

A Qualitative Study of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) in Destination Context

There is growing awareness of environmental issues in the United States and across the globe. It is partly because of the growing concern about climate change (Gore, 2006), and increasing demands of green consumers who are willing to live “green” and to buy ecological products (Ip, 2003). To meet the needs of those consumers, many companies have introduced sustainability programs into their businesses in order to increase their operational efficiency and to do the “right” thing.

In the 1980s, sustainable development was defined as “development that meets the needs of the present generation without comprising the ability of future generations to meet their needs” (WCED, 1987). . Most recently, in a broad sense, researchers describe sustainability as an integration of three dimensions: environmental, economic, and social (Elkington, 1994; Goethe, 2008). However, CSR can contribute to the destination image in many different ways. For example, it can help a destination build positive image and then increase and maintain the functionality and appeal of a destination.

The existing sustainability programs in tourism destinations start with 1) green programs, which refer to all the environmentally friendly practices implemented in destinations, and 2) CSR, which is the responsibility for the impact of tourism destination activities on the environment, consumers, employees, communities, stakeholders and all other members of the public sphere in some way.

This study attempts to answer the question “how can CSR improve the image of the U.S.

tourism industry?" The focus of this study is to explore how CSR can help to improve the perception of destination images from the perspective of marketing and branding.

Literature Review

Definition and Concepts of Sustainability

Sustainability encompasses economic, environmental and social issues. The economic dimension of sustainability is focusing on decoupling environmental degradation and economic growth. The environmental dimension of sustainability is the ability of an ecosystem to maintain ecological process, functions, biodiversity and productivity into the future. The social dimension of sustainability is about issues such as peace, security, social justice (Dawley, 1993).

. Figure 1 and 2 shows the interlocking spheres model and the concentric spheres model, separately.

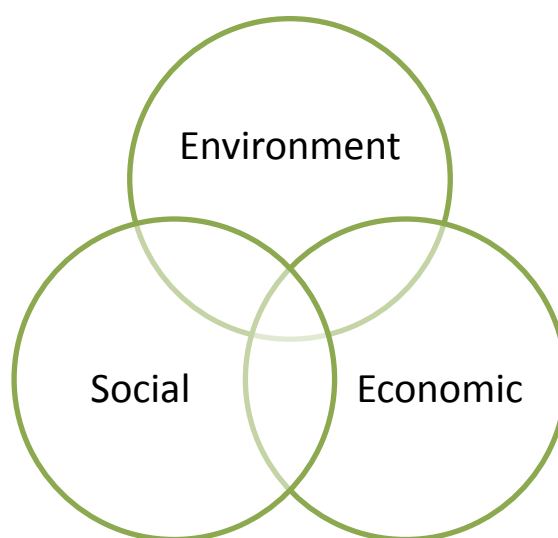


Figure 1 Interlocking Spheres Model of Sustainability

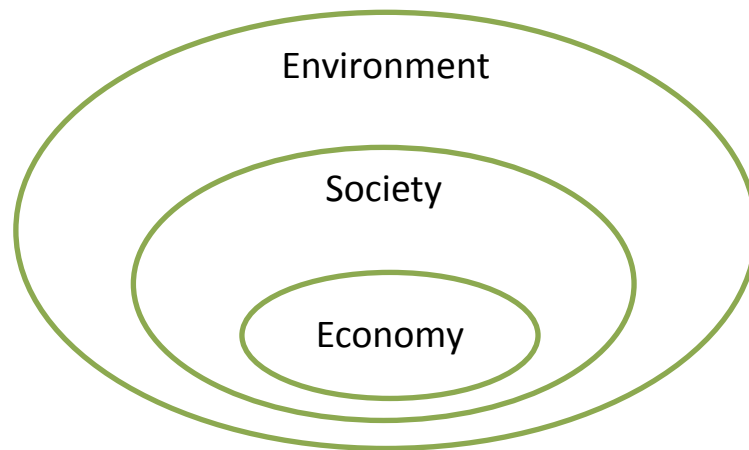


Figure 2 Concentric Spheres Model of Sustainability

The two models above offer different ways of conceptualizing sustainability and serve different purposes as well. The concentric model (Figure 2) provides a representation of how we “should” understand the relationship away the environmental, social, and economic spheres, portraying their interdependent relationship and ultimate reliance. On the contrary, the interlocking model (Figure 1) visually represents how we “could” understand the nature of each sphere and the reciprocal sphere (Barron & Gauntlett, 2002).

The concentric spheres model is used in this study with an attempt to provide in-depth and detailed understanding of the social dimension including existing CSR programs and the outcome of the adoption of such programs in tourism destinations in the United States. From a business standpoint, CSR refers to how companies manage the business processes to build an overall positive image on society. Moreover, a general definition of CSR is a commitment to behave ethically and contribute to economic benefits while improve the quality of life at a community-based level. In the tourism sector, CSR often include charitable efforts and

volunteering. For example, Marriott International has developed and implemented charitable program, as well as green programs, and as a result, clarified itself as CSR.

CSR and Destination Image

Rowe and Schlacter (1978) clarified the characteristics of CSR and presented guidelines about how businesses can foster a reputation for CSR. Firms must work to develop incentives in terms of both corporate structure and government policy to ensure that CSR becomes an integral part of their social structures. Similarly, Knox and Maklan (2004) explored the effect of CSR had on business decision making. They also linked CSR and business success and social outcomes. Their study indicated the relationship between CSR, business and social outcomes. What's more, Hutchins and Sutherland (2008) reviewed indicators of social impact and initiatives to evaluate social sustainability in corporate settings. They also explored the relationship between business decision-making and social responsibility. According to CSR literature, CSR can help businesses build positive reputations, as well as help them to differentiate themselves from other companies.

The CSR programs show that companies care about society, and spend a huge amount of money trying to improve both tourist and resident's lives. As a result, both tourists and residents are more likely to speak well of the tourism destination, which creates a positive association and thus attracts more tourists and contributes to the local economy. However, CSR has not been studied in the destination sector due to the holistic system nature of it.

Methodology

In this study, a grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) approach will be used. The sample will be recruited through the CVB (e.g., CVB in Indianapolis) gatekeepers and compose of employees who have been involved in or are currently working for destination marketing or promotion programs. Interviews will be audio-taped and transcribed following the process recommended by Corbin and Strauss (2008). Interview questions will be developed to further develop the relationship between CSR and the destination image from CVB's perspective.

Discussion and Implications (work-in-progress)

Theoretically, this study will demonstrate the responsiveness of CVB in tourism destination. Specifically, it will explore the efficiency and effectiveness of existing CSR programs. Tourism destinations are different from hospitality companies such as hotels or restaurant, since they do not have a clear and specific structure. The concept of CSR in organizational theories is not completely applicable to tourism destinations. Practically, it can help employees working for CVB come up with effective marketing or promotion strategies. However, the limitation of the study is that we select the CVB in mid-western area of the United States. The marketing or promotion strategies can be different in other areas of the United States. Future research can explore the contribution of CSR in other tourism destinations and compare with the result in this study.

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