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PRESENTATION OF THE PHD THESIS

**«PERCEPTIONS ON SUSTAINABLE ENTREPRENEURSHIP OF TOURISM SMES
OPERATING IN THE COASTAL-AND MARITIME AREAS
- THE CASE OF THE MEDITERRANEAN ISLAND OF CYPRUS»**

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Abstract

The thesis examines the relationship between sustainability and tourism enterprises operating in coastal and marine destinations. It is widely acknowledged that tourism, along with its positive effects, negatively impacts these popular, but also vulnerable areas in most cases and that stakeholders' involvement is essential to further sustainable tourism. However, there is a lack of research on how stakeholders perceive the holistic integration of sustainability in business operations, referred to as sustainable entrepreneurship. Against this backdrop, the thesis seeks to detect the perception of the predominant small and medium tourism enterprises on sustainable entrepreneurship in Cyprus. This aim was to be reached through the following objectives: 1. To examine the importance of sustainable entrepreneurship for SMEs operating in coastal-and maritime areas - in general and in the Mediterranean island destination of Cyprus. 2. To analyse the challenges and opportunities that tourism SMEs operating in coastal-and maritime areas may face regarding sustainable entrepreneurship in the Mediterranean island destination of Cyprus. 3. To analyse the reasons of tourism SMEs operating in coastal-and maritime areas for their level of involvement in sustainable entrepreneurship in the Mediterranean island destination of Cyprus through a series of motivational determinants. 4. To measure the level of importance that tourism SMEs operating in coastal-and maritime areas attach to a series of actions regarding sustainable entrepreneurship in the Mediterranean island destination of Cyprus. 5. To explore the association between the nature of SMEs and their motivation for the involvement in sustainability actions. 6. To suggest managerial strategies for the effective implementation of sustainable entrepreneurship by tourism SMEs operating in coastal-and maritime areas.

The methodology applied consists of a comprehensive analysis of data collected in three phases through in-depth interviews and a survey, involving five tourism professionals and over 1000

owners/managers of tourism companies. Findings indicate that sustainable entrepreneurship is a method to foster sustainability in coastal and marine destinations.

The research reveals the importance of and involvement in sustainability actions, the reasons, challenges and opportunities related to the involvement, as well as the association between the characteristics of companies and their sustainability actions. It demonstrates tourism enterprises' common interest in sustainability, which is mostly due to the positive impact of sustainability actions on the image of the enterprise and to expectations from the demand side. Besides, the importance of relationships and government-related barriers were perceived as the most common hindering forces, while the availability of local (fresh) and environmentally friendly products, as the main opportunities for their sustainability involvement.

The theoretical implications of the thesis encompass a suggested framework for sustainable entrepreneurship in tourism, which offers the structure for further research and theory development. Regarding its practical implications, it contributes to the shaping and refining of sustainability-oriented policies. It highlights the strong capacity of small and medium tourism enterprises to further sustainability, along with the measures to take by public authorities to encourage the sustainability involvement of these companies. Furthermore, it also reveals the potential business advantage that sustainable entrepreneurship may generate and proposes a sustainable business model. The thesis contributes to the comprehension of sustainable tourism and sustainable entrepreneurship. Moreover, by stressing the issues to address for the advancement of sustainability involvement of small and medium tourism enterprises in a particular setting, it opens up new directions for future research in other contexts.

Keywords: Sustainable tourism, sustainable entrepreneurship, coastal and marine tourism

Introduction

Tourism, which has been recovering at a high speed from the global Covid-19 pandemic (UNWTO, 2024), has experienced rocketing growth over the years and has become a multibillion-dollar industry (Strippoli, Gallucci and Ingrao, 2024). Its sub-segment, coastal and marine tourism (CMT) is nowadays considered as one of its dominant components (Tonazzini *et al.*, 2019). Hence, it is not astonishing that CMT has become a significant economic sector (Tonazzini *et al.*, 2019). However, tourism development does not impact only the economy of a country or a region, there are many other positive and negative effects. To further the development of tourism in a sustainable way, the importance of stakeholders' involvement is imperative (Sotiriadis and Shen, 2020). Among tourism stakeholders, the role of small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) is vital; without them, sustainable tourism (ST) cannot be addressed (Thomas, Shaw, and Page, 2011), as the large majority of tourism companies belong to this category (UNWTO, 2021), consequently, they can act as agents of change (Andrade-Valbuena, Baier-Fuentes and Gaviria-Marin, 2022). However, it is still a question nowadays how companies can contribute to sustainable development (SD) (Persson-Fischier, 2022) and research is lacking on the perception of SMEs - operating in tourism generally and in CMT particularly – on their holistic involvement in sustainability (i.e. sustainable entrepreneurship) (Crnogaj *et al.*, 2014; Nguyen, Costanzo and Karatas-Özkan, 2023). This study addresses this theoretical gap. The three-phased and holistic investigation provided several findings that broaden the understanding of the perception of small and medium-sized tourism enterprises (SMTEs) on sustainable entrepreneurship (SE) and on sustainability in general. In addition, in the thesis, a framework for sustainable entrepreneurship in tourism (SET) - which contributes to earlier literature - and a sustainable business model in tourism (SBMT), - which offers a concrete and practical support for those SMTEs that wish to get (more) involved in sustainability – are also suggested.

