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Like a fish in water: Habitus adaptation mechanisms of informal tourism entrepreneurs in Thailand

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ABSTRACT

This article investigates possible pathways of habitus change by informal tourism entrepreneurs in Thailand. Bourdieu's concept of habitus is depicted as a person's understanding of the world. Do people adapt their worldview in response to only external stimuli? Through ethnographic fieldwork including participant observations and active semi-structured interviews with 53 participants, this paper identifies a classification of four modes of habitus adaptation: (1) Understanding and appreciating the field and its conditions, (2) Challenging core beliefs systems, (3) Applying a practical sense to 'objective possibilities', and, (4) Challenging non-reflective dispositions. We argue that charting the modes of habitus adaptation could help policymakers understand the change processes of informal entrepreneurs in the tourism sector and their willingness to change.

Introduction

Few social scientists today would deny that global tourism has significantly contributed to changes in host communities' social and cultural structures. These change processes are often context dependent and accompanied by the (in)formal tourism entrepreneurs aligning with the new structures, and changing their individual behaviour (Hall & Page, 2014). In explaining the processes of change from a social science perspective, habitus is probably one of Bourdieu's most cited concepts (Maton, 2012). Habitus shapes one's present and future embodied practices and consists of 'one's mental and corporeal schemata of perception, appreciation, and action' (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 16). Despite the vast quantity of research that has examined the role of habitus in changing the social structure through exploring a person's social position (Entwistle, 2000), the social reproduction process (Crossley, 2003), the use of the natural environment for leisure by immigrants (Horolets, Stodolska, & Peters, 2019), and the exchange of capitals by volunteer tourists (Thompson & Taheri, 2020), much less research exists regarding how habitus adapts in response to individual and social structural change (Aarseth, Layton, & Nielsen, 2016; Green, 2008; Lau, 2004).

This paper seeks to answer the following central question: *How habitus adapts in response to major and minor individual and social structural change?* More precisely, this paper empirically investigates whether and how informal tourism entrepreneurs change their habitus in response to both internal and external stimuli in Thailand. As such, this paper presents the first formal attempt in the tourism literature to break up habitus adaptation empirically by integrating concepts from two bodies of literature: affective psychology and sociology. This consolidated novel approach focuses on the pathways of habitus change and how habitus adapts dynamically to the new conditions and circumstances impacting upon one's social structural environment and individual

life trajectories. Notably, this novel approach incorporates the notion of individual changes together with structural changes in the production of new facets of the self. To this end, this study indicates new avenues for research in social sciences and, in particular, in tourism studies.

Thailand is chosen as the study context. Thailand has experienced a five-fold increase in international tourist arrivals in the last two decades. This intensified a migration flux from rural regions and neighbouring countries to the urban areas and major tourism destinations (De Jong, 2000). This rapid expansion of tourism and its associated developments has significantly changed the local communities' everyday realities (Green, 2005; Pongponrat, 2011). These new conditions in the social context might exert pressure on field actors to change their habitus and this change might also redefine conditions in these fields. This dialectic process makes Thailand an interesting context for this study. The research materials were collected through ethnographic participant observations and active semi structured interviews with 53 informal tourism entrepreneurs on the three popular tourist islands of Koh Samui, Koh Phangan and Koh Tao. The overriding concern of centring ethnographic method in this study was to observe participants' everyday actions and to understand their habitus change processes.

This study's results reveal an ongoing exchange between field actors' habitus and the conditions in their social context – or as Bourdieu would probably address it *the fields reproduce the habitus and the habitus reproduces the fields* –. While some entrepreneurs reflect consciously on the field conditions and their individual history and appreciate the field and their perfect 'fitting in' with field conditions, like a fish in water, others change their habitus radically in their personal and professional domains as a reflexive break with their past. To this end, this study contributes to our understanding of the nuances of habitus change. Its results could be used for a policy intervention in predicting tourism stakeholders' willingness to change and to adapt their habitus to the new conditions in a field.

The importance of habitus in shaping strategy praxis

While stakeholders' strategy praxis remains an important focal point that we seek to understand in tourism studies, it is critical to recognise that the stakeholders' habitus is a primary unit of investigation. The domain of praxis is wide and embraces all actual activities undertaken by people, such as formulating and implementing a strategy that leads to a good performance in relevant fields (Whittington, 2006). Habitus plays an important role in this process and it includes internalised cultural discourses, perceptions and attitudes, past experiences, skills, gestures, mimicry and speech (Stones, 2005). Habitus is an embodied *feel for the game*, knowing what to do, when to do in order to fit in the game (Bourdieu, 1990). Individuals develop their strategy praxis according to their habitus. In these encounters, they experience the tension between the adaptation to the social world and the singularity of the self (Leandre-Gomez, 2010). While individuals develop subjective elements in their social environment, their personal aspects are embedded in this social context. Their praxis through habitus (dispositions for action) is derived from different forms of capital, which in turn, define their evolving place and role within the fields (i.e. their social context) to which they belong and in which they define their position and stakes.

In examining praxis, Bourdieu focuses on relationships and habitus conditioned by the structure of the field and its context. Unlike the rational actor theorists' (e.g. Habermas) idea that the actions of 'human beings' are the result of conscious intentions (Haggard & Libet, 2001), Bourdieu suggests habitus as 'a pre-reflexive concept, a second nature, durable and largely unconscious to social actors' Bourdieu and Wacquant (1992, p. 133). In this vein, habitus is not formed consciously, and it is not a rational thought of a homo economicus. It is deeply embodied and comes from being in these situations on a regular basis. Individuals – or better to say, social agents – incorporate the social traditions and regularities of fields unconsciously in their conduct. They develop their practical intuition necessary for the field and act through improvisation and elaboration of themes in collaboration with others (Bourdieu, 1977). However, social agents do not shape their habitus with full agency. The field doxa (i.e. the taken-for-granted, unquestioned truths of a field) provides them with the rules of play within the limits of what is thinkable and doable in a field. Habitus is based upon this practical doxic experience, and social actors experience their world non-reflectively (Husserl, 1989). For instance, like tennis players, social agents have a *sense of the game* by having an intimate understanding of the game's object and the kinds of situations that can occur. They have the practical flexibility to know when and how they should run to the net or into an open space within the given rules of field doxa.

