



Curtin University



Faculty of Business and Law

2020 Australian Government Research Training Program Scholarships

Strategic Project Profile

PROJECT TITLE: Licence to obfuscate: Consumer hypocrisy in sustainable tourism in a post-truth era

FIELD OF RESEARCH CODE: 1506

PROJECT SYNOPSIS: As societal pressures to comply with sustainability are mounting, there is an increasing need to differentiate between corporations' talk on the one hand and their substantive practices on the other. Initially considered an area for government regulation, sustainability has increasingly been exposed to voluntary market dynamics which prompted a strong interest in Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR). However, pressure to engage in CSR may create incentives for obfuscating talk which is inconsistent with actions (Cho et al., 2010) and accompanies irresponsible practices (Volgger & Huang, 2019). 'Hypocrisy' denotes such an inconsistency between talking and acting. More specifically, 'greenwashing' denounces corporate practices of misleading consumers by selectively revealing some (minor) initiatives to divert attention from poor overall sustainability performance (Rahman et al., 2015). Although research on corporate hypocrisy is scant, there are some initial results indicating that consumers tend to dislike greenwashing practices (Lim et al., 2013; Rahman et al., 2015; Wagner et al., 2009).

While these consumer reactions seem to imply an absence of consumer hypocrisy, caution in drawing premature conclusion is needed. There is almost no existing research on consumer hypocrisy. Hypothesising an absence of

consumer hypocrisy seems to be in contradiction with claims of a reigning indifference of the public with respect to 'fake news' despite being blatantly inaccurate (Marchi, 2012) and the purported "dawning of the post-truth era" (Love & Ahiaga-Dagbui, 2018).

Moreover, key findings in sustainability research in tourism point towards instances of hypocritical consumer behaviour. Consumption in tourism is driven by hedonistic motivations, high degrees of emotional decision making and surrounded by an aura of 'exceptionality' and enjoyment. First, in consumer behaviour in sustainable tourism, an attitude-behaviour-gap is often observed: While many tourists declare to be willing to support sustainability practices during their holidays, few of them translate their (declared) attitude into revealed consumer behaviour (Juvan & Dolnicar, 2014). Second, tourists tend to relegate sustainability practices to their everyday lives conceiving tourism moments as pleasure-driven and exceptional (Miao & Wei, 2013; Volgger et al., 2017). Third, recent research indicates that more intuition-driven decision making (such as the one prevalent in tourism) plays a role in the susceptibility to distorted information (Pennycook & Rand, 2019).

Overall, there are strong indications to assume consumer hypocrisy in sustainable tourism. Therefore, this research will scrutinise the spectrum of tourist reactions to companies which try to compensate an overall questionable sustainability performance with cherry-picking positive claims in specific areas. While there is an emerging literature on organisational hypocrisy (Cho et al., 2015) and related consumer reactions (Lim et al., 2013; Rahman et al., 2015; Wagner et al., 2009), it remains undifferentiated and aggregate, and does not tackle consumer hypocrisy specifically. For example, it is unknown how tourists weigh different areas of sustainability against each other. It is also unknown whether some tourists welcome fictional hypocritical façades of tourism providers in order to support their own individual façade and storytelling. The study asks: Under which conditions do tourists either tacitly agree or disagree with a mere cosmetic approach to sustainability and CSR? What are the causes and boundary conditions of presence and absence of consumer hypocrisy in tourism?

By drawing on the work of Brunsson (1989) on hypocrisy, this research aims to analyse under which conditions and why consumers become willing accomplices of some tourism provider's hypocritical sustainability and social responsibility communication. Among its original theoretical and practical contributions, this research will help to evaluate under which conditions voluntary and market driven approaches to sustainable tourism may be able to produce the socially desired outcomes in practice – and not only in their fictitious storytelling.

FEASIBILITY AND RESOURCING – DESCRIPTION OF THE SUPPORT THIS PROJECT WILL RECEIVE:

The student will work within the Tourism Research Cluster, which is a growing research group with regular visitors, industry events and seminars. The faculty will provide a laptop, shared workspace and research training. The research office provides sufficient research support funds and conference funding. The university provides access to the necessary software. No additional resources are needed to complete the project.

WHAT MINIMAL ATTRIBUTES AND SKILLS EXPECTED BY THE CANDIDATE BE COMPETITIVE:

Honours I or higher. Some research experience with a first author output.

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE PROJECT/ PROGRAM FOR THE ENROLLING SCHOOL OR INSTITUTION:

Tourism is an established area of research strength at Curtin University and identified as a Faculty priority field of research. The project will be linked to the Faculty of Business & Law's Tourism, Hospitality & Events Discipline and the multidisciplinary Tourism Research Cluster (hosted at the School of Marketing), established in 2011, to bundle and further strengthen tourism research activities at Curtin University. In the 2017, 2018 & 2019 ShanghaiRanking, Curtin was ranked in the top 50 globally for Hospitality and Tourism Management

and, according to the Australian Research Council, tourism research at Curtin is recognised as 'world-class' with four consecutive ERA '3' rankings (2010, 2012, 2015 & 2018).

The PhD study is well aligned with established and ongoing research interests in Curtin's Tourism Research Cluster on Sustainability and Corporate Social Responsibility. The PhD project will contribute to progress this work at the forefront of current international research avenues aimed at scrutinising inconsistencies between sustainability talk and related actions.

Students are advised to contact the Project Lead listed below prior to submission of their scholarship application to discuss their suitability to be involved in this strategic project.

PROJECT LEAD CONTACT

NAME: Min Teah, Faculty of Business and Law

EMAIL: min.teah@cbs.curtin.edu.au

CONTACT NUMBER: +61 8 9266 4348

PRIMARY SUPERVISOR

NAME: Michael Volgger, Faculty of Business and Law

EMAIL: michael.volgger@curtin.edu.au

CO-SUPERVISOR

NAME: Ross Taplin, Faculty of Business and Law

EMAIL: R.Taplin@cbs.curtin.edu.au

CO-SUPERVISOR

NAME: Aneeshta Gunness, Faculty of Business and Law

EMAIL: aneeshta.gunness@curtin.edu.au

CO-SUPERVISOR

NAME: Sean Lee, Faculty of Business and Law

EMAIL: Sean.Lee@curtin.edu.au