

HOTEL ENVIRONMENTAL SUSTAINABILITY PERCEPTIONS: CUSTOMER AND MANAGEMENT PERSPECTIVES

PERCEÇÕES SOBRE SUSTENTABILIDADE AMBIENTAL NOS HOTEIS: PERSPETIVAS DOS CLIENTE E DA GESTÃO

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Abstract

With increasing relevance at the national and global levels, the sustainability issue leads to countless adjustments to daily human behaviours, which should minimize the impacts on the environment through products, services, and procedures. The hotel industry is one of the trades that has done significant efforts to reduce the ecological footprint by introducing many improvements in their daily labour routines. This work addresses a survey that originated 320 questionnaire responses from customers, and five hotel managers' interviews addressing their motivations and difficulties in adopting sustainable practices. This research focuses on finding the main perceptions and behaviours of consumers and hotel managers on conservation of the environment itself and their perspective about sustainability towards the hotel industry. Preliminary findings showed that consumers are introducing more often sustainable policies in their routines and consider environmental sustainability as an important practice in their life. Moreover, respondents assume that the hotel industry has an important role in preserving the environment. Yet participants do not choose a hotel or local accommodation due to their environmental practices, issues such as price or location are more important in the selection process.

KEYWORDS: Environmental sustainability; hospitality; Consumers perceptions; Sustainable practices

Resumo

Com cada vez mais relevância, a nível nacional e global, o tema da sustentabilidade tem promovido significativos ajustamentos nos comportamentos humanos diários, no sentido de minimizar os impactos no ambiente através de produtos, serviços e procedimentos. A indústria hoteleira é uma das áreas de negócios que tem feito esforços significativos para reduzir a sua pegada ecológica, introduzindo muitas melhorias nas suas rotinas diárias de trabalho. Este trabalho aborda um inquérito a clientes que originou 320 respostas, e cinco entrevistas de gestores de hotéis, abordando as suas motivações e dificuldades na adoção de práticas sustentáveis. Esta investigação centra-se em encontrar as principais percepções e comportamentos dos consumidores e gestores hoteleiros sobre a conservação do próprio

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ambiente e a sua perspectiva sobre a sustentabilidade para a indústria hoteleira. Os resultados preliminares mostram que os consumidores estão a introduzir políticas mais frequentemente sustentáveis nas suas rotinas e consideram a sustentabilidade ambiental como uma prática importante na sua vida. Além disso, os inquiridos assumem que a indústria hoteleira tem um papel importante na preservação do ambiente. No entanto, os participantes não escolhem um hotel ou alojamento local devido às suas práticas ambientais, questões como o preço ou a localização são mais importantes no processo de seleção.

PALAVRAS CHAVE: Sustentabilidade ambiental; hospitalidade; Perceções dos consumidores; Práticas sustentáveis.

1. INTRODUCTION

In the past few years, a lot has been written and discussed about environmental sustainability. Moreover, it is given a high level of seriousness to the theme, highlighting the need to act urgently. These concerns are extended to many areas and industries and so the growing concern with environmental sustainability triggered a sense of responsibility that allowed many companies and organizations. Thus, these organizations need to develop responses based on this topic with the purpose to enhance their competitive advantage and simultaneously represent a source of credibility and distinction for companies. According to National Geographic (2018), Portugal was one of the countries that rose its position in the human development index, being the 17th in terms of environmental policies. Tourism is one of the areas that has been experiencing exponential growth in the country, with special emphasis on the city of Porto, which registered in 2019, according to the Portuguese Hospitality Association, an occupancy rate of 90% (AHP, 2020), thus overcoming places like Lisbon or Algarve. Therefore, the aim of this study is to analysis the perspectives of guests and hotel management about environmental sustainability itself, and hotel management's role in this matter.

