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ABSTRACT

If destination marketing organisations (DMOs) are to contribute to the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals, they have a moral responsibility to encourage the development of more sustainable tourism, to promote this to consumers and engage them to behave more sustainably. However, we know little about how these DMOs frame the sustainability discourses of their destinations or how they urge potential consumers to act. We conducted a content and discourse analysis of six European Arctic DMO consumer websites. The findings reveal examples of euphemistic labelling and using morally neutral language to conceal unsustainable activity. There is a sustainability communication discourse in what can be interpreted as moral muteness. Moral muteness helps us to interpret how DMOs downplay the negative impacts of tourism and promote low-effort pro-environmental behaviour to provide a narrative that allows the clients to morally disengage. This article contributes to the call for discussion on the ethics of sustainable tourism and the need to overcome an innately economic growth-friendly tourism science.

Introduction

The sustainability of tourism destinations has been posited as a potentially significant contributor to the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) (Hall, 2019; Moyle et al., 2022). Given the increased interest in and dedication to sustainability amongst different stakeholders in tourism, there is a potential for co-creating value and possibly mainstreaming sustainability (Font et al., 2018), going beyond growth thinking and instead maintaining sustainable development through management of consumer behaviour and negative externalities (Saarinen, 2018). Therefore, it is also critical for destination marketing organisations (DMOs) to credibly communicate their efforts, commitment and motivation to follow sustainability principles (Fennell & de Grosbois, 2023; Font et al., 2018). This can be effectively done *via* destination websites (Leung et al., 2013), although not all destinations seem to utilise this possibility to communicate

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their present sustainability practices and improvements (Ghanem & Elgammal, 2017), to use sustainability as a success factor for the destination (Santos et al., 2022).

DMOs are vital for encouraging tourists' sustainable behaviour, as part of their role is to engage with locals (Ghanem & Elgammal, 2017), tourists (Melo & Farias, 2018) and other stakeholders within and outside the destination (Tanković & Mušanović, 2022). The meaning of sustainability has been challenged in tourism research, as highly contested both in academia and practice, even leading to a certain aversion against using the term among DMO managers (Albrecht et al., 2022). Nevertheless, sustainability communication, which here refers to how DMOs communicate responsibilities, obligations and activities related to sustainability, can inspire pro-environmental behaviour (PEB). In tourism, sustainability communication is commonly split into high-effort and low-effort behaviour, measured by the level of commitment and involvement required from the individual (Li & Wu, 2020).

Tourism research on sustainability (Hall, 2016) and sustainable communication (Font & McCabe, 2017) continues to grow. Nevertheless, a systematic review (Tölkes, 2018) of almost 100 published articles on sustainability communication reveals a theoretical gap, as the focus on the 'environmental' pillar of sustainability is overrepresented, while only one-third of the articles investigate sustainability communication from all three pillars of economic, environmental and social sustainability. DMOs play a crucial role in sustainability communication and in marketing idealised destinations, yet there are few studies that empirically explore their communication efforts (Ghanem & Elgammal, 2017) in relation to all the SDGs. To acknowledge the role of DMOs in tourism destinations' achievement of the SDGs and the connection to sustainability communication, one should be aware of its power to improve companies' reputation (Kim & Park, 2011; Sen & Bhattacharya, 2001). Nevertheless, sustainability communication is often inadequate and superficial, particularly on online channels (Moisescu, 2015). Hence, research is needed to understand how DMOs' communication can be used as a tool to achieve the SDGs through promoting sustainability at tourism destinations, or how it, on the contrary, might downplay more PEB at destinations by muting sustainability.

Building on Ghanem and Elgammal (2017), Tanković and Mušanović (2022) argue for the importance of multidimensional sustainability communication from DMOs; this should include (1) information on sustainability covering all three pillars (e.g. code of practice, local community life or tourism flow) and (2) sustainability motivation and engagement (e.g. certifications or green transport alternatives), as this indirectly affects destination reputation. However, there has been little discussion regarding DMOs' sustainability communication and the moral muteness that seemingly prevails. The moral disengagement perspective represents a novel approach to address this 'ethics – morality gap' in tourism literature (Caton, 2012; Jamal, 2020). Through the lens of moral disengagement theory, this study adds to the sustainability communication literature by investigating how DMOs shape the sustainability discourse, analysing the communication of the SDGs and PEB. Moreover, the use of this theoretical lens represents an innovative, and called-for, perspective (Jamal, 2020; Saarinen, 2018) on how DMOs use language to promote or mute sustainability.

Literature review

The responsibility of DMOs for a more sustainable future

There are multiple studies relating SDGs to tourism (Lockstone-Binney & Ong, 2022; Moyle et al., 2022; Nunkoo et al., 2023; Rasoolimanesh et al., 2023), but they often focus on one goal at a time, explaining how its achievement will aid the realisation of the remaining goals (Hall, 2019). For example, Alarcón and Cole (2019) found a link between the SDGs and gender from a tourism perspective. Gender relates to many of the SGDs, but SDG 5 aims to achieve gender equality (United Nations, 2022a). Covering only one goal could be problematic because it does not incorporate the more holistic perspective that critically considers the dynamics of tourism (Boluk

et al., 2019), and viewing tourism as a whole is necessary to achieve the SDGs (Hall, 2019). Several scholars have emphasised that without good tourism management, there will be significant negative impacts on the planet, its people, peace, and prosperity. Research also highlights how important the SDGs are for tourism to grow and develop sustainably (Hall, 2019). At the same time, tourism research can be criticized for being inherently growth-friendly and not going beyond the current narrow paradigm (Hall, 2022; Saarinen, 2018), which often drives the DMOs market approach.

