THE UNEXPECTED CONSEQUENCES OF ENGAGING TOURISTS IN DESTINATION SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY THROUGH CHECK-OUT-CHARITY. THE CASE OF SKI RESORTS IN THE FRENCH ALPS

Abstract

While destinations try to find ways to enhance tourists' pro-social behaviors and engage them in destination social responsibility (DSR), this study aims at understanding the mismatch between destination expectations (such as raising funds easily or using a modern charity tool) while launching check-out charity (COC) campaigns and the tourist perception of such an initiative. Based on a mixed method gathering interviews with managers of ski resorts' tourist offices, an *in-situ* poll mimicking a check-out charity campaign (n=289) and semi-structured interviews (n=20), this study conducted in Alps ski resorts explores the effects of COC when used as a tool for DSR strategy deployment. The main research question is whether asking tourists to donate to local projects is perceived as a mean to take part in the DSR and whether it has an effect on their attitude towards donation and towards the destination. We find that despite a willingness to support local causes, COC requests in such a leisure context is not always perceived by tourists as a way to do good for the destination. We attribute this to the existence of a triadic relationship between the cause, the store, and the destination, which can confuse tourists as to who is the true beneficiary of the donation. In addition, COC request in a tourism context can provoke negative outcomes foremost among which is unwillingness to donate and annoyance.

Statement of key contributions

Method – This study developed an original mixed method approach to explore the effects of charity appeal at check-out (check-out charity by rounding up, COC) when used as a tool for destination social responsibility deployment (DSR).

Theory - Theoretically, this study offers new insights for the comprehension of destination social responsibility perception by tourists when they are requested to contribute to it. We find that COC do not have a direct impact on DSR perception and ultimately on attitude towards the destination. However, we bring to light the possible mediating role of tourist-destination identification and the role of place attachment on the decision to give and on destination perception.

Practitioners - From a managerial perspective, using the Charity Triad perspective (donor-beneficiary-fundraisers, defines by Chapman et al., 2022) this study highlights that the destination is not perceived at all as a fundraiser for a philanthropic cause when there is a charity appeal at check-out within destination's stores (so-called check-out charity). Accordingly, our findings suggest that charity appeals at check-out is a complex tool in a DSR strategy that can provoke negative outcomes – annoyance and unwillingness to donate – that are reinforced in a touristic context. Destinations managers should carefully design their strategy to make tourists contribute to their DSR, to avoid negative attitudinal consequences while trying to "do good".

Not only this study contributes to philanthropic marketing by suggesting that tourist contribution to destination social responsibility might me a powerful tool for enhancing charitable behaviors, but also contributes to tourism marketing through suggested effects of tourist contribution on tourist-destination identification and attachment.

Introduction

Organizations participate in socially responsible behaviors for several reasons, including increased profits, employee organizational commitment, public scrutiny, improved investor relations, and the principle that social responsibility is the "right thing to do" (Juholin, 2004). In the tourism industry, Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) is focused on two dimensions: community and the environment (Madanaguli et al., 2022), confirming that how to be more sustainable have become a crucial question in tourism marketing (Sheldon and Park 2011). Consequently, destinations increasingly communicate about their responsible actions which is known to generate positive emotions, foster tourist-destination identification (Su and Swanson, 2017), affect the relationship quality and ultimately tourists' intention to revisit (Su, Gong, and Huang, 2020). However, research that investigates how destinations finance their CSR and involve tourists in their strategy is scarce in the tourism context. Admittedly, tourists can adopt responsible behaviors by themselves, doing voluntourism or adopting pro-environmental behaviors (Loureiro, Guerreiro, and Ali, 2020). Nonetheless, although there are examples of resorts creating opportunities for tourists to engage with communities (Chilufya et al., 2019), there is a gap in the understanding of how destinations and tourists can be intertwined in social responsibility. Excepted from a few pioneering studies (e.g., (Lis et al.,2022), research often overlooks how tourist's direct involvement in pro-social initiatives impacts their behaviors and perception of a destination image. As a consequence, there is a call for considering the role of customers' involvement in CSR-driven activities (Madanaguli et al., 2022).

