

Theses of PhD dissertation

Doctoral School of Earth Sciences

**Responsible tourism: the study of environmental and social
responsibility among tourism actors**

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1. Introduction

Nowadays, tourism is undergoing radical changes. The number of participants in tourism grew steadily until 2020, and no one could have imagined that the globally dominant economic sector would experience such a shock. The pandemic resulted in a 22% reduction of international tourist arrivals in the first quarter of 2020, leading to the loss of millions of jobs and stalling progress towards the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) (World Tourism Organisation, 2020b). Suddenly, travel habits started to change, with a focus on nearby destinations and domestic trips. Many tourism businesses have been forced to suspend their activities and not all of them could continue to operate later as they had to find other sources of income. But those businesses that manage to survive the economic collapse need to be prepared for a reopening to meet the changing needs of tourists.

Many destinations popular among tourists suffer from the phenomenon of “overtourism”, which is already generating conflicts (Milano, 2018; Goodwin, 2017; Horváth, 2017). This gave rise to the term “tourism phobia”, used by Spain’s Minister of Tourism Álvaro Nadal at the ITB event in Berlin in 2016 to describe local communities that revolted against mass tourism due to excessive tourist arrivals (Cañellas, 2016). However, the two terms are closely related and linked to unsustainable tourism growth (Milano, 2017).

Different types of tourism aimed at reducing the negative effects of mass tourism, such as ecotourism, soft tourism, green tourism, have already appeared at the end of the 20th century. The change of attitude, the main motivation for tourists to travel, who are taking responsibility for the environment, has become, among other things, the desire to visit protected natural and cultural values. This change of attitude has also become necessary for the important pillars of the tourism superstructure, namely tourism service providers. The aim of sustainable tourism is twofold. On the one hand, it has a “moral” responsibility not to cause irreversible damage to the world’s natural, social and economic environment. On the other hand, environmental sustainability is also important for tourism from a business aspect, as insufficient development of tourism can damage or destroy the very natural and cultural environment on which it is based (Putzkó & Rátz, 2002).

In my research, I intend to explore the issue of responsible tourism, which plays an important role in preventing negative impacts. My choice of topic is not only motivated by its timeliness. I have been interested in this topic for a long time, as I have witnessed many inspiring tourism initiatives and good practices in my surroundings. This also explains the regional focus, since Pécs and South Transdanubia represent an area rich in attractions, which, in my opinion, is certainly ranked in an unpteenth place, if not neglected, by tourists when choosing a destination. I received impulses from responsible tourism operators in the region that encouraged me to look at the issue not just in a one-sided way, focusing only on one sub-topic.

Since it was already clear at the beginning of my work that the topic could only be examined in a complex way, I decided to conduct the research in the most comprehensive way, in order to make its complexity and interconnections as visible as possible. I considered it important to create a broad picture, so I divided the vast topic into several sub-topics. This is why the structure of this dissertation is somewhat different from the standard.

A considerable part of the literature review has been placed under the subheadings of each specific results, in order to provide a theoretical background to the research and the related results, while at the same time aligning with the conceptual framework. In my work, I typically focus on the micro level, which in this case means tourism service providers, as they

are the ones who have a local impact on the sustainability of destinations and play a key role in promoting responsible tourism.

2. Objectives

2.1. Attitude survey of service providers on environmental responsibility

The starting point of my work is a survey on a representative sample of service providers, which reveals the prevailing attitudes and behaviour of service providers in the sample area. In this research, I investigate the issue of environmental sustainability among tourism service providers. Such initiatives can be found mainly in the field of energy, with a focus on energy efficiency. However, I intend to carry out my research on a much broader basis, ranging from attitudinal research to concrete actions taken at environmental and social level.

The number and popularity of eco-certified accommodation is low, therefore I found it justified to extend the research to this topic as well, and to broaden the geographical dimension of the study to a neighbouring country, in this case Croatia, which has a high seasonal tourist population, for comparison. The aim of this section is to compare the chosen certification schemes (eco, green).

2.2. Acceptance of responsibility on the part of guests

In the tourism sector, as a key economic sector, the issue of sustainability is becoming increasingly important. In Hungary, for several years now, tourism service providers have been able to apply for the Kisfaludy Tourism Development Program for developments aimed at increasing sustainability, whether economic or environmental. At the same time, a growing number of service providers are recognising the importance of their environmental and social responsibilities and have integrated sustainability aspects into their business policies, thus pursuing their activities and shaping their future plans along these values. Therefore, it is important to know how the efforts of tourism service providers in this direction are received by guests and the demand side.

