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Place Identity - Sustainability Performance Relationship Among Rural Tourism Entrepreneurs

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Abstract: Place identity is the symbolic significance that an individual has for a specific place or locality. The term encompasses the ways in which physical and symbolic attributes of certain locations contribute to an individual's sense of identity. Place identity is also related to the concept of place attachment. At the individual level it has been proposed that an individual's positive place identity has a positive effect on pro-environment behavior. The place attachment may also explain an individual's attitudes to environmental concern and issues. Similarly, it has been found that there is a positive relationship between place identity and entrepreneurial performance. Therefore, an interesting question arises: Is there a relationship between place identity and sustainability performance? The objective of this study was to examine the concept of place identity in regarding the sustainability performance relationship of rural tourism enterprises. The theoretical framework is built from place identity and the concept of sustainable development. The material consists of interviews with 24 rural tourism entrepreneurs. The themes of the interviews comprise descriptions of the /countryside/scenery/ and cultural heritage, the sense of communality, cooperation with stakeholders, sustainability actions and background information. The rural tourism entrepreneurs were aware of the features of the surrounding countryside and cultural environment and were /inspired/motivated/ to protect them in different ways. Entrepreneurs were more aware of the cultural heritage of the place than of natural values. There were no differences as to where the entrepreneurs came from or whether they had a special relationship to the place. The enterprises utilized the historical and cultural elements of the area in their business and in so doing they preserved the heritage, which was a sign of the entrepreneur's place attachment. In most cases the sense of community was perceived as being positive, but the feelings of losing the communality was also expressed. It seems that the place identity has a positive relationship to the sustainability performance of the rural tourism entrepreneurs, but it is not the only reason for entrepreneurs' actions. The finding explains the importance of place identity in the sustainability development, but on the other hand, the study reveals the spectrum of other factors influencing it.

Keywords: sustainability performance, rural tourism, place identity

1. Introduction

Generally rural tourism is regarded as sustainable because it is often small-scale, locally-owned, located in the countryside or in the natural environment. However, the assumption that this kind of tourism business is automatically sustainable, has been criticized (Roberts and Tribe 2008; Swarbrooke 1999). Sustainability is essential in tourism and also in rural tourism, because it has been proved that the tourism industry has both negative and positive impacts on the environment, culture and society. The World Tourism Organization (WTO) has defined sustainable tourism as the following: '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' (UNEP and WTO 2005).

The special feature of the tourism industry is that tourism products are produced and used locally and that emphasizes the importance of local institutions and elements, such as the local environment and stakeholders. In Finland, rural tourism enterprises are often family-owned, micro-sized companies that utilize traditional and local food, culturally valuable surroundings and serving experiences in the Finnish countryside and environment. Although the locality is in the centre of the rural tourism business realization and the ownership, the effect of place and its multiple dimensions on the business and on the sustainability performance is still little known or understood. Therefore, this study examines the effect of place, using the concept of place identity, on the sustainability performance of rural tourism enterprises.

1.1 Place identity

Place-identity is a broad and complex concept with multiple dimensions. Proshansky, Fabian and Kaminoff (1983) defined place identity as the symbolic significance of the place for the individual and it refers to the ways in which physical and symbolic attributes of certain locations contribute to an individual's sense of identity. Place identity is a sub-structure of the self-identity of a person comprising /cognitions/perceptions/ about the physical world in which the individual lives. These cognitions represent memories, feelings, attitudes, values, preferences, meanings, and conceptions of behaviour and experience (Proshansky et al.

1983). Individuals define who and what they are in terms of strong affective ties to house-and-home and/or neighbourhood and community.

The place-identity of a person is also shaped by other people (Proshansky et al. 1983). The group membership and social roles defines who the person is to his or herself and to others. The rural entrepreneurs' social ties to a place might be manifold extending from family and neighbourhood to the community level. These memberships and many of the sociocultural roles the individual plays, involve evaluations of the performance of these roles and the social value of his or her group membership. (Proshansky et al. 1983).

