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Operating small tourism firms in rural destinations: A social representations approach to examining how small tourism firms cope with non-tourism induced changes

Lai P-H, A Morrison-Saunders and S Grimstad

Abstract

This study explores the representation that owners and managers of small tourism firms ascribe to their rural destination and how non-tourism induced changes interfere with this representation and motivate coping as guided by social representations theory. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with twenty-four owners and/or managers of at least one small accommodation property in Gloucester, New South Wales, Australia. The informants became involved in the area’s accommodation sector primarily driven by the lifestyle goals embedded in their representation of Gloucester. The perception that mining-induced changes might transform Gloucester into a mining town as opposed to its current representation as a town with a mine has motivated many informants to cope. However, coping is impeded by feelings of powerlessness, perceived uncertainties, and distrust in both government and industry. The findings provide preliminary insight into why and how small tourism firm owners/managers cope in the face of change from the perspective of social representations.

Keywords: small tourism firms; rural destinations; social representations theory; non-tourism induced changes; coping.

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1. Introduction

Small tourism firms (STFs) in rural destinations play a significant role in supporting rural development (Lane & Kastenholz, 2015; Thomas, Shaw, & Page, 2011). Many firms are locally owned, tend to use products and services produced in the destination in which they operate, and thus contribute to a higher income multiplier effect therein (Anthopoulou & Melissourgos, 2012; Wanhill, 2000). Because of the relatively low entry requirements for starting an STF, the tourism industry is accessible to individuals or families seeking economic diversification or a supplementary source of income in areas where traditional rural industries (e.g., agriculture, fishing, timber, mining) are in decline and natural resources remain attractive to tourists (Ateljevic, 2008; Getz & Carlsen, 2005; Carlsen, Morrison, & Weber, 2008). Tourism also provides opportunities for residents and amenity migrants to sustain or develop a relationship with rural destinations that both carry significant meaning and support a desired way of life. When such a person-place bond is established, it can motivate individuals to conserve important natural, social, and cultural features that are essential to the sustainability of rural landscapes and contribute to destination competitiveness (Getz & Carlsen, 2000; Jones & Haven-Tang, 2005; Morrison, 2006).

To operate a STF in a rural destination, owners and managers need to cope with not only turbulence within the core tourism system of their destination—the structures, goods, services, and resources that directly feed into the tourism industry (Farrell & Twining-Ward, 2004)—but also external changes driven by sources outside of those core tourism systems. Changes can threaten the meaning and representation of rural destinations that motivate the initial involvement of STF owners and managers in and their continuing commitment to operating their business therein. As such, how STF owners and managers cope in the face of change can influence whether they continue to engage in activities that support the
development of their business and the destinations in a manner that conforms to their ideal representation.

The purpose of our study was to examine how STF owners and managers cope with external changes by understanding the representation that they ascribe to their rural destination and how non-tourism induced changes interfere with this representation and motivate their coping responses. Below we first present the characteristics of STFs and the main source of external changes that can challenge STF operations. The Social Representations (SR) Theory that guides our study is then introduced.

2. STFs and changes external to rural destinations

STFs are characterised by their small size in terms of employees and rooms or level of capital investment (Thomas et al., 2011; Wanhill, 2000). For example, an STF in the accommodation sector is defined by Tourism Research Australia (TRA, 2013) as a bed and breakfast, self-contained accommodation, caravan/camping park, farmstay, hotel/motel, or lodge that is operated with less than 15 rooms/units. The literature also suggests that STFs are dominated by owner-managers with non-economic motivations that underpin their lifestyle goals. The enjoyment of a lifestyle supported by the natural environment and its associated opportunities is often among the reasons that participants in this sector become involved in rural tourism (Ateljevic & Doorne, 2000; Hall, 2009a). These non-economic motivations are frequently embedded in the various aspects of meaning and representation that STF owners and managers ascribe to the rural destination in which their tourism business is situated and to which they become attached (Carlsen et al., 2008).

Many of these owners and managers are amenity migrants who are attracted to rural destinations that support a desired way of life (e.g., close interactions with nature and local residents) through small tourism operations (Ateljevic & Doorne, 2000; Ioannides & Peterson,
2003; Shaw & Williams, 2013). Operating an STF also provides an opportunity for rural residents to remain connected with their community because of the important meaning and values they ascribe to the location (Ateljevic, 2008; Getz & Carlsen, 2005; Carlsen et al., 2008). The lifestyle goals and meanings that STF owners and managers ascribe to rural destinations can become entrenched in decision-making related to business operations, community involvement, and destination development (Getz & Carlsen, 2005; Hallak et al., 2012; Morrison, 2006). In light of these values and motivations held by STF owners and managers, it is unsurprising that they are sensitive to externally induced changes.

Many rural areas in Western societies have been experiencing changes that arise from shifting societal expectations in terms of function from supporting intensive production via agriculture, logging and mining toward accommodating a multifunctional landscape. This shift manifests the growing public interest in conservation and consumption, as reflected in the growth in protected areas, tourism and recreation, and amenity migration (Argent, 2011; Holmes, 2006). Changes arising from sources external to the core tourism system of rural destinations manifest the complex processes within the rural tourism system and interdependence of rural tourism and other systems (e.g., ecological, social, cultural, economic) across various spatial scales (Farrell & Twining-Ward, 2004; Leiper, 2003).

External changes signify the vulnerability of the rural tourism system and the STFs therein because such changes often evolve beyond STFs’ control. Meanwhile, external changes not only directly impact the ecological and physical landscape of rural areas but also shape their socio-economic characteristics that collectively contribute to the meaning of the areas as attached places of residence and/or attractive rural destinations (Devine-Wright & Howes, 2010; de Sousa & Kastenholz, 2015). Changes can also affect the destination image that STF owners and managers value highly and wish to promote (Irvine & Anderson, 2004). However, they often lack the management skills and other resources necessary to assist with
their capacity to cope (Lashley & Rowson, 2010; Mottiar, 2007).

