The Impact of Sustainable Marketing Communications on Consumer Responses in the Hotel Industry*

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Abstract

This paper aims to analyse the impact of sustainable marketing communications on consumer responses, based on their ecological knowledge, customer-based brand equity, and satisfaction, and moderated by the trip purpose. Data were obtained from a survey of 303 hotel guests in Kyiv, Ukraine. This research finds that Integrated Marketing Communications consistency for sustainability significantly influences guests' ecological knowledge and brand equity, which, in turn, considerably impacts guests' satisfaction. In addition, trip purpose moderates the relationships between the proposed variables and shows significant differences in explaining the impact of sustainable message consistency and the creation of satisfaction for groups of leisure and business travellers.

Keywords: IMC consistency for sustainability, ecological knowledge, brand equity, satisfaction, trip purpose, hotel industry
JEL Codes: M31, L83

1. Introduction

The tourism industry, including hotels, has been identified as a significant contributor to greenhouse gas emissions (Lenzen et al. 2018). In recognition of this reality and according to the clients' requirements, many hotels have become more "environmentally aware" and have started to implement sustainability and corporate social responsibility (hereinafter CSR) practices. Sustainability and CSR have been discussed by some scholars as almost interchangeable concepts (Babiak/Trendafilova 2010), and by others as closely related but still different concepts (Schwartz/Carroll 2008; Strand et al. 2015). The European Commission defines CSR as "*the responsibility of enterprises for their impacts on society*" (Strand et al. 2015). Sustainability is most commonly described in terms of sustainable development and defined by the UN's Brundtland Commission as "*development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the*

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ability of future generations to meet their own needs". Studies on CSR and environmental sustainability are converging as a result of shared economic, social, and environmental baselines (Babiak/Trendafilova 2010). Therefore, the natural environment is viewed as one of the main pillars of CSR (Babiak/Trendafilova 2010). In this paper, we focus mainly on environmentally responsible business practices that are components of CSR. These practices are the most demanded and applied practices within the hotel industry (e. g. recycling, towels and sheets reuse, energy saving) (Moise et al. 2018), aimed at minimising carbon emissions and pollution (Chen/Tung 2014).

A key question emerges in this current business environment: Why are environmentally responsible practices so important for hotel brands? The literature suggests that these practices help firms to improve not only their brand image and awareness but also other brand equity assets (Martínez/Nishiyama 2019; Moise et al. 2019), which results in competitive advantage through differentiation (Walsh/Dodds 2017). From the client perspective, brand equity symbolises a strong connection between customers and the brand (Keller 2009), and consistent marketing communications are one of its key drivers (Keller 2009; Šerić et al. 2020). However, green practices are not frequently communicated by hotel firms. A study suggests that only around 30% of sustainability practices are communicated on hotel websites (Font et al. 2017). It seems that tourism businesses lack the technical competence to communicate their messages effectively, which is why clients frequently remain unaware of a hotel's "green" performance (Tölkes 2020). Subsequently, hotels miss the opportunity to create a positive attitude towards the brand based on its green initiatives.

According to Tölkes (2018), tourists believe companies should better communicate and represent implemented sustainability practices. Sending clear messages about the hotel's environmental practices makes guests aware of the most sustainable travel options available to them and informs clients about how these offers fulfil their expectations and the sustainability criteria (Tölkes 2020). However, despite the importance of communication for sustainability in hospitality companies, the theoretical foundations of its practical impacts and results have yet to be examined (Benoit-Moreau/Parguel 2011; Wehrli et al. 2014). In recent studies, scholars have focused their attention on message consistency to measure the efficiency of company communication by applying the Integrated Marketing Communications (hereinafter IMC) concept (Šerić et al. 2020; Šerić/Vernuccio 2020). Message consistency is considered a baseline of communication integration of the company. It refers to the strategic coherence of messages communicated via different tools and channels, expecting to achieve clear positioning for the brand (Šerić et al. 2020), which is crucial for sustainability-related companies (Martínez/Nishiyama 2019; Moise et al. 2019). However, to our knowledge, there is no prior research on the effect of IMC consistency for sustainability on the development of hotel brand equity.

