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Promoting Ethical Practice and Awareness in Tourism Students towards Responsible and Sustainable Tourism Development

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Abstract

Tourism is a rapidly expanding and vigorous industry that significantly impacts national economies, natural environments, and societies in general. As it grows, it becomes increasingly crucial for tourism professionals to operate with a robust ethical foundation and a sense of responsibility. The aim of this research is to encourage higher education institutions offering qualifications in tourism to consider the inclusion of modules on ethical practices within the industry. Tourism education plays a pivotal role in shaping future leaders who can navigate the complexities of the industry with integrity and accountability. There is compelling evidence of a decline in moral standards among university students, irrespective of their field of study, indicating a pressing need for the teaching of ethics in tourism studies. Moreover, students of tourism come from diverse backgrounds and consequently possess different expectations and ethical standards, which may not align with the desired practices in the workplace. Given the numerous moral challenges facing students in the industry, the promotion of ethical awareness is of paramount importance, particularly in light of the substantial growth of the tourism sector globally over the last few decades. Through the instruction of ethics to tourism students, educational institutions will be nurturing responsible future professionals who are empowered to navigate the intricacies of the tourism industry while promoting sustainability and respecting the diverse cultures of the countries in which they will operate. Such instruction must take into account respect for local traditions and the prospective impacts of tourism on the host communities. Developing a strong ethical consciousness is fundamental in efforts to avoid exploitation and is likely to foster positive relationships between tourists, indigenous hosts, and all stakeholders involved. In this regard, Socratic deontology plays a crucial role.

Keywords: Ethical practice; sustainability; consciousness; tourism education; proactivity

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Introduction

This article departs from the premise that it is vitally important that tourism students be taught to consider ethical implications of their actions in life in general, but more so in their tourism practises. It argues that there is a need for ethical training and courses need to be developed in which tourism students are taught the importance of always acting ethically when it comes to the moral standards in the society in which they operate. Through adhering to the moral ideals off society, they will be serving the tourism market well and acting in ways that are acceptable to society (Niketan, 2024; Chazan, 1985). This requires their ethical and moral decision-making to be sound. Ethical and moral conduct relates to acting in a manner that is considered to be correct, good, and just in terms of societal and professional standards and expectations. Ethics incorporates sets of rules or principles that are intended to guide one's behaviour in both social and professional settings. Ethics are obtained from philosophy and are often systemized by institutions into codes of desired and expected practice. Morals on the other hand, refers to one's personal or culturally derived values concerning right or wrong conduct. One's morals are in the mainstream influenced by their upbringing, their religion and culture, or even through their personal values. For one to be considered to be ethical and moral they are required to hold solid moral principles and strive to be honest at all times while demonstrating compassion and concern for others and in all situations, including the workplace. An ethical person strives to be responsible, fair and just and treat all others without prejudice and is accountable for their actions all the time. Tourism companies are gradually realising that endorsing an ethical stance is good business practice since it increases their profits, supports management effectiveness, boosts a company's image and additionally leads to enhanced employee relations (Hudson & Miller, 2005). It is crucial for all employees in tourism to serve the industry ethically in all transactions with tourists since tourism is a huge industry across the globe. In 2024, Travel and Tourism's contribution to global GDP totalled US$ 10.9 trillion. This included direct, indirect, and induced impacts of the sector. As a share, Travel and Tourism represented 10% of the global economy. Travel and Tourism is also an important source of employment. In 2024, the sector supported a total of 357 million jobs globally, which is approximately 1 in 10 jobs. In the USA alone, domestic visitors spent US$ 5.3 trillion, growing 5.4% over the 2023 level. At the same time, spending by international visitors increased 11.6% annually to reach US$ 1.9 trillion (World Travel & Tourism Council, 2023).