Aim and Objectives of the Study

The purpose of the study is to contribute to existing literature by examining the perception on sustainable entrepreneurship (SE) of SMTEs operating in coastal-and maritime areas with a focus on the Mediterranean island destination of Cyprus. The ultimate aim of the research is to assist the mitigation of the negative environmental, social, and economic impact of tourism in coastal and marine regions, which was reported in previous studies.

This aim was to be reached through the following objectives:

1. To examine the importance of sustainable entrepreneurship for SMEs operating in coastal-and maritime areas - in general and in the Mediterranean island destination of Cyprus.
2. To analyse the challenges and opportunities that tourism SMEs operating in coastal-and maritime areas may face regarding sustainable entrepreneurship in the Mediterranean island destination of Cyprus.
3. To analyse the reasons of tourism SMEs operating in coastal-and maritime areas for their level of involvement in sustainable entrepreneurship in the Mediterranean island destination of Cyprus through a series of motivational determinants.
4. To measure the level of importance that tourism SMEs operating in coastal-and maritime areas attach to a series of actions regarding sustainable entrepreneurship in the Mediterranean island destination of Cyprus.
5. To explore the association between the nature of SMEs and their motivation for the involvement in sustainability actions.
6. To suggest managerial strategies for the effective implementation of sustainable entrepreneurship by tourism SMEs operating in coastal-and maritime areas.

Justification of the choice of Cyprus for the research

Cyprus was selected for the fieldwork, because of the following reasons: (1) the island is located in the world's most touristic region (UNWTO, 2021), the Mediterranean, and is referred to as a typical "sun, sand, and sea" destination (Boukas and Chourides, 2016); (2) the economy is dependent on tourism (IMF, 2021); (3) the country faces a number of sustainability problems (Evaneos and Roland Berger, 2024; Tonazzini *et al.*, 2019); (4) almost all companies are SMEs (European Commission Directorate-General for Internal Market, Industry, Entrepreneurship and SMEs - DG GROW, n.d.), and (5) SMEs have been identified as principal contributors to the environmental impacts (Calogirou *et al.*, 2010).

Consequently, based on the above-mentioned, there is no doubt that it is reasonable to study SMTes' perception on SE, as they could play an essential role in the sustainability transformation of tourism in Cyprus.

Literature Review

Coastal and marine Tourism

In coast occurs 80% of all tourism (United Nations's One Planet Network, 2020) and the world's leading destination is also a 3S (Sea, Sun, and Sand) region, the Mediterranean (UNWTO, 2021). In coastal destinations, tourism generally leads to increased economic wealth (Smith *et al.*, 2023), along with enhanced environmental protection (Swarbrooke, 2020) and positive cultural and social effects (Holloway and Humphreys, 2016). However, tourism frequently has negative effects on environment (UNEP/MAP/Plan Bleu, 2020), society (Holloway and Humphreys, 2016) and economy (OECD, 2022), which are most likely to occur in coastal and marine destinations (OECD, 2020). This is alarming, as coastal and marine areas are extremely precious parts of the world. Oceans and seas provide many ecosystem services,

which are essential for life and are highly valued for the economy (NASA Science, 2021; UN, 2017), as well as a number of social and cultural services (Bareket, 2018; Course and Cole, 2021; Kikiloi, 2010). Therefore, even if CMT has many positive impacts, its negative environmental, social, and economic effects, often swollen by overtourism (Peeters *et al.*, 2018) and the growing pressure from the side of tourists (Booking.com, 2021), point to the necessity of the sustainable transformation of CMT. As most companies are small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) by far (The World Bank Group, 2022), their holistic sustainability involvement would undoubtedly have a huge positive environmental, socio-cultural and economic effect in coastal and marine destinations.

