Understanding the Sustainability Perspectives of City Tourism : Directions for Strategies and Future Research

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Abstract

Purpose: Due to the diversity of tourist objectives and corporate needs, city tourism creates sustainability issues. Resilience, digital communication, industrial integration, and novel sustainable branding strategies are required in the aftermath of the crisis. This research found limitations in the promotion of a sustainable future in city tourism.

Methodology: While much research in the literature focuses on city tourism and tourist experiences, just a few studies consider a sustainable future. As a result, this communication was created as a research note based on the author's review of current research data and contemplation on city tourism's complicated state of the art.

Findings: This research paper focused on venues based on the UNWTO 2019 City Tourism Performance Report, theoretical basis – destination image perspectives, omitted destination culture, destination cooperation, communication, and so on. Opportunities for sustainable branding and experimental research were also emphasized.

Implications: This research note highlighted the potential research opportunities in city tourism studies, emphasizing the need for longitudinal, technological, community-centric, and comparative research to enhance sustainable city tourism and achieve the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (UNSDGs) 2030.

Originality/Value: Critical gaps in sustainable urban tourism were identified. The post-crisis circumstances of city tourism, including chances for resilience, digital methodologies, and community-centric initiatives, were mainly explored.

Keywords: city tourism, sustainable future, research note, UNWTO, United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (UNSDGs)

JEL Classification Codes: M31, O18, Z32

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he tourism business is becoming increasingly volatile, particularly after health and economic disasters. Initially, most destinations develop destination resilience and communicate with people about preparedness to tackle disasters while continuing to offer tourism products and services. The complexity has further increased with the shifting travelers' objectives, views, and destination selections (Ravichandran, 2023a). Destination marketers must compete with tourists' previous experiences rather than competing places, resulting in new sectors, destinations, and competitive capacities. The following capabilities are: While facing the challenges of the health crisis, economic slowdown, and globalization of tourism transactions, the tourism industry must develop integration with other businesses like food, restaurants, transportation, accommodation, fashion, and other associated actors.

Destinations seek to teach technology disruption in their tourism marketing and offerings, communicating

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60 Prabandhan: Indian Journal of Management • September 2024

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with tourists around the world via digital sources of information, managing online reputation, building resilience, providing one-stop tour solutions to tourists, generating diverse avenues of tourism revenue, and discovering new microsegments of tourists, as well as creating, communicating, and delivering niche offerings such as virtual tourism, among other things. Tourists are bestowed with extensive information over online platforms, connected with people through social media networks beyond geographic boundaries, the option to reject the marketing messages that they do not hold interest in, the ability to communicate to the destination marketers, tourist communities and potential tourists through user-generated-contents, finding best deals of tour packages, etc. These capabilities have recently brought a new dimension to the tourism industry. Among the other forms, city tourism is critical as it serves tourist experiences and a commercial and economic spot, thereby witnessing these changing capabilities and the need for destination branding strategies for a sustainable future.

Rationale of this Perspective

City tourism is an essential factor for economic growth across the globe. It attracts a wide range of domestic and international tourists. According to the United Nations World Tourism Organization (World Tourism Organization, 2020), city tourism witnessed 45% of international tourist arrivals compared to the previous year. The numbers are relatively large in big cities such as Paris, Bangkok, and New York. Policymakers have initiated various sustainability measures while considering the growing challenges in city tourism. However, the outcomes of those frameworks are ineffective (Scott & Gössling, 2022). According to the Ministry of Tourism, Government of India (2023), between 2022 and 2023, Indian cities saw a significant increase in domestic and international tourist arrivals. As per the recent report, foreign tourist arrivals (FTAs) in May 2024 were 600,496. This shows a 0.3% increase from May 2023. Prominent cities such as Delhi, Mumbai, Chennai, Bangalore, and other cosmopolitan cities are witnessing such trends of overflowing tourists, attributed to several reasons such as connectivity to other tourism destinations, diverse cultural heritages in the cities, and mainly the growing urban facilities catering to tourists. This creates strong sustainability concerns and resource depletion (Shekhar et al., 2023; Singh & Srivastava, 2022).