Habitus and its structural relations with fields is internally related (Lau, 2004). In his practical conceptualization of habitus, Lau (2004) specifies habitus contents as three interlinked non-reflectively cognitive components emergent from experience. When a perfect match or 'strategic fit' occurs between an entrepreneur's habitus and the entrepreneurial field (Hill, 2018), this entrepreneur experiences the field like a fish in water. Nevertheless, this relationship cannot be eternal. Fields are dynamic, and field doxa and social agents' positions are liable to change (Reid, 2021). When the forms of capital lose their relevance to field doxa and the habitus of social agents do not fit to the field, habitus changes. Although Bourdieu's construct admits scope for various paths for habitus adaptation, the mechanisms of habitus adaptation have remained understudied in tourism studies. This article addresses this gap and gives insight into when and after which events entrepreneurs feel the need to adapt their habitus or to stick to their habitus.

Habitus in the tourism literature

Habitus and related issues in tourism have been studied from a range of different perspectives (see Table 1). Most studies in the existing literature – with a few exceptions – tend to focus on the collective habitus of specific social classes and how these groups are distinct from others based on their class' characteristics.

Table 1
Selected studies on habitus in the tourism literature.

Author	Study	Method	Findings	Habitus focus
Ahmad (2014)	Tourism consumption behaviour of Western tourists in India	Quantitative, Factor and regression analysis	Tourists produce and reproduce oppositional choices in conformity with their respective class habitus.	Lifestyle and taste
Lee et al. (2014)	Habitus, food lifestyle and slow food	Qualitative, in-depth semistructured interviews	Tourists interested in food lifestyles may carry this interest as part of their habitus to their visited destinations.	Food lifestyle and taste
Lee and Scott (2017)	Utillity of habitus in examining African Americans' travel behaviour	Qualitative, in-depth semistructured interviews	The fear of racism by the African Americans had been socially reproduced across generations, deeply embedded in the fabric of African American culture, and developed into distinctive travel habitus.	Travel habitus
Musavengane (2019)	Residents' tourism consciousness	Qualitative, in-depth semistructured interviews	Structural exclusion has an influence on residents' consciousness of tourism.	Consciousness and habitus
Campelo et al. (2014)	Local residents' sense of place	Qualitative, multisited etnography	The community habitus is based on how being-in-the-world was experienced and represented in the constructs that determined their sense of place.	Community habitus
Warren and Dinnie (2018)	Promotional actors' strategy development in destination branding	Qualitative, in-depth semistructured interviews	Promotional actors use their habitus in deciding about promotional and message strategies of a place.	Professional habitus
Liang and Chan (2018)	Multidimensional cultural impacts of tourism development	Mixed methods, survey and interviews	Changes in the political leading have higher influence on the changes of habitus of social groups.	Collective habitus
Stringfellow et al. (2013)	Influence of celebrity chefs in processing taste formation	Conceptual paper	Changing dynamics of culinary taste suggests the nature of a transitioning habitus within the culinary field.	Habitus transition of celebrity chefs
Horolets et al. (2019)	Use of natural environments for leisure by immigrants	Qualitative, in-depth semistructured interviews	Immigrants use only one strategy "finding substitutes" as potential for their nature-related habitus.	Habitus of immigrants

For instance, habitus is considered as an effective tool in examining individuals' taste formation rooted from a specific social class. Individuals use this information in their decision-making process, aligning their lifestyles (Ahmad, 2014; Lee, Scott, & Packer, 2014). In another study, Campelo, Aitken, Thyne, and Gnoth (2014) examined local residents' habitus towards their sense of place and how the collective habitus of stakeholders is salient in their response to the tourism development across their multidimensional cultural characteristics. In tourism development and destination marketing, policymakers', and destination marketers' habitus influence their choice of strategies (Liang & Chan, 2018; Warren & Dinnie, 2018). The role of habitus in food and taste formation remains essential in examining the culinary field and consumers' taste transition (Stringfellow, MacLaren, Maclean, & O'Gorman, 2013). Travel habitus (Lee & Scott, 2017), residents' tourism consciousness (Musavengane, 2019), and how the habitus of migrants shapes their use of nature (Horolets et al., 2019) are examined in recent studies on habitus in the tourism literature. However, these studies focus on the relationship between habitus and behaviour and show how structural changes influence the participants' habitus.

Primarily, tourism studies have referred habitus to a collective practical sense related to macro structures like social class, occupation, taste and lifestyle, while the individual-level of habitus has been underestimated. This has also led some researchers to equate habitus to cultural capital. This study rejects equating habitus to cultural capital. In addition, this study indicates that habitus is not only a determinant structuring force but that it is also capable of change. Social and individual events change the social context of an individual, consequently this generates a new practical logic, and habitus can and does transform. Therefore, this paper contributes to the tourism literature on both aspects by examining the mechanisms of habitus adaptation at the individual level, and by outlining the habitus adaptive capacity to change over time.

Habitus adaption as a consequence of individual and social structural change

Habitus is relatively durable but it is not eternal and changes constantly: it is 'an open system of dispositions that is constantly affected by them in a way that either reinforces or modifies its structures' (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992: p.133). Habitus adaptation may be subject to the changes in the conditions of a field and how capitals remain relevant in these fields (Everett, 2002). However, a change in the field conditions does not always engender a habitus change and a *hysteresis effect* occurs when a social agent maintains her already acquired habitus and limits adaptation to the new conditions (Bourdieu, 2013). This hysteresis effect often happens if a social agent perceives the lived moment as a crisis or as a transition period, and habitus lags behind these changes and needs to catch up. Although Bourdieu argues that in the event of such circumstances, habitus might become

dysfunctional leading to failure, he does not provide further explanation on how individuals can respond to this discrepancy (Wimalasena & Marks, 2019).

Bourdieu's social theory, in particular habitus, has been criticised for being static and implying a degree of social determinism by underplaying the conscious actions of social agents (Archer, 2007; Jenkins, 1992; King, 2000). Some critical realist scholars have noted that habitus does allow for conscious deliberations in a sense that the actions motivated by the habitus are rooted in *doxa* (i.e. common sense), which enables social agents to reformat existing structures through changes in habitual behaviour (Elder-Vass, 2007; Sayer, 2010). While Bourdieu uses various psychoanalytical concepts like *a feel for the game*, *unconsciousness*, *misrecognition*, *love*, *taste*, *libido* and so on, some critics claim that habitus is a limited concept as it does not incorporate an intersectionality approach (Wetherell, 2012). Applying intersectionality would mean including one's individual history, subjectivity, and affective practice, which altogether connects the personal to the social world (ibid.). Silva (2016) suggests that intersectionality is included in Bourdieu's work as for Bourdieu all individual factors (e.g. age, gender, ethnicity) operate through a mechanism of class-based habitus. However, the fact is that the overemphasis on the social structure's role is a crucial aspect of habitus that has often been criticised. Although Bourdieu acknowledged the unconscious part of one's habitus, he did not elaborate on its functioning (Aarseth et al., 2016).