As mentioned above place identity is a complex construct with multiple dimensions that function as indicators of place identity. Several indicators have been applied in the research of place identity, such as the following: commitment to stay (Hallak et al. 2012), place attachment (Lee et al. 2016; Williams and Vaske 2003), support for community (Hallak et al. 2012), perception of familiarity (Lee at al. 2016), cohesion (Lee et al. 2016), social acceptance (Lee et al. 2016) and place dependence (William and Vaske 2003; Vaske and Kobrin 2001). Place identity is often related to the concepts of place attachment and place dependence. In this research place identity is viewed through place attachment and place attachment is used to explore the place identity of the rural tourism entrepreneurs' (Figure 1).

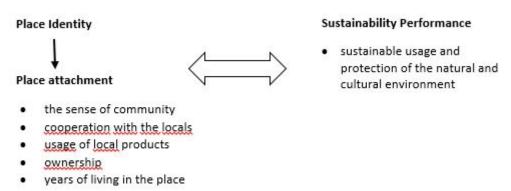


Figure 1: Conceptual model relationships between sustainability performance and place identity and place attachment

1.2 Place attachment

Another frequently used term to describe bonding to environmental settings is 'place attachment' (Altman and Low 1992; Moore and Graefe 1994; Vorkinn and Riese 2001). Viewed from the environmental psychology discipline place attachment signifies a positive connection or bond between a person and a particular place (Giuliani and Feldman 1993; Williams and Vaske 2003). A strong emotional attachment is created when an individual sees his/her neighbourhood as part of self and as a resource for satisfying his/her goals (Williams et al. 1992). Attachment can be developed via regular interaction with events and environments in the neighbourhood. These are significant factors in /one/an individual/a person/ getting a feeling of belonging to a place he or she resides (Lee et al. 2016; Proshansky et al. 1983). Place attachments develop slowly and the length of time the resident has lived in the community may have an effect on the feeling of belonging (Vorkinn and Riese 2001).

There are two approaches to perceive place attachment: one is to view place attachment from an emotional perspective and the other is to view it from a more objective behavioural and cognitive perspective (Giuliani 2002). Place attachment may also be functional. It reflects the importance of a place in providing features and conditions that support specific goals or desired activities (Stokols and Shumaker 1981; Williams and Roggenbuck 1989). This functional attachment is embodied in the area's physical characteristics such as accessible walking routes in forests (Williams and Vaske 2003). The quality of the current place in terms of the availability of social and physical resources to satisfy business goals of the rural entrepreneur is of course essential. Therefore, the entrepreuneurs' place attachment may also include the special bond as entrepreuneur in addition to the emotional bond.

It has been claimed that attachment to a place also involves care and concern for the place (Relph 1976), which implies that individuals with a strong attachment to an area probably will oppose environmental

degradation (Vorkinn and Riese 2001). It has been argued that individuals with self-identities strongly linked to a place (e.g. their neighbourhood or a forest) will show their commitment to the place by demonstrating care and concern because their communities are central to their sense of self-identity (Uzzell et al. 2002). The things that people/entrepreneurs care about, and are cared for by those with whom they feel they belong are associated to the sense of community. McMillan and Chavis (1986) define a sense of community as 'a feeling that members have of belonging, a feeling that members matter to one another and to the group, and a shared faith that members' needs will be met through their commitment to be together.'

1.3 Sustainable performance - place identity relationship

Sustainability in tourism covers all the practices that are more energy efficient, consume less water, minimize waste, conserve biodiversity, value cultural heritage and traditional values and generate local income (UNEP 2011). Given that rural tourism relies heavily on environmental attractiveness and healthy outdoor pursuits, it might be expected that tourism and hospitality operators would be especially motivated to adopt sustainable development practices (Carlsen et al. 2001). In some areas the role of rural tourism is to support the preservation of the rural nature and landscape (Fons et al. 2011).

There are several factors that influence sustainability performance at the company level. The most significant factors are stakeholder pressure, economic drivers, company features and external factors (Epstein 2008; Gonzalez-Benito and Gonzalez-Benito 2005). The small-scale rural tourism entrepreneurs most often experienced that influencing sustainable practices are a combination of personal values or reasons, external factors, economic drivers and the influence of stakeholders (Väisänen and Törn-Laapio 2017 unpublished). The role of place identity in the sustainability performance in rural tourism context has not yet been studied. Moreover, little is known about the extent to which the place where the business is located influences decisions made by tourism entrepreneurs concerning the sustainability.

