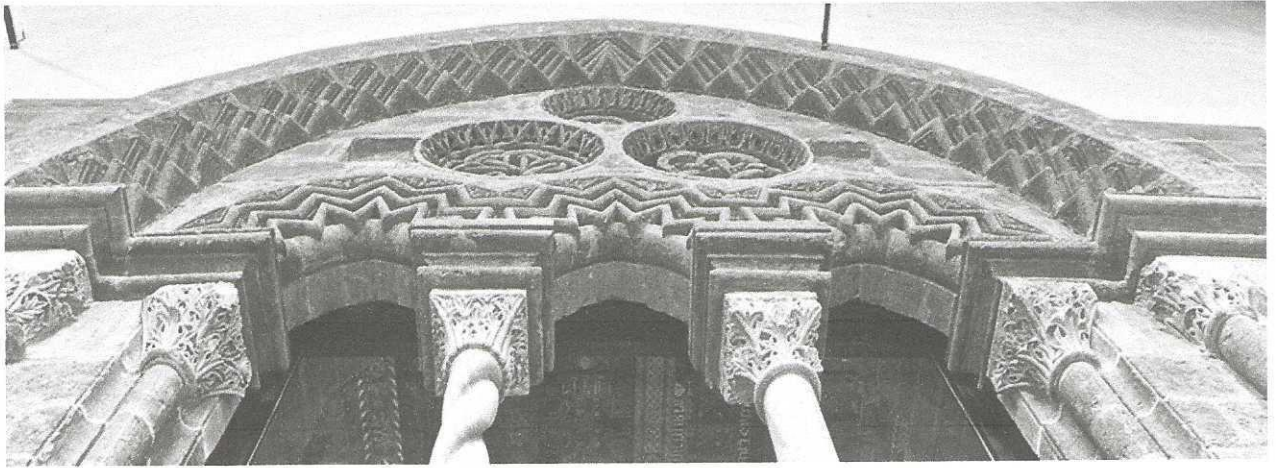


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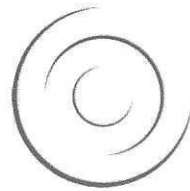
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Humanistic education: an analysis of students' attitudes towards sustainable ski tourism

ANNA IRIMIÁS* SERENA VOLO*

Objectives. *The complex issues related to sustainable tourism challenge the way tourism businesses and destinations operate (Ioannides and Gyimóthy, 2020), but also the way higher education in tourism is conceived in most cultural and geographical environments (Wilson and von der Heidt, 2013). Teaching, and thus learning, about sustainability is nowadays part of most tourism courses, a must for many universities and institutions (Boyle et al., 2015). Traditionally, the triple bottom line (environmental, economic, social) approach to sustainable development has been at the core of such curricula. However, this approach has been increasingly criticized for its narrow focus on continued growth and progress (see e.g. Sheldon et al. 2008; Scott, 2011). To enrich the vision of tourism educators and the perspective of students, different approaches can be considered. In this line Springett (2010) argued that social responsibility should be at the center of the debate on sustainable tourism education. Hence, tourism scholars have integrated the triple bottom line approach with concepts of responsible tourism, societal ethics, and values in the framework of the Tourism Education Futures Initiative (TEFI) (see e.g. Sheldon et al. 2008). Furthermore, Thomas and Day (2014) claimed that sustainability skills -understanding environmental sustainability, understanding social and ethical issues, skills in cooperation and participatory approaches among others- should be incorporated into the competences to develop in undergraduate courses. The need to educate the future generations of tourism and hospitality managers, leaders and stakeholders has permeated the last two decades of research in sustainability and education in our field.*

This paper seeks to contribute to the debate on tourism education and sustainability by introducing the concept of humanistic tourism education in the field of Alpine tourism. The aim of this study is threefold: (1) explore younger generations' understanding of tourists' responsibilities with respect to preserving ski-destinations; (2) identify the actors in charge of promoting responsible behavior at the destination and in the wider context of skiing; and (3) contribute to theoretical development of humanistic tourism education. Based on qualitative data collected with a cross-cultural sample of undergraduate students, the study attempts to answer the following research questions:

RQ_1: What kind of "social responsibilities in the area of sustainability" do younger generations attribute to ski-tourists?

