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Dimensions of Sustainable Tour Experiences

ABSTRACT

Tour operators are crucial to supply chain management within sustainable tourism. This research sought to identify sustainable tour dimensions from the tourists' perspective. The sample comprised 878 post-experience online reviews of 20 tours across Portugal, written by tourists from different countries. Mixed content analysis methods (i.e., qualitative narrative and quantitative computer-assisted analyses) produced results used to generate a concept map of 12 themes: tour, guide, experience, hike, service, food, recommendation, fun, return, walk, difference, and wildlife. Each theme contains concepts related to service quality and experience dimensions. The findings provide a better understanding of how tourists perceive sustainable tour experiences.

KEYWORDS sustainable tour; sustainable tourism; content analysis; Web review

Introduction

The hospitality and tourism industry is part of the experience economy, in which customers expect not only service delivery and quality but also experiences and memories (Hemmington, 2007; Quan & Wang, 2004). Recent studies have suggested that purchasing behavior in hospitality contexts is more driven by an experiential perspective than the information-processing perspective generally used in more rationalist approaches to consumer behavior (Sánchez et al., 2006). Overall, satisfaction with tourism experiences is related to their authenticity and meaningfulness to individuals, as well as to the “subjective mental state felt by participants” during service encounters (Otto & Ritchie, 1996, p. 166). Aho (2001) identified four core contents that explain the nature of tourism experiences and that are often found by tourists engaging in tour activities: emotional, informative, practice, and transformation experiences.

According to Otto and Ritchie (1996), tourism services differ from other services in that they have a greater potential to stimulate emotional and experiential reactions among customers. In addition,

these individual experiences can be influenced by external factors such as social settings (e.g., employees providing services), physical environments (e.g., natural ambiance), or even other customers (Mossberg, 2007). Xu and Chan (2010) divided service experiences in package tours into four dimensions: hedonics, involvement, recognition and escapism, and peace of mind and relaxation. These dimensions have a direct influence on tourists' overall satisfaction and behavioral intentions.

Package tours include different services provided to customers not only by tour operators but also by local service providers, such as hotels, restaurants, busses, local guides, and incoming travel agents. Prior studies have examined service quality as provided by tour operators (e.g., Caber & Albayrak, 2018; Chan et al., 2015; Lin et al., 2007; Wang et al., 2013), day tour operators (e.g., Caber & Albayrak, 2018; Vélez et al., 2019), and tour guides (e.g., Heung, 2008; Mak et al., 2010, 2011; Min, 2016; Zhang & Chow, 2004). Researchers in this field have applied different research designs based on either qualitative or quantitative approaches (Wang et al., 2013). Various scholars have suggested that the numerous dimensions previously identified still need to be validated in different settings (Vélez et al., 2019).

The existing research has highlighted tour operators' crucial role in supply chain management in sustainable tourism as providers of sustainable products (Frey & George, 2010; Seuring et al., 2005; Wijk & Persoon, 2006) that meet tourists' expectations (Brochado & Pereira, 2017). Specialist tour operators can be seen as forming the forefront of sustainable tourism offers (Tölkes, 2020) that respond to travelers' increasing environmental awareness (Richards & Font, 2019) while developing competitive advantages in the marketplace.

The present study sought to extend previous research on tour experience dimensions by focusing on sustainable tours and applying a novel approach in tour research that relies on data from user-generated content. The merits of peer-to-peer content shared on social media sites versus more traditional approaches to assessing service quality are related to this material's accessibility, reliability, ready availability, trustworthiness, and spontaneous content (Stoleriu et al., 2019). The current study thus examined narratives shared online by consumers of sustainable tours. The central research question was defined as follows: What are the main narratives shared by tourists online and the dimensions of tourists' service

experiences with sustainable tours?

This paper is structured so that, first, the literature review provides an overview of past studies of evaluations of the experiences offered by tours operators and guides. Second, the methodology section describes the research context, data collection process, and procedures used to perform content analyses of Web reviews. Third, the results section identifies the main dimensions of sustainable tours and offers excerpts from tourist narratives that describe each dimension. The last section offers a discussion of managerial implications, limitations, and avenues for future research.

Literature review

Package tours comprising a variety of services

While researchers have not come to a consensus on how package tour services should best be categorized, scholars generally agree that these services can be divided into distinct components that can be evaluated separately (Chan et al., 2015). Hence, service quality measurement tools for package tours need to cover all service dimensions offered to tourists, whether the services are provided by travel operators or local service providers (Wang et al., 2007).

In the literature on tourism and travel, basic, all-inclusive package tours and day tours, together with their service quality, have been examined by numerous researchers (e.g., Caber & Albayrak, 2018; Lee et al., 2011; Vélez et al., 2019; Wang et al., 2007, 2000). In one of the earliest studies to evaluate tour service performance, Whipple and Thach (1988) distinguished between tourism services and attractions. The cited authors found that two tourism service factors (i.e., tour guide services and convenience of departure points) and one attraction factor (i.e., the quality of sightseeing) are determinants of customer satisfaction and revisit intention.

Hsu (2000), in turn, separated out 40 items among the attributes that influence senior tourists' satisfaction and brand loyalty with regard to bus tour operators and tour packages. Wang et al. (2000) analyzed package tours according to nine consecutive dimensions comprising pre-tour briefing, air-ports, hotels, restaurants, bus services, scenic spots, shopping, optional tours, and "other" elements. The cited researchers concluded that 1,204 features could satisfy or dissatisfy customers and 662 features could satisfy or dissatisfy employees.

Hudson et al. (2004) proposed measurement tool for tour operators' service quality, which consisted of 146 items and clustered service quality elements into 13 dimensions. Skiing/snowboarding, airport transfer, brochures, meeting representatives, and resort activities were identified as the most important dimensions, whereas company magazines and journeys emerged as the least important dimensions for customer satisfaction.

