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The Power of Positivity: How Images Affect Intention to Purchase Green Hotel Accommodation.

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 lodging sector (Warren, Becken, & Coghlan, 2017). Many hotels are attempting to implement green programs, which has led to the emergence of 'green hotels'. According to Barber and Deale (2014), a crucial reason for going green is consumer demand leading to a competitive advantage for hotels employing green practices. Though the demand for green hotels is still relatively low, some lodging consumers now search for hotels that demonstrate evidence of the implementation of green practices (Rahman & Reynolds, 2016).

Inducing consumers' pro-environmental behaviour requires communication strategies that focus on essential aspects relevant to consumers who may not fully comprehend the complexity of sustainability. Research of the literature shows that despite consumers' rising environmental concerns, the effect of hotels' green messages on consumers' intentions to purchase accommodation has been rarely examined (Dolnicar, Knezevic Cvelbar, & Grün, 2017). Developing persuasive advertising messages is critical in ensuring the effectiveness of the hotel's green initiatives (Yu, Li, & Jai, 2017). A pivotal concept in understanding the impact of advertising messages on consumers' purchase intention is the imagery perception, as pictures used in these messages can communicate concepts, values, and ideas (Previte, Russell-Bennett, & Parkinson, 2015). Hotels have been promoting their green practices through a continuum of images that implies their positive and negative impacts on the environment (Jones et al., 2016), therefore, it is arguably crucial to understand the anticipated effect of such images on consumers' purchase decisions.

In this context, the primary aim of this research is to examine the impact of pictorial representations on consumers' purchase intention. Through applying the framework of the Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB), this study examines the effectiveness of multiple interventions through the use of images aiming to trigger pro-environmental behavior in the green hotel context.

Literature Review

Individuals can contribute significantly to environmental sustainability by adopting environmental behaviour patterns, but the challenge lies in changing their behaviour initially (Doppelt, 2017). Interventions are suggested as a method designed to produce changes in intention and behaviour. Nevertheless, several researchers have pointed out, even the most effective interventions do not lead to substantial changes in behaviour (Hardeman et al., 2002). This may be attributed to the fact that interventions are not based on theories of social behaviour (Hardeman et al., 2002). Therefore, there is a call to develop interventions that use theory and report its implications, which would contribute to the evidence-based progress in impacting behavioural change (Kao, Aranda, Krishnasamy, & Hamilton, 2017).

Valid theories can serve as the blueprint for intervention, yet the TPB has been used as a basis for many successful intervention programs (Pang, Rundle-Thiele, & Kubacki, 2017). The TPB is one of the most widely applied theoretical frameworks used to predict human social behavior (Ajzen, 1991; Gao, Wang, Li, & Li, 2017). The theory is based on the idea that people generally take into account implications of their actions before they decide whether to engage

in a given behaviour (Ajzen, 1991). The TPB assumes that intention is based on three conceptually independent determinants: attitude (i.e. the general feeling of what is favourable or unfavourable for a certain action), subjective norm (i.e. the perceived pressure of important people) and perceived behavioural control (i.e. the perceived ease or difficulty of performing the action) (Ajzen, 1991).

According to Ajzen (2017) one type of intervention that could be considered is persuasive communications. Several researchers have documented the effectiveness of persuasive communications for changing human behaviour in the context of marketing and social marketing (Babakhani, Ritchie, & Dolnicar, 2017). One of the means of persuasive communications is the use of pictorial elements. The ability of pictures to stimulate emotion makes it an effective means for communicating messages (Perrin, 2011).

As for the content of persuasive communications for intervention development, the literature indicates that individuals respond differentially depending on how the communication is framed (Babakhani et al., 2017). Messages can be framed either in terms of potential advantages or losses. Positive framing associates with presenting the positive consequences of engaging in the action while negative framing is related to the negative consequences that will occur if a certain action is not taken (Masnovi, 2013).

