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„WORD-OF-MOUTH IS STILL MOST IMPORTANT" – HOW RURAL TOURISM PROVIDERS CONCEPTUALIZE STAKEHOLDER ENGAGEMENT STRATEGIES IN A DIGITALIZED ERA

Abstract: Globalization and digitalization affect the individual rural tourism provider's relationship with the stakeholders (e.g. customers, suppliers). For example, customers compare prices online, book their holidays via distribution platforms (e.g. *booking.com*) and rate their holidays on a farm anonymously via online websites. The increasing digitalization of provider-customer relationships may lead to resistance against digitalization among rural tourism providers due to persistent "traditional" beliefs and "mental maps", but also to new stakeholder engagement strategies, e.g. around digital platforms. However, a research gap on the views and experiences of individual rural tourism providers and their preferred (digital) stakeholder engagement strategies exists.

Hence, in this paper our research goal is to conceptualize the effect of digitalization on stakeholder engagement strategies in "rural tourism". We base the conceptual analysis on a revision of the theoretical building blocks *rural tourism*, *stakeholder engagement* and *mental maps* in order to derive propositions for further empirical research and for a (comparative) case study-analysis of rural tourism providers in Austria and Serbia. Our literature review highlights the relationship between the tourism provider and the customers as key stakeholders; it also sheds lights on (potential) differences in the understanding of rural tourism across sub-concepts and countries: We conceptualize how rural tourism providers offer personalized experiences and close interaction with the rural life through various culture-specific sub-concepts like slow tourism, agritourism, ecotourism etc. In the case of rural tourism, we argue that establishing relationships via word-of-mouth and maintaining long-term intensive relationships built on reciprocal trust is crucial, as this type of tourism builds – to a great extent – on extensive interactions between the local community and the tourist. Moreover, we conceptualize how existing "mental maps" may act as a barrier to adopt new forms of distribution channels and customer contact despite a potential competitive advantage (e.g. through booking.com and holiday-on farm websites). Based on this literature review we derive five propositions for further research on rural tourism providers in Austria and Serbia. Amongst other propositions, we argue that the understanding and the (digital) strategies around "rural tourism" differ among the countries. Moreover, we propose that the more successful the rural tourism providers have been with traditional/classical communication channels the less likely it is that they will embrace digitalization in their stakeholder engagement strategies. Finally, we propose that new digital forms of stakeholder engagement strategies (e.g. via platforms) have to be combined with "traditional" engagement strategies (e.g. word-of-mouth) in order to gain a competitive advantage.   We close the analysis with a brief outlook on preliminary results of our study, which point to the high importance of "traditional" strategies (word-of-mouth) for attracting customers.

Keywords: Rural Tourism Providers, Stakeholder Engagement Strategy, Digitalization, Mental Map, Trust

1. INTRODUCTION

Digitalization affects most industries in the sense that it changes the ways in which the stakeholders within the industry interact, among other things. By stakeholders are meant individuals or groups that can affect and/or is affected by a given organization's activities (Freeman, 1984). The new ways of interacting can e.g. involve communication media (through websites and social media) and non-human interactions (through Internet-of-Things, i.e. systems that can monitor and regulate e.g. light, heat and more within a hotel room).

The increasing digitalization of provider-customer relationships involve less direct human contact, while at the same time offering possibilities for new (digital) stakeholder engagement strategies and practices. A digitalization example are reservation platforms (e.g. *booking.com*) which have been coined "disruptive innovations" (Gössling and Lane, 2014). Such digital innovations significantly change the rules of the market and/or the user behavior as well as the way stakeholders (e.g. tourism providers and their customers) interact (Christensen et al., 2010). Hypothetically, digitalization may thus challenge existing beliefs and "mental maps" (Black & Gregersen, 2014) of rural tourism providers as small-scale entrepreneurs regarding the way they do their business and set their strategies.

