

Tourism Destination Quality and the UN Sustainable Development Goals: Tourism Agenda 2030

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Abstract

- Purpose: This conceptual paper explains how improving tourism destination quality could contribute to addressing the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) at tourism destinations.
- Design/methodology/approach: The paper synthesizes literature on sustainability, the SDGs and tourism destination quality, and considers sustainability from the destination quality frame of reference. The approach starts with a critical analysis of principles of sustainability, as embodied in the 17 SDGs, in terms of whether they are primarily concerned with ‘quantity’ or ‘quality’. This is followed by examining potential links between destination quality and the SDGs, using results of a recent empirical research on tourism destination quality (henceforth the TDQ study).
- Findings: The paper reveals that most of the SDGs are largely focused on quantity, whilst relatively few are concerned primarily with quality. Several TDQ dimensions, specifically ‘Authentic’, ‘Safe’, ‘Well-kept’, ‘Affordable’, ‘Novel’, ‘Varied’, ‘Relaxing’, ‘Uncrowded’, ‘Hospitable’ and ‘Informative’, and in addition the holistic perspective of destination quality indicated in the TDQ study, are revealed as having strong links with the SDGs, largely because of their concern with quality. The paper therefore proposes a positive relationship between enhancing destination quality and addressing the SDGs at tourism destinations.
- Originality: This is the first paper that adapts the extant theory on sustainability (represented by the SDGs) by introducing a destination quality frame of reference. The links between tourism destination quality and the SDGs have not been previously investigated. This paper indicates strong relationships between destination quality and several SDGs, and thus extends the existing theory on sustainability by introducing the quality improvement perspective.
- Research implications: The paper calls for future empirical research to test the theoretical links between destination quality and SDGs established in this paper.
- Practical implications: The use of the proposed framework for managing tourism destination quality and sustainability can help destination managers in enhancing destination quality and the attainment of the SDGs.

KEYWORDS: Quality, Tourism Destinations, Sustainable Development Goals, Tourism Destination Quality

Conceptual paper

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Introduction

Sustainability has been a major issue for at least three decades and has involved reference to a range of topics including jobs, income, the environment, and communities, which helps to explain why it has also become a buzzword for individuals and organizations (Mowforth and Munt, 2016; Weaver, 2006). It has also been applied to a variety of geographical scales from local, through regional to international.

To bring about sustainable development in all fields of human activity, the United Nations (UN) published 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in 2015. However, despite a good deal of positive response, the publication of the SDGs was not met with universal support (UNDP, 2018). Although the SDGs were based on the eight millennium goals produced in 2000, criticism of them related to the sheer number of goals and the range of topics they covered, but also how achievable they might be in the given time frame. Some of the goals even appeared contradictory. As Hickel (2015) claimed, the continual pursuit of industrial growth underpinning several SDGs was damaging the planet and threatening the basis of human existence. Of particular concern was that programs of preventing hunger and poverty reduction were regarded as relying on an old model of industrial growth, with ever-increasing levels of extraction, production, and consumption (Hickel, 2015).

Table 1 shows the SDGs in the left column and it is clear that many of them have a concern with increasing ‘numbers’ at their core, e.g., economic growth and productive employment for all, as referred to in SDG 8 ‘Decent Work and Economic Growth’. Yet other SDGs call for a reduction in numbers, such as that concerned with eliminating poverty (SDG 1 ‘No Poverty’) or preventing hunger (SDG 2 ‘Zero Hunger’) or limiting inequalities (SDG 10 ‘Reduce Inequalities’). In summary, these SDGs are largely concerned with ‘quantity’. Relatively few of the 17 SDGs consider, overtly, the significance of ‘quality’ in relation to sustainability. SDG 4 (‘Quality Education’) and, by implication, SDG 14 (‘Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions’) and SDG 3 (‘Good Health and Well-being’) are exceptions to this concern with quantity in the 17 SDGs.

Although there is literature concerning the link between quality and sustainability, a literature review indicates that the focus is predominantly on specific aspects of sustainability (e.g., environmental) or on specific aspects of quality (e.g., quality of life). Little is known about the wider contribution of quality improvement to the attainment of the 17 SDGs that address all aspects of sustainability (i.e., social, economic, environmental), especially within the context of tourism.

This paper considers therefore how a focus on improving quality at tourism destinations may be a fruitful approach to achieving the desired goal of sustainability, represented by the SDGs. It is a conceptual article that attempts to adapt current theory (see Jaakkola, 2020) on sustainability. It analyses recent empirical research results on tourism destination quality (Seakhoa-King, Augustyn and Mason, 2020) to challenge and modify the predominant ‘growth/quantity’-focused theoretical standpoint on sustainability. This theory adaption is intended to contribute to the extending of current knowledge on sustainability, by introducing an alternative frame of reference (destination quality) as a new perspective on the extant conceptualization of sustainability (see McInnis, 2011).

The results of Seakhoa-King et al.’s (2020) research on tourism destination quality have been selected as the basis of this theoretical analysis of the proposed relationship between improving destination quality and sustainability (as reflected in the SDGs) for several reasons. First, Seakhoa-King et al. (2020) provide evidence in their research monograph that prior conceptualizations of quality in general (i.e. the quality management, service marketing and geographical perspectives on quality) and previous applied research on some aspects of service and product quality at tourism destination (including those that use the Parasuraman, Zeithaml and Berry’s, 1988 conceptualization of service quality), do not provide an adequate basis for conceptualizing tourism destination quality. Second, the Seakhoa-King et al.’s (2020) conceptualization of tourism destination quality was established inductively through extensive and robust mixed method empirical research. Third, a literature review indicates that there has been no further advancement of the destination quality conceptualization since 2020.