Understanding how STF owners and managers react to changes external to rural tourism systems that may threaten their relationship with these destinations and associated meanings that are essential to their lifestyle goals is important given the positive role that STFs can play in rural development. A growing body of literature has been developed to examine how destinations are impacted by and have recovered from changes driven by natural causes such as wildfires, earthquakes, and epidemics (e.g., Armstrong & Ritchie, 2008; Hystad & Keller, 2008; Irvine & Anderson, 2004). This literature emphasises the important role of destination marketing organisations and relevant government entities and stakeholders in recovery marketing to cope with crises and restore public perceptions of destinations. Much less destination research has been devoted to examining human-made changes that are external to tourism systems and are slowly unfolding; such as a proposed mining project the impact of which can continue for several years due to uncertainties associated with related changes. Coping with changes of this nature often requires strategies and actions that go beyond immediate damage control to counteract negative public perceptions. It also requires that the resilience capacity of STFs be enhanced so that they can continue to thrive and contribute to rural developments (Dahles & Susilowati, 2015; Scott et al., 2008).

A better understanding of how STF owners and managers in rural destinations cope and develop their resilience capacity in the face of change needs to be situated within the context of the place in which they operate their business, engage in social interactions, and pursue value beyond profit-making (Dahles & Susilowati, 2015). Places or geographic locations of meaning, including rural destinations, are social objects that can be integrated into a self or group identity, become subjects of attachment, and motivate place-based actions (Greider & Garkovich, 1994; Twigger-Ross et al., 2003). Social Representations theory provides a
theoretical framework for examining how the representation of a rural destination impacted
by external changes motivates the coping responses of owners and managers who operate an
STF in the destination.

3. Social Representations theory

SR theory examines “what people mean as they engage in the task of making sense of
the world in which they live and communicate with others about it” (Jovchelovitch, 2001, p.
176). Representations exist in the reality in which humans live their daily lives. Serge
Moscovici (1998), the founder of SR theory, likens representations to theories and
propositions used by individuals and groups to classify social objects, describe their
characteristics, and give meaning to the feelings and actions towards them. SR theory
contends that people do not develop their understanding and representation of reality
individually but instead through the process of representations. During this process,
individuals and groups incorporate shared representations of reality derived from social
thinking and collective communications into the cognitive system in which reality is
reconstructed to reflect the values, norms, and identity to which they subscribe (Abric, 2001;
Howarth, 2006). As such, representations are produced through social practices, and are
appropriated and reconstructed by individuals to serve as an interpretation system that
informs their relations with the surrounding environment and guide their beliefs, ideas,
expectations, attitudes, and subsequent actions (Abric, 2001).

Changes to a rural destination can threaten, challenge, and problematise an existing
representation that STF owners and managers ascribe to the destination and to which they are
committed. The concept of themata—the plural of thema—has been adopted in SR research
to examine the dynamism of representations induced by changes (Lai, Hsu, & Wearing,
2016). Themata are oppositional or contradictory categories of ideas arising from individuals’
and groups’ socialisation into cultures (Marková, 2000). They are enduring and implicit imprints of postulates that are embedded in a culture and anchored in beliefs. They serve as the source ideas from which the meaning and representation of an object is developed and upon which it is elaborated. Individuals and groups define and represent a social object often based on the commonly accepted features that characterise the object and the features that define the opposite. For example, protected areas are often characterised both by what they are (e.g., natural, undeveloped) and what they are not (e.g., man-made, developed). Therefore, the oppositional categories that comprise a thema are dialogically interdependent and function to facilitate communication (Liu, 2004).

The categories of themata serve as a system that helps classify and name social objects, a mechanism that SR theory refers to as anchoring (Marková, 2000). Individuals who engage in classifying social objects are driven by the need to determine the extent to which these objects conform to the world in their knowledge system which is cultivated through processes of socialisation and personal experiences (Jovchelovitch, 2001; Lai et al., 2016). Once classified, the process allows individuals to name and label the objects. For example, tourism, despite its complexity as manifested in the various social-cultural, political, geographic and ecological processes involved, is often classified and labelled as composed of economic activities, especially in places where it is promoted as a means of growth (Holden, 2016). Objectification is another mechanism involved in the process of representation in which social objects are transformed from initially abstract constructs into something more concrete (Clémence, 2001). During objectification, the essence of the objects is projected through individuals’ knowledge systems and then turned into a conceivable and communicable reality (Moscovici, 2000). Tourism is sometimes objectified as a disease or plague to communicate the image of negative tourism impacts, which can be difficult to control (Pearce et al., 1996).

Not all oppositional categories are thematised and become the focus of attention.
(Marková, 2000). Changes such as crises, inventions, unfamiliar phenomena or shifting societal values can threaten, challenge, and problematise an existing representation that is highly valued. Incongruences in the representation of rural destinations attributable to external changes can occur when related changes cause an initially familiar and desired classification, naming and objectification of the destinations to become problematic. This can thematise the representation and drive tensions and conflicts within and between individuals and groups. SR theory recognises the agency of individuals as social actors to cope with incongruent meanings when a valued representation is thematised due to changes that in turn can motivate coping in order to challenge, accommodate, or adapt to the new environment arising from such changes (Marková, 2000; Wagner et al., 2000).

Guided by SR theory, three research questions are examined in our study. First, what is the representation that STF owners and managers ascribe to their rural destination? This research question aims to understand how STF owners and managers make sense of the world within their rural destination. Second, how do changes driven by external forces affect STF owners’ and managers’ representation of the destination? In other words, how do they make sense of external changes that can impact the destination and the world with which they are familiar? Third, how do STF owners and managers cope with the external changes that have unwanted impacts on their representation? Because SR theory suggests that undesired changes can problematise representations and motivate individuals to react, this question investigates whether and how STF owners and managers respond to changes that might threaten their representation. In exploring Research Question 3, it was also our intention to identify the factors that might interfere with the effectiveness of coping.

