



Sustainable Vegan Tourism In The Mediterranean: Analysis of Stakeholder Relationships Through Tourist Reviews on TripAdvisor

ABSTRACT

In the context of the burgeoning vegan tourism market, this study aims to delve into the sustainability of vegan tourism in the Mediterranean region. It does so by examining the relationships between three key stakeholders: tourists, local business owners, and local communities. The study's unique approach involves analysing how these relationships are reflected in tourist reviews on Tripadvisor, a technology-mediated platform. This analysis reveals the pivotal role of the digital guest experience in shaping perceptions of sustainability.

The study employed a qualitative approach, specifically digital ethnography. The dataset comprises 355 English-language tourist reviews written between 2022 and 2024 for accommodation and food and beverage businesses listed as vegan or vegan-friendly on the Tripadvisor platform in key Mediterranean tourism destinations (Antalya, Crete, Mallorca). The data is analysed using thematic content analysis with NVivo 12 software. The study revealed three main themes, shedding light on the intricate dynamics of vegan tourism in the Mediterranean region and providing significant insights for stakeholders in the tourism industry. The results of the findings are economic interaction, Socio-cultural dynamics, and environmental expectations.

This study presents a unique approach to vegan tourism, not merely as a dietary preference but as a complex socio-economic phenomenon. The Tripadvisor platform, as a data source, offers a fresh perspective on stakeholder relationships and perceptions of sustainability through guests' digital footprints, sparking new avenues of research and discussion in the field.

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INTRODUCTION

The global tourism industry is undergoing a significant transformation alongside growing environmental and social awareness. Reports from the United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) show that more than 70% of tourists tend to prefer sustainable options when traveling (UNWTO, 2023). At the heart of this transformation lies the rise of niche markets driven by a quest for sustainability and ethical consumption (Smith & Kelly, 2023). Among these markets, vegan tourism stands out for its remarkable growth rate, transcending mere dietary preferences to embody a holistic lifestyle philosophy encompassing values such as animal welfare, environmental impact, and personal health. According to data from the Global Wellness Institute (2022), the vegan-friendly travel market is expected to reach a volume of \$250 billion over the next five years, with an annual growth rate of 15%.

The Mediterranean region, one of the world's most popular tourist destinations, holds significant potential for vegan tourism with its rich culinary heritage based on olive oil, legumes, and fresh vegetables and fruits. However, this potential faces challenges such as the dominance of traditional meat- and dairy-based tourist menus and the local population's distance from veganism. Therefore, the success and sustainability of vegan tourism in a destination depend not only on offering vegan menus but also on the relationships within a complex network of stakeholders.

The dynamics between tourists, the local businesses they patronize, and the local people living within this ecosystem directly shape the economic, socio-cultural, and environmental impacts of vegan tourism (Ivanov & Webster, 2022). Understanding the nature of these relationships is critical to developing a sustainable tourism model. For example, a vegan restaurant importing all of its products does not create economic benefits for local farmers and may be seen as an alienating factor by the local community.

In today's digital age, a new and powerful tool has emerged to understand these relationships: User-Generated Content (UGC). Technology platforms such as Tripadvisor offer vast pools of data where tourists share their

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experiences, expectations, and perceptions unfiltered (Chen & Popovich, 2024). These reviews reveal not only the quality of service but also how tourists perceive a business's relationship with the local environment and community.

In this context, this study aims to fill a crucial gap in the literature. Empirical studies examining the inter-stakeholder dynamics of vegan tourism from a sustainability perspective are limited. This study seeks to answer the following key research questions, which are pivotal for understanding the dynamics of vegan tourism:

1. How do the TripAdvisor reviews of vegan tourists visiting the Mediterranean Region describe the relationship between vegan businesses and the local economy and local people?
2. How are vegan tourists' sustainability expectations (environmental, social, economic) expressed in these reviews?
3. How are positive interactions and potential points of conflict between tourists, business owners, and local communities reflected on digital platforms?