Advancing needed ethical civic habits, principles and values is important to teach so as to persuade and change students while they are still relatively young (Sherrod et al., 2002). For tourism students, it is vital that they are taught principles and values that ought to guide their decision-making and behaviour as they work in the tourism industry. They will be expected to carry out their administrative tasks ethically and provide quality services in the work they perform while engaging with clients. This necessitates providing honest information, answering all inquiries, and resolving any issues for their clients such as inter-alia making reservations, honest marketing, dealing with social media, handling of client documents and dealing with payments

Open Rubric

and basically demonstrating their integrity and virtue in how they operate in whatever they undertake. Responsible tourism is now a significant trend in especially the western world, and there is a broader consumer market tendency towards lifestyle marketing and ethical consumption in tourism (Goodwin & Francis, 2003). As students graduate and then grow in the tourism industry, they will often serve in managerial positions and will have a critical role and impact in fostering ethical practices and they therefore need to contribute to the growth and development of the tourism industry through serving as paragons of virtue as they ultimately model desired behaviour to their minions. The principles they should embrace ought to inter-alia include having an appreciation for cultural diversity, a passion for environmental sustainability, a desire to treat employees fairly, and especially demonstrating integrity in all the marketing and business practices they are involved in. It is thus imperative to educate tourism students about following ethical principles since this ensures they understand the importance of maintaining high standards of conduct in their professional lives and in dealing with all stakeholders with who they come into contact (Alston, 1988). It is additionally evident that ethics education produces at least some homogeneity and is highly favourable when seeking to acquire cross cultural understanding and similarity in ethical values as espoused globally (Jamal, 2004). In this regard deontological ethics is imperative to consider as it is primarily concerned with the notion of universal truths and principles which one needs to observe in practice, irrespective of the circumstances one may find themselves in. One cannot conceivably promote sustainable and responsible tourism development that can produce strong socio-economic and environmental benefits to local communities without ethical practices been adhered to (Piccioto, 2019).

Considering Socratic Philosophy

The teachings of Socrates (470 – 399 BCE) are important to consider when ethical and moral education is sought. Aristotle stated that, "the end and purpose of the polis is the good life" (Barker, 1948). Socrates argued that all virtues are principally one, as they are a type of knowledge (Guthrie, 1972). He highlighted a deontological approach in which universal principles and truths need to always be adhered to irrespective of situations (Morrison, 2010). In this scenario, the means are more important than the ends. It is a normative ethical theory arguing that the morality or immorality of an action should be grounded on whether or not an action is right or wrong when considering rules and principles, rather than being based on the mere consequences of the action that is carried out (Olson, 1967). Socrates maintained that when a person is unethical or immoral it is predominantly based on their lack knowledge. Knowledge and virtuous action go hand in hand and when one falters on the ethics front, it is based on ignorance (Rowe, 2006). Socrates promoted the notion that virtues need to be united so that when one is aware of a threat they can be proactive and avoid it- thus knowledge of virtue is central. A person can only be just if he or she knows what justice is (Ahbel-Rappe & Kamtekar, 2009). When anyone breaks the law, from a deontological perspective, this is unethical and immoral. We need to remember that morals are in essence the corpus of standards that a society establishes for its members. The standards are invariably embodied in the traditions and institutions of a society and from them, principles are derived as rules that essentially predetermine one's conduct (Waller, 2005; Ahbel-Rappe, 2011). This is why it is important for tourism students to receive sound education on ethics and issues of morality so that they may be socialised into interacting in ways that are consistent with what society expects form its members. For Socrates then, moral duties and realistic consideration can provide significant awareness for tourism students. This is crucial as they will in all likelihood need to traverse numerous ethical challenges which are intrinsic in the tourism industry. Deontological ethics, spotlights the morality of one's actions based on sets of rules rather than on mere outcomes. For Socrates all individuals ought to conduct themselves according to innate moral principles rather than simply pursuing desirable outcomes for themselves (Bussanich & Smith, 2013; Hartman, 2015) or their tourism industry employer. Tourism employees need to be maintaining ethical standards on an ongoing basis, and they always need do the right thing even if it risks losing business for their company. Socratic deontology has great potential to guide tourism students when seeking to act ethically and make sound decisions especially when challenged with ethical dilemmas.

