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## **8. Socially sustainable tourist behaviour – Bridging the gap between scholarly research and real-world issues**

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### **1. Introduction**

The concept of sustainable tourism emerged in the 1970s (Serrano et al., 2019), with early research in this field led initially by geographers and environmentalists to discuss sustainable development from an environmental perspective (Butler, 1999). Over the time, sustainability grew in importance and became increasingly embedded in tourism research, with the first definition of sustainable development published by the United Nations' Brundtland Commission in 1987 (Liu, 2003). By the 1990s, scholars were becoming increasingly concerned about sustainable tourism as a concept despite a need for more consensus on a precise definition. However, definitions gradually emerged for sustainable tourism (Cater, 1993; Butler, 1999), though sustainable tourism and sustainable tourist behaviour (STB) continued to be used interchangeably.

Today, sustainable tourist behaviour has become a critical field of enquiry within sustainable tourism (Xiao and Smith, 2006; Lu and Nepal, 2009). As tourism destinations' sustainability challenges continue to grow, it is becoming increasingly apparent that changes in the behaviour of tourists will be necessary in the future (Schultz, 2014). Some of the earliest research describing sustainable tourist behaviour emerged around the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, focusing on environmental sustainability (Wearing et al., 2002). A decade later, researchers started to investigate other dimensions of sustainability, including social and cultural ones, which broadened the discussion of sustainable tourist behaviour. Although a growing body of research addresses multiple sustainability issues, a universally accepted definition of sustainable tourist behaviour continues to elude scholars (John, 2020), partly due to the heterogeneity of tourism destinations and the complexity of the challenges they face. Nevertheless, in general terms, it can be posited that sustainable behaviour involves actions and consumption that tend to deliver social or environmental benefits while reducing the negative impacts (Alazaizeh et al., 2019) in a "green", "ethical", "eco-friendly" or "sustainable" fashion (Hanna and Adams, 2019).



*Figure 8.1 United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (Photo: Courtesy of the United Nations)*

A systematic search of the tourism literature performed using the Scopus database, revealed that there is a growing interest among scholars in sustainable tourist behaviour, in particular related to social and cultural sustainability (Alazaizeh et al., 2019; Gao et al., 2017; Mustafa, 2019). Still, the concept of socially sustainable tourist behaviour remains relatively unexplored, especially in the context of urban tourism destinations, where the interaction between visitors and residents tends to be subject to additional challenges as a result of higher population densities. The concept of socially sustainable tourist behaviour (SSTB) refers to behaviours deemed beneficial to the sustainability of tourism destinations from a socio-cultural perspective. Using the United Nation's framework for Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) (United Nations, 2019) as a reference (Figure 8.1), it could be argued that SSTB can be directly related to SDG1 (no poverty), SDG3 (good health and wellbeing), SDG5 (gender equality), SDG8 (decent work and economic growth), SDG10 (reduced inequalities), SDG11 (sustainable cities and communities), SDG12 (responsible consumption and production), and SDG16 (peace, justice, and strong institutions).

Parallel to this, the communication between academics and real-world on this topic is minimal. Significant gaps exist between academic research and practice. For instance, compared to other disciplines, little research appears to exist on the relationship between tourist behaviour and resident/tourism employee wellbeing (Mathew and Sreejesh, 2017). Another arena where academic research is lacking relates to how tourist consumption contributes to the sustainability of local economies (Testa et al., 2018). Practitioners do not have the same level of knowledge nor fully benefit from academic findings. In turn, primarily due to a seemingly perennial - though not necessarily deliberate - lack of communication between practitioners and academics, urban tourism practice appears to need to be more engaged with research findings, with the risk of this gap potentially widening in the next few decades.

Accordingly, this chapter aims to highlight the gaps between academic and real-world in terms of the discourse of socially sustainable tourist behaviours, and to provide suggestions on how to bridge the gaps. The specific research objectives were to:

1. Assess the adequacy of the coverage of sustainable behaviour and socially sustainable behaviour in the academic and practitioner literatures.
2. Determine if gaps exist in the two literatures and, if so, what these gaps are.