Therefore, in the nascent green marketing field, understanding how guests value a tourism brand based on their perception of IMC consistency for sustainability needs to be addressed as a matter of priority.

The literature suggests that firms' sustainable and CSR practices and their related communication activities strongly influence consumer behaviour (e. g., Becker-Olsen et al. 2006; Luchs et al. 2015; Sun et al. 2016). Accordingly, a number of authors have stressed the need to include consumers in this research stream (e. g. Lee et al. 2012; Pigors, M./Rockenbach 2016; Sun et al. 2016) and proposed novel research looks at the role of marketing activities in the development of responsible consumer behaviour (e. g. Luchs et al. 2015; Vitell 2015). In addition, Lee et al. (2012) suggested that consumer knowledge needs to be considered in future CSR research models. In this study, we attempt to address all these research calls by examining the impact of sustainable marketing communication messages on consumers' ecological knowledge and brand equity and their subsequent effects on customer satisfaction.

It is well known that consumer behaviour influences business as purchase decisions signal the desire for certain types of products and production processes. In this way, responsible consumption behaviour contributes to sustainable development, complementing companies' CSR efforts (Buerke et al. 2017; Hosta/Zabkar 2021). Researchers have identified a wide range of factors predicting sustainability-related consumer behaviours, where consumer knowledge is one of the most fundamental (Hosta/Zabkar 2021). Thus, the enrichment of consumer ecological knowledge is a necessary prerequisite for a change towards responsible consumption and sustainable development of companies. Indeed, there is evidence that consumers lacking in ecological literacy are unable to understand hotels' attempts to promote eco-friendly initiatives (Teng et al. 2018). The knowledge-attitude-behaviour model shows that ecological knowledge has a favourable impact on customers' positive attitudes regarding responses to various environmental issues (Kollmuss/Agyeman 2002), leading to positive perceptions of environmental concern and practices and therefore, positive perceptions of the hotel brand (Teng et al. 2018; Moise et al. 2019).

Organisations supporting sustainability may need to take more effective measures to increase consumer awareness and attention. In any case, consumers must be educated on their own social responsibility. The literature suggests that corporate sustainability communication enhances consumers' environmental values and awareness (Cheng/Wu 2014; Walsh/Dodds 2017; Teng et al. 2018). As recommended by various authors, a clear, consistent message related to a company's sustainability activities could trigger consumers' environmental values and encourage responsible consumer behaviour (Font et al. 2017; Han et al. 2018; Tölkes 2020; Hosta/Zabkar 2021). This communication not only helps to educate clients but leads to the adoption of environmentally responsible

behaviour, for example, recycling or similar (Cornelissen et al. 2008; Preziosi et al. 2019). However, there is limited research on the impact of IMC consistency for sustainability on consumer ecological knowledge. To fill the gap, this study aims to investigate this connection, assuming that clear, coherent and integrated communication consistency can help to elevate guests' ecological literacy and to develop a positive attitude towards the hotel brand.

In addition, to measure final brand results in the service industry, customer satisfaction is often considered as a key instrument (Reid 2005; Wang et al. 2018). Therefore, in this study, we aim to explore the effects of both ecological knowledge and brand equity in regard to guest satisfaction, given the gaps identified in the literature regarding these relationships from the perspective of hotels implementing sustainable practices.

Finally, in the green marketing field, researchers have attempted to profile consumers based on diverse characteristics, including varying levels of concern for the environment (Millar et al. 2012). However, research investigating the influence of consumer sociodemographic characteristics, such as trip purpose, on green behaviour has been scarce and mixed (Millar et al. 2012; Moise et al. 2018; Radojevic et al. 2018; Moise et al. 2020). There is evidence that the trip purpose affects guests' opinions of their stay, which in turn helps hotels to better segment and target the market (Millar et al. 2012; Moise et al. 2018; Radojevic et al. 2018). Differences can be seen between interactions with and perceptions of hotel services and degrees of guest satisfaction, specifically when distinguishing between business and leisure guests (Millar et al. 2012; Radojevic et al. 2018). However, the results of the studies are inconsistent and represent an opportunity for further research. We address this gap in the literature by assessing the moderating effect of the trip purpose (business or leisure) on the relationship between IMC consistency for sustainability, ecological knowledge, brand equity, and guest satisfaction regarding the hotels that implement green practices.

