
Exploring Tourists' Experiences and Satisfaction with Sustainable Tourism Practices in Local Destinations

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ABSTRACT

This qualitative research examined how tourists view sustainable tourism in local places and their satisfaction with it. The author examined how tourists perceive and respond to sustainability programs and initiatives related to environmental, social, cultural, and community issues, and used a qualitative design to better understand tourists' views and needs. The researchers used purposeful sampling to select participants with relevant experience in sustainable tourism (i.e., having visited local destinations with sustainable tourism practices). The researchers collected data through a documentation research method, including analysis of visit-related documents, records, tourism materials, reports, and other information related to sustainable tourism. The results show that tourists generally evaluate sustainable tourism positively and attribute this to a clean environment, effective waste management programs, the preservation of natural resources, the development of local culture, and doing no harm to local communities. Moreover, tourists value initiatives that allow them to engage in responsible tourism and communicate meaningfully with local people. However, limitations such as inadequate sustainable facilities, inconsistent implementation, overcrowding, pollution, traffic, and insufficient sustainability information were also encountered and were found to affect tourists' experiences and satisfaction. In conclusion, implementing sustainable tourism regulatory practices makes tourism experiences more authentic and worthwhile when they are regularly applied and integrated into destination management practices. Thus, it is essential to improve environmental management, active local participation, cultural preservation, tourist education, and the development of eco-oriented facilities.

Keywords: Sustainable tourism; tourist experiences; tourist satisfaction; local destinations; tourism sustainability

INTRODUCTION

Tourism has generated significant income for the economy and fostered cultural exchange and improved livelihoods. However, as the number of tourists increases rapidly, tourism contributes to pollution, resource depletion, environmental degradation, environmental modification, and social problems. Therefore, the need for sustainable tourism has arisen, with an emphasis on finding appropriate means to balance the interests of visitors, local people, the tourism industry, and the need to protect the environment. Sustainable tourism presupposes rational use of natural resources, environmental safety, preservation of local culture and traditions, involvement of local people in tourism, and long-term tourism development.

The growing influence of sustainable tourism is evident in how destinations plan and manage tourism activities. Tourism stakeholders have adopted waste management ideas, conservation of natural resources, protection of cultural and historical sites, promotion of local products, help to local businesses, and the introduction of responsible tourism practices. These measures aim to limit tourism's adverse effects and improve the quality of tourism experiences. Nevertheless, the success of the implementation process depends on the policies and practices in place and on how tourists perceive them.

Tourists play a vital role in sustainable tourism because their impressions, opinions, attitudes, and satisfaction can either foster or hinder the effectiveness and success of sustainability implementation. Factors that affect tourists' perceptions of a destination include the quality of its attractions, cleanliness, environmental management, cultural authenticity, community involvement, accessibility, and responsible tourism practices. Tourists are more likely to feel positively toward a destination when they assess how well sustainability is integrated into the tourism experience. If tourists perceive sustainability measures as ineffective, difficult to implement, or merely advertising, their experiences and satisfaction levels will suffer.

Tourist satisfaction is significant because it affects tourists' behavioral intentions. This implies that if tourists are satisfied after visiting a destination, they will be more loyal, talk positively about it, and return again. Satisfaction is perceived almost exclusively through quantitative indicators such as scores and ratings. Nevertheless, tourists' actual experience includes emotions, expectations, interpretation, and reflection, making it impossible to measure satisfaction in quantifiable terms. Hence, it is crucial to understand what happens to tourists emotionally when they visit a destination.

In local areas, sustainability practices and tourist experiences are closely intertwined. Local tourism areas rely heavily on natural resources to attract tourists, and local culture, small businesses, and community participation are also essential. However, local tourism areas often struggle with limited resources, poor infrastructure, environmental strain, inconsistent application of tourism policies, and balancing tourists' expectations with the interests of the local community. Understanding tourist perceptions and experiences may therefore provide insight into how sustainable tourism practices are implemented in local tourism areas.

The significance tourists attribute to their experiences sheds light on both the positive aspects of the experiences and shortcomings that tourism managers and local authorities might overlook. Therefore, it is important not only to learn about tourists' satisfaction with the experience, but also to understand tourism from tourists' point of view by gathering tourists' narratives. Analyzing tourist narratives is significant because it helps collect feedback on the positive aspects of the travel experience as well as areas that need improvement.