### 3. Provide practical recommendations and suggestions on how to bridge the gaps.

The major contribution of this chapter is in identifying the gaps that exist related to socially sustainable tourist behaviour between academia and practice, and in stating how these gaps can be closed. Closing the gap between academic and real-world will help practitioners in addressing sustainability issues caused by tourists, which is required for achieving sustainable development. The UN's (2015) "2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development" and its 17 sustainable development goals (SDGs) are used as guidance for call for actions for all stakeholders to get engaged in sustainable development from multiple dimensions, including the social perspective (United Nations, 2019).

## 2. Academic research on socially sustainable tourist behaviour

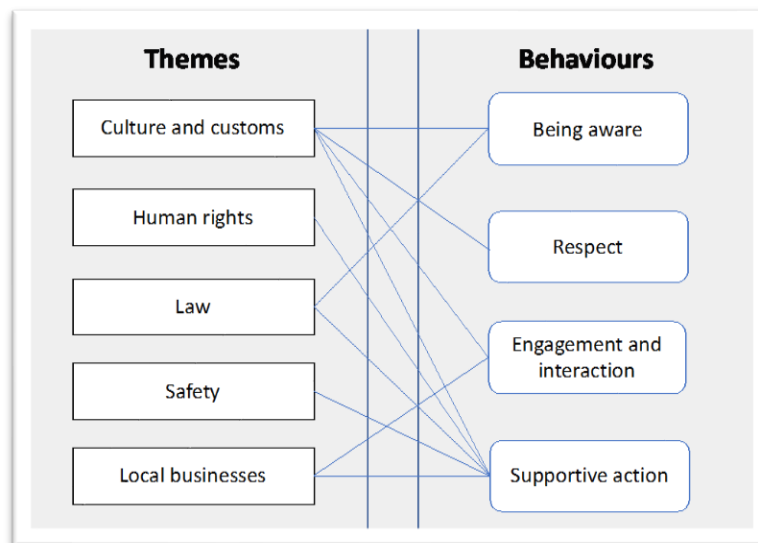
### 2.1 Contested interpretations of socially sustainable tourist behaviour

Despite the growth of research on sustainability in tourism and consumption (Sesini et al., 2020), scholarly enquiry into socially sustainable behaviour remains embryonic, especially in tourism. In the broader context of consumer behaviour, socially responsible consumption has been linked to increasing positive ecological and social impacts (Yan and She, 2011) while reducing negative ones (Mohr et al., 2001). Thus, an ethical consumer would be expected to consider a product or service's ethical performance when making purchase decisions (Shaw and Clarke, 1999). In tourism, however, there has yet to be a consensus on an overarching definition of sustainable tourist behaviour. The same applies to socially sustainable tourist behaviour. Instead, many synonymous terms have been adopted to refer to socially sustainable tourist behaviours. These include - but are not limited to – sustainable (Chandran et al., 2021), ethical ones (Teng et al., 2021), responsible behaviours (Diallo et al., 2015), civilised (Liu et al., 2020), pro-social and protective (Chi et al., 2021), mindful (Jirojkul et al., 2021), coping (Seong et al., 2021) and helping behaviours (Kim and Yoon, 2020). To complicate things further, each category appears to have its contested nuances. Somewhat frustratingly, research on unsustainable or irresponsible tourist behaviour seems to have created its typologies, including uncivilised behaviour (Zhang et al., 2019), deviant behaviour, unethical behaviour, misbehaviour, questionable behaviour, and, for good measure, annoying behaviour (Volgger & Huang, 2019). In turn, this raises methodological dilemmas as the same term is seldom measured using the same constructs, with overlaps between terms that remain fuzzy in our understanding. In essence, the lack of consensus among scholars on this topic does not bode well for effective communications with managers, policymakers, and key decision-makers in tourism cities.

