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The Future of the Tourism Industry: Post-Pandemic Challenge and Opportunity

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Abstract

Introduction

The tourism and travel industry has been one of the most significant supporters of the global economy, given its contribution of 313 million jobs, over 10% of the world's GDP, and millions of cross-cultural interactions day to day (World Tourism & Travel Council, 2020). However, it is believed that tourism-driven economic development and success come at the expense of environmental pollution and deterioration, which is detrimental to a destination's sustainable development (Azam et al., 2018). Moreover, the recent outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic has caused unfathomable social and economic impacts. While recognizing the adverse effects of the pandemic, many researchers view this unique situation as a potential catalyst to fundamental transformation and embrace sustainable changes at destinations (Higgins-Desbiolles, 2021).

Literature Review

The concept of sustainable development has been widely applied and discussed in tourism and travel (Ninerola et al., 2019). More and more global leaders are beginning to publicly recognize tourism's ability to deploy and maximize sustainable development across each of the United Nations' 17 goals through diverse, localized efforts to achieve global change and advance COVID recovery (UNWTO, 2022). The development of sustainable tourism indicators (Rasoolimanesh et al., 2020) is an excellent example of a sectoral initiative in promoting sustainable tourism development. Sustainable tourism development is a shared responsibility, and all stakeholders need to collaborate, spread awareness, and maximize legitimate local strategies for collectively achieving sustainable changes at a destination (Salem

et al., 2018). Several studies suggest DMO's ability to develop leadership capacity around the SDGs to spread awareness and educate partners on practical implementations (Fang et al., 2020).

Despite these efforts, Sharpley (2020) noticed the discrepancies between academics and practices, where little progress has been made towards sustainable tourism development. Unfortunately, existing studies for practical application of sustainable tourism development are heavily weighted in European efforts, while there is a lack of records in the United States detailing specific applications of the UN's SDGs (Rasoolimanesh et al., 2020).

Methodology

Accordingly, this study aims to address this issue, combine theory with practices, and develop an initial benchmark for periodically assessing destinations' progress in deploying sustainable development goals. More specifically, this study will use the sustainable tourism indicators to assess destinations' performance and employ the theory of planned behavior to identify the major drivers of destinations' sustainable planning behavior. The findings of this study not only reflect the current state of destinations' sustainable practices but also can identify the best practices, drivers, and major challenges for tourism sustainable development.

As one of the early attempts in evaluating U.S. destinations' sustainable development performance, this study tries to answer the following questions: (1) How are destinations practicing sustainable development goals? (2) What are the motivations driving specific SDG engagement? (3) What are the challenges faced by destinations from deploying SDG?

This qualitative study features thirty-six semi-structured, in-depth interviews. Interviews will be conducted with directors from Destination Marketing Organizations throughout the eleven

interior regions of the United States. Interviewees will be prompted to answer the three leading questions. Then, using the Theory of Planned Behavior, researchers will thematically analyze responses to identify the key attitudes, social norms, and perceived behavioral controls for DMO's deploying the UN's SDG framework to develop, implement, and measure sustainable development initiatives and those who do not. Here, is where the information lies to create an effective intervention to regenerate the tourism industry.

Results & Implications

The short-term goal of this study is to (1) offer an overview and critical evaluation of destinations' sustainable development performance in the U.S., (2) transfer academic findings into industry-specific best practices for replication and further advancement of SDGs by the United Nations' 2030 goal, and (3) Direct future research in SDG advancement by calling attention to specific areas of challenges.

The long-term goal of this study is to (1) produce research that contributes to the UNWTO's transnational database of SDG achievements and current worldly efforts by assessing SDG knowledge and participation in the U.S., (2) facilitate conversations across four primary disciplines of the tourism industry at their organic points of intersection to reveal motivations for SDG participation through psychology-based theory, and (3) formulate a starting point for the tourism industry's benchmark assessment for sustainable development in the U.S..

Conclusion & Discussion

A multifaceted, competitive, and progressive solution is needed to regenerate the tourism industry and advance COVID recovery. Additionally, this solution must allow each stakeholder within the event tourism industry to demonstrate their willingness to take on responsibility for

externalities realized pre-pandemic, quell the negative impacts imposed by the pandemic, and bridge the gap between the research and current industry practices for streamlined advancement post-pandemic. The UNWTO suggests that deploying Sustainable Development Goals framework will not only build industry resiliency and contribute to economic, social, and environmental recovery; but shape better tourism policies, foster partnership, improve resource allocation, increase tourism competitiveness, and teach individuals how to be a better, more responsible traveler (UNWTO, 2022).

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