

Communicating Tourism Sustainability Online The Case of Victoria Falls World Heritage Site

Maria Garbelli ^{a,c},
Asta Adukaite ^{a,b}, and
Lorenzo Cantoni ^{a,b}

^a UNESCO Chair in ICT to Develop and Promote Sustainable
Tourism in World Heritage Sites

^b webatelier.net

Università della Svizzera italiana (USI Lugano, Switzerland)

^c Department of Economics, Management and Statistics
Università degli Studi di Milano Bicocca (Milan, Italy)

{[maria.garbelli](mailto:maria.garbelli@usi.ch); [asta.adukaite](mailto:asta.adukaite@usi.ch); [lorenzo.cantoni](mailto:lorenzo.cantoni@usi.ch)}@usi.ch

Abstract

The debate about tourism sustainability, and its contribution to local development has been very active, especially in connection with UNESCO World Heritage Sites, whose preservation is of the utmost importance. In recent times, the pervasiveness of ICTs within the tourism experience and industry has called for more research on how ICTs can help attaining the sustainable tourism goals. In this paper, ninety-one available online resources have been studied to assess the presence of sustainability-related contents in Victoria Falls, one of the most known WHSs in Africa, so to measure how important it is for information providers covering this topic.

Keywords: Sustainable Tourism; Information and Communication Technologies; UNESCO World Heritage Sites

1 Introduction

The World Heritage Convention clearly states that apart from conservation and protection of world heritage of Outstanding Universal Value (OUV), its “presentation” (UNESCO, 1972: p. 3) is also among its primary aims. The main challenges are thus to reconcile the preservation of World Heritage Sites (hereafter WHS) and tourism, to communicate sites’ heritage value, and to thus foster responsible and respectful behaviour among visitors. UNESCO’s main strategy to achieve these goals is via sustainable tourism (Ali and Frew, 2013) in order to ensure the long-term viability of their heritage (Lo Piccolo, Leone and Pizzuto, 2012), to benefit the local community (Cantoni 2013), and ultimately to enable a high-quality tourist experience through the UNESCO label and the site Outstanding Universal Value (Marcotte and Bourdeau, 2012). A prospective traveller, who is interested in visiting a WHS, goes online, and accesses several online resources (mainly websites) looking for satisfying her/his information needs (Wang & Fesenmaier, 2013; The 2013 Traveler’s Road to Decision: Affluent Insights, 2014). In place, travelers from emerging countries may still lack awareness of the need for responsible and

sustainable tourism behavior (Weaver, 2012): environmental problems in the tourism industry could be further aggravated due to travelers from these emerging markets.

2 Methodology

Two main research questions have guided this protocol: *People willing to visit a WHS, and visiting tourism-related websites...*

- RQ1 ... *are they likely to be informed about the fact that such falls are enlisted among the WHSs?*
 - RQ1a: do relevant websites offer the piece of information that Victoria Falls is a World Heritage Site?
 - RQ1b: in case they provide it, are the reasons for such enlisting further explained and elaborated upon?
- RQ2 ... *are they likely to be informed about issues related with sustainable tourism at that destination?*
 - RQ2a: do relevant websites mention the issue of “sustainability”, naming it explicitly?
 - RQ2b: in case they do not mention it, do they anyway cover issues related with sustainable tourism?

To answer those questions a relevant WHS has been identified in Victoria Falls (VF), a trans-boundary property located between Zambia and Zimbabwe (Livingstone District of Southern Province of the Republic of Zambia and Hwange District of Matabeleland North Province of Zimbabwe). The site is rounded by two natural parks (Victoria Falls National Park in the Zimbabwean side, and Mosi-oa-Tunya National Park in the Zambian side) in a poor economic area, but the uniqueness of the place has attracted national and international investors and produced economic development around the site.

To define the relevant corpus of websites, several queries on the most used search engines (google.com, bing.com) have been performed, with the following keywords: Zambia, Zimbabwe, Livingstone Victoria Falls, accommodation, lodge, bed and breakfast, hotel, national park, information, travel, world heritage site (all queries have been performed from Lugano, Switzerland, in the period June-August 2014). Links provided in the first two pages have been considered for inclusion. Further sources have been directly used to integrate the corpus of relevant online resources: the two national DMOs and tripadvisor.com, in order to find the names of hotels in the area (whose names have then been entered in google.com to check the availability of a related website); and iTunesStore, in order to check the availability of ad-hoc mobile apps.

After removing all duplicates, a final sample of 91 online resources has been identified and, then, classified in five categories (moving from the suggestion by Strickland-Munro, Allison and Moore (2010) (Table 1). Then, a content analysis of such online resources have been performed. While assessing the presence of a clear info about VF being a WHS (RQ1a); the presence of further info about the reasons why it has been enlisted among WHSs (RQ1b), and the use of the very term “sustainability” (RQ2a) is quite a straightforward task, answering RQ2b required much more efforts.

Table 1 presents data to answer RQ1; moving to the second RQ, results are presented in Table 2. To answer it, the Sustainable Tourism for Development Guidebook (UNWTO, 2013b) framework has been applied, through its five pillars to be considered for the evaluation of tourism performance: (1) tourism policy and governance; (2) economic performance, investment and competitiveness; (3) employment, decent work and human capital; (4) poverty reduction and social inclusion; and (5) sustainability of the natural and cultural environment. For each pillar, several sub-pillars have been defined, to assess if the corresponding relevant topics are covered by the online resources.

