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Entrepreneurship and Sustainability in Hospitality and Tourism: Implications for Education and Practice

Introduction

Sustainable tourism appears to be a natural fit for entrepreneurs wishing to pursue business opportunities in this dynamic, economic climate, especially in the area of hospitality and tourism where sustainability is receiving increasing attention.¹ Sustainable tourism can be defined as "tourism that takes full account of its current and future economic, social and environmental impacts, addressing the needs of visitors, the industry, the environment and host communities."² Yet, while the study of entrepreneurship is extensive, with Kuratko³ identifying 44 refereed academic journals in the English language, not much research has focused specifically on entrepreneurs in hospitality and tourism nor specifically with regard to sustainability.⁴ More needs to be learned about entrepreneurs in hospitality and tourism in rural areas and the connections that they have to the three strands of sustainability.

Background

Fifteen years ago, Zhara⁵ wrote that the new global economy must be an entrepreneurial one in which entrepreneurial leadership will take center stage. And while some entrepreneurship scholars have focused on firm performance,^{6,7} others observe that "there is no entrepreneurship without the entrepreneur"⁸ and contend that it is still worthwhile to study entrepreneurship at the individual level.^{9,10} Entrepreneurs have been shown to have characteristics that include attention to creditability, a need for achievement, and a desire for autonomy.^{11,12} However, academics note that there is presently a need for more qualitative work to gain further understanding of the roles of entrepreneurs in rural tourism development.¹³

Specifically in hospitality and tourism, in a conversation with Harold Rosen, president and CEO of the Rosen Hotels, interviewers found that Mr. Rosen embodied a "certain restlessness, a capacity to dream and to inspire, business intelligence, confidence, diligence, and high personal values,"¹⁴ supporting earlier work on characteristics of entrepreneurs in hospitality and tourism.^{15,16} In the sustainable hospitality and tourism sector in particular, Kensbock and Jennings developed a grounded theory of entrepreneurs based on the theme of pursuing in terms of the entrepreneurs' pursuit of information, legitimacy, and futurity. Sub-categories of pursuing included the entrepreneurial self, social interaction, and pursuing sustainable tourism and ethics.¹⁷ Yet, while interviews with highly successful entrepreneurs such as Mr. Rosen provide useful insights into profitable entrepreneurship in large businesses, little is known about small start-up businesses that add much to hospitality and tourism, especially in rural areas where farming and other agricultural or natural resource based economic activities are often decreasing and where tourism may play and could play a greater role in the development and maintenance of a healthy economy.¹⁸ In addition, in rural areas there are often several entrepreneurs, some who compete directly against each other or cooperate to provide the same product or service, and others who provide complementary products and services. For example, one might find entrepreneurial food and beverage operations, lodging operations, attraction operations, and support products and services all serving tourists and residents in one small rural community.

Nevertheless, relatively little is known about the perceptions of these small business owners and how they incorporate financial, environmental, and social sustainability into their businesses.

The Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to explore the perceptions of small entrepreneurs in a rural community in the United States (US) to better understand their backgrounds and experiences, using the grounded theory of entrepreneurship proposed by Kensing and Jennings as a framework.¹⁹ Entrepreneurship does not have one classic or standard meaning. However, for the purposes of this study, given that the focus was on sustainable hospitality and tourism, the researcher conceived of entrepreneurship in the way that Kensing and Jennings used it in their grounded theory study of tourism entrepreneurs such that “tourism entrepreneur” refers to “an individual who creates a business with some component of originality in provision of a product, service, or experience for tourists.”²⁰ Using this definition of entrepreneurship and concentrating on the entrepreneurial themes of the pursuit of information, legitimacy, and futurity, the researcher investigated the perceptions and practices of hospitality and tourism entrepreneurs with a focus on sustainability to better understand this segment of the hospitality and tourism industry. This project addressed the following research questions: 1.) What are hospitality and tourism entrepreneurs’ experiences, perceptions, understandings, and practices related to pursuing information, legitimacy and futurity? 2.) What are hospitality and tourism entrepreneurs’ experiences, perceptions, understandings, and practices of sustainable tourism?