The following sections of this conceptual paper discuss the results of a literature review on sustainability and the SDGs; tourism destinations and the SDGs; tourism destination quality; and quality and sustainability. In the subsequent section on destination quality and the SDGs, findings

of the analysis of the links between destination quality (as empirically conceptualized by Seakhoa-King et al., 2020) and sustainability (represented by the SDGs) are discussed. Practical implications of this analysis are then considered in the section ‘Towards a sustainable quality tourism destination’ and the paper is concluded with an Agenda 2030 for future tourism research and practice that arises from the analysis presented in this conceptual paper.

Insert Table 1 here

Sustainability and the SDGs

The terms *sustainability* and *sustainable development* are often used as if synonymous or interchangeable. However, as UNESCO (2015) states, sustainability is usually considered as a long-term goal, while sustainable development refers to processes involved to achieve sustainability. Both terms are used in this article, with ‘sustainability’ preferred where possible, as this is the objective of the SDGs. Nevertheless, the 17 SDGs, as shown in Table 1, refer directly to sustainable development and suggest that it is a complex process, covering a large range of topics. Perhaps not surprisingly, sustainable development has proved difficult to define and attempting to apply it requires a difficult balancing act between its different components. Despite problems of definition, sustainable development is usually viewed as ‘development that meets the need of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs’ (Our Common Future, 1987). ‘Our Common Future’ was one of the first publications to provide a definition of sustainable development, but recent publications (see for example Dhiraj and Kumar, 2021, which is concerned specifically with economic development) still reflect this focus on current needs not compromising the ability of future generation to be able to maintain their needs.

It is generally accepted that sustainable development/sustainability comprises three aspects: environmental, social and economic (Hall, 2019; Szromek and Karasek, 2019). While environmental sustainability is concerned with the protection and conservation of the environment, what could be called the ‘well-being of the natural environment’ (Weaver, 2006; Holden, 2016), social sustainability is concerned with the social ‘well-being of people’ and usually focuses on

cultural and community issues (Pantin and Francis, 2005; Mowforth and Munt, 2016), while economic sustainability is often considered to be concerned with maintenance of jobs, income and prosperity (Cooper et al., 2005; Hall, 2019).

In the SDGs there is clear evidence of the acceptance of the importance of economic, social and environmental topics and that these are linked. Although there is a lack of detailed reference to any supporting theories that have contributed to the creation of the goals, there are important principles that underly the SDGs (UN Foundation, 2019). The first two SDGs indicate the goal of reducing, and in fact ending, poverty and hunger. Other SDGs (especially SDG 8 ‘Decent Work and Economic Growth’, SDG 9 ‘Industry, Innovation and Infrastructure’ and SDG 12 ‘Responsible Consumption and Production’) either directly suggest, or are underpinned by the need for, economic growth. Some topics are concerned with providing wealth and prosperity for everyone, by ensuring that all have fulfilling lives and that economic, social and technological progress occurs in harmony with nature. SDG 13 ‘Climate Action’ indicates the need for reduction in some contributors to global warming, as well as increasing activities that may benefit short- and long-term global climate. SDG 14 ‘Life Below Water’ and SDG 15 ‘Life on Land’ have themselves important climate dimensions and are concerned to promote sustainable development through conservation. However, it is clear that most themes represented by these SDGs are concerned with quantity; their goals being to either increase or reduce numbers. Nevertheless, some, but relatively few, topics in the SDGs, including justice, human rights, education, decent working conditions and gender equality are concerned with quality (UNDP, 2018), and not just quantity. However, in their report on progress towards realizing the SDGs, the UN Foundation (2019) stress the need to *measure* what has already been achieved, which, by definition, means this process will require the use of numbers.

Tourism Destinations and the SDGs

Although there is little direct reference to tourism in the SDGs, there are themes in the goals relevant to tourism, as noted by Bolak, Cavaliere and Higgins-Desboilles (2017, cited in Mason, 2017, pp. 246-247). These themes are presented in the right-hand column of Table 1. Writers on tourism have long recognized the three major elements of sustainability (economic, social and environmental) that are evident in the SDGs (e.g., Weaver, 2006; Mowforth and Munt, 2016).

However, it is not clear that the general public, including tourists, share this ‘three-elements’ view on the meaning of sustainability, or that they conceptualize sustainability in terms of ‘quantity’ or ‘quality’, particularly as relatively little research of the public’s understanding of sustainability has been undertaken (Bausch et al., 2021). Indeed, Bausch et al. (2021) report that on the few occasions when consumers’ views of sustainability are sought, results are nearly always concerned with solely environmental dimensions and respondents refer only to such terms as ‘eco-friendly’, and ‘protection of nature’. In a study concerned directly with consumer’s views on tourism and sustainability, young tourists were asked about the relationship between the environment and sustainability in the context of tourism destinations (Pirghie and Meia, 2020). The results showed the tourists had particularly strong views regarding the *quality* of a destination’s environmental components, and their behavior demonstrated an awareness of the need to conduct tourist activities sustainably, with minimal (i.e., *a low number*) of environmental effects. Hence the results indicate tourists’ concern with both quality and quantity in destinations.

