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Social Interactions in Rural Tourism: A Host Perspective Case Study

Shang-Pao YEH¹, Anestis K. FOTIADIS²

Abstract

This research investigation fills a gap in the literature by examining social interaction in rural tourism management from a host perspective. Furthermore it is aimed at identifying the main factors influencing social interactions in rural tourism in Greece. A structured questionnaire related to social interactions was distributed to 174 hosts in a variety of rural areas throughout Greece. Four factors related to rural tourism social interactions were identified: Local government and community cooperation, Leadership, Coordination and collaboration among tourism entrepreneurs and Cooperation with NGO's. Results indicated that the "Local government and community cooperation" factor had the highest variance level (27.61) amongst the explanatory factors on a social interactions scale for rural tourism hosts in Greece while "Cooperation with NGO's factor" had the highest average score (5.68).

Keywords: social interactions, rural tourism, hosts, Greece, rural development.

Introduction

Tourism can affect community development; it may impact local population structure, transform the forms and types of occupation, change values, influence traditional lifestyles, and modify consumption patterns (Acharya & Halpenny, 2013). That is why, policy makers try to diversify rural economies based on new sectors/products such as tourism in an effort to reorganized the quality of life in rural areas (Almeida, Correia, & Pimpão, 2013). Greece as a member of the European Union tries to diminish the gap between the heavily developed coastal areas and the underdeveloped rural areas (Andriotis, 2006, 2011). Based on

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European Union sponsorship and some private investment many rural areas which were demographically endangered have managed to grow economically and socially (Dimitrovski, Todorovic, & Valjarevic, 2012). Rural tourism can be an important vehicle for economic diversification and social regeneration (Fotiadis & Vassiliadis, 2010; Fotiadis, Vassiliadis, & Piper, 2013; HavenTang & Jones, 2012; Vassiliadis, Fotiadis, & Piper, 2013) and the economic benefit is the most important factor that affects rural residents' (Fan, Lu, & Wu, 2013). Well-developed and focused rural tourism can become a new source of money and jobs and at the same time it can eliminate social isolation and even be an important factor in internal migration for a country (Dimitrovski *et al.*, 2012; Ohe & Kurihara, 2013). As Bosworth and Atterton (2012) conclude, local business in rural areas often bring a substantial amount of money into the area which can help improve the environment and landscape through a thriving level of business activity. Engagement of women, minorities and local people in rural tourism enterprises is also important for achieving economic, environmental and social development (Harris, Wise, Gallagher, & Goodwin, 2001; Ohe & Kurihara, 2013). Community-based social entrepreneurship, inherent in small units of societies (Smith & Barr, 2007), plays a very important role in impoverished populations and rural communities by updating the infrastructure, old cultural habits and reducing gender inequalities. Apart from those reasons for local residents becoming rural tourism hosts in Greece there is the advantage of bringing European union sponsorship (Fotiadis *et al.*, 2013), specific economic benefits (Fotiadis & Vassiliadis, 2010) as well as higher social recognition (Polo Peña, Frías Jamilena, & Rodríguez Molina, 2013). Although there have been several research studies that examine rural area residents social interactions (Anthopoulou, 2010; Chen, 2011; Fan *et al.*, 2013; Giles, Bosworth, & Willett, 2013; Holladay & Powell, 2013; Vareiro, Remoaldo, & Cadima Ribeiro, 2013) there is a gap in literature related to the nature of rural host social interactions.

The main purpose of this paper is filling this gap by examining social interaction in rural tourism from the host perspective. More specifically it aims to investigate the main factors that affect social interactions in a Pan-Hellenic research. This is achieved through examining factors related to tourism leadership, local government, coordination and cooperation between individual investors and local leadership, tourism support by the local community and coordination and collaboration among tourism entrepreneurs and non-profit organizations.

This paper is organized into five sections. Section one is the introduction. Section two presents an overview of the literature related to rural tourism host social interactions Section three presents the research methodology and section four describes the results of the study. The last section gives a number of general conclusions and some specific recommendations.