Previous research has shown that negative messages increase emotional arousal (Newhagen & Reeves, 1992). People experience greater arousal when they are exposed to negative messages than they do when they are exposed to comparable positive images and alter their behaviour accordingly (Perrin, 2011). Yet, different researchers in different contexts have provided further evidence that a brief intervention using positively framed messages may impact behaviour (Previte et al., 2015). Cueing people with positive messages affect their pro-environmental self-perception more strongly than does negative cueing (Cornelissen, Pandelaere, Warlop, & Dewitte, 2008).

Methodology

The sample for this research comprised Australian travellers 18 years and older from six states and two territories. The survey was distributed online from the beginning of April through the end of June 2017. Qualtrics™ was employed to administer the questionnaire through an online survey to a quota sample of consumers who are willing to stay in a hotel in the near future.

The study also used contrasting advertising pictorial elements that were embedded into the online survey instrument. These elements focused on either positively framed images that evoke green hotels' environmental benefits or negatively framed images that indicate the hotels' contribution to environmental pollution, to test participants' ability to change intentions towards purchase of green hotel accommodation, given these influences. The research employed an experimental design in which 781 participants were assigned randomly to either neutral control conditions or to two experimental groups. The participants in the control condition, were asked to complete the survey directly without influence from an intervention. The participants in the two experimental groups, received the same survey with positively or negatively framed environmental images.

Structural equation modelling (SEM) was used to evaluate the fit of the TPB model and assess the hypothesized relationships. To provide further understanding behind participants'

responses in the three groups, further investigations were conducted using analysis of variance (ANOVA) and post-hoc analysis tests.

Results

The results indicated that positively framed images related to the hotels' environmental preservation actions evoked consumers' purchase intention, rather than negatively framed images that reflect the environmental pollution of these hotels. For visiting intention, the results indicated that there was a statistically significant difference at the $p < .05$ level in intention scores for the three groups. Post-hoc comparisons using the Tukey HSD test indicated that the mean score for the first experimental group which was exposed to positive images ($M= 5.929$, $SD= .869$) was significantly different from the control group ($M=5.233$, $SD=.623$) and the second experimental group which was exposed to negative images ($M=5.127$, $SD=.870$).

In addition, the SEM results demonstrated that the TPB model could well predict Australian residents' intention to purchase green hotel accommodation ($\chi^2= 1623.10$, $df= 502$, $p<0.001$, $\chi^2 /df= 4.032$, $RMSEA= 0.068$, $CFI= 0.954$), and attitude ($\beta =0.310$, $p< 0.01$), subjective injunctive norm ($\beta =0.13$, $p< 0.01$), subjective descriptive norms ($\beta =0.11$, $p< 0.01$) and perceived behavioural control ($\beta =0.36$, $p< 0.01$) have a positive impact on consumers' purchase intention.

Conclusion and Discussion

This study examined the important issue of how marketing tactics using persuasive communication influence consumer behaviour. The TPB framework was specifically used to examine the effect of multiple interventions associated with green hotels' impact on the environment. While previous research applied the TPB model to understand consumers' behaviour in green hotels, it has ignored the potential effect of communication messages on motivating purchase intentions. This study provides directions on an alternative approach to designing communication interventions, which move beyond negative appeals to engage target audiences in behaviour change, and recommends developing effective communication targeted at promoting pro-environmental behaviour.

This study also investigated the applicability of the TPB in the green hotel context. The study concludes that the original constructs of the theory are identified as key factors that influence consumers' purchase decisions towards green accommodation in Australia. More than 50% of the variance in behavioural intentions was explained. In addition, the findings revealed that perceived behavioural control and attitudes had the most predictive ability on behavioural intentions to visit a green hotel. However, subjective injunctive and descriptive norm had a minimal impact on intentions.

The paper also offers practical implications which could benefit hotel management in planning and practice. For instance, the study reveals that the effectiveness of pro-environmental appeals in triggering pro-environmental behavior can be achieved by developing interventions that offer some kind of benefit. As a consequence, hotel marketers might design campaigns with messages related to the benefits of green hotels. In addition hotel managers should improve the accessibility of their green hotels and marketing messages should be targeted at changing attitudes towards green hotels.

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