

I endorse it, as long as it is sustainable: Generation Z's involvement with agrotourism and ecotourism

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Abstract

Sustainability is a highly debated topic in tourism research. In this study, focusing on visitors belonging to the age cohort of Generation Z, we examined their perceptions of the sustainability of agrotourism and ecotourism. Then, we investigated if and how these perceptions influence their levels of involvement in these two alternative forms of tourism. The results revealed that environmental and economic sustainability perceptions are associated with the development of involvement with both agrotourism and ecotourism. These findings indicate a strong relationship between sustainability perceptions and involvement with alternative tourism, also calling for further research on how to enhance this connection.

Key words: agrotourism; ecotourism; sustainability; involvement; Generation Z

Introduction

The concepts of agrotourism and ecotourism emerged as alternatives to mass tourism, promoting new ideals about tourism destinations, tourists' behavior, and values associated with tourism activities. Initially developed as a means to facilitate the survival of farms under conditions of economic uncertainty (Vogeler, 1975), agrotourism includes all tourism activities that take place on working farms (Barbieri and Mshenga, 2008), presenting strong connections with environments, products, and accommodations that are essentially "agrarian" (Sharpley and Sharpley, 1997), and have a commercial nature (Ollenburg and Buckley, 2007), in the sense that tourism services are offered at a price to visitors who enjoy the value of agrotourism experience. Ecotourism, on the other hand, having its roots in the last decades of the 20th century, gained momentum after the rise of the new millennium, following the development of a conscious tourism behavior that embraces the respect for the environment and takes into consideration the socio-cultural externalities of mass tourism (Khan, 2003). Although both terms, and especially agrotourism, are not new, the discussion around them is still vivid, focusing on a wide variety of issues, such as the contribution of these two alternative forms of tourism to sustainability (Pérez-Olmos and Aguilar-Rivera, 2021; Wang et al., 2021; Salman et al., 2021; Ammirato et al., 2020), rural communities' development (Adom et al., 2021; Adom, 2019), or the reduction of gender gaps in rural economic activity (Halim et al.,

2020; Morgan and Winkler, 2020). The quest for sustainable and just development, along with the realization that mass tourism is accompanied by environmental (Kuvan, 2012), social (McKercher, 1993), cultural (Chong, 2020), and ethical issues (Jamal and Camargo, 2014), led scholars and policy-makers to shift their attention to the search for alternative tourism development that can guarantee a safe future, by offering high-quality travel and tourism experiences while simultaneously respecting the environmental and socio-cultural heritage of destinations (Hall et al., 2015).

Some scholars argue that both agrotourism (Barbieri, 2013) and ecotourism (Walker and Moscardo, 2004) have the potential to lead to more sustainable use of rural resources, possibly mitigating the negative impacts of mass tourism. Nevertheless, others suggest that the shift to alternative forms of tourism may entail some sustainability-related risks. For instance, Bhatta and Ohe (2020) note that agrotourism, offering opportunities for an alternative – and perhaps easier – income to farmers than agriculture, can lead rural residents to an unwillingness to engage in farming activities. Tsaur et al. (2006), in their study, mention a series of concerns associated with ecotourism development, including environmental deconstruction and changes in community livelihoods.

However, a pivotal question – yet not sufficiently answered so far – is how potential visitors evaluate the ability of agrotourism and ecotourism to promote or ensure sustainable development. Since visitors seem to care about issues associated with sustainability (Lima Santos et al., 2020; Navratil, 2019), the identification of their sustainability perceptions of agrotourism and ecotourism deserves special attention. On the other hand, research has shown that involvement in tourism, which refers to the perceived importance that visitors attribute and the interest they express for tourism, as well as their level of engagement in it (Gross and Brown, 2008; Gunter and Gunter, 1980), is a crucial factor guiding visitors' choices, attitudes, behavior, and intentions (Choo and Park, 2020; Gu et al., 2020, 2018; Ho et al., 2010; Chen et al., 2009).

