Tourist destination marketing: From sustainability myopia to memorable experiences

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A B S T R A C T

This study explores the way in which consumers interpret and process the marketing and communication of sustainable forms of tourism in destinations, in order to inform policy makers about the appropriateness of different types of sustainability messages. Through a thematic analysis of focus group data, we explore the ways in which consumers engage with, and respond to, explicit discourses of sustainability in marketing a tourist destination. We find that overt discourses of sustainability are often rejected by consumers, thus suggesting that messages concerned with sustainability should place greater priority upon consumer experience and opportunities afforded by the purchase and consumption of the travel experience (that happens to be sustainable) they can expect at their chosen destination. As such, commitments to sustainability manifest within organisational philosophy and practice should not drive the principle, overt discourse communicated to consumers. Rather, as embedded within product and practice, such messages would have greater power and effect if they occupied a more subliminal position in destination marketing materials.

1. Introduction

There has been increased public awareness of the consequences of excessive consumerism and the need to use marketing as one of a suite of techniques to promote sustainable behaviour change (Belz & Peattie, 2012; Font & McCabe, 2017; Lee & Kotler, 2015; Prothero & Fitchett, 2000). The discrepancy between everyday sustainability behaviours and those exhibited in decision-making practices in tourism (Barr, Shaw, Coles, & Prillwitz, 2010; Cohen, Higham, & Reis, 2013; Miller, Rathouse, Scarles, Holmes, & Tribe, 2010) means that tourism specific research is needed to understand how sustainability marketing differs to marketing commodities or behaviour change in habitual situations. Although there seems to be a persistent lack of public engagement with sustainability in tourism, we know little from a marketing perspective as to why this is the case (see Weeden, 2014).

Sustainability marketing has traditionally focused on how to overtly market sustainable products, with a view to mobilising sustainable behaviour as a central, rather than peripheral, activity (McDonagh & Prothero, 2014). This has led to communicating sustainability product features as if these are key purchasing attributes, a phenomenon labelled as green or sustainability marketing myopia because of its over reliance on altruistic consumer interest in sustainability (Ottman, Stafford, & Hartman, 2006; Villarino & Font, 2015). This approach has

been problematised (Grant, 2007; Rex & Baumann, 2007), suggesting that the route to mainstreaming sustainable production and consumption requires more than increasing the market share of deep green consumers, but instead requires making all experiences more sustainable.

While the direct correlation between increased interest in sustainability in tourism and greater demand for tourism products that are embedded with sustainability principles has yet to be directly proven through research, there is a noted emphasis on tourists searching for experience, and connection within authentic and ethical encounters (Weeden, 2008). A focus on how specific sustainability features help consumers fulfil their hedonistic travel desires requires a more pragmatic approach that links notions of sustainability to tourist experiences through the significant contribution that elements in sustainability can have on the facilitation of memorable tourism experiences (MTEs) (Agapito, Valle, & Mendes, 2014; Kim, 2014; Kim, Ritchie, & McCormick, 2012; Pine & Gilmore, 1999). Through the creation and portrayal of *experience* in sustainability marketing, factors concerned with the environment and local culture in destinations could act as unique selling points, providing benefits to consumers, without explicitly drawing on notions of sustainable tourism as being in opposition to 'mass tourism' (Caruana & Crane, 2008), or providing a narrative centred on 'doing tourism differently' or 'saving the world'

(Butcher, 2002).

It is our contention that there is a need for further in-depth investigations to explore the complexities of human engagement with discourses of sustainability in a tourism destination marketing context. This will help us to understand not only how destination promotional campaigns influence behaviour, but also provide insight into and hence overcome some of the barriers preventing positive change (Becken, 2007; Verbeek & Mommaas, 2008). The objective of this article is to further understand the questions that arise regarding the ways in which consumer engagement and response to advertising and promotion is intrinsically connected to the successful marketing of sustainability for a tourism destination. This paper explores consumer interpretations of a marketing campaign conducted by a leading European destination. It contends that overt discourses of sustainability are often rejected by tourists, thus leading to the suggestion that marketing messages concerned with sustainability should place greater priority upon the opportunities afforded by purchasing and consuming a responsible travel experience. As such, commitments to sustainable destinations manifest within organisational philosophy and practice should not drive the principle, overt discourse communicated to consumers. Rather, as embedded within product and practice, such messages would have greater power and effect if they occupied a more subliminal position.

To offer some context for this, the paper first presents an account of existing research in the area of sustainable tourist behaviour and the marketing of sustainability in tourism and destinations. It then moves on to explore the role of experience in consumer decision making. The methodology for this research is then presented, followed by a presentation of our analysis. Finally, the paper concludes with a discussion of the role of both sustainability and experience in the marketing of tourism destinations to offer the suggestion that more implicit marketing strategies are needed to move away from a reproduction of the distinction between 'mass' and 'sustainable' tourism, towards one that collapses this arbitrary distinction and facilitates all forms of tourism to be underpinned by notions of sustainability.

