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Tourism as an innovation and its diffusion among rural destinations

− A Case study in Tsurui Village -

（イノベーションとしての観光と農村地域への普及：鶴居村の事例）

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1. Background

Technology and globalization enhance global interactions but rural areas are still behind, lacking easy access to the benefits experienced by big cities (Chambers, 2014). Rural development struggles compared to urban areas in both developing and developed countries (Ellis, 1999). Which has increased the interest in rural development in recent decades (McGehee & Kim, 2004).

Tourism is viewed as a tool for rural-urban development balance (Briedenhann & Wickens, 2004). Growing interest in rural tourism entrepreneurship aims to diversify work, leverage existing experience, and enhance product positioning (McGehee, Kim, & Jennings, 2007). However, despite the known benefits, challenges persist in equally distributing positive impacts (Viljoen & Tlabela, 2007). Tourism, while creating job opportunities and foreign exchange earnings, also brings negative consequences economically, socially, and environmentally (Martín, Martínez, & Fernández, 2018). Thus, community involvement in tourism development, especially with Community Based Tourism, is crucial for sustainable outcomes (Jafari, 2003).

Perceptions of tourism in local communities vary, with some plans perceived as outsiders' attempts to boost tourism rather than focusing on destination development (Ashley, Goodwin, & Boyd, 2000). Residents' views on tourism are divided, influenced by its impacts on the community (Alvarez, Inelmen, & Yarcan, 2009). In addition, individual experiences shape perceptions, making it essential to understand residents' varying levels of attachment or aversion to tourism (Šegota, Mihalič, & Kuščer, 2017). A shift in the tourism development narrative is needed, emphasizing improving residents' quality of life rather than merely attracting tourists (Nunkoo, Smith, & Ramkissoon, 2013).

Amongst the evolving tourism landscape, defining different concepts remains a challenge, even for experts. Thus, it makes sense that residents find it more challenging to distinguish between various types of tourism (Andereck & Vogt, 2000). Thus, research on residents' perception of tourism must focus on specific tourism types. In addition, even though there's understanding of tourism impacts on perceptions, there's still a gap in comprehending how these perceptions are formed, their specificity, and their influence on residents' behavior within tourism dynamics.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Rural Areas and Tourism

Living in an era where some areas lack easy access to basic services, rural disadvantages are evident in limited healthcare, education, and job opportunities (Deavers, 1992). Three key characteristics differentiate rural from urban: small-scale settlement, distance from large urban centers, and specialized economies (Deavers, 1992). Moreover, both developing and developed countries face challenges in rural development (Zhang & Shunfeng, 2003), with issues like rural decay in the United States and the emergence of

"Rurban" Villages in Japan (Sawa, 1988). Tourism is a relied-upon strategy to bridge the rural-urban development gap, creating jobs and increasing foreign exchange earnings (Wilson, Fesenmaier, Fesenmaier, & Van Es, 2001). However, tourism's blind spots, particularly the lack of awareness about its consequences on destinations, lead to undesirable effects on local communities (Carroll-Brentnall, 2014). The challenges extend to tourism innovations and entrepreneurship in small destinations, resulting in the loss of investment (Jafari, 2003). It was only in the 1980s, with the recognition of tourism's impact on destinations, that community involvement became integral to the development process, prompting discussions among scholars and practitioners for strategic planning (Jafari, 2003).

2.2 Diffusion of Innovation Theory (DOI)

DOI has a long history and has been utilized in many different fields. The most acknowledged researcher is Everett Rogers, as he has been responsible for the most significant findings and the most persuasive theories related to DOI (Surry, 1997). With its relatively long history of usage, it has been applied to both quantitative and qualitative approaches because of the richness it can offer with its elements usable for different areas of investigations (Dibra, 2015). Consequently, it is common for many studies to focus on a specific part of this theory, thus showing the flexibility and conveniences that DOI has to offer. Even though DOI theory has several elements, frameworks, and topics covered by Rogers (2003) and other DOI researchers, in this review only the themes that are most relevant to this study will be covered.

DOI theory starts by presenting what diffusion stands for on the theory. Diffusion is a distinct kind of communication (Rogers, 2003), which is related to the process that appears through the mixture of three elements: information, its statement, and the selected understanding or misunderstanding resulting from the previous two (Luhmann, 1992). In other words, diffusion is a type of communication process which involves a selection of information, new ideas, and the ways in which this information is passed on with the goal of reaching an understanding, even if that doesn't always happen.

