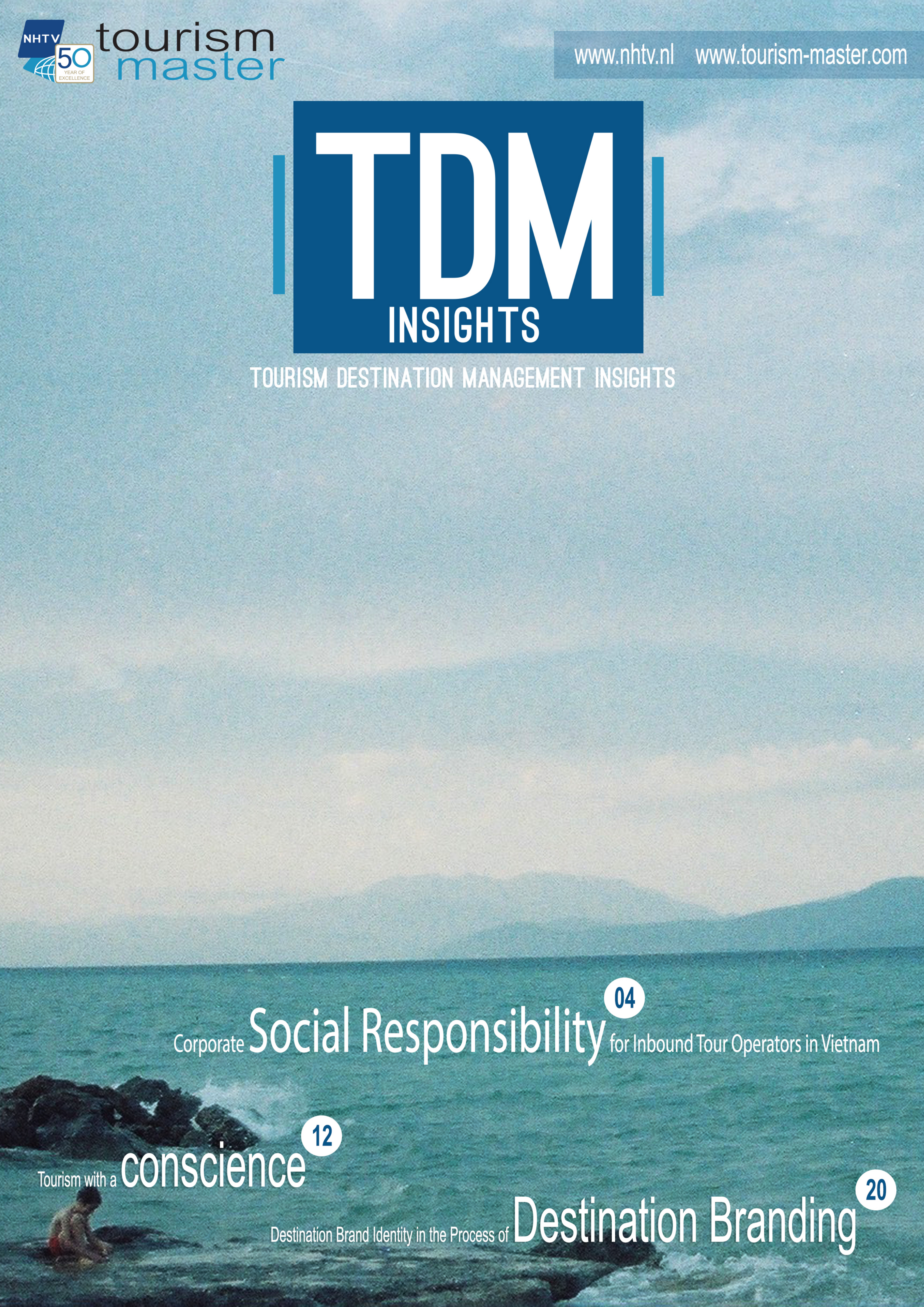

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TDM INSIGHTS

TOURISM DESTINATION MANAGEMENT INSIGHTS

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Colophon

“TDM Insights” is an online journal that has discussions and columns on the topic of Tourism Destination Management. The journal is founded by NHTV Breda University of Applied Sciences, on behalf of their Master of Arts program in Tourism Destination Management (TDM). It is based on the contributions by TDM alumni, NHTV lecturers and other academics and practitioners who provide academic and practical insights on various topics of interest.

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Whose responsibility is it anyway?

Dear readers,

By now it is probably clear, especially to the readers of this journal, that the impacts of tourism cannot be ignored. Impacts occur on a local level, such as the generation of money and jobs, the creation of meaningful interactions between inhabitants and visitors, and the preservation of cultural heritage and the natural environment (or their negative counterparts). But there is also increasing awareness of the impacts of tourism on a global level. According to the PhD research of Paul Peeters, one of our contributors, air travel will, if allowed unregulated growth, by 2070 generate more CO2 emissions than agreed at the Paris Climate Agreement (2015) for all of the world.

Awareness is one thing, solving this problem is something completely different. It brings to mind the Prisoner's dilemma, a well-known concept from game theory: Two people are arrested for a serious crime, but there is no evidence. They are put in separate rooms – and cannot communicate with one another. They are then offered three choices: (1) If they both remain silent they will only get a fine; (2) if one confesses and acknowledges that both of them are guilty, this person will be set free while the other one will be sent to jail for 10 years (3); If they both confess, they will get five years each. Although they would jointly be better of remaining silent each suspect has an incentive to confess. If the other person confesses, he is better off confessing as well. If the other person remains silent, confession is also the best strategy, as a result of which both are worse off.

This metaphor can be translated to tourism: There is no doubt that addressing the negative impacts of tourism, like the CO2 emissions or degradation of our natural assets, will in the end make the world, destinations, and people better off. The downside is these effort can be costly and might only be effectively realized by limiting the amount of tourism. When destinations are not convinced their efforts to become more sustainable will be copied by competitors, they might feel their own efforts will simply hurt themselves and make no positive difference globally. Because each destination is making this consideration, the two-person prisoners' dilemma is now turned into a 'multiplayer prisoner's dilemma' – also referred to as the 'tragedy of the commons'. The decision made by each participant (destination) is out of line with their collective interest.

Whose responsibility is it then to get us out of this dilemma or stop the tragedy? Local governments? National governments? Our world leaders? The tourism industry? Or is up to the tourists themselves? This issue of TDMI confronts the dilemma head on – delivering food for thought, highlighting the idealistic and the pragmatic, and offering some ideas worth trying. By putting together this issue, for which we gratefully acknowledge all TDM alumni and the respondents, we can maybe, just maybe, inspire and engage the world – and destinations – to become a little bit more sustainable. Let's just say that that is our responsibility as an editing team!

Sincerely,

The editors

Dr. Jeroen Klijs (lead)
Dr. Celiane Camargo-Borges
Dr. Ondrej Mitas

Corporate Social Responsibility for Inbound Tour Operators in Vietnam:

Perception and Reality and introducing Travelife Certification for the Travel Sector

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Introduction

"The tourism sector has been a major factor in job creation, economic development and poverty alleviation in Vietnam, leaving no doubt that tourism has played a crucial role in our country's overall socio-economic development," said Vice-President Nguyen Thi Doan of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam at The World Travel & Tourism Council's Global Leaders for Campaign on 20 April 2012 in Hanoi (WTO, 2012). It is the general perception that tourism brings many benefits for Vietnam. However, due to arbitrary and disruptive policy decisions from the government at macro-economic level (BMI Research, 2015), as well as limited national coordination and poor destination management , Vietnam's natural tourism assets is vulnerable to loss of value.