Literature Review

Rural Tourism

Rural tourism is considered an alternative for peripheral development since it can contribute to employment, family income and socio-economic reformation of local rural communities (Anthopoulou, 2010; Fotiadis, 2011; Fotiadis & Vassiliadis, 2010). One of the most “acceptable” definitions is the one given by (Lane, 1994). He said that rural tourism is tourism located in rural areas i.e. areas which are rural in scale, character and function and which reflect the unique patterns of the rural environment, economy, history and location. Fotiadis (2011) redefines rural tourism by focusing on smaller subcategories such as farm tourism, village tourism, agrotourism, agritourism which develop and promote the “rurality tourism milieu” of each region through a sustainable procedure that sets out to be consistent with natural, social and community values.

In Greece, the main provision of the rural tourism product is the bed and breakfast with accommodation in traditionally furnished rooms with traditional breakfasts often based on homemade products (Fotiadis, Michalko, & Ratz, 2008; Michalko & Fotiadis, 2006).

According to the Hellenic organization for standardization (2007), rural tourism operations in Greece are enterprises that are established in rural tourism destinations in regions with a small population and limited development of tourism infrastructures. The enterprises must provide at least one of the following services: accommodation, meals, sightseeing, involvement with the natural surroundings, or environmental education.

Economic issues are the main reason the rural hosts start up their activity (Fotiadis & Vassiliadis, 2010; Fotiadis *et al.*, 2013; McGehee & Kim, 2004; Miller, Mcleod, & Oh, 2001; Nickerson, Black, & McCool, 2001). However, as Nickerson *et al.* (2001) and McGehee and Kim (2004) say, entrepreneurs become more successful when they manage to share their own rural experience with visitors and when there are opportunities to socialize.

Social Interactions in Rural Tourism

Entrepreneurs are often the first who welcome changes in the activities of rural areas as entrepreneurship provides the catalyst for increasing productivity, as well as increasing the diversity and volume of goods and services produced in an area (Acs & Armington, 2004). Brida, Osti, and Faccioli (2011) made a case study of the small rural community of Folgaria, Italy and found that residents recognized the positive economic impacts of tourism and the attendant social and cultural impacts which occur, although to a lower degree. In a study by Fan *et al.* (2013)

in China it was found that rural residents' income level continuously improves and the government has positioned the tourism industry as the key pillar of expansion to allow the rural residents' tourism market to gradually developed. In their research Acharya and Halpenny (2013), identified increased social cohesion, economic benefits and fewer leakages of income among homestay operators. Moreover it preserved cultural values with the hosts' increased commitment to preserving and providing knowledge on local customs and daily routines. Collaboration amongst different partners such as local society and different types of government was observed.

In research on rural tourism in Serbia, Dimitrovski *et al.* (2012) found that rural hosts are playing an important part in social and cultural development of rural destinations and that local government is very important for tourism development and promotion. Here they found out that a bad relationship between Serbian local government authorities and the tourism hosts in the Gruza region was creating many problems. Giles *et al.* (2013) investigated local perceptions about rural areas marketing and concluded that social factors in stakeholder interaction was highly significant as they are the connection between place marketers, local communities and target audiences. Prideaux (2009), suggests that positive leadership is needed to develop valuable collaborations and partnerships, which can provide social, cultural and/or environmental benefits for local businesses. HavenTang and Jones (2012), who examined local leadership for rural tourism in UK, showed that additional jobs were created by community-based tourism initiatives in rural areas. Even when hosts are not local residents there are social and economic interactions since externally owned tourism businesses also created economic and social benefits for locals (Rid, Ezeuduji, & Pröbstl-Haider, 2014). As Simpson (2008) mentions, this benefit is usually related to employment, improvement of social standards, improved health care and insurance, and enhanced education.

Methodology

Demographics

The survey population is all rural tourism hotel enterprises in Greece and a sample frame was obtained from websites on Agro SA and the Greek Network of Rural Accommodation. From these two rural tourism websites, considered the main ones for rural tourism in Greece, we found 652 rural tourism hotel companies. All of the companies were contacted by phone and informed that they would be invited to complete a survey electronically or by regular mail. The final response rate of 174 or 26.69% provides an adequate representation of the overall population. Table 1 lists the sample by region and response rate.

