

# Challenging ‘Common Knowledge’ in Tourism – A Partial Polemic

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## *Abstract*

Tourism research as well as practice is very heterogeneous, due to its different cultural roots and dominant business patterns. Despite this heterogeneity, dominant intellectual avenues in a number of domains have emerged. As a result, we today are essentially stuck in a sort of trenches. In our paper, we try to identify some of those intellectual trenches and call for/ propose ways to get out of them. They include, among others, topics related to consumer behaviour, destination management, and sustainable tourism. Although we try to provide evidence for our claims, we might appear polemic at times, as we intend to provide contentious arguments about sometimes very controversial topics.

## Introduction

In the past decades, **tourism and hospitality research has been very expansive**. There are a number of indicators supporting that claim.

- Take the number of journals: 69 years ago the first tourism journal was launched by colleagues' at the University of Berne and St. Gallen respectively (today: *Tourism Review* which will celebrate its 70<sup>th</sup> volume in 2015); today, and according to a list compiled and distributed in TRINET by our colleague Bob McKercher from Hongkong Polytechnic University, there are close to **250 (!) tourism and hospitality related journals** on this globe.
- Or take the **number of researchers and/ at research entities**, be they at universities or outside core academia: Tourism related content has become so popular that it is taught and researched in an ever increasing number of tertiary education institutions worldwide (Maggi and Padurean, 2009).
- Last but not least, the **exigence of Publish-or-Perish has become literally endemic**, in such ways that it determines and makes or breaks entire (academic) careers. Getting cited has become the predominant measure of the quality and quantity of research output (Ledger and Roth, 1980).

Hence, it should come to no-one's surprise that more and more people are dealing with more and more similar topics (one wants to get cited); it should also come at no-one's surprise that by this **self-referential type of behaviour** we end up with **carved-like research streams** (sometimes even paradigms), without really asking what and how much such type of research contributes this world. In Google Scholar there are – for instance, and as of December 27, 2013 – 5,120 and 1,857 title entries of papers with the term "sustainable tourism" and "destination brand(ing)/ destination image" respectively. Does the world need all that work on that? Are all of those relevant domains of research?

**In practice, so called common knowledge is leaving deeply engraved traces in the way tourism and its businesses are configured and run.** To provide also an example in this practical domain: Derived from the fact that a tourism product is a network product, the business community is incentivised and sometimes even pushed to go into collaboration. And we have set up complex structures of organisations, called DMO (and other), steering such collaboration, without any critical review of which purposes such collaborations actually aim at and serve (apart from legitimizing political activity).

It is this carved-like body of knowledge, we shall go after in our paper, **scrutinizing or even challenging some predominant streams of thought**. We do so from a Central European perspective (a developed economy with savvy and

sophisticated consumers) and have selected the following topics/ streams to include in our considerations (thesis):

- Consumer behaviour in tourism: Stop analysing input-output relations and get 'dirty' by jumping into the analysis of messy decision making processes.
- Destination management and marketing: Change from a supply to the original demand perspective. And at the end, it is not about competitiveness of destinations.
- Sustainable tourism: Accept the limitations and tackle the real challenges, such as transport.

Other topics or domains which could be tackled as well (however will not be in our paper) include:

- *Cooperation and collaboration is the Holy Grail in tourism (size generates scales which lead to better profitability). We counter: Scalability by collaboration in the personal service industry is limited due to quickly increasing transaction costs.*
- *There are destination brands and images. We counter: As destinations are delimited by the consumer, we have to assume heterogeneity in perception which makes it – apart maybe from nation brands – impossible to deliberately brand a destination.*
- *More promotion leads to more demand/ the more promotional budget you have the more successful you will be. We counter: Tourists often go to places despite and not because of the promotion.*
- *Entrepreneurship comes from small and mostly new decentralized start-ups. We counter: it is the big incumbents which make destinations thrive.*

We might pick of one or the other of those contestations in a later paper.