Small and medium-sized tourist Enterprises

Small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) dominate the economy (The World Bank Group, 2022), including tourism (UNWTO, 2021). In the EU, the share of small and medium-sized tourist enterprises (SMTEs) is above 99% (European Commission, 2021). Consequently, due to their economic importance and representation, SMTEs are crucial players in tourism, including its sustainable transformation (UNWTO, 2023), which cannot be addressed without them (Thomas, Shaw, and Page, 2011). Similarly to other SMEs, they can generate the sustainable transformation of products (services) and processes (Hall, Daneke and Lenox, 2010) and can also alter the attitudes of individuals and institutions (Yilmazer and Onay, 2019). SMTEs play an even more significant role, as it has been acknowledged that tourism can potentially support the achievements of all Sustainable Development Goals (UNWTO, 2020). Besides, the sustainable transformation of the sector is also in the interest of firms because there is an increasing request from the demand side for environmentally (Booking.com., 2021) and socio-culturally sustainable offers of products and services (CSTI, 2023; Deputy Ministry

of Tourism of Cyprus - DMoT, n.d.). One method for the integration of sustainability in management practices into the operation of SMTEs is sustainable entrepreneurship (SE).

Sustainable Entrepreneurship in Tourism

It is widely accepted that sustainability and SD have three pillars¹: economic, environmental, and social, and that only a balance between them can result in real sustainable progress (UNEP and UNWTO, 2005). In the business world, it is suggested that companies could contribute to sustainability by measuring the impact of their operations not only on profit but also on society and environment. This can be done by the insertion of two additional lines to the profit/loss bottom line (Elkington, 1998), which is the core aspect of the Triple Bottom Line (TPL) framework. Sustainable entrepreneurship (SE) aligns with the TPL theory as it is a managerial method that aims at value creation while respecting sustainability concerns (Tilley and Young, 2009). There are several approaches to SE, as scholars are not united on how SE should be apprehended. Some academics emphasise the opportunity that it offers to reach sustainability goals (Parrish, 2010), other scholars stress the value creation through innovation (Schaltegger and Wagner, 2011). According to the accepted definition of Tilley and Young (2009), the primary mission of SE is to balance the efforts targeting the holistic integration of the three pillars of sustainability in the operations, without any prioritisation of any pillars.

A lack of research has been revealed on the practical integration of sustainability in tourism, particularly on stakeholders' perception on SE, despite the fact these companies affect and are affected by tourism activities and that analysing their perception on SE can explain how they can support STD in the destinations (Nguyen, Costanzo and Karatas-Özkan, 2023).

¹ Instead of 'pillars' the other words that are mostly used in the literature interchangeably are: dimensions, components, aspects, stool legs and perspectives (Purvis, Mao and Robinson, 2019).

Perception

Investigating perception is common in tourism studies, and academics mostly analyse various aspects under the umbrella of perception, namely: opinions, views (Damian, Navarro and Ruiz, 2022); attitudes (Usmonova, Alieva and León, 2022); considerations (Ladičorbić *et al.*, 2023); beliefs (Nguyen, Lee and Warren, 2023); preferences and dislikes (Moreira Gregori, Román and Martín, 2020). Studies have shown that perception impacts an individual's interaction with the world and is a truly personal process, as it is influenced by many factors (Hofstede and Hofstede, 2005; Ladičorbić *et al.*, 2023). Consequently, it can differ from person to person (Pot, van Wee and Tillema, 2021). Nguyen, Costanzo and Karatas-Özkan (2023) state that stakeholders' perception on SE has not been in the research focus of tourism academics and that their research is the first to empirically investigate stakeholders' perception of SE in tourism. Indeed, the literature review revealed that earlier studies had generally explored the perception of the importance of the three pillars of sustainability, the target population had included mostly companies operating in one type of activity (for example, accommodation), and SE is commonly not mentioned in the study (Gaspari and Cela, 2016; Mihalič, Žabkar and Cvelbar, 2012). The study addresses this research gap.

After a review of the literature studied, the next section presents the methodology that was followed.

Methodology

The study can be considered applied research because it aims to explain a real problem (Patton, 2002). In addition, according to its purpose, it can be classified as the combination of exploratory (as it explores perception), descriptive (as it describes the characteristics of SMTEs), and causal (as it investigates the relationships between the various characteristics of SMTEs and their perception on SE) research (Zikmund *et al.*, 2009).

Concerning the method of data collection, as is common in PhD research (Boukas, 2008; Vrenegoor, 2023), the study started with the collection and examination of secondary data in order to gain deeper and essential knowledge on the subject. After this stage, the primary data collection followed, which can be qualified as an Exploratory sequential designed mixed-methods research (MMR), as it entailed the collection and analysis of qualitative data in the first phase and of quantitative data in the second phase. In the current research, the Exploratory sequential design described by Bryman (2016) was complemented by a qualitative research after the second phase. The additional phase allowed a deeper exploration of the subject, which was needed because of the lack of research, and made the verification of the second phase results (of the survey) also possible. Due to the sample size, the amount of information to collect, and the national coverage, the second phase was considered as the main phase, which was built on the results of the first phase (Bryman, 2016; Creswell, 2009). Thus, the method applied in the current research can be described, according to the classification of Bryman, (2016), as a 1. qual \rightarrow 2. QUAN \rightarrow 3. qual, whereby ‘qual’ stands for qualitative, ‘quan’ stands for quantitative. The main method is indicated by capital letters (QUAN) and “ \rightarrow ” stands for the sequential characteristic of the design (Bryman, 2016).