Given this, this research aims to study how tourists experience and react to sustainable tourism practices when they visit a local destination. It also aims to identify which aspects of sustainability lead to positive or negative experiences, which factors affect tourist satisfaction, and how sustainable tourism practices shape tourists' opinions of the destination. Listening to tourists and their experiences may help tourism managers, local government, tourism

businesses, and local communities create more effective, responsible, and tourist-oriented sustainable tourism strategies.

Statement of the Problem

The study explored the tourists' experiences and satisfaction with sustainable tourism practices in local destinations. Specifically, it sought to answer the following questions:

1. What are the lived experiences of tourists regarding the implementation of sustainable tourism practices in local destinations?
2. How do tourists perceive and describe their satisfaction with sustainable tourism practices during their visits to local destinations?

Scope and Delimitations

This study examined tourists' experiences and level of satisfaction with sustainable tourism methods in the destinations chosen for the study. The research included tourists' opinions on aspects of sustainable tourism in practice, including environmental conservation, proper resource use, the role of local communities, and cultural preservation for sustainability purposes. In addition, the research examined factors affecting tourists' satisfaction, including service quality, sustainability measures, management of visited destinations, environmental conditions, and authenticity of experiences. To obtain qualitative data, the research used qualitative methods to gather and analyze information about tourists' opinions and practices.

This research focused on tourists who visited selected local destinations within the study's defined time frame. The study focused mainly on tourists' opinions and did not include the views of tourism entrepreneurs, government authorities, locals, or other stakeholders. The research served its purpose of studying tourists' perspectives without making generalizations about destinations and tourists across the whole country. To conduct the research and make it qualitative, the researchers gathered many narratives for analysis.

Review of Related Literatures

Sustainable tourism is increasingly seen as a practice that balances environmental conservation, economic development, sociocultural preservation, and tourists' experiences. Asmelash and Kumar (2019) investigated the relationship between tourist satisfaction and sustainable heritage tourism development in Tigray, Ethiopia. They found that the institutional and economic dimensions of sustainable tourism are related to tourist satisfaction, while environmental sustainability has no significant effect. This suggests tourists perceive sustainability not only in environmental terms but also in tourism management and economic contribution. This result is crucial for the current paper because it indicates that tourists assess sustainable tourism based on many aspects of their destination experience, not only environmental impact.

Similarly, Huete-Alcocer et al. (2019) studied tourist satisfaction in the context of cultural heritage tourism. They highlighted the importance of evaluating tourist satisfaction in cultural tourism and cultural heritage preservation. It provides an important perspective on how satisfaction results from sustainable tourism practice. For the present qualitative research, this perspective supports an exploration of how tourists describe satisfaction, enjoyment, comfort, and perceived value while experiencing sustainable practices in local destinations.

In the hospitality industry, Moliner-Tena et al. (2019) analyzed environmental sustainability and customer experiences in hospitality services. The authors emphasized the significance of comprehending how environmental sustainability interacts with customer

experience in the tourism business. This research matters because tourists perceive sustainability differently when it becomes part of their service experience. Therefore, recycling, energy saving, responsible resource consumption, and other environmental sustainability practices within the overall experience will influence tourists' perceptions. This approach conforms to the goals of the present research, which seeks to examine the realities of tourists' experiences rather than the opinions of tourism operators.

To analyze how sensitive mass tourists are to sustainability, Bernini et al. (2021) examined tourists' evaluations of environmental sustainability. The scientists raised an important issue, as previous studies mostly focused on residents' perceptions rather than tourists'. The findings reveal the need to study travelers' views on environmental practices in mass tourism places.

Aydın and Alvarez (2020) examined tourists' attitudes toward sustainability in cultural tourist destinations. Their findings show that destination development must include tourists' opinions because sustainability measures become meaningless unless they align with tourists' expectations and perceptions. In their research, the researchers used qualitative techniques such as online user-generated reviews and interviews with tourism experts to examine how sustainability characteristics are understood in cultural tourism. This research is significant for my research because it highlights the importance of tourists' explanations of sustainability, rather than relying solely on quantitative analysis.