Based on the above, we pose the following overall research question: *How do rural tourism providers conceptualize stakeholder engagement strategies in a digitalized era?*

We provide a literature review and preliminary theoretical framework, based on building blocks within the fields of *rural tourism*, *stakeholder engagement* and *mental maps*. Our analysis highlights (potential) differences in the understanding of "digital" rural tourism across sub-concepts and countries. In detail we conceptualize how digitalization influences the rural tourism providers' so-called *stakeholder engagement strategies*, i.e. strategies with the intent to enhance and sustain contributions from and interaction with the various stakeholders (Eskerod & Jepsen, 2013). We focus especially on the relationship between the rural tourism providers and the customers, i.e. current, recurring and potential guests – and review digitalization pressures related to new forms of distributions channels and customer contact (e.g. through *booking.com* and *holiday-on-farm* platforms). Based on the literature reviews, we derive preliminary research propositions for our future comparative case study of rural tourist providers' strategies from a stakeholder perspective in two different countries, Austria and Serbia for each building block. The concluding section points to limitations and future research.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

2.1. Rural Tourism and its sub-concepts – a culture-specific concept?

The definition of "rural tourism" is not clear-cut. One of the most cited definition stems from Lane (1994). He argues that rural tourism in its "purest" form would be*: "(1) Located in rural areas. (2) functionally rural - built upon the rural world's special features of small-scale enterprise, open space, contact with nature and the natural world, heritage, 'traditional' societies and 'traditional' practices. (3) Rural in scale—both in terms of buildings and settlements — and, therefore, usually small-scale. (4) Traditional in character, growing slowly and organically, and connected with local families. It will often be very largely controlled locally and developed for the long-term good of the area. (5) Of many different kinds, representing the complex pattern of rural environment, economy, history and location"* (Lane, 1994, p. 14). Lane (1994) also concludes when it comes to the definition of 'rural' is that it is small, and almost always less than 10,000 inhabitants. In the scholarly literature, the term "rural tourism" is often used when referring to related (sub)concepts like agritourism or farm tourism (e.g. Darău et al., 2010; Daniloska & Hadzi Naumova-Mihajlovska, 2015), culinary food tourism or sustainable tourism (e.g. Sims, 2009), educational rural tourism (e.g. Căprar et al., 2011), slow tourism (e.g. De Salvo et al., 2014; de Salvo & Calzati, 2018; Lane, 1994; Miretpastor et al., 2015), and cultural tourism (e.g. MacDonald & Jolliffe, 2003; Bachleitner & Zins, 1999; Yang, Wall & Smith, 2008).

Above concepts – albeit different in focus and activities entailed – highlight the high relevance of offering "experiences", and close(r) engagement and interaction between the tourism provider/the region and the customer, features, which are in alignment with Lane's (1994) definition. For example, Daniloska & Hadzi Naumova-Mihajlovska (2015) name activities like food processing, farmers' markets, 'petting' farms, roadside stands, and 'pick-your-own' operations, shearing sheep, mowing, engaging in overnight farm stays and other farm visits, as well as visiting agriculture-related festivals, museums, and other similar attractions as part of agri-/farm tourism. Yang, Wall and Smith (2008) argue that a "cultural" rural tourist is motivated to seek out exotic cultural *experiences*, which can include and are not limited to: visiting minority homes, ethnic villages and ethnic theme parks, being part of ethnic events and festivals watching traditional ceremonies or dances or shopping for ethnic handicrafts and souvenirs. Also De Salvo and Calzati (2018), in their conceptual analysis of slow tourism, argue that besides *sustainability* and (slow) *modality*, *experience* is a defining feature of slow tourism. However, not only direct personal contacts may account for the close interaction of the customer with the provider and the immersion of the customer into the culture: Sims (2009) argues

that "authentic" products (made available by the rural tourism providers) symbolize the place and culture of the destination. i.e. products produced by the tourism provider (e.g. food and wine) connect the customer to the region, the culture, and the provider - and selling these "individual" products fosters the relationship with the customer and leads to a close and trustful relationship between the tourist provider and the customer.