In the research most related to DMOs, Scheyvens and Cheer (2022) explore the partnerships required to achieve the SDGs. Their study underlines the importance of SDG seventeen (i.e. partnerships, linking stakeholders regionally, nationally and internationally to work together towards common goals) acting as a link between organisations to work towards the other SDGs (Scheyvens & Cheer, 2022), and explains how imperative it is that partnerships are formed in tourism, to give destinations and their communities the best chance of achieving sustainable development. Although there are references to destination management and how this can be done sustainably, there is a lack of empirical research linking DMOs specifically to the SDGs. Yet DMOs' communication plays a role in the process of destination image formation (Băcilă et al., 2022) and hence in promoting sustainable tourism behaviours (Sultan et al., 2021).

The sustainability muteness of DMOs

We use the concept of moral muteness to explain how and why DMOs downplay the climate change emergency, the negative impacts of travelling to a destination, and the sustainability actions that the DMO and organisations in the destination may be taking, for fear of making potential customers feel a sense of conflict between their desire to visit those locations and the probable negative impacts of their visit. As marketers of destinations, DMOs' communication is crucial in terms of its influence on sustainable tourism. Herein lies DMO's opportunity to encourage the development and communication of tourism which also could foster lasting change (Soulard et al., 2019), allowing tourists to morally engage.

Sustainability communication is an emerging topic in tourism research (Font & Lynes, 2018; Tölkes, 2018) as well as in the tourism industry (Moisescu, 2015). There is considerable understanding of what constitutes sustainability communication (Font & McCabe, 2017), and it has been studied at different levels, such as business (Moisescu, 2015; Villarino & Font, 2015), tourist (Melo & Farias, 2018) and destination (Tiago et al., 2021), along with the benefits tourism destinations might gain from it (see e.g. Mele et al., 2019). Although tourist destinations have been systematically developing their sustainability efforts (Veiga et al., 2018), communicating these efforts is viewed as challenging because of the different understandings of sustainability (see Ghanem & Elgammal, 2017; Ghanem & Saad, 2015) or the fear of the message being perceived as deception such as greenwashing (Font & McCabe, 2017).

This is not necessarily the case for DMOs, because their role is not merely to market and sell a destination but also to manage infrastructure, facilitate stakeholder engagement, provide business advice, and develop destination strategy, along with others (Pearce, 2016). The degree to which sustainability is integrated into these tasks depends on a variety of variables such as available funding and the division of work between local, regional, and national actors (Albrecht et al., 2022). Additionally, as DMO's perceptions and interpretation of the term sustainability vary, the execution of sustainability can also differ depending on the destination (Albrecht et al., 2022). Albrecht et al. (2022) point out that the realization of sustainability is contingent upon the establishment of a shared understanding of what constitutes sustainable destination development. Mutual understanding, in turn, develops through sustainable-oriented communication (Băcilă et al., 2022).

Sustainable tourism has been criticized for bringing similar problems as conventional tourism, and for being a new way of marketing that allows businesses to wrap the same products in a

more ethically appealing way (Lansing & De Vries, 2007). However herein lies the responsibility of promoting tourism ethics, which is not only understudied in tourism research (Caton, 2012; Jamal, 2020), but also represents an area in tourism practice, in need of morally just marketing of sustainable tourism that can foster responsible commitments and behaviours from both businesses and consumers, towards the achievement of the SDGs.

At the DMO level, one aim of sustainability communication could be to gain a shared understanding of sustainability and enhance interaction (Joseph, 2010) between tourists and destinations (Buhalis & O'Connor, 2005) by sharing information. The different interpretations of sustainability generate a situation where one tends to emphasise either environmental and/or social sustainability issues or financial aspects (Ghanem & Elgammal, 2017), instead of having a holistic focus on all three pillars of sustainability (environmental, economic and socio-cultural). Ghanem and Elgammal (2017) concluded that DMOs often lack suitable tactics to communicate sustainability and that they need to balance all three pillars in their communication to better inform, motivate and engage stakeholders in the development of sustainability at destinations. To this end, previous studies (e.g., Ghanem & Elgammal, 2017) have stressed the role of DMOs in creating a common vision of sustainability and thereby in developing the sustainability in a region (Joseph, 2010). Digital communication channels, including DMOs' websites, play an increasingly important role for effective, credible and engaging sustainability communication (Ghanem & Elgammal, 2017), thus fostering sustainable tourism destinations.

Activation of low-effort PEBs to facilitate moral disengagement

For destinations to become sustainable, actions and behaviour that positively impact the destination are needed, e.g., moving beyond the prevailing growth paradigm and rethinking tourism development (Higgins-Desbiolles et al., 2019; Saarinen, 2018). DMOs should acknowledge their role in sustainable development, which represents opportunities and benefits for the destination and its stakeholders (Albrecht et al., 2022).

Actions or behaviours that have very little or no negative impact on the environment, or those that even contribute towards its protection and sustainability are referred to as PEBs (Bamberg & Möser, 2007; Kim & Coghlan, 2018; Steg & Vlek, 2009). PEBs can be either high-effort or low-effort, depending on the level of commitment and involvement (Li & Wu, 2020), with low-effort PEBs often having a smaller impact than high-effort PEBs (Cologna et al., 2022). A company that fears customer backlash will choose to make it easy for customers to buy the product by suggesting only some PEBs that are low-effort, but sufficient to restore the customers' sense of having done their duty (and thus allowing the customer to morally disengage). Low-effort behaviours can be regarded as more of a social involvement, whereas high-effort behaviours go beyond this and can be seen as active engagement (Ramkissoon et al., 2018).

This can be exemplified by the fact that low-effort PEBs require less contribution from tourists and include more relaxed activities (Ramkissoon et al., 2013), such as picking up litter or not feeding wild animals (Halpenny, 2010). By contrast, high-effort PEBs would require more time and active participation, such as volunteering time to help with conservation efforts or campaigning for protection of a national park (Ramkissoon et al., 2013). Nevertheless, for tourists' sustainability efforts to gain momentum and make a significant difference, tourists should adopt both low-effort and high-effort PEBs; arguably high-effort PEBs are more crucial since they have a greater positive impact and bring immediate benefits by protecting and enhancing the environment of a destination (Li & Wu, 2020; Song & Soopramanien, 2019). Whereas low-effort PEBs have limited value in safeguarding and improving a destination's resources (Li & Wu, 2020).

