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Gaming can be sustainable too! Using Social Representation Theory to examine the moderating effects of tourism diversification on residents' tax paying behavior

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HIGHLIGHTS

- Resident perceptions of tourism's impacts extensively studied.
- Limited research linking attitude to behavior.
- Social Representation Theory explains the social construction of resident perceptions and responses.
- Residents adopt a hegemonic social representation of tourism that tourism planners must account for.
- Social representation infuses the capitalist urbanism of tourism development into the definition of rurality.

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ABSTRACT

Tourism authorities in the Las Vegas region have suggested the diversification of the tourism industry as a strategy to improve the vitality of rural communities outside of the metropolitan area. The present study uses Social Representation Theory as the conceptual basis to test the moderating effects of the various types of proposed tourism development on residents' willingness to pay higher taxes to support such development. A survey of 301 residents in Las Vegas rural communities examined how the factors of economic dependence on tourism, community attachment, and ecocentric attitude towards tourism influence residents' perceptions of tourism's impacts. A higher economic dependence on tourism and higher levels of community attachment led to more favorable perceptions of tourism's economic and social impacts. The economic impacts, in turn, resulted in a willingness to pay higher taxes, irrespective of the type of tourism development proposed by the Las Vegas authorities. The results suggest that rural communities reinforce a hegemonic social representation of tourism in order to characterize the ethos of capitalist urbanism that pervades the economic development discourse. The residents' social construction of tourism has important implications for tourism planners in the region and suggests the adoption of an inclusive tourism diversification strategy that leverages both gaming and alternative tourism.

1. Introduction

The role of tourism in stimulating the economic development of regions has been widely acknowledged by studies across the world. However, as Menning (1995) notes, the development of tourism is not simply a matter of matching product supply with tourist demand—local acceptability must also be considered. Local acceptability of tourism development is the outcome of what Telfer and Sharpley (2008) call the "development dilemma," i.e., for tourism development to be successful, destination communities must perceive that the benefits from tourism outweigh its costs.

Since resident support for tourism development is essential, it is also important to understand the type of tourism that is most likely to succeed in the development region. For long-term sustainable growth, the tourism sector relies heavily on both the natural amenities in the destination and on publicly provided infrastructure and public goods. This infrastructure is most often paid through taxes and user charges (Dwyer, Forsyth, & Dwyer, 2010). Thus, understanding whether a community is amenable to one type

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of tourism or another serves as a determinant of the community's willingness to pay taxes and thereby support infrastructure development. Economic growth is thus a consequence of a more sustainable approach to tourism development, one that must involve a determination of the community's support for specific types of tourism, particularly in view of the competing paradigms of tourism development.

Since the 1980s, there has been an increasing recognition of the need for tourism planners to include "alternative" forms of tourism in their development portfolio (Butler, 1990). While the exact constitution of the alternative remains contentious, the authors follow Gursoy, Chi, and Dyer's (2010) definition of alternative tourism as "development that is less commercialized and consistent with the natural, social, and community values of a host community" (p. 1). Such development is characterized by its stronger emphasis on contact and rapport between hosts, tourists, and the environment; attractions designed for smaller, more selective groups; and greater collaboration with other sectors of the local economy. The present study includes the following development options within its definition of alternative tourism: nature-based tourism, adventure tourism, recreation-based tourism, event and festival tourism, cultural tourism, and medical tourism. This definition is consistent with Weaver's (1991) recognition of alternative tourism as a generic term encompassing a range of tourism strategies that purport to offer a more benign alternative to conventional mass tourism, which, in the present context of the Las Vegas region, comprises the primary economic base of gaming tourism.

While alternative forms of tourism development may have greater political and social acceptability and may fit within desirable contemporary marketing paradigms (Jamrozy, 2007), they may not correspond with popular sentiment. Any discrepancies in this regard are likely to impede the successful development of tourism at the community level. This is particularly important in the study's context of the greater Las Vegas region. This region was particularly hard-hit by the recession and the slow economic recovery. Casino revenues on the Vegas strip dropped for twenty-two straight months (Bush, 2013). The first two years of the financial crisis caused a $5.2 billion swing from profitability to loss for the top twenty-two performing Las Vegas Strip properties between peak fiscal year 2007 and 2009 (Macomber, 2012). Unemployment rates were some of the highest in the nation, hovering at 14 percent and pointing to the deepest economic slide that the region had faced since the 1940s (Nagourney, 2010). The city became the unofficial foreclosure capital of the U.S, and median home values declined more than sixty percent between 2008 and 2011 (Bush, 2013; Hanscom, 2014). The region's lack of economic diversity and heavy reliance on just a few industries, including gaming, tourism, and construction, was cited as its biggest vulnerability.

