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Perception of green hotels among tourists in Hong Kong: An exploratory study

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Perception of green hotels among tourists in Hong Kong: An exploratory study

Keywords: environmental practices, hotel industry, public attitudes, qualitative method

Abstract

A qualitative study was conducted to investigate perceptions of environmental practices at hotels among tourists. A quota sample of fifteen mainland Chinese and fifteen English-speaking overseas tourists visiting Hong Kong were recruited for an interview. The results showed that saving energy, use of environmentally friendly materials, and not using single-use consumables were most frequently perceived as what a green hotel should do. Staying in a green hotel was perceived to benefit both the environment and the hotel guests. The most frequently mentioned negative attributes of staying in a green hotel were its premium price, lower comfort level, and inconvenience.

Perception of green hotels among tourists in Hong Kong: An exploratory study

Introduction

Over the years, efforts to improve environmental conditions as well as social responsibility in the hospitality industry have grown dramatically among individual hotels as well as the entire hotel sector. Green hotels, also known as environmentally friendly hotels, have become more and more familiar to consumers. The “Green” Hotels Association in the United States advocates that going green will help a hotel’s bottom line, develop the long-term value of a hotel property, nurture repeat customers, and reduce staff turnover as the management cares for their health and well-being (“Green” Hotels Association, n.d.).

A study showed that hotel guests were interested in staying at green hotels because of their environmental image (Lee et al., 2010). Green practices at hotels were well received by consumers who are environmentally conscious (Millar & Baloglu, 2008). Participating in a hotel’s linen and towel reuse programs no longer satisfies consumers’ eagerness to contribute to the environment (Ogbeide, 2012). Consumers are showing increasing expectation for hotels to implement more environmentally friendly practices. However, some customers are reluctant to pay a premium for green hotel rooms (Manaktola & Jauhari, 2007).

To promote green hotels, it is important for hotel management to understand what kind of products and services consumers are seeking from a green hotel. Hoteliers

also need to know the perceptions and attitudes of guests towards existing green practices in hotels. Implementation of environmental initiatives often involves capital investment. It is therefore necessary for hoteliers to examine if hotel guests are willing to pay a premium for green hotels. The current study attempts to provide hotel management with such information from tourists in an Asian context.

Literature Review

Environmental concern and green hotel practices

The greening of various industries has become increasingly important in appealing to consumers. Although the hotel industry seems to have less visible influence on the environment than the chemical or oil industries, a hotel's lurid energy and resources consumption and possible contamination (e.g., water and soil contamination resulting from the waste emissions of a hotel) of the environment puts great pressure on the environment (Rada, 1996). Along with the spread of concern for environmental degradation and the recognition of hotels' impact on the environment, it is increasingly being recognized that the hotel industry also has a responsibility to contribute to the environment (Rada, 1996).

The establishment of International Hotels Environment Initiative (IHEI) in 1993 was a catalyst for the green campaign in the hotel industry. The hotel industry has developed a standardized and systematized method for measuring the environmental

friendliness of hotels. There are international hotel certification programs in place such as Green Globe and Energy Star, and accreditation schemes such as ISO 14001, LEED (Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design), and GSTC (Global Sustainable Tourism Criteria).

Currently, there is no unified definition of the term “green hotel” in the hospitality industry. The “Green” Hotel Associations (n.d.) defines green hotel as “environmentally-friendly properties whose managers are eager to institute programs that save water, save energy and reduce solid waste – while saving money – to help protect our only earth”. Nowadays, the term “green” involves more than environmental issues. It relates to all aspects of sustainability and corporate social responsibility (International Tourism Partnership, n.d.). Kasim (2004) incorporates the social responsibility factor and defines green hotel as a hotel that “operates in a responsible manner towards its employees, the local community, the local culture, and the surrounding ecology”.

The International Tourism Partnership proposes that green hotels need to incorporate sustainable thinking in their decision-making at all levels throughout the organisation.

This organization put forward six dimensions of standards that a green hotel should follow, including policy and framework, staff training and awareness, environmental management, purchasing, people and communities, and destination protection

(International Tourism Partnership, n.d.). The most common practices implemented by green hotels to improve their environmental impact are saving water, saving energy, and reducing solid waste (Ogbeide, 2012). With the popularization of green hotels all around the world, other environmental practices have been introduced, including eco-cuisine, installation of hinge activated lighting, and replacement of paper check-in by electronics means (Wolff, 2008).