Lahire (1999) posits that individuals often have significant intrapersonal conflicts and identity problems, and these are not accounted for in the notion of habitus. While a *universal perspective* focuses on determining the effects of one's personal development (i.e. the early years on character formation), a *contingent perspective* highlights individuals' dependents, conditions and specifics (e.g. divorce, ageing, and other crucial human matters) (Layton, 2004). This latter contingent perspective focuses on one's unconscious' dynamic relations within the opportunities offered by his/her cultural structure (ibid.). To this end, the contingent perspective posits that one's practices within their given options would affect one's unconscious perceptions, appreciation and actions and, therefore, one's habitus. Following this reasoning, it seems logical to adopt a contingent perspective as well as a perspective on social structure and thus address intersectionality. Therefore, this study aims to understand habitus adaptation by incorporating an individual perspective and a social structural perspective. Taking the critique mentioned above seriously, this study examines both major and minor changes in individuals as well as in social structures in the informal tourism sector in Thailand.

Informal tourism entrepreneurs and their habitus

Both academic scholars and policymakers increasingly recognise informal entrepreneurship as a potential for jobs and a driver of economic growth in developing countries (Autio & Fu, 2015). More than 2 billion people worldwide make their living in the informal economies (ILO, 2018). The informal tourism entrepreneurs work on their own account, hire people from their close environments, and let the local communities in which they operate benefit from their entrepreneurial activities, especially during a crisis period (Brata, 2010; Dahles & Prabawa, 2013). In doing this, they unconsciously adapt their habitus regarding their position in the social structure. In addition, tourism on its own is a factor in acculturation affecting attitudes, altering common beliefs, changing mentalities, and spreading new concepts concerning work, money and human relationship (Kesmanee & Charoensri, 1995).

Like other individuals, informal tourism entrepreneurs display their own habitus by viewing their own social and physical spaces and accordingly position themselves in that social world (Silva, 2016). Every informal tourism entrepreneur is part of several fields with a different set of social relations influencing field members' behaviours (Hill, 2018). An entrepreneur makes sense of herself and others' social places in these fields and develops an understanding of the world in her lived environment. In this vein, a habitus analysis of informal tourism entrepreneurs would give us insights into who they are, their opportunity and challenge structures, and what would make them succeed in their social positioning. In that event, habitus is not always a visible framework and requires an immersion the participants' context, and an examination of certain aspects of informal tourism entrepreneurs' experiences affected by their past life trajectories. Thus, the researcher needs to examine the *very product* of one's history.

Methods

This study sought to explore habitus adaptation mechanisms of informal tourism entrepreneurs in response to individual and social structural change in Thailand. To achieve this aim, a qualitative approach was adapted to examine multiple realities of people producing knowledge through their experiences and relations with others. The academic interest in practice theory is growing in tourism studies (Bargeman & Richards, 2020; Thompson & Taheri, 2020). This study focused on the practice of informal tourism entrepreneurs based upon ethnographic fieldwork that gave priority to observing the participants' actions in understanding their emic points of view, the meanings of their practice and the regulations of their social context. The fieldwork resulted in narrative active interviews with 53 informal tourism entrepreneurs to investigate their habitus transformation through focussing on the three components of habitus: (a) fundamental beliefs and taken-for-granted assumptions; (b) perception and appreciation; (c) a descriptive and prescriptive practical sense of objective possibilities (Lau, 2004). The field research sites were purposively chosen as Koh Samui, Koh Phangan, and Koh Tao islands, the *top-three* most popular tourist islands in the south of Thailand (Lonely Planet, 2014). The fieldwork took place in and around informal tourism entrepreneurs' communities on these islands in three periods, spanning from three to 6 weeks, between 2013 and 2015. We first sketch the research context and then detail the research methods regarding data collection and data analysis.

The field research context

Koh Samui is the third-largest Thai island populated by diverse ethnicities rooted from Malaysia and China. People born on the island preferably refer to themselves as 'chao Samui', *Samui folk,* rather than as Thai. (Pongponrat, 2011). The island was identified as one of Thailand's marginal paradises three decades ago (Cohen, 1982). The tourist numbers increased rapidly after opening the airport in 1989 and this brought modern changes to the infrastructure on the island. This rapid tourism development influenced the change of environment and local communities' everyday lives significantly (Green, 2005). Many migrant workers and entrepreneurs have been attracted to the island from the mainland and neighbouring countries over the years. Informal tourism entrepreneurs have primarily mobile businesses and some medium-size stores. The power relations are not equally negotiated and performed through business discourse. It is not easy for an informal tourism entrepreneur to compete as a network partner in its own right. They run tourism businesses both directly and indirectly.

The second island, Koh Phangan, is located close to Koh Samui and it is a much smaller island. Backpackers do not stay long on Koh Samui due to the relatively high prices and move to Koh Phangan, which has a reputation for its full moon dance parties (Gibson & Connell, 2003). These relatively low-budget tourism activities have also influenced the types of (informal) tourism enterprises on the island. Here informal tourism entrepreneurs are engaged with nature-related activities offering hiking, spiritual training, fishing trips, taxi boats rides and overnights in homestays. Over the years many migrant workers and entrepreneurs, who were initially living on Koh Samui moved to Koh Phangan, where the power relations on social fields are asymmetrical and newcomers get relatively more chance to developing themselves on their own competence.

The last island Koh Tao is known as a *diving paradise* among divers worldwide. The informal businesses are similar to those found on the other two islands, but there is a main focus on diving and water activities. Here the informal entrepreneurs work mainly with the formal tourism entrepreneurs and provide them with products and services, and they also deal directly with tourists. Like Koh Phangan, the power relations in social fields here are also asymmetrical, which makes Koh Tao more hospitable to migrant workers and entrepreneurs from northern Thailand and Myanmar.