Consequently, regional stakeholders are not only interested in diversifying the economic base beyond these industries, but also in "broadening the geographic influence of tourism to highlight the region's diverse communities, while at the same time strengthening the existing tourism core (the Las Vegas Strip and downtown) through targeted infrastructure and placemaking investments" ("Southern Nevada Strong Regional Plan", 2015). An example of the diversification of the region's tourism offerings is the Vegas Valley Rim Trail (VVRT) initiated by the Outside Las Vegas Foundation, an estimated 113-mile trail system that would interconnect and expand existing parks and trails in Clark County and preserve open space on perimeter lands. An economic impact study estimated that the VVRT would produce an annual total of approximately $477 million in total value-added income and generate 7544 jobs in Southern Nevada (Suess, 2013). The plans for the new trails are contingent on finding public funds and facilitating the collaboration of many different jurisdictions over the next ten to fifteen years to create opportunities for family outings, health and fitness, education, and community building (Ryan, 2014).

The need for the diversification of tourism is echoed by residents, who advocate serious efforts to encourage an economy that extends beyond gaming to create a sustainable Las Vegas region (Futrell et al., 2010). The development of supplementary, *alternative* forms of tourism has the potential to both diversify the economy and contribute to more complete communities in which a wide range of factors, including jobs, housing, transportation, safety, health services, cultural amenities, and recreation, combine to create places that support economic opportunity and healthy options ("Southern Nevada Strong Regional Plan", 2015). Thus, there is a demonstrable need for improvement and revitalization within rural communities. For the purpose of the present study, 'rural communities' comprise those located outside the contours of the Las Vegas metropolitan area, in 67 out of the 74 zip codes in Clark County. These communities occupy what is known as the "urban-rural fringe" in developed nations (Weaver & Lawton, 2001; Zhang, Inbakaran, & Jackson, 2006) and represent the study area in Fig. 1.

However, before Las Vegas' rural communities develop the infrastructure needed to support investments in tourism diversification, it is imperative to understand residents' perceptions regarding tourism's impacts. As highlighted by Sharpley (2014), "from a planning perspective, understanding residents' perceptions of tourism's impacts is as important, if not more so, than understanding the impacts themselves" (p. 43). The vast literature on resident perceptions of tourism can be divided into two broad types: the first identifies and tests variables that determine or predict residents' perceptions, while the second segments local communities according to their degree of support for tourism.

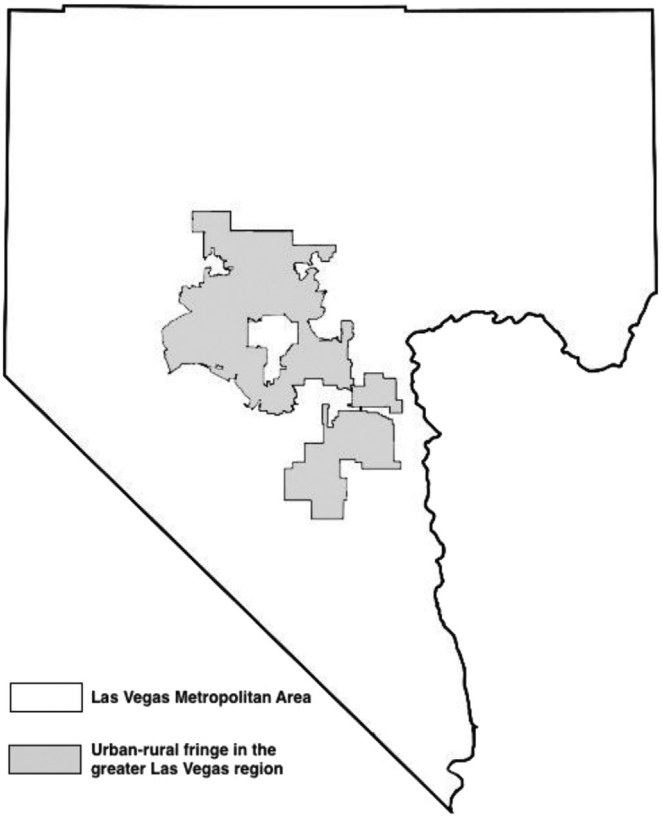

Fig. 1. Study area representing the urban-rural fringe in Clark County, Nevada.