In short, focusing on tourism businesses, specifically hotels, this proposal aims to highlight the gap identified in the literature along the lines of analysis described. Thus, this paper intends to, first, examine the effect of IMC consistency for sustainability on guests' ecological knowledge and analyse its impact on hotel brand equity. Second, it attempts to understand the role that guests' ecological knowledge plays in their satisfaction with the stay, thus evaluating the effectiveness of marketing strategies by seeing how brand equity influences satisfaction. Third, it looks at examining the role that trip purpose plays in the relationships between all the variables in order to understand how to segment the market better. Therefore, all of the aforementioned are the primary research objectives. The results obtained offer relevant information to hotel managers and will assist in guiding them in designing communication strategies with cus-

tomers. The results will also provide sources for developing competitive advantages related to a sustainable environment, allowing hotels to better differentiate themselves from their competition. These aspects demonstrate the importance and originality of this research study.

2. Conceptual Framework

2.1. Ecological Knowledge

It is no secret that hospitality businesses share significant responsibility for the current unsustainable waste of natural resources. For this reason, many hotel managers recognise the negative impact that their establishments have on the environment and have started to practice CSR and "go green" by incorporating environmentally friendly practices (Moise et al. 2018; 2019; Preziosi et al. 2019) in order to actively contribute to sustainable development. However, how business is run is also influenced by consumer behaviour (Buerke et al. 2017). According to the literature, one of the most important reasons for implementing green practices is, indeed, society's demand (Iglesias et al. 2019). Nevertheless, although consumers positively recognise pro-environmental attitudes, only a few of them choose green products or services (Buerke et al. 2017; Font et al. 2017; Tölkes 2020). Responsible corporate behaviour and responsible consumption may equally contribute to favourable sustainable development outcome. However, there is still a discourse regarding the potential to further increase responsible consumer behaviour towards the environment (Hosta/Zabkar 2021), particularly in hospitality (Font et al. 2017; Tölkes 2020).

According to Hosta and Zabkar (2021), individual concerns and awareness about ecological problems strongly impact the willingness to behave responsibly. Indeed, there is evidence that consumers who do not possess sufficient ecological knowledge are not able to appreciate these hotels' green practices (Teng et al. 2018). In the literature, customers with high levels of ecological awareness are found to have more positive attitudes regarding various environmental problems such as global warming and ecological practices (Mostafa 2007; Wang et al. 2018).

Ecological knowledge reflects what people know about the environment, the key relationships established with environmental aspects or impacts, an appreciation of the entire ecological system, and the collective responsibilities that are required for sustainable development (Mostafa 2007). Teng et al. (2018:10) state that Ecological Knowledge includes low-carbon literacy and is understood as "*a person's knowledge and understanding of energy preservation, carbon reduction, and the implementation of this knowledge in everyday life"*. Thus, ecological knowledge is a measurable characteristic that describes an individual's capacity to understand, recognise, and interpret the health of all the ecosystems that make up the environment and to use information to take appropriate

measures to sustain those systems (Morrone et al. 2001). The study by Horng et al. (2013) provides important evidence regarding the impact of ecological knowledge on the attitudes of tourists and tourism professionals towards protecting the environment by taking realistic and appropriate action. Green marketing research has determined that customers' responses to a company´s pro-environmental initiatives depend on the level of ecological knowledge (e. g. Horng et al. 2013; Teng et al. 2018; Hosta/Zabkar 2021). In addition, studies on ecological knowledge suggest that people's awareness of environmental issues influences their perceptions and behaviours (Robelia, B./Murphy 2012). Learning about environmental topics is based on the quality of information coming through different communication channels (Robelia, B./Murphy 2012), and, consequently, the acquisition of this ecological knowledge results in the formation of consumers' positive attitudes (Kuźniar et al. 2021) towards environmentally friendly products (Haryanto 2014) and increased intentions to purchase green products (Rahmi et al. 2017). Based on these premises, this study attempts to strengthen the conceptualisation of the ecological knowledge construct by studying it in a new geographical context (Ukraine) and empirically testing ecological knowledge in relationships with relevant consumer behaviour variables in hospitality. In our conceptual model, we propose IMC consistency for sustainability as a potential driver of consumer ecological knowledge and customer satisfaction as its potential effect. We discuss all these relationships in the following subsections.