With respect to data collection in the various phases, after the review of the interview guide by an expert and by a ministry official, data were collected in the first phase in the frame of in-depth, semi-structured interviews in March 2022³ and in April and May 2023. Five tourism professionals were interviewed who were selected by convenience sampling. The interviews lasted between 0.5 and 1.5 hours. As all interviewees had a high level of command in English, the interviews were conducted in this language. Confidentiality and anonymity were ensured

³ The first interview took place in March 2022 to support the presentation in an international conference.

in all cases. The results were analysed by NVivo12 software with the application of thematic coding.

In the second, principal phase, quantitative data were collected on the whole island. The questionnaire was drafted with extreme caution and was several times verified by an expert. It was prepared in Greek and in English, the two common languages used in the tourism sector in Cyprus. The content and language conformity of the two versions of the questionnaire were verified by the same two people as in the first phase. The questionnaire was anonymous, self-administered and was delivered in paper-and-pen formats as well as online. The first thirty exemplars that were personally collected were considered pilots, and based on the feedback, one question was slightly changed. Regarding the target population in the second phase, it was defined, based on the study of Hall (2001) and Orams (1999), as SMTEs operating in the following six activities: (1) accommodation; (2) catering; (3) water sports; (4) recreational fishing; (5) diving, and (6) mini cruise/boating (including wildlife watching). However, it was judged that it was not possible to have a separation of water-based activities' companies (WBACs) according to their activity with reliable results. Consequently, it was decided to consider all companies that offer water-based activities as a group of companies, which is a common practice in the academic circle (Curtis, 2003; Jennings, 2007; Morar and Pop, 2016). Elements were the owners/managers of the companies, and sampling frames were the official lists of the Deputy Ministry of Tourism of the Republic Cyprus (DMoT)'s official lists (DMoT, 2023a, b), of two professional organisations (Safe Watersport n.d; PADI, 2023) and the list established by a secondary search. Following the example of earlier studies (Battistella *et al.*, 2018; Hieu and Nwachukwu, 2019), sample sizes were determined for the three activities separately, and a logarithm was used for this purpose (Adam, 2020). This method led to a total sample size of 1015, which is regarded as a proper number in SE research (Reuther *et al.*, 2023). Elements from the sample were selected by simple random probability sampling (Hair

et al., 2007). Data collection started in October 2023 and lasted two and a half months, together with follow-up and encoding of replies. Thereafter, the data from the 410 completed and collected questionnaires were encoded, verified, and cleaned. These measures resulted in the retention of 285 completed questionnaires (of which 206 were personally collected), which had the item non-response rate below 5%, as recommended (Riedel, 2005). The analysis of the results was conducted by IBM SPSS Statistics 28.0.

Similarly to the previous phases, the interview guide was set up with great care in the third, last phase as well. As in the second phase, the interview guide was prepared both in English and in Greek, and, as in the previous phases, it was verified several times by an experienced academic, and the same people ensured its language conformity. As in the second phase, the target population was defined as coastal and marine SMTEs in Cyprus and the elements the owners/managers of these companies. The sampling frame was the list of those owners/managers of SMTEs who completed the questionnaire and indicated their willingness to be interviewed together with their contact details. 20 owners/managers of SMTEs were selected based on convenience sampling. The interviews were conducted according to the request of the interviewee, either in Greek or in English, and they were recorded every time with the consent of the interviewees. The duration of the interviews was 30-75 minutes. As in the first phase, the results were analysed by NVivo12 software with the application of thematic coding.

After having discussed the methodology, the following section summarises the main results of the research.

Results

Main Results concerning Importance of and Involvement - Objectives 1 and 4

Results showed that both in theory (importance) and in practice (involvement), SMTEs attribute a particularly high importance to management of the company with a long-term perspective, to ensuring accessibility for people that need it, and respect of people's diversity. In addition, it was also found that SMTEs seem to have recognised the importance of environmental sustainability actions (protecting plants and animals and reducing the generation of pollution in the sea).

With respect to involvement, beyond the three above-mentioned actions, the two other actions, in which SMTEs declared in the survey their most frequent involvement, are social: ensuring respect of local culture and offering trainings to employees. Concerning respect of local culture, the outcome suggests that most owners/managers care for the local culture and the use of local language. In addition, it was found in phase 3 that there are SMTEs that wish to go beyond the respect of local culture: they wish to be part of the community. As for offering training to employees, the frequent involvement in this action also confirms that SMTEs make plans for the long term and that they wish to increase the quality of their business operation.