Li and Wu (2020) analysed (high-low) PEB intentions and ways of predicting these through social interactions and found that the two types were not distinguished by environmental

knowledge but by how much tourists valued and were concerned about the environment. Tourists who demonstrated high PEB intentions showed a strong association with environmental value and concern. Tourists with high-effort PEB intentions had stronger emotional connection to the destination, strong interpersonal trust and higher group norms, and with high-effort behaviours, tourists will contribute directly towards enhancing the biodiversity and increasing the sustainability of the destination (Li & Wu, 2020). However, Ramkissoon et al. (2013) warn that place satisfaction positively affects low-effort PEBs, meaning that tourists with higher place satisfaction are less likely to engage in high-effort PEBs because they were so satisfied with their experience that they do not see a need to change it or their behaviour as a result. It is therefore essential that tourists receive reliable information (e.g. from DMOs) on how their behaviour impacts their destination and on what they could be doing to help the environment in places with high tourist satisfaction, to encourage high-effort PEBs.

Moral disengagement via under-communication of environmental crises and exaggeration of compensation of low-effort behaviours

DMOs can choose to selectively communicate environmental crises and some low-effort environmental efforts that customers can engage in, as a deliberate mechanism to allow customers to go on holiday without feeling moral responsibility. Moral disengagement theory (Bandura, 1986) explains how individuals can disassociate moral standards from their actions to allow them to adopt unethical behaviour without feeling negative emotions (Moore, 2015). Tourists tend to justify actions that are not environmentally friendly. Wu et al. (2021) contend that tourists are more likely to engage in PEBs if they have a strong moral obligation towards safeguarding the environment. Hence, research needs to embrace both moral obligation and moral disengagement when investigating sustainability behaviour in tourism.

Although research into moral disengagement has covered almost all industries and aspects of society (Detert et al., 2008), tourism lacks extensive research to date, despite noteworthy exceptions (Peng et al., 2023; Ryan & Kinder, 1996). The moral disengagement theory explains how individuals might exhibit or join unethical behaviour, without feeling negative emotions about it, as their moral standards have been detached from their actions (Moore, 2015). For tourism specifically, the existing literature explains that tourism is 'a temporally constrained, socially tolerated period of wish fulfilment, a form of fantasy enactment that is normally denied to people' (Ryan & Kinder, 1996, p. 507), which is why the moral disengagement theory is present in the industry and its tourists. A common example of moral disengagement in the tourism industry is the travelling involved; most tourists acknowledge the negative effects of travelling by air, yet do it anyway, unconsciously using justification techniques, highlighted in the moral disengagement theory (Wu et al., 2021).

Bandura (2002) explains the eight interrelated mechanisms that allow people to behave in ways they believe to be unethical, but without or by reframing potential feelings of guilt and self-censure. *Moral justification* is the process of justifying immoral actions, by allowing them to have some positive purpose (Bandura, 2007). It is a disengagement practice and allows an individual to reconstruct their negative behaviour or to portray it as socially or personally acceptable, as it serves a moral or worthy purpose (Sharma, 2020). *Euphemistic labelling* explains the reconstruction of an individual's conduct by distorting language or using morally neutral language, to make an unethical act seem to be ethical or respectable (Sharma, 2020). *Advantageous comparison* is used by individuals to make their negative actions seem less harmful (Wu et al., 2021), by comparing their behaviours to other more negative actions (Jørgensen & Reichenberger, 2023), making the behaviour they are exhibiting appear to be the lesser of two evils (Bandura, 2007).

Displacement of responsibility refers to people minimising their connection to a negative action by transferring their responsibility onto someone else, such as the authorities (Bandura,

1999), essentially passing on the blame and thus feeling less responsibility. *Diffusion of responsibility* is similar to displacement; however, it spreads the blame over a number of people, with a group of people being held responsible for the behaviour, and therefore less responsibility on each individual (Wu et al., 2021). *Distortion of consequences* refers to minimising or disparaging the seriousness of the consequences of a certain unethical behaviour (Moore et al., 2012). *Dehumanisation* operates based on the recipients of the unethical act or behaviour (Bandura, 2002), as 'the mechanism whereby individuals' internal moral standards are less likely to be activated if the target of behaviour has been defined as unworthy of moral regard' (Wu et al., 2021, p. 3). The final mechanism is *attribution of blame*, which places responsibility for the unethical behaviour on the target (Detert et al., 2008).

When linking moral obligation and PEBs, the literature suggests that many types of tourists are justifying their negative behaviour by using one or more of the mechanisms of moral disengagement theory. The higher a tourist's level of moral reasoning, the more likely that person is to behave altruistically (Wu et al., 2021). In studying the formation of PEBs, while using moral disengagement theory to understand the promotion and inhibition of PEB mechanisms, Wu et al. (2021) suggest that moral obligation contributes towards tourists' engagement with low-effort PEBs, and that the self-efficacy achieved from demonstrating these actions will encourage their intention to perform high-effort PEBs. Distinguishing between low-effort and high-effort PEBs was critical, with evidence showing that low-effort PEBs act as a mediator between moral considerations and the intention of displaying high-effort PEBs.

DMOs play a key role in stressing the importance of promoting PEBs as influencing the sustainability of destinations. In this study, we aim to explore how moral disengagement is used in communication from DMOs to promote feel-good aspects of sustainability, while in so doing potentially also muting sustainability that can be perceived as controversial, to legitimize travel. The rhetoric-reality gap is relevant in this regard because it refers to co-existing discourses which are translated into social practices (Bell et al., 2019). Hence, when arguing for the responsibility of DMOs to encourage more sustainable tourism actions and behaviour, we would argue that the time is ripe for an investigation into the content and discourses of destination communication.

