

Essay

A Theoretical Model of Strategic Communication for the Sustainable Development of Sport Tourism

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Abstract: Sustainability and sustainable development are two fundamental principles that currently influence the way sport tourism activities, like those of any other socioeconomic area, are managed. For this reason, for some time, especially in the last decade, scholars have been wondering not only about the application methods of these two concepts in sport tourism but also how to communicate good practices among operators, residents, and tourists, and how to encourage the adoption of sustainable behaviours. Pro-sustainable attitudes are widespread, but they do not always convert into sustainable behaviour. Communication can intervene to favour these socio-cultural changes at an individual and collective level. This research is inspired by several studies and the most recent systematic literature reviews to identify communication methods and strategies that determine the tourism–sports experience, influencing the assumption or reinforcement of sustainable behaviours. This study attempted to configure a theoretical model of sustainable communication that can support the sustainable development of sport tourism. The goal is to understand how to create effective communication actions to raise the awareness of institutions and businesses, residents, and tourists towards the adoption of sustainable practices, and to encourage the promotion of sustainable initiatives in territories in support of the socioeconomic development of localities from an increasingly sustainable perspective.

Keywords: communication; sport tourism; sustainability; sustainable development; sport tourism experience; territorial development; sustainable behaviours



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1. Introduction

The sustainable development of sport tourism is increasingly becoming an object of study in the scientific community, and the literature has recorded a gradual but constant increase in theoretical and empirical insights over the last 30 years. Many recent systematic literature reviews have reported an increase in studies on this topic [1–5]. The cited reviews report studies conducted at an interdisciplinary level on sustainable tourism, sport tourism, sports events, and sports sustainability, and identify different lines of research. Their choice already explains why it is important for sport tourism to become increasingly sustainable, as well as areas of intervention and priority aspects, as summarised in Figure 1 and in Table 1.

Scholars [6–8] share an important assumption: that the sustainability of sport tourism depends on the degree of local development, the number of tourists, the size of the community, tourism development, and the ability to build a local sporting identity for residents and tourists. This means that the more popular and well-developed tourist–sport destinations are, the more conditions they have to enhance their sustainable development by intervening in the quality of services, structures, and infrastructures in their offer in an appropriate manner. Consequently, to guarantee a valid sport tourism offer, it is necessary to enhance the sustainable development of territories and communities.



Figure 1. Research lines for sustainable sport tourism.

Table 1. Intervention ambitions for sustainable sport tourism.

Areas of Intervention
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – infrastructure renovations and impact assessment [1,3] – socioeconomic development from a circular economy perspective [1] – centrality of events and activities offered [4,5] – quality of services [4,5] – perception of the environmental impact [2,3] – type of information provided and development of sustainable awareness [2] – attention to the safety of people and workers in the sector [4,5] – sustainable reorganisation of commercial aspects [1,3–5] – impact on climate change and repercussions in territories and tourist–sport activities [2,3] – appropriate and proactive political engagement of institutions [4,5] – favour the social and economic growth of specific areas without degrading or altering the environment (human and physical) [2,3] – base every action on solid sustainable principles at the economic, environmental, social, and cultural levels [1–5] – satisfy the needs of communities and tourists by favouring positive and long-term effects for the landscape, culture, and economic and productive heritage in full compliance with sustainable principles and without compromising the prosperity and wellbeing of future generations [4,5] – generate experiences that are not only touristic or focused only on sports culture or physical abilities, but also organic and increase collective participation in the creation of a better world from all points of view [3–5]

Studies [9–12] examine the types of sustainable sport tourism and classify them according to the degree of development, highlighting that many of these types—as will be explored further—have limited or partial levels of development, and therefore, much effort is still needed to achieve high levels of sustainable development. The basic awareness that emerges from these studies is that sustainable development requires an organic and holistic approach in which all dimensions of sustainability (environmental, socio-cultural, economic, and managerial) are pursued to create virtuous and self-reinforcing circuits [13]. This also makes it possible to increase the scope and effectiveness of the actions carried out in favour of harmonious and sustainable development [14,15]. To achieve this goal, the role of communication is strategic because it enhances and promotes tourist–sport offers and spreads sustainable behaviour among the various categories of actors and users involved. However, how can we encourage people to adopt sustainable behaviours? In the literature [16–18], this aspect has still not been examined in theoretical and empirical studies, even if the profiles of the target groups have been configured and the use of communication tools verified [19–21].

This essay aims to reflect on these aspects and provide a starting theoretical model for setting up effective communication strategies consistent with the stages of sustainable development and with the actors involved. Sustainable communication’s contribution to sport tourism is to consolidate the value of its proposal over time, to attract investments and economic support, and to fuel the perception of value among people who choose a type of sustainable offer. Concepts such as the credibility of the proposal, recognition of its value, development of critical awareness, behavioural conversion, experiential participation, and involvement are some of the main cornerstones of the reasoning on which the theoretical model of sustainable communication is based. These aspects will be presented and discussed in the following sections. This study aims to contribute to the growth of the sustainable communication studies of sport tourism.

2. Literature Review

This section presents a literature review that helps understand how communication can help improve the development opportunities of sport tourism from a sustainable perspective. The previous section summarised the characteristics that sport tourism must possess to be sustainable and that are useful for reasoning in communication, while this section focuses on studies on communication. It examines theoretical and empirical studies on the role of communication as a tool for promotion and enhancement in support of the sustainable development of sport tourism, not only to identify the needs, methods of intervention, and limitations but also to understand the actors involved, the characteristics of their profiles, and the behavioural and relational modalities they activate. The insights reported in this section are useful for laying the foundation for analysing how to organise communication actions to make them more targeted and effective in supporting sustainable development. This will be conducted in the next section.