Although tourists’ perception of what makes a sustainable destination is not fully understood, according to Bettini (2018), since the early years of this century local tourism providers have been increasingly considering what should be offered to tourists and how this could be managed to create sustainable destinations. A key factor in this growing focus has been the emerging concept of ‘smart destinations’ (Bettini, 2018; Harvard University, 2018). A major element in smart destinations is the use of modern technology to change the way of thinking about them and their management (Buhalis, 2020). Bettini (2018) considers a smart destination to be a geographical location where tourism development is planned and conducted based on technological infrastructure, enabling ‘local sustainable development while providing quality of the experiences for visitors and the quality of life for locals’.

The technological infrastructure in smart destinations (Bettini,2018), refers to not only the use of the internet through which tourists can obtain detailed information on destinations, which has revolutionized tourism marketing (Buhalis, 2020; Morrison, 2019), but also to sophisticated geographical packages for destination management (Bettini, 2018; Buhalis, 2020; Harvard University, 2018).

Tourism Destination Quality

Although a good deal of literature exists on service quality at tourism destinations, such as that applying the SERVQUAL scale (Zeithaml, 1981; Parasuraman, et al. 1988) to measure aspects of destination quality of individual services, there would appear to be a general lack of empirical studies that explore what tourism destination quality actually is, when the destination is seen as a whole unit of analysis, and also ways in which quality can be measured, managed and assessed.

However, Butler (1980), who was particularly interested in the development of destinations over time, concluded in his stage-by-stage life-cycle model that with growing numbers of visitors, there would be a decline in the quality of the destination. A visible sign of this would be overcrowding and congestion (Butler, 1980) caused by the sheer number of visitors to a specific place at specific times. Butler suggested what indicators would be evident when this stage in the destination's development was being reached, so that planning could offset or even prevent the negative consequences on the destination. Butler indicated that he drew on the work of Doxey (1976) in creating his model. Doxey predicted that local people in a destination would develop antagonism and even hostility towards tourists as numbers reached a peak. However, neither Butler nor Doxey used detailed empirical research to support their theoretical positions, meaning there was a lack of evidence of how both locals in, and tourists to, a destination would react to the stage where there are very high numbers of visitors. Nevertheless, there have been several attempts to apply Butler's theory to a range of destinations, but development processes have tended to be the focus of research. However, one study (Keane, 1996) did focus on destination quality and its relationship to increasing tourism demand in the context of the Irish island of Inisheer. A key finding of Keane's (1996) study is that quality is closely linked to reputation of tourism destinations, with an inverse relationship between visitor numbers and destination quality. Nevertheless, Keane's study like the great majority of similar destination-focused research did not collect consumer (tourist) views on destination quality. Hence, until recently little has been known about tourists' perceptions of what destination quality actually is.

However, a recent study by Seakhoa-King, Augustyn and Mason (2020) has provided important insights into tourists' views on tourism destination. Seakhoa-King et al. (2020) asked tourists, via sequenced mixed methods research, to give their views on what they associate with

tourism destination quality. The initial exploratory qualitative phase involved interviews, which resulted in emergent dimensions of destination quality and in the second quantitative phase, a relatively large sample of over 800 respondents completed a questionnaire survey employing statements based on the results of the qualitative phase, rated on a 7-point Likert scale (Mason, Augustyn, and Seakhoa-King, 2021). The survey research took place in two neutral locations - UK airports rather than actual destinations to avoid influences of a specific location on respondents' views - and involved tourists about to depart on international flights. Based on the results of the TDQ study, Seakhoa-King et al. (2020, p. 207) define tourism destination quality as the extent to which destination features meet tourists' requirements concerning "conditions suitable for pursuing tourist activities and interests". Seakhoa-King et al. (2020) empirically identify 12 dimensions of destination quality that comprise a total of 75 attributes. These dimensions are shown in Table 2. The dimensions of tourism destination quality in Table 2 are in descending order of importance in terms of their mean values on the 7-point Likert scale of the questionnaire survey. All but the dimension 'Child-Friendly' obtained a mean value over 4 (the mid-point) on the scale and eight of the twelve achieved a mean over 5.

Seakhoa-King et al. (2020) also found that tourists have a holistic view of destination quality, which is reflected in the 12 dimensions that describe characteristics of the whole destination, and not characteristics of individual facilities or services that the diverse providers offer at tourism destinations. Seakhoa-King et al. 's (2020) findings thus differ substantially from the results of studies by Zeithaml (1981) and Parasuruman et al. (1988) on dimensions of service quality of individual service providers and offer a novel conceptualization of tourism destination quality emerging from, and supported by, empirical evidence.