In the present work, by bringing together the construct of involvement and visitors' sustainability perceptions, we aim to answer if and how visitors' perceptions of environmental, economic, social, and cultural sustainability affect the development of involvement in agrotourism and ecotourism. Sustainability, defined as the ability of current systems to produce while simultaneously maintaining their future productive capacity in the future (WCED, 1987), affects many decisions individuals, enterprises, governments, and sectors of economic activity make. Sustainable consumption refers to the emergence of new solutions to socio-environmental imbalances and the development and adoption of lifestyles that promote the idea of responsible consumer behavior (Glavič and Lukman, 2007). The concept of sustainability has entered the field of tourism research, and many scholars endeavor to understand how sustainability-related tourists' perceptions affect their choices (Bernini et al., 2021; Aydın and Alvarez, 2020; Clemente et al., 2020).

Contributing to this research stream, in the present study, we examine visitors' perceptions of the sustainability of agrotourism and ecotourism and their impacts on the development of involvement with these two types of alternative tourism. To do so, we distinguish four dimensions of sustainability, often taken into account by individuals when making tourism-related decisions: environmental, economic, social, and cultural. Environmental sustainability refers to the balance between interconnected socio-economic interests that allows societies to meet their needs without exceeding the

capacity of current ecosystems to produce the services that are essential for meeting these needs and without harming biological diversity (Morelli, 2011). In a similar vein, economic sustainability concerns the ability to generate income without eroding capital and economic resources (Chelan et al., 2018). On the other hand, the creation of “life-enhancing conditions within communities” and the processes through which that condition can be achieved is the foundation of social sustainability (McKenzie, 2004). Although the concept is a bit more complicated than its environmental and economic equivalents (partially owing to the complexity that characterizes social structures and systems), it speaks of some essential elements of social life, such as social justice and social capital (Rasouli and Kumarasuriyar, 2016). Finally, cultural sustainability reflects the capacity of a community to exploit its cultural resources (i.e., cultural landscape, heritage, and vitality) without putting at risk the access of current and future generations to these resources (Locah et al., 2017; Soini and Birkeland, 2014; Axelsson et al., 2013). Our study focuses on visitors belonging to the Generation Z, i.e., persons born between 1997 and 2012 (Dimock, 2019), who represent relatively new but very active entrants to the tourism system (Robinson and Schänzel, 2019) and are characterized by different motives, needs and attitudes toward tourism than the older generations (Olson and Ro, 2021; Monaco, 2018). The relevant literature provides contradictory findings on the degree to which sustainability perceptions and attitudes affect visitors’ behavior in Generation Z. Some research results indicate that sustainability might not be a catalyst for Gen Z choices (Haddouche and Salomone, 2018), while others suggest that sustainability-related values guide to some extent these choices (Jiang and Hong, 2021). Focusing on the four above-mentioned sustainability dimensions (environmental, economic, social, cultural), in the present work, we investigate whether they increase the levels of Gen Z visitors’ involvement with agrotourism and ecotourism.

In the following sections, we outline our methodology, present the results of our analysis, and close the paper by discussing the main findings of the study.

Methods

Participants and procedure

To recruit participants for this study, we posted a Facebook announcement written in Greek, asking young people aged between 17-24 years old to fill out an electronic questionnaire. After three days (April 3 to April 5, 2021), we collected 126 completed questionnaires. Participants had an average age of 21.4 years (S.D.=1.76), whereas 60.3% of them were women. Most of the respondents (86.8%) were university students. Among them, 31 participants (24.9% of the total sample) were students who work part- or full-time.