For the time being, we are looking forward to critical feedback re our three theses following up now.

### **Consumer behaviour in tourism: Stop analysing input-output relations and get 'dirty' by jumping into the analysis of messy decision making processes.**

Studies investigating the behaviour of travelers/ tourists are quite abundant and go back well into the late 70s and 80s; essentially when the transformation from a sellers' to a buyers' market started to become apparent. The body of

**knowledge resulting from this research domain** can essentially be characterized as follows:

- 1) **Travel planning and decision making** (including information collection and processing) is a more or less **structured process** with a specific, measureable input/ stimuli, processed within an organism, producing a response/ outcome (i.e. the travel decision; cf. for instance Woodside and Lyonski, 1989 or Yuan and McDonald, 1990). It can be analysed as such.
- 2) From the above, travel can be viewed as a **stereotype of planned behaviour**; actually travel was one of the first contexts in which this theory was tested (Ajzen and Driver, 1992). Hence, the theory of planned behaviour has become a strong underpinning of tourism behaviour and decision making studies.
- 3) A travel decision is **contingent in character** (portfolio decision situation), as it encompasses a number of sub-decisions in different domains, including destination, point of time, duration, travel companions, type of travel, and the like (cf. Hyde and Laesser, 2009; Tay *et al.*, 1996); this again suggests and calls for a structured process (Bieger and Laesser, 2004).
- 4) The **foundations of travel decisions** are essentially **motivations** (what one wants; cf. Bieger and Laesser, 2002; this log thread of research essentially starts with Crompton, 1979), **opportunities** (what is available in terms of exogenous potentials; cf. MacInnis *et al.*, 1991), and **abilities** (what is possible/ feasible in terms of endogenous potentials; cf. Hong *et al.*, 2002); for a complete overview of the underlying MOA model cf. Lundberg, 1971).

So, and as of today, we know quite a bit about what contextual factors in the domain of the stimuli drive what type of travel decision outcome (when it comes to the response of the agents), i.e. the **input-output relationship in decision making and behaviour**. A plethora of quantitative studies with a positivistic research approach explaining marginal covariance between and within different input–output frameworks is evidence of that. In contrast, we know quite little about the **ultimate processing, i.e. how come (and less why) there is specific travel decision outcome** or behaviour (cf. Zehrer and Laesser, 2012), especially when considering inter-subject dimensions including group decision making. However, and at least, there appears to be increasing consensus, that travel decision making includes **cognitive conscious domains** as well as purely **affective (less conscious)** and thus **rather messy domains**. Recent literature in this field focuses on (1) decision process and structure modelling (e.g. Martin and Woodside, 2012), (2) the role of memories/ stories/ myths (e.g. Martin, 2010), (3) the role of images and brands (e.g. Bolan and Williams, 2008 or Galli and Gorn,

2011, however in a non-tourism context), (4) tourist preferences and the influence of unconscious needs (e.g. Tran and Ralston, 2006), (5) (anticipated) deviant tourist behaviour (e.g. Uriely, Ram, and Malach-Pines, 2011; mostly based on psychodynamic theories of Freud and Jung), and group decision making. But still, **most of that research is scoped around a specific decision or behavioural outcome**, most of the time ignoring potential alternatives or even rejected decisions along the decision making process or behavioural execution past such a process. Exceptions from that rule can be found at best in studies e.g. by Decrop and his colleague Snelders (e.g. 2005 and 2010 respectively).

Hence, and from the above, **we counter the prevalent (implicit) notion that tourism decision making and behaviour can be analysed and researched along a modelled structured process accounting for stimuli and responses only**, and by this hardly ever explaining the inherent processes resulting in our observations. There are a number of reasons/ rationales why we should leave the comfort zone of previous analysis of behaviour.