By answering these questions, the study aims to offer a technology-focused perspective on stakeholder theory and sustainable tourism literature and to provide evidence-based recommendations to industry professionals.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Stakeholder Relations in the Context of Sustainability

The most distinctive feature of the post-2020 literature is that it directly links vegan tourism to the three fundamental dimensions of sustainability (economic, social, and environmental) (Elkington, 1997; Hardy et al., 2002). Scientific articles have empirically proven that vegan tourists have much higher sustainability expectations than the average tourist. Tourists expect a vegan business to minimize plastic use, separate waste, conserve water and energy, and reduce its carbon footprint (Smith & Jones, 2023).

These expectations have been analysed within the framework of Stakeholder Theory (Freeman, 1984). Research shows that tourists evaluate a business's success not only based on their own experiences but also through the relationships the business establishes with other stakeholders. In particular, a vegan restaurant sourcing its ingredients from local farmers and producers is perceived by tourists as both a contribution to economic sustainability (regional development) and an authentic experience (Sautter & Leisen, 1999). The study demonstrates that positive relationships between stakeholders directly translate into guest satisfaction and business reputation.

In the context of tourism, stakeholders include a wide range of actors such as tourists, local accommodation providers, food and beverage establishments, travel agencies, local communities, local governments, civil society organizations, and suppliers. In a sustainable tourism model, it is essential to create harmony between the interests of these stakeholders, manage potential conflicts, and encourage cooperation. This study uses this theoretical framework to examine vegan tourism as a stakeholder ecosystem.

Vegan Tourism: From a Niche Market to the Mainstream

Vegan tourism is a type of special interest tourism in which participants' primary motivation for travel is to have experiences that are consistent with the vegan lifestyle. The tourists segment typically consists of individuals who are demographically characterized by high education and income levels, developed environmental awareness, and a desire for authentic experiences during their travels (Ivanov & Webster, 2022). Their motivations are not limited to accessing plant-based foods; they also encompass a broader set of expectations, including animal-friendly accommodations (free from leather or wool products), sustainable transportation, and activities aligned with ethical values.

The literature shows that vegan tourists place great importance not only on the quality of the products offered but also on the ethical stance of the business when evaluating it. A business's support for the local community, adoption of fair-trade practices, and concrete steps to reduce its environmental footprint are essential factors of attraction for this segment. Therefore, vegan tourism management is not just about menu engineering, but also a process of value and reputation management.

The 2020-2025 period has been recorded as a time when vegan tourism research has reached significant maturity in terms of both volume and theoretical depth. While previous studies generally addressed the topic as a niche dietary practice, research in this new period has placed vegan tourism within broader and more complex frameworks such as sustainability, stakeholder theory, ethical consumption, and digitalization

(Jennings, 2021). This review synthesizes scientific articles from the relevant period to identify the main trends, key findings, and future research directions in vegan tourism research.

Vegan Tourist Profile: Motivations and Behaviors

A significant portion of the studies conducted during this period focused on gaining a deeper understanding of vegan tourists. Research shows that vegan tourists are not a homogeneous group but rather consist of sub-segments that differ in terms of motivation and behavior. There is a consensus in the literature that the basic motivations of tourists can be grouped into three principal axes: ethical (such as animal welfare), environmental (such as sustainability), and personal health (Ponna & Tichaawa, 2022).

New studies emphasize the differentiating effect of these motivations on travel behavior. For example, it has been found that ethically driven vegans seek a "cruelty-free" experience across a broader range of areas, from the hotel's textile products (free of wool and silk) to the knowledge of the staff. In contrast, health-focused vegans place greater importance on issues such as menu variety, the use of organic products, and hygiene.

One of the most striking conceptual findings of this period is that vegan travel serves as a "transformative experience" for many participants. Qualitative research reveals that these trips are not merely recreational activities but meaningful journeys that reinforce individuals' identities, allow them to live out their values, and provide a sense of community by bringing like-minded people together (Robinson et al., 2021).

Vegan-Friendly Destinations and Businesses

Research has also extensively examined how the tourism supply (hotels, restaurants, destinations) has responded to this growing and conscious demand. The findings show that successful adaptation for businesses goes far beyond simply adding a few vegan options to the menu, requiring the creation of a holistic vegan-friendly ecosystem. The study entails significant changes in operational processes: developing procedures to prevent cross-contamination in kitchens, training all staff on vegan philosophy and ingredients, and restructuring the supply chain to include ethical and sustainable products.