This of course necessitates that there are ethical frameworks and codes of conduct in workplaces, and carefully crafted procedures and principles in place that speak to the pressing moral issues and possible challenges that may be encountered. Above all there should be teaching of a model of appropriate and desired ethical behaviour for the tourism industry. Such inclusions will serve to support pressing problems for example environmental unsustainability, injustice and inequality. When students are taught about such issues, they will be far better positioned to contribute positively to responsible tourism practices and of course enhance the chances of sustainability. For example, by observing sound ethical guidelines they can mitigate the exploitation of local communities and at least to a measure, safeguard the equitable distribution of tourism benefits (Piccioto, 2019). Socrates stressed the significance of self-reflection and continuous learning (Hartman, 2015). In the course of their education, tourism students should be guided to engage in the practice of lifelong learning and critically examine the personal values they embrace. If they wish to develop their professional careers they need to be 'tuned-in' to the right ethical standards and required moral behaviour in the industry. Only in this way can they be expected to make informed ethical decisions in the workplaces they will serve in. Socratic deontological thought, if promoted in tourism education, can provide students with a vigorous ethical framework, highlight their moral duties, promote their faithfulness to ethical codes, encourage them to continuously self-examine what they do how they do it, and assist them to apply their knowledge of ethics in practice to real-world situations. Such a foundation will prepare and train them to have the integrity and responsibility to effectively and virtuously navigate the complex ethical landscape in which the tourism industry operates in which they can role-model desired conduct. By teaching them and motivating them to do the right thing, students will be far better positioned to consider the benefits and harms of some decisions and possible actions they may take as they serve in the tourism industry (Enea, 2007).

Ethical tourism education practice

Li (2002) maintains that there has been a lack of progress when it comes to ethical tourism practise and this is predominantly due to the fact that no philosophical underpinning is in place for tourism students to embrace, and it is imperative that moral and socially acceptable conduct should exist in all responsible tourism related activities. The level of ethical education in tourism studies is most certainly likely to influence the ethical decision making of students entering the industry. There has been a rise in appeals for ethical training amongst tourism students from industry (Jamal, 2004) but sadly hardly any evidence exists that tourism students are indeed receiving much needed ethics education (Cohen et al. 2001). Responsible behaviour in tourism goes way beyond ethics. It invariably incorporates a measure of accountability for a wide range of socio-economic, as well as the environmental impacts of tourism. Responsible tourism practices must always seek to reduce any-and-all negative impacts while maximising the positive contributions to local communities as well as the natural environment. Education must thus vigorously promote sustainable tourism practices and stress the role that students will need to play in the ongoing promotion of responsible tourism practices.

The integration of ethics into the tourism curricula

It is undoubtable that education plays a key role in forging strong ethical values which ultimately contribute to developing the ethical, responsible and trustworthy employees that the tourism industry desires. In addition, ethics education also develops one's character. Thus, it is critically important to incorporate it within all tourism curricula and not merely have it as an elective. It is through well-crafted curricula that the desired ethical values are propagated. It is essential to have ethics teaching modules and these need to focus on ethical values such as inter-alia integrity, responsibility, trustworthiness honesty, respect for the other and fairness. The desired values should be considered to be principles and should be likened to duties that people working in tourism are obliged to fulfil. The duties that are expected of tourism employees must lead to the creation of a culture in the workplace that is conducive to sound ethical behaviour, while negative aspects are to be avoided and totally abstained. The latter would include any activity that is conducive to immorality or any unethical acts being perpetrated by one serving in the tourism industry. All tourism education programmes must promote ethical tourism practices by advancing the idea that students need to foster and support initiatives that align with ethical standards. Students need to learn to recognise and advance tourism products and services that highlight ethical consequences, such as community-based tourism and conservation initiatives in a spirit of justice and fair-trade.

