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Greening Hotel Brand Experience in the Era of Experience-Seeking Customers: A Managerial Perspective

Abstract

The research note elaborates on the role of green marketing in creating the hotel brand experience (HBE). It aims to reduce the gap in understanding how hotel brand managers stage green encounters within the brand experience and what they believe drives negative vs. positive guest experiences when exposed to specific green marketing initiatives. The theoretical background is followed by the presentation of results from qualitative research conducted with managers in Croatia's leading four- and five-star hotel chains and standalone hotels. Hotel managers consider green marketing a crucial driver for success and long-term survival. Despite a shared belief that delivering a superior experience is a priority, green initiatives are often chosen primarily on the basis of implementation costs. Encounters in which guests are presented with higher investments by the hotel lead to more positive brand experiences. Although hotel managers believe that affective experiences are the most important, they are particularly interested in evoking cognitive experiences through green marketing messages. Therefore, further research should focus on identifying ways to evoke an affective brand experience.

Keywords: green marketing, hotel brand, hotel brand experience (HBE)

1. Introduction

Implementing green marketing strategies is a norm rather than an option for tourism and hospitality, which traditionally depend on the environment and are commonly associated with elements of nature (Hays & Ozretić Došen, 2014). In a review of 76 scientific papers, Arun et al. (2021) concluded that the impact of green hotels on consumer behaviour is still underdetermined, despite the discovered antecedents (attitudes, social norms, values, beliefs, green image, green initiatives) and moderators (demographic and psychographic variables, country, and hotel context) of this relationship. This research note examines green marketing as a critical factor in hotel brand experience (HBE). It explores its role in eliciting negative and positive sensorial, behavioural, affective, and cognitive responses, which, according to Brakus et al. (2009), together form the brand experience.

Green marketing has been proposed as a potential source of intellectual (cognitive) sensations for hotel guests (Manthiou et al., 2016). However, it has also been linked to perceptions of cost-cutting, inconvenience, and decreased luxury, which can diminish the overall customer experience (Rahman et al., 2015). Despite this, very few studies have focused on the hotel brand experience (Khan & Rahman, 2017).

Considering the growing pressure from consumers to incorporate green practices in hotels as well as a general lack of empirical studies connecting them with experience outputs, additional research and analysis are needed to understand when green practices help build superior HBE and how (Yu et al., 2024; Sukhu & Scharff, 2018; Baker et al., 2014). To address the existing research gap, the research note offers

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theoretical contributions to HBE and green marketing, presented alongside the findings of an exploratory qualitative study conducted among managers of leading four— and five-star hotel chains and independent hotel brands in Croatia.

2. Literature review

Providing unique and pleasurable brand experiences to customers is an essential strategy among marketers (Schmitt & Rogers, 2008). This is especially true for hedonic service providers such as the hospitality industry, where hotel managers describe positive guest experience as the most critical consideration for any investment (Vlahovic-Mlakar & Ozretic-Dosen, 2022; Giebelhausen et al., 2016). In the specific context of hotel service, identifying the key factors of hotel brand experience (HBE) is of interest to both academics and practitioners, as such an understanding would enable superior delivery of HBE. This, in turn, leads to benefits such as greater brand differentiation, positive word-of-mouth, increased sales, customer satisfaction, and repeat purchases (Purohit et al., 2023; Liu & Hu, 2021; Khan & Rahman, 2017).

Manthiou et al. (2016) demonstrated that HBE is grounded in the four realms or dimensions proposed by Brakus et al. (2009) and suggested that hotel brands can differentiate themselves from competitors by implementing experience-oriented marketing strategies. The authors were the first to propose that the ideas behind environmental protection can engage guests' thinking and that hotels should foster intellectual experience through environmental awareness. When exploring factors affecting brand experience, it is vital to keep in mind that customers' experiences depend on how they react to staged encounters by organisations, depending on specific situations or states of mind (Mossberg, 2007; Walls, 2013).