This gap in the literature is widening progressively as some destinations are adopting checkout-charity (COC) as a tool to involve directly their clients in the philanthropic part of their CSR strategy. COC is an effortless way to donate to charities by rounding up the amount of a bill (Hwang, et al., 2021; Kelting et al., 2019). Earlier studies have shown the effect of

COC on revisit rate (Giebelhausen,et al., 2020) and on the attitude towards the store (Obeng et al., 2019) but such studies were always conducted in a retail context.

Against this backdrop, the current research aims to better understand the use of COC as a CSR tool in the context of the tourism industry by answering the following questions: (1) Is charity donation perceived by tourists as a way of being directly engaged in the destination? (2) how does tourist direct engagement impact their attitude and behaviors? To do so, we first investigate the motives of a destination for launching a COC campaign. Secondly, thanks to a mixed qualitative-quantitative research method, we explore the willingness of tourists to support causes through donation while being in vacation and their perception of COC requests by a destination.

Literature Review

Tourist engagement and positive outcomes

The concept of destination social responsibility (DSR) has gained interest among tourism scholars. It is defined as "*the collective ideology and effects of destination stakeholders (e.g., government, hotels, restaurants, airlines, travel agencies, local residents) to conduct socially responsible activities*" as perceived by tourists (Su et al., 2018, p. 1043). Responsibility initiatives generally fall into three categories: environmental, human rights, and philanthropic (Wymer, 2021). The current research investigates social responsibility with a philanthropic responsibility lens, which involves supporting charities and programs that benefit society. Recently, businesses have started to combine charitable campaigns with shopping processes to maximize their effectiveness, offering their customers to donate to charity during a shopping checkout, the so-call check-out charity (COC) (Giebelhausen et al., 2020).

There is a consensus in literature on the appearance of positive outcomes when organizations develop whether their Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) - or their Destination Social Responsibility (DSR) from a tourism marketing lens - or their charity strategy through check-

out charity campaigns. According to literature on CSR, its perception by clients leads to positive evaluations (Lii and Lee, 2012), ameliorates brand loyalty (Ahn, 2020) and increases purchase intention (Bianchi et al., 2019). Thus, brands adopt CSR to improve client satisfaction, brand image, brand reputation and reinforce their relationships with clients (Guerreiro et al., 2015, 2016), including in the tourism context (Ahn et al., 2020). Tourism research has equally shown that tourists' attitudes and behaviors are influenced by DSR (Su and Huang, 2020; Su and Swanson, 2017), with an important behavioral outcomes which is customer loyalty (Tuan et al., 2019). Finally, research on check-out charity (COC) has demonstrated that giving at check-out can provoke a warm glow for clients leading to a higher revisit rate (Giebelhausen et al., 2017) and a better brand relationship quality (Obeng et al., 2019).

Charity triad theory

The gap in literature lies in the understudied effects of interactions between charity actors in the giving process. Indeed, the positive outcomes mentioned in the previous section suppose that perception of organization social responsibility is clearly identified and attributed to the organization itself. Yet, conducting an extensive systematic review of philanthropic literature, Chapman et al. (2022) posit that charitable giving is a triadic phenomenon involving donors, beneficiaries, and fundraisers. Their interactions are multiple and intertwined. Charitable Triad Theory proposes that charitable giving is influenced by the characteristics of three actors: donors, beneficiaries, and fundraisers. The theory suggests that the relationships between these three actors play an important role in determining charitable behavior.

The theory provides a comprehensive framework for understanding charitable giving that integrates a broad range of research on the topic. The theory's emphasis on the importance of

relationships between donors, beneficiaries, and fundraisers also highlights the interconnectedness of these actors in the charitable ecosystem. By understanding the complex relationships between donors, beneficiaries, and fundraisers, organizations may be better able to design effective fundraising strategies and build stronger connections with their supporters. The literature extensively covers the various attributes of donors that encourage giving such as gender and age (Christensen et al., 2016), emotions (Chapman et al., 2022) and social norms (Nook et al., 2016). Accordingly, beneficiaries' characteristics can play a role on giving, whether the cause is (un)popular (Body & Breeze, 2016), desirability of the beneficiaries (Cryder et al., 2017). However, the beneficiary worthiness depends also on how it is presented by fundraisers. Defined as "*the ones asking for money*" (p.1835) this is the less studied actor in the Charity Triad. Because donors rarely give to charity without a clear request (Bryant et al. 2003), the fundraiser plays an important role in giving.