At the individual level, it has been proposed that the individual's positive place identity has a positive effect on the pro-environment and sustainable behaviours (Halpenny 2010; Lee et al. 2016; Vaske and Kobrin 2001). Moreover, the place attachment may explain individuals' attitudes to environmental concern (Vorkinn and Riese 2001). It has also been found that there is a positive relationship between the place identity and entrepreneurial performance (Hallak et al. 2012). There is growing evidence that environmentally significant action increases with affective attachments to and identification with nature and place in other words connectedness to nature or place (Gosling and Williams 2010). As closeness to nature or place increases, so does empathy and the willingness to help (Mayer and Frantz 2004). Therefore, an interesting question that arises is as follows: Is there a relationship between the place identity and sustainability performance? The objective of this study was to examine how the place identity influences sustainability performances of microsized rural tourism enterprises. We indicate the place identity of the rural tourism enterprises in this study. The place identity is investigated using the concept of place attachment. Place attachment is indicated in terms of the following items: the sense of communality, cooperation with the locals, ownership, length (years) of living in the place. In this research place is defined as comprising both the physical and the social environments (Dewine-Wright 2009; Proshansky et al. 1983).

2. Material and methods

A total of 26 interviews of rural tourism entrepreneurs were carried out in four regions in Finland (Southern Savo, Central Finland, Päijänne-Tavastia and Tavastia Proper). The semi-structured interviews were conducted face-to-face at the companies' premises during the summer and autumn of 2013. Qualitative research can be conducted with the intention to gain insight into meanings that places possess in place attachment research. Some of the techniques used for qualitative research are in-depth interviews and verbal reports from focus groups (Lewicka 2011).

Background information of interviewed rural tourism companies is found in table 1. All the companies had tourist accommodation business. In addition, 16 companies provided food services and 13 companies had theme or programme services. The majority of the companies had been in operation for less than 16 years (73% of the companies). Five of the interviewees (19%) can be said to be very experienced and long-term entrepreneurs, age of the companies varying from 2 to 76 years. The revenue of the companies also varied greatly from under 100 000 to over 300 000 euros per year. However, the revenue of the majority of the companies was below 100 000 euros per year. Over one-third of the companies had one or two employees, over half had three to five employees and only two had six or more employees. Typically, the rural tourism

business is made up of family-owned and family-run companies. In most cases the main employees were the entrepreneurs themselves.

The majority of the companies (18) has been established in the family farm or in the land of the family farm. Four entrepreneurs have moved to the place elsewhere. Two entrepreneurs had a family-relative relationship to the property. Many of the entrepreneurs had a close bond with the place, because the farm has been their childhood home.

The rural tourism companies operated their tourism activities as agricultural and/or natural environment experiences. In table 2 is presented the classification of rural tourism companies according to tourism activities based on agricultural and/or natural environment.

Table 1: Background information of interviewed rural tourism companies

		Companies
		(number or percentage)
Tourism activity (n=24)	Accommodation	100%
	Food services	62%
	Activity	50%
Age of the company years (n=24)	0–5	4
	6–10	5
	11–15	8
	16–20	2
	21–25	0
	26≤	5
Revenue euros per year (n=16)	0-100 000	12
	100 001–200 000	2
	200 001–300 000	0
	300 001-	1
Number of employees (n=19)	1–2	7
	3–5	10
	6≤	2

The entrepreneurs were asked to describe the natural and cultural environment that their businesses operated in, what sustainable practices they implement in the physical and social operational environment and in producing the tourism product, how they feel the communality in their area and what kind of cooperation they have with the locals (stakeholders). In the background information were inquired the ownership the property, age of the company, the length of living in the place. The interviews were analysed using classifying and quantifying methods.