Breiby et al. (2020) studied sustainability in tourism and argued that a sustainable tourism experience should incorporate a variety of sustainability and experience aspects. The research showed that experience design and perceived value are essential to creating sustainable tourism. The authors emphasized that sustainability can be part of tourists' experience for those engaged in activities that link environmental, cultural, and social dimensions with the idea of experience.

According to Palacios-Florencio et al. (2021), sustainable tourism can help tourism businesses recover after COVID-19. They highlight the need to prevent overcrowding and strike the right balance between tourists' needs and economic, sociocultural, and ecological requirements. They state that sustainable tourism should ensure conditions in which tourists can enjoy a visit without risking their own or others' well-being, while also minimizing negative impacts on communities and resources. In this regard, this study is valuable because tourist satisfaction can depend on factors such as crowding levels, destination management, environmental conditions, and trip quality.

The literature reviewed confirms a growing recognition of tourist experience and satisfaction as key components of sustainable tourism. Previous studies highlight that sustainability includes environmental protection, economic advantages, sociocultural preservation, institutional governance, and tourism services. New studies focus more on the tourist as an active observer and participant in sustainable tourism and examine perceptions, memorable experiences, environmentally conscious behavior, destination trustworthiness, and satisfaction.

Theoretical Framework

The **Social Exchange Theory (SET)** formed the core basis for the study, introduced by George C. Homans (1958) and elaborated by Peter M. Blau (1964). This theory states that people evaluate social exchanges by weighing the benefits gained against the costs incurred. In this case, tourists evaluated the travel experience based on the benefits they received (for example, top-quality service, cultural experience, environmental concern, safety, and contact with locals) and what they paid for it. This theory was suitable for the current research study because tourists' satisfaction can vary depending on how they perceive sustainable practices in the destination.

Furthermore, the research has employed the Systems Theory/Systems Thinking framework, specifically the sustainable tourism system created by Roxas, Rivera, and Gutierrez (2018). The authors view tourism as a complex system in which tourists, the host population, businesses, governmental entities, and the environment mutually affect one another. The authors claim that the aspects of tourism that include visitor satisfaction, tourism development, environmental impacts, involvement of the community, and sustainability are interconnected rather than functioning independently. As a result, the theory proved suitable for analyzing tourists' experiences and satisfaction with their trips because their experiences were seen as outcomes of interactions among destination management, environmental protection, community involvement, and tourism services. Thus, applying both Social Exchange Theory and Systems Theory established a strong theoretical framework for investigating tourists' experiences and satisfaction in terms of sustainable tourism.

Conceptual Framework

The study was anchored on the Input–Process–Output (IPO) Model, which provided a systematic framework for examining tourists' experiences and satisfaction with sustainable tourism practices in local destinations.

The **Input** consisted of tourists' experiences and perceptions related to the implementation of sustainable tourism in specific local settings. The input included tourist experiences related to environmental preservation, care for natural and cultural artifacts, support from the local community, waste management, preservation of local customs and traditions, and sustainable tourism mechanisms and services. The input also included tourists' perceptions of destination management, accessibility, cleanliness, safety, authentic experience, and the extent to which the touristic activity improved the local area.

The **Process** involved collecting, organizing, interpreting, and analyzing tourists' experiences. The information was collected using different qualitative analysis methods, mainly by interviewing tourists and/or using their experiences. The researchers examined respondents' answers to systematize and identify recurring or differing views, similarities, and differences in tourists' experiences with sustainable tourism. After collecting the data, they sorted it using coding and thematic analysis methods. Through this process, the researchers interpreted how sustainable tourism practices had influenced tourists' overall experiences and satisfaction.

The **Output** included themes and insights related to tourists' experiences of, and satisfaction with, sustainable tourism initiatives in the visited places. The work helped gain a better understanding of successful sustainable initiatives that tourists appreciated, the factors that led to their satisfaction, and the barriers they faced while in the destination. The data also enabled the author to identify tourists' expectations and recommendations regarding

sustainable tourism practices. In sum, the results served as a starting point for suggestions on developing practical solutions and improvement mechanisms that may help local tourism agents, destination managers, and community partners enhance sustainable tourism practices and increase tourist satisfaction.