### 2.2. Framework for socially sustainable tourist behaviour

Despite the lack of consensus among scholars concerning a definition of the concept, Li et al. (2022) developed a framework for socially sustainable tourist behaviour based on five themes, adapted partly from the socio-cultural dimension of responsible tourism behaviour (Gong et al., 2019) and other aspects of this concept (Stanford, 2008). A summary of behaviours drawn is shown below in Figure 8.2. Socially sustainable tourist behaviour tends to build on social and cultural themes, with culture playing a crucial role in sustainability (Hawkes, 2001). Some of the behaviours outlined in this framework map favourably onto the UN's Sustainable Development Goals. These include respect, supporting minorities, social equality, safety (Civero et al., 2017), and socially responsible purchasing (Zerbini et al., 2019). To achieve sustainable development and sustainable tourism, there is an urgent need

to comprehensively conceptualise socially sustainable tourist behaviour and investigate the antecedents of the behaviours that are causing issues in real world.



*Figure 8.2 Coverage of the socially sustainable tourist behaviour (SSTB) framework in academic literature (proposed by Li et al., 2022)*

### 3. Real-world perspectives

In the real-world, tourism is not a panacea for economic growth or social development (Singh, 2017), even if it has often been portrayed as such in emerging economies (Binns and Nel, 2002). Nevertheless, tourism has often offered employment opportunities for individuals who lack skills and formal education (ILO, 2017). Similarly, the tourism sector employs a higher proportion of women than other sectors of the economy (UNWTO, 2019), has more women employers than other sectors (Ibid, 2019), and tends to employ high levels of ethnic minorities. Against this backdrop, major multinational tourism organisations such as UNWTO, WTTC, and PATA have led the development of multiple certification bodies for sustainable tourism and ecotourism (e.g., Global Sustainable Tourism Council (GSTC), EarthCheck, Green Globe, Green Key, Blue Flag, Rainforest Alliance, Audubon International, and EU Ecolabel). The same can be said about sustainable tourism organisations (e.g., Center for Responsible Tourism (CREST), Destination Stewardship Center, Green Destinations, Sustainable Travel International, The Travel Foundation) and NGOs, including the World Wildlife Fund, Conservation International, International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN), Fairtrade International, Ocean Wise, and the Nature Conservancy (Morrison, 2023).

Today, much of the employment tourism and hospitality continues to be dominated by low wages (UNWTO, 2014) and sometimes precarious working conditions; issues such as social equity, public welfare, and dignity have become critical challenges highlighted by NGOs in the tourism sector (ILO, 2017). Unfortunately, these are no longer specific to developing countries as migrant labour, on which tourism and hospitality tends to rely, but increasingly becomes the norm in global tourism cities such as London, Dubai, Paris, Rome, New York, Cape Town, or Kathmandu, to mention but a few. However, much of the emphasis of practitioner studies remains on sustainability issues likely to have arguably a much more

significant impact on global tourism cities. These include major threats to environmental sustainability, such as climate change and rising sea levels (Pew Research Center, 2022; World Economic Forum, 2022).

Although societal issues are also on the top list of global issues by the United Nations and World Economic Forum (WEF), much less attention has been placed by practitioner organisations on certain issues of corporate social responsibility (CSR) in tourism, such as the impact of migrant labour and socio-economically disadvantaged groups accepting lower wages and longer working hours in tourism and hospitality. Some academic studies have already started scrutinising the fairness and safety practices of the sector, particularly with regards to employees in the lower echelons of the management ladder (Winchenbach et al., 2019).

Similarly, how should small- and medium-sized business in tourism and hospitality engage with the principles of CSR (Tamajón and Font, 2013)? Most academic research in this context has understandably focused on larger corporations (Coles et al., 2013). However, small- and medium-sized enterprises account for 80% of employment in tourism, which mirrors their role in the broader services sector.

However, with regard to sustainable tourist behaviour, practice-based guides abound with tips for tourists on how to travel sustainably and responsibly, covering all environmental, social, and economic aspects. For example, UNWTO (2020) suggests seven tips for a responsible traveller, built around the nine core principles of the Global Code of Ethics for Tourism. AITO (2022) and Responsible Travel (2022) provide a thorough list of things to do before the trip, on holiday, and after returning home.