Data collection and analysis

The study materials were collected through ethnographic fieldwork through observations, collecting visual materials, and conducting active semi-structured interviews (Holstein & Gubrium, 2016). In the observations, the focus was on participants' everyday facets of experience in their work. In the first round, the observations of informal tourism entrepreneurs were conducted through acting like a tourist at their work locations, collecting visual materials like brochures, photographs, recording short videos, conducting informal conversations lasting from 35 min to one and half hours, and taking notes on their practices and activities. In the following rounds, the observations were continued, the informal conversations became longer, the informal entrepreneurs' social activities were participated in and discussions often occurred with them on the possible improvement points of their products and services. The extended open informal conversations sometimes lasted up to 4 h, and the participants further introduced their friends and family members. All the interviews with informal tourism entrepreneurs were held in English; only conversations with family members and some friends were held through an interpreter, who was the main interviewee in these cases. Although an interview guide was used, participants were encouraged to share their thoughts and experiences freely. The interview guide included broad themes such as personal background, daily work, family relations, social space, future outlooks, life history, and everyday reality for the construction of participants' experience. In this way, the bulk of data was gathered in eight field note diaries, video films, and more than 400 photographs.

Narrative inquiry has been used widely in tourism studies to explore people's lived experiences and their identities (McCabe & Foster, 2006). The narratives were constructed through transcripts of interviews, videos, photographs, and historical documents, which altogether convey a sense of personal agency and spontaneity. Fifty-three participants (see Table 2), all informal tourism entrepreneurs, were selected through a combination of purposive and snowball sampling techniques. Pseudonyms are used to ensure the anonymity of participants. They predominantly represent mainstream informal tourism entrepreneurs such as homestay owners, transport providers, street vendors, operators of food stalls and unofficial tour guides. The participants also represent a cross-section of individuals in terms of age (ranging from 18 to 57), gender (33 women and 20 men), ethnicity (Thai, Burmese, Cambodian, Filipino, the hill tribes of Northern Thailand such as Karen, Akha, and Lahu), religion (Buddhist, Christian, Hindu, Muslim), class, and geographical location. Due to this study's longitudinal character, multiple visits to an informal tourism entrepreneur were often conducted while some participants were interviewed at different locations.

Narrative inquiry is 'always interpretive at every stage' (Josselson, 2006, p. 4) from data collection to data analysis and to reporting research results in order to find *narrative meaning* (Polkinghorne, 1988). The qualitative data analysis approach used by Creswell and Poth (2016) was employed and a qualitative software package (i.e. NVivo 10) was used for coding and interpreting the data pool. In determining the coding categories, both a deductive and inductive approach has been used to identify the categories of habitus adaptation (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). First, a directed content analysis (i.e. deductive) was conducted and focused mainly on the three habitus components depicted by Lau (2004). Here, the goal was to identify key concepts as initial coding categories, validate these habitus components, and look for possible extensions for habitus change. Next, these three habitus components codes were defined before and during data analysis. Following this step, a conventional content analysis (i.e. inductive) was conducted for a richer understanding of participants' habitus adaptation (Braun & Clarke, 2006). As a result, an additional code was developed, and the initial coding scheme was revised and refined. Finally, four categories were identified: (1) Understanding and appreciating the field and its conditions; (2) Challenging core beliefs systems; (3) Applying a practical

Table 2
Participants profile.

	Pseudonym name	Age	Occupation	Gender	Origin
Koh Samui Island	Apinya	31	Boutique owner	F	Nakhon/Thailand
	Akela	29	Scooter rental	F	Isan/Thailand
	Aroon	32	Taxi driver	M	Surathani/Thailand
	Boon Mee	44	Tourist guide	M	Koh Samui/Thailand
	Brandit	57	Taxi driver	M	Bangkok/Thailand
	Bussaba	34	Laundry service	F	Koh Samui/Thailand
	Chaisai	30	Musician	M	Bangkok/Thailand
	Chantou	36	Drinks stall owner	F	Cambodia
	Chuenchai	36	Art gallery owner	F	Koh Samui/Thailand
	Danilo	32	Musician	M	Philippines
	Decha	33	Fire dancer	M	Chiang Mai/Thailand
	Eyw	29	Food stall owner	F	Koh Samui/Thailand
	Gabriel	29	Musician	M	Philippines
	Kla	33	Tattoo shop owner	M	Chiang Mai/Thailand
	Lamai	30	Home stay owner	F	Koh Samui/Thailand
	Lookpla	31	Souvenir vendor	F	Lampong/Thailand
	Pakpao	52	Food stall owner	F	Koh Samui/Thailand
	Princess	28	Singer	F	Philippines
	Sandi	41	Food stall owner	F	Myanmar
	Sud	41	Coconut products producer	M	Koh Samui/Thailand
	Tun	27	Vendor clothes	F	Myanmar
	Waan	39	Massage saloon owner	F	Chiang Mai/Thailand
Koh Phangan Island	Aye	43	Spiritual trainer	M	Myanmar
	Daw	43	Fishing trips organizer	M	Koh Phangan/Thailand
	Khun Mae	39	Yoga instructor	F	Chiang Mai/Thailand
	Kiet	41	Taxi boat owner	M	Koh Phangan/Thailand
	Kittibun	38	Taxi boat owner	M	Koh Phangan/Thailand
	Kohsoom	46	Yoga instructor	F	Bangkok/Thailand
	Lek	35	Souvenir shop owner	F	Karen/Thailand
	Mongkut	53	Spiritual trainer	M	Chiang Mai/Thailand
	Mya	29	Laundry service	F	Myanmar
	Nattapong	33	Trekking tours organizer	M	Bangkok/Thailand
	Nyunt	32	Souvenir shop owner	F	Myanmar
	Penchan	36	Home stay owner	F	Koh Phangan/Thailand
	Pensri	46	Spiritual trainer	F	Koh Phangan/Thailand
	Phairoh	51	Yoga instructor	F	Bangkok/Thailand
	Phueng	36	Home stay owner	F	Koh Phangan/Thailand
	Sanda	27	Café owner	F	Shan/Myanmar
	Som	33	Tourist guide	F	Koh Phangan/Thailand
	Sukhonn	42	Spiritual trainer	F	Bangkok/Thailand
Koh Tao Island	Aat	23	Motorbike taxi	M	Koh Tao/Thailand
	Acharya	24	Motorbike taxi	M	Cambodia
	Alika	24	Jewellery vendor	F	Akha/Thailand
	Anada	29	Underwater photographer	M	Chiang Mai/Thailand
	Aung	32	Diving items vendor	F	Myanmar
	Aye	25	Scooter rental	F	Myanmar
	Chai Son	51	Bungalows rental	M	Bangkok/Thailand
	Chit	28	Diving items vendor	M	Myanmar
	Htet	22	Food stall owner	F	Myanmar
	Manee	18	Fruit salade vendor	F	Surathani/Thailand
	Prija	28	Travel agent	F	Surathani/Thailand
	Sunstra	31	Dive shop owner	F	Bangkok/Thailand
	Wattana	38	Bungalows rental	F	Bangkok/Thailand

sense to 'objective possibilities'; and, (4) Challenging non-reflective dispositions. In the following section participants are clustered according to these four categories. In each category, how informal entrepreneurs adapt their habitus in a specific mode as part of the changes taking place in their life-trajectories and in the social structure is described.