One of my aims was to find out whether and to what extent the sustainability efforts and responsible developments of tourism service providers have added value from the guests' point of view. The attitude survey based on the guest survey started before the outbreak of the epidemic in the South Transdanubian region.

2.3. Examining the relationship between social responsibility and HR in tourism service providers

Nowadays, human resources have become one of the most important assets of the economy, which has a significant impact on the competitiveness of countries. The labour outflow is still continuous in Hungary, especially in the labour-intensive tourism sector, thus raising economic sustainability issues beyond competitiveness. Tourism service providers have a significant role to play in the level of development and further growth of a destination, so it is important how they address the challenges related to the workforce. The focus of this research was to identify the most common problems tourism service providers face in this area and to examine what solutions could be effectively implemented. The selected sample area, the South Transdanubian tourism region, is not one of the most popular destinations, so I considered it important to ask service providers, especially hotels, to explore their social responsibility towards their employees, as responsible behaviour is now an expectation for businesses.

2.4. Responsibility and tourism security

The aim of this section is to examine the attitudes of potential tourists towards tourism security, including health security. Within this topic, I sought to find out what responsibility, if any, they are willing to take in relation to health security. There are obviously mandatory requirements for tourism service providers, but in my research, I also explored whether potential tourists expect them to ensure their security. Responsible behaviour as an expectation is mainly directed towards service providers, or possibly because of measures taken by other actors (including travellers themselves) to make them feel secure in a destination. The question is whether the COVID 19 epidemic had any impact on the importance of tourism security among travellers? In addition, another question is whether individual responsibility is reflected among tourists in relation to health security?

All of these topics and related research are in line with the responsible tourism guidelines.

Based on the above seemingly multi-faceted studies, I seek answers to the following research questions:

Q1: Is responsible tourism present in the geographical focus area chosen for the surveys? Do tourism service providers go beyond energy sustainability and in what way? Are there effective initiatives that can be implemented and followed as best practices for other service providers?

Q2: Environmental responsibility is becoming increasingly widespread thanks to the availability of tendering resources, in addition to the essential requirements for operation. Environmental consciousness is also increasingly becoming an attitude and demand to be followed in society. The question arises as to whether the environmental business policy pursued and applied by tourism accommodation providers has added value from the demand side of tourism.

Q3: Can social responsibility (separated from CSR) emerge as a priority for tourism accommodation providers? How does social responsibility appear in the South-Transdanubian accommodation providers, while there are several barriers in the region?

Q4: Because of the pandemic, many of the attitudes associated with tourism have changed. This reminded me that tourism security is a multifaceted issue, in which responsibility and accountability are essential and cannot be ignored these days. As a research question, I was interested to know whether tourists' attitudes towards responsible tourism have changed in the wake of the COVID-19 epidemic. Is individual responsibility present in tourism?

My clear aim is to make the principles of responsible tourism more understandable, so that they can be more easily integrated, applied and validated in Hungarian practice, moving away from theory and supporting a positive shift in both approach and practice.

3. Research methods

3.1. Secondary research

The research and content of the dissertation is based on primary and secondary data. The analysis of the topic was carried out within the framework of contemporary domestic and foreign scientific and professional literature, and in this context, I used secondary data. In the

course of reviewing the literature, I have also processed various academic works, numerous researches and their results, such as the works of Harold Goodwin, the “father” of responsible tourism, or the works of Michael C. Hall, a holistic tourism expert. In addition, I also reviewed the related documents (such as reports, narratives, declarations, statements) of international (UNWTO, WTO, etc.) and national tourism organisations (MTÜ, Hungarian Tourism Zrt., etc.) to map the theoretical background of responsible tourism. As a part of the classic desk research, I could not ignore the processing of development documents, statistics and analyses (KSH, Hungarian Tourism Agency, Eurostat).

3.2. Primary research methods

The desk research method was followed by primary research, which was carried out using various methods, including fieldwork, qualitative interviews and analysis, as well as quantitative questionnaires and their analysis.

I placed great emphasis on regular field trips in the South Transdanubian region of Hungary and in the Istrian and Split-Dalmatian counties of Croatia (Istarska županija, Splitsko-dalmatinska županija), as well as on personal contacts with national and international tourism service providers.

I conducted unstructured and semi-structured interviews and in-depth interviews, which required the searching and contacting of persons with relevant information, mainly among tourism actors of the South Transdanubian tourism region. In addition, for some subsections, the topic justified the need to interview actors who, for example, have been involved in the projects of regenerating public spaces or who have since then been involved in some activity to support and manage their recreational function.