As for findings of the factor analysis (FA), they showed that SMTEs perceive environmental actions as particularly and distinctly important from socio-cultural-economic actions, which may indicate that SMTEs attribute a higher importance to environmental sustainability compared to the other two pillars and acquired a deeper knowledge of it. In contrast, the results of FA related to involvement suggest that SMTEs are holistically involved in sustainability actions in general, as only one group of actions was related to one pillar exclusively (this time also to the environmental one).

Furthermore, the comparison of survey results of importance and involvement has shown that, except for three socio-cultural actions, SMTEs have attributed a higher importance to sustainability

actions than they are involved in them. This suggests that they are well aware of the significance of the actions, but the actions have not been (yet) implemented to the same extent. It should be noted, though, that according to the results, SMTEs are relatively often involved in sustainability actions, which the interviews in phase 3 also confirmed.

Main Results in Relation to Challenges and Opportunities - Objective 2

Regarding challenges, it can be stated that the survey has shown that SMTEs perceived the importance of relationships in business success as the principal challenge, and this finding was confirmed in the other phases as well. This indicates that people's attitude vis-a-vis each other, which is part of the culture and of the local mentality, may have an impact on the sustainability involvement of companies. In addition, several main challenges were identified, which are linked to the manner of operations of the government. Bureaucracy, insufficient cooperation with SMTEs, barriers to using renewable energy, and insufficient support for sustainability actions were considered key challenges. This suggests that public authorities have a great potential for fostering the sustainability involvement of SMTEs in Cyprus. As for the lack of financial support, some tourism professionals have a contrasting view, as they claim that much support is available for SMTEs to conduct sustainability actions. Therefore, even if in the current study 'availability of support' is accepted as a challenge to SMTEs, it may occur that the lack of awareness of the availability of financial support is also a challenge.

Concerning opportunities, the availability of local (fresh) products and the availability of environmentally friendly products were identified as the main opportunities. This result indicates that SMTEs in Cyprus have the possibility to integrate local and environment-friendly products into their operation.

In addition, it was found that there is a correlation between governmental support for local community actions and involvement of SMTEs in SE, and that environmental/social events can

encourage SMTEs to get involved in local environmental actions – which validates the important role of the government and indicates that other organisations (for example, local associations and non-profit organisations) could also further sustainability in this manner.

The FA confirmed the above-mentioned findings as the four factors that were identified as challenges and opportunities are related to the availability of financial support and events for sustainability actions, government-related barriers/support for sustainability actions, and cooperations and relationships.

Reasons of SMTEs for involvement in sustainable Entrepreneurship - Objective 3

There are many reasons that may motivate SMTEs to take sustainability actions. Among them, the positive impact of environmental, social, and economic actions on the image of the company was perceived as the most important. Further, the SMTEs have also recognised that expectations from the demand side push them towards sustainability measures. The FA confirmed these results.

As for the third motive, it was found that training is also a strong motive for sustainability involvement. This outcome shows that knowledge and awareness of sustainability are driving forces for sustainability involvement.

Another key motive that was revealed in all phases concerns the financial interest. It was seen that SMTEs find it important that sustainability actions lead to cost reduction and that they are profitable, as profit was found to be an essential reason for operating the company. FA also confirmed that profit was perceived as a more important reason for operating an SMTE than SE.

The positive effect of sustainability actions on employees' loyalty was identified as another key motive. In fact, loyal employees can lead to a win-win situation, which some companies have already recognised. As for the FA, it also showed that a reason why SMTEs take social

and environmental actions, and actions that support the local economy, may also be their positive impact on employees' loyalty.

As for the last main motive - identified in phases 1 and 3 - which should not be considered as the last one in terms of significance, it is the personality of the owner/manager. It was observed that his/her principles and convictions are likely to crucially impact the sustainability involvement of the company.

Association between Characteristics of SMTEs and Motivation for sustainable Actions ***Objective 5***

Concerning the characteristics of *owners/managers*, it was found that with the increase of age, the two main motives - positive impact on the image and the request of clients - are strengthened. This may indicate that experience has a positive effect on these two driving factors. In addition - in contrast to the general finding, discussed above - it was shown that higher educated owners/managers have the tendency to perceive that offering higher than average salaries is expensive and that caring for the environment does not have a positive effect on the loyalty of employees. This outcome suggests that education does not always have a positive effect on the sustainability involvement of SMTEs. Finally, it was observed that with the increase of the period the owner/manager has exercised his/her function, he/she considers decreasingly less that the company can afford to care for the environment. This implies that environmental care may be identified with cost and that with the increase of time spent in the function, SMTE owners/managers become more sensible to the financial situation of the company.

