Chapter 2
Special Interest Travel: Reflections, Rejections and Reassertions

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Abstract The term special interest tourism (SIT) first appeared in the tourism literature nearly three decades ago and continues to be used as a label by tourism scholars, researchers and educators. Given SIT is most robust as a demand construct, this chapter uses the acronym SIT to refer to special interest travel and special interest travellers. The chapter traces the development of SIT, identifying milestones for both SIT and other closely related terms that have gained traction in the tourism literature in recent decades. The similarities, differences and overlaps between SIT, neo-tribal tourism and serious leisure are discussed and presented as a diagram. The chapter concludes with avenues for further research and implications for marketing.

Keywords Special interest travel · SIT · Neo-tribal tourism · Serious leisure · Niche tourism

2.1 Introduction

The aim of this chapter is to present an overview of special interest tourism (SIT) and its pathway in the academic literature over the past few decades in order to chart its conceptualisation over time. With the emergence of new concepts such as consumer tribes (Cova and Cova 2002), neo-tribes (Maffesoli 1996) and neo-tribal tourism (Hardy and Robards 2015) in particular, it is timely to reflect on what is meant and encompassed by special interest tourism and how it informs, relates to or is distinguished from neo-tribal phenomena in tourism.

As such, the chapter draws on previous literature to define SIT and present themes that have been explored to date. This helps position SIT in relation to other terms and concepts including serious leisure, niche tourism and neo-tribal tourism. A timeline showing the emergence of some of these other concepts in the scholarly literature in

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parallel with the evolution of SIT scholarly literature is then presented. The review of SIT and related literature provides a foundation for establishing the relationships between SIT and neo-tribal tourism, including what can be learned from the SIT literature to inform neo-tribal tourism and what the latter can bring to the literature that SIT has not. Implications for research and marketing are also considered.

2.2 Defining Special Interest Tourism

Special interest tourism (SIT) has been part of the lexicon of tourism scholarship since at least the early 1990s, when it was introduced as the title of an edited book by Weiler and Hall (1992). Hall and Weiler (1992: 4) suggest that the term was coined by Read (1980) in a chapter he wrote for a tourism marketing and management text. However, it was Weiler and Hall's book that launched SIT in the tourism academic literature and that provided a working definition that has framed subsequent work.

What then, are the defining elements of SIT? Firstly, according to Hall and Weiler (1992: 5), travel can be described as SIT when "the traveller's motivation and decision-making are primarily determined by a particular special interest" or, as Read (1980: 195) expressed it, when the special interest is "the hub around which the total travel experience is planned and developed". In other words, special interest travellers are motivated to pursue a particular hobby, activity or interest on their holiday, and this motivation drives the decisions they make about where, when, and for how long to travel. *The special interest, rather than the destination, drives decision-making.* This defining quality of SIT appears to be widely accepted in principle by all who research or write about SIT, notwithstanding the fact that what is labelled in the literature as SIT often extends well outside this definition. See, for example, the three edited volumes and one authored monograph listed in Table 2.1, all titled and devoted to 'special interest tourism'. According to the definitions presented in the introductions of each of these collected works, these editors and authors concur with Hall and Weiler's definition, even though it is evident that not all the tourists and experiences described in the case studies are centred on a particular special interest. Indeed, over the last few decades case studies presented as being under the umbrella of SIT seem to have strayed further and further from a focus on travel that is driven by a particular special interest. This is true not only of collected works, but by journal and conference paper authors who use the SIT umbrella under which to position their particular case study. For example, travellers may follow a wine-and-food touring route for part of their trip, attend a festival or event, or spend a day at a health spa. While some of these are true special interest tourists, most of these travellers might be better labelled as generalists. In other words, tourists in these case studies may well participate in activities that align with their interests but, as McKercher and Chan (2005) note, this is not the same as planning and executing a holiday around a particular special interest.

