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Sustainability communication in tourism – A literature review

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ABSTRACT

Sustainability communication in tourism is an emerging research topic. In acknowledgement of tourism researchers' and practitioners' need to gain a better theoretical and practical understanding of effective sustainability communication, this article provides the first literature review to identify what is known of the subject and what needs further study. This systematic review indicates that extant research has focused on the marketing of green hotels and environmental sustainability. Little is understood about personal communication channels and message factors that lead to positive consumer reactions. These are major explanations why sustainability messages have not been as effective as they could be. Furthermore, there is a lack of theoretical foundation with regard to information processing and effective message design, and of experiments and interpretivist/qualitative approaches to support such research. Recommendations on future research are provided to broaden theoretical perspectives and support practitioner solutions by a more holistic approach to sustainability communication.

1. Introduction

The tourism industry has begun to increase its sustainability engagement, mainly by developing a more sustainable product range. Such tourism products are endowed with different sustainability attributes to ensure high standards of economic fairness (e.g., local purchasing), positive sociocultural impacts (e.g., protecting cultural heritage) and environmental-friendliness (e.g., responsible resource management) (GSTC, 2016; Wehrli et al., 2014). These alternative products are managed according to the principles of sustainable tourism by positively aligning sustainability criteria with the needs of visitors, the industry, and host communities (UNWTO, 2013; Wehrli et al., 2014). Sustainability communication sets out to make consumers aware of the availability of sustainable travel products, to inform consumers how these offerings meet their needs and comply with sustainability criteria, and ultimately to stimulate pro-sustainable purchases. Alongside this product perspective, sustainability communication aims to increase transparency about a company's sustainability engagement to encourage an interactive dialogue between companies and stakeholders about the company's activities (Belz & Peattie, 2012; Bridges & Wilhelm, 2008). Hence, sustainability communication forms part of a wider sustainability marketing strategy that adopts an integrative and holistic approach to achieve corporate objectives and the long-term goals of a sustainable development (Belz & Peattie, 2012).

Communicating sustainability, however, is a challenge. The abstract and vague nature of the concept of sustainability and sustainable tourism (Bramwell, Henry, Jackson, & van der Straaten, 1996; Moser,

2010) make it difficult for consumers to recognise and understand sustainability product attributes (and their added value) (McDonald & Oates, 2006). These complexities add to the largely intangible service characteristics of travel products (Zeithaml, Parasuraman, & Berry, 1985) and increase the level of uncertainty and risk (Wahab, Crampon, & Rothfield, 1976) associated with pro-sustainable travel choices as opposed to conventional tourism bookings. These intricacies are reflected in the current status of research and practice on sustainable communication. How to design effective sustainability messages that motivate sustainable consumer behaviour is an issue marketing practitioners still have a limited understanding of (Belz & Peattie, 2012; Villarino & Font, 2015; Wehrli et al., 2014) and tourism researchers cannot fully explain theoretically (Wehrli et al., 2014). Despite the importance of effective sustainability communication for the tourism industry, its theoretical foundations, influences, and outcomes have still to be examined (Coles, Fenclova, & Dinan, 2013; Wehrli et al., 2014). To address this gap in the literature, this article provides the first literature review of research into sustainability communication in tourism.

This study uses a systematic literature review with the aim of identifying, summarising, and critically assessing the existing literature on sustainability communication in tourism to give an overview of what is known and what is still unknown about this subject. In an attempt to provide researchers and practitioners with a deeper understanding of the mechanisms of effective sustainability communication, we will examine how sustainability communication has been investigated with regards to the formal criteria of the publications, research contexts,

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communication channels, message factors, outcomes, methodologies, and theoretical foundations. The aim is to derive where relevant research has been undertaken and where potential knowledge gaps are that would guide future research. Both academia and practitioners can benefit from the findings presented in this paper. Tourism research can benefit from this article's approach, since this review responds to the researchers' call for a more 'concrete scientific understanding' (Wehrli et al., 2014, p. 2) while the methodological rigour of the systematic review conducted here is a response to the need for high-quality literature reviews (Petticrew & Roberts, 2006). Practitioners can draw on this synthesis of knowledge to derive the latest developments and insights to find solutions on how to technically compose sustainability messages.