As for the characteristics of the *company*, results showed that there is an association between the activity of SMTEs and their motivation to get involved in SE, suggesting that SMTEs with different activities may have different reasons for taking sustainability actions. Another finding was that the size of SMTEs may impact their motivation for involvement in SE, which,

however, does not mean that smaller companies may not be involved in SE to a large extent, as it was observed in phase 3.

Finally, results suggest that the longer the operation time, the more SMTEs have the perception that two social actions targeting the employees ('Offering above standard working conditions' and 'Paying higher than average salaries') are expensive and that 'Buying/offering local goods is profitable'. A reason for the explanation may be that due to seasonality, the financial weight of better conditions offered may be perceived as a heavier charge in the off-season, compared to the high season. In contrast, the perception of SMTEs' owners/managers that 'Buying/offering local goods is expensive' decreases when local products are integrated in the operation for a longer time.

After the analysis of the main findings, the discussion on the implications follows.

Implications

Theoretical Implications

The literature review has shown a lack of studies investigating how owners/managers of SMTEs operating in CMT in accommodation, catering & entertainment, and various water-based activities perceive the factors that may impact the involvement in SE of their company. The three-phased investigation provided findings that broaden the understanding of the perception of SMTEs on SE and on sustainability in general. While some findings confirm results of previous research, the study also led to some novelties.

With respect of importance and involvement, it was observed that management of the company with long-term vision is a priority – which contrasts previous findings (Farmaki *et al.*, 2015) - and that companies are socially sensitive, which has not been reported in the literature reviewed. In addition, it was also revealed that environmental actions are perceived as particularly important, which confirms earlier literature (Abaeian *et al.*, 2019; Buffa, Franch

and Rizio, 2018). However, as far as involvement in sustainability actions is concerned, results suggest that SMTEs are generally holistically involved in sustainability actions, except for environmental actions that results in reduction of resources and cost. Findings indicate that if companies take environmental actions that result in saving resources and costs, it does not mean that they are likely to take other economic or social sustainability actions. Based on the literature review, this finding seems to be a new one. Furthermore, the research has also shown that SMTEs respect the local culture and offer training to their employees, which confirms earlier literature (Abaeian *et al.*, 2019).

Regarding challenges, the outcome validates the observations of earlier studies that relationships and networking essentially impact entrepreneurial activities (Bosma *et al.*, 2004; Tilley and Young 2009). As for the other main challenge observed, which is the manner of operation of the government, earlier research in various settings also reported that hospitality entrepreneurs were dissatisfied with regulatory developments and increasing bureaucracy (González-Morales, Santana Talavera and Calero García, 2023) and that the procedure related to financial loans is complicated (Yasa, 2020).

As for opportunities, respondents identified the availability of local (fresh) products and the availability of environmentally friendly products as two main opportunities. Besides, it was also revealed that environmental/social events may turn out to be key opportunities, as they are likely to influence the involvement in sustainability actions. None of these opportunities were reported in the literature reviewed.

With respect to reasons, SMTEs perceived the impact of sustainability actions (all three pillars) on the image as a dominant motive to take sustainability actions, which was in line with earlier literature (Schlenker, Edwards and Watts-Seale, 2019). In addition, expectations from the demand side (clients and professional circle) were revealed as a main motive, which was also reported earlier (Booking.com, 2021). However, it should be noted that both during the first

and the third phase interviews, it was mentioned that tourists can also hinder the sustainability actions of SMTEs, which was also observed by scholars (Abaeian *et al.*, 2019). Another key motive was the positive impact of training, which also validates earlier findings (Chandralal and Fernando, 2022). Furthermore, the outcome confirms earlier observations that financial interest can be a motive for SMEs/SMTEs to take sustainability actions (Abaeian *et al.*, 2019), while cost be a hindering factor (European Commission - Directorate-General for Internal Market, Industry, Entrepreneurship and SMEs, 2022). The last two principal motives that the research has revealed were the impact of sustainability actions on employees' loyalty and the personality of the owner/manager. Both were observed in earlier literature (Fotiadis and Vassiliadis 2015; Persson-Fischier, 2022).