Findings

Understanding and appreciating the field and its conditions

Eleven participants were identified as a subgroup expressing an understanding and appreciation of the field and its conditions. This subgroup includes nine women and two men with ages ranging from 23 to 36 originating mainly from Northern Thailand and Myanmar. Roughly half of the participants identified themselves as Buddhist, but none of them practised all the Buddhist rituals in their daily lives. All eleven participants report that working conditions in tourism and hospitality are demanding and

characterised by long hours. They believe (informal) businesses must operate around the clock and on extended hours. The wage levels are low, and without holiday and sick leave entitlements. However, the participants believe there is also good practice in the tourism sector. It provides entry-level jobs for low-skilled and part-time jobs for people, mainly women, taking care of the children. There is a high proportion of female and migrant workers in the businesses throughout these islands. These female entrepreneurs understand the requirements of tourism practices on the islands and do not consider their jobs as tough and difficult.

For instance, they compare their current jobs with other possible jobs they would perform, and one says:

> 'You do not need any education to work in a café, everybody can do this job. It is not difficult… Every job is the same, if you have a problem, you solve the problem.'
>
> [Sanda (27 years, female, Burmese, café owner – Koh Phangan, April 2015).]

Sanda belongs to an ethnic minority (i.e. Shan) in Myanmar. She could not operate a café or any small business in her country, as the conditions in Myanmar would have been dissimilar to her current context. The social pressure in Myanmar would not allow Sanda to become a tourism entrepreneur, and she considers her life comfortable enough compared to other family and friends working in Myanmar. Furthermore, having migrated to another country far from home is not a strange thing for Sanda. Everyone from her town has a family member living across the border. The Shan language is similar to the northern Thai dialect, and people from both sides are ethnically and historically connected to each other. Sanda was 18 years old when she left her town in Myanmar – followed her friends – and originally moved to Chiang Mai to find a job. She stayed together with her friends at their apartment and started working in a restaurant where many other Shan people were part of the staff. Her new conditions in Chiang Mai were challenging, but she earned more:

> 'I was a home maid in my town and was earning 900 kyat [equals to 0,58 US$] for a day. It was also not easy [to work as a home maid], but in my first job in Chiang Mai, I took 80 Baht [equals to 2,51 US$] for a day as a dish washer.'
>
> [Sanda (Koh Phangan, April 2015).]

An informal worker does not earn much in Chiang Mai. However, the standard food and beverage costs are less for local people in Thailand than in Myanmar. For instance, with the wage in Chiang Mai Sanda could buy more (e.g. 4 lunch boxes including chicken noodles and a beverage from street food stalls) than with the wage she earned in Myanmar (e.g. where she could buy only 1 lunch box with the same contents). Sanda worked in Chiang Mai for 3 years, she held different restaurant positions and worked two shifts (day and night shift) to save money. In those years, she spoke in the Shan language to her friends, often ate *fermented beans* (a Shan meal) and listened to the Burmese radio. Sanda and her friends continued to follow the Shan traditions in their daily life in Chiang Mai. Some of Sanda's *new* friends had moved to Koh Phangan and told her about the 'easy work' and 'higher income' opportunities there. She followed her *new* friends this time and moved to Koh Phangan in 2009. Moving to southern Thailand weakened Sanda's ties with her family. Although she calls her family regularly and sends remittance, she had visited them only once in the previous 6 years. It is hard to visit the family in Myanmar (due to travel costs and passport related issues) and Sanda does not feel that she can leave her work. When Sanda listens to the Shan music – she loves the rock icon Sai Sai Mao's songs – she often thinks about 'home' but less about the issues in Myanmar:

> 'I love to listen to the Shan pop and also rock music from Sai Sai Mao. He reminds me [of] my mother and the beautiful scenery and people from my hometown. Then I wish to go back home and hug my mother, but there is no future there for me'.
>
> [Sanda (Koh Phangan, April 2015).]

Since she moved to Koh Phangan, Sanda has followed the Thai media more in her everyday life and has become a fan of the Thai television soaps. She has more Thai friends on the island, and her English has improved. She is proud of her English skills and often holds conversations with international tourists to learn about their cultures and eating habits. She works with another two Thai women in the café. Both are from Chiang Mai, but they did not know each other before until they met on Koh Phangan. All three women are aware of their strengths and learning processes. They create an understanding of 'others' cultures. Their flexibility and understanding of 'others' ideas and behaviours help them be successful in their work-life and adapt to the changes in their social life.

In all cases, participants reflect upon the field conditions and their life trajectories, and consequently they do not delay habitus adaptation to the changed social context. They adapt their habitus to the field perfectly and develop a *feel for the game*, and feel like a fish in water.

Challenging core belief systems

Sixteen participants were identified as a subgroup that challenges their core belief systems and experiences a paradigm shift in their daily lives. This subgroup includes eleven women and five men, who have a mix of ethnicities (i.e. Thai, Burmese, Cambodian) and are aged between 31 and 42 years. The most striking premise in this subgroup is the development of a different 'status of women' resulting in more active businesswomen as informal tourism entrepreneurs. Compared to men who mostly preferred to work as labourers, women work more like entrepreneurs and are well represented in the informal economy. Women's place is not entirely in the home anymore, and it is highly acceptable for women to work on these islands. In all sixteen narratives, the common aspect in this subgroup is the participants' subconscious awareness of the underlying discourse in their

contexts, their abilities, and their self-reflection on their actions. They are critical about their previous lifestyle and observed the changes in their living contexts and shifted their mindset and habits in their daily lives. The new way of living is most likely based on their individual abilities.

For instance, Lek (female, 35 years) was a housewife earlier before starting her souvenir shop next to her house. She has four children, and her mother-in-law lives with them. Her husband helps her to buy stones and other materials to produce handicraft souvenirs. Lek states that she now engages more in decision making in the areas and issues where traditionally males are dominant. She is supporting the extended family:

> 'Since I am working as a boss, my family consults me for everything. My younger brother was going to start university education, they asked me what study to choose. My mother was ill and they asked me to which hospital to take her to. I was shy before, now I make decisions, this is because I support them now.'
>
> [Lek (35 years, female, souvenir shop owner Koh Phangan, April 2015).]