Hotels' green practices not only contribute to protecting environmental (e.g., reducing environmental harm and making use of waste streams) (Bohdanowicz, 2006), but also have a direct role in economic benefits (e.g., cost reductions, higher satisfaction and positive word of mouth, attraction of new customers and customer retention, and more motivated employees) (Kassinis & Soteriou, 2009; Lee et al., 2010). Moreover, positioning itself as a green hotel can facilitate a hotel to get through trade barriers (Post & Altma, 1994). Attracted by these advantages, hotel operators believe that green practices could help them to establish a new niche for environmentally concerned customers as well as sustain long-term sales and profits (Manaktola & Jauhari, 2007).

Consumers' attitudes towards green hotels and their willingness to pay

More consumers are expressing a preference for environmental products and services (Schubert et al., 2010). Consumers' environmental concerns can influence their

decision when selecting a hotel. Studies showed that 83% of English holidaymakers would select a hotel with a green award (Lee et al., 2010). Nearly 40% of leisure travellers in America would choose a hotel that is environmentally friendly (Yesawich, 2008).

Although consumers have a general preference for staying in hotels that adopt green practices, not all of them are willing to pay more for the environmental practices in a green hotel. Some studies reported that most of the respondents were willing to pay extra for staying in a green hotel. For instance, 67% of the consumers in Kenya have a strong willingness to pay a higher rate for an environmentally friendly hotel (Masau & Prideaux, 2003). Choi, Parsa, Sigala, and Putrevu (2009) got similar results in their study of consumers in Greece and the United States. Other studies pointed to the opposite conclusion. One study revealed that the majority of the consumers thought that a green hotel room should cost the same or even less than one in a hotel that does not have green practices (Ogbeide, 2012). In a study of Indian hotel guests, only 15% of the respondents would like to pay more for the hotel's environmental initiatives. The remaining 85% of the respondents felt that the costs should either be paid for by the hotel or shared (Manaktola & Jauhari, 2007). American hotel guests also had a similar attitude, with only 30% of the respondents expressing willingness to pay more to stay at a green hotel (Kang et al., 2012).

Consumers' perceptions of green hotel practices

According to Watkins's (1994) study, the environmentally oriented attributes of hotels that may influence consumers' decision making include recycling bins, energy-efficient lighting, changing sheets only when requested, and turning off lights in unoccupied guest rooms. The practices were found to be well received by consumers (Millar & Baloglu, 2008). A study was conducted to investigate consumers' perceptions of energy-saving manipulations in green hotel rooms. Results showed that consumers were very supportive of these practices (Susskind & Verma, 2011).

Selected attributes such as refillable soap and shampoo dispensers, and low flow showerheads were not perceived favorably (Kasim, 2004; Millar & Baloglu, 2008).

Consumers perceived these practices as being less sanitary and comfortable (Millar & Baloglu, 2008). While consumers appreciate the contribution green hotel practices make to improving the environment, they do not want to compromise on service quality or living comfort.

Regarding the role green practices play in influencing consumers' satisfaction, studies found that the environment-related attributes of a hotel were regarded by consumers as an integral part of the service offer (Kasim, 2004; Robinot & Giannelloni, 2010).

This implied that if the attributes were perceived unfavorably, they would have a negative effect on consumers' satisfaction. Given this, it was proposed that the hotels

should be advised not inform their guests about the environmental practices in place to avoid the risk of being evaluated unfavorably (Robinot & Giannelloni, 2010).

However, with more and more consumers aware of the green attributes of hotels, it is unclear whether this advice is appropriate.

Research Objectives

As most of the studies on green hotel practices are conducted in the western culture, there is a need to understand consumers' perceptions of green hotels in an Asian context. A study was conducted in Hong Kong with the following research objectives:

- To investigate consumers' perceptions of what a green hotel should do or should be;
- to investigate green practices that are most welcomed by consumers as well as consumers' perceptions of the effectiveness of the green practices;
- to examine perceptions of the benefits and negative attributes of staying in green hotels; and
- to investigate if hotel guests are willing to pay more for staying in a green hotel

Methodology

This is the first study on green hotels among inbound tourists in Hong Kong.