In a subsequent study, Bowie and Chang (2005) used nine dimensions (i.e., tour leaders, hotels, restaurants, busses, shopping, optional tours, tour guides, attractions, and others) to analyze guided package tours. The cited authors found that the consumption experiences of hedonism and enjoyment embedded within tours significantly affect customer satisfaction. Lin et al. (2007) used eight dimensions (i.e., information, hotels, restaurants, scenic spots, shopping, optional tours, busses/drivers, and local guides) of package tours. The cited authors identified a total of 862 satisfying and dissatisfying incidents seen by product managers and a total of 888 satisfying and dissatisfying incidents witnessed by tour leaders.

In addition, Wang et al. (2007) proposed a measurement instrument of package tour service quality using six dimensions, namely, hotels, transportation, shopping arrangements, optional tours, tour leaders, and local guides. Lin et al. (2009) examined guided tours' service attributes and the main dimensions that influence consumer satisfaction according to five specific attributes of guided tours (i.e., pre-tour information, hotels, restaurants, busses and drivers, and scenic spots).

Wong and McKercher (2012) further concluded that tour operators' business model (i.e., commission- or noncommission-based tours) influences the development of day tour itineraries. Wang et al. (2013) developed a scale addressing seniors' perceptions of package tour service features in Taiwan and China. The main service dimensions of package tours are pre-tour briefing, tour leaders and guides, restaurants, hotels, busses, scenic spots, and optional tours. The cited authors found five dimensions (i.e., tour leaders and guides, restaurants, hotels, busses, and scenic spots) were important for senior tourists in Taiwan and three dimensions (i.e., pre-tour briefing, restaurants, and optional tours) particularly mattered to senior tourists in China.

According to Chan et al. (2015), attractions, recreation and

entertainment, and shopping can be classified as support services that motivate participation in tours. Tour guiding services provided by tour guides and food, transportation, and accommodations are, in turn, core services that customers need to survive during trips. The cited authors found that satisfaction with tour services and satisfaction with tour experiences are distinct constructs with a different relationship with the seven tour services. Albayrak et al. (2016) further identified the main service quality dimensions of package tour (i.e., flight, transfer service, vehicle, information, hotel, and guide). The cited researchers concluded that hotels and guides have the strongest positive and significant effects on Russian tourists' overall satisfaction while visiting Turkey.

Day tours usually do not last longer than 24 hours and do not include overnight stays. Tour operators typically offer tour participants a professional tour guide, transportation, food and beverage services, and visits to cultural, natural, or sports-related attractions. These tours have been found to generate additional revenues and foster destinations' development.

Caber and Albayrak (2018) developed a new scale for measuring service quality in a typical day tour (i.e., DAILYSERV) that comprises the following significant dimensions: transportation, tour guide, food and beverage facility, shopping facility, stopover facility, and museum and site. In more recent research, Vélez et al. (2019) assessed the day tour service quality dimensions (i.e., boat transportation, food and beverage, tour guide, and visit) of Ecuadorian island day tours. The cited study revealed that all these dimensions have a significant direct impact on tourists' satisfaction and that satisfaction has an indirect impact on behavioral intentions (see Table 1).

Table 1. Dimensions of tour services.

Reference	Research Context	Research Design	Service Quality Dimensions
Wang et al. (2000)	Taiwan N = 302 N = 64 employees (travel agency)	Interviews, critical incident technique, descriptive statistics	Pre-tour briefing, airport, hotel, restaurant, bus service, scenic spot, tour, and other shopping, optional
Hudson et al. (2004)	United Kingdom N = 220 SERVQUAL and	Survey, importance performance analysis, SERVPERF, descriptive statistics, hypothesis testing	Brochure, waiting to go on the journey, meeting the representative, transfer to accommodations, arrival at accommodations, accommodations, welcome, resort activity, skiing/snowboarding, company magazine, departure, transfer to airport
Bowie and Chang (2005)	Scandinavia (Norway and Sweden) N = 43	Participant observation, modified grounded theory attraction, and	Tour leader, hotel, restaurant, bus, shopping, optional tour, tour guide, other
Lin et al. (2007)	Taiwan N = 36 x 2 (product managers and tour leaders)	In-depth interviews, critical incidents technique and	Information, hotel, restaurant, scenic spot, shopping, optional tour, bus/driver, local guide
Wang et al. (2007)	Taiwan N = 521 and N = 312 students	Scale development procedure (focus groups and survey), exploratory factor and confirmatory factor analysis, correlation	Hotel, transportation, shopping arrangements, optional tour, tour leader, and local guide
Lin et al. (2009)	Taiwan N = 35 travel experts	Focus group, Multiple-criteria decision making	Pre-tour information, hotel, restaurant, bus and driver, and scenic spot
Wang et al. (2013)	Taiwan and China N = 239 and N = 217 seniors, respectively	Scale development procedure (focus groups, interviews, and survey), exploratory and confirmatory factor analysis, correlation	Pre-tour briefing, tour leader and guide, restaurant, hotel, bus, scenic spot, and optional tour
Chan et al. (2015)	Hong Kong N = 580 Chinese tourists	Survey, structural equation modeling	Attraction, recreation and entertainment, shopping, tour guide service, food, transportation, and accommodations
Albayrak et al. (2016)	Anatolia, Turkey N = 4,029	Survey, ordinal regression analysis	Flight, transfer service, vehicle, information, hotel, and guide
Caber and Albayrak (2018)	number.	Anatolia, Turkey N = 186 and N = 424 Day tours, Isla de la Lata, Ecuador N = 195	Scale development procedure (focus groups and survey), exploratory and confirmatory factor analysis, correlation Survey, partial least squares, structural equation modeling, partial least squares-path modeling
Vélez et al. (2019)			