A second definitional element notionally associated with SIT is that it is *experience-based or experiential* (Weiler and Hall 1992), as opposed to a more

Table 2.1 Focus of case studies in collected works on special interest tourism

Weiler and Hall (1992)	Douglas et al. (2001)	Agarwal et al. (2018)	Rittichainuwat (2018)
Educational travel	Regional tourism	Social tourism	Food tourism
Arts and heritage tourism	Cultural tourism	Family tourism	Medical tourism
Ethnic tourism	Heritage tourism	Religious tourism	Film tourism
Nature-based tourism	Rural tourism	Literary tourism	Shopping tourism
Adventure tourism	Educational tourism	Music tourism	Dark tourism
Sport tourism	Cycle tourism	Film tourism	Ghost tourism
Health tourism	Aboriginal cultures and Indigenous tourism	Carnival tourism	Suicide tourism
	Health, spa and health resorts	Golf tourism	
	Environmental tourism	Adventure tourism	
	Wine and food tourism	Shopping tourism	
	Cruise tourism	Food tourism	
	Festivals and events	Garden tourism	
	Sex tourism	Slow tourism	
	Senior tourism		
	Urban tourism		

superficial or consumptive travel style and set of behaviours. Here also we see some points of digression by scholars, as many of the case studies in the collected volumes of so-called SIT and labelled as SIT in the wider academic literature, for example urban tourism, cruising and shopping tourism, might be better labelled as consumptive or mass tourism (again, see Table 2.1). In other words, defining what is and is not 'experiential travel' is not clear-cut; indeed some would argue that all tourism is experiential irrespective of whether tourist behaviour involves passive or active 'hands-on' experiences (Pine and Gilmore 1998). Some have tried to distinguish experiential tourism from those activities that are more obviously consumptive (e.g. shopping) or status-building (e.g. a holiday at a well-known resort) and it is perhaps this notion that prompted Brotherton and Himmetoglu (1997: 17) to argue that SIT is "motivated by intrinsic factors derived from the interest or activity". However, much travel that is *not* SIT also can be intrinsically motivated, for example a family camping holiday, and arguably the motivations for many special interests are not necessarily 'intrinsic' only, for example those that involve collecting or those that involve competing for an extrinsic reward (e.g. some sports tourism). That said, there does seem to be agreement that SIT can be characterised as being less consumptive and more experiential in nature.

Weiler and Hall's (1992) volume included a number of review chapters and case studies that focused on what were considered to be subsets of special interest tourism at the time but would not be considered so today. This approach was replicated in the other three subsequent volumes, each providing a suite of updated (Douglas et al. 2001) and/or new (Agarwal et al. 2018; Rittichainuwat 2018) case studies. With the benefit of hindsight, it can be seen that these and other case studies collectively include what other authors would now label (i) 'niche markets' (e.g. cycle tourism;

ballooning; fossicking), (ii) 'target markets' (seniors; families; gay travellers), (iii) 'tourism genres' (educational travel; social tourism; slow tourism) and (iv) 'tourism sectors' (regional tourism; events; cruise tourism) (again, see Table 2.1).

This terminological and conceptual messiness is understandable. At the time that the first edited book was published, terms such as ethical, alternative, sustainable and ecotourism were only just emerging in the scholarly tourism literature. Any tourism product or experience that focused on smaller discerning markets of tourists was implied as more responsible and a better alternative to mass tourism. It is thus understandable that some of Weiler and Hall's case studies fall outside what would be considered SIT today. Indeed, Weiler and Hall themselves flag this confusion in their introductory chapter. Again, with the benefit of hindsight, Weiler and Hall's (1992) compilation might better have been titled *Special Interest Travel*, not only to distinguish it from travel and travellers driven by more generalist motives but also to place the focus on the traveller and the experience rather than on the destination or the product. Our review of the SIT literature led us to conclude that SIT should not be regarded as a supply concept at all, as there are no particular defining characteristics of special interest *tourism*. SIT is a demand construct, and its defining characteristics relate to the special interest traveller him/herself and the trip or travel that the individual constructs for themselves. What makes it 'special' is the perspective and experience of the tourist, not what is delivered by a destination or tourism operator (Trauer 2006).

