

Article

Destination Assessment and Certification: Challenges and Opportunities

Stephan Grapentin ¹ and Maureen Ayikoru ^{2,*}¹ absolutGPS, 04105 Leipzig, Germany² Faculty of Business & Law, School of Management, Anglia Ruskin University, Cambridge CB1 1PT, UK

* Correspondence: maureen.ayikoru@anglia.ac.uk

Received: 20 May 2019; Accepted: 28 June 2019; Published: 5 July 2019



Abstract: This study examines recent developments in destination assessment and certification as a basis for identifying challenges and benefits they engender, from tourist and tourism organizations' perspectives. It uses online surveys and semi-structured interviews to collect primary data from prospective tourists and key informants on destination assessment and certification. The findings highlight the strengths and weaknesses of schemes currently in use, including various factors that might influence their future development. Specifically, the study finds that destination assessment and certification are affected by four key issues, namely, practicability, reliability, visibility, and (un)availability of incentives. It concludes that the manifestation of these issues and their ensuing complexity affect the way in which tourists and tourism destinations engage with destination assessment and certification. This, therefore, delimits the inherent opportunities and constraints within such schemes.

Keywords: destination certification; destination assessment; ecolabels; tourist attitudes and awareness; sustainable tourism

1. Introduction

Tourism is one of the fields in which the concept of sustainability is constantly invoked, but in ways that mostly reflect diversity rather than coherence in understanding and application [1,2]. Such observations have led Agyeiwaah and others [3] (p. 30) to decry the problem of choice overload, several decades after the sustainability concept first emerged in academic and policy debates. Choice overload is a term used to describe the availability of too many choices to consumers, which can sometimes lead to undesirable consequences, such as consumers deferring decisions, being too fatigued to go through the many choices available, or simply staying with the default choice options [4,5]. Yet, none of these concerns are necessarily new to tourism. Nearly two decades ago, Buckley [6] (p. 183) presented a critical review of ecolabels and environmental accreditation or certification schemes, noting how prevalent, uncoordinated, and controversial these topics were in tourism and, most importantly, how their effects on “consumer purchasing decisions and corporate environmental performance remained (largely) unknown”. Recent studies suggest that the prevalence of sustainability certification schemes in the tourism industry are still causing confusion amongst tourists due to the multitude of labels in existence [7,8]. An emerging trend, which is not entirely new (cf. [4]), is that of certifying tourism destination as a whole. According to Murphy et al., [9] (p. 44), destinations can be considered as the most central element of the tourism system, that is, “the marketplace where supply and demand compete for attention and consumption”. Variations exist in the way different researchers define a destination, with most considering the concept either from a sociological [10] or economic [11] point of view. According to Holloway [12] (p. 13), tourism destinations “may be either ‘natural’ or ‘constructed’, with most of them being ‘managed’ to some extent”. However, other than accommodation and catering

facilities, attractions, and monuments, tourism destinations are intangible entities that are defined by “the sum total of what is relevant to the tourist” in a given context [13] (p. 81), rather than simply “a place visited that is central to the decision to take the trip”, as defined by the United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) [14].

Having clarified what a destination is, it can be construed that the emerging interest in its assessment and certification might, in part, be due to the recognition that negative impacts of tourism arise from various sectors (e.g., hotels, cruise ships, transportation, etc.) [15] that cannot be accounted for when specific businesses within a destination are certified as being sustainable whilst ignoring the wider picture. This trend might also echo the observation that the application of the concept of sustainability in practice remains a difficult task, in spite of several decades of debate on its theoretical, practical, and policy perspectives [2,3,16]. Black and Crabtree [17] (p. 20) describe environmental/eco-certification as a “voluntary procedure that sets, assesses, monitors, and gives written assurance that a business, product, process, service, or management system conforms to a specific requirement”. An organization that meets the certification criteria is awarded a market label, sometimes known as an ecolabel, providing that conformity to the assessment criteria transcends the basic regulatory requirements. Certification schemes are known to have three main purposes in tourism. First, they encourage voluntary adoption of sustainability practices by the industry; second, they can contribute to potential enhancement of profitability; thirdly, they can inform prospective tourists on the sustainability performance of the organization [7,17,18]. The perceived benefits of such schemes for the industry and tourists continue to be debated widely [7,8,19,20].

The extent to which these schemes are, in turn, understood and embraced by consumers in their decision-making and their wider efficacy as tools for practicing sustainability in tourism continues to attract interest from researchers [3,7,9,21–23]. Furthermore, it is questionable whether or not it is possible to organize destinations in a sustainable way and how effectively a region can be certified for sustainability. In this regard, Buckley [16] (p. 535) wrote a critical review of sustainable tourism, commenting on both research and reality, in which he noted, among other issues, that “large-scale voluntary improvements in sustainability are improbable, especially given low public pressure for sustainability and the particular ambivalence to tourism”. Whilst echoing previous research that highlighted difficulties of achieving sustainability and the limited evidence of its practice in tourism, Buckley averred that the sustainability discourse and the practicalities of its social and environmental management will continue to be of significance in future tourism research and reality. With this in mind, we ask two main research questions; first, “What are the opportunities and constraints of tourism destination assessment and certification schemes currently in operation?” and second, “has there been any major change in the way prospective tourists respond to sustainability and certification in tourism?” These questions form the basis of the exploratory study presented herein, which aims to examine recent developments in destination assessment and certification in order to identify the inherent challenges and benefits from tourist and tourism organizations’ perspectives. The research questions are explored in light of a selected number of destination assessment and certification schemes in use and ongoing debates about such schemes in general, prior to undertaking the empirical part of the investigation. The rest of the paper is structured as follows. First, a review of the relevant literature is presented, followed by study methods and discussion of the study findings, and finally, the concluding remarks.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Destination Assessment and Certification in Tourism

Indicators are considered to be the core elements in operationalizing sustainability [24]. The World Tourism Organization (WTO) [25] describes sustainability indicators (SIs) as quantitative tools that facilitate the analysis and assessment of information so that managers can make sound decisions. The main purpose here is to alert managers and other decision-makers to potentially negative impacts, hence serving as a caution. Indicators can also be considered as tools for describing processes and

ways in which these evolve over time. For instance, Crabtree and Bayfield regard indicators as tools for “quantifying change, identifying processes, and providing a framework for setting targets and monitoring performance” [26] (p. 1). SIs may be classified in at least three main ways [21], depending on whether they assess the historical and present situation with a view to making progress toward sustainability, predict future occurrence by evaluating resource use with regard to sustainability, or intend to influence the future direction with respect to sustainability through policy or other strategies that may trigger behavior change.

Many of the certification schemes used in tourism encompass one or more of the highlighted classifications of SIs. The first eco-certification scheme in the tourism industry, namely the Blue Flag Program (BFP), started in 1985 [9]. Since then, the concept has spread and numerous labels have emerged in the tourism sector, all aimed at meeting local needs and legal requirements [18]. However, several labels exist that are unfamiliar to travelers, which play a minor role in the tourism decision process. For instance, at one point, there were more than 260 labels worldwide [27] and more than 50 in Europe alone, making it the continent with the most eco-certification schemes [28]. The vast majority of the schemes presently in operation are responsible for certifying tourism businesses, such as accommodation establishments or natural assets, e.g., beaches [29].

However, emphasis has been placed on the meaningfulness and the practicality of any certification schemes chosen by destinations, if these are to facilitate the sustainable management of tourism and its development. In this regard, Schianetz et al. [30] provided an overview of different assessment tools, underlining the significance of the two main elements of eco-certification, namely the indicators upon which a particular scheme is based and the audit process leading to the label being awarded. However, two recent studies casted doubt about the efficacy of certification schemes in specific contexts. The first of these studies evaluated the effectiveness of nine beach certification schemes in Latin America and the Caribbean, based on indicators of sustainable development and integrated coastal management [31]. The authors compiled a list of 27 objectives with 62 indicators and evaluated the effectiveness of each scheme by testing 95 elements found in the schemes against the indicators. They found that “the analyzed schemes have low levels of effectiveness [and that] the most effective certification complies with 60% of the indicators, while the average compliance level is only 33%” [31] (p. 1550). Another context-specific study done in Ontario, Canada, aimed at assessing the effectiveness of the BFP as a concomitant environmental monitoring and management and tourism promotional tool, led the authors to conclude that “there are significant issues with the Blue Flag programme, including a lack of clarity and consistency with some of the criteria” [32] (p. 49).

Unsurprisingly, Torres-Delgado and Palomeque [21] reviewed previous research and concluded that there was lack of agreement on the number of indicators used within an indicator system. Rather, what mattered was that the chosen indicators have the capacity to comprehensively assess the multifaceted nature of the phenomenon whilst remaining manageable. This view was recently reiterated in a meta-analytic study that evaluated previous research on various indicator models in order to identify any common features which could be leveraged by enterprises in their quest to adopt a more sustainable path [3]. Agyeiwaah et al. argued convincingly that the plethora of indicators currently in existence, far from being meaningful tools for practicing sustainability, have turned out to inhibit enterprises in the tourism and hospitality sectors and they strongly urge “a rethink ... (that is) ... instead of developing extensive lists of rather meaningless indicators, we need to focus on a small set of meaningful, enterprise-specific indicator themes that can be adopted relatively easily and then embedded in organizational culture” [3]. What seems to be clear is that further debates are required on the role of indicators and the various assessment and certification schemes currently used for practicing sustainability at enterprise or destination levels [16].

Figure 1 represents a summary of some of the destination assessment and certification schemes currently in existence, such as the Global Sustainable Tourism Criteria for Destinations (GSTC-D), the European Tourism Indicator System (ETIS), the World Tourism Organization’s Indicators of Sustainable Development for Tourism Destinations (WTO), and the Romania-based Ecotourism

Certification Scheme, The Association of Ecotourism in Romania (AER). The summary in Figure 1 was constructed by identifying the four main criteria used to assess sustainability under each scheme, namely “Destination Management”, “Economic”, “Socio-cultural”, and, “Environmental” criteria. This was followed by an identification of the number of indicators needed to assess each main criterion, both in numbers, as seen on each bar and in percentages, as seen on the X or horizontal axis. Due to lack of space and given that it is the latest (compared to WTO and the GSTC-D) major institutional involvement with sustainability in tourism, the European Commission’s [33,34] European Tourism Indicator System (ETIS) is briefly reviewed in slightly more detail here.