METHODOLOGY

This study used a qualitative method to examine tourists' experiences and satisfaction with sustainable tourism practices at local locations. This methodology was chosen because the study required exploring tourists' views on sustainability practices and their related experiences, rather than measuring these experiences numerically. The qualitative design provided the researchers with information about how tourists experienced sustainability during their visit to the chosen local destinations. Using this design, the researchers identified widespread practices, perceived advantages, difficulties tourists experienced, and areas for improvement.

The study focused on learning about tourists' experiences in the context of tourism. The researchers examined how tourists perceived sustainability practices in terms of environmental protection, waste disposal, cultural participation, community involvement, resource use, and support for local communities.

The study included tourist participants who had visited selected local places where sustainable tourism practices were observed or practiced in real time. The researchers used purposive sampling to select participants with adequate skills to provide worthwhile information. Selection was based on specific criteria, including at least one visit to the selected local destination, personal observation or experience of sustainable practices, and willingness to share impressions and experiences during the interview process.

The need for purposive sampling was explained by the requirement to include participants with important and meaningful experience related to the object of study. Instead of using random sampling, researchers used purposive sampling to select tourists who had something to tell about their experience. Researchers continued recruiting participants until they had enough rich, recurring information to meet the goals of this study.

Researchers utilized semi-structured interviews to capture first-hand data from participants of their choice. The researchers created a question guide based on the research questions and key aspects of sustainable tourism practices. The questions encouraged interviewees to discuss their experiences with sustainability practices in places they had previously visited. Follow-up queries were also used at times to ensure clear comprehension of responses and to extract information from interviewees about specific cases more deeply.

Interviews were organized to allow interviewees to express their opinions freely. After obtaining participants' permission, the interviews were recorded and transcribed for analysis. Field notes captured anything relevant, contextual, and significant observed during data collection.

Furthermore, the researchers conducted documentary analysis alongside interviews to gather complementary data and contextual evidence on sustainable tourism in the mentioned localities. The researchers reviewed versions of documents targeted at addressing the questions,

including tourism development plans, sustainability programs, destination management materials, government publications, reports, environmental policies, and others.

To substantiate and contextualize the information gathered from the participants, the researchers conducted a documentary analysis. The researchers reviewed the documents to find evidence of existing sustainability policies, environmental management actions, cultural preservation initiatives, people's involvement in tourism, responsible tourism actions, and other related subjects. The information obtained from the documents was later compared with participants' interview statements to reveal similarities and differences and provide contextual explanations. The documents did not replace the data gained from the participants but helped to reinforce the interpretations made.

The interview data was analyzed using thematic analysis. Thematic analysis was preferred because it provided a systematic way to find, classify, and examine themes in the participants' stories. Once the interviews were transcribed, the researchers re-read the transcripts multiple times to familiarize themselves with the information and understand the context of the participants' stories.

The researchers also examined the documentary data thematically. The researchers coded and organized relevant information from the reviewed documents according to concepts associated with sustainable tourism practices. The researchers then compared the documentary findings with the themes derived from the interviews. This process enabled the researchers to identify supporting evidence and contextual information while also recognizing areas where documentary evidence and tourists' experiences differed.

Finally, the researchers interpreted the themes in relation to the research objectives. The analysis focused on tourists' results, perceived effectiveness of sustainable tourism, satisfaction with destination management, advantages and disadvantages of sustainability initiatives, and tourists' recommendations to enhance sustainable tourism. The data were presented through thematic descriptions, including statements from some respondents and documents, while maintaining participants' confidentiality.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

SOP 1. What are the lived experiences of tourists regarding the implementation of sustainable tourism practices in local destinations?

Tourists' lived experiences reveal their viewpoints about sustainable tourism practices in local destinations. These include their involvement in, reactions to, and perceptions of social, environmental, and community-oriented activities during their journeys. Visitors' experiences indicate both positive and negative experiences that shape their view of sustainable tourism practices.

- ***Environmental Awareness and Appreciation*** – Tourists have gained knowledge about the significance of environmental preservation when they have seen the practices of waste segregation, minimizing plastic usage, conservation of environmental resources, and keeping the surroundings clean. This helps tourists understand the importance of preserving tourism spots for the future.
- ***Participation in Sustainable Practices*** – There were situations when tourists expressed that they were engaged in sustainable activities such as proper waste disposal, using reusable containers, saving water and energy, and following the recommendations for nature. By doing so, tourists felt they were helping protect the place they were visiting, rather than just looking at it.