In the decades that followed, many of what were originally considered subsets of SIT have become runaway successes in terms of volume of publications, including nature-based tourism, ecotourism, adventure tourism, health tourism, and cultural tourism, and some have emerged as tourism genre in their own right. Each tourism genre is likely to comprise a mix of travellers with generalist and specialist motivations. In other words, for many tourists the decision to engage in an activity within a particular tourism genre (for example, visiting a war museum) may be incidental to their decision to travel rather than being their primary motivation for travel. This is in contrast to the often smaller number of travellers whose decision-making about where and when to travel is driven by their special interest (for example, war history).

In summary, special interest travel is distinguished based on what drives the traveller's decision-making and the experiential nature of the travel. The fact that case studies (both within and outside edited volumes) are labelled SIT when they fall short of meeting these two very basic definitional criteria has impeded development of the SIT construct and no doubt has contributed to the growth of new labels and typologies including neo-tribal tourism, a point we return to later.

2.3   Themes in the SIT Literature

In addition to attempts to define SIT, scholars have proposed a number of other themes as potentially consolidating the SIT literature and distinguishing SIT from other constructs. In the same vein as the definitional elements reviewed above, it

is useful to review the literature in relation to these themes, in an effort to better understand the SIT phenomenon. As this section demonstrates, all of these themes are to some extent contestable.

One theme that is not widely embraced is that *special interest tourists exhibit a particular socio-demographic profile*. Brotherton and Himmetoglu (1997) in particular suggested that special interest travellers are of higher socio-economic status, are more experienced/sophisticated tourists, typically belong to clubs, are price-sensitive and tend to be allocentric travellers. This line of argument, however, has not been pursued by other scholars, and it does seem unlikely that, given the wide range of possible interests that could motivate and drive special interest travel, special interest tourists would share a common profile. Of course, travellers who share a particular special interest may well have a common socio-demographic profile, and this has been reported in studies of specific SIT segments such as golf tourists (Hennessey et al. 2008) and bird watching tourists (Kim et al. 2010), but the desire and behaviour to undertake special interest travel is not confined to a particular socio-demographic.

A second and closely related theme is that *special interest products (or experiences) exhibit certain common characteristics* that distinguish them from 'other' tourism products. For example, it has been suggested that SIT is active, novel, adventurous, authentic, emotionally engaging, involving, personalised, and more satisfying and memorable (Weiler and Hall 1992; Brotherton and Himmetoglu 1997; Agarwal et al. 2018). While SIT can be some or all of these things, all of these have been dismissed as defining characteristics of SIT, with many embedded into the definitions of new terms in the literature such as quality tourism, alternative tourism, ethical tourism, and responsible tourism. For example, Argawal et al. (2018: 14) are quite explicit about saying that "SIT is … no more or no less authentic than mass tourism". Many have sought to contrast SIT with mass tourism in other ways, such as the style of travel, the benign nature of the travel, and the quality of the experience. In reality, in terms of style of travel, SIT can often look like mass tourism and, as noted earlier, travellers pursuing a special interest (for example wildlife tourists) may well visit destinations, participate in experiences, and stay in accommodation that is shared with mass tourists. Some suggest that special interest tourism came about due to the growing opposition to mass tourism and the increasingly negative impacts of mass tourism development on destination regions. As such, special interest tourism has often been regarded as synonymous with 'ethical travel' (Frommer 1988) and 'sustainable tourism' (Richter 1987), in terms of delivering quality outcomes for both the tourist and the hosts/destination, although empirical evidence to support this notion is lacking. The assumption that special interest tourists are more experienced travellers, with greater awareness of their environment and seeking both authentic experiences and deeper involvement with host communities, is not always verifiable.

A third advance in the SIT literature has been the idea of *a continuum in level of interest and expertise* among special interest travellers. While the special interest needs to be the driver of travel decision-making, the pursuit of a special interest while travelling does not necessarily have to be of an obsessive or extreme nature. Thus, both Brotherton and Himmetoglu (1997) and Trauer (2006)—the latter building on

the former—have proposed a continuum of experiences: dabbler, enthusiast, expert, and fanatic. Trauer uses this continuum to propose a 4-cell model for what she calls a 'micro-level' of analysis of SIT. The dabbler is a novice and participates infrequently and with low involvement. The fanatic is an expert and seeks more frequent and higher involvement. This idea stems from the serious leisure literature and adds a useful perspective, although some may question whether, if one is at the 'dabbler' end of the spectrum, one is in fact engaging in serious leisure/SIT (Veal 2017). Trauer herself suggests that enduring involvement is a key element of both serious leisure and SIT. It is not difficult to see how the novice end of the continuum begins to blur with being a generalist who choose to participate in an activity while on a holiday, as discussed by McKercher and Chan (2005) (see last section of this chapter).

