

## “Seeing a country with your own eyes”: The impact of immersion experiences in language travel

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### Abstract

This study approaches immersion experiences in the context of language tourism. Immersion is here understood as tourists' extensive engagement and interaction with the members of the host culture. Previous studies have pointed out that language tourism implies a deeper contact with locals; however, other studies have observed that many language programmes abroad are not always as immersive as expected. These contradictory findings suggest that there may be a tremendous variation in contact with locals in the context of language tourism.

Hence, the present mixed methods study uses interviews with 22 language travellers, and 1,011 survey answers to address the question of how language tourists who had an intense contact with local residents differ – in terms of profile and travel experiences – from those language travellers who did not have such an intense contact. There are significant differences between these groups. Those who had a more intense contact with locals are more likely to be intrinsically motivated by an interest for the local culture, to travel alone, to report higher levels of fluency, more frequent accommodation at homestays, and greater engagement in a wider range of activities at the destination.

**Keywords:** language travel; language tourism; immersion; contact with locals

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## 1. Introduction

Language affects intercultural communication and travel decisions (Hall-Lew & Lew, 2014; Basala & Klenosky, 2001). It creates communication barriers and serves as a functional tool to overcome these barriers, while playing a role in the representation of cultural and other identities in tourism destinations (Hall-Lew & Lew, 2014). The importance of language in tourism is perhaps most visible in the phenomenon of language travel, where language learning is one of the main travel motivations. Language tourism comprises the activities of people travelling to a place outside their usual environment for less than a year ‘and for whom language learning is a primary or secondary part of their trip’ (Iglesias, 2014, p. 10). According to the World Tourism Organisation and the World Youth Student and Educational Travel Confederation (UNWTO & WYSE, 2016), it is an important element of the global tourism market.

Language travel is still an understudied topic. However, foreign language acquisition has been a travel motivation since at least the Grand Tour (Ritchie, 2003), and it is one of the drivers for educational tourism according to the World Tourism Organisation (Iglesias, n.d.). Although non-European destinations are rising in importance in the context of language tourism, European countries remain the most popular destinations for language tourists, in particular the United Kingdom, which is the largest destination worldwide for language learning (IALC, 2016). Language tourists are an important segment in Malta (Deloitte, 2018), while Spain has had a national language tourism policy since 2002 (Richards, 2008).

Although the effects of language tourism on second language acquisition have been approached by research on language acquisition since the late 1960s (Iglesias, 2020), they have been scarcely approached in the context of tourism studies (e.g., Carvalho, 2021b, 2021a; Iglesias, Aliaga, & Corno, 2019). A somewhat controversial topic has been whether language programmes abroad promote truly immersive experiences, leading to linguistic gains and intercultural competence. While some studies have focused on the benefits of such sojourns abroad (Carvalho, 2021b; Iglesias *et al.*, 2019), others have pointed out the missed opportunities for deeper language and intercultural contact (Schwieter, Jackson, & Ferreira, 2021; Trentman, 2013). These contradictory findings suggest that there may be substantial variation in the amount of contact between language tourists and local people, but more studies are needed to determine which factors are related to greater contact with local people.

Hence, in this paper, we seek to throw light on language tourists' immersive experiences in host communities. Immersion is here understood as tourists' extensive engagement and interaction with the members of the host culture (Powell & Aram, 2016; Vogt, 2020). We aim to understand how contact with the host community varies in the context of language tourism, and how it is linked to variations in travel experience. We address the question of how the profile and travel experiences of those language tourists who had an intense contact with local people differ from those who did not. In particular, we analyse how accommodation, length of stay, and other travel-related choices are associated with different levels of contact with the local population. This study is expected to bring practical benefits to governments, destination management organisations (DMOs), language schools, product planners, local communities, and language tourists themselves.

Given the importance of immersive experiences, the present study includes not only formal language tourism in its scope, but also informal language tourism. We define informal language tourism as a type of language tourism which implies sojourn in a destination where the target language is spoken, but which excludes formal study. Although the importance of interaction with locals beyond formal class settings has been highlighted by previous research (Goldoni, 2013; Trentman, 2013), studies on language

tourism have limited their scope to the analysis of formal language tourism, where students undertake formal language studies at universities or language schools abroad. Even if there is recognition of informal language travel (e.g., Leighton & Adriani, 2014), it has only been considered in very recent qualitative studies (Carvalho, 2021b; Carvalho & Sheppard, 2021a, 2021b).

The article begins with a literature review on tourist-host contact in the broader context of tourism and, more specifically, in the context of language tourism. From there, the article moves on to describe the mixed-methods approach used. Empirical data consists of twenty-two in-depth interviews and 1,011 survey answers. An analysis and discussion of the qualitative and quantitative findings follows. To conclude, there is a discussion of implications of the study, as well as suggestions of areas for future research.

## 2. Literature review

### 2.1. Tourist-host social contact

According to Cohen (1972), organized mass tourists experience destinations confined within an environmental bubble, where familiarity with their own culture and habits is maintained, in order to avert or minimize cultural shocks, risks and inconveniences. These tourists only meet the representatives of tourism establishments, hardly ever meeting any locals. Hence, these tourists are hindered from having a more authentic experience at the destination. However, not all tourists travel confined within such a bubble. Many tourists have a varying level of contact with their hosts (Unger, Fuchs, & Uriely, 2019), and the contact that is established might be one of the most significant aspects of their travel experience (Carvalho, 2021b; Kastenholz, Carneiro, & Eusébio, 2018; Kennett, 2002).

Tourist-host interactions have been approached in tourism literature, but mostly from the perspective of hosts (Andereck, Valentine, Knopf, & Vogt, 2005; Sinkovics & Penz, 2009; Sita & Nor, 2015), while the perspectives of tourists have been comparatively devoted less attention (e.g., Kastenholz *et al.*, 2018; Pizam, Uriely, & Reichel, 2000). The majority of studies that have approached the tourists' perspective have focused on the effect of tourist-host social contact on tourists' perceived social and cultural distance with hosts. Social distance has been defined as the extent to which an individual experiences a sense of familiarity or unfamiliarity with people belonging to different groups from their own (e.g., ethnic, religious etc.) (Hodgetts & Stolte, 2014), or the extent to which an individual is willing to feel emotionally or physically close to an individual from another group (Yilmaz & Tasci, 2015). Cultural distance refers to the extent to which the culture of the area from which the tourist originates differs from that of the host region (Goeldner & Ritchie, 2012).

Studies have found out that more contact between tourists and hosts might increase or decrease tourists' perceived social and/or cultural distance. On the one hand, contact has been pointed out as a factor that not only diminishes prejudice and stereotypes, but also leads to a positive attitude change, to the development of friendships, and to the improvement of intergroup relations (Çelik, 2019; Kirillova, Lehto, & Cai, 2015; Pizam *et al.*, 2000), at least under certain circumstances (Yilmaz & Tasci, 2015). In Pizam *et al.* (2000), those tourists with the most intense level of social contact were also the ones who experienced the most positive change in attitudes. On the other hand, tourist-host contact can also have negative effects, such as the reinforcement of stereotypes, prejudice, and isolation (Chen, Lin, & Petrick, 2012; Reisinger & Turner, 2003). For example, Chen *et al.* (2012) concluded that biased perceptions which are fairly solid before the trip might not be dissipated after visiting the destination. Fan *et al.* (2017) found out that the quality of contact and the quantity of social contacts negatively influenced tourists' perceived cultural distance, while the quantity of service-oriented contacts

positively affected perceived cultural distance. Hence, contact with local communities and in non-tourism settings may foster more satisfactory travel experiences.

Most of the existing studies treat cultural distance as an outcome of social contact. The effect of cultural distance on social interactions between hosts and guests has been comparatively less approached by the literature. Yet, both variables tend to influence and reinforce each other. For example, Fan *et al.* (2020) concluded that cultural distance may lead to an increase in the quantity of contact with the hosts. However, the larger the cultural distance, the more likely tourists are to perceive contact experiences with hosts as negative because of miscommunication or distortion of meaning due to cultural differences.