Table 1. Survey population

Area	Number of Companies	%	Companies Surveyed	%
PELOPONISUS	122	18.71%	26	14.94%
EPIRUS	98	15.03%	20	11.49%
THESSALY	90	13.80%	14	8.05%
CRETE	89	13.65%	20	11.49%
MACEDONIA	86	13.19%	42	24.14%
STEREA ELLADA	73	11.20%	28	16.09%
SOUTH AEGEAN	36	5.52%	6	3.45%
IONIAN	26	3.99%	8	4.60%
THRAKI	20	3.07%	8	4.60%
NORTH AEGEAN	12	1.84%	2	1.15%
TOTAL	652	100%	174	100%

Our questionnaire contains a total of thirty six questions and sub-questions. The questions presented in the questionnaire were divided into two different sections. The first section consists of twenty nine questions related to Social Interaction which includes topics about leadership on rural tourism, governmental and private agencies dealings with issues of rural tourism, local authorities and community support, and participation, coordination and cooperation between private investors, local government and entrepreneurs of rural tourism. All the questions had a scale with seven items from totally disagree to totally agree. The second section of the questionnaire covered demographic and operational characteristics of tourism host.

Scale reliability

The content validity of this study was a priori, built on the literature review and experts' opinions (Malhorta & Birks, 2006; McTavich, 1997). The questionnaire was sent to five (5) experts who occupied managerial positions in the rural tourism industry. According to them, the items of the questionnaire appeared to be an adequate tool to examine visitors' behavior. Cronbach's alpha statistic was used to measure the reliability of the 36 items of the questionnaire. For an acceptable internal consistency, various authors suggest an alpha value greater than .70. (Cortina, 1993; Netemeyer, Bearden, & Sharma, 2003) The Cronbach's alpha coefficient of .919 for all the items of the questionnaire is therefore acceptable with the reliability value of the items in the social interaction scale being .960.

Factor Analysis

Factor analysis was used to determine the structural relationships between statements on social interactions and host perspectives. This involved conducting KMO and Bartlett's Test of Sphericity followed by a principal axis factoring. The

analysis revealed many coefficients of 0.3 and above in the correlation matrix with a statistical significance for the Bartlett's Test of Sphericity of less than 0.000, which supports the factorability of the correlation matrix (Bartlett, 1954). Furthermore, the Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin value of 0.949 for social interaction scale exceeded the recommended value of 0.6 by a wide margin, which supports the appropriateness of the constructs used in the questionnaire (Kaiser, 1970, 1974).

Following the Kaiser rule of eigenvalues ≥ 1 , a four-factor solution was generated for the social interaction scale after varimax rotation which accounted for 65.82% of the total explained variance. When a solution counts for more than 50% of the total variance it is regarded acceptable (Hair, Black, Babin, Anderson, & Tatham, 2006; Zhang, Ma, & Qu, 2012). The first factor for the social interaction scale consisted of six items which was labeled "Local government and community interactions" as it included issues about: local government development and promotion, local government construction and maintenance of infrastructure, local government support, local support on tourism, local believe on tourism impacts and elders residents support. For this factor, 27.61% of the total variance was explained. The second factor, with six items, was named "Leadership Interaction" as it is related to local leadership assistant and collaboration, local leadership needs, local leadership acceptance of collaboration, state promotion of rural tourism, skillful person to manage resources are important and collaboration to deal with shortages and problems. For this factor, 19.16% of the total variance was explained. The third factor consisted of three items and it was named "Tourism entrepreneurs interactions" as it is connected to cooperation between entrepreneurs is important for success, variety of cooperation is important for success, and it should be a net between the regional entrepreneurs. For this factor, 10.92% of the total variance was explained. The final factor explained 8.13% of the total variance is called "NGO's Interactions" and it consists of four items associated with NGO's cooperation to establish more flexible shifts for visitors, NGO's cooperation in order to improve the visiting sites, NGO's cooperation team for organization of special events and NGO's cooperation team for business financing and promotion (Table 2). All items were extracted with a factor loading higher than 0.5 (Kayat & Hai, 2013; Kim, 2013; Stevens, 1996). Based on these factor analysis results, twelve attributes which had low factor loadings were eliminated. As we can see from Table 2 the "Local government and community cooperation factor", had the highest variance level (27.61) for the explanatory factors pertaining to the social interactions scale of rural tourism host in Greece. The "Cooperation with NGO's" factor has the highest mean score (5.68) while "Leadership" factor (5.28) has the lowest.