Moving forward from the definitions of different sub-concepts above, we argue that any concept and definition of rural tourism is embedded in a cultural/national context. Also Lane et al. (2013) argue that criteria used by different nations about what defines rural tourism may vary considerably among nations. Sharpley and Roberts (2004) argue that the concept of rural tourism as "sustainable tourism" might be a concept of those who have the luxury to be able to be sustainable. Countries who have political, social and economic crises has gone through a war in recent history, may not be able to. Other countries profit from European Union membership and EU funds and initiatives (e.g. LEADER projects, https://www.bmnt.gv.at/land/laendl_entwicklung/leader.html), which tackle tourism projects with the aim to include and strengthen regional stakeholders (e.g. local communities, regional tourist associations and providers).

Moreover, a rural area or zone in a country or region is complex and subject to different interpretations and criteria, e.g. regarding population density (Albaecete-Saez et al., 2007; Lane et al., 2013). Also, tourism activity in rural areas is heterogeneous. Also the motives of the tourism providers for engaging in rural tourism themselves may vary and are embedded in the culture-specific understanding of what rural tourism entails. In these context, the boundary between "rural" and "urban" tourism is often ambiguous: Lane (1994) argues that rural tourism is multi-faceted, "*because rural areas themselves are multi-faceted and rarely either static entities or self-contained, or free from urban influence*" (p. 10). In a more recent analysis, Lane et al. (2013) argue that urban or resort-based tourism is not confined to urban areas, but spills out into rural areas (e.g. through excursions, employment and purchase). Likewise, rural tourism can also be "urban" in form, and merely located in a rural area (Lane et al., 2013). In this context, the concept of slow tourism – while predominant in rural areas – is by definition not bound to the rural sphere. However, getting closer to the "real" values of the rural world is a frequently cited topic in the literature (e.g. Albaecete-Saez et al., 2007).

Hence, based on the above, we formulate our first proposition:

Proposition 1: Tourism providers from Austria and Serbia differ in the way they conceptualize "rural tourism" and engage in (different) rural tourism activities.

2.2. Digital stakeholder engagement strategies by rural tourist providers
2.2.1. A stakeholder view on rural tourism
An organization's stakeholders are defined as the individuals or groups that can affect and/or are affected by the organization's activities (Freeman, 1984). Traditionally, the relation between the focal organization and its stakeholders is seen as a dual reciprocal relationship in which both "give" and "take", i.e. contribute and receive benefits from contributing (Rhenman, 1968). The underlying assumption is that each stakeholder assesses the input-output ratio in order to consider whether to initiate and sustain the relationship. A classical transaction between an organization and its customers concerns the products and services any given customer aspires to get and is willing to pay a certain amount of money for. However, non-monetary exchanges between an organization and its customers typically also take place (Eskerod & Jepsen, 2013). In a digitalized era, it is common for organizations within many industries - among these the tourism industry - to ask for reviews on online media, e.g. on Tripadvisor. In this way, the customer gets a chance to give feedback on their experiences made with the rural tourist provider.

New stakeholder theory suggests a replacement of a narrow transactional, dual perspective with the perspective of a stakeholder value network (Freeman et al., 2018). Here the various actors (focal organization and stakeholders) interact in ways that create benefits/value for all parties involved. A social partnership perspective (e.g. Savage et al., 2010) rejects the classic view of (descriptive) stakeholder theory, which sets forth a focal organization engaging in stakeholder relationships out of self-interest. The relationship between various stakeholders (e.g. municipality, tourism providers, tourist agencies) in a social partnership is a "network" relationship, often building on trust. Trust is often defined as the willingness to be vulnerable to the discretionary actions of another part (e.g. Pirson & Malhotra, 2011). Stakeholders' perceptions of an organization and the willingness to engage with the organization are highly related to the concept of trust (Pirson & Malhotra, 2011). For example, in an empirical study among rural tourists in Spain and Portugal results show that trust has a positive influence on loyalty of the tourist to the rural tourism provider (Correira Loureiro & Gonzalez, 2008).