In the context of hotels, the investment and implementation of green marketing initiatives and practices should be accompanied by strategic marketing that conveys green signals to consumers (Dang-Van et al., 2024). However, the confusion around green marketing effectiveness is evidenced by a growing number of research papers showing how green initiatives often leave customers skeptical and questioning the true motives behind hotel initiatives (Park et al., 2024; Wang et al., 2017; Baker et al., 2014). This is potentially because "many hoteliers are asserting that they are green by simply hanging a sign that says they are green, and many indulge in simple practices such as getting rid of disposable toiletries or changing the bedding and towels less often" (Rahman et al., 2015, p. 1057). As a result, several hotel managers started to call off green initiatives to protect their guests' experience (Giebelhausen et al., 2016). Yu et al. (2024) have empirically demonstrated that the authenticity of a green hotel brand positively influences customer emotional and behavioural engagement. This finding further underscores the significance of customer perceptions of green hotel brands and their impact on the hotel industry. Akel and Noyan (2024) emphasise the importance of a dual approach to future hotel operations, highlighting the need to adopt both "green" and "smart" practices to achieve environmental and economic benefits.

According to Wang et al. (2017), hotel guests' perceptions decrease when asked to behave in an environmentally friendly way if the hotel shows no visible, costly investment in environmental protection. Apart from showing how green marketing can have both positive and negative experiential outcomes (more precisely, cognitive experiences) depending on certain conditions (in this case, "visible costly effort from the hotel"), the study shows how hotels often include behavioural outcomes such as a green marketing goal to reduce costs. Similarly, Giebelhausen et al. (2016) found that voluntary green programs can lead to positive or negative emotional outcomes depending on the combination of circumstances – whether guests participate in the program and how the hotel stimulates participation.

This points out two important aspects that could be extrapolated to HBE research: (1) The outcomes of green marketing initiatives vary according to specific circumstances, namely visible hotel investment, guest

participation and nature of stimulation, and (2) Green marketing in hotels does not just influence the cognitive brand experience dimension but can affect emotions, resulting in guests feeling good about themselves (Wang et al., 2017; Giebelhausen et al., 2016) and often aims at affecting behaviour by enabling a lifestyle change or just raising awareness about the importance of being environmentally conscious. Manthiou et al. (2016) suggest that ideas about environmental protection can engage guests' thinking, and that hotels should foster intellectual experience through environmental awareness.

It remains unknown how hotel managers stage green encounters. Are they thinking about the brand experience while doing so, and what do they believe are the biggest drivers of negative vs. positive guest experiences when exposed to specific green marketing initiatives? To examine whether green marketing can engage customers on HBE dimensions (cognitive, sensorial, affective, and behavioural), two research questions were set:

RQ1: How does green marketing currently contribute to the HBE?

RQ2: What experience dimensions are affected?

3. Methodology

Following the presented theoretical contributions and identified lack of research connecting green marketing with HBE, exploratory research on hotel managers' opinions about green marketing and its effects on hotel brand experience was conducted to reveal the circumstances leading to negative vs. positive effects from the practitioner's point of view and to help academics and practitioners better understand the possibilities for building superior HBE via green marketing.

Because the price positioning of a hotel can trigger inferences about its social responsibility, and high-priced hotels are consistently perceived as greener than their low-priced counterparts (Wang et al., 2017), the qualitative research focused on four- and five-star hotels. By including only hotels with higher price positioning, discrimination against lower price-positioned hotels was avoided. The hotel brands in the study were selected using non-probabilistic sampling, in which the researchers, at their discretion, selected representative subjects to represent the unique characteristics of certain groups (Berg, 2007). Following Pérez and Rodríguez del Bosque (2012), the "frequency of use" criterion was used to choose the leading hotel brands in terms of regional and national market share, while the "heterogeneous sample" criterion helped to choose brands representing different categories in terms of type of guests, purpose of travel and type of property. Hotel managers from six four- and five-star hotel brands were interviewed in depth. The data were obtained through a combined approach of structured and open-ended questions, which were recorded and transcribed for further analysis. Additional information was obtained from secondary sources, and content analysis of data from media (brochures, websites, and social media channels) and internal documents was carried out to increase objectivity (Pérez & Rodríguez del Bosque, 2012).