A fourth related theme is the idea of an *SIT career path*. Brotherton and Himme-toglu (1997) propose that travellers progress from being generalists to being special interest travellers, something that to our knowledge has not been investigated or supported in the literature. Somewhat differently, Trauer (2006: 194) mentions the "potential for a career path in SIT", that is, that over time an individual may seek to pursue their special interest at increasingly frequent intervals and with greater levels of involvement. While this would clearly not apply to all special interest travellers, it is probable that those at the expert or fanatic end of the continuum would have progressed to that point over time in their home pursuits (if the interest is a 'serious leisure' interest) as well as in their travels. As with Pearce's (Pearce and Lee 2005) more generic travel career ladder, however, the idea that there is or should be a unidirectional path in one's travel behaviour over a lifetime has been questioned, as it implies that one form of travel (in this case generalist travel and/or dabbling) is somehow a lesser form of travel than another (in this case, fanatical SIT).

A fifth theme that is not prominent but very much relevant to the present discussion is whether there is a '*shared social world*' element to special interest travel. While the SIT experience may be shared with travellers who have like-minded interests, the idea of a collective to which SITs create, contribute to and strengthen is less evident in the SIT literature than it is in the more recent neo-tribal tourism literature (Hardy and Robards 2015). Hall and Weiler (1992: 8) were prepared to go only so far as to say that "special interest tourists will be more likely to exhibit preferences and behaviour associated with a particular social world" and more likely to embrace "special beliefs, values, moral principles, norms and performance standards" associated with such a world (Stebbins 1992: 257). Brotherton and Himmetoglu (1997) found that a majority of SITs are members of clubs associated with their special interest holiday choices in their daily 'non' SIT existence, suggesting a strong link between home-based leisure and the activities of SITs, however they acknowledge that their study draws on a very limited study sample. Trauer (2006) goes further, arguing that a shared social or cultural world is important in SIT, and examples come to mind to support this, such as scuba diving and wine tourism; yet one can imagine many special interest travellers making travel decisions quite independent of seeking engagement in an SIT collective, such as solo walkers and wildlife tourists.

In summary, there are a number of themes that have appeared in the SIT literature with varying levels of support. These themes have been used in some cases to identify

what is a special interest travel experience and what is not, as well as who may be labelled a special interest traveller. The value in presenting these in the current chapter is to explore how SIT relates to other labels and constructs, and particularly whether neo-tribal tourism offers potential as a construct with perhaps clearer and more definitive boundaries.

2.4 The Evolution of SIT Over Time

The term special interest tourism first came to prominence in the tourism literature in the early 1990s as a counterpoint to mass tourism. Discussions of special interest tourism at this time signalled the arrival of 'the new tourist' (Poon 1993) characterised by a desire for 'REAL' (rewarding, experiential, authentic and learning) travel experiences. Research into SIT at this time tended to focus on understanding the characteristics and types of special interest tourists and how they differed to conventional tourists (Brotherton and Himmetoglu 1997). As illustrated in Fig. 2.1, new terms have since emerged, many of which share commonalities with SIT.

For example, parallels can be drawn between SIT and Stebbins's (2001) theories of serious leisure with respect to both the SIT participant continuum (dabbler to fanatic) and the behaviours and norms that come with shared social worlds. Stebbins' ideas are not without its critics (see for example Veal 2017), however, the basic notion that a passion for a particular activity or interest can drive one's leisure choices including travel decision-making has persisted for decades in both the leisure and SIT literature and continues to be a link between these two constructs. Thus, the concept of serious leisure travel can be seen to be closely aligned with special interest travel, with the travel component perhaps being the "desire to engage … in a novel location" (Agarwal et al. 2018: 3).