- ***Positive Interaction with Local Communities*** – Travelers witnessed many meaningful meetings with the locals, tradesmen, guides, and community members of the destination. These conversations helped travelers learn about local traditions, culture, and daily life, and gave them a richer travel experience.
- ***Authentic and Meaningful Tourism Experiences*** – Practices related to sustainable tourism lead to the fact that tourists feel that the experience was authentic and culturally significant. Visiting attractions managed by local people, buying local products, and partaking in activities benefit tourists in those destinations.
- ***Clean, Safe, and Well-Maintained Destinations*** – Tourists connect sustainability with cleanliness, environmental maintenance, and safety. Visited places were comfortable and pleasant because of cleanliness, adequate facilities, and waste management.
- ***Encountering Limitations in Sustainable Facilities*** – Although tourists have positive experiences, there were some shortcomings related to infrastructure. An inadequate number of litter bins, poor public transportation conditions, a lack of clean facilities, and large crowds could hinder tourists from practicing eco-friendly behavior.
- ***Awareness of Overtourism and Environmental Impacts*** – Tourists became aware of the negative effects of excessive tourism, particularly in crowded destinations. Overcrowding, littering, noise, traffic, and environmental degradation were experienced as concerns that could diminish the natural and cultural appeal of local destinations.
- ***Support for Local Businesses and Livelihoods*** – Visitors expressed satisfaction when their purchases supported local communities. Buying local goods, eating at local venues, and hiring local guides helped them not only earn a living but also better understand the destination.
- ***Influence of Tourist Behavior*** – The experience of tourists showed that sustainability is a result of the actions of destination management and tourists. They understood that responsible actions such as respecting local traditions, not littering, and saving resources are crucial for sustainable tourist development.
- ***Overall Positive Perception of Sustainability*** – Generally, tourists perceived sustainable tourism practices as beneficial only when they are applied regularly and noticeably connected with environmental protection, culture preservation, and the well-being of local communities.

SOP 2. How do tourists perceive and describe their satisfaction with sustainable tourism practices during their visits to local destinations?

Tourists reported high satisfaction with sustainable tourism initiatives as part of their travel experience. They said their pleasure came not only from visiting various attractions but also from destinations' environmental performance, how they treat local communities, and their efforts to encourage responsible tourist behavior. Tourists were more satisfied when they saw clean places, proper waste disposal, and environmental conservation. These experiences convinced them that the tourist destination is willing not only to attract visitors but also to preserve its resources for future generations.

Tourists perceive that cleanliness and proper waste management have a huge impact on their satisfaction. Tourists like places where waste bins are available, littering is controlled, and public spaces (beaches, parks, and other tourist places) are clean and tidy. Clean, organized

environments make tourists feel more comfortable and extend their stay. On the other hand, excessive litter and poor sanitation negatively affect the tourist experience.

The tourists showed satisfaction when they witnessed conservation and protection of natural resources. Tourists viewed activities such as safeguarding forests, marine ecosystems, local fauna, beaches, and other natural attractions positively. They believed that these activities indicated the destination's commitment to protecting the environment. Respondents viewed sustainable tourism more positively when tourism activities were well organized and did not harm the environment. The destination's resource protection made their journey valuable because they knew they could enjoy their visit without significantly harming the locality.

Another significant factor in tourists' satisfaction was the preservation of local culture. They appreciated destinations that preserved traditional practices and offered local products and cultural sites. They valued the experience as a way to understand the local community's identity. Respondents' satisfaction was also linked to supporting local businesses, buying local products, and respectfully communicating with local people.

Respondents said they were satisfied with the tourism experience because of sustainable tourism practices. They appreciated the information tourism organizations and destination managers provided on expected tourist behavior, environmental preservation, respect for other cultures, and proper use of resources. In their opinion, these practices raise awareness of tourists' actions while traveling. Some respondents reported higher satisfaction because they were given opportunities to engage in sustainable actions in the places they visited.

