An Exploratory Study of Online Environmental Statements and Claims in Web-Based Tourism Marketing

Tung-Zong Chang and Andrea Insch

Abstract—Environmental sustainability has become an important public policy and marketing issue due to increasing concerns with the natural environment. As a result, environmental messages and claims have been widely used to produce positive product and corporate images. We investigated the use of web-based objective and subjective environmental statements and promotional claims by means of reviewing the websites of 153 golf resorts worldwide. The results indicate that a variety of environmental statements and/or promotional claims have been used by 71 golf resorts. Ad hoc comparisons based on how such statements and claims are used reveal significant effects on perceptions. Resorts with objective statements or claims seem to enjoy more favorable perceptions than resorts with only subjective statements or claims. Important implications for management and future research directions are provided.

Index Terms—Environmental sustainability, online marketing, promotion claims, survey.

I. INTRODUCTION

Environmental sustainability (ES) has emerged as an increasingly important consideration among consumers who are concerned with the impact of human activities on the natural environment. Consumers are paying more attention to how product uses might affect the natural environment as well as to actionable measures that could alleviate such effects. Due to consumers’ growing attention to green issues, companies have increased their effort to address these important issues by modifying their product offerings and communication strategies. In addition to statements and claims appearing on product packaging and advertisements, many firms have incorporated online media to relay ES messages via corporate websites. As more consumers turn to the Internet for information, it is imperative to examine the effectiveness of such online ES messages.

Of the range of consumer products and services, travel destinations are at the forefront of embracing ES measures into decision making process. In this domain, a number of related environmental issues have become apparent. Traveling to a destination leads to energy use and pollution. Second, traffic count at a destination has direct impacts on the natural environment. Growth in traffic count at a destination is likely to directly affect the welfare of local residents as their quality of life can be severely affected [1]. Environmentally sensitive consumers may seek out environmentally friendly alternatives. As a result, destination managers have started to embrace the concept of sustainable tourism by exploring approaches that help them select and evaluate sustainable indicators that tourism destinations can use to achieve a balance among the interests of various constituencies [2].

With intense competition among destinations, considerable marketing effort has been employed to differentiate one from others to build a strong, loyal customer base. A positive destination image could assist not only a destination, but also a country’s export brands [3]. Worldwide, many municipal governments have employed marketing campaigns to build their cities as destinations of choice [4]. Alternative approaches and models have been developed to measure the pre-visit and post-visit perceptions of a destination. ES factors, such as natural resource conservation, have been included as factors that have been incorporated to form a destination’s image. One widely adopted communication approach is the use of online medium, specifically, a company’s website [5]. With the broad acceptance of the Internet as a communication vehicle, firms, including travel destinations, have learned to develop online content that conveys important messages.

The present study sets forth to examine the types and effects of online ES messages in the context of destination marketing. Two types of ES messages, ES statements and ES promotional claims, are examined based on their objectivity. The research results are expected to shed some light on how online sustainability messages are employed and how consumer perceptions are influenced by such online messages.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

A. Environmental Sustainability in Tourism Marketing

With increasing awareness of various environmental issues, there is an escalating demand for greener technologies, products and services. A major reason for resistance in embracing ES efforts is often the added costs of operations. The added costs of designing and developing an eco-friendly destination could be seen as barriers in the immediate future to greater investment and adoption of greener systems and technologies. Based on an empirical study of consumer products in the UK, Wong, Turner, and Stoneman [6] cite costs as key barriers for green product diffusion. Nonetheless, the acceptance of the concept of environmental sustainability has vastly improved since the rapid rise in energy prices in 2007, growing agreement on the global climate change phenomenon, and the increasing economies of scale of
environmentally friendly products. The general belief is that investments in environmental sustainability could lead to improved consumer perceptions and patronage intentions. Ginsberg and Bloom [7] have shown that embracing eco-friendly measures in resort management could provide important synergies by enhancing the image of a resort and leading to more efficient operations. Furthermore, key players in the global tourism industry have been incorporating ES concerns into their decision making process. Major tour operators, such as TUI and Thomas Cook Group, have incorporated ES as a criterion when evaluating destinations, hotels, and resorts for marketing and booking decisions. Similarly, ES features as a key factor in destination rankings of National Geographic and other global travel societies. As a result, embracing environmental sustainability has become an effective means of promoting a destination’s image.