Insert Table 2 here

Quality and Sustainability

Quality, defined by the International Organization for Standardization (ISO) as "the degree to which a set of inherent characteristics of an object fulfils [stakeholder] requirements" (ISO, 2015), does not necessarily equate with sustainability. Although there are a significant number of

academic articles that examine the relationship, they tend to be concerned with topics that are not strictly the focus of this paper, as they do not refer to tourism and are not typically focused on tourism destinations. Nevertheless, five different clusters of works on quality and tourism (including those focusing on sustainability and tourism) were identified in a detailed study of over 4,500 articles, published up to the end of 2018 (Garrigos-Simon, Narangajavana-Kaosiri and Narangajavana, 2019). These clusters were concerned with the following topics: marketing; hospitality; tourist satisfaction; resident attitudes; and the use of IT and social media. However, the great majority of the articles in these clusters do not focus on the relationship between sustainability and quality and few, other than those investigating resident attitudes, were concerned with tourism destinations (Garrigos-Simon, et al., 2019).

In addition to academic articles discussing the relationship between quality and sustainability, several sectors of industry have recognized this important link for some time. However, care should be taken with these business-based statements, as they may be just blogs, and are therefore not authoritative, they generally lack supporting references or evidence, and can be viewed (at least in part) as material employing buzzwords (particularly sustainability) to promote the author's organizations. Nevertheless, for example, Sapru (2011), when focusing on corporate social responsibility, discussed quality as a key factor in relation to achieving sustainability. A European academic conference concerned with corporate responsibility held in 2003, also focused on the relationship between quality and sustainability (Zwetsloot and van Marrewijk, 2004). In addition to business statements linking quality and sustainability, the Chief Executive Officer of the Chartered Quality Institute (UK) has suggested companies with a sustainability approach are those that meet their needs without compromising those of their customers, stakeholders or the planet (Desmond, 2021). Such companies have sustainability embedded in their corporate culture and the relationship between quality and sustainability is summarized in a blog by Desmond (2021): "today's quality is tomorrow's sustainability".

Findings - Destination Quality and the SDGs

This section reports the findings of the analysis of the concept of destination quality established in the TDQ study (Seakhoa-King et al, 2020) in relation to the concept of sustainability indicated in the SDGs. The process of analysis involved the comparison of the focus and contents

of the SDGs with the TDQ conceptualization, in an attempt to reveal potential links between destination quality and sustainability. Each SDG was taken in turn and compared with the TDQ dimensions to indicate which specific dimensions could contribute to the attainment of particular SDGs. This process of analysis made use of the actual attributes generated in the TDQ study - these were statements made by respondents that were subsequently grouped into the TDQ dimensions - to enable a more detailed analysis. In addition, an analysis of the holistic view of destination quality established in the TDQ study, was also conducted to indicate potential links between enhancing destination quality and attaining the SDGs. The findings are discussed in detail below.

In terms of the TDQ study, the first two of the dimensions in Table 2 ('Authentic'; 'Safe') can be regarded as very closely associated with the nature of sustainability indicated in the SDGs. The actual attributes provided by respondents in the TDQ study, which have been grouped to give the dimension 'Authentic', relate to natural attractions/resources being conserved and/or the presence of destination heritage attractions, and this dimension achieved the highest mean score on the Likert scale in indicating quality in a destination in the TDQ study. This result reveals some important similarities with the findings of both Bausch et al. (2021) and Pirghie and Meia (2020) where environmental quality was regarded as very significant in indicating sustainability. In relation to the SDGs shown in Table 1, several of these can be seen to relate to 'Authenticity'. In particular, these are SDG 14 'Life below Water' and SDG 15 'Life on Land', which have important elements relating to the TDQ dimension 'Authentic', particularly in terms of the references to conservation of marine and terrestrial ecosystems.

The second dimension in Table 2 is 'Safe'. The attributes that contribute to the dimension 'Safe' reveal a range of factors that can be divided into two broad categories: firstly, effects on tourists' belongings/property and secondly, physical harm to tourists. In terms of the first category, respondents in the TDQ study expressed concerns about security in relation to petty crime including 'bag snatching' and other types of theft of tourists' property, a significant issue in relation to destination safety (Holcombe and Pizam, 2006). However, crime against tourists reported in the TDQ study also involved the more serious acts of violence towards them. Concerns with personal safety and security can be considered to link strongly to SDG 16 'Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions', but also SDG 11 'Sustainable Cities and Communities', where there is specific

reference to safety. Tourists have been regarded as an easy target for those determined to undermine security (Weiping, 2010). At an international scale, examples of serious crimes against tourists include the 2002 and 2005 terrorist attacks on Bali, in Indonesia, and the targeting of tourists at Luxor, Egypt, in 2001 (Hitchcock and Putra, 2005; Mawby, 2000; Weiping, 2010). The immediate and post-incident decline in tourist numbers, where such terrorist attacks have occurred, are clear indicators of the importance tourists place on safety (Kılıçlar, Uşaklı and Tayfun, 2018; Mason, 2020).

However, tourists' concern for safety does not just focus on violence, but disease can also be a cause of this. The outbreak of the virus SARS in SW China in late 2002 and its subsequent global spread had a significant impact on tourists' behavior (Mason, Grabowski and Du, 2005). More recently, COVID-19 has had an even more dramatic impact on tourists' attitudes and behavior towards locations affected by high incidence of this virus, which contributed to a serious decline in international tourism in 2020 and 2021 (UNWTO, 2022). 'Safe' as a dimension of TDQ is concerned with the extent to which a destination is where tourists feel free from danger or risk. Thus, the more a destination feels safe, the greater the likelihood that tourists will view it as a quality tourism destination. It is therefore possible to claim that a safe tourism destination is more sustainable than one which is considered dangerous, as tourists are more likely to visit it and quite possibly return to it (Weiping, 2010; Mason, 2020).

