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Harvesting micro-geographic heterogeneity to increase community acceptance of tourism

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Abstract

Tourism marketing literature has long recognised the importance of residents' acceptance of tourism if a location's tourism industry is to be sustainable. This study contributes to this field by challenging the composite or averaging approach often applied by studies of residents in a tourism destination by arguing that there may be important differences of residents' attitudes within a location. The study focuses on the emerging tourism industry in the City of Wollongong and finds that there are important differences between residents based on the characteristics of micro-communities. It is argued that a greater understanding of the heterogeneity of attitudes towards tourism within these micro-communities will assist destination managers to more efficiently and effectively manage the community acceptance of tourism.

Keywords

tourism marketing, tourism hosts, community acceptance, tourism, internal marketing, Wollongong.

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HARVESTING MICRO-GEOGRAPHIC HETEROGENEITY TO INCREASE COMMUNITY ACCEPTANCE OF TOURISM

ABSTRACT

Tourism marketing literature has long recognised the importance of residents' acceptance of tourism if a location's tourism industry is to be sustainable. This study contributes to this field by challenging the composite or averaging approach often applied by studies of residents in a tourism destination by arguing that there may be important differences of residents' attitudes within a location. The study focuses on the emerging tourism industry in the City of Wollongong and finds that there are important differences between residents based on the characteristics of micro-communities. It is argued that a greater understanding of the heterogeneity of attitudes towards tourism within these micro-communities will assist destination managers to more efficiently and effectively manage the community acceptance of tourism.

KEYWORDS: tourism marketing, tourism hosts, community acceptance, tourism, internal marketing, Wollongong.

INTRODUCTION

Background

It has been documented that research on residents' attitudes of tourism constitutes one of the most systematic and well studied areas of tourism, with the perceptions of residents being the focus of studies for many years (McGehee & Andereck, 2004). Studies of tourism impacts has seen the focus change from an emphasis on the positive impacts throughout the 1960s to the negative impacts in the 70s and a more balanced account in the 1980s, (McGehee & Andereck, 2004; Zhang, Inbakaran, & Jackson, 2006). It is recognised that without residents' support it is difficult to develop a sustainable tourism industry in a community (Andereck & Vogt, 2000; Zhang, Inbakaran, & Jackson, 2006). Residents who express either their opposition or support towards the development of tourism have been identified in segmentation studies regarding attitudes towards tourism (Zhang, Inbakaran, & Jackson, 2006), having being termed as '*haters*' (Davis, Allen, & Cosenza, 1988; Madrigal, 1995), '*cynics*' (Williams & Lawson, 2001) or '*somewhat irritated*' (Ryan, C & Montgomery, 1994) and '*in-betweeners*' (Davis, Allen, & Cosenza, 1988). Differences in the attitudes and perceptions of residents towards the tourism industry in their community have been researched from many different angles (Andereck, Valentine, Knopf, & Vogt, 2005; Gilbert & Clark, 1997; Lankford & Howard, 1994; McGehee & Andereck, 2004).

Predictors or influential factors linked to community residents to determine the source of heterogeneity in residents attitudes towards tourism have also been used as a basis of many studies. Studies of residents' attitudes towards tourism have also been undertaken in a number of tourism destination contexts. A summary of this research is referred to in Table 1.

Table 1
Studies of Community Resident Attitudes

		Author/s
Resident-related factors	Age	(Fredline & Faulkner, 2000; Madrigal, 1995; Weaver & Lawton, 2001)
	Gender	(Weaver & Lawton, 2001)
	Proximity to tourism resort	(Madrigal, 1995)
	Level of contact with tourists	(Akis, Peristianis, & Warner, 1996; Davis, Allen, & Cosenza, 1988)
	Knowledge about tourism	(Davis, Allen, & Cosenza, 1988)
	Personality Traits and Ethnicity	(Zhang, Inbakaran, & Jackson, 2006)
Tourism Context	Mass-tourism destinations	(Akis, Peristianis, & Warner, 1996; Andriotis & Vaughan, 2003; Faulkner & Tideswell, 1997; Gunce, 2003; Haralambopoulos & Pizam, 1996; Liu & Var, 1986; Milman & Pizam, 1988)
	Individual areas with unique elements	(Andereck, Valentine, Knopf, & Vogt, 2005; Andriotis & Vaughan, 2003; Fredline & Faulkner, 2000; Gilbert & Clark, 1997; Gursoy & Kendall, 2006; Haley, Snaith, & Miller, 2005)
	Rural destinations	(Brunt & Courtney, 1999; Carmichael, 2000; McGehee & Andereck, 2004; Perdue, Long, & Allen, 1990; Ryan, C., Scotland, & Montgomery, 1998)
	Urban-rural fringe	(Weaver & Lawton, 2001; Zhang, Inbakaran, & Jackson, 2006)
	Cities in a developing country	(Teye, Sirakaya, & Sonmez, 2002)