2.1. Sustainable Sport Tourism

Sport tourism is part of a broader debate based on two guiding concepts: sustainability and sustainable development. First, sustainability is intended as a strategic lever for the development of sustainable sport tourism, and it has been discussed in the literature since the 1990s. Several authors [22–24] highlight the holistic, dynamic, and multidimensional characteristics of this approach. They find that sustainability is a long-term goal aimed at ensuring a harmonious and balanced development of all sustainable dimensions, from the environmental, economic, and social dimensions—which were already identified by Elkington in 1997 in the Triple Bottom Line [25]—up to the fourth dimension, which is the managerial dimension [26,27]. This means that to pursue sustainability, it requires the convergent commitment of all the actors involved in sustainable development. They must simultaneously meet the needs of tourists, tourism enterprises, and the host community, as well as the need for environmental protection [28,29]. Second, sustainable development is a process that allows for sustainable objectives to be pursued and achieved without compromising the ability of future generations to satisfy their own needs, as highlighted in the 1987 Brundtland Report and discussed by Hajian and Kashani [30]. According to Adelman [31] and Sharpley [32], sustainable development “*perpetuates instrumental rationality, progress and economic growth and conceives nature as capital*” (p. 23). From an organic perspective, the theoretical reconstruction reported by Yang et al. [33] highlights several aspects that characterise sustainable development, especially when applied to sport tourism: it must be certified; it must involve local governance and support local and national government departments in setting objectives and managing resources, investments, technological development, and institutional change; it must consider the potential and limits of the different types of sport tourism (active and passive, organised for primary sports, secondarily related to holidays and indirectly related to the offer of facilities in the area [34]); it must be based on economic feasibility and natural resources, the diversification of the sports offered in the territories, the enhancement of socio-cultural resources, and the social responsibility of the companies involved. Sustainable development must take place in full respect of the rights and needs of the local community, as well as the needs and expectations of tourists.

2.2. The Role of Communication as a Lever for Sustainable Sport Tourism

This study considers the communication of strategic sustainability to obtain consensus and the involvement of all the actors included in three macro-categories.

First, it is intended for interested parties that are directly involved, that must be proactive in developing stable, long-lasting relationships, and that have the ability to achieve sustainable goals in a win–win logic with the territory and the local community. Second, it is aimed at residents who must share sustainable objectives, understand the advantages, behave responsibly, and participate in the entire process. Third, it is intended for users (passive and active sports tourists, spectators, companions, and visitors) to raise

awareness, reinforce positive attitudes, and encourage the conversion of their attitudes into pro-sustainable behaviours.

This literature review serves to understand how to involve the three categories through communication actions and how to exploit digital technologies to strengthen communication dynamics, above all to address the various macro-categories of actors in an appropriate and differentiated manner.

2.2.1. The Macro-Categories of Actors Involved

The studies, which are detailed below, show greater attention to the third category, particularly to sport tourism in contact with nature, and less attention to the second category, especially in the relationship between residents and tourists and the ability of the former to activate social exchanges with the latter. However, the first macro-category is neglected despite being the constitutive basis for the entire communication process in support of sustainable development.

The first macro-category is made up of public institutions, bodies and businesses, organisers, and tour and sports operators directly involved in the organisation. Therefore, it is possible to define all these interested parties as a network of stakeholders, with stakeholder theory [35,36] as the foundation capable of attracting various interested parties and maintaining their temporal continuity of the project in the territory. In this regard, a recent literature review [37] has highlighted how several studies confirmed the effectiveness of collaborations between stakeholders in the case of sport tourism connected with mega-events and in a small-scale event to promote the development of the local economy. The main advantages are derived from the combination of different resources and skills, from the strengthening of the network of collaborating stakeholders, and from the presence of greater synergies and more constructive relationships between sports and local tourism policy. The network becomes effective when it consolidates over time to achieve shared objectives and when the parties involved consider participation in the project to be mutually beneficial. To create this sharing, communication serves to determine the perception of a win-win advantage by all stakeholders and to encourage exchange in the network, therefore ensuring good coordination between the parties. It allows the integration of different interests, avoids duplication of work, eliminates conflicts, and achieves successful collaboration [38–40]. According to the authors, the exchange and collaboration between the network players develop cognitive capital that can stimulate innovation and create economic capital to generate a competitive advantage in the market and social capital to counter environmental degradation and social injustice. In summary, communication serves to create the conditions for adopting sustainable models from a holistic perspective.

In this regard, some scholars hoped for the development of *sustainable public engagement*, which favours the massive dissemination of information and awareness campaigns with various objectives [2]: to spread a sense of urgency to stimulate proactive interventions and behaviours; to demonstrate the benefits derived from sustainable actions for the sport tourism sector and for host territories and communities; to create a widespread critical awareness in support of the political choices that must be made; and to involve stakeholders at all levels in an active and continuous commitment in favour of sustainable development. In this sense, the model presented in this paper is functional for optimising sustainable public engagement activities because it defines the best way to manage relationships and disseminate information and communication.

According to Jeong et al. [41], communication aimed at stakeholders has positive repercussions on the satisfaction of the community, tourists, and visitors because it allows for the construction of an image of the destination that can develop positive perceptions and attachment to the place, reinforcing behavioural intentions. These advantages can also generate a virtuous mechanism in which people recommend a sports tourist destination and decide to return.

In the second macro-category, which is the local community, community development theory [29,42,43] states the involvement of the local community is determined by the ability

of the sustainable project to improve the quality of life of residents, solve problems, and satisfy needs. If the project limits itself to solving problems, residents can only assume a passive attitude, whereas if the project has an organic and complete value, then the residents become active, and their pro-sustainable attitudes can be converted into virtuous behaviours. The interventions most appreciated by residents' concern are the improvement of structures and infrastructures, the creation of permanent jobs, technological innovation, and the positive repercussions in the service economy at the local level [9,16,43].