In the TDQ study, 'Well-kept' is an important dimension associated with quality. Key attributes, provided by respondents, linked to this dimension are that the destination should be both clean and tidy. As Table 1 indicates, SDG 6 'Clean Water and Sanitation' is concerned with the quality of both water and sanitation and SDG 11 'Sustainable Cities and Communities' refers to resilience of settlements.

'Uncrowded' is an important dimension of destination quality in the TDQ study and respondents suggested that a quality destination is one with sufficient space to engage in tourist activities. However, overcrowding in certain destinations at specific times has been occurring recently, which not only affects the tourist experience, but can contribute to environmental damage (Holden, 2016; Morrison, 2019). Unfortunately, tourism also has a reputation for irresponsible production, and a tendency to have overconsumption at destinations (McKercher, 1993; Saarinen, 2006; Holden, 2016). Since at least the 1970s, mass tourism has been viewed as causing

overconsumption, which can contribute to overcrowding and, in specific circumstances, this has led to what has been termed overtourism (Milano, Novelli and Cheer, 2019). Overtourism has been defined as many tourists visiting a destination simultaneously, thereby resulting in unacceptable quality of life for residents at the place (Duignan, 2019). Overtourism can also have a negative impact on tourist experiences (UNWTO, 2017). As indicated in Table 1, SDG 12 calls for both sustainable production and consumption of resources, which if applied to tourism, could assist in remedying the problems that have contributed to overconsumption, overcrowding and overtourism, for both tourists and local communities affected.

One of the negative consequences of overcrowding is growing tension between locals and tourists. In extreme cases, this can lead to what has occurred in Barcelona, in the past decade, where locals have tried to exclude tourists at certain times of the year (Milano et al., 2019). Venice has had similar overcrowding problems to Barcelona, and this has increased the locals' feeling of animosity towards tourists (UNWTO, 2017). As noted earlier, Doxey's (1975) Irridex predicted that, over time, as tourist numbers grow, local communities may develop hostility to tourists. Within the context of the TDQ study, the reaction of local people towards tourists is considered a key indicator of the level of destination quality.

The TDQ dimension 'Hospitable' relates to the extent to which tourists view 'a destination as a place with a local community disposed to give a friendly response to tourists' (Seakhoa-King et al., 2020, p. 117). Several attributes, given by respondents, represent this dimension, including 'welcoming local people'; 'local people who are ready to advise tourists on the local area', and 'those who make tourists feel like locals'. 'Hospitable', in the TDQ study, can be viewed as being linked to SDG 3 'Good Health and Well-being' as this attitude of locals should encourage a positive relationship between members of the community and tourists. 'Hospitable' can also be seen within the context of SDG 12 'Responsible Production and Consumption' with the emphasis here on responsible consumption, and additionally it can be linked to SDG 11, where hospitable locals can be seen to help create sustainable cities and communities.

Several dimensions within Table 2 may appear to have less relevance to the SDGs. However, the desire by tourists to visit 'Affordable' destinations, can be viewed within the context of sustainability, if it is considered that tourists will not visit what they regard as an overpriced location, or, if having visited such a destination once, will not return. With customer loyalty and

repeat visitation so important within tourism (Alegre and Cladera, 2006), such a destination is unlikely to have long-term sustainability. It can also be argued that those destinations perceived as affordable will be those that assist with tourists' feeling of economic well-being, and in this way can be seen to help achieve SDG 3 'Good Health and Well-being'.

'Novel' and 'Varied' are indicators of quality in a destination in the TDQ study. The attributes accompanying these dimensions include 'to have opportunities to visit new attractions', 'to engage with different cultures', and 'to experience a range of different cuisines, restaurants, bars and accommodation'. These attributes should encourage repeat visitation to the destination, which in turn should assist with sustainability. Varied and novel attractions should also help with tourists' feeling of satisfaction and positive mental health (see SDG 3 'Good Health and Well-being'). Similarly, TDQ dimensions 'Informative' and 'Relaxing' can be seen to help with achieving the aims of ensuring healthy lives, as indicated in SDG 3.

The two remaining dimensions of the 12 provided in Table 2, 'All-weather' and 'Child-Friendly', may suggest little in the way of links to sustainability. However, for some types of tourists 'All-weather' and 'Child-Friendly' are important TDQ destination conditions, without which such tourists are likely to feel anxious, which could negatively affect their mental well-being and, as noted above, good health and well-being are the focus of SDG 3. 'All weather' as a dimension is a recognition of the unreliability of weather in many destinations and that poor weather prevents or inhibits some tourism activities. However, if weather has a significant influence on where and when tourism occurs, locations and timings of tourist seasons are likely to change because of global warming and will require ways to alleviate the problems caused by climate change, as suggested in SDG13 'Climate Action'.

The discussion so far in this section has involved a focus on specific TDQ dimensions and their potential contributions to sustainable tourism and the SDGs. However, a major finding of the TDQ study was that tourists had a holistic perspective on destination quality. In other words: "they viewed destination quality as a whole unit of analysis, where the sum of the parts can only be understood in terms of their contribution to the whole destination" (Seakhoa-King et al., 2020, p. 191). This holistic view of destination quality, rather than just a focus on specific facilities, attractions or services in the destination, is a significant finding of the TDQ study that diverges

from previous conceptualizations, where emphasis has been placed on the quality of individual goods or services (Seakhoa-King et al., 2020).

