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Sustainable Urban Tourism with Green-Slow Mobility: A Case of Ikebukuro, Japan

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ABSTRACT: This study investigates how green-slow mobility services can contribute to sustainable urban tourism development. It first reviews the literature related to green-slow mobility and sustainable urban tourism to identify a research gap. It then discusses how green-slow mobility services can nurture the atmosphere of slow tourism in urban areas based on the case of the Ikebus, a green-slow mobility service in Ikebukuro, Japan. The case of the Ikebus is described based on secondary data, mainly from Toshima City in Tokyo, Japan. Based on the Ikebus case, this study proposes that green-slow mobility can enhance the slow tourism atmosphere in a destination through the destination's residents and workers. The case demonstrates that, with strategic planning and implementation, green-slow mobility can lead local residents and workers to feel a greater attachment to the city. As the symbol of Ikebukuro, the Ikebus will signal to tourists and visitors that residents and workers in Toshima City are supportive of providing tourists and visitors with local tourism experiences. This study proposes a preliminary new idea that green-slow mobility can serve as a catalyst to realize slow tourism in urban destinations.

KEYWORDS: green-slow mobility; sustainable tourism; urban tourism; slow tourism

Introduction

Tourism is increasingly becoming an integral part of an urban area's sustainable development. Tourism is not something that should be considered only in rural towns as a means of revitalization. It can also be an important policy issue for large cities to increase economic revenue, boost liveliness, and enhance the city's attractiveness and brand image. For such tourism development to be sustainable, it is necessary to not only focus on the economic benefits brought by tourists; policy makers should also simultaneously tackle social and environmental issues (Edwards et al., 2008; Maxim, 2016). Because conflicts always exist between the interests and objectives of various stakeholders present in a city, such as residents, workers, tourists, and businesses, reconciling their benefits and costs has been regarded as a difficult problem in sustainable urban tourism development (Timur & Getz, 2009).

In urban planning, the transportation sector is the area in which the impact on tourism should be the most scrutinized. The use of transportation services within an urban destination is part of the tourism experience, so if an urban destination develops regional transportation services with convenience for tourists in mind, this will directly improve the quality of the tourism experience. Meanwhile, because transportation services within the destination are also used by residents, it is essential to develop transportation services to satisfy both tourists and residents, particularly in crowded urban areas. Further, the negative environmental impacts of transportation systems, which have been seriously recognized in the context of tourism development (e.g., Bows et al., 2009; Peeters & Dubois, 2010), should not be ignored.

Given these aspects of the interplay between transportation and tourism, the urban tourism literature has focused on research topics such as the role of transportation as the interface of tourists and local communities (Hall, 1999), the relationship between transportation experience and tourist satisfaction (Thompson & Schofield, 2007; Romão & Bi, 2021), the mismatch between the supply and demand of public transportation (Albalate & Bel, 2010), strategies for a modal shift to public transportation by tourists (Le-Klähn & Hall, 2015), and the spatial dynamics of tour bus operations (Daniels et al., 2018). Recently, new modes of transportation, such as e-scooters and e-bikes, particularly in the context of the sharing economy, have gained attention in urban tourism studies (Davies et al., 2020).

Following these studies on transportation issues in urban tourism, the present study investigates how slow mobility services can contribute to sustainable urban tourism development. "Green-slow mobility" (Ministry of Land, Infrastructure, Transport, and Tourism [MLIT], n.d.) is an original Japanese concept that has received increasing attention from governments and business companies as a key method to achieve sustainable development at a tourism destination. In Japan, green-slow mobility has been extensively used or experimented with as a transport method in underpopulated areas where public transportation is lacking. This study, however, presents the practice of a green-slow mobility service, the Ikebus, in Ikebukuro, Toshima City, Tokyo, which marks the first trial of this tourism practice in an urban destination in Japan.

To examine this initiative of Toshima City and discuss its academic and practical implications, the present study utilizes the concept of slow tourism, which values slowness in tourism to spend a longer time for fewer activities and appreciate local cultures in destinations (Heitmann et al., 2011). Because slow tourism concerns the environmental impacts of tourism and the slowness of transportation (Lin, 2017; Lin et al., 2020), it should be appropriate to understand green-slow mobility through the lens of slow tourism, which is closely related to sustainable tourism.