The women entrepreneurs do not only contribute to their household finances, but they have also become emancipated working in tourism. A perfect example for this finding is Apinya (31 years, Thai, from Suratthani). She has transformed the front of her house into a boutique where she sells unique and distinctive (some were her own designed) silver jewellery. A part of her collection includes the 'Siam Silver Nielloware' – charcoal black enamelled silver jewellery depicting characters and scenes from Buddhist and Hindu tales – items sourced from her hometown Nakhon. Apinya had a tough childhood and youth:

> 'My family was poor, and my parents had to work hard. I was only eight years old when I was taking care of my three siblings and our home. I only went to the primary school, and then I had to stop. With the age of thirteen, I went to Phuket to find a job in tourism, but I did not have any skills. I ended up working at a chicken stall in the market, fourteen hours a day and six days a week. It was tough. I was eighteen when I met with the father of my daughter. But later, I saw that he was a butterfly guy and was not interested in founding a family. I was pregnant when I had to return home and gave birth and raised up my daughter in Nakhon.'
>
> [Apinya (31 years, female, Thai, from Suratthani, boutique owner – Koh Samui, April 2013).]

Raising her child alone in the first 5 years in Nakhon was difficult for Apinya. She was living together with her siblings, parents, grandparents and her daughter under the same roof. Apinya's grandfather was the head of the household, and his advice was expected to be followed without any question. Like in every other household, Apinya had to 'know her place' in the family and the community. She was cooking, washing everyone's clothes, cleaning the house and taking care of her daughter. A fundamental shift took place in Apinya's world when she had an invitation in 2006 from her cousin asking her to work at her food stall in Koh Samui. She accepted this offer and came alone to the island. When she arrived on the island, she first purchased an English dictionary and then enrolled on an English language course, which she followed in the weekends. A short period later, Apinya found a job at a hotel where she met with her current Dutch husband. In the beginning, she was scared about having a relationship with a *farang* (i.e. a white race person) since she had heard many stories about them, and she already had a broken relationship in the past. However, she followed her heart, and after 2 years, they got married. Her husband works on a ship and is not at home for 6 months a year. With some financial support from her family in law, Apinya started with her jewellery store. She always liked to draw and began to design her own jewellery. She went to her hometown famous for 'Siam Silver Nielloware' in the past and encouraged people to start working again. She gave some orders to produce jewellery based on her design and promoted 'Siam Silver Nielloware' in Koh Samui. Furthermore, she has travelled to several European and Asian destinations to get inspiration in her designs.

When Apinya looks back at her childhood, she becomes sad, but she took her life in her own hands and changed it for the better. Apinya is more realistic now in her choices and actions and no longer believes that she is powerless. She says:

> 'People always want to have more and they think it will make them happier but it only makes their life more difficult. I am happy with what I have, and my choices, and admire this way of thinking, feeling and living.'
>
> [Apinya (Koh Samui, April 2013).]

She always wanted to do something for herself, her daughter, extended family and people from her hometown. She is self-confident, proud of what she did, and flipped the old paradigms from her childhood and youth. Apinya has liberated herself from the control of traditional power structures.

In both cases, participants changed their habitus as a result of conscious reflection on their individual history both in personal and professional domains evidencing habitus change as a reflexive break with the past.

Applying a practical sense to 'objective possibilities

Seventeen participants were identified as a subgroup that expresses a practical sense of 'objective possibilities'. Max Weber's (2017) concept of 'objective possibilities' contends that asking 'what might have happened if' is not pointless and forces one to consider alternative scenarios and possibilities. In Weber's terms, the participants in this group focus only on the external (i.e. objective) and the final result of their actions without considering the internal (e.g. intention, motivation). This subgroup's central character is that its members strongly reproduce their past experiences and tendencies, which guide participants to think and act in some determinant ways. This finding is in line with Lau's (2004) results, and often involves some social limits and petrifies

one's 'sense of belonging'. For instance, regardless of their incomes, informal entrepreneurs who belong to this group rarely stay at a hotel on holiday. They prefer to stay at one of their family members' and friends' houses. A taxi driver from Koh Samui says:

'We can't stay with whole family at a hotel. It is not for us'

[Brandit (57 years, male, taxi driver – Koh Samui, April 2015).]

Brandit thinks hotels (regardless of their price range) are for rich people and not for people like him. Although he works as a taxi driver, he either uses a tuk tuk or rents a scooter rather than using a taxi when he is on holiday. Brandit came from Bangkok to Koh Samui 17 years ago. He has six children - all grown up now - living their independent lives but keeping close contact with their parents. One has opened a restaurant on the southern part of the island, and two children moved to Bangkok. When he first came to Koh Samui, Brandit was the sole breadwinner in his family and had to work hard. Over the years, the children became independent and do not need any more financial support from dad. However, Brandit wants to keep working as a taxi driver. He says:

'I know everything in Koh Samui and this is my job'

[Brandit (Koh Samui, April 2015).]

Brandit considers other possibilities for his practices, but he always aims for the same result as he is used to, and he is less open to change. For instance, he has been performing the same job for many years, though from time to time he considers stopping or updating his business, even to move to other places, but, in the end, he stayed at the same place performing the same job.

The informal entrepreneurs coming from rural areas tend to keep 'traditional' thoughts and experiences for more extended periods. Lookpla (31 years old female vendor from Lampang) is a perfect example of this group. Another characteristic of this group, including Lookpla, is that all the Thai and Burmese participants avoid sunbathing. Lookpla says:

'*Being white is beautiful. Face can be brown, that is okay but not the body.*'

[Lookpla (31 years, female, Thai, vendor, from Lampang – Koh Samui, March 2014).]

After living on Koh Samui for 12 years, she still believes the countryside's thought – 'whoever does not work on farm has a fair skin' – and considers having pale skin as a status symbol. Contextually, sunbathing may ruin her social life status, and others might think she is a farmworker. Unlike international tourists, who tend to favour tanned skin, participants prefer to have light skin and keep their skin away from direct sunlight. Both male and female participants consider the pale white skin colour attractive and want to appear similar to international tourists. As a result, they protect their body from sunlight very carefully and refrain from wearing skimpy clothes.

This subgroup is the only cluster in which the number of men is higher than women (i.e. 10 men, 7 women). The average age of participants in this subgroup is higher than in other subgroups (i.e. 39 years). In all narratives, the participants' experience is a dominant factor in influencing their thinking and acting. They all see changes in their life-world as 'usual' and have their own explanations (i.e. reasons and effects) for these changes in their life based on their previous experiences. Here, a hysteresis effect occurs, the participants maintain their already acquired habitus, although the conditions in fields change. The participants insist on living 'the presence of past' as Bourdieu refers to the moment when durable practices are not adapted to the new conditions and remain.