The studies examined in this review [44] highlight the gap between pro-sustainable attitudes and effective behaviours. The authors confirmed that the conversion of residents' attitudes into behaviour depends on the value of the projects promoted in favour of the territory and on the expectation of satisfying their needs and requirements. The opposite is also true: in the event of a negative perception of the effects generated by sustainable sport tourism, they can negatively affect the support of residents. For example, this occurs when they do not consider a certain intervention good (e.g., providing artificial coral reefs), if they think that the excessive influx of tourists increases prices or causes logistical inconvenience at the local level, or if the benefits are distributed unevenly among the population, generating social gaps such as advantages for some commercial activities over others or for the inhabitants of some neighbourhoods over others.

Kaplanidou [43] points out that residents are more engaged when they live in territories that carry out sustainable development projects because they are directly interested and involved in the positive consequences and related benefits. They can also positively influence tourists because of the direct testimony of their behaviours, experiences, and opinions. Some authors [15,19,45] define residents as *attachment points* –together with athletes, teams, events, places, and destinations–because of their ability to influence tourists and visitors, the demonstrative value of their pro-sustainable identity, and their ability to stimulate intentions of participation and experimentation of suitable behaviours.

The theory of social exchange [46,47] is applied to explain how the local community can positively influence tourists when it generates a direct relationship between residents and visitors. It claims that the positive and negative perceptions that this relationship generates can lead to changes in collective and individual attitudes. In this case, the residents are *attractors* who stimulate tourists and visitors to travel and *supporters* who keep alive the interest in the place, the sport tourism offers, and its sustainable value until the time comes that the tourists can speak of its authenticity and enhance its value, creating the identification of the potential tourist with the resident [48,49].

Regarding the second and third macro-categories, Mascarenhas et al. [16] explore the advantages of good communication in stimulating sustainable behaviour among residents and tourists and show how to set up content and tools for sharing. These aspects are detailed below. Among the main advantages of communication in sustainable development are environmental education, support for sustainable planning by administrations, more convergence in community needs, the incentive of tourists to prefer sustainable sports destinations, more attention to the protection of territories and the development of a circular economy, and the dissemination and consolidation of responsible behaviour.

A crucial node for communication, which has already emerged in the study of local communities, is bridging the gap between attitudes and behaviours. The process has no sequential linearity; therefore, not all pro-sustainable attitudes are transformed into behaviour. This is also true for the third category, as shown in the literature.

For example, studies conducted on the forms of active natural tourism [50,51] show greater attention by participants to psycho-physical wellbeing and environmental protection, even if these studies do not always demonstrate an effective increase in sustainable behaviour. The results of empirical research are conflicting on this last point, which is also influenced by the relationship between the type of sporting activity and the type of behaviour. Similarly, several studies [2,16,19,20,46,52] address the issue of sustainable mobility to reach places that host sport tourism (e.g., related to skiing, surfing, and golf) and show that even when shuttles or shared transportation are used in places, how tourists

reach these places is not sustainable and still produces high carbon emissions. This result confirms that sports tourists show pro-sustainable attitudes but do not always adopt sustainable behaviours, as in the case of mobility. Wicker [53] reveals that tourists with higher incomes and more frequent sporting activities choose less environmentally friendly modes of transport (e.g., disposable cars). In general, however, tourists are more aware of and sensitive to problems that directly affect their sport. For example, climate change overheats the planet and reduces the period of natural snow for ski enthusiasts or worsens plastic pollution in the oceans for surfers. Moreover, some authors [42,54,55] reveal that organisations must be credible in their actions and communication and that the example of athletes increases this credibility and the intention of fans to engage. However, they do not demonstrate that these two aspects are predictors of the actual conversion of the behaviour. The assumption of some behaviours in favour of aspects with greater sensitivity is usually not followed by corresponding behaviours. Sensitivity depends on the fact that some issues are considered problems involving the personal sphere and one's own sporting experience. Furthermore, as Ziakas and Costa [56] point out, events have an important function as a vehicle of communication and to increase participants' satisfaction with sustainable practices and behaviours.

A recent review of the literature [44] confirms a smaller gap between active sports tourists who adopt responsible behaviour towards the environment when they are directly related to their sports practice. However, they do not always have coherent behaviours towards other aspects that are equally important in terms of sustainability. For example, as already discussed previously, sports tourists are respectful of nature (mountains, sea, playing field, etc.) and are less attentive to the means of transport to reach those places. Similarly, passive sports tourists and spectators of sporting events are influenced in their behaviour by the credibility of the organisers and the sustainable efforts evident during the event (e.g., the use of shuttles, the adoption of plastic-free systems or the recycling of materials). However, no studies verify whether the assumption of behaviour on these occasions produces a definitive assumption even after the events when people go home and go about their daily lives. In the case of residents, the studies examined by the review confirm that conversion is linked to the value of the projects promoted in favour of the territory and to the expectation of satisfying their needs and requirements. The opposite is also true: in the event of a negative perception of the effect generated by sustainable sport tourism, it can negatively affect the support of residents; for example, when they do not consider a certain intervention good (e.g., providing artificial coral reefs), if they think that the excessive influx of tourists increases prices or causes logistical inconvenience at the local level, or if the benefits are unevenly distributed among the population, generating social gaps, such as advantages for some businesses over others or for the inhabitants of some neighbourhoods over others.

2.2.2. The Role of Digital Communication

It is also useful to explore the role of digital technologies in supporting the dissemination and awareness of sustainable content to stimulate responsible behaviour. To date, the entire sport tourism experience, from the choice to participate to returning home, is characterised by a massive use of digital channels that allow information, stories, images, emotions, opinions, reviews, and comments to be shared in real time and to do it with different actors: institutions, organisers and businesses, residents, and other tourists. Sharing is important in travel planning and in defining the motivations of a socio-psychological and relational nature that affect the way of organising and living experiences [57–59]. Therefore, they create the conditions for understanding and absorbing content and basing their behavioural choices on it. The path that leads to defining one's behavioural intentions can make the stable assumption of pro-sustainable behaviours even more solid over time when the experiential feedback is positive [60,61]. For this reason, it is important that communication sustainably encourages the sharing of sport tourism experiences. Glebova [62] emphasises the role of technology holistically in sports spectator customer experiences,

and Weed [63] verifies that: websites are effective for disseminating information useful for developing credibility, trust and security in relation to the proposal offered; social networks are the most effective for creating relationships that influence the psychological and emotional components by stimulating co-creation among the various actors involved; and personal blogs are the most effective in influencing choices and decisions because of the direct testimony of their authors. Therefore, bloggers become competent *opinion leaders* in their specific areas of interest [64].