In the following sections, this paper first reviews the literature related to green-slow mobility and sustainable urban tourism. It then describes the case of Ikebukuro, Japan, before exploring how green-slow mobility services can nurture an atmosphere of slow tourism in urban areas.

Literature Review

Mobility in Sustainable Urban Tourism

Between 1993 and 2007, sustainable tourism was studied primarily in the context of general tourism and nature-based tourism, while less attention was paid to research on sustainability specific to urban tourism (Lu & Nepal, 2009). During this time, a minority of tourism research considered sustainable urban tourism by examining, for example, the economic, environmental, social, and cultural aspects of tourism strategies by the local authorities in the city of Málaga, Andalusia, Spain (Barke & Newton, 1995), and Singapore (Savage et al., 2004). From around the late 2000s, partly because of the increasing number of international tourists—which has been enhancing the importance of tourism promotion in cities—and the growing international interest in climate change issues, more interest has been devoted to studies discussing sustainability issues specific to urban tourism (e.g., Timur & Getz, 2008; Lee et al., 2014; Maxim, 2015, 2016; Miller et al., 2015; Önder et al., 2017; Boom et al., 2021; Phuc & Nguyen, 2023).

In developing sustainable urban tourism, mobility within an urban destination, among others, has been regarded as a critical element. The present study defines mobility as the act of people moving through space (Bauder & Freytag, 2015). In cities where the population and the flow of people are concentrated in certain areas, it is important to manage the mobility of tourists and residents from a perspective of holistic optimization, balancing the benefits and costs for all stakeholders involved. With the advancement of location-tracking technologies, such as global positioning system (GPS), studies that objectively record and analyze the spatial behavior of tourists in urban destinations have been accumulated. Such studies have examined whether and how a city's street pattern and public transportation system are tourist friendly (Edwards & Griffin, 2013) and how the degree of preparation by tourists for a trip to an urban destination influences the spatial behavior of them at the destination (Bauder & Freytag, 2015). Another study that analyzed GPS data has demonstrated that international tourists tend to visit the same iconic spots in Osaka City, Japan, regardless of their nationality (Sano et al., 2021), which can be seen as a reason for overcrowded public transportation in urban destinations. As these studies imply, tourist movements in cities can now be understood with a high degree of accuracy; thus, the effects of transportation and tourism policies on tourist mobility patterns and congestion in public transportation can be quantitatively examined. This approach to sustainable urban tourism development based on tourism mobility is becoming more essential.

As a stepping stone to transforming the spatial travel patterns of tourists, local residents, and commuters, which will lead to sustainable urban tourism, the benefits and challenges of new modes of transportation are being investigated. Of particular interest in recent years are the shared-mobility services of conventional bikes, e-bikes, or e-scooters. These services can reduce the negative environmental impacts of people's travel by replacing other means of transportation, such as cabs and private cars. They also have the potential to increase the convenience of overall transportation systems in a city by providing last mile or transit mobility services (Shaheen & Chan, 2016; Cao et al., 2021). However, issues such as safety concerns, relocation of vehicles, and bad parking habits have not yet been completely resolved (Fishman et al., 2013; Latinopoulos et al., 2021). Collaboration between service operators and local authorities should be critical for the effective integration of a new shared-mobility service with other modes of transportation and for proactive resolution of bad riding issues.

Along with shared-mobility services, green-slow mobility is another new form of transportation that has been drawing attention in Japan, defined as "a generic term for small mobility services that utilize electric vehicles capable of traveling on public roads at speeds of less than 20 km/h, or the vehicles themselves" (MLIT, n.d.). In Japan, the possibilities of using green-slow mobility in the cab business, car rental business, bus business, and private paid transportation of passengers have continued to be studied throughout the country. As the name directly implies, green-slow mobility is mainly characterized by running at very low speeds and not emitting CO_2 while driving. Compared with shared-mobility services, the opportunities and challenges of introducing green-slow mobility in urban tourism have not been sufficiently discussed. Thus, the present study proposes a preliminary idea as to what values green-slow mobility can bring to sustainable urban tourism.