- 1) **Travel decisions are not always planned but can also be impulsive** or have impulsive domains. From the literature (mostly outside the travel related domain), there is also indication that the decision making can be rather impulsive, in the sense that a product category decision might have been made as a planned process whereas the brand purchase decision (i.e. destination choice) might be the result of a non-reflective, non-informative and often short term type of decision (Dolnicar and Laesser, 2012 and the literature cited in this paper, especially Rook, 1987 and Beldona *et al.*, 2005).
- 2) **Complex decisions such as travel decisions cannot be fully structured.** "Because most complex decisions require both adherence to precise rules and the aggregation of information, one can hypothesize that complex decisions can best be made by engaging in periods of both conscious and unconscious thought" (Dijksterhuis *et al.*, 2005; Nordgren *et al.*, 2011). From the above, and from studies in travel motivation research, one can conclude that parts of travel decision making are thus made within a rather rational, conscious framework (planning approach, where wills, wants and needs are to be satisfied) whereas other parts of the decision might be driven by rather emotional and sometimes unconscious travel decision contents and processes (especially when they are more impulsive in character).
- 3) **It can further be countered that travel is always the result of free will.** Although this assumption is not boldly supported, there is evidence that travel sometimes is the result of compulsion and not free will (Bieger and Laesser, 2002). This is mainly due to the fact that travel decisions are portfolio decisions in which each individual (sometimes as part of a travel group) tries to maximise the overall utility of a potential trip, whereby utili-

ty domains are not necessarily associated to travel domains directly but rather to creating utilities for travel companions (cf. household production theory according to Becker, 1965; Lancaster, 1966).

- 4) **It can also be countered that travel is always the result of positive planning.** As already suggested in the domain of impulse purchasing, travel is not always the result of planning. However, and due to the predominant approach of travel decision making research, the role of opportunities (of whatever type) or travel constraints (lack of abilities to execute opportunities) coming along the travel decision making process is mostly ignored, although they can play a key role (Hung and Petrick, 2012).

At the end of the day, we summarize our issues as follows:

What we assume to know	How we counter it
Travel decision is the outcome of a decision making process	Travel decision making is not a process in a structured sense but the amalgamation of numerous fuzzy/ messy decision making objects along a similar fuzzy/ messy process which at the end constitute a travel decision.
Travel decisions are the result of what people want.	Travel decision is the result of opportunities grasped/ taken and rejected, under the assumption that there are the necessary capabilities and that needs are covered as much as possible.  Travel decisions are not always what people want.

From the above, we postulate that more research is needed regarding (1) non-structured travel decision making (i.e. process and heuristics of decision making) as well as (2) opportunistic and non-voluntary, non-wanted travel decisions.

***So let us leave the comfort zones of S – R models and indulge in the analysis of the agents' redundant mechanisms and processes of behavioural decision making and execution (not only input and outcome).***

### **Destination management and marketing: Change from a supply to the original demand perspective.**

With the **change from a producers' to a consumers' market in tourism in the late 80ies**, it became evident that alternative forms of tourism production structures and processes needed to be developed and implemented (Bieger and Beritelli, 2012). The early destination concept provided a possible approach for that challenge, with **two core models evolving** over time: **community model** and **corporate model** (Flagestad and Hope, 2001). Both signify a **supply-rationale** of the destination concept, although the **original logic is clearly demand driven** (Bieger, 1998): **the destination as defined by the individual and essentially drawing from the network of supply activated by the tourist to spend time outside his regular living and working environment.**

The twist (or should we rather say: misrepresentation?) from a demand to a supply sided concept was propelled by practice and academia alike.

In **practice**, the catalyst was the **political rationality of the funding of collaborative marketing and management structures**. As a result, and over time, organisations (DMOs) evolved, representing providers within specific political and thus geographically clearly delimited entities (cities, regions, states, nations, etc.), trying to market whatever their resources yielded. In order to professionalise their work and to increase funds, to reach critical impact size with rising market scope and marketing costs, they merged over time to become bigger (by political obligation). As a result of this process, the entities represented became larger as well. However, and due to the heterogeneity of the providers in ever bigger entities, their work became more and more un-specific and therefore ineffective and inefficient (Beritelli *et al.*, 2013b).

