

THESIS SUMMARY
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Can travel experiences
impact on
pro environmental behaviour?

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INTRODUCTION

This MSc thesis is concerned with the future of tourism and more authentic travel as a possible solution to achieving pro environmental behaviour change. The aim was to reveal further insight into whether a travel experience can be a catalyst for pro environmental behaviour change. The research was exploratory and investigated the point of convergence of: travel experiences; behaviour change; and pro environmental behaviour.

BACKGROUND TO RESEARCH

The challenge of achieving behaviour change is commonly considered the holy grail of the climate change agenda. While there is a longstanding history of behaviour change theories and models, and there is increasing research into how to achieve pro environmental behaviour change, there has been little specific research into the relationship between behaviour change and travel experiences. However, what is clear from existing research is that during times of travel and holiday's there is an opportunity to change behaviour as people are less resistant to change and more open (Futerra 2006).

Within the travel and tourism industry one of the key challenges currently faced is creating a more sustainable future for the industry, of which consumer behaviour plays a key part. In a report by Forum for the Future called, '*Tourism 2023*' (Forum for the Future 2009), the need for further research into consumer behaviour has been identified. It highlights not only the importance of understanding consumer behaviour, but also the need for innovative solutions to achieve a more sustainable future for tourism.

It is therefore in the spirit of innovative solutions to the climate change agenda, combined with the contemporary phenomenon of achieving pro environmental behaviour change and a more sustainable future for tourism that this area of convergence was identified and the research was implemented.

RESEARCH STRATEGY

The thesis comprised both a Literature Review and Empirical Research. The Literature Review explored the current challenges of pro environmental behaviour change and the future of the travel and tourism industry, and evaluated the relationship between travel experiences and behaviour change.

The Empirical Research explored the impact of a travel experience on participant opinions and actions with respect to pro environmental behaviours. A case study approach was adopted, with the case study being '*Tribewanted: Vorovoro*' (Tribewanted 2009), an innovative cross-cultural tourism project that integrates life on the island of Vorovoro in Fiji, with a global online social network. The experience provides a sustainable development project, an adventure holiday, and a cultural journey as part of a travel experience. This case study was used as it provides an example of the convergence of an innovative approach to the future of travel experiences, a desire to improve the way we live (behaviour change) and a potential approach to achieving more sustainable living (pro environmental behaviour).

An online survey was used as the research method, capturing both quantitative data, through questions using, '*One Planet Living's 10 Principles of Sustainability*' (WWF 2009),

and qualitative data collation. The survey was designed using surveymonkey and communicated to participants through a blog and e-newsletter, providing the respondents with an opportunity to answer asynchronously. Of the total potential participants that visited Vorovoro between April 2006 and September 2009 (figures based on 1000, although this may be less due to changes of contact details over the 3 year period, however this is unknown), 43 (4.3%) respondents started the survey and 34 (3.4%) completed it. The sampling of the participants was convenience sampling of those who participated in 'Tribewanted: Vorovoro'.

RESEARCH FINDINGS

In exploring this area of convergence the research revealed that yes, travel experiences can be a catalyst for pro environmental behaviour change. More interestingly the research also revealed some of the conditions that are unique to travel experiences which can enable behaviour change, as well as highlighting some of the challenges in achieving change.

Changes in Pro Environmental Behaviour

Changes in pro environmental behaviour were evidenced across all ten 'One Planet Living Principles of Sustainability,' (WWF 2009). Changes ranged from increased awareness of issues of sustainability, to changes in attitudes and pro environmental behaviour. The most significant changes were demonstrated in the principles of:

Consumption (Water, Food, Waste and Purchasing) Transport and Nature The Wider Environment

Consumption - Water, Food, Waste and Purchasing

59% of respondents said they now purchase more chemical free products

66% of respondents said they now buy more local, seasonal and organic produce

'The big wake-up call for me on Vorovoro was chemical waste. You just had to go down to the waterfall shower after someone had been using chemical body products and see the disgusting pool of goo accumulated in the sand. And it sat there and looked yucky for days.... I was already half-heartedly using non-toxic body products but I completely switched when I got home.' Quote from respondent

Transport and Nature - Walk and Cycling, being Outdoors

47% of respondents said they now use their bicycle more

68% of respondents said they now walk more

These changes were not only indicated under the principle of 'Transport', but also 'Health and Happiness'.