Measures

To assess respondents’ involvement in agrotourism and ecotourism we used a modified version of Zaichkowsky’s (1985) scale, consisting of six semantic differential items with bipolar pairs of words (unimportant/important, boring/interesting, trivial/fundamental, doesn’t matter/matters to me, useless/useful, undesirable/desirable). A principal axis factor analysis confirmed that items form a single factor for the involvement in agrotourism (eigenvalue=4.01) explaining 66.8% of the total variance. Loading values ranged from 0.70 to 0.87. Following the same procedure, we found a unidimensional structure (eigenvalue=4.84) for the items referring to ecotourism

(loadings ranged from 0.82 to 0.91). The factor explains 80.7% of the initial variance. Cronbach's alphas for both scales were very high (0.900 and 0.951, respectively).

We also developed different scales (Table 1) to evaluate participants' perceptions of the environmental (items: "agrotourism/ecotourism contributes to the prudent use of natural resources," "agrotourism/ecotourism helps preserving the natural environment," "agrotourism/ecotourism has low climate change impacts"), economic (items: "agrotourism/ecotourism contributes to the economic development of rural areas," "agrotourism/ecotourism creates opportunities for economic development in deprived areas," "agrotourism/ecotourism can support the economic survival of small enterprises"), social (items: "agrotourism/ecotourism promotes social justice," "agrotourism/ecotourism offers job opportunities to people in need," "agrotourism/ecotourism destinations enjoy high levels of social well-being"), and cultural sustainability (items: "agrotourism/ecotourism enterprises respect the cultural heritage of the regions within which they are located," "the practices used by agrotourism/ecotourism enterprises are compatible with the culture prevailing in the regions that they operate," "agrotourism/ecotourism supports the survival of local cultures") of the two examined forms of tourism.

Tab. 2. Scales used in the analysis: Eigenvalues, explained variances, and Cronbach's alphas

Sustainability dimension	Loading values	Eigenvalue	Explained variance	Cronbach's α
<i>Agrotourism</i>				
Environmental	0.47-0.91	2.04	67.9%	0.749
Economic	0.72-0.87	2.21	73.8%	0.813
Social	0.52-0.94	2.04	68.0%	0.764
Cultural	0.56-0.89	2.03	67.7%	0.757
<i>Ecotourism</i>				
Environmental	0.73-0.89	2.38	79.3%	0.870
Economic	0.79-0.88	2.42	80.5%	0.876
Social	0.64-0.91	2.19	73.0%	0.815
Cultural	0.58-0.88	2.08	69.2%	0.772

In all cases, a principal axis factoring procedure revealed that the items referred to agrotourism and ecotourism load on the expected factors, yielding eigenvalues higher

than 1.0 and satisfactory alpha values. Between the scales were found positive and significant correlations (Table 2).

Tab. 2. *Pearson's correlation coefficients for the relationships between sustainability dimensions of agrotourism (above the diagonal) and ecotourism (below the diagonal)*

Sustainability dimension	EN	EC	S	C
Environmental (EN)		0.35**	0.49**	0.58**
Economic (EC)	0.45**		0.57**	0.52**
Social (S)	0.52**	0.72**		0.70**
Cultural (C)	0.67**	0.63**	0.69**	

Data analysis plan

To present data, we used measures of central tendency and dispersion. We also employed paired samples t-tests, independent samples t-tests, and Spearman's rho to perform binary analyses. To evaluate whether participants' perceptions of the sustainability of the two alternative types of tourism are associated with the levels of involvement they develop with agrotourism and ecotourism, we conducted two hierarchical regression analyses. In the first step of both models, we entered respondents' gender, age, and a continuous variable showing the number of recreation trips they took in the past two years. This way, we sought to examine for moderating effects of factors commonly referred to in the literature as potential determinants of visitors' attitudes toward tourism (Allan and Altal, 2016; Sabina and Nicolae, 2013; Baral et al., 2012; Kim et al., 2007) and/or their involvement in it (Alonso et al., 2007; Lehto et al., 2004; Zalatan, 1998).

