



AIC 2018: FUTURE OF MARKETING AND MANAGEMENT

Sustainable Tourism Development: An Application of Social Exchange Theory in Thailand

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*Peer-review under responsibility of 4th Asia International Conference 2018 editorial board
(<http://www.utm.my/asia/our-team/>)*

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Research Highlights

As multi-stakeholders in tourism development help to create tourism experience, it is therefore vital to understand each stakeholder's perception towards tourism development. In addition, local leaders and policy makers play a critical role in facilitating the mutual benefits of all tourism stakeholders in sustainable tourism development in the local community. Most research on Social Exchange Theory (SET) in tourism only focuses on resident's and tourist's perceptions toward tourism, and some studies indicate the ambiguous explanation and interpretation on SET in understanding community's perceptions toward tourists and tourism. Therefore, it is a need to understand local leaders' and policy makers' perceptions toward sustainable tourism development, as they act as the initiators or facilitators in sustainable tourism development. In-depth interviews were conducted with ten local leaders and policy-makers in Thailand and the results were thematically analysed. The anticipated results explain positive and negative impacts toward economy, society and environment.

Research Objectives

Multi-stakeholders in tourism are parts of creating tourism experience. This research focuses on sustainable tourism development and applies social exchange theory (SET) in explaining all stakeholders' perspectives. It is a need to better understanding all stakeholders' perceptions toward tourism development, which social exchange theory (SET) seems to assist to clarify each stakeholder's perceptions as it offers the additional perspectives from different knowledge areas that are usefully, fruitfully and synergically investigate the various issues at each stage of tourism development (Bimonte & Faralla, 2016; Bimonte & Punzo, 2016). In addition, those studies include mainly on resident's (Bimonte & Faralla, 2016; Gursoy, Chi, & Dyer, 2010; Nunkoo & Gursoy, 2012) and tourist's (Sharpley, 2014) perception toward tourism, while the studies of local leaders and policy-makers are still limited. Furthermore, this study applies SET's "Economic", "Socio-Cultural" and "Environmental" aspects (Ozel & Kozak, 2017) toward the impacts of tourism development to explain stakeholders' perceptions and attitudes.

This research aims to understand all stakeholders' perceptions on sustainable tourism development by applying SET to explain the different elements involved in sustainable tourism development stakeholders especially between local leaders and policy-makers of a destination and the tourism industry.





Methodology

This research only includes some parts of the larger research project due to the page limit. This research presents ten in-depth one-to-one interviews of local leaders and policy-makers from a community-based tourism site in Thailand. The sampling criteria include 1) respondents were selected to participate in this research as if they are one of local leaders and policy-makers (e.g., mayors, sub-district Headman and village headman) in a particular area and 2) to identify and select the tourism attraction site, it has to be a tourism destination that has either started or been developed a tourism development project in the local area. The local area can have any existing or new tourist sites in order to understand those tourism stakeholders' perspectives, perceptions and attitudes toward benefits and impacts at different stages of tourism development projects. The interviews were audio recorded with consent. Thematic analysis was used to analyse the interview data.

Results

The preliminary findings of this research identify local policy makers' perceptions of a local tourist site toward its local tourism development positively and negatively in three aspects: economic, social and environmental impacts.

All local leaders and policy-makers perceived the major benefits from tourism industry in the local economy including a boost in employment and discretionary income in the community and infrastructure development through tourism such as accommodations, restaurants and local souvenir. The local tourism development also provides benefits to agriculture or local farmers as they can sell their products to tourists directly, no need to travel or pay for outbound logistics. In addition, the central government has provided budget for a local government continuously to develop local infrastructure such as new local roads (paths) and easy access to the destination. However, the tourism development affects a local community to some extent, for example, the interaction between the local and tourists causes changes in a community especially in dressing culture as local residents imitate tourists' costume (e.g. dresses, jeans and shirts). Only few residents still wear a local traditional costume. Additionally, there is a concern about environmental impacts due to the growth of the number of tourists in the destination causes the increase of local community waste and pollution. This raises the need to find a better solution for waste disposal because the local government still uses sanitary landfill disposal.





Findings

It is paramount to better understanding of local policy makers in sustainable tourism development which enhances the harmony in societies and results in satisfaction and well-being of all stakeholders. The findings reveal various perspectives on sustainable tourism development such as creating positive economic outcomes such as increased revenue and employment, and better infrastructures in the areas, and challenges socio-cultural and environmental impacts. This research provides the advancement of all tourism stakeholders' perception and attitude toward tourism development to be more sustainable and fostering mutual benefits for all stakeholders in a sustainable way.

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