4. Methodology

4.1. Research setting
Gloucester, which is located in New South Wales, Australia, has been experiencing changes that reflect the shift in societal expectations for rural landscapes described above. It provides a suitable context to examine how changes can threaten and problematise the representation that STF owners and managers ascribe to a rural destination and motivate their coping reactions. Gloucester encompasses a rural area of almost 3,000 km² and is home to approximately 5,000 residents. More than half of the area is composed of productive lands that until the last two decades have predominantly been used to support cattle and dairy farming (Campbell & Gedye, 2013).

Traditional agricultural activities have been gradually replaced by more diverse practices (e.g., organic farming, viticulture, aquaculture, agritourism). In addition, a substantial portion of the area is covered by forest ecosystems that are managed not only for conservation but also for logging, the importance of which is increasingly being reduced. The area’s forest ecosystems and agricultural landscapes support vibrant nature-based tourism, recreation and amenity migration industries that have only become prominent in recent years.

Moreover, Gloucester’s rich mineral resources have attracted the mining industry, with the first coal mine opening in 1995. More recently, a coal seam gas (CSG) mining project was granted with conditional approval in early 2013, and an application for an open-cut mine and another for expanding the first coal mine were submitted for approval in 2012. The decline in traditional agriculture and forestry activities, growth in tourism/recreation, and recent mining developments are the dominant sources of change that have shaped Gloucester’s ecological, social, and economic landscape over the past few decades (Campbell & Gedye, 2013).

### 4.2. Sampling and data collection

A list of 42 accommodation properties that satisfied Tourism Australia’s definition of a
small accommodation business (TRA, 2013) mentioned above was obtained from the Gloucester Visitor Information Centre and served as the sampling frame of our study. An invitation letter was sent to all accommodation properties on the list, followed by phone contact to obtain consent to participate. Overall, 18 semi-structured interviews were conducted in July 2013 that involved 12 individuals and 6 couples (i.e., 24 informants). Together, the informants owned and managed 21 accommodation properties, accounting for 50% of the area’s small accommodation businesses.

The study participants were asked a series of semi-structured interview questions to help us gain insight into our research questions (Table 1). Whenever necessary, they were encouraged to elaborate on the meaning that they attributed to Gloucester, what and how change(s) affected that meaning, the actions they took to cope with the identified change(s), and the effectiveness of the coping mechanism. Additionally, to better understand the informants’ goals in Gloucester, they were asked to describe their motivations for establishment an accommodation business. Interviews were conducted mostly at the informants’ accommodation properties and lasted from one to two hours. All of the interviews were transcribed first and then the content was analysed.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Research questions</th>
<th>Interview questions</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. What is the representation that STF owners and managers ascribe to their rural destination?</td>
<td>1. Please picture Gloucester as a place you know. Can you tell me what images/pictures emerge? Please describe in detail the meanings of these images/pictures.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>2. In addition to the images that you just described, is there any other meaning of Gloucester that is significant to you and your business?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. How do changes driven by external</td>
<td>1. Have these images and meanings remained</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
forces affect STF owners’ and managers’ representation of the destination?

unchanged since you started your accommodation business?

2. If not, can you identify any source that has significantly changed these images and meanings of Gloucester?

3. How has the identified source of change shaped Gloucester?

3. How do STF owners and managers cope with external changes that have unwanted impacts on their representation?

1. What have you done to cope with the change(s)?

2. How do you rate the effectiveness of these coping actions?

<table>
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<tr>
<th>4.3. Data analysis</th>
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<tr>
<td>Three steps were taken to analyse the interview transcripts. As presented above, the shared representation plays an important role in informing the individuals’ relationship with their surrounding environment and reaction to a modified environment that arises out of external changes. Identifying shared representations has been suggested by Pearce et al. (1996) as an essential step to establishing SRs. Therefore, the first step of our analysis focused on establishing the representation shared by our informants to provide insight into Research Question 1. This was done by deconstructing the informants’ representation of Gloucester and itemising the elements of the representation that were repeatedly cited by each informant. These elements were then coded, followed by reassembling and combining codes of a similar nature into themes and interpreting those themes without deviating from what the informants initially meant (Yin, 2015). Often, each of the themes (e.g., Gloucester as a natural landscape) identified during this step belonged to one of the categories comprising the corresponding thema (e.g., natural vs. unnatural) and served as an anchor to classify the different elements that the informants used to represent what Gloucester was (e.g., natural) as opposed to what it was not (e.g., unnatural).</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Step 2 corresponded to Research Question 2 and involved determining whether and how the shared representation established in Step 1 was affected and transformed by the informant-identified changes that were external to the area’s core tourism system. The elements and associated themes were identified from the informants’ representation of Gloucester that could emerge due to external changes using the same analytic approach adopted in Step 1. The oppositional categories (i.e., themata) that characterised Gloucester’s representation became more evident when contrasting the representation of Gloucester as it was at the time of research with its representation that could result from changes. The contrast between the representations also allowed us to establish the overall image pertaining to each representation that our informants used to objectify Gloucester from an initially abstract construct into conceivable and communicable reality.

Step 3 was devoted to examining Research Question 3 and included enumerating the coping actions employed by the informants whose representation of Gloucester was problematised due to external changes and factors that interfered with coping.