2. Methodology

This article draws on a systematic literature review to respond to the early stages of the industry's and research community's understanding of the mechanisms of effective sustainability communication and the uncertainty of the answers to this question. Furthermore, a systematic review is used to account for the complex, multidisciplinary, and fragmented conditions that define sustainable tourism (Farrell & Twinning-Ward, 2004; Pomeroy, Noble, & Johnson, 2011), and consequently the knowledge base concerning the marketing communication of its products. A systematic literature review is characterised by comprehensiveness in the search for relevant publications on a certain theme and involves a synthesis and critical appraisal of the literature guided by a series of pre-defined steps (Petticrew & Roberts, 2006). This study uses a systematic review approach as this method best fits the aims of the study and the basic conditions that frame research on sustainability communication in tourism.

Systematic quantitative reviews have been employed in tourism studies to investigate themes such as gender and risk (Yang, Khoo-Lattimore, & Arcodia, 2017), virtual reality and augmented reality (Yung & Khoo-Lattimore, 2017), the use of mixed methods (Khoo-Lattimore, Mura, & Yung, 2017), and sustainable tourism (Kristjánsson, Ólafsson, & Ragnarsdóttir, 2017). The method is useful to show what is and what is not yet known about a subject. Its quantitative approach is particularly effective in mapping out the breadth of a field (Petticrew & Roberts, 2006; Pickering & Byrne, 2014). By quantifying where research has been conducted and where there are knowledge gaps, the method is suitable for capturing emergent research themes and areas with uncertain evidence. Thus, the method is particularly useful when examining the effectiveness of interventions (Petticrew & Roberts, 2006; Pickering & Byrne, 2014), as in the case of tourism sustainability communications. Most importantly, this method is advantageous for coping with the given diverse and transdisciplinary knowledge base (Petticrew, 2001; Pickering & Byrne, 2014). In this respect, a systematic review supports the promotion of new methodologies (Petticrew & Roberts, 2006), which is so important when accounting for the specific intricacies involved in sustainability communication and its research.

Systematic reviews can address some of the weaknesses which are commonly associated with the methodologies of traditional reviews. Being reliant on an author's expertise, traditional reviews tend to produce unrepresentative forms of sampling and generate subjective and biased results, which are less structured and often uncritical (Petticrew & Roberts, 2006). In contrast, quantitative systematic reviews make use of a transparent and replicable procedure in the search, collection and selection of articles. This enhances the methodology's academic rigour (Petticrew & Roberts, 2006) and yields comparable results when the procedure is repeated (Pickering & Byrne, 2014). There is a need in the tourism industry to design more effective sustainability appeals. By assessing studies for their practice relevance, identifying emergent developments, and providing evidence-based answers (Petticrew & Roberts, 2006), a systematic review could provide practitioners with



Fig. 1. The systematic review process.
(Source: Adapted from Petticrew & Roberts, 2006).

practical solutions to their problems.

The systematic review process was conducted in a sequence of different steps which are adapted from Petticrew and Roberts' (2006) seven-stages-model of a systematic review (Fig. 1).

To investigate the mechanisms of effective sustainability communications in tourism, we frame this literature review with the following research questions and sub-questions similar to the dimensions of marketing communications as defined by Kotler, Bowen, and Makens (2010). The main research questions addressed in this literature review are:

- What is the **current state of knowledge** of sustainability communication in tourism?
- Which are **future directions** of research?

More specifically, this literature review analyses the following sub-questions, which refer to formal criteria and content-related criteria discussed in the literature:

- How did the literature develop in terms of its **year-wise development** and its **distribution** over journals? What is the **disciplinary background** of the journal publications?
- In which **contexts** has sustainability communication been investigated (i.e., which types of tourism products and sustainability dimensions)?
- Which **dimensions of sustainability** have been addressed?
- Which **channels of communications** and **message factors** have been examined?
- What **outcomes** of sustainability communication have been identified?
- Which **theories** have been used to explain the effects of sustainability communication?
- What types of **methods** have been used to analyse sustainability communication?

After defining the research questions (1), the type of studies and their selection criteria for this review were determined (2). To this end, a review protocol was used to document the rationale for the review, the search procedure including the search terms and databases, and the inclusion and exclusion criteria for the literature to be selected. This form of documentation allows for the replicability of the results. It also documents how the inclusion and exclusion criteria were defined, which is important for assessing the relevance and quality of the literature reviewed (Petticrew & Roberts, 2006). The scope of this literature review includes original research articles published in peer-reviewed journals written in the English language. Since the aim of the

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