Methods

It is important to study moral disengagement about unsustainable consequences of travelling, as tourism remains one of the world's largest industries. Paradoxically in the search for new, sustainable experiences, tourists seek vulnerable natural areas. The Arctic is one example. To initiate PEBs is particularly important for the Arctic, where in recent decades global warming has increased almost four times faster than in the rest of the world, known as Arctic amplification (Rantanen et al., 2022). This research explores how DMOs selectively communicate economic, environmental and socio-cultural aspects of sustainability, to facilitate customers' moral disengagement by downplaying the importance and urgency of unsustainable impacts and customers' contributions to them and easing customers' conscience by proposing easy-to-achieve low-involvement PEBs.

We conduct this research in the Arctic tourism context, where the impacts of climate change are undeniable and where there is evidence of last-chance tourism (D'Souza et al., 2023), which demonstrates customers' awareness of the environment decoupled from their perceptions of responsibility (Font & Hindley, 2017; Hindley & Font, 2018). The data collection was based on a sample of six European Arctic DMO websites (coded A–F), that vary in size. Our data reflects the online communication content as it can be analysed from the websites (Krippendorff, 2013; Vespestad & Clancy, 2021). Throughout the analysis, the team was conscious of the importance to maintain the awareness of what might affect the outcome of the data collection through reflexivity and transparency (Gretzel et al., 2020).

Phase 1: Content of sustainability communication

Few methodologies have been developed to measure tourism activities relative to key theoretical concepts of sustainability. Haddock and Devereux (2016, p. 82), however, developed a 'crosswalk' or mapping system to correlate specific tourism volunteering activities against the SDG goals. The advantage of this crosswalk system was to show how individual volunteering opportunities contributed to several SDGs and how the SDGs can be achieved in many ways (Haddock & Devereux, 2016). Lockstone-Binney and Ong (2022) have since adopted the crosswalk of Haddock and Devereux (2016) to further analyse tourism volunteering contributions to the SDGs. Both Haddock and Devereux's (2016) and Lockstone-Binney and Ong (2022) use the crosswalk system for volunteering opportunities against the SDGs. This study similarly uses the crosswalk to correlate specific tourism activities against the SDGs and then builds upon Haddock and Devereux's (2016) and Lockstone-Binney and Ong;s (2022) studies by also correlating to the three pillars of sustainability and low-effort and high-effort PEBs.

Phase 1 data were collected during summer 2022. An initial matrix form per DMO was used. First, the adapted matrix was populated if each DMO's consumer website acknowledged any of the three pillars of sustainability, or if tourists were actively encouraged to do things which benefited the local people economically, environmentally, and socially. For example, DMO-E: Highlights how travelling at different times of the year will support the economy year-round. Next, the matrix was completed if the DMO aligned its tourism activities and practices with any single SDG. For example, DMO-E links to SDG 8 (decent work for all) by noting it encourages people to buy from local vendors and do activities using local companies, due to the advantages this brings to the local economy. Also, encouragement to book during the off-peak season, which will secure tourism jobs year-round. Lastly, the form was completed with examples of various high- and low-effort PEBs evidenced from the DMO's consumer website. For example, DMO-A had guidelines on how to visit the nature sites, e.g., taking your rubbish with you and using official campsites.

Following the initial thematic coding and data mapping, a further iteration of Haddock and Devereux's (2016) crosswalk was generated. This second matrix was created to explore the potential links between the Arctic DMOs' communications of sustainability and Bandura's (1986) eight psychological mechanisms of moral disengagement. The matrix was populated with DMO actions or behaviours to highlight how their promoted activities and practices have differing levels of impact on the environment. To our knowledge, such an undertaking has not been attempted to date. For example, DMO-B we noted moral justification of trying reindeer meat as a way to engage with local culture and traditions, despite reindeer being classified as vulnerable by the WWF (2022).

Since an indicative coding scheme was absent in Haddock and Devereux's suggested methodology, the authors developed one and used it to facilitate the mapping processes. Examples were added to the matrix if the DMO communicated sustainability issues directly by explicitly stating how their activity or practice aligned with a sustainability pillar or SDG, or indirectly by highlighting any activities' environmental credentials or impact without specifically stating how they applied to a sustainability pillar or an SDG.

Phase 2: Sustainability discourse

The data for this phase were collected during winter 2022/2023. After the first part of the analysis was conducted on the manifest content (Vespestad & Clancy, 2021), there was a need to capture the latent content with the intent of going deeper into interpretation, and capturing the underlying meaning (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005) of sustainability communication. A second analysis was therefore performed from the same DMOs' websites. In general, a discourse is 'a

language for talking about or representing knowledge about a specific aspect' (Mutana & Mukwada, 2018, p. 60). When something is articulated in a text, it is also a way of not saying something else (Bell et al., 2019), that is, something is communicated in the unsaid. Therefore, the authors sought to reveal the discourse in the communication and conducted a discourse analysis.

There are four main features of discourse analysis: (1) it is not only about speech (also interrelation between texts and context-dependent), (2) contextual understanding (talk in context of occurrence), (3) it resists codification and (4) there is sensitivity to what is unsaid (Bell et al., 2019). These features were followed as guiding principles for the analysis. As in Caruana et al. (2008, p. 259), discourse in this study is taken to 'produce localized and context dependent meanings'. The communication of the websites was studied in line with critical discourse analysis as encouraged by Fairclough (2003), and further inspired by the emphasis of Caruana et al. (2008) on three discursive processes: (1) defining subjects and objects, (2) relating subjects and objects and (3) institutionalising consumption to identify what was downplayed or ignored in the data.