5. Results and discussion

The age of our informants ranged from 40 to slightly less than 80 years old. They had been residing in Gloucester from three years to more than 60 years. Lifestyle was a prominent motivation for establishing an accommodation business in Gloucester. This motivation was closely related to the informants’ sense Gloucester as a place with significant meaning and their ideas about what it could offer personally and professionally. Eighteen informants had their first experiences in Gloucester as a visitor and moved to the area because of its attractiveness. Six informants were born in the area, left for education or work, and then returned and started an accommodation business upon recognising the area’s tourism potential to continue their attachment and self-identity ingrained in the area. Below, we first
describe the themes and their corresponding elements embedded in our informants’
representation of Gloucester to provide insight into Research Question 1. This is followed by
an analysis of the informants’ representation of Gloucester resulting from external changes
and associated images, themes, and themata to explore Research Question 2. Finally, the
coping actions and their effectiveness are enumerated to address Research Question 3.

5.1. What is the representation that STF owners and managers ascribe to their rural
destination?

Four themes emerged from the shared representation that the informants ascribed to
Gloucester at the time of research. Theme 1a is that of Gloucester as a natural landscape
composed of natural elements endemic to the areas that afforded opportunities for interacting
with nature. Theme 2a is that of Gloucester as a rural community characterised by its rural
attributes and networks of support. Theme 3a is that of Gloucester as a place rich in natural
and rural qualities desired by its residents and attractive to urban tourists. Theme 4a is that of
Gloucester as a home hosting feelings of attachment and a sense of self-identity and
community (Table 2). These four themes are mutually dependent and work collectively to
form a holistic representation of the area as described by our informants.

Gloucester’s natural attributes (e.g., rivers, mountains, valleys, forests, wildlife,
ecosystem and climate features), landmarks (e.g., the Barrington Tops, the Gloucester Tops,
the Buchan Buchan—the aboriginal name for the Bucketts), and opportunities afforded by
these attributes and landmarks were identified by all informants as the components essential
to its representation (Theme 1a). For example, Informant 10 described that

"(I)t’s just the beautiful mountains around and the beautiful scenery and the rivers. I
love the rivers and love going for walks in the park and it’s just a lovely place to live."
Gloucester, which has been known as a rural idyll (Sherval & Hardiman, 2014) was characterised by 21 of our informants as a community with the rural attributes of green pastures, tractors, farmers working with farm animals, country living, country hospitality, and small shops owned by local people. These rural attributes were often intertwined with Gloucester’s natural attributes to create the informants’ representation. Informant 11’s account provides an illustration of the interdependence between the natural and rural attributes that collectively contributed to her representation.

“Gloucester is a very pretty town. It’s a friendly town... The green pastures, country living, waterways, rolling hills, clean country air, just seeing cattle grazing, National Park, Gloucester has been the base camp of that friendly town.”

Rural characteristics were often associated with well-connected networks of support within the community—identified by 13 informants—in which people looked after one another. The informants’ social networks presented one form of social capital that was conducive not only to their own business but also to the community as a whole, as indicated by Informant 2.

"To me, living here I think it’s just the friendliness that you know everybody. There is always somebody to help if you are in difficulty. Neighbours work together, and we (the tourism group of which the informant was a member) work together."

In addition to operating an STF, Informant 2 was involved in a local tourism network that promoted farm tours targeting retirees. Her tourism network attracted overnight visitors.
who visited local farms and attractions and contributed to local businesses (e.g., food, accommodation). The well-functioning network within the area was, according to Informant 2, what kept a small town like Gloucester functioning. Instead of competing with one another, 12 informants showed how their tourism network functioned to help one other. Informant 13 viewed this supportive network not profit-making, as an important defining characteristic of Gloucester’s quality of life.

“We kind of always had the attitude of ‘Let’s just get people to Gloucester. Let’s take them to Barrington Tops and where they stay is irrelevant. The more people that come, the fuller everyone will be…’ We can’t really afford to do much but we’ve got enough lifestyle.”

The qualities of being scenic, green, fresh, clean, unspoiled, tranquil, peaceful, relaxing, local, and friendly were often used by the informants to describe the natural and rural attributes that comprised their representation of Gloucester (Theme 3a). These attributes and qualities not only had personal significance to the informants but were also viewed as important tourist drawcards and used by the informants to promote their business primarily via the Internet and pamphlets to their target market, which primarily comprised visitors from Sydney and Newcastle, two major cities less than 3 hours away from Gloucester by car.

To many informants, the area’s natural and rural qualities created “the otherness” (Irvine & Anderson, 2004) and offered attractive features that were different from the qualities (e.g., noisy, busy, polluted, commercialised, industrialised, overwhelmed by technologies) that characterised the environment (i.e., unnatural and non-rural) experienced by city dwellers on a daily basis. These qualities and corresponding attributes created an environment that allowed visitors to escape, explore Gloucester’s unique ecosystems,
participate in nature-based activities (e.g., bushwalking, birding, canoeing, horse riding, stargazing), and experience the country life not found in urban areas.

The aforementioned natural and rural attributes and associated qualities were the primary reason that 22 informants made Gloucester home, where they developed a sense of place attachment, self-identity and community (Theme 4a). Gloucester’s natural and rural characteristics motivated two-thirds of the informants to shift their relationship with the area from that of a visitor to an attached resident and STF owner and/or manager. The bond between the informants and Gloucester was expressed through their reluctance to relocate and emotions ascribed to the area. Informant 6 reflected on his first encounter with Gloucester’s natural landscape and the emotion inspired by the encounter.

“It was a very grey day in the middle of a summer, in the middle of a drought and Gloucester was bright green... I was astounded at how beautiful it was. Even on a grey day it’s amazing so I think I fell in love with Gloucester then.”

To Informant 4, Gloucester’s natural and rural features together contributed to the spirituality she experienced the first time she visited the area.

“It was almost like the area adopted us, but not just the people, just the feel of the place. It’s almost got a spirituality about it which is hard to define.”

Informant 14 described the feeling that connected him with Gloucester as commensurate with the relationship between the aboriginal peoples and the land.
"We say that the native peoples of this country are connected to the land but I think that we can be too. I feel a connection after eight years with this block of earth. It’s mine and I love it very much"

The emotion and spirituality that connected the informants to Gloucester was also cultivated through the social aspect of their daily experience supported by the community. Although not born in Gloucester, Informant 10 expressed how she become rooted in Gloucester through her community network that afforded her

"...a warm feeling that one gets when you are wanted and loved in the district."