N =

D	ERV scale:	facility, shopping facility, stopover
A	transportati	facility, and museum and site
I	on, tour	
L	guide, food	Modified DAILYSERV scale:
Y	and	transportation by boat, food and
S	beverage	beverage, tourist guide, and visit

Tour guides: service quality and experience providers

Tour guides are viewed as being capable of recognizing tourists' individual needs and preferences (Geva & Goldman, 1991), making these employees the most responsible for tourist satisfaction with services (Ryan & Dewar, 1995). Accordingly, the perceived quality of guided tours depends largely on tour guide service quality (Ap & Wong, 2001), so the service quality aspect of tour guiding has received increasing attention in the literature (e.g., Chang, 2009; Heung, 2008; Mak et al., 2010, 2011; Min, 2016; Wang et al., 2000).

For example, Wang et al. (2000) employed the critical incident technique to identify critical service incidents with regard to tour guide services in package tours. Most incidents were related to shopping, optional tours, and airport and/or plane sectors, suggesting that the service features of these three sectors are most influential in customer satisfaction or dissatisfaction. Based on a more recent study, Heung (2008) suggests that the quality of tour guide services can be evaluated using three main constructs: core service delivery, customer orientation, and communication effectiveness. The cited author further explains that core services refer to the essence of tour guide services, which guides must deliver with consistency. This includes following tours' agreed itinerary and ensuring that transportation, accommodations and dining, and tour activities are arranged smoothly and safely.

According to Heung (2008), customer orientation reflects the extent to which guides put tourists' needs and interests ahead of their own in providing superior value to tourists. For example, guides need to ensure customer satisfaction during the journey, focus on what is valuable to the tourists, do as much as possible for them, and avoid adopting a hard-sell approach to tourists. Guide communication involves exchanges of information, such as giving the trip itinerary to tourists, providing interpretation of attractions, and handling tourists' inquiries, which makes communication another crucial function of tour guides. Heung's (2008) approach thus encompasses critical service dimensions for understanding and assessing service quality in tour guiding.

Mak et al. (2010) identified factors affecting the quality of tour guide services specifically in Macau, grouping the factors into six subcategories. These are unhealthy business practices, market domination, tourist market immaturity, changes in tourist behavior, intense competition between inbound tour operators, and human resource issues. Similarly, Mak et al. (2011) identified six main themes for critical issues affecting the service quality and professionalism of tour guides in both Hong Kong and Macau. These themes are role conflicts, human resource issues, unhealthy business practices of Chinese outbound travel agencies, immaturity of the Chinese tourism market, exploitative measures applied by inbound tour operators, and service

quality assurance mechanisms. In Taiwan, Min (2016) isolated six dimensions (i.e., tangibles, reliability, assurance, responsiveness, empathy, and culture) and 30 indicators of service quality for local tour guides, using a combination of qualitative and quantitative analyses.

In a sustainable tourism context, Alazaizeh et al. (2019) measured tour guides' performance based on their resource conservation (i.e., improving visitors' sustainable behaviors) and tour management roles. Researchers have previously also highlighted the role of tour guides as experience providers, site interpreters, heritage and environment protectors, and attitude and behavior modifiers (Alazaizeh et al., 2019; Poudel & Nyaupane, 2013). By offering quality information about significant natural and cultural features, tour guides promote visitors' understanding and appreciation of and emotional connection with places (Alazaizeh et al., 2019; Poudel & Nyaupane, 2013).

Tour operators' role in sustainable tourism

Sustainable tourism has been lauded for offering win-win solutions involving local residents, tourists, and the environment. Many studies have indicated that tour operators are in many ways the key to achieving more sustainable forms of tourism (Frey & George, 2010; Wijk & Persoon, 2006). By acting as an intermediary between both sides of the tourism market, tour operators play the essential roles of promoting and distributing products and facilitating information sharing in tourism supply chains. These operators thus have a great potential and responsibility for triggering a sense of obligation and essential changes in the attitudes and actions of other tourism stakeholders toward environmental protection measures and more sustainable tourism practices (Budeanu, 2005). In recent years, a wide range of sustainable products have been designed that can satisfy the increasing demand for memorable, unique, and local experiences while delivering sustainable benefits (Richards & Font, 2019).

Tour operators are considered to be a crucial pressure point of the mass tourism system due to the extensive influence they have on destinations, supply chains, and tourists (Budeanu, 2005; Feruzi et al., 2013). Operators influence the volume and direction of tourism flows (Cavlek, 2002; Sigala, 2008; Tapper, 2001), integrate and affect the attitudes and practices of numerous tourism suppliers and stakeholders (Budeanu, 2005; Sigala, 2008; Tapper, 2001), and shape destinations and local communities (Sigala, 2008; Tepelus, 2005). While playing a focal role in sustainable tourism supply chain management (Seuring et al., 2005), tour operators' influence can be exercised through relationship building aimed at collaboratively creating a common voice and sustainable targets (Tepelus, 2005; Tour Operators Initiative, 2004).

According to the Tour Operators Initiative (2007), tour operators can integrate sustainable practices in five key operating areas: internal management, product development and management, supply chain management, customer relations, and co-operation with destinations. The first four areas cover actions and decisions that tour operators make when preparing holiday packages. Through these actions and decisions, tour operators have either a direct impact on sustainability (e.g., managing office supplies) or a significant influence on sustainability (e.g., supply chains). The fifth area covers operators' efforts to address their products' impacts on destinations (Tour Operators Initiative & Global Reporting Initiative, 2002).