Fatihmath (2015) argues that in rural tourism the analysis stakeholder collaboration has not received much attention so far. In particular analyses from the perspective of the individual tourism providers are – to our best knowledge – scarce. (Digital) certificates, joint tourist attraction packages, discount/customer vouchers and related initiatives with (regional) tourist associations, platforms, local suppliers and the local community in general are examples of how rural tourism providers engage with various stakeholders. The importance of the respective stakeholders may vary: In rural and peripheral areas, the local authorities or other public agency might be dominant; In highly sensitive ecological groups the parks authority or environmental groups are likely to be regarded as key players from the perspective of the tourist provider (Theobald, 2012). Also, potential national differences and initiatives for

collaboration have to be taken into account (cf. proposition 1). Initiatives on the regional and national level in Austria and Serbia are likely to impact the stakeholder engagement strategies of rural tourist providers.

Hence, based on the conceptualization of rural tourism provider as a small-scale entrepreneur we conceptualize the single tourism providers as small-scale entrepreneur applying a social partnership perspective with close and personal direct interactions with their stakeholders (Savage et al., 2010); With regards to establishing relationship with the customer, we argue that with a social partnership approach, establishing relationships via direct, personal interactions to engage the costumer in a "direct" experience (e.g. handwritten Christmas-letters, phone-calls), and to maintain long-term intensive relationships building on reciprocal trust is crucial (Nagaraju & Chandrashekara, 2014). Even indirect interaction (e.g. via word-of-mouth) is a strategy to build relationships with potential customers.

The above leads to our second proposition:

Proposition 2: Austrian and Serbian tourism collaborate in a "social partnership" with their key stakeholders.

2.2.2 The effects of digitalization on stakeholder engagement strategies with customers

Based on Andreopoulou et al. (2014) we argue that *Information and Communication Technology* (ICT), in particular the emergence of the internet impacts the whole tourism value chain and service delivery, even in rural tourism Andreopoulou et al. (2014). The experience-oriented rural tourism industry is affected by digitalization in various ways, in particular regarding engagement strategies with customers as key stakeholders: While it is an industry which encompasses multi-faceted non-mass activities and experiences outside urban areas, e.g. gastronomy events and stays at farms (e.g. Lane et al., 1994), the customers might come from areas more populated and "digitalized". Even in remote areas, digitalization affects the individual rural tourism provider's relationship with the stakeholders: digital media have opened opportunities for other communication media, and not least the customers, i.e. the rural tourism provider's new and recurring guests, have got more opportunities to get to know about the tourism provider's offers (via websites like Tripadvisor) and to interact (via digital platforms, emails etc.). Many rural tourists compare prices online, book their holidays via distribution platforms (e.g. *booking.com*) and rate their holidays anonymously via online websites after the stay. But not only online booking platforms and ratings, but also (digital) certificates, joint packages and other initiatives with (regional) tourist associations, local suppliers, local councils, and the local community in general are examples of how rural tourism providers have to engage with various stakeholders, often in a digitalized form; i.e. digital marketing activities imply a certain level of collaborative practice across different stakeholders.

Studies from different countries indicate different levels of "success" with digital stakeholder engagement strategies. For example, in their analysis of Norwegian tourism providers, Gössling and Lane (2014) investigate whether reservation systems as "disruptive innovations" may pose challenges on family or lifestyle entrepreneur rural tourism businesses (e.g. dealing with increased price transparency, complexities of multi-channel management etc.). Results from their interview-study among accommodation providers in western Norway indicate that *booking.com* now has a significant role in reservations in rural Norway, and that individual businesses perceived themselves to benefit from the adoption of the platform, despite commission costs (Gössling & Lane, 2014). In contrast, Andreopoulou et al. (2014) find in their empirical study that the e-business activities of rural tourism enterprises in Greece are still in their infancy. To the authors' best knowledge, there are no recent studies from Austria and Serbia with regard to the (perceived) types and effect of digital engagement strategies.

This leads to our third proposition:

Proposition 3: Rural tourism providers in Austria and in Serbia perceive a pressure to engage with their customers via digital strategies.

2.2.3 Mental maps

The classical communication channels for engaging with customers are through face-to-face interactions, phone conversations and mail. If this has led to success in the past, there is a high risk that the rural tourism providers have developed a mental map saying that this is the best – or even the only – way to engage successfully with stakeholders (Black & Gregersen, 2014). It could also be that the providers have positive experiences with digitalization from other parts of their lives.