To half of the informants, the area’s friendly atmosphere was an essential element that contributed to a sense of community. Additionally, for four informants, the lifestyle supported by the natural landscape and rural community comprising their representation of Gloucester also revealed who they were and what they were passionate about. When describing Gloucester as the location of his upbringing, Informant 5 continued,

“(G)rew up in the bush and had parents that were very open-minded towards that so we did lots of things in the bush. They taught me how to care for the environment, not just use the environment for my own good.”

The experience of interacting with the area’s nature motivated Informant 5 to develop products and services aimed at forging his clientele’s affiliation with nature. Similarly, the distinct climatic features, scenic landscape, unique ecosystems, and clean environmental qualities supported the identity of Informant 6, Informant 8, and Informant 15 as a farmer,
photographer, or gardener, in addition to their business role in tourism.

The four themes deconstructed from our informants’ representation help provide insight into Research Question 1. They also served as the anchors through which the values and norms shared among our informants were expressed, as shown in the placement of Gloucester in the natural and rural categories as opposed to the unnatural and non-rural categories (Table 2). The shared representation and associated values and norms also guided 15 informants’ expectations and actions towards protecting and sustaining this representation, as manifested in Informant 4’s account. Recognising the area’s unique landmarks and environmental qualities and their appeal to tourists, she indicated that:

“I prefer that we don’t have hundreds and thousands of people coming up trampling all over it, making it a mini-Blue Mountains... I believe that slow growth is sustainable growth.”

Contrasting Gloucester with the Blue Mountains World Heritage Area, which attracts more than four million tourists in 2014 (Office of Environment & Heritage, 2015), Informant 4 highlighted her expectation that tourism in Gloucester should be developed within its carrying capacity without compromising its important attributes and qualities. To achieve this, she and nine other informants worked with the area’s tourism and natural resource management entities to develop a sustainable vision for a future Gloucester and promote it accordingly. By doing so, they were investing in sustaining the area’s natural and rural resources, maintaining the qualities that were important to their representation, and manifesting the representations’ function of guiding expectations and actions (Lai, Hsu, & Nepal, 2013; Moscovici, 2000). The informants’ expectations and intended actions towards Gloucester became most evident when external changes were perceived as threatening and
challenging their representation.
Table 2. Themes and themas

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Representations of Gloucester at the time of research</th>
<th>Representation of Gloucester as what it would become with increased mines</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Thema 1: Natural/Endemic vs. Unnatural/Introduced</td>
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<tr>
<td>Theme 1a: A landscape composed of natural elements endemic to the areas that afforded opportunities to interact with nature</td>
<td>Theme 1b: A landscape modified by introduced changes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thema 2: Rural vs. Non-rural</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Theme 2a: A rural community characterised by its rural attributes and networks of support</td>
<td>Theme 2b: A community whose rural characteristics were deteriorated or lost</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thema 3: Desired/Attractive vs. Undesired/Unattractive</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Theme 3a: A place rich in natural and rural qualities desired by its residents and attractive to urban tourists</td>
<td>Theme 3b: A place whose desired and attractive natural and rural qualities were impaired</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thema 4: Rooted vs. Uprooted</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Theme 4a: Home that hosted feelings of attachment and a sense of self-identity and community</td>
<td>Theme 4b: A place where an anchor for attachment and a sense of self-identity and community no longer existed</td>
</tr>
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</table>

5.2. How do changes driven by external forces affect STF owners’ and managers’ representation of the destination?

Two major sources of non-tourism induced change—the introduction of CSG mining and potential increase in open-cut mining—were identified by 21 informants as affecting the four themes (i.e., Themes 1a - 4a) essential to their representation of Gloucester. Although five informants believed that mining and related developments provide potential economic benefits to their business and/or the community, mining was mostly viewed as incompatible with the informants’ shared representation. When portraying how Gloucester could be changed by increased mining, the image associated with “a mining town” was used by 13
informants to objectify what it would look like compared to its current image as “a town with a mine.” Themes and categories opposite from those that symbolised Gloucester’s current representation were employed to illustrate a mining town (Table 2).

Gloucester was described by 19 informants as becoming a landscape modified by changes introduced by mining-related developments (Theme 1b). Unnatural and introduced elements as opposed to the natural attributes endemic to Gloucester, were identified to characterise an environment that was modified by increased mining. They included but were not limited to the increase in heavy-vehicle traffic and the introduction of a supermarket chain, mining pits, gas wells, and pollution of the area’s water, air, soundscape, and nightscape. Moonscapes and the two well-known mining towns in the state—Muswellbrook and Singleton, where coal mining covers an area of more than 300 km² (McManus & Connor, 2013)—were adopted to make the physical landscape of a mining town more conceivable. This is a process pertaining to objectification.

Eighteen informants indicated that increased mining could lead to the deterioration or loss of the rural attributes to which they anchored their ideal representation of Gloucester and would turn the area into a non-rural community (Theme 2b). Like many rural places in Australia, the notion of the rural idyll that has been long associated with Gloucester was challenged (Sharval & Hardiman, 2014). Decreased farmlands, declined local businesses, increased community division, uncertainty and worry, and shifting socio-demographic characteristics were among the most-acknowledged changes incongruent with the area’s existing rural characteristics. Farms, farmers and farming activities were employed by Informant 1 to represent Gloucester’s rural attributes. He feared for what Gloucester would become if more farmland was appropriated for mining.
“If the farmers aren’t farming, there aren’t cows. If there aren’t cows or rural activity, people say, ‘Well, it’s not a rural area, it’s not a farming area... Let’s go somewhere else... someplace where we don’t have the mine.’”

