vacation.

The emphasis on 'good weather' as the primary motivator for visiting the Canary Islands must be understood in context with other factors highlighted by respondents. This applies particularly to infrastructure and affordability for people from Iceland, as

the availability of frequent, accessible, and low-cost flights, coupled with the relatively low cost of living in the Canary Islands compared to Iceland, significantly contributes to making the islands an attractive destination. Thus, from a broader perspective, Spain and the Canary Islands' geopolitical position in Europe situates them as an affordable or 'cheap' destination, offering Icelandic visitors access to a range of goods, services, and experiences that might otherwise be out of reach. The infrastructure in the southern parts of Tenerife and Gran Canaria—such as direct flights from northern Europe, ample taxi services, diverse accommodation options, multiple small grocery stores, restaurants, and entertainment venues within walking distance of hotels—reflect policies that have deliberately prioritized these regions as accessible hubs for international sun-and-beach tourism. The survey also showed that some respondents selected the Canaries because they perceived it as 'family friendly' and did not necessarily select the destination themselves. Activities suitable for different age groups, the proximity of amenities, and the density of restaurants and hotels within small areas make it easier for families and larger groups to stay together comfortably, which also applies to other larger groups of people. Convenience can thus be seen as integral to a "family-friendly" destination and one where people travel with others.

Linking these findings with some of the other aspects of the survey, such as the minimal emphasis respondents placed on factors such as experiencing the culture or the natural environment, further underscores how the tourism infrastructure—i.e., the high concentration of restaurants and entertainment in a relatively small area rather than the Canary Islands as a destination per se—that seems to be appealing about the destination. This emphasis suggests that the Canary Islands have an appeal due to their predictability—they are 'produced' as destinations tailored to the needs of people living in other places, who arrive through forms of privileged mobility, such as tourism, digital nomadism, or retirement, into prefabricated spaces.

However, as critics of oversimplified notions of mass tourism have argued ([Vainikka, 2015](#); [Vainikka, 2013](#)), it is essential to avoid viewing the population enjoying their vacation there as a homogenous 'mass' with an identical experience. Visitors arrive with different subjectivities, shaped by various backgrounds, social classes, sexualities, and genders, which in turn shape their experiences. Tourists do not passively consume spaces but actively shape them through their engagement with them ([Pons, 2003](#)), meaning that certain forms of co-creation occur, even in areas of high tourism density. For instance, [Andrews \(2005\)](#) highlights how visual signs of British identity in Spanish destinations attract British tourists and are integral to place-making (pp. 262–263). Similarly, the Canary Islands are shaped by the needs and preferences of their visitors. The survey revealed that visitors to the islands are often of high income, and there is a lack of correlation between education and travel to the islands. While this suggests that mass tourism from Iceland to the Canaries is not class-based in a narrow sense, travel to different islands can be. Qualitative research has shown that for Icelandic people, tourism to Tenerife has more privilege than Gran Canaria, with the latter island being associated in a prejudiced way with elderly and disabled people ([Loftsdóttir, 2024](#)). The media analysis results indicate that media coverage of influencers is limited to Tenerife. This is interesting and highlights the complexity and various layers of meaning that travelers attribute to destinations.

Yet, recent concepts like overtourism and touristification emphasize the structural processes behind tourism, drawing attention to the fact that "destinations" are spaces where others than tourists live, stressing the need to address fundamental questions of equality and power dynamics that prevail within the tourism economy ([Higgins-Desbiolles, 2020](#)). [Milano and Koens \(2022\)](#) highlight that while new places and meanings are indeed created in the tourism economy, this can occur at the expense of destroying others in unequal power relations (p. 225). Research on residence dispossession from sites of intense tourism

shows how mass tourism can lead to ‘dispossession of daily life’ and destroy memories of particular places (Jover & Barrero-Rescalvo, 2024). This highlights how the tourism crisis is often part of a broader, interlinked polycrisis—intersecting with and contributing to other crises, such as environmental and housing crises. State policies have facilitated and allowed for specific types of buildings and services in tourism economies (Fayard, 2023), creating areas primarily designed to meet the needs of tourists. This growing discontent, reflected in demonstrations and critiques of tourism dependency, must be taken seriously. Some of these critical perspectives have also stressed how the pandemic exposed the vulnerabilities of economies overly reliant on tourism (Cheer, 2020, p. 521).