Studying COC in a tourism context is particularly relevant to apply Charity triad theory and to study tourist engagement in CSR because of the presence of a blurred triad. Engaging charitable tourists to support beneficiaries while shopping in stores within a destination is even closer to a tetrad.

Nourished by this literature, we adopted an abductive methodology to explore the motivations of destination to make tourists contribute through COC and the consequences of a direct charitable involvement on attitude and behavioral outputs. Four research propositions are made to foster research in this area.

Methodology

Field description

Ski resorts are suitable contexts to explore the effect of a Charity Triad in CSR perception in a tourism perspective. Ski resorts develop their own brand image but gather various shops, places, activities. Geographical limits of these destinations are sometimes uneasy to define.

These destinations have to protect their environmental patrimony to ensure their own continuity. In the meantime, mountain villages have to maintain economic activity all year long despite a strong seasonality effect. Thus, finding a way to finance local projects for maintaining both social activities and environmental patrimony appears as a necessity for these destinations. The ski resorts studied are Chamonix and Notre-Dame-de-Bellecombe (NDB). Chamonix is an international ski resort surrounded by Mont-Blanc. NDB is a small family-friendly ski resort located at 1000m of altitude. Both are surrounded by a remarkable natural environment.

Data collection

The study was conducted in three steps. First, four open interviews with tourism office managers of two ski resorts were conducted to identify the main reasons for launching COC campaigns within a destination.

The second step of the study is an *in-situ* study conducted in NDB ski resort to compare quantitatively clients' intention to donate to a local (vs an international) cause. For technical and accounting reasons it was not possible to launch a real COC campaign on stores' payment terminals. Thus, we created conditions mimicking the act of rounding up at check-out. We asked clients in five different station stores (i.e., the tourist office, two groceries shops, hairdresser, and pharmacy) to do a donation at checkout with a false 50-cents coin (fictive money change). Two small money boxes were positioned side by side on cash desks – each presenting either a local or an international NGO (See Appendix 1 for visuals). To be comparable and commonly accepted both NGO fictively supported environmental causes. Cashiers were informed about the study and were encouraged to ask clients to participate. A one-month period (from 12/15/2021 to 01/15/2022) was chosen to mitigate a possible generosity-effect before Christmas.

The third and last part of the study consisted of 20 interviews right after check-out with short semi-structured interviews (total duration = 62 min, mean duration = 3,1 min. See Appendix 2 for interview guide details). Each interview started with a simple question ("*Are you familiar with COC?*") and followed up with short questions to approach pre-defined themes based on research questions (attitude towards COC, attitude towards donation in general, preference for local or international causes and personal experience with the ski resort). Data were collected in three stages, at different hours of the day and at different times during the experiment period to mitigate potential behavioral bias.

Data analysis

Following Weber (1990) methodology, all the verbatims obtained were classified by creating a coding scheme from assumed categories. The text was encoded with NVivo software. We checked for stability and reliability in coding.

Results

In line with literature and our expectations, we found in the first part of the study (interviews with managers of tourist offices) that COC appears as a mean for destinations to diversify funding sources of local projects. It is a way to capture a part of cashflows transiting within the destination stores in order to reroute it towards projects that could not benefit from the tourist economy otherwise (i.e., local sports associations, events for inhabitants, environment protection). Managers' verbatims highlight that COC is seen as "modern" and "new trend". Ski resort representatives has no awareness of the negative consequences that might appear while launching COC campaigns. Verbatims from destination managers lead us to suggest the following proposition (P1) on consequences expected by the destination while setting up COC in the resort.

P1: ***Destinations overestimate positive outcomes*** *while launching a COC campaign at the scale of the destination (positive WOM, better tourist attitude towards the destination, financial revenues for the destination, etc.)* ***but ignore potential negative consequences.***

Considering articles such as Guerreiro et al. (2015, 2016) on the effect of COC on brand image, we expected that tourists would correlate charity appeals at check-out with the destination itself (a direct question on the link between contribution in COC and perception of the destination image was included in the interview guide). Still, there is no clear perceived link between the COC appeal in stores and the perception of destination social responsibility. From the Charity Triad Theory perspective, we suggest that the donors (tourist) is able to identify the beneficiary (here an environmental cause) but not the fundraiser (nor the store, nor the destination). On one hand, this might be explained by the mere fact that the image of a destination is a blurred concept and tourist-dependent as a "*the sum of beliefs and impressions people hold about place*" (Gertner & Kotler, 1993). On the other hand, some verbatims refer to the store owner as a trusted third-party that can foster giving (*"If [the owners] say "here is a cause to support", I will give thoughtlessly")*, but none of the tourists interviewed refer to the store, nor the cashier as the "*one asking for money"* (i.e the fundraiser as defined by Chapman et al., 2022, p.1835).