Increased mining was perceived as not only contributing to noise, dust, water pollution and traffic, but also impairing the area’s visual appeal—an environment characterised by attributes and qualities that were inconsistent with those essential to the informants’ representation, as illustrated above. Becoming a mining town was viewed by 21 informants as adversely affecting Gloucester’s natural and rural qualities both as an ideal place of residence for local residents and as a destination attractive to predominantly urban tourists (Theme 3b). Qualities (i.e., undesired, unattractive) that contrasted the desired and attractive ones were used to illustrate this theme. Dirty, ugly, and unhealthy were terms used to describe the quality of the landscape; non-local, uncertain, and divided were used to characterise the quality of the rural community as a result of excessive mining. Informant 22 expressed with anger how she made sense of the new environment that could result from transforming Gloucester from a “pretty” town into an “ugly” one, which also had a psychological effect on the community.

“I think that Gloucester’s main attraction is its friendliness but also its landscape. If you muck around with that, I think you change people’s mind too because if they’re living in an ugly place with noise and dirt and that sort of thing, I think it will change the whole feel of the town. Gloucester is one of the prettiest towns I’ve ever been to and to have that spoilt so close to people’s homes makes me very angry.”
The publicity that Gloucester attracted from various forms of media (e.g., the Internet, radio and TV programs, newspaper articles) because of community opposition to increased mines was identified by eight informants as another impact of mining-induced changes relevant to Theme 3b. The related changes were perceived to impair the area’s qualities as a peaceful, relaxing, and clean destination. Informant 9 contrasted Gloucester’s peaceful and natural image as the “gateway to the Barrington Tops” with an image imbued with intrusive and unnatural connotations that became circulated through the media to demonstrate how the area’s representation was impacted.

“I think the town has gotten a little bit of notoriety for the wrong reasons, particularly with the coal seam gas... I think going outside of the area and talking to other people and they ask where you are from, and you say ‘Gloucester,’ and they say ‘Oh, that’s where all the picket lines and the coal seam gas is.’ You know... in the last 18 months, people would associate Gloucester and the area with the Barrington Tops and with a great place to go on the weekend and somewhere to chill out.”

Developments induced by increased mining, particularly a large supermarket chain that was recently introduced, were identified by nine informants as repelling local businesses and threatening the area’s rural quality as being local. Ten informants were also concerned about the increased community division because of residents’ different opinions about increased mining, which was inconsistent with the area’s friendly quality that was indispensable to the informants’ sense of community.

Mining-induced changes also adversely affected Gloucester’s representation as home to at least one-third of the informants (Theme 4b). Informant 24 pictured the possibility of Gloucester becoming a mining town and feared that it could threaten his business, which
relied on the natural quality of the environment, and his relationship with the area. He stated that

“(T)he biggest change to me... would be the type of environment that we go down the road of. If we go down the road of becoming a mining town instead of a town with a mine... I just won’t want to be here anymore.”

Some informants indicated that the social network from which their sense of community was nourished diminished because some of their friends either relocated unwillingly or were forced to stay and cope with the unfolding changes. Informant 2 explained how mining-related changes were affecting many local residents, including her.

“It’s a big uprooting for many people who bought those blocks thinking that they were living in a rural place to retire in for the rest of their lives, put all their savings into it, then are stuck there because no one wants to buy them. If they do, they are going to lose half of their money, and those people are getting sick from all this worry.”

The analysis of the themata that underlie our informants’ representation of two contrasting images of Gloucester (i.e., a town with a mine vs. a mining town) and related themes helps shed light on the nuances of the meaning that they ascribed to these images and contribute to a better understanding of Research Question 2. The four pairs of themes and corresponding themata (Table 2) signalled the tension experienced by most of our informants and potential conflicts between those who supported and those who opposed the introduction of CSG mining and/or increase in open-cut mining. Negative feelings such as anger, worry, fear, sorrow, and frustration were expressed by 17 informants when describing mining-
induced changes and how related changes interfered with their ideal representation of Gloucester. This further suggests that tension and psychological distress were experienced and that thematisation was at work. This finding aligns with past research finding that undesirable changes in a place of significance can have negative psychological consequences (Fried, 2000).

In our study context, mining was perceived by the majority of our informants as being incompatible with and problematising Gloucester’s representation as a town with a mine and a place that hosted desirable natural and rural attributes and qualities that were conducive to their place attachment, self-identity, and sense of place. These attributes and qualities not only demonstrated the conditions of the area that were desirable for tourism and residential purposes but were also used as anchors to classify and label contrasting attributes, qualities, and associated meanings that could result from Gloucester becoming a mining town as unnatural/introduced, non-rural, undesirable/unattractive, and uprooted. The examination of themata reinforces the importance of the four themes (i.e., Themes 1a – 4a) embedded in the informants’ shared representation of Gloucester and the deterioration of the elements that comprised these themes about which the informants were concerned. It also helps unpack why and how STF owners and managers react to external changes incompatible with their ideal representation to preserve the themes and elements essential to this representation.

5.3. How do STF owners and managers cope with the external changes that have unwanted impacts on their representation?

The potential increase in mining was perceived by our informants to be a major source of stress contributing to the vulnerability of their business and their ideal representation of Gloucester. Vulnerability is “the degree to which a system is likely to experience harm due to exposure to a specified hazard or stress” (Chapin et al., 2009, p. 22). Twenty-one informants
adopted various coping strategies to confine or prevent the increase in mining from contributing to the vulnerability of their accommodation business and transforming Gloucester from a town with a mine into a mining town while striving to overcome barriers. Thirteen informants actively managed their business to adapt to the mining-induced changes since the CSG mining proposal was revealed in 2010. Adaptation was deployed, aiming not only to counteract the adverse business impacts of changes attributable to the image and representation associated with a mining town but also to seize economic opportunities. These informants worked individually to promote an image of Gloucester that was congruent with their representation of the area as natural/endemic, rural, and attractive by placing marketing materials on websites and pamphlets, networking with public media, and interacting with their guests, many of whom were repeat customers, to reinforce this positive image. By doing so, it was also the informants’ intention to disassociate the area’s image from being perceived as unnatural/introduced, non-rural, and unattractive. Improving marketing by conducting research and targeting niche markets was among the adaptive strategies adopted by six informants. Informant 9 identified being pro-active and prepared as critically important in a world of change.