According to the UNWTO report — "Recommendations on Urban Tourism" (2019), increasing urbanization has enhanced the reach of urban tourism and witnessed a sharp climb in the growing middle-class population in cities. This has led to the issue of efficient space and commutation management in cities. This has also resulted in the overconsumption of natural resources, an inverse influence on the environment — land, water, air, and nature, altering cultural habits of residents, an increase in immoral and illegal behaviors, congesting infrastructure, and managing services. Along with these crucial variables, political objectives have been shown to influence tourists' and residents' tour experiences and economies (Novy & Colomb, 2020). While there are many innovative city initiatives by policymakers, the effectiveness of tackling these issues still exists and thus predominantly creates sustainability issues (Lee et al., 2020; Ravichandran, 2023 a,b). While there is a wealth of study evidence on managing city tourism and branding around the world (Chan et al., 2021; Huertas et al., 2021), there is very little research on Indian cities. As a result, this study's perspective demonstrates the different research pathways that aid city tourism policymakers and destination marketers.

City Tourism: A Preamble

City or urban tourism is a prevalent form of tourism worldwide that attracts many tourists. This type of tourism includes non-agriculture, transport, administration, trade and services, cultural, architectural, technological, social, and natural catering for leisure and business motives in urban spaces (World Tourism Organization, 2020). The other elements, such as tourism offerings aligning with the economy, social life, and geographic uniqueness,

add concreteness to urban tourism. According to UNWTO projections, around 60% of the world's population will live in urban areas by 2030. A global survey on residents' perceptions of city tourism: Impact and measurements done by UNWTO and IPSOS indicated that city tourism is expected to contribute to wealth and income development (approximately 52% of respondents attributed this statement). Such revenue generated by tourists (domestic and foreign) promotes economic development, cultural preservation, and intercultural exchanges between cities. Food, shopping, arts, culture, heritage, nature-based locations, event-based areas, religious, entertainment, adventurous, spiritual, LGBTIO, and other tourist objectives are all integrated into urban tourism (Al-Hinkawi & Zedan, 2021; Payne, 2023). Hence, urban tourism plays a significant role in the growth and development of the tourism industry, and it serves a wide range of tourists and benefits several stakeholders, businesses, and industries across the globe.

UNWTO City Tourism Performance Report 2019: Key Takeaways

The UNWTO's city tourism performance report is based on interviews with tourist officials and stakeholders from 15 cities to identify strategies that increase performance, competitiveness, and sustainability. The research focused on five critical performance areas: Destination management, economic, social, and cultural perspectives, environmental factors, technology, and new business models. The cities studied include Buenos Aires, Linz, Antwerp, Beijing, Hangzhou, Tianjin, Bogota, Copenhagen, Berlin, Turin, Sapporo, Tokyo, Marrakech, Seoul, and Cape Town. The report highlights common success factors such as shared vision, community engagement, and effective marketing strategies. Key obstacles noted include a lack of data for measuring effectiveness, inadequate environmental management systems, poor accessibility, ineffective urban tourist regulations, social responses to environmental issues, flexible government structures, political instability, and poor seasonality management. Despite these challenges, the report proposes sustainable city tourism branding options that conjure massive experimental research channels.

Branding City Tourism: Theoretical Research Avenues

Strategic destination branding focuses on three key elements: cognitive, emotive, and overall images (Shankar, 2020). This section talks about the scientific expansion of cognitive image aspects.

Cognitive Image of Cities

Cognitive image is the fundamental belief that tourists hold about the destinations, and the affective image is when the tourists experience the destinations' attractions. The image emphasizes favorability, positivity, intention, recommendation, and loyalty. In the case of the city's cognitive image, the city brand elements should have the tangible power to linger in the thoughts of tourists. It is vital to note that cognitive image is very complex to conceive and difficult to break. However, cognitive image drives the affective and overall images (Shankar, 2020). The cognitive image of the cities can include cultural heritage, nature-based attributes, infrastructure, appealing food, entertainment, arts, sports, LGBTIQ, religious and spiritual components, etc. Many research insights apply the model-based framework to evaluating the cognitive image of the destinations (Wang et al., 2023). While these are pre-existing for cities, the focus should be on how well these components are positioned in tourists' eyes from a sustainability standpoint.

Studies on such facets are rarely seen in the literature. Culture is critical to destination image formation (Zhou et al., 2024). A destination culture that reflects sustainability elements is complicated for policymakers and destination marketers to produce; however, there is a considerable possibility of imbibing cultural elements in destination positioning. Thus, it is necessary to map all the city's cognitive image elements to sustainability cues through successful marketing initiatives. There is a research deficit here because most research insights focus on destination culture as a significant component impacting tourist motivation, loyalty, and happiness (Japutra, 2022). In contrast, cultural aspects of cognitive qualities are not widely addressed.