2. BACKGROUND

The concept of sustainability causes ambiguities and a lack of clarity according to several authors since it is often mistaken with sustainable development – an approach that goes against the limits of nature (Hopwood *et al.*..., 2005), whereas the term implies the notion of growth that is accomplished through the intensive use of resources. Colbert & Kurucz (2007) explain that sustainability has and must be contextualized according to the dimension to which it belongs – social, economic, and environmental. Thus, the term environmental sustainability can be defined as a set of criteria that guide human activities and actions (Salas-Zapata & Ortiz-Muñoz, 2019).

On what concerns the path to environmental sustainability, the theme triggered primary interest in 1972 at the First United Nations World Conference of Man and the Environment that took place in Stockholm. Gradually the theme of sustainability achieves an increasingly active voice with organizations like the UN (United Nations). Bergquist *et al.*... (2019), assumes that the very first steps about environmental sustainability in companies and organizations started with the regulations established by several countries of the world such as recycling, air and water pollution, or protection of vulnerable species. Companies are increasingly willing to explore practices related to environmental problems as they are often the industries that cause more environmental pollution (Taherdangkoo *et al.*..., 2019).

In addition, a marketing strategy based on “green” actions by a company will make relationships with consumers, as well as with society in general benefit. These measures provide a better understanding of the topic for consumers while triggering a sense of obligation for compe-

ting companies to follow this example. The adoption of sustainable practices by organizations and companies provides a greater willingness to participate in these measures and a better perception of companies by consumers, as well as a greater growth in the understanding of the subject in general.

Ceylan & Murat (2019) question sustainability in the economic context since an economy that fails to meet the basic needs of the population is a volatile and unstable economy and is consequently uncertain. Thus, opposite to what ecologists and many other individuals outside the economic context think when referring that sustainability is a single and comprehensive criterion that can and should guide global development, the expansion of the economy in parallel with population growth and standards of life need to be based on environmental sustainability principles and actions.

Keeble (1988) assumes that sustainability is one that meets the current needs of tourists and host regions, doing sustainable management of all economic, social, and ethical resources. However, there are imbalances between environmental sustainability and hotels, originated during the construction, production, distribution, and consumption process (Paskova & Zelenka, 2019). Therefore, it is not possible to consider the hotel industry as 100% sustainable, because the construction, production, distribution, and consumption process can cause negative consequences either in the social, environmental, or economic dimensions.

The hotel industry has been in charge of adopting attitudes and measures that give voice to environmental practices, such as compliance with environmental legislation, reduction in the use of energy, water, and other materials; reduction of solid waste production; recycling as well as monitoring its environmental impact (Silva *et al.*..., 2015). The Hotel Energy Solutions Report (HES, 2011), warns that nowadays the fight against climate change cannot be seen as a trend but as an essential condition for the survival and success of the sector. This report also suggests that the biggest obstacles in the adoption of sustainable practices by hotel units differ from country to country in agreement to their culture and sensitivity and, at the same time, due to being something that is not reflected in the short term. Dabour (2003) points out that the lack of technical knowledge about sustainable possibilities can result in negative consequences. Melissen (2013) also gave, as an example, the notion that a higher sustainable approach to the sector demands a new generation of business that goes beyond the current approach. Thus, the actual framework only counts on the ecological and economic elements of sustainable development, since the social dimension is uncommon, hotel units should, therefore, lean on local communities, organizations, and suppliers in a sense of economic as well as social cooperation.

In a report written by Bruns-Smith *et al.*... (2015) with 120 000 participants, it was possible to conclude that the majority of guests are very receptive to participate in sustainability programs. However, the fact of the hotel unit uses and contributes to friendly actions of the environment does not represent an aspect of preference when compared to conditions such as price or location. Also, it was found that around 75% of participants are even more interested in participating in actions that are carried out by hotels if these benefits convert as, for example, points on loyalty cards.