Slow Tourism at Urban Destinations

In the present study, we employ the concept of slow tourism to understand how green-slow mobility can increase the value of urban tourism while enhancing its sustainability. Working as the background of slow tourism is the slow philosophy, which questions the mass production, mass consumption, and mass waste culture of contemporary society. Slow travel is another term that has been used interchangeably with slow tourism, with nuanced differences in their focus and emphasis (e.g., either the supply or the demand side). In the tourism context, the slow philosophy emphasizes quality rather than quantity of tourism experiences (Heitmann et al., 2011). It particularly relates to the slow use of time, environmental concerns, respect for local cultures, and engagement with other tourists and host communities (Dickinson et al., 2011; Heitmann et al., 2011). For example, Lin (2017) and Lin et al. (2020) identified the following as the three main components of slow travel: using slow transportation, seeking authentic tourism experiences through local activities, and environmental sensitivity. Thus, slow tourism has the potential to become the basis for sustainable tourism development.

Previous studies on the relationship between slow mobility and slow tourism seem to have focused relatively more on walking (Tiyce & Wilson, 2012; Kato & Progano, 2017) and cycling (Fullagar, 2012; Matteucci & Tiller, 2023) as modes of transportation; however, they have actually considered a wide range of modes including hitch-hiking (O'Regan, 2012), boating on a canal (Fallon, 2012), train travel (Roy & Hannam, 2013), and campervan travel (Wilson & Hannam, 2017). The research objectives of these studies are set primarily with regard to tourists' perceptions of their tourism experiences and the influence of tourism with slow mobility on local communities and the natural environment. Kato and Progano (2017), for example, argue how spiritual walking tourism in Wakayama Prefecture, Japan, enables the co-creation of slow tourism between visitors and local communities.

Although slow mobility in slow tourism tends to be studied in a nonurban context (e.g., Timms & Conway, 2012; Losada & Mota, 2019), implementation of the concept should be equally important for sustainable urban tourism. In reality, slow and fast travel modes can coexist (Oh et al., 2016; Serdane et al., 2020), so practicing slow tourism in fast-paced urban destinations should be possible and further investigated. While an increasing number of municipalities are considering the introduction and effective use of green-slow mobility, and the potential for the development of slow tourism in urban areas using green-slow mobility has been implicitly suggested, its process and significance have not been fully studied. Identifying this as a research gap, the present study explores the answer to the following research question through

a case in Japan: how can green-slow mobility services can facilitate the development of slow tourism in urban areas?

Case Study

This section describes how a green-slow mobility service, the Ikebus, was introduced and developed in Ikebukuro, Japan. The case of the Ikebus is described based on secondary data such as newspaper articles, documents and web pages published by Toshima City in Tokyo, Japan, and videos published by Toshimananamaru, the city's official YouTube account.

Relying on the case of the Ikebus, we conduct an exploratory case study (Yin, 2018). As a first step toward a study that integrates primary and secondary data analyses (e.g., Maxim, 2016), which is planned to follow, the present study summarizes the findings from the analysis of secondary data.

The Context for Introducing the Ikebus

Ikebukuro is the downtown area around Ikebukuro Station, which is located in the center of Toshima City, Tokyo, Japan. The population of Toshima City was 288,549 on March 1, 2023, and the area was 13.01 square kilometers (Toshima City, n.d., 2021). Ikebukuro Station is one of the busiest railway stations in the world. Shared by the East Japan Railway Company, Seibu Railway Company, Ltd., Tobu Railway Company, Ltd., and Tokyo Metro Company, Ltd., the station was used by 2,653,000 passengers a day from April 2019 to March 2020, although the number decreased to 1,795,000 passengers a day from April 2020 to March 2021 because of the impact of the COVID-19 (Toshima City, 2022). As a traffic node, Ikebukuro has developed as one of three large subcenters in Tokyo, along with Shinjuku and Shibuya.