2.2. Integrated Marketing Communications Consistency for Sustainability

Communication consistency of corporate social initiatives is found to be critical in shaping consumer beliefs, attitudes, and intentions (Becker-Olsen et al. 2006). Sun et al. (2016) discussed how the lack of consistency in communication of CSR initiatives provokes negative consumer responses. In hotel businesses, sustainability and CSR communications are of paramount importance for hotels so that their efforts and investment in CSR initiatives can be noticed and valued by stakeholders. If the communication strategy is managed effectively, the company could profit from consumers' positive reactions and awareness of CSR, and higher brand equity (Iglesias et al. 2019; Martínez/Nishiyama 2019; Muniz et al. 2019). However, Font et al. (2017) and Tölkes (2020) found that when it comes to sustainability initiatives, tourism companies often fail to communicate the vast majority of their actions to consumers. Furthermore, the authors stated that messages about sustainability and CSR practices addressed to the public often lack persuasiveness, interactivity, and consistency. Therefore, the understanding of consumer responsiveness to marketing communications about sustainability and CSR has been challenged (Tölkes 2020). As a result, there has been an incremental interest among both professionals and academics in IMC as an effective instrument to achieve coordination and synergies in marketing

communications tools and channels for maximum impact (Šerić et al. 2015). The concept has recently been observed from the perspective of sustainability (Bormane 2018; Bordian et al. 2022) as a novel research field.

According to the American Association of Advertising Agencies (1989), IMC is a concept related to marketing communications planning. It recognises the added value in a plan that integrates a variety of strategic disciplines, for example, general advertising, direct response, sales promotion, and public relations, and it combines these disciplines to provide clarity, consistency, and maximum impact on communication. Along the same lines, Lee and Park (2007) identify IMC as a concept in which a company systematically coordinates its different messages and numerous communication channels and integrates them into a coherent set of marketing communications in order to send to the target market a clear and consistent message and image about the company and its offerings.

In an exhaustive review, Tölkes (2018) notes that most of the work in the field of communication for sustainability and CSR solely considers the environmental dimension (57.4%), and that only 35.1% of works study sustainability communication from the Triple Bottom Line (TBL) approach. TBL is a comprehensive perspective that uses three areas of analysis, namely: economic, environmental, and social. Adopting each of the three sustainability areas is crucial for creating greater business value for the company, where (1) economic bottom line is not simply the traditional corporate capital, but should be measured in terms of how much of an impact the business has on its economic environment; (2) the environmental bottom line takes into account the impact the business has on the environment and natural resources it consumes; and (3) the social bottom line measures the business' profits in human capital, including the fair and beneficial labour practices, corporate community involvement, and the impact of its business activities on the local economy (Alhaddi 2015).

Using TBL, Bormane (2018:84) introduces the concept of IMC for sustainability, stating that it is "*the implementation of marketing activities by integrating opportunities of public welfare, environment preservation and balanced economic development with a view to increase the consumption value of a product or service through the company's communication with market participants using distribution channels*". Thus, communication for sustainability should be a part of a broader marketing strategy that adopts an inclusive and holistic approach to achieving corporate goals and long-term sustainable development goals (Preziosi et al. 2019).

The recent marketing literature on IMC suggests that consistency is an indicator of communication efficiency as it can encourage consumer brand engagement (Šerić/Vernuccio 2020) and creation of a long-lasting relationship between consumers and the brand (Šerić et al. 2020). IMC consistency is understood as sharing a cohesive brand message and meaning via multiple instruments and

channels of communication (Duncan/Moriarty 1998; Šerić/Vernuccio 2020). However, little is known about whether the messages on sustainability coming from various sources are actually perceived as consistent and whether this can affect customer knowledge and perception of brand outcomes. Given that the current market and consumers are interested in communication that fulfils sustainability objectives, this research endeavours to analyse the concept not from a general perspective, but from a more specific sustainability-focused angle.