Qualitative interviews were employed. Qualitative method is justified in view of its exploratory nature and the lack of empirical data from Hong Kong. A draft interviewing protocol was developed based on previous studies. The draft interviewing protocol in both Chinese and English was pilot tested for clarity of questions on three tourists intercepted at a tourist destination. Based on comments received, modifications were made and a final interviewing protocol was used. The questions asked are listed in the Appendix.

The study was conducted in Hong Kong, an Asian city with 41.9 million inbound tourists in 2011 (Information Services Department of Hong Kong, 2012). Because of the interviewer's proficiency in Putonghau and English, the target population for this study comprised mainland Chinese tourists and English speaking tourists from overseas.

The study was conducted in October 2012. A quota intercept sampling was adopted.

The interviewees consisted of 15 visitors from mainland China and 15

English-speaking overseas visitors, aged 20 to 60. One of the authors recruited the interviewees at Tsim Sha Tsui, a popular tourist destination, right after the daily laser light show at 8 p.m. Of the sample, 16 were female and 14 were male. Either Chinese or English was used in the interviews according to the preferred language of the

interviewees. With the consent of the interviewees, 20 interviews were audio recorded; the others were recorded by hand. Both the audio and written records were transcribed into English afterwards. Transcripts were analyzed question by question. Similar answers were grouped and frequencies were recorded. In view of the small sample size, the results were not analyzed by age or gender. However, all of the interviewees' responses were analyzed.

Results

Perceptions of what a green hotel should do or should be

A total of 75 responses about what a green hotel should do or should be were reported.

The responses were grouped into 12 categories (see Table 1).

[Insert Table 1 about here]

The most frequently mentioned perception of what a green hotel should do concerned saving resources and energy. Interviewees described a green hotel as one that

conserves electricity and saves water. One interviewee expressed it this way:

“A green hotel should use as little energy as possible; it should make good use of electricity, and it should not use too much water, you know, the laundry, the cleaning, etc.” (female, American, age 25-30)

Specifically, some interviewees mentioned the use of green energy such as solar energy. This attribute was often mentioned by overseas interviewees. Other ways to save resources and energy were also mentioned, such as not delivering newspapers unless guests requested them, and encouraging guests to take the stairs instead of

using the elevator.

Using environmental friendly materials was the second most frequently mentioned attribute of a green hotel. Interviewees thought that a green hotel should use materials that pose no harm to the natural environment as well as to the human body. Two typical quotes are as follows:

“It should keep away dangerous chemicals. Everything you use in a green hotel, it should be good for the environment.” (Female, British, age 50-55)

“The materials used in a green hotel should be environmental-friendly. The colour, look, smell, and even the touch of them should be well designed, so that guests can be more comfortable and relaxed.” (Female, mainland Chinese, age 30-35)

Not using single-use or individually packed consumables was the third most

frequently mentioned attribute. This attribute was often mentioned by mainland

Chinese interviewees. Typical statements included,

“It should not provide single-use consumables. It’s too wasteful and may pollute the environment.” (female, mainland Chinese, age 30-35)

“Why put individually packed shampoos in the bathroom? Just put it in a big bottle and it can reduce much waste.” (male, Germany, age 50-55)

Other frequently mentioned attributes included cultivating a physical environment

with plants or green decorations, reducing unnecessary products or services, and

handling waste in an environmental way.

Liking and perceived effectiveness of environmental practices in green hotels

Nine environmental practices adopted in green hotels were presented. Interviewees

were asked to rate on a five-point scale their liking for these practices and their

perceived effectiveness in protecting the environment. There was no significant

difference between mainland Chinese interviewees and overseas interviewees. The results are summarized in Table 2.

[Insert Table 2 about here]

The mean scores for the liking of various environmental practices ranged from 3.1 to 4.7, revealing that the practices were evaluated favorably in general. Planting lots of trees to provide clean air was most appreciated by the interviewees, followed by setting up smoke-free rooms or smoke-free floors, asking guests to sort the waste, and cutting off the power when the room is unoccupied. Using low flow showerheads was perceived as the least favorite practice.

