

Research Problem and Gap

The capacity of the Earth's atmosphere and biosphere to serve as a stable foundation for social and economic development is currently being undermined by the never-ending pursuit of growth. Coupled with a rising recognition that growth does not necessarily improve the quality of human life, degrowth is proposed as an alternative concept, which calls for a paradigm shift away from the endless pursuit of economic growth and toward the concept of 'right-sizing' global and national economies. Tourism is strongly tied to the urgency of degrowth as it is one of the world's largest sectors and a key driver of global economic growth. Many destinations have been overdeveloped to the point where they must right-size or downscale their tourism activity. Degrowth from a tourism perspective is based on a concept that opposes traditional mass tourism and prevents exploitation of the local community. Following these needs, tourism businesses are increasingly forced to reinvent their business models to adhere to the degrowth paradigm. Numerous research has already been conducted on operationalizing degrowth principles inside businesses. Hankammer et al. (2021), for example, provide a set of eleven guiding principles for businesses pursuing degrowth. Nonetheless, the case studies chosen to examine the actual implementation of degrowth concepts are in the setting of retail and manufacturing companies. As a result, a cohesive understanding of the adoption of degrowth principles and the associated opportunities and challenges in implementing them has yet to be put into a tourism context.

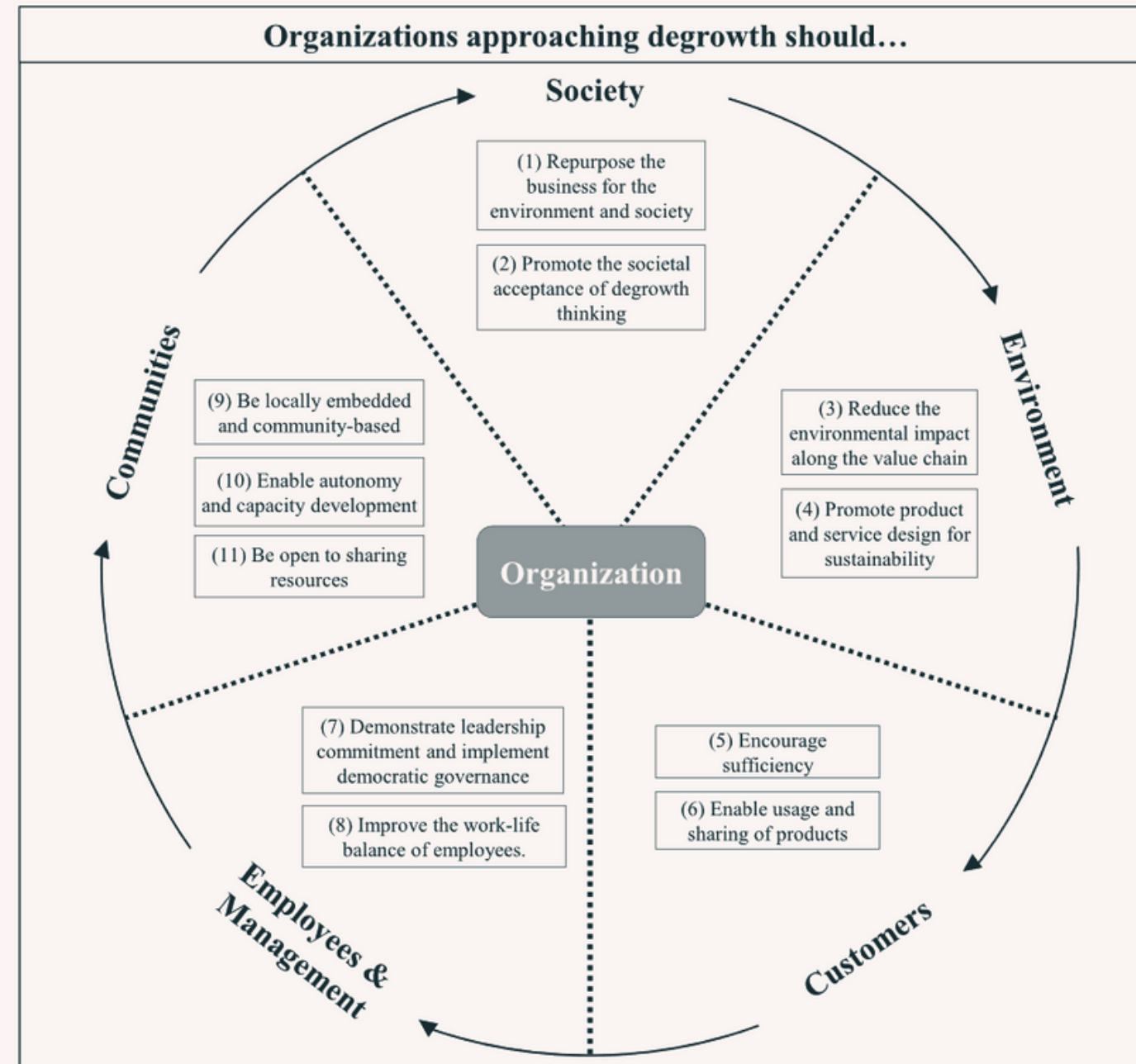
Research Aim and Objectives

To fill the knowledge gap, this study aimed to answer the following question "How can the degrowth principles be operationalized in the context of sustainable tourism businesses?" by pursuing the following objectives:

- 1) To explore the degrowth practices pursued by sustainable tour companies, and
- 2) To investigate the associated challenges in implementing them.

Theoretical Framework

Framework of the eleven degrowth principles in organizations by Hankammer et al. (2021)



Examining the Operationalization of Degrowth Principles in the Context of Sustainable Tourism Businesses

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Methods

Design	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Qualitative • Multiple Case Study
Collection	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 6 semi-structured interviews • Purposive sampling • 4 sustainable tour companies in the Netherlands <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◦ commitment to sustainability ◦ adherence to some of the degrowth principles ◦ willingness to participate in this study
Analysis	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Iterative thematic analysis • Abductive method • An initial coding list was generated according to the conceptual framework <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◦ 31 first-order codes identified ◦ mapped to the eleven degrowth principles as second-order themes

Findings

Degrowth Principle	Corresponding degrowth practices within the case companies
Repurpose the business for the environment and society	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The company is established to satisfy local needs • Growth is an organic approach to pursue a greater impact on the community without externalizing costs to the environment and society • Profit is not prioritized but rather plays only a facilitative role in sustaining social goals • Keeping the size of the business at a local level to maintain quality and control over the tour activities • Measure performance by social/environmental metrics
Promote the societal acceptance of degrowth thinking	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Building stronger coalitions for collective behavior change • Oppositional activism and educational campaigning on the negative impact of tourism
Reduce the environmental impact along the value chain	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Stimulate customers to travel using low-carbon transportation (e.g., by train instead of flying) • Eliminating the use of single-use plastics during the tours
Promote product and service design for sustainability	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Providing slow travel tours
Encourage sufficiency	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Targeting more local instead of international tourists to stimulate travel closer to home and less flying • Keeping the size of the group limited to a small number of people to prevent damaging the local infrastructure and crowding one space • Provide off-the-beaten-track-tours • Turning travelers from consumers to prosumers by engaging them in participative activities with the locals
Enable usage and sharing of products	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Stimulate sharing of resources through ride-sharing or home-sharing
Demonstrate leadership commitment and implement democratic governance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Stakeholders involved in participatory decision-making • Strong commitment to company values that oppose mass tourism
Improve the work-life balance of employees	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Enabling job sharing • Providing flexibility in working time and place
Be locally embedded and community-based	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Co-creation with the locals in designing the tours • Provide only locally guided tours • Storytelling about the history of the place • Ensure host acceptability through open communication with the local community • Tours are designed to create local distinctiveness and preserve local culture which contributes to experience richness • Visit local entrepreneurs instead of the big chain
Enable autonomy and capacity development	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Empowering local communities by giving financial and promotional benefits from the tours • Provide educational training to the community • Stimulating tour partners to acquire sustainability certification
Be open to sharing resources	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Participate in knowledge networks focused on sustainable tourism • Be open to sharing the business model with other players

Conclusion

This study found that the operationalization of degrowth principles in the tourism industry involves the de-commodification of tourism activity, the reduction of carbon emissions from transportation, the altered patterns of production and consumption, and the importance placed on the travel experience by maximizing locality.

Recommendations

This research is relevant to the practical world by providing guidance to sustainable tourism businesses on how to innovate their business models to be compatible with the degrowth paradigm. Sustainable tourism businesses should refer to the degrowth practices found in this study to leverage their sustainability performance and ultimately strive to operationalize the degrowth principles.

Building on the preceding findings and some tensions found, this study proposed a number of interrelated inquiries for future research needed for the advancement of tourism degrowth:

- Future research should investigate whether organic growth is allowed for tourism companies approaching degrowth in order to eliminate the harmful players in the industry.
- Future research should investigate which form and size of tourism business fits more into the degrowth paradigm.
- Future research should cover the topic from the perspective of bigger actors, such as regulators or global tourism organization such as UNWTO, to investigate their role in the potential of tourism degrowth.
- Future research could consider an international context (e.g., in developing countries or in disadvantage region where pro-poor tourism can be deeply analyzed).