The organic validity of the study is good because the data were collected from a natural setting. It was agreed to focus on the text of the DMOs' consumer websites only to ensure that any examples collected from external websites were filtered out and not included in the findings. The researchers conducted iterative rounds of review (Bell et al., 2019) in the intercultural research team of three researchers of different nationalities (i.e. researcher triangulation), which maintains the trustworthiness of the study. Further, theory triangulation, using theory on moral disengagement, PEBs and moral muteness supported the quality of data collection. In a similar approach to that of Lockstone-Binney and Ong (2022), the matrices were initially completed by each researcher separately before they came together to share their findings, compare commonalities and discuss areas of divergence, ensuring inter-rater reliability. Although the researchers had mostly coded the results in the same way, there were some differences, which we then discussed together until we reached agreement on how to interpret the results.

Findings and discussion

Our analysis of the sustainability communication from DMOs in the Arctic provides new insights into how destinations make use of the SDGs in their online communication, and whether they are actively encouraging their tourists to be sustainable through high-effort PEBs. The destinations were analysed in relation to moral disengagement theory, to create new knowledge in understanding how DMOs link to moral disengagement. The findings and discussion are presented based on the two phases of the study. Both studies incorporate the three theoretical constructs: (1) sustainability communication and the SDGs, (2) Arctic DMOs and low versus high-effort PEBs and (3) moral disengagement and Arctic DMOs. The Appendix highlights excerpts from the data in comparison to each of the three theoretical constructs.

Arctic DMOs and the SDGs

This research went beyond the three pillars of sustainability to explore whether the Arctic DMOs were working towards achievement of the SDGs, and whether they provide evidence of this for tourists to see on their consumer websites. The findings from the first phase of the study show that only two out of the six DMOs referred to the SDGs on their websites: Visit-A and B. At first impression, Visit-A immediately informed about the importance of sustainability at the destination, providing links on their website to sustainable tourism pages. One of these links takes you to a page entitled 'A—a Sustainable Destination' with details about which SDGs the organisation supports: (3) Ensure good health and wellbeing, (8) Decent work and economic growth, (9) Resilient infrastructure and innovation, (11) Sustainable cities and communities, (12)

Responsible consumption and production and 17) Partnerships for sustainable development. Although goal fourteen is not mentioned, more goals than those specifically related to the three tourism-specific SDGs are supported by Visit-A, potentially showing the DMO's dedication and commitment to sustainable development. However, one criticism would be that there is no further detail about what actions Visit-A is specifically taking to contribute towards the achievement of these goals, or information about how tourists can also help towards their efforts. Thus, the DMOs are not actively initiating or promoting partnerships and collaboration towards achieving the goals (Scheyvens & Cheer, 2022).

Visit-B refers to the SDGs with their 10 principles of sustainability, yet they do not specifically state which SDGs they are working towards. Like DMO-A, B displays this information on their designated sustainability page but does not elaborate further on their specific contribution towards the goals, or how tourists can help, which is a consistent theme in both these DMOs. Although Visit-B does not say which goals they are working towards, their 10 principles suggest that their efforts also go further than the tourism-specific goals, with some of their principles supporting biological diversity and resource efficiency, which are linked to SDGs 7 and 15 (United Nations, 2022a).

As the findings thus far have demonstrated, the DMOs do not explicitly say how they are working towards achieving their goals, or how their tourists can help. It appears to be more informative communication, lacking the elements that could motivate tourists to more sustainable actions (Fennell & de Grosbois, 2023). However, further exploration of DMO websites reveals that they do provide detailed information about their sustainability practices, which can be linked to some of the DMOs. For example, through local wealth creation, Visit-B aims to create economically viable and competitive tourism destinations and businesses, which is linked to SDG 8. Visit-B also supports goal eight through their seventh sustainability principle, which is to have good quality tourism jobs for the local people. Nevertheless, they do not express a holistic approach to achieving the SDGs in tourism (Hall, 2019). The wording on the Visit-B sustainability pages is very much positioned towards tourists, encouraging them to act to preserve the destination, which will then contribute towards the achievement of their principles and the SDGs. The communication of Visit-B is thus closer to multidimensional, as contended by Ghanem and Elgammal (2017) than that of Visit-A.

Low- and High-Effort PEBs

The notion that high-effort PEBs are more important than low-effort PEBs is supported by many academics (Cologna et al., 2022), with Song and Soopramanien (2019) explaining that high-effort PEBs are more crucial; not only do they have a bigger impact, but they also bring more immediate benefits. For example, where a low-effort PEB would help to safeguard a destination's resources, a high-effort PEB would protect the natural environment, even going as far as enhancing it (Li & Wu, 2020). In this study all but one of the Arctic DMOs studied display both low and high-effort PEBs on their website. Typical examples of low-effort behaviours mentioned include using marked paths, taking your rubbish with you, turning off the lights, eating locally, choosing local providers for excursions, respecting private property, using reusable plastics and using tap water (Visits A, B, D, E and F). The language used to promote these PEBs is quite informative, pointing out that these are specific things that tourists could do. In some cases, the DMOs are encouraging tourists to adopt PEBs to comply with the efforts being made for the sustainability of the destination, to enable tourists to feel legitimised to travel there.

High-effort PEBs involve higher levels of engagement and examples shown on the Arctic DMOs' sites include a trip to Arctic fjords in minibuses rather than private transfer, choosing businesses accredited by the national 'Green Travel' badge (A), travelling outside the peak season, choosing accommodation awarded the 'Sustainable Travel Label' (D), lowering emissions by

actively choosing public transport or walking and cycling (B), choosing hotels awarded the 'Green Key' environmental certification (E) and choosing electric car sharing or carpooling (F). Noticeably on the websites, the examples of low-effort PEBs are more extensive, these are easier for tourists to adopt, and small things which DMOs can easily encourage their customers to consider. Keeping in mind that low-effort PEBs do not have much impact improving destinations' resources (Li & Wu, 2020). Visit-C was the only DMO which did not encourage any PEBs. This is not only surprising but also miscommunication, as it mutes sustainability altogether. These findings relating to DMOs' potential to create PEB show that there are sustainability initiatives. However, for the destination organisations to become both marketers and managers (DMMOs) of sustainability, the full potential of sustainability communication should be used to encourage PEBs at their destination.