Since the late 1980s, sustainability has more and more become one of the leading philosophies for practitioners, entrepreneurs and academics in tourism (Butler, 1999; Mowforth & Munt, 2015). Despite various critical views on tourism sustainability, it is agreed to a large degree that the key to managing the negative impacts related to tourism is sustainability. Sustainability can be obtained by cohesive tourism planning and implementation and management of these plans by all stakeholders . This study focuses on inbound tour operator (ITO) in Vietnam; the main stakeholder in the tourism value chain in Vietnam.

Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) is an approach for businesses to achieve sustainability (Hawkins, 1982; Reich, 1998; Carroll, 1999). It is defined as the "active and voluntary contribution of an enterprise to environmental, social, and economic improvement". For ITOs CSR is a trendy concept . However, no study had been done focusing on CSR perception and practices by ITOs in Vietnam. There are over 1.500 formal ITOs in Vietnam. Together they are responsible for the majority of international arrivals. ITOs also play a key role in tourism supply chains. Their operational management has a clear influence on many subjects, from products to customers.

The goal of the present research was:

To analyse and compare how CSR is perceived and the reality of its practices by ITOs in Vietnam, with a focus on the assessment of business's readiness, benefits and barriers in practicing CSR, to evaluate the proposition of applying the Travelife sustainability certification programme for advancing CSR practices and engaging more participation from ITOs in Vietnam.

Methods

A mixed method approach, combining qualitative and quantitative data, was used. Various online sources, such as books, academic articles, news, annual reports, and master plans were reviewed to determine the research goal and questions. The research was partly based on an auto-ethnographic method. Hereby, the researcher's own experience are seen as a topic of investigation in its own right . Four years of sustainability and CSR working experiences of the researcher were used as data for this research. Finally, interviews with 10 governmental officers and a survey – in which 100 ITO participated - were used to collect primary data for this research.

Findings and discussion

Sustainability terms are ambiguously used. The research showed that CSR is still an ambiguous concept for many practitioners. This resulted in inconsistent use of terms in official or casual communication, in master plans, as well as in media representations. Sustainable tourism, green tourism, responsible tourism, and CSR have been used without clear clarifications of concept and applications. Terminology is important, as ITOs even considered the term "responsible tourism/travel" to be offensive. Vietnamese ITO do not want to call their operations responsible because that implies, in their perception, that they were not responsible before. This interpretation leads to unwillingness and demotivation to engage in sustainable development, making it a real barrier.

Limited national coordination. Another barrier to implement CSR, according to the ITOs, is the government's weaknesses in planning and implementing sustainable/responsible development. Unclear goal and roles and uncoordinated actions plans are the evidence to support such an argument. There is a wide communication gap between policy imposers and implementers, which makes it difficult to work towards a shared vision. The findings showed, on the one hand, that the private sector seems to have lost their trust in the government's planning and monitoring. On the other hand, it also makes clear the adversity that the government's endeavours and projects face towards promoting sustainable/responsible tourism in Vietnam. ITOs seem unable to objectively evaluate the government's performance and are prejudiced in blaming the government for poor management. The ITOs expect the government to be active and leading, while being passive in reaching out for information themselves. Surely, ITOs faced limited national coordination as one of their challenges in exercising CSR. But it is worth noting that their frigid attitude towards national sustainable development objectives widens the gaps in public-private partnerships.

ITOs "ego-ing" rather than "eco-ing" responsible tourism practices. Not only does this study call into question the validity of ITO's reports on CSR practices, it also points out the need to be aware of how contexts impact a company's "ego" more than "eco", as Brian Wheeller (1993) ironically addressed in his research about sustainability and businesses. Following up on this, in the present study the same group of respondents was interviewed twice, once anonymous and once with an identifiable respondent. The data from the two survey was drastically different. The anonymous survey showed that ITOs did not do many of the things they claimed to be doing in the survey with identifiable respondents. This leads to a general statement, not meant to stereotype, that the higher the "ego", the bigger the gap between oral commitment and actual actions. In this sense, "eco" is misused for short-term social recognition.

This tendency is influenced by the lack of an accreditation system. This demotivated ITOs from formal CSR practices, as they are unsure of how to benchmark their profit, efficiency pursuits and social responsibility. In addition, there was no guidance and support from the government and external organizations. This added up the passiveness in making positive changes towards sustainability. The tendency of being untruthful is encouraged by the widespread trend of responsible tourism. This study suggests that a company's target market, the domestic context of regulations, and worldwide trend are the factors that drive a company's "ego" towards being "eco" or sounding "eco".
Lack of systemic thinking and implementation. ITOs acknowledge the power they have to encourage the tourism industry to move towards sustainable development. This does not mean, however, that they use this power. ITO's CSR practices were found to be scattered, unorganised and more importantly unmonitored. Related to this, ITOs did not regard profit increases and cost reductions as benefits of CSR, indirectly associating CSR with high(er) costs of time and capital. This is contradictory to evidence given throughout the literature review about the economical benefits of CSR for enterprises.

Travelife certification program as an initiative for cross-sector collaboration. Sustainable tourism certification can be used to measure and monitor the sustainable management of tourism companies or destinations. For developing countries, certification may be a good tool to promote better management of tourism stakeholders, and the environmental and socio-economic impacts of tourism, and to help attract high-end, environmentally-conscious tourists. Travelife is the certificate that is most recognised by the industry, locally and internationally, and by ITOs. Different from other eco-labels, Travelife is a dedicated sustainability auditing system for tour companies and travel agencies. Travelife recognizes that what Vietnam needs is to ease ITOs into the implementing of sustainable / responsible development, not another complication. Travelife could act as a mirror for tour companies to reflect on their own position and capacity, expectations and objectives, their company's value system before they engage in activities to make their operations more sustainable.

Conclusions

The study is important because it provides new insights into the comprehension and implementation (or lack thereof) of CSR by ITOs in Vietnam. ITOs recognised the urgent need of Vietnam's tourism for sustainability and their position in the stakeholder network to support government's strategy, to influence clients and partners. However, their practices in CSR turned out to be informal, unorganised and sometimes fictitious. It identified the factors that leads to the contraction - which could be used for decision planning and making towards sustainability for tourism stakeholders of all types.
To aid for tourism sustainable development in Vietnam, further research should look into the market demand for sustainable products in Vietnam, factors to build an effective communication mechanism for public and private sector in working towards share sustainability objectives, and factors that influence tour company's "ego" in "eco-ing" their operations.

Response to Chi Nguyen

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I am Emma Duong Thuy Nguyen and I am Vice Director of Eviva Tour Vietnam and President of the Responsible Travel Club of Vietnam (RTC). I am writing my feedback on 'CSR for ITOs in Vietnam: Perception and Reality and introducing Travelife Certification for the Travel Sector' by Chi Nguyen. This topic is very important for ITOs in Vietnam, for two reasons:

- ITOs have the power to make an impact. As tourism is one of the three core economic activities in Vietnam, ITOs play a very important role and can influence all buyers and suppliers of tourism products in Vietnam. They buy tourism products from hotels, transportation, restaurants and others and are the (nearly) only focal points in Vietnam for the travel agencies, tour operators and customers overseas before they enter Vietnam.
- Due to the education system after the war, current Vietnam ITO leaders' awareness towards CSR is very low.