B. Web-Based Communication in Destination Marketing

Another emerging factor in destination management is the dominance of web applications, which have two important effects for travel destinations. First, the customer has taken over the booking process with the assistance of web technology. Second, web-based communication could effectively promote the sustainability concept and facilitate new forms of consumer citizenship in that sustainable consumption is valued. Cobos, Wang, and Okumus [8] suggest the importance of using web-based destination marketing activities, such as information, communication, transaction, and assurance, to build a long-term relationship with potential visitors. Hyun, Lee, and Hu [9] also call for more attention to the use of virtual experience in tourism. As internet marketing has become a staple in many developed economies, utilizing internet technology to communicate with consumers has become a basic requirement in resort management. As a result, there is a strategic window for differentiation to enhance the image of a destination by connecting with potential customers via the internet [10].

A resort destination’s website is often the first point of contact with potential visitors who are searching for alternative travel destinations as well as a means of maintaining positive relationships with existing patrons. Online environmental sustainability messages could be a potential tool for differentiation and a base for segmentation. The cues on the care of and concern for the environment could suggest the environmentally friendly experience the customer would enjoy during their visit. Therefore, incorporating environmental sustainability messages into website design could be a valuable marketing tool for resort managers to build a positive impression with potential customers [11]. For destination resorts that have significant investment in sustainability measures, in particular, it would be beneficial to communicate such ES effort effectively with site visitors to create positive consumer perceptions.

C. Classifications of ES Messages

Marketing messages have been examined along various classifications, including directly asserted or implied [12], data claims (scientific effort been undertaken to produce the basis for the claim) or puffery (claims without scientific basis) [13], claim extremity [14], search qualities (those claims that can be determined prior to purchase), experience qualities (claims that can be determined post purchase), credence qualities (claims that can never be determined) [15, 16], substantive or associative [17, 18, 19], and objective or subjective [16, 20]. For the purpose of classifying online statements and claims, the last two classification schemes warrant further consideration. Overall, the objective and subjective classification is stricter than the substantive and associate scheme. For example, product orientation terms such as biodegradable and recycled may have limited concrete meaning to consumers. Morris, Hastak, and Mazis [21] found that respondents exhibited limited understanding of ES terms, “recycled,” “recyclable,” “pre-consumer waste” and called for stronger regulation of environmental marketing claims. A stricter classification, such as objective/subjective, could meet such a call. Objective statements and claims would include those with concrete meanings, such as the installment of solar panels, water recycling systems, low water usage plants, etc. Subjective statements and claims would include those that lack concrete meanings and are often subject to interpretation, e.g., “eco-friendly,” “recycled,” “certified,” etc. Based on the theory of economics of information, consumers are more likely to be skeptical of subjective information, which is difficult to verify, and less skeptical of objective information, which can be easily verified [15], [16], [20]. In an empirical study, Ford, et al., [20] examined the effect of various types of marketing claims and found that consumers are less skeptical of objective environmental claims as well as search attribute claims. The objective information is similar to the direct “hard” information, which Nelson [16] argues to have a greater value to consumers. In a related study, Pettus & Diener [22] show that concrete, objective information has a greater impact on decision making. As a result, in the present study, we examine online messages based on the subjective/objective classification.

D. Informational Statements and Promotional Claims

Online environmental sustainability messages can be informational statements or promotional claims. Information ES statements are often placed in a separate web page as an informational section on environmental sustainability, including a firm’s commitment to ES efforts and descriptions of related ES features that have been adopted by the destination. Information ES statements are usually not intended to be used to influence behavior directly. Promotional claims are prominently displayed on a destination’s website with the clear intention of generating positive perceptions and inducing patronage. Informational ES statements may be considered passive and indirect, whereas the promotional claims are forceful and direct with the explicit purpose of influencing perceptions, attitude, and behavior.

With ever increasing ES concerns, both informational ES statements and ES claims are often present on a website. Yet, the effects of online ES informational statements and online ES promotional claims have not been adequately studied. In the present study, we examine the effects of different types of
online environmental statements and promotional claims, distinguished by the subjective/objective criterion, on consumer perceptions among informed consumers. The following four possible combinations of online environmental sustainability messages are examined:

- subjective ES statements; subjective ES claims
- subjective ES statements; objective ES claims
- objective ES statements; subjective ES claims
- objective ES statements; objective ES claims

The effect of each of the four combinations on consumer perceptions is hypothesized in the following section.

III. HYPOTHESIS

Online environmental sustainability statements may signal a resort destination’s commitment to the improvement of one’s natural environment. Such positive signal has the potential to influence the consumer’s evaluations. As a result, the inclusion of such environmental sustainability information on a resort’s website could enhance the quality perceptions by the consumer. Furthermore, presenting objective sustainability statements may have a stronger effect on quality perceptions because objective features convey such information more effectively among informed consumers [23]. Based on the theory of economics of information, consumers are more likely to be affected by objective information than by subjective information because objective information is more specific and verifiable [16], [20]. On the other hand, subjective statements are often subject to puffery and such claims cannot be readily verified. As a result, consumers might ignore or discount such subjective statements. This leads to the following hypotheses:

- H1a: The presence of environmental sustainability statements enhances quality perceptions.
- H1b: Objective environmental sustainability statements have a stronger effect on quality perceptions than subjective environmental sustainability statements.

