

Branding Regenerative Tourism for Sustainable Rural Destinations : A Critical Reflection Perspective

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Abstract

Purpose : Regenerative tourism is widely popular in many countries. With the changing dynamics of tourists across the globe, disruptive challenges in managing the destinations and uncertainties in delivering tourism offerings have clouded the significance of regenerative tourism mainly catering to rural destinations. The crux of this critical reflection perspective (CRP) was to infer more on the sustainability perspectives through regenerative tourism and to reflect on the avenues of branding regenerative tourism for a sustainable future of rural destinations.

Methodology : This CRP is based on the self-reflection of the author based on the readings from literary sources, exposure to research outcomes, and experience in consulting destination management organizations. Hence, a mixed method of reflection exercise has been performed on the acquired content over the years.

Findings : As novel findings, this CRP infers on the imposition of a regenerative tourism image with the notion of sustainability of rural destinations. Also, the relevance of food tourism, creative tourism, and agri tourism referring to regenerative tourism for the sustainable future of rural destinations have been inferred.

Practical Implications : Careful strategic branding framework on building regenerative tourism with the elements of food, creative, and agri tourism will eventually attract wide segments of tourists across the globe, perhaps contributing more towards the sustainable future of rural destinations.

Social Implications : This CRP highlights the benefits of regenerative tourism for sustainable consumption of tourism resources that would handover the valuable tourism resources to the next generations without degrading their originality.

Limitations/Scope : The inferences derived are solely based on the competence of the author's opinions. The research avenues highlighted here, if performed with suitable robust methodology, will produce valuable insights into literature and facilitate in conceiving novel contexts in tourism marketing.

Originality/Value : This CRP is based on an evolving concept in developed and developing countries and highlights the novel perspectives of blending regenerative tourism with food tourism, creative tourism, and agri tourism with reference to the marketing communication elements. These perspectives haven't been attempted in the given literary sources and are highly aligned with the tourism industry's current state-of-the-art trends.

Keywords : regenerative tourism, sustainability, destination branding, rural tourism

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The COVID pandemic has changed every aspect of people's lives and how businesses operate. In tourism, the industry has witnessed a huge change in tourists' perceptions and behaviors, and thus, it presents a challenge for destination marketers and policymakers to react. Among the various forms of tourism, rural

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tourism has gained significant interest due to its natural attributes, uniqueness of inculcated heritage value, investment avenues, employment, and various other features that are the underlying challenges and opportunities for rural tourism development. Rural tourism is anticipated to contribute to the economic recovery and perhaps will open avenues for destination marketers to brand rural destinations lucratively. While rural tourism is far-reaching the pinnacle, the most recent form of regenerative tourism has been witnessed syncing the tourists' motives of exploring rural destinations. This blend of rural tourism and regenerative tourism is yet to be explored; perhaps, if researched and contemplated, will benefit the thereof, including the destination management organizations and mainly the policymakers. This reflection perspective note intends to highlight the possibilities for destination marketers on strategic destination branding and positioning their rural destinations by fostering the regenerative tourism images.

Rural Tourism vs Regenerative Tourism

Since the 1960s, the global tourism industry has witnessed varied tourism forms and offerings. Research in the tourism arena has also diversified by producing impactful insights resulting in a whole array of marketing implications. Rural tourism has gained significant attention in the industry and among tourists since 1970 (Lane et al., 2022). Rural tourism serves the tourists' motives of visiting, exploring, experiencing, and engaging in rural areas, including participating in the recreational activities of the farms and pursuing a suit of activities that contribute to the environment (Ayhan et al., 2020; Kumar et al., 2022; Siow et al., 2022); whereas, regenerative tourism emphasizes that destinations and tourists are the core components of the living system that are ingrained into the natural environment under certain agreed principles (Hussain, 2021). The term 'regenerative' means "creating the conditions for life to continuously renew itself, to transcend into new forms, and to flourish amid ever-changing life conditions (Hutchins & Storm, 2019). This definition resembles the ideology of 'building back better,' and this concept has been increasing among tourists. Inferring further, this form of tourism inculcates the aspects of sustainability in tourists' motives of not harming the natural environment. Hence, this form of tourism is expected to contribute to economic recovery, mainly in the phases of sustaining and managing rural destinations (Hussain, 2021).

Where Do We Stand Aside in Research?

Several studies relate to rural tourism, such as tourists' behavior, food tourism, wine tourism, eco-tourism, etc. (Robinson, 2021; Shankar, 2022). These studies focus on either blending rural tourism with other forms or tourists' behavior and perception in general. Though there are studies that investigate the importance of tourists' responsible behavior in tourism destinations, many of these research works are limited to the coastal areas and urban destinations (Nowacki et al., 2021; Sahabuddin et al., 2021; Yilmaz & Anasori, 2022). Rural tourism has been viewed with lesser importance, mainly with regard to the tourists' sustainable consumption of rural tourism resources. There exists a void of approaches to the research in rural destinations, mainly in a sustainability and regenerative tourism context (Davardoust & Karahan, 2021; Dredge, 2022). This research stage should be enhanced to add values to the rural destination branding and sustainability literature and produce viability for a sustainable future.

What Could be the Agenda?