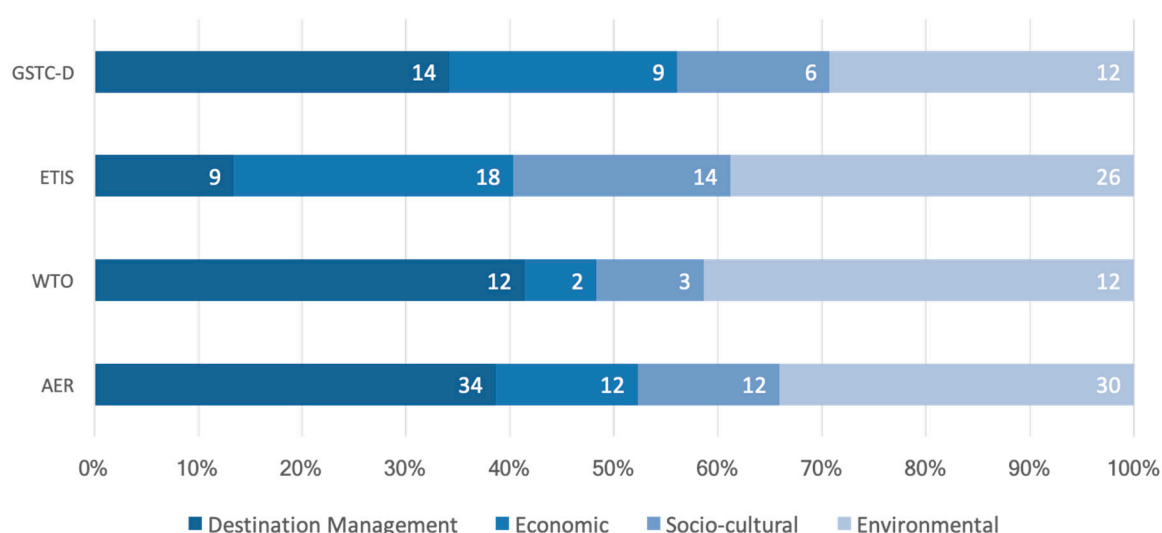


Figure 1. Distribution of criteria between core objectives in selected schemes. Source: Original illustration. **GSTC-D** = Global Sustainable Tourism Criteria for Destinations; **ETIS** = European Tourism Indicator System; **WTO** = World Tourism Organization Indicators of Sustainable Development for Tourism Destinations; **AER** = The Association of Ecotourism in Romania AER

ETIS was developed by the European Commission in 2013. It is premised on the notion of shared responsibility and joint decision-making amongst stakeholders, who are expected to collaborate on aspects such as information gathering and analysis and discussion of outcomes aimed at improving sustainability in their destinations. In this sense, ETIS closely mimics key features of the BFP that valorizes joint responsibility by the local stakeholders [9]. The system is based on a set of 22 criteria and 67 indicators and it is complemented by a toolkit as well as a dataset. All these instruments can, according to the European Commission, “be used on a voluntary basis and might also be integrated into existing destination monitoring systems” [33] (pp. 7–10).

The criteria and indicators are classified into four sections that encompass core and optional indicators. They include: Destination management, which comprises four core and five optional indicators (i.e., a total of nine indicators or 13% of 67); economic value, consisting of seven core and 11 optional indicators (i.e., a total of 18 indicators or 27% of 67); social and cultural impact, entailing five core and nine optional indicators (i.e., 14 indicators in total or 21% of 67); and lastly, environmental impact, which is made up of 11 core and 15 optional indicators (i.e., 26 indicators in total or 39% of 67). The original ETIS toolkit of 2013 has recently been revised based on feedback received from 100 destinations across Europe that participated in a pilot study over a two-year period [34]. The revised ETIS toolkit now comprises “43 core indicators and an indicative set of supplementary indicators” [34] (p. 10), whilst retaining the element of flexibility with which destinations can choose which aspects to implement in their various contexts, as well as the emphasis on a stakeholder approach.

The revised ETIS toolkit encompasses a seven-step process required for effective implementation, summarized as follows. First, there is need to raise awareness amongst the key stakeholders in a given destination, followed by the creation of a destination profile, after which a stakeholder working group

(SWG) is formed. Then, roles and responsibilities are established, which should lead to collection and recording of data which will eventually form the basis of the destination assessment. The last two stages entail analysis of data, which should feed into the ongoing development and continuous improvement of the scheme [34]. An interesting aspect of the seven-step process is that there is an opportunity to return to the SWG in order to agree on the sort of priorities that need addressing and thus devising a plan of action to implement them [34].

The emphasis on shared responsibility and joint decision-making represents the value attached to stakeholder collaboration in sustainable tourism, whilst concomitantly being a potential weakness within ETIS. This is simply because it does not fully reflect on the challenges of stakeholder collaboration in tourism destination contexts, where differing opinions and conflicts of interest may hamper efforts in such situations [23,35,36]. Challenges of stakeholder participation were reported in a recent study that evaluated the social impacts of tourism in South Sardinia, using the ETIS questionnaire. The authors concluded, among other things, that despite the generally positive attitudes toward tourism development “... , local people denounce their lack of involvement in the decision planning, pointing out that stakeholder inclusion in the tourism development process has not been realized” [23] (p. 15). Furthermore, the delineation of a tourism destination as excluding “large areas, i.e., national or regional areas that do not directly manage tourism resources and facilities and engage with stakeholders” [33,34], calls to question the very idea of certifying a destination instead of specific entities within it. The challenges of defining a destination in such contexts were explicated in another recent study [37], in which the ETIS was adapted and implemented in the county of Brasov in Romania. Here, the authors highlighted the importance of flexibility in selecting ETIS indicators, paying attention to particularities of the destination, the needs of all stakeholders, and the usefulness of the indicators to their unique contexts [37] (p. 8). Regardless of their (albeit limited) efficacy, an important area in this research centers on the issue of tourist perceptions, given the view that such schemes serve the purpose of informing tourists [29]. The next subsection briefly reviews tourist perceptions of eco-certification schemes and thus sustainability.

2.2. Tourists' Perceptions of Eco-Certification

Certification schemes encompass one way of avoiding customer confusion with regard to what sustainability standards businesses adhere to and an eco-label enables presentation of information in an easily recognizable symbol [7,9,19,38]. However, it remains unclear whether or not certification schemes influence tourists' perceptions of a given tourism product or destination and if they confer any benefits to tourism businesses or destinations. Thus, questions about effectiveness and, hence, contributions of such schemes to the operationalization of sustainability continue to be raised within the literature [2,3,6,7,19,23,32]. Recent studies have suggested that there are variations in the extent to which certification may benefit or be valued by tourism businesses, let alone by tourists. In Costa Rica, it was shown that the BFP, which was first introduced in the country in 1996, was not only used to highlight the credibility of the overall environmental quality of the beach communities, but it was also associated with increases in demand for hotel rooms in certified areas [9]. Additionally, a recent study on the economic impacts of BFP certification on seaside coastal destinations in Italy found that “current certification positively affects future foreign tourist decisions to visit the destination” [22] (p. 88). Contrapuntally, a study that sought the views of selected London hotel managers on certification concluded, among other things, that “environmental certifications are, at the present, not a selection criterion used by guests to book a hotel” [7] (p. 94). Instead, the hotel managers emphasized that other criteria, such as “price, location, and service quality”, were considered to be more important than sustainability issues [7] (p. 94). Similarly, Badulescu and Mester [20] surveyed 82 mostly small and medium-sized tourism and hospitality ventures operating in Bihor County in Romania, with the aim of assessing their understanding and, hence, uses of certification schemes as a strategy in promoting and developing sustainability in their enterprises. The authors concluded, rather astonishingly, that “more than half of the respondents are not aware of (national or international) institutions effectively dealing

with . . . the environmental standards certification . . . (and that) companies holding such certificates do not use them as an advantage to attract new clients [20] (p. 31). However, interestingly, the authors also found that companies targeting the luxury segment of the market tended to hold at least one environmental or quality certification. Clearly, there is an ongoing issue with the valorization and thus usage of certification schemes in tourism and hospitality, both for the enterprises and their prospective customers, which calls for further investigation.

One of the major issues in this debate thus entails the ambivalence surrounding the view that there is a sheer lack of awareness of tourism eco-labels—or even the negative impacts of tourism—amongst tourists, which has been argued in a number of studies [19,39]. Several studies [9,38,40–42] revealed interest in sustainable tourism amongst travelers. These findings included, inter alia, that “64% would be willing to pay more for eco-certified accommodation” [38] (p. 7), that “70% of consumers believe companies should be committed to preserving the natural environment and 55% want fair working conditions for tourism professionals” [40] (p. 31), and “75% of consumers want a more responsible holiday” [41] (p. 13). In the case of Costa Rica, demand for hotel rooms and investments in new hotel properties was associated with the prevalence of BFP certifications [9].

However, Dickinson and Dickinson [43] cautioned against asking tourists about their behavior in hypothetical situations which may trigger positive answers that give a good impression but which might not be truthful. This type of disparity has previously been evidenced through a study carried out by Martin [44], in which over 85% of British tourists stated that they considered it “very” or “fairly important” that their holidays do not harm the environment. However, empirical evidence a few years later suggested less than one percent of all outgoing holidays booked in the UK give any real priority to the environment [45]. This is further underlined by Chafe’s [46] finding that, “while 70–80% of tourists state their strong concern for eco-social components of holidays, only about 10% convert this concern into purchasing decisions” [29], a phenomenon which has been described by Chung and Monroe [47] as the *social desirability bias*. These views have been corroborated by some London hotel managers, as mentioned above [7].

Interestingly, Miller et al. [39] (p. 629), stated that various populations of tourists are “largely ignorant of the impacts of their behavior”. Nevertheless, it is beginning to emerge that what is at stake might go beyond an awareness, or lack thereof, of the impacts of one’s own behavior when it comes to making pro-sustainability choices. Alternative views exist, which add to the observed ambivalence as seen in recent studies. That is, a study by Doran et al. [48] suggested that variations in individuals’ value orientations might influence environmental concern. They reviewed extant literature on key dimensions of value orientation, demonstrating that people who are egoistic (concerned with costs and benefits to the self), altruistic (concerned about others), and biospheric (concerned about the entire eco-system) will make different sustainability choices. For instance, those who hold biospheric values are more likely to reflect these in their choice of tourism activities that minimize environmental and social impacts. The converse would hold for those that hold egoistic values. This implies that, rather than being “ignorant” or even “unaware”, most tourists may well be holding values that stand at odds with pro-sustainability behavior, regardless of their level of awareness of sustainability issues. Another study evaluated the role of sustainability labels and goal-directed behavior regarding the way prospective tourists perceived and responded to sustainable (product) offers [42]. The findings indicated that awareness of sustainable tourism products and prospective tourists’ values and attitudes on sustainable behavior positively correlated with their preference for certified tour operators. Surprisingly, the authors concluded that “...tourism industry needs to raise awareness of the importance of sustainable tourism offers, as a perfect holiday is not linked to sustainability yet” [42] (p. 1). One way of reflecting on this ambivalence from consumer perspective resides in the emerging view that changing beliefs does not necessarily mean changing behavior [49] and that to attain pro-environmental behavior and sustainable consumption in a contemporary world, which is replete with unsustainable production and consumption practices, requires “a broad and sophisticated understanding of social life and change in general” [50] (p. 96). Such processes clearly

take time, hence the need to assess what, if any, changes in behavior may have occurred over time, with regard to sustainable consumption in general or specifically in the context of tourism.

