Niche Tourism and Sustainability: Perspectives, Practices and Prospects

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Edited by

Anna Farmaki

Cyprus University of Technology, Limassol, Cyprus

Pramendra Singh

Lovely Professional University, Punjab, India

and

Viana Hassan

American University of Malta, Cospicua, Malta
CEO and Founder of European Tourism & Events Training Academy

CABI

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Biographies of Editors and Contributors

Editors

Anna Farmaki (ORCID: 0000-0002-9996-5632) is Assistant Professor at the Cyprus University of Technology, Cyprus. She holds a doctorate (PhD) in marketing from Nottingham Trent University, UK. She has published extensively in reputable, peer-reviewed academic journals such as *Tourism Management*, *Annals of Tourism Research*, *Journal of Travel Research*, *Journal of Business Research*, *Journal of Sustainable Tourism* and *International Journal of Hospitality Management*, among others, and has presented her work in various international conferences, seminars and workshops. Dr Farmaki is a Fellow of the Higher Education Academy (UK) and a member of the Management Committee in several COST Actions. In addition, she is Associate Editor of *Tourism Review* and sits on the Editorial Board of various journals including *International Journal of Contemporary Hospitality Management*, *Service Industries Journal*, *Tourism Planning & Development*, *Journal of Hospitality and Tourism Management* and *Journal of Service Theory and Practice*. Her research interests lie primarily in the areas of tourism planning and development, with emphasis on sustainable tourism, and tourist behaviour. Email: anna.farmaki@cut.ac.cy

Pramendra Singh (ORCID: 0000-0002-9142-265X) is currently working as an Assistant Professor and Head of the Department of Tourism and Airlines in the School of Hotel Management and Tourism at Lovely Professional University, Punjab, India. He completed his PhD in heritage tourism. He has also earned three master's degrees, two in Tourism and Travel Management and one in History, along with a Postgraduate Diploma in Folklore and Culture Studies. He has more than 10 years of teaching and research experience. His research portfolio includes many research papers, book chapters and edited books on tourism and related areas published by internationally reputed publishers. His research interests include heritage tourism, cultural tourism, sustainable tourism, niche tourism, tourism education, and tourism and technology. Email: pramendra58@gmail.com

Viana Hassan (ORCID: 0000-0002-7372-5059) is actively involved in academic and research work in Tourism and Cultural Management in Lebanon and Malta. She is the Founder and CEO of the European Tourism & Events Training Academy. She received her PhD in Tourism Management and Culture from Saint Joseph University, Beirut. Her thesis was entitled 'Medical Tourism in Lebanon'. She is an experienced lecturer with more than 16 years of teaching experience at several universities

in Lebanon (Lebanese University, AUL, Lebanese International University, Islamic University, the Institute of Tourism Studies, STC higher education partner of Wolverhampton University) and in Malta (University of Malta, GBS Malta, Scholars School System). She is interested in tourism management, customer service, branding, event management, airline business management, niche tourism, business operations management, customer acquisition and medical tourism. Dr Hassan has participated in several international conferences (e.g. Expo Dubai 2020, 7th Medical Tourism World Summit).
Email: viana24@hotmail.com

Contributors

Maria Alebaki holds a PhD in Agricultural Economics from the Aristotle University, Greece, supported by the National Scholarships Foundation. In addition, she has conducted two postdoctoral fellowships at the Hellenic Agricultural Organization DEMETER (ELGO-DIMITRA) and the Agricultural University of Athens. Since 2018, she is an Assistant Researcher at the Agricultural Economics Research Institute of ELGO-DIMITRA (AGRERI). Apart from her position at AGRERI, she serves as a Visiting Professor (Agricultural University of Athens, Hellenic Mediterranean University) and an Adjunct Faculty Member (Hellenic Open University). Her current research interests include the exploration of sustainability, resilience, training aspects and digital marketing of wine tourism.
Email: malempaki@gmail.com

Katerina Antoniou is an interdisciplinary scholar in Tourism and International Relations and an Assistant Professor and Course Leader at the University of Central Lancashire Cyprus (UCLan Cyprus). She has published work on peace tourism, citizen diplomacy and social mediation, and is the author of the book *Tourism as a Form of International Relations*. She is a resident expert for the Interdisciplinary Centre for Law, Alternative and Innovative Methods (ICLAIM). Dr Antoniou is a member of the initiative 'Social Mediation in Practice' (European Citizen's Prize 2020) and has co-authored a series of Social Mediation manuals. She is a Fulbright Alumna.
Email: kaantoniou@uclan.ac.uk

Kleio Arvanakou holds a bachelor's degree in Business Administration of Food and Agricultural Enterprises from the University of Patras (Greece) and a master's degree in Tourism Management from the Hellenic Open University (Greece). Her thesis, titled 'Adopting the Dynamic Capabilities Approach to Explore Sustainable Wine Tourism in Corfu Island', focused on advancing sustainable wine tourism through the lens of dynamic capabilities. She has extensive experience as a Front Office Manager in luxury hotels, specializing in optimizing guest experiences. Throughout her career, she has successfully implemented strategies to enhance guest satisfaction and develop innovative solutions to ensure smooth departmental operations.
Email: kleiwarvanak@gmail.com

Furkan Atasoy Karacabey was born in 1996 in Yozgat, Türkiye. He works as a Research Assistant in the Department of Tourism Management at the Faculty of Tourism, Sivas Cumhuriyet University. He is pursuing his doctoral studies at Ankara Hacı Bayram Veli University, and he has completed his master's and bachelor's degrees in Tourism Management at İzmir Katip Çelebi University. His research areas include tourism management and residents' support for tourism development. Karacabey has conducted various academic studies in the fields of tourism and hotel management.
Email: furkankaracabey@cumhuriyet.edu.tr

Bruno Barbosa de Sousa is a distinguished academic with a PhD in Marketing and Strategy. He graduated in Business Management in 2006 and has since held various academic positions.

Currently, he serves as a Lecturer at the Polytechnic Institute of Cávado and Ave (IPCA, Portugal) and has previously lectured at the University of Minho. Professor Sousa's research focuses on diverse areas including sustainable development, tourism behaviour, organizational performance and agile marketing. He has authored several books and numerous book chapters, along with contributing to prestigious journals such as *Current Issues in Tourism*, *EuroMed Journal of Business*, *Annals of Leisure Research*, *Journal of Cultural Heritage Management and Sustainable Development*, *Tourism Management Perspectives*, *Wine Economics and Policy*, *Journal of Hospitality and Tourism Insights*, *Journal of Tourism, Heritage & Services Marketing* and *Journal of Organizational Change Management*.
Email: bsousa@ipca.pt

Gülsel Çiftci is an Associate Professor at Trakya University's Faculty of Applied Sciences in Edirne, Türkiye. She is also a Visiting Research Scholar at the School of Community Resources and Development, Arizona State University, USA. She received her PhD in Business Management and holds a master's degree in Tourism Management. With extensive experience in cross-border tourism, crisis management in the hospitality industry and various research projects, she has been honoured with multiple academic awards. Additionally, she is a licensed tourist guide in Türkiye.
Email: gulsellciftci@gmail.com

Fani Efthymiadou is an Assistant Professor at the Department of Tourism Administration, Faculty of Managerial Sciences of the Boğaziçi University, Istanbul, Türkiye. Her research focuses on the sharing economy, women empowerment and sustainability.
Email: fani.efthymiadou@bogazici.edu.tr