Most studies within the urban and rural contexts have not found residents to be greatly concerned about the negative aspects of tourism. Overall attitudes and perceived impacts tended to be positive. One exception to the generally positive attitudes toward tourism was the study conducted by Johnson, Snepenger, and Akis (1994) that found residents in three rural communities to be negatively disposed toward tourism.

One factor used to explain the reactions of residents is their proximity to the tourism district. Numerous studies have investigated the relationship between the distance of residents to the tourism destination and their perceptions about tourism. Belisle and Hoy in their 1980 study did

report serious negative economic impacts in Columbia (Gilbert & Clark, 1997). They concluded that as distance from the central tourism zone increased, community perceptions of impacts became less favourable and more negative towards tourism. Conversely, Williams and Lawson (2001) in their examination of how residents of ten New Zealand towns perceived the effects of tourism on their communities discovered that those living close to attractions perceived tourism less favourably. Their findings support those of Jurowski and Gursoy (2004).

Problem Recognition

Many of the studies referred to have analysed residents' perceptions holistically within the context of a location. It could be argued that such an approach is contrary to basic marketing principles by treating residents as a homogenous market. As mentioned above, the development of a sustainable tourism industry at a destination is difficult (Andereck & Vogt, 2000; Zhang, Inbakaran, & Jackson, 2006). It is therefore important to monitor residents' attitudes towards tourism and – if necessary – communicate with them to prevent or correct negative attitudes (or address concerns by supply-side improvements such as capital works and/or operational plans e.g. traffic management plans). This can be considered an internal marketing process in which destination managers and residents are involved. Implementing internal marketing activities is most efficient if segments of residents can be identified which can consequently be targeted rather than communicating the same message (which may not be appropriately reflecting all residents' views) through mass marketing channels. While many segmentation variables previously associated with respondents' attitudes towards tourism could be useful for achieving internal marketing aims, it is suggested that further empirical investigation is required in the following areas: (1) segmentation of tourism destinations in a context specific sense, and (2) marketing communication to residents within a context specific destination.

From an examination of prior work on community acceptance, it appears that reasons for community acceptance or rejection of tourism development are highly context dependent. Consequently, it is argued that findings of earlier empirical studies of residents have treated locations holistically. In addition, it is questionable as to whether such findings can be generalised given the diversity and complexity of tourism destinations. Managerially, the most attractive option would be if residency in micro-geographical areas would be associated with attitudes towards tourism. If such an association is found to exist, internal marketing communication messages could be customised to the micro-geographic region and communicated mainly through local channels, thus offering a highly targeted and cost-effective communication alternative. To the authors' knowledge, prior studies examining the reactions and attitudes of tourism within communities have, however, all taken a destination-wide paradigm (Andereck, Valentine, Knopf, & Vogt, 2005; Andriotis & Vaughan, 2003; Ryan, C & Montgomery, 1994; Snepenger, O'Connell, & Snepenger, 2001) or studied a number of large regions (Carmichael, 2000; McGehee & Andereck, 2004; Milman & Pizam, 1988; Perdue, Long, & Allen, 1990) to examine the degree of community acceptance.

Assessing whether an association between residency in micro-geographic areas and attitudes towards tourism exists is the main purpose of this study. Identifying such an association would

(1) represent a theoretical contribution to the study of community acceptance by introducing a new relevant dimension of heterogeneity, and

(2) be of significant practical value as it would enable destination managers to conduct customised and cost-efficient internal marketing campaigns to increase community acceptance.