The mean scores for perceived effectiveness of various environmental practices ranged from 3.1 to 4.4, indicating that these practices were perceived as effective in general. Among them, setting up smoke-free rooms or smoke-free floors, planting lots of trees to provide clean air, and reducing the frequency of changing the towels and linen were perceived as most effective. Suggesting that restaurant customers should not order food excessively was perceived as least effective practice. Using low flow showerheads was also perceived as being not that effective. Interviewees thought it would result in a longer shower and more water would be consumed.

Perceived benefits of staying in a green hotel

A total of 56 responses about the benefits of staying in a green hotel were collected.

They are summarized in Table 3.

[Insert Table 3 about here]

The most frequently mentioned benefit of staying in a green hotel was contribution to the environment. Interviewees thought that green hotels had less environmental impact than conventional ones. They also believed that green hotels would save resources and energy, reduce waste, and generate less pollution. A typical quote is as follows:

“Staying in a green hotel is very good for environmental protection. Through the recycling programme, the energy-efficiency measures and other practices, the earth can be much greener.” (Female, mainland Chinese, age 25-30)

Uplifting living standards and health conditions was the second most frequently mentioned benefit of staying in a green hotel. Interviewees believed that the facilities and the service procedures at a green hotel were standardized and more canonical. As a result, the guests enjoy a more comfortable and higher quality experience. Here are two typical quotes:

“I would feel more comfortable staying in a green hotel. I have confidence that everything in the hotel is eco-friendly and everything I use is made of natural things, which can be recycled after use. As for other hotels, I won’t say that for sure.” (Male, Russian, age 20-24)

“Fewer chemicals are used in green hotels, the standard of our living environment can be guaranteed. The cleaner air and higher level of hygiene in green hotels are also good for our health.” (Female, age 25-30)

Other frequently mentioned benefits included saving energy, better air, and better mood.

Perceived negative attributes of staying in a green hotel

Among all the interviewees, 11 of them (including three mainland Chinese interviewees and eight overseas interviewees) said that there wasn't any negative attribute of staying in a green hotel. The other 19 interviewees reported a total of 33 responses about the negative attributes of staying in a green hotel (See Table 4).

[Insert Table 4 about here]

The most frequently mentioned negative attribute of staying in a green hotel was the higher price. Some interviewees didn't understand why green hotels cost more. For example, one said that the price would be higher because of the investment, but it should be lower in the long run. Some interviewees considered it not worth paying a higher price for staying in a green hotel. One interviewee worried that the so-called green practices are just 'window dressing' or just excuses for higher price.

Less comfort was mentioned by interviewees, mainly due to the use of low flow showerheads. Some interviewees thought it would be inconvenient if a hotel did not offer single-use consumables such as toothbrushes, especially when guests forget to bring their own. Other perceived negative attributes included the worry about hygiene when linen were changed less frequently, and the inconvenience of not being able to recharge appliances when away. Two overseas interviewees from America and the Netherlands said that they were annoyed by the environmental messages posted at

hotels. They thought they had high environmental awareness and did not need to be reminded again and again. Waiting for the room to become cool because of energy saving was perceived as inconvenience, but the interviewee said it would not be a big problem. One interviewee said it was too tedious to sort the waste.

Consumers' willingness to pay more for green hotels

The interviewees were asked whether they found it acceptable to pay more for a green hotel. Seven of them reported that they would not accept it. Among these, six interviewees said they would not pay a higher price for a green hotel room because they did not understand why green hotels cost more. They thought that with the cutting of unnecessary energy use and consumables the hotel price should not be higher. One interviewee said that he understood why the price is higher, but he would not like to pay more for it.

The remaining 23 interviewees expressed a willingness to pay more for staying at a green hotel. Altogether 18 interviewees said that it was understandable that a green hotel would cost more and they would like to pay more. The remaining five interviewees said even though they did not quite understand why green hotels cost more, they were still willing to pay more to support environmental protection.

For the 23 interviewees who expressed willingness to pay more for staying in a green hotel, three were willing to pay a premium of 1-5% more, ten of them 6-10% more,

four of them 11-15% more, and seven of them 16% more respectively.