Chi Nguyen's findings are not new but very valuable and practically applicable. There are relevant recommendations for ITOs. Hereby, I refer specifically to the group of pioneering ITOs that are the members of RTC Vietnam. It will take substantially more time for the other ITOs to take steps. The Travelife certification program is new to most of Vietnam ITOs including RTC members. The finding of ITOs "ego-ing" rather than "eco-ing" responsible tourism practices are really interesting and ironical – and relevant in understanding the psychology of the people working in the travel sector.

In implementing Chi Nguyen's recommendations the following barriers need to be overcome:

- The costs involved in introducing Travelife, e.g. inviting a Travelife expert, are substantial – considering that ITOs' awareness is not high. The RCT only has a limited budget. Sponsorship by relevant organizations could help to make a good start.
- ITOs are basically busy all year round. Raising awareness for CSR and Travelife has to happen during those small gaps in time when they are less busy, otherwise it will fail. The recommended months are early September or early May (for the majority of ITOs) or June for ITOs specializing in inbound tours only.
- As awareness of CSR is low and the misuse of the terms are common, the benefits of offering responsible travel for ITOs need to be explained (EGO, not ECO first). For example, one of the biggest ITOs does many responsible things, but the owner think responsible is a fashionable word that is not consistent with the company's focus on revenue. So although they are doing very well, he thinks they would never qualify for a responsible label. It has to be explained to ITOs how CSR can reduce costs, increase revenue, and only then to talk about how good it is for the environment. Information about responsible travel can be spread via social media (Facebook, Instagram, blogs, websites) and email, using infographics and videos that are understandable to people working in the field. This is a low-cost, high-impact strategy. Furthermore, there can be attention for CSR during the monthly networking event of RTC – so that all the people working in the field from different positions can feel, taste and understand and practice responsible criteria.
- RCT wants to partner with Travelife to implement the certificate in Vietnam. After Chi proposed this at the 2017 ITB in Berlin, we have been searching for a coordinator to implement this, but have yet to find one. The limited budget available plays an important role in this. If the right person, who is professional, passionate, and within the limited budget can be found, we will do it right away!

A potential implementation of Travelife fits very well with the existing strategy and actions of RTC. One of our important action plan point for 2017 is to revise the responsible criteria. This will be combined with trainings and on-site inspections with each company bi-annually—to make sure all the companies follow the CSR criteria. While RTC is not so strong and lack experts for doing this, Travelife is known for applying this in a professional manner. We hope that a number of pioneering ITOs in Vietnam can become members of Travelife to apply the real practice and guide the rest towards CSR in the future.

The conditions for successful certification and CSR in tourism.

Response to Chi Nguyen

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I very much appreciate and welcome the paper by Chi Nguyen. Her research covers a number of important issues related to sustainability in tourism, supporting some of the results we obtained during 15 years of research in the sustainable development of tourism at the NHTV Centre for Sustainability, Tourism and Transport (www.cstt.nl). The first lines of her paper, for example, show that politicians often simplify matters beyond what can be demonstrated by science. Indeed, the idea that tourism always brings benefits and seldom problems is as widespread among policymakers as it is incorrect.

To what extent can corporate social responsibility (CSR) help businesses to "actively and voluntarily contribute to reducing negative social and environmental impacts?" CSR has become mainstream even with some large corporations such as TUI International and Air France-KLM. But at the same time, sustainability problems like climate change and poverty are still growing. Is CSR failing to do its job or do we need more? One should never forget that the main objective of every viable enterprise is to make a profit, simply because businesses consistently making losses will soon disappear, leaving only those making a profit. This is a form of natural selection in a competitive world. Of course there is some room for combining sustainability and profit: For instance, a hotel can switch from incandescent lamps to energy-saving LED lights and at the same time save much on the electricity bill, enhancing profits.

I very much welcome Chi's study on international tour operators (ITO's) in Vietnam, because I believe that tour operators are key to making a difference in tourism. But they will do so only when they are fully aware of the main sustainability issues of inbound tourism and the strategies on how to reduce these and when unequivocally supported by government policies. What I miss in the paper is a clear view on the main sustainability issues at hand and how CSR could help mitigate these. The closest comes the observation that one objective of CSR and Travelife should be to attract the "environmentally conscious tourist." However, I am afraid that may not work very well, because of a couple of reasons. First, from research, we know that tourists have difficulty to maintain their environmentally friendly attitude from home during their travel (Hardeman, Font & Nawijn, 2017). In general, an 'attitude-behaviour gap' exists (Juvan & Dolnicar, 2014), which means that even people with a pro-environment attitude fail to translate that into real environmentally friendly behaviour. Interestingly, Chi Nguyen's study shows a same kind of phenomenon based on the management survey among managers in ITO's when she discusses the big difference between answers given by anonymous respondents as compared to identifiable respondents (see also Font et al., 2012). Second, it is to be seen whether the environmental impact of the small group of environmentally conscious tourists is indeed better than that of 'ordinary' tourist. For instance, from unpublished research at CSTT we know that voters for the Dutch Green Party during national elections are the most frequent flyers of all different voter groups. Tourism based on air transport is not a sustainable form of tourism (Peeters, 2016) and Green Party voters are certainly aware of this, but apparently unable to act accordingly. Therefore, I would like to suggest that the main challenge is not to attract 'self-declared sustainable tourists,' but to organise tourism in a way that tourists—all tourists—increasingly behave sustainably. In other words, by 'greening' the tourism product rather than the tourist.

Interesting is the idea to involve Travelife in the CSR process in Vietnam. The Travelife label requires a detailed assessment of the impacts of a tourism business and the ways it tries to reduce these impacts. One objective is to get a certificate, which may attract environmentally conscious tourists. However, we know from research that eco-labels have a rather limited impact on travel choices and behaviour (Villarino & Font, 2015). As discussed by Chi, acquiring a label can have more objectives and effects.

At CSTT we will start in November 2017 a four-year project, SASTDes (Smart Assessment of Sustainable Tourist Destinations) in which Travelife is also involved. The project has two main objectives. First, we will try to substantially reduce the efforts to gather all information required to get a green label. Second, we will try to share the collected information with the management to enable the destination or enterprise to become more competitive. For instance, by making available information about air or water quality, which, if it is found to be outstanding, could be used to more successfully advertise the destination or to shift marketing to markets that specifically appreciate such characteristics at destinations. We will provide the sector with economic arguments to join Travelife and be involved in CSR rather than a social argument.
Finally, a word about the role of governments. I feel it is

insufficient for governments to only stimulate CSR. For instance, because air transport is a major contributor to unsustainable tourism development, the government should also try to change the current prices for air tickets as compared to the cost of rail or coach tickets or using your car to reach the destination. You cannot expect the tourist to take a train if it not only takes far more travel time but also is way more expensive. The same applies to ITO's. They will never offer non-air trips when air travel is several times cheaper.

Chi Nguyen's paper is a welcome contribution to the CSR and sustainable tourism literature. Our knowledge needs to develop further to achieve sustainable tourism development. So new research and papers on this topic are very welcome!