The core aspect of the present study is not to assess the destination as an entire unit, but to examine community acceptance at suburb level ('micro-geographic communities'). Within the 'destination unit' of the Wollongong area, many micro-geographic communities – historically coastal villages - exist which are approximately 2 to 4 square kilometres in area. This reasoning supports that of Zhang et al. (2006) in light of Butler's Tourism Destination Life Cycle Model (1980). Butler proposes that tourism development within a destination can be identified by six stages. The model, however assumes heterogeneity and a unidirectional movement in the attitudes of the community. While destinations do experience tourism as a whole, the micro-geographic community units within the destination experience tourism at different rates. Communities within destinations are introduced to the effect of tourism in different ways and at different times even though the destination as an entire unit may be seen as being at the same stage of the life cycle (such as the tourism development phase of Wollongong).

The City of Wollongong

The location under study is the City of Wollongong located on the east coast of Australia in the State of NSW approximately 100 kilometres south of the state's capital, Sydney. Located in the Illawarra Region, Wollongong is recognised as the third largest city in NSW (population: 192,402 in 2005) (Australian Bureau of Statistics). Throughout the 1900's the city had a dominant industrial base with a large steel works located south of the city centre at Port Kembla. By the 1980's despite maintaining its image as an industrial city, the local steelworks was being rationalised having been subjected to downturns in demand and global competition; particularly as a result of free trade policies on the part of governments and improved technology allowing for a more streamlined workforce. The steel works shed labour from a workforce of 22,000 to less than 7,000 (Watson, 1991). For similar reasons, the local coal mines also were succumbing to economic pressures and at the same time were introducing technological advances which required less labour. Although in the current decade both the steel works and the coal mines are benefiting from the introduced production efficiencies and the unprecedented demand from China and India, the experience of the late 1900's had provided an incentive for the city's leaders to look to seek ways to diversify the city's industrial base and the near total dependence of steel and coal – the local saying being, "when the steel works sneezes, Wollongong catches cold". The experience of Wollongong was similar to that of many industrial cities throughout the world.

Law (1992) identified the phenomenon of 'urban tourism' as being tourism in older industrial cities and refers to the advances made in cities such as Liverpool, Manchester, and Birmingham and in the UK and Baltimore and Boston in the US. In these cities, Law explains that there was an element of tourism but was of small importance relative to the economies of these cities. Law argues that the promotion of tourism in such cities in the 1980's was due to two factors. "First, many older cities suffered from deindustrialisation with a loss of jobs These cities sought replacement industries. Secondly ...tourism was being perceived worldwide as a growth industry," (p.600). The reasons put forward by Law are applicable to the development of an interest in tourism on the part of the City of Wollongong.

Despite its dependency on heavy industry the City of Wollongong has had an association with tourism for many years. Suburbs both to the northern and southern extremities of the city were popular with tourists since the early 1900's both having smaller guest houses and caravan parks/camping sites allowing visitors to take advantage of the city's coastline and lake. Similar to the cases referred to by Law, Wollongong had a tourism association in the 1980's but tourism

was in relative terms a small player in the local economy. Since this time the importance of tourism has grown in the city. Perhaps a catalyst for this change was the commitment of the City Council to support an image strategy at a cost of over \$2.5mil (Valerio, Baker, & Gulloch, 1999). The city now has a growing and important tourism industry with an increasing number of tourism assets and access to new markets being achieved by local operators and destination managers. With reference to Wollongong and its regional area (the Illawarra) the Illawarra Regional Information Service (IRIS) reported that if the area was a picture, tourism would be one of only a few bright spots (Ellis, 2006).

Wollongong is unusual as a city seeking to 'ramp up' its tourism industry in that it is not starting from a zero base like many of its industrial counterparts in other countries but has for most of its history contained some small-scale tourism related businesses which have sought to capitalise on the city's coastal environment and escarpment. The city now has a committed approach to tourism and is pursuing the research of its industry in an endeavour to better understand the way in which the marketing of tourism should be implemented.

