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Research paper

Shaping tourists' green behavior: The hosts' efforts at rural Chinese B&Bs

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ABSTRACT

Tourists' green behavior has recently attracted much academic interest. The majority of the existing studies use quantitative research methods and explore how tourists' cognitive and emotional factors influence their environmental actions. This study assesses tourists' green behavior from a unique perspective, that is, how hosts at rural Chinese B&Bs interact with tourists and shape their sustainable actions. The research team analyzed why the rural hosts are motivated to promote tourists' green behavior, and identified the strategies they pursue to convince the tourists to be more sustainable. Guzhu Village, well known for its rural tourism and popular with senior tourists in the Yangtze River Delta, was the site for the study. Auto-ethnography was used as the key research method. It was found that both tangible and intangible environmental benefits motivate the hosts to guide tourists' sustainable behavior. Hosts specifically structure some leisure activities and use compelling signage to both promote positive environmental actions and simultaneously enhance tourists' satisfaction. This is the first study to emphasize the active roles of the hosts in shaping tourists' green behavior through dynamic social interaction. The findings highlight the processes, such as humor and social approval, which have broad international applicability. Further, it was noted that the hosts employ 'face', a distinctive Chinese concept, to limit tourists' less-desirable behaviors. Practical implications are also offered for sustainable destination management.

1. Introduction

There are limited development opportunities for many rural communities. In the era of globalization and industrialization, as well as due to the decline in traditional industries (e.g. logging, agriculture, livestock husbandry, and mining), many rural and regional areas now employ tourism as a tool for economic and social development (Wu & Pearce, 2016). In many rural communities, especially those in the poorer developing countries, the negative social and environmental impacts caused by tourists and tourism are, however, often overlooked in favor of the economic benefits (Amuquandoh, 2010; Gu & Wong, 2006). The sustainability challenges and the value of environmental resources have been slowly recognized in China. This awareness is an important development for building a more sustainable global tourism industry. China's current President Xi Jinping has emphasized many times that 'lucid waters and lush mountains are invaluable assets'. Government officials at different levels are slowly rethinking their development approaches (Watts, 2010). The public have gradually realized the need to protect environmental quality, both for their own lives and to maintain destination competitiveness to attract tourists.

Chinese rural residents, especially those who live in appealing

natural environments and close to big cities, have participated in tourism since the early 1990s. The most popular form of tourism involvement is running a bed-and-breakfast establishment (hereafter B&B). In China, these B&Bs are called Nongjiale, which literally means happiness in the farmhouse (Su, 2011). The Chinese B&Bs are usually small in scale, and are owned and run by rural families. In a typical Chinese rural B&B context, tourists can enjoy the rural environment through having meals made from locally grown ingredients (e.g. local free range chicken, duck, pork and seasonal vegetables), and participating in rural activities (e.g. farm work, picking fruit and vegetables) (Gu & Wong, 2006). Very often, the B&B operators also provide basic accommodation for tourists who would like to stay overnight (Gao, Huang, & Huang, 2009; Park, 2014). At the rural B&Bs, there is intensive interaction between the hosts and tourists, which is also an appealing part of the product (Chen, 2015). As a result, the hosts have the potential to influence tourists' green behavior. It is these influence processes and actions which are explored in this paper.

Many studies of tourists' green behavior, both in China and globally, have explored how tourists' cognitive and emotional factors influence their actions (Ballantyne & Packer, 2013; Chiu, Lee, & Chen, 2014; Steg & Vlek, 2009). Most of the current research has adopted quantitative

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research methods (Cheng & Wu, 2015; Chiu et al., 2014), such as questionnaire based surveys, and used structural equation modeling to analyze the potential relationships. Although these contributions are recognized, there is an increasing awareness that hosts play a key role in host-guest interaction and have the potential power to discipline tourists' behavior (Maoz, 2006; Wu & Pearce, 2013). It is apparent, however, that the influence of hosts in shaping tourists' green behavior through social interaction has been neglected. This study focuses on host-guest interaction, and, through this perspective, seeks to understand green tourist behavior better. It takes Chinese rural B&Bs as the research context and considers the hosts who run such businesses as the research respondents. Considering the nature of host-guest interaction and the researchers' background, auto-ethnography is used to gain access to the voices of B&B hosts. The research is guided by the aim of analyzing the B&B hosts' motivations to be green, and seeks to document the hosts' strategies in shaping tourists' green behavior during social interaction.

2. Literature review

Two bodies of literature underpinning the international literature on the topic of tourist behavior and sustainability are considered. Initially, the key factors influencing green behavior in the tourism setting are examined to contextualize the study in a broad global context. Next, ways to assess host-guest interaction will be reviewed to characterize the special theme of the study. These studies and conceptual ideas lead to a synthesis identifying the lack of tourist green behavior research from the perspective of host-guest interaction. Together, these theoretical and conceptual frameworks offer a basis not only for this specific study but also to build its broader applicability for discussions of sustainable tourism.