Richards and Font (2019) most recent research provided further evidence of tour operators' role in greening supply chains by sourcing and selling more sustainable tours. The cited study identified key success factors in sustainable tourism supply chain management by tour operators. These service providers function as "trustworthy, professional [ethical] partners." They also offer "unique, value-adding experiences"; "learning, sharing, participation, and hands-on experience"; and "sustainable tourism tools and processes," as well as "educating, raising awareness, and telling tourists what they are supporting."

Sustainable tourism assessment

Ramachandran (2009) examined the underlying meaning of responsible tourism indicators from various stakeholders' perspective at a national park in Malaysia. The five themes that emerged include socio-culture, economy, ecology, technology, and politics. Jaini et al. (2012), in turn, used sustainable tourism indicators – including the social, economic, and environmental issues and management planning strategies suggested by the World Tourism Organization (Dymond, 1997) – to investigate the standards of current ecotourism practices among ecotourism providers (i.e., travel agencies) in Malaysia.

In more recent research, Xin and Chan (2014) studied tour operators' perspectives on responsible tourism indicators in a national park also in Malaysia and found five themes covering 17 core indicators. These include the destination management theme comprising the indicators of sustainable tourism public policy, high participation, customer satisfaction, information and communication, and properly developed sites. The economic value theme contains the indicators of tourism contributions to local economies, employment levels, quality of employment, and tourism supply chain management. The ecological theme includes the indicators of stress, reducing transportation impact, landscape and biodiversity management, conservation, and waste management. The social theme comprises the indicators of satisfied residents and improved infrastructure, and the cultural theme contains the remaining

indicators: protecting and enhancing cultural heritage and local identity and assets.

Tölkes (2020) argues that the main criteria used to assess sustainability in tour operations should include environmental (e.g., balance between travel duration and distance) and cultural (e.g., local culture preservation) variables. Other key criteria are socioeconomic variables (e.g., local food, local employees, and fair employment) and sustainability certification (e.g., TourCert). Tölkes (2020) also highlights the role of sustainability communication in enhancing the demand for sustainable tour operators' services.

Previous studies have addressed the service quality provided by tour operators who offer basic package tours (Albayrak et al., 2016; Hudson et al., 2004) and day tours (Caber & Albayrak, 2018; Vélez et al., 2019) in different geographical contexts. The present study sought to extend previous research by investigating sustainable tours' main service dimensions. A few studies have applied an exploratory approach (e.g., Lin et al., 2007; Wang et al., 2000), but most researchers have used surveys and factor analysis methods to assess tour experiences' dimensions (e.g., Wang et al., 2007, 2013).

In more recent studies, scholars have advocated the advantages of user-generated content in service quality research as compared with more traditional approaches (Lu & Stepchenkova, 2012; Wu et al., 2014). Ratings and text reviews shared by visitors in social media platforms are seen as a spontaneous source of reliable, trustworthy, readily available, and cost efficient information useful to consumers, companies, and researchers (Brochado, 2019; Brochado & Brochado, 2019; Lu & Stepchenkova, 2012; Stoleriu et al., 2019). The present study, therefore, focused on answering the aforementioned research question of which narratives shared by tourists online stand out most clearly in order to define the key dimensions of tourists' service experiences with sustainable tours.

Methodology

Data collection

The sample collected consisted of 878 textual post-experience reviews by tourists of 20 tours across Portugal (i.e., the mainland and islands), which were retrieved from the TripAdvisor website. The tours covered by the reviews were chosen to match the relevant criteria of sustainability, namely, responsible tourism, volunteer tourism, green tourism, and other ecological concerns, as well as to incorporate tours with at least 40 reviews. The sample included a total of 82,862 words in reviews posted by tourists of diverse nationalities and in various languages that were translated into English as needed.

In addition to the reviews, demographics and satisfaction rating information were also collected from TripAdvisor. More than half (52.2%) of the reviewers were from Europe, 18.6% from North America, 3.1% from Asia, 2.4% from South America, and 1.7% from Australia and Oceania, while the origin of 22.1% of the authors was not specified. The reviewers were also categorized by how they traveled. Couples represented 41% of the sample, and 28% traveled with friends, 17% with family, 12% alone, and 1% on business. The tourists were almost all extremely satisfied with the tours since 94% gave 5 out of 5 stars, 5% 4 stars, 0.7% 3 stars, and the rest 2 and 1 stars.

All the reviews were compiled on a Microsoft Excel spreadsheet, with a row for each review, which was then converted into a.txt file. In addition, words that were destination labels (e.g., Lisbon, Oporto, the Azores, and Madeira), too broad (e.g., guides' names, tours, booking agencies, enterprises' names, restaurants, and bars) and not meaningful (e.g., "day," "hours," "everything," "take," and "thanks") were not considered useful in this research. Words from the same family were also merged (e.g., "feeling" and "felt"; "dinner", "meals," and "lunch"; and "knowledgeable" and "knows" and "knew").

Data analysis

The analysis was done using Leximancer software (i.e., LexiPortal Version 4.5), which employs a technique based on Bayesian statistical theory that directs fragmented pieces of evidence to form clusters of meaningful information (Wu et al., 2014). Leximancer is a tool that automatically analyzes collections of natural language texts and extracts relevant data in an electronic format through a coding process (Tkaczynski et al., 2015). These data are identified by the frequency of their lexical co-occurrence, using a machine learning algorithm. Next, the software clusters these concepts into themes based on the frequency they are mentioned together in a text (Wu et al., 2014). The program then displays the information as a concept map, in which concepts are grouped into themes presented on a graphical map and identified by colored circles. The warmest colors represent the most important themes, enabling researchers to analyze the initial natural language material more efficiently.