Taking into account that consumer knowledge and information are some of the central results of the IMC process (Tafesse/Kitchen 2017), company communication for sustainability and CSR activities could play a key role in enhancing consumers' ecological knowledge and sustainable behaviour (Cheng/Wu 2014; Walsh/Dodds 2017; Teng et al. 2018). This communication not only helps to educate clients but leads them to adopt pro-environmental behaviours, for example, recycling or similar (Cornelissen et al. 2008; Preziosi et al. 2019). It is recommended to communicate and promote the company's sustainability and CSR initiatives to raise customers' perceptions and awareness of these practices (Martínez/Nishiyama 2019). That, in turn, leads to more responsible behaviour outcomes (Babiak/Trendafilova 2010). In some cases, people may behave in a more environmentally responsible manner if they perceive the act as a social norm. Research has shown that communicating a message to guests at a resort such as "most of our customers reuse their towels" can be an effective social norm that leads guests to participate in towel reuse programmes (Wehrli et al. 2014).

Butt et al. (2017) highlight the need for using a two-level marketing communication strategy aimed at creating general awareness and environmental values among consumers as well as promoting a brand's "green" characteristics by companies. It was found that persuasive and consistent communication regarding sustainability plays a significant role in triggering environmentally friendly standards, thereby increasing tourists' levels of participation in environmentally-sound activities and creating a better perception of the tourism company brand (Han et al. 2018; Tölkes 2020). It is challenging to generate congruent knowledge across consumers if they receive incomplete and somewhat confusing media images and messages (Font et al. 2017; Tölkes 2020). For this reason, communication consistency is one of the basic principles of the IMC approach (Šerić et al. 2020), and is presented as a valuable asset when managing, informing, and even educating consumers about the company's offers and practices related to sustainability (Bormane 2018; Tölkes 2020).

Based on all the considerations above, and considering that the theoretical foundations of the impact of IMC consistency for sustainability are still weak, we attempt to examine whether consistent marketing communication messages

about sustainability influence guests' ecological knowledge and we propose the first research question (RQ) accordingly:

RQ1: Does IMC consistency for sustainability influence guests' ecological knowledge?

2.3. Brand Equity

From the consumer's perspective, brand equity has gained the most attention and interest in recent years, as it offers a clear competitive advantage and constitutes a vital component of business success (Christodoulides et al. 2015; Ruan et al., 2020). From the hotel sector perspective, brand equity represents the favourable or unfavourable attitudes and perceptions that arise and influence customers regarding a hotel brand and their willingness to make a reservation (Prasad/Dev 2000).

Brand equity reflects the idea that brand identity is one of a company's most important assets, due to its ability to provide sustainable and inimitable competitive advantages (Aaker 1991). According to Aaker (1991:15), brand equity is conceptualised as "*a multidimensional entity comprised of five components: brand loyalty, name awareness, perceived quality, brand associations, and other assets linked to the brand"*. Brand awareness is defined as the *"the ability of a potential buyer to recognise or recall that a brand is a member of a certain product category"* (Aaker 1991:61). Perceived quality refers to *"the evaluation that a consumer makes about the excellence or superiority of a product"* (Zeithaml 1988:3). Brand associations stand for *"anything linked in memory to a brand"* (Aaker 1991:109), whilst brand loyalty is *"the attachment that a customer has to a brand"* (Aaker 1991:39). Some researchers have developed global measurements of the brand equity concept. For example, Yoo and Donthu (2001) proposed an overall brand equity measure, which evaluates the concept through four items._Christodoulides et al. (2015) went one step further and developed a new scale to measure brand equity via intercultural significance by gathering measures from multiple studies in different countries to expand the set of elements and measure brand awareness, associations, perceived quality, and brand loyalty.