RQ_2: What is -in the mind of the young generation- the role of influential figures (e.g.: ski champions, instructors) in stimulating ski-tourists to behave responsibly?

RQ_3: What aspects of humanistic education in tourism can be successful across different cultures?

Theoretical background

Tourists' social responsibilities

The role that a single tourist plays in sustainable tourism development has often been overlooked in tourism education research. At business level, much attention has been given to corporate social responsibilities (Garay and Font, 2013) but less to individual responsibilities (Fennell, 2017). Tourists' social responsibility refers to the behavior, which is respectful towards the host destination built, cultural and natural environment. Thus, it is without doubt that tourists are central stakeholders in winter sport tourism (Steiger, 2011). Prior research show that tourist interpretation of their own responsibilities varies according to their cultural background and based on the value they attribute to responsibility in self-identity formation (Caruana et al., 2014). In more, it has been evidenced that while tourists engage in sustainable and responsible behavior at home, on holiday they behave hedonistically with limited attention on sustainability issues (Juvan and Dolnicar, 2014). One of the reasons of the attitude-behavior gap in sustainable tourism in winter tourism is that tourists have limited knowledge on how winter tourism products are developed and at what cost. Stanford (2008) highlighted that tourists in some context might be receptive to take responsibility since they also expect tourism businesses to operate in a sustainable and responsible way. It has been observed that during spectator sport events tourists behave more responsibly in the place situated context which is central to the sport event (Higham and Hinch, 2018). This might explain why influential figures such as sport champions and instructors in different winters sport disciplines play a role in stimulating tourists to behave in a more responsible way. Winter sport events

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can be highly emotional and transformative for sport tourists and since the sport events are linked to the place, the event-hosting places turn to be meaningful for tourists (Higham and Hinch, 2018). Thus, many interesting opportunities can be found to foster the sustainability culture among tourists interested in winter sports.

Humanistic tourism education

The growing interest in sustainability education is associated with the awareness of the need to be proactive in sustainable development (Allen et al., 2017). Such proactivity lies at the base of value-driven humanistic tourism education. Humanistic education recognizes and valorizes people as core elements in building sustainable tourism (Della Lucia et al., 2021). Pirson (2017:237) argued that managerial education needs to be more human centered with issues related to 'values, character, trust, empathy and mindfulness'. Social and environmental responsibility are among the key concepts to lead humanistic tourism education. The paradigm of humanistic tourism management is based the following principles: respect for human dignity; ethical work, strategies and treatment of tourists; engagement with stakeholders on a real purpose (Owsianowska, 2020). Fennell (2017) urged practitioners to embrace ethics in tourism management and called for a more ethical tourism education with a focus on care and preserve rather than consume and compete. Guidici et al. (2011) explored the importance of social commitment in management focusing on the role universities should play in nurturing and diffusing such values by designing appropriate training sessions and courses. Putting emphasis on values of ethics (Wals and Blewitt, 2010), tourism management education provides graduate students with transformative learning experiences (Irimiás et al., 2021), responsibility in decision making and knowledge in social responsibility processes. Conclusively, recent research points out to different pathways to embed the sustainability values into education and considers the potential of humanistic education to innovate the current tourism management context (Della Lucia and Giudici, 2021).