A review of the existing literature found Wollongong to be a unique case for the investigation of the association of micro-geographic residency and attitudes towards tourism for a number of reasons:

1. The destination does not fit the existing definitions of tourism destinations but is a combination of 'urban' (Law, 1992), 'seaside', 'escarpment' as well as 'urban-rural fringe' (Zhang, Inbakaran, & Jackson, 2006).
2. The city is trying to move from a working class industrial base to a being a player in the new service economy within which tourism forms an important part and as such has a changing demography.
3. The city had a previously well-documented negative image held by both internal and external stakeholders.
4. Most importantly, the city is a conglomeration of former municipalities spread along its coastline. It can be described as a 'city of towns'.

Wollongong fits the characterisation of a 'difficult area' – in the context of tourism. Its tourism base is small in comparison to neighbouring cities such as Sydney. The negative image of a polluted steel town has formed due to the city's dependence on the steelworks plant. A 2004 image study found that 28% of respondents associated Wollongong with the negative image of an "industrial city - steelworks, and pollution" (IRIS Research, 2004). Wollongong formed its masculine profile from the steel and coal industry which employed many migrant males. At the peak of the industrial economy of the region the steelworks employed 41% of the workforce in 1976, after which the 1980s recession saw 20,000 jobs lost in steel and coal in the space of six months between 1982/1983 (Watson, 1991). There is also need for further infrastructural improvement of the coastal drive and accommodation catering to tourists demanding hotels of higher ratings. The negative aspects of the region are counterbalanced by the unique seaside towns that line the coast of the city, the natural beauty of the escarpment, the city's close proximity to a major tourist destination hub (Sydney); and its unique multicultural diversity.

METHODOLOGY

Data for this study was collected in two ways: First, a number of meetings were held with the General Manager and staff of Tourism Wollongong. These meetings provided in depth insight into the development stage of Wollongong as a tourism destination as well as the general community reactions. Rich qualitative data resulted from these meetings. Interestingly there was some concern about a proposal to ask residents directly what they thought of tourism. Possibly influenced by a number of negative letters to the editor of the local newspaper one cautious comment was “I know what they will say!”

Second, approval was obtained to include questions into a regular panel survey conducted by the regional market research company (IRIS). The June 2006 panel was used for this survey which was conducted in the form of telephone surveys using a CATI facility. Data collection took place in the week from the 17th to the 22nd of July 2006. The sample was geographically stratified to reflect the adult population distribution for the five Local Government Authorities of the Illawarra Region. Although a regional study, provision of postcodes allowed an identification of respondents relative to their residential suburb. This also allowed for postcodes outside the city to be excluded in this study although the regional data collected may allow for the scope of the study to be expanded in the future. To allow for this, the question asked of residents referred to the ‘region’ rather than the ‘city’. Pre-testing of the question did not identify differences if the word ‘city’ or ‘region’ was used.

Respondents were asked to state their attitude in response to the statement, “The region is attracting more tourists than ever before and further increases over the coming years are predicted”, on a five point scale (very positive, positive, hard to judge, negative, very negative) and were then required to elaborate on the motivations behind their answer.

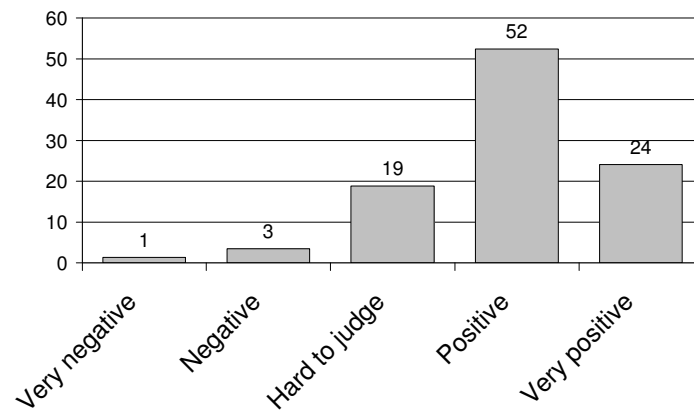
The responses to the first question were obtained in quantitative format and are ordinal in nature; the responses to the second question were open. 394 of the 554 respondents (71%) provided reasons for their response to the first question. These open-ended statements required coding by the researchers. Coding was undertaken by one researcher first. The first researcher passed on the code categories to the one of the other researchers who coded all statements using these same categories as well as introducing two new categories. Finally, the two sets of codes were compared and – where codes were not identical – the coding was reviewed.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Community acceptance of tourism