In summary, the literature review presented here seems to indicate the need for an in-depth understanding of the experiences of those promoting/implementing sustainability assessment and certification schemes as one particular strand of research into the ongoing debates on the practice of sustainable tourism. It also highlights the need to review if prospective tourists' overall interest in sustainability and, specifically, in such schemes may have changed over the years. In this way, more can be learnt about the current state of assessment and certification schemes and the extent to which they represent opportunities and constraints in the practice of sustainability in tourism. What follows is a description of the study methods.

3. Materials and Methods

Key informant interviews, simply described as interviewing a small sample of purposively selected group of participants who can provide insight, information, or ideas on a given issue or who have had an in-depth level of involvement with a particular issue [51,52], formed the basis for obtaining qualitative evidence in this study. The main justification for using key informant interviews lies in their appropriateness to the research context. This includes the need to access alternative insights into an issue, which may not necessarily be easy to obtain from official policy or other relevant sources [51], or where general descriptive information on institutions or socioeconomic circumstances may suffice to make decisions or conduct evaluation, or even where there is an interest in understanding the motivations and attitudes of a target population among others [52]. Consequently, key informant interviews and an online survey were deployed in this study, preceded by a contextual mapping of the main stakeholder groups, which were categorized as follows: Prospective tourists; (certified) tourism destinations; national governmental or non-governmental organizations, and international governmental or non-governmental organizations providing assessment or certification schemes. This combined strategy, an important decision in the research design, was justified due to its potential in facilitating a better understanding of the views of both tourism officials and prospective tourists on destination assessment and certification.

For the prospective tourists, the strategy aimed to gather information from a broad target group in order to establish what, if any, had changed in regard to the general perceptions and attitudes to sustainability and the emerging interest in destination assessment and certification. A survey was considered the best strategy in achieving this goal, given its utility for aggregating views [53] on a given issue compared to qualitative methods. On the other hand, the opinions of representatives of tourism organizations involved in the assessment and certification of destinations needed to be as detailed as possible. Therefore, the focus was narrowed down to a limited population of key informants. This choice of method is similar to that used in previous studies investigating certification schemes [19,54,55]. However, it differs from previous studies in terms of the inclusion of a survey element that sought to minimally quantify the current attitudes of prospective tourists on sustainability issues. We therefore sought "insights from statistical and narrative methods to help create a fuller understanding" of the research problem [56] (p. 666). Consequently, semi-structured interviews were conducted with three representatives, who were chosen because of their level of expertise and involvement with some of the existing assessment schemes. The research design thus entailed a deliberate integration of all four groups. Triangulation was attained through a review of the literature, an online survey and key informant interviews with experts of different organizations involved in the assessment of destination sustainability, and a representative of a certified tourism destination.

The first group comprising prospective tourists was covered by the online survey, which opened from 20 October 2014 until 31 December 2014, hence lasting for a total of 72 days. The survey aimed at generating descriptive data on a number of issues regarding awareness of sustainability issues in general compared to tourism services and coherence, or lack of it, in purchasing behavior.

Apart from being within the age of consent, participation in the online survey was not restricted by demographical or geographical attributes. The population of potential participants therefore included every person who has ever travelled or will travel in the future and was available to complete the online survey which was shared via email and also on Facebook to 350 people. The latter were requested to share the survey link with at least one person on their own professional and personal networks. In other words, the non-probability method of snowball sampling was applied to select participants in this study, mainly to ensure higher response rates whilst minimizing demographic constraints. Although this strategy might invite criticism from those who are only familiar with probability sampling methods, research shows that “non-probability samples may sometimes yield results that are just as accurate as probability samples ... and that the continued use of non-probability samples seems quite reasonable if one’s goal is not to document the strength of an association in a population ... ” [57] (pp. 711–737).

Participants were between 18 and 75 years old, with about half of them in the age bracket 25–45. The questionnaire consisted of a total of 23 questions, including six demographic questions (see Supplementary Materials for details). Of these, some questions were dependent on the answers given to the preceding questions. Therefore, each participant was able to answer a maximum of 22 questions. Both closed and open-ended questions were included in the questionnaire to allow participants to provide both objective and subjective responses. The responses given to the open-ended questions increased the contextual validity of the answers and enabled deep insights into prospective tourists’ attitudes and perceptions toward sustainability issues in tourism and its certification. To increase the response rate and also to reach a broader population, the questionnaire was made available in both English and German. The latter language was chosen based on the first author’s personal and professional environment, which is largely German-speaking. Subsequently, 273 people participated in the survey and 247 of them responded to all questions. It is, however, important to note that the questions included in the questionnaire were not only devised to generate data for this study, but that they were comparable with those used in previous research [38,57–61] on tourists’ perceptions on sustainability issues and ecocertification. Given the use of snowball sampling in this exploratory study, the effective sample is non-representative of the overall population, specifically because neither generalization nor causality was the main focus of the online survey.

The remaining three groups were covered using semi-structured interviews with representatives of selected organizations in each of the groups. The interviews were held over the telephone or through Skype between December 2014 and January 2015 and each lasted between 45 and 60 min. These were recorded and transcribed afterward. The interviewees represented the previously referenced stakeholder groups as follows:

- Second Group (Certified tourism destinations), represented by St. Kitts—participant’s initials were DT-W;
- Third Group (National organisations) from AER—participant’s initials were BP;
- Fourth Group (International organisations) from ETIS—participant’s initials were CdM.

Interview questions focused on two main areas, namely the implementation and operation of the referent scheme or set of indicators. It was also aimed at finding out about the promotion of the schemes and the main challenges identified during the whole process. Specifically, the two individuals representing a national and an international organization providing assessment or certification schemes were selected out of the pool of schemes currently in operation. The AER was chosen because the *Criteria for the Designation of Ecotouristic Destinations in Romania* was one of the first national schemes to be introduced. The ETIS was chosen because, in contrast to the AER scheme, it was an international scheme launched by a major institution (the European Commission) that could be used for the assessment rather than the certification of destination sustainability. However, with regard to comparability, both schemes were developed by organizations based in Europe and were published in 2013 and 2014, respectively. The representative of the group of certified destinations was chosen from the list of 14 Early Adopter Destinations of a third and very well-known scheme that can be

used for the certification of destinations, namely the *Global Sustainable Tourism Criteria for Destinations* (GSTC-D). From this list, St. Kitts and Nevis were randomly selected to participate in this study. In summary, Greene [62] (p. 14) aptly described the essence of mixed methods by stating “the rationales ... of mixing methods in social inquiry centers on the value of the mixed methods for the overall purpose of better understanding social phenomena, which are inherently complex and contextual”. This description coheres rather well with the choice of a mixed methods strategy in our study.

Data Analysis

The survey data was analyzed using IBM SPSS Statistics 20 software. Descriptive statistics, specifically, univariate, bivariate, and multivariate analyses, were done to establish the relationship between the importance attached to sustainability in everyday life and tourist booking behavior and the importance of culture, price, and sustainability for destination choice, among others [53,63]. Given that the focus was on assessing relationships rather than causality [63], it was considered unnecessary to test hypotheses in this study, in a way similar to what was done in the recent work on the perceived effects of value orientations and time perspective on sustainable tourism choices [48].

For the qualitative part, transcription was done soon after completing the three key informant interviews. Findings were split into thematic clusters related to the focal areas of the interviews and coded using the MAXQDA 11 software. Therefore, interviewees’ opinions on each of the focal areas were covered, which allowed for a relatively direct comparison of the opinions of each of the three interest groups. Table 1 contains a summary of these views in relation to key issues discussed in the study findings, which are presented following the advice and guidance on ways of presenting findings of a qualitative study [64,65]. We specifically use at least one “power quote” within the main body to evidence the theme under consideration, whilst leaving additional excerpts within Table 1 [64,65], mainly due to lack of space.

The analysis presented in this paper will most likely face common criticism leveled against studies that are not heavily quantitative in design, particularly those rooted in a lack of scientific basis for generalization. Such criticism normally stems from the ways in which methodological concepts, such as reliability, validity, and replicability, are discursively constructed and understood in various research contexts [63–67]. The pervasive influences of such discourses, which fundamentally points to the differences in positivist and non-positivist epistemological views on what is considered scientific is sometimes reflected in researchers’ choice of either quantitative or qualitative approaches [68]. However, as explained previously, a mixed methods approach was employed and there were no attempts at generalization beyond the particular contexts presented in this study, hence the reason descriptive statistics were preferred to inferential statistical methods. Instead, emphasis was placed on what could be learned from the study contexts [62,69] in a way that plausibly answered the main research questions. With this in mind, of particular significance to this study is Deetz’s [70] (p. 192) observation that “the world can be constituted in many ways, depending on alternative systems of valuing (and) the most significant part of this contest for object constitution is the capacity to enact the line of distinction producing some things as alike and others as different”. What follows is a presentation and discussion of the study findings.

Table 1. Summary of Key Informant Interview Transcripts.