“When you were asking about coping mechanisms, I think probably it’s not a matter of coping. It’s a matter of being prepared, you know. Most people that are in touch with their industry and the local market segment should be prepared and they should be able to foresee what is going on.”

Informant 9 and nine other informants actively sought new information to learn about the most current market trends by exploring the Internet, connecting to and expanding their tourism networks, and/or analysing data collected from their booking systems and
conversations with guests to build a guest profile of their clients. Consequently, they were able to adjust their marking strategies, products, and services to better keep up with the constantly evolving market. Nine informants also explored ideas for developing new products and diversifying the activities that Gloucester could offer, aiming to strengthen and add value to existing products and services and reduce the vulnerability of its tourism system caused by factors such as seasonality, unpredictable weather, and competition from other destinations.

Furthermore, these informants engaged in collaborative adaptation by working with farmers, the NSW Parks and Wildlife Service, the Gloucester Visitor Information Centre, and other local and regional tourism networks. A collective effort was made to reinforce the linkage between tourism and the agriculture/protected areas, broaden the range of tourism products, and fortify the natural, rural, and attractive image of the area aiming to counteract the image associated with a mining town. The informants’ involvement in the various networks can be viewed as an investment in social capital that has been shown to forge and diversify businesses and products, facilitate the sharing of business knowledge, and acquire external resources that can then help individuals and communities cope and adapt in a world of constant change (Park et al., 2012; Scott et al., 2008).

Eleven informants rejected Gloucester’s representation as a mining town by addressing the source of changes directly—strategies labelled as problem-focused coping (Folkman & Lazarus, 1985). Problem-focused coping was adopted to stop increased mining or reduce associated impacts on the area’s natural and rural attributes and qualities that contributed to their representation of Gloucester as home. Resources such as time, money and energy were invested into actions that included attending community meetings concerning the mines, participating in or making donations to support activities to combat increased mining, and gathering and/or presenting information to showcase an alternative future for the area without more mines. Coping was driven in part by feelings of fear, anger, and worry attributable to
the impact of changes that thematised the representation of Gloucester ideal for the
informants because such changes could transform it into a place characterised by attributes
and qualities incompatible with their vision for its future. To Informant 6, relocation was not
an option since living in Gloucester and assisting with its sustainable development via nature-
based tourism and organic agriculture was a dream in which he had been investing for years.
He stated that

“(S)o that fear of change... my fear of the change is the town that I loved and in helping
to grow sustainably through sustainable industries will change... I will not like what it
changes into and will have to leave. So I guess that’s what is driving me.”

Meanwhile, coping was not always done without concerns and difficulties, as
demonstrated by seven informants. Investment in problem-focused coping diverted resources
away from being allocated to improving the informants’ business and making necessary
adaptations to ongoing and foreseeable changes. Coping was also impeded by perceived
uncertainties related to the impact of mining and the political environment within which the
informants operated their business. Informant 1 had to refrain from making additional
investments in his accommodation business, as he explained.

"We not only have to contend with the vagaries of the market and try to develop
business, but we actually have to try and contend with the State Government who are
not supportive of what we are trying to do in terms of developing this type of business,
and what we fear is that we will become so reliant on the extractive industry, which is
not a sustainable industry, that once they are gone there will be nothing left."
A sense of powerlessness and lack of trust in the government and industry entities also limited the informants’ coping options. When asked about whether anything could be done to prevent unwanted changes from increased mining, Informant 11 replied,

“No. I don’t think there is. I mean the Government’s going to take what they want and that’s where they are getting their money from, so... I honestly think that you won’t stop them despite there has been lots of rallies and lots of petitions.”

Because the proposed new open-cut mine could come very close to the township and accommodation property of Informant 12, she was concerned about related activities that could negatively affect her property, which was designed as a rural retreat in which her guests could relax and rejuvenate. Recognising that keeping extractive activities a reasonable distance from residences should be part of government regulations, she indicated that it was also the mining industry’s responsibility to engage in a mutually respectful relationship with the community. Being devastated by the possible encroachment of the proposed mine towards her property and a lack of respect from the mining industry, she chose to cope using wishful thinking that the problem would go away. Informant 12 stated that

"(I)t should be part of the deal, you know, that they (the mining industry) live in harmony with us and respect... They’ve got their work to do. We’ve got our stuff. Let’s see how we can work together to make it better. But there is no cooperation from them."

The findings reported in this subsection reveal our informants’ strategies for coping with the adverse impacts of mining-induced changes to their ideal representation, thus
contributing to our understanding of Research Question 3. Some of these strategies and actions aimed at sustaining and reinforcing the area’s representation and image that was congruent with the informants’ lifestyle goals. The symbolic otherness and associated image is what makes rural destinations attractive to urban tourists (Irvine & Anderson, 2004). This also makes rural destinations vulnerable to changes that can damage their destination image. Recovery marketing in which key stakeholders, including STF owners and managers, are involved has been recommended to manage the negative image resulting from crises and disasters and minimise associated impacts on visitor numbers (Armstrong & Ritchie, 2008; Hystad & Keller, 2008). This strategy was adopted by some of our informants with support from the Gloucester Visitor Information Centre.