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Designing research with creativity: arts-based methods as a way to co-create with destinations

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Understanding the complexity of a destination is core when developing a new project or new interventions. Besides the understanding phase, there is also the phase of involving all the stakeholders, the assessment phase and so forth. Being successful in destination management is quite hard as destinations are full of complexities and local policies, local culture and values play a big role. Conducting research therefore become mandatory for tackling all the matters above.

There are however many approaches to research in a destination. This article introduces a possible way to design research that is very connected to creativity. Creativity refers to the capacity of the researcher to be curious and open-minded, in order to explore and investigate beyond what is given (the data), aiming at immersing in the complexity of a place and of people in order to create an unimagined future together with the destination.

According to Montuori (2006), a scholar who publishes a great deal on creativity and creative inquiry, this approach on research moves away from the logic of either/or and from the logic of oppositions or polarities, navigating towards the spectrum of opportunities, embracing an intuitive and rational ambiguity, promoting a variety of rich meanings and knowledge related to the topic investigated.

Creativity in research is also about framing research as a creative process (Montuori, 2005), creating what "might be" instead of sticking to "what it is." The core of creativity in research is to give form to loose ideas during the whole process of the research, ideas that are apparently not interconnected, framing that into possible connections, further understanding and ultimately creating new actions. Paré and Larner (2004) endorse this way of doing research by stating that "research is not simply an act of finding out, but is also always a creating together process" (p. 213).

This orientation is also connected to a framework called Social Construction (Camargo-Borges & Rasera, 2013) inviting researchers not just to raise hypotheses, collect data and make conclusions about a destination but also to embrace a more collaborative approach towards the social actors involved in order to produce useful and contextual meanings. Social Constructionist ideas encourage creativity in research in order to understand and co-create with a destination instead of for a destination, producing more user-centered and context-related findings and directions (Camargo-Borges 2017).

This creative approach to research challenges universal knowledge and its inclination to predict and control, instead inviting a closer look at local knowledge, at different voices and perspectives and at the dynamics of our ever-changing world/society (Gergen, 2015; Anderson, 2014; McNamee & Hosking, 2012). If knowledge is co-created in relationship, in context and in history, this approach to research invites not just an understanding of this creation but also a recreation to new forms of knowledge, focusing on what Gergen (2014) calls future forming research. Future forming research differs from traditional research where the research is understood to be a mirror of reality. In a future forming research, the aim is not to look at what "is there," but to create new forms of action thereby creating alternative possibilities for society, organizations and community.

To enable this type of research new methods need to be applied. Arts-based research offers a set of methods such as Photovoice, Storytelling, pictures and visuals that invites creativity and engagement in research. Arts-based research can be defined as a form of qualitative research that uses the premises, procedures, and principles of the arts in the investigation of a topic. According to Knowles and Cole (2008), arts-based research is an expanding orientation in research that brings inspiration and representation from the arts to qualitative social science. According to the authors it is a systematic way of "…understanding and examining experience by both researchers and the people that they involve in their studies" (p. 29).

Patricia Leavy (2009), an expert in Arts-Based Research, states that embracing methods that come from the field of arts enable powerful narratives in research as they go beyond rational linguistic representation, thereby amplifying stories and providing a more complex view of a situation or topic.

Creative Research in Uganda

Three researchers (one is the author of this paper) and two NGO's in Uganda (Hope for Youth Uganda & Health Nest Uganda) engaged in a collaborative creative inquiry. These NGOs work with some communities in Uganda focusing on local developments in healthcare and education. The aim of the inquiry was to explore possibilities for establishing partnerships and to get to know more about the local community from their own perspective. We began with understanding the context by having online virtual meetings together (each of us in our own countries) to get to know each other, our interests, our needs in order to establish the theme of the research.

We entered the field as co-researchers (Irving, 2007), which meant that we were not standing there as experts, but as participants with some expertise that we hoped to combine with the expertise of our partners in Uganda. This understanding phase resulted in a research proposal entitled, "Discovering the Beauty of Uganda", with the aim to engage in an exploration of the community through the youth's meanings of their positive experiences and impressions of Uganda.

In the second phase, we were in Uganda all together. We (the researchers) introduced participants to the Photovoice method (Griebling et. al., 2013) and trained them in the context of the research topic. The method builds on the power and potential of photography to enable and encourage participants to be creative and reflective. It invites participants to imagine alternative futures on a specific topic. With the Photovoice method we offered a prompt, which was to take photos of something that was meaningful to them, that had a meaningful story or represented an important experience in their lives.
The data collection unfolded, as the participants were absorbed with the topic, the method, and co-created meaning together. We gave digital cameras to 20 young people, aged 8 to 26. They moved around the city and took pictures of what they saw/interpreted as the beauty of Uganda.

We encouraged participants to work interdependently, inviting creativity and imagination as they freely choose what they would like to share about themselves and their surroundings in a visual manner. With their camera, participants were able to explore the place, document and reveal what they appreciate about Uganda and what they would like to share.

During the data collection, they were actually generating (creating) data, in which the interaction participants-method-team promoted the emergence of new ideas and material with which we worked afterwards (analysis phase). The arts-based method used here involved all participants in the research, enabling them to tap into their creativity and invited interaction among themselves as well as with the researchers.

The next phase was to collect all the pictures taken. The participants sat together in small groups and started telling the stories their photos portray. Their stories got richer as they shared them with each other. After choosing some pictures to be printed they managed to find shared meanings and also find what was special about their own experiences and stories. The research project ended with a final exhibition of the pictures together with the stories written in the community park. By sharing the pictures and stories with community members and leaders their meanings were extended and new stories emerged from the interaction.

The findings were framed using the method of Storytelling (Bochner & Rigg, 2014) which creates collective meanings by developing stories together. A story has the power to bring out multiple voices and multiple constructions, building connections and relationships between the persons and the topic.

The example of the research "Discovering the Beauty of Uganda", shows the potential that creative approaches can bring to research aimed at social impact.

Lessons for Tourism Destination Management (TDM)

Creative research approaches are most valuable for TDM. Through engaging the participants you can understand better a destination from the eyes of the locals (but also through the eyes of any other group you want to focus on) as well as it can open up new ways of being in relation to a place and new possibilities to be created. It leads to "an inquiry space where diverse views can be in dialogue with each other" (Alvesson & Deetz, 2000 in McNamee, 2010, pp. 16-17). It is a powerful way to co-create new conversations, to encourage participants to expand their own view on a topic and to build new actions in the destination.

For TDM creative research opens up possibilities to work with places and communities in a more engaged way, learning from local people, local stories, values and experiences. It can lead to more inclusive projects, where all participants, including the researchers, co-create possible futures together. In turn, inclusive projects promote a sense of ownership, which supports sustainable change as people commit and take care of what belong to them.
TDM would benefit from alternative approaches that embrace the complexity of this field, research approaches that are not just focused on controlling of environment, prediction of behavior, but also and specially focused on the co-creation of knowledge among all involved that can engage, motivate and promote sustainable changes. Lo-

cality and its people play a fundamental role in the success and sustainability of a project. Embracing creativity can be a powerful way to do research WITH people and NOT for people, involving the destination in every step of the research.