Tourism education programmes should all incorporate ethics and responsibility into their curricula in all courses and modules offered. Tourism ethics focussed courses provide students with important practical and theoretical knowledge and should present suitable practical frameworks for addressing many ethical dilemmas that arise in the industry. They also promote responsible tourism practices by including subjects such for example, ethical decision-making, sustainable tourism and corporate social responsibility. These should all be part of the curriculum for tourism practitioners. By supporting ethical tourism, students can help to motivate positive change happening in the industry. A tourism student needs to thus fully understand that violating the rights of other stakeholders through dishonest means and theft is totally unacceptable, as is any attempt to corrupt others. Any unethical behaviour wears away the very fabric of the tourism industry and this is highly destructive since the industry is forged on human interaction, cultural exchange, and mutual trust. By being ethical in their conduct, tourism employees not only protect others but also themselves and the tourism industry in general. Stakeholder theory advances the notion that organisations should always seek to create value for all stakeholders, not just their shareholders. In tourism, this attitude fosters ethical and responsible behaviour towards various stakeholders incorporating local communities and tourists (World Economic Forum, 2023; Baena & Cerviño, 2024).

Legal procedures that are required need to be fully upheld and in the process the rights of all stakeholders must be considered. Whatever is put out in the media concerning tourism whether it be print or electronic or any other form must be totally devoid of immoral and unethical action. Tourism businesses need to include checks and balances and accountability when dealing with stakeholders. There needs to be strong collaboration between tourism businesses and civil society where there is strong two-way communication in sincere dialogue. The first necessity is to have people serving in the industry that have good values and moral capitalism at the individual level.

Corporate social responsibility

Tourism employees also need to be aware that corporate social responsibility (CSR) is also their concern and a great challenge. Each tourism enterprise can develop their own type of CSR and craft their own model and guidelines in this regard. There is a definite need to have CSR which is in no way to be regarded as a mere public relations exercise. It is important to have sound business practises and to consider ethics in all operations failing which there could be a great loss of trust in an enterprise which will invariably damage a business (Freeman, et al., 2018). Numerous studies demonstrate that when tourism businesses or ethical, have sound governance and are socially responsible, they are highly favoured in the public domain. This makes investors more likely to be interested in such companies. CSR is often referred to as a tacit social contract which essentially relate to the idea that a community allows a business to operate within it in order to provide work for residents and needed revenue through taxes. In the process it is expected that the company helps to sustain the environment and improve the lives of all stakeholders. Societies that thrive or those that are infused with strong moral and ethical values and that seek to improve the quality of life of people (Responsible Tourism Partnerships, 2002). A tourism company that wishes to be taken seriously should seek to incorporate socially responsible values into the mission and vision statements and demonstrate that they truly care through socially responsible practises (World Travel & Tourism Council, 2023). Such companies invariably have codes of

conduct that their customers as well as other stakeholders are required to uphold through ethical decision-making, and they continuously strive to enhance ethics and have principled values (Fennell, 2020). This of course is not an easy task and can take time. It is ultimately caring individual tourism employees with a strong ethical orientation and personal integrity, that are committed to uphold lofty moral values in their dealings with their stakeholders.

A principle-based approach which is led by values is ultimately far more effective than a mere rule-based approach since employees intuitively do the right thing and have a will to curb corruption (Hartman, 2015). Integrity based lessons in tourism modules would help to ensure that desired core values are upheld. Students should be taught that rules are reinforced not only through signing of agreements in workplaces, but through the moral standards they uphold as responsible and ethical employees and citizens. The curricula must promote respect and sensitivity for all cultures and races and education received must stress the importance of appreciating and indeed valuing cultural diversity. Especially the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) are vital to incorporate in curricula. Most importantly, SDG 8 (Decent Work), SDG 12 (Responsible Consumption), SDG 13 (Climate Action) as these align tourism ethics to global development priorities (United Nations Sustainable Development Goals, 2023). Students must learn about the positive, and also the negative impacts of tourism on regional cultures and the critical importance of respecting and preserving cultural heritage (Archer et al., 2005). Such considerations would go a long way to help future tourism employees advance civil and culturally applicable interactions between tourists and the host communities they spend time and money in. In addition, all tourism students should be taught about sustainable tourism and its principles and how to use these in their operations. In this regard aspects such as eco-friendly tourism and good community engagement initiatives need to be promoted. Failing to educate tourism students on such aspects will not allow them to meaningfully add value to the industry's viability (Leslie, 2012). We should remember that entry level employees in the tourism industry would eventually become leaders and with us need to develop them ethically to be well positioned to guide the industry in its search for responsible and sustainable practises. We cannot foster a culture of integrity in tourism without promoting ethics in the curricula that are offered and consider all cultures in our curricula (Mason, 2015).
It is non-negotiable to teach students about the social impacts of tourism and the importance of marketing tourism products ethically and to have them participating in community engagement projects and initiatives so as to understand issues that need to be addressed in building local development. This will support them in being socially responsible tourism professionals who also care about the natural environment.

