

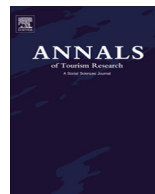


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A Social Cognitive Theory of sustainability empathy



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ABSTRACT

Social-Cognitive Theory is used to test the argument that the motivations behind sustainable tourism, and the types of sustainable actions undertaken, depend on one's empathy towards sustainability. Latin American businesses were surveyed about their motivations for acting sustainably and any sustainability actions undertaken. Based on their responses, TwoStep cluster analysis found four clusters (cost, legitimisation, biospheric, and lifestyle). Acceptance of responsibility to be more sustainable depends on one's level of empathy with, and attachment to, sustainability, explained by a beneficiary focus (personal norms that drive one to act to help oneself or others) and a cultural focus (acting in response to individualistic or collectivistic social norms). Lifestyle businesses are argued to be culturally individualistic but self-transcendent in benefit focus.

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Introduction

A greater mindfulness of people and their environment enables hoteliers to increase their customers' sustainable behaviour (Barber & Deale, 2014). Repeated and enhanced mindfulness of a place, and its people's long-term wellbeing, can create in a person a sense of care, connectedness, belonging, and a bond with that place, which results in empathy. Thus, sustainability empathy is defined as one's ability to establish an emotional connection with the surrounding people and environment. In this

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study the concept of empathy is applied to explain how tourism staff, primarily owners/managers of small and medium sized enterprises (SMEs), make sense of what sustainability means to them as a result of their background and motivations.

This paper uses Bandura's Social Cognitive Theory (SCT) (1986, 1991, 2000, 2002) to explain how the motivations of, and types of action taken by, individuals depend on their empathy towards sustainability. SCT proposes that behaviour, environmental factors, and personal factors are reciprocal, albeit not all of the same strength or occurring at the same time. In a cyclical fashion, one's behaviour is determined by both the environment and one's personal characteristics; personal characteristics are further shaped by behaviour; and eventually one's behaviour and personality can influence one's environment. SCT has been used widely in health, communication, education and business, but has been rarely used to study sustainable tourism behaviour (Sampaio, Thomas, & Font, 2012). Bandura's (1991) SCT of moral thought and action is of particular interest here because of his arguments regarding self-sanctions as regulatory mechanisms of moral agency.

SCT allows researching factors that encourage compliance with social and personal norms, and thus to contextualise other contemporary tourism research on the business case for sustainability. SCT argues that people choose from a wide range of sustainability actions based on their preferences and competencies, centred on the stakeholders and the environmental and cultural influences that shape them. SCT suggests that motivations and actions are situationally bound, and that individuals are more likely to see the moral consequences of actions with familiarity or proximity (Kreps & Monin, 2011), which are pre-conditions for empathy. This article models the relation between sustainability beneficiary and cultural background to show how the congruence between personal norms and societal norms determines an individual's accepted responsibility towards being more sustainable.

Firstly, following the work of Stern and Dietz (1994), this paper argues that sustainability actions can be explained in relation to sustainability values and norms, and the beneficiaries of such actions. Egoism, collectivism, altruism, and principlism are the personal sustainability values and norms that, according to Batson (1994), explain which objects are valued. The self, other people, and the biosphere are three sets of valued objects, proven by Schultz (2001), that underpin environmental concern. For example, a tourism business can take energy-saving decisions primarily for financial reasons (while at the same time caring about climate change), place birdfeeders for the enjoyment of guests (and conservation), and provide flexible working hours to a widow for altruistic reasons (and to increase staff loyalty). Hence, this study considers the relation between actions taken and the primary reasons for acting.

Secondly, understanding the culture in which an individual operates helps to explain the expectations society places on that individual, and thus, how their personal norms are shaped by their culture's social norms. Hofstede (1980) classified social norms as ranging from individualistic to collectivistic, and subsequent research has divided the latter into in-group (our close family and peers) and institutional, out-group (the broader society) collectivism. The dominant Western social paradigm encourages individualism based on the concept of a level playing field within a market economy, while countries where the state does not satisfy society's basic needs have higher collectivism (Gelfand, Bhawuk, Nishii, & Bechtold, 2004). But today's world is far more complex than these dualities, and owners/managers of tourism SMEs can resort to individualistic or collectivistic concepts according to the context; moreover, the two concepts can coexist and serve to reinforce a decision (Husted & Allen, 2008). Hence, this study tests how culture influences sustainability motivations and behaviour in three Latin American countries, and is influenced by collectivism and individualism.

The beneficiary focus

Sustainability empathy can be partly explained by the relationship between the person acting and the beneficiary of their sustainability actions. Likewise, the extent of a person's focus on the beneficiary is dependent on their personal values. Decisions made by tourism SMEs are often an extension of the owner/manager's personality and characteristics, and they tend to demonstrate local grounding (Shaw & Williams, 2004), enacting values and habits beyond simply being shaped by profit (Fassin, Van Rossem, & Buelens, 2011). The inclusion of society and the environment as integral parts of one's

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