Theme and Sub-Themes	Supporting Excerpts
<p><i>The current state of destination assessment and certification</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • * Size of the destination and the role of stakeholders * • # Internal management and coordination & ongoing monitoring of assessment process # • → Lack of human resources, competence and governmental support • ❖ Complexity of the indicator sets & lack of incentives and awareness of benefits ❖ • ♦ Potential uses for internal and external marketing & benchmarking ♦ 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • * It was interesting to participate during this stakeholder working group [...] That is the challenging phase. Then there is the technical part. But once you have established the responsibilities (of key stakeholders), you go back home [...]. In one month, one needs to get this information, can you do it? No, I am so busy, I have no time. No, it's too difficult ... (CdM, interview held on 23 January 2015). • [...] There are many things to be taken into consideration in terms of the differences between all the stakeholders, but it [...] might be easier because of the size of St. Kitts or St. Kitts and Nevis as small islands. Because we would basically know each other, all the people within the areas we would want to touch to get things done would be familiar with each other. That can be a plus, but it can also be a minus because you know in situations, familiarity can also play a role. An old saying is that “familiarity means contempt” (DT-W, interview held on 26 January 2015). • # The main challenge is to make these destinations work as an Ecotourism destination because this award is only an award. You know, they really have to start working at a local level, and to attract funds, and to start developing and to improve the local services. (B.P, interview held on 16 December 2014) • So, when we had done the assessment, one of the recommendations was for greater awareness. Not only public-private sector, because that is one of the areas people tend to focus on [...] But we also recognise[d] the need for public sector – public sector collaboration. For example, we are in the Ministry of Tourism [...] We are not responsible for awards. Yet if there were awards, everybody would try to get the attention of the Ministry of Tourism. Now, how can we convince the Ministry responsible for the awards to give priority to an award, for example, which might lead to a tourism attraction [attractiveness?] as opposed to preparing awards that are for residents? (D.T-W, interview held on 26 January 2015) # • We lack human resources [... because] we do not have any universities on our island. [...] So people will have to leave here and go and become qualified, and in a lot of times once people have left here and travel, then become qualified, not many of them return. So that is a very great [serious] issue. (DT-W, interview held on 26 January 2015) • We started a funding programme [...] to financially assist seven areas to establish the destination management organizations (DMOs). [...] But unfortunately, this has absolutely no connection with the governmental authorities. So I was telling you about the incentives and the financial support which is not yet happening from their side.” (BP, interview held on 16 December 2014)

Table 1. Cont.

Theme and Sub-Themes	Supporting Excerpts
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • ❖ [...] In the long term, our aim is to attract, you know, a certain category of tourists interested in nature, nature-based activities and rural culture. This is what is already happening in certain areas of Romania, but that is not enough. I mean, there is a very high potential in Romania for developing ecotourism well... not yet. This is way too soon to look for this kind of result [...] (BP, AER). • Some of the areas were covered in other areas, and it could have been a bit cumbersome because [...] they had so many [...] criteria and indicators. (DT-W, interview held on 26 January 2015) • [...] For the moment, there is only this word from the ministry and they don't have other incentives from the government [...] What we are trying to do now is to work with the National Tourism Authority and with other ministries, and we try to convince them to find and to give some incentives to these areas that want to have a more sustainable development (BP, interview held on 16 December 2014). ❖ • ♦ In terms of having a feedback from our visitors on our sustainability efforts, we have not undertaken that. Most of the surveys that are done are focused on our marketing efforts. More so, it will include aspects of sustainability because there are cultural aspects of our destination, so when we are marketing, those things will come out (DT-W, interview held on 26 January 2015) • We are hoping by doing that [...], persons would be aware of the issues that we are dealing with in sustainability for tourism. And so it would not be as difficult to convince people to work along with you. And all of us would have a greater understanding of what is needed to keep us on the track with respect to sustainable tourism. [...] Because you have [Author's note: to have] the market internally first. I mean, you have to have it internally as well as externally. There is no use in saying all these wonderful things outside of the country if the people, the residents, are not a part of it, are not on board with what you are trying to achieve. So it works both ways (DT-W, interview held on 26 January 2015) • So now, we have to understand. We have to make this deep analysis a [...] } And then we will be able to say at the end, Okay, so we are not pretending that this system is the perfect one but at least we collected the feedback coming from a huge number of destinations (CdM, ETIS). • Once you collect data, it can be provided to policy makers, you can provide this kind of really concrete information regarding your sustainable tourism performance and you can say, well, my environmental impact is this, towards this one year ago, this year it has improved, especially regarding the management of renewable energy, for example. [...] Then you can say, well, let me see what another town like me is doing. I'm from the South, what is another town in the North doing? (CdM, interview held on 23 January 2015) ♦

Table 1. Cont.

Theme and Sub-Themes	Supporting Excerpts
<p><i>The potential for further development of destination assessment and certification</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Quality of the schemes & their future improvements 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> We will decrease the number. We will simplify even more. [...] It's an issue this problem, a technical issue because people are saying, 'Oh my god, it's complicated' when they start, and then they stop it. (CdM, interview held on 23 January 2015) We need to be in touch. Because the destinations are still proud if they know that the Commission is still there somehow watching or coordinating the initiative. (CdM, interview held on 23 January 2015) The areas were awarded but it's not like you go there and everything is as it should be, I mean things still have to be [...] put into place, and the offer has to be developed. And the Ecotourism infrastructure has to be developed and constructed, and so on. (BP, interview held on 16 December 2014) What we were able to do is to review the criteria, and provide feedback. [...] For example [...] one of the methods used for evaluation of the destination spoke about a traffic light system. [Interviewer's note: traffic light system is used by GSCT for the grading of compliance with the indicators]. Whilst on St. Kitts, we are living without traffic lights, we have seen it on television and those who travel had experiences with it, but traffic lights are not on St. Kitts. [...] I think that having gone through the process of refining the document, it has become more usable, more user-friendly. And it is quite good, I find it very good. (DT-W, interview held on 26 January 2015) When we are speaking about destinations [...], the size of a destination can be different, the local conditions and the factors can also vary from one country to the other, so the idea was to create that new certification system designed for destinations based on the reality that we have here in Romania. (BP, interview held on 16 December 2014) For example, when the European Commission "launched a call for expression of interest towards destinations, [...] there were more than 220 destinations who were interested in participating at the beginning" (CdM, interview held on 23 January 2015).

4. Results

In this section, we present findings on the opportunities and constraints in destination assessment and certification schemes currently in use. Two main themes are considered in this section; the first one evaluates the current state of destination assessment and certification by focusing on the constraints and opportunities identified by the interviewees. The second theme assesses prospects for future developments in destination assessment and certification by identifying key influences that might have an impact on the schemes. Italicized excerpts are used in the next subsection to represent interviewees' responses.

4.1. The Current State of Destination Assessment and Certification

The study findings indicate that there are various issues concerning the implementation and operation of destination assessment and certification schemes. Two of these issues focus on the size

of the destination and the role of stakeholders and the ensuing complexity in operationalizing the schemes, as captured in the excerpt below:

The size is a problem. And, for example, we have in Romania some areas which are quite large, and we are asking right now what's the best approach for this kind of areas [...]. And it's very difficult to bring all the stakeholders at the same table. So, this depends very much on the local partners because [...] it's up to them to decide how to apply [... , and] how large the area should be

(BP, AER)

Another important issue entailed the internal management and coordination of the assessment process and the on-going monitoring and development as illustrated through the following statement. *"This is also an issue regarding the management from the local destination and how they manage themselves. Are they aware about what they are doing or not?"* (CdM, ETIS).

The fact that many schemes are voluntary initiatives raises some further constraints, thus, *"the first problem was the lack of human resources and competences"* (CdM). This issue was not only observed by the European Commission, but was also one of the main points of criticism during the pre-testing of the GSTC criteria on St. Kitts. *"We lack human resources ... we do not have any universities on our island ... So people will have to leave here and go and become qualified, and in a lot of times..., not many of them return. So that is a very great [serious] issue"* (DT-W, St. Kitts).

The problem mentioned above is, according to one of the interviewees, mainly a result of a lack of support from authorities and funding, thus:

We started a funding program ... to financially assist seven areas to establish the Destination Management Organizations (DMOs) ... But unfortunately, this has absolutely no connection with the governmental authorities. So I was telling you about the incentives and the financial support which is not yet happening from their side."

(BP, AER)

Further constraints identified by the interviewees are related to the indicators and the structure of the schemes, or lack of awareness of the benefits of the assessment to the DMOs. With regard to the schemes themselves, the main critique concerned the complexity of the indicator sets, as well as the difficulties associated with collection of data relating to the criteria and indicators, hence: *"Some of the areas were covered in other areas, and it could have been a bit cumbersome because ... they had so many ... criteria and indicators"* (DT-W, St. Kitts).

As mentioned before, there seem to be issues concerning the estimation of benefits amongst DMOs. Even though these issues were mentioned by all interviewees, the *"need to promote more"* (CdM) seems to be even higher on the agenda of the European Commission than on that of the other interviewees, thus the emphasis: *"There is no [...] economic incentive for doing it. So, they do not see the benefit. We have to clarify very well what are the benefits"* (CdM, ETIS).

Nevertheless, some potential benefits were also identified. For instance, the potential for using these schemes for both internal and external marketing was mentioned most frequently by the interviewees. The AER seems to consider the assessment mainly as *"...a means to convince the authorities ... to start looking to Ecotourism in detail and to give a higher importance to this form of tourism"* (BP). The St. Kitts Ministry of Tourism focused more specifically on the tourism industry and local residents, that is:

We are hoping by doing that ... , persons would be aware of the issues that we are dealing with in sustainability for tourism. And so it would not be as difficult to convince people to work along with you ... I mean, you have to have it internally as well as externally. There is no use in saying all these wonderful things outside of the country if ... , the residents, ... , are not on board with what you are trying to achieve

(DT-W, St. Kitts)

The use of assessments for internal marketing purposes points to its potential for raising awareness and consciousness of tourism as a development option that ensures a more sustainable future than other options. In this sense, BP explained the influence of the Romanian scheme using the example of *Maramures* in the North of Romania, where there were plans to construct water power plants on some of the rivers. In this case, *“the local community decided to oppose the construction of the water power plants in order to promote and to support the development of Ecotourism in the area”*. According to BP, the local community’s reaction was an outcome of the awareness raised following the application of the AER scheme. Thus, the benefits of applying the indicators and criteria internally became especially evident from the destination perspective. In this context, the evaluation of previous efforts, as well as the exposure of potential trouble spots, was mentioned as another benefit of the destination assessment. During the interviews, it became clear that the assessment *“brought our attention to some of the things that we might not have been considering in terms of our development in tourism . . . issues that need to be addressed . . . Our activities have become more targeted as a result of the assessment”* (DT-W, St. Kitts).

Furthermore, interviewees indicated that there is a potential for using the resultant data for benchmarking purposes, that is:

Once you collect data, it can be provided to policy makers, you can provide this kind of really concrete information regarding your sustainable tourism performance and you can say, well, my environmental impact is this, towards this one year ago, this year it has improved, especially regarding the management of renewable energy, for example . . . Then you can say, well, let me see what another town like me is doing . . .

