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Sustainability, value, and satisfaction: Model testing and cross-validation in tourist destinations[☆]

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the relationships between visitors' perceived sustainability of a tourist destination and their perceived value of and satisfaction with the trip. Perceived sustainability is a multidimensional construct made up of economic, socio-cultural, and environmental dimensions. By using survey data and structural equation modeling, this study tests and cross-validates the model in two tourist destinations: Cullera (Spain) and Oristano (Italy). The results, which support all the hypotheses and offer a robust model whose basic structure is invariant across samples, enhance the understanding of perceived sustainability as a key factor in the development of more competitive and market-oriented tourist destinations. The findings extend sustainability literature by covering previously ignored outcomes that demonstrate how perceived sustainability tends to be a universal factor for explaining perceived value and satisfaction in the context of tourist destinations.

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1. Introduction

Tourist destinations often rely on tourism as their principal source of economic development. However, development that is not properly planned can have destructive effects on natural resources and local communities. As a result, sustainability is a critical factor in the growth and competitiveness of a tourist destination (Mazanec, Wöber, & Zins, 2007). The World Tourism Organization estimates that the number of international tourists will reach 1.8 billion by 2030 (UNWTO – World Tourism Organization, 2011). Meeting this growth in a way that concurrently reinforces economic growth, social welfare, and environmental protection is the challenge facing the tourism sector. However, as Buckley (2012) asserts, typically, sustainable tourism has limited success due to poor implementation, in both developed and developing nations worldwide. Consequently, much of the tourism industry remains alarmingly unsustainable (Higgins-Desbiolles, 2010). This fact suggests that, despite efforts to promote more sustainable tourist destinations, room for improvement exists in most countries (United Nations, 2012).

Despite the large volume of research on the topic, and the remarkable importance of sustainability in tourism, its definition is flexible enough to allow a variety of approaches and interpretations of the concept (Cernat & Gourdon, 2012; Higgins-Desbiolles, 2010). As a result, no agreement on a universal list of indicators enabling the comparison of sustainability levels in different tourism destinations exists, because of the multivariate character of sustainability, together with the difficulty in aggregating the considerable amounts of information required (Fernández & Rivero, 2009). Furthermore, the analysis and measurement of sustainability becomes more complex owing to the difficulty of studying the market and tourist perceptions. Following Hult (2011), a strategically based marketing view of sustainability distinguishes sustainability from corporate social responsibility, in that the former follows a market orientation that involves customers. Therefore, sustainability can be a strategic resource that leads to competitive advantage (Dwyer, Edwards, Mistilis, Roman, & Scott, 2009) and, ultimately, to superior performance (Ketchen, Hult, & Slater, 2007), but only through a market-based approach.

The present research attempts to fill the gap in the literature regarding how perceived sustainability of destinations affects tourist perceptions from a market orientation perspective. Specifically, the authors develop a model in which visitors' perceived sustainability predicts their perceived value of and satisfaction with the trip, and test the model using the structural equation modeling approach. The study adopts the concept of perceived sustainability as a multidimensional construct made up of environmental, socio-cultural, and economic sustainability dimensions. Furthermore, in order to test the robustness of the model, the authors re-examine the model in a different destination and with a new sample of visitors. The findings should help researchers and practitioners in the tourism industry improve their knowledge

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about the perceived sustainability of destinations, to develop their market offerings and marketing strategies more efficiently, and to show the significant implications of the valuation of the tourists' experience of the destination's sustainability.

2. Theoretical background and research hypotheses

2.1. Conceptual framework

Sustainability is more than a recent trend. In the tourism industry, the Brundtland Commission provides the original definition of sustainable development in *Our Common Future* as the “development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs” (WCED – World Commission on Environment and Development, 1987, p. 43). The 1992 Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, and, subsequently, the RIO + 20 United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development (United Nations, 2012), expand on this definition by creating principles for sustainable development that operationalize the concept of sustainability and its application to development. Thus, sustainable tourism development satisfies present tourists' and host regions' demands, while protecting and enhancing opportunities for the future.

Consensus on the conceptualization and measurement of sustainability does not exist yet (Buckley, 2012; Ko, 2005). Some authors develop sustainability indicators for specific geographical areas (e.g. Cernat & Gourdon, 2012; Ko, 2005). Other researchers apply multidimensional approaches, considering various numbers of dimensions, such as three—economic, social, and environmental (Martínez & Rodríguez del Bosque, 2014); four—economic, socio-cultural, environmental, and institutional (Cottrell, Vaske, & Roemer, 2013); or even seven—environmental, cultural, political, economic, social, managerial, and governmental (Bramwell et al., 1996). Many authors, as well as international organizations (e.g. United Nations, 2012; UNWTO – World Tourism Organization, 2011), define sustainable development on the basis of its constitutional components and argue that the definition explicitly conveys the existence of three principal aspects: environmental, socio-cultural, and economic (Farsari, 2012; Jamrozy, 2007; Ramgulam, Raghunandan-Mohammed, & Raghunandan, 2013). According to these arguments and following the sustainable tourism development paradigm that has traditionally underscored the economic, socio-cultural, and environmental dimensions of sustainability (Spangenberg, 2002), this study adopts the three-dimensional approach.

First, the environmental dimension is the component on which sustainable tourism literature originally focused (e.g. Collins & Flynn, 2008; Hunter & Green, 1995), which relates to natural capital and the condition of renewable and non-renewable resources. Second, the socio-cultural dimension focuses on human–environment interactions and the protection of socio-cultural resources of local communities and host areas, which emphasizes the cultural interaction and the activities necessary to develop a cultural exchange in the tourism sector (Pearce, 1995). Finally, the economic dimension of sustainability implies meeting the economic needs of the population, producing a maximum output in order to achieve a high standard of living within the constraints of the existing capital (Mbaiwa, 2005).

Sustainable development of a tourist destination has the potential to affect all aspects of its management, operations, and levels of value creation, implying the necessity to implement a market-focused orientation. At least two research streams point to such a link: institutional theory (Scott, 1987) and stakeholder theory (Maignan, Ferrell, & Ferrell, 2005). Institutional theory examines how elements linked to social structure (e.g., schemas, rules, norms, and routines) are created, diffused, adopted, and adapted over space and time as authoritative guidelines for social behavior (Scott, 2005). Stakeholder theory (Freeman, 1984) asserts that an organization can take care of its responsibilities (or act sustainably) by acting in line with the demands of all its stakeholders, including customers. Taken together, both theories

suggest that for a destination to enhance its sustainability, merely implementing sustainability initiatives is inadequate and that customers should be involved and value these policies. Building on this suggestion, Daub and Ergenzinger (2005) propose the term “generalized customer” to denote people who not only care about the consumption experience, but are also actual or potential members of stakeholder groups that companies need to consider. Viewed in this way, generalized tourists are likely to evaluate destinations from a sustainability point of view, which involves a more holistic perspective of the tourism experience.

From this perspective, the proposed conceptual model links perceived sustainability with other concepts that contribute to the understanding of how tourists experience a destination. Specifically, this study focuses on examining the relationships between perceived sustainability, perceived value, and tourist satisfaction. The analysis in the literature on the effects of perceived sustainability on these variables is limited (e.g., Cottrell et al., 2013). Hence, the present study discusses the proposed relationships in the next subsection.

2.2. Research hypotheses

Although the concept of perceived value attracts increasing interest in the literature, researchers' definitions and measures of the concept vary (Holbrook, 1999; Woodruff, 1997; Zeithaml, 1988). The conceptualization of value as a trade-off between “get” and “give” promotes a universal interest in the composite nature of perceived value (e.g. Bradley & Sparks, 2012; Gallarza & Gil Saura, 2006). In particular, the literature defines the perceived value of a destination as the process by which a tourist receives, selects, organizes, and interprets information based on the various experiences at the destination, to create a meaningful picture of the value of destination experience (Prebensen, Woo, Chen, & Uysal, 2012).

Some researchers emphasize that sustainability-driven organizations create unique idiosyncrasies that positively affect their standing in the marketplace and deliver value to customers (Closs, Speier, & Meacham, 2011; Hult, 2011; Pelozo & Shang, 2011). For customers who care about sustainability, the sustainability level of the company elevates or diminishes the value of its product (Choi & Ng, 2011). From these arguments, certain studies assume that the extent to which tourists understand the sustainability of a destination may predict their perceptions after visiting the specific place (e.g., Pulido-Fernández & López-Sánchez, 2014); in particular, such understanding can affect the perceived value tourists derive from this experience. Thus, the present study hypothesizes as follows:

H1. Tourists' perceived sustainability of the destination has a positive influence on their perceived value of the trip.

Despite the growing interest in the concept of sustainability in the tourism industry, few studies attempt to empirically document the relationship between sustainability and tourist satisfaction. Some studies define tourist satisfaction as the individual's cognitive–affective state derived from a tourist experience (Rodríguez & San Martín, 2008). In a pioneering study on marketing, Luo and Bhattacharya (2006) confirm the influence of corporate social responsibility on customer satisfaction. In another study focusing on the concept of sustainability, Cottrell and Vaske (2006) find that all sustainability dimensions (they considered economic, social, environmental, and institutional dimensions) were significant predictors of tourist satisfaction in a national park. A similar study by Cottrell et al. (2013) indicates that those four dimensions influence resident satisfaction with sustainable tourism development. Yet, Huayhuaca, Cottrell, Raadik, and Gradl (2010) conclude that only some dimensions of sustainability (i.e., the social and the institutional dimensions) have a significant effect on resident satisfaction. The present study examines the context of sustainability for tourist destinations by investigating the relationship between the dimensions of

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