Responsible Tourism Experiences. Designing solutions to improve community-based tourism services for local sustainable development

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1 Abstract
The tourism sector has undergone multiple evolutions in recent decades due to its dynamic and complex nature. While globalised mass tourism characterised the demand for tourism in the 20th century, in the new millennium, this demand is significantly more substantial and diversified (Gainsforth, 2020). Despite the positive impact on economic development, increased tourism consumption has led to the exploitation of natural and local resources causing damage to the environment and host communities (Fragidis et al., 2022). Interest and discussions around sustainable tourism have been going on for three decades. Still, tourism authorities continue to promote the growth of tourism through unsustainable models despite the ecological and social constraints we are currently experiencing (Higgins-Desbiolles, 2018).

The Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) argues that the prevailing tourism strategies for the future address two main issues: digital transformation and the sustainable development of tourism destinations (Zhu et al., 2020). Sustainable tourism development poses great challenges to tourism organisations and local stakeholders in making local communities the core of future tourism (UNWTO, 2022). In this scenario, policies and impact measurements are fundamental to understanding the degree of sustainability to be achieved in order to develop awareness and acceptance of sustainable tourism principles and objectives and, above all, adopt responsible tourism practices. For this reason, the author’s thesis focuses on responsible tourism as a form of tourism that applies through responsible practices and actions, principles and theories of sustainability (Mihalic, 2016). Despite several decades of academic and practical debate on tourism sustainability, its application in practice remains problematic. Wheeler, in 1993, argued that the “intellectually appealing” concept of sustainable tourism has little practical application because it has turned into a public relations tool for addressing the criticism of the impact of tourism while allowing essentially the same behaviour as before, this is still true today. The dominant tourism discourse on sustainability
and responsibility calls for a solid understanding of how a responsible destination implements a sustainability agenda and how the local community and stakeholders are involved in the design of tourism services. From this perspective, the research aims at defining a new model of implementation of responsible tourism services in destinations, shifting the focus from the perceived sustainability of consumers to the actual sustainability implied in place-based communities (Mihalic, 2016) through sustainable social impact assessment. The current academic research focuses on an outside-in perspective, which means a focus on the customer experience (Fesenmaier and Xiang, 2017). Adopting an inside-out perspective, through the application of a design approach, it is possible to address tourist experiences and co-design tourism services from host communities favouring sustainable social impact.

In this scenario, the research investigates how Service Design and Design for Social Innovation can foster the participation of place-based communities in the design of a new service paradigm for responsible tourism based on social sustainability impact assessment parameters.

References