In 2017, Gössling [65] takes on a more critical perspective because he considers that platforms shape choices by imposing a sort of implicit other-directed mainstream, blur the boundaries between consumer and citizen, and influence the perspectives on management, responsibility, and roles of the individual of the companies and institutions involved. In particular, the use of artificial intelligence exacerbates this mechanism. Although this may be partially true, it must be considered that the entire process is effective only if it considers and satisfies users' predispositions. Furthermore, if these concerns were entirely valid, it would be easy to orient the other-directed individual towards sustainable behaviours. On the contrary, the same author [66], in a subsequent study, notes that, in the face of greater sensitivity and diffusion of sustainability issues in the public debate, words concerning the environment are less and less present on the net, even if the meanings related to them have taken on greater depth. Therefore, people talk less about sustainability, but they do it in more attentive and aware niches.

Therefore, making good digital communication sustainable means providing increasingly specific and targeted content for target groups. This takes place in dedicated environments to increase the possibility of dialogue, discussion and sharing of knowledge on specific aspects and, above all, to stimulate evaluation by those who must make behavioural decisions. The platforms are an important tool for active learning, for the acquisition of critical awareness for the people concerned, and for the promotion of sustainability objectives in sustainable sport tourism. Hysa et al. [67] demonstrate some positive behavioural effects derived from the appropriate use of digital platforms, while Grilli et al. [68] note a greater disposition of users who already have developed attitudes and beliefs to adopt sustainable behaviours, to support sustainable development projects, and to make donations or become personally involved. The study then highlights significant differences between targets set by age group in terms of sustainable tourism choices. Baby boomers (1954–1964) travel more because they have greater spending power and have the pursuit of their wellbeing, the care of their psycho-physical health, and contact with nature as their main goals, regardless of the attention paid to sustainable offers. Golf and hiking are among the most popular sporting activities in active tourism. Generation X (1965–1980) is more attentive to the values promoted by a destination and seeks contact with local communities. Therefore, in communication, comparison with residents is important, especially during the planning phase of the trip. Generation Y, also called the Millennials (1981–1994), is also attentive to the issues of sustainability, ethics, multiculturalism, and the understanding of social problems. Millennials are predisposed to sustainable communication, comparison, and dialogue at a digital level. For this reason, they are also greatly influenced by the considerations, reviews, and comments they acquire online, which guide their travel choices. They are mainly concerned with active sport tourism. Generation Z (1995–2010) is attentive to the exploration of places and combines active and passive sport tourism. Those born in this generation are curious, eager to have information, and open and attentive to questions and problems of various kinds and to evaluating the different solutions offered. They are the most influenced by opinions and comments on the internet. The Alpha Generation (from 2011 onwards) shares the Millennials' marked attention to sustainability and environmental protection, even if it prefers passive sport tourism to active sport tourism despite their ages. These differences are useful because they allow for a better understanding of users' needs, expectations, and behaviours, therefore helping to set up sustainable communication in a targeted manner with respect to the various target groups.

3. Proposal: The Hypothesis of a Theoretical Model for Sustainable Communication in Sport Tourism

The in-depth discussion of the previous literature so far has highlighted the heterogeneity of the development of sustainable sport tourism, in which most situations show a condition dictated partly by structural limits and economic and managerial difficulties and partly by the difficulty of translating attitudes pro-sustainable into effective behaviours. Communication can contribute to development processes by intervening in this last aspect, but how? It has already been established that experience is the most significant trait for encouraging the assumption of responsible behaviour because it implies direct action by the subject involved, who also self-evaluates the results. This occurs when people are already willing to have that experience. Therefore, it is necessary to foresee a series of communicative actions that accompany individuals in this direction according to the stage of sensitivity and predisposition in which they find themselves.

The method used for the theoretical construction of the model is of an inductive type and is based on the main theories developed in sustainable communication and the main literature reviews. These literature reviews report both refuted and consolidated theories, and empirical evidence that demonstrates the effective application of the indicated theories. The approach is, therefore, of the ontological type, which has the objective of formulating an exhaustive and rigorous conceptualisation within a given phenomenological domain, aimed at re-understanding the conceptual systematisations existing at a scientific level by creating a hierarchical structure of relationships between axioms, characteristics, and theoretical perspectives. In a subsequent phase, the model is compared with studies that have partially applied some aspects that make up the model in order to verify its validity. Obviously, the theoretical construction of the model represents only the first phase. It requires additional validation steps which will be covered in future articles.

The proposed model references the sport tourism cube, which was elaborated by Schlemmer Barth and Schnitzer [21] and considers the main definitions developed from the 1990s until today: *'all travel-related activities of single persons or groups leaving their place of residence with a view to participating in sports events (professional and recreational) or in activities not related to sports events, to practising sports (physical activity) out of the home range or personally assisting and supporting athletes in their competition or training activities'* (p. 7).

This definition includes all types that emerge from the convergence of three axes: event/non-event, type of physical involvement (active or passive), and type of sporting commitment (amateur, professional, recreational, nostalgic). Indirectly, the cube also includes all types of users involved (amateur and professional athletes, support staff, chaperones, spectators, visitors), but does not consider employees, organisers, residents and, therefore, those who create the conditions for the feasibility of sport tourism itself. In the opinion of the present researcher, these actors should be included when the issue is explored from the perspective of sustainability and sustainable development.

On this basis, the proposed model develops a hypercube of sustainable communication in sport tourism (Figure 2).