Challenging non-reflective dispositions

Nine participants (i.e. 6 women and 3 men) form a subgroup that conveys challenging non-reflective dispositions. This subgroup's age range is between 18 and 32, and the participants are roughly the youngest ones among others. All nine participants are Thai, and four are from the fieldwork location Koh Samui, and the other five participants come from the mainland of Thailand. Jean-Paul Sartre's (2001) concept of 'non-reflective consciousness' refers to one's acceptance of a happening as it is – unmediated – and does not attentively inspect or reflectively introspect but perceives it as just experience on its own. In Sartre's (2001) terms, the participants in this group are expected implicitly to be aware of the changes in their social space and do not reflect on them. However, this group is explicitly aware of the individual changes and changes in the social field. Still, they prefer to accept these changes as a random experience and do not reflect on them.

For instance, these relatively young informal entrepreneurs, who possess somewhat higher intercultural communication competence, use European, American gestures in their daily lives. The vendors in the Chaweng market area in Koh Samui use both *thumbs up* to say okay or *kiss fingertips* to say wonderful. One of the vendors in Chaweng market is Eyw (28 years old, female, from Koh Samui) and she says that:

'*People* [who are working in the market area] *wear Western clothes, eat Western food with chop sticks and behave like international tourists. These signs* [gestures] *are not Thai they are all learned from their European and Australian friends.*'

[Eyw (28 years, female, from Koh Samui, vendor in the Chaweng market – Koh Samui, March 2014).]

These new gestures are not used in the mainstream Thai communication, and vendors and workers in this area adopt them from international tourists. Remarkably, many vendors often use these gestures (in some cases very fulsomely) in their daily communications. Another change has been observed in the type of products sold by the vendors in the streets and markets during the

fieldwork periods. During the first fieldwork period in 2013, it was mainly domestic people who visited the local markets in Chaweng and vendors were selling primarily to locals. However, almost one and a half years later, the crowd in the markets had changed to tourists, and more than the half of the vendors had switched their products to souvenirs, t-shirts, and other eye-catching tourist items. While the market area is used now as a shopping street in the morning, it is used as a 'Night Market' after 7 p.m. until midnight. Eyw was selling fresh fruit juice in her stall in 2013, and she was working from 8:00 to 17:00 h daily. In 2015 she transformed her stall to a mobile bar where she offers cocktails to the low budget international tourists. She profits from the proximity of the market area to bars and nightclubs on the main street. Eyw is hopeful that she will earn more with her adapted products:

> 'Young tourists came here for pre-drinks before they were actually partying at the Ark bar, Reggae bar, or other places on the beach. They get here cheap food and cocktails from the stalls and prepare for the night. Yes, last time [when we met in 2013] I was selling only fresh fruit juice and some tourists liked it. Last year a friend recommends me adding some alcohol into juices and making cocktails. It was very good idea, now I am selling only cocktails at the Night Market, fresh fruit juice only to other vendors here. I work now only in the evening but I earn much more and work less'

[Eyw (Koh Samui, March 2015).]

Local people visit the Chaweng market from very early in the morning till 10 a.m. and afterwards leave it to the international tourists and workers. Although the opening hours of the market area are prolonged (now open from 5:30 in the morning till 00:30 at night), the visiting hours of locals have been compressed, and the available products have been changed to respond to international tourists' demands. As a result, vendors are still vendors, but their products and customer portfolio have changed over time, and their reactions are not always reflective of these changes.

Discussion

This study's findings align with Lau's (2004) suggestions and Elder-Vass' (2007), who operationalise habitus as a practical sense emerging from experience. The study demonstrates how major and minor changes in individual life trajectories and social structure determine habitus adaptation. Acknowledging major and minor changes are context-dependent: individuals may perceive the same change either as a major or minor change depending on the context in which they experience the change. Our analysis discloses how informal entrepreneurs' habitus is influenced by their original conditions (e.g. family upbringing, history, culture, social class) and how these individuals construct habitus through perception, appreciation and action. The field conditions and the changes in social contexts influence one's habitus adaptation. Habitus is constructed in a chronological ordering (e.g. gaining experience and skills from the practice in a first job and using it in successive positions) (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992). Thus, habitus adaptation is a result of an interplay between chronological ordering and field conditions.

Further analysis reveals how the different modes of habitus adaptation, which are identified in this research and presented in the findings section, relate to (1) individual and social structural changes, and (2) major and minor changes. Fig. 1 shows how these two axes of change – 'individual and social structural change' and 'major and minor change' – form a matrix in which the four modes can be understood.

The mode of understanding and appreciating the field and its conditions

Understanding and appreciation of the field and its conditions reflects a situation where there is a major individual change (e.g. transition to adulthood, emigrating to a new country) and a minor change in the structure (e.g. changes in tourism markets, facilities, governance). Individuals create an understanding and appreciation for others' culture, for dissimilar roles and forms of communication, for different ideas and behaviours, and at the same time for their strengths and weaknesses in the field. In this mode, individuals become more flexible in adapting to conditions in the field. For instance, Sanda changed her friends and her media consumption in her new home on Koh Phangan. She and her colleagues are continuously attempting to understand their clients' eating habits. The participants in this subgroup become more resilient to major changes in the social structure. For instance, the variety of cultures in the fieldwork locations provides various cues and options for migrant entrepreneurs to adapt their habitus. A constant characteristic of the field is that it is dynamic and new contacts with international tourists push the individual entrepreneurs to continuously negotiate their diasporic habitus.

