

SOCIAL INNOVATION IN TOURISM

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Abstract

Purpose – This working paper explores the emerging topic of social innovation in the field of tourism through a systematic literature review. The proposed review desires to discuss the research trends in the field of Social Innovation in Tourism (SIT), contributing in tracing the major interests and gaps inside this field, for the orientation of future research and future policies. Our research goal is to investigate how social innovation initiatives can contribute to re-design a different relationship between the tourism sector and local communities in order to combat poverty and other inequalities, by offering new possibilities of access to social, cultural and economic resources for target groups.

Design/Methodology/approach – For the systematic literature review we used SCOPUS and Web of Science, in order to trace the most influent papers on the subject and their content. After collecting and selecting the papers which discussed both subjects (social innovation and tourism) – 65 papers in total – we applied a two level analysis: the first one for tracing basic information about the papers and for arriving in a cluster classification and the second one for a deeper look on the contents of each papers (on a micro/individual level, on a meso/network level and on a macro/governance level).

Implications – Our research shows that when the SI is profit-driven (less groups of actors involved) rather than community-driven (more and diverse group of actors involved), the beneficiaries are a much smaller part of the local community, bringing to a less equally distributed welfare to the latter. When the SI is community-driven, the benefits in an individual and network level are unquestionably multiple, other than benefiting noticeably also the touristic experience in terms of authenticity. Moreover, there seems to be a knowledge gap in terms of: a) the local governance profile which could be crucial to understand, in order to translate the conditions of a SI to emerge and to flourish or not, b) the conflicts between actors, in order to understand better the relations between them, their quality and the outcome of a SI innovation, c) the lifestyles of important figures/actors who are triggers of SI, such as artists and artisans for example, because deepening our knowledge on their lifestyles could be crucial in order to understand the composition of the precise local atmosphere, which is responsible for a success/failure of a SI.

Originality/value – The paper constitutes a useful tool for the hands of researchers, as it explores all the most significant conceptual stages and trends of the subject by delivering the first systematic literature review of the latter and, moreover, the paper becomes a useful tool also for the hands of policy-makers, as it contributes in understanding how to orientate future public policies regarding local community and touristic development.

Keywords – social innovation, tourism, review, local community, development

Brief introduction – including RQ and theoretical perspective

Innovation and its relation to tourism is an emerging field of research in the last years (Hjalager, 2010, 2015) and is characterized by the great attention for the role of new technologies (Stamboulis & Skayannis, 2003), management (Sigala, 2018), entrepreneurship (Işık et al., 2019) and community's participation (Rasoolimanesh et al., 2017). Inside the field of tourism innovation studies we trace also the part concerning social innovation (SI), which has emerged in the last ten years (Trunfio & Campana, 2019; Wirth et al., 2022).

Following the definitions of SI proposed by Oosterlyink et al. (2019), Moulaert and McCallum (2019) and Moulaert et al. (2013), our research goal was to investigate how social innovation initiatives can contribute to re-design a different relationship between the tourism sector and local communities in order to combat poverty and other inequalities by offering new possibilities of access to social, cultural and economic resources for target groups. In order to do that, we decided to investigate the particular topic of 'social innovation in tourism' by conducting a systematic literature review.

For the review SCOPUS and Web of Science (WoS) were used. By setting a number of filters and parameters necessary, the total number of the papers and proceedings selected for the review was 65; 54 documents were identified in both repositories and 11 more in Wos (further information on the methodology described in the appendix). Subsequently, a two-level analysis has been applied: the first-level analysis, in order to select and register basic information about the papers and the second-level analysis was conducted in order to understand the impact of SI initiatives in a 'micro', 'meso' and 'macro' dimension, chosen by following an analytical framework based on the needs social innovation initiatives deal with (micro-level, Maslow, 1943), the networks of actors involved in the initiatives (meso-level, cfr. Granovetter, 1978; Burt, 1992), and the forms of governance characterizing the local contexts where SI initiatives take place (macro-level, cfr. Galego et al., 2022).

Main findings

Regarding the first level analysis, papers begin to appear in 2007 (1 paper), a more noticeable production begins in being registered in 2016 (6) and the highest pic in the year 2021 (12 papers).