Overall, while mass tourism has provided travel opportunities to segments of society in Western countries who would not have been able to travel to sunnier climes before the 1980s, there are changes afoot among new generations in source countries for outbound tourism, which are often much more conscious of the tangible and intangible impacts of this type of travel on local communities in tourism destinations (Possamai, 2022). Thus, more purposeful forms of travel are emerging, including slow or regenerative tourism, where the quality of the visitor experience is prioritised over the number of locations visited, or the level of (material) luxury enjoyed (Sustainability Leaders United, 2021). A key ingredient in service quality here is meaningful and, in some cases, transformational experiences for visitors due to their genuine interaction with their host communities (Sustainable Travel International, 2020).

#### 4. The gaps between academic research and practice

There are significant and recognised gaps between academic research and managerial practice (Rynes et al., 2001; Williams, 2014). The authors suggest that these gaps apply to sustainable tourism and sustainable tourist behaviour, especially concerning the social aspect.

Tourists - essential actors in sustainable tourism - also receive significant attention from academia and practice, focusing on their sustainable behaviours. Academic studies and practical discussions on sustainable tourist behaviour mainly focus on the environmental aspect. While the academic literature on tourism and hospitality studies contains less than 10% of its publications studying the social-cultural dimension of sustainable tourist behaviour (Li et al., 2022), the practical discussion on this aspect is even more limited.

Socially sustainable tourism and socially sustainable tourist behaviour, particularly its conceptualisation – from a theoretical perspective – and behavioural components – from a practical perspective – merit closer attention from both tourism academia and practitioners. Similarly, specific behaviours are often overlooked in tourism studies, and sustainable tourist behaviour is often defined quite generally using rather vague and incomprehensive components. A framework for a more holistic overview of sustainable tourist behaviour is necessary. Only recently, Li et al. (2022) have considered existing practitioners' sustainable travel tips to establish a comprehensive list of socially sustainable tourism. This should be done for all aspects of sustainability as well.

Furthermore, when discussing the social aspect of sustainability in tourism, the industry's emphasis is on the local communities rather than tourists as in academia. For example, the impacts of overtourism or mass tourism on local residents attract significant attention from the industry, governments, and NGOs. The issues of overtourism in Venice or Barcelona have been discussed widely, and governments of these destinations have implemented various strategies to limit the negative social impacts on the communities and ensure the socially sustainable development of these destinations.

#### 5. Social sustainability challenges and gaps in the context of the UN's SDGs framework

Social sustainability is one of the triple-bottom-line framework's (Elkington, 1994) pillars for sustainable development (Purvis, Mao, and Robinson, 2019; Bastante-Ceca et al., 2020). Furthermore, several of the UN's Sustainable Development Goals are related to the social aspects of sustainability (United Nations, 2015). These include SDG1 (no poverty), SDG2 (zero hunger), SDG3 (good health and wellbeing), SDG4 (quality education), SDG5 (gender equality), SDG8 (decent work and economic growth), SDG10 (reduced inequalities), SDG11 (sustainable cities and communities), SDG12 (responsible consumption and production), SDG16 (peace, justice, and strong institutions) and SDG17 (partnerships for the SDGs) (UNWTO, 2020). In fact, prior to the development of its 17 SDGs, the United Nations set 12 goals for sustainable tourism, which aimed to address issues such as visitor fulfilment, cultural richness, community wellbeing, employment quality, and social equity as key social sustainability challenges and impacts (UNWTO, 2005). Although tourist behaviour significantly impacts many of the UN's SDGs outlined earlier, there remain significant gaps in our understanding of the processes affecting these behaviours. Some of these are outlined in Table 8.1. Similarly, the processes affecting these behaviours deserve a level of enquiry that pays due attention to different cultural and geographical contexts, often subject to considerably different value sets.