Emrullah Erul, PhD, is Associate Professor in Tourism Management at İzmir Katip Çelebi University, Türkiye. He undertakes community-centred research focusing on sustainable tourism planning and management (with a particular emphasis on social–cultural impacts and resident–tourist relationships) as well as protected areas and adjacent communities. His research interests concern residents' attitudes towards tourism development and their support for tourism, sustainable tourism development and Artificial Intelligence (AI) (e.g. ChatGPT and Chatbots) in tourism and hospitality. His research has appeared in numerous leading tourism journals, such as *Tourism Management*, *Journal of Sustainable Tourism*, *Journal of Travel Research* and *Current Issues in Tourism*.
Email: emrullah.erul@ikc.edu.tr

Ângela Gonçalves is pursuing a master's degree in Tourism Management at the Polytechnic Institute of Cávado and Ave (IPCA, Portugal). She graduated in Tourism from the Polytechnic Institute of Viana do Castelo (IPVC) in 2023. During her studies, she participated in a Galileo course, an INPEC+ project and volunteered at an event organized by the Administration of the Ports of Douro, Leixões and Viana do Castelo (APDL). She was also involved in the 'DEMOLA' research project and a module on projects, which ignited her interest in the investigation field. Ângela is currently a research fellow at the IPVC, under the FISATUR project funded by the European Maritime, Fisheries and Aquaculture Fund (EMFAF).
Email: a30004@alunos.ipca.pt

Werner Gronau holds the position as Professor for Tourism, Travel & Transport at the German University of Applied Sciences Stralsund. He is member of research groups such as NECTAR or the German 'Tourism Research Working Group'. He works as Associate Editor of the *Journal of Tourism Science* and *Frontiers in Sustainable Tourism*. His research interests focus on sustainable destination management and tourism-related transport issues. He has worked in several research projects granted by the German Ministry of Research or the European Commission and presented the results at international conferences as well as in various journals and books.
Email: werner.gronau@hochschule-stralsund.de

Jana Große Hokamp earned her BA in Human Geography at the Catholic University of Eichstätt-Ingolstadt. With a master thesis on 'Motorcycle tourism in Tirol' she completed her master studies at the University of Applied Sciences in Stralsund. Since October 2021 she is working as a tourism consultant at 'Kohl und Partner' Stuttgart with focus on destination consultation, regional planning, moderations of workshops, as well as accompanying participatory processes.
Email: jana@gr-hokamp.de

Maria Hadjielia Drotarova received her PhD from the Department of Educational Research of Lancaster University, UK. She is a Head of Research and Assistant Professor in the field of business and hospitality, CTL Eurocollege, Cyprus. She is a UNESCO Peace Speaker. Her research is found at the intersection of education and tourism, drawing on longitudinal qualitative research approach and focusing on topics such as educational research, social learning, dark tourism and sharing economy. Dr Hadjielia has substantial experience on EU-funded projects under Erasmus+ and Horizon 2020.
Email: hadjieliadrm@ctleuro.ac.cy

Sıla Karacaoğlu is an Associate Professor in the Faculty of Applied Sciences, Department of Tourism Guiding at Bilecik Şeyh Edebali University, Türkiye. She received her PhD degree from the Mersin University in Tourism Management in 2017. In her doctoral dissertation, she studied 'Community Perceptions, Attitudes and Support for Community Based Tourism: The Case of Misi Village'. Her research interests are tourism marketing, sustainable tourism and its types, cultural heritage and tourist guiding.
Email: sila.karacaoglu@bilecik.edu.tr

Stella Kladou (PhD, MBA, FHEA) is an Assistant Professor at the Hellenic Mediterranean University (Greece). Her academic experience first developed in the UK (Sheffield Hallam University), Türkiye (Boğaziçi University) and their international partners. Stella's research revolves around place branding and specifically the heritage–culture and tourism dimensions of the place brand. She has co-edited books, published in prominent academic journals and presented at well-esteemed international conferences. She is an International Place Brand Specialist for *The Place Brand Observer*, the Associate Editor for Europe and Africa Region of the *Journal of Foodservice Business Research*, on the Editorial Review Board of the *Annals of Tourism Research*, on the Editorial Board of the *Journal of Qualitative Research in Tourism* and participates in the organizing and/or scientific board of international conferences.
Email: stellakladou@hmu.gr

Andrew Le is a Senior Lecturer at the International College of Management, Sydney (ICMS) in Australia. He earned his PhD in Tourism and Hospitality Management from Griffith University (Australia) and an MSc in Leisure and Environments from Wageningen University (the Netherlands). Dr Le's research focuses on the tourism and hospitality industry and sustainable development. He has published works in top-tier journals and with renowned publishers, including the *Journal of Sustainable Tourism*, Springer, CABI, IGI Global and IUCN. Beyond academia, Andrew has more than 20 years of experience as a Senior Consultant for international development projects. He has worked on initiatives funded by various organizations, including EuropeAid, the Asian Development Bank (ADB), UNESCO, the Netherlands Development Organisation (SNV), the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) and the Australian Agency for International Development (AusAID).
Email: ale@icms.edu.au

Glenn Murray lives and works on Sydney's Northern Beaches and serves as the Program Manager for International Tourism and Hospitality at the International College of Management, Sydney (ICMS). He holds a master's in Research and a master's in International Hospitality and Hotel Management.

Glenn has lectured at several universities in tourism and hospitality management, with a strong emphasis on the experience economy, focusing on both guest and workforce perspectives, including innovation and emerging technologies. His passion for discovering the ultimate experience drives his ongoing travels around the world.
Email: gmurray@icms.edu.au

Athina Nella serves as an Assistant Professor of Tourism Marketing at the School of Social Sciences, Hellenic Open University, Greece. In parallel with her academic pursuits and extensive teaching experience, she amassed 20 years of professional experience in FMCG, Services & Tourism Marketing, enriched by roles within esteemed organizations of the private and public sector in Greece and the UK. Her research interests encompass the domains of tourism marketing, destination branding and tourism behaviour. In 2021 she was honoured with a Fulbright Scholarship (Chico, California State University).
Email: a.nella@eap.gr

Beverly M. Ntshabeleng is a Lecturer at the Tshwane University of Technology (TUT) in South Africa. She obtained her PhD in Management Studies with a specialization in Tourism from the University of South Africa. Her main research areas are sustainable tourism, heritage tourism and visitor behaviour.
Email: NtshabelengBM@tut.ac.za

Feras Orekat is a Lecturer at the International College of Management, Sydney (ICMS) in Australia. He earned his PhD in Heritage Studies from the University of Sydney. Dr Orekat's research focuses on visitors' experiences, heritage tourism and tourism sustainable development. Feras has more than 10 years of experience working as a tour guide and heritage site consultant. He is a developer of innovative tour designs for heritage sites, focusing on sustainability and visitor engagement. He has worked on initiatives funded by various organizations including the University of Sydney, The University of Technology Sydney, The University of Jordan, UNESCO and the Hashemite University.
Email: forekat@icms.edu.au

Chryso Panayidou is an accomplished academic in the field of Tourism Studies. She holds a PhD in Tourism Development from the Cyprus University of Technology, an MA in European Leisure Studies from Loughborough University, UK and Tilburg University, the Netherlands, and a BA (Hons) in Business Studies with Tourism from the University of the West of England, Bristol, UK. Her research interests include tourism development and special interest tourism. She is currently a Specialist Scientist in the Department of Tourism Management and Hospitality at the Cyprus University of Technology.
Email: chryso.panayidou@cut.ac.cy