Nevertheless, among people mentioning their willingness to give at check-out if asked within the station, two reasons come out, leading us to suggest two propositions.

Firstly, tourists willing to contribute share an attachment to the destination or a feeling that the destination match their lifestyle and preferences ("*Here it is a true village"; "we needed a small ski resort"; "I like that it's family-friendly"; "there is this rural life, local life"*). This finding echoes the concept of tourist-destination identification construct (Ahmed, 1996) that

states that tourists identify destinations' identities and are more prone to choose the ones similar with those these travelers assume in daily life. Thus, we propose that:

P2: *Asking tourists to donate at check-out has **no direct effect on the destination's DSR perception** nor on attitude towards the destination, but can have an **indirect effect through tourist-destination identification.***

Secondly, tourists willing to contribute, prefer to support local causes. This finding is based both on verbatims analysis and the exploratory quantitative study. According to the fictive COC campaign (n=289), local causes (66%) are preferred over international ones (34%), independently of the store type and the period (before/after Christmas). This result is reinforced by content analysis ("*I am in holiday so as I'm here better support local causes*"; "*there is more trust, because there are locals*"). This led to a third research proposition:

P2bis: *Asking tourists to donate at check-out has no direct effect on the destination's DSR perception but plays **a role in fostering place attachment** (whether as an antecedent or a consequence).*

Finally, a crucial finding is that charity appeals at check-out can generate negative outputs for the destination. Several respondents expressed their annoyance due to an excessive call for charity ("*We are asked for donations everywhere and every time. People are so fed up that they are going to not donate anymore*"). The context of leisure and holidays reinforces this negative feeling, because tourists feel that the mere fact to choose a destination is a way to support local life ("*If I'm coming to a small ski resorts like this, by the simple fact I buy*

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locally, I contribute to the local life";"*[Do you feel concerned by the station development as a 1-week tourist?] Only one fifty-second of the year*"). Thus, we propose that,

P4: Negative perceptions of donation appeals are exacerbated in a leisure context.

Conclusion and limits

Based on an original mix-method approach, we explored new practices observe among some destinations and we suggest theoretical propositions to contribute to the research on COC on CSR in a tourist context. But this approach is not without its limits, notably the small sample size and the focus on a unique destination.

However, this study contributes to the body of knowledge in two ways. Theoretically, this exploratory mix-method research helps understanding tourist perception of destination social responsibly (DSR) when they are asked to directly contribute to it. Some destinations aim to make tourist contribute to their DSR with charity appeals at check-out (check-out charity, COC). We find that COC do not have a direct impact on DSR perception and ultimately on attitude toward the destination. However, we bring to light the possible mediating role of tourist-destination identification and the role of place attachment on the decision to give and the effect on destination perception.

Moreover, our findings suggest that charity appeals at check-out is a complex tool in a DSR strategy that can provoke negative outcomes – annoyance and unwillingness to donate – that are reinforced in a touristic context.

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APPENDIX 1

Visuals of poll boxes (local vs international cause) put on stores counters.

APPENDIX 2

Interview protocol

1 - Are you familiar with check-out charity?

▫ Have you seen the request to donate at the counter?

2 – What your opinion on check-out charity?

▫ Do you usually give at counter?
▫ Why ?
▫ How often do you give?
▫ Do you donate to another cause by any other means?

3 – The station is planning to request for donation at check-out in station stores. What is your opinion about that?

▫ Would you prefer to support a local or an international cause?
    ▫ Why ?

4 – What is your "relation" with Notre-Dame de Bellecombe resort?

▫ Are you staying here for vacation/in your second home/do you live here?
▫ How often do you come in the station?
▫ What do you like here?