(CdM, ETIS)

4.2. The Potential for Future Developments in Destination Assessment and Certification

The study findings also highlight the existence of several issues that are likely to influence the future development of destination assessment and certification. These can be clustered into three groups, namely, the quality of the schemes, their continued improvement and promotion, and tourists’ perspectives. The quality of the schemes and their further improvement have partly been highlighted in the previous subsection, but these also play an essential role for the future too, as the schemes will not be considered practicable if these issues are not addressed. This is evident from the following statement: *“We will decrease the number. We will simplify even more . . . It’s an issue this problem, a technical issue because people are saying, ‘Oh my god, it’s complicated’ when they start, and then they stop it”* (CdM, ETIS).

Further areas of improvement include the need to provide up-to-date tools to the destinations using the schemes, and improved measures for comparing their performance to that of other destinations. One very important issue is that of continuous monitoring and on-going development beyond the assessment process. The assessment and further development of sustainable tourism within a destination is *“a continuous journey . . . that keeps people working towards something, achieving something, and to move to another level”* (DT-W, St. Kitts). However, keeping up the destination’s motivation and commitment requires, aside from adequate funding, a close and long-term co-operation with the organizations responsible for the schemes, hence: *“We need to be in touch. Because the destinations are still proud if they know that the Commission is still there somehow watching or coordinating the initiative”* (CdM, ETIS)

The need for an ongoing development and continuous support was also reiterated by BP: *“The areas were awarded but it’s not like you go there and everything is as it should be, I mean things still have to be . . . put into place, and the offer has to be developed. And the Ecotourism infrastructure has to be developed and constructed, and so on”*.

Having established the views of destination officials in Sections 4.1 and 4.2, we move onto the tourists’ perspectives in the next section to gain a broader view of the issues under consideration in this paper.

4.3. Tourists' Perspectives: Survey Results

The starting point in this survey was to understand what respondents' general attitudes were toward certification in everyday life. Table 2 represents a summary of the findings. Interestingly, over 70% of the respondents attach importance to certification in everyday life, assigning weights of 4 (29.7%), 5 (34.6%), and 6 (8.2%) to this issue. The respondents were also willing to pay, on average, 18–28% more for certified products compared to normal, non-certified alternatives.

Table 2. People's attitudes toward certification in everyday life.

Importance of Certification in Everyday Life	Share of Respondents	Average Price Difference Accepted (As Compared to Usual Products)
1 (very low)	3.7%	+2.40%
2	8.2%	+7.68%
3	15.6%	+9.98%
4	29.7%	+18.21%
5	34.6%	+28.00%
6 (very high)	8.2%	+19.73%

Source: Original illustration.

The survey also presented respondents with 12 factors, from which they were asked to choose all those that relate to sustainable management. The answers provided to this question highlight the prevalence of an imbalance amongst the three elements of sustainability (cf. Figure 1 above) in terms of tourist awareness. Hence, all of the criteria associated with the ecological and economic dimension of sustainability were selected by at least 56% of respondents. The three criteria relating to socio-cultural dimension were, in turn, amongst the four factors that were chosen by the least number of participants, as illustrated in Figure 2.



Figure 2. Factors considered to be part of sustainable management. Red = economic; green = ecological; blue = socio-cultural. Source: Original illustration.

Given the prevalence of these schemes in tourism sustainability debates, policy, and practice, and also within the context of respondents' views on the first two issues, it seemed logical to establish which factors they usually consider when choosing a travel destination (see Figure 3).

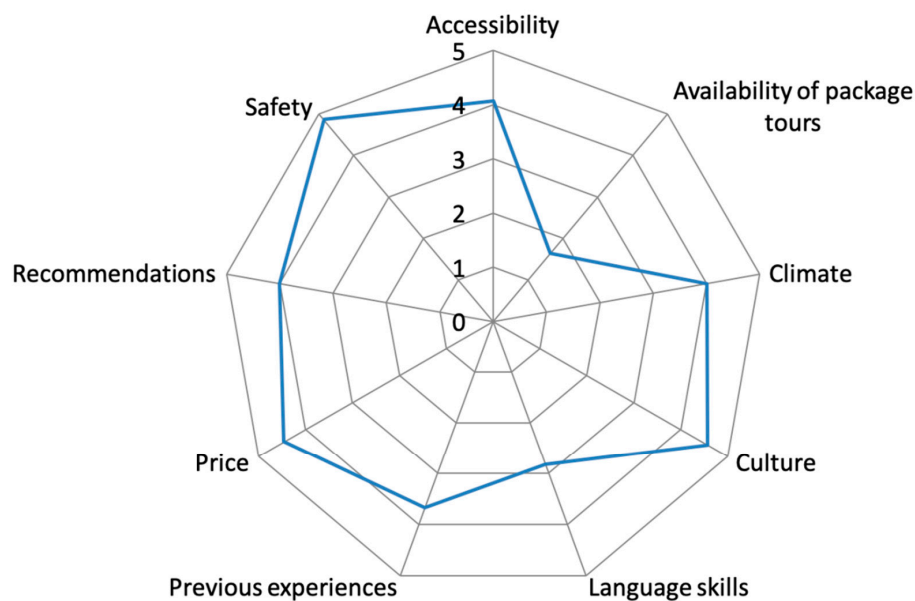


Figure 3. Importance of selected factors in destination choice. 1 = very little; 6 = very high. Source: Original illustration.

What is clear from Figure 3 is that those factors that are related to sustainability play only a very minor, if almost neutral, role, with an average of 3.26 out of 6. This means sustainability is one of the three least important factors out of a total of ten that influence destination choice. Furthermore, respondents were asked to indicate whether or not they had ever knowingly stayed in an accommodation facility that was certified for its sustainability efforts. Their responses are summarized here below in Figure 4.

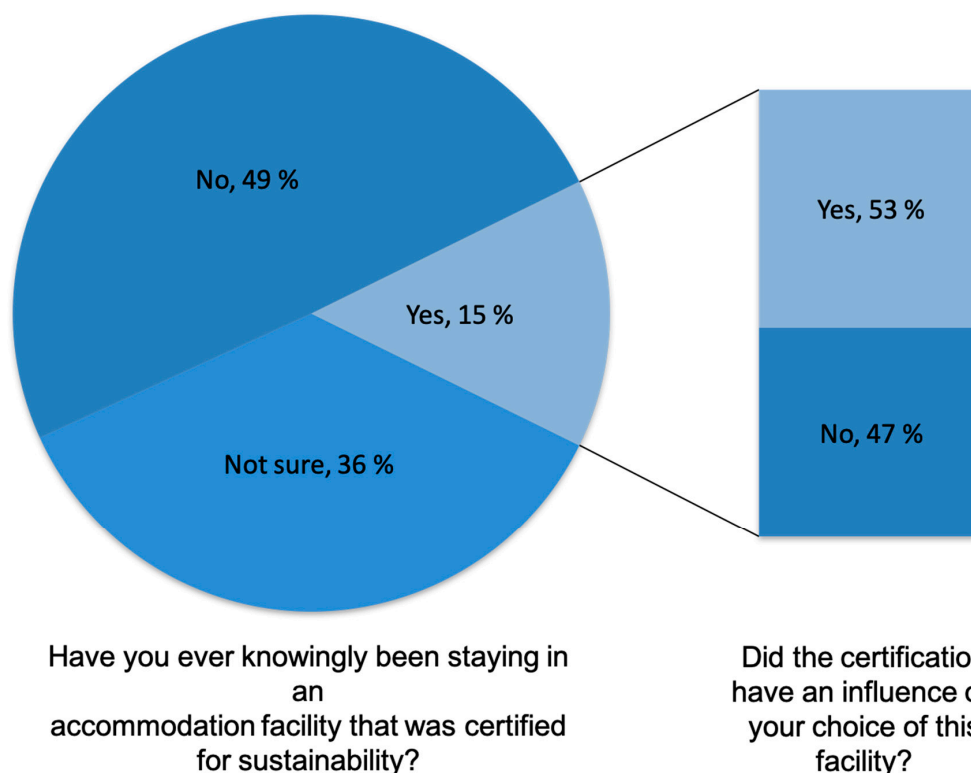


Figure 4. Influence of sustainability certification on accommodation choice. Source: Original illustration.

Only 15% of respondents had stayed in a certified accommodation and, within this group, only half revealed that the certification played any role in their choice of accommodation. Of those who claimed to have never paid attention to this issue, 140 (57%) attributed it to a lack of awareness of the labels in use (cf. [6,39,42]). However, a clear tendency can be observed when comparing the importance of sustainability in choosing a travel destination with actual booking behavior (Figure 5). Although this was only tested with respect to accommodation facilities rather than destinations as a whole, the findings reveal that a higher importance rating implies greater awareness and preference for sustainable options (cf. [48]), as illustrated in Figure 5.

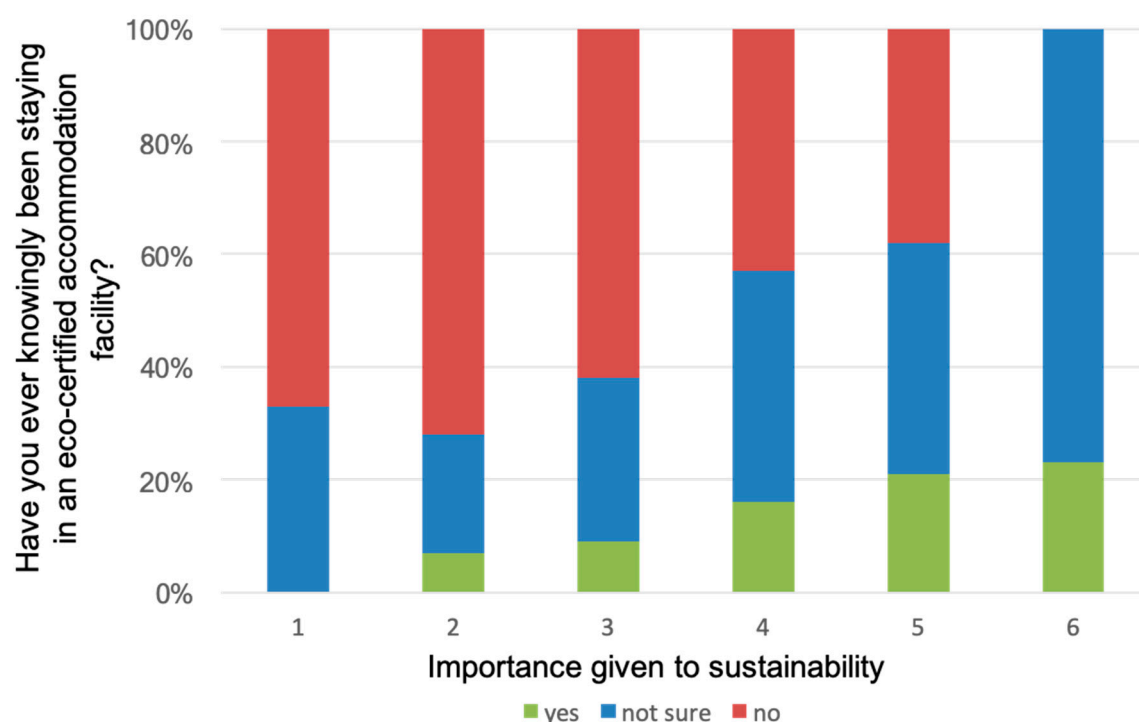


Figure 5. Relation between importance of sustainability in everyday life and tourism booking behavior. 1 = very low; 6 = very high Source: Original illustration.

