



## Research article

# Normative influences: How socio-cultural and industrial norms influence the adoption of sustainability practices. A grounded theory of Cretan, small tourism firms

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## ABSTRACT

Previous research explains the various factors that motivate or discourage the owner-managers of small firms to behave sustainably. However, it has failed to develop a meaningful understanding of how these factors interrelate or combine to influence their decisions. This research identifies and explains how socio-cultural and industrial norms influence the intentions and behaviours towards sustainability of owner-managers of small tourism firms. This grounded theory study shows how selective peer association allows the use of norms that match one's values to predict the difficulties, benefits and therefore justification for pro-sustainability (in)action. Locally-held socio-cultural norms determine what is commonly (dis)approved of through reflective and comparative processes. Connectedness to the locality triggers empathy for nature and the local society, but not a corresponding sense of responsibility. This dissonance is managed by allocating responsibility to industry actors perceived as more powerful, particularly tour operators and consumers, and to the widespread greed and short term culture dominating the sector.

## 1. Introduction

Concerns over the negative effects of tourism development have led to calls for tourism businesses to hold themselves accountable for the environmental and social impact they have on the tourist destinations they rely on (Camilleri, 2014; Cooper et al., 2008; del Mar Alonso-Almeida et al., 2018; Sharpley, 2003). Tourism industry impacts have been under-estimated due to the multiplicity of service sector suppliers it involves, making it harder to measure impacts and attribute responsibilities (Gonzalez-Benito and Gonzalez-Benito, 2006; El Dief and Font, 2010), when in fact it accounts for 8% of global greenhouse gas emissions (Lanzen et al., 2018). The tourism industry consists mainly of Small and Medium-sized Enterprises (SMEs), who underplay their responsibility towards being sustainable due to their size (Coles et al., 2014; Thomas et al., 2011). However, their collective impact on the environment of accommodation SMEs is more significant than that of larger firms (Williams and Schaefer, 2013).

Previous studies have explored the internal reasons to adopt sustainability practices such as owner-managers' positive environmental attitudes, personal values and knowledge of environmental issues; business reputation, and cost-savings. The relationships between a

positive attitude and actual environmental behaviour are complex (Tilley, 1999), as SMEs face numerous constraints that explain their attitude-behaviour gap, in relation to their world-views, ability to learn, knowledge, mastery, self-efficacy, lack of finance, time and resources (Dewhurst and Thomas, 2003; Garay et al., 2017; Sampaio et al., 2012; Prud'homme and Raymond, 2016). However these studies tend to be framed in stakeholder and institutional theories, that are more appropriate to examine larger firms than SMEs (Font et al., 2016b; Neubaum et al., 2012; Russo and Tencati, 2009).

We propose to study the pressure to follow social obligations and duties that are associated with the local community and shared/common norms, and the effect these social norms have on SMEs taking responsibility to be more sustainable. SMEs are embedded in their local societies, as shown by the fact that their owner-managers are more likely to a) come from the same geographic location in which they have established their businesses, b) employ local residents, and c) work with local suppliers (Darnall et al., 2010). Due to this embeddedness, SME owner-managers tend to mimic behaviour that is perceived appropriate to the local community and to conform to shared norms (Lepoutre and Heene, 2006). Studies so far, have highlighted the important role of different factors on driving SMEs to be more environmentally active,

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and have also suggested that they will perceive the same pressures differently, resulting in various degrees of engagement. We know that while most firms will conform to mimetic pressure and adopt sustainability practices based on social expectations, the most proactive owner-managers go against societal normative pressures by redefining what SMEs can contribute towards sustainability (Andrews, 1998; Bansal, 2005; Bansal and Roth, 2000; Font et al., 2016a).

There are two potential explanations as to why SME owner-managers have different perceptions of their responsibilities to be sustainable, which the existing literature has neglected and which are addressed in this article. Firstly, even in current times, in which sustainability is rising in the public agenda, a tourism SME may not experience any noticeable pressure to invest in sustainability practices (Coles et al., 2016). Secondly, pressures for more proactive engagement with sustainability may be in conflict with more salient health and safety, quality and price pressures (Baddeley and Font, 2011). Empirical studies examining sustainable behaviour amongst tourism SMEs are scarce (see Sampaio et al., 2012; Sardianou et al., 2016; Tzschentke et al., 2008). Some scholars call for further research as to what contextual characteristics specific to the tourism industry influence SMEs to behave more sustainably (Garay et al., 2018; Papagiannakis and Lioukas, 2012; Bansal and Gao, 2006), including social norms (Sardianou et al., 2016).

Hence this research aims to understand the complex factors that motivate owner-managers in tourism SMEs to take responsibility, or not, to be more sustainable. This article focuses on one part of the findings of a larger study and focuses on only one factor, that of norms. This factor was identified from the in depth interviews with the participating SME owner-managers as an influential element in their decisions to adopt or reject sustainability behaviour. In order to better understand what, how and why various factors interplay and influence these owner-managers, the study adopted a grounded theory approach.