The individuals who are exposed to the new idea will eventually seek for some kind of information about it, to decrease uncertainty, even if it turns into a reason for rejecting it. Therefore, diffusion can be defined as “the process by which an innovation is communicated through certain channels over time among the members of a social system” (Rogers, 2003, p. 11). Which at the same time are the four main elements of the theory: Innovation, Communication Channels, Time and Social system. As a differentiating element between DOI and other behavioral change theories, the ***Time*** element has relationship in the behavioral change created by the innovation diffusion process because of three main elements that are related to it: (a) the innovativeness and adopter categories, (b) the rate of adoption and (c) the innovation-decision process (Rogers, 2003).

Moreover, out of the four elements of DOI theory namely Innovation, Communication Channels, Time and Social System, Time and especially time's innovation-decision process is the least used element in most fields (eg.,Tanye, 2016; Yap & Chen, 2017; Zhou, 2008). Even though a significant component that differentiates DOI from other behavioral change theories is Time (Rogers, 2003), most studies focus on the other three elements. Thus, the part of the theory that can help understand the individual behavioral change process that the innovation generates on the people that are exposed to it, has still room to cover and studies to clarify the behavioral change in individuals rather than only focusing on the change of the social system. The innovation-decision process is able to follow such behavioral change because it focuses on the different levels of involvement and processing that individuals pass through when encountering an innovation. These levels or stages are:

(1) Knowledge stage: For the innovation to be diffused, the possible adopters need to acquire knowledge regarding the innovation (Masri et al., 2018).

(2) Persuasion stage: In this stage the individual gains interest about the innovation and seeks supplementary information (Kaminski, 2011). It presents a new level of individuals behavior it is related to the behavior which allows one to connect on a deeper level with the innovation.

(3) Decision stage: Is the stage when a decision-making unit is involved in activities that lead to the adoption or rejection of an innovation. A decision making process is characterized by uncertainty or by the decision-making unit's preference (Pitz & Sachs, 1984).

(4) Implementation stage: This stage occurs when the innovation is put to use by the individual or a decision-making unit (Rogers, 2003).

(5) Confirmation stage: the individual looks to avoid experiencing discomfort created by the innovation and its usage, or, creating a new behavior that aligns with the innovations' adoption (Rogers, 2003).

2.3 Diffusion of Innovation Theory in Tourism

The Diffusion of Innovation theory in tourism research usually exhibits a pro-innovation bias (Rogers, 2003), emphasizing its spread among tourism enterprises and tourists, with limited focus on residents and local communities. Existing studies predominantly center on managerial and marketing aspects within the tourism industry, exploring technology adoption and marketing strategies (Migiro & Ocholla, 2005; Raymond, 2001; Smerecnik & Andersen, 2011; Walle, 1996). Fewer studies examine technology adoption among tourists for tourism consumption (Yap & Chen, 2017), and even fewer delve into various forms of tourism as innovations for host communities (Dabphet, Scott, & Ruhanen, 2012). Consequently, the diffusion of innovation among tourism enterprises and tourists has been extensively covered compared to its exploration among local communities and residents.

Furthermore, the element of Time is often overlooked in diffusion of innovation studies in tourism, with a focus on community-wide approaches rather than individual adoption timelines. Adopter categories based on innovativeness are commonly used but fall short in assessing the level of adoption among different groups (Fichman & Kemerer, 1999).

While useful in marketing, these categories only capture the initial purchase and fail to track adoption and maintenance over time. There is a need for a tool that goes beyond innovativeness categorization to assess adoption levels and long-term usage.

2.4 Purpose of the study

This research aimed to consider the Diffusion of Innovation's innovation-decision process regarding tourism innovation in a local community in a rural area. Mainly, it develops and theorizes the author's Level of Adoption Classification (LOAC) as a tool that can assist in the classification and identification of residents' adoption levels and maintenance of a tourism innovation. This dissertation applies the Diffusion of Innovation theory to track down the perception change of residents in Tsurui Village, Hokkaido, Japan. To do so, the residents of the case study are cataloged using the LOAC based on their proximity to a tourism innovation in the village. Then, these groups are used as a sample to determine their perception change using the innovation-decision process adapted from the Diffusion of Innovation theory. Later, the perception change shown through the innovation-decision process from each LOAC group is compared. The comparison aims to highlight the differences and similarities of the perception change process. Then, resident clusters are made based on each stage of perception change they fit into. Lastly, profiles for each LOAC group based on their behavioral patterns (related to tourism innovation and tourism) were theorized.

Research question

How does the diffusion of a tourism-related innovation change residents' perception of tourism?