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Tourism with a conscience

An empirical investigation of the perception of travelers on CSR-certification of tour operators based in Germany

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Introduction

The thesis underlying this article investigated the Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) commitment of tour operators based in Germany. Tour operators are organizations that have the power to influence the journeys that tourists experience. The research uncovered that certification of tour operators and the communication of sustainable tourism through CSR-labels is an emerging issue . The focus was specifically on the TourCert certificate and the awareness and perception of German travelers on this label. The certificate has been awarded to European tour operators for more than seven years, to identify CSR practices and what could be improved.

With the immense growth of the tourism industry over the past six decades, to become one of the largest economic sectors in the world (UNWTO, 2016), and the existing evidence of its negative impacts (Luu, 2011), certification and labeling programs have been developed to protect tourism destinations. Certification ensures that businesses meet sustainable criteria in line with the aspects of people, planet and profit. Today, more than 150 certificates are circulating within the tourism industry worldwide (ECOTRANS, 2016) and are presented by means of e.g. green leaves stickers or blue flags in hotel lobbies and tourism bureaus. The high amount of certificates implies that consumers can hardly distinguish which label is trustworthy and regularly monitored by an examiner (Plüss & Zotz, 2012). Furthermore, it is debatable to what extent a certificate is beneficial for a tourism business, considering the efforts, costs and changes involved in the certification process.

Accordingly, the aim of is the thesis was to investigate CSR-certificates from both the supply and the demand side. First, it attempted to uncover German travelers' perceptions of CSR-certificates of tour operators and to find out if they recognize a difference in quality, responsible behavior, and credibility between certified and uncertified tour operators. Second, the potential and challenges of undergoing the certification process for tourism businesses were examined. Finally, advice was formulated on how to properly integrate the CSR-certificate into customer communication and develop consumer's awareness about CSR and certification positively.

Methods

The research was based on a combination of qualitative and quantitative methods. The qualitative method consisted of semi-structured interviews with seven customers and six experts who are familiar with CSR-certified tour operators. The quantitative method consisted of a customer survey with 315 participants. While the survey data was analyzed with SPSS to identify the perception of the wider population and to test hypotheses from the literature, the interview data were investigated with a thematic content analysis to unfold patterns and recurring opinions.

Findings and discussion

The research revealed that German travelers strive to contribute to sustainable tourism, since they put a high priority on ecological and social engagement of tour operators and on personal encounters with the local community of the visited destination . However, the CSR-certificate is still widely unknown and does not lead in attracting tourists. In contrast, the quality of the product and the price remain the determining factors in the decision-making process. Tour operators considered the certification process as beneficial for business operations and environments. In this process, strengths and weaknesses of the business operation could be unfolded by evaluating the firm's activities at hands of specific and sustainability criteria. Therefore, most tour operators primarily utilize certification for their internal business improvement and regular quality management by external auditors. They do not consider the CSR-certificate as a unique selling point to attract customers or to gain a competitive advantage over other tour operators. Hence, they limit their marketing activities accordingly.

Regarding a perceived difference between certified and uncertified tour operators, the German travelers did not associate the certificate with an enhancement in product quality, although tour operators stressed that the certification process has the advantage that the CSR and product quality is constantly improved.

Besides, this study revealed that younger travelers belonging to Generation X and Y, who have a lower education and lower income, and those who have already experienced a trip with a certified tour operator, had a more positive perception towards the certificate and believed that a certified tour operator performs better than an uncertified one . Higher educated respondents and those with a higher income were most critical towards the certification. As this group is the main target group of most certified tour operators, there is an urgent need for proper clarification to counteract this critical view.

Lastly, the hypotheses testing results showed that if travelers consider a certificate as positive (trustful, quality assured, etc.), they in turn tend to respond with positive word of mouth, loyalty and the willingness to pay more for a certified tourism company . This outcome demonstrates the importance of increasing the level of customer awareness about the certificate.

The findings lead to several practical recommendations that can be effective for tour operators. Due to the lack of awareness, enhancing marketing and communication activities is crucial. By making the label more visible on catalogues and websites, by creating an exchange platform for interested and experienced travelers to encourage electronic word-of-mouth and by cooperating with bloggers, who inform about the certificate, the awareness and knowledge of CSR-certificates can be effectively increased.

Moreover, it is crucial to involve customers and let them participate in CSR developments, so that they can feel the benefits of the CSR-certificate at first hand. Thus, communication should not only take place from businesses to customers, but also vice-versa from customers to firms as well as amongst the customers themselves. This customer co-creation and innovation can be encouraged by organizing post travel events, for instance. These encounters can be used to collect additional feedback and to brainstorm with customers about improvements and potential future projects. By actively involving customers in business development, their understanding of the implementation of sustainable projects and the certification process can be increased and the demands and expectations of tourists can be directly integrated.

In addition, there is a need to focus on training and involvement of employees and partners. It is suggested to hold frequent workshops about CSR for all employees to enable dialogue and allow them to bring in fresh ideas. This way, all employees feel involved and responsible. Awareness of the content of CSR-certificates and believe in the advantages are important preconditions for the staff to educate and inspire customers.

Finally, continuous evaluations and improvements of the certificate are necessary for a long-term success. Thus, cooperation and co-creation between the certification company and tour operators should be strengthened to use collective creativity to evaluate certificate criteria and to develop new marketing strategies.

To conclude, the tour operating industry should strive towards a situation whereby CSR-certificates positively influence the decision making of customers. The market is already willing to travel in a sustainable way. It is, however, lacking sufficient information about the advantages of certificates for destination countries and for themselves as tourists. More tour operators should become CSR-certified, including larger tour operators, and CSR-certificates and their meaning should not only be communicated to but felt by tourists - by actively involving them. These are the first steps towards more awareness and knowledge among German travelers about CSR activities and CSRcertificates.

Response to Finja Hansen

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Certification and labeling are often used in tourism, but their usefulness is debatable (Gössling & Buckley, 2016). This is nicely illustrated in the article of Finja Hansen. The implications of her study on corporate social responsibility (CSR) certification suggest that tourists should be more involved in CSR and its role within the decision-making process of vacations.

My own research has addressed similar topics. For instance, I have participated in research on sustainable behavior of tourists in relation to information communication (Hardeman et al., 2017), carbon labeling (Eijgelaar, Nawijn, Barten, Okuhn, & Dijkstra, 2016), and the gap between intention and behavior (Antimova, Nawijn & Peeters, 2012).

The tour operators of the study mainly use certification as a showcase for external audits. This is a sensible choice! Hansen's findings and many others (e.g., Eijgelaar et al., 2016; Horne, 2009) find that traditional labels have no or only a very limited effect on tourists' behavior. We really should give up on expecting these labels or certificates to have any kind of effect on tourist behavior and accept that their main use is simply a marketing tool to dress up company policy measures for the outside world, i.e. external auditors or shareholders. It would be wonderful if tourists actively participate in "post travel events" to discuss sustainable policy measures, as suggested by Hansen, but it seems far removed from reality.

Should we then give up on a sustainable (tourism) future? No. But we should be realistic. Tour operators, airlines, hotels, etc. are for-profit companies. That means that their main goal is to make profit, taking into account national and international laws, and industry guidelines about what is acceptable and what is not within a specific industry. Tourism demand is highly important too, but so far studies show that sustainability ranks low(est) in the decision-making process of tourists (e.g., Eijgelaar et al., 2016). The answer is thus not going to come from the tourism industry nor from tourists, but mainly governmental actions will allow for a more sustainable future (Peeters, 2017).