Table 2. Factor Analysis Results – Factor loadings, Variance explained, Cronbach alpha and Mean scores

Factor	Factor loading	Eigenvalue	Variance explained	Cronbach α	Mean
Factor 1: Local government and community cooperation		4.54	27.61	0.86	5.53
Local government aims at the development and promotion of tourism	.757				5.70
Local government aims at the construction and maintenance of infrastructure related to tourism	.747				5.67
The local government supports us through financial capitals for the creation of tourist brochures, through actions which ensure normal road traffic and supports us by improving the landscapes of the geographic region	.689				5.61
The locals believe in tourism and they support it new employment opportunities are formed on the local level	.662				5.45
The locals and the community perceive tourism as a factor of changes which results in the increase of population during the tourist period, with negative impacts such as changes in the values and the traditions as well as the increase on crimes in the region	.590				5.28
The elder residents support the development of tourism in their region	.567				5.39
Factor 2: Leadership		3.15	19.16	0.78	5.28
The local leadership provides assistance and collaboration	.813				5.74
The local leadership identifies the needs of the individual professionals entrepreneurs-investors	.802				5.04
The local leadership accepts the fact that tourism depends on the collaboration between the individuals and the local organizations	.765				5.07
The activation of the State for the promotion of the Greek destinations cannot be successful without the support by the businesses	.714				5.22
We have skillful persons who manage well the available resources and they ensure the right management of the financial capitals and the resources from financing	.611				5.60
Our members have learned to collaborate in order to deal with the shortages and the problems that occur each time	.592				5.77

Factor 3: Coordination and collaboration among tourism		1.84	10.92	0.71	5.54
The success of the tourist development in our region results from the existence of time available and the will of the entrepreneurs for developing cooperation's	.891				5.11
Our success results from the variety of enterprises which collaborate among themselves, e.g. shops, restaurants and sights	.772				6.08
There are nets of communication, collaboration and coordination among the retail traders of the region	.757				5.40
Factor 4: Cooperation with NGO's		1.40	8.13	0.51	5.68
NGO's coordinate in order to establish more flexible shifts for the visitors of the region e.g. open markets on Sundays, during the holidays etc.	.777				5.12
NGO's coordinate in order to improve the visiting sites e.g painting buildings	.748				5.61
NGO's have a coordination team for the organization of special events	.581				6.27
NGO's have a team for business financing and promotion	.561				5.78

Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin = .960

As shown in Table 2 rural tourism hosts have a positive impression related to the social interactions in their area for every factor we examine. The best type of cooperation according to them is the cooperation with NGO's. In "Cooperation with NGO's" factor we can see that hosts believe that NGO's most important cooperation is related to "cooperation for a special event" (6.27), "cooperation for business financing and promotion" (5.78), "improving visiting sites" (5.61), and "establish more flexible shifts for visitors in the area" (5.12). "Coordination and collaboration among tourism entrepreneurs" factor has the second highest average. Here the rural tourism hosts believe that their success results from the "variety of enterprises which collaborate among themselves, e.g. shops, restaurants and sights" (6.08), that "there are nets of communication, collaboration and coordination among the retail traders of the region (5.40) and that mainly the success of the tourist development in their region results from the existence of "time available and the will of the entrepreneurs for developing cooperation's" (5.11). "Local government and community cooperation" (5.53) is the third more important factor for the hosts. They believe that "local government aims at the development and promotion of tourism" (5.70), "aims at the construction and maintenance of infrastructure related to tourism" (5.67), and "supports them through financial capital" (5.61). In addition they believe that their "social interactions with local residents is very good since locals believe in tourism and they support it because occupation posts are formed on the local level" (5.45), moreover the elder residents seem to support the development of tourism in their region (5.39) and the community perceive tourism as a factor of changes which results in the increase

of population during the tourist period, with negative impacts such as changes in the values and the traditions as well as the increase on crimes in the region (5.28).