3. Case Study and Methodology

3.1 Case Study: Tsurui Village

This research focuses on Tsurui village in Aka-gun, Hokkaido, Japan. It forms part of the three wild fields of Yukito, Hororo, and Kusaro that run along the Akan caldera outer ring mountain. The village has been working with a migration promotion project from the Honshu area, it has been developed, so the wealthy are particularly migrating ("Most beautiful villages in Japan," 2019). Dairy farming, a key industry in Tsurui Village, is currently undergoing large-scale management and clean-up of the livestock environment through incorporation. It has received numerous awards for milk quality (Tsurui Village Homepage, 2019a). Because of its convenient location, it is well connected to the airport and other tourism attractions from Kushiro, as is the case of Akan Lake, about a 45 minute drive, and about 20 minutes from Kushiro Shitsugen (wetland) National Park (Tsurui Village Homepage, 2019b). Moreover, it also has its own tourist attractions that are gaining interest not only in Japan, but internationally. The most recognized are wetland

animals and plants sightseeing and the red-crowned cranes sightseeing (Tsurui-Tourism, 2019).

Because of this, it is considered a developing tourism destination already with a guaranteed stable income from tourism (Kushiro General Promotion Bureau, 2019). Tsurui village, according to the characteristics described for each of The Tourism Area Life Cycle (Butler, 2006), is between the involvement and development stage as a tourist destination, which allows studying the process of its development. Because of the small amount of research done on rural areas with these kinds of characteristics in Japan, it is worthwhile explore Tsurui village as case-study. Moreover, it presents the advantage of owning a significant acceptance level of an innovation related to tourism services and products.

The innovation: Heart'n Tree

This research situates Heart'n Tree (H'nT), an over 20-years-old entrepreneurship established by the married couple Sachiko Hattori and Masato Hattori as innovation in the case of Tsurui village. It opened originally as a farm-restaurant in 1999. One year after, the owners additionally started running a cottage. Later on, they developed the enterprises by adding a cheese workshop in 2013, and an experience and accommodation studio in 2014. In 2021, the restaurant added a weekly wine tasting event that attracts customers from the surrounded areas.

Their experience plan offers classes like bread making, cooking class, herb salt preparation, string cheese making. Moreover, a guiding service is also offered. From 4 to 10 hours course with an average price of 20,000 yen per person. The guides include different touristic sites in and around Tsurui and early morning visit to the red-crown sanctuary and Ito bridge.

Through all of the services they provide, it has been able to position itself as a link between the visitors, tourism industry, and the community, accomplishing it specially through its innovative restaurant. The farm-restaurant offers fusion cuisine and slow cuisine using local products, and the service is usually provided by foreigners working as Willing Workers on Organic Farms (WWOOF) offering an innovative environment that both inbound and domestic tourists and residents can enjoy, giving them the opportunity to experience different cultures while remaining on their village or home country.

The innovation has been promoted by the media as well, with local and national TV programs, and various articles in local and national magazines and newspapers. With an special appearance on Japan Airlines Skyward magazine (Shinagawa, 2019, pp. 84-85). H'nT owners are Mr. and Mrs. Hattori, both have made efforts to promote Tsurui village and Heart'n Tree throughout the years. One of their latest achievements was the opening of a Public Relationship office of Heart'n Tree in Taipei, Taiwan which works as a bridge for tourists not only for Heart'n Tree, but also for Tsurui village.

3.2 Methodology

To answer the research questions, there is a need to consider what "perception" is since, depending on people, it will be subjective. Not everybody has the exact same perception of reality (Guest, MacQueen, & Namey, 2011). Therefore, to focus on the perceptions the subjects have about tourism and the innovation, the interpretive paradigm was chosen. This paradigm gives the flexibility to understand that each participant, including the researcher, has a different perception of the reality. In addition, it helps create a framework that can contribute on the understanding of the perceptions found among the subjects. Furthermore, because the majority of local communities' related studies are atheoretical and most published articles are quantitative (Nunkoo et al., 2013), additional insights can be obtained using qualitative methods such as interviews. Moreover, mixed methods research can be helpful to determine underlying explanations of results (Andereck & Vogt, 2000). Therefore, mixed-methods research was carried out because the quantitative data helped identify people for the researcher's tool-in-development LOAC. The initial basic information regarding subjects' experience with tourism and their relationship with the innovation. The qualitative data was used to gather deeper, more specific information about the subjects' perceptions and behavioral patterns.

At the same time, because of the nature of this study, flexibility was needed for the analysis of the cross-language aspect, the interpretation, and comparison of the data. Thus, Thematic Analysis was selected because of its coding flexibility, thematic relationship approach, and capacity for qualitative and quantitative data analysis, and it has been used for cross-language research, studies with the interpretive paradigm, and mixed methods research as well (Ellis & Biggs, 2001; Guest et al., 2011). Moreover, to understand better the data gathered from the three methods (participatory observation, survey and interviews) an integrative multi-methods was applied (Seawright, 2016).

