Chapter 3
Sharing Economy and Sustainability in Tourism: New Challenges for the Tour Operators

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ABSTRACT
The chapter focuses on the growing importance that the sustainability issue is gaining in tourism and on the increasing research of sustainable forms of tourism among travelers, looking to the relation with the emerging market of the sharing economy. Three streams of literature are merged: the contemporary tourists, the sustainable tourism and the sharing economy. This triangulation allows reflecting on the challenges that tour operators and in general the traditional tourism sector have to face in order to maintain their position on the market while accomplishing the sustainable goals. The analysis of three case studies, peer-to-peer platforms from South Korea, Italy, and the USA, favors the identification of some preliminary suggestions.

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INTRODUCTION

The chapter focuses on the increasing research of sustainable forms of tourism among travellers and relation with the emerging market of the sharing economy.

The neoliberal tourism industry (also called neo-colonialist, see Corvo, 2005) and the related mass-tourism have indeed demonstrated to be large-scale, highly focus on popular destinations and with little regard to local community (Mosedale, 2016), with major impacts on the natural and built environments and on the wellbeing and culture of host populations (UNEP & WTO, 2005). The growing attention, in the last 30 years, for the sustainability dimension represents a reaction to this impacting form of tourism and refers not only to the natural environment but also to the social, economic and cultural spheres as well as the built environment.

The idea of making tourism more sustainable finds today a new ally in the spread of the Information Communication Technologies (ITCs) (Ali & Freu, 2014) and, in particular in the emerging market of the sharing economy. What before was provided by businesses such as hotels, taxis or tour operators, today can be directly provided by individual, with a peer-to-peer approach, sharing temporarily with tourists what they own, do or know (e.g. house or car, meals or excursions) (Juul, 2017). The internet-based booking platforms used to match supply and demand facilitate the spread of alternative tourist offerings and services (Brauckmann, 2017), that appear more sustainable, low-impact, and respectful of the environment and of the local communities then the traditional tourist offer.

Nevertheless, this kind of triangulation – tourism, sustainability, sharing economy – is posing new challenges to the traditional tourism operators, which cannot ignore the effect of the peer-to-peer relations in the tourist sector and should try to gain a better understanding of the phenomenon, carrying out specific strategies to accomplish the sustainability goals and maintain their position in the market.

The chapter reflects on these challenges starting from the analysis of three sharing economy platforms operating in the tourism sector and with different geographical origins. Reading the cases through the lens of the sustainability allows identifying some preliminary suggestions useful for the traditional tourist operators to face the current challenges.

THE CONTEMPORARY TOURISM BETWEEN ITCS AND SUSTAINABILITY

Features of the Contemporary Tourist

The contemporary tourists are more and more demanding and active: they put emphasis on the emotional dimension of the travel and on the opportunity to do real travelling experiences (Richards, 2001); they look for a more authentic connection with local community and increasingly reject the standardisation and commodification of tourism experiences (Day, 2017). As noted by Dredge and Gyimóthy (2015) “consuming travel is intimately bound to identity construction and narratives of authentic encounters with local culture” (p. 9). Tourists are indeed increasingly focus on the research of meaningful personal experience, memorable and unique, in which to feel completely engaged; not just a simple spectator, but an active and creative actor (Richards, 2011). A form of tourism that preserve the local cultural heritage and seek the so-called relational goods, i.e. goods that cannot be enjoyed alone (Ruisi, 2004) but “through the establishment of interpersonal relationships in which organizers are not just profit-driven, but strive to establish an atmosphere of honest and shared hospitality” (Forno & Garibaldi, 2015, p. 205).