The first pillar is rarely tackled, which is quite understandable, due to the fact that our analysis is based on dedicated Public Authorities and businesses.

Pillar two recognizes the relevance of tourists through investments, commitment and quality and diversity of the product offered: all hospitality players do present contents related with such issue; almost all mobile apps (83.3%), several tour operators (38.5), and one DMO do tackle related issues.

Pillar three here deals with the treatment reserved to the own workers: this topic is rarely covered; in 50% of the cases where the topic is directly touched are by Zambian hospitality players.

Pillar four here refers to teaching/education initiatives, orphan care, and other relevant community volunteering projects, and it is definitely relevant for Public Authorities (60%), followed by DMOs (41.7%), and Tour Operators (15.4%). 60% of Zambian hospitality players do cover it, compared to only 9% of the Zimbabwean ones. Neither Mobile apps nor Magazines and Newspapers touch this issue.

Pillar five (conservation projects and volunteering) is quite present, especially when it comes to the natural environment (only a few DMOs and some hospitality players do touch also the cultural environment protection). All Public Authorities and National Parks provide contents about this area, along with Newspapers and Magazines. However, only a few businesses address these issues: DMOs (33.3%), Tour operators (23.1%), and Hospitality players (26.9%), for this the last category it can be noted again a substantial difference between the Zimbabweans (13.6%) and the Zambians (36.7%).

3 Discussion and Conclusion

The analysis conducted taking the perspective of a person navigating online to collect information on a possible travel to the VF has been able to answer all research questions. In Summarizing, people willing to visit VF, and visiting tourism-related websites...

- *RQ1 ... are they likely to be informed about the fact that such falls are enlisted among the WHSs?*
 - No: there are just a few mentionings of the fact that VF is a WHS.
 - 23.0% of main relevant resources do state it (RQ1a), and even less resources (5.5%) do further elaborate such information (RQ1b).
- *RQ2 ... are they likely to be informed about issues related with sustainable tourism at that destination?*
 - No: their attention is likely not to be drawn to such issues, at least explicitly.

- o In fact, only in very few cases (6.6%) the sustainability issue is named explicitly (RQ2a); one can find many more resources tackling topics relevant for sustainable tourism, with a particular attention to Poverty reduction & social inclusion, and to Sustainability of the natural & cultural environment (RQ2b).

Results show that in the case of Victoria Falls, there is room for improving the online communication of both the value recognised by the inscription in the UNESCO, as well as of the closely connected sustainable tourism issue, and of its several facets. Online communication might improve the likability of prospective travellers to be made aware of such issues, to learn (informally) about the several implications of being a WHS, and to be (somehow) educated to behave in a sustainable and responsible manner in case of visit.

Results show also that different approaches can be noted when it comes to online communication of hospitality players in Zambia and in Zimbabwe: the former ones appear to be definitely more interested in sharing information about WHS and sustainable tourism than the others.

Table 1. Explicit mentions of the fact that Victoria Falls is a WHS (percentages refer to each category).

	Relevant resources	%	# – % of resources explicitly stating it	# – % of resources further elaborating it
Public Authorities	5	5.5	-	-
National parks	1	1.1	1 – 100.0	1 – 100.0%
DMOs	12	13.2	5 – 41.7	1 – 8.3%
Tour Operators	13	14.3	6 – 46.0	-
Hospitality players	52	57.1	3 – 5.8	-
Mobile Apps	6	6.6	4 – 66.7	1 – 16.7%
Newspapers / magazines	2	2.2	2 – 100.0	2 – 100.0%
TOTAL	91	100.0	21 – 23.0%	5 – 5.5%

Table 2. Use of the very term “sustainability” within the analysed online resources, and coverage of issues relevant for tourism sustainability.

	# on-line res.	# – % resources using the term “sustainability”	UNWTO Book on Sustainability 2013				
			Tourism policy and governance	Economic performance, invest, competitiveness	Employment decent work, human capital	Poverty reduction & social inclusion	Sustainability of the natural & cultural environment
Public Authorities	5	3 – 60.0%	-	-	2 – 40.0%	3 – 60.0%	5 – 100.0%
National parks	1	-	-	-	-	-	1 – 100.0%

	# on-line res.	# – % resources using the term “sustainability”	UNWTO Book on Sustainability 2013				
			Tourism policy and governance	Economic performance, invest, competitiveness	Employment decent work, human capital	Poverty reduction & social inclusion	Sustainability of the natural & cultural environment
DMOs	12	-	-	1 – 8.3%	-	5 – 41.7%	4 – 33.3%
Tour Operators	13	-	1 – 7.7%	5 – 38.5%	-	2 – 15.4%	3 – 23.1%
Hospitality players	52	3 – 5.8%	6 – 11.5%	52 – 100.0%	4 – 7.7%	20 – 38.5%	14 – 26.9%
<i>In Zambia</i>	30	3 – 10.0%	6 – 20.0%	30 – 100.0%	3 – 10.0%	18 – 60.0%	11 – 36.7%
<i>in Zimbabwe</i>	22	-	-	22 – 100.0%	1 – 4.5%	2 – 9.0%	3 – 13.6%
Mobile Apps	6	-	-	5 – 83.3%	-	-	1 – 16.7%
Newspapers /magazines	2	-	-	-	-	-	2 – 100.0%
TOTAL	91	6 – 6.6%	7 – 7.7%	63 – 69.0%	6 – 6.6%	30 – 33.0%	30 – 33.0%

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* All online resources have been checked in August, 2014.