Responses to question 1 were ‘surprisingly’ positive (Figure 1). Half of all respondents indicated a positive attitude to increased tourism in the city, 24% were very positive. Only 19% felt that it was difficult to judge whether or not the consequences would be positive or negative, and only 4% felt that increased tourism in the region was negative or very negative.

Figure 1
Evaluation of effects of increased tourism
(in percent of a regionally representative sample)



The responses to question 1 only provide an indicator of the general attitude towards tourism and do not enable destination managers to take any kind of action to increase acceptance or address specific fears the community may have. Such insights can, however, be gained by studying the open ended responses. The frequency of responses within each category is provided in Table 2. Multiple responses were allowed for question two.

Table 2
Reasons for evaluation of effects of increased tourism

POSITIVE REASONS	Freq	%	NEGATIVE REASONS	Freq	%
Good for business	238	42.9	Region will be more crowded	7	1.3
More people to Wollongong	49	8.8	More traffic	8	1.4
More jobs	42	7.5	Higher retail prices	6	1.1
Leads to better infrastructure	17	3.0	Do not like tourists	5	0.9
			Negative effect on residents	3	0.6
			Will ruin the natural beauty	2	0.4
			Legal problems	2	0.3
			Infrastructure not ready yet	16	2.9

As can be seen, the positive effect of the tourism industry on local business is the strongest argument supporting the increased tourism development in the city. Forty three percent of all respondents made a statement that was classified as belonging to this category. The following two positive categories (attracting more residents to Wollongong and the availability of more jobs in the region) ranked nearly equal with approximately 8% of respondents making a statement in this category. Finally, infrastructural improvements as a consequence of increased tourism, was perceived as a positive effect by three percent. A few of the original statements include: “boosts the hospitality industry” and “boosts the local community”, “brings more money and jobs to the region”, “brings more work to local community”, and “creates employment”.

Among community concerns, no such concentration on one single factor occurred. Statements in all categories were made by less than two percent of the respondents who expressed their concern that more tourism will make the city and the beaches more crowded, that it will increase the traffic, lead to higher retail prices (including petrol, which was explicitly stated a number of times), will ruin the beauty of nature and cause legal problems. Generally some respondents expressed that they did not like tourists and that they expected negative effects for residents which they did not further specify. Some of the original statements include: “can’t get near the beaches: too busy”, “inflated prices in local stores”, “tourists are a pest”, and “weekend traffic interferes with local residents”.

Heterogeneity in community acceptance

Given the ordinal nature of the evaluation questions and the nominal nature of the coded open-ended statements, Chi-square tests were conducted to assess whether differences are systematically associated with socio-demographics of respondents using a significance level of 95% to evaluate the resulting p-values. Neither age, income, nor ownership status of their house are associated with their evaluation of increased tourism in the area. A significant difference was, however, identified in dependence of the suburb in which respondents live, indicating that personal characteristics alone cannot be the reason for different levels of tourism acceptance. It can be assumed based on previous studies (Gilbert & Clark, 1997; Jurowski & Gursoy, 2004; Williams & Lawson, 2001) that differences in prior exposure or experience with tourism have a major effect on tourism acceptance. In the case of Wollongong this effect was evident in that respondents to the north of the city (54 in total), who recently received the ‘tourism benefits’ of

a forty million dollar Sea Cliff Bridge and the naming of the Grand Pacific Drive which received extensive local and national media coverage, were the most negative towards tourism. Their peaceful coastal villages had been awakened by the new road. The precise suburbs with the post code 2515 include Austinmer (area: 4.2 square kilometres, population: 2,220), Clifton/Scarborough (area: 1.8 square kilometres, population: 350), Coledale (area: 1 square kilometre, population: 895), and Thirroul (area: 5 square kilometres, population: 5,600).