Another finding that implies an opportunity for sustainable destination certification concerns the relationship between the importance of sustainability and other factors when choosing a travel destination. The importance of culture, for instance, even exceeds that of the price of a holiday for those paying some attention to sustainability issues (see Figure 6).

Moreover, a comparison of the demographic characteristics of the survey respondents and their attitudes toward sustainability issues revealed further opportunities for destination assessment and certification. Although it might be unsurprising that a very strong positive correlation (Spearman: 0.826) exists between people's income and the additional amount they would be willing to pay for certified products, income also has a large influence on the importance of sustainability when choosing a travel destination (Pearson: 0.678) (see Figure 7). A moderate correlation can also be observed between the importance of sustainability and the participant's age and level of education. Figure 7 furthermore illustrates a very high importance of sustainability in the range of group 5, i.e., the age between 30 and 35 years and an income between £40,000 and £50,000. This means, in effect, that the importance given to sustainability with respect to choosing a travel destination increases with an increasing age, level of education and, more particularly, income.

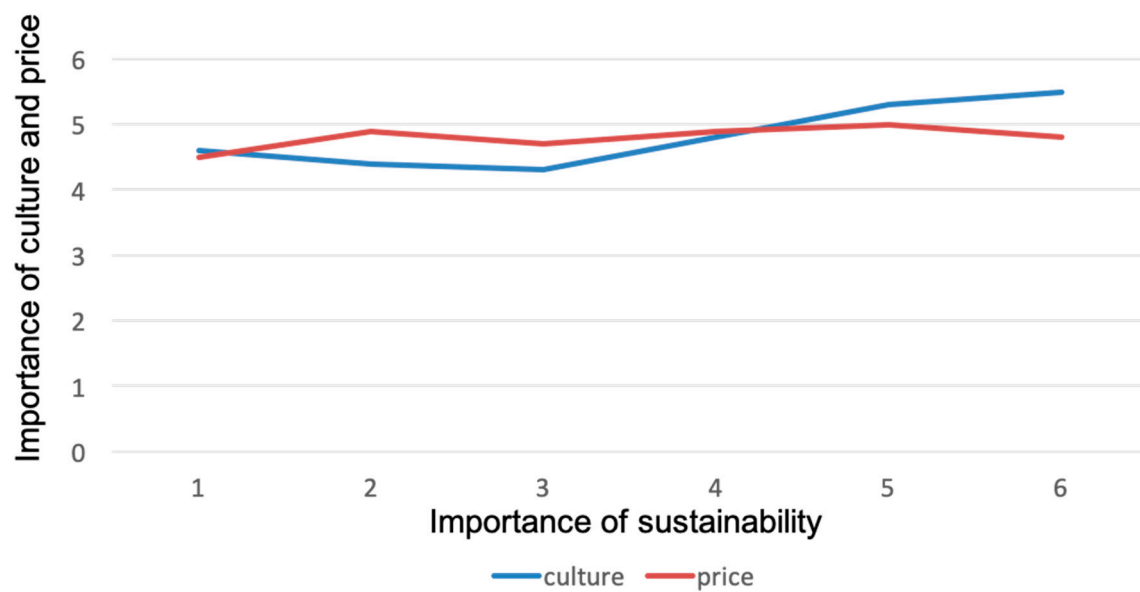


Figure 6. Importance of culture, price, and sustainability for destination choice. Source: Original illustration.

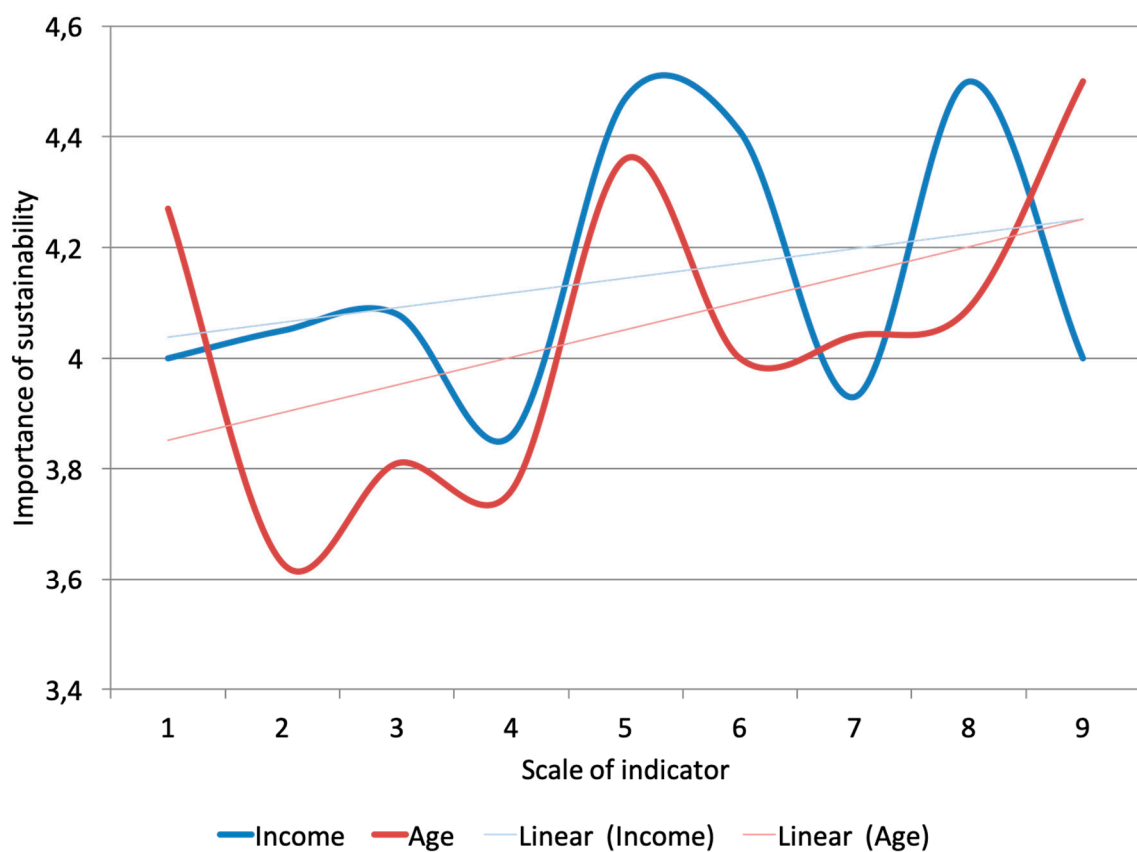


Figure 7. Influence of level of income and education on the importance given to sustainability in everyday life. Source: Original illustration. Note: Both indicators have been scaled into nine groups in order to facilitate their comparison.

What follows is a discussion of the study findings that reflects on data from the key informant interviews and insights from the survey results.

4.4. Discussion

The study findings are discussed here to highlight the opportunities and constraints inherent in destination assessment and certification. These discussions entail four key issues, namely, the practicability of the schemes, their reliability, their visibility, including to prospective tourists, and the availability of incentives for participating in the schemes.

With regard to practicability, it is clear that the complexity of the indicators and the consequent challenges of collecting relevant data for all indicators represent a substantial constraint, more so when linked to the two characteristics of geographical focus and stakeholder involvement. Here, complications were linked to destinations being complex structures involving a plethora of stakeholders and interest groups. In this context, the main concerns entail the limitations of assessing different sizes and kinds of destinations using an inflexible set of indicators and the difficulties of including all relevant stakeholders and a full spectrum of opinions in the process. In this sense, our findings cohere well with previous research on the challenges of stakeholder collaboration in tourism [31,35,36]. It therefore seems these schemes that aim to bring stakeholders together still have to find ways of meaningfully addressing this particular constraint.

Notwithstanding their strengths, the criteria included in the schemes were not found to be balanced between the three elements of sustainability (i.e., economic, environmental, and socio-cultural) or between these elements and the aspect of destination management (see Figure 1 in Section 2.1 above). Unsurprisingly, this imbalance is also prevalent in the survey participants' understanding of sustainability (see Figure 2 in Section 4.3 above), as well as in previous research e.g., [39]. These imbalances are exacerbated by the perceptions of tourism operators and some accommodation providers, who do not often see any direct financial benefit of socio-cultural aspects of sustainability to tourists or themselves (cf. [7,55]).

Consequently, the ecological dimension of sustainability remains the most attractive due to potential cost savings (cf. [9,55]) and this, in a way, narrows down the idea of sustainability to environmental elements, not for their own sake, but for the potential economic benefits to such operators. After all, as noted by Budeanu and others [71], the indicators used by UNWTO and the World Travel and Tourism Council (WTTC) rely heavily on economic metrics that emphasize direct contributions to jobs, gross domestic product, investment, and so forth, which unwittingly militate against progress made in sustainability and tourism. Furthermore, the low awareness of socio-cultural issues undermines the reliability and efficacy of such schemes that claim to assess destinations for their overall sustainability; hence reiterating concerns raised within the literature about their usefulness (cf. [16,19,55]). It could therefore be argued that, due to the very setup of the schemes, they do not reliably measure overall sustainability, but rather assess compliance with elements of the concept to varying degrees. This in turn would mean the schemes are not necessarily dissimilar in scope to those that assess and certify tourism businesses, hence undermining the very idea of a holistic approach to destination rather than tourism business assessment and certification.

In terms of visibility, there is apparently high demand from destinations for sustainability assessment and certification, which is particularly true for ETIS, shown also by the recent evidence of increasing interest in WTTC's "Tourism for Tomorrow" Awards [71]. However, there is also insufficient communication of the benefits of being assessed or certified to the public, thus, a low visibility of the schemes (cf. [20]), as they are currently being used primarily for conducting internal assessments only. Tourists however, to a large extent, remain uninterested in sustainability, as demonstrated by their limited familiarity with the schemes and the importance of sustainability in their purchasing decisions (cf. [39,42]). It might be the case, alongside what is known in the extant literature [7,20,43,48], that such a lackluster attitude by prospective tourists is what might be discouraging destinations and other entities from actively promoting their involvement in such schemes or the outcomes of the assessments and certifications.