Other approaches beyond the theory of social contact have been followed to investigate tourist-host relationships from the perspective of the tourist. For example, Kastenholz *et al.* (2018) segmented a rural tourism market according to their interaction patterns with the local community. They concluded that the tourists with the most intense interactions with residents were the ones with the most overall positive experiences. This group of tourists was also more likely to be loyal, and to spend more money on local services and products. Fan, Zhang and Tavitiyaman (2017) identified five types of tourists in their tourist typology in social contact. While two types of tourists had minimal contact with the hosts (i.e., ‘Dependents’ and ‘Conservatives’), the three other types had more contact with them. The ‘Criticisers, who explored the destination through their own cultural lens, had superficial contact with the locals in order to get information or to know more about the destination. The ‘Explorers’ had more frequent and deeper contact with locals. They also had more access to non-tourist areas. The contact that they established might alter their original images of the destination or of the hosts. Finally, the ‘Belonging Seekers’ set themselves apart from the other groups due to their social purposes for contacting natives. They made some local friends and felt attached to the destination.

Language tourism is a type of tourism that is particularly conducive to interactions between hosts and guests (Carvalho, 2021b; Kennett, 2002): language tourists usually have prolonged stays (Leiton, Adriani, & Schülter, 2016; Ortiz, Ruiz, & Molina, 2016; Ullauri, Rincón, & Martínez, 2017), and travel alone (Carvalho, 2021b). In addition, they are often lodged at homestays with local families (Iglesias *et al.*, 2019), and they frequently gain entry to local sites that are less accessible to traditional tourists (Kennett, 2002). Since many of them are motivated by the goal of improving their language skills, this might be an additional motivation to establish contact with locals (Carvalho, 2021b). Hence, they often have the opportunity to experience the destination beyond the tourist environmental bubble through interactions with locals who are not ‘professional hosts’.

Despite these aspects that favour interaction with the hosts, not all language tourists have the same level of contact with local people (Carvalho, 2021b). In some cases, an ‘international bubble’ (Aliaga, Corno, Iglesias, Luengo, & Puigneró, 2018, p. 18) may be created when language tourists establish contact practically only with their fellow countrypeople and other international students in the same situation. This can severely limit the contact that they have with locals.

In the current paper, we seek to throw light on language tourists' interactions with local people from outside of service settings. In particular, we aim to analyse how different types of language tourists vary in their level of contact with the local community, and how this is reflected in their travel experience.

## 2.2. Language tourism, immersion, and tourist-host contact

Language tourism is still an understudied topic in tourism research. The analysis of the profile and motivations of language tourists has been the main aspect approached by studies in this field (e.g., Boekstein, 2010; Redondo-Carretero, Camarero-Izquierdo, Gutiérrez-Arranz, & Rodríguez-Pinto, 2017; Urgilés & Pauta, 2018). However, many aspects of this phenomenon deserve further analysis. For example, only very few studies within the tourism field have approached tourist-host interaction in the context of language tourism (Aliaga *et al.*, 2018; Iglesias *et al.*, 2019). Although this topic has received somewhat more attention in the fields of education and linguistics, where the linguistic benefits and/or intercultural competence gained from immersive language learning experiences have been evaluated, many questions that are relevant for the tourism sector remain unanswered.

Iglesias *et al.* (2019) concluded that learning a language in an immersion context abroad facilitates intercultural contact and the appreciation of cultural diversity. For these authors, language tourism enhances personal development benefits, such as open-mindedness, which can have a transformational impact on an individual's identity and values (Alcázar *et al.*, 2019; Aliaga *et al.*, 2018; Iglesias *et al.*, 2019). The intercultural contact that is established by staying with host families or through volunteering activities has been deemed particularly beneficial for language tourists. Homestays in particular may promote a better integration, broad-mindedness and further linguistic gains (Iglesias *et al.*, 2019). Participation in activities with local residents outside of an academic setting may favour language learning and facilitate integration with locals, who might themselves seize the benefits of this intercultural contact, for example, to improve their own language skills (Alcázar, Gámiz, Iglesias, & Padró, 2019). In the academic field of language teaching, Martinsen (2011) compared students' cultural sensitivity before and after a six-week study abroad program. Although the increase in students' cultural sensitivity was small, it was nonetheless significant. The variable that predicted this increase was the amount of time spent interacting with native speakers.

However, an 'international bubble' (Aliaga *et al.*, 2018, p. 18) may be created when language tourists opt for shared apartments or residence halls instead of homestays, with the aim of staying with friends, having more independence, or meeting other international students in the same situation. This can affect not only the quality and quantity of language discourse, but also limit contact with local people. In our previous qualitative study (Carvalho, 2021b), we concluded that although most participants talked extensively about the opportunities they had to get in contact with locals, a few did not report such opportunities, and described travel experiences akin to the 'international bubble' portrayed by Aliaga *et al.* (2018).

Studies from within the field of education and linguistics have questioned the role of study abroad experiences in language acquisition and intercultural engagement. These studies revealed that such programmes are not always as immersive as expected (Goldoni, 2013). The research participants in Schwieter, Jackson and Ferreira (2021), who were university students in a study abroad context, revealed numerous stereotypes and superficial observations concerning the host environment. According to the authors, international experiences without engagement in structured reflection and meaning-making may not necessarily lead to greater intercultural competence.

Other studies on language programmes abroad concluded that students often struggled to establish contact with locals. Gallego-Balsà (2018) concluded that, despite language instructors' optimistic views on the opportunities provided by studying abroad, students reported a lack of opportunities to enter local networks, and therefore interacted mostly with other international students. Similar findings were stated by Trentman (2013). In Barbeiro, João and Barros (2015), spontaneous interaction between

Chinese students and local Portuguese students was limited and superficial when they did not share common courses or curricular activities. Other studies pointed out excessive reliance on the use of English when participants did interact with locals (Carvalho, 2021a; Schwieter *et al.*, 2021; Trentman, 2013).

Some studies have highlighted the importance of individual agency to penetrate social networks and have access to native speakers (Goldoni, 2013; Norton & Toohey, 2001; Trentman, 2013). DePalma (2015), who analysed informal linguistic interactions beyond the classroom, concluded that linguistic immersion may be more difficult to attain for students of marginalised languages. However, some of these students were able to establish contexts of immersion by actively seeking ‘participation in communities of practice where Galician served as a marker of authenticity’ (p. 439). Goldoni (2013) concluded that some of her research participants developed strong friendships with members of the host community. These friendships allowed them to enter a wider network of locals, to have extended opportunities for language use, and to have a closer and more authentic contact with the culture. Some of the ways participants used to create opportunities to interact with local people were: pursuing hobbies and personal interests with members of the local community; getting involved in volunteer and service-learning experiences; and making the most of the opportunity of staying with host families (and of the durable contacts established with them). Trentman (2013) also highlighted the role of individual agency in establishing contact with local people and increasing opportunities for language use. For example, one of her research participants made friends with all the shop owners and garbage collectors, asked for directions even when he did not need them, and tried to improve his Arabic pronunciation (his target language) to increase the likelihood of local people replying to him in Arabic.

### 3. Methodology

This study adopted an exploratory sequential mixed method research design, where a qualitative research strand chronologically preceded a quantitative one (QUAL → QUAN) (Creswell & Clark, 2018; Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2009). Building from the exploratory qualitative results, we designed the quantitative study (Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2009). The final interpretation of data both quantitative and qualitative findings are compared. According to Creswell and Clark (2018), exploratory sequential mixed method designs explore a phenomenon in-depth and measure the prevalence of its dimensions. Hence, in this study, the exploratory qualitative part contributed to the inductive development of theory. As suggested by Creswell and Clark (2018), qualitative results were combined with theories from literature to inform the quantitative study. In the quantitative study, we examined variables using a new sample of participants to test hypotheses with a large sample.