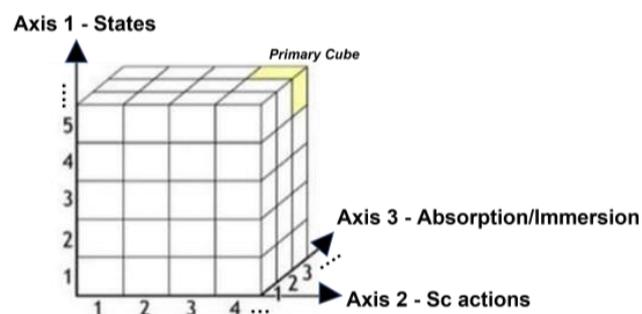


Figure 2. The multidimensional hypercube of communication. The researcher's own elaboration.

The model rests on three interrelated axes: (1) the states of individuals/groups: that is, the position that people—individually and collectively—have towards sustainability in terms of attitudes and behaviours, (2) the communication actions that solicit the assumption of sustainable attitudes and behaviours, and (3) the degree of involvement generated by absorption/immersion. The latter arises from how people undergo realms of experiences that contribute to increasing predispositions, attitudes, and behaviours and reinforcing them over time. As they are lived in the first person, whether alone or with company, experiences consolidate opinions, emotions, and ways of acting. The model considers both individuals and groups of people because the relationship with others is a vector that contributes to making decisions, experiencing situations and actions, and cultivating ways of thinking and acting. The proposed hypercube is a multidimensional figure because the complexity of the levels envisaged for each axis creates a large number of combinations that can give rise to multiple cube variants (e.g., the dynamic functioning of Kubrick's famous multidimensional cube as a graphical representation). In its dynamism, it is also possible that the combination between the level of each axis and the levels of the other axes is not linear. Instead, it can envisage the combination of several levels of the three axes from a polyhedral perspective. For example, multiple communication actions in relation to one stage open up scenarios of more than one realm of experience at the same time.

To simplify the reasoning, we proceed linearly in steps, as required by this study, to understand the individual steps and the role of each axis.

To begin, it is necessary to clarify the difference between attitude and behaviour by considering the main studies of social psychology that have clearly highlighted this difference [69–72]. Attitude is a mental construct derived from an individual's set of cultural, contextual, and experiential backgrounds. It defines one's way of feeling and thinking and is made up of cognitive, affective, and conative factors that guide one's behaviour. Therefore, attitude can be understood as the predisposition to assume a certain behaviour, even if it is not indicated that behaviour is directly consequential to attitude. Behaviour is the way in which an individual acts. It includes a set of possible actions through which subjects respond to stimuli of various types. For this reason, depending on the circumstances, behaviour can vary and not be dependent on its original attitude.

How is the degree of predisposition recognised, and how are the most appropriate actions identified considering the three macro-categories of actors previously identified (stakeholders, residents, and tourists)?

The analysis of the profiles in relation to the type of development of sustainable sport tourism makes it possible to understand the level of predisposition to sustainability issues of the subjects involved in communication. It may be useful to relate possible communicative actions that can help guide sustainable attitudes and behaviours and encourage opportunities to have direct experiences.

To develop the cube, the hypothesis is to relate some theories that consider the different aspects indicated. This relationship makes it possible to verify the correspondence between different yet complementary approaches and to assume an organic conception of the value of communication with respect to the functions it must perform to promote sustainable behaviour.

In terms of the degree of predisposition, it is important to understand how people can appreciate the proposed content. Therefore, classic studies on attitudes and behaviours are considered (i.e., theory of planned behaviour [72] and theory of modelling [73]), which help to understand the state of a subject/group when it receives communicative stimuli and how these can affect its engagement in certain behaviours. Communication solicits the motivation to adopt sustainable behaviours and to repeat them over time. The reinforcement mechanism is then produced when the behavioural outcome is considered positive by the person who assumes this behaviour. Some studies [17,74] have taken up these theories by applying them in sporting events, while in the current study, they are adapted to sport tourism. In terms of sport tourism types, scholars believe that communication should disseminate themes in the collective debate to increase knowledge and encourage

critical awareness in the case of partial types, such as ecotourism and eco-friendly types. In these types, sustainable behaviours should be taught to encourage institutions, organisations, and stakeholders to expand interventions for development. Likewise, residents and tourists should be educated to adopt sustainable lifestyles. In the intermediate types of sport tourism, which have solidarity and a community nature, the process of behavioural orientation triggered by education must be reinvigorated by the demonstrative effect produced by the image of the place and by events among visitors and the local community. The importance of events is derived from the fact that messages are more effective when shared in a communicative process, consistent with the primary objective of having fun. Otherwise, users, especially those who have less-developed sustainable attitudes, could be annoyed by the educational approach. Finally, the more advanced types of sport tourism (i.e., sustainable and responsible) usually attract users who are already predisposed to sustainability and are more willing to receive phatic solicitations: that is, they are oriented towards experiencing the benefits of sustainability first-hand. In this case, the behaviour experienced on that occasion helps to stimulate the assumption of sustainable and responsible behaviour. Tölkes and Butzmann [17] suggest that the process is enhanced by a sequential mechanism of sustainable behaviour evolution involving four states (pre-contemplation, contemplation, preparation, action, and behaviour maintenance). By applying the states to a hypercube, some are reorganised until six states are identified:

- Pre-contemplation: when individuals simply observe because they do not feel the need to change their habits.
- Passive contemplation: when they are aware of the problems and are willing to become involved and, therefore, are predisposed, but intend to evaluate the costs and benefits of a possible adoption of new behaviours.
- Active contemplation: when they are predisposed and oriented to assume new behaviours but want to understand how they should act.
- Interactive contemplation: when they are oriented towards adopting new behaviours but feel the need for a discussion because they seek confirmation from others.
- Preparation: when they experiment with new behaviours but whether they will assume them definitively is not known. This occurs when experimentation consolidates previous beliefs and fuels the motivation to act in that way again. If communication does not intervene adequately to support preparation, the risk is that situations of uncertainty or dissatisfaction will occur, producing the opposite result (i.e., abandonment of the behaviour).
- Action and maintenance of the behaviour: when a positive experience confirms and reinforces the assumption of the behaviour experienced. If repeated over time, the reinforcement and sedimentation of these actions take place over time. In this case, communication is essential because it helps to support the process of converting attitudes into behaviours and establishing new sustainable behaviours.