Through this and other strategies, the informants collectively contributed to the resilience capacity of Gloucester’s tourism system—its capacity to absorb shock while maintaining its function, identity, and structure in the face of change (Chapin et al., 2009). Their resilience capacity was enhanced through their effort to diversify tourism services and products, along with their willingness to learn, experiment, invent, work with others to address the shared mining problem, and plan for the future despite uncertainty. All of these efforts are characteristics of small and lifestyle business entrepreneurship (Ateljevic & Doorne, 2000; Irvine & Anderson, 2004; Lashley et al., 2010). Meanwhile, many of the informants also employed problem-focused coping mechanisms aiming to address the sources of undesired changes by investing resources in preventing mining-induced changes and alleviating related impacts on Gloucester’s representation.

However, coping and adaptation were not implemented without barriers. Perceived uncertainties, feelings of powerlessness, and distrust in government and industry entities limited the informants’ coping options and further contributed to the psychological distress experienced by some of them. Uncertainties arose in part because of the unknown risk
involved in CSG that has been represented as a form of creative destruction of rural space because it relies on advanced technology in horizontal drilling and fracturing that assists with extraction (Wearing et al., 2014). Recommended support for STFs has often focused on developing participants’ business, marketing, and information technology skills, empowering tourism stakeholders, enhancing both internal and external networks, and providing financial assistance through loans, grants and advisory services (Ateljevic, 2008; Carlsen et al., 2008; Wanhill, 2013). Although this support can enhance the STF owner's capacity to cope with tourism-induced changes, its utility in buffering them from external changes is likely limited. Often STF owners and managers have little control over these changes, which nonetheless can increase the vulnerability of the natural and rural attributes and qualities supportive of a preferred way of life and attractive destination.

Many of the natural and rural attributes that our informants ascribed to Gloucester’s representation are common-pool resources (e.g., scenic views, water, air, tranquillity, a healthy image). Common-pool resources in rural destinations are utilised not only to support tourism but also to grow other rural industries (Garrod et al., 2006). For example, the scenic view supported by a landscape formed by contiguous farmlands, natural areas, and rural properties in a rural destination is used to attract tourists and promote tourism. The same view is also available to other rural industries (e.g., agriculture, mining) with the ability to acquire and consume the landscape and therefore the view, by converting it into something less compatible with the desired destination image. Incompatible uses of common-pool resources can result in conflicts among stakeholders who are concerned about the consumption, production, and protection of rural resources.

In Gloucester, potential use conflicts related to common-pool resources likely exist between different community groups (e.g., farmers, tourism and other commercial and non-commercial interests) and external entities (e.g., the mining industry and NSW State
Government) (Sherval & Hardiman, 2014). This reinforces the need to broaden the existing scope of tourism policy initiatives and consider the interplay and collaborative planning between tourism and other policy initiatives (Hall, 2009b; Thomas et al., 2011). Additionally, to alleviate the effect of uncertainty arising from the intrusive nature of external changes driven by mining and a sense of powerlessness and distrust among the stakeholders, a social license to operate—an informal social contract between rural communities and the energy industry—has been suggested (IEA, 2012; Wearing et al., 2014). Key destination stakeholders, including STF owners and managers, need to be involved early in the planning process of the proposed changes so that their concern can be expressed and measures to minimise unwanted impacts can be proposed and implemented.

6. Conclusion

Our study adopts SR theory to guide our investigation of the representation that STF owners and managers ascribe to the rural destination in which they reside and operate their business and how non-tourism induced changes interfere with this representation and motivate coping. Using the context of Gloucester, our findings reveal that many STF owners/managers become involved in the accommodation sector primarily motivated by lifestyle goals. These goals are closely linked to what the destination is represented as a place and what it has to offer to them as residents and STF owners/managers. The destination is represented primarily as a natural landscape and rural community with desired qualities. Through interactions with the area for a period of time, the area has become home to a sense of place attachment, self-identity, and community. The four themes that comprise the representation serve as anchors to guide STF owners’ and managers’ vision and expectations for their business and the future development of the area.
Changes originating from outside of the destination’s core tourism system, when perceived as threatening the ideal representation that STF owners and managers ascribe to the area, can problematise this representation and drive thematisation. Thematisation manifests when STF owners and managers employ themes and images contradictory to those themes that are essential to their ideal representation to portray the destination’s future image if undesired changes become reality.

Thematisation and subsequent tension experienced by STF owners and managers drive them to engage in coping mechanisms and negotiate with the changing environment to maintain their business viability and protect the representation and associated themes that they value. However, the ability to cope and adapt can be impeded by several factors. First, STF owners and managers are already constrained by their limited resources. Those who adopt problem-focused coping also must allocate limited resources to support related activities instead of using them to improve the business and make adjustments. The capacity to cope is also impeded by uncertainties arising from an ambiguous government environment regarding land use (e.g., rural tourism vs. mining) that might not always conform to an ideal representation of rural destinations in which STF owners and managers wish to operate their business while pursuing their lifestyle goals. Third, operating an STF in a changing environment is challenging when a sense of powerlessness is prevalent, thus preventing owners and managers from taking pro-active actions. A sense of powerlessness may result from an unclear political environment, along with the lack of a transparent process in which the decision about land use is made and mutually respectful communication between key stakeholders is absent.

Because change is a norm in any environment, our study provides some preliminary insight into the relationship among representations, changes, and coping in the context of STF managers and owners in a rural destination. To realise STFs’ function of supporting
sustainable rural development, it is vital to recognise rural tourism systems are embedded within larger economic, political, social, and environmental systems that constantly shape tourism in rural destinations. When external changes drive thematisation, there is an opportunity for debate, negotiation, reconciliation, and invention to address the source that drives them. Accordingly, the problematisation of rural destinations’ representation provides a venue for collaborative planning. During the planning process, stakeholders concerned about the production, consumption, and protection of rural landscapes beyond those directly involved in the rural tourism system, while challenging, need to be encouraged to come together to share, negotiate, and co-construct the representation of rural destinations that is acceptable to most, if not all.
References


