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Qualitative Research Methods Workshop

Understanding the regulatory landscape of the tourism sharing economy: A reflective policy Delphi approach

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To be considered for the methods in qualitative research session

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Short Abstract

Understanding the regulatory landscape of the tourism sharing economy: A reflective policy Delphi approach

The tourism sharing economy is a dynamic and highly contested space where incumbent tourism industries are increasingly engaging in a battle with new entries in the market who have embraced the sharing economy model. Central to this conflict is disagreement about how the tourism sharing economy is best regulated. This paper discusses the application of a policy Delphi technique to develop a comprehensive matrix that reflects current knowledge about the regulatory landscape of the tourism sharing economy in Australia. Despite concerns about dysfunction and conflict, a constructive outcome resulted in a current and comprehensive picture of the sharing economy in both global and local contexts, its impacts and the range of potential regulatory responses available both locally and globally.

Understanding the regulatory landscape of the tourism sharing economy: A reflective policy Delphi approach

Introduction

The sharing economy has quickly become a unique form of economic and social exchange that some have suggested facilitates and extend the inter-connectedness of communities (Buczynski 2013). However, research around the tourism sharing economy (TSE) is yet to fully explore its dynamics (Miller 2015). Despite its historical connotations, the sharing economy is still emerging as a contemporary concept. Therefore, considering its emerging nature, and the speed at which it is reshaping existing services and business, it is unsurprising that it is a contestable space. Industry and government responses to the TSE broadly coalesce around two largely opposing perspectives. The first perspective, typically held by incumbent industries and businesses, and many governments, views the TSE as a mechanism for bypassing established regulatory and quality measures which incumbent businesses must follow. The alternative view, held by most sharing economy businesses, some industry associations and some governments is that the TSE is a transformative business model that uses new technologies to more effectively serve the needs of both consumers and suppliers that can have positive social and economic benefits not realized under more traditional models of business and should not be encumbered by unnecessary red-tape (Lyons and Wearing, 2015).

Those who hold these two opposing perspectives have been unable to reach consensus about the most appropriate level and type of regulatory measures that should be applied to businesses operating in sharing economy within a particular context. However, a defining feature of conflict in dynamic contexts is that consensus is often impossible until greater clarity around the range of approaches and potential solutions to the problem are identified (Turoff, 2012). This paper discusses the application of a modified qualitative policy Delphi technique employed to establish this clarity by collectively building and sharing comprehensive state-of-the-art knowledge about the regulatory landscape of the tourism sharing economy.

Literature Review

Normative Delphi techniques describe methodological processes designed to seek information, views and insights on a given topic from a panel of experts (Turoff, 2002). The panel is typically comprised of a group of experts and, through a series of iterative rounds and feedback, reach consensus about a

solution to a problem associated with the topic. While this approach is effective when dealing with well-understood, stable phenomena, it is not well suited to more ambiguous, unstable and contentious processes that are typically encountered in the context of policy development and review (Linstone & Turoff, 2002). Moreover, concerns over how to define an 'expert' has called into question the validity of such an approach (Paraskevas & Saunders, 2012).

An alternative approach is the 'policy Delphi method' that seeks to generate, articulate and disaggregate wide-ranging and contested perspectives as an important foundation upon which to understand the characteristics and implications of poorly understood phenomena. Policy Delphi was developed by Turoff (1970) as a way of identifying and establishing the breadth of views and perspectives regarding relatively unknown phenomena. Unlike the more normative Delphi approach that draws on relatively detached views of a group of experts ultimately resulting in consensus regarding the best option/course of action, the policy Delphi focusses on the diverse perspectives of advocates who understand and champion a particular perspective but whose expertise is bounded by that perspective. Ultimately, the policy Delphi approach uses a multi-stage discovery process designed to reveal and harness the breadth of possible issues and options/courses of action available (Parsekavas et al. 2012).

Most applications of a policy Delphi have followed the normative Delphi method by using a more quantitative research design and have been effectively employed in tourism forecasting (Lin & Song, 2015). However, McKenna (1994) has suggested qualitative techniques, especially individual interviews, are more effective in engaging key stakeholders in the Delphic process. However, a limitation of both interviews and surveys is that they do not provide an opportunity for oppositional interactions to occur. In the tradition of focus groups, a lack of consensus can be viewed as dysfunction (Belzile & Öberg, 2012). However, following the policy Delphi tradition, lack of agreement about a course of action can lead to a much larger range of potential insights into the phenomena of interest (Turoff, 2002).

Methodology

The Policy Delphi method (Linstone & Turoff, 2002) was employed and adapted to engage with a group of tourism industry association advocate-leaders identified by the tourism industry division of a state level business chamber in Australia. The panel included 12 leaders from a range of sectors associated with tourism and captured a broad spectrum of views about the tourism sharing economy. Industry operators, including those who operate in the sharing economy context, were represented by

various association bodies on the Delphi Panel. This included representation at state and national levels of the ride-sharing and taxi industry, the holiday rental industry, the hotel accommodation industry and food and catering industries.

The panel convened once in a face-to-face focus group and then online via an email group for two additional rounds. Prior to the focus group meeting, the research team developed a framework for a tentative typological matrix document that used broad categories of TSE products and service types; TSE impacts; and TSE regulatory responses organized into local, regional, and international geographical contexts.

The panel members met for 2 hours in a neutral meeting space. Members were asked to discuss whether the matrix parameters were relevant and broad enough to capture the knowledge/resources that members of the panel felt were relevant to their understanding of the TSE. Members were invited to suggest ways to extend or amend the matrix parameters. At the completion of the meeting, the research team modified the parameters of the matrix and circulated it via an email group to all members and asked participants to share resources and information with other Delphi members and the research team that could be used to populate the matrix. Participants were asked to only share via email attachments or links to web resources, publicly available information and documents (no commercial in-confident information was captured). There were no other parameters placed around what could be shared enabling participants to include information that would reflect their individual advocacy positions.

In addition to gathering information and resources and locating them within the matrix according to the Delphi panel members' suggestions, the research team undertook a comprehensive review of the academic literature and contributed this to the matrix. The matrix was updated and modified based on this and re-circulated in a second round and third round to produce. At each round, Delphi members were asked to share any further resources and to offer suggestions about how to refine the way the matrix was organized. At the end of the last round, a final matrix document was developed that subsequently informed an industry report on the regulatory landscape of the tourism sharing economy in Australia.

Results

Of the original twelve Delphi Panel members, nine actively participated through all rounds of the Delphi process. The remaining 3 did not actively withdraw but remained silent throughout the process. The final typological matrix produced from the policy Delphi process included over 1200 individual documents and resources including 211 refereed journal articles (primarily produced by the research team), 358 government regulatory reports/documents from across the globe, 270 media reports, and 377 industry submissions, documents and reports that the Delphi panel felt were relevant to the tourism sharing economy.

Conclusion and Discussion

While there was no consensus sought in regards to identifying an appropriate regulatory response to the TSE, there was agreement about what constituted the best way to organize the breadth of relevant resources and information that the Delphi panel identified and shared. Moreover, the breadth of resources generated and shared through this process was highly valued by each Delphi panel member who each saw the resultant typological matrix as a valuable resource for their industry in its own right.

The tourism economy remains in its infancy and while significant effort to understand its impact scope and appropriate regulatory responses, current efforts are limited by a lack of understanding of its scope and diversity. In addition, policy responses have been relatively myopic and fail to build on the knowledge-base being developed in a wide range of contexts across the globe. This paper demonstrates one approach to sharing that knowledge demonstrating how a policy Delphi approach can be a useful mechanism for this.

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