2. Tourist decision-making, sustainability and marketing

Attention turns firstly to the conceptualisation of consumer behaviour in the context of sustainable tourism and the emergence of ethical consumption in tourism. Tourist decision-making has long been the focus of both researchers and practitioners (Sharifpour, Walters, Ritchie, & Winter, 2014), and its inherent complexity means it remains a subject of intensive study. Recognition of the importance of experience, and factors such as emotion (Moons & De Pelsmacker, 2012), self-identity (Varul, 2009), a sense of responsibility (Wells, Ponting, & Peattie, 2011), and motivational complexities in decision-making (Jägel, Keeling, Reppel, & Gruber, 2012) have contributed to a rejection of the consumer as rational decision maker, as proclaimed in traditional decision-making models (see Engel, Kollatt, & Blackwell, 1968; Howard & Sheth, 1969; Nicosia, 1966). These assume consumers move in a linear way through problem identification, information search, evaluation of alternatives, choice and post-choice processes, an approach now considered inappropriate, especially when investigating a multifaceted and challenging area of study such as green/ ethical consumption (McEachern & Carrigan, 2012). Marketing strategies with overt altruistic sustainability messages follow this traditional decision-making model mentality of providing factual sustainability information, whereas understanding tourists as complex emotional decision-makers will suggest we need to design hedonistic messages that appeal to tourists' desire for experiences (Villarino & Font, 2015).

This paper argues that information exchange alone seems limited in attempting to change behaviour. While awareness of the global impacts of human consumption has become significantly more apparent around the world, little has been achieved to move towards a more sustainable society (Buckley, 2012). It is the authors' understanding of the effects such knowledge and understanding have on tourists' purchasing choice

that has recently come to the fore of research. For some, the effects of climate change are considered the driving force of a gradual general behavioural transformation (Scott, Gössling, & Hall, 2012), supported by evidence of increased purchasing of sustainably labelled goods (CooperativeBank, 2010). Yet significantly, while UK consumers have higher-than-average awareness of ethical product choices, their consumption of sustainable products lags behind those of neighbouring European countries (Sudbury Riley, Kohlbacher, & Hofmeister, 2012). This increased awareness of environmental impacts only makes more obvious the gap between the values, attitudes and intentions of consumers and their actual behaviour (McEachern & Carrigan, 2012; Young, Hwang, McDonald, & Oates, 2010), explained as a rejection of threats to ones' right to consumerism, in the context of not being able to travel (Font & Hindley, 2016). Miller et al. (2010) suggest that a clear distinction exists between environmental awareness, public understanding of sustainability within everyday purchasing behaviours, and that associated with travel and tourism related purchases. Essentially, consumers' heightened awareness and good intentions do not translate into greater levels of sustainable tourism consumption, with desire for responsible purchases traded off in the market place in favour of other, more appealing options (Devinney, Auger, & Eckhardt, 2010). The challenge is therefore to design sustainable holidays to appeal to the hedonistic nature of travel (Malone, McCabe, & Smith, 2014). This requires putting the consumer at the centre of the (sustainable) experience, which has not always been a key strength of tourist destinations (King, 2002; Serra, Font, & Ivanova, 2016).

Too much emphasis on sustainability within promotional material can have a negative effect on tourists' purchase behaviour, leading to an increase in 'traveller's guilt,' and greater levels of discomfort, dissonance, denial, a delegation of responsibility to other actors, and increased demand on the unsustainable product (Becken, 2007; Font & Hindley, 2016; Scott et al., 2012). This perception of sustainable tourism activities and holidays being in some way less appealing, and requiring sacrificial behaviour, may be key to understanding barriers to sustainable holiday purchasing. For instance, Caruana, Glozer, Crane, and McCabe (2014) undertook research into the personal accounts of tourists on a 'responsible travel' experience in order to gain insight into their motivations, and identify what, if anything, differentiated these individuals from 'regular' tourists. Their study revealed tourists who expressed higher levels of involvement and intrinsic motivations in responsible tourism were also driven to seek pleasure and relaxation, similar to the research by Malone et al. (2014). Likewise, Weeden (2011) reported responsible tourists believed they deserved to fly because they prioritised sustainable behaviours in their everyday lives. Yet within the context of travel and tourism, such negotiations remain relatively unexplored. Indeed, while these issues are evident in studies seeking to clarify ethical consumer decision-making (Carrington, Neville, & Whitwell, 2014), the specific nature of the role of marketing in the anticipatory construction of the tourist experience, and the importance, and habitual nature of leisure travel to consumer lifestyles, have so far been neglected. It is to an analysis of existing work on sustainable marketing that attention now turns.

3. Marketing sustainability in destinations

The economic value of the global tourism industry has created an increasingly competitive market, with marketing integral to the success of a destination seeking to secure commercial advantage (Pike & Page, 2014). Destinations are a complex amalgam of tourist products and services (Buhalis, 2000), and are thus required to balance a varied set of attributes, stakeholders, and actors in the co-creation of tourist experiences, whilst simultaneously engaging with the sustainability agenda (Fyall, Garrod, & Wang, 2012). As a key element within a package of differentiated appeal, it has been claimed that the marketing of sustainable attributes can enhance destination competitiveness (Fjelstul, 2014). The effective marketing of sustainability in