In the qualitative study, interviews were carried out with a heterogeneous sample of participants to capture common patterns in their experiences (Table 1). Participants were chosen based upon their previous language learning travels, which included travel to a foreign country, for less than a year, where language learning was a main or secondary motivation for their travel. The purposeful sample was made up of informants recruited on various social media, mostly in language and travel-related interest groups (e.g., communities of travellers, polyglots, language exchange etc.). Overall, 22 in-depth interviews were carried out from July 2018 to January 2018. They accounted for a total of 91 language travel experiences (29 experiences of formal language tourism programmes, 46 of independent language travel and 16 of exchange semester/year abroad). The in-depth interviews were like a conversation with a structure and a purpose (Kvale, 1996), allowing for the reflection and the construction of new knowledge (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). There was an interest in understanding the experience of participants and the meaning they made of that experience (Seidman, 1991). The interview guide contained an outline of topics/ questions to be covered but it was not rigidly followed. The conversation

with participants went beyond the interview guide to include aspects that they considered important. NVivo was used to assist in the development and organization of themes. A latent thematic analysis approach was employed to interpret the findings and link back to theory (see Braun & Clarke, 2006). This approach also included narrative analysis to capture the fluidity, variability, and perceptions of each participant's unique experience. The main findings of this exploratory study have been published in several articles (Carvalho, 2021a, 2021b; Carvalho & Sheppard, 2021a, 2021b). The qualitative part of the study raised several questions that can be better answered through a quantitative approach that provides a bigger picture of the pattern of language travellers' experiences.

**Table 1.** *Sample of participants in the qualitative study*

<b>Participant</b>	<b>Sex</b>	<b>Age (years)</b>	<b>Country of origin</b>	<b>Country of residence</b>
P1	Female	26	Ukraine	Italy
P2	Male	19	UK	UK
P3	Female	38	Australia	Australia
P4	Female	24	India	Dominican Republic
P5	Non-binary	26	UK	UK
P6	Female	34	Sweden	Sweden
P7	Male	25	Canada	Canada
P8	Female	25	US	China
P9	Female	28	US	US
P10	Female	34	Italy	Italy
P11	Female	19	Venezuela	Portugal
P12	Male	33	Bosnia-Herzegovina	Sweden
P13	Female	21	Egypt	Egypt
P14	Male	20	Colombia	Austria
P15	Female	29	Italy	Italy
P16	Female	46	Germany/ US	US
P17	Male	62	US	Japan
P18	Female	33	Portugal	Portugal
P19	Male	28	Portugal	Portugal
P20	Female	33	Italy	Portugal
P21	Female	29	Russia	Russia
P22	Male	31	Canada	Canada

Source: developed by the authors

The second study was quantitative. A questionnaire available in six languages was used to collect primary data from participants and non-participants in language tourism (2,535 respondents) between January and May 2021. A convenience sampling method was used. Participants were recruited with the support of several Portuguese universities and some national institutes for culture belonging to EUNIC (European Union National Institutes for Culture). The questionnaire was also shared on social media (mostly Facebook, LinkedIn, and Instagram). Because of the possibility of Common Method Bias in data collection through self-administered online surveys, procedural (ex-ante) controls were used to avoid effects; the survey design followed MacKenzie and Podsakoff's (2012) recommendations in order to ensure accurate responses and included fact-based questions. The data used in this article concern participants in language tourism (1,011 respondents), i.e., those who had already travelled with the (primary or secondary) aim of learning, practicing, or improving a language.

Statistical quantitative data analysis was performed using IBM SPSS Statistics 27. Descriptive statistics were used to characterize the sample, and inferential statistics to analyse the differences between language tourists who reported an intense contact with local residents, and those who did not. Several tests of hypothesis were performed: independent-samples *t*, chi-square, and Mann-Whitney U. The statistical significance level was set at 0.05. Effect sizes interpretation followed Cohen’ benchmarks (1988).

In the quantitative study, having had the most contact with locals (or not) during one’s most significant language trip was chosen as a segmentation variable. Participants were asked in a multiple-choice question who they had the most contact with during their stay in the destination of their most significant language trip. They were given the following answer options: family; spouse/partner; friends from my home country; local residents I met; foreigners I met at the destination; teachers; host family; and tourist guides. For the sake of segmenting the sample into those who had more and less contact with locals, we decided to consider that those who had more contact with locals were the ones who chose the option ‘local residents I met’ and/or ‘host family’, which suggests a higher degree of immersion and contact with the local culture as compared to not choosing any of these options. Therefore, we considered it as a proxy for interaction with the local culture. Accordingly, we named participants as ‘More Contact’ when at least one of these two answers was given, and ‘Less Contact’ when that was not the case. Although teachers were likely to be members of the local community, we decided not to consider that having contact with teachers was sufficient to be included in the ‘More Contact’ group. Since the goal of this research is to study immersive experiences, we aimed to look for participants’ contact with locals beyond the classroom – in line with many other studies on immersive experiences in language tourism/ study abroad experiences (e.g., Goldoni, 2013; Trentman, 2013). Moreover, even if there is some likelihood that tourist guides be local people, we decided that having had the most contact with tourist guides did not count as considerable contact with locals unless either the option ‘local residents I met’ or the option ‘host family’ were additionally selected. In mass tourism, tourist guides might not be residents, but rather from the same country as the tourists. In addition, this is a service-oriented type of contact. Unlike social contacts, service-oriented contacts might positively affect perceived cultural distance, as suggested by Fan *et al.* (2017).

## 4. Results

### 4.1. Qualitative study

Following Creswell and Clark’s (2018) and Teddlie and Tashakkori’s (2009) theories on mixed-methods research, the findings of the qualitative study were combined with the findings of previous studies to build the design of the quantitative study, in particular its hypotheses. The qualitative part of this study the present study addresses, published in Carvalho (2021b), aimed to understand how the pursuit of language skills in a context of immersion influences the tourism experience of those who travel with language learning goals as a primary or secondary motivation. The findings suggested that participants’ language travel experiences were influenced by their pursuit of language skills in two main ways: by their communication ability in the host language; and by their process of striving to improve their language skills. This process of language learning through immersion frequently placed them in environments where they could get more contact with the locals (e.g., through accommodation with local host families), and gain a deeper understanding of local culture. The main themes derived were related to how speaking the local language opened up opportunities for getting to know locals, followed by how having some knowledge of the local language allowed for more authentic and enriching experiences and, finally, how language knowledge was important for practical aspects (e.g., safety, greater sense of freedom, not being swindled by vendors).

The findings suggested that speaking the local language (even if not fluently) improved the quality of interactions, leading to stronger connections ('[P6 talking about her host families in Alaska] it's like my second home, they are like my second family'). Hence, in most cases, language travel opened the doors for more contact with local residents (e.g., 'you connect more to the people when you speak in their language, I think. It's also easier to be included in the group' P6), particularly when the length of stay was long ('I think because I had the time, I could really develop those relationships and friendships. Whereas if you're just there for a week, it's kind of a superficial experience, you know?' P16). Several participants who had prolonged stays made friendships with locals that lasted after several years or decades in some cases ('I made life-long friendships that year, that I have stayed with until now' P6). Previous studies also observed an association between longer stays and more frequent and deeper contact with the locals (Kastenholz, Carneiro, Eusébio, & Figueiredo, 2013; Pung & Chiappa, 2020). Hence, the first hypothesis for the quantitative study was proposed:

*(H1) Language tourists with longer stays are more likely to have had more contact with locals.*

However, not all participants had the same amount of contact with locals. This was mostly the case of participants who were taking shorter language programmes together with other foreigners or fellow countrypeople, and who were lodged in residence halls (instead of homestays with a local family). Their contact with local residents was practically limited to teachers and staff at their teaching institution. For example, when participants were asked whether they had met locals ('did you meet any locals?'), a few answered: 'Not much. I think that my teachers and so' (P19) and 'Not that much, because we were a group. So we were like all together, always' (P18). In addition, P1 avoided staying at residence halls because she feared that this would limit her contacts to other international students. Aliaga *et al.* (2018) labelled as 'international bubble' (p. 18) the type of environment generated at residence halls where international students socialise with each other while only having very limited contact with local people. Hence, this type of accommodation is believed not to promote contact with locals, in contrast with homestays (Aliaga *et al.*, 2018; Iglesias, Aliaga, & Corno, 2019). This led us to put forward the following hypotheses:

*(H2) Language tourists who stayed at homestays are more likely to have had more contact with locals;*  
*(H3) Language tourists who stayed at residence halls are less likely to have had more contact with locals.*