Leximancer has been used in previous sustainable tourism research to assess visitors' experiences based on narratives shared online (Brochado, 2019; Brochado & Brochado, 2019; Lu & Stepchenkova, 2012; Stoleriu et al., 2019). The main advantages of using this software are that it automatically identifies the main topics within texts, emphasizes how topics connect to each other, and indicates where exactly these particular topics are located in the data (Wu et al., 2014).

Results

The analysis revealed 12 themes that describe sustainable tour experiences. These themes can be organized into five groups: core services (tour and service), tour guide services (guide), sustainable support services (hike, food, walk, and wildlife), emotional experiences (experience, difference, and fun), and post-purchase behaviors (recommendation and return).

Tour

The tour theme includes the concepts of tour (count = 1,572, relevance = 100%), the best (229, 15%), fantastic (tour) (202, 13%), travel (184, 12%), and multiday (tour) (120, 8%). This theme describes duration and emotional aspects as the tour characteristics tourists associate with experiences they rate as the best and fantastic. The nationality, type of traveler, tour name, and star rating are provided, when available, after each excerpt.

One tourist wrote in a review, “[A] fantastic variety of wildlife are regular visitors to[o] and [we] have . . . [taken] numerous tour[s] with [the] guide. Our latest tour[,] like all the others, was fantastic” (United Kingdom [UK], couple, Birds & Nature Tours, five rating). Another review from a visitor reads, “[This f]antastic canoe tour [is an] excellent tour. [We saw a f]antastic river, wildlife, [and] trees along the river[, and stopped] for healthy refreshments” (families, Ecotrails, five rating). A further review says:

[This is a f]antastic tour, [and we had] . . . a beautiful tour with [our] guide, the best of our travel[s]. The natural park is wonderful and I think it will be . . . [unlikely we will] see other landscapes like these [again]. (friends, Oporto Adventure Tours, five rating)

Service

The service theme incorporates the concepts of service (count = 334, relevance = 21%), accommodation (155, 10%), transportation (149, 10%), excellence (234, 15%), helpfulness (144, 9%), and languages (88, 6%). This theme includes aspects of core tour services. A typical review about the service reads, “[The] guide help[ed] . . . us chose a wonderful combination of accommodation [.] Each [was] excellent and unique and had something special to offer” (couple, the United States [US], Portugal Premium Tour, five ratings).

Another opinion expressed about the tour services was that the “[l]ogistics [were] very well suited to tourists ([the] transportation [takes] you . . . [to the] accommodation and will bring you back). [The g]uide speaks [various] languages very well, which allowed us to take full advantage of his advice and knowledge” (couple, France, Birds & Nature Tours, five rating). Still another review from a tourist said, “[We experienced e]xcellent service[,] great service[,] fabulous courses, [and] fantastic accommodation with a cuisine to match.

Next year [we want] . . . more [of this]" (friends, Portugal, Portugal Nature Trails, five rating).

Guide

The guide theme comprizes the concepts of guide (count = 1,423, relevance = 91%), transportation (355, 23%), information (155, 10%), group (172, 11%), and friendly (guide) (159, 10%). This theme describes positive evaluations of the guides as friendly and the added value they provided through information. Moreover, the groups along for the tour are also described in the narratives.

One review states, "[O]ur guide was the best part of the tour. [H]e has so much knowledge about the history of the [area] and about nature[. He was] super friendly and helpful" (couple, Germany, Oporto Adventure Tours, five rating). Another tourist shared:

[The g]uide was very friendly and informative, [so we] felt safe at all times and got to know a bit about [the area]. [We s]topped off for some liqueur and wine along the way, [and] stopped . . . [at the] highest viewpoint [to get] fantastic views . . . [The guide told us n]ot only about the flora and fauna but also about cultural, geological and current information [and] issues. [This was a v]ery friendly guide and quite happy to talk about other issues . . . [in] the history [of the island]. (families, the UK, Up Mountain Madeira, five rating)

A further tourist wrote:

[We had a f]antastic tour out [as] we took the west side tour and shared the tour with two other couples that we had not met before but by the end of the tour it was like we had been friends for years. [The] guide was our driver and did a brilliant job of taking us to out of the way places that only the locals know about and . . . [the] hidden places transportation can[’t] get to. [A]s a locals [sic] guide [he] shared his love of . . . the outdoors with us and was very informati[ve] and great fun to be with. [I]f you want to spend the tour seeing the real [island] with passion[ate] people then i [sic] would highly recommend [this tour]. (couple, the UK, Up Mountain Madeira, five rating)

Hike

The theme of hike includes the concepts of hike (count = 329, relevance = 21%), beauty (282, 18%), landscapes (162, 10%), views (137, 9%), and people (92, 6%). This theme is mainly linked with nature sports and physical activities. A guest shared:

[T]he hiking [tour] provided enough physical activities that it felt like an accomplishment, but never too strenuous for anyone of [sic] general physical fitness. If people needed to take a break, we just paused and basked in the beautiful . . . landscapes[. T]he views were extremely beautiful and you hik[e] . . . to places that most tourists don’t see. (friends, the US, The West Coast Adventure Co., five rating)

Another tourist described the landscapes as amazing:

[T]he guide took us on a great hiking [trail] along the south west [sea]coast . . . [We saw such] beautiful views. [I] love[d] climbing the rocks and hiking to the beach. [I]t's challenging enough to be exciting but easy enough for everyone to enjoy. [T]he picnic at sunset was a perfect close to a perfect tour. (solo, the US, Portugal Nature Trails, five rating)

A different tourist stated:

The landscapes and views are amazing and there was a good mixture of hiking, clambering around rocks and trails, and[–] the highlight [–] wild swimming in the crystal clear river, complete with waterfalls. . . . [We took] a break between for . . . authentic and delicious traditional food at [sic] an isolated village high in the hills[. Everything was] so good. [I have n]othing to complain about[:] it was just perfect. (couple, Oporto Adventure Tours, five rating)

