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## Toward a More Comprehensive Use of Social Exchange Theory to Study Residents' Attitudes to Tourism

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### Abstract

Early studies on residents' attitudes to tourism were criticized for being atheoretical. As a result, it was not clear to researchers how, why, and in what conditions residents of a destination react to the impacts of tourism. To address these shortcomings, researchers started making use of a number of theories, among which, the Social Exchange Theory (SET) is considered to have made the most important theoretical contribution to studies on residents' perceptions of tourism. This paper critically analyzes the different elements involved in the social exchange process between residents of a destination and the tourism industry. It analyzes the core constructs of the SET and in particular, focuses on power and trust between the actors in the exchange process. The arguments suggest that researchers have failed to integrate these core concepts in a single study to investigate their influence on residents' perceptions of tourism and their support for development. The paper suggests that the power and trust concepts have significant potential in explaining community acceptance of tourism and if this field of study is to be advanced theoretically, then researchers should empirically test these concepts in an integrative framework.

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### 1. Introduction

Tourism has been a growing sector in several parts of the world. It creates jobs, generates revenues for the local community, promotes cultural exchange, improves infrastructure, and acts as a vehicle for environmental protection and preservation (Andereck, Valentine, Knopf, and Vogt, 2005; Hao, Long, and Kleckley, 2011). However, while

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tourism has brought many benefits, it has also led to several negative social, cultural, and environmental impacts (Choi and Sirakaya, 2005; Nunkoo and Ramkissoon, 2007). The industry has been found notorious for its ability to disturb, disrupt, and destroy local communities, undermining social norms, degrading social structure, and stripping communities of individuality (Nunkoo and Ramkissoon, 2011; Ramkissoon and Nunkoo, 2011; Simpson, 2008). Such concerns have led to an increased emphasis on the notion of sustainable tourism development, requiring residents' input in the tourism development process (Choi and Sirakaya, 2005). A community's active support for tourism is a pre-requisite for the sustainable development of the industry. The extent to which residents' desires are met and their views are taken into account determines their receptiveness to both tourism development as well as visitors (Davis, Allen, and Cosenza, 1988). Through an evaluation of the host community's views on tourism, the industry's negative impacts can be minimized and appropriate policies put in place (William and Lawson, 2001). Residents' attitudes to tourism also have a significant influence on tourism development policies. Consequently, studies on this topic have been an important topic of research and continue to proliferate in the literature (e.g. Nunkoo, 2015; Nunkoo, Gursoy and Juwaheer, 2010; Nunkoo and Ramkissoon, 2010; Nunkoo, Smith, and Ramkissoon, 2013; Nunkoo and So, in press; Park, Nunkoo, and Yoon, 2015).

Early studies on residents' perceptions of tourism were of an atheoretical nature (Gursoy and Rutherford, 2004) and this limited researchers' understanding of why local residents perceived and responded to tourism as they did, and under what conditions they reacted to the impacts of tourism. As a result of the lack of theoretical underpinning of early studies on residents' perceptions of tourism, Husbands (1989) argued that:

....one persistent problem in this body of work is that the theoretical understanding of residents' perceptions of, or attitude to, tourism is weak. This accounts for the general absence of explanation grounded in the social structure of the destination society. There is, so far, no theoretical justification of why people, are or are not, favourably disposed to tourism (p. 239).

In an attempt to address these concerns and provide a better explanation of residents' perceptions of and their support for tourism, researchers have started making use of a number of theories. Although many theories have been put forward to explain residents' perceptions of tourism, the most widely utilized one has been the Social Exchange Theory (SET, Byrd et al., 2009). Ap (1992) describes SET as "a general sociological theory concerned with understanding the exchange of resources between individuals and groups in an interaction situation" (p. 668). Researchers consider SET to have made the most important theoretical contribution to the field of residents' perceptions of tourism (Fredline and Faulkner, 2000). However, despite the wide application of SET by researchers and scholars investigating this topic, important constructs such as trust and power which are relevant to the exchange relationship between residents of a destination and the tourism industry have been left out and need to be investigated further. While some studies, though limited in number, have considered the role of power in explaining residents' perceptions of tourism (e.g. Kayat, 2002; Madrigal, 1993), with the exception of a few studies e.g. Nunkoo and Smith, 2013; Nunkoo, Ramkissoon, and Gursoy, 2012; Nunkoo and Ramkissoon, 2011; 2012), the construct of trust has to-date remained under-explored in the literature. In this context, Nunkoo and Ramkissoon (2011) argue that:

The core ideas of trust and power that comprise the SET have yet to be adequately integrated in a single framework in research on community responses to tourism. Tests of the SET, as well as its application by researchers investigating residents' attitudes have been based on an incomplete specified set of ideas, leaving out important theoretical constructs relevant to the theory (p. 966).

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