Previous studies that analysed immersion in the context of formal study abroad experiences concluded that such programmes are frequently less immersive than expected (Barbeiro, João, & Barros, 2015; Goldoni, 2013). Our qualitative findings were not clear in this regard. While some participants in formal tourism seemed to have good opportunities for establishing contact with locals, in particular those who stayed with host families, others struggled more to meet locals ('I spent a lot of time in college, so I met people from there. So many new people, but not locals' P21; 'At the beginning that was the hardest part because you don't get to know German natives in a German course' P14). Those participants who more successfully established contact with locals were those who either shared accommodation with locals or more actively searched for contact, regardless of whether they were enrolled in formal language study or not:

*I'm very good at this... I like talking. I mean I talk to somebody in the elevator. You know, many people are like this. I mean I always talk to people. On the bus or something (...) And in Asia I'm different, so it's easy to start a conversation. People are curious (P17, informal language traveller).*

*Interviewer: ‘How did you meet them [local people]?’ P14: ‘Just external activities, like... sports clubs, or I don’t know... that kind of stuff, mostly sport and travelling.’ (P14, formal language traveller)*

*Yeah, it was pretty simple [to interact with locals] everywhere. They are everywhere in the country, they are everywhere to be found so it’s not necessarily difficult to talk to them, just walk to them and start saying something (P7, formal language traveller)*

Since previous studies also pointed out that formal study programmes may be less immersive than expected (Barbeiro, João, & Barros, 2015; Goldoni, 2013), we put forward the following hypothesis:

*(H4) Taking language lessons in the destination is not associated with greater contact with locals;*

The qualitative findings also suggested that the fact that language tourists tend to have a greater likelihood for solo travel favoured integration with locals and opened up opportunities for integration:

*If your goal is to have an experience, get to know people, improve a language, then it’s always better, at least in my case... if I’m alone it’s easier to... you have an “obligation” to practice, to interact with other people, if you’re with other people it’s sometimes harder to do that. (P20).*

Previous studies also support this idea that solo travel is linked to greater contact with local residents and to deeper cultural immersion (Bianchi, 2016; Murphy, 2001; Osman, Brown, & Phung, 2019). Hence, the following hypothesis was established:

*(H5) Language tourists who travelled alone are more likely to have had more contact with locals;*

In the qualitative study, we did not evaluate whether there was a relationship between having more contact with locals and satisfaction with the overall travel experience. However, many participants who had more intense contact with locals considered this aspect a particularly rewarding aspect of the trip, particularly because it enabled a deeper experience of a new culture:

*The whole thing about learning, learning about other people, learning about other ways of doing things and thinking in a new way, I think it’s the positive things that you get from it. (P6, who stayed in Alaska with a host family)*

*I had like a homestay family so I stayed with them for two days and I could like practice my Korean with her and try to explain everything in Korean, so that was the best part. (P14).*

Previous studies also associated a more intense interaction with local residents with more overall positive experiences (Kastenholz, Carneiro, & Eusébio, 2015; Pizam, Uriely, & Reichel, 2000). Therefore, we put forward the following hypothesis:

*(H6) Language tourists who had more contact with locals are comparatively more satisfied with their overall language travel experience.*

Although our qualitative results mostly support the idea that language tourism is tied to greater engagement with local people and local culture, the small sample size and the agentic behaviour of most participants may not reflect the typical experience of language tourists. Hence, we used a

quantitative study to evaluate the patterns in tourist profiles and travel experiences associated with greater contact with the host population.

#### 4.2. Quantitative study

##### 4.2.1. Sample characterization

The sample used in this paper consists of 1,011 language tourism participants aged between 18 and 75 years. Respondents classified as having had 'More Contact' with local residents account for 40% of the sample and those classified as having had 'Less Contact' represent 60% of the sample.

Table 2 presents the main characteristics of the sample. About 70% of the participants were women, half of the sample was 34 or younger and 25% was 43 or older. Most participants were single (58%) and 20% was living alone, with roughly half (47%) living with one or two more people in the household. Academic qualifications were very high: 87% of respondents had a bachelor's degree or higher, 18% were taking a bachelor's degree at the time of answer, and the same percentage were taking a graduate degree; 47% had degrees higher than a bachelor's and 17% were taking such degrees. More than a third of participants (37%) was either completely or partially financially dependent, while the rest had their own income.

**Table 2.** Sociodemographic characteristics

	Total (N = 1011)	Less contact (N = 408)	More contact (N = 603)	Test
<b>Gender</b>				
Female	69.34%	67.16%	70.81%	$\chi^2(2) = 3.32$ $p = 0.190$
Male	30.07%	32.60%	28.36%	
Nonbinary	0.59%	0.25%	0.83%	
<b>Age</b>				Levene's test: $F = 4.25, p = .040$ t-test: $t(822) = 0.21, p = .834 (d = .014)$
M (SD)	35.91 (11.72)	36.07 (12.76)	35.91 (11.72)	
<b>Marital status</b>				
Single	57.57%	57.60%	57.55%	$\chi^2(2) = 0.75$ $p = 0.688$
Married/ Non-marital partnership	34.92%	34.07%	35.49%	
Divorced/Separated, Widowed	7.52%	8.33%	6.97%	
<b>Education</b>				
Primary education	0.49%	0.49%	0.50%	$\chi^2(5) = 3.78$ $p = 0.582$
Secondary education	10.68%	11.76%	9.95%	
Post-secondary education	4.35%	3.43%	4.98%	
Bachelor	36.20%	38.24%	34.83%	
MSc Degree	41.05%	38.73%	42.62%	
PhD Degree	7.22%	7.35%	7.13%	
<b>Income source</b>				
I have my own income	63.11%	66.18%	61.03%	$\chi^2(2) = 7.27$ $p = 0.026$
I am financially dependent	21.96%	22.55%	21.56%	
I am partially financially dependent	14.94%	11.27%	17.41%	

Note: Statistically significant results (absolute value of adjusted residuals higher than 1.96) are marked in bold. Cohen's d less than 0.20 - very small, from 0.20 to .50 - small, from 0.50 to 0.80 - medium, and 0.80 or more - large.

More than two thirds of respondents (67%) had Portugal as the country of residence and a similar but smaller number (57%) had Portugal as the country of origin. The second most common country of residence and origin was Brazil (5% and 10% respectively), followed by Germany (4%; 3%).

Statistically significant differences between the answers of those who had ‘More Contact’ and ‘Less Contact’ with locals were only observed in terms of income source. Those who had ‘More Contact’ were more likely to be partially financially dependent than those who were not.

#### 4.2.2. Languages spoken & language trips

The most common mother tongue was Portuguese (72%) followed by English (7%) and Spanish (6%). Less than a tenth of participants (9%) spoke more than one mother tongue, but 91% spoke at least one foreign language, which is also a result of the sample selection (having travelled to learn new language). Approximately one third of participants (32%) spoke two languages and more than half (53%) spoke at least three different languages (Table 3). English is the most common foreign language (89%), followed by Spanish (56%), French (47%), German (22%), Portuguese (22%) and Italian (18%). There were statistically significant differences in the number of mother tongues and spoken languages. Those with ‘More Contact’ with locals were likely to have more mother tongues and to speak more languages (medians 1 and 3, respectively) than those with ‘Less Contact’ (1 and 2).

Table 3 also presents results concerning the trips taken with the primary or secondary aim of learning or practicing languages. About one third of participants (31%) took solely one trip, and roughly another third (30%) took two, while the rest of the respondents took three or more. Differences between those with ‘More Contact’ and ‘Less Contact’ were not statistically significant.