In terms of urban planning, one of the challenges for Toshima City is that many visitors stay in Seibu Ikebukuro and Tobu Department Store Ikebukuro—two department stores located at Ikebukuro Station—and do not travel around Ikebukuro (Morioka, 2022). The aisles at Ikebukuro Station are congested with pedestrians, and the station's complicated structure makes it difficult to find the right exit, which discourages tourists from going outside (Toshima City, 2020). When they leave, pedestrians are concentrated in limited places, such as Sunshine60-dori Street on the east side of Ikebukuro Station (Toshima City, 2020). This prevents the spread of activity to the wider area of Ikebukuro. However, Toshima City has recognized that expanding pedestrian flows is key to increasing Ikebukuro's value and attractiveness (Morioka, 2022).

As the goal of its transportation strategy, Toshima City is pursuing "the realization of the enjoyable town for both residents and visitors by generating flows of people from the station to the town" (Toshima City, 2020, p. 4 in Chapter 2). The introduction of the Ikebus is positioned as one measure to pursue this goal of improving mobility and encouraging people to visit various places in the city.

Ikebus Summary

Ikebus, a slow round-trip bus service in Ikebukuro operated by Willer Express, Inc., commenced operations on November 27, 2019 (Willer Marketing, n.d.). Toshima City

purchased 10 small electric buses from Thinktogether Co., Ltd. for this service (Thinktogether, 2020). The Ikebus vehicle (Figure 1) is a customized version of eCOM-10, one of the company's standard product lines (Thinktogether, 2019). It is about five meters long and can take up to 22 passengers (Willer Marketing, n.d.). The vehicle's maximum speed is only 19 kilometers per hour (Willer Marketing, n.d.).

Figure 1: Appearance of the Ikebus (From Toshima City, Tokyo [https://www.city.toshima.lg.jp/]. Used with permission)

The Ikebus runs on two circular routes and connects parks, commercial facilities, public facilities, and train stations in Ikebukuro (Figure 2). From February 1, 2024, it operates daily from 9:51 a.m. to 5:21 p.m., running 16 times on one route and 12 times on the other route (Willer Marketing, n.d.). The fee is 200 Japanese yen for one ride for an adult, which has been discounted to 100 Japanese yen since October 1, 2021 until January 31, 2024 (Toshima City, 2024). In addition to the regular scheduled service, the Ikebus offers a one-day bus tour service in Toshima City on irregular dates, as well as charter services on request (Willer Marketing, n.d.).

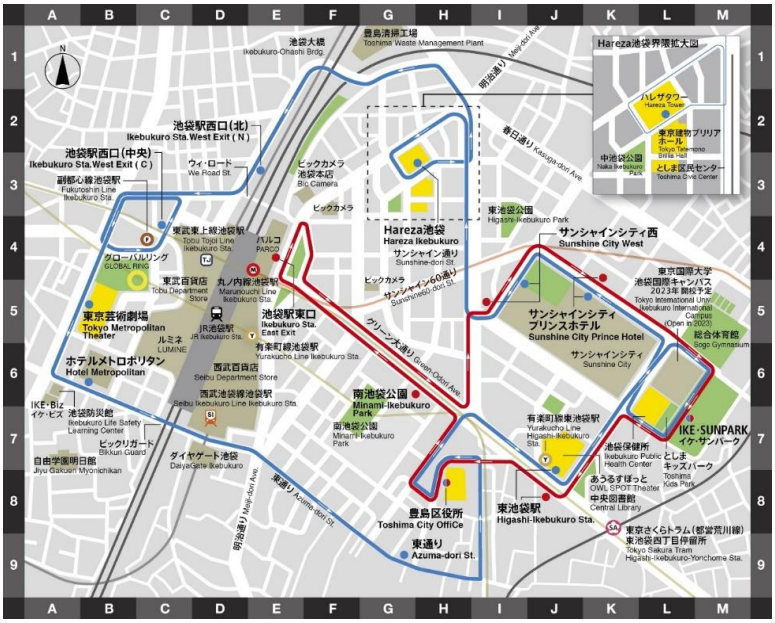

Figure 2: Two circular routes to the Ikebus (From Willer Marketing [n.d.]. Used with permission)