Given the holistic view of destination quality, it is proposed that improving destination quality could holistically contribute to enhancing destination sustainability and attaining the SDGs, especially as quality is about meeting requirements (ISO, 2015; Seakhoa-King et al., 2020) and the requirement for sustainability could be viewed as one of them. The holistic view, as such, requires a systemic approach to examining and managing destination quality and sustainability. This requires interconnecting the various dimensions of destination quality and sustainability, and understanding the bigger picture, towards attaining SDGs. As such, collaboration among key destination stakeholders is crucial to successfully attaining both destination quality and sustainability. The need for collaboration amongst stakeholders is also made in the SDGs, specifically in SDG 17 ‘Partnerships for the Goals’.

Table 3 summarizes the theoretical relationships between TDQ study results and the SDGs, (with the TDQ dimensions indicated in bold italics). Specifically, it considers how the holistic view of the TDQ study, and the specific dimensions of destination quality could contribute to the attainment of SDGs. Table 3 also reveals the relative importance of specific SDGs, particularly SDG 3 ‘Good Health and Well-being’ and SDG 11 ‘Sustainable Cities and Communities’ in relation to the TDQ dimensions. It is possible to state that the large number of TDQ dimensions linked to SDG 3 as indicated in Table 3 can be related to the importance of tourism as a recreational activity which will benefit tourists’ physical, as well as mental health. The TDQ dimensions of ‘Safe’, ‘Hospitable’ and ‘Well-kept’ are of particular importance in helping cities and communities become sustainable (see SDG 11), it can also be argued.

Insert Table 3 here

Towards a sustainable quality tourism destination – practical implications and Agenda 2030

Based on the results of the TDQ study, Seakhoa-King et al. (2020, pp. 217-220) propose a diagnostic tool for attaining tourism destination quality. Given the results of the analysis of the

potential links between destination quality and the SDGs presented in the previous section of this paper (summarized in Table 3), a modified, yet novel, diagnostic tool is proposed as a ‘Framework for Assessing and Managing Tourism Destination Quality and Sustainability’. The diagnostic tool proposed in this paper, and encapsulated in Figure 1, extends Seakhwa-King et al.’s (2020, pp. 217-220) tool by incorporating destination sustainability that can be effectively assessed and managed alongside destination quality, as indicated in this conceptual paper that shows the likely positive contribution of destination quality to attaining SDGs.

The modified diagnostic tool incorporates the five stages proposed by Seakhwa-King et al. (2020, pp. 217-220) but provides more detail on what should happen in each stage in relation to destination quality and sustainability. While involvement of various stakeholder groups, including tourists, is crucial to enhancing destination quality (Augustyn, 1998; Seakhwa-King et al., 2020), and to the attainment of SDGs through destination quality enhancement, as shown in the findings of this analysis in Table 3, initially, research into the current state of the destination quality and sustainability, using secondary sources in relation to the TDQ dimensions and SDGs, as proposed by Seakhwa-King et al. (2020), would be required.

Using the approach suggested by Seakhwa-King et al. (2020), the first stage of the research would involve the Destination Management Organization (DMO) considering the first two of the following questions to assist in the creation of a sustainable quality destination:

- 1) Where are we now?
- 2) Where would we like to go?
- 3) How will we get there?
- 4) How will we know we have arrived?

The second stage would make use of primary research, once again using the first two questions above, conducted by the DMO, and would involve focus groups, interviews and/or questionnaires (as used successfully in the TDQ study) with tourists to enable them to indicate the key dimensions concerned with quality and sustainability in the destination. The third stage, based on the approach employed in the TDQ study, and to be conducted by the DMO/task force, would involve using the results from Stage 1 and Stage 2 to identify strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats in

relation to the destination quality and sustainability. Stage 4 (following the TDQ approach) would require answering Question 3 above, via the design of a plan to implement a sustainable development strategy for the destination, and Stage 5 would involve the implementation of the plan, whilst answering Question 4 above would involve monitoring of this plan, when put into action. This process of research and implementation (as suggested in the TDQ study) should be seen within a context of continual evaluation and monitoring to ensure the maintenance of a sustainable tourism destination. Given the results of this study in the potential links between destination quality and sustainability, it is proposed that DMOs use the modified version of this tool (Figure 1).

Insert Figure 1 here

Based on the analysis of the links between TDQ and SDGs presented in this paper, to facilitate the attainment of the SDGs through enhancing destination quality, the following Agenda 2030 is proposed.

- Given the holistic view of destination quality established in the TDQ study and its potential contribution to achieving the SDGs, a systemic and collaborative approach to managing destinations, involving a range of stakeholders including tourists, is required.
- DMOs, policy makers and assessing bodies should use the proposed framework for evaluating and managing tourism destination quality and sustainability to assist in enhancing destination quality, sustainability, and the attainment of the SDGs.
- As there has been growing international focus on smart destinations (Buhalis, 2020) that make use of modern technology to achieve their objectives (Bethune, Buhalis and Miles, 2022), DMOs should place particular emphasis on agreed objectives that make use of this technology as a means to facilitate the achievement of quality and sustainability at tourism destinations in smarter ways than current approaches.

