Tourism research in the eyes of tourism practitioners

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Abstract:

This study aims to enrich the theoretical knowledge about *"how tourism practitioners perceive tourism research"* and *"how research-practice gap in the tourism discipline can be potentially redressed"*. The qualitative approach and specifically in-depth interviews were conducted with 26 industry practitioners and government representatives who are working in the Hong Kong tourism industry. The expected findings of this work are valuable because they can identify feasible solution/s for optimizing the readership and applicability and utilization of tourism research by tourism practitioners.

Keywords: Academia-industry divide; knowledge transfer; research-practice gap; tourism research.

1. Research Rationale

To support the sustainable growth and development of economy, the government of most economies have been allocating a substantial amount of budget on research & development (R&D) in general and academic research in particular (Merigó, Cancino, Coronado, & Urbano, 2016). For instance, the British government increased its spending on research and innovation from GBP866 million in 2017 to GBP962 million in 2018 (Office for National Statistics, 2020). The amount of money the Chinese government spent on R&D has increased from RMB 1.42 trillion in 2015 to RMB 2.44 trillion in 2020, as CNBC (2021) reports. The Hong Kong Special Administrative Region government also spent over HKD 13 billion and HKD 16 billion in higher education and academic research in year 2019, respectively (Census and Statistics Department, 2021).

In line with the increase in research funding, the volume of publications increases drastically over the past few decades (Pohl, 2021). As an important contributor to the global economy, an exponential growth of tourism studies has been published in journals, books, conference proceedings and other forms in recent years (Kirilenko & Stepchenkova, 2018). McKercher (2020) describes that more than 400 tourism journals can be identified as of early 2020 and over thousands of tourism articles are published annually. Since tourism is still developing rapidly, he envisions that more tourism research will emerge in the coming years.

Singleton (1994) underscores that one ultimate goal of conducting academic research is to provide industry practitioners with accumulated knowledge and thereby improving the quality of their practice. Besides Singleton (1994), many academic scholars (e.g., Van Scotter & Culligan, 2003) also advocate that academic research are produced with an aim of guiding practitioners' decisions via offering theoretical principles and scientific evidences. Although this assertion is widely acknowledged in the academic community, many studies find and report that insights disseminated in tourism research have not always resulted in progress in practice (e.g., Cohen, Higham, Gössling, Peeters, & Eijgelaar, 2016; Melissen & Koens, 2016).

Hawkins' (200) seminal paper states that knowledge from tourism research was underutilized by practitioners because tourism academics' ivory tower approach rarely results in actionable strategies at the practical realities. Vong's (2017) study notes that the underutilization of tourism research in practice is partially attributed to the difference in foci between practitioners and academics. In short, practitioners are interested in actionable results and "how to" knowledge, whereas academics are eager to pursue theory development and "why" knowledge.

Rynes, Colbert and Brown (2002) note that the examination of how practitioners perceive academic research is an initial but vital step to redress the "research-practice gap" problem. Another editorial by Rynes (2007) reiterates and stresses that enriching the understanding about practitioners' needs and interests is the most efficacious approach to increase value and usefulness of academic research for practitioners. Indeed, in order to create a positive research culture (i.e., a phenomenon where research is perceived as useful and widely applied by practitioners in the field), it is of necessity to identify the answers to the questions of:

- *How do tourism practitioners perceive tourism research?*
- *Whether and how practitioners are involved in the compilation of tourism research?*
- *Whether and how practitioners base their practice on tourism research?*
- *How industry practitioners perceive the presence of "research-practice gap"?*
- *How can researchers and practitioners mitigate "research-practice gap"?*

While the topic of "research-practice gap" has been a matter of prime interest in other disciplines such as psychology (e.g., Kazdin, 2016) and information science (e.g., Pilerot, 2016), to the best of our understanding, it has been neglected in the tourism field. Even though several researchers discussed the presence of "research-practice gap" or "academia-industry divide", existing studies are mostly anecdotes or commentaries (e.g., Melissen & Koens, 2016; Xiao & Smith, 2007).

Noticing this research void, a qualitative study has been conducted with industry practitioners in the tourism field in order to enrich the theoretical knowledge about *"how tourism practitioners perceive tourism research"* and *"how research-practice gap in the tourism discipline can be potentially redressed"*.

2. Research Methodology

The current study adopts the qualitative approach and specifically in-depth interviews to understand tourism practitioners' perceptions towards tourism research and other issues pertinent to "research-practice gap" in the tourism field. The target respondents are tourism practitioners who are working or previously worked in any tourism sector (e.g., airline, attraction, travel agency etc.) regardless of the hierarchical levels in their corresponding companies. A mixture of purposive and snowball sampling was employed with an aim of recruiting more qualified respondents.

In January 2021, the lead author sent emails to all tourism professional bodies in Hong Kong (e.g., Hong Kong Hotels Association, Tourism Commissions) and invited their representatives to join the in-depth interview. The lead author also invited other industry practitioners who attended past events organized by his affiliations to join the in-depth interviews. After completing the twenty sixth interview, data collection was completed as data saturation was reached. Both industry practitioners (at different hierarchical levels) and representatives from government authorities were invited and participated. The detailed profile of the interviewees will be disclosed in the full paper.

The interviews were conducted using interviewees' preferred online conferencing tools (e.g., Zoom, Skype, GoToMeeting). The semi-structured interview mode was employed, and the interviews were guided by questions pertinent to: (1) respondents' perceptions towards tourism research; (2) factors affecting respondents' decision to read / not to read tourism research; (3) factors affecting respondents' decision to base / not to base their practice on tourism research; (4) respondents' agreeableness on the presence of "research-practice gap" in the tourism discipline; and (5) potential solutions to resolve "research-practice gap". Each interview lasted for 65 minutes, and the longest one lasted for 105 minutes. The dialogue was transcribed verbatim after completing each interview. The transcripts were reviewed by the corresponding interviewees to avoid any loss of data and inaccurate interpretation.

The conventional content analysis was adopted to analyze the qualitative data. Following the three-step approach (i.e., open coding, axial coding, and selective coding), the authors first reviewed the transcripts several times to make sense of the data. Then, the transcripts were re-read to identify, categorize and summarize manifest content. At the moment of this writing, the authors did not complete the analysis of all collected data yet. Still, the abovementioned process will be administered multiples times to assure the reliability of research findings.

3. Significance of Expected Findings

Although the data analysis was not completed and the findings were not presented in this submission, the expected findings of this work are considered to be valuable and insightful because they can identify feasible solution/s for optimizing the readership, applicability and utilization of tourism research by tourism practitioners. On the other hand, the current research findings are expected to help identify potential solution/s for mitigating the "research-practice gap". Ideally, a new system for conducting "industry-friendly" tourism research can be derived from the findings of this work. Ultimately, more practical studies can be produced in the future in order to support the sustainable growth of tourism industry.

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