**Table 3.** Languages spoken, language trips and target languages

	Total (N = 1011)	Less contact (N = 408)	More contact (N = 603)	Mann-Whitney U test
<b>Number of mother tongues</b>				
1	91.20%	93.63%	89.55%	$U = 118,123.00$ $p = 0.029$ $r = 0.069$
2	7.72%	4.90%	9.62%	
3 or more	1.09%	1.47%	0.83%	
<b>Number of spoken languages</b>				
None	0.69%	1.23%	0.33%	$U = 134,082.00$ $p = 0.012$ $r = 0.079$
1	14.34%	15.69%	13.43%	
2	32.05%	35.54%	29.68%	
3	28.59%	25.25%	30.85%	
4	14.05%	13.24%	14.59%	
5 or more	10.29%	9.07%	11.11%	
<b>Number of trips taken with the primary or secondary aim of learning or practicing languages</b>				
1	31.26%	31.86%	30.85%	$U = 117,568.00$ $p = 0.217$ $r = 0.039$
2	29.57%	32.11%	27.86%	
3	15.03%	13.48%	16.09%	
4	8.31%	8.58%	8.13%	
5	5.84%	5.15%	6.30%	
6	2.18%	2.45%	1.99%	
7 or more	7.81%	6.37%	8.79%	

Notes: Effect size,  $r$ : less than 0.30 - small effect, between 0.30 and 0.50 - medium, greater than 0.50 - large.

#### 4.2.3. Overview of the most important language trip

Respondents were asked to describe the language trip they considered most significant. From this section onwards, the findings only concern this trip. Thirty-six per cent of all respondents were between 18 and 22 years old and 78% were less than 30 years old when their most important trip took place (Table 4Table 5). Those participants who had 'More Contact' with locals were not significantly different from those with 'Less Contact' with respect to age at the time of travel.

Regarding trip financing, participants could choose more than one source of financing. Around 48% of respondents totally or partially financed their own trip, 38% answered that their family partially financed it, and 28% had a scholarship. The differences between participants with 'More Contact' and 'Less Contact' were not statistically significant with one exception: participants with 'Less Contact' were less likely to have earned money at the destination than participants with 'More Contact'.

**Table 4.** Age and trip financing in most significant language trip

	Total (N = 1011)	Less Contact (N = 408)	More Contact (N = 603)	Test
<b>Age at the time of travel</b>				
Less than 18	18.00%	19.85%	16.75%	Mann-Whitney U: $U = 119,961.00$ $p = 0.488$ $r = 0.022$
18-22	35.61%	32.60%	37.65%	
23-29	24.63%	22.55%	26.04%	
30-39	13.35%	14.46%	12.60%	
40-49	5.64%	6.13%	5.31%	
50 or more	2.77%	4.41%	1.66%	
<b>Trip financing (a)</b>				
Own financing	47.48%	44.85%	49.25%	Chi-square: $\chi^2(1) = 1.89; p = 0.169$ $\chi^2(1) = 0.80; p = 0.371$ $\chi^2(1) = 0.01; p = 0.912$ $\chi^2(1) = 8.07; p = 0.005$ $\chi^2(1) = 0.14; p = 0.707$
Family	37.69%	36.03%	38.81%	
Scholarship	28.49%	28.68%	28.36%	
Money earned at the destination	6.92%	4.17%	8.79%	
Prize/award	2.47%	2.70%	2.32%	

Note: (a) Yes answer. Statistically significant results (absolute value of adjusted residuals higher than 1.96) are marked in bold.

Table 5 displays information on reasons for language and country choice. Participants could choose multiple reasons. The two main reasons for language choice were: interest in the language and/or culture of their destination (66%) and enjoying 'to get to know different languages and/or cultures' (57%). Those with 'More Contact' with local residents were more likely than those with 'Less Contact' to point as reasons for language choice the interest in the language and/or culture of the destination, getting to know different languages and/or cultures, travelling to countries where the target language is spoken, and getting a better job in one's country.

Regarding country choice, the two most frequently presented reasons were the interest in the country's culture (41%) and the country being 'the best place to learn the language' (35%). Those with 'More Contact' with local residents were more likely than those with 'Less Contact' to mention the following reasons: interest in the country's culture, an opportunity that arose for that specific country, a more affordable cost of living, climate, or being the only country where the language is spoken. When it comes to the relation between the degree of contact with locals and the interest in the country's culture, the statistically significant result sheds light on the relation between the motivation to learn and understand more about the destination and the degree of immersion and contact in the travel experience itself. If one assumes that prior motivations were not reinterpreted or misremembered a

posteriori, either such motivation is caused by some underlying factor (a personality with an above-average degree of openness) that causes the participant to look for more contact with local residents, or the motivation directly leads to greater agency in searching for opportunities to contact with locals.

**Table 5.** *Reasons for language and country choice*

Reasons for:	Total (N = 1011)	Less Contact (N = 408)	More Contact (N = 603)	Chi-square test $\chi^2$ (df); p-value
<b>Language choice</b> <sup>(a)</sup>				
Interest in the language and/or culture	65.88%	<b>60.54%</b>	<b>69.49%</b>	8.67 (1); 0.003
I like to get to know different languages and/or cultures	57.27%	<b>50.74%</b>	<b>61.69%</b>	11.94 (1); 0.001
To travel to countries where this language is spoken	32.54%	<b>25.98%</b>	<b>36.98%</b>	13.42 (1); <0.001
Academic reasons	38.77%	39.22%	38.47%	0.06 (1); 0.812
To get a better job in my country	19.19%	<b>15.93%</b>	<b>21.39%</b>	4.68 (1); 0.030
For use at work (including business trips)	26.61%	24.75%	27.86%	1.20 (1); 0.273
For emigration	9.99%	9.56%	10.28%	0.14 (1); 0.707
To communicate with spouse/partner	2.97%	3.43%	2.65%	0.51 (1); 0.474
To maintain knowledge of a language spoken by my family	2.97%	2.70%	3.15%	0.18 (1); 0.676
It was my parents (or other relatives) that wanted me to	6.82%	5.88%	7.46%	0.96 (1); 0.328
<b>Country choice</b> <sup>(a)</sup>				
Interest in the country's culture	40.95%	<b>32.35%</b>	<b>46.77%</b>	20.91 (1); <0.001
It is the best place to learn this language	35.21%	35.54%	34.99%	0.03 (1); 0.858
The opportunity that arose was for a specific country (e.g., scholarship, prize, partnership agreement)	30.96%	<b>26.72%</b>	<b>33.83%</b>	5.76 (1); 0.016
I know people who live in this country	20.08%	18.63%	21.06%	0.9 (1); 0.343
Proximity to where I live	17.90%	16.91%	18.57%	0.46 (1); 0.499
More affordable cost of living	7.91%	<b>5.88%</b>	<b>9.29%</b>	3.87 (1); 0.049
Climate	7.72%	<b>5.64%</b>	<b>9.12%</b>	4.15 (1); 0.042
It is the only country where this language is spoken	7.52%	<b>5.39%</b>	<b>8.96%</b>	4.44 (1); 0.035
I wanted a different experience to the one I had in another country where the same language is spoken	7.32%	5.39%	8.62%	3.75 (1); 0.053
My parents (or other relatives) decided	0.10%	0.25%	0.00%	1.48 (1); 0.224

Note: <sup>(a)</sup> Yes answer. Statistically significant results (absolute value of adjusted residuals higher than 1.96) are marked in bold

#### 4.2.4. Trip length

Regarding the length of the trip, 37% of them lasted for two weeks or less, and 45% took more than a month (Table 6). Here we found statistically significant differences between respondents with ‘Less Contact’ and ‘More Contact’. About 24% of the trips of the former had a duration inferior to eight days, as compared to 12% of the latter; the same may be said regarding trips lasting between eight and 15 days, which represent 26% of the trips of respondents with ‘Less Contact’, but only 17% of the trips of respondents with ‘More Contact’; for long duration travels, the opposite relation may be observed: travels lasting between 46 and 120 days represented 11% of the overall most significant trips for the participants with ‘Less Contact’, but 16% in the case of participants with ‘More Contact’; for travels with a duration above 250 days, 8% was the value associated with participants with ‘Less Contact’ and 18%

the value associated with participants with 'More Contact'. Overall, our data shows a clear association between longer stays and contact with local residents ('More Contact': Mdn =32 to 45 days and 'Less Contact': Mdn = 16 to 21 days). Therefore, there is evidence to support H1.