The mode of challenging core beliefs systems

Individuals challenge their core belief systems only when they experience a major change in their life trajectories (e.g. losing a loved one, getting married or divorced, becoming a parent) and when at the same time they perceive a major change in the social structure (e.g. pandemic, political system change, natural disaster, war). A core belief system is about how one perceives oneself in relation to other people, the world, and the future. Individuals develop their core belief systems over time, from childhood to being a grandparent, and through significant life events or particular life trajectories. Core belief systems present one's state of mind and are quite resistant to change. Individuals intend to change their core belief systems when major individual changes take place in parallel with major system changes. For instance, Lek did not participate in the household decision-making process until she became successful in her business. In another example, Apinya did not comment on her given *place* in her family and
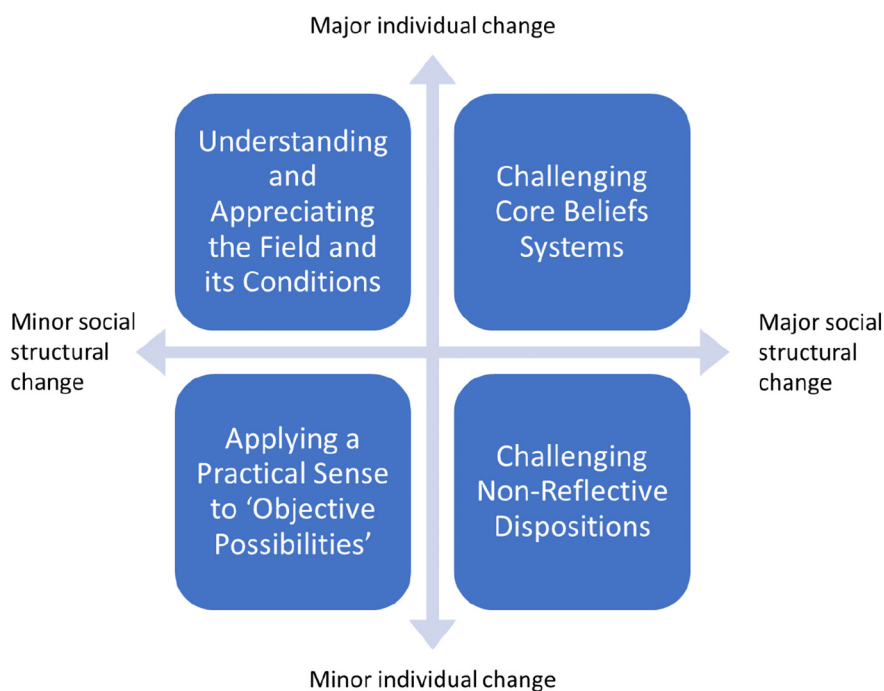
Fig. 1. Modes of habitus adaptation as they relate to major and minor changes in an individual and social structure.

community until she moved to Koh Samui and later got married to a foreigner. In all the narratives, the participants fundamentally intend to modify their perspectives on themselves and their place in the structure.

The mode of applying a practical sense to 'objective possibilities'

Applying a practical sense to 'objective possibilities' happens when individuals experience individual changes as well as social structural changes as minor. Past experiences and tendencies remain dominant and guide the entrepreneurs in thinking and acting as they have always done. For this group of individuals, they do not go beyond "business as usual". This group of individuals places limits on their practice and social mobility, petrify social limits and deny themselves more deliberate actions (Lau, 2004). They use preconceptions in their encounters and judge new possible experiences in terms of 'that's not for us'. In this mode, habitus is least likely to change in response to changes in structural (field) or individual life events.

The mode of challenging non-reflective dispositions

Individuals challenge their non-reflective dispositions when they perceive a major individual change and a minor change in the social structure. Individuals operating in this mode adapt their habitus unconsciously and explain their practice in simple statements like 'I did …' instead of 'when others behaved in a certain manner, I did …'. Their actions do not entail reflection and happen on their own, like scratching a part of the body when one has an itch. However, the group which challenges their non-reflective dispositions is aware of the major changes in the social structure and the minor individual changes but prefers not to reflect on these changes. They perceive these changes as random or infrequent.

Conclusions

Conceptualizing informal entrepreneurs' habitus adaptation mechanisms assists our understanding of their present and future practices, including their mental and corporeal schemata of perceptions, appreciations, and actions (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992). To account for habitus adaptation, it is necessary to apply an individual perspective as well as a social structural perspective. This study alerts us to the nuances of habitus change as a product of structural and individual dimensions. Habitus is not only be interpreted as a result of changes in social structure, but also one's emotional dispositions play an essential role in habitus adaptation (Leys, 2011). Informal entrepreneurs adapt their habitus based on their interpretations of individual and social structural changes and again relate these adaptations to changes in the field in which they operate. Their original individual conditions (e.g. family wealth, social class, culture) kind of form a foundation for habitus adaptation. This habitus adaptation (changes in the facets of self) in its turn is then dependent on the practices of informal entrepreneurs as they relate to fields and capitals (Bourdieu, 1990). Habitus acts as an enactive prism through which fields and capitals are interpreted and acted upon (Reid,

2021). When informal entrepreneurs' habitus responds well to the changes of field, the entrepreneurs feel like a fish in water (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992).

Our study demonstrates an ongoing exchange between informal entrepreneurs and the fields where they encounter different conditions and circumstances in their everyday lives. It is concluded that major individual changes – in combination with respectively minor and major changes in the social structure – contribute, on the one hand to an understanding and appreciation of the field and its conditions, and on the other hand to radically challenging belief systems. It is also concluded that minor individual changes – in combination with minor and major changes in the social structure – tend to accompany applying a practical sense to 'objective' possibilities and challenging non-reflective dispositions.

This study responds to the call for empirical examination of habitus adaptation by combining an individual and a social structural approach (Aarseth et al., 2016; Green, 2008). It fills a gap in tourism studies by empirically unpacking the habitus adaptation mechanisms of informal entrepreneurs. The matrix of major and minor individual and social structural changes offers scope for further research to understand the modes in which other tourism stakeholders (e.g. formal tourism entrepreneurs) adapt their habitus. However, habitus does not change if individuals perceive both the social and individual change as minor. A hysteresis effect occurs, and individuals maintain their already acquired habitus. Even a relatively radical change (as deemed by others) is perceived as minor by individuals and this may not lead to a habitus change. Socio-demographic factors of individuals influence their habitus adaptability. For instance, the age of participants contributes to a more rigid habitus-field relation and needs to be investigated in future studies.

Habitus change is relevant for the formulation of effective tourism destination management. In the public domain, public agents and policymakers (at any level of government) can benefit from a habitus analysis in predicting stakeholders' willingness to change and adapt their habitus considering changes taking place. First, a fitness test between field and habitus analysis would show the gaps in stakeholders' understanding of field. These gaps or misfits might be valuable input for entrepreneurship support programs. Consequently, stakeholders with 'right habitus fit' could be aligned with the changes in field. As a result, this group can react faster to the opportunities or evade possible risks for their positions in fields. Second, habitus analysis is essential for destination development strategies. To craft an inclusive destination development strategy, policymakers must understand how local stakeholders see the world. This information indicates whether their premise is accepted and which stakeholders are essential for collaboration. Finally, this study highlights possible implications for different kinds of habitus modification paths and related policy interventions.

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