Using environmental sustainability features in promotional claims should improve quality perceptions of a resort. Employing environmental claims is likely to lead to superior quality perceptions. Furthermore, objective environmental sustainability claims will communicate with informed consumers more effectively, and thus will receive superior quality perceptions than subjective environmental sustainability claims. Among various types of marketing claims, Ford, et al. [20] concluded that consumers are more confident with objective environmental claims. On the other hand, consumers might have limited understanding of subjective ES terms [21]. The following are corresponding hypotheses:

- H2a: The presence of environmental sustainability features in promotional claims enhances quality perceptions.
- H2b: Objective environmental sustainability promotional claims have a stronger effect on quality perceptions than subjective environmental sustainability claims.

IV. METHODOLOGY

Use Golf resorts are selected as research subjects because they have faced mounting environmental concerns and increasing sensitivity toward golf course development. Embracing environmental sustainability in resort management represents a potential business opportunity for this global leisure industry. Golf resorts have been cited as one of the major environmental offenders due to their substantial land and water use. As an example, Donald Trump encountered considerable resistance and criticisms for a plan to develop a $2B golf resort on an environmentally sensitive stretch of coastline in Scotland in 2008. In the same year, Tiger Woods’ golf course projects in the Bahamas drew complaints due to the impact on freshwater supply and other environmental concerns.

Sample worldwide golf resorts were selected from listings provided by various resort information websites, including Resort Online, Golf.com, among others. The inclusion of golf resorts from different countries allows ad hoc cross-country comparisons. Upper-level college marketing students were recruited and trained as website reviewers. Each reviewer went through a one-hour orientation and information session to become expert reviewers. The use of expert reviewers has been used in previous studies [24]. Reviewers were given introductory information regarding golf resorts, golf course development, and related environmental issues. At the end of the required training session, reviewers were introduced to a resort review questionnaire. They were told to use the questionnaire to evaluate three pre-selected benchmarking destination golf resort websites in order to gain familiarity and experience with the review process. The three resort websites vary in the inclusion of a separate web page on environmental sustainability, the use of promotional environmental claims prominently displayed on the home page or on pages within second-level links (two clicks away from the home page, not including site map) or less, and/or the use of ES claims, objective and subjective.

On resort websites, a number of resorts have included a separate section that provides general ES statements and ES-related actions undertaken by the resort. Such information varies widely as some provided specific actions taken with examples of built-in ES features; while others only provide general statements of its ES accomplishments, commitments, or concerns. Promotional ES claims are identified independently. Reviewers were instructed to search for ES claims made on a resort’s home page or on a webpage that is no more than two clicks away from the home page. Site map is excluded from this consideration because such map provides a one-click away convenience for experienced users. Such ES claims could be part of a general promotion messages prominently displayed on web pages. Finally, the differences between objective ES claims and subjective ES claims were delineated to interviewers.
Objective claims describe concrete actions or features employed, such as water recycling systems, solar power panels, energy-saving LED lighting etc. Subjective ES claims are slogan-like statements, such as “eco-friendly,” “we care,” and “certified,” that do not specify concrete actions or features. If both objective and subjective claims are used, it is deemed objective. Trained students are expected to mimic informed travelers who possess adequate knowledge in ES issues and are reviewing potential golf resort destinations via the internet.

Upon completing the training session, reviewers were randomly assigned to pre-selected resorts and made their evaluations using the resort review questionnaire, which includes measures related to the degree of involvement in sustainability, the inclusion of ES information statements, and the use of promotional ES claims. Key measures include the inclusion of informational ES statements, the use of promotional ES claims; objectivity of such statements or claims, reviewer’s assessment on the resort’s degree of engagement in sustainability, and reviewer’s subjective assessment on quality, appeal, and recommending to others.

A total of 153 resorts were successfully evaluated, including 86 North America golf resorts and 67 resorts outside North America. Among the resorts reviewed, 60% located within or near a major metropolitan area, 77% near a national/state park or recreational areas, 67% near a well-known natural wonder, 10% could not be reached by mass transportation or motor vehicles, and 37% attract mainly international visitors.