Vasilis Papavasiliou received his PhD from the School of Hotel and Tourism Management (SHTM) at the Hong Kong Polytechnic University (PolyU). He is the Head of the hospitality department and Lecturer in the field of hospitality and tourism, CTL Eurocollege, Cyprus. He has a keen interest on topics in relation to culture and identity creation. Specifically, his research focuses on understanding how individuals interact independently but also as a collective within the tourism and hospitality world. Hence, Dr Papavasiliou's academic and research interests are cultural anthropology, identity politics, authenticity and tourism destination development.
Email: vpapavasiliou@ctleuro.ac.cy

Mariana Pereira is a student of Tourism Management at the Polytechnic Institute of Cávado and Ave (IPCA, Portugal). In 2023, she graduated in Tourism from the Polytechnic Institute of Viana do Castelo (IPVC), at the School of Technology and Management. During her academic journey,

she participated in projects like 'DEMOLA', studying sustainable food, and attended several lectures, including the Tourism Days. She also achieved a B1 level in English, certified by the Cambridge School. Her academic involvement reflects a strong interest in exploring and contributing to the development of tourism, focusing on sustainable practices and innovation.
Email: a30323@alunos.ipca.pt

Madiseng M. Phori is a tourism lecturer at Tshwane University of Technology (TUT) and holds degrees of doctor of Management Sciences in Tourism from TUT and a master of Management Sciences in Hospitality and Tourism from Durban University of Technology in South Africa. His research focus includes community-based tourism, sustainable tourism development, heritage tourism, rural tourism, pilgrimage tourism as well as safety and security in tourism.
Email: PhoriMM@tut.ac.za

Jéssica Ribeiro is a student at the Polytechnic Institute of Cávado and Ave (IPCA, Portugal), where she is studying for a masters in Tourism Management. She completed her degree in Tourism in 2023 at the Polytechnic Institute of Viana do Castelo (IPVC). During the summer of 2023, she did an internship at a renowned Portuguese travel agency. During her degree, she undertook Galileo training and also volunteered at an event organized by the Douro, Leixões and Viana do Castelo Port Administration (APDL), acting as a tourist guide. With a special interest in research, during her degree she also took part in the 'DEMOLA' research project. She is currently enrolled on the Specialist Accounting Technician course, part of the 'ATIVAR+' initiative run by the Institute for Employment and Vocational Training (IEFP).
Email: a30410@alunos.ipca.pt

Knut Scherhag is Professor of Destination Management at Worms University of Applied Sciences in Germany; Head of the Tourism bachelor's degree programmes (Department of Tourism/Travel Management); representative for the Department's international cooperation; and Deputy Speaker of the Commission Wine Tourism/Culinary of the German Society for Tourism Science (DGT). After studying business administration at the University of Trier, he worked for 4 years as a research assistant at TU Dresden, then for about 5 years as a senior consultant at Europäisches Tourismus Institut GmbH/Trier (ETI). Dr Scherhag's research focus is on special interest tourism in the destination (e.g. motorcycle tourism and wine tourism) and regional tourism development.
Email: scherhag@HS-Worms.de

Dimitrios P. Stergiou holds a PhD from the University of Surrey, UK. Currently he is Vice-Dean and Associate Professor of Tourism Management at the School of Social Sciences, Hellenic Open University, Greece. He has over 15 years of experience in education and research in the tourism field in Greece and internationally. Dimitrios' research interests are in the wider areas of tourism and hospitality management, and theoretical/methodological issues in social (tourism) research. Alongside his academic duties he has worked with several government and private organizations on tourism project work.
Email: dstergiou@eap.gr

Acknowledgements

Introduction

Anna Farmaki[1]* and Pramendra Singh[2]

[1]Cyprus University of Technology, Limassol, Cyprus; [2]Lovely Professional University, Punjab, India

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The Rise of Niche Tourism

Over the years, niche tourism emerged as a popular developmental option for destinations and a preference of tourists. Currently regarded as one of the fastest-growing sectors of the tourism industry (Bunghez, 2021), niche tourism is forecasted to continue to expand in both demand and supply. The popularity of niche tourism is somewhat unsurprising considering its promising potential as a developmental strategy for emerging and established destinations as well as an experience offered to tourists. To begin with, as the global tourism market has become highly competitive, destination management organizations (DMOs) are striving to identify new tourism products that will differentiate and/or improve their offering. Niche tourism has proven to be particularly favourable as a tourism development approach in emerging destinations and peripheral regions (Novelli, 2018) that often have limited resources and are better able to serve small tourist segments. Additionally, niche tourism has been heralded as a preferred rejuvenation strategy for established destinations wishing to diversify from the conventional tourism product as it allows them to expand their product offering and enhance their destination image (Farmaki, 2012a).

Notwithstanding, the development of niche tourism represents a turning point in contemporary tourism that largely evolved as a response to consumer needs (Novelli, 2005). Indeed, there has been a noticeable change in consumer behaviours in the last three decades as a result of globalization and a higher disposable income, highlighting the need for destinations to seek new tourism products that differentiate them and offer unique experiences to an increasingly demanding breed of tourists. According to Lew (2008), niche tourism is compatible to postmodern society characteristics where hyper-consumerism entails that people are exposed to a huge range of products and services. In this context, market differentiation and specialization has become prevalent for tourism businesses and destinations which are called to serve an array of market segments, each possessing distinct features and preferences. Specifically, the postmodern tourist is sophisticated and seeks authentic memorable experiences as well as activities that reinforce his/her identity (McCabe, 2015). Activities that tourists perform at home during their free time and allow people to express their identity (e.g. photography, cycling) are essentially packaged and sold as a holiday option under the label niche tourism. Hence, niche tourism is often referred to as special interest tourism as it targets small groups of people who share a special interest.

This parallel use of terminology creates semantic issues, calling for greater attention to be given to the conceptualization of niche tourism in order to understand what it is, what aspects it

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*Corresponding author: anna.farmaki@cut.ac.cy

encompasses and, most importantly, how it distinguishes itself from other forms of tourism that have become prevalent as keywords in recent tourism scholarship and policy.

Definition and Conceptualization of Niche Tourism

The term *niche* is attributed to Hutchinson who first mentioned it in 1957 to describe a region in a large geographical area which a creature can exploit. Since, the word niche has been used in marketing as part of market segmentation strategies adopted by companies to delineate 'a specialised space in the market where a firm can escape direct competition or exploit its own special competence' (Richards, 2021, p. 1). In tourism, the term niche came to be used in reference to a tourism product that meets the needs of a small market segment which includes individuals with shared characteristics. In the last three decades, as the need for product diversification became imminent, destinations' developmental focus shifted from mass tourism to smaller niche tourism segments in an attempt to withstand increasing competition amidst changing consumer needs. None the less, an overview of various conceptualization attempts reveals that niche tourism has to do more with what tourists are doing rather than their number (Bunghez, 2021). The geographical definitional approach, for instance, considers the location of the tourism consumption (e.g. urban, rural, etc.) and the population involved in the process but what matters most is the experience and/or activity that tourists wish to engage in (Novelli, 2005). The product approach includes the activities and amenities offered as part of niche tourism and which influence tourist expectations, whereas the customer approach considers tourist needs and wants as the basis of the experience of niche tourism (Novelli, 2005). Hence, niches have been linked with specific special interests of tourists (Richards, 2021).