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGIES

The current research presents an exploratory study, which aims to analyse both hotel guests and hotel management perceptions towards environmental sustainability aspects and issues. With this purpose, a survey was conducted targeting hotel guests, and a sample of 320 valid responses was collected. Moreover, five interviews were carried out with managers of four hotels and one local accommodation, all from the region of Porto. The purpose of these interviews was to assess their motivation, interest, and difficulties on what concerns the environment and its sustainability in the industry. This study's survey focuses on behaviours, attitudes, and opinions of the individuals towards environmental sustainability and hotel management sustainability, using

mostly Likert scale questions. The interviews with the managers were structured with questions about their approach towards the hotels' environmental sustainability.

4. MAIN RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Regarding the hotel guests' behaviour, it was possible to understand that the participants classified as "important" (52.5%) their relationship with environmental sustainability. They also mentioned adopting frequently (48.1%) sustainable practices in their home routines. On what concerns to the hotel industry and their responsibility to build a more sustainable world, the respondents consider that hotel managers have an important role in this issue (88.1%). In addition, the majority of guests (72%) replied as being willing to contribute with a fraction of the price paid for their stay to develop more environmental actions. Conversely, when comparing environmental practices, with hotel features as prices, location, and comfort, consumers rated these latter more important than environmental preservation. Moreover, guests classified environmental preservation as "neither too little nor too much important" in their hotel selection process. In addition, they mentioned that the fact that a hotel claims having implemented sustainable practices does not influence their decision when selecting accommodation (74.7%). Also, their willingness to participate in a sustainable action promoted by the units in which they're staying is predominantly neutral, responding as "neither too little nor too likely" by 30% and "likely" by 27%. Furthermore, to better analyse the results, the SPSS statistical program was used to complete a "spearman correlation", which helps to identify the variables that better correlate with one another. This was useful to understand that the importance that individuals give to environmental sustainability influences many aspects such as willingness to contribute to sustainable practices developed by hotels or their frequency in adopting sustainable practices by themselves.

Regarding the interviews with hotel managers, the results show that environmental policies differ from hotel to hotel, importing their mission as a hotel unit and their clients' interests. Nevertheless, the hotel managers mentioned that customers are increasingly more aware of the environmental concerns and they tend to look for hotels that contribute somehow to decrease the ecological footprint. Nonetheless, this is not evident in their strategy when compared with other factors such as price policy or location. Amongst the respondents, only one hotel showed that environmental policies are a matter of huge interest in their strategy carrying out actions that contribute to the preservation of the planet. The main barriers founded in the adoption of environmental policies are the price of some "eco-products", the lack of general knowledge and the inexistence of educative training on what concerns environmental sustainability has prevented and hindered this greener path.

5. SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

Current research explores the results from five interviews with hotel managers and 320 questionnaire responses from hotel guests. The results contributed to a better understanding of the hotel guests and managers perceptions about the emergent issue of environmental sustainability. It is showed that economic, social, and environmental dimensions should be in balance, so a valuable contribution to environmental sustainability is achieved.

This study identifies that the majority of hotel guests are sensitive to environmental issues, classifying their role in environmental sustainability as important, and adopting sustainable practices in their home routines. As a result, a large majority of them indicated that are willing to contribute with a fraction of the paid price to contribute to the integration of sustainable practice. Conversely, the study also identifies that guests rate less sustainable practices, when compared with hotel features as price, locations, and comfort, and hotels having this attribute seem not to

have a great influence on the hotel selection. Nonetheless, it seems to exist a positive correlation between guest's behaviour towards environmental sustainability and willingness to contribute to sustainable practices and hotel selection.

This research also shows that hotel managers are well informed about their guests' behaviour. They are aware that their guests are becoming more environmentally concerned and for some, the hotel's sustainable practices affect the guest selection. Hotel managers also tend to give less importance to green attributes and do not consider them in their strategy, because they are also aware that most of the guests give more importance to other hotel features, like price and location, and the high costs associated with the environmental policies.

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