'I definitely felt more connected with nature when I came home and as I live in NZ and am surrounded by nature, have made a more concerted effort to spend time in green spaces in my lunch breaks and weekends.' Quote from respondent

The Wider Environment - Work, Education, Career, Involvement in local community

The results were interesting as they highlighted how travel uniquely allows for **vicarious learning** and a transfer of knowledge. This provided the potential for a '**diffusion effect of environmental behaviour**' when participants returned home to their families, friends, communities and workplace. One could say that the participants become '**agents for change**'.

'As i now work for the council i have quizzed where things like recycling goes and whether we can recycle more. As different councils are able to recycle why cant we etc.' Quote from respondent

'I work in travel and I now think that sustainable tourism is definitely the way forward for all and the most rewarding type of holiday for all ages.' Quote from respondent

The impact a travel experience can have on ones personal life choices, such as work, career, and study was also evidenced.

Right Conditions for Behaviour Change

The research also revealed how travel is rather unique in that it can provide the '*right conditions*' to facilitate changes in behaviour. These conditions fell into two categories:

Psychological and External Factors

Psychological

The research evidenced that travel experiences provide a unique environment where one is away from the habits of a home environment, the pressures of day to day living, and enjoying leisure time that can enable behaviour change to occur.

'We were in a place far away from 'reality' and all of the other influences that may have previously tempted us to be lazy and choose the easy but less sustainable option.' Quote from respondent

External Factors of Influence

These are experiences one encounters which can influence behaviour, and form an integral part of travel experiences. The research highlighted four external factors of influence that facilitated pro environmental behaviour change, which were:

Firsthand Experience Participation Social Interaction Forums

Firsthand Experience

Increased knowledge and awareness provided for a change in perspective and **self efficacy**, that is, '*a belief in ones ability to take action*' (Darnton 2008).

If your waste is living right there next to you, you become much more aware of it. I bought two Bokashi composters on my return, and that has cut down our waste immensely, as most of it was food waste. 'Quote from respondent

Participation

The research revealed that by participating in experiences on the island respondents had opportunities for exploration and increased understanding of experiences that they may not otherwise encounter.

71% of respondents indicated they now have less waste and 76% do more recycling

Since helping Leavi in the gardens I now appreciate seasonal food and try to plan my meals around what is in season at the time rather than what I just want to eat. 'Quote from respondent

Social Interaction

The research revealed the importance of the role of social interaction in achieving behaviour change. Travel allowed the removing of social boundaries and provided opportunities to encounter other travellers, people and communities which, at home may never be experienced.

This enabled a '**diffusing effect of pro environmental behaviour**' between participants on the island.

'it reinforces so many ideas that people might have, and talk about but dont actually know how to put it into practice.' Quote from respondent

This '**diffusing effect**' was not only facilitated by participants on the island but also through members of the local community.

'The Fijian culture showed me that what I aim for at home can be acheived across an entire community and still provide a very satisfying and rewarding existance.' Quote from respondent

Vicarious learning, and a transfer of knowledge to one's peers when returning home was also evidenced, providing an opportunity for participants to be '**agents for change**' and what Seth Godin would call a '**Tribe**' like effect (Godin 2008).

'I already found great interest in environmental and sustainable ways of living, however my best friend who came with me would previously scoff at me before when I made her take bags to the supermarket to re-use or turn off all the plugs at the socket not just with standby.....however now its a different story completly. Whe we came back from traveling, she not only started recycling but got her mum's and her sisters house involved, and is now much more environmentally friendly!!....' Quote from respondent

Forums

The research revealed that forums both on the island and online after the experience provided an opportunity for discussion, debate and reflection, as well as the re-enforcing of lessons learnt.

'I took part in a great number of forums during which this was the topic several times which open my eyes to the problem much more. I am now much more aware of this and make a conscious decision to reduced my consumption in fuel and energy.' Quote from respondent

'after I came home I read a blog by James Strawbridge on the website about how he tries to limit his flights. I now have a real think about my flights before I choose to take them, and have started buying carbon offset certificates or donating to a conservation trust each time I fly.' Quote from respondent

In summary, it is therefore a **unique combination** of the **psychological conditions** of travel and the **experiences respondents encountered** that provided the opportunity for pro environmental behaviour change to occur.

Challenges of Achieving Change

The research revealed two key challenges:

The transition of **returning home**
Existing values, attitudes, beliefs and behaviours

Returning Home

Participants expressed concern about not being able to maintain some of the lessons they had learnt when they returned back to their 'everyday life'.

'I do my best to avoid waste wherever possible. Inevitably this is much easier when you're on an island and away from temptation, but I'm doing my best to maintain these values in my life now.'