Focusing on Fuerteventura, Rodríguez et al. (2010) note that weather and beaches, in addition to price, remain the primary motivations for visiting the Canary Islands, despite promotional campaigns that have emphasized other attractions. This preference aligns with the portrayal of the islands in Icelandic media, which—although not the only source where people in Iceland hear or learn about the Canary Islands—plays a significant role in shaping perceptions of the Canary Islands. Media stories mentioning Tenerife or Gran Canaria center primarily around Icelandic people and their island activities, often focusing on vacation or travel-related issues. In these narratives, the Canary Islands appear as a destination for people from Iceland to engage in various forms of tourism or to reside in the islands, where stories about the Canary Islands become somewhat Iceland-centered. As argued by Skinner (2021), a discrepancy may exist between the identity the destinations aim to create and the image perceived by visitors (p. 182), which appears to be the case here. This Iceland-centered perspective renders residents largely invisible and overlooks the broader impacts of mass tourism on the natural environment of the Canary Islands. Such media representations perpetuate a narrow understanding of the Canary Islands, emphasizing their role as a leisure destination for Icelanders while overlooking the complexities and challenges faced by the local population and ecosystem. This development underscores the need for a more critical and inclusive narrative that considers the perspectives of local communities and the environmental consequences of tourism.

5. Conclusions

Some destinations have been branded as “sun and beach destinations,” epitomizing mass tourism. Parts of the Canary Islands have been extensively shaped by various actors, including the state, investors, residents, and tourists, to cater primarily to visitors from specific parts of Europe. It would be simplistic to assume that this co-creation of space occurs under equal relations of power or that the benefits of this organization of space are equally distributed. Recent protests and scholarly discussions highlight the need to understand mass tourism even better, which we have addressed here by focusing on the significance of the Canary Islands to a particular group of visitors—Icelandic travelers. Our analysis has shown (research question a) that Icelandic travelers prioritize convenience, affordability, and easy travel to good weather, which makes the Canary Islands a good option. The island’s infrastructure makes it easy to travel in large groups, accommodation is inexpensive compared to other destinations, the weather is favorable, and travel is convenient. This analysis has still emphasized the importance of contextualizing the desire for the “sun and beach” within broader geopolitical structures that facilitate and shape such mobility and can marginalize long-term residents (research question b). Our research certainly has limitations, as previously mentioned. It does not reveal how these research participants perceive or feel about their destination as individuals, nor does it allow for different nuances in their experiences or show how some resist being confined to areas of intense tourism—especially given that many visitors do not select the destination themselves. Additionally, this questionnaire only covers one year. Conducting the same

questionnaire regularly would provide a more nuanced result, allowing for an examination of changes in perspective.

Additionally, this research does not provide insights into others occupying the same spaces, such as residents who work in the tourism sector or those whose lives are shaped by living in areas of intense tourism or overtourism. Despite these limitations, the data provide essential insights into how certain places have meaning as destinations and are perceived as places to engage in particular types of tourism. Their infrastructure and environment have prioritized the needs of specific mobile populations that can participate in certain lifestyles. The recent massive protests in the Canary Islands against mass tourism underscore the urgency of understanding why this form of tourism remains prevalent and its broader social and economic implications.

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

Data Availability Statement: The data can be available on request.

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Notes

- ¹ See the homepage of the Social Science Research Institute <https://ssri.is/services/questionnaire-surveys/online-panel> (accessed 11 April 2025).
- ² As shown later in the article, travel to Spain is, for example, calculated in official statistics with travel to Portugal, making it necessary to rely on data from Spanish authorities.
- ³ This reflects that very little data exists on travels from Iceland. A report from 1983 states this lack of data regarding travel from Iceland (Ministry of Transport [Samgönguráðuneytið], 1983).

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