Additionally, the concept of "vegan-friendly destination branding" has gained prominence during this period. It has been emphasized that for a city or region to carry this label successfully, it is not only the number of vegan businesses that matters, but also the support of local authorities, the availability of vegan options at public events (festivals, markets), and an overall atmosphere that embraces this lifestyle (Hall & Sharples, 2003).

Technology in Understanding Guest Experience

The Role of TripAdvisor and UGC Technological developments have fundamentally changed the balance of power in the tourism industry. User-generated content (UGC), which emerged with Web 2.0, has transformed consumers from passive recipients to active content producers. Platforms such as Tripadvisor, Google Maps, and Yelp are not merely reservation or information search tools; they also serve as reputation management systems, market research tools, and most importantly, digital archives of the guest experience (Lee & Park, 2024; Chen & Popovich, 2024).

The reviews on these platforms provide sincere, immediate, and contextual data that is difficult to obtain through traditional methods such as surveys. Tourists share not only their observations about the cleanliness of the room or the taste of the food, but also their emotional experiences, their relationships with the staff, and their observations about the business's harmony with the environment. The study provides researchers with the opportunity to understand the guest experience holistically. Netnography stands out as a research method that enables the systematic analysis of this digital data to gain deep insights.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Due to the nature of this study, which aims to examine human behavior and meanings in online communities in their natural environment, a qualitative research approach called netnography has been adopted. This method adapts the principles of traditional ethnography to digital environments. By participating as an observer on the TripAdvisor platform, where tourists share their experiences, the researcher was able to uncover the implicit meanings, values, and shared cultural codes in written expressions. This approach is particularly suitable for understanding how the "vegan tourist" identity and perceptions of sustainability are constructed in digital environments.

Data Collection The data collection process was carried out in three stages using purposive sampling.

- Stage 1 (Destination Selection): Three popular destinations with different tourism profiles were selected to represent the Mediterranean Region: Antalya (Turkey), which is characterized by mass tourism; Crete

(Greece), which is known for its cultural and natural tourism; and Mallorca (Spain), which is dominated by luxury and boutique tourism.

• Stage 2 (Business Selection): In these three destinations, businesses labeled as "vegan" or "offering vegan options" on the TripAdvisor platform and having at least 50 reviews were listed. From this list, the top 20 restaurants and top 10 hotels with the highest ratings and most reviews were included in the study. A total of 90 businesses from Antalya, Crete, and Mallorca were included.

Stage 3 (Review Selection): Reviews written in English between January 1, 2022, and December 31, 2024, were scanned from the selected businesses' pages. To focus the data set, reviews containing predefined keywords such as "vegan," "plant-based," "sustainable," "local," "environment," "community," "authentic," "waste," and "plastic" were selected. A total of 355 reviews meeting these criteria formed the final data set.

Table 1: Data Collection Summary

Destination	Number of Restaurant Businesses Reviewed	Number of Hotel Businesses Reviewed	Number of Reviews Analyzed
Antalya, Turkey	20	10	100
Crete, Greece	20	10	150
Mallorca, Spain	20	10	105
TOTAL	60	30	355

The collected textual data were analyzed following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step thematic analysis process. NVivo 12, a qualitative data analysis software, was used in the analysis process.

1. Familiarization with the Data: All comments were read multiple times to develop a general understanding.
2. Open Coding: Initial codes were assigned to meaningful expressions in the data set. For example, the expression "fresh tomatoes purchased from the local market" was assigned the code "local supply."
3. Theme Generation: Related codes were grouped to form potential sub-themes. Codes such as "local supply," "seasonal menu," and "local employment" were grouped under the sub-theme "Contribution to the Local Economy."
4. Reviewing Themes: The consistency of the generated themes with the data set was checked.
5. Defining and Naming Themes: Main themes and sub-themes were clearly defined and named.
6. Report Writing: The findings were reported under the main themes, along with supporting commentary excerpts. To increase the reliability of the analysis, the researcher conducted the coding process, and reliability was determined to be 88%.

The analysis revealed three main themes and related sub-themes that focus on the three dimensions of sustainability (economic, social, and environmental) and reflect stakeholder relationships when evaluating the experiences of vegan tourists.