Why not to market the certification seal to the customer? Response to Finja Hansen

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The thesis of Mrs. Finja Hansen investigates the customer awareness, knowledge, and perception of CSR Certification schemes. Moreover, the analysis looks on the side of the tour operators and the motivation of running the certification and communicating about it.

The finding that the CSR certificate is still widely unknown to the traveler is unfortunately correct and not very surprising. TourCert started in 2008 as a pilot project with the certification of five tour operators, all members of the association forum anders reisen e.V. in Germany. At the present moment, 93 tour operators are certified with the Tourcert label. Looking at the German travel market, this represents only a very small proportion of businesses. According to the data of the German travel association (DRV) there are around 2,500 tour operators on the German market. None of the big tour operators has an external certification, but 70% of all organized trips of customers are booked through the big seven internationally known companies. Therefore, the wider dissemination of the certification is still missing. This explains the lack of customer awareness.

In 2008, the members of forum anders reisen decided to make certification by TourCert (formally started by KATE) obligatory for membership. The objective was to demonstrate the sustainability performance of the members, and use a transparent system to make this measurable and comparable. The certification was additional to the commitment to the sustainability criteria developed by the members themselves. This set of criteria is however very descriptive. Hence, we wanted to transfer the criteria into a system that was based more on numbers. To raise credibility, we decided that independent evaluators should monitor this process and certification should be made by a third-party decision. The most important part of the certification is the optimization program which secures a continuous improvement of sustainable performance.

If we now look to the question of communicating this process, marketing of the CSR label itself is not the focus of the tour operator. The certification scheme is a tool for behind-the-scenes improvement rather than a marketing USP. The main message in the communication of small- and medium-sized tour operators are the specific kind of tours they offer. This is their core business. They like to attract travelers with the individual and creative way of travelling including environmentally friendly, economically fair and socially acceptable aspects. It is more important to communicate how sustainability is integrated in the tours than to talk about certification.

The CSR system is a data based, highly analytical, and a rather abstract ‘background tool.’ In communication towards customers, the focus should be the impact of sustainability on the traveler and on the destination: What does it mean for her or his tour? How can (s)he feel the improvement? What is her or his profit in travelling the sustainable way? How does it help to make the destination a better place to live and to visit? Marketing should always look towards the interest of the traveler. He or she is planning his holiday, not looking for a business case.

Certification can be a way to distinguish between greenwashing and real sustainable engagement of enterprises. Marketing is not the right motivation for being certified, but marketing sustainability is among the values of a company.

The thesis is interesting because it makes clear that different target groups have different knowledge and understanding of what certification means. The customer is one of the most important stakeholders in the tourism business. Her or his feedback—quantitatively and qualitatively monitored—is part of the CSR System of Tourcert. Feedback tools and direct talks with the customers are an important part of organizing relationships with them, and part of the daily business of a tour operator. The idea to involve these stakeholders even more is good and important.

But in the end, the customer is not buying a certification, but a personal dream of a holiday. Thus, he or she is looking for a destination, an activity and a special experience. CSR-certification is relevant on a second level of the decision making process – it is a sign of guaranteed quality. The real importance in tourism is to stimulate more and more travelers to travel sustainably. Various surveys show a growing interest of customers for social and environmental aspects, as Ms. Hansen mentioned, but in the decision making so far only a small group of customers behave accordingly. An increase of this group can only be achieved by communicating the positive impacts for the traveler himself.

About the author and her background

Petra Thomas is general manager of the forum anders reisen, a business association of small and medium-sized tour operators. The association promotes gentle forms of tourism based on sustainable development. For this purpose, its members have committed to comply with a comprehensive set of criteria, which are monitored through a CSR process. The umbrella organization is organized as a registered association (e.V.). It was founded in 1998 and comprises 135 members (May 2017). Before joining the association Petra Thomas has been working for the tour operator a&e erlebnis:reisen, specialized in tours for small groups with the focus on social and ecological aspects. In this position, she was responsible for the product development and the CSR management.

Response to Finja Hansen

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My name is Vincent Platenkamp. Since 2015 I am a visiting professor at NHTV, university of applied sciences in Breda. Before that I was a professor in Cross-cultural Management at the same institute. My field of research is a contextual approach of the international tourism destination from a cross-cultural perspective (Platenkamp, 2007). Contextual aspects have to do with politics, quality, and socio-economic aspects. The approach is transdisciplinary and focusses on the relation between theory and practices from a cultural point of view. Corporate social responsibility has a strong relation with various aspects of the international tourism destination, especially with the organisations that operate in this context. Tour operators based in Germany play an interesting role in this complex, contextual game in tourism. Sustainable tourism and corporate social responsibility are actual and much-debated ideals that have to cope with many practical obstacles in various situations.

This study concentrates on the obstacles that are related to the process of certification (of corporate social responsibility) and how this process can be aligned to the perceptions of travelers themselves. As Hansen states:
“it is arguable in how far a certificate is beneficial for a tourism business - taking into consideration the involved efforts, costs and changes that occur in the course of the certification process.”

The main question is how to integrate this certificate in the customer communication process of the organization and how to raise customer awareness in this field. The study shows that the customer awareness on sustainable issues is highly prioritized but certificates, including social corporate responsibility certificates, are met with skepticism. The CSR-certificates are widely unknown, whereas product and price are crucial for customers. The tour operators use certificates for their internal organization and to be known as high quality organizations, but do not bother their customers with it. They limit their marketing activities accordingly. These conclusions are highly relevant in this study area, of course. Especially higher educated travelers with a higher income are critical towards certification, whereas most certified tour operators aim at these travelers.

Hansen ends her study with some recommendations to escape from this dilemma. The question is whether these will be sufficient to overcome the serious obstacles that she analyzed in a sophisticated manner. Her article points to the great need of practical studies that would support a more nuanced perspective on corporate social responsibility and sustainability as ideals that ask for a more pragmatic approach … as is hers.

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The NHTV Tourism Panel: A project with long-term vision

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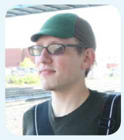

One of the most important issues in destination management is quality of life. Quality of life is the variable most tourism professionals, researchers, and tourists themselves arrive at when asking "why?" Why do people travel, why must destinations be managed, what is the added value of a tourism industry? Underneath the myriad reasons for these phenomena is the belief that if people can travel in their leisure, somehow the world is a better place. It is possibly better for the residents of destinations, who may make money or gain external perspective (Nawijn & Mitas, 2012), and apparently better for tourists themselves, who enjoy a break in routine (Drewery et al., 2016), seeing something new (Cohen, 1972), and getting a fresh perspective on new or existing relationships (Mitas, Yarnal & Chick, 2012).

However, real evidence of how tourism contributes to people's quality of life—and here I will focus on tourists', rather than local residents', quality of life—is surprisingly thin in the tourism research literature. This is not surprising, given that quality of life is a broad construct and quite difficult to measure. However, governments of the world increasingly operationalize quality of life subjectively, using constructs such as happiness or its more precise, psychological incarnation, subjective well-being. Tourism is known to influence subjective well-being (Kim, Woo & Uysal, 2015), especially its short-lived emotional component (Ondrej). In the words of organizational psychologist Jessica de Bloom, it seems that tourism's contribution to tourists' quality of life is "lots of fun, quickly gone" (de Bloom et al., 2010, p. 196). However, more general measures of quality of life, as well as the arguably broader, longer-term well-being component of life satisfaction, does not consistently improve in the days and weeks after a vacation.