Results

Participants showed moderate involvement with agrotourism (Mean=3.85, Standard deviation=0.77) and ecotourism (Mean=3.63, Standard deviation=0.93). Paired samples t-test revealed that the involvement in agrotourism is significantly higher than that in ecotourism ($t=3.24$, $p=0.002$). The effect of gender on levels of involvement was found to be non-significant in both cases ($t=-1.917$, $p=0.058$ and $t=-1.586$, $p=0.115$), although women had higher mean scores in both cases. Spearman's coefficients indicated non-significant correlations between participants' age and involvement with agrotourism ($\rho=0.096$, $p=0.286$) and ecotourism ($\rho=-0.005$, $p=0.953$).

The mean scores for the dimensions of agrotourism's sustainability ranged from 3.84 for social sustainability to 4.36 for economic sustainability, whereas, among the dimensions of ecotourism's sustainability, the values ranged between 3.68 in the case of social sustainability and 4.06 for the economic sustainability. It is remarkable that, for both types of alternative tourism, their contribution to economic sustainability was evaluated as significantly higher than the other three sustainability dimensions. For agrotourism, the differences were significant at the level of 0.001, whereas t values were between 7.15 and 8.34. Between the other three dimensions, no significant differences were observed

($0.07 < t < 0.15$, $p > 0.05$). The same pattern exists for ecotourism. The mean score for economic sustainability was significantly higher ($p < 0.001$) than those of environmental ($t = 4.24$), social ($t = 6.89$), and cultural sustainability ($t = 5.69$), while between the non-economic dimensions, the differences were non-significant ($0.08 < t < 0.19$, $p > 0.05$).

Non-significant associations were detected between gender and the perceptions of the environmental ($t = -0.10$, $p = 0.923$), economic ($t = -1.34$, $p = 0.182$), social ($t = -1.03$, $p = 0.307$), and cultural sustainability of agrotourism ($t = -0.75$, $p = 0.455$). Age was not correlated with any of the sustainability dimensions. Spearman's rho coefficients ranged between 0.01 and 0.12 ($p > 0.05$ in all cases).

In the case of ecotourism, the analysis uncovered significant gender effects on the perceptions of economic ($t = -2.31$, $p = 0.023$) and social sustainability ($t = -2.82$, $p = 0.006$), with women showing a higher agreement. For environmental ($t = -1.71$, $p = 0.090$) and cultural sustainability ($t = -1.82$, $p = 0.071$) the differences between men and women participants were marginally non-significant. Low and non-significant correlations were found between age and the evaluation of environmental, economic, and social sustainability of ecotourism ($0.08 < \rho < 0.10$, $p > 0.05$). However, the analysis demonstrated a marginally non-significant correlation between age and the perception of cultural sustainability ($\rho = 0.17$, $p = 0.054$).

The comparison between the two types of tourism revealed that participants consider that agrotourism has a higher contribution to the achievement of economic, social, and cultural sustainability than ecotourism (Table 2). On the contrary, perceptions of environmental sustainability did not significantly differ between agrotourism and ecotourism.

The two hierarchical regressions (Table 2) showed that the first block of variables did not contribute to the models. In both analyses, we found that the second step accounted for a significant change in the explained variables. Among the four variables entered in the second block, the perceptions of environmental sustainability had the strongest contribution to the two models, followed by the perceptions of economic sustainability. The positive signs of beta coefficients confirm a positive association.

Tab. 3. *Perceptions of the sustainability dimensions of agrotourism and ecotourism*

Dimensions of sustainability	Mean score (standard deviation)		t	p
	Agrotourism	Ecotourism		
Environmental	3.85 (0.73)	3.73 (0.83)	1.65	0.101
Economic	4.36 (0.64)	4.06 (0.81)	4.75	<0.001
Social	3.84 (0.81)	3.68 (0.82)	2.79	0.006
Cultural	3.88 (0.68)	3.71 (0.75)	2.83	0.005

Discussion and conclusions

In this work, focusing on people coming from the Generation Z cohort, we examined the associations between visitors' perceptions of sustainability and levels of involvement with agrotourism and ecotourism. Since the Gen Z visitors represent the future of tourism (Francis and Hoefel, 2018) while they already actively shape its present (Vieira et al., 2020), understanding their choices and attitudes is pivotal for designing appropriate and functional tourism development plans. The construct of involvement that we examined in this study is an outcome of visitors' perceptions and a crucial antecedent of their intentions and behavior as tourists (Xu et al., 2020). Hence, the results of the present research can offer insights into how sustainability perceptions drive the intentions of Gen Z visitors towards agrotourism and ecotourism.