Conversely, suburbs the same distance south of the central Wollongong tourism district expressed their positive reactions to tourism. A possible explanation here is that these micro-geographic suburbs – which are located around Lake Illawarra which represents a recreational area that attracts some regional tourism - have had time to gently adjust to welcome tourism in their suburbs. No major tourism resource developments have taken place around these suburbs. These suburbs included Windang and Warilla (area: 2.2 square kilometres, population: 2,300) with a 2528 post code (Wollongong City Library, 2006).

Those residents within the central Wollongong city district (area: 10 square kilometres, population: 13,800) and immediate surrounds of Gwynneville (population: 5,600), Keiraville, Mangerton, and Mount Kembla (area: 1.6 square kilometres, population: 940), with the post code 2500 were also very positive about tourism (Wollongong City Library, 2006). One suggestion for the generally positive nature of these residents is that the central Wollongong area has been booming over the past five years with a large number of residential and commercial buildings developments having been completed and being under construction. With a number of new hotels being built in this area it is likely that the positive attitude reflects optimism about the benefits the central Wollongong area will gain from future tourism.

It should be noted that there are significant differences in relation to the communication channels between each of these micro-communities. For instance, those suburbs in the north of the city receive a free newspaper called the Northern Leader, those suburbs south of the city receive the newspaper the Advertiser. While the regional newspaper is the Illawarra Mercury and is available for all suburbs to purchase, the free weekly newspapers are heavily used in the micro-communities and consequently allow destination managers to target the concerns in each of those areas specifically.

CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

The aim of this study was to investigate whether an association between residents' attitudes towards tourism could be identified in dependence of the micro-geographic region in which respondents live. This question is of theoretical interest as it introduces a novel segmentation approach to community acceptance research and of practical value as it enables destination managers to undertake internal marketing activities in a customised and cost-effective way.

Wollongong was chosen as the destination under study because it is currently not perceived as a major tourism destination; it faces specific challenges and is geographically structured in micro-regions along the coastline which use different communication channels.

The following central findings resulted from the empirical study:

1. The community acceptance of tourism is generally very high in the City of Wollongong, contrary to the evaluation of destination managers. This is a very positive outcome, particularly

because Wollongong is currently in the process of building four new hotels and tourism is likely to increase significantly over the coming years.

2. An association between residency in micro-geographic communities and attitudes towards tourism were identified. Three micro-geographic regions were particularly interesting: the northern suburbs, central Wollongong and the Lake Illawarra suburbs. They significantly differed in their evaluation of how positive or negative increased tourism in the area would be and listed different reasons for their evaluation. Given that they can be reached through different communication channels it is possible for destination managers to use customised communication messages accounting for the predominant micro-geographic concerns and using novel communication channels to transmit them.

The limitations of the current study are that, given the nature of the survey, only a small set of personal characteristics of respondents were available that would enable to profile community members with a positive or negative attitude or such who have particular reservations about increased tourism industry in the city. The reasons for liking or disliking increased tourism were stated in an open-ended manner. This provided a range of responses which were used in coded form in the current research, but could easily be developed into a structured response question for future studies, which will make it easier to test for differences.

Suggestions for future research would include the necessity to include a wider range of questions to evaluate the reasons behind the attitudes of certain residents. This would not only allow a more rigorous research study but also give a more complete picture of the attitudes, impacts and potential reasons behind the attitudes of residents'.

The key theoretical developments made by this study are related to the findings of differences between residents' perceptions of tourism development within the various micro-geographical communities in the suburbs of Wollongong. Heterogeneity exists among the many smaller sub-units that make up a destination. It would seem that for a city with diverse characteristics, such as Wollongong, that the one-message-for-all, advocating the benefits of tourism, is not an appropriate strategy, both in terms of cost and effectiveness. Destination managers have the opportunity to segment the concerns of their residents and tailor a message based on those concerns via communication channels within each geographic subgroup such as community newspapers, business chambers and verbal communications through opinion leaders. In this way, destination managers have the ability to more effectively address the attitudes of residents. A general one-message-for-all transmitted through channels of mass communication may in fact be ineffective, inefficient and even counter-productive in situations such as the one encountered in Wollongong.

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