**Table 6.** Length of most significant language trip

	Total (N = 1011)	Less Contact (N = 408)	More Contact (N = 603)	Test
<b>Length of the trip (days)</b>				
Less than 8	16.52%	<b>23.53%</b>	<b>11.77%</b>	Mann-Whitney U: $U = 90,211.00$ $p < 0.001$ $r = 0.229$
8 - 15	20.87%	<b>26.23%</b>	<b>17.25%</b>	
16 - 21	6.33%	6.37%	6.30%	
22 - 31	10.88%	10.05%	11.44%	
32 - 45	3.46%	3.43%	3.48%	
46 - 120	13.95%	<b>11.03%</b>	<b>15.92%</b>	
121 - 250	13.75%	11.27%	15.42%	
More than 250	14.24%	<b>8.09%</b>	<b>18.41%</b>	

Note: <sup>(a)</sup> Yes answer. Statistically significant results (absolute value of adjusted residuals higher than 1.96) are marked in bold.

#### 4.2.5. Accommodation in the destination

Table 7 presents results regarding accommodation during the most important trip. When it comes to accommodation, data shows that participants with 'Less Contact', when compared with those with 'More Contact', are significantly more likely to stay in residence halls (21% vs. 14%), hotels (24% vs. 12%), or houses they own possibly as secondary residence (3% vs. 1%), and much less likely to stay at homestays (18% vs. 35%). Results make clear that there is an association between 'homestay' and contact with locals, whereas stays in residence halls, hotels and secondary residences tend to be associated with lower contact with local culture. Hence, data provided evidence to support both H2 and H3.

**Table 7.** Accommodation in the destination

	Total (N = 1011)	Less Contact (N = 408)	More Contact (N = 603)	Chi-square test $\chi^2$ (df); $p$ -value
<b>Accommodation</b>				
Homestay	27.99%	<b>18.14%</b>	<b>34.66%</b>	60.81 (7); <0.001
Residence hall	17.11%	<b>21.08%</b>	<b>14.43%</b>	
Hotel	16.82%	<b>23.77%</b>	<b>12.11%</b>	
Hostel	9.10%	10.54%	8.13%	
Individual apartment	8.61%	7.84%	9.12%	
Own house (secondary residence)	1.98%	<b>3.19%</b>	<b>1.16%</b>	
Couchsurfing	0.59%	0.25%	0.83%	
Shared apartment	17.80%	15.20%	19.57%	

Note: For Chi-square tests, statistically significant results (absolute value of adjusted residuals higher than 1.96) are marked in bold.

#### 4.2.6. Language lessons in the destination

Concerning language lessons in the destination, less than half of the respondents (44%) took language lessons during the trip (Table 8). These results suggest that language tourism outside of formal class settings – either at universities or language schools abroad – is an important phenomenon that may represent the majority of experiences regarding trips with the purpose of learning a new language. Differences between those who had 'More Contact' and 'Less Contact' were not statistically significant,

suggesting that formal language tourism may not be more beneficial in terms of promoting contact with locals than informal language tourism. Therefore, data provided evidence to support H4.

Those 44% having lessons during the trip were asked about the type of institution and type of classes attended, the average number of lesson hours per week and the level of satisfaction with the classes/course (Table 8). In terms of class type, most respondents only had group classes (88%), while only 5% had individual classes and 7% had a mixed approach with both group and individual classes. Around a quarter of the respondents (23%) averaged more than 20 hours of lessons per week, and the majority (87%) stated positive satisfaction with the classes. There was no significant relationship between the level of contact with local residents and the type of classes, the average weekly lesson hours, and the satisfaction with the classes. However, there were differences concerning learning the language at a university, which was a much more prevalent answer among those who had ‘Less Contact’ than among those who had ‘More Contact’; and concerning having a private teacher, a much more prevalent answer among those who had ‘More Contact’ than among those who had ‘Less Contact’.

**Table 8.** *Characterization of the language lessons taken during the trip*

	Total (N = 440)	Less contact (N = 170)	More contact (N = 270)	Test
<b>Type of course</b>				
Course with focus on cultural and leisure activities	32.27%	32.94%	31.85%	Chi-square: $\chi^2 (3) = 1.81$ $p = 0.613$
Language exam preparation course	21.82%	21.18%	22.22%	
Language preparation course for specific purposes	40.00%	41.76%	38.89%	
No courses	5.91%	4.12%	7.04%	
<b>Where</b>				
University	41.14%	<b>47.06%</b>	<b>37.41%</b>	Chi-square: $\chi^2 (4) = 9.79$ $p = 0.044$
Language school	39.55%	39.41%	39.63%	
Official cultural institute (e.g., British Council, Alliance Française etc.)	11.59%	10.00%	12.59%	
Private teacher	2.50%	<b>0.59%</b>	<b>3.70%</b>	
Other	5.23%	2.94%	6.67%	
<b>Type of classes</b>				
Individual	4.77%	5.88%	4.07%	Chi-square: $\chi^2 (2) = 5.76$ $p = 0.056$
Group	88.18%	90.59%	86.67%	
Both	7.05%	3.53%	9.26%	
<b>Average number of hours of lessons per week</b>				
Less than 5	22.95%	18.82%	25.56%	Mann-Whitney U: $U = 20,867.50$ $p = 0.097$ $r = 0.80^{(a)}$
5 – 10	20.23%	20.00%	20.37%	
11 – 20	34.32%	35.29%	33.70%	
21 – 25	7.73%	11.18%	5.56%	
More than 25	14.77%	14.71%	14.81%	
<b>Level of satisfaction with the classes/course.</b>				
Very dissatisfied	0.45%	0.59%	0.37%	Mann-Whitney U: $U = 22,392.50$ $p = 0.637$ $r = 0.02^{(a)}$
Dissatisfied	2.27%	2.35%	2.22%	
Neutral	10.68%	10.00%	11.11%	
Satisfied	37.50%	36.47%	38.15%	
Very satisfied	49.09%	50.59%	48.15%	

Notes: <sup>(a)</sup> Effect size,  $r$ : less than 0.30 - small effect, between 0.30 and 0.50 - medium, greater than 0.50 - large. For Chi-square tests, statistically significant results (absolute value of adjusted residuals higher than 1.96) are marked in bold.

#### 4.2.7. Travel companions and contacts in the destination

Table 9 presents information regarding travel companions (if any), and contacts during the stay. The majority of respondents (56%) travelled alone. However, this was not the case for those with 'Less Contact', who were significantly less likely to travel alone (46%) than participants with 'More Contact' (63%). This way, evidence was obtained to support H<sub>5</sub>.

Of those who did not travel alone in the whole sample (44%), 62% reported having travelled with their friends, 24% with their family and 20% with their partner (it was possible to choose more than one answer). No significant differences were found between the two groups under analysis. When those who did not travel alone were asked if their travel companions were also interested in learning or practicing the language, a high proportion, 78%, answered affirmatively, but no statistically significant differences were observed between those with 'More Contact' and 'Less Contact'.

**Table 9.** Travel companions and contacts during stay

	Total (N = 1011)	Less Contact (N = 408)	More Contact (N = 603)	Chi-square test $\chi^2$ (df); $p$ -value
<b>Travelled <sup>(a)</sup></b>				
Alone	55.98%	<b>46.32%</b>	<b>62.52%</b>	25.91 (1); <0.001
<b>Travelled with <sup>(a)</sup></b>	<b>(N = 445)</b>	<b>(N = 219)</b>	<b>(N = 226)</b>	
Friends	62.47%	61.64%	63.27%	1.26 (1); 0.722
Family	24.27%	23.74%	24.78%	0.07 (1); 0.799
Spouse/partner	20.22%	20.09%	20.35%	0.01 (1); 0.945
Travel companions were also interested in learning or practising the language <sup>(a)</sup> <sup>(b)</sup>	77.53%	76.26%	78.76%	0.40 (1); 0.527
<b>Most of the contacts during the stay <sup>(a)</sup></b>				
Foreigners met at the destination	51.34%	48.28%	53.40%	2.55 (1); 0.110
Friends from my home country	28.98%	<b>33.33%</b>	<b>26.04%</b>	6.30 (1); 0.012
Teachers	21.36%	18.38%	23.38%	3.62 (1); 0.057
Spouse/partner	11.47%	13.24%	10.28%	2.09 (1); 0.148
Tourist guides	1.88%	1.47%	2.16%	0.62 (1); 0.431

Note: <sup>(a)</sup> Yes answer. Statistically significant results (absolute value of adjusted residuals higher than 1.96) are marked in bold.