4. Results

Table 1 summarises the analysis of data extracted from managers' quotes obtained during in-depth interviews and from official hotel materials regarding RQ1: How does green marketing currently contribute to the HBE?

Green marketing initiatives were categorised into two groups: (1) Guest investment - demand an investment of time, energy or money from guests, and (2) Hotel investment - display an investment (usually of money) performed by the hotel. For example, inviting guests to reuse towels is a widely used green marketing initiative that requires no additional investment by the hotel, as guests assume responsibility for the green choice. On the other hand, getting rid of single-use plastic is an example of the hotel investing, while the guests do not need to invest additional energy, money, or time.

All research subjects used a standard messaging combination to raise awareness of the greening issue while encouraging guests to reuse towels, avoid single-use plastics, and conserve water or energy. By doing so, hotels sought to influence both guests' behaviour and their cognitive brand experience.

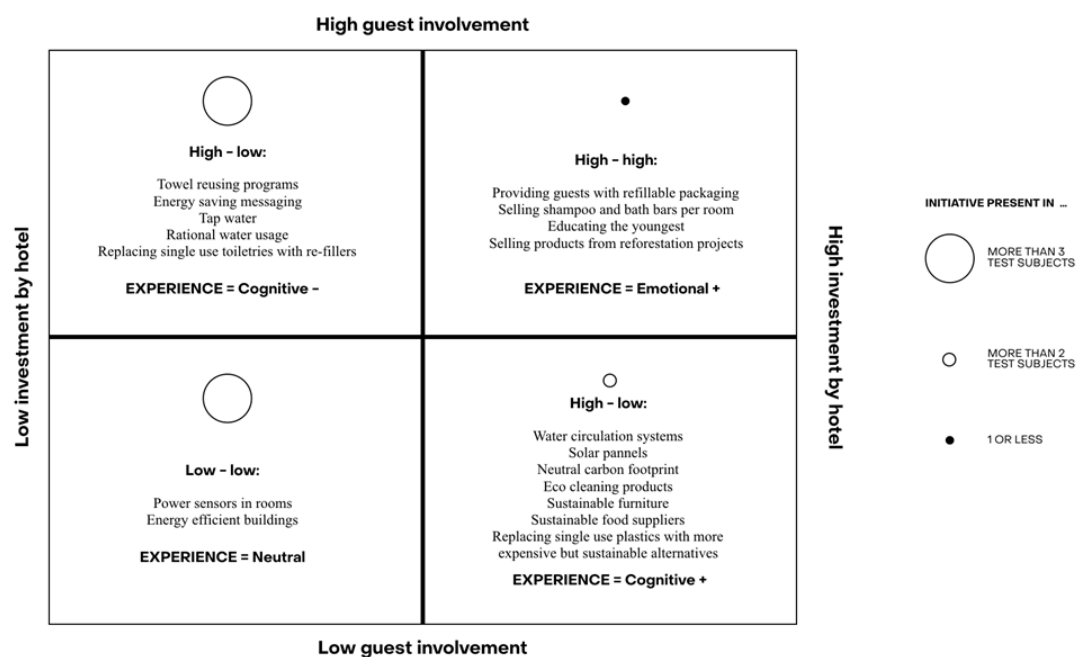
Table 1
Green marketing initiatives by type of investment in selected 4 and 5-star hotels in Croatia

Green marketing initiatives	Hotel investment	Guest investment
Towel reusing program		X
Automatised turning off the lights	X	
Getting rid of disposable toiletries		X
Getting rid of the plastic front office	X	
Getting rid of the plastic back office	X	
Educational program for kids	X	X
Carbon-neutral goal	X	
Reforestation	X	
Solar panels and self-sufficiency	X	

Source: Research

Regarding the HBE dimensions affected (RQ:2), participants found it particularly difficult to maintain the same premium experience their guests are used to while reducing certain aspects of the offer, such as eliminating single-use toiletries and replacing them with refillable options or asking guests to save water and electricity by posting energy-saving messages. This confirms the previously identified concern that green marketing can undermine brand experience when the green encounter is poorly conceived and poorly executed. However, this could be avoided by implementing and displaying the hotel's costly investments, and, if possible, using creativity to produce non-standard, surprising solutions. Some suggestions are presented in Figure 1.