Finally, the study revealed that age, education, and duration of the function's occupation of the owners/managers, as well as operation time, activity, and the size of the company may impact the motivation. The findings confirmed earlier observations concerning activity (Mäkitie, 2019) and the positive association between some motivation and age (Yamane and Kaneko, 2021) and size (European Commission - Directorate-General for Internal Market, Industry, Entrepreneurship and SMEs, 2022; Valdivieso, 2019). As for education, the association with two motives ('Paying higher than average salaries is expensive' and 'Caring for the environment makes employees more loyal') showed that the increase in the level of education may have a negative impact on the sustainability involvement, which contrasts earlier literature (Fotiadis and Vassiliadis 2015). Also, concerning the length of operation time, it was found that the longer the operation time, the more SMTEs have the perception that 'Offering above standard working conditions' and 'Paying higher than average salaries' are expensive and that 'Buying/offering local goods is profitable'. This outcome also contradicts previous research (Valdivieso, 2019).

Practical Implications and Recommendations

Practical Implications and Recommendations - for Decision-Makers

The results of the study may be relevant for decision-makers as it can contribute to the shaping and refinement of sustainability-oriented policies. In fact, the findings suggest a higher awareness of SMTEs of the importance of environmental sustainability and that SMTEs can probably be persuaded smoothly to take environmental actions. This is all the more important because it can bring along the involvement in sustainability actions belonging to the other pillars, since, as results suggest, SMTEs are commonly involved in sustainability in a holistic way. In addition, findings have also shown that SMTEs are socially sensible and that several companies attribute high significance to the embeddedness in the community. Therefore, and because it was also found that environmental events also have a positive impact, the organisation of environmental and social sustainability events with high involvement of SMTEs is recommended.

Besides, based on the results, the positive impact of the actions on the image of the company, on the loyalty of the employees, and, as aforementioned, the request of the demand side (clients, professional circle, and associations) could be mentioned to encourage SMTEs to take sustainability actions. In addition, as it was revealed that in the sustainability involvement of SMTEs, the financial interest plays an essential role, financial support is likely to strongly motivate SMTEs to participate in sustainability actions. This latter is all the more crucial because SMTEs have the perception that there is a lack of financial support. In addition, they also had the view that the government does not cooperate with SMTEs satisfactorily and that there is an issue with the flow of information. Accordingly, the improvement of the communication of the financial support and of the SMTEs-government communication in general (for example, by the development of a webpage in Greek and in English that could

function as a platform where all sustainability-related information can be easily found) is highly recommended. Furthermore, as bureaucracy was also identified as a barrier that may prevent the sustainability actions of SMTEs, public authorities could foster the sustainability involvement of SMTEs by decreasing bureaucracy. In addition, as the employment policy was perceived as a hindering force to employ locals and, consequently, to support the local economy, the rethinking of employment policy is advised. Furthermore, as the research has also revealed that SMTEs find the availability of local (fresh) and environmentally friendly products as an opportunity, the attribution of financial subvention for the purchase of these types of products is recommended, as the lower price would probably encourage SMTEs to integrate such products in their operations more frequently. Finally, the role of training should be stressed. It was discovered that training, which increases knowledge and awareness of sustainability issues, positively impacts the sustainability involvement. Consequently, it is suggested that decision-makers organise training sessions for parents and for companies and include sustainability-related subjects in the national curriculum for schoolchildren from an early age.

Practical Implications and Recommendations - for Managers

Results show that SMTEs' owners/managers consider the viability of the company as a priority and take actions accordingly, which is likely to foster SD (Booking.com, 2021; Fennel and Cooper, 2020; UNWTO, 2022). In addition, respondents also perceived that various business advantages (as seen above) can be the result of sustainability actions, which was also reported in earlier literature.

Consequently, it is recommended that SMTEs in Cyprus increase their involvement in sustainability, as findings show that sustainability actions (for example, integration of local and environmentally friendly goods in the operations and provision of above-standard working

conditions) could make a positive effect on the image of companies, on the loyalty of employees, and on the embeddedness of the company in the community and would contribute to meeting the increasing expectations of sustainable solutions. Concretely, accommodation and catering companies should take more actions to protect the sea environment (for example, beach cleaning and actions to prevent marine litter), as in phase 3 it was observed that the interviewed accommodation and catering companies do not take such actions. In addition, the application for environmental schemes that allow saving resources (electricity and water) is also highly recommended. In case of a lack of such schemes, the investigation of other solutions is advised, as saving resources is not only an environmental action, but it is also financially advantageous.

Finally, participation in sustainability-related training is suggested, as it could increase the sustainability literacy of SMTEs' owners/managers and could raise their awareness of business advantages to which their sustainability involvement could lead.

After having analysed the implications, the next part indicates the conclusion of the research, which is followed by the limitations of the study and the suggestions for future research.

Conclusion

As a conclusion, it can be generally stated that SMTEs are well aware of the significance of sustainability actions, but most actions have not been (yet) implemented to the same extent as they are considered important. It was also observed that both in theory and in practice, managing the company with a long-term perspective is a priority for SMTEs (which contrasts earlier literature) and that they are characterised by a high social sensitivity. In addition, results suggest that SMTEs attribute a distinct importance to environmental sustainability and have acquired a deep knowledge of it. However, as far as their involvement is concerned, SMTEs are holistically involved in sustainability actions in general, except for environmental actions, which lead to a reduction of use of resources and of cost. This outcome suggests that not only

the importance but also the involvement in such actions is distinctly perceived from other sustainability actions.