Positive Effects of the Ikebus on Residents and Workers

Partly because of its historical background, Ikebukuro, with its large downtown area, has continued to have a negative image, being described as a scary, dark, and dirty town (Mori, 2021). Thus, the Ikebus project can be seen as one of measures by Toshima City to improve Ikebukuro's image while making the Ikebus a symbol of the city. For this reason, renowned industrial designer Eiji Mitooka was commissioned to design the vehicle (Toshima City, 2024). Mitooka was also commissioned to supervise the design of the bus stop, driver's uniform, and Ikebus-related merchandise for consistency (Toshimananamaru, 2020a). A distinctive red color (the color of the Ikebus vehicle in Figure 1) was also selected for the Ikebus and named "Ikebukuro Red" as the color of Ikebukuro (Toshimananamaru, 2020a). The stylish Ikebus vehicles and the Ikebukuro Red color are intended to make Ikebukuro more attractive and nurture a sense of unity among residents and tourists in Ikebukuro.

The slow-moving, small Ikebus vehicle encourages communication. For example, kindergartners in Toshima City are invited to ride the vehicle, providing them with a safe and enjoyable opportunity to go out (Toshimananamaru, 2020a, 2021). When riding the Ikebus, kindergartners are encouraged to wave to people outside the vehicle, prompting pedestrians and store workers to wave back (Toshimananamaru, 2021). This activity is possible because the Ikebus vehicle offers slow and safe transportation and a pleasant experience for both children and adults. Communicating with kindergartners living in Toshima City offers pedestrians and store workers a sense of community.

The Ikebus also provides a means of activity for elderly people living in Toshima City who have a high willingness to contribute to society. On November 1, 2019, Toshima City started a cleanup project with elderly people (Toshimananamaru, 2020b). Forming groups of three, they work together to improve the environment around Ikebukuro Station by picking up trash and asking people to refrain from littering (Toshimananamaru, 2020b). These elderly people wear Ikebukuro Red uniforms designed by Mitooka, creating a sense of unity with the Ikebus (Toshimananamaru, 2020b). When they see an Ikebus operating during their work, they wave to the passengers, providing them with an enjoyable interaction with local residents (Toshimananamaru, 2020b). Because elderly people are proudly working to improve Ikebukuro's environment, they significantly contribute to increasing the attractiveness of both the Ikebus and Ikebukuro.

The introduction of the Ikebus has, therefore, had numerous positive effects on residents and workers in Ikebukuro, increasing the value of Toshima City as a place of residence, as well as tourism and enhancing residents' attachment to Ikebukuro and Toshima City.

Discussion

Tourism that uses eco-friendly, slow vehicles like the Ikebus, in itself, can be regarded as an example of slow tourism because it appeals to tourists' environmental sensitivity via a slow mode of transportation (Lin, 2017; Lin et al., 2020). However, simply introducing a transportation service with slow electric vehicles is not sufficient to realize slow tourism, particularly in a busy and crowded downtown area like Ikebukuro. In addition to investing in transportation infrastructure, nurturing the atmosphere of slow tourism at the tourism

destination must be strategically considered to provide tourists with authentic tourism experiences through local activities (Lin, 2017; Lin et al., 2020).

The case of the Ikebus demonstrates that, with strategic planning and implementation, green-slow mobility can lead local residents and workers to feel a greater attachment to the city. When residents and workers in Toshima City feel more attached to Ikebukuro, they will be more likely to aim to discover more about the city and tell tourists and visitors. Such an attitude by residents and workers will increase the opportunities for tourists and visitors to engage in authentic local tourism experiences. The liveliness of residents and workers will also encourage tourists and visitors to participate in local activities. As pleasant experiences with tourists and visitors accumulate, residents and workers will increasingly invite tourists and visitors in a spirit of hospitality and open-mindedness.

As the symbol of Ikebukuro, the Ikebus will signal to tourists and visitors that residents and workers in Toshima City are supportive of providing tourists and visitors with local tourism experiences. Riding the Ikebus may provide tourists with opportunities to talk to local residents and workers, spot elderly people in Ikebukuro Red uniforms waving to them from outside the vehicle, and wave back. This affable atmosphere surrounding the Ikebus vehicle will extend to other places in Toshima City, motivating tourists and visitors to be more responsible for the wellbeing of local communities in the city (Goodwin, 2023).

