A green step forward: Eliciting consumers' purchasing decisions regarding green hotel accommodation in Australia

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ABSTRACT

This study identifies beliefs and additional constructs that contribute to the formation of Australian residents’ purchasing decisions of green hotel accommodation through the lens of the Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB). A qualitative approach using focus groups and open-ended questionnaires were employed to gain an in-depth understanding of the beliefs of travelers in the South East region of Queensland, Australia. The study utilizes thematic content analysis from three focus group discussions with 15 participants. Benefits, concerns, referents, facilitators and barriers were identified. Moreover, there was significant unprompted vagueness regarding the green hotel practices. The results provided distinctive information concerning Australian residents’ beliefs about staying in green hotels. Moreover, the study revealed that the TPB needs expansion to account for the lack of knowledge about green hotel practices. The research adds to a growing body of literature on the use of theory to study consumer behavior in the green hotel sector.

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1. Introduction

With the growing awareness of environmental responsibility, many industries are attempting to implement effective green initiatives (Huang, Lin, Lai, & Lin, 2014). This ‘greening’ of praxis is also gaining increased attention in the hotel sector (Han, Hsu, & Sheu, 2010). The hotel sector has been associated with negative effects on the environment through the consumption of natural resources, the generation of greenhouse gases, and waste production (Alzboun, Khawaldah, Backman, & Moore, 2016). Many hotels are attempting to reduce the level of negative environmental impacts, which has led to the emergence of ‘green hotels’. The industry defines ‘green hotels’ as lodging properties that are committed to various environmental initiatives such as reducing energy and water consumption, and decreasing waste outputs (Rahman & Reynolds, 2016). Green hotels strive to implement comprehensive environmental practices to create positive contributions for protecting the environment (Han & Yoon, 2015). Rationales and benefits such as compliance with government policy and regulation, increased stakeholders pressure, competitive advantage and reputation enhancement in addition to corporate performance improvement and cost reduction justify the hotels’ decision to adopt green practices (Barber & Deale, 2014; Han & Yoon, 2015; Rahman & Reynolds, 2016).

Central to all these reasons are consumers, who generally acknowledge green hotels’ practices by showing willingness to pay a premium, sacrificing their convenience, comfort and some luxury standards through the process (Barber & Deale, 2014; Rahman & Reynolds, 2016). Though their demand for green accommodation is still relatively low, some lodging consumers now search for hotels that demonstrate the evidence of the implementation of green practices (Rahman & Reynolds, 2016). Thus, it is crucial to have improved understanding of consumer behavior of purchasing green accommodation, so that successful marketing and operation strategies that influence their purchasing choices could be implemented (Han et al., 2010).

Researchers have identified several factors that impact environmentally-friendly behavior including personal characteristics (e.g., gender, age and education), internal factors (e.g., beliefs,
environmental responsibilities, green knowledge and values) and external factors such as economic, social, incentives, barriers and situational factors (e.g., price, location, healthy environment, time and effort) (Baker, Davis, & Weaver, 2014; De Leeuw, Valois, Ajzen, & Schmidt, 2015; Han et al., 2010; Kang, Stein, Heo, & Lee, 2012; Miao & Wei, 2013). Nevertheless, Han et al. (2010) and Miao and Wei (2013) argue that large variances in pro-environmental behavior can be attributed to internal factors. As such, this research focuses on internal factors, specifically, beliefs to provide distinctive information concerning consumers’ behavior in the green hotel setting.

Human social behavior is assumed to follow the beliefs that individuals hold regarding a specific behavior (Fishbein & Ajzen, 2010). Consumer behavior literature indicates that beliefs play a critical role in the decision formation process (De Leeuw et al., 2015). Therefore, it is important to identify the beliefs underlying green purchasing behavior from a sound theoretical framework which could then usefully inform strategies to encourage such behavior.

One of the most influential theories that has been used to identify beliefs is the Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB). The TPB is a validated social-cognitive model of human behavior which is well suited to explain the significant beliefs that impact behavioral intentions and subsequent behavior (Ajzen, 1991; De Leeuw et al., 2015). The TPB assumes that human behavior is based on rational decision-making and is guided by three types of salient beliefs: beliefs about the benefits/concerns of performing the behavior (behavioral beliefs), beliefs about the normative expectations and actions of others (normative beliefs) and beliefs about the presence of factors that may facilitate or impede the performance of the behavior (control beliefs) (Fishbein & Ajzen, 2010). Attitude, perceived norm, and perceived behavioral control are formed respectively based on these beliefs, and they lead to the formation of intention and perceived behavioral control (Ajzen, 1991). Fishbein and Ajzen (2010) indicate that eliciting readily accessible beliefs would provide substantive information about the cognitive foundation of the behavior. In addition, this can assist in the identification of other constructs that affect decision making (Han & Ryu, 2012). This study, therefore, aims to explore the behavioral, normative, and control beliefs and also identify if there are any additional constructs that would contribute to the formation of Australian consumers’ purchasing decisions related to staying in green hotels.