Šerić et al. (2020) and Šerić and Vernuccio (2020) confirmed that a high level of IMC consistency, as perceived by consumers, can increase the brand's equity and brand-related outcomes (e. g., trust, commitment, and loyalty), thereby providing hospitality and tourism business with competitive advantages. More specifically, communication consistency is found to influence the creation of relationships between consumers and brands, thus validating the importance of IMC in the creation of positive consumer responses. Furthermore, in terms of communication for sustainability and CSR communications, the studies of

Benoit-Moreau and Parguel (2011) and Muniz et al. (2019) provide evidence of the positive empirical impact of environmental claims on customer-based brand equity. Findings of other scholars also show that customers' perceptions of ethicality and CSR initiatives positively impact company brand equity (Hur et al. 2014; Iglesias et al. 2019; Martínez/Nishiyama 2019). However, to the best of our knowledge, no prior research has analysed the role of IMC consistency for sustainability in the development of customer-based brand equity in the hotel sector. Therefore, we propose the second research question:

RQ2: Does IMC consistency for sustainability influence a hotel's brand equity?

2.4. Satisfaction

Customer or guest satisfaction is one of the most researched concepts and is an area rich with contributions in the field of tourist behaviour (Pizam/Ellis 1999). Within the context of hotels, Pizam and Ellis (1999:330) state that "*satisfaction with a hospitality experience is a sum total of satisfactions with the individual elements or attributes of all the products and services that make up the experience".*

Certain authors have studied satisfaction as a key behavioural variable (San-Martin et al. 2018), by linking it to green practices in the tourism industry (Chen 2010; Wang et al. 2018; Moise et al. 2019). According to Davis et al. (2011), when customers are satisfied with the environmental aspect, this can positively influence their ecological behaviour. Schmitt et al. (2018) found positive associations between pro-environmental behaviour and satisfaction. Based on the knowledge-attitude-behaviour model, which explains that ecological knowledge contributes to environmental awareness and concern (environmental attitudes) and leads in turn to pro-environmental behaviour (Kollmuss/Agyeman 2002), we conclude that ecologically knowledgeable customers are more satisfied with their stay at a hotel that implements some or many environmental practices.

Moreover, in accordance with the expectancy-disconfirmation model (Oliver 1980), customers compare perceptions of the services received with prior expectations, and if positive or zero disconfirmation occurs, customers find satisfaction with the service. In turn, customer expectations are shaped by their knowledge (Prayag et al. 2020). Therefore, feeling "knowledgeable" allows consumers to act more competently and efficiently by making better decisions, and knowledge is also found to affect consumers' judgements (Lee/Ro 2016). The way that consumers assess the benefits and sacrifices from purchasing a product or service, as well as their expectations, could be affected by their personal values and knowledge related to the product or service (Teng et al. 2018). As a result, ecological knowledge might shape customers' expectations

and judgement about the "green" hotel service and subsequently affect their satisfaction with the stay. We attempt to examine this relationship in our study and therefore propose the following research question:

RQ3: Does ecological knowledge influence guest satisfaction?

In order to analyse the final brand results (Reid 2005), numerous researchers provide conceptual and empirical evidence to support the positive relationship between customer-based brand equity and satisfaction within the context of the tourism sector (e. g. Nassar 2017; San-Martin et al. 2018; Moise et al. 2019; Wong et al. 2021). González-Mansilla et al. (2019) underline the antecedent effect of brand equity dimensions (brand awareness, brand associations, loyalty, and perceived quality) on customer satisfaction in hospitality contexts. According to their study, brand equity leads to guest satisfaction only when the higher standard of quality is provided and when the service is adapted to the customer's specific needs and requirements. Oliver (1980) and San-Martin et al. (2018) also confirmed these findings, which proves the antecedent nature of perceived quality in tourist satisfaction. In this study, we seek to examine whether this relationship can also be confirmed in our conceptual model, and we propose the fourth research question accordingly:

RQ4: Does hotel brand equity influence guest satisfaction?

2.5. Trip Purpose

Business and leisure travellers appear to have different travel motives and demonstrate differences in expectations and preferences when selecting a hotel (Radojevic et al. 2018). Although they are two major market segments of the modern hotel industry, to the best of our knowledge, no study has yet investigated the effect of the trip purpose as a moderating variable in IMC–ecological knowledge–brand equity–satisfaction relationships. Some authors have expressed interest in this research area (e. g., Moll-de-Alba et al. 2016; Rajaguru/Hassanlin 2018, Moise et al. 2020; Bordian et al. 2022) but their findings regarding the role of trip purpose have proved inconsistent in the consumer behaviour literature.