While this may be seen as a disappointing finding, I see it as a methodological fault in previous research of tourism and quality of life. Tourism does contribute to quality of life, but not in a way that people's life satisfaction is necessarily higher after they get back from a holiday. Rather, anticipating, enjoying, and reflecting on a holiday become one of the things people reflect on when they think about their life. This obviously doesn't change day to day and month to month, but may well change year to year, if people get granted an extra holiday or, conversely, have to skip a holiday for health or financial reasons. Thus, to appreciate the contribution of tourism to individuals' quality of life, a multi-year analysis is needed. No such analysis occurred until 2014.

In that year, TU Delft researcher Maarten Kroesen blew the tourism-quality of life question wide open with his groundbreaking time-lagged analysis of LISS Panel data collected by the University of Tilburg (Kroesen & Handy, 2014). These data afforded 4 years of quality of life and tourism behavior measures. The analysis showed that indeed, skipping a holiday negatively affected quality of life the year after. The shortcomings of this analysis have to do with measurement of quality of life, which doesn't include a good measure of emotions, and with the measurement of tourism behavior, which is very basic.

Thus, I would like to introduce here our initiative at NHTV to start a panel of our own oriented precisely at tracking quality of life development over a multi-year time span. We collect participants for the NHTV Tourism Panel through channels including a first-year e-marketing course as well as, hopefully, this column. The panel has existed for about a year and a half now and comprises about 100 participants, mostly living in the Netherlands, who fill out a questionnaire about their tourism behavior and quality of life every six months. With each round of questionnaires, we give away 2 x 100€ of vouchers as an incentive, but the main reason to participate, we hope, is people's feeling that they are contributing their experiences and opinions to help address this important scientific and societal questions.

Thus, the findings from this panel will also regularly be featured in educational materials, scientific articles, and a regular column here in TDMI. I look forward to reporting new insights to you about tourism and quality of life here. In the meantime, if you would like to join the panel to share your experiences, please send me your email address to mitas.o@nhtv.nl and I will put you on the list.

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Destination Brand Identity in the Process of Destination Branding: A Case Study of Shiraz, Iran

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Introduction

The application of branding techniques to places is receiving increasing attention from academics and practitioners. Driving this interest are efforts of places to attract talented immigrants, influential investors and domestic as well as international tourists. Simon Anholt (2005), a pioneer policy advisor, believes that "a globalized world is a marketplace where country has to compete with country — and region with region, city with city — for its share of attention, of reputation, of spend, of goodwill, of trust" (p.4). As a consequence, places including cities and regions have been applying branding techniques in their marketing efforts and policy plans to compete with other places (Ashworth & Kavaratzis, 2009; Dinnie, 2004; Rainisto, 2003).

Destination branding allows stakeholders to form a unique image in the mind of visitors. In other words, it applies brand techniques for the benefit of tourism destinations (Morgan et al., 2002). Destination branding also reaches beyond the tourism industry with the capacity harmonize community development (Ashworth & Kavaratzis, 2009). In order to manage destinations efficiently, Hanna and Rowley (2008) assert that it is essential for destination managers to engage in the process of brand identity formulation to unify the complex nature of a place's purpose and direction.

An initial step in designing brand identity is to understand the identity of the place to be branded. In other words, place identity is the core brand that facilitates the representation of a consistent image in the mind of stakeholders as well as visitors (Kavaratzis, 2005; Simoes & Dibb, 2001). Moreover, destinations must incorporate several elements, namely identification, differentiation, recognition, expectations, emotional response and consistent message to develop a brand (Blain et al., 2005). Therefore, the exploration of place identity followed by the formation of place brand contribute to brand awareness and to the appreciation of local culture.

Whereas most branding studies have been focusing on Europe and North America, Central American, African and Middle Eastern places have remained unexplored (Whitelock & Fastoso, 2007). According to Govers (2015), insufficient knowledge of these regions reflects that "globalization has accelerated the challenges facing humanity, but even though we now have the technology and international media, globalization has done little in terms of extending our patience with and understanding and appreciation of 'the other'" (p.5). Shiraz, as one of the main tourism destinations in Iran, is among these unexplored branding cases. Despite the availability of a wide range of attractions from natural resources to cultural heritage sites, Shiraz has not been successful in reaching its potential number of international visitors. One of the main challenges herein is the absence of a place/destination brand in this city (Kazemifar, 2015; Sarai & Shamshiri, 2013). Hence, the goal of my research was to analyze place identity in the process of destination branding and develop brand identity for the city of Shiraz to attract tourists.

Methods

The exploratory nature of this research mandated a case study approach. As Morris and Wood (1991) stated, a case study approach assists the researcher in understanding a case in context. Most extant research in place branding has used qualitative methods (Gertner, 2011). Therefore, the chosen approach for this research was a qualitative case study. Primary data were collected using in-depth interviews, questionnaire based survey, observation and field notes.

Findings

There are serious ambiguities in the minds of stakeholder groups about the brand of Shiraz. The reason of this unfamiliarity is the absence of a destination marketing organization or a branding campaign in the city. However, the background and history of the city were emphasized in formulating a vision for the destination brand. In other words, the preservation and expression of Farsi language and Persian culture are favorable visions. Also, functional attributes, such as the beauty of historical architecture and Persian gardens, as well as emotional attributes, like the warm-hearted attitude toward tourists, make the city identifiable. However, the influence of sub-cultures creates a challenge in distilling the city's values due to growing number of immigrants moving from rural areas to the city. In addition, the lack of effective cultural events and unproductive cultural management hinder the formation of consistent values.

The importance of developing a consistent brand message plays a vital role in branding a destination. While stakeholders acknowledge the importance of branding as a powerful tool to introduce the city and attract visitors, three important factors challenge the city to form its brand identity and lead to complexity in developing Shiraz brand. The first one is the variety of decisions that different governments have made regarding tourism policy and national development plan which directly affect the ways of development in not only Shiraz but also other Iranian cities. The second factor is the lack of cooperation among relevant stakeholders in the formation of place identity. The third topic is related to the expansion of the city which led to the division of Shiraz into two parts, called the old and new districts, respectively. While the old district is occupied by historical attractions and antique architectural monuments, the majority of native Shirazi people have moved to the new district because of insufficient infrastructure and migrant settlement in the old part of the city. Therefore, there is some confusion about the articulation of Shiraz's identity because of various decisions made by public stakeholders regarding tourism development followed by the contradictory urban planning of the city over the past decades.

Several actions are needed to move this situation forward. First of all, the involvement of all relevant public and private stakeholder groups is needed to reach a comprehensive agreement about the identity of Shiraz. In other words, the engagement of previously neglected stakeholder groups like Shiraz universities with their faculties of marketing and business management, tourism, archaeology, history and Farsi language is recommended. Hence, the necessity of discussions and sharing different views regarding the identity elements of Shiraz followed by cooperation between stakeholders are emphasized to develop a consistent brand message. Holding academic conferences and branding seminars would also assist the stakeholders to collaborate in the branding effort.