Affective Image of Cities

Designing sustainable experiences requires destination marketers and politicians to consider the city's dynamic image. Tourist experiences are a crux of factors like accessibility, infrastructure, accommodation, food, residents, and business transactions. Sustainable practices in these areas, such as electric vehicles, green routes, community transport, green spaces, sustainable foodscapes, and community participation, can drive tourists toward sustainable consumption. For instance, foodscapes have become vital in city tourism, with significant sustainability relevance (Forleo & Benedetto, 2020; Sabari, 2021, 2022). The success of integrating sustainability cues in foodscapes is feasible, as experiencing local food is a primary tourist activity. However, studies focusing on food sustainability in destinations are limited.

Similarly, LGBTIQ events significantly contribute to city tourism, promoting community friendliness and acceptance (Vorobjovas-Pinta & Hardy, 2016). This highlights the need for gender-sensitive research in the field of city tourism. City tourism also caters to the reunion and film tourism motives, making it viable to impose sustainable cues in these contexts (Bertolini et al., 2022; Martinelli et al., 2023). Tourists develop emotive perceptions based on cognitive attractions. While evidence exists for this notion, studies on city tourism have yet to be discovered. Incorporating sustainable cues—messages on sustainable futures, controlled consumption symbols, usage directions, and resource accessibility limitations—can significantly influence these perceptions. Another important idea is destination behavior, which influences visitor behavior. Measuring tourists' sustainable behaviors can encompass preferences for green consumption, attitudes toward electric vehicles, awareness of carbon footprints, and responsible resource consumption.

Similarly, destinations can measure their actions by how well they reflect sustainability in their appeals, products, communications, and values. For example, avoiding plastic usage and promoting controlled water consumption can drive sustainable tourist behaviors (Shankar, 2021). However, these studies are focused on other forms of tourism, such as drive tourism (Fitt, 2022; Hu et al., 2021), but not in the context of city tourism.

Conative Image of Cities

The third aspect of the image is the general image of the city. This is the tourist's view after visiting the destination—favorable/unfavorable, positive/negative, recommendation, intention, and loyalty. Cognitive and affective images tend to conceive an overall image of cities. Induction of sustainability cues in cities' image (cognitive and affective) drives behavioral changes in tourists and fosters their post-visit behaviors, mainly recommendations. Many tourists rely on digital sources of information created by tourists and communities (through blogs, vlogs, social media posts, and articles), and these sources are considered credible for the destination choice process (Shankar, 2021). Encouraging tourists to generate content based on their experiences with destination attractiveness (specifying sustainability cues) will influence potential tourists. Accordingly, destinations' brand communications in the purview of sustainability through brand elements—logos, symbols, taglines, sonic attributes, social media advertising, affiliate advertising, partnerships with allied industries, and promotion through events, public relations, sponsorships, social cause marketing, and combo trips—will become sources of information for tourists. While studies are found in these contexts of sources of information and conative images (Huete-Alcocer et al., 2019; Lojo et al., 2020), studies evaluating the sustainability cues that

affect the overall conative perception, tourist-generated contents driving sustainable destination choices, and post-city visit behaviors are unaddressed.

Branding City Tourism: Research Voids in Practice

This section discusses the research possibilities from the perspective of practical applications through destination marketers.

Destination Culture in Cities

Sustainability in city tourism is shaped not only by destination marketers and policymakers but also by tourists and the inherent culture of the destinations. Ng et al. (2007) found that the idea of destination culture is critical in determining a city's competitiveness in sustainable development. Thriving destination culture necessitates careful consideration of three components: The nation's culture (country), the nationals' culture (tourists), and the destination culture (tourist spots).