As also illustrated in Fig. 2.1, other terms such as niche tourism, which grew out of niche marketing (Rapp and Collins 1990), have effectively taken over the role previously played by the term SIT, particularly when referring to products and experiences that are not widely sought. That said, Novelli (2005) considers there to be a spectrum from macro-niche tourism (with relatively large market shares) such as cultural tourism, to micro-niche tourism (such as geotourism and geneology tourism). Moreover, Novelli dedicates one section of her edited book on niche tourism to a subset of case studies that she labels special interest tourism (e.g. photography, geology, gastronomy and transport). Nonetheless, niche tourism is a useful term in that it is inclusive of experiences that are not necessarily what the individual traveller pursues in their home environment (that is, not serious leisure), and travel that is not necessarily wrapped around an 'interest'. That is to say, not all consumers of niche tourism products can be classified as special interest tourists according to Weiler and Hall's (1992) definition. So, for example, dark tourism is considered a niche tourism product but the motivation and decision-making have less to do with a special interest and more to do with events that have occurred at the destination.
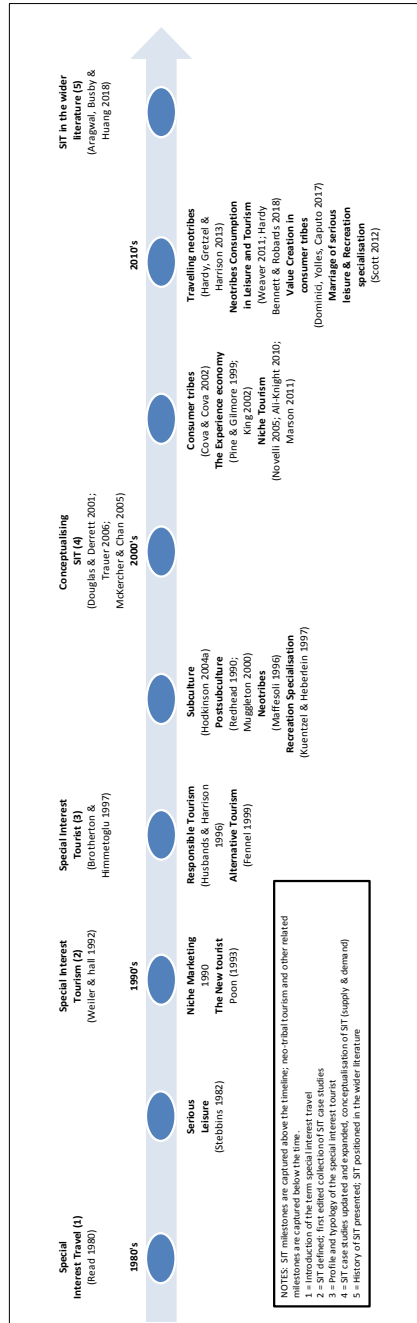
Fig. 2.1 Timeline of SIT and related scholarly literature

Niche tourism can also refer to a product or experience with a fairly small market appeal. Whereas SIT is consumer-focused, niche tourism involves focusing a product on a subset of the market. Many tourism operators choose to adopt a competitive strategy of specialising in the creation of high-value tailored products to appeal to smaller segments of the market. So-called macro-niches are probably the equivalent of tourism genres (e.g. adventure tourism, cultural tourism), within which there are true niche tourism products and experiences such as abseiling/climbing tours and indigenous immersion experiences. Similarly, travellers such as youths, seniors and families seem to be better referred to as market segments rather than as SIT or niche markets.

At the same time as efforts were being made in tourism to pin down SIT as a concept, the discipline of sociology was wrestling with the notion of 'subcultures'. The term neo-tribe was introduced by Maffesoli (1996) as an alternative to the concept of subculture. Where 'subculture' was used to describe groups of homogenous individuals that share a common belief or interest, the term 'neo-tribe' highlighted the fact that individuals from different walks of life also often come together through a series of temporal group gatherings characterised by fluid boundaries and floating memberships. Neo-tribal theory has since been applied in other disciplines such as marketing, which introduced the term 'consumer tribes' to acknowledge the influence of subcultures on individual consumer behaviour (Cova and Cova 2002). These subcultures of consumption "challenge the view that consumers are [always necessarily] isolated individuals who self-consciously consume to maximize their utility" (Goulding et al. 2013: 813).