Digitalization can be seen as an external force that is driving organizations (and their stakeholders) to undertake various changes. However, organizations often fail to change due to the fact that they don't feel any/sufficient urgency (Kotter, 2008), or that they face barriers. Black and Gregersen (2014) introduce three barriers to change: (1) Barrier to see, (2) barrier to move, and (3) barrier to finish. The authors (Black & Gregersen, 2014) state that "mental maps" on which behaviors that lead to success is preventing people from seeing the need for change. This is in line with Schein (1985) who states that people's behavior is guided by underlying unconscious assumptions on what will lead to success, based on previous experiences. Black and Gregersen (2014) state that many people stick to behavior that was helpful in the past "Doing the Right Thing Well" even though this behavior may not lead to success anymore "Doing the Wrong Thing Well", because they don't want to start all over again on the "Proficiency Curve", falling down the "Proficiency Cliff" and start "Doing the Right Thing Poorly".

As long lasting mental maps may prohibit change (Black & Gregersen, 2014), it is interesting to investigate whether persistent beliefs on "the right way" of engaging with stakeholders lead to resistance and challenges among rural tourism providers when it comes to embracing digitalization.

In line with Black & Gregersen (2014), we argue that the interaction mode through many years has established and maintained a certain "mental map" saying that this is "the way" to create trust and thereby a (continuous) relationship with the guests (e.g. *word-of-mouth is still most important*"). This makes it difficult for rural tourism providers to embrace digitalization.

The above leads to the fourth proposition:

Proposition 4: *The more successful the rural tourism providers have been with traditional/classical communication channels the less likely it is that they will embrace digitalization in their stakeholder engagement strategies.*

We argue that a lack of knowledge and (technical) resources as well as persistent beliefs and "mental maps" about the conceptualization of rural tourism might challenge the effective adoption of digitalization strategies for stakeholder engagement (e.g. via *booking.com*). However, we argue that the "traditional" way of engaging and managing customer relationships (e.g. word-of-mouth) is not outdated, but is often complemented by a digital approach. Based on section 2.2.1 we argue that even in the digitalized area rural tourism providers which create and sustain stakeholder relationships based on mutual trust and cooperation will have a "competitive advantage" (Berman et al., 1999). However, this will depend on how well the individual provider responds to the needs of the (digitalized) customer, but still maintain close relationships and interactions with the company; i.e. we argue that tourism providers need to incorporate "traditional" into digital interactions with the customer (e.g. by replying to ratings, setting up online guestbooks, sending e-christmas letters etc.)

Hence, we formulate the fifth proposition like this:

Proposition 5: *Rural tourism providers that incorporate "traditional" stakeholder engagement strategies into digital platforms and media have a competitive advantage.*

5. OUTLOOK TO PRELIMINARY RESULTS AND FUTURE STUDIES

To answer the research question, *How do rural tourism providers conceptualize stakeholder engagement strategies in a digitalized era?* we conducted an in-depth literature review on various theoretical building blocks. These preliminary results of the literature review and the five research propositions will serve as a basis for future empirical studies on tourism, e.g. comparative case studies between Austrian and Serbian rural tourism providers.

First results from our comprehensive interviews with Austrian tourism providers and other stakeholders show that "*word of mouth is still important*" for attracting new customers. Also, results point to high efforts from the side of the tourism provider to engage in personal interactions and offer "experiences", build a level of trust and transmit their rural "values" to the customers. However, despite the traditional engagement strategies the tourism providers also often regard the adoption of *booking.com* and other platforms as crucial for the future success of their business.

Future research should also tackle the strategies from a customer perspective, i.e. how (different) customers get into contact with rural tourism providers and to which extent they prefer to draw on "personal networks" and word-of-mouth versus digital platforms or online recommendations in the countries. Qualitative and quantitative approaches can reveal changes in customer strategies regarding first and recurring interaction with the rural tourism provider.

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