*Table 8.1 Examples of understudied potential contributors (socially sustainable tourist behaviour) to SDGs.*

SDGs	<b>Examples of potential contributors (socially sustainable tourist behaviour) obtained from real-world sources: UNWTO (2021), Center for Responsible Travel - CREST (2022), Association of Independent Tour Operators - AITO (2021), Global Sustainable Tourism Council - GSTC (2022), and Responsible Travel – RT (2022)</b>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Support local charities during travel.</li> <li>• Make donations to local charities.</li> <li>• If wish to donate, ensure the gifts are distributed fairly and properly.</li> </ul>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Be aware of how to access medical care or contact the embassy in case of an emergency.</li> <li>• Take health and safety precautions.</li> </ul>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Be polite.</li> <li>• Treat with courtesy and respect staff, caretakers and service providers at all tourism facilities.</li> <li>• Consume/purchase local and seasonal.</li> <li>• Pay a fair price and avoid aggressive bargaining.</li> </ul>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Support female-owned businesses.</li> <li>• Support minority-owned businesses.</li> <li>• Choose ethnically diverse businesses.</li> <li>• Support businesses embracing diversity and equality.</li> </ul>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Learn and respect local culture, history, customs, religious beliefs, dress code and more.</li> <li>• Check local regulations when using shared accommodation.</li> <li>• Check the destination's social and political information.</li> <li>• Support responsible programs that benefit the local communities.</li> </ul>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Check and choose responsible/sustainable travel options/operators.</li> <li>• Travel off-season.</li> <li>• Avoid purchasing unethical or illegal or counterfeit products/souvenirs.</li> <li>• Be aware of the origins of products.</li> </ul>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Recognise the signs of illegal activities and report serious issues to local authorities (i.e., human trafficking, human rights abuses, injustice, exploitation, discrimination, wildlife exploitation, poaching, destruction and others).</li> <li>• Observe, follow and obey the local regulations/codes/rules.</li> </ul>

## 6. Bridging the gaps

While academic research on sustainability has flourished since the first volume of the Journal of Sustainable Tourism in 1993, practitioner writing on the topic has also been prolific. In addition to major multinational tourism organisations such as UNWTO, WTTC, and PATA, there are multiple certification bodies for sustainable tourism and ecotourism (e.g., Global Sustainable Tourism Council (GSTC), EarthCheck, Green Globe, Green Key, Blue Flag, Rainforest Alliance, Audubon International, EU Ecolabel), sustainable tourism organisations (e.g., Center for Responsible Tourism (CREST), Destination Stewardship Center, Green Destinations, Sustainable Travel International, The Travel Foundation), and NGOs including the World Wildlife Fund, Conservation International, International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN), Fairtrade International, Ocean Wise, the Nature Conservancy) (Morrison, 2023). Add to this various travel and tourism trade associations, companies, and many DMOs

publishing sustainable tourism guidelines, and the professional literature has become massive.

The reasons for the gaps between academia and practice have been the subject of considerable research. One significant reason is the differences in how academics and practitioners communicate (Figure 8.3). For example, unwieldy language, complex modelling, and a lack of understanding of the real world are the main reasons practitioners think academic research studies (in marketing) are irrelevant (Repsold & Hemais, 2018). Bartunek and Rynes (2014) say that the academic-practitioner divide in the broader management context exists due to differing logics, time dimensions, communication practices, rigour and relevance, and interests and incentives.

Academics follow a somewhat formulaic process in reviewing the literature and reporting on research, as journal editors and reviewers expect this. The sources cited are almost exclusively from academic journals, while practitioner contributions and publications tend to be overlooked. There is a distinct emphasis on theory building and enhancement, with few attempts to merge and synthesise academic and practitioner works. Academics need help articulating meaningful managerial implications from their research, and often such suggestions are thin and not practically grounded.

Practitioners write with greater freedom and primarily based on experience and field knowledge. Seldom do they quote academic research, preferring to cite instead the works of major consulting organisations, research companies, government agencies, and industry associations. Practitioners emphasise “how to” solutions, while academics argue that the foundations for these recommendations are not robust, theory- or research-based. However, Repsold and Hemais (2018) argue that frequently theories are alienated from everyday life because they are hard to prove and have little practical relevance.

