

Political economy of tourism: Trust in government actors, political support, and their determinants

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H I G H L I G H T S

- ▶ Trust in government is a good determinant of political support.
- ▶ Political performance of government is the strongest predictor of trust.
- ▶ Social exchange theory is partially supported.
- ▶ No empirical support for cultural theory of political trust.
- ▶ Strong empirical support for institutional theory of political trust.

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A B S T R A C T

This study developed a comprehensive model of residents' trust in government actors and political support for tourism based on social exchange theory, institutional theory of political trust, and cultural theory of political trust. The model was tested on a sample of 391 residents of Niagara Region, Ontario, Canada, using confirmatory factor analysis and structural equation modelling. Findings suggested that residents' perceptions of the benefits and costs of tourism and their trust in government actors were significant determinants of political support. Their perceptions of the political and economic performance of government actors significantly predicted trust in government actors. Interpersonal trust, perceived costs of tourism, and perceived power in tourism decision-making were insignificant determinants of trust. The study found partial support for social exchange theory. Cultural theory of political trust was not found to be relevant, while strong support was found for institutional theory of political trust.

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1. Introduction

The negative consequences of tourism development on local communities have led researchers emphasise on the sustainability of the sector (Choi & Sirakaya, 2006). It is now widely accepted among scholars and destination practitioners that sustainable tourism requires that residents are involved in the planning process of and actively support the sector (Diedrich & Garcia-Buades, 2009; Dyer, Gursoy, Sharma, & Carter, 2007; Latkova & Vogt, 2012; Nunkoo & Ramkissoon, 2011, 2012). Recognizing communities' central role in tourism, researchers have widely investigated

residents' perceptions of tourism impacts and their support for the sector's development (e.g. Nunkoo & Ramkissoon, 2011, 2012; Nunkoo & Gursoy, 2012). The premise of these studies rests on the assumption that residents' perceptions of tourism are at least as important as the actual benefits and costs of the sector, if not more so (McGehee & Andereck, 2004).

Various theories have been used to explain the ways in which residents react to tourism development. While each theory has contributed in its own ways to this area of investigation, social exchange theory (SET) has been the most widely utilized and has made significant contributions to studies on residents' support for tourism (Gursoy, Chi, & Dyer, 2010). AP (1992) described SET as "a general sociological theory concerned with understanding the exchange of resources between individuals and groups in an interaction situation" (p. 668). Applied to a tourism context, SET posits that residents' support is determined by their perceptions of the benefits and costs of tourism development. A key concept of

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SET is trust among the actors involved in a social exchange relationship (Blau, 1964; Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005). The fundamental role of trust in social exchanges is reinforced because exchange of benefits is a voluntary action and entails unspecified future obligations (Konovsky & Pugh, 1994). The persistence and extension of social exchange are based on implicit trust among the actors involved in an exchange relationship (Blau, 1964). In the absence of trust, opportunities for mutually beneficial co-operations among social actors would have to be forgone (Arrow, 1971; Bowles & Gintis, 2002).