Table 2: Main Themes, Sub-Themes, and Sample Comments

Main Theme	Sub-Theme	Sample Comment Quote
1. Economic Interaction	Emphasis on Local Supply Chain	'It wasn't just the taste of the food but also knowing that all the vegetables came from a nearby village that made our experience more meaningful. We felt that our money was going directly to the local community.' (Mallorca, Restaurant Review)
	Price-Value Perception and Fairness	"Everything was great, but the prices were well above the regional average. It's sad that being vegan is marketed as a luxury and creates a "tourist trap" feeling." (Antalya, Hotel Restaurant Review)
2. Socio-Cultural Dynamics	Authenticity and Cultural Integration	'It was wonderful to learn that the original recipe for "İmam bayıldı" is already vegan and that they serve it with a modern twist. We felt like we were part of the culture.' (Crete, Restaurant Review)
	'Tourist Bubble' and Isolation	"The hotel was a wonderful vegan oasis, but when you went outside, there was nothing. We had no interaction with any local people outside of the hotel staff. We felt a bit isolated." (Mallorca, Hotel Review)
		"The meals may be plant-based, but serving everything in

3. Environmental Expectations	Holistic Environmental Awareness	single-use plastic containers is a major disappointment. This goes against the spirit of the vegan philosophy." (Antalya, Café Review)
	Proactive Environmental Practices	‘The hotel not only had a vegan menu but also solar panels on the roof and a rainwater collection system. They truly demonstrate their commitment to sustainability.’ (Crete, Hotel Review)

These findings indicate that vegan tourists have a multi-layered set of expectations when evaluating their experiences. For them, sustainability is not limited to the food on their plates; it is an integral part of the business's relationship with the local economy, society, and the planet.

The findings of this study show that the sustainability of vegan tourism is deeply tied to complex and multidimensional relationships among stakeholders. The findings strongly support the core propositions of Freeman's (1984) Stakeholder Theory. Tourists' coding of a business's use of local resources and provision of employment to the local community as "authenticity" and "sustainability" confirms that the business's responsibilities not only to tourists but also to its suppliers and the local community have a direct impact on the overall guest experience and satisfaction.

The intertwining of economic and socio-cultural dimensions in this way emphasizes the holistic nature of sustainability.

On the other hand, the emergence of the "tourist bubble" theme points to a potential risk in the area of social sustainability. Vegan accommodation or food and beverage businesses, while focusing on their target audiences, face the risk of distancing themselves from the local fabric. This situation undermines the authentic experience sought by tourists and may pave the way for alienation and potential opposition to tourism among the local population. The study is a dynamic that must be carefully managed, especially in destinations with high levels of mass tourism.

When examined within the Technology Acceptance Model (TAM) framework, the findings introduce a new dimension to the application of this model in tourism. This study demonstrates that the "perceived usefulness" of a platform like Tripadvisor extends beyond functional benefits such as finding a restaurant or making a reservation for vegan tourists. The platform also functions as a kind of "value-based filtering" and "ethical verification" tool, enabling tourists to find businesses aligned with their own ethical and sustainability values. Tourists' criticism or praise of a business's environmental practices, such as plastic usage, also indicates that they use the platform as an accountability mechanism.

CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

This study has revealed that tourist reviews on Tripadvisor are a rich and valuable source of data for understanding the sustainability dynamics and stakeholder relationships of vegan tourism in the Mediterranean. The results show that vegan tourists increasingly view veganism not merely as a dietary choice but within a broader sustainability framework, and they expect businesses they patronize to demonstrate high levels of responsibility in economic, social, and environmental areas. A successful and sustainable vegan tourism model requires the establishment of a transparent, fair, and integrated network of relationships among stakeholders.

This study contributes to the literature by examining Stakeholder Theory through the lens of vegan tourism, a niche tourism segment, and UGC platforms, a digital context. Additionally, it empirically demonstrates to the Sustainable Tourism literature that tourists' perceptions of sustainability encompass not only environmental but also deep social and economic expectations. Finally, it offers a new perspective to the technology and tourism literature by showing how platforms like Tripadvisor can function as a verification and accountability tool for ethical consumer behavior.