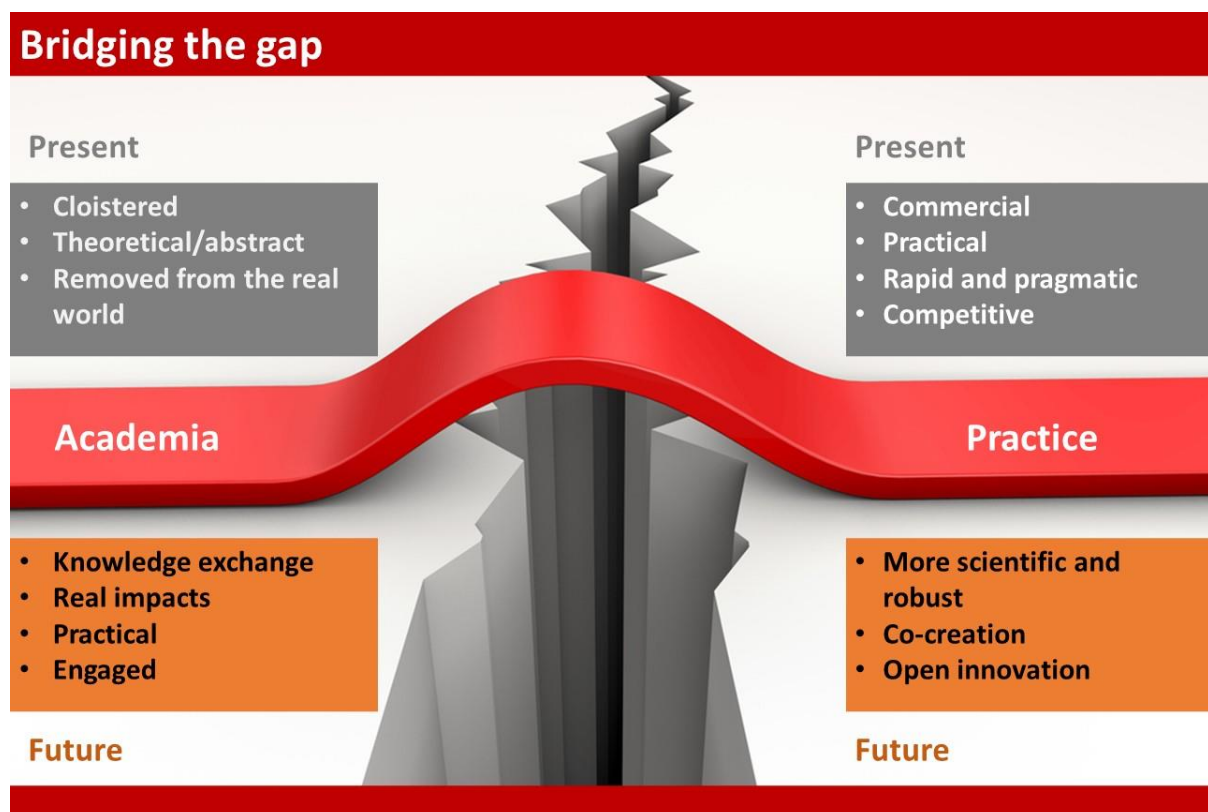


Figure 8.3 Gap between academia and practice. Author's design (Photo: Courtesy, Shutterstock, Inc.)

While the chasm is vast and seems to be expanding, the authors recommend that efforts be made by both sides to blend the best of academic and professional writing, particularly for sustainable development and sustainable tourism. The twin goals should require academic research to make a more significant contribution to society ("real impacts") and encourage practitioners to integrate more rigorous research into works and projects. How to achieve these laudable goals? This will be challenging since information and data on sustainability are massive, given the untethered nature of online content creation. The UNWTO International Network of Sustainable Tourism Observatories (INSTO) could be the forum for taking up this challenge. INSTO is "a network of tourism observatories monitoring the economic, environmental, and social impact of tourism at the destination level" (UNWTO, 2022).