Based on this discussion, we propose a hypothetical process of slow tourism enhancement using green-slow mobility in urban areas, as demonstrated in Figure 3. The proposed process claims that green-slow mobility can enhance the slow tourism atmosphere in a destination through the destination's residents and workers.

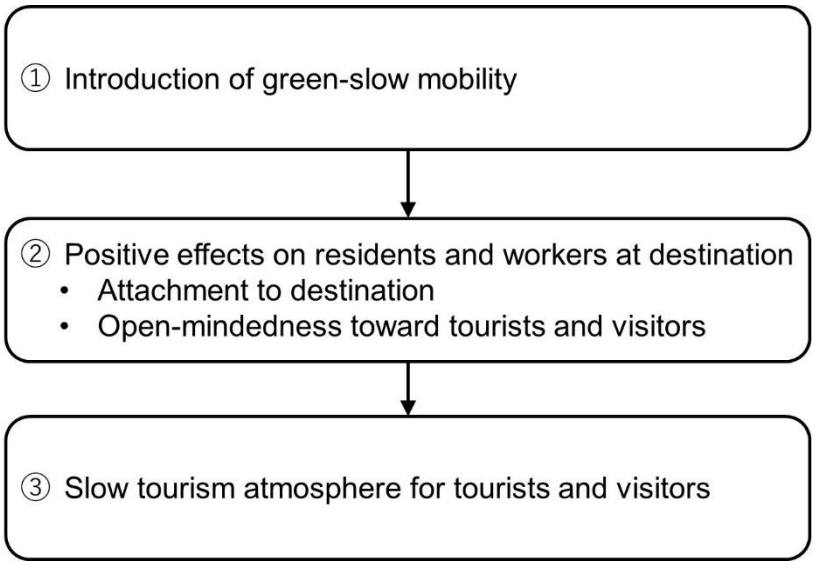

Figure 3: A hypothetical process of slow tourism enhancement using green-slow mobility in urban areas

Conclusion

The present study has discussed how introducing green-slow mobility can enhance slow tourism experiences in busy downtown areas. As the Ikebukuro case demonstrates,

introducing green-slow mobility at an urban destination affects local residents and workers, increasing their attachment to the tourism destination, which then increases opportunities for slow tourism at the destination. Because green-slow mobility is as slow as a bicycle, it is not functionally attractive as a mode of transportation. Thus, the experience of green-slow mobility must be entertaining enough for it to become an end in itself.

The current study contributes to the literature on sustainable urban tourism development by proposing a preliminary new idea that green-slow mobility can serve as a catalyst to realize slow tourism in urban destinations. Because the value of green-slow mobility in sustainable urban tourism has not yet been studied with academic viewpoints, we believe that the present study has established a starting point for further studies and discussions on this topic. Subsequent research should analyze primary data, such as interview data collected from stakeholders, to verify whether the process proposed in the present study can be further justified or refined.

The current study also provides practical implications for local authorities regarding how green-slow mobility can be effectively developed in urban destinations. Although the development of green-slow mobility has been considered mainly in nonurban areas, the approach to sustainable tourism using it can be applicable in densely populated urban areas, as the present study has suggested. In this way, the current study has shed light on the overlooked potential of green-slow mobility. Additionally, the detailed description and analysis of the advanced case in the present study can provide useful information for local authorities responsible for urban planning and development.

The present study only emphasizes one aspect of green-slow mobility in urban tourism, so further discussion is needed on relevant issues that the current study did not focus on. For example, the present study did not explicitly consider the strategic and operational challenges of introducing and developing green-slow mobility in urban areas. Because the launch of a new transportation service like the Ikebus requires high financial investment and involves a variety of stakeholders, the coordination process among the stakeholders should be further elaborated. In addition, as with other public transportation services, the economic viability of green-slow mobility should be carefully evaluated. These issues suggest room for future research.

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