Concerning contacts during the stay at the destination, around a half of the respondents (51%) reported that most contacts were with foreigners they met at the destination and 29% answered 'friends from my home country'. Among all types of contacts, only for 'friends from my home country' was there a statistically significant difference between those with 'Less Contact' and those with 'More Contact'. Having most contacts during the stay with people from one's own country led to a lower likelihood of intense contact with local residents.

#### 4.2.8. Satisfaction

We evaluated participants' level of satisfaction with the trip and the intention to return and to recommend it to friends or family. Regarding the level of satisfaction with the trip, a large percentage of participants (96%) reported positive levels of satisfaction. Participants with 'More Contact' were

significantly more likely to be more satisfied (proportions of positive satisfaction, 97% versus 93%) (Table 10). Therefore, our findings support H6.

About 76% of participants reported an intention to return and 89% a willingness to recommend the destination to friends and family. Among the participants who intended (or might intend) to return to the destination, the majority (68%) indicated 'traveling/ learning more about the country' as the main reason, followed by 'visiting friends' and 'learning, practicing or improving the language' (40% each). There were no statistically significant differences in neither of variables in terms of contact with locals.

**Table 10.** Satisfaction & intention to return and recommend

	Total (N = 1011)	Less Contact (N = 408)	More Contact (N = 603)	Test
<b>Level of satisfaction with the trip</b>				
Not at all satisfied	0.30%	0.25%	0.33%	Mann-Whitney U: $U = 114,347.5$ ; $p = 0.018$ $r = 0.07$
Somewhat satisfied	0.20%	0.25%	0.17%	
Neutral	3.76%	6.13%	2.16%	
Much satisfied	25.91%	27.21%	25.04%	
Very much satisfied	69.83%	66.18%	72.31%	
<b>Intention to return</b>				
No	5.24%	5.64%	4.98%	Chi-square: $\chi^2 (2) = 0.31$ ; $p = 0.857$
Yes	76.26%	75.49%	76.78%	
Perhaps	18.50%	18.87%	18.24%	
<b>Reasons to return</b>				
To travel/know more about the country	(N=958) 68.27%	(N = 385) 68.83%	(N = 573) 67.89%	Chi-square: $\chi^2 (1) = 0.09$ ; $p = 0.759$
To visit friends in the destination	39.98%	37.66%	41.54%	$\chi^2 (1) = 1.44$ ; $p = 0.230$
To learn, practise or improve the language	39.87%	40.26%	39.62%	$\chi^2 (1) = 0.04$ ; $p = 0.842$
<b>Intention to recommend to friends/family</b>				
No	1.78%	1.23%	2.16%	Chi-square: $\chi^2 (2) = 1.60$ ; $p = 0.449$
Yes	88.92%	88.73%	89.05%	
Perhaps	9.30%	10.05%	8.79%	

Note: Effect size,  $r$ : less than 0.30 - small effect, between 0.30 and 0.50 - medium, greater than 0.50 - large. For Chi-square tests, statistically significant results (absolute value of adjusted residuals higher than 1.96) are marked in bold.

**Table 11.** Target language: pre-trip and post-trip fluency

	Total (N = 1011)	Less Contact (N = 408)	More Contact (N = 603)	Test
<b>Level of fluency before the trip</b>				
Beginner (A0-A1)	29.28%	27.70%	30.35%	Chi-square: $\chi^2 (2) = 2.84$ $p = 0.242$
Elementary (A1-A2)	26.61%	29.41%	24.71%	
Intermediate (B1-B2)	44.11%	42.89%	44.94%	
<b>How the trip influenced the level of fluency<sup>(a)</sup></b>				
Nothing	0.79%	1.72%	0.17%	Mann-Whitney U: $U = 99,273.50$ $p < 0.001$ $r = 0.17$
A little	4.45%	4.66%	4.31%	
Moderately	18.40%	23.28%	15.09%	
Much	35.01%	39.46%	32.01%	
Very Much	41.35%	30.88%	48.42%	

Note: Effect size,  $r$ : less than 0.30 - small effect, between 0.30 and 0.50 - medium, greater than 0.50 - large

In terms of pre-trip fluency, 44% of respondents reported having an intermediate level in the target language before the trip, without statistically significant differences between those with ‘More Contact’ and ‘Less Contact’ (Table 11). Regarding post-trip fluency, most participants (76%) considered that the trip had a positive influence on their level of fluency, highlighting the potential of this kind of tourism to improve language skills. Participants with ‘More Contact’ improved their skills significantly more than those with ‘Less Contact’ (80% of the former improved ‘much’ or ‘very much’, against 70% of the latter). This is a key result, given that the improvement in fluency is one of the main purposes of this kind of tourism: ‘More Contact’ with residents is associated with perceived higher improvement in skills in the target language.

In summary, the data collected provided supporting evidence to all the hypotheses formulated (Table 12).

**Table 12.** Summary of decisions on tested hypotheses

Hypotheses	Decision at the 5% significance level
(H1) Language tourists with longer stays are more likely to have had more contact with locals.	Supported
(H2) Language tourists who stayed at homestays are more likely to have had more contact with locals.	Supported
(H3) Language tourists who stayed at residence halls are less likely to have had more contact with locals.	Supported
(H4) Taking language lessons in the destination is not associated with greater contact with locals.	Supported
(H5) Language tourists who travelled alone are more likely to have had more contact with locals.	Supported
(H6) Language tourists who had more contact with locals are comparatively more satisfied with their overall language travel experience.	Supported

## 5. Discussion

This study aimed to address the question of how the profile and travel experiences of those language tourists who had an intense contact with local people differed from those who did not. The findings revealed statistically significant differences between those language tourists who had ‘More Contact’ with local people, as compared to those who had less contact. Those who had ‘More Contact’ were more concentrated in the 18-29 age range, which might explain their greater likelihood for being partially financially dependent, and thus earning money at the destination (e.g., as an Au Pair or through Workaway). These findings corroborate those of previous studies, according to which language tourists are concentrated in the age range of 18 to 25 years (Ortiz *et al.*, 2016; Redondo-Carretero, Camarero-Izquierdo, Gutiérrez-Arranz, & Rodríguez-Pinto, 2017; Ullauri *et al.*, 2017; Urgilés & Pauta, n.d.). In contrast, those who had less contact with locals were more likely to be older than 50 at the time of their most significant language trip.

The results suggest that those language tourists who had ‘More Contact’ with locals also had more interest in languages and cultures. Firstly, they spoke more languages than those language tourists who had less contact with local people. Secondly, when asked about the reasons for language choice, they were more likely to mention reasons such as having interest in the language or culture, getting to know a different language or culture, or travelling to a country where the language is spoken. Thirdly, when

asked the reasons for country choice, they also mentioned interest in the country’s culture as the most important reason and valued this reason significantly more than their counterparts who had less contact with the local population. Since memory and forgetting can lead to a re-interpretation and transformation of experience (Quinlan-Cutler & Carmichael, 2010), one may assume that those tourists who had more contact with locals ended up reinterpreting or misremembering their motivations a posteriori. However, previous literature suggested an association between an interest in culture and greater contact with locals in the tourism context. For example, Fan *et al.* (2019) revealed that the segment of tourists who had the most intense interaction with local residents was mainly motivated to experience local culture, understand otherness and self-improvement. Likewise, in Eusébio and Carneiro (2012), looking for cultural enrichment, among other factors, positively influenced social contact with locals.

Those who had ‘More Contact’ with locals had longer stays in the destination. Therefore, the sample data provided evidence in favour of H<sub>1</sub>, related to language tourists with longer stays being more likely to have had more contact with locals. Longer stays might enable a deeper contact with locals and the development of friendships, as also evidenced in the qualitative study. The importance of trip duration in study abroad experiences has been documented by previous studies (DeLoach, Kurt, & Olitsky, 2019), including the relationship between trip duration and cultivation of lifelong friendships (Dwyer, 2004), albeit there is no total agreement with the importance of trip duration.