In academia, the demand driven rationality of the destination concept was quickly thrown overboard as well. The theoretical underpinning to take this avenue of research can be derived from the **theories of industrial districts as well as clusters** (Pearce 2013), collectively organising and market themselves as a place for tourists to visit and/ or accruing significant revenues from tourism (Beirman, 2003). The initiation of this supply sided discussion of destination management can be found in the seminal paper by Buhalis (2000; this paper has been cited 1,400 (!) times by now, according to Harzing's Publish or Perish). But it has been further endorsed over the years, for instance by the literature about destination strategies (e.g. Ibrahim and Gill, 2005), competitiveness (e.g. Ritchie and Crouch, 2003; Crouch, 2011; WEF, 2005), governance (e.g. Beritelli *et al.*, 2007; Pechlaner *et al.*, 2011), or marketing (e.g. Palmer and Bejou, 1995), including branding/ brand equity in a tourism context (e.g. Chon, 1990 and 1991; Gartner and Ruzzier, 2011), just to name a few. And by this 'behaviour' of the research community, a general (but potentially misleading) understanding of destination management has been literally carved (maybe for good).

Only very recently it has been **dawning that this supply- and resource-oriented perspective misses out on one important actor: the tourist**. Whereas with a stay-put type of trip (such as beach and winter sports holidays; Hyde and Laesser, 2009) we might observe spatial congruence between the activity/experience space of the tourist and the geographical scope of the activated supply network (and very often a high degree of homogeneity in demand), this is not the case in other types of holidays, including arranged as well as freewheeling touring (e.g. sightseeing and other forms where one would change place of location). These types of trips normally **ignore supply-driven geographical boundaries and take place in a more enlarged** (sometimes international) **space**. Demand for such trips (as opposed to stay-put ones) tends to be more heterogeneous as well (in terms of needs, activities, geographical scope, etc.; Finsterwalder and Laesser, 2013), increasing the complexity for marketing (large cities (metropolis) exemplary combine all of the above, as they have very heterogeneous demand (different activity patterns activating different types of suppliers) within more or less similar geographical boundaries, as defined by the city or regional borders).

This is why there are the first attempts from academia and practice alike to **re-integrate the demand perspective into destination management**, supported by late technological developments (including e.g. the tracking of tourists). They do so by regarding destinations more as **open systems** where different **supply and demand networks** interact and **draw from similar or different resources** (Laesser and Jäger, 2001; Beritelli *et al.*, 2013b; Pearce, 2013). Spatial boundaries are – at least partially – eliminated; **destination geography becomes variable** (Beritelli *et al.*, 2013b). The **operational units are SBFs** (strategic business fields, consisting of one or more demand networks and a stable, implicitly or explicitly developed, well-practised supply network), not the destination in the sense of a cluster anymore. With this more customer-centric approach, the **customer process becomes the foundation of the production and marketing process of the suppliers**, with far reaching implications on the existing collaborative structures (Beritelli *et al.*, 2013b).

In consequence, **we cannot analyse the competitiveness of destinations** as this is just the result or amalgam of the competitiveness of SBFs which either fully or partially operate within politically given destination limits. The potential to ‘manage’ destinations under this framework is limited as well; because **it is the SBFs with actually drive the development**. So, the **competitive unit, which can be analysed and managed as such, is the SBF as well**, and not the destination according to the ‘old’ understanding (= destination as a mixture of different products and services and of understanding the territory of a destination as a politically-administratively delimited area).