Neo-tribal theory in the context of tourism is a much more recent advancement (see Fig. 2.1), embraced for its potential for "understanding lifestyles, behaviours and needs of consumer groups" (Hardy et al. 2013: 51). Neo-tribal theory has been applied in a number of different tourism contexts including recreational vehicle holidays (Hardy et al. 2012, 2013); cruise tourism (Weaver 2011; Kriwoken and Hardy 2018), clubbing holidays (Goulding and Shankar 2011) and music events (Gibson and Connell 2003) as well as within certain tourist segments (Vorobjovas-Pinta 2018). The findings of these studies suggest that the social behaviours and motivations of these different tourist types can usefully be conceptualised in terms of neo-tribes.

2.5 Links to Neo-Tribal Tourism and Other Constructs

As already indicated, one conclusion we have come to is that it is not fruitful to look for what is special about special interest tourism destinations or products; SIT is most useful as a demand construct. Referring to the travel experience (rather than focusing on the business of tourism including destination and product development) puts the focus on the individual's motivation(s) and decision-making (including pre-trip, during travel, and post-travel) and travel behaviour.

How then are special interest travellers similar to neo-tribal tourists and how do they differ? They appear to be similar in that an individual can have more than one special interest and be a member of more than one tribe; the special interest or tribe does not necessarily dominate one's behaviours (Hardy and Robards 2015). Both special interest travel segments and tribes also share the quality of being transient, with fluid membership (Goulding and Shankar 2011).

However, as illustrated in Fig. 2.2, neo-tribal tourists and special interest travellers are not always the same thing. We suggest that an individual is both a special interest traveller and a neo-tribal tourist only when:

- Their travel is formed around a common interest and/or shared passion for a particular object, issue, or activity
- They share a social world and are capable of collective action
- They consume goods as symbols of the special interest/tribe
- They adopt rules of engagement such as dress codes, language, etiquette, and rituals (Goulding and Shankar 2011; Hardy and Robards 2015; Hardy et al. 2018).

Although this suggests considerable common ground, there are neo-tribal tourists who are not special interest travellers. Neo-tribal tourism that is necessarily based on a special interest includes some of the RVers in the research by Hardy et al. (2012). These are travellers with a wide range of motives and interests and activities, so *their trip is not driven by a special interest*, but they do share many common travel patterns (such as mode of travel and length of time on the road) and exhibit neo-tribal behaviour, including being attracted by like-minded travellers. Cruise ship passengers are another example of travellers who are not necessarily there because of common special interests, but rather to share a mode of travel. On the other hand themed cruises targeting tourists who seek the company of like-minded travellers
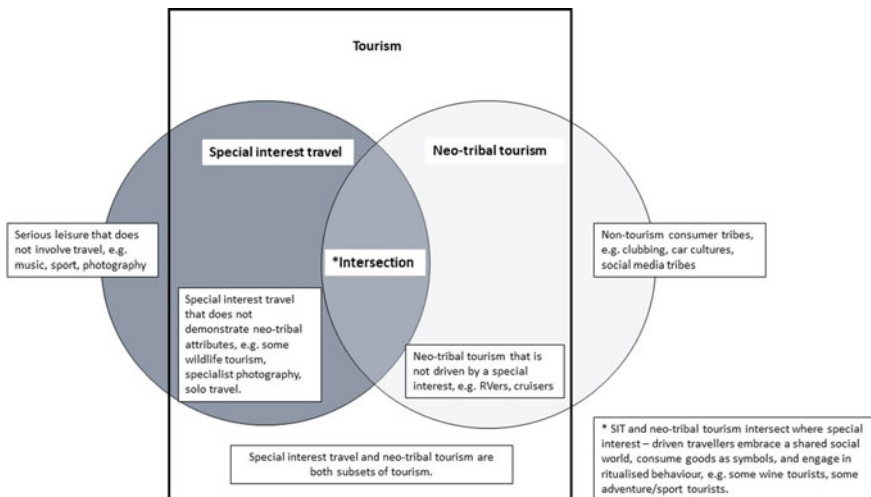

Tourism

Special interest travel

Neo-tribal tourism

Serious leisure that does not involve travel, e.g. music, sport, photography

Non-tourism consumer tribes, e.g. clubbing, car cultures, social media tribes

*Intersection

Special interest travel that does not demonstrate neo-tribal attributes, e.g. some wildlife tourism, specialist photography, solo travel.