A dialogue on this topic must be started virtually or through in-person, academic-industry meetings. Coalitions of academic journal publishers, journals, industry, and academic associations could organise these efforts. The greater sharing and exchange of information and data must be at the top of the agenda for the dialogue. For example, in the context of sustainable urban tourism, a collaborative effort by Emerald Publishing, a DORA signee (DORA, 2022) and creator of the *Real Impact Manifesto* (Emerald Publishing, 2021), the *International Journal of Tourism Cities*, the International Tourism Studies Association (ITSA), and the City Destinations Alliance (CityDNA) may be appropriate. This is especially critical since scholars have relatively neglected urban destinations concerning sustainability and crises (Maxim and Morrison, 2022; Morrison and Maxim, 2022).

There are specific initiatives that have been taken in some countries to encourage greater sharing of data and information among various partners. One of these is the Knowledge Exchange Framework (KEF) operated by Research England. The KEF's aim are as follows: "The KEF aims to allow universities to better understand and improve their own performance in knowledge exchange, as well as provide businesses and other users with more information to help them access the world-class knowledge and expertise within English providers of higher education" (Research England, 2023).

The authors have already taken up the challenge by integrating academic research and professional recommendations to develop a scale for measuring socially sustainable tourist behaviour (Li et al., 2022). Academic scholars, consultants, and practitioners were involved in the early formative stage of this scale development. This bridging of the divide was required as the academic research on socially sustainable tourist behaviour was too sparse and underdeveloped. The integration of real-world experiences was integral to developing a scale that was robust and comprehensive, as well as practical.

In the run-up to 2030, the date for achieving the UN's Sustainable Development Goals, the need for bridging the academic-industry gap will be accentuated. The attainment of SDG11, Sustainable Cities and Communities, mainly requires the joint attention of academic scholars, urban planners, and tourism practitioners.

## 7. Future trends and catalysts

Expanding calls for greater social responsibility to be shown by the corporate and higher education sectors will be a major catalyst for bridging the knowledge gaps between the two in the future on all aspects of sustainable development, including sustainable tourism. The greater attention to the UN SDGs will be one of the reasons, as will be the increasing focus on filling the gaps by academic institutions and their governing bodies, industry associations, and publishing companies. Another future trend that is expected is joint knowledge exchange (KE) partnerships between industry and academia to clarify the understandings of sustainable tourist behaviour and socially sustainable tourist behaviour.

## 8. Conclusion

To achieve the sustainable development of tourism destinations, the responsibilities lie with all stakeholder groups, including current and future visitors and current and future host communities (i.e., residents, business owners, and government officials) (Byrd, 2007). In line with this, the behaviour of tourists towards local stakeholders and their host destinations will play a vital role in the sustainable development of those destinations. While sustainable tourist behaviour has attracted attention from scholars and practitioners, most focus has been on environmental issues. Conversely, comparatively less attention has been paid to social and cultural and economic aspects. This chapter has attempted to redress the balance by reviewing the latest thinking on socially sustainable tourist behaviour and identifying gaps between academic research and practice. Although differences in communication styles and focus lie at the core of these gaps, a fundamental deficiency in our understanding remains to be rooted in a lack of consensus regarding a definition of what is meant by socially sustainable tourist behaviour. There is also a need for a more meaningful theoretical framework to logically and comprehensively synthesise the diversity of tourist behaviours. Similarly, the processes involved in these behaviours still need to be better understood despite the precise alignment between socially sustainable behaviour and many of the UN's Sustainable Development Goals. Scholarly research must strive to increase its alignment with and relevance to real-world issues if it is to remain impactful. In order for this process of change to commence, a better level of dialogue will need to be developed between practitioners and scholars. A modest, though essential step in this sense is the authors' ongoing research on developing a measurement scale for socially sustainable tourist behaviours, which has yielded more than 50 tourist behaviours that contribute to the socially sustainable development of tourism destinations (Li et al., 2022). This research includes input from practitioners and scholars in sustainable tourism from four continents. The approaches suggested in this chapter are not limited to tourist behaviour. They carry implications for studying broader tourism, consumer, and social science issues affecting cities today and are likely to remain strategic sustainability challenges for generations.

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