Nevertheless, the respondents indicated that sustainable tourism practices were not implemented properly. Some people pointed out that sustainability initiatives were implemented in some areas but were applied less successfully in others. Other respondents felt that some destinations promoted sustainability, but their implementation of sustainable actions was inconsistent or ineffective. For example, overcrowding, over-commercialization, poor infrastructure development, traffic, and pollution were cited as factors negatively affecting the tourists' experience.

Overall, tourists described their satisfaction with sustainable tourism practices as being closely connected to the quality, authenticity, and consistency of sustainability efforts they experienced during their visits. They were more satisfied when environmental protection, cultural preservation, community participation, and responsible tourism were integrated into the overall destination experience. Their perceptions indicate that sustainable tourism can enhance tourist satisfaction when it provides a clean, safe, authentic, and meaningful experience while simultaneously protecting the destination's resources and benefiting the local community. Thus, tourist satisfaction appears to extend beyond personal enjoyment and includes the feeling that their visit contributes positively, or at least minimally negatively, to the destination and its people.

SUMMARY

The research findings show that tourists' experiences with the adoption of sustainable tourism practices in local destinations were predominantly satisfying and significant. Tourists developed more positive attitudes toward the environment after observing good waste management, reduced plastic use, resource conservation, and a clean environment. Additionally, tourists' experiences in such places improved through opportunities to take part in sustainable practices, meet locals, support local businesses, and experience authentic culture

and traditions. Nevertheless, tourists faced challenges such as a lack of proper sustainable infrastructure, overcrowding, littering, transport congestion, pollution, and uneven implementation of environmental practices. The tourists' experiences show that implementing sustainable tourism practices depends not only on destination management but also on tourists' responsibility. This includes respecting local culture, disposing of waste properly, using resources responsibly, and complying with destination rules.

Tourists usually judge their satisfaction with sustainable tourism initiatives based on the quality, consistency, and authenticity of those initiatives in host locations. A clean environment, effective waste disposal, environmental protection activities, cultural conservation, responsible tourism practices, and support for local communities lead to greater comfort, pleasure, and satisfaction. Tourists appreciated places where sustainability was part and parcel of their overall tourism experience, rather than a marketing gimmick. Poor sanitation, congestion, lack of facilities, commercialization, contamination, and limited sustainability information lead to lower satisfaction. Moreover, sustainable tourism increases tourist satisfaction through clean, safe, authentic, and valuable experiences.

CONCLUSIONS

- The experiences of tourists show that sustainable tourism practices provide tourists with numerous valuable travel experiences, such as environmental awareness, involvement with the community, cultural respect, and wise conduct as tourists. Tourists appreciated the cleanliness and maintenance of the destinations they visited, the ability to contribute to locals' livelihoods, and even the opportunity for authentic communication with locals. However, visitors' positive experiences were sometimes hindered by inconsistent implementation, low-quality facilities, crowding, and ecological issues. Overall, for tourists, sustainability matters most when the protection of nature, preservation of culture, good community conditions, and appropriate guest actions are connected to the destination experience.
- Tourist feedback showed that those practices can make visitors feel satisfied when they observe them everywhere. Cleanliness of the destination, proper waste management, ecological efforts, cultural inclusion, and responsible tourism create tourist satisfaction. However, globalization, pollution, poor conditions, and inconsistent sustainability practices lower tourists' pleasure.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings and conclusions of the study, the following recommendations are suggested:

1. The implementation of sustainable tourism practices by local authorities has to be more consistent. In particular, local managers must upgrade waste management and sanitation facilities, control overcrowding, preserve natural and cultural heritage, and provide tourists with effective sustainability guidelines. They should also expand community-based tourism and create opportunities for participation in local livelihoods.
2. Destination managers should focus on upgrading their sustainability initiatives. Sustainability practices will affect tourist satisfaction, since key aspects such as cleanliness, waste management, environmental conservation, cultural preservation, and local community involvement must be considered. Regular tourist feedback is

necessary to identify weaknesses in sustainability practices and improve tourism facilities and services.

AI DECLARATION STATEMENT

Artificial intelligence (AI) tools were employed only to enhance language quality and formatting. The researcher carried out conceptualization, data analysis, interpretation of results, and conclusion formulation independently.

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