The final factor is to do with “leadership” which has an average of 5.28. It is a factor the focuses on the need for both local and government leadership to help facilitate social interaction amongst the various hotel owners and the local community of supplies of goods and services. Although they tend to believe this is done well the involvement of government is needed to maintain the social interactions created.

Discussion and Conclusion

This study analyzed the social interaction of rural tourism hosts in Greece in order to examine the main factors that affect social interactions in a Pan-Hellenic research in establishments and operation of locally based tourism suppliers in rural Greece. Social interaction is considered as one of the most important aspects of the rural tourism experience (Kastenholz, Carneiro, Eusébio, & Figueiredo, 2013) since visitors and local community are interacting with the hosts. The main contribution of this study is to add a new perspective to the literature on rural tourism since most of the studies focus on the effects of tourism on local residents or on tourist interactions with the local people and places they meet or visit. It focuses on the tourism host’s opinion about social interactions between the key stakeholders in local government and local businesses since very little has been published on this perspective. Many previous studies from an empirical basis also tend to emphasize the specific characteristics of the case setting (Yang, Ryan, & Zhang, 2013). In this study the country as a whole is examined and not just a specific geographic area. Since this study is Pan-Hellenic it permits a good degree of generalization to be possible.

According to the factor analysis of attitudes pertaining to social interactions in rural tourism, there were four characteristics that explain the concept of social interaction for rural tourism hosts: 1) Local government and community cooperation 2) Leadership 3) Coordination and collaboration among tourism entrepreneurs 4) Cooperation with NGO’s. The “Local government and community cooperation factor” was the strongest in explaining the range of attitudes about rural tourism social interactions between the hosts and other stakeholders. Our results agree with HavenTang and Jones (2012) findings which suggest that effective rural tourism development is reliant on sharing and communication of leadership skills between rural tourism’s different stakeholders. Rural tourism hosts in Greece believe that they have the necessary leadership skills which are why they can cooperate well and can deal with problems such as shortages of resources and can guarantee the efficient management of financial capital. As many researchers have noted (Acharya & Halpenny, 2013; Brida *et al.*, 2011; Fan

et al., 2013) rural communities are familiar with the positive impacts of rural tourism development and see it in their interest to have good social interactions with the rural tourism hosts. As the results also indicate rural tourism hosts believe that their social interactions with local community are ideal with strong levels of community support because of employment opportunities, development of their region and because it is a change factor which results in an increase in population. Additionally, the rural tourism hosts have a strong faith in local government since its aims are virtually identical to theirs, as shown by the development and promotion of tourism, the construction and maintenance of infrastructure and support through financial capital and investment.

Hosts judge NGO's as an important partner in social interaction as they can help in rural tourism development since they cooperate well when they organize a special event, organize business financing and promotion, improve visiting sites and establish flexible shifts for visitors in the area. Rural tourism hosts also cooperate with other entrepreneurs to buy products or services and that is why they consider that social interaction among rural tourism entrepreneurs is a very important factor. They rely on a variety of enterprises e.g. shops, restaurants and sites to co-operate and collaborate among themselves to provide a better tourism product. They also believe that it is important to create a strong communications net for social interaction between various retail traders, produce suppliers and support services of the region where their combined success will rely on the entrepreneurs' commitment to developing a high level of mutual cooperation.

Social interactions have been shown to be very important for rural tourism communities where they desire to improve their economic conditions and adopt tourism development (Park & Stokowski, 2009). Though the needs of the community members should be the main factor for successful development it is through social interaction that the community members will assure a high level of rural tourism development acceptance. Local residents' affect the experience of rural tourists (Choo & Petrick, 2014), since "rurality" is part of the rural tourism product (Fotiadis *et al.*, 2008; Fotiadis *et al.*, 2013).

Finally there remains a lack of a more comprehensive analysis of host perspectives of social interactions in rural tourism. One future direction for this topic is to research social interaction on rural tourism development in a multi-ethnic environment and to compare this study with those in other countries. This will encourage an expansion and advancement of the proposed system of analysis. Optimistically, this study will attract awareness from scholars and researchers of social interactions in rural tourism and more will contribute to this field.

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