However, without discounting the differences in contexts, the findings in previous studies e.g., [38,41], clearly contrast with those from the online survey, where a small minority (15%, N = 273) is

consciously interested in eco-certified accommodation, although more than 50% indicated willingness to pay more for eco-certified everyday products. This, in a way, reveals the fact that not much has changed in terms of tourist attitudes toward sustainability (cf. [29]); it also highlights the irony in destination rather than tourism business assessment and certification, given the limited awareness of what these schemes represent.

More than that, the findings show those who assign higher importance ratings for sustainability were more likely to be aware of and opt for sustainable options, including in tourism consumption (see Figure 5 in Section 4.3 above). This is not dissimilar to Doran et al.'s [48] assertions about the positive relationship between those holding biospheric values and pro-sustainability consumption behavior. The online survey thus reveals opportunities for future development of destination assessment and certification. Nevertheless, this remains the case for a small minority of the participants in this study (cf. [29]). For now, the study findings indicate that destination assessment and certification schemes are not actively seeking to leverage this small but rising interest in sustainable tourism by prospective tourists.

5. Conclusions

This exploratory study set out to understand the opportunities and constraints inherent in destination assessment and certification schemes as tools for practicing sustainability in tourism and if such schemes are valorized by prospective tourists. The findings indicate that there is still an imbalance in the set of indicators that assess the main elements of sustainability, with a bias toward environmental and economic indicators (cf. [18,55]). The socio-cultural indicators on the other hand are not strongly represented (cf. [55]). This is also revealed to be the case in both the prospective tourists' understanding of sustainability and within the literature, including the preferences shown by tourism businesses (cf. [39,55]), hence undermining the very idea of a holistic approach to sustainability.

While there is some evidence of self-motivation by DMOs to participate in destination assessment and certification programs, challenges remain in terms of how to attract more participants while keeping existing ones. It would appear that introducing some form of benchmarking that allows for comparisons internally and against other destinations might be an option worth considering by these schemes (cf. [6,19,31]). Therefore, we recommend increasing the comparability of data between destinations in order to facilitate benchmarking, setting up networks between destinations to apply the criteria sets, encouraging horizontal communication and mutual support between and amongst destinations, and awarding best practice designations which can be reviewed regularly (e.g., biennially).

Despite the weaknesses identified in this study, destination assessment and certification have the potential to develop into powerful tools that could enhance the role of sustainability in tourism. This is partly because the certification of whole destinations, by the nature of their geographical reference, allows the application of only a rather small number of schemes, compared to that of individual businesses. In this sense, it has great potential to prevent confusion arising from the plethora of certification schemes for individual tourism businesses that has been elaborated on in previous studies e.g., [3,7,18]. However, one practical step the DMOs and sustainability-certifying institutions can take is to raise more awareness of these schemes and their potential benefits to more tourism destinations and prospective tourists. Drawing on the experiences of the currently certified destinations and the feedback received from them, they can induct new destinations into participating in assessment and certification schemes that closely meet their particular sustainability needs. The availability of experiential and hands-on support to new and inexperienced destinations could go a long way toward attracting new participants whilst raising awareness of these schemes for the general public. In terms of raising public awareness, certified destinations should highlight their sustainability credentials as prominently as other key features of the destination, hence making them easily recognizable to tourists and the general public. In addition to this, certified destinations could aim to use smart digital technologies to summarize the specific sustainability goals they are pursuing, coupled with an invitation to prospective tourists to participate through meaningful and playful engagement whilst at

the destination. For instance, certified destinations that aim to manage carbon foot prints, or spread the benefits of tourism to the local resident population, or even manage undesirable socio-cultural impacts could have these messages succinctly presented through desktop and smart phone or tablet computer applications. These messages could be introduced to prospective tourists seeking information about the destination or those who have actually visited the destination, using push notifications (the latter describes automated messages sent by an application to the user, even when the application itself is not open or running). The push notifications could be used to alert prospective tourists about these sustainability goals and ways in which they can participate, for example, using public transport, visiting and buying from locally owned, small-scale businesses such as restaurants, arts and crafts, or being mindful of local cultural heritage and the accepted and respectful ways of interacting with attractions, etc. These could also be linked to rewards, for instance, taking public transport whilst at the destination could be linked to reduced entry fees to some popular attractions or events, or exemptions from tourist taxes, and so forth. Prospective tourists who choose to engage with the smart sustainability applications, might, as an indirect benefit to the destinations, share their experiences through various social media outlets, hence expanding public awareness through electronic word of mouth.

It is indeed very promising to see that there are organizations concerned about these schemes; the high level of interest demonstrated by destinations in Europe, in particular, but also elsewhere (e.g., St. Kitts), points to the importance and urgency of a paradigm shift with regard to the sustainability of the whole destination. After all, as aptly noted by DT-W of St. Kitts, “... when the visitors leave, and they go back to their homes, we have to be here”. But for such enthusiasm with the schemes to be even more meaningful, they will need to engage with prospective tourists who continue to be mostly ambivalent about sustainability in their consumption behavior. In a nutshell, the emerging interest in destination-wide sustainability certifications and the inherent challenges and opportunities, including the ambivalent response from prospective tourists, points to the limits of indirect regulation. In other words, the pursuit of sustainability goals and the very idea of certifying destinations happen on a voluntary basis rather than through a compulsory regulation from local or national governments (cf. [16]). This means destinations on the one hand and prospective tourists on the other can choose if or when they are interested in participating in sustainable production and consumption. The implications are that small positive steps are taken in practicing sustainability at the destination level, regardless of the efforts made by various stakeholders in assessing, certifying, and promoting specific schemes.

Limitations and Future Research

The main limitation of this study is that it is of an exploratory nature and is limited to evaluation of the current schemes from a small number of key informants, who have provided insightful information based on their deep involvement with and knowledge of destination assessment and certification, but this information cannot be meaningfully quantified. In other words, although these key informants are high-ranking, senior officials with direct experience of and responsibility for developing and implementing the reviewed schemes in their respective stakeholder groups, their views remain narrowly limited to their specific contexts. Furthermore, the survey element that reflects the views of prospective tourists only used descriptive rather than inferential statistical analysis. In other words, the study findings cannot be generalized beyond their context to reflect the opportunities and constraints linked to destination assessment and certification. Given that the latter is still in its early stages, there remains a need for research regarding the issues presented here in future studies to include both a wider range of stakeholders and perhaps a more balanced understanding of the qualitative and quantitative aspects.

Supplementary Materials: The following are available online at <http://www.mdpi.com/2071-1050/11/13/3691/s1>.

Author Contributions: S.G. conceived and designed the study, collected and analyzed data; co-wrote the paper; M.A. supervised the research process, co-wrote, revised and edited the paper.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

References

1. Pforr, C. Concepts of sustainable development, sustainable tourism, and ecotourism: Definitions, principles, and linkages. *Scand. J. Hosp. Tour.* **2001**, *1*, 68–71. [CrossRef]
2. Mihalic, T. Sustainable-responsible tourism discourse—Towards ‘responsustable’ tourism. *J. Clean. Prod.* **2016**, *111*, 461–470. [CrossRef]
3. Agyeiwaah, E.; McKercher, B.; Suntikul, W. Identifying core indicators of sustainable tourism: A path forward? *Tour. Manag. Persp.* **2017**, *24*, 26–33. [CrossRef]
4. Chernev, A.; Böckenholt, U.; Goodman, J. Choice overload: A conceptual review and meta-analysis. *J. Cons. Psychol.* **2015**, *25*, 333–358. [CrossRef]
5. Schwartz, B. *The Paradox of Choice: Why More is Less*; Ecco: New York, NY, USA, 2004.
6. Buckley, R. Tourism ecolabels. *Ann. Tour. Res.* **2002**, *29*, 183–208. [CrossRef]
7. Geerts, W. Environmental certification schemes: Hotel managers’ views and perceptions. *Int. J. Hosp. Manag.* **2014**, *39*, 87–96. [CrossRef]
8. Medina, L.K. Ecotourism and certification: Confronting the principles and pragmatics of socially responsible tourism. *J. Sustain. Tour.* **2005**, *13*, 281–295. [CrossRef]
9. Murphy, P.; Pritchard, M.; Smith, B. The destination product and its impact on traveller perceptions. *Tour. Manag.* **2000**, *21*, 43–52. [CrossRef]
10. Urry, J. *The Tourist Gaze*; Sage Publications: London, UK, 1990.
11. Cooper, C.; Fletcher, J.; Gilbert, D.; Wanhill, S.; Shepherd, R. *Tourism: Principles and Practice*, 2nd ed.; Pearson Education: Harlow, UK, 2000.
12. Holloway, J. *The Business of Tourism*, 7th ed.; Pearson Education: Harlow, UK, 2006.
13. Howie, F. *Managing the Tourist Destination*; Continuum: London, UK, 2003.
14. UNWTO. Understanding Tourism: Basic Glossary. Available online: www.media.unwto.org/en/content/understanding-tourism-basic-glossary (accessed on 10 January 2015).
15. Blackman, A.; Naranjo, M.A.L.; Robalino, J.; AlpiZar, F.; Rivera, J. Does tourism eco-certification pay? Costa Rica’s Blue Flag Program. *World Dev.* **2014**, *58*, 41–52. [CrossRef]
16. Buckley, R. Sustainable tourism: Research and reality. *Ann. Tour. Res.* **2012**, *39*, 528–546. [CrossRef]
17. Black, R.; Crabtree, A. (Eds.) *Quality Assurance and Certification in Ecotourism*; CABI Publishing: Wallingford, UK, 2007.
18. Font, X. Environmental certification in tourism and hospitality: Progress, process and prospects. *Tour. Manag.* **2002**, *23*, 197–205. [CrossRef]
19. Jarvis, N.; Weeden, C.; Simcock, N. The benefits and challenges of sustainable tourism certification: A case study of the green tourism business scheme in the West of England. *J. Hosp. Tour. Manag.* **2010**, *17*, 83–93. [CrossRef]
20. Badulescu, D.; Mester, I. Certification in Tourism between Expectations and Effectiveness: A Quantitative Evaluation on Romanian Companies, BASIQ 2015 International Conference “New Trends in Sustainable Business and Consumption”. Available online: <http://www.conference.ase.ro/pdf/04.pdf> (accessed on 10 May 2019).
21. Torres-Delgado, A.; Saarinen, J. Using indicators to assess sustainable tourism development: A review. *Tour. Geog.* **2014**, *16*, 31–37. [CrossRef]
22. Capacci, S.; Scorcu, A.E.; Vici, L. Seaside tourism and eco-labels: The economic impact of Blue Flags. *Tour. Manag.* **2015**, *47*, 88–96. [CrossRef]
23. Foroni, I.; Modica, P.; Zenga, M. Residents’ satisfaction with tourism and the European tourism indicator system in South Sardinia. *Sustainability* **2019**, *11*, 2243. [CrossRef]
24. Bell, S.; Morse, S. *Sustainability Indicators: Measuring the Immeasurable*, 2nd ed.; Oxon: Earthscan, UK, 2008.
25. WTO. *What Tourism Managers Need to Know: A Practical Guide to the Development and Use of Indicators of Sustainable Tourism*; World Tourism Organization: Madrid, Spain, 1995.
26. Crabtree, R.; Bayfield, N. Developing sustainability indicators for mountain ecosystems: A study of the Cairngorms, Scotland. *J. Environ. Manag.* **1998**, *52*, 1–14. [CrossRef]