However, for some participants returning home provided the opportunity to influence others vicariously, as already stated.

Existing Behaviours

The research highlighted the challenge of translating lessons from experiences into our lives and local environment at home. Online forums are already identified as one way this can be addressed and is discussed further in the recommendations.

The other challenge that the research revealed was one that is common in achieving pro environmental behaviour change, and that is translating attitudes into action. This was highlighted with respect to flying, prompting the question – can achieving pro environmental behaviour change justify the carbon emitted to fly to the other side of the world?

CONCLUSIONS

This exploratory research was concerned with the three areas of convergence of behaviour change; pro environmental behaviour; and the travel and tourism industry. In summary, the research found that:

- 1. Travel experiences can provide a catalyst for pro environmental behaviour change**
2. The four areas where **pro environmental behaviour change** was demonstrated most significantly were **consumption, transport, nature, and the wider environment**
3. A **travel experience is unique** in that it can create the both the **right psychological and external conditions for change**
4. The **four external factors of influence** that can facilitate change are **firsthand experience, participation, social interactions and forums**
5. **Vicarious experiences provide an opportunity** to influence the wider environment on returning home through a '*diffusing effect*' and can provide potential '**agents for change**'
6. The **transition of returning home presents a challenge** for maintaining pro environmental behaviours.

So, while there is no single solution to achieving pro environmental behaviour change, the research highlighted the opportunity travel experiences have to contribute to change. The findings also presented an opportunity to inform future developments in the travel and tourism industry.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings of the research, recommendations for the potential application of the findings to the future sustainability of the travel and tourism industry and for further research are made.

Market Development Opportunities in the Travel and Tourism Industry

The research highlighted the positive impact travel experiences can have on pro environmental behaviours and sustainability issues as well as customer experiences, presenting an opportunity for further market development.

Social marketing could be one such solution that could increase businesses market share as part of a more sustainable travel and tourism industry.

Through the collation of basic data from customers on their environmental attitudes/beliefs/values before and after the experience, businesses can use this market information to:

- enhance the experience for both the local people at destination and customers as part of the experience
- potentially develop and expand their businesses market share
- maximise the impact of the experience on customers environmental behaviour
- create a more sustainable future for the travel and tourism industry

Product Development

Businesses have an opportunity to develop innovative solutions to the future of travel and tourism and potentially integrate the findings of this research into the products they promote and develop to create a more sustainable future for the travel and tourism industry.

Potential solutions to integrate into experiences:

- Be **innovative** – travel provides a time when individuals are most receptive to change, presenting a real opportunity to influence and facilitate pro environmental behaviour change, particularly in the independent travel market and with respect to more authentic travel experiences
- Make both destination and online **forums** a positive feature as they are proven to support the learning both during and after the travel experience
- Focus on the '**principle of consumption**' as part of experiences as this is where most participants recorded an impact on behaviour
- **Integrate opportunities for firsthand experience, participation and social interaction into experiences.** These are proven to be powerful in encouraging pro environmental behaviour change.
- Provide **information on environmental impacts and sustainability** both during and after the experience, examples of which could be basic environmental/sustainability information that is directly linked to the experience
- Provide **Top Tips** on how to be environmentally responsible and live more sustainably when back home making it easier for customers to transfer lessons learnt to their lives back home. This could include websites with further information, what's quick, cheap and easy to introduce

Further Research Opportunities

The research demonstrated that travel experiences have the opportunity to provide the '*right facilitating conditions*' to achieve pro environmental behaviour change. With little research into the specific area of convergence further research is recommended.

Based on the findings of the research, three areas of travel and tourism where this would be particularly relevant are:

- Conservation projects where participants are in contact with nature. With international organisations and academics alike highlighting the link between times spent in nature and more environmentally conscious behaviour.
- Volunteer projects that involve firsthand experience and participation.
- Community based tourism, as it provides for firsthand experience, participation and social interaction, and could potentially provide a useful comparison to these findings.

Where possible it is recommended that the research involves before and after data capture as this would provide a timescale for the measurement of change. While a longitudinal study would be suited to revealing changes in behaviour, the time it is conducted over may not be appropriate to travel. Therefore, a case study approach would be recommended, as

would the collation of both qualitative and quantitative data, to provide depth to the findings. If conditions allow, it may be useful to conduct a survey and also use forums or interviews to enhance the findings, however this may not be possible due to the nature of travel. Additionally, depending on the sample of participants, conducting the data collation online through surveys or forums is particularly suited to research in travel due to the global dispersion of participants.

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