Discussion

In this qualitative study, 30 interviewees from mainland China and overseas were asked about their views on green hotels. Based on the interviews, we have the following five observations.

First, interviewees were in general knowledgeable and supportive of green practices in hotels. The responses collected ranged from macro-level measures such as energy saving to micro-level measures such as changing linen less frequently. This suggests that interviewees had clear and specific perceptions of what a green hotel should have or should be. Interviewees' liking for green practices adopted in green hotels, and their perceived effectiveness, were both high, indicating strong support for green hotels. Interviewees reported green hotels' contribution to the environment as the primary benefit of their staying in a green hotel.

Second, energy and resources saving ranked top on interviewees' perceptions of green hotels. The result is consistent with a previous study that consumers and other stakeholders expect green hotels to work on energy efficiency, waste diversion, and water conservation (Heisterkamp, 2009). This study also found that cutting off power when guest rooms are unoccupied was perceived as favorable as well as effective by

the interviewees. Along with a previous study revealing that guests either did not notice or supported energy-conservation measures in hotels (Susskind & Verma, 2011), hoteliers can consider various resources and energy saving programs such as using solar energy, cutting off power when guest rooms are unoccupied, and installation of dual-flushing toilets.

Third, interviewees perceived that the environmental practices of green hotels benefit both the environment and hotel guests. Interviewees perceived planting trees and setting up smoke-free areas to be their favorite green practices. This suggests that interviewees are concerned about their own health during travel. They also have high expectations of the landscaping at green hotels. Hotel management should put effort into designing a physical environment that has abundant plants and flowers. Hoteliers need to understand consumers' concerns for their own well-being. When constructing a green hotel, efforts to enhance guests' living standards and health conditions should be taken into consideration.

Fourth, there were mixed views about the necessity of environmental publicity in a green hotel. Interviewees with concern for the environment but lacking environmental knowledge were eager to enrich their understanding of environmental issues. They welcomed environmental publicity in green hotels. However, some interviewees found the environmental messages in hotels annoying, because they thought they were

knowledgeable on the issue. This is a reminder for hoteliers that they should be sensitive in designing environmental messages posted at hotel premises. They should take care not to bother guests.

Fifth, a majority of the interviewees were willing to pay higher rates for green hotel rooms. Even though some of them did not understand why green hotels cost more, they still would like to pay a premium to support environmental protection.

Although there is a need to investigate the link between consumers' willingness to pay and their actual purchase behavior, this finding is promising for hotel managers in that consumers at least are ready to pay for environmental initiatives in hotels.

Conclusion

This exploratory study conducted a qualitative methodology to investigate perceptions about green hotels among tourists in Hong Kong. The study found that consumers in general were supportive of green practices as well as green hotels. Interviewees in this study most frequently mentioned saving energy, use of environmentally friendly materials, and avoiding single-use consumables as the attributes of a green hotel.

Interviewees in general showed appreciation of most of the environmental practices in green hotels and found them effective in protecting the environment. Staying in a green hotel was perceived to benefit both the environment and hotel guests. The most

frequently mentioned negative attributes of staying in a green hotel were premium price, lower comfort level, and inconvenience. A majority of the interviewees were willing to pay higher rates for green hotel rooms to support environmental protection.

Marketing Implications

Based on the current study, we have the following recommendations for hoteliers in designing environmental initiatives and marketing green hotels. First, when constructing a green hotel, hotel managers should employ energy saving measures, use environmentally friendly materials, and avoid single-use consumables. Various energy saving measures can be adopted, such as using solar energy, cutting off power when guest rooms are unoccupied, and installing dual-flush toilets. Second, green measures should not be perceived as compromising the hygiene conditions or comfort levels of hotel guests. When adopting devices or measures such as a water-saving flow showerhead, it is important that the water flow is adjusted in a way that will not be noticed by most of the consumers. We recommend using low flow showerheads that can save water while the change in water flow remains largely unnoticed. Third, hotel management should pay attention to the physical environment and landscape design of green hotels. Fourth, in terms of pricing, the price premium should be set at below 10%, as this is the level that most of the consumers are ready to accept. The price system should be presented in a transparent and credible manner in order to

avoid being regarded as “green-wash”.

