



Operating small tourism firms in rural destinations: A social representations approach to examining how small tourism firms cope with non-tourism induced changes



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HIGHLIGHTS

- Small tourism firms in rural destinations are constantly challenged by industry related and external changes.
- Representations of a rural destination by small tourism firm owners and managers are explored.
- Coping is mobilised by perceived threats to the destination's representation.
- Implementation of coping is not without difficulties and concerns.
- Collaborative planning with stakeholders concerned about rural development is needed.

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the representation that owners and managers of small tourism firms ascribe to their rural destination and how non-tourism induced changes interfere with this representation and motivate coping as guided by social representations theory. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with twenty-four owners and/or managers of at least one small accommodation property in Gloucester, New South Wales, Australia. The informants became involved in the area's accommodation sector primarily driven by the lifestyle goals embedded in their representation of Gloucester. The perception that mining-induced changes might transform Gloucester into a mining town as opposed to its current representation as a town with a mine has motivated many informants to cope. However, coping is impeded by feelings of powerlessness, perceived uncertainties, and distrust in both government and industry. The findings provide preliminary insight into why and how small tourism firm owners/managers cope when faced with change from the perspective of social representations.

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1. Introduction

Small tourism firms (STFs) in rural destinations play a significant role in supporting rural development (Lane & Kastenholz, 2015; Thomas, Shaw, & Page, 2011). Many firms are locally owned, tend to use products and services produced in the destination in which they operate, and thus contribute to a higher income multiplier effect therein (Anthopoulou & Melissourgios, 2012, pp. 359–370; Wanhill, 2000). Because of the relatively low entry requirements

for starting an STF, the tourism industry is accessible to individuals or families seeking economic diversification or a supplementary source of income in areas where traditional rural industries (e.g., agriculture, fishing, timber, mining) are in decline and natural resources remain attractive to tourists (Ateljevic, 2008; Carlsen, Morrison, & Weber, 2008; Getz & Carlsen, 2005). Tourism also provides opportunities for residents and amenity migrants to sustain or develop a relationship with rural destinations that both carry significant meaning and support a desired way of life. When such a person-place bond is established, it can motivate individuals to conserve important natural, social, and cultural features that are essential to the sustainability of rural landscapes and contribute to destination competitiveness (Getz & Carlsen, 2000; Jones & Haven-Tang, 2005; Morrison, 2006).

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To operate an STF in a rural destination, owners and managers need to cope with not only turbulence within the core tourism system of their destination—the structures, goods, services, and resources that directly feed into the tourism industry (Farrell & Twining-Ward, 2004)—but also external changes driven by sources outside of those core tourism systems. Changes can threaten the meaning and representation of rural destinations that motivate the initial involvement of STF owners and managers in and their continuing commitment to operating their business therein. As such, how STF owners and managers cope in the face of change can influence whether they continue to engage in activities that support the development of their business and the destinations in a manner that conforms to their ideal representation.

The purpose of our study was to examine how STF owners and managers cope with external changes by understanding the representation that they ascribe to their rural destination and how non-tourism induced changes interfere with this representation and motivate their coping responses. Below we first present the characteristics of STFs and the main source of external changes that can challenge STF operations. The Social Representations (SR) Theory that guides our study is then introduced.

2. STFs and changes external to rural destinations

STFs are characterised by their small size in terms of employees and rooms or level of capital investment (Thomas et al., 2011; Wanhill, 2000). For example, an STF in the accommodation sector is defined by Tourism Research Australia (TRA, 2013) as a bed and breakfast, self-contained accommodation, caravan/camping park, farmstay, hotel/motel, or lodge that is operated with less than 15 rooms/units. The literature also suggests that STFs are dominated by owner-managers with non-economic motivations that underpin their lifestyle goals. The enjoyment of a lifestyle supported by the natural environment and its associated opportunities is often among the reasons that participants in this sector become involved in rural tourism (Ateljevic & Doorne, 2000; Hall, 2009a). These non-economic motivations are frequently embedded in the various aspects of meaning and representation that STF owners and managers ascribe to the rural destination in which their tourism business is situated and to which they become attached (Carlsen et al., 2008).