2.1. Factors influencing green behavior in the tourism setting

Green behavior is also labeled as 'eco-friendly behavior', 'environmental behavior', 'conservation behavior', 'pro-environmental behavior', 'environmental responsible behavior', 'environmental friendly behavior' and 'being sustainable and green'. In this study, tourists' green behavior is broadly defined as all types of activities that intentionally reduce the negative impacts and maximize the positive impacts of tourists' actions on the natural environment and destination community (Steg & Vlek, 2009). The key components of green behavior include a pro-conservation lifestyle (e.g. green consumption), environmental citizenship (e.g. supporting environmental policy), social environmentalism (e.g. environmental persuasion) and land stewardship (e.g. protecting the wildlife and its habitat conservation) (Larson, Stedman, Cooper, & Decker, 2015). The broad scope of these ideas applies across countries and continents. In the context of B&B operations, tourists' green behavior mainly includes conservation lifestyle actions (e.g. recycling plastic and paper, reusing linen and towels, energy/water conservation) and social environmentalism (e.g. respecting local environmental customs and values, and participating in local environmental activity).

The background factors shaping tourists' green behavior have been quite well studied in the tourism setting (Cheng, Wu, & Huang, 2013; Han, 2015; Kiatkawsin & Han, 2017; Ramkissoon, Smith, & Weiler, 2013). These factors cover a wide range of issues, for example, the individual's demographic background, recreation experience (Lee & Jan, 2015), environmental concern (Chen & Peng, 2016; Minton & Rose, 1997), environmental knowledge (Cheng & Wu, 2015), place attachment (Halpenny, 2010; Ramkissoon et al., 2013), perceived value (Chiu et al., 2014) and personal norms (Han, 2014). Typically, these studies are couched within an established theoretical framework. Examples of the approaches employed include motivational theory, expectancy value theory, the theory of reasoned action (TRA), the theory of planned behavior (TPB), norm-activation theory (NAT) and value-

belief-norm theory (VBN). All these schemes attempt to predict green behavior (Gao, Huang, & Zhang, 2016; Han, Hsu, & Sheu, 2010; Kollmuss & Agyeman, 2002; Steg & Vlek, 2009).

Scholars such as Dewhurst and Thomas (2003), Sampaio, Thomas, and Font (2012), and Tzschentke, Kirk, and Lynch (2008), meanwhile, have examined why the hosts of small tourism firms adopt environmental practices. The driving forces for the hosts being green include environmental sensitivity, environmental concern, personal values and beliefs, and others' actions and attitudes.

The above mentioned studies, both on tourists and hosts' green behavior, are insightful in helping researchers better understand green behavior. It is, however, also noteworthy that most of the studies cited, especially those using advanced statistical techniques, have neglected the social nature of green behavior: that is, how sustainable actions are constructed and embedded in social contexts of interaction (Georg, 1999; Hargreaves, 2011; Nye & Hargreaves, 2010). As a broad example of the social forces germane to sustainable behaviors, Georg (1999) indicated the power of mixing with others in shaping household environmentally friendly behavior. Through three Scandinavian eco-communities cases, she found that everyday social interactions exerted considerable influence on people's preferences for environmental friendly goods.

In tourism settings, social interaction is one of the most frequently studied topics, as it is believed to be pivotal to the tourist experience (Fennell, 2006; Pizam, Uriely, & Reichel, 2000). Despite the power of others to influence human action, the ways social interaction can shape tourists' green behavior has rarely been investigated (Holloway, Green, & Holloway, 2011). It is thus timely to conduct more studies on how social interaction encourages tourists' green behavior.

2.2. Host-guest interaction

Tourism is essentially about tourists interacting with other people and other places (Bimonte & Punzo, 2016). Thus, host-guest interaction is fundamental to tourism. Host-guest interaction is constrained in time and space (Pearce, 2005). For example, different tourism sites (such as hotels, shops, B&Bs and restaurants) may structure various host-guest interactions. Host-guest interaction depends on the nature of the relationship and the frequency of the contact (Sharpley, 2014). When hosts have direct business relationship and frequent contacts with tourists, host-guest interaction is more likely to influence hosts and tourists' attitudes, perceptions and behavior (Sharpley, 2014). On the one hand, high quality and positive social interaction with the hosts can lead to tourists' memorable tourist experiences (Murphy, 2001; Papathanassis, 2012; Pearce, Wu, & Chen, 2015; Pizam et al., 2000; Yu & Lee, 2014). On the other hand, how tourists interact with the locals often affects the hosts' attitudes and perceptions of those who come to their community. The process is dynamic with first impressions leading to actions which align with the perceptions, thus following a spiral which may work positively or descend into unpleasantness (Maoz, 2006). How hosts prevent and arrest negative behaviors in the sustainability sphere is a strong point of interest in this paper.

More and more recent studies indicated that the hosts are actively involved in tourism development (Moufakkir & Reisinger, 2013). In the rural tourism context, the host-guest interaction is kind of social exchange scheme (Bimonte & Punzo, 2016). Hosts and tourists exchange 'resource-space' against income. They not only reversely gaze on tourists, but also take active roles to influence tourists' on-site behavior in the directions they prefer, such as minimizing consumption, appropriate photography and culturally respectful behavior (Maoz, 2006; Gillespie, 2006; Wu & Pearce, 2013). For example, Chan studied the social interaction between Vietnamese hosts and Chinese visitors in Vietnamese border tourism. He suggested that during the host-guest interaction, Vietnamese hosts kept silence on historical conflicts and highlighted the historical intimacy and familiarity in order to elicit friendliness and make money from Chinese visitors. In another

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