Regarding the authors' affiliation, 43 authors are of European affiliation, 13 for Asia 10 from Latin America, 2 from North America (USA and Canada) and 1 from South Africa. This result suggests that the interest in the topic is primarily focused on countries with significant socio-economic disparities. The number of authors and papers from Italy are considerably high in comparison to other countries.

Regarding the subject area of the paper as identified from Scopus and Wos, the majority of papers come from Social Sciences (42 papers), 6 papers are related to Business, Management and Accounting, 5 papers come from Economics, Econometrics and Finance, 4 papers come from Computer Science and 3 papers from Environmental Sciences. This result is quite different from other areas of social innovation studies, where management and territorial – both urban and regional – sciences tend to prevail.

As far as the methodology applied in the papers is concerned, 6 papers out of the total present a strictly quantitative approach: structural equation modeling, data evaluation, questionnaire elaboration, agglomeration theory, entropy method, statistics, confirmatory factor analysis. 29 papers present a qualitative methodology such as fieldwork, in-depth or semi-structured interviews, qualitative content analysis, focus groups, direct and participatory observation, ethnography and biography approach. 20 papers use mixed methods and 13 papers present a theoretical analysis (literature review, critical review and systematic literature review). Here, the qualitative analysis methodology as a winning method seems related to the level of development of this research field, which is still in its early stages and require exploratory and inductive studies for a better understanding.

Regarding the countries of the case-studies presented in the papers (in total 55 papers), it is interesting to note that 31 cases are from inside the EU (Italy, Spain, Finland, Portugal, France, Sweden, Croatia, Denmark, Switzerland), 10 cases from Asia (Thailand, Indonesia, Japan, China, India and Vietnam), 8 cases from Latin America (Argentina, Brazil, Chile and Colombia) and the rest from USA, Canada, Mexico and South Africa. We hypothesize this result is related, from one hand, to the desire to help local communities (especially in EU countries and wealthier countries) in dealing with the inequality in opportunities and social conflicts the touristic phenomenon inevitably brings to the table and, on the other hand, this result is related to the possible solutions for the phenomenon of undertourism, which a lot of local contexts mainly of the global south is dealing with, in which tourism is presented as a valuable resource for responding to poverty and unemployment.

Finally, we proceeded in a cluster classification, based on the particular topic/SI initiative described. Fourteen papers discuss the topic of environmental sustainability, in which the main goal is to propose touristic development with a great focus on climate change. Ten papers discuss ICT solutions and the contribution of digital platforms or technology solutions for offering visibility to enterprises (especially for small or medium-sized ones) and for attracting more possible customers. Twelve papers discuss the topic of participation, in which the focus is the involvement of more social groups in the co-design and decision-making processes for touristic development. Eleven papers discuss the contribution of social enterprises as a way to respond to the needs of vulnerable social groups through tourism. Ten papers deal with the creative industries and how they can become triggers for urban or rural regeneration and trigger services and tourist flows. Six papers present the topic of rural tourism and eco-tourism, in which the goal is to improve the quality of life of inner and rural areas through agriculture and agritourism. Finally, two papers discuss topics related to SI in tourism, such as governance and SI procedures.

The common fil rouge, which connects all papers, is the focus on sustainability and also on community-based processes. Sustainability is a term which appears in the majority of the papers analyzed and refers to the ways with which touristic development can flourish and offer benefits (financial, social and cultural) to the local society in its whole and to more possible social groups. Community-based processes are also another common topic in the papers, as the majority of them describe the high level of importance for the local societies to build a touristic development and to offer a better future to themselves by themselves.

As far as the second level analysis is concerned, the findings are divided - as already stated above - into micro (individual dimension), meso (network dimension) and macro (governance dimension) level findings.

Regarding the micro level, our research goal was to investigate how SI initiatives are being translated at an individual level (in terms of personal needs and beneficiaries). For understanding the particular needs discussed in the papers in an individual level, we used the Maslow pyramid and hierarchy of needs (Maslow, 1943): physiological needs (natural resources, clothing, etc.), safety needs (employment, health, personal security, etc.), love and belonging (friendship, sense of connection, intimacy, etc.), esteem (respect, status, recognition, etc.) and self-actualization (desire to become the most that one can be). Moreover, the goal here was to individuate the main beneficiaries of the SI initiative.