Destination marketers can significantly shape the destination's culture while unable to influence national and tourist cultures. A strong destination culture should reflect environmental, social, and economic sustainability cues. Environmental cues include managing city spaces, pollution, water resources, waste, public transport, energy use, and carbon footprints. Social cues involve resident participation in destination recovery, green consumption, circular behavior, and biodiversity. Economic cues encompass political stability, ethical consumption, and promoting local products. Strategies such as regenerative tourism, responsible tourism, and ecotourism can be integrated into sustainable tourism, contributing to economic recovery and a sustainable future (Bellato & Pollock, 2023; Burrai et al., 2019; Singh et al., 2023). World Tourism Organization (2020) highlighted the need to promote diverse forms of tourism to optimize natural resources. City branding initiatives should combine environmental, social, and economic sustainability features, supporting innovative types of tourism that accord with sustainable development. It is critical to ensure destination resilience through crowd control, health and safety, economic stability, environmental protection, and technology agility (Wang et al., 2022). This suggests an essential study area for evaluating the city's culture that displays sustainable cues and influences on the overall competitiveness and sustainability of municipal tourism.

State of Businesses in Cities

The sustainability of city tourism depends on strategic marketing by destination marketers and stakeholders' business operations. Several potential business models can generate revenue while promoting sustainability. Technology disruption has significantly enhanced sustainability in tourism (Erol et al., 2022). One promising sector is sustainable travel booking systems that encourage eco-friendly accommodations as well as sustainability-minded transportation and tour providers. These platforms can build credibility through green certifications and evidence of community involvement in waste management and environmental protection. Virtual tourism is another innovative business model that allows tourists to visit cities virtually, which can help preserve heritage sites, manage crowds, and reduce environmental impact (Bhatia et al., 2022).

The growth of sustainable blogging and content creation among young travelers creates new economic prospects. Partnering with bloggers and vloggers who highlight sustainable practices, responsible travel tips, and the sustainable culture of cities can influence tourists' behaviors and attract potential tourists. Online souvenir marketplaces promoting locally manufactured, ecologically friendly products from recycled materials might affect tourists' perceptions and behavior toward sustainability. City tourism can also benefit from apps focusing on

sustainability, providing information on sustainable attractions, eco-friendly transportation, recycling facilities, and responsible dining choices. These apps can drive tourists toward sustainable and responsible consumption. This review generates a new area of research on understanding how destination marketers and businesses collaborate to adopt innovative business models to improve the sustainability of city tourism, impacting tourists' sustainable habits. This ideation immediately assists policymakers in promoting city tourism to a sustainable future.

Conclusion

Destination image, culture, and resilience are significant in fostering sustainable city tourism. A strong cultural identity and a positive destination image boost resilience, assuring long-term sustainability through responsible visitor attraction and retention. As a result, this research note has carefully selected these parameters to evaluate the research gaps. This note has a variety of management and theoretical ramifications.

Implications

Contributions to Theory

There is a plethora of research in the tourism marketing literature focusing on destination sustainability; however, very few studies have looked into cities as tourism destinations (Martini & Buffa, 2020; Shankar, 2021). A notable research void exists in various perspectives, such as longitudinal studies. There is a lack of long-term studies tracking the impacts of sustainable tourism initiatives over extended periods (Timur & Getz, 2009); Technological integration: Research on the role of emerging technologies (e.g., AI and IoT) in promoting sustainable city tourism is limited (Mariani & Wirtz, 2023), community-centric approaches — More studies are needed on how to effectively involve local communities in sustainable tourism planning and decision-making processes (Lew et al., 2021) and comparative analyses — Comparative studies across different cities and regions are scarce, hindering the ability to generalize best practices and lessons learned (Crouch & Ritchie, 2011), etc. Addressing these study opportunities produces comprehensive literature-based theories in city tourism.

Contributions to Practice

The outputs of such research insights will contribute to the UNSDGs 2030, primarily objective number 11: Make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient, and sustainable. The achievements will boost the city's image as a tourist attraction while also greatly improving people's lifestyles, level of living, and resource bandwidth for future generations. Such rigorous marketing and promotion of city locations can increase the competitiveness of the tourism industry (Mishra & Ojha, 2014). The research focused primarily on the views mentioned in this communication will add new aspects to local tourism branding.

Limitations of the Study and Scope for Future Research

This study note is limited to the author's reflections on literary materials related to city tourist branding and management. Empirical information on understanding tourists' perceptions and behavior in city tourism sites will generate a broad scope for marketers and policymakers.

Author's Contribution

Dr. Sabari Shankar Ravichandran has solely drafted this research paper.

Conflict of Interest

The author certifies that he has no affiliations with or involvement in any organization or entity with any financial or non-financial interest in the subject matter or materials discussed in this manuscript.

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