The need for understanding the sustainable perspective in rural tourism has become even more important due to the pandemic (Li et al., 2021; Polukhina et al., 2021; Shankar, 2021b). Being bestowed with the natural resources

that humans can't produce, rural destinations should be sustained through effective branding and marketing strategies and visible policies. Thus, the growing regenerative tourism paves the way for rural destinations' sustainable future. Here arises the quest of how marketers and policymakers bring thoughts to reality. There are a few critical perspectives to be reflected on: the rural destinations' image and personality traits and tourists' motives and communication. Most destination branding strategies rely on destination image and personality factors (Shankar & John Paul Raj, 2022). While branding the destination inculcates the strategic choice of brand elements, do these elements reflect sustainability cues along with their rural attributes? This is crucial as tourists' choices of destinations are clouded by perceived destination image (Shankar, 2020 a, b). If such sustainability cues are accumulatively branded, does the rural destination also reflect on the regenerative tourism opportunities? Since regenerative behavior contributes to sustainability, such antecedents should be portrayed during the rural destinations' positioning and mainly in the marketing messages.

Secondly, tourists' motives play a critical role; perhaps they exhibit varied motives from time to time (Shankar, Koshy, Jose, & Sakshi, 2022). However, careful evaluation of tourists' motives attract key differentiating destinations' propositions that could benefit the thereof. For example, food tourists have been identified with sustainable thoughts, and loyal tourists exhibit sustainability behaviors (Shankar, 2022).

Similarly, tourists who perform creative tourism expose regenerative and sustainable behavior (Duxbury et al., 2021). These forms of tourists' motives have a commonality of sustainability and regeneration, and this inference can be accounted seriously in the evaluation of rural tourists' motives. This will again link to the previous pointer of rural destination branding with the sustainability cues and inculcating all the possible aspects of motives in branding and positioning the rural destinations. Overall, the rural destinations will be portrayed with the sustainability and regeneration brand identity.

Similar is agritourism, where the tourists explore rural farmlands and participate in agricultural activities with sustainability thoughts (Misara et al., 2022). These motives, such as exploring rural tourism, creative tourism, and agri tourism, have common references to the sustainability of rural destinations under the spectrum of regenerative tourism. While sustainability is more about protecting the destinations, regenerative tourism intends to enhance the value of the destination for better future consumption. However, these critical reflections, though accommodated in the strategic destination branding process, unless imbibed in tourists' behavior, the possibility of a sustainable future may be far-fetched. Destination marketers can rely on digital information sources to foster such behavioral change in tourists. Digital sources of information play a critical role in conceiving images of the destinations and eventually trigger motives and visiting intentions in tourists' behavior (Shankar, 2020a, 2021a). However, while designing the marketing messages, the elements of regenerative tourism, agritourism, creative tourism, and food tourism can be portrayed to cater to the micro-segments and related segments of tourists, which would suffice the rural destination marketing.

Overall, the marketing message strategy should induce emotional perception as a central focus with the elements of regenerative, creative, food, etc., about the rural destinations. The marketers should also decide on what type of information should be generated as a marketing message and what forms should be routed through. It is vital to note that social media marketing plays a critical role in destination image formation, perhaps the most credible sources of information that tourists do primary information search about the destinations (Shankar, 2020a, 2021a). Here, it is decisive for destination marketers to think of virtual reality in positioning their rural tourism with regenerative thoughts. This is because virtual reality in tourism can contribute to tourists' sustainable behavior and thereby contribute to the effective protection of rural tourism resources (Shankar, Koshy, & Mathew, 2022b). This will eventually induce the tourists' perception, indicate varied motives, and conceive a choice process of choosing the rural destination for regenerative tourism, despite of prospect tourists being motivated to perform other forms of tourism. Hence, the tourists' inflow to rural destinations will surge with the notion of regeneration motives.

Conclusion

This reflection perspective aligns with the prevailing need for sustainability of the rural tourism economy, aiming for a better future by promoting regenerative tourism. Branding regenerative tourism for rural destination sustainability will facilitate destination marketers and destination management organizations and contribute to policymakers thriving for sustainable development goals. For example, regenerative tourism can contribute to the categories of United Nations Sustainable Development goals. Academically, any research fostering regenerative tourism will add a lot of value to the destination branding literature, methodological approaches, and conceptualization, mainly referring to rural destinations.

Implications

Destination marketing has become complex as the most critical purpose of branding has far reached from deriving profits to sustainability. In the case of rural destinations, the sense of natural resources is prone to impact due to overconsumption and irresponsible consumption by tourists. Regenerative tourism perhaps focuses on facilitating the tourists to control and responsibly consume tourism resources. The pointers here evoke the ideologies of what makes regenerative tourism branding more effective for the sustainability of rural destinations for future consumption. However, branding and positioning regenerative tourism for the sustainability of rural destinations is purely a strategic process. This requires the strategic choice of the right elements from regeneration, creative, and food tourism attributes that perfectly align with the sustainability motives. Also, careful evaluation of tourists' perceptions, motives, and behavioral intentions that act as commonality of the above-mentioned forms of tourism, and designing effective marketing messages, the mode of disseminating — online and offline, and the comprehensive metrics to measure the outcomes determines the success of regenerative tourism. One strategic branding framework generated by rural destination marketers may not be viable for the other rural destinations with its given limitations and commonality of attractions, and thus, requires greater research activities to build a ground theory. Also, if investigated further for policy-making, this reflection would derive a novel form of tourism that attracts wider segments of tourists worldwide and perhaps contribute to nations' sustainable development goals.

Limitations of the Study and Scope of this CRP

This critical reflection note has been written solely based on the author's readings and reflections. All inferences and discussions in this perspective are at the high competent level of the author. The pointers indicated in the perspective, if executed, would open avenues for further research and conceive for rebranding and repositioning of the rural destinations with sustainability thoughts through the regenerative tourism form.

Author's Contribution

This perspective has been solely written by Dr. Sabari Shankar Ravichandran based on the readings from the literature.

Conflict of Interest

The author certifies that he has no affiliations with or involvement in any organization or entity with any financial interest or non-financial interest in the subject matter or materials discussed in this manuscript.

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