Short communication

Creativity and sustainability in hospitality and tourism

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ABSTRACT

An ongoing challenge facing hospitality and tourism academics, policy makers, and industry practitioners is dealing with the complex issue of sustainability. In contrast with previous studies that focus on solutions within the constraints of what is already known, this conceptual article presents a fresh perspective in the form of creativity toward greater sustainability. The article adopts an inductive reasoning systems approach to develop a creativity framework for greater sustainability in hospitality and tourism. More specifically, the article offers a contemporary overview of sustainability and a thorough explanation of the creativity concept and its application in these industries. In doing so, the article provides greater clarity on the creativity–sustainability relationship in hospitality and tourism.

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1. Introduction

An upsurge in awareness of and interest in sustainability issues in hospitality and tourism has occurred in recent years (Dolnicar, Crouch, & Long, 2008). Although hospitality service providers and tourism operators have acknowledged the benefits of creating and engaging in sustainability practices, which can serve as a tiebreaker for customer booking and patronage when all other factors, such as price and quality, are equal (Ricaurte, Verma, & Withiam, 2012), myriad concerns have been raised about the impact of hospitality and tourism operations on stakeholders' (i.e. anyone with an interest in activities performed by an organization, such as owners, investors, employees, suppliers, creditors, customers, communities, trade unions, and governments Friedman & Miles, 2006) economic (e.g. income, monetary cost), environmental (e.g. climate, natural resources), and social (e.g. culture, employment) well-being (Aragon, Martin-Tapia, & de la Torre-Ruiz, 2015), all of which relate to the sustainability agenda—note that these (sustainability) issues are not new but remain ongoing.

Although many studies have contributed promising solutions to sustainability issues in hospitality and tourism, they remain limited to conceptual definitions (Farrell & Twining-Ward, 2004; Saarinen, 2006), perceptual and behavioral understanding (Ham & Han, 2013; Kim, Yoon, & Shin, 2015; Namkung & Jang, 2013), and objective measures and reporting (Choi & Sirakaya, 2006; Ham & Lee, 2011; Holcomb, Upchurch, & Okumus, 2007) of sustainability. To date, no study has explored the creativity–sustainability relationship in the context of hospitality and tourism, which may limit the adaptability of existing strategies and the discovery of new solutions to address myriad sustainability issues in the area. This article argues that the concept of creativity holds immense potential to advance the findings of existing studies and to contribute to new sustainable pastures in hospitality and tourism, as creativity involves recognizing and producing new and valuable ideas that lead to acceptable, adaptable, coherent, effective, efficient, feasible, innovative, novel, original, practical, and reliable solutions (Franken & Bauers, 2002; Harris, 2012; Kaufman, 2009). Hospitality and tourism are closely related industries, and thus creative solutions for the sustainability agenda may produce solutions that overlap between these industries. For example, ecotourism is not limited to tours at ecotourism sites (e.g. rainforests) but also involves neighboring hospitality services (e.g. accommodation, restaurants) in the area—this overlap may be required to achieve greater sustainability in terms of being economically (e.g. profits), environmentally (e.g. minimal carbon footprints), and socially (e.g. employment for tourism operators and local communities) healthy.

Considering the need for an introduction and thorough explanation of the creativity–sustainability relationship in the hospitality and tourism literature, a conceptual route to developing this article becomes especially relevant. Note that the central thrust of a conceptual article is not to present dispositive factual information (e.g. empirical findings based on quantitative or qualitative analysis), but rather to present arguments that may proceed from factual assumptions premised on broadly accepted facts to support conceptual ideas and propositions (Watts, 2011). Thus, this conceptual article aims to accentuate the creativity–sustainability relationship and, in doing so, to provide a creativity framework for greater sustainability (in terms of economic,

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environmental, and social well-being) in hospitality and tourism. More specifically, this article adopts an inductive reasoning systems approach—a logical process of synthesizing specific observations from broadly accepted facts to identify the interdependence of internal and external factors that form an interactive conclusion of an investigated phenomenon (Galanakis, 2006; Heit, 2000)—to develop the proposed framework. As such, this article contributes in two major ways: (1) to theory, by providing an understanding on the creativity–sustainability relationship in hospitality and tourism, and (2) to practice, by offering useful guidelines to encourage creative practices that produce sustainable outcomes in hospitality and tourism.

2. What is sustainability?

The notion of *sustainability* has emerged as a result of significant concerns about undesirable outcomes of ongoing economic and population growth and consumption of natural resources (United States Environmental Protection Agency, 2015). The conceptualization of sustainability by the Brundtland Commission of the United Nations is the most widely quoted definition in academia and practice: "meeting the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs" (World Commission on Environment and Development, 1987, p. 43). In ecology, sustainability refers to the capacity of the ecosystem to maintain essential functions and processes, especially its biodiversity in full measure over time (United Nations Environment Programme, 2010). Semantically, sustainability refers to "the equilibrium between an activity and its supporting environment, where they interact with each other without mutual detrimental effects" (Faber, Jorna, & Van Engelen, 2005, p. 5).