Table 2: Classification of rural tourism companies according to tourism activities based on agricultural and/or natural environment

	Number of companies (n=24)
All tourism business or main part of it in farm and	11
very near (agricultural environment)	
Tourism business mainly on natural environment	8
Tourism business or part of is in both farm and	5
natural environment	

3. Results

3.1 Place attachment: the sense of communality

The entrepreneurs perceived the communality in most cases to be positive (18 positive and 6 negative comments). The positive sense items of communality were explained to be the coexistence/cooperation with neighbours, taking care of each other (neighbours and other entrepreneurs) and the common interests

(schools in the village – village school), active working and taking part in village society activities or in work parties, and also cooperation with other entrepreneurs. Some of the entrepreneurs perceived the sense of community as being based on the company's operations: they want to ensure that the customer stays in the place or in the area. They opined that all the customers are appreciated and accepted equally and customers were also redirected to other tourism companies in certain cases (e.g. in the event of the customer requiring accommodation and the businesses' own rooms were full). One entrepreneur describes the communality as 'the thing that makes the customers come again and again, and the personnel to stay from year by year'.

The negative expressions of communality were associated with the feeling of losing the communality. In most cases the ending of the local comprehensive school in the village has been the reason for disappearance of the communality. But it was notable, that despite the negative perception and feeling of the communality the enterprises worked (more or less) for the sustainability.

3.2 Place attachment: cooperation

Companies cooperated with each other, municipalities, local societies and non-governmental organizations (NGOs), schools and land owners (Table 3). The majority of the entrepreneurs belonged to or had been involved in local activities, and their operations supported them. Support was given, for example, by providing premises free of charge for activities, employing trainees and doing voluntary work in NGOs. It was worth noting, that entrepreneurs very actively participate in all kinds of development projects: they are both a target group and active players. The rural entrepreneurs identify the stakeholders connected to their business and have procedures that foster and enhance this relationship. The most important stakeholders were customers, the environment and other enterprises in the area.

Table 3: Cooperation of rural tourism companies in the local level

Interest group	Number of co-working rural	Types of cooperation
	tourism companies	
Land owners	9	recreation trails, voluntary work
Schools	9	trainee cooperation/work experience/,
		company presentations, other programmes
		to students or pupils
Societies and	10	voluntary work, informing public,
associations		organising events together
Municipalities	12	taking care of regulatory matters with
		municipal authorities, organising events,
		tourism, tourism marketing
Other companies	20	Purchasing services and products, guiding
		customers to other tourism company, joint
		purchasing, borrowing equipment or staff

3.3 Sustainability performance

The rural tourism entrepreneurs were asked to describe the special features of the nature and the culture of their localities. The rural tourism entrepreneurs were aware of and appreciated the features of the surrounding nature and cultural environment, and aspired to protect them. The enterprises had preserved and protected the natural environment in their land areas. Half of the companies took the initiative of protecting different kinds of elements/natural features/ in their own land areas. This indicated the entrepreneur's high reverence for nature and also for environmental values. Buildings were conserved mainly by renovation and maintenance, and traditional materials and working methods were used whenever feasible. In most cases the tourism businesses were located on the farm and its lands, which had been owned by the family for hundreds of years. These entrepreneurs expressed the desire to preserve the natural environment and farms for the next generations. Almost all enterprises used renewable energy resources. Timber could be obtained from their own forest, and geothermal heating of cottages with heat pumps was chosen as a practical alternative to heating from electrical power. Steps to save energy or water have been taken or have at least been planned.

Most of the enterprises utilize the historical and cultural elements of the area in their business and in this way preserve the heritage. The overall impression was that cultural heritage is something to be proud of for

entrepreneurs. The actions reflect the entrepreneur's valuation of culture, and also its utilization in their businesses. A few of the respondents were not originally from the region that they were currently living in, therefore it was hard for them to answer to describe the culture of the area/place.

4. Discussion and conclusions

Most of the enterprises were products of the environment, heritage and history of the place or area. Many of the companies operated on a farm that had been owned by the same family for generations or the owner had another kind of bond with the area/locality. They felt that it is important to preserve the environment and one's heritage for the following generations. By carrying out such practices in the natural environment and on farms, entrepreneurs also strived to maintain the operational environment of the enterprise and the ability to operate and keep the business running.