The analysis revealed that agrotourism attracts the interest of young visitors more than ecotourism. That is not surprising, given that young tourists show a positive attitude towards agrotourism activities (Taylor, 2016), whereas ecotourism is not equally developed in Greece. However, in both cases, Gen Z visitors have moderate involvement with both types of tourism, suggesting that the promotion of both agrotourism and ecotourism should be enhanced.

Tab. 4. Standardized coefficients of the hierarchical regression analyses

	Agrotourism			Ecotourism		
	ΔR^2	β	p	ΔR^2	β	p
Step 1	0.05		0.104	0.02		0.474
Gender		0.13	0.075		-0.01	0.849
Age		0.09	0.227		-0.04	0.586
Number of recreation trips in the past two years		0.09	0.232		0.05	0.507
Step 2	0.32		<0.001	0.43		<0.001
Environmental sustainability		0.35	<0.001		0.48	<0.001
Economic sustainability		0.20	0.030		0.30	0.004
Social sustainability		0.18	0.113		0.15	0.180
Cultural sustainability		-0.02	0.834		-0.15	0.201

The examination of the associations between perceptions of sustainability and involvement uncovered that environmental and economic sustainability are the two catalysts for developing of involvement with agrotourism and ecotourism. Although the finding that the environmental concerns drive visitors' choices is not new (Bergin-Seers and Mair, 2009; Dolnicar and Leisch, 2008), the observation that perceptions of economic sustainability are associated with tourists' involvement can be seen through a broader lens of sustainable tourism: a view that emphasizes not only the environmental but also the economic dimension of sustainability. Besides, the analysis showed that Gen Z visitors consider both types of tourism economically sustainable.

Nevertheless, perceptions of social and cultural sustainability did not emerge as significant predictors of involvement. This finding calls for future research and opens up several new questions. Are Gen Z visitors not fully aware of the impacts that tourism may have on social and cultural sustainability? Or, following the dominant public discourse, they attribute higher emphasis on the environmental and economic aspects of sustainability? Do tourist professionals and governmental organizations promote agrotourism and ecotourism as only environmentally friendly and economically viable forms of tourism without paying attention to their contribution to socio-cultural sustainability? Or visitors belonging to Generation Z do not consider the perseverance of social stability and cultural heritage as equally important to the environmental and economic viability of tourism? Future researchers can answer these questions, thus facilitating the development and appropriate promotion of agrotourism and ecotourism.

To conclude, despite the omission of variables like intentions (Levitt et al., 2019) and quality of previous experiences (Brune et al., 2021), which can impact visitors' involvement, the present work reveals a positive association between perceptions of environmental and economic sustainability and involvement with agrotourism and ecotourism. From a managerial standpoint, these findings suggest that to effectively promote agrotourism and ecotourism in the dynamic cohort of Generation Z, the ability of both forms of tourism to conserve the natural and economic environment should be stressed. From a policy perspective, the results point out a need to re-establish the fundamental basis of these two forms of alternative tourism with the pillars of sustainability; environmental, economic, social, and cultural.

Although our study drew on data from Greek visitors, and despite the fact that the potential of agrotourism and, especially, ecotourism in Greece has not yet been fully exploited, the results offer some first insights into how tourism sustainability perceptions stimulate visitor involvement with alternative tourism activities. Much work is needed to understand how Generation Z visitors stand toward agrotourism and ecotourism, and we hope our study will motivate additional research.

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