The empirical research was based on the primary data collection method in the field, where the main instrument for data collection was a Hungarian-language questionnaire based on previous similar research. In addition, in the context of SARS-CoV-2 (Covid 2019), I tried to avoid personal contact and therefore conducted surveys using online questionnaires. I managed to do this using Google Drive Forms survey administration software. Sampling was done using probability, that is, random sampling (simple random selection) for the majority of surveys and using non-probability (non-random) sampling for some surveys. The latter was used, for example, in the guest survey, where only tourists were included in the population as an arbitrary parameter. The definition of sample population by expert selection was used in case of tourism accommodation providers.

Attkison et al. (1996) interpreted the concept of attitude as follows: “Attitudes are likes and dislikes - affinities for or aversions to objects, persons, groups, situations, or any other identifiable aspects of the environment, including abstract ideas, and social policies.” The main aim of the attitude survey is to find out the attitudes of the respondents, namely the data providers, which I measured on a Likert scale. The Likert scale, used to measure attitudes, is a scale in which “different statements are measured on a scale between two extreme endpoints, which is usually scored from 1 to 5 or 1 to 7” (Zerényi, 2016). In the questionnaires where I used this scale, respondents had a choice of options from 1 to 5. In addition, in both the in-person and the online questionnaire-based survey, I sought to use closed, dichotomous and ranking questions. Results were typically processed and statistically analysed using Microsoft Excel 2016, and IBM SPSS Statistics 26.

The questionnaires used in the studies included in this dissertation were divided as follows (Table 1):

Table 1. Sample size, area coverage and data collection method of the questionnaires included in the studies of this dissertation.

Study	n	Area	Data collection method
Attitude survey on the environmental and social responsibility of service providers - MSZÉSZ	10	South-Transdanubia-MSZÉSZ members	in-person and email
Reception of environmental responsibility based on a South Transdanubian guest survey	416	South Transdanubia	in-person
Individual responsibility and tourism security	927	nationwide	online

4. Summary of results

Neither professional commitment nor responsible attitude can be questioned on the basis of the case studies examined, but it is also clear that neither of them is sufficient if they fail to reach at least the management level.

Regarding the eco-certified accommodation (South Transdanubia, Hungary), the accommodation providers visited during the research have both eco-certification and re-certification, so the selected tourism service providers can share very useful experiences with each other in relation to the criteria, which are essential elements of the tourism sector's responsibility. During the interviews, a number of barriers were identified that hinder the commitment of accommodation providers to responsible tourism, and criticisms were made of the certification system, its shortcomings and problematic inconsistencies.

These are voluntary certification systems. While the cost of applying for certification is relatively low, tourism certification bodies and committees sometimes impose excessive access limits to raise standards. Limited knowledge of certification among tourism service providers is a major obstacle to the adoption of certification. Negligible marketing of certificates, titles and trademarks is a barrier in several respects. Standards such as the Framework for Responsible Environmental Marketing Communication can provide essential guidance for changes in tourism (ICC Framework for Responsible Environmental Marketing Communications, 2019). Applicants would benefit from a transparent certification and verification process and simplified, understandable criteria. Guests should be provided with adequate information about the service provider, the natural and cultural environment and appropriate behaviour. The research has shown that in the Hungarian cases, the criteria need to be changed at certain points. Because of the differences in the capacity of accommodation, it is essential to reconsider or change some of the criteria regarding their necessity. The scope and definition of the current criteria should be reviewed.

The application of certification systems in the tourism sector should be transparent and provide detailed information to the wider public. Fulfilling the need for responsible - environmentally friendly, environmentally conscious - tourism can increasingly be considered a key to success. The long-term value of certification systems is bringing the supply and demand sides of the tourism sector closer to responsible tourism.

Green or environmentally conscious innovation and the use of innovative technologies are also becoming more widespread in tourism. Various tendering resources make it easier for tourism service providers to implement environmentally friendly developments. Private funding for such investments is rare. In the geographical focus area chosen for the studies, it is possible to identify environmental responsibility on the part of accommodation providers, but this is not by any means outstanding. Energy related sustainability efforts and

environmentally conscious behaviour have a primarily economic background, which is not necessarily identical with the broader context. The lack of positive feedback, in addition to the constraints imposed by law, regulations and rules, is a barrier to the implementation of environmental responsibility guidelines by accommodation providers supporting in principle their use, and thus guidelines do not represent a strong competitive advantage. However, studies have shown that the most important factor on the demand side is the need, but this does not yet have a major attractiveness or a positive financial impact on tourism service providers. Therefore, the environmental business policy pursued and applied by accommodation providers has only limited added value from the demand side of tourism.

