

SUSTAINABILITY AS AN ATTRIBUTE OF HOTEL CHOICE

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ABSTRACT

INTRODUCTION

The attention on sustainability has been increasingly influencing the development of the tourism sector and of the destination competitiveness (Bohdanowicz, 2005). Especially the hospitality industry has generally a heavy and negative economic, environmental, and socio-cultural impact on the destination (e.g. consumption of energy, water, food) (Crouch, 2007; Mazanec et al. 2007; Font and McCabe, 2017). For these reasons hotels have to face hard pressure by international and national stakeholders (Dasanayaka et al. 2022; Buffa et al. 2015). From the one hand, new regulations (e.g. waste management) affect daily procedures and operations. On the other hand, a growing segment of customers is willing to pay a premium price to stay in a “green hotel” (Chang et al., 2015). Therefore, it is really important for hotels to understand how sustainability is perceived by customers and its role as a hotel attribute during the hotel choice process. The paper examines the importance of sustainability as an attribute that determines the hotel choice. The paper wants to contribute to existent literature about sustainability in hospitality, investigating the concept of sustainability as multidimensional (environmental, economic and social). Therefore, the study has the purpose to investigate the importance that hotel consumers give to sustainable practices among other hotel attributes, considering the various dimensions. Moreover, the study analyses the motivations and factors that influence guests’ hotel choice (Xu and Gursoy, 2015; Han, 2021; Gerdt et al., 2019).

The research questions the study investigates could be summarized as follows: RQ1: Which is the importance of sustainability for hotel guests among various hotel attributes? RQ2: Which are the most important dimensions of sustainability (environmental, economic, and social) for hotel guests?

THE ATTRIBUTES OF HOTEL CHOICE AND SUSTAINABILITY

The attributes that lead travellers to choose one hotel over others was a topic already studied in previous literature. Dolnicar and Otter (2003) found that cleanliness and location were the most important attributes for travellers. Other studies pointed out that price (Ananth et al., 1992; Lockyer, 2005) and value of money (Caber and Albayrak, 2014) were important features considered during the hotel choice. Most recent studies underline the importance of natural environment and sustainability practices in determining hotels choice (Bohdanowicz 2005; Lee et al. 2010; Han et al. 2011; Millar and

Baloglu 2011). The study of Verma and Chandra (2018) reveals the prominent role of sustainability practices followed by price, location, value for money, brand awareness and food & service quality. In this case the concept of sustainability is strongly associated with energy conservation practices, recycling and greenscaping. Indeed, previous literature considers the concept of sustainability mainly for the environmental dimension (Franco et al. 2021). However, it is impossible to analyse the relationship between tourism and sustainability without considering the social and economic dimensions (Tölkes, 2018, Franco et. al. 2021), for example local products and craft, tangible and intangible attractions (Noonan and Rizzo, 2017).

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

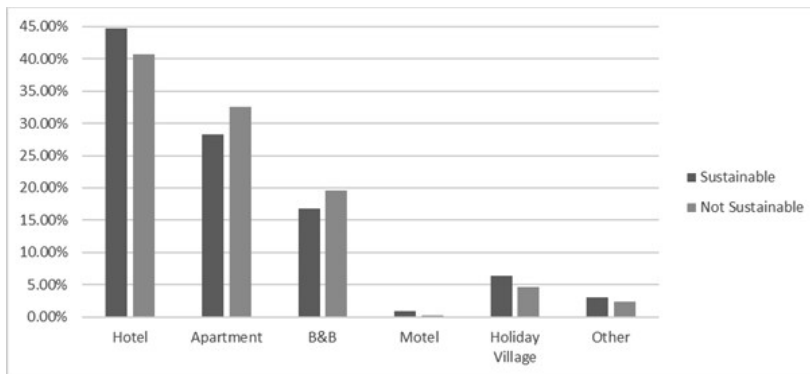
An exploratory survey was conducted to reply to RQs. Data for the study were collected in the period November 2019-January 2022 through self-administered questionnaires. The questionnaire is divided in 3 parts. The first part investigates socio-demographic features of respondents (i.e., age, gender, profession). The second part concerns some behavioural variables (i.e., the purchase channels, the frequency of bookings, the reasons for travel). The third part of the questionnaire analyses the attributes used by travellers for hotel selection. A special focus is given to examine the importance travellers assign to sustainability (in all its dimensions) and the expectations about sustainable practices adopted by hotels. The hotel attributes were identified based on a review of relevant literature illustrated in the previous paragraph and adapted for the purpose of the study. The questionnaire was initially tested and after minor reviews it was delivered online to more than 1.100 travellers. For data analysis, both descriptive and inferential statistics techniques were used. Descriptive statistics were used to summarize and describe the main features of the dataset, while inferential statistics were used to make inferences and draw conclusions about the population based on the sample data. One specific inferential statistical technique that was utilized is the Mann-Whitney U test (for further details see Hart, 2001).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The sample is composed by 676 women, 407 men and 13 respondents who did not declare their gender. Furthermore, 43% of the sample declared to have a job and 42% to be a student. Considering the rest of the respondents, it is made up of retirees and people without a job. Focusing on instruction, 234 respondents declared that they have a university degree and 683 a high school diploma. Focusing on age and generation, 42% of the respondents belong to Generation Z, 25% to Generation Y and the rest to previous generations. The following analysis are based on a self-evaluation based on the concept of “being a sustainable tourist” and, considering the propensity for sustainability, using this data, gender