Those who had ‘More Contact’ with locals were more likely to choose a country because of its affordable cost of living. Finding a more affordable destination might have been deemed more important by these participants, who had to conciliate longer stays with a greater likelihood of partial financial dependence, and opportunities for earning extra money at the destination, as already analysed. Riley (1988) labelled as ‘long term budget travellers’ those tourists who wanted to extend their trips beyond that of a brief annual holiday and were thus ‘faced with the necessity of living on a budget’ (p. 825). This preference for affordable holidays in order to extend their length is a trait that language tourists share with the backpackers described in several studies (Loker-Murphy & Pearce, 1995; Murphy, 2001).

In terms of accommodation, those who had ‘More Contact’ with locals were significantly more lodged at homestays. In the qualitative study, participants also described how many of the opportunities for interaction with locals arose from their choice of accommodation – with host families, CouchSurfing and au pair hosts providing significant socialization opportunities. Therefore, data provides evidence to support H<sub>2</sub> (Language tourists who stayed at homestays are more likely to have had more contact with locals). In fact, homestays and contact with host families have been considered important contributors to enriching language tourism experiences, since they not only favour language learning but also facilitate integration in the local community and sociocultural gains (Aliaga *et al.*, 2018; Iglesias *et al.*, 2019; Schmidt-Rinehart & Knight, 2004; Shiri, 2015). However, some studies have also pointed out that conflicts might emerge between hosts and language travellers at homestays (Stewart, 2010).

In contrast, those who had less contact with locals stayed significantly more at residence halls; thus, the data provided evidence for H<sub>4</sub>, i.e., that language tourists who stayed at residence halls were less likely to have had more contact with locals. These participants were also more likely to stay at hotels, or secondary residences. Participants in the qualitative study who had the least contact with locals were the ones lodged in residence halls, who in some cases ended up having contact practically only with other foreigners or fellow countrypeople. This kind of conditions is likely to give rise to ‘international bubbles’ (Aliaga *et al.*, 2018, p. 18; Dervin, Härkönen, Yuan, Chen, & Zhang, 2020), which can limit language tourists’ contact with local people. Trentman (2012), in her study of Arabic language learners

studying in Egypt, also concluded that those who stayed in residence halls found it difficult to make friends with locals due to lack of opportunities.

One interesting finding of this research is that the majority of language tourists did not take any lessons in the destination – they were informal language tourists. This does not match with how understudied informal language tourism has been. More studies are needed to analyse this neglected phenomenon. Language tourists who had ‘More Contact’ with locals did not demonstrate a significant difference in terms of pursuing language lessons in the destination. Hence, results provide support for H4 (Taking language lessons in the destination is not associated with greater contact with locals). Likewise, there was not a statistically significant difference between both groups either in terms of average number of lesson hours, or satisfaction with the lessons taken in the destination. Hence, as compared to informal language tourism, formal language tourism does not seem to be associated with a more intense contact with locals. These findings suggest that other variables might be more important in determining contact with locals, such as type of accommodation (Aliaga *et al.*, 2018; Schmidt-Rinehart & Knight, 2004; Shiri, 2015) and agency (Goldoni, 2013; E. Trentman, 2013).

A more intense contact with locals is associated with greater improvement in language fluency as a result of the trip. Acquaintances, friendships, and the degree of friendship with local peers have also been considered predictors of greater language proficiency (Dewey, Belnap, & Hillstrom, 2013). Likewise, participation in activities with local residents outside of an academic setting facilitates intercultural contact, integration and improvement in language skills (Alcázar *et al.*, 2019). Previous studies revealed that out-of-class experiences and less traditional study plans may lead to ‘impressive progress’ in language skills compared with regular courses (Fraser, 2002, p. 45).

In addition, language tourists with a higher degree of contact with local residents were much more likely to have travelled alone. Hence, supporting evidence was provided for H5 (Language tourists who travelled alone are more likely to have had more contact with locals). Language tourists who had ‘More Contact’ were also less likely to have travelled with friends from their own country. These findings were observed both in the quantitative and in the qualitative study. Previous studies have also revealed an association between solo-travelling and more immersive experiences (Bianchi, 2016; Murphy, 2001; Osman *et al.*, 2019).

Finally, the results suggested that a higher degree of contact with locals is associated with greater satisfaction in the destination. Therefore, the sample provided evidence in support of H6 (Language tourists who had more contact with locals are comparatively more satisfied with their overall language travel experience). In Pizam *et al.* (2000), those who established the most intense contact with locals had more positive feelings towards them and experienced the most positive change in attitude towards the destination. In their segmentation of rural tourists, Kastenholz *et al.* (2015) concluded that there was a positive effect of socialization on tourism experiences. Those rural tourists who interacted intensely with local residents were also the most satisfied, the most loyal to the village, and the most likely to come back and recommend the village to others. A similar positive relationship between interaction and tourist satisfaction was also observed by Choo and Petrick (2014).

## 6. Conclusion

In this mixed-methods research, the qualitative study was exploratory in nature, using in-depth interviews. Based on its qualitative findings and previous studies, a series of quantitative hypotheses were developed and tested using a questionnaire completed by 1,011 language tourists. Qualitative and quantitative findings were compared, and qualitative findings were used to shed light on some patterns

found out through quantitative analysis. The present study concluded that there are significant differences between those language tourists who had more contact with locals and those who had less contact. These differences were observed in terms of pre-trip aspects, such as motivations for language and country choice, but also in terms of profile and travel behaviour.

Concerning theoretical implications, this study contributes to fill the gap in knowledge relating to language tourism, which is an understudied but significant tourism phenomenon. This study makes a unique contribution to tourism research by illustrating how contact with local residents – a crucial aspect in language tourism – is related to several travel choices. This way, greater contact with locals is associated with longer trips, solo-travelling, and lodging at homestays (rather than residence halls or hotels). Our finding that a greater contact with locals is associated with more satisfaction is another important contribution to literature in this field.

In terms of practical implications, this study provides implications for governments, DMOs, language schools, product planners, local communities, and language tourists themselves. Firstly, language schools and product planners could design itineraries to include “socially intense activities with locals” (Fan, Zhang, Jenkins, & Lin, 2017, p. 10), and promote greater access to non-tourist areas. Existing initiatives to promote cultural exchange between locals and migrants could be promoted to tourists (e.g., language exchange events to promote language acquisition, networking events, cultural festivals). DMOs could promote such activities on their various platforms. The involvement of tourists in these activities could increase their appreciation of local culture, promote sociocultural exchange and a better mutual understanding between hosts and tourists. Tourism providers offering good opportunities for extended contact with locals (e.g., those associated with voluntourism, rural tourism, and bed-and-breakfast or homestay lodging) could also benefit from promoting their services to this niche of tourists. Finally, given that intense contact with locals is not guaranteed for language tourists, they could be more proactive in the search for contact with locals. The study concluded that solo-travellers and those lodged at homestays had greater contact with locals. Hence, language tourists could include these considerations in the planning of their trips.

The present study is not without some limitations. Firstly, this study is constructed on the basis of two convenience samples of language tourists. In the qualitative study, this was a small heterogeneous sample, albeit in the quantitative study, a large database was obtained. Nonetheless, Portuguese individuals are overrepresented, as well as women and those who are highly educated. Secondly, the extent to which travellers under or over-estimated their contact with locals or their improvement in language skills is unknown. Thirdly, the quantitative data are limited to participants’ most important language travel experiences; hence, we have no information about participants’ other language travel experiences in this sample.

Informal language tourism and language as a travel motivation are gaps ripe for future studies. In particular, further studies could address whether it is formal or informal language tourism which bring more personal, cultural, social or linguistic benefits. There is also scope for further research that addresses the segmentation of language tourists. The present data reveals that there are significant differences among language tourists, but thus far only one study has attempted to segment this niche of tourists (Redondo-Carretero *et al.*, 2017) – yet that study left out informal language tourists. The role of agency and personality in gaining more access to locals is also a gap to be filled by future studies in the language tourism field.

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