Conclusions

This conceptual paper has indicated that although the SDGs may be viewed as significant steps towards achieving sustainability, there have been important criticisms of them. Of particular importance to this paper is that several of the goals are primarily concerned with quantity and relatively few with quality. The original contribution of this paper is that it has argued and provided theoretical evidence that an approach focusing on quality may be more successful in achieving the SDGs. Indeed, this is the first paper that adapts the extant theory on sustainability (represented by the SDGs) by introducing a destination quality frame of reference.

The paper has discussed results of recent empirical work on tourism destination quality (the TDQ study) and linked these to the SDGs. It has suggested that the dimensions indicated in the TDQ study and the overall holistic perspective on destination quality revealed in the TDQ study, could contribute to attaining the SDGs and hence enhancing sustainability in general. The paper regards the relationship between destination quality and sustainability as complementary whereby the attainment of one contributes to the achievement of the other. The causal direction of this relationship is that of quality improvement efforts leading to the attainment of sustainability (the SDGs) at the very place tourists ultimately spend their holidays, i.e. the tourism destination. Further, it suggests that the technological tools proposed within the smart tourism destination framework can be viewed as key enablers for achieving both destination quality and sustainability.

This paper thus extends the existing theory on sustainability by introducing the quality improvement perspective. The 'Framework for Assessing and Managing Tourism Destination Quality and Sustainability' proposed in this paper, as well as the Agenda 2030, bridge theory and practice. It is acknowledged that this paper, which draws largely from findings of an empirical study conducted by Seakhoa-King et al. (2020), is conceptual and as such, the proposed links between tourism destination quality and sustainability (the SDGs) need to be tested/verified through future empirical research studies. Further research is also needed to examine the potential links between destination quality, smart destinations and sustainability.

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Table 1 The 17 SDGs and indicative themes relating to sustainable tourism

Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)	Related Tourism Themes (Indicative examples only)
Goal 1. No Poverty End poverty in all its forms everywhere	Critiques of the green economy Hegemony/gender/oppression/domination/fascism Poverty alleviation through tourism and its critique Pro-poor tourism
Goal 2. Zero Hunger End hunger, achieve food security and improved nutrition and promote sustainable agriculture	Sustainable food systems Agritourism Permaculture and food movements Food based micro-enterprises Culinary epistemologies for sustainability
Goal 3. Good Health and Wellbeing Ensure healthy lives and promote well-being for all at all ages	Community development Social capital Tourism and quality of life Tourism as a tool for positive aging
Goal 4. Quality Education Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all	Critical pedagogy and neoliberalism Collaborative research methods for transformation The role of critical thinking in transforming tourism education International training and education The Global Sustainable Tourism Council (GSTC) Multi-lateral training programmes Educational tourism as a tool for inclusivity
Goal 5. Gender Equality Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls	Social complexity, social inequities, structural labours of care and leisure, racialized, gendered, and classed perspectives Multilateral/non-governmental/industry/academic structures of power Ecofeminism and feminist ecology
Goal 6. Clean Water and Sanitation Ensure availability and sustainable management of water and sanitation for all	Considerations of the quadruple bottom line Water and resource use in tourism Water rights and hegemony in tourism
Goal 7. Affordable and Clean Energy Ensure access to affordable, reliable, sustainable and modern energy for all	Energy use in tourism Sustainable transport Low carbon energy transitions
Goal 8. Decent Work and Economic Growth Promote sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment and decent work for all	Considerations of economic growth and de-growth Eco-colonialism and eco-imperialism Indigenous owned and operated tourism business Assumptions of economic growth Leisure and the rights for rest and reflection Workers' Rights Universal basic wage Social Tourism
Goal 9. Industry, Innovation and Infrastructure Build resilient infrastructure, promote inclusive and sustainable industrialization and foster innovation	Innovations for sustainability Sustainable energies The use of virtual technologies in Hospitality and Tourism Social entrepreneurship
Goal 10. Reduce Inequalities Reduce inequality within and among countries	Ethics and bio-cultural conservation: Ecosystems/biodiversity/culture/heritage White/Western privilege Marginalized communities Rights of LBGTQ+ and tourism
Goal 11. Sustainable Cities and Communities Make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable	Linking urban and rural tourism Tourism systems in the urban context Futurism Humanising cities
Goal 12. Responsible Consumption and Production Ensure sustainable consumption and production patterns	Critiques of the green economy Considerations of economic growth and degrowth Conscious Consumerism Localisation Slow tourism Participation

	Certification
Goal 13. Climate Action Take urgent action to combat climate change and its impacts	Climate actions and activism Paris COP21 Agreement Climate change and structures of power Climate change and aviation Mobility rights and impacts Indigenous activism for positive futures
Goal 14. Life Below Water Conserve and sustainably use the oceans, seas and marine resources for sustainable development	Tourism and Marine Protected Areas (MPAs) Marine mammals and tourism Tourism and the Blue Economy
Goal 15. Life on Land Protect, restore and promote sustainable use of terrestrial ecosystems, sustainably manage forests, combat desertification, and halt and reverse land degradation and biodiversity loss	Tourism and Protected Areas (PAs) Linking tourism and conservation The politics of conservation and environmental justice Indigenous cosmologies
Goal 16. Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions Promote peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, provide access to justice for all and build effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels	Tourism as a conduit for peace Peace building/poverty alleviation/livelihood development/gender equality Cultural interpretations of sustainability Indigenous approaches to interdependence Islamic perspectives on tourism
Goal 17. Partnerships for the Goals Strengthen the means of implementation and revitalize the Global Partnership for Sustainable Development	Tools that facilitate inclusive and participatory multi-stakeholder dialogue Global Sustainable Tourism Council (GSTC) United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWO) Greenwashing/Certifications/Accreditations Roles of NGOs as advocates for justice in tourism