Methods

For this study, hospitality and tourism entrepreneurs were interviewed in the US in a small, rural community in western North Carolina. Interview data were analyzed for themes related to motivations and operational practices and the findings were compared to previously identified themes for entrepreneurs found in the literature. A template analysis method was used, for as noted, the researcher concentrated on the entrepreneurial themes of the pursuit of information, legitimacy, and futurity to investigate the perceptions and practices of hospitality and tourism entrepreneurs with attention to sustainability to learn more about these participants in the hospitality and tourism industry.²¹

Purposeful sampling was used in this study. In this method, study participants are selected based on their characteristics.²² Specific characteristics for this project included being current hospitality and tourism entrepreneurs, ongoing experiences with entrepreneurship, an interest in sustainability, and a desire to participate in the project. For this study, the investigator used a snowball sample that started with personal knowledge of business people in a small community who were entrepreneurs in a variety of businesses related to hospitality and tourism. From these contributors, additional participants were recruited that fit the sampling criteria. A Facebook message to each potential participant, via his or her business page, introduced the project and alerted potential participants to the research, provided specific details about the study, and asked for participation in the interviews. Entrepreneurs interested in participating were contacted individually to set up an interview date and time. Semi-structured interviews were conducted by the researcher. This method was chosen because it allowed the researcher to seek clarification from interviewees so as to gain understanding of their behaviors and attitudes.^{23, 24, 25} Interviews lasted approximately one and a half hours and used a funneling technique to build rapport between the interviewer and the interviewee.^{26, 27, 28} The interview questions were based on current literature. Interviews were voice recorded and then transcribed for data analysis.

In accordance with Morse's and Richards' guidelines, data analysis for the project did not begin until all interviews were completed.²⁹

Findings

Interviews were conducted with 12 entrepreneurs. Their businesses included two microbreweries, a food truck, a wine shop, an outdoor store, a gift shop, a fresh fish market, a clothing boutique, a gift store featuring local handmade craft items, an ice purveyor, a restaurant, and a bookstore. Using the grounded theory of entrepreneurship in sustainable tourism proposed by Kensbock and Jennings, the researcher focused on the entrepreneurial themes of the pursuit of information, legitimacy, and futurity in the analysis.³⁰ In terms of pursuing information, all of the entrepreneurs interviewed indicated that they continuously sought knowledge about their business operations and product, yet some differences were given with regard to the types of information. As far as pursuing legitimacy, all of those interviewed mentioned concerns about making certain that they complied with all business laws and regulations, although their exact concerns varied according to their type of business and their own resources, such as connections to legal advisors. And as for pursuing futurity, those interviewed all suggested that they needed to have a holistic view of their business, look at the big picture, and have a vision. As for their entrepreneurial self, those interviewed displayed the characteristics of creditability, need for achievement, and autonomy. While their social interactions focused on the importance of supportive families, business partners, and communities, their pursuit of ethics revealed a strong focus on collaboration and authenticity. And specifically related to sustainability, one entrepreneur summed up the group's position on operating a sustainable tourism business by noting that, "You have to be sustainable in house too. You have to make sure you are conscientious about how you personally use resources."

Implications

Learning more about entrepreneurs in hospitality and tourism, and particularly in terms of their connections to sustainability, has implications for industry and education given the growth of entrepreneurship. Interviewees noted that they continually pursued knowledge and making those opportunities available and worthwhile is important. They also noted the importance of their connections with their communities and other entrepreneurs to continually practice and promote sustainability. In hospitality and tourism education, instructors often focus on practical pre-occupation training and educational content. However, it is possible that further attention could be given toward helping current and future entrepreneurs develop creative and critical thinking skills and to engage in deeper self-discovery experiences to help prepare them for entrepreneurial roles in the industry.³¹ For entrepreneurship is "about continual innovation and creativity" and there is a need to further understand the juxtaposition between risk and security, including how to incorporate sustainability into their ventures.^{32,33}

Conclusions

This study may provide insights into education and industry to help those interested in pursuing entrepreneurship opportunities in sustainable hospitality and tourism. It will also help focus further studies of entrepreneurship in hospitality and tourism, especially with the increased attention to sustainability around the world. Future research is needed with larger samples to determine how these three themes are carried out in a wider capacity and to further investigate the role of sustainability as a consideration in entrepreneurs' business plans and operations.

Notes

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