As a theory-building study, *a priori* literature was consulted primarily as a means of creating theoretical sensitivity within the areas of business sustainability, tourism SMEs and factors that motivate or hinder business owner-managers to adopt sustainability practices (briefly presented in this introduction). The important role of the concept of subjective norms on business decision making emerged from the interpretations of field data and was not imposed on the data from the beginning of the research. In other words, and in line with the Grounded Theory Method (GTM), the researchers engaged with relevant theories e.g. normative theories, during the theoretical and constant comparison stages, in order to enhance their theoretical sensitivity and to compare the emerging theory with other work in the field.

An inherent difficulty of the GTM is how the conceptual explanation is presented. One belief is to write and present as it happens i.e. data drives theory. However, this is not easily followed by the reader, because GTM studies use an iterative process of data collection and analysis (Goulding, 2009). As a result of these difficulties, the analysis represents the final theoretical interpretation of the category of socio-cultural and industrial norms, which is the product of the iterative process of data and theoretical integration (Suddaby, 2006). The article will continue with the explanation of the research method followed in this study. This is followed by a section on key theories of norms before presenting our analysis of what, how and why norms are used by SME owner-managers in their justifications of their chosen (un)sustainable business behaviour.

## 2. Grounded Theory Methodology

GTM was considered an appropriate methodology to investigate the sustainable behaviour of tourism SMEs and explore how different factors contribute, interrelate and eventually influence their sustainability decisions. This is because GTM facilitates the development of a theory by means of continuous data collection and analysis, and allows

theoretical concepts to emerge from the data without being influenced by predefined frames of previously existing theories (Glaser, 2004). By adopting GTM this study answers the call made by Stumpf et al. (2016: 1692) for more GTM research in sustainable tourism that can “elucidate novel theoretical perspectives on sustainability”, which the current tourism research lacks. A qualitative method was used to keep the approach flexible and open-ended in order to learn the meanings and views held by the participants in the study (Miller and Salkind, 2002).

The spatial boundary of the study area was the island of Crete. Crete is the largest island in Greece and one of the most popular tourist destinations for European and other international travellers. The firms included in this research were micro firms typically employing less than 10 people each, and were personally managed by their owner-managers. In addition to business size, ownership also acted as a control variable; only small firms owned and managed by one or two people were included in this study. It is worth noting that this study selected a cross-section of owner-managers, unlike previous studies of sustainable behaviour that have singled out individuals from businesses with sustainability credentials, or that self-selected themselves to participate in a sustainability survey (for example Coles et al., 2016; Font et al., 2016a, 2016b; Garay et al., 2018; Sampaio et al., 2012; Sardianou et al., 2016; Tzschentke et al., 2008).

GTM typically uses in-depth face-to-face interviews to collect data. In this study the interviews were conducted in two stages, on an individual basis, and took place at the participants' business addresses for their convenience. During the first stage of the research, interviews were conducted with each of the owner-managers from the 23 participating SMEs. These interviews were unstructured, using open-ended questions, and aimed to construct a better understanding of the main issues considered important in tourism SMEs and which influence their daily operations. During the second stage, the focus was on elaborating upon key issues identified during analysis of the first round interviews. Consequently and in line with GTM, the researchers used theoretical sampling in order to select appropriate participants. 14 individuals from the first stage were re-interviewed, while two owner-managers from additional businesses were approached due to their fit with the emerging theory. For the second stage 16 interviews were conducted, bringing the total to 39 in-depth interviews for the whole study, with 25 participants. The average interview duration was 60 min.

All of the interviews were voice recorded and conducted in Greek, the native language of both the leading researcher and the participants. This was advantageous as it was easier to build rapport with the interviewees and to obtain rich data. The interviews were verbatim transcribed while only a few were professionally translated into English for verification purposes during the analysis. The second researcher verified the coding to maximise cross-coder reliability. The research was approved by the Research Ethics Committee of [NAME TO BE ADDED AFTER REVIEW] University.

The researchers chose to use a multi-step data analysis technique that synthesised both Strauss and Corbin's (1998) and Charmaz's (2006) versions of GTM. This combination made the most of the guidelines that could be adapted to this particular study (Strauss and Corbin's version), whilst also acknowledging that both researchers and participants embark together on the process of constructing reality (Charmaz' s version). Strauss and Corbin's basic principles of open coding, axial coding, theoretical emergence, theoretical sampling, and the process of abstraction remained fundamental throughout this research.

The interview transcripts were read carefully and key words or sentences were highlighted. Codes were developed to capture the main ideas of the participant's words, and these were written in the margins of the transcript. Through this deeper insight, the researchers became familiar with the participants' implicit and explicit concerns and how these were used to explain their (in)action towards sustainability. The codes were grouped into categories according to the events and issues discussed by the participants. Through this more abstract level of analysis, the initial categories were restructured into more meaningful

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