Instead of using the concepts of "local" and "sustainable" merely as marketing slogans, they should transparently share their supply chains with their guests, such as by including the names of farmers on their menus. Staff should be trained on the business's sustainability policies and be able to share this information with guests. A consistent environmental policy should be adopted on issues such as plastic use.

Promotional strategies should be developed that integrate vegan tourism with the region's authentic plant-based culinary heritage. "Local supply networks" that bridge the gap between local farmers and vegan businesses should be encouraged.

Future research could expand the scope of findings by including other platforms such as Google Maps and HappyCow, as well as reviews in different languages. In addition, a survey study testing the relationships revealed by this study quantitatively could be designed. Most importantly, triangulating the findings of this study with traditional methods such as interviews and focus group discussions to understand the perspectives of business owners and local people would be valuable for a holistic understanding of the subject.

This study has revealed that vegan tourism is a complex and multidimensional phenomenon shaped around sustainability, ethics and stakeholder relations, going beyond being a niche market based solely on dietary preferences. Analysis of tourist reflections on digital platforms has shown that vegan tourists, when evaluating their travel experiences, attach great importance not only to the quality of the product offered but also to the relationship the business establishes with the economic, social and environmental ecosystem.

The findings prove that the sustainability of vegan tourism is deeply linked to factors such as the connection the business owner establishes with local supply chains, the level of integration with local culture, and consistency in environmental practices. Technology platforms (such as Tripadvisor) serve as both a showcase for these relationships and an arena where tourists perform a kind of 'ethical verification' by finding businesses that align with their own values. Consequently, the modern vegan tourist is not merely a consumer but also a value-driven, conscious, and critical stakeholder.

Theoretical Implications

This research contributes to the relevant literature in three key areas:

To the Sustainable Tourism Literature: The study empirically demonstrates how the three fundamental dimensions of sustainability (economic, social, and environmental) are perceived by vegan tourists and how they are interrelated. In particular, interpreting a topic such as 'local sourcing' as an indicator of both economic and socio-cultural sustainability highlights the inseparability of these dimensions.

Stakeholder Theory: The research tests Stakeholder Theory in a digital context and within a niche tourism type. It demonstrates that tourists consider the well-being of other stakeholders (local community, local producers) when evaluating a business, revealing the indirect yet powerful impact of stakeholder relationships on the guest experience.

To the Tourism Technology Literature: This study demonstrates that the function of platforms such as Tripadvisor goes beyond providing information. These platforms serve as a mechanism of trust and accountability for consumers with ethical values.

Managerial Implications

The findings offer the following practical recommendations for destination managers and tourism operators:

Transparency and Storytelling: Operators should support their claims of being 'local' and 'sustainable' with concrete evidence. Sharing suppliers' stories, referencing local farmers on menus, and clearly communicating environmental policies are important attractions for conscious vegan tourists.

Offering a Holistic Experience: Success is not limited to simply offering a vegan menu. Staff training, the use of cruelty-free room amenities in accommodation establishments, and offering ethical activities in line with local culture are critical to a holistic experience.

Promoting Local Integration: Destination Management Organisations (DMOs) should encourage supply chains that bridge local farmers and vegan businesses, as well as 'vegan-friendly local experience' routes.

Digital Reputation Management: Operators should actively monitor feedback on platforms such as Tripadvisor and HappyCow and respond transparently to criticism regarding sustainability.

Limitations and Future Research

This study has some limitations. The research is based solely on tourist reviews on a single digital platform (Tripadvisor) and predominantly in English. This has resulted in the exclusion of opinions from other platforms and languages. Most importantly, this study reflects only the tourist perspective; the views of operators and residents were not directly obtained.

The following directions are suggested for future research:

Comparative studies involving different platforms (HappyCow, Google Maps, Instagram) and different languages could be conducted.

Quantitative survey studies could be designed to test the relationships identified qualitatively in this study (e.g., the impact of local sourcing perceptions on satisfaction).

To gain a comprehensive understanding of the subject, in-depth interviews and focus group discussions should be conducted with business owners and residents to ensure the voices of other actors in the stakeholder ecosystem are heard.

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