Regarding challenges, the survey has shown that SMTEs perceived the importance of relationships in business success and the manner of government's operations as principal challenges, which confirmed earlier research. This suggests that mentality/culture and public authorities play an essential role in the sustainability involvement of SMTEs in Cyprus.

The availability of local (fresh) and of environmentally friendly products along with environmental/social events were identified as the main opportunities, which indicates that SMTEs in Cyprus have the option to integrate local and environment-friendly products into their operation and that participation in environmental/social events could further their involvement, which, again, confirms the significant role that public administration plays in SD. Concerning the motivating factors for sustainability involvement, results indicated that beyond business motives, awareness, knowledge, and the value system of owners/managers may play a role, which confirmed the results of previous literature.

As for the characteristics of the company and of the owner/managers, survey results showed that socio-demographic characteristics of the owner/manager and characteristics of the company can both positively and negatively impact the motivation to take sustainability actions. Concerning the age of the owner/manager and size of the company, the results were in line with previous studies and confirmed the positive associations. With respect to activity, an association was found between activity of SMTEs and their motivation to get involved in SE, suggesting that SMTEs with different activities may have different reasons for taking sustainability actions. In contrast, the associations with level of education and operation time were both positive and negative, while with duration of occupation of the function was negative - whereby the negative associations contrast the findings of earlier literature.

Limitations of the Study and Recommendations for future Research

Limitations of the Study

Although the research was mixed-methods research (MMR) and was preceded by a literature review that studied the existing research in depth, it has some limitations, which are related to various steps of the research. They are the following:

Literature review

- The literature review has revealed a lack of relevant studies, which was a limitation in the exploration of the topic and in the establishment of the questionnaire.

Methodology

- One limitation was linked to sampling in the second phase. There were SMTEs of certain activities that were not included in the sample, for example, tour operators and travel agencies. Accordingly, the results did not include their perception.
- Companies were regarded as a single category of companies in the results, while the categorisation of SMTEs according to activity would have probably brought more accurate results.
- The qualitative research, including both first and third phase interviews, used convenience sampling method.

Fieldwork

- Due to time limitations, results in all three phases are based on a limited number of respondents, whereas more respondents may have led to more accurate results.

- Due to the time and economic limitations of SMTEs and their flexible working hours, it was not always possible to make owners/managers fill out the questionnaire in the second phase. In addition, it also occurred that the GPS did not find the address, or another business was in the indicated location, whereas a higher number of completed questionnaires would have probably brought more results.
- The research was conducted exclusively in Cyprus, which does not allow a generalisation of the results.

Recommendations for future Research

The study has revealed that management with a long-term vision is the highest priority for SMTEs, which contradicts previous findings (Farmaki *et al.*, 2015). In addition, it was also shown that SMTEs are socially sensible, which has not been revealed in the literature reviewed. Consequently, it would be necessary to conduct research to investigate the importance of these actions in other settings and other industries. In addition, the interviews - in contrast to the survey results - suggested that the protection of the sea environment is a priority only for companies active in water-based activities. Therefore, it would be useful to conduct further research on this topic as well. Besides, in the literature reviewed, no comparison of importance of and involvement in sustainability actions was detected, accordingly, it would be worth conducting similar research in other settings and in other industries. Furthermore, it would be useful to verify if the involvement in environmental actions resulting in the saving of resources and costs implies the involvement in economic or social sustainability actions in other settings and industries.

As for challenges, while the research mostly confirmed earlier findings, the results of phase 1 and of the other two phases in relation to the availability of supports did not coincide. This discrepancy between the results may be explained by the lack of awareness of the existence of

support. This hypothesis is underpinned by the aforementioned insufficient cooperation between government and SMTEs. Accordingly, it would be worth conducting further research to test the correctness of this assumption in Cyprus.

Regarding opportunities, results indicated that SMTEs in Cyprus have the possibility to integrate local and environment-friendly products into their operation and that environmental/social events are likely to influence the involvement of SMTEs in sustainability actions. As none of these three opportunities were reported in the literature reviewed, it would be useful to conduct similar research in other settings.

Concerning reasons, as all findings confirm earlier research, it is suggested that future studies test the results in other contexts.

With respect to results related to associations between the characteristics of SMTEs and their motivation for involvement in SE, it would be worth conducting further research on the characteristics of the SMTEs and of their owners/managers that may impact their motivation to endorse SE.

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