

Consumer-Driven Sustainable Tourism: Towards Inconspicuous Consumption

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Introduction

Life in the typical affluent modern market economy is associated with high spending power and extensive consumer choice. Social comparison, competition and rivalry at work, and stress all drive consumer choice (Layard, 2005). The resultant status race is invariably associated with conspicuous consumption (Veblen, 1899), i.e. consumption that is demonstrative and signals an individual's position in the social pecking order. Consumer satisfaction with goods, services and experiences is derived from one of several types of consumer value, which are either extrinsically or intrinsically motivated. Extrinsic value may be understood as a means to some end, whereas intrinsic value is enjoyed for its own sake (Holbrook, 1999). Another characteristic of extrinsic value is that it can be pursued deliberately, as is typical for conspicuous consumption.

Recreational activities offer opportunities for people to rebalance their lives through less conspicuous consumption, associated with more intrinsic consumer value. However, as intrinsic consumption value is more transitory, less predictable and less self-conscious than extrinsic value, products designed to deliver it present a particular challenge, nowhere more so than in terms of branding and marketing. This is exacerbated where tourism is concerned, because consumption takes place away from the familiar home environment and because it is not routine. Thus the tourist is likely to be in a heightened emotional state with deeper and longer-lasting memories being created.

Personal values serve an important function in individual decision-making because they guide people throughout their lives (Schwartz and Bardi, 2001, p. 269). Consumption is determined by the general set of values a consumer holds (Holbrook, 1999). However, it is also context-based and influenced by the conditions of the market space. Holbrook identifies four types of intrinsic consumer value (Fig. 1).

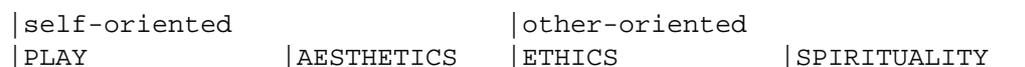


Fig. 1 Four types of intrinsic consumer value (Holbrook, 1999)

As this paper deals with sustainable consumption, it will focus predominantly on the two other-driven values, namely, Ethics and Spirituality. However, as the realisation of intrinsic value relies on the active participation of the consumer in its production, elements of play and/or aesthetics are always likely to be present as part of any ethical or spiritual experience.

Sustainable tourism

Tourism has been defined as "... the sum of the phenomena and relationships arising from the travel and stay of non-residents..." (Hunziker & Krapf as in Burkart & Medlik, 1974). And sustainable tourism development encompasses economic, ecological and local sustainability (Hunter, 1995). Some of its key features are a community's resources, both natural and cultural, and its amenities. Sustainability is concerned not only with the natural environment but also with wider questions of social need and welfare, economic opportunity and equity in terms of the tourism destination. Participation in sustainable tourism, e.g. expensive ecotourism, could enhance a person's status with their associates and be pursued for this reason (conspicuous consumption). On the other hand, intrinsically motivated participation in sustainable tourism is likely to be far less self-conscious and less conspicuous. There are particular difficulties in designing, producing and advertising inconspicuous tourism experiences that will satisfy consumers in terms of ethical/spiritual consumer value. True experiences are individualistic by nature and, if directed too strongly, the consumer is denied the opportunity for personal growth that is implicit in Holbrook's (1999) typology.

Despite consumers' increased awareness of sustainability issues over the last two decades, sustainability values fail to significantly influence tourist behaviour (Sharpley, 2001). This paper aims to provide a theoretical framework for a new line of research in consumer-driven sustainable tourism development, by applying Holbrook's framework to the context of sustainable tourism. This conceptual framework aims to support the identification of the drivers of sustainable tourism consumption and ultimately, to set up the baseline for consumer-driven sustainable tourism branding.

Drivers of Sustainable Consumption

Past research that has looked into consumer values associated with sustainable tourism has mainly taken the focus on the environmental aspect. This is the case with the research developed by Font (2001), whose work is focused within the context of eco-labelling. They contend that the tourism industry as well as consumers themselves are demonstrating their willingness to embrace more environmental friendly policies, placing a strong focus on labelling aspects. While some argue that the emergence of green consumers also implies the emergence of green tourists, these authors believe that "there is a high degree of ambivalence within the context of postmodern consumer culture. And in fact, within the context of postmodern consumer culture, tourism is consumed in a variety of ways which are in opposition to the notion of green, environmentally aware tourist, presenting complications for the design, role and potential influence of eco-labelling in tourism" (Sharpley, 2001:42).