For each identified state, it is possible to trace the communicative actions placed on the second axis, starting from the classical studies on communication [75]. Actions serve to stimulate the creation or strengthening of attitudes and behaviours:

- Raising awareness: leveraging emotional/affective, cognitive, and value-based aspects to stimulate orientations towards sustainability. It is especially useful when people have not yet developed pro-sustainable attitudes or have different conceptions of their lifestyles other than sustainability. This is valid for all three categories of actors, namely: institutions, businesses, and organisations, which have to start sustainable sport tourism projects and build a network; local communities that must perceive the value of the possible change; and tourists, visitors, and various categories of companions who will not choose the destination if they are not sensitive.
- Inform: spreading knowledge in a widespread and transparent manner to cultivate opinions and beliefs. It is useful when individuals are predisposed to receive information on sustainability because they have developed sensitivity to these issues, even when they are minimal. However, they still have little knowledge; thus, their attitudes

are still not deeply rooted and do not affect their behaviour. Information is also useful in more advanced states, such as when the objective of the information is to broaden knowledge, develop critical awareness, and stimulate the assumption and maintenance of certain behaviours. Starting from the presentation stage of a sustainable development project, the various categories of actors, based on their interests, must be able to access information to acquire knowledge, make their own assessments, and decide the positions they want to take on this issue.

- Educate: consolidating attitudes, reinforcing predispositions, and creating the conditions for adopting pro-sustainable behaviours. This communicative action implies that the predisposed subject is available and participates in the learning process. When education is positive, it directs the experimentation of learned behaviours. For example, it is useful for involving stakeholders in the organisational network because they can fully understand the value of the project. While information distributes the basic notions, the educational process allows for a greater comparison between parties to better clarify the different objectives and aspects and thus arrive at a more complete evaluation. Similarly, education creates the conditions for residents to give their consent to the development project, while it is useful to show tourists the value of sustainable initiatives and, therefore, guide them towards a more informed choice. In more advanced states, individuals exploit educational opportunities with greater awareness to perfect their behaviour or acquire new behaviours, perhaps responding to other dimensions of sustainability that they have not previously considered.
- Encourage the relationship: enhancing the sharing of opinions, beliefs, and attitudes that can stimulate the adoption of behaviours and, over time, establish the behaviour assumed and considered compliant or similar to the behaviour of others, as derived from the opportunities for discussion and sharing. In more advanced states, the relationship confirms the decisions made and is therefore an important reinforcing tool. In general, the relationship stimulates participation, encourages involvement and experimentation, and is valid for all categories of users. The more it is used in conjunction with other actions, the more it helps reinforce behaviours.
- Encourage experience: stimulating the assumption or reinforcement of behaviours. When direct experience is positive, it confirms the value of behaviour and fuels the desire to repeat it. If repetition on multiple occasions is positive, then it can generate a conversion of behaviour, as described in the modelling theory. Previous communicative actions serve to create conditions that lead people to have experiences. Communication is in fact the most effective for assuming behaviours. The experience touches the cognitive, emotional, and conative levers, and has a greater force of incisiveness. It serves to consolidate the participation of stakeholders in the network, stimulate the proactive participation of residents, and reinforce the behaviours assumed in all categories of actors involved.
- Encourage action: stimulating the assumption or reinforcement of behaviours. Experience is already a form of action, but according to the analysis of the literature, the assumption of behaviour does not always translate the full conversion of attitudes into consolidated behaviours that characterise people's ways of acting. In situations other than those experienced, people may adopt different or even opposite behaviours. Therefore, creating opportunities to repeat acquired behaviours is useful for consolidating behaviours over time and in certain directions. For example, to incentivise stakeholders and residents to continue along the path traced to achieving long-term goals, tourists return to their destination and make this set of behaviours an integral part of their lifestyle.

Evidently, to maintain behaviour over time, as indicated in the last state of the first axis, the most advanced communication actions should provide for the combined use of all or more methods, which must be wisely used and calibrated according to the specific needs of individuals and the contexts in which they are used.

Finally, the third axis focuses on the ability to absorb/immerse experiences and considers the four realms of experience elaborated by Pine and Gilmore [76,77]. These researchers' theoretical construction introduces more complexity into the elaboration of a hypercube because it already rests on two axes (absorption and immersion) that explain how experiences can help create involvement in actions. Involvement is an element that increases the value of actions, especially in the process of assuming, establishing, and maintaining sustainable behaviours. For the authors, absorption serves to acquire informational and educational inputs to support behaviours. Inputs are useful for enhancing the value of experiences, even when these experiences are limited. Informational inputs are passively acquired through entertainment experiences, while educational inputs are actively acquired through educational experiences. Immersion allows one to fully benefit from first-person experiences alone or with company, obtaining aesthetic and escapist inputs. The former is obtained passively when the experience is limited to observation, whereas the latter is active, as people participate directly and react to requests. In the latter case, individual commitment and investment are much higher; therefore, the ability of experiences to influence behaviour is greater.

Lebrun et al. [78] apply the four realms of experience of Pine and Gilmore in nature sport tourism and classify the experiences by dividing them into three types: *organisation-controlled*, *organisation-guided* and *co-guided*. According to them, when the experience is *controlled*, sports tourists rely on the organisation to live entertainment experiences with the aim of absorbing the elements of the experience in a passive manner. It takes place through natural and/or artificial sensory stimuli or formalised events. When experiences are *guided*, sports tourists benefit from aesthetic experiences in which they passively immerse themselves in themed environments. When the experiences are *co-guided*, the organisation provides structures, infrastructures, and platforms in which people actively act to absorb educational experiences or immerse themselves in escapist experiences. In both cases, individuals respond to requests by creating new ones and redefining the boundaries and meanings of the experience itself, starting with the elements offered. This key to understanding the value of the experience is also important for understanding the levels of participation and effective involvement of sports tourists with respect to the sustainable proposal. Sports tourists' willingness to get involved is highlighted to strengthen opinions, beliefs, and attitudes and, in co-guided experiences, to experiment with behaviours that can be assumed or reinforced.