Overall, a broad range of niche tourism forms exists based on the interests of tourists. According to Papathanassis (2011), these special interests often reflect societal trends on which niche tourism can be classified, including: (i) sustainability (e.g. ecotourism, agritourism); (ii) the experience economy (e.g. extreme sports); (iii) self-development (e.g. cultural tourism, educational tourism); (iv) hedonism (e.g. dark tourism, sex tourism); (v) consumerism (e.g. shopping tourism); and (vi) conscious living (e.g. religious tourism, medical tourism). Yet, these niche tourism products often vary in characteristics and size. Novelli *et al.* (2022) argued that there are macro niche tourism products that include various activities such as sport tourism and nature tourism among others. Within these, micro niches can be detected that encompass more exclusive activities; for example, under sport tourism activities like trekking, cycling or extreme sports may be commodified and sold as niche tourism products whereas under nature tourism specific forms such as ecotourism or wildlife tourism may be offered.

Therefore, niche tourism involves an extensive list of tourism activities that can appeal to the mainstream tourist as well as more specific groups of tourists who travel to satisfy a specific need. This characteristic of niche tourism, coupled with its growth in popularity over the years, raises questions over the nature of niche tourism in relation to mass tourism. In contrast to mass tourism's standardized products and broad appeal, niche tourism targets a selective audience seeking exclusive and authentic experiences (Marson, 2011). Hence, niche tourism is generally positioned at the antipode of mass tourism (Bunghez, 2021); however, elements between mass tourism and niche tourism frequently overlap. For example, the participation of tourists in the niche tourism experience may not necessarily be active as tourists may engage in the tourism consumption in a passive way (Farmaki, 2012b) with their interaction with locals remaining superficial. Likewise, many large tour operators nowadays offer niche tourism products (Wilhelm Stanis and Barbieri, 2013) entailing that the production patterns of niche tourism resemble those of mass tourism.

Conceptualization attempts are further complexified by associations of niche tourism to the alternative tourism paradigm (Skinner and Soomers, 2019) as both aim at addressing the broader socio-economic concerns arising from mass tourism activities. As such, niche tourism has come to be considered as more sustainable (Trunfio *et al.*, 2006; Boukas and Chourides, 2016) based on the

premise that its impacts on the local environment and society are minimal given the small number of tourists involved and the focus on social and environmental aspects. Even so the contribution of niche tourism to sustainability has been contested, prompting a scholarly debate that revolves around the impacts of this increasingly popular tourism form.

Niche Tourism Impacts

The sustainability argument underlying niche tourism is based on the potential socio-economic and environmental benefits it may offer to destinations. Niche tourism has been argued to provide significant opportunities for tourism development in small remote and peripheral destinations that often lack resources (Butler, 2019). In this capacity, niche tourism may lead to a sustainable form of tourism development that will benefit such destinations in the long term. Peripheral areas, in particular, may diversity their income sources through niche tourism which is often regarded as a panacea to the economic decline and youth migration experienced in such destinations (Dinis and Krakover, 2016). Niche tourism also enables established destinations to diversify their tourism product offering by introducing year-round niche tourism forms and therefore addressing seasonality (Malik, 2018; Garanti, 2022). Moreover, given the small-scale nature of niche tourism, it may offer greater control to the local community over tourism development. In turn, locals may engage more actively in tourism planning and utilize local products, networks and knowledge in an effective manner, thereby enhancing the destination's sustainability potential.

In addition to encouraging local community participation in tourism, niche tourism may lead to an improvement in locals' well-being. As niche tourism is based on smaller-scale development, it may help to mitigate the negative impacts of over-commercialization and overcrowding on destinations (Boukas and Chourides, 2016). Likewise, due to its smaller-scale operation and emphasis on environment, niche tourism may promote the conservation of the environment (Wolf *et al.*, 2017) and minimize the harmful effects that tourism development may yield on the ecosystem. Last, niche tourism may offer benefits to tourists as well through the provision of greater satisfaction and deeper engagement with the destination's environment and culture (Swanson and Cavender, 2019), making the tourist experience more authentic, meaningful and memorable (Sharma and Nayak, 2020). On the other hand, niche tourism has been criticized for its emphasis on specialization and small targeted market segments which may limit its economic contribution to destinations, especially when considering the relatively high cost of development of certain niche tourism products (Farmaki, 2015). Therefore, the economic benefits for local communities are questionable, particularly if they lack the necessary skills and experience to cater to niche tourists, suggesting that niche tourism may not necessarily provide a more economically sustainable alternative to mass tourism for destinations. Critics also raised questions on niche tourism's ability to improve the livelihood of the local community. Indeed, niche tourism tends to commodify the local culture as well as natural resources as a large proportion of niche tourism products are based on social and environmental resources. Correspondingly, an overuse of natural resources may take place that will in turn put a strain on the environment (Butler, 2019; Khanra *et al.*, 2021) while the local community may experience a cultural degradation as elements of the local culture transform into a competitive culture tourism product (Coronado, 2014; Zou *et al.*, 2021).

Also, the popularity of niche tourism entails that its offering is not confined to small independent companies as many large tour-operating companies are designing and promoting niche tourism products to larger market segments (Wilhelm Stanis and Barbieri, 2013). In relation to this point, it may be said that the vast range of products offered under the label niche tourism require deep understanding of each niche tourism market if the long-term viability of the product is to be maintained. Yet, failure to do so by larger tour operators implies that niche tourist behaviours are not well considered in the development of niche tourism, leading to unstable demand and poor satisfaction rates. The provision of niche tourism by large tour operators also suggests limited economic benefits

to the local community and minimal local participation in tourism planning. Evidently, the boundary between mass tourism and niche tourism is rather blurred (Agarwal *et al.*, 2018). Indeed, Ma *et al.* (2020) argued that a large share of tourists involved in what is traditionally understood as niche tourism activities exhibit behaviour and profile characteristics of mass tourists seeking novelty.

These challenges pose the question whether niche tourism may in fact be considered a contributor to destinations' sustainability, highlighting the need for further research on the niche tourism and sustainability relationship. Novelli *et al.* (2022) argued that the impacts of niche tourism compared to mass tourism from a sustainability perspective remain an under-explored research area. Indeed, most studies have looked at various niche tourism forms from a competitiveness angle, exploring tourist satisfaction and behaviour (e.g. Sharma and Nayak, 2020; Cillo *et al.*, 2021), or a developmental aspect delving into strategies and practices (Koens *et al.*, 2009; Nair and Mohanty, 2021). In addition, the focus of past studies on specific niche tourism forms has led to a rather fragmented literature which adds to the complexity of the examination of the niche tourism and sustainability nexus. More research is, thus, required on how specific niche tourism forms may contribute to sustainability and, in particular, to the Sustainable Development Goals outlined in the United Nations' Agenda 2030 amidst global challenges such as changing consumer needs post COVID-19 and technological advancements. This edited volume hopes to fill in this gap in knowledge and enhance understanding of niche tourism and sustainability aspects.