Many of these owners and managers are amenity migrants who are attracted to rural destinations that support a desired way of life (e.g., close interactions with nature and local residents) through small tourism operations (Ateljevic & Doorne, 2000; Ioannides & Petersen, 2003; Shaw & Williams, 2013). Operating an STF also provides an opportunity for rural residents to remain connected with their community because of the important meaning and values they ascribe to the location (Ateljevic, 2008; Carlsen et al., 2008; Getz & Carlsen, 2005). The lifestyle goals and meanings that STF owners and managers ascribe to rural destinations can become entrenched in decision-making related to business operations, community involvement, and destination development (Getz & Carlsen, 2005; Hallak, Brown, & Lindsay, 2012; Morrison, 2006). In light of these values and motivations held by STF owners and managers, it is unsurprising that they are sensitive to externally induced changes.

Many rural areas in Western societies have been experiencing changes that arise from shifting societal expectations in terms of function from supporting intensive production via agriculture, logging and mining toward accommodating a multifunctional landscape. This shift manifests the growing public interest in conservation and consumption, as reflected in the growth in protected areas, tourism and recreation, and amenity migration (Argent, 2011; Holmes, 2006). Changes arising from sources external to

the core tourism system of rural destinations manifest the complex processes within the rural tourism system and interdependence of rural tourism and other systems (e.g., ecological, social, cultural, economic) across various spatial scales (Farrell & Twining-Ward, 2004; Leiper, 2003).

External changes signify the vulnerability of the rural tourism system and the STFs therein because such changes often evolve beyond STFs' control. Meanwhile, external changes not only directly impact the ecological and physical landscape of rural areas but also shape their socio-economic characteristics that collectively contribute to the meaning of the areas as attached places of residence and/or attractive rural destinations (Devine-Wright & Howes, 2010; de Sousa & Kastenholz, 2015). Changes can also affect the destination image that STF owners and managers value highly and wish to promote (Irvine & Anderson, 2004). However, they often lack the management skills and other resources necessary to assist with their capacity to cope (Lashley & Rowson, 2010; Mottiar, 2007).

Understanding how STF owners and managers react to changes external to rural tourism systems that may threaten their relationship with these destinations and associated meanings that are essential to their lifestyle goals is important given the positive role that STFs can play in rural development. A growing body of literature has been developed to examine how destinations are impacted by and have recovered from changes driven by natural causes such as wildfires, earthquakes, and epidemics (e.g., Armstrong & Ritchie, 2008; Hystad & Keller, 2008; Irvine & Anderson, 2004). This literature emphasises the important role of destination marketing organisations and relevant government entities and stakeholders in recovery marketing to cope with crises and restore public perceptions of destinations. Much less destination research has been devoted to examining human-made changes that are external to tourism systems and are slowly unfolding; such as a proposed mining project the impact of which can continue for several years due to uncertainties associated with related changes. Coping with changes of this nature often requires strategies and actions that go beyond immediate damage control to counteract negative public perceptions. It also requires that the resilience capacity of STFs be enhanced so that they can continue to thrive and contribute to rural developments (Dahles & Susilowati, 2015; Scott, Laws, & Prideaux, 2008).

A better understanding of how STF owners and managers in rural destinations cope and develop their resilience capacity in the face of change needs to be situated within the context of the place in which they operate their business, engage in social interactions, and pursue value beyond profit-making (Dahles & Susilowati, 2015). Places or geographic locations of meaning, including rural destinations, are social objects that can be integrated into a self or group identity, become subjects of attachment, and motivate place-based actions (Greider & Garkovich, 1994; Twigger-Ross, Bonaiuto, & Breakwell, 2003). Social Representations theory provides a theoretical framework for examining how the representation of a rural destination impacted by external changes motivates the coping responses of owners and managers who operate an STF in the destination.

3. Social representations theory

SR theory examines “*what people mean as they engage in the task of making sense of the world in which they live and communicate with others about it*” (Jovchelovitch, 2001, p. 176). Representations exist in the reality in which humans live their daily lives. Serge Moscovici (1998), the founder of SR theory, likens representations to theories and propositions used by individuals and groups to classify social objects, describe their characteristics, and give meaning to the

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