V. RESULTS

Hypothesis 1a states that the presence of environmental sustainability statements on a resort’s website enhances the quality perceptions of a destination. To test the hypothesis, t-tests were conducted on the three subjective quality measures, rated on a 10-point scale with 10 being good. All tests showed significantly superior perceptions for resorts with such statements than for resorts without (see Table I). The follow-up hypothesis proposes that objective statements are more effective than subjective statements. Test results reveal that resorts with objective sustainable statements receive more positive perceptions than resorts with only subjective statements. To further examine the effects due to sustainable statements, we compare resorts with only subjective sustainable statements with resorts without sustainable statements at all. Surprisingly, none of the t-tests were significant. In fact, upon further examination, it revealed that resorts without sustainable statements receive higher mark than resorts with only subjective statements (Table I).

Hypothesis 2a tests the effectiveness of the use of promotional ES claims. Overall, the inclusion of promotional ES claims results in significantly favorable perceptions (see Table II). The follow-up hypothesis, 2b, proposes that objective ES claims are more effective than subjective ES claims. The hypothesis is upheld by the result, which shows that objective ES claims yield stronger positive effects in perceptions. The results show a strong positive effect due to objective claims and a general lack of significant effect due to subjective sustainable statements (Table II).

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VI. DISCUSSION

The present study provides evidence of the effects of online environmental sustainability statements and claims on quality perceptions among informed consumers. The results show palpable support for the positive effect of online environmental sustainability statements and claims on consumer perceptions, which might provide resort managers incentive to employ environmental sustainability features to enhance resort image and increase travelers’ visit intentions. Furthermore, it shows that there is a lack of effect when only subjective environmental sustainability statements or claims are used. For environmental sustainability statements and claims to be effective, objective information should be provided.

Prior research shows that the mass market has a general lack of willingness to pay for environmental sustainability
features [25]. The positive effects due to the presence of online environmental sustainability statements and claims could provide a reason for managers to embrace environmentally friendly factors. With the increasing environmental concerns among the general population, more destinations are expected to incorporate ES factors. As a result, it will be increasing important for destination managers to determine which ES features should be built into its destination offering portfolio and how effective the ES components are in attracting travelers. Future research may identify discriminating ES factors in product differentiation and market positioning decisions. Despite mixed results on the financial return from ES activities, past research has shown that more firms have adopted proactive environmental strategies to raise their internal efficiency and external legitimacy in achieving competitive advantage [26]. The management could be interested in the contributions of various ES factors to a firm’s profitability and competitiveness.

In addition to differentiation and positioning decisions, a carefully selected target market may be needed for a destination to recoup its investment in ES efforts at the early stage. For example, there is a potential niche of informed consumers who might be willing to pay more for greener alternatives. Chitra [27] reports that the majority of subjects in a green consumer study are aspirants who send out a positive signal to an eco-friendly marketing mix. Based on a study at six eco-lodges in the Cayo District of Belize, Kwan, Eagles, and Gebhardt [28] found that such consumers are middle-aged, highly educated, and employed with high levels of income. Using informed reviewers, the present study shows that such consumers form positive perceptions on golf resorts with online ES statements and claims. Further, such effect is even strong when objective ES information is used. Therefore, destinations that incorporate ES features may aim to attract niche customers who are affluent, concerned for environmental issues, and willing to pay more.

There are limitations associated with the present study. The observed effects are expected to be more evident among informed travelers as reviewers were trained so that they could be more likely to be influenced by sustainable statements and claims. The use of students is a weakness. Furthermore, the evaluation was based on the presence of sustainable features on resort websites. A resort could have significant investments in sustainable features, yet did not provide such information online. Therefore, the results observed in the present study might not be related to the level of effort in environmental sustainability. Further research is needed to better understand the significance of environmental sustainability in resort management in terms of consumer quality perceptions, visit intentions, return on investment, etc.

REFERENCES


**Tung-Zong (Donald) Chang** is from University of Missouri-Columbia, USA, 1988 with Ph.D. in Marketing. He is senior full professor with the Metropolitan State University of Denver and working on research in e-business management, leadership behavior, corporate marketing culture, destination marketing, and service quality management. Dr. Chang has published in *Psychology and Marketing, Journal of Academy of Marketing Science, Supply Chain Management, International Marketing Review, Journal of Global Marketing*, etc.

**Andrea Insch**, Ph.D. in Marketing, is from Griffith University. She is senior lecturer, School of Business, University of Otago, Dunedin, New Zealand. Her research expertise is focused on place-based marketing, with an emphasis on understanding and measuring the ways that place identity can create stakeholder value. Dr. Insch has been awarded a School of Business Emerging Researcher Award and has published a number of research papers in destination marketing.