Sustainable winter sport tourism

The experiential value of winter sport tourism is largely dependent upon the landscape where it is performed: a combination of scenery, climate and weather. From a geographical perspective, 'the environment is the totality of tourism activity, incorporating natural elements and society's modification of the landscape and resources' (Mitchell & Murphy, 1991:59). Thus, in consideration of such approach sustainable ski tourism is a contested concept. Winter sports such as skiing are intrinsically linked to certain types of landscape and natural environment and at the same time contemporary ski tourism heavily exploits nature and landscape. The experiential value of the mountain environment forms an important part of ski tourists' experiences. In fact, as Higham and Hinch (2018) highlighted outdoor sports are dependent on the integration of a physical activity with specific environmental attributes. However, skiing is built around specific features of the natural environment as sources of pleasure, challenge, competition. Indeed, human intervention in the tourism ski industry is massive and not always sustainable from an environmental point of view. The literature certainly points out to the vulnerability of winter sport destinations and attributes it to the changing weather patterns associated with climate change and the behavioral adaptation of sport tourists (Cocolas et al., 2016). However, sustainability can be analyzed from different perspectives. Little is known in our scholarly field about the potential that tourism and hospitality managers, leaders and stakeholders of winter tourism can have in educating tourists towards sustainable behaviors at ski tourism destinations.

Methodology. Alto Adige South Tyrol was selected a destination setting for the purpose of this research. The selection is justified by the fact that winter tourism is a relevant income source in the region and sustainable tourism is considered a priority by tourism planners, marketers and businesses working at the destination. In Alto Adige South Tyrol nature-based winter sport tourism is promoted by the destination marketing organization (DMO) on the website as 'environmentally friendly tourism' (www.visitsouthtyrol.com). For this exploratory research, a qualitative method was deemed useful to investigate the topic of humanistic tourism education in the context of ski tourism. Undergraduate students in two tourism courses were involved in the research data collection which consisted of two focus groups. A cross-cultural convenience sampling frame consists of students (n=10) enrolled at two universities: five students from the University of Trento and five students from the Corvinus University of Budapest were recruited. All students involved in the research had prior ski-tourism experiences in the studied area. Data collection was carried out between February and March 2021, in two videoconferences organized on Microsoft Teams. The reason to choose this online data gathering method was the mobility restriction imposed by the Covid-19 pandemic at the time of data collection. Qualitative data was gathered with two focus group discussions allowing to obtain rich data and insights. To organize the focus group sessions the traditional guideline by Morgan (1996) was followed, the English language was used during data collection. After an introductory phase, the researcher guided the discussion around the main topics of the research (a) the overall sustainability of ski tourism destinations; (b) tourists' responsibilities with respect to preserving ski-destinations and particularly younger generations "social responsibilities in the area of sustainability" at skiing destinations (c) the role of the different actors in charge of promoting responsible behavior at the destination and in the wider context of skiing; (d) possible role of influential figures (e.g.: ski champions, instructors) in stimulating ski-tourists to behave responsibly. In order to facilitate the discussion among participants three different situations related to sustainable winter tourism were also presented by the focus group moderator. All situations involved skiing, tourists, stakeholders and influential figures. Students were asked to reflect on the different situations and to discuss their ideas with other participants regarding responsibilities, values, and approaches to foster sustainability. A discussion of potential cross-cultural differences between the two groups was also facilitated, and the focus on the

potential of humanistic education in tourism was kept along the discussion with occasional interventions of the researcher.

Findings. This research is explorative in nature. The first phase of the focus group session was designed to introduce students to the topic and discuss the characteristics of the destination with respect to ski tourism.

The discussion rotated around the research themes in a smooth manner and students touched upon several relevant points. In discussing the topic of overall sustainability of ski tourism destinations, participants addressed several issues taking into account different stakeholders' point of views. Students reflected on the ethical issues regarding tourism management decision making processes. Discussing such issues in a cross-cultural context contributed to recognize and appreciate different understanding of social responsibility and allowed reflection on one's own habits and behavior, thus individual responsibility as well. Acknowledging that tourists are key stakeholders in winter tourism, participants discussed the need and possibility of a more active engagement of tourists in social and environmental sustainability issues. Such proactivity highlights young adults' responsibilities with respect to preserving ski-destinations, especially considering the role of younger generations in being in charge for and caring about skiing destinations. Participants of the focus groups identified different actors as influential figures in promoting responsible behavior at the destination. Students addressed the responsibilities of such actors with respect to informing and educating tourists about the cultural, social and ethical values of the winter tourism destination. In this cross-cultural focus group research, students of different cultural background found a mutual understanding on identifying influential personae linked to winter tourism destinations and sports. The exemplary behavior of winter sport athletes and their team-members was identified as a possible vehicle to stimulate ski-tourists to behave responsibly, to respect people and the environment. Skiing and snowboarding instructors, identified as knowledgeable stakeholders in winter tourism destinations, were also mentioned by participants as those in charge to behave in an exemplary way with respect to ethics, sustainability and protection of natural landscape. A discussion of cross-cultural differences between the two groups was also facilitated and the focus on the role of humanistic education in tourism was kept along the discussion with occasional interventions of the moderator