The organizing principle for sustainability is *sustainable development*, which argues for the integration of economic, environmental, and social considerations to achieve enduring progress (Kahle & Gurel-Atay, 2014). In business, this principle is often referred to as the 'triple bottom line', which encourages formulating solutions and decision making grounded on the interconnected relationships among profit, planet, and people (Slaper & Hall, 2011). As such, sustainability provides a *direction* for stakeholders to approach the type of problems related to the deteriorating relationship between ongoing economic development and global ecology (i.e. socio-environment; Lejano & Stokols, 2013; Rapport & Maffi, 2011).

However, streamlining the concept of sustainability into existing practices may be subject to potential bias, resulting in "sustainability practices" that deviate from its intended meaning. For example, profit-oriented hospitality service providers and tourism operators might consider doing whatever it takes (e.g. in a commercially lawful way, but neglecting socio-environmental responsibilities) to sustain their economic well-being, whereas hospitality and tourism businesses that are environmentally (e.g. environmentalist) or socially (e.g. socialists) inclined might go all out to sustain the environmental and social well-being of stakeholders in the ecosystem in which they operate at the expense of other sustainability dimensions (e.g. economic well-being). Indeed, it is often challenging for both commercial and non-profit organizations, including those in hospitality and tourism, to strike a balance in maintaining the economic, environmental, and social well-being of all stakeholders in the ecosystem. In the subsequent sections that follow, this article offers a potential solution to this challenge by introducing the notion of creativity and the ways creativity can contribute to achieving the well-balanced goal of greater sustainability.

More important, it should be noted that sustainability, as an independent concept, provides only a general direction for enduring progress—that is, by considering economic (profit), environmental (planet), and social (people) well-being. Thus, contextualization, a process by which a subject takes root in a specific context (Rousseau & Fried, 2001), of the concept is required for making purposeful and meaningful contributions to, in this study specifically, hospitality and tourism.

3. Sustainability in hospitality and tourism

The unprecedented boom in hospitality and tourism is well documented, with a record 1.14 billion international travelers in 2014 (United Nations World Tourism Organization, 2015), accounting for 9.5%, or US$6.83 trillion, of gross domestic product globally (Ernst & Young, 2015; Statista, 2015). However, these staggering statistics often overshadow the inherent struggles between the needs of conservation management and hospitality and tourism operations. For example, many hospitality service providers and tourism operators tend to focus only on the value derived from economic exchanges when promoting travel and consumption-related activities, which makes hospitality and tourism industries vulnerable to myriad socio-environmental risks, such as environmental degradation and conflict with host communities. The key to resolving these issues resides in *sustainable hospitality and tourism*—that is, hospitality and tourism that takes full account of the impact of all its activities on current and future economic, environmental, and social well-being (Center for Responsible Travel, 2013) and, as a result, generates income and employment in ways that are less harmful to the ecosystem (Gössling, 2000; Sloan, Legrand, & Chen, 2012).

Many agents can be identified in the process of creating, using, and spreading sustainable hospitality and tourism. Torres-Delgado and Palomeque (2012) provide a list of key institutional initiatives that contributed to this cause from 1992 (e.g. Earth Summit) to 2009 (e.g. meeting of the Tourism Reactivation Committee of the United Nations World Travel Organization) and resulted in myriad policies and strategies to encourage sustainable hospitality and tourism practices. Furthermore, academics and scientific communities have played a significant role in the discourse of sustainability in hospitality and tourism, ranging from debates on the conceptualization and contextualization of sustainability to propositions for assessing and managing sustainability in the field (e.g. Buckley, 2012; Font & Harris, 2004; Garrod & Fyall, 1998; Ko, 2005; Saarinen, 2006). Most often, objective measures have been proposed to tackle the issue of unsustainable hospitality and tourism practices, such as ecological footprint analysis and green certification (di Pietro, Cao, & Partlow, 2013; Hunter & Shaw, 2007). More recently, Cucculelli and Goffi (2016) provided the first empirical evidence of a positive hospitality and tourism outcome in the form of destination competitiveness enhancement as a result of engaging in sustainable economic, environmental, and social practices.

Notwithstanding the immense contribution of academics, policy makers, and industry practitioners thus far, this article contends that sustainability initiatives for hospitality and tourism should continue to develop, as sustainability peculiarities in these industries are not static but rather reflect a dynamic ecosystem that develops and evolves as stakeholders in the economic and socio-environment interact. More specifically, there is a need to identify and develop mechanisms that facilitate the sustainability of sustainability initiatives, address unresolved sustainability issues, and thus direct the field toward greater sustainability. Greater sustainability involves the sustainability (or the continued existence and progress) of sustainability, which requires a holistic approach to managing sustainability issues, such as continued actions to address existing and unresolved problems related to sustainability and to capitalize on opportunities to improve sustainable outcomes (Lim, in press). In doing so, this article introduces the concept of creativity, discusses its position in extant hospitality and tourism literature, and explores how creativity can be developed and used to encourage greater sustainability in hospitality and tourism.

4. What is creativity?

Creativity is a complex activity consisting of a special form of problem solving resulting in something new and valuable (Bonnardel & Marmeche, 2005; Ott & Pozzi, 2010). It is becoming increasingly recognized as an important competency for a better future in a modern-day