Neo-tribal tourism that is not driven by a special interest, e.g. RVers, cruisers

Special interest travel and neo-tribal tourism are both subsets of tourism.

* SIT and neo-tribal tourism intersect where special interest-driven travellers embrace a shared social world, consume goods as symbols, and engage in ritualised behaviour, e.g. some wine tourists, some adventure/sport tourists.

Fig. 2.2 The relationship between special interest travel and neo-tribal tourism

who share a common interest such as gambling, gastronomy, wellness, opera or photography (Weaver 2011) may well be an example of neo-tribal tourists who are SITs.

Similarly, there are special interest travellers who are not neo-tribal tourists. Co-presence and community are seen as central to neo-tribalism, where individuals come together as a micro community to coalesce, usually (although not always) around a particular special interest (Weaver 2011). In contrast, being part of a community does not always apply to special interest travel. For example, there are individuals who travel pursuing their special interest, but without necessarily participating in a *shared social world*. Bird-watchers and some other types of wildlife tourists go to great lengths to pursue their interest, but often do this as individuals or couples, rather than as a 'tribe'. This is also true for many food tourists and those driven by their passion for specialist photography.

While *symbolic consumption* has been identified as an element of consumer tribes and also has been researched in the context of tourism (Gazley and Watling 2015), there has been little written about SITs and symbolic consumption. One can imagine this occurring with some special interests, for example wine tourists, as well as some food tourists and adventure tourists, but perhaps not with others. The *adoption of rules of engagement* is also evident in some but not all SITs. In other words, special interest travellers who do not engage in symbolic consumption and do not adopt rules of engagement would not be considered neo-tribal tourists.

2.6 Implications for Researching and Marketing Special Interest Travel

The foregoing review suggests there is still much to be gained by continuing to research special interest travellers and special interest travel, including their overlap with neo-tribal tourism. Despite several attempts to conceptualise SIT markets, experiences, products and even destinations, the acronym SIT is almost certainly best used to refer to special interest travel and the special interest traveller, that is, the traveller and the experiential component, rather than special interest tourism as a distinct product. Yet we still have a poor understanding of the special interest traveller. The existence of a special interest travel career progression (from dabbler to fanatic, or from novice to expert) and the factors that might impact this might be a fruitful avenue for research.

It is important to recognise, however, that one cannot ascribe the label 'special interest tourist' to an individual or group of individuals beyond a particular travel experience. An individual cannot be categorised as *being* a special interest tourist, as this runs the risk of suggesting that an individual can only have one special interest, and that all travel undertaken by that individual must be driven by that special interest. This, of course, would be as flawed as labelling a person as a resort traveller based on the fact that they spent two weeks at a beachside resort during the school holidays.

In this sense, special interest travellers are similar to neo-tribal tourists. Clearly, there are many factors that bring particular motivations including special interests to the fore for any given trip. On the supply side, it is equally folly to think that a product such as a cruise, tour or resort, let alone a destination, would cater only to those whose primary motivation was to pursue their special interest. Thus, future research and scholarship should employ the term special interest travel to refer to a particular trip undertaken by one or more individuals whose primary motivation and decision-making (including choice of destination, length of stay, price, activities at the destination, etc.) are based on their special interest.

Furthermore, the term SIT should be contrasted with generalist travel rather than with mass tourism. Special interest tourist typologies (Brotherton and Himmetoglu's 1997) go some way to explaining the differences in behaviour of special interest tourists based on their level of experience and commitment to pursuing their special interest, however an opportunity exists to further develop special interest tourist typologies (Agarwal et al. 2018) and to better understand how special interest travel differs from generalist travel.