Communality is seen as an important part of normal living in the countryside according to the entrepreneurs. In most cases the entrepreneurs perceived communality to be positive. At the local level, the majority of the entrepreneurs belonged to or had been involved in local activities, and their business operations supported them in several ways. As members of the local community, small firm owners need to feel that they are part of and not separate from the local management of the area (Dewhurst and Thomas, 2003) as it was also indicated by the companies studied. It is plausible that regular interaction with events and with environments in the neighborhood have given entrepreneurs a feeling that they know and also belong as residents (Lee et al. 2016).

A minority of the entrepreneurs felt that the communality to be negative. It was notable that despite the negative perception/ feeling of the communality the enterprises worked (more or less) *inter alia* for the goal of sustainability. It might be the connectedness to nature was strong with these individuals. Connectedness to nature is the extent to which an individual feels that he or she is a part of nature: affinity with nature predicted willingness to undertake simple conservation behaviours. Dutcher, Finley, Luloff and Johnson (2007) found that connectivity with nature was a significant predictor of environmental behaviour. Rural tourism companies value the environment highly, because if the natural environment is damaged the business will lose its competitive advantage and will not be able to continue.

The sense of community can be perceived at different levels. The entrepreneurs mentioned several times that the other companies (in tourism and in other business) are important for them: other tourism companies are more cooperators than competitors. The company level networking refers to the professional communality with other entrepreneurs and this, in turn, may have positive influences on the economic performance (Ostgaard and Birley 1996) and also on the entrepreneurial /self-efficacy/business performance/ (Bratkovič et al. 2012). It has been pointed that small and medium enterprises are often dependent on relationships with other local businesses (Chell and Baines, 2000) and engage in activities that seek to improve their local social and economic environment.

It could be concluded that the place attachment of rural tourism enterprises is positive and strong. It can be explained by the two approaches of place attachment, which are: to view place attachment from an emotional perspective, and to view place attachment from a more objective behavioural and cognitive perspective (Giuliani 2002). The emotional bond had built upon the entrepreneurs own living history and roots in the place. The majority of the entrepreneurs had family relationship to the place, which naturally effects the attachment to the place. The cognitive bonds that explains the operational side (Inalhan and Finch 2004) is more or less tied by the business operations.

Strong ties between individuals and their communities are proven to enhance sustainable actions and policy. Individuals who strongly identify with their residential suburbs are more likely to be committed to the /well-being for /the good/ of their community. Their commitment to place drives residents to become more proactive in preventing any environmental degradation of their locality and area by engaging in sustainable behavioural practices. It is argued that individuals are not driven by the need to create a clean, green environment because of social norms or legislation, but by a deeper motivation i.e. the preservation and enhancement of self-identity (Lee et al. 2016). Recent research has shown that less tangible motivations, including place attachment and connectedness to nature, are important drivers of environmentally significant action (Kals et al. 1999; Vaske and Kobrin 2001).

Our research suggests that rural tourism entrepreneurs' positive place attachment and sustainable performance have a positive relationship. The relationship has been found previously at the individual level, among the residents (Halpenny 2010; Lee et al. 2016; Vaske and Kobrin 2001; Vorkinn and Riese 2001), but the relationship between actual behaviour and place attachment from the entrepreneur's point of view has hitherto been lacking. Place identity (explained by place attachment) by itself do not solely explain the sustainable performance. The other factors that influence the rural tourism entrepreneurs' sustainable practices are a combination of personal values or reasons, external factors, economic drivers and the influence of stakeholders (unpublished Väisänen and Törn-Laapio 2017). On the other hand, it is suggested in the literature that personal ethics in addition to personal values are the key determinants of business behaviour, especially with regard to ethical or environmental issues (Tzschentke et al. 2008). It can be presumed that the motives that underlie sustainable actions were both ecocentrism that values nature for its own sake, and anthropocentrism that values nature for the material or physical benefits it can provide for humans (Thompson and Barton 1994).

It is worth noting that the study measured the attachment to the place from which all entrepreneurs earn their living and in some cases where they had lived for all their entire lives. The exigencies of running a profitable business can and does complicate the relationship between place attachment and sustainable actions. Therefore, it is important to examine what kind of relationships are there between the business goals, place identity and the sustainable performance.

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