In general, the conservation of old city district would help keep its original identity alive. It is recommended that the city represents itself as the capital of Persian culture and Farsi literature for two reasons. Firstly, it would help Shiraz distinguish itself from other cities in Iran and in the Middle East. Secondly, it contributes to the image of Iran by showing the distinctive features of national identity that can be found in the physical assets like Persepolis or in emotional attributes like the hospitality of people. According to Anholt (2006), it is difficult to brand a country as a whole since there are various features like landscape, people and culture that are different from one region of a country to another region. By contrast, when a city and its name comes to the mind of an individual, it is easier to think about it as a single entity.

Brand identity elements interact produce the story of the place. More specifically, experience and culture are trending elements for cities to represent themselves (Jensen, 2007). A focus on heritage tourism would highlight Persian culture and Farsi literature as the legacy of ancient legends and historical scholars who lived in Shiraz. Moreover, in experiential services like tourism, epistemic value that stimulates curiosity gives experiences unique value (Babin, Daedern & Griffin, 1994; Seth et.al, 1991, in Sweeney & Souter, 2001). However, the involvement of different stakeholder groups and their knowledge regarding place identity and brand are the prerequisites in the process of destination branding. In consequence, this research can be considered as the initial stage to get an insight into this process.

The overwhelming challenge with place brands is the wide range of key stakeholders narrating different stories, leading to complexity. According to Freeman (2010), stakeholder mapping is attainable by analyzing stakeholder's rights, interests and their interaction. A coherent and legitimate brand is achievable if different stakeholder groups including public sector, private sector, and civil society, all accept its identity. Hankinson (2010) claims that the weakness of some place branding studies is that they ignore the views of practitioners and exclude considerable parts of managerial application. Although the recent place branding literature complains about the ignorance of practitioners, the findings of this case study research show that the serious and early engagement of academics play a crucial role in building a brand identity as well. Furthermore, the involvement of academic stakeholders helps political leaders fill the legitimacy gap that might occur between public perceptions of what a place is doing and what is expected of it (Kazemifar, 2015; Sethi, 1979).

Place branding in Shiraz is in its infancy. Practitioners and executives have insufficient knowledge about the process of place branding. Moreover, various interpretations regarding the city's space result in conflict among Shiraz stakeholder groups (Manoukian, 2012). Thus, the early engagement of academics who have insight about the identity and culture of place may help form the local brand identity, as well as contributing knowledge of the branding process.

Response to Arsalan Kazemifar

Reza Sahkeri
Inbound Tour Operator, Iran

Mr. Arsalan Kazemifar mentioned one of the most prominent factors in the development of tourism industry in Shiraz. If Mr. Kazemifar's recommendations are realized, Shiraz will reach a competent position based on its high potential and long history. The researcher shares his experience in the city and mentions some of the strengths and weaknesses for branding the name of Shiraz.
There are many emotional connections between people and the places they are living, visiting, and working. The feelings that exist in these places are considered a new aspect by which place branding and marketing can be defined. Furthermore, these processes change and develop quickly. Cities must regularly adapt themselves to the changing situation, and at the same time, the balance between the viewpoints and values of the inhabitants must be preserved.

A city might have natural and cultural features that highlights it as a unique place. Having a long history in terms of tourism as well as unique historical and cultural places enables it to enter the branding process. Without having strong and effective leadership and intelligent cooperation, however, the city would never reach its strengths based on the definition of a brand. In creating a brand that attracts the desired visitors and residents, investments of time, money, and knowledge are required. Also, the commitment of companies and organizations for creating a place branding is influential. Applying the principles of branding creates a focused strategic approach for introducing a city.

Although product branding has been around for many decades, branding of touristic places is a relatively newer concept. Many countries accept touristic branding with an open heart and perform it correctly. More recently, branding has been applied to larger cities. Place branding has become an effective positioning tool in today's competitive world, provides a framework for decision making, and increases responsibility for beneficiaries in creating place marketing principles. Australia, Hong Kong and United States are examples of place branding forerunners. In contrast to Mr. Kazemifar's opinion, I believe that branding the name of Shiraz is not a new process and this process had been going well before the Islamic Revolution, but after the Islamic Revolution and beginning of the war, branding Shiraz was forgotten. Branding components are quite different in comparison to contemporary political components.

Our imaginations and understandings of places have been change over time and sometimes develop little fit with reality. We have a positive attitude toward some places, even if they do not deserve it. Therefore, the brand of the city is considered as a general picture of it and all the things that associate in the mind of a person. Branding is the informed process that causes change and develops these associations in people's minds.

Response to Arsalan Kazemifar

Mojtaba (Moji) Shahvali
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Most of the scholars in the field of place branding consider branding as necessary for tourism marketing. Furthermore, destinations have developed place branding to the extent that brand strategy and brand management have become formal institutions in tourism marketing departments and associations. For realizing brand strategies which make the cities more competitive and successful, leaders of this science apply branding techniques in the fields of commerce and service. Not all the place branding is successful, however, and most branding projects deviate from their intended aims.

The brand image of a city does more than attract tourists. It has extensive economic, political and social value. Many jobs, businesses, and organizations owe their success to a city's brand. If a brand is comprehensive, the duty of guaranteeing the continuing development is a challenge which depends on through the collaboration of all the partners. Apart from focusing on attracting more tourists, stakeholders in the branding process should define strategic aims from the beginning and make sure that there is enough budget for facilitating these aims. The financial resources must be sufficient to encourage a branding expert to lead a process.

As Mr. Kazemifar mentioned in his article, bilateral relations between these organizations and stakeholders are needed to develop a brand. Unfortunately, this cooperation is not operating in Shiraz and there are many infrastructural problems in aligning these organizations. My company, as the best tourism importer in Iran and in Shiraz, face with problems with these organizations which I individually try to solve as much as possible.

Two of the findings of Arsalan Kazemifar's research on branding the city of Shiraz are specifically notable. First, Kazemifar states that one of the problems with the branding of the city Shiraz is related to "the expansion of the city which led to the division of Shiraz into two parts, called the old and new districts." It sounds intuitive that having two distinct city parts can challenge the process of assigning a unique label or brand to a city. That being said, this argument can benefit from further elaboration.

One of the other findings of this research which I personally think is on target is the notion that in Shiraz, a lack of communication and collaboration between tourism stakeholders has brought upon challenges for designing a unique place identity and brand for the city. Being born and raised in Shiraz, I can attest that miss-communication between entities in charge is a prevalent issue with a number of other tourism destinations in Iran and in the region. A next step that can bring upon more impact would be investigating who those entities and stakeholders are in this specific case study. In other words, who has the power and right to make such decisions regarding destination branding in Shiraz? And what entity can bring everyone together in the process of branding the city?

Lastly, I find it advantageous that Kazemifar touches upon the impact of governmental leaders in Iran in the process of branding. He argues how it is important to find a balance between leaders' viewpoint of what a destination should look like in the eyes of potential tourists and immigrants and, how the public perceive the destination to be. In a world where mass media and news channels negatively impacts the image of destinations for the favor of politicians, authentic branding is of vital importance for a true representation of tourism destinations. Research such as this can help beautiful and alluring tourism destinations such as Shiraz reach their full potential in attracting travelers from around the world. I enjoyed reading this research and I wish Kazemifar and his future colleagues the very best.

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