Structure of the Book

The book aims to contribute to the debate on niche tourism and sustainability. Specifically, through a collection of 12 conceptual and empirical chapters presenting niche tourism cases from around the world, the book seeks to add to the discussion on the niche tourism and sustainability interface. The book is structured around the following themes: (i) the emerging trends shaping demand characteristics and behaviours; (ii) resident perspectives of niche tourism; (iii) niche tourism implementation practices; and (iv) prospects of niche tourism in terms of sustainability. Therefore, the book offers a comprehensive overview of the dynamic relationship between niche tourism and sustainability. The book also serves as a platform for critical inquiry of aspects pertinent to niche tourism and sustainability and, in turn, imparts important theoretical and practical insights to destination planners, policy makers, industry practitioners, educators and students on how niche tourism can become more sustainable and also assistive in strengthening destinations' sustainability goals.

Part I consists of three chapters discussing tourist behavioural aspects and experiences that shape demand for niche tourism. Chapter 1, authored by Beverly Ntshabeleng and Madiseng Phori, explores the transition from mass tourism to sustainable niche tourism in South Africa, highlighting the emerging importance of mindful tourism in sustaining destinations. By examining South Africa, the chapter discusses how integrating ecotourism, cultural preservation, community engagement and mindfulness can enhance tourist satisfaction and improve sustainability. In Chapter 2, Feras Orekat, Glenn Murray and Andrew Le underline the significance of visitor experiences in heritage tourism development. By exploring visitor encounters at the heritage site of Sydney's Quarantine Station, the chapter identifies cultural characteristics as significantly influential in shaping visitors' overall experiences. Werner Gronau, Jana Große Hokamp and Knut Scherhag authored Chapter 3 which addresses the preconditions of motorcycle tourism in regard to the three pillars of sustainability. The chapter analyses the attitudes and motivations of motorcycle tourists and outlines the developmental requirements for destinations in making motorcycle tourism more sustainable.

In Part II, which examines residents' perspectives of niche tourism, two chapters are presented. Chapter 4 is authored by Fani Efthymiadou and Chryso Panayidou and it discusses resident perceptions and support for zero waste management as part of environmental practices in the context of ecotourism. The study draws from the island of Tilos (Greece) to reveal that residents demonstrate a high level of environmental awareness and support towards a zero waste programme implemented

on the island. In this context, residents' perceptions and attitudes enhance the destination's eco-tourism image as a sustainable niche tourism form. Emrullah Erul and Furkan Atasoy Karacabey authored Chapter 5, which investigates how residents' attachment to their community and perceptions of mass tourism influence their attitudes towards niche tourism development. Using the stimulus–organism–response theory, the study draws from Manavgat (Türkiye) to examine how resident attitudes predict their support for niche tourism in the light of expectations of potential benefits.

Part III includes four chapters that discuss niche tourism implementation practices amidst the challenges destinations face in terms of sustainability. In Chapter 6, Athina Nella and Dimitrios Stergiou analyse UK stakeholder practices in terms of birdwatching tourism and reveal varied sustainability efforts, ranging from eco-friendly travel options to community engagement initiatives. Chapter 7, authored by Stella Kladou, Maria Alebaki and Kleio Arvanakou, draws from the island of Corfu in Greece to explore sustainability practices and challenges for family wineries in the context of wine tourism. In Chapter 8, Sıla Karacaoğlu examines the role of creative tourism in the sustainable development of rural areas. By presenting cases of creative tourism practices in Türkiye, the author offers a comprehensive overview of creative tourism as an important niche tourism form that enhances and sustains the tourist appeal of rural destinations. Maria Hadjielia Drotarova and Vasilis Papavasiliou are the authors of Chapter 9, which explores the practices of rural small and medium tourism enterprises (SMTEs) in Cyprus. The chapter considers digital transformation as an innovative way to deal with the challenges encountered by rural SMTEs, thus promoting sustainable rural tourism development.

In Part IV, the prospects of niche tourism in terms of contributing to the sustainable development of destinations are considered through the presentation of three chapters. In Chapter 10, through a discussion of the Israel/Palestine conflict, Katerina Antoniou examines the role of citizen diplomacy enacted by residents and tourists in fostering peace tourism, which may contribute to the destinations' sustainable development. Gülsel Çiftci authored Chapter 11 in which she discusses the impact of cross-border tourism on social cohesion, justice and peace, advancing understanding of how cross-border tourism can contribute to sustainable development of destinations and the maintenance of peaceful societies. Chapter 12, authored by Ângela Gonçalves, Jéssica Ribeiro, Mariana Pereira and Bruno Barbosa de Sousa, is the last chapter of this book and offers an examination of volunteer tourism as an emerging sustainable niche tourism form that may exert positive impacts on local communities and support destinations' sustainability goals.

Undoubtedly, the list of topics presented and discussed in this edited volume is not exhaustive of the important theme of niche tourism, which includes a huge range of tourism products that is likely to further expand as destinations strive for uniqueness and innovativeness as a competitive advantage. Even so, through a collection of selective cases, this book introduces the possibility of niche tourism in contributing to the sustainability potential of destinations. As such, the book may offer important theoretical insights to researchers aspiring to delve deeper into the examination of the niche tourism and sustainability nexus. Practical recommendations may also be provided to destination stakeholders such as tourism planners and industry practitioners wishing to align policies and practices to sustainability principles through the development of niche tourism.

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Part I: Tourist Behaviour and Experiences

This first part of the edited book consists of three chapters discussing tourist behavioural aspects and experiences. The first chapter (Chapter 1), authored by Beverly Ntshabeleng and Madiseng Phori, explores the transition from mass tourism to sustainable niche tourism in South Africa, highlighting the importance of a mindful tourist behaviour in promoting destination sustainability. The second chapter (Chapter 2) by Feras Orekat, Glenn Murray and Andrew Le draws from Sydney's Quarantine Station to demonstrate the significance of visitor experiences in developing heritage tourism. Werner Gronau, Jana Große Hokamp and Knut Scherhag authored the third and final chapter of this part (Chapter 3); it analyses the attitudes and motivations of motorcycle tourists in order to provide greater understanding of how tourism demand aspects can be incorporated in the effort to develop a more sustainable form of motorcycle tourism.

1 Exploring Niche Tourist Behaviour in the Global South: Dynamics and Prospects in South Africa

Beverly M. Ntshabeleng* and Madiseng M. Phori

Department of Tourism Management, Faculty of Management Sciences, Tshwane University of Technology, Pretoria, South Africa

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Abstract

This chapter explores tourism's transition from mass tourism to sustainable niche tourism, aligning with post COVID-19 shifts towards mindful travel in the Global South, with a specific focus on South Africa. It highlights a growing demand for specialized experiences and emphasizes the importance of mindful tourism in sustaining destinations. Despite the prevailing focus on mass tourism, there is a call for a broader perspective on niche tourism to benefit both tourists and local communities economically and environmentally. The study advocates for tailored offerings that reflect tourists' evolving preferences, promoting sustainability and positive contributions to destinations. By linking niche tourism strategies to sustainability, the chapter underscores how sustainable practices can enhance the economic and environmental resilience of tourist destinations. Additionally, it discusses the implications of this transition for other contexts beyond South Africa, suggesting that the principles of sustainable niche tourism can be applied to various regions globally. This approach aims to position South African tourism as sustainable, fulfilling and culturally rich, meeting the expectations of mindful tourists while preserving the integrity of destinations.