Moral disengagement

The first phase of the study revealed an overall lack of findings explicitly demonstrating moral disengagement on the DMOs' websites. For example, the study revealed that for the Arctic DMOs, there are only two examples of euphemistic labelling found across all six destinations. Although these examples are brief, they can be linked back to the literature review. Visit-A demonstrates euphemistic labelling (Table 1) where in a section about whale watching, there is a 'did you know…?' item which makes light of the fact that whale migration is changing and moving increasingly farther north, 'Whales follow the herring shoals. Some time ago, you could see marine mammals just off the coast of destination-A. In recent years, the whales' food supply has moved further north and, since 2017, whales have stayed in the area. No one knows if they will remain there next year, or in the years to come'. This could be viewed as morally neutral language, where Visit-A does not specifically mention that this whale migration is likely to be due to the impacts of climate change.

Visit-B also displays euphemistic labelling when explaining how they want to host the coming FIS Alpine Ski Championships in a sustainable way. Traditionally, the skiing industry is one of the industries that is most negatively affected by climate change and has a reputation for being one of the most unsustainable leisure industries in the world, with its consumption significantly contributing to its own downfall (Stoddart, 2011). This example demonstrates how the language is altered, with its distortion making skiing seem sustainable, when the reality might be different.

The findings from the DMOs' websites contrast with the findings from other industries, which are perhaps more commercial. An example is the airline industry, with research demonstrating that moral disengagement theory is heavily used to cover up the negative impacts of flying, with the aim of encouraging tourists to still book flights (Higham et al., 2022). Research has shown that airlines are so focused on making profits that they deny responsibility for the consequences of their negative actions, with airlines using consumers' desire to travel to overlook the negative impacts, based on the moral disengagement theory (Higham et al., 2022). As moral disengagement is seen in other tourism sectors and organisations, it is important to understand its relevance in Arctic DMOs, and what that means for the sustainability discourse in Arctic tourism. This is interpreted in the findings from the second phase of the study.

The Arctic sustainability discourse

The second phase of the study went into depth on the latent content of the DMOs' communication related to two main areas: downplaying sustainability and ignoring opportunities to communicate sustainability. The discourse is constructed by that some DMOs miss out on the opportunity to set the discourse or agenda for the destination (e.g. DMO-B), disregarding

communication on sustainability altogether in their text. Others have clear sustainability communication, but the discourse downplays the less sustainable elements of the tourism experiences they offer. One example is DMO-E, which promotes aiming for economic and environmental sustainability by preserving snow, which is particularly environmentally friendly as it saves large amounts of water. This is of course better than using snow canons, but it neglects the fact that waiting for natural snow would be the most environmentally friendly option. This underpins the gap between rhetoric and reality.

A rhetoric-reality gap (Bell et al., 2019) is identified in the Arctic context. For example, DMOs use informative language (B) or motivating language (E) in a way that simply states the variety of offers (or lack of offers) at the destination. Some DMOs motivate tourists to visit the destination because it is a sustainable option due to the proximity to nature of the Arctic, along with the connectedness between culture and nature which is embedded in the local culture.

A paradoxical sustainability discourse arises in the (non-) communication. For example, DMO-D offers tourists to discover the 'breath-taking beauty of the Arctic wilderness', snowmobiling through the Arctic Forest 'experiencing the magic of a reindeer sleigh ride', that is, they promote the natural and pristine Arctic, but neglect to mention the unsustainable act of experiencing it *via* a snowmobile. The DMO then portrays the purity of Arctic nature but fails to address sustainability altogether, thus instead of initiating PEB (Li & Wu, 2020) they offer an unsustainable activity, muting sustainability of the destination. There is also a clear rhetoric-reality gap (Bell et al., 2019) between promoting these activities as cosy, as for most people, cosiness is not reflected in snowmobiling. This leaves a somewhat ambivalent impression and represents a clear failure in communication of moral obligation that could foster sustainability at the destination through the PEBs of the tourists (Wu et al., 2021). This appears to be missed opportunity to market and manage sustainability at a destination.

The findings suggest a sustainability discourse in the use of destination distancing. An example is one DMO that contextualises the destination as being far away from everything, yet at the same time saying that this might be exactly where you want to be (to get away from it all). The rural, genuine and natural are elements that promote a sense of sustainability, and although it is not explicitly stated, the authenticity of nature and culture come together as a whole to somehow encourage PEB. This seems to make the destination a more sustainable option, thus pointing to advantageous comparison (Bandura, 2007), yet the DMOs refrain from making this explicit, perhaps because they lack documented sustainability or labels, and therefore mute sustainability in a way that facilitates moral disengagement by the consumer.

Moral muteness

The findings from this study bring us closer to a conclusion as to why moral disengagement is not as explicitly used in Arctic DMOs communication. One reason is that they represent mostly small and medium-sized businesses, and therefore do not feel the need to disguise or justify immoral behaviour. Yet at the same time, they are funded by the governments and encourage travelling to the Arctic, travels most often served by large airlines. This represents a moral dilemma. Moral muteness is a concept whereby organisations or individuals do not feel they must justify the morality of their actions, focusing more on specific goals or activities, rather than on the morals behind them (Molthan-Hill, 2014). Another explanation for the absence of overt moral disengagement in Arctic DMOs could be that DMOs have more of a moral obligation than organisations such as airlines because they are often run or funded by governments (Beritelli et al., 2007), and therefore have various tourism objectives, which are not always financial.