The third axis of the hypercube considers the absorption/immersion continuum. Unlike the creators of kingdoms, these two dimensions in the hypercube not only represent the extremes of the continuum but can also combine with each other to increase stresses in favour of the other in a sort of virtuous circuit.

Therefore, in the third axis, binomial absorption/immersion expands into different levels of active/passive, as the four realms of experience can be activated in relation to the states in which individuals/groups find themselves and to the stimulus potential they receive from communication. Furthermore, the three categories of Lebrun et al. [78] are used to introduce the organisers' role when accompanying residents and tourists on their experiential journeys. The axis provides the following:

- Passive (unaware) absorption/immersion. Absorption occurs through an entertainment experience in which information is obtained, while passive immersion occurs through an aesthetic experience controlled by organisers when the subject is at the destination (e.g., attending an event) and observes the actions and behaviours of others. This can especially occur in the state of pre-contemplation.
- Passive (conscious) absorption occurs through an entertainment experience controlled by organisers, especially in the state of passive contemplation.
- Active absorption occurs through a guided or co-guided educational experience based on users' degree of activism, especially in the state of active contemplation.
- Active immersion occurs through a co-guided escape experience, especially in the state of interactive contemplation.

- Active immersion occurs through the experience of escapism (guided or co-guided, depending on the circumstances), especially in the states of preparation and behaviour maintenance.

For clarity, the following Table 2 shows the relationship between the three axes of the hypercube that give rise to the composition of the primary cube, based on the previous discussion. The primary cube means the minimum combination of the three axes determined by the circumstance in which one communicates, the target groups involved and the objectives of the communication.

Table 2. Primary cube. The relationship between the three axes encourages the assumption of attitudes and behaviours in the categories of the actors involved.

Axis 1—States of Individuals/Groups	Axis 2—Main Communicative Action	Axis 3—Absorption/Immersion	Attitude vs. Behaviour	Target Group
Pre-contemplation	Raise awareness	Passive (unaware) absorption/immersion through controlled entertainment or aesthetic experience	No or minimal predisposition of attitude	Stakeholders, residents, and tourists who are not yet predisposed
Passive contemplation	Inform	Passive (aware) absorption through controlled entertainment experience	Predisposition of the attitude to cultivate	Stakeholders and residents to stimulate acceptance of sustainable projects; tourists sensitive to the issue but not necessarily looking for a sustainable offer
Active contemplation	Educate	Active absorption through guided or co-guided educational experience	Attitude consolidation to stimulate behaviour	Stakeholders to share the value of the project, residents to acquire consensus, and sensitive tourists to guide them towards a sustainable offer
Interactive contemplation	Encourage relationships	Active immersion through co-guided escape experience	Attitude consolidation to stimulate behaviour	Stakeholders to involve them in the network, residents to stimulate them to participate, and sensitive tourists to guide them towards a sustainable offer
Preparation	Encourage experiences	Active immersion through co-guided escape experience	Attitude reinforcement for conversion into behaviours	Stakeholders to consolidate the network, residents to stimulate them to proactively participate, and tourists to stimulate them to act
Action and maintenance of the behaviour	Encourage actions	Active immersion through guided or co-guided escapist experience	Reinforcement of the behaviours assumed by rooting the behaviour	Stakeholders and residents to stimulate loyalty to the project to be cultivated over time; tourists to encourage them to share experiences and return to the place

Source: Author's own elaboration.

The hypercube, as a polyhedral and multidimensional construction, is developed based on multiple opportunities to combine the elements in which the three axes are articulated, and can give rise to a very extensive mix of factors depending on the contexts in which it occurs, the actors involved (e.g., tourists from a specific sports activity), and the types of sustainable development discussed above. If, for example, behaviours decline according to sustainability dimensions, it is possible to hypothesise that each conversion of attitudes into behaviours occurs at different states of the individuals/groups and that it diversifies according to whether the individuals make their assessments at an individual or collective level. Similarly, in maintenance actions, the possible combination of communicative actions and the realms of experience can generate differentiated situations. If most types of development today are partial, it can be hypothesised to intervene at the communicative level in two complementary ways: reinforcing the behaviours connected to the more developed aspects of sustainability and stimulating attitudes to encourage those behaviours that are still underdeveloped. This dualism requires adapting communication actions based on the development objectives and the characteristics of the target groups

involved. As stated by Mascarenhas et al. [16], it is important to build communication that is not generalist but segmented with respect to different target groups and purposes.

For this reason, the hypercube is a basic model that will have useful implications at the application level if used as a starting approach for experimenting with methods of setting up communication and experiential situations in different environments and circumstances.

4. Discussion

The choice of communicative actions in the hypercube is not random but considers various applications already validated in sport tourism and sustainable communication. To better understand the implications of their application in sport tourism, some considerations related to the importance of their use should be discussed.

First, creating knowledge through the dissemination of information and education about sustainability is a primary objective of communication. Based on the theory of trust transfer developed by Strub and Priest in 1976 [79], which was recently revived by Kim and Stepchenkova [80], individuals who have little or limited knowledge of an issue or an aspect of it seek credible and reliable sources that can provide them with guidance and recommendations. The change in attitudes, especially the assumption of new behaviours, requires knowledge, an assumption of awareness and motivations that predispose to behavioural change. Consequently, providing cognitive answers means helping people orient themselves and take a pro-sustainable point of view. This is even more important when they can associate their own attitudes with those provided by sport tourism destinations to engage in positive behaviours. The authors give an example of choosing an eco-tourist package. Interested parties choose it if they are aware of the specific environmental problems, if they know how to behave during their stay, and if they are aware of playing a role in favour of the sustainable wellbeing of the destination. Otherwise, they give up and choose other types of offers that they consider less dissonant [81] with respect to their attitudes, knowledge, and lifestyles. The greater the knowledge, the greater the empathy with the place and the possible attachment to it. Similarly, the higher the values of sustainability, the more sustainable behaviours are consolidated.