Food

The food theme comprises the concepts food (count = 376, relevance = 24%), locals (265, 17%), nice (food) (159, 10%), history (121, 8%), and wine (108, 7%). This dimension links gastronomy with local ingredients and traditional food prepared by locals. One tourist shared:

[T]he tour finished off with a drive well and truly off the beaten track, weaving around sand dunes . . . to take us closer to the last part of the tour which ended with a sunset picnic of locals [sic] goodies (crusty bread, cheeses, meats & wine) and [the] guide's homemade guacamole which was very, very nice. (family, the UK, The West Coast Adventure Co., five rating)

The food was described by another tourist as “[g]reat food at . . . local . . . [spots], [with an] excellent guide. We have mobility problems, and he was very receptive to our needs. The tour was very comprehensive and fun. We would recommend [it] highly” (friends, Canada, Portugal Premium Tours). One more review on this theme says:

[This was a n]ice teambuilding experience [so] we had a very nice tour perfect for a teambuilding session. We did kayak[ing and] paddl[ing], [and ate] . . . typical traditional food[. W]e went to waterfalls and visit[ed] typical villages. T[he guide t]ook photos for us all tour long. It was lovely. (business, France, Oporto Adventure Tours, five rating)

Walk

The walk theme contains the concept of walk (count = 104, relevance = 7%), which is linked to the sustainable transportation services provided by tour operators. A tourist shared that “the picnic at sunset on the cliff and the subsequent night walk back offer an extraordinary atmosphere, which you can enjoy with all [your] senses” (couple, Germany, The West Coast Adventure Co., five rating).

Another tourist commented, “[The] walking tour was a fantastic way to see hidden places which are not usually part of the touristy crowds[“ itinerary]” (friends, New Zealand, ImpacTrip – Day Tours, five rating). A further visitor wrote:

[I]t was way better than a standard touristic walking tour[;] plus i [sic] learned about and admire the responsible tourism activities beyond guiding around visitors like me. [It’s] well worth it to check out this way of seeing [the area]. (solo, the US, Lisbon Sustainable Tourism, five rating)

Wildlife

The wildlife theme includes the concepts of species (count = 107, relevance = 7%) and wildlife (91, 6%). This dimension covers wildlife and flora observation and learning opportunities. One satisfied tourist wrote:

[I] really recommend this strongly, no matter what your skill level is. [I] haven’t crunched the numbers, but i [sic] added at lot of species to my life list. [M]ost of these species were unfamiliar to me, [but the] guide was excellent at pointing out each species and [was] helpful. (friends, the US, Birds & Nature Tours, five rating)

Another tourist shared:

[This was a] fantastic tour for a fantastic multiday wildlife observation. [I]n fact its [sic] more than just a wildlife-observation outing, its [sic] a complete education [about] nature and history[. The] guide was excellent, [and had] exceptionally [complete] knowledge, about not just the species but in general[. On the] tour[,] which was amazing, [we saw] . . . a lot of species but the highlight for me was a pair of species . . . which we had great . . . [opportunities to watch. I]t was a truly amazing tour [all] in all. (solo, the UK, Birds & Nature Tours, five rating)

An additional tourist shared the opinion that the tour was “[v]ery enjoy[able] and a bit different to many tour[s], [with] friendly guide[s] who were very knowledge about the flora species. T[he t]our transportation goes to all attractions including [a] sugar cane factory and plantation” (the UK, Madeira Fauna & Flora).

Experience

The experience theme contains the concepts of experience (count = 353, relevance = 22%), amazing (experience) (275, 17%), wonderful (experience) (197, 13%), enjoyment (187, 12%), and nature (137, 9%). This theme includes narratives describing nature-based experiences, emotions (i.e., enjoyment), and positive consumer perceptions (i.e., amazing and wonderful). One visitor wrote:

[The] tour pulls you out from . . . [normal] reality and bring[s] you to . . . [a face to face] meeting with nature and [the] wild sea. [I]t’s [an] amazing experience, full of . . .

[authentic] emotions, movement, sweating, reaching distant points and . . . [feel]ing so much happiness. (solo, Russia, The West Coast Adventure Co., five rating)

This type of experience was described by one tourist as “[an] amazing tour in [a] natural park[.] I can recommend taking part in this tour . . . because the tour with a group of my friends was definitely one of the best experience[s] during my travel[s]” (friends, Czech Republic, My Greenway Tours Day Tours, five rating). Another tourist’s opinion was that:

[This was a] great experience[. M]e [sic] and my boyfriend did an hour and a half by kayak [on a] river and we love[d] the experience[. W]e start[ed] from a beach that has a wonderful view of [the] villa and we enjoy[ed] . . . the river and [all that] nature have [sic] to offer. [The tour was s]uper quiet and . . . [relaxing]. (couple, Portugal, Nature Activities Outdoor Travels, five rating)

A further review from a tourist reads, “[This is an o]utstanding nature and adventure tour[. I]t’s with great joy that I [recall that I] had the opportunity to enjoy such a wonderful and rich experience” (solo, Portugal, Oporto Adventure Tours, five rating).

Difference

The difference theme comprizes the concept of difference (count = 99, relevance = 6%), which focuses on how tours differ from tourists’ daily lives. One review says, “[T]he tour[s] run by this service are a little different from the hundreds of other tour service as they are based . . . [on] natural [and] beautiful places and wildlife” (couple, the UK, Madeira Fauna & Flora, five rating).

Another tourist emphasized that, “for anybody looking for something different to do and especially for those who are interested in making sure that the locals benefit from tourism and not just the mass tourism service[s,] this needs to be on your list” (friends, Germany, Lisbon Sustainable Tourism, five rating). An additional review from a tourist reads, “[This was a g]reat experience [as] all [of the] tour was very well planned. It included different kind[s] of activities, like rock-climbing, sightseeing, food, [and] swimming in a thermal pool. This tour will be unforgettable” (friends, Latvia, My Greenway Tours – Day Tours, five rating).