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Table 1 Perception of what a green hotel should do or should be (N=30)

| | Tourists from | | |
|---|-------------------|----------|--------|
| | Mainland China | Overseas | Total* |
| Saving resources and energy | 6 | 14 | 20 |
| Using environmentally-friendly materials | 4 | 6 | 10 |
| Not using single-use or individually packed consumables | 6 | 2 | 8 |
| Cultivating a physical environment with plants or green decorations | 5 | 2 | 7 |
| Reducing unnecessary products or services | 2 | 4 | 6 |
| Handling waste in an environmentally responsible way/Recycling waste | 3 | 3 | 6 |
| Not changing bedding or towels everyday | 0 | 4 | 4 |
| Reducing waste and pollution | 1 | 3 | 4 |
| Adopting a comfortable and humanistic design | 2 | 1 | 3 |
| Environmental publicity | 1 | 1 | 2 |
| Others: providing shuttle bus service(1), using high-tech products(1), constructing the hotel on a hilltop(1) | 3 | 0 | 3 |
| Others: reducing carbon emissions(1), clean air(1) | 0 | 2 | 2 |
| Total* | 33 | 42 | 75 |

*Each interviewee can mention more than one response

Table 2 Liking and perceived effectiveness of environmental practices in green hotels

| | Liking [*] | Effectiveness [*] |
|---|---------------------|----------------------------|
| Plant lots of trees to provide clean air | 4.7 | 4.2 |
| Set up smoke-free rooms or smoke-free floors | 4.6 | 4.4 |
| Ask guests to sort their waste | 4.2 | 3.6 |
| Cut off the power when the room is unoccupied | 4.2 | 3.7 |
| Put up posters for promoting environmental awareness | 4.1 | 3.7 |
| Reduce the frequency of changing the towels and linen | 3.9 | 4.2 |
| Suggest to restaurant customers that they do not order food excessively | 3.6 | 3.1 |
| Do not provide single-use consumables, or provide them with a fee | 3.6 | 3.5 |
| Use low flow showerheads | 3.1 | 3.3 |

^{*}On 5-point scale (5=like very much or perceived very effective)

Table 3 Perceived benefits of staying in a green hotel

| | Visitors from | | Total* |
|--|-------------------|----------|--------|
| | Mainland China | Overseas | |
| Making a contribution to the environment | 6 | 10 | 16 |
| Uplifting living standards and health conditions | 7 | 6 | 13 |
| Saving energy and resources | 3 | 2 | 5 |
| Better air | 0 | 5 | 5 |
| A better mood due to the practice of environmentally responsible behavior | 1 | 4 | 5 |
| Encouraging myself to practice environmentally responsible behavior | 3 | 1 | 4 |
| Better health because of smoke-free areas | 3 | 1 | 4 |
| More economical with less luxurious products and services | 2 | 2 | 4 |
| Total* | 25 | 31 | 56 |

*Each interviewee can mention more than one response

Table 4 Perceived negative attributes of staying in a green hotel

| | Visitors from | | Total* |
|---|-------------------|----------|--------|
| | Mainland China | Overseas | |
| Higher price | 11 | 4 | 15 |
| Less comfortable | 4 | 1 | 5 |
| Inconvenience due to no single-use consumables being offered | 5 | 0 | 5 |
| Poorer hygiene | 3 | 0 | 3 |
| Not able to recharge appliances when away | 1 | 0 | 1 |
| Environmental messages perceived as unnecessary | 0 | 2 | 2 |
| Too tedious to sort waste | 0 | 1 | 1 |
| Need to wait for the room to become cool | 0 | 1 | 1 |
| Total* | 24 | 9 | 33 |

*Each interviewee can mention more than one response

Appendix list of questions asked

1. What do you think a green hotel should do or should be?
2. For each of the following practices, please rate how much you like it, and how effective it is in making an environmental contribution?
3. Consumers sometimes need to pay more for a green hotel. Is this acceptable to you?

(If acceptable) How much more are you willing to pay?
4. What would you say about the benefits of staying in a green hotel?
5. What would you say about the negative attributes of staying in a green hotel?