Additionally, there is little evidence to support the fundamental assumption that the interest in ecotourism is actually related to green motivations. Eagles (1992) suggests that this kind of tourist is keen on specific types of destinations, but does not believe that their behaviour is moulded by environmental values. In fact, research has found that consumers fail to present consistent environmentally friendly behaviours and only a small percentage of those consumers who claim to embrace green values get to ever transfer them to their consumption behaviour (Witherspoon,

1994).

This suggests that research into ecotourism generally fails to capture the determinants of consumer behaviour. Much of it is based on assumptions that different social groupings can be identified with “technocentric” or “ecocentric” attitudes and behaviour, that these are static and consistent and specific questions can reveal whether they will consume in one or another way. But what they fail to capture is the differences in consumption elicited by each type of products. According to Sharpley (2001) green consumerism must be assessed according to individual products or activities and must be based upon a variety of related factors, including a product’s cost, availability, substitutability, purpose/use and, in a semiotic sense, its significance. In other words, where a green product costs more, provides inferior performance, involves greater effort on the part of the consumer or simply does not fully satisfy customer needs, environmental values are likely to be of little consequence in the consumer decision making process.

It is reasonable to believe that this inconsistency between consumer values and the actual behaviour in relation to the consumption of green products could also be extended to the broad concept of sustainable tourism. And this suggests that in order to grasp those underlying dimensions determining its consumption, the link between consumer value and behaviour needs to be established. Consequently, the questions are: Which values do we need to engage with in order to make these products more attractive to potential customers? In other words, what are the determinants of Sustainable Tourism products consumption? And how can we engage with consumers in the development of sustainable practices? In other words, how can we make Sustainable Tourism more sellable?

Components of Sustainable Tourism

Looking into the origin of Sustainable Tourism, one can easily understand that this is not a concept which emerges from the demand-side. This concept has been originated to represent those tourism development practices aiming to minimise the negative effects that tourism may have in the community, while preserving economical development (Hunter, 1995). Therefore, this concept has mainly adopted a policy-maker and tourism developers driven approach.

However, previous research has indicated that the adoption of sustainable tourism practices by the industry is mainly triggered by financial benefits (Jones et al., 2005; Bhaskaran et al., 2006; Bausal & Roth, 2000; and Harris, 2007). In fact, Kassaye (2001) suggests that 30% of businesses in USA adopting green practices were financially motivated. Therefore, it can be expected that unless consumers start to favour those producers who are adopting sustainable practices, the process of adoption by the tourism industry will remain slow. This suggests the need to engage with consumers for the development and marketing of sustainable tourism products, supporting in this way, the generation of demand-driven pressure for the development of sustainable tourism practices.

However, limited research has tried to identify determinants of sustainable consumer behaviour. While previous research has looked into certain aspects of sustainable tourism and the determinants of sustainable tourism behaviour, these tend to present two different types of limitations. One relates to the limited scope of some of this work to only one aspect of

sustainability, which is the case of the work by Font (2001), mainly focused on the environmental development. The other one relates to the mistakenly interchangeable use of terms defining tourism practices and preference for activities developed in natural environments, which might not be necessarily environmentally friendly. This is the case of the work developed by Hvenegaard (2002). This suggests that in order to generate the required demand-driven pressure for the adoption of sustainable tourism practices by businesses, in-depth research needs to grasp those key fundamental dimensions influencing sustainable consumption in tourism.

There are very different definitions of sustainable development. The World Commission on Environment and Development (WCED) defined sustainable development in the 80s as “that (which) meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs” (WCED, 1987:383). More closely related to the concept of sustainable development is another tourism-specific term. This is carrying capacity, which relates to “the level of recreation use an area can sustain without an unacceptable degree of deteriorating of the character and quality of the resources or recreation experience” (Countryside Commission, 1970, cited in Hall & Page, 2006).