Sustainable tourism issues such as mobility, environmental protection, the use of renewable resources and visitor management were evidenced as core elements in sustainable future development. Findings reveal the vulnerability of ski fields and evidence the importance of individual assessment and tourists' responsibilities in ski tourism destinations' preservation. Results confirm prior research findings (Della Lucia and Franch, 2017) evidencing that participatory planning and stakeholder involvement are fundamental tenets in sustainable tourism management of ski-tourism destinations.

Conclusions. Universities have the responsibility to empower graduate students with the competences to become responsible leaders with sustainability skills, but professors should also listen to students since they have also a great deal of values to share, and their contribution can be beneficial. Thus, empowering them with more tools and desire to drive change in the field of sustainability and other societal issues might be critical also for our scholarly field. During the pandemic, in the online learning process offered by higher education institutes there is less space to allow students to experience cross-cultural context and to stimulate critical reflections on responsibilities and humanistic values. In order to make online delivered courses more human and respectful for students' dignity, their voice must be heard. In this study a collaborative data gathering work carried out by the Italian and Hungarian undergraduates allowed students to share their vision on sustainable ski tourism. The different session of the focus group interviews allowed them to reflect on tourists and other stakeholders' role in sustainable winter tourism development. The students proceeded in a critical but collaborative way discussing relevant issues that can be useful to planner. In terms of the principles of humanistic tourism education, this approach has given participants the opportunity to challenge themselves in a cross-cultural context, to be open to different point of views and to try to be empathic in understanding the different cultural approaches and ways of thinking about sustainability. The concept of 'sustainable tourism', as emerged from the discussions, is perceived as wide and distant. In order to bring sustainable principles closer, individual responsibilities should be addressed. Thus, placing human dignity at the center of the discussion might enhance young adults' responsibility for sustainable winter tourism development. This approach can also make such principles tangible by identifying key actors as inspirational and exemplary of responsible behavior.

Research limits. The study has certain limitations. First, the study explores young adults' reflections on sustainability winter sport tourism during the Covid-19 pandemic which may limit the generalizability of findings. Second, the study applies qualitative methods that while giving an in-depth description of the issue, do not offer the possibility to generalize findings. Future studies should implement mix methods to explore the interconnections between humanistic values, ski tourism and sustainable tourism management. This study is exploratory in nature, but it is planned to be implemented with field research carried out in some winter sport tourism destinations once travel restrictions are lifted.

Practical implications. From a practical point of view this study offers managers, stakeholders and planners some initial suggestions on the view of the younger generations on the overall sustainability of ski tourism destinations. Tourism managers could implement on young adults' vision of tourists' social responsibilities with respect to preserving ski-destinations, and on the perceived role of the different actors in charge of promoting responsible behavior at the destination. Results offer some insights - from the research participants' perspective - on the possible role of influential figures (e.g.: ski champions, instructors) in stimulating ski-tourists to behave responsibly. Furthermore, scholars in tourism management can use these findings to reflect on issues in sustainable tourism

education and how to incorporate sustainability skills into curricula by employing humanistic tourism management theory and practice.

Originality of the study. This exploratory study contributes to the debate on tourism education on sustainability by introducing humanistic tourism education. The study highlights that a value-driven humanistic tourism education can be a driver for change impacting on sustainable ski tourism. Involving students in cross-cultural transformative learning experience contributes to develop students' skills. The participatory experience provided students with hints and suggestions on the directions they could undertake in promoting sustainability issues once starting their professional life in the field of tourism, hospitality, and leisure.

Key words: humanistic education; sustainability; cross-cultural communication; ski tourism

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