For the majority of the study an etic approach was taken to categorize and creat clear boundaries and definitions of the appearing themes. The emic approach was not used, since the focus was not on investigating cultural and socioeconomic tied variables that might have had an impact on the phenomenon.

3.3 Methods, instruments to collect data

Due to Covid-19, social distance restrictions, and the overall comfort of the residents, quantitative was gathered through self-administrated questionnaires, residents could choose between printed questionnaire that could be filled and send to me with an envelope provided or a web version of the same questionnaire accessible through QR code (96 questionnaires were received). The questionnaires asked subjects' basic demographics, past experience with tourism, and their relationship with the innovation. The questionnaire was designed in a way that helped the researcher identify the Early Rejectors, Supporters,

Acceptors, and Adopters from the LOAC group (asking for their motive of visits and number of visits), as well as the basic information regarding subjects' innovation-decision process. In addition, a section to ask for consent to participate in the next stage of the research (the interviews), was asked to the subjects and for the contact information they could provide. After contacting different representatives from each LOAC group, only 6 accepted to continue with the semi structured interviews stage.

4. Discussion

Early Rejectors and Acceptors

In this case, both groups do not show similar patterns but show the same pattern. Their awareness about Tsurui village being a tourism destination by choice is higher than what they see to have been done to make it into a tourism destination. However, when reviewing the themes regarding the benefits that H'nTree brings to the village through tourism, their awareness shifts from thinking about what makes them reliable by chance, and they show an increased level of awareness about the role that H'nT plays for the village to become a tourism destination by choice.

Supporters

This group follows the same pattern as the Early Rejectors and Acceptors, however, they follow it on a different scale since their awareness from both sides of the pre- and post-innovation-decision process are higher than the past groups. Furthermore, the level of change they present from the pre-assimilation stage is higher, showing their preference for knowledge that accepts Tsurui village to be a tourism destination by chance rather than by choice, since the initial "by chance" pre-assimilation stage is still higher compared to the "by choice" stance in the post-assimilation stage.

Adopters

Even though this group showed different levels of awareness regarding the innovation throughout the innovation-decision process, the final result was the same when comparing their initial stage of preference and awareness of Tsurui village as a tourism destination. What is interesting about this seeming "lack of change" might be the high awareness they show to have about the village being a tourism destination by choice. The pattern shown in the Adopters might be that they believe in the village having the opportunity to improve through tourism and the improvements being done by choice from different entities in and outside the village to make it a tourism destination. In addition, the role of the innovation in their appreciation of tourism has a higher effect on their expectations about the village as a tourism destination. Thus, they see the innovation's incentive at the same level as they see the innovation's good qualities that do not strongly impact tourism development, even if they benefit the community.

The change in tourism perception among the LOAC groups can be seen because their interest in the improvement that H'nT can do for the village and tourism development

increased after the innovation-decision process in three of the groups, the Early Rejectors, the Supporters and the Acceptors. However, on the side of the Adopters, the innovation-decision process helped to increase their already high awareness and witness what they perceive from both sides, tourism and the innovation. Nevertheless, since their awareness, participation and preference for tourism were already high from the beginning, the innovation-decision process didn't affect them as much as it did for the other groups.

5. Conclusions

Research sub-question 1:

What perception change patterns exist in the LOAC groups regarding the innovation?

The pattern in the perception and behavioral change, among all the LOAC groups, regarding the innovation showed that their awareness of the case study as a mere entrepreneurship decreased almost steadily throughout the process. Their awareness of it as an innovation increased, reaching the highest peak when pondering its role as an innovation, and then it stabilized in a more balanced level of awareness regarding its impacts or significance for the village.

7.8 Research sub-question 2:

How do the LOAC groups' perception change patterns regarding the innovation relate to their perception change of tourism?

The change in tourism perception among the LOAC groups can be seen, as their interest in the improvement that the innovation can do for the village increased after passing through the innovation-decision process. Especially for the Early Rejectors, Supporters and Acceptors, their perception of the village as a tourist destination became more balanced, with a stronger awareness of its competitive advantages as a tourism destination instead of only being aware of the comparative advantages. However, on the side of the Adopters, whose awareness of tourism was already high, the innovation-decision process did not affect them considerably.

7.9 Research sub-question 3:

How do the perception change patterns of the LOAC groups differ and resemble each other?

Based on the interviews, the observations and the conceptual framework of adapting the innovation-decision process, a small profile of each LOAC group was drawn. This was done to help understand how the perception change patterns of the groups differ and resemble each other. Only the most prominent aspects of the profile were presented in the thesis as the characteristics that stood out from each LOAC group.