Keywords: Niche tourism, sustainable tourism, mindful tourist, South Africa, Global South

Introduction

Niche tourism markets in the Global South present both challenges and prospects in terms of the dynamics of tourist behaviour. Understanding niche markets as social rituals, involving consumers and producers, is crucial for sustainable development in tourism (Richards, 2021). This chapter investigates an essential aspect of contemporary tourism, the transition from mass tourism to sustainable and mindful niche tourism. This shift is imperative in meeting the evolving demands of experienced tourists, particularly in the post COVID-19 era, characterized by heightened awareness and preferences for specialized vacation experiences.

South African tourism can transition from a mass tourism focus to a more sustainable and mindful niche tourism approach by incorporating ecotourism projects in urban areas, developing tourism routes in local municipalities and addressing the impact of climate change on tourism demand. Urban ecotourism destinations, such as Dinokeng in the Tshwane metropolitan area, offer a unique opportunity

*Corresponding author: NtshabelengBM@tut.ac.za

to combine wildlife conservation with urban development (Burton and Rogerson, 2023). The development of tourism routes, as seen in the City of Mbombela Local Municipality, can contribute to community development and economic growth while preserving the sociocultural and environmental attributes of the area (Sekole *et al.*, 2022).

The central question guiding this exploration is how tourism industries in the Global South, especially in countries such as South Africa, can effectively align their offerings with the dynamics of tourist behaviour, emphasizing mindfulness and sustainability. Chong (2020) indicates that there is a noticeable shift in tourist preferences towards niche experiences, signalling a departure from traditional mass tourism models. This trend underscores the need for destination management strategies that cater to the growing demand for mindfulness-oriented tourism (Richards, 2021). Therefore, the purpose of this chapter is to understand the niche tourism dynamics and strategies that foster mindful tourism experiences. Furthermore, this chapter contributes to the ongoing discourse on sustainable tourism by highlighting the importance of niche tourism in meeting the changing expectations of modern tourists while ensuring the preservation and enhancement of cultural and natural heritage. The chapter offers valuable insights and recommendations for stakeholders in the tourism industry to navigate the dynamics and opportunities presented by the evolving tourism landscape in the Global South. By understanding and responding to these evolving demands, destinations can not only attract tourists but also ensure the long-term sustainability of their cultural and environmental assets.

Theoretical Background

There has been a pronounced shift in tourist behaviour with an increasing demand for specialized vacation experiences among seasoned tourists (Kachniewska, 2014; Di-Clemente *et al.*, 2020). Tourists are now seeking emotional and experiential products, leading tourism organizations to employ fresh strategies to meet these new demands (Mihajlović, 2020). This shift is driven by factors such as socio-economic changes,

specific tourist motives (i.e. adventures, new experiences and culture) and economic changes reflected in purchasing power (Chhabra, 2022). Additionally, the invention of Web 2.0 and the rise of social media have changed the way tourists extract information and perceive their travel experiences, emphasizing the importance of various social media platforms for both tourists and the tourism industry (Somrak and Khaewmesuan, 2022).

Moreover, the behaviour of tourists and their preferences for sustainable niche tourism can be shaped by various significant factors. Firstly, Lu and Nepal (2009) found that the availability of reliable information on the sustainability of destinations positively influences the adoption of pro-sustainable travel and tourism habits. Secondly, as highlighted by Kollmuss and Agyeman (2002), personal factors such as environmental values, attitudes and habits shape tourists' environmentally friendly behaviour. Additionally, Poria *et al.* (2004) discussed how destination context including facilitating conditions, tourist identity and culture, and visual cues influences tourist behaviour by conveying social norms related to environmental friendliness. Ajzen and Fishbein (1980) emphasized that psychological determinants such as personality characteristics, attitudes, evaluations and emotions influence tourist behaviour and demand. Furthermore, Steg and Vlek (2009) noted that factors like environmental knowledge, participation motivation, opportunity, self-identity and commitment have significant positive effects on tourists' pro-environmental behaviour. These factors collectively shape tourist behaviour and their demands for sustainable niche tourism. The COVID-19 pandemic has further accelerated these changes, with online information sources taking precedence over consulting friends and relatives, and a significant advance in digitization is expected, leading to the displacement of physical travel agencies by online platforms.

A critical aspect of this chapter is the synthetic analysis of existing literature on niche tourism and sustainability. By synthesizing and critically evaluating previous studies, the chapter aims to provide insights into the dynamics and opportunities facing the tourism industry in transitioning towards a more niche-oriented and sustainable paradigm. The methodology employed involves a thorough synthesis analysis

of scholarly works, industry reports and case studies to extract valuable lessons and best practices. The implications of this research are significant for destination management, policy formulation and tourism development strategies, particularly in areas grappling with the tension between mass tourism-driven economic growth and the need for sustainable practices. Adopting a sustainable tourism approach that considers the 'Triple Bottom Line' framework (a sustainability framework proposing that businesses should consider social and environmental issues along with profit) and addresses carbon emissions can ensure long-term sustainable growth for the South African tourism industry (Proos and Hattingh, 2022).

Methodology

The research methodology for the present study includes a conceptual framework about sustainable niche tourism, synthesizing previous studies and industry reports (Kumar *et al.*, 2018). The significance of a conceptual paper is its ability to develop logical and complete arguments rather than to test them empirically. In this chapter, a research design rooted in conceptual theory synthesis was employed to enhance understanding of the specific concept studied, which is sustainable niche tourism. Theory synthesis refers to the conceptual integration across multiple theoretical perspectives (Jaakkola, 2020). The potential goal of this approach is to summarize and integrate current understanding on a topic, thereby advancing knowledge on the interface between niche tourism and sustainability.

Specifically, the present study involved a search for studies on sustainable niche tourism and mindful tourist experiences across databases such as ResearchGate, Wiley Online Library Full Collection, Science Direct, Taylor & Francis Online, Scopus (A&I), Springer LINK and Google Scholar. This approach contributes to the ongoing discourse on sustainable tourism by highlighting the significance that niche tourism plays in meeting modern tourists' expectations while preserving and enhancing cultural and natural heritage (de Bruyn *et al.*, 2023). A critical discussion of the literature follows, building around the main themes that emerge from the

review of pertinent studies and which relate to the development of sustainable niche tourism in the context studied. In particular, tourist behaviour in relation to sustainable niche tourism is discussed in addition to the importance of targeting mindful tourists in shaping a sustainable tourist experience.

Sustainable Niche Tourism in South Africa

South Africa's tourism industry is enriched by a diverse array of sustainable niche tourism types, each contributing uniquely to the country's cultural, environmental and economic landscapes. From ecotourism to culinary experiences, these niche tourism segments showcase South Africa's rich heritage while promoting sustainability and community engagement.

Sustainable niche tourism in South Africa plays a crucial role in the country's tourism landscape. Ecotourism stands out for its focus on environmental conservation and biodiversity protection, engaging tourists in activities like guided nature walks and wildlife viewing while emphasizing the importance of ecological sustainability (Nel and Rossouw, 2020). Cultural heritage tourism, on the other hand, immerses tourists in the country's rich cultural heritage through traditional dances, craft demonstrations and visits to cultural sites, fostering cultural exchange and supporting local artisans (Rogerson, 2020). For adventure seekers, South Africa offers a plethora of activities under adventure tourism including hiking, mountain biking and water sports, all set in diverse natural landscapes that prioritize safety and environmental conservation (Van Niekerk, 2022). Township tourism emerged post the 1994 democratic elections in South Africa, spurred by the recognition of townships as politically significant areas appealing to tourists interested in the country's transition to democracy (Ramchander, 2007; Vos, 2015). These townships are scattered across all major cities in each of the nine provinces (Ramchander, 2007), with Johannesburg and Cape Town particularly popular for township tours, representing a profitable venture for tour operators (Vos, 2015).