Fun

The fun theme includes the concept of fun (count = 171, relevance = 11%). This is linked with emotional experiences during sustainable tours. A guest shared, “[This was] one of the most interesting tour[s] of my life[. W]hat a crazy [time] i [sic] had. [This was] a tour full of fun in a fantastic environment” (solo, Portugal, Oporto Adventure Tours, five rating).

Another review by a tourist reads:

[The] volunteering tourism catered to [our] children. [The] guide put together a couple of excellent tour[s] for us. [W]e love[d] our electric tour and also working on a forestry project. [This was] such a fun way to begin introducing our children to giving back at a young age. (family, the US, ImpacTrip – Day Tours, five rating)

One further review says, “[This was a g]reat tour with [a] wonderful guide[. The] tour was very interesting and fun, combin[ing] nature, culture and activities” (couple, Israel, Oporto Adventure Tours, five rating).

Recommendation

The recommendation theme contains the concepts of recommendation (count = 409, relevance = 26%) and visit (208, 13%). This dimension is linked to positive post-purchase behaviors. A tourist shared online, “[W]e can’t recommend this tour enough[. I]t’s by far the best tour that we have ever had and we’ve travelled to many countries and been on lots of excursions” (couple, the UK, Up Mountain Madeira, five rating).

Another tourist wrote:

[This was a g]reat experience. [This s]ervice offers you the possibility to visit natural park[s] and other places on [sic] [the] north that usually aren’t to[o] famous . . . It was a good experience, [and] the guide [is] knowledge[able] about fauna and flora. [I r]ecommend [this]. (Portugal, My Greenway Tours – Day Tours)

An additional reviewer wrote, “We definitely recommend the tour if you love . . . nature and need a break from . . . mass touris[m] places” (couple, Belgium, Oporto Adventure Tours, five rating).

Return

The return theme incorporates the concept of return (count = 138, relevance = 9%). The majority of the tourists said they would like to return as sustainable tours provide a welcome change, offering good tour services with a difference. A tourist wrote, “[W]e did the geology tour, [with] so much detailed knowledge given in a[n] easy manor [sic], . . . [and] we learn[ed] so much we need to return again” (couple, the UK, Madeira Fauna & Flora, five rating).

Another tourist shared, “[W]e recommend [this guided] visit . . . service, which we will return again [to use] for sure” (friends, Brazil, Portugal Premium Tours, five rating). An additional review on this theme reads:

Wow, what a fabulous tour. We went on a tour with [a] fantastic guide [who was] full of knowledge and very enthusiastic. Despite the rainy weather we saw many different species. [We t]horoughly enjoy[ed] the tour and we would recommend it[. We will] definitely return for another tour. (the UK, Birds & Nature Tours)

Conclusion

This study sought to answer a predefined research question: What are the main narratives shared by tourists online and the dimensions of tourists' service experiences with sustainable tours? An analysis was conducted of the narrative content shared online by tourists who went on sustainable tours. The results offer potentially valuable theoretical contributions and have managerial implications.

Discussion

The analyses highlighted 12 themes that describe satisfactory sustainable tour experiences. The themes and their concepts were then grouped together to facilitate interpretation. These groups comprise core services (tour and service), tour guide services (guide), sustainable support services (hike, food, walk, and wildlife), emotional experiences (experience, difference, and fun), and post-purchase behaviors (recommendation and return).

Some themes relate more directly to the traditional dimensions of service quality as applied to tour operators, such as tours and services. The online reviews related to tours include both tour characteristics (e.g., day and multi-day) and positive adjectives tourists associate with their travel experiences (e.g., the best and fantastic). The reviews covering the service theme encompass concepts such as accommodations and transportation. Tour service factors have been identified in previous studies as important service quality aspects of tour operators' offers (e.g., Chan et al., 2015). This theme further describes the tour guides' core services identified by Chan et al. (2015) and Heung (2008): following an itinerary and ensuring transportation and accommodations.

The guide theme is linked with the concepts of group, information, and friendly people. The participants commented on the guides' passion, knowledge, and ability to "share . . . [their] love" of the outdoors. The importance tourist reviewers give to tour guides has been confirmed by previous research's results (e.g., Caber & Albayrak, 2018; Wang et al., 2007, 2013). This theme also corresponds with the communication dimension of tour guide service quality identified by Heung (2008). Guides play an important part in providing interpretations of nature and local culture and history and stimulating intellectual and emotional connections between tour participants and the environment. The reviewers' narratives provide further evidence for interpretative tour guides' role as experience providers and gatekeepers (Alazaizeh et al., 2019) and thus as effective promoters of sustainable tourism (Poudel & Nyaupane, 2013).

The sustainable tour reviews analyzed in the present study reveal that tourists' experiences are linked with tour providers' best sustainability

practices (Tepelus, 2005). More specifically, the theme of wildlife (i.e., observations) is connected with information and education criteria. The food theme describes tourists tasting local food prepared by nearby communities, so this feature of tours meets the social investment criteria. Other related activities mentioned in the reviews include picnics with locals. In addition, walks' design shows that tour operator services are tailored to fulfill environmental criteria.

The food theme includes traditional dishes prepared by residents with local ingredients. Previous studies have also highlighted the role of food and restaurants in tour operations (Caber & Albayrak, 2018; Chan et al., 2015; Vélez et al., 2019). Reviews with this theme additionally describe interactive experiences (Otto & Ritchie, 1996) (e.g., picnics with locals). These opportunities for tourists to connect with locals offer a chance for restaurant businesses to develop further, which strengthens the visited regions' economies, thereby meeting the socioeconomic criteria for sustainable tour operations (Tölkes, 2020).

