**Abstract title**

Sustainability: Do the consumers understand what this might be in tourism?

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**Keywords**

Sustainability, consumer perception, sustainable tourism, symbolic elements

**Background of the study**

Sustainable tourism is now an accepted and well-researched concept worldwide (Niñerola et al., 2019). However, its implementation is often neglected and limited. There are few practical recommendations for the industry, governance systems and for tourists (Moyle et al., 2020). To successfully implement sustainable tourism practices, stakeholders urgently need to know how guests understand sustainability and if it is perceived as adding value for them. Although the demand side of sustainable tourism has been well researched for 25 years (Bramwell et al., 2017), few studies were found that deal with the fundamental question: how do consumers understand the term sustainability and / or sustainable tourism (e.g. Simpson & Radford, 2012)?. To answer that question and show its implications for the industry, an intercultural qualitative study (German – Italian) was conducted in South Tyrol, Italy. This paper presents first results and conclusions from the work in progress.

**Purpose of the study**

The term sustainability is frequently used in research, studies, publications and promotion. But researchers and marketers assume that consumers have an implicit and common understanding of the term. This study answers the following research questions:

R1: Do visitors know what sustainability is, and, in particular, what sustainable tourism at destination level is?

R2: Do visitors from different countries and cultures have a common understanding of the meaning of sustainability?

**Methodology**

German and Italian participants for the study were recruited through an online panel. In total 87 Germans and 69 Italians participated in the qualitative study which was conducted from 2nd to 5th December 2019 as an online forum using QDC -Studio as a technical tool. The survey participants were required to complete 15 to 20 minutes of daily work over four days. A mix of open-ended questions were asked plus playful exercises (e. g. card-sorting). Raw data were coded, discussed and analysed by three researchers over multiple cycles, using a Grounded Theory approach (Strübing, 2008) and SPSS 25. A linguistic analysis compared the posts to address research question R2.

**Results**

Our study shows that consumers exhibit a vague and incomplete understanding of sustainability. Most focused strongly on the environmental dimension, whereas social aspects such as fair working conditions or education, and economic aspects were mentioned less frequently. Strikingly very few described sustainability using the triple bottom line concept typically found in the literature or research. Few consumers connected climate change and protection from climate change to sustainability. Substantial differences in the understanding of sustainability or sustainable tourism between Germans and Italians were not found. However, Germans associated sustainability more concretely with resources and their economical use than Italians, while the Italian interpretation of sustainability, on the other hand, remained abstract and put emphasis on regeneration and the reduction of problematic impacts.
When defining sustainable tourism some participants focused just on one single aspect (e.g. mobility / travel mode) while others included various topics of the travel chain in their definition. However, the definitions found in literature / research were hardly or rather only partially used by consumers to explain sustainable tourism. Many associated sustainable tourism with environmentally friendly mobility; local food or the regional origin of products are seen as important symbols. Finally, participants also expressed doubts, not only related to greenwashing, but also regarding the existence or the general feasibility of a really sustainable tourism.

**Conclusions**

As consumers have a biased and frequently simplified outlook when defining and describing sustainability and sustainable tourism, we see a serious gap between experts and the market. Destinations that aim to be sustainable should bear this in mind. This biased consumer mindset might influence the brand equity perception concerning sustainability. We found that consumers' perceptions are based on just a few highly symbolic elements from the tourism service chain. The destination specific identification and communication of these symbols will support destination brand strategies much more than untransparent certificates or complex sustainability indexes.

**Research implications and limitations**

Further research is needed to fully understand the symbolic mindset of consumers’ understanding of sustainable tourism and to explain the cultural differences found. Limitations: our sample did not include guests above the age of 65. The study was done online, excluding those without access to the internet or to computers or smartphones. Due to their qualitative nature, assigned codes (even though having used grounded theory) can partially have subjective elements because of the cultural and knowledge background of the researchers.

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