(source: Bolak, Caviliere and Higgins-Desboilles, 2017, based on : 'Sustainable Development Goals: 17 Goals to Transform Our World' (2015) with indicative tourism content added cited in Mason, 2017)

Table 2 Dimensions of Destination Quality in the Tourism Destination Quality Study

Tourism Destination Dimensions	Definition of Dimensions
Authentic	With preserved and accessible natural and/or cultural heritage defining the character of the tourism area.
Safe	A tourism environment free from risk and danger.
Well-kept	A clean and tidy environment for tourism
Affordable	Reasonably priced in terms of primary and ancillary tourism goods and services relative to tourists' means
Informative	Tourist-oriented and tourist-friendly information and communication
All-weather	Opportunities to pursue tourist activities in all types of weather
Uncrowded	Sufficient space and facilities in relation to the number of tourists
Hospitable	A local community in the destination willing to provide a friendly response to tourists
Relaxing	A tourist environment conducive to relaxation
Varied	With diverse tourist attractions and facilities
Novel	With features that are new or unusual to tourists
Child-friendly	Catering for the needs of children and accompanying adults

Source: Seakhoa-King *et al.* (2020)

Table 3 The relationship between the SDGs and the TDQ dimensions and holistic perspective

SDGs	TDQ Dimensions and Holistic Perspective
Goal 1. No Poverty - End poverty in all its forms everywhere	Enhancing TDQ could contribute to a flow of an acceptable numbers of tourists and thus to job creation/continuity and a subsequent increase in local community income, which could help reduce poverty levels
Goal 2. Zero Hunger - End hunger, achieve food security and improved nutrition and promote sustainable agriculture	As with SDG 1, enhancing TDQ could contribute to a flow of an acceptable numbers of tourists and thus to job creation/continuity and increase in local community income, which could help reduce hunger
Goal 3. Good Health and Wellbeing - Ensure healthy lives and promote well-being for all at all ages	<i>Hospitable, Informative, Relaxing, Varied, Novel, Child-friendly, Affordable</i>
Goal 4. Quality Education - Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all	Enhancing TDQ would require educating local communities to develop skills needed in the delivery of quality at tourism destinations
Goal 5. Gender Equality - Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls	As with SDG 4, enhancing TDQ would require educating, specifically females, in local communities to develop skills needed to the delivery of quality at tourism destinations
Goal 6. Clean Water and Sanitation - Ensure availability and sustainable management of water and sanitation for all	<i>Well-kept</i>
Goal 7. Affordable and Clean Energy - Ensure access to affordable, reliable, sustainable and modern energy for all	Generating income (as indication with reference to SDG 1 and 2) should help destinations improve quality of affordable, clean energy.
Goal 8. Decent Work and Economic Growth - Promote sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment and decent work for all	As with SDG 1 and SDG 5, enhancing TDQ could contribute to a flow of acceptable numbers of tourists, which could result in job creation and ultimately sustainable economic growth
Goal 9. Industry, Innovation and Infrastructure - Build resilient infrastructure, promote inclusive and sustainable industrialization and foster innovation	Enhancing TDQ would require adequate infrastructure for tourism
Goal 10. Reduce Inequalities - Reduce inequality within and among countries	As with SDG 1 and SDG 5, enhancing TDQ could contribute to a flow of suitable numbers of tourists and thus to job creation, which could help reduce income inequality within and between countries.
Goal 11. Sustainable Cities and Communities - Make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable	<i>Safe, Hospitable, Well-kept, All-weather</i>
Goal 12. Responsible Consumption and Production - Ensure sustainable consumption and production patterns	<i>Uncrowded, Hospitable</i>
Goal 13. Climate Action -Take urgent action to combat climate change and its impacts	<i>All-weather, Well-Kept</i>
Goal 14. Life Below Water - Conserve and sustainably use the oceans, seas and marine resources for sustainable development	<i>Authentic</i> By enhancing quality through the dimension ‘Authentic’ a destination could at the same time achieve SDG 14 which is intended to protect life below water
Goal 15. Life on Land - Protect, restore and promote sustainable use of terrestrial ecosystems, sustainably manage forests, combat desertification, and halt and reverse land degradation and biodiversity loss	<i>Authentic</i> By enhancing quality through the dimension ‘Authentic’ a destination would at the same time achieve SDG15 which is intended to protect life on land
Goal 16. Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions - Promote peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, provide access to justice for all and build effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels	<i>Safe</i> Enhancing TDQ could contribute to making the destination a safe place to visit
Goal 17. Partnerships for the Goals - Strengthen the means of implementation and revitalize the Global Partnership for Sustainable Development	To successfully enhance the quality of a destination as a whole, all stakeholders need to collaborate

Figure 1 Framework for Assessing and Managing Tourism Destination Quality and Sustainability (TDQ+S)