Furthermore, the dimension of walking tours comprises a sustainable transportation option ensuring an equilibrium between travel duration and distance (Tölkes, 2020). The hike theme also includes nature-based sports and physical activities (e.g., swimming in crystal-clear rivers and canoeing) and activities connected with views and landscapes. Tourists' appreciation of nature-based sports activities is in accordance with previous studies' findings (Hudson et al., 2004), and these activities are related to opportunities to practice skills (Aho, 2001) that enhance consumers' capabilities during their tourism experiences.

In addition, the wildlife dimension is linked with learning about species and flora. This theme corresponds to the stimulation dimension of Otto and Ritchie (1996) scale, as well as possibly being linked to the informative experiences described by Aho (2001). The latter researcher relates learning to the knowledge acquired by individuals during experiences, which can be intentionally sought out by tourists or stimulated by occasional offers of information (e.g., shared by tour guides). Guides are of utmost importance to planning visits to places that only locals know about.

Some of the themes identified include concepts related to tourism experiences, such as fun and different. Tours for tourists thus can stimulate emotional and experiential reactions among customers (Otto & Ritchie, 1996). In the context of sustainable tours, Richards and Font (2019, p. 283) suggest that the most important success factor is "unique, value-adding experiences." The sustainable tours under study provide services that inspire tourists to write positive narratives.

The theme of experience describes the positive emotions associated with contemplating nature that is considered amazing and wonderful. An important concept in this theme is enjoyment. The fun theme is also related to emotional experiences felt immediately or later in tourists' memories (Aho,

2001). This is the hedonic component of experiences (Otto & Ritchie, 1996). Chan and Baum (2007) report that sustainable tourists tend to use more hedonic dimensions to express their feelings and describe positive experiences, such as enjoyment and fun.

The difference theme is connected with escapism and thus relates to the novelty dimension identified by Otto and Ritchie (1996). Tourists value being able to escape from their routine and do something new. In the context of sustainable tour operations, different services allow visitors to experience something different from mass tourism by contemplating nature, wildlife, and flora, as well as enjoying local culture and history and authentic gastronomic experiences.

Tourists' reviews show high levels of satisfaction with sustainable tours. The recommendation and return dimensions translate this satisfaction into positive post-purchase behaviors. High levels of service quality are known to be associated with positive outcomes (Chan et al., 2015), and the themes of return and recommendation are related to the dimensions of service quality provided by tour guides that Heung (2008) identified as customer orientation. When tour guides succeed in addressing tourists' needs, they provide superior value and ensure customer satisfaction.

Theoretical contributions

This study's results make potentially valuable theoretical contributions to the existing literature. The findings facilitate a better understanding of the most important dimensions of tourists' experiences in this underresearched area of tourism. Sustainable tours consist of a series of service encounters. Besides confirming the three overall groups of dimensions identified by Chan et al. (2015), the present content analysis of online narratives adds to previous studies' results regarding day tours' service quality (Caber & Albayrak, 2018; Vélez et al., 2019).

First, the current results suggest new dimensions that cover the tours' sustainability features. These dimensions include wildlife and flora observations, hikes, nature-based sports, and physical activities (e.g., canoeing and swimming in crystal-clear water) that allow tourists to contemplate nature.

Second, the data analysis's results offer a deeper understanding of how the themes identified are related to sustainability, adding new components to the items previously used to describe the tour experience dimensions included in existing scales (e.g., DAILYSERV). For example, the food and beverage dimension needs to include not only food and facility quality but also opportunities to taste local ingredients and food prepared by locals. Transportation should also encompass sustainable modes (e.g., walking tours). To meet sustainability criteria, tour guide assessments by participants must include the guides'

interpretative role and their capacity for stimulating tourists intellectually and emotionally and encouraging links between participants and the places visited.

Tourists use social media platforms to share their experiences during sustainable tours in the post-purchase phase. From a methodological perspective, the present results provide an example of how researchers can use tour participants' rating and reviews to gain a fuller understanding of the main dimensions of sustainable tour experiences.

Managerial implications

The results of the present study offer some managerial implications. First, for those operating in the sustainable tourism market, the findings confirm high levels of satisfaction among consumers of different geographic segments and traveler types (i.e., solo, family, business, and couple). Second, for those entrepreneurs who are planning to become sustainable tour operators, the results highlight the most important themes of tourists' overall experiences. When promoting sustainable products, entrepreneurs should emphasize escapism, education, visitor involvement, and hedonics in experiences. The themes identified also describe experiential dimensions and emotions (e.g., fun and difference) that can be used to improve the effectiveness of sustainable tour operators' communication (Tölkes, 2020).

Third, the current findings include the importance of employing local guides to provide interpretations of flora and fauna and to contribute to regional development. Fourth, customers value tasting traditional food prepared with local ingredients by residents. Last, tour operators should use electronic word-of-mouth data to assess their tours' service quality and thus continuously improve their service design.

Limitations and future research

Although these findings facilitate a better understanding of experiences offered by sustainable tourism from the tourists' perspective, this study also has some limitations. The sustainable tours under analysis are offered in a single country – Portugal (i.e., the mainland and islands). As most tourists in the sample were satisfied, the content analysis only identified the dimensions of great sustainable experiences.

Although islands are characterized by a relative scarcity of resources compared with the mainland, they are also known for their unique offers and resources. Future studies could study eco tours on different islands and test whether these products could be developed into value propositions. Finally, from a methodological perspective, the dimensions of sustainable tour experiences identified based on narratives shared online could be validated using

mixed methods and then incorporated into a modified DAILYSERV scale to be applied in sustainable tour research.

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