Figure 1
Green marketing initiatives - positive vs. negative effects and HBE dimensions



Source: Research.

However, research participants were unsure how to directly evoke affective experiences, although they claimed that they are by far the most important. One good example of a specific encounter (high hotel investment and high guest involvement) is a planned initiative to start educating the youngest guests by showing them how to recycle, thereby teaching them something valuable for the future. The educational green encounter for kids is, of course, another example of cognitive experience for the youngest, but it can also serve as an emotional experience for their parents. A more obvious example of affective expertise would probably be providing the guest with products and services that enable them to contribute to the issue themselves (also, high hotel investment and high guest involvement). This differs from initiatives such as towel reuse (low hotel investment and high guest involvement) because it also requires hotel investment. According to the participants, high hotel investment and high guest involvement are rare in practice and, as one participant put it, demand a lot of creativity. This concept is currently missing from both academic and practitioners' discussions about green marketing.

Finally, sensorial experiences were detected throughout the usage of specific aesthetic strategies. Hotels in the study signal their green investments through natural colours and materials, plants and greenery taking a central stage in the décor or by offering a variety of sustainably sourced food and beverages.

Hotel managers believe green marketing is an essential driver for future success and long-term survival. Hotel chain brands included in the study implement green marketing in various forms, and this is influenced, among other factors, by their overall brand strategy.

Hotel chains that follow a consistent verbal and visual identity for all hotels in the analysed segment design green encounters from the top down. In contrast, hotel chain brands with a more heterogeneous individual brand offering and specific concepts for each hotel tend to design the green encounter for each hotel as well.

5. Conclusion

Most of the hotel's green actions to date are aimed at influencing guests' behaviour and their cognitive brand experience. This aligns with Mathieu et al.'s (2016) suggestions but also highlights an additional aspect of green marketing in hotels: it is usually aimed at evoking a specific type of behaviour, with or without visible, costly hotel investment. According to Wang et al. (2017), this helps hotels justify the costs of green investments.

When designing green experiences, managers try to minimise costs. They noted the difficulty of finding green partners, such as food or cleaning product distributors, or energy-efficient providers who could help reduce the overall investment in providing guests with a more environmentally sustainable experience. This, in turn, impacts how green marketing contributes to building the hotel brand experience. While research participants share the belief that delivering a superior experience is the highest priority, green initiatives are primarily chosen based on their implementation and scaling costs. As a result, most initiatives are standardised and similar, if not identical, to those worldwide.

Encounters in which hotel guests are presented with higher investments by the hotel seem to lead to more positive brand experiences. However, according to the most used green marketing initiatives, hotel managers are particularly interested in evoking cognitive experiences via green marketing messages.

The results contribute to the theory by narrowing the conceptual gap between hotel brand experience and green marketing. They problematize the idea that green marketing can be designed to reinforce the holistic brand experience, rather than merely providing cognitive (intellectual) sensations for guests. Furthermore, the results indicate that green marketing can lead to both a decrease in HBE and positive brand experiences, demonstrating that green marketing is an HBE contributor.

Possible implications for practitioners: Hotel managers need to move beyond the usual "ubiquitous" green marketing activities and adopt innovative approaches that signal the hotel's high involvement and investment in its design and creativity, thereby stimulating guest involvement and, consequently, the affective dimension of HBE.

The research limitations relate to the researchers' subjectivity in selecting questions, analysing, and interpreting the data. Six respondents from higher-class hotels (one per hotel) were involved; in the future, it would be helpful to expand the sample to include representatives of other hotel categories to avoid missing insights into the broader market situation. A comparison of hotel managers' opinions with guests' perceptions of certain green marketing practices and their impact on HBE represents a desirable direction for research that may help better understand how hotels can use green marketing as a brand experience-building tool.

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