I was also looking for an answer to the question of whether social responsibility (separated from CSR) can emerge as a priority for tourism accommodation providers. Based on the results, it can be concluded that social (and economic) responsibility is still in its infancy. This is most likely due to the slow process of attitude development as well as the lack of knowledge and best practices. Social sustainability is even lower with regard to the staff. These may include improving working conditions, promoting more efficient work processes, applying the principle of equal treatment, and non-discrimination (especially negative discrimination) by HR management.

A completely new and unprecedented situation has arisen in tourism with the outbreak of COVID-19 pandemic, for which it is safe to state, that no one in the industry was prepared. Of course, both the supply and the demand sides have tried to adapt to this unusual and completely new situation. At this point, I found it important to examine how this responsibility is expressed at the level of the individual, this time from the guests' point of view.

Tourism is a security-sensitive industry, so it is crucial to continuously monitor the evolution of security factors and the reactions of tourists, both globally and regionally. This research has shown that there are some security factors to which potential travellers are particularly sensitive, which is not surprising given that most people travel with their family members, so tourists are not only concerned about their own safety, but also that of their close relatives. Those who wish to travel do not even consider the situation caused by the pandemic as a barrier to their travel. Public security is considered the most important security issue, which they expect the public sector to provide. Health security is only in second place, but the results suggest that travellers consider service providers to be responsible in this respect. The majority of respondents are willing to cooperate with tourism service providers, but they would only comply with restrictive measures mandatory imposed by health/epidemiological authorities. They still do not plan to relax and recharge in a destination other than they used to, although they are more interested in destinations close to nature.

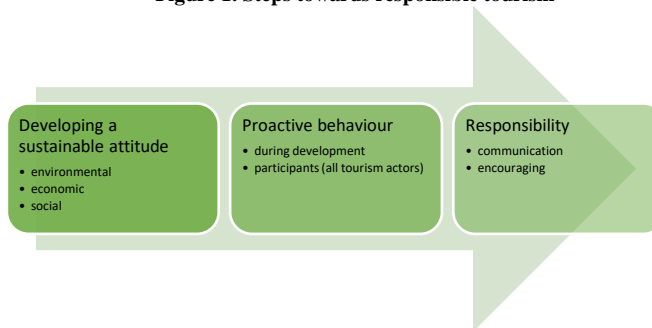
The COVID-19 pandemic, which became a worldwide epidemic in 2020, has changed our globalised world, highlighting the fragility of our countries and the world economy. It disrupted people's usual way of life and this is likely to have long-term effects in the future. Clearly, the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on tourism (and other industries) at a global level cannot yet be determined, if only because many countries are still struggling with the pandemic. This also means that the increased awareness of health risks is not only important for tourists travelling to a particular destination, but also for the people living there.

The survey showed not only that security is an important issue for those planning to travel, but also that health security as a factor influencing the travel decision is only partially relevant. The research provides valuable insights for supply-side actors in the tourism sector, as service providers face a new competitive challenge as tourism is restarted following the removal of SARS-19 pandemic restrictions. Based on the results obtained, both tourism service

providers and destination management organisations can put more emphasis on tourism security and its marketing communication.

In Hungary today, sustainability efforts vary not only by region but also by destination. Although not all regions have been surveyed, the partial results (e.g., literature data, “Green Hotels”) show that the development of responsible tourism is currently at different stages in each destination. The steps leading to responsible tourism are essential, including the development and influence of a sustainable attitude at all levels of society, as well as emphasizing the fact that sustainability is not only based on environmental aspects (Figure 1).

Figure 1. Steps towards responsible tourism



Another important aspect is whether sustainability related knowledge is applied by the actors in the sector. For example, their application is essential in the various tourism development processes, but this can also be expected from tourism destination management organisations and local authorities, as well as from tourists themselves during their travels. Communicating the why and how of responsible tourism is not only informative for potential tourists, but can also be an encouraging factor, because if they have the right attitude, they will consciously look for destinations and service providers where they can find responsible tourism. This can also be positive feedback for service providers and an encouraging factor for other actors.

Environmental, economic and social sustainability requires a comprehensive approach and intervention across the entire sector. The research results can serve as a model for actors in the tourism sector, which can help and support the spread of responsible tourism through appropriate adaptation. Since the attitude is also reflected in the National Tourism Development Strategy 2030, the territorial relevance of this research is that the destination management organizations with less potential can take the results and conclusions of this dissertation into account during their development, thereby they can implement a more successful and responsible tourism locally.

List of publications on this topic

Publications in journals

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