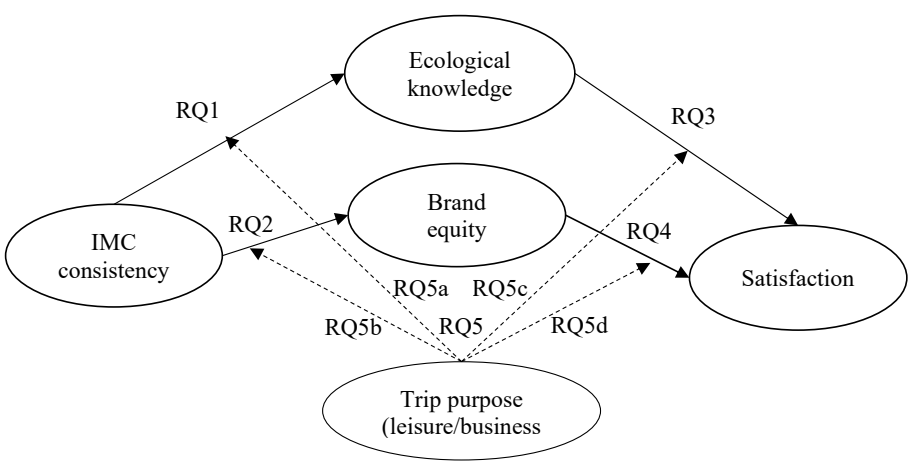
More specifically, comparing the ecological knowledge of leisure guests to business guests has yielded mixed results in the literature. While some authors state that leisure travellers are considered "*more environmentally conscious*" (e. g., Crocker 2008), others suggest that business guests are more concerned with the environment (e. g., Bordian et al. 2022). Some studies point out significant differences between the two groups based on the travellers' evaluations of a hotel's environmental initiatives (Millar et al. 2012; Moise et al. 2018; Moise et al. 2020).

Furthermore, recent studies reveal that the trip purpose makes a difference when evaluating the relationships between quality of service, perception of the hotel's green attributes, and guest satisfaction (e. g., Millar et al. 2012; Radojevic et al. 2018; Rajaguru/Hassanlin 2018). Moll-de-Alba et al. (2016) study the difference between the two groups in regard to their satisfaction with the destination variable. Their results reveal a significant relationship for leisure tourists but not for business travellers. Although this same phenomenon appears in the hotel study conducted by Radojevic et al. (2018), findings provided by Bordian et al. (2022) suggest the opposite, as business customers report significantly higher levels of satisfaction with hotel services than leisure travellers. Finally, although there is a gap in the literature related to the moderating nature of the trip purpose with reference to the connections between IMC consistency for sustainability and the other variables contained in our work, there is evidence that business travellers value the quality of service and the information they find through online media when searching for information about their destination (Datta et al. 2018).

Based on the above-mentioned studies and considering inconsistent findings on the role of trip purpose in hospitality literature, we can only posit the research question regarding this variable in our proposed conceptual model. In conclusion, we find it plausible to presume the existence of differences between guests based on the trip purpose. Therefore, we propose the final research question

RQ5: Does trip purpose moderate the relationships between IMC consistency for sustainability, ecological knowledge, brand equity, and satisfaction (RQ5a-RQ5d)?

Figure 1. Conceptual Model



Source: own elaboration.

On the basis of all the research questions, we propose a conceptual model presented in Figure 1.

3. Methodology

3.1. Data Collection and Sample Profile

The information was collected in Kyiv, Ukraine[1] during August 2018. In 2018, four new hotels with a total capacity of 794 rooms were opened in Kyiv alone. Hotel profitability levels and occupancy rates grew in 2018 compared with previous years. A number of hotels have obtained the Green Key ecological certification[2], whilst others are attempting to implement traditional green initiatives to a limited degree (e. g., towel reuse or water conservation), and the rest continue to neglect the implementation of any sustainable practices. It is therefore important to understand whether Kyiv hotels have managed to adapt successfully to these new market challenges.

To address our research objective and test the research hypotheses, an ad-hoc closed-response structured