This research supports existing tourism literature surrounding the SDGs, with Hall (2019) explaining how important it is that tourism can be linked to all the goals, as evidenced by

the Arctic DMOs, who associate their actions to more goals than only those directly related to tourism. Evidence from our findings demonstrates the importance of the industry not limiting its aims to the three SDGs which directly mention tourism. This is the first study that links DMOs and SDGs and it provides scope for further research to explore the actions needed by DMOs to achieve the SDGs, how their tourists can contribute, how this might lead to more long-term changes in tourism (Soulard et al., 2019), and what impact this will have upon destinations. For example, covering all three pillars of the sustainability goals seems particularly important to the Finnish government, whose aim is to transform Finland by 2030 to be socially, economically and ecologically sustainable (United Nations, 2022b), with this goal naturally filtering through to the DMOs, which are run by the same organisation. In this case, therefore, there is no need to hide unethical behaviour, as it is simply not there.

In this connection, it could be that the moral obligation of Arctic DMOs is naturally increasing in line with the trend of tourists wanting to become more sustainable and environmentally conscious (Expedia Group Media Solutions, 2022; Kim & Coghlan, 2018). As a result, the activities they offer are becoming more sustainable to cater for the needs and wants of their tourists, as research shows that many destinations are already attracting a more environmentally conscious type of tourist (Denley et al., 2020). An example is dark tourism, where tourists pay funeral workers to take photos of them, which they justify by giving the locals money to support them (Sharma, 2020). This is clear evidence to support the mechanism that tourists are reframing their negative behaviours into something which supports the public good (Moore et al., 2012). In the Arctic context, this might be identified in the discourse that the Arctic is attracting tourists based on 'nature and adventure', while at the same time, Arctic amplification is a fact. Hence in promoting the 'last wilderness' and attracting more tourists (even if they are more environmentally conscious), the DMOs increase tourism but also attempt to appeal to 'responsible visitors' who act, eat and become like locals, suggesting that this would inspire tourists to adopt more sustainable PEB.

Conclusion

The findings of this study contribute to existing literature by bridging the current theories of moral disengagement and PEB, while presenting the potential of this approach in sustainability communication in tourism. DMOs have a moral responsibility to initiate PEB in vulnerable areas, which could mean taking a leap into a more sustainable tourism future. This is the first study that attempts to fill the knowledge gap relating to DMOs' sustainability communication of SDGs with data from the Arctic, and it shows that although DMOs are using the SDGs as guidelines, they do not describe in detail the specific actions they are taking towards the achievement of their goals. Tourists' potential contribution is muted. Hence, DMOs miss out on the opportunity to engage tourists, by only informing on sustainability instead of encouraging tourists to achieve the SDGs by making it clear what impact their efforts will have in reality (PEB). This higher engagement with the tourists could spread awareness about and among Arctic DMOs and their contribution towards the SDGs and destination sustainability and would then have the potential to unmute sustainability in this context.

Examining sustainability communication through the moral disengagement theory lens, analysing all eight mechanisms of the theory, shows examples of euphemistic labelling, and using morally neutral language to make an unsustainable activity appear not to be so. This contributes to tourism literature on destinations and DMOs' communication. Along with the finding that there were significantly more low-effort than high-effort PEBs in Arctic DMOs' sustainability communication, this provides valuable insight into how DMOs can initiate sustainability through communication. A criticism in the findings was the lack of information for tourists about what difference their positive actions would make, allowing tourists to downplay

any negative impacts of tourism actions. This moral muteness from the DMOs instead allows tourists to disengage morally, without adopting high-effort PEBs.

Managerial implications of this study would be that DMOs that do not advertise PEBs on their sites could draw inspiration from those who do; hence the results are transferable beyond the Arctic tourism context. Future research on this topic could investigate the engagement DMOs have with their suggestions for PEBs and establish what impact tourists have on their destinations by adopting these, which in turn could be displayed on the DMO websites to enable tourists to see just how much of an impact they could have if they changed their behaviour. Also, keeping silent about sustainability at destinations is a way of disregarding moral obligation, therefore, DMOs should actively unmute sustainability.

A main contribution of this study is its novel insights into the sustainability discourse in Arctic tourism online DMO communication, where moral muteness prevails. The findings also help us understand how moral disengagement links to DMOs' sustainability muteness in their communications. Overall, the results provide important knowledge of how DMOs could become key players in the development of sustainable tourism if they acknowledge their role in marketing *and* managing destinations responsibly, along with recognizing the need to downplay the current growth paradigm and knowing degrowth as a path towards change (Fletcher et al., 2019). This further necessitates incorporating the SDGs into management strategies by taking some bold moves to link SDGs directly to communication to counteract sustainability muteness.

The results must be evaluated in relation to certain key limitations. First, the data were collected from websites, ignoring other forms of online communication such as social media, which is growing in importance in the promotion of destinations (Tham et al., 2020). Second, we used a limited sample of Arctic DMOs which may not reflect the views of all stakeholders, particularly beyond the European lens. As a suggestion for future research, quantitative studies with larger samples could be used to cover other geographical areas. Integrating interviews from DMOs could provide a deeper understanding of sustainability communication.

Third, we studied sustainability communication. Future studies could delve into sustainable consumption in Arctic nature tourism destinations and could also examine the different ways DMOs can encourage their tourists and stakeholders to make a greater environmental impact. This would establish how DMOs could become DMMOs that could advance sustainable tourism destinations. Also, future studies could assess the 'rhetoric-reality gap' further by delving deeper into ontological reflections in tourism, referring to the fact-value antinomy (see e.g. Fuchs, 2022).

Disclosure statement

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Appendix

Table A1.