The interesting finding to note is that all categories of SI identified in the papers try to respond to Safety needs, in terms of employment and financial security. The papers discussing community-based tourism through diverse SI initiatives (in particular the clusters about social entrepreneurship, cultural heritage, sustainable development, rural tourism and ecotourism) respond to multiple needs and in particular the great opportunity to participate in co-design and decision-making procedures and the possibility to blend economic and social inclusion by fostering forms of responsible tourism (especially in the cluster about social entrepreneurship). This opportunity has an important impact on the needs of the individual: the right to protect local natural resources, to generate income and occupation opportunities, for building a sense of connection with the local community members and also for building self-esteem and recognition as a result of accomplishment through creating a better way of life for itself and a better future for the greater community. Moreover, especially for the rural tourism and eco-tourism cluster, the authors present these SI initiatives as an opportunity for a new lifestyle and for a better quality of life.

Regarding the second parameter set in the micro level, the beneficiaries of the SI initiative, it is interesting to note that in the majority of the papers the beneficiaries are not well identified but only cited (inhabitants, firms, local authorities, etc etc.). Most of the papers present "local community" as the main beneficiary of SI, nevertheless, without deepening the knowledge on the particular composition of the community and its multiple different social groups, which have different needs. It should be highlighted that, since most beneficiaries are not vulnerable individuals, except for a few who may fall into the generic category of citizens or inhabitants, these SI initiatives carry the risk of producing counterproductive effects in terms of social inequalities, benefiting those who need it less (cfr. Matthew Effect).

Proceeding with the meso level analysis, the goal was to investigate the local context in terms of the networks: actors, typology – "industrial district" or "strategic alliance" (Inkpen & Tsang, 2005) and orientation – "bonding" or "bridging" - (Putnam, 2000) presented in each paper. In general, when the ties are weak the market tends to prevail over the defense of local and social interests; conversely, when the ties are strong and act in a coordinated manner, local interests can regulate the market. An interesting finding is that as we are dealing with SI in tourism, all papers discuss the importance of creating networks in a micro level (local) as well as in a macro level (global). Nevertheless, with the exception of the ICT cluster for which the major focus is at an international level, for all the remaining clusters the focus is at a local level (regional, national level included). Within all clusters more actors are described in involved in the SI initiative, public (administration, universities, other public institutions) and private (entrepreneurs, tourist providers, artists and inhabitants). This appears to be a classic example of the 'quintuple helix' (Iaione, 2017), where social innovation arises from interdependence mechanisms among individual innovators, civil society, research centers, public institutions, and businesses. Since



no cluster focuses in the study of brokerage and network management processes, it is of great importance to highlight that there seems to be a knowledge gap regarding how actors interact with each other and on the mechanisms and dynamics between the actors involved in the networks.

Finally, regarding the macro level, which is about the governance profile of the context, the aim was to identify the orientation (Della Lucia & Trunfio, 2012) – incline to innovation or conservative –, the typology of governance (Sabatier, 1986) – top-down or bottom-up/collaborative - and who participates in governance procedures. A finding of great interest is that the majority of papers doesn't describe the governance profile of the context, or at least until 2023, when it seems that governance issues begin to be considered more in the papers. Furthermore, it is urgent to highlight that the papers deal with the term “community”, when referring to its right to participate in decision-making procedures, in a rather rhetoric level. Nevertheless, in a practical level, community is a complicated term and is composed of multiple social groups with different needs. Even if participation is being highlighted, it is necessary to understand that community is not a one-dimension actor, but consists of diverse layers and figures. Moreover, another interesting finding is that there is little attention on the question of conflicts between actors and interests. There seems to be a knowledge gap in terms of conflicts when different interests arise in participative governance, when dealing with touristic development and SI.

Implications

Our analysis present the following implications for theory and practice:

When the SI initiative is rather profit-driven than community-driven, the beneficiaries are a much smaller part of the local community, especially businesses as less actors are involved in the process. On the other hand, a community-based touristic development involves multiple actors and their multiple needs, including businesses. A topic concerning both future research as well as policy-making, should be the identification of all possible actors, but also to explore and to analyze their relations and their dynamics. Regarding the analysis of their relations and the type of their connections, it could be enlightening to identify the conflicts between actors and inside networks. Today we know very little about why SI gets success or not. By studying possible conflicts and divergent interests, a more clear identification of the motivations around the success or failure of a SI initiative and a better understanding of how the initiative contributes to the general interest could be achieved.