Additionally, a new set of concepts represents a shift from the awareness of only environmental issues to a concern for the social and economical impact of tourism, including ethical tourism, responsible tourism, fair trade tourism and pro-poor tourism (Swarbrooke & Horner, 2007). Morality in our day-to-day life is ruled by Reciprocal Altruistic principles, by which ethical behaviour, in accordance to the standards of our social communities will determine the survival and therefore, biological evolution (Fennel, 2006). However, this is not the case of tourism, which takes place in a different environment to where tourists live, and for a limited period of time, which prevents from the development of Reciprocal Altruistic codes of ethic.

In the long run, it is expected that this lack of ethical principles might evolve into unsustainable practices from not only tourists and suppliers, by placing little consideration for the social and environmental aspects of the local community, but also from the local community, demonstrating little consideration towards tourism, influencing the tourism experience, in the form of lacking satisfaction and/or authenticity, and which becomes economical unsustainable. Therefore, the economical dimension of sustainable development reinforces the idea underlying this research, on the need to grasp into the essence of consumer behaviour, in order to encapsulate those demand-related concepts, such as marketing and tourism satisfaction, addressing issues of expectations, consumer values and authenticity. However, according to Butler (1999), sustainable development is not a value free concept. It adopts the norms of the society in which the concept is generated.

The work presented here adopts a wide definition of Sustainable Tourism Development, by considering the dimensions of environment, local community and economical development as key aspects of sustainability, but embedded into an enriching interaction between the host community and tourists.



Fig. 2 Components of Sustainable Tourism

The Components of Sustainable Tourism framework outlined in Figure 2 suggest a shift from a static approach to Sustainable Development, ruled by conspicuous consumption through social norms which address the issues of ethics, fairness, equity, environmental viability and authenticity. It is here suggested that Sustainable Tourism Development implies a living interaction between locals and tourists, in their generation of a new vibrant community, based upon the social capital emerging from their communion. It is argued here, that this process is not ruled by extrinsic norms, but by inconspicuous consumption, led by the thrill of recreation and personal growth, in accordance with the spirituality dimension of consumption introduced by Holbrook (1999). There is a direct link between a community's social capital and its successful economic growth (Halpern, 2005:71). The challenge is how to allow the tourist who wants intrinsic value from their tourism experience to contribute to this capital instead of damaging or depleting it.

Finally, two more aspects need to be addressed when bringing a market approach to Sustainable Tourism Development. This relates to the feasibility of branding for this type of concept and the other is associated with the intrinsic limitations of its market. In relation to the first one of these issues, Hunter (1997) considers that Sustainable Tourism should be a flexible concept and perceives this as an adaptive paradigm. According to this author, Sustainable Development is circumstantial and this attribute is intrinsic to the nature of Sustainable Tourism Development. Consequently, this also raises the question of whether a consumer-driven, and therefore, context-free concept of Sustainable Tourism Development is actually feasible. In relation to the latter, it raises the question on whether Sustainable Tourism Development can ever become a mass consumption element, without losing its intrinsic meaning.

Conclusions

This work examines the literature and supports the generation of a consumer-driven research agenda for Sustainable Tourism Development. The review of the literature provides extensive

evidence on the importance of consumer engagement into Sustainable Tourism Development practices, and suggests that little research on Sustainable Tourism has in fact adopted this approach. Most work focused on Sustainable Tourism mainly adopts a policy-makers approach. However, tourism businesses will only adopt sustainable practices if this generates financial benefits. Therefore, the need to engage with consumers in the development of sustainable practices, by focusing on the identification of those consumer values triggering the consumption of sustainable products. On the other hand, those studies adopting a consumer approach for examining Sustainable Tourism tend to focus on environmental aspects only.

Based upon Holbrook's (1999) work, this paper introduces a new concept of Sustainable Tourism Development. Similar to previous studies, this concept implies the social, economical and environmental development of the host community. However, it adopts a consumption-based approach for its definition, whose determinants move away from a static and externally imposed norms towards an intrinsically driven individualised ruled consumption. It is expected that this type of Sustainable Tourism Development can provide a more enriching value to the community, not only related to the economical outcomes brought in by tourists, but also to the social capital emerging from their experiences and interaction. Therefore, this suggests a research agenda supporting the identification of those underlying consumer values which will trigger sustainable consumption in tourism, aiming, in the long-term, for the generation of a consumer-driven Sustainable Tourism Brand.

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