Theoretical constructs	Elements	Excerpts from data
Three pillars of sustainability (Tölkes, 2018).	*Economic*	*Economic:* DMO-B: Direct reference to the importance of tourism employment as well as the financial viability of the tourism companies at the destination. DMO-E: Highlights how traveling at different times of the year will support the economy year-round. Notes that 'sustainable tourism supports the economy of the area' but does not elaborate on this. Encouraging to buy and eat local food on the 'choose local' page, referring to how this will 'support the vitality of the region'. DMO-F: Indirectly highlights the economy by mentioning the importance of local ownership: 'the majority of our businesses are locally owned'.
	Ecological	*Ecological*: DMO-A: Guests are encouraged to always consider their surrounding environment, with activities designed to protect nature at the destination, such as 'ethical guidelines for whale watching'. There is a section detailing 'how guests can care for A'. DMO-E: Promotes environmentally friendly ski-resorts by explaining how to be environmentally conscious in accommodation and which hotels have environmental certifications. DMO-F: Presents an "environmental promise" which ensures a genuine and natural experience for the tourist, DMO is also part of the "Sustainable Travel" programme. There is also information about responsible consumption, animals, local nature and the climate.
	Social	*Social:* DMO-D: Suggests what to do to embrace local culture including local food, educating guests about traditions, and informing them where they can experience these, with related activities including a 'local history lesson'. DMO-B: Cultural activities advertised on the website, such as the 'Sami Culture Experience' and historical experiences. DMO-A: Emphasises that local people are involved in tourism planning, and tourists are encouraged to engage in local culture and traditions, and that it is 'a good place to live' and visit.

(*Continued*)

Table A1. Continued.

Theoretical constructs	Elements	Excerpts from data
Three SDGs that are relevant for the tourism sector (UNWTO, 2022a).	Decent work for all (goal-8)	Goal-8 DMO-E: Encourages people to buy from local vendors and do activities using local companies, due to the advantages this brings to the local economy. Also, encouragement to book during the off-peak season, which will secure tourism jobs year-round. DMO-A: Focuses on coordinating, communicating and selling local activities to ensure that tourism creates local value.
	Sustainable consumption and production (goal-12)	Goal-12 DMO-F: Visitors are asked to buy local products and eat local food with details on how and where it was produced. DMO-E: Same example as above, interconnects with goal-8. DMO-D: Promotes those service providers who are certified with national Sustainable Travel badge on their website.
	Marine resources (goal-14)	Goal-14 DMO-A: Tourism operators and boat users are asked to follow the guidelines for responsible whale watching.
	Other goals	Other goals DMO-A: A sustainable destination section of the site directly describes SDGs 11 and 17: Destination-A has been awarded the Sustainable Destination Label, based on international standards and in accordance with the SDGs. The DMO has arranged sustainability education for tourism companies to increase understanding of how sustainability and green strategies can be implemented in large and small companies. DMO-E: For Goals 7 and 13, DMO-E have detailed the work they are doing in their ski resorts to reduce the environmental impact, as well as providing guidelines to visitors on how they can save energy. The local ski resort uses 100% reusable energy, and they encourage visitors to move around the destination using 'muscle energy' rather than by transport. DMO-F: Goals 7 and 13 are being worked towards by destination-F, which uses renewable energy, and has a whole section on their responsibility page about climate where they detail their energy usage and the importance of waste reduction and responsible use of resources.
PEBs (Steg & Vlek, 2009): actions or behaviours that have very little or no negative impact on the environment.	Low-effort PEBs	Low-effort PEBs DMO-A: Guidelines on how to visit the nature sites, for example, taking your rubbish with you and using official campsites. DMO-D: General guidelines, for example, eat locally, respect nature. DMO-B: General advice on how to respect nature, other visitors, and private property. Suggestions on paying interest to local traditions and history. DMO-E: Advising visitors to return empty bottles and cans back to shops as you get money for recycling these. Offer direct advice on how to consider sustainability, for example: rent equipment for activities rather than buying it, buy goods without unnecessary packaging and if dining at a buffet, only take what you can eat.
	High-effort PEBs	High-effort PEBs DMO-A: Trips to local sites are made with shared minibuses rather than private cars. There are lists of 'green activities' and green places to stay. Choosing services accredited by the 'Green Travel' badge, which includes activities and accommodation. DMO-D: Recommendation to travel outside the peak season. DMO-B: Public transport or walking/cycling are recommended. Recommendations on choosing activities with a low-impact footprint. Tourism products presented on the DMO's website are 'green'. DMO-E: Local mining company encourages local tourism companies at the destination to participate in sustainable tourism and certification programmes by providing economic support for the companies. DMO-C: Renting e-bikes.

(Continued)

Table A1. Continued.

Theoretical constructs	Elements	Excerpts from data
Moral disengagement theory (Bandura, 1986): *Eight mechanisms that detach an individual's moral standards from their actions, allowing them to adopt unethical behaviour without feeling negative emotions about it.*	(1) *Moral justification* (2) *Euphemistic labelling* (3) *Advantageous comparison* (4) *Displacement of responsibility* (5) *Diffusion of responsibility* (6) *Distortion of consequences* (7) *Dehumanisation* (8) *Attribution of blame*	(1) DMO-B: Encouragement to engage with local culture and traditions by trying reindeer meat while visiting. (2) DMO-A: 'Whales follow the herring shoals. Some time ago, you could see marine mammals just off the coast of destination-A. In recent years, the whales' food supply has moved further north and, since 2017, whales have stayed in the area. No one knows if they will remain there next year, or in the years to come'. DMO-B explains how they aim to host a coming FIS Alpine Ski Championships sustainably. (3) DMO-A: Justifies participating in whale watching by choosing to do it with a local guide (see the sustainable guide to whale watching for reference). (4) All: Any of the excursions or activities run by local guides and operators could be used to shift the blame for unethical behaviour. Examples are activities that involve getting somewhere by private transport or large groups of people descending on a peaceful area and causing disruption. (5) All: DMO-A advertise many group activities (can be seen on their 'things to do page') and if tourists exhibited negative behaviour during these, the responsibility could be diffused among the entire group. (6) No examples. (7) DMO-A: Whale watching or reindeer watching which could be perceived by some as disrupting their natural habitat may not be a concern to others because they are affecting animals rather than other humans or themselves. (8) No examples.