Additionally, wellness tourism caters to tourists seeking relaxation and holistic well-being, with spa retreats, yoga sessions and wellness workshops set against the country's scenic beauty and serene environments (United Nations, 2018). Furthermore, agritourism and food tourism highlight South Africa's agricultural prowess and culinary traditions, offering farm visits, agricultural activities and culinary experiences that promote sustainable farming practices and celebrate local flavours (Van Niekerk, 2022). These niche tourism types collectively contribute to environmental conservation, cultural preservation and community development while enhancing the overall tourism experience in South Africa. Sustainable niche tourism in South Africa is not just about offering unique experiences to tourists but also about preserving natural habitats, safeguarding cultural heritage, supporting local economies and promoting sustainable practices. By embracing and further developing these niche tourism segments, South Africa can continue to thrive as a leading destination for responsible and authentic tourism experiences, contributing to the country's long-term sustainability and growth in the tourism sector.

Sustainable niche tourism in South Africa has garnered increasing scholarly attention in recent years. Scholars such as Rogerson and Rogerson (2021a, b) emphasize the importance of sustainable practices in niche tourism, particularly in South Africa's diverse ecological and cultural landscapes. The authors argue that sustainable niche tourism not only contributes to economic development but also fosters environmental conservation and community empowerment (Rogerson and Rogerson, 2021a, b). Their research highlights how niche tourism initiatives can create job opportunities, promote local entrepreneurship and encourage the conservation of natural and cultural resources. Building on this perspective, Ntshingila and Musakwa (2020) explore the role of community-based tourism enterprises (CBTEs) in promoting sustainable niche tourism. Their study highlights the potential of CBTEs to empower local communities economically while preserving cultural heritage and natural resources. Key findings indicate that CBTEs can serve as a model for sustainable tourism development by integrating local community participation and

ensuring that tourism benefits are equitably distributed. Similarly, Singh (2021) focused into the significance of cultural heritage in sustainable niche tourism, emphasizing the need for responsible tourism practices that respect and promote local cultures. The study also suggests that cultural heritage tourism can drive economic growth by attracting niche market tourists who are willing to pay a premium for unique and meaningful experiences. By providing these various niche tourism options, South Africa's tourism industry seeks to meet different tourist demands and encourage tourists to take actions that will contribute towards sustainable niche tourism.

Tourist demand and behaviour in sustainable niche tourism

The primary focus of niche tourism is on the demands of the tourists (Bunghez, 2021). Tourists are consistently seeking a more specialized and fulfilling tourism experience. This necessitates tourism organizations in South Africa to create inventive products to stay competitive. According to Bunghez (2021), when considering tourist demand, tourism organizations in the Global South – particularly South Africa – must actively engage tourists in a specific niche through their unique consumerist strategies. These strategies must contribute to ensuring that critical factors such as tourism facilities (e.g. activities, attractions, settlements and food), hospitality, ambience, surrounding environments and crowd density meet tourist demand (Mutum and Ghazali, 2023).

While sustainability is typically not the foremost consideration when choosing to engage in tourism, there is a growing trend among tourists to prioritize sustainable tourism. Approximately one-third of tourists are interested in sustainable tourism or specific aspects of sustainability (Weber, 2019). Poon observed this shift as early as 1989, when tourists began to demand more sustainable yet segmented, customized and flexible vacations rather than standardized holiday packages (Poon, 1989). In the same notion, Novelli (2018) concurs that there is a growing demand for conscious and transformative vacations, a trend in which sustainable tourism can

provide the means to change both lifestyles and increase the positive caring impact made on destinations.

In South Africa, the increasing demand for sustainable tourism may be attributed to the advancements in modern systems of representation, transportation, communication and digitization (Mayer *et al.*, 2023). Moreover, for the first 2 years of the COVID-19 pandemic, the majority of individuals globally including South Africa were confined to their homes, placed in lockdowns and socially isolated. This has prompted an interest in engaging with others in more expansive, 'greener' environments (Mell and Whitten, 2021). The pandemic has changed tourist demands, presenting tourism organizations with an opportunity to shift away from mass tourism and develop innovative niche tourism offerings (Azmi *et al.*, 2023).

According to Sert (2017), niche tourism offerings should be distinctive and not have many alternatives for individual tourists; they are tailored to a group of tourists with similar characteristics. In the mid-1990s, Dalgıç and Leeuw (1994) cautioned that when assessing the viability of a niche market, service providers should consider the following factors:

- The niche market should have a size that is sufficient to potentially generate profits.
- New entrants should have a competitive advantage.
- It is imperative not to overlook potential competitors.
- There should be growth potential.
- There should be desire for special treatment.
- Customer goodwill.
- There should be a market that has enough purchasing power.

It is necessary to evaluate these factors in context with regions, as these factors may affect behaviours of niche tourists from developed regions in a distinct manner compared to those from developing or underdeveloped regions (i.e. the Global South). For instance, empirical research indicates that niche tourists from the developed countries have higher purchasing power (Lissner and Mayer, 2020) compared to those from the Global South regions (Gisore and Ogutu, 2015; Mgonja *et al.*, 2017). Accordingly, the Global South regions should assess these factors so as to figure out how to enhance niche tourism's accessibility, not only for international tourists but also for local tourists. Moreover, South Africa needs to address knowledge gaps regarding the changing supply–demand situations of specific niche tourism offerings post COVID-19 to inform evidenced-based policy interventions, decision making and strategy formulation (Rogerson and Rogerson, 2021a, b). Given the specialized nature of niche tourism, it is critical for niche tourism interventions to comprehend what can add value and enhance tourist experiences in order to foster mindfulness.

Mindful tourists

Mindfulness can be defined as 'a state of conscious awareness in which the individual is implicitly aware of the context and content of information' (Langer, 1992, p. 289). Mindfulness theory delineates two distinct modes of information processing, namely mindful and mindless (Langer, 1989). A mindful approach is characterized by its openness and capacity for elaborate thinking, while a mindless approach relies on inflexibility and less elaborate thinking, often based on past distinctions (Luttrell *et al.*, 2014). In contrast to mindfulness, Moscardo (2017) views mindlessness as a single-minded reliance on information without an active awareness of alternative perspectives or uses for the information received. Mindfulness enables individuals to perceive situations with clarity and recognize underlying possibilities, rather than being confined by preconceived notions (Shapiro, 2020). Dutt and Ninov (2016) posit that promoting mindfulness among tourists in the Global South, including South Africa, would be advantageous due to its association with numerous beneficial outcomes.

Mindfulness in tourism has been linked to interpretation, demonstrating the efficacy and significance of interpretation in tourists' experiences and acquired knowledge (Moscardo and Pearce, 1986; Eck *et al.*, 2023). This approach explores how tourists build interpretations to enhance the overall quality of their experience and raise awareness of their behaviour (Suryandari and Rahmawati, 2022). Benefits of mindfulness for tourists include enhanced

learning and comprehension, more enjoyable and positive tourism experiences (Lee and Kim, 2018; Taylor and Norman, 2019), improved recollection of information (Moscardo and Pearce, 1986; Dutt and Ninov, 2016) and psychological and physical well-being (Chen *et al.*, 2017; Wang *et al.*, 2021).