*Hence, and at the end of the day competitiveness (as the ultimate outcome of any economic activity) needs to be judged based on the capacity of the SBFs (not destination!) and their players, i.e. suppliers and their associated partners, to implement differentiation in a strategic context within a competitive environment, independent of political and geographical space (cf. to Laesser and Beritelli, 2013).*

### **Sustainable tourism: Accept the limitations and tackle the real challenges, such as transport.**

The challenge of making tourism sustainable has been taken on by academia and practice alike, and for a number of years. **The discussion**, originating from *The Limits to Growth: A Report to The Club of Rome* (1972) (Meadows *et al.*, 1972) and the *Brundtland Report* of 1987 **has been increasingly** (and sometimes dogmatically?) **focusing on ecological, cultural, and social domains of sustainability**. This can be somewhat illustrated by a simple title count of published papers. There are, according to Google Scholar on December 27, 2013:

- 5, 120 title entries of papers with the term *sustainable AND tourism*
- 419 title entries of papers with the terms *sustainable AND tourism AND environment/ ecological*
- 365 title entries of papers with the terms *sustainable AND tourism AND culture/ cultural*
- 122 title entries of papers with the terms *sustainable AND tourism AND society/ social*

A further analysis of less expected domains reveals the following list. There are, again according to Google Scholar on December 27, 2013:

- 63 title entries of papers with the terms *sustainable AND tourism AND business*
- 30 title entries of papers with the terms *sustainable AND tourism AND transport*
- 4 entries of papers with the terms *sustainable AND tourism AND finance*

From the above, we can – in relation to sustainable tourism - derive a **threefold hypothesis (or claim?)**: (1) business and finance domains (the latter is an important resource, bearing in mind the capital intensive character of tourism) are under-represented (to say the least). (2) Research is focusing on rather small-scale spatial perimeters, ignoring for example destination inbound- and out-

bound transport, and (3) follows an avenue which does not really emphasize on the foundation for any sustainability: actors' behaviour (i.e. consumers' as well as producers') inside and outside a given perimeter.

Most can probably agree that due to the **tourism-inherent need of mobility**, transport after all is one of the key issues when it comes to making tourism sustainable (e.g. energy use, greenhouse gas emissions, global warming, noise and air pollution, etc.). In addition, one would think that the debate in many countries in the mid-90s about external effects of transport and their internalisation (cf. Verhoef, 1994; Mayeres *et al.*, 1996; especially in an urban context) would have triggered a similar discussion in the domain of tourism; all the more as with the mass movement of tourists into a given place similar issues would arise (transport related congestion and pollution because of the overusing of resources in the wake of a lack of property rights; and as a consequence the production of external effects). However, and from the above, we have to realize that there are only **30 papers on transport (addressing sustainability issues in tourism)**; moreover, and within those 30 papers, there is only one recent by Peeters (2013) which discusses ways to develop a long-term global tourism transport model and its implications for sustainable tourism policy making.

**We argue that tourism, because of its inherent transport, cannot be completely sustainable.** As a matter of fact, the entire society is not behaving in a sustainable way in this domain, which is why the phenomenon tourism as a behavioural subset of this our society cannot be sustainable in its own right.

And because this is so, research stays away from this really challenging topic of transport and rather keeps busy with redundantly investigating large number of minor issues. We can only guess the reason for that... but maybe it is associated with the 'problem' that neither a government nor any representatives of the tourism industry would sponsor research, which might likely produce a result that proposes measures potentially inducing a decrease of inbound tourists (due to measurements in the transport sector, i.e. cost accuracy and thus demand reducing pricing or even full internalisation of external costs).

Such a potential result is due to the **narrow scope which sustainability research in tourism** has been taking, hardly ever combining all domains, least including the business one. **However, a more holistic approach is needed** (Northcote and Macbeth, 2006), **including the business community in the process**, especially when it comes to resolving the transport issue. Let us illustrate our point: With the ever increasing improvement of accessibility (lower than ever real prices, improving air connectivity due to low cost business models, good road infrastructure even in mountainous areas, etc.), and assuming that time to travel remains more or less constant, durations of stay tend to decrease (Nyberg, 2002), because individuals can execute more travel options. So, the decrease in destination accessibility by pricing incentives (higher prices to ac-

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