Also, especially regarding policy-makers, understanding conflicts and their dynamics could contribute in problem-setting and problem-solving. In smaller contexts, tourism is a valuable resource for offering new opportunities to local inhabitants, nevertheless, very often conflicts are triggered because of contrasting interests. Identifying those conflicts could contribute immensely in learning how to manage and to solve them.

Regarding cultural heritage and creative industries, artists are actively involved in SI initiatives in tourism, as authors discuss. Nevertheless, even if artists play a significant role in many SI initiatives and they are frequently cited, they are never efficiently described and explored in the papers: how do they live, how do they work and what exactly they do. Deepening the knowledge in their style of life could be very significant in order to understand better how to improve the quality of their life and the outcome of a SI initiative related to their work and existence.

Especially when it comes to the touristic experience itself, tourism connected to SI initiatives related to social enterprises, cultural heritage, rural tourism and ecotourism offer the visitor unique, place-based experiences. Authors discuss that the above SI initiatives create genuine experiences to the visitor, as they offer an “immersion” to local activities and know-hows connected to the local identity. For tourist businesses and policy-makers it is important to note that touristic development when designed and implemented by the local community through SI initiatives appears to be a “win-win” condition, in which both local contexts and visitors are beneficiaries.

Due to the limited research on local governance processes, in the papers analyzed, there is an obvious gap in terms of knowledge on the governmental profile of local contexts and its characteristics, which can be crucial for the success of SI initiatives.

Conclusion

The results show that policies should be orientated towards facilitating the SI initiatives in which local communities have a central role, in order to arrive at sustainable solutions for tourism. Local administration and institutions should focus on creating the right conditions for local communities to participate in the design and decision-making procedures, as this possibility creates an environment in which more possible actors can benefit from the touristic phenomenon, reducing inequality and unemployment. However, the absence of a reflection on intermediary figures and organizations within networks and between networks and other local actors (see brokers, Burt 1992) represents a weakness in the studies analyzed here, while it constitutes a central theme in the literature on the relationship between social structures and local economic development (Granovetter 1985). It is rather urgent to highlight the benefits for the local contexts and for more diverse actors when tourism is community-oriented; in these contexts not only the local economy flourishes but inequality in wealth distribution is also noticeably reduced following the equivalence that says “a nice place to visit” is usually “a nice place to live in”. In other words, policy-making should work on constructing a “nice place to live in” which then becomes a “nice place to visit”. Regarding research, the latter should be oriented towards two different areas of study: identifying all possible actors who are involved in SI initiatives and their role in the particular initiative and also investigating more deeply the governance profile of local contexts.

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Appendix

The string used for the topic of social innovation in tourism was: “TITLE-ABS-KEY (*social-innovation AND in AND tourism*)” for both softwares: 117 papers for SCOPUS and 172 for Web of Science were identified. We proceeded with a manual selection of the articles which:

- strictly dealt with both topics of SI and tourism,

- were articles in journals or in conference proceedings, while chapters in books were excluded due to copyright issues and for not being open-access.

The total number of the papers selected for the review was 68; 57 papers were identified in both softwares and 11 more in Wos.

Subsequently, the review has been divided into two different levels of analysis:

1. In the first level of the analysis, we were interested in the above parameters: year – country of authors – subject area of the journal/conference as identified in Scopus and Wos – type of article (journal/conference proceedings) – number of citations – keywords – methodology (quantitative/qualitative/mixed/literature review) – case study.

In this first level of analysis, nine macro-areas have been identified, related to SI in tourism: ICT and technology oriented, entrepreneurship, rural tourism, management, sustainable development, local participation and community-based tourism, ecotourism, social enterprises and cultural heritage.

2. Based on a theoretical framework we don't explain here, in the second level of analysis, we were interested in reading the papers through a micro, meso and macro level.

For the micro level, the goal was to individuate the benefits of SI initiatives at an individual level.

For the meso level, the goal was to individuate actors and networks, their typology and organization.

For the macro level, the goal was to individuate the political orientation and the governance profile of the context.

We added, furthermore, the organization level, in order to understand how decisions are being taken in organizations involved in the particular SI initiative under study.

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