

Chapter 13

Consumer Confidence in Responsible Tourism: How Business Reporting Systems can Encourage Respectful Behaviour

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ABSTRACT

The chapter focuses on reporting systems which assess responsible tourism and Corporate Social responsibility (CSR) in the tourism industry. These tools have recently received more and more attention from the international academic and professional community, given the urgent need to promote a socially, environmentally and economically sustainable development of tourism. The use of reporting systems can encourage responsible practices by tourism businesses, improving internal processes and activities along the tourism value chain, as well as enhance consumer confidence in respectful companies and in responsible tourism.

Through the application of the Analytic Hierarchy Process (AHP), the chapter develops a critical assessment of the reporting systems currently available in Europe, in order to support the diffusion of responsible policies and practices in the tourism industry and the businesses' commitment towards clients. Particular attention is paid to small and medium-size tourism enterprises, since they have more difficulties in organising their business according to social and ecological principles and to develop the conditions under which a product can be defined as "responsible".

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The analysis underlines that the evaluation of these tools, in terms of their effectiveness and reliability in monitoring business responsibility, depends on the criteria taken into account for the analysis and then on the auditors' selection of appropriate variables.

INTRODUCTION

The evolution of consumption beyond minimal and basic needs has led people to consume a large amount of products and resources. Even though this phenomenon is not negative in and of itself, there are some important issues that need to be addressed: how are the products actually produced; what are the impacts of this production and of certain forms of consumption on the environment, the society and the individuals; which actors influence consumers' choices and, in particular, to what extent what people consume is influenced by businesses' goals and advertising and not by their personal needs (Shah, 2008).

The shift from the marketing concept to the societal marketing concept has moved businesses' focus from merely satisfying clients' needs to also preserving and enhancing their well-being (Kotler, 1994). The consumerism approach developed by the consumerism movement and its disciples aims at harmonising the goals of businesses and the goals of society. It postulates a new ethics of production and consumption, a greater attention being paid to the quality of products, the safety of consumers and the preservation of the environment.

Contributions in the literature about ethics in consumerism have been proposed and much discussed in order to encourage ethical consumption behaviour and change in business practice (as Corporate Social Responsibility - CSR) (Tallontire, Rentsendorj, & Blowfield, 2001).

Today an increasing number of consumers seem to found their consumption decisions on ethical motivations, paying attention to eco-friendly products, respect for labour standards and human rights. Many businesses, on their side, seem to

adopt green and ethical practices, producing responsible products.

However, evidence suggests that the ethical approach associated with consumerism is not put into practice as much as it is celebrated. There is a gap between opinions on green and ethical consumer values and the development of ethical products. According to some empirical findings, even though consumers follow certain values when they are shopping, there is a significant disparity between what people state to do and their actual purchases (Tallontire et al., 2001). The same applies to the industry: there are companies that integrate ethical principles in their internal processes and products and companies that claim to integrate these principles without implementing them concretely, the scope being to increase their visibility and appeal on the market.

Tourism, as a form of consumption, is directly involved in this debate. As stated by Hall (2012), tourism existed well before the onset of the industrial age of tourism. However, the industrial revolution and the rapid growth of the capitalist society changed its nature and rate of growth, giving rise to a new form of mass consumption and production with effects on both people and places. At the beginning of the 80s, the widespread concern of the international community about the negative effects produced by mass tourism and the growing attention paid to the topic of sustainability led to the development of actions aimed at promoting and supporting alternative forms of tourism. This implies the adoption of a responsible behaviour both by tourists and by tourism businesses involved in travel production and distribution.

The main issue is how to encourage ethical consumption (Sharpley, Hall, & Henderson, 2012) and the spread of responsible tourism. Although

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