The double-edged sword of transparency in sustainable customer behavior

Insights from the hospitality industry

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Purpose:

Climate change is the central crisis of our time and unfolds even faster than many experts anticipated (UN, 2020). Thus, fundamental transformation is required in all sectors of society, including service ecosystems such as the tourism sector (Field et al., 2021). Despite its relevance, achieving sustainability in this sector is especially challenging, since customers have a significant impact on the usage of resources (Field et al., 2018). In line with these considerations, Ostrom et al. (2021) highlight the importance of investigating the effect of transparency on encouraging customers into more sustainable behavior.

Therefore, we analyze the effect of social comparison on energy consumption in hospitality. Previous research suggests that such social norms, in addition to willingness to sacrifice for the environment, also predict customers' pro-environmental decision-making (e.g. Schultz et al., 2008). By integrating both, we shed light on the potential interplay among these predictors, which remains underexplored in current literature (Han et al., 2018). Pride and guilt are conducted as mediators, since self-conscious emotions are shown to be powerful motivators of human behavior (Lewis, 1995) and their relevance for sustainable behavior is discussed in current environmental psychological literature (e.g. Hurst & Sintov, 2022). We further investigated any potential negative side effects for hotels providing such information to their customers in terms of customers' revisit intention.

Methodology:

We conducted a scenario based between-subject-design with 700 frequent travelers from the US. Participants were confronted with their energy consumption, which was either equal to the average of a comparable booking or lower or higher. Additionally, the intervention was placed either during the purchase decision or after the stay (6 groups).

Findings:

Our analysis shows that customer's revisit intention is significantly lower (higher) in the above (below) average condition for both placements along the customer journey. While both consumption forms lead to an increase in customers' willingness to sacrifice in the pre-accommodation stage, mediated through anticipated pride and guilt, pride loses its mediating effect in the post-stay phase. Hence, compared to average energy consumption, only higher consumption leads to higher customer willingness to sacrifice, mediated partially by experienced guilt, while customers with lower consumptions have lower willingness, mediated through a decrease in guilt.

Research limitations:

First, this study investigates a single service setting based on a laboratory experiment. Future research should therefore examine the effect of transparent energy consumption in different environments. field experiments with behavioral outcomes are needed to address concerns

about measuring intentions. Second, researcher should analyze the impact on different outcomes.

Practical implications:

We show that being transparent about customers' energy consumption can lower their revisit intention, raising managers' sensitivity to sustainability initiatives like this. Furthermore, a customer's positive evaluation after their stay leads to a decrease in their willingness to sacrifice for sustainability.

Originality/value:

To the best of our knowledge, this is the first study that examines the influence of a transparent display of customers' energy consumption in hospitality along the customer journey. Additionally, the findings shed light on the current discourse on the influence of experienced and anticipated guilt and pride on sustainable behavior.

References upon request