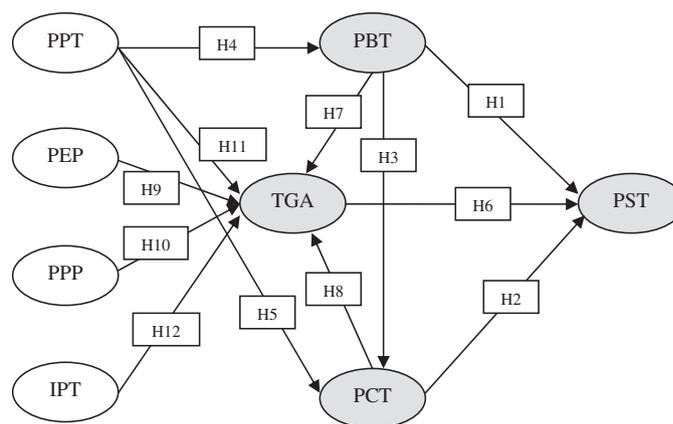
The studies by Beritelli (2011) and Beritelli, Bieger, and Laesser (2007) reinforce the need for researchers to consider trust as an important ingredient for cooperation among tourism actors and effective destination management. One of the lacunae of existing studies on community support for tourism is that the majority of them have omitted trust as a key component of SET. This omission needs to be addressed by future studies to ensure that the full potential of SET in explaining community support for tourism is achieved. Also, notwithstanding the contributions of SET to this research area, the theory has been criticized by some researchers (Pearce, Moscardo, & Ross, 1996; Ward & Berno, 2011). SET assumes that individuals are rationale decision-makers, processing information systematically. However, research from psychology suggests that humans are more likely to be cognitive misers who use mental shortcuts that result in quick but inaccurate solutions instead of engaging in an effortful mental processing (Fredline & Faulkner, 2000; Nunkoo & Ramkissoon, 2009; Pearce et al., 1996). SET is also based on the premise that a person's knowledge is derived from direct experiences with tourism, when in reality such knowledge is socially derived (Fredline & Faulkner, 2000). Given these limitations, it is important that SET is complemented with other theoretical approaches to investigate community support for tourism to provide new perspectives to this scientific area of investigation.

This paper develops a comprehensive model that predicts residents' trust in government actors and political support for tourism based on three different theories: SET, institutional theory of political trust (ITPT), and cultural theory of political trust (CTPT). Grounded in a political economy perspective, the study investigates the concept of trust in the context of a social exchange relationship between residents and local government actors involved in tourism development. Political economy suggests that government has a central role in tourism planning and regulation of the sector

(Bramwell, 2011). Thus, trust is conceptualized as residents' trust in government actors (also referred to as political trust or citizens' trust in institutions) involved in tourism development. Additionally, the study uses ITPT and CTPT to investigate the determinants of residents' trust in government actors. Fig. 1 shows the proposed model of the study which was tested on a sample of 391 residents of Niagara Region, Ontario, Canada, using structural equation modelling (SEM).

This paper makes some valuable contributions to existing literature. Despite the centrality of trust in social exchanges (Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005) and its importance for good governance of the tourism sector (Beritelli, 2011; Beritelli et al., 2007), very little is known about its role in tourism planning and development. Few researchers have considered trust in the context of community support for tourism (e.g. Nunkoo & Ramkissoon, 2011, 2012; Nunkoo, Ramkissoon, & Gursoy, 2012), yet these studies contain some theoretical limitations that need to be addressed. Although Nunkoo and Ramkissoon (2011, 2012) provide valuable insights on the role of trust in fostering community support, the studies are limited because the models tested were developed solely on the postulates of SET. These studies do not provide any insights on the determinants of residents' trust in government actors in tourism. Nunkoo et al.'s (2012) used ITPT and CTPT to investigate the antecedents of residents' trust in government actors. However, the study considered trust as the only determinant of community support for tourism and failed to take into account two important variables of SET (residents' perceptions of the benefits and costs of tourism) that have been found to be strong predictors of residents' support in many previous studies (e.g. Ko & Stewart, 2002; Nunkoo & Gursoy, 2012).

The implications of these are that existing research on this topic is based on incomplete theoretical propositions and may be lacking in predictive power. It is therefore important that these studies are enhanced and made theoretically more robust so that a more accurate analysis of residents' support for tourism is achieved. It is also important that more research is carried out on residents' trust in government actors and its determinants given the paucity of research on this topic in tourism. The study of trust in tourism is more than ever important because several recent studies alert us of declining societal trust and citizens' trust in government institutions (e.g. Scheidegger & Staerke, 2011), including those of tourism (Bramwell, 2011). By empirically testing the model illustrated in



Notes:

PST: political support for tourism; PBT: perceived benefits of tourism; PCT: perceived costs of tourism; TGA: trust in government actors; PPT: perceived power in tourism; PEP: perceived economic performance of government actors; PPP: perceived political performance of government actors; IPT: interpersonal trust.

Fig. 1. The proposed model.

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