The incentive to take action requires more factors connected with direct experiences and participation [82]. The sport tourism experience is defined as a subjective interpretation of the organisational, infrastructural, environmental, economic, and socio-cultural attributes of the destination, coherent with individual and collective motivations and with the specific characteristics of the sporting activities practiced in an active or passive way [44,83,84]. Some elements reinforce experience, such as: the value of the sustainable proposal with respect to the needs and motivations of the individual; quality of goods and services offered and of the operational and management processes that guarantee their efficiency; and the factors that enrich the value of the proposal, such as the perceived sense of security, the involvement of the local community, and expected donations for a 'good cause' [82,85,86]. The resulting satisfaction intensifies the perception of the quality of the lived experience.

Finally, to create good communication that responds to the identified requirements and is segmented by the target group, it is also necessary to consider the methods of construction of the content and two transversal aspects: perception and congruence of the image and authenticity.

Although they do not fall directly under the hypercube model, these two transversal aspects influence the choice of communication actions and contribute to stimulating the desire to live and share experiences.

Given that the category of organisers has been introduced into the hypercube, this reflection is especially useful for understanding how they can apply the elements of the model just presented.

The first aspect is image perception and congruence. Zhang et al. [87] argue that the representation of a sport tourism destination must be consistent with its sustainable development and convey the elements of the sustainability dimensions from an organic perspective.

The transfer of meaning can depend on the overall image, especially when it expresses the identity of the place. In this case, it occurs when the place has already achieved sustainable development. It depends on the individual elements of identity, such as the landscape, social or cultural characteristics, specific features of the offer, events, services, or testimonials that express sustainable values, when the level of development is not very advanced or has not evolved into a holistic level [88–90]. Messages must always be differentiated and organised in a targeted manner for individual target groups that have different characteristics, motivations, and objectives with respect to their travel choice (more linked to naturalistic, competitive, cultural, and spectatorship aspects). Depending on the individual characteristics, the perception of the image can be of an (1) affective type and, therefore, be more linked to the values of sustainability, (2) more cognitive and, therefore, dependent on the perception of the quality of its offer, or (3) conative and, therefore, linked to the intention behavioural experience. According to the authors cited, affective and cognitive perceptions help strengthen conative perception. The assessment of the congruence of the image is based on the factors that individuals consider to be more consistent with their concept of sustainability and on their knowledge. Therefore, the construction of the image is not separate from the construction of the educational, informative, and incentive contents discussed above, nor from the creation of environments where experiences referring to the four realms can be lived. Therefore, it is important to create a direct relationship between the identity of the place and the identity of the user [87,91,92].

The second aspect affecting the axes of the hypercube is authenticity. It is the way in which communication is transferred to the categories of residents, tourists, destinations, and the sport tourism proposal in a way that adheres to reality. Some studies [93,94] have agreed that users do not want the spectacularisation of sustainability but rather a real and objective picture. Authenticity can enhance the adherence of a sustainable development project to principles and values, identities and traditions, community spirit, cultural and environmental heritage, and managerial and economic rigor. In this case, scholars have categorised authentic communication into three types [95]: objective, as it adheres to reality that is reinforced when sports tourists interact with it during their stay; constructive, as it is capable of enhancing ‘personalised’ contents with respect to the target groups from a symbolic perspective to favour individual interpretations while remaining authentic; and existential, as it creates connections between the aspects characterising the destination and the identity of the host community and the cultures of origin of the target groups, which it will find again in the place. Therefore, authenticity is a lever that stimulates involvement and the desire to live the sport tourism experience and suggest it to others when the subjects involved find positive feedback in their direct experience. A culturally authentic resource is both culturally and economically valuable. Furthermore, the sharing of authentic communication on digital channels, enhanced by conversations and narratives of personal experiences, is a tool that reinforces the effectiveness of sustainable communication [96]. It allows the comparison between residents and tourists before tourists arrive at the destination, and this interaction can increase the value of authenticity because it is a form of direct feedback. This is similar to what happens in the online comments of tourists who have already had the experience and have talked about it, evaluated it, or commented on it. The authentic contents that scholars consider most effective are [70,71] the value of sustainable practices, evidence of responsible behaviour, the effectiveness of the management network and the virtuous collaborations that support sustainable development projects, the story of the value of the events and sport tourism offers, interactions between sports tourists who share the same interests and passions, and direct comparisons with tour and sports operators.

These considerations make it easier to understand how to coherently organise content in various communication actions with the characteristics of the target groups and the states of individuals and groups.

5. Conclusions

The considerations presented so far show that this study is limited by the fact that it is only a starting point for a development that will probably take many years to arrive through a complete systematisation of the application procedures of the model. However, it is necessary for the scientific community to have a starting theoretical systematisation in the field of communication applied to sport tourism to initiate further investigations on its evolution in sustainable sport tourism. The hypercube is a useful theoretical construction that opens up future research and field experiments that serve to perfect the contributions that communication can make to the sustainable development of the sector. During the validation phase and subsequent application of the model, it is possible to examine the relationships between the various stakeholders not only by using interviews and focus groups, but also by envisaging the analysis of relational networks to examine the most effective ones for creating networks capable of promoting sustainable development. Regarding the categories of residents, visitors, and spectators, it can be useful to apply the model to examine conversational content and its effectiveness in generating engagement and dissemination of good practices. This is possible through content analysis and through longitudinal analyses of user behaviour. The advantage of the hypercube is its adaptability to changes and possible scenarios brought about by the sustainable transition in the near future. For this reason, the model can envisage the use of different research methodologies useful for examining communication in sports tourism.

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