The importance of the social world and membership with a 'tribe' of like-minded individuals to the overall special interest tourism experience remains unclear. Some individual travellers may give little consideration to the social context of their leisure pursuit, preferring to undertake their special interest travel alone, for example bird-watchers and mountaineers. The travel experience of other types of special interest tourists may be greatly enhanced through opportunities to interact with like-minded individuals who share the same interest, for example participants on an organised cycling tour. Therefore future research could investigate the importance of the social environment and 'tribe' membership for different types of special interest travel including independent travel, organised tours and mass events.

Another element that has not been widely considered in the literature on special interest travel is the sense of identity that comes from participating in special interest travel. Consideration should be given to how changes in communication technology, such as the prevalence of social media, influences and shapes the 'situational self-image' (Gazley and Watling 2015) and group identity for special interest tourists. Related to this is the importance of behavioural rules and practices, rituals and symbolic consumption for special interest travel. All of these are elements of serious leisure that may, or may not, have traction in the context of SIT.

In their seminal book on special interest tourism, Weiler and Hall (1992) noted that special interest tourism is often considered synonymous with 'ethical' and 'responsible' travel (Frommer 1988), yet there still remains a lack of empirical evidence to support this idea. More recently writers have considered the potential for special interest tourism to move tourist behaviour in the direction of ethical consumerism (Agarwal et al. 2018). However further research is necessary to understand special interest tourists vis-à-vis ethical travel, and the potential role of their special interest 'tribe' in shaping their behaviour. Weiler and Hall (1992) also observed that few writers had considered the benefits and costs of special interest tourism from the industry's perspective. Now almost three decades on, the impacts of special interest

travellers and how their impacts compare to generalist travellers still remains an unexplored area of research.

Notwithstanding the fact that special interest travel and travellers do exist, SIT's potential as a target market for destinations and for specific tourism businesses needs to be treated as a separate issue to research opportunities. Some researchers have studied how specific destinations are targeting special interest tourists to compete more effectively as destinations face the risk of homogenisation. Agarwal et al. (2018) express concern regarding a continuing trend of hyper-segmentation in marketing, as suppliers focus their strategies on ever-more-specialised markets. Recent publications discuss some of these newly emerging forms of special interest tourism such as slum tourism and suicide tourism (Rittichainuwat 2018), as well as the opportunities and impacts they present for industry and the host community. In their edited book on special interest tourism, Douglas et al. (2001) caution against introducing a new category of SIT to classify every new class of traveller whose interest lies beyond the conventional idea of tourism, a particularly important observation when it comes to marketing practice.

Complementing these observations, McKercher and Chan (2005) present a compelling case for dismissing the way visitor numbers are used to make a case for high-volumes of special interest tourists generally and for particular subsets of SIT, arguing (quite rightly) that pursuing a special interest or engaging in a specific activity while travelling cannot be equated with travelling that is motivated primarily by one's special interest. So, for example, a traveller might well visit a spa or have a health treatment while on holidays, but that does not make them an SIT. On the other hand, someone whose travel decision-making is wrapped around a particular festival or sporting event (whether as a participant, volunteer or spectator) can be considered a special interest tourist, even though they may combine it with other activities and interests.

In other words, there appears to be no basis for advocating that destinations and tourism businesses exclusively target SITs. Firstly, they are not of sufficient numbers and membership lacks stability over time. Travel in pursuit of special interests may wax and wane depending on internal (motivational) as well as external factors such as economic downturns, weather events and terrorism/safety threats. Secondly, special interest travellers generally do not collectively exhibit particular socio-demographic or consumer behaviour characteristics that lend themselves to being easily targeted by marketers. Thus, even if a government or operator wants to target an SIT 'market', their heterogeneity in profile and fluidity in membership makes them difficult to identify and reach. On the other hand, cooperative marketing and the harnessing of new media may provide new opportunities not previously available to destinations and businesses to reach SITs and sustain their interest.

In conclusion, this chapter has sought to illustrate how the conceptualisation of special interest travel and neo-tribal tourism have occurred separately, and to examine how the two concepts differ and where they converge. Insights gained from this investigation have helped to identify avenues for research and to illuminate opportunities and challenges for marketing to both special interest travellers and neo-tribal tourists.

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