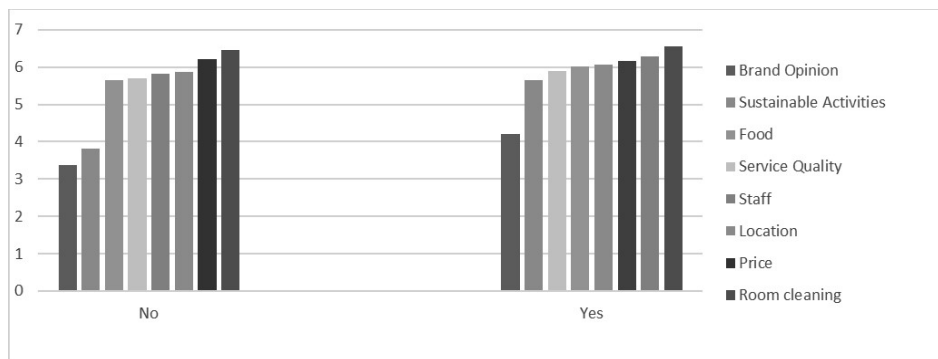
and educational level are not relevant variables. To frame any differences between the choices of accommodation between the two categories of respondents, it is important to verify that there are no significant differences in the choice of accommodation facility (as in Figure 1). In fact, the two groups select hospitality structures for their holiday with very similar percentages.

Figure 1 Accommodation Choice



Considering hotel attributes the travellers take into account during the hotel choice, from Figure 2 emerges that the two groups have similar ranks but, considering the assigned evaluation (Likert from 1 to 7), there are several distances between sustainable tourists and not sustainable tourists, especially in the context of the sustainable activities promoted by the hotel. These results confirm previous studies that stated that cleanliness, price and location are the most important attributes for hotel guests (Ananth et al., 1992; Lockyer, 2005; Dolnicar and Otter, 2003). The role of sustainability is not considered one of the top attribute also by tourists that affirm to be “sustainable” (RQ1). Finally, the analysis provided to answer on RQ2, are based on a Mann–Whitney U test and the 3 dimensions of sustainability were compared. The three tests carried out for the three dimensions of sustainability are statistically significant ($P\text{-Value} < 0.001$) and, consequently, it is possible to state that the perception of the three dimensions of sustainability is very different among the two categories of respondents (i.e. The greatest significance is for the environmental dimension). Therefore, environmental dimension is confirmed to be the most considered by sustainable tourists. Concluding, the future analysis will try to understand the distances, in terms of sustainability, between the two categories of tourists.

Figure 2 Ranking according to the self-evaluation “being a sustainable tourist” (Yes/No)



THEORETICAL AND MANAGERIAL IMPLICATIONS

The present study offers a theoretical contribution to existing literature about sustainability and tourism considering the concept of sustainability as multidimensional (environmental, social and economic dimensions). Moreover, the study enriches the literature about the attributes that influence customers' hotel choice with a particular focus on sustainability affecting consumer behaviour. At the same time, the findings offer interesting managerial implications for hotel managers to develop innovative strategies and business models in order to minimize their negative impacts and to satisfy the customers' needs. A deep knowledge about customers' preferences becomes crucial in determining corporate strategies. The studies demonstrate the importance of some more traditional attributes (price, location) but underlines the increasing importance of sustainability, in all its dimensions. Therefore, hotels should consider how sustainability influences guests' choices in defining their management and communication strategies. The study offers interesting insight also for the other stakeholder of the destination (transportation, attractions, restaurants, etc.), being tourism an overall and integrated experience that involve all the services of a destination.

LIMITATIONS AND FURTHER DEVELOPMENTS

The present study presents some limitations. First, the concept of sustainability is complex with different interpretations. Second the analysis is focused on the hotel business. For the future the study could be extended from the point of view of the respondents (more categories of tourists) and from the point of view of the sectors analysed (i.e., restaurants, transportation, and attractions). A new survey's wave could offer data to compare three different periods: pre-Covid 19, the pandemic period, post-Covid 19. The comparison of data from different periods could provide valuable insights into the changes in consumer behavior and attitudes towards sustainability in the wake of the pandemic.

Keywords: Sustainability, hotel attributes, hotel choice, services, hospitality, tourism

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