27. WTO. *Indicators of Sustainable Development for Tourism Destinations: A Guidebook*; World Tourism Organization: Madrid, Spain, 2004.
28. Plüss, C.; Zotz, A. *Sustainability in Tourism: A Guide through the Label Jungle*; Naturefriends International: Vienna, Austria, 2012.
29. Font, X.; Epler Wood, M. Sustainable tourism certification marketing and its contribution to SME market access. In *Quality Assurance and Certification in Ecotourism*; Black, R.A., Crabtree, A., Eds.; CABI Publishing: Wallingford, UK, 2007.
30. Schianetz, K.; Kavanagh, L.; Lockington, D. Concepts and tools for comprehensive sustainability assessment for tourism destinations: A comparative review. *J. Sustain. Tour.* **2007**, *15*, 369–389. [[CrossRef](#)]
31. Zielinski, S.; Botero, C. Are Eco-labels sustainable? Beach certification schemes in Latin America and the Caribbean. *J. Sustain. Tour.* **2015**, *23*, 1550–1572. [[CrossRef](#)]
32. Klein, L.; Dodds, R. Blue Flag Beach Certification: An environmental Management Tool or Tourism Promotional Tool? *Tour. Rec. Res.* **2018**, *43*, 39–51. [[CrossRef](#)]
33. European Union. *The European Tourism Indicator System (ETIS): Toolkit for Sustainable Destinations*; Publications Office of the European Union: Luxembourg, 2013.
34. European Commission. The European Tourism Indicator System (ETIS): ETIS Toolkit for Sustainable Destination Management. 2016. Available online: <http://ec.europa.eu/growth/sectors/tourism/offer/sustainable/indicators/> (accessed on 10 January 2018).
35. Dredge, D. Networks, conflicts and collaborative communities. *J. Sustain. Tour.* **2006**, *14*, 562–581. [[CrossRef](#)]
36. Hatipoglu, B.; Alvarez, M.D.; Ertuna, B. Barriers to stakeholder involvement in the planning of sustainable tourism: The case of the Thrace region in Turkey. *J. Clean. Prod.* **2016**, *111*, 306–317. [[CrossRef](#)]
37. Tudorache, D.M.; Simon, T.; Frent, C.; Musteata-Pavel, M. Difficulties and challenges in applying the European tourism indicators system (ETIS) for sustainable tourist destinations: The case of Brasov County in the Romanian Carpathians. *Sustainability* **2017**, *9*, 1879. [[CrossRef](#)]
38. Bakas, F. An Investigation into Consumer Attitudes to Ecocertification. The Case Study of Lake Plastira in Karditsa, Greece. ECOCLUB.com E-Paper Series. 2005. Available online: <http://www.ecoclub.com/library/epapers/11.pdf> (accessed on 10 January 2018).
39. Miller, G.; Rathouse, K.; Scarles, C.; Holmes, K.; Tribe, J. Public understanding of sustainable tourism. *Ann. Tour. Res.* **2010**, *37*, 627–645. [[CrossRef](#)]
40. TUI Travel PLC. *Annual Report & Accounts*; s.l.:s.n; TUI Travel PLC: Hanover, Germany, 2010; Available online: www.tuitravelplc.com (accessed on 10 January 2018).
41. Forum for the Future; the Travel Foundation. *Survival of the Fittest: Sustainable Tourism Means Business*; The Travel Foundation: Bristol, UK, 2012.
42. Penz, E.; Hofmann, E.; Hartl, B. Fostering sustainable travel behaviour: Role of sustainability labels and goal-directed behaviour regarding touristic services. *Sustainability* **2017**, *9*, 1056. [[CrossRef](#)]
43. Dickinson, J.E.; Dickinson, J.A. Local transport social representations. Challenging the assumptions for sustainable tourism. *J. Sustain. Tour.* **2006**, *14*, 192–208. [[CrossRef](#)]
44. Martin, A. *Attitudes towards Package Holidays and ABTA*; s.n: London, UK, 2001.
45. Mintel. *Ethical Holidays*; Mintel-Leisure Intelligence: London, UK, 2005.
46. Chafe, Z. *Consumer Demand and Operator Support for Socially and Environmentally Responsible Tourism*; Center on Ecotourism and Sustainable Development (CESD): Washington, DC, USA, 2005.
47. Chung, J.; Monroe, G. Exploring social desirability bias. *J. Bus. Ethics* **2003**, *44*, 291. [[CrossRef](#)]
48. Doran, R.; Hanss, D.; Larsen, S. Intentions to Make Sustainable Tourism Choices: Do Value Orientations, Time Perspective, and Efficacy Beliefs Explain Individual Differences? *Scand. J. Hosp. Tour.* **2017**, *17*, 223–238. [[CrossRef](#)]
49. Sniehotta, F.F. Towards a theory of intentional behaviour change: Plans, planning, and self-regulation. *Br. J. Health Psychol.* **2009**, *14*, 261–273. [[CrossRef](#)]
50. Hargreaves, T. Practice-ing Behaviour Change: Applying Social Practice Theory to Pro-environmental Behaviour Change. *J. Consum. Cult.* **2011**, *11*, 79–99. [[CrossRef](#)]
51. Bergin, R.J.; Emery, J.; Bollard, R.; Whitehead, V. Research evidence supports cancer policymaking but is insufficient for change: Findings of key informant interviews from five countries. *Health Pol.* **2019**. [[CrossRef](#)]
52. Kumar, K. *Conducting Key Informant Interviews in Developing Countries. A.I.D. Program Design and Evaluation Methodology*; Report No. 13; Agency for International Development: Washington, DC, USA, 1989.

53. Newman, W.L. *Social Research Methods: Qualitative and Quantitative Approaches*, 4th ed.; Allyn & Bacon: Boston, MA, USA, 2000.
54. Tzschentke, N.; Kirk, D.; Lynch, P.A. Reasons for going green in serviced accommodation establishments. *Int. J. Cont. Hosp. Manag.* **2004**, *16*, 116–124. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
55. Tepelus, C.M.; Córdoba, R.C. Recognition schemes in tourism—From ‘eco’ to ‘sustainability’? *J. Clean. Prod.* **2005**, *13*, 135–140. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
56. Cunliffe, A.L. Crafting qualitative research: Morgan and Smircich 30 Years on. *Organ. Res. Met.* **2011**, *14*, 647–673. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
57. Yeager, D.S.; Krosnick, J.A.; Chang, L.; Javitz, H.S.; Levendusky, M.S.; Simpser, A.; Wang, R. Comparing the accuracy of RDD telephone surveys and internet surveys conducted with probability and non-probability samples. *Public Opin. Q.* **2011**, *75*, 709–747. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
58. Baysan, S. Perceptions of the environmental impacts of tourism: A comparative study of the attitudes of German, Russian and Turkish tourists in Kemer, Antalya. *Tour. Geog.* **2001**, *3*, 218–235. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
59. Conaghan, A.; Hanrahan, J. *Demand for and Perceptions of Sustainable Tourism Certification in Ireland*; Institute of Technology of Sligo: Sligo, Ireland, 2010; Available online: <https://www.itsligo.ie/files/2011/03/Aine-Conaghan-A1.pdf>. (accessed on 10 January 2018).
60. Wehrli, R.; Egli, H.; Lutzenberger, M.; Pfister, D.; Schwarz, J.; Stettler, J. Is there demand for sustainable tourism? In *ITW Working Paper Tourism 01/2011*; Hochschule Luzern: Lucerne, Switzerland, 2011.
61. Puhakka, R.; Siimaki, P. Nature tourists’ response to ecolabels in Oulanka PAN Park, Finland. *J. Ecotour.* **2012**, *11*, 56–73. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
62. Greene, J.C. *Mixed Methods in Social Inquiry*; Jossey-Bass: San Francisco, CA, USA, 2007.
63. Bryman, A.; Bell, E. *Business Research Methods*, 3rd ed.; Oxford University Press: Oxford, UK, 2011.
64. Pratt, M. From the editors: For the lack of a boilerplate: Tips on writing up (and reviewing) qualitative research. *Acad. Manag. J.* **2009**, *52*, 856–862. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
65. Bansal, P.; Corley, K. From the Editors, the coming of age for qualitative research: Embracing the diversity of qualitative methods. *Acad. Manag. J.* **2011**, *54*, 233–237. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
66. Denzin, N.K.; Lincoln, Y.S. (Eds.) *The Landscape of Qualitative Research: Theories and Issues*, 1st ed.; Sage: Thousand Oaks, CA, USA, 2003.
67. Yin, R. *Case Study Research: Design and Methods*, 4th ed.; Sage: Thousand Oaks, CA, USA, 2009.
68. Piekkari, R.; Welsh, C.; Paavilainen, E. Case study as disciplinary convention: Evidence from international business journals. *Organ. Res. Methods* **2009**, *12*, 567–589. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
69. Stake, R. Qualitative case studies. In *The Sage Handbook of Qualitative Research*, 3rd ed.; Denzin, N.K., Lincoln, Y.S., Eds.; Sage: London, UK, 2005.
70. Deetz, S. Describing differences in approaches to organization science: Rethinking Burrell and Morgan and their legacy. *Organ. Sci.* **1996**, *7*, 191–207. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
71. Budeanu, A.; Miller, G.; Moscardo, G.; Ooi, C. Sustainable tourism, progress, challenges and opportunities: An introduction. *J. Clean. Prod.* **2016**, *111*, 285–294. [\[CrossRef\]](#)