In South Africa and other parts of the Global South, scholars suggest that mindfulness could benefit tourism destinations by increasing tourists' awareness and concern, thereby aiding in destination sustainability (Moscardo, 1996; Stankov and Filimonau, 2023). Given this background, it is reasonable to deduce that the practice of mindfulness in tourism contributes to achieving Goal 12 of the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals 2030, which focuses on ensuring sustainable consumption and production patterns (United Nations, 2015). Tourism organizations in the Global South can intentionally craft tourist experiences to induce mindfulness or facilitate profound shifts in consciousness, both during and after the visit (Sheldon, 2020).

Sustainable tourist experience

The concept of experience has garnered significant interest from various academic fields. In psychology, experience is a fundamental aspect of consciousness that is consistently present throughout a person's life (Gadamer, 1979). Drawing on this definition, tourist experience is a subjective mental state (O'Dell and Billing, 2005; de Freitas Coelho *et al.*, 2018) and multisensory performance, relying on tourists' specific interests, motivations, perceptions, depictions, level of engagement and sharing while participating in tourism activities (Stankov *et al.*, 2022). Experience includes learning, enjoyment and escapism (Kang and Gretzel, 2012). The 'learning experience' refers to the process by which a tourist acquires new knowledge and skills (Pearce, 2005; Câmara *et al.*, 2022). The 'enjoyment experience' refers to the degree to which the tourist experience is deemed enjoyable beyond its practical value (Davis *et al.*, 1992). The 'escape experience' refers to the immersive encounter that tourists have with the destination environment, allowing them to detach from their everyday lives (Pearce, 2005).

The level of learning, enjoyment and escapism is determined not only by the tourist but also by tourism organizations (Moreira *et al.*, 2021), converging tourism consumption and production to create value (Akel, 2022). Within this context, Stankov *et al.* (2022) suggest that implementing mindfulness is an effective approach for tourism organizations to integrate individual tourist demands into a value proposition, ultimately enhancing the meaningfulness of tourists' experiences. Rubin *et al.* (2016) highlight that in addition to recognizing the unique demands of tourists, tourism organizations should acknowledge the factors that enable tourists to be engaged and have meaningful experiences.

The framework proposed by Walls *et al.* (2011) identifies four key factors that influence the overall experience of consumers (tourists): (i) physical environment, which refers to the physical facilities and surroundings; (ii) human interaction environment, referring to the interactions that occur between tourists and tourism organizations; (iii) situational factors, which refers to specific attributes that shape the characteristics of the visit, such as the purpose of the visit and the individuals accompanying the tourist; and (iv) individual characteristics, including personality traits and sensitivity to surroundings, influencing how tourists perceive the coordinated tourism services. Collectively, these factors contribute to the overall tourist experience (Zhang *et al.*, 2016). If one factor falls short, others can compensate, thus enhancing mindfulness in the tourist experience. The effective implementation of mindfulness into tourist experiences requires collaborative efforts between tourists and tourism organizations to integrate these factors meaningfully.

In the context of the Global South, involving the local community in developing niche tourism is crucial for creating a mindful experience. Kuntai (2020) suggests that in Kenya's Maasai Mara National Reserve, local community involvement is essential. Moscardo's (2017) study in South Africa's Kruger National Park and Soweto revealed that storytelling plays a significant role in encouraging mindful tourists and supporting positive tourist experiences. Manwa *et al.*'s (2017) study indicated that when

tourism organizations fail to offer experiences fostering mindfulness, it may be difficult for niche tourism, such as cultural tourism, to grow into a significant economic driver in the Global South (e.g. Lesotho). Sarantou *et al.* (2021) discovered that in Namibia, niche tourism offerings promoting mindfulness not only develop sustainable livelihoods for local service providers but also offer highly meaningful experiences for tourists.

Mindfulness in tourism experiences benefits tourists by meeting their needs for enhanced experiences, potentially leading to increased tourist satisfaction (Eck *et al.*, 2023) and raising awareness of their behaviour (Suryandari and Rahmawati, 2022). This, in turn, helps tourism providers achieve their business goals (e.g. profitability) (Suryandari and Rahmawati, 2022) while assisting local communities in preserving their natural and cultural resources for present and future generations and gaining economic benefits (e.g. employment) (Kuntai, 2020).

Conclusions and Implications

The purpose of the present study was to explore the transition from mass tourism to sustainable niche tourism, emphasizing the importance of creating meaningful and mindful tourist experiences. The study focused on South Africa due to its rich cultural and natural diversity, which provided an ideal context for developing sustainable niche tourism. By examining South Africa, the study aimed to illustrate how integrating ecotourism, cultural preservation, community engagement and mindfulness can enhance tourist satisfaction, support local economies and contribute to long-term environmental and social benefits. Insights from South Africa's approach can offer valuable lessons for other regions in the Global South aiming to adopt sustainable tourism practices.

The growing demand for specialized vacation experiences among seasoned tourists post COVID-19 underscores the need for destinations to align with evolving tourist behaviour and preferences (Kachniewska, 2014; Di-Clemente *et al.*, 2020). To achieve this transition successfully,

several key recommendations emerge and are presented below.

1. *Incorporating ecotourism projects*: South African tourism can incorporate ecotourism projects in urban areas to create unique experiences that combine wildlife conservation with urban development. This approach attracts mindful tourists and contributes to environmental conservation efforts (Burton and Rogerson, 2023).
2. *Developing tourism routes*: The development of tourism routes in local municipalities, such as those seen in the City of Mbombela Municipality, can promote community development, economic growth and cultural preservation. These routes offer tourists immersive experiences while supporting local economies (Sekole *et al.*, 2022).
3. *Addressing climate change*: Addressing the impact of climate change on tourism demand is crucial for sustainable tourism growth. By adopting sustainable tourism practices and considering the 'Triple Bottom Line' framework, South Africa can mitigate negative environmental impacts while ensuring long-term growth (Proos and Hattingh, 2022).
4. *Responding to evolving tourist demands*: Understanding and responding to evolving tourist demands, including a preference for emotional and experiential products, is essential for tourism operators. This entails developing fresh strategies, leveraging advancements in communication technologies and embracing sustainable practices (Mihajlović, 2020; Somrak and Khaewmesuan, 2022).
5. *Promoting mindfulness*: Promoting mindfulness among tourists can enhance their experiences and contribute to sustainable tourism practices. By creating meaningful and immersive experiences that foster mindfulness, tourism organizations can increase tourist satisfaction and promote destination sustainability (Moscardo and Pearce, 1986; Sheldon, 2020; Suryandari and Rahmawati, 2022).

In this chapter, we focused on South Africa to illustrate how sustainable niche tourism can be developed in a context rich

with cultural and natural diversity. The South African example highlights the potential for integrating ecotourism, cultural preservation, community engagement and mindfulness into a cohesive strategy for sustainable tourism. However, the insights from the case study can be applied more broadly to the Global South and beyond. This chapter demonstrates that by adopting these practices, destinations can create sustainable and meaningful tourist experiences that contribute to long-term environmental, economic and social benefits.

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