2. Literature review

Increased attention to environmental concerns has stimulated interest in research related to green hotels (Chan, Hsu, & Okumus, 2016). ‘Green hotels’ are lodging properties that are committed to various environmental practices such as saving energy, reducing water consumption and decreasing waste (Rahman & Reynolds, 2016). Green hotels are becoming a growing niche in the competitive accommodation market (Han & Yoon, 2015), with the world’s leading hotel brands starting to embrace environmental initiatives globally in order to become green (Kang et al., 2012). This trend is not only confined to large hotel chains with several small and medium size lodging properties around the world participating in green programs to reflect their environmental responsibility (Rahman, Park, & Chi, 2015). However, whilst some of these hotels have initiated changes to their practices, less attention has been paid to the role of consumer behavior in the green hotel context.

Although some studies indicate that consumer demand for green hotels has gradually increased (Chan et al., 2016), more rigorous consumer research in this field is needed. According to Myung, McClaren, and Li (2012), out of the 52 research articles identified in the hospitality sector, only 28 per cent focused on consumer behavior towards green practices. Similarly, Kim, Lee, and Fairhurst (2017) reported that out of the 146 articles reviewed, only 25.3 per cent were consumer centred. This supports recent calls to increase attention to environmental behavior in the green hotel sector (Gao, Mattila, & Lee, 2016). One way in which researchers can investigate such behavior is to build on social psychological theories, for example the TPB (Ajzen, 1991; Fishbein & Ajzen, 2010).

The TPB is one of the most widely applied theoretical frameworks used to predict human social behavior (Gao et al., 2016). According to the TPB, behavior is predicted by intention to engage in a certain behavior and perceived behavioral control (Ajzen, 1991). The model further proposes that intention is determined by the interaction of three distinct constructs: individuals’ evaluation of the behavior (attitude), their perception of the social pressure to engage in that behavior (perceived norm), and their perception of the potential difficulties and obstacles of performing the behavior (perceived behavioral control), and that these constructs are underpinned by beliefs (Ajzen, 1991). Attitudes towards the behavior are underpinned by behavioral beliefs. Perceived norms are based on normative injunctive and descriptive beliefs. Perceived behavioral control is proposed to arise from control beliefs; however, despite the TPB’s general usefulness, the theory can be broadened and deepened through adding additional constructs to enhance the predictive power of behavior in different contexts (Ajzen, 1991).

Several researchers have verified and validated the TPB in various domains of environmental behavior and such applications are expanding. Examples include: recycling (White & Hyde, 2011), green consumer behavior (Paul, Modi, & Patel, 2016), energy saving (Chen, 2016), green restaurant choice (Jang, Chung, & Kim, 2015), and green hotel choice (Chen & Peng, 2012; Chen & Tung, 2014). One limitation with the majority of these studies is that few of them have examined beliefs underlying the core TPB constructs. Specifically, in the green hotel sector, most research only employed the direct constructs (attitude, perceived norms and perceived behavioral control) alone to determine their influence on intention and behavior (Chang, Tsai, & Yeh, 2014; Chen & Peng, 2012; Chen & Tung, 2014; Han & Yoon, 2015; Han, 2015; Teng, Wu, & Liu, 2015). Only three studies elicited consumers’ beliefs related to green accommodation purchase (Han & Kim, 2010; Han et al., 2010; Kim & Han, 2010). This is unfortunate, as beliefs are viewed as the ultimate psychological determinants of behavior (Fishbein & Ajzen, 2010).

According to De Leeuw et al. (2015), recognizing the subjective beliefs people hold towards an issue and how these beliefs influence their behavior is crucial for researchers in different fields. Peach, Jimmerson, and White (2005) stated that a key strength of the TPB lies in its capability to detect the core beliefs that stir a certain behavior. Beliefs may vary from behavior to behavior and from population to population (Ajzen, 1991). Therefore, to determine the actual beliefs of the target population and to gain further information about the foundations of their behaviors integrating belief constructs is essential (Fishbein & Ajzen, 2010). As more consumers have started to understand that their purchasing behavior impacts the environment directly, it is important to investigate the behaviors of green consumers that are connected explicitly to their beliefs (Fornara, Pattitoni, Mura, & Strazzera, 2016).

As mentioned previously in the literature review, the TPB recognizes three types of beliefs, namely behavioral, normative, and control beliefs (Ajzen, 1991). In the green hotel context, some studies have identified environmental protection, social responsibility, performing environmental friendly practices and enjoying environmental friendly products, and healthy amenities.
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