Tourists' values and empathic attitude toward sustainable development in tourism

Charles A. Adongo[a,*], Francis Taale[b], Issahaku Adam[a]

[a] Department of Hospitality and Tourism Management, University of Cape Coast, Ghana
[b] Department of Economics, University of Cape Coast, Ghana

ABSTRACT

Tourism is one of the key sectors expected to accelerate the global efforts towards sustainable development, and with this, there is a renewed interest in understanding and influencing tourists' attitude and behaviour. Analysis of data from 819 international tourists using structural equation modeling indicates that values are significant antecedents to empathic attitude towards: nature conservation, fellow tourists, and local community development, as implicit facets of sustainable development in tourism (SDT). The results indicate significant variations in these issues across respondents' sex, religion, past visitation to nature reserve (s) and environmental club membership. The study concludes that values are central to ensuring empathic attitude towards SDT.

1. Introduction

Sustainable development and its derivative Sustainable Development in Tourism (SDT) are been embraced as a panacea to threats against nature. The objective of SDT is to create economic opportunities, socio-cultural benefits and ensure environmental conservation (Nickerson et al., 2016). SDT is expected to satisfy multiple stakeholders including tourists, businesses and host communities. For the tourists, SDT ought to provide satisfactory experience; to the entrepreneur, maximization of profit; to host communities, development; and to the environment, conservation (Moeller et al., 2011; Pulido-Fernández et al., 2015; Sher et al., 2015). Implementation of SDT, nevertheless, is fraught with various challenges including variable and unreliable support from stakeholders (Forbes et al., 2004; Das & Chatterjee, 2015).

Whereas some attempts to achieve SDT have come from tourism businesses as well as governmental and non-governmental organisations, support from tourists has not yet been optimised. Santana-Jimenez and Hernandez (2011) established that tourists are generally mindful of their own recreational experience with less to environmental conservation and contribution towards local community development. Additionally, tourists are found to introduce invasive species into alien ecosystems, trample on coral reefs, and collect and transport wild resources as souvenirs (Huang et al., 2008; Xu & Fox, 2014; Jägerbrand & Alatalo, 2015). A majority of tourists do not purchase products and service from local residents (Ferraro & Hanauer, 2011). Consequently, the demand side of tourism has been criticised as being sustainability

unfriendly (Wu & Chen, 2016); thus the need to identify strategies to ensure that tourists behave sustainably.

Literature on SDT advances that acceptance of responsibility to be sustainable is dependent on one's state of empathy with, and attachment to the ideals of sustainability (Ericson et al., 2014; Czap et al., 2015; Font et al., 2016), which depends on values. Font et al. (2016: 65) consider sustainability empathy "as one's ability to establish an emotional connection with the surrounding people and environment" (p. 65). This puts into perspective Yilmaz et al. (2016) conceptualization of empathy as mental structures behind moral judgments concerning care for self and others.

Sustainability empathy is regarded as a moral imperative, hence linked to tourism in various ways such as tourism being a moral and ethical encounter, a social justice, and an experiential product (Ericson et al., 2014). As a result, tourism becomes a conduit for understanding tourists' relationships with other stakeholders in the industry and the responsibilities they owe each other, and how to harness these relationships for the benefit of sustainability. However, the concept of empathy has not been accorded the needed attention in tourism studies (Tucker, 2016), and especially in relation to research which links value orientation to sustainability empathy. While sustainability empathy has been widely acknowledged as a topic worth researching into because of its centrality to natural resource governance (Juvan & Dolnicar, 2016; López-Sánchez & Pulido-Fernández, 2016), existing discourse on this concept are largely theoretical. An exclusive empirical study on sustainability empathy is the one by Font et al. (2016). Whereas their findings provide useful insights on sustainability empathy, the study's

focus was on tourism enterprises and their motivations for acting sustainably. Moreover, employing Bandura's (1986) social cognitive theory, Font et al. (2016) acknowledged the casual complexity among personal factors, values and sustainability empathy, but could not account for such causal relationships in their analytical model.

Furthering insights of previous studies, this current study employs a co-variance structural equation modelling (SEM) approach to holistically analyse how tourists' value orientation affects their attitudes as to whether or not tourism should satisfy a number of needs such as the needs of conservation, needs of host communities, and needs of the broader economy. Recognising values as criteria "for guiding action and for developing and maintaining attitudes towards relevant objects and situations" (Rokeach, 1968, p. 160), this study chooses the value-based theory (VBT) by Stern and Dietz (1994) as the guiding framework to explain how tourists express empathic attitude towards humans and the environment based on their value orientation. VBT proposes that values, attitudes, environmental factors and personal factors are reciprocal in their causal relationship, even though not all are of the same strength or occur at the same time. Thus, values may not directly influence attitudes because of the moderating role of some factors. VBT further assumes that value orientations are conjoint; or that individuals may hold several orientations to some degree depending on the situation and context (Xu & Fox, 2014).