Marketing and communication relating to tourism products and services are also imperative areas in which ethics is essential. Tourism marketing education must teach students about ethical marketing practices and the need for candour in all advertising initiatives. In addition to the aforesaid tourism students need to fully understand both the legal and regulatory frameworks within which tourism operates and this means that the regulations and laws relating to tourism are well understood by students. The main laws that need to be well understood include those relating to labour issues, protecting of consumers and environmental issues. Students must deal with real-world situations in their classes through case studies and be taught to carefully consider the consequences of their actions. They need to realise that all their decisions must be well- aligned with ethical standards of conduct. One cannot argue that in their culture things are done differently and thus they lapsed ethically (Isaacs, 1997). Academics should encourage their students to become lifelong learners in order to ensure they remain current with the latest laws, ethical standards and observe best practices on an ongoing basis. After graduation, they should be encouraged to attend workshops annually and obtain needed certification of their ethical competence throughout their careers. Most importantly, they should be taught to circumspect in their use of technology and artificial intelligence digital tools. The instilling and practicing of values that promote responsible, respectful, and sustainable interactions within the tourism industry is a lifelong project. Avoiding exploitative tourism practices and the promotion of genuine, respectful cultural exchange is needed. There should be no deceptive practices in marketing, pricing, and any communication. Especially truth-in-advertising standards is vital with no fake promises being made. Students should also be taught that tourism needs to accessible to people with disabilities and various other needs and that inclusive services for such individuals also need to be designed. Above all, they should be tuned in to eschewing cultural insensitivity, any environmental damage, and exploitation of stakeholders as they strive first and foremost to builds trust with all tourism stakeholders.

Conclusion

This article has highlighted the need for ethical lessons to be incorporated into the tourism curricula in higher education. It argues that such ethical lessons have the potential to address moral challenges that arise in a rapidly expanding tourism industry. Despite growth setbacks perpetuated by the recent events such as the Covid-19 pandemic, recovery efforts have shown the resilience of the sector that continues to recover with increased demand for travel. This highlights tourism's position as a significant component of the global economy in terms of job creation. As such, the need for skilled individuals who can work in a sector that advocates for ethical behaviour to attain the SDGs imperatives cannot be overemphasized. Literature has shown that ethical behaviour remains an obligation and a major component of the sustainability of the tourism sector linked to elements of service quality and equitable distribution of benefits to communities where tourism activities occur. Thus, embedding ethical education potentially has the ability to enhance tourism students to think critically about the choices they make in terms of industry practices. Put simply, to "choose the right thing when it is easier to do the wrong" as advocated for based on Socratic deontology. Such ethical courses can develop essential values, including respect, honesty and fairness in students while teaching them environmental responsibility which is crucial for conservation and preservation efforts to combat overexploitation and climate change while advancing regenerative efforts. Moreover, educating tourism students about CSR, noting that stakeholders in tourism are all affected by their respective actions, assists them in recognizing ethical obligations to the general society.

Thus, a robust curriculum that takes into consideration lifelong ethical learning, cultural understanding and proper decision-making can produce effective tourism managers that can promote trustworthiness, resilience building, social responsibility and responsible tourism.

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