This study seeks to contribute more meaningfully to theory by clarifying the causal paths between values, economic growth, and empathic SDT. Empathic SDT is conceptualised as a form of tourism in which stakeholders have strong positive feelings and commitment towards the welfare of local residents, conservation of natural resources and enhancement of tourists' experiences. The present study differs from previous studies because rather than concerning itself with the explicit measurement of the three dimensions of SDT (i.e. economic, social and environmental), it explores tourists' views based on their values; whether tourism should improve the well-being of locals, provide quality visitor experience, and preserve the environment. To better segment visitors and provide precise information towards optimizing pro-sustainable behaviours, the study further characterizes tourists' on the aforementioned issues based on their sex, religion, past visitation to nature reserve (s) and environmental club membership. Such exploration has practical implications for anticipating differences in tourists' responses to sustainability messages based on their value profiles and addressing those variations. Evidence suggests that people's ability to recognize and discern observed experiences of others aids in a multitude of adaptive processes including conflict resolution, favourable relationship outcomes, accommodative behaviour and communication accuracy (Verhofstadt et al., 2008; Ma-Kellams & Lerner, 2016).

2. Literature review

2.1. Operationalisation of concepts

Following the realisation that tourism has positive and negative impacts (Coria & Calfucura, 2012), the efforts of tourist destinations to ensure growth in arrivals and receipts are parallel with the tenets of sustainable development. This is especially so given the documented evidence of growing inappropriate and anti-sustainable behaviour among tourists (Packer et al., 2014). Based on a 25-year bibliometric analysis of trends and patterns in sustainable tourism research, Ruhanen et al. (2015) conclude that since the publication of the Brundtland Report in 1987, SDT has become the concern for not only international and donor agencies, but tourism scholars and futurists. According to Ruhanen et al. (2015), SDT is that type of development where activities result in the efficient use and management of resources to achieve environmental, economic and socio-cultural needs of the present and future generations (World Conservation Union, 1996; Bramwell et al., 2017). This suggests a tourism development whose policy ideals and implementation grants environmentally responsible

travel and visitation to natural areas, low visitor impact, and provides for beneficially active socio-economic involvement of local people.

According to World Tourism Organisation (2006), sustainable tourism is a form of tourism that is developed and maintained on a scale that is viable over an indefinite period of time and does not degrade the environment. This definition also includes the following guiding principles in the construction and measurement of sustainable tourism, namely: making prudent use of the earth's resources, alleviating poverty and reducing gender inequalities, enhancing the quality of life, preserving biodiversity and life support systems for all natural habitats, preserving indigenous knowledge and ways of life based on respect for different traditions, encouraging bottom up responsibility for participation and enhancing capabilities for local-level decision-making. The United Nations Environment Programme and World Tourism Organisation (2005) maintain that sustainable tourism is t*ourism that takes full account of the current and future economic, social and environmental impacts by addressing the needs of visitors, the industry, the environment and host communities*. Viewed in this way, sustainable tourism is considered distinct from conventional tourism in that it is expected to benefit local residents, respect local culture, conserve natural resources and maintain a high level of tourists' satisfaction (Ding & Pigram, 1995).

Notably, behaviour communication change research recommends that persuasive communication can be effective in fostering positive empathic feelings among tourists towards the ideals of sustainable development (Kim & Weiler, 2013). Empathy in its broadest sense refers to the response of an individual to the observed experiences of others. This involves the individual having a perspective that allows him or her to assume the position of the observed experience. Simply put, empathy is the power to feel as another person or thing feels. Hoffman (2008) views empathy as a pro-social motive and defines it as the ability of an individual to feel appropriately for the situation of another person, and to understand and share that person's emotional experience. Figuratively, empathy is understood as the capacity to put oneself in another person's shoes and thus to share the feelings or thoughts of that person (Kirman & Teschl, 2010; Czap et al., 2012).

Empathy is a multi-dimensional construct with two main dimensions namely cognitive empathy and emotional empathy (Hogan, 1969; Tam, 2013). Whereas cognitive empathy pertains to the mental consideration of someone else's situation without necessarily having had a previous experience, emotional empathy relates to the emotional arousal one experiences when he/she sees or identifies with someone else's situation (Davis, 1983). The empathizing object can either be animate or inanimate. Evidence suggests that cognitive and emotional empathy reflect distinct neurological responses. Cognitive empathy is regulated in the ventromedial area of the brain, whereas emotional empathy is regulated in the inferior frontal gyrus, insula, amygdala, and anterior cingulate cortex (Shamay-Tsoory et al., 2009). The two strands of empathy also differ by their mode of measurement. Perspective taking, the tendency to spontaneously adopt the emotions and view of others is the main measure of cognitive empathy. In contrast, measures of emotional empathy include social self-confidence, even-temperedness, and sensitivity. Alloway et al. (2016) divided emotional empathy into six dimensions notably empathic suffering, positive sharing, responsive crying, emotional attention, feeling for others, and emotional contagion. For the purpose of this study, empathy is seen as the tendency to experience feelings of warmth, compassion, and concern for others. Nevertheless, elicitation of empathic attitude and behaviours that are amenable to persuasion can be a difficult task if stimuli are not identified (Kim & Weiler, 2013). Therefore, this study leaves room for all other important stimuli that can affect empathy.

Values have been acknowledged as factors that can significantly determine tourists' commitment to sustainable attitudes. In other words, variations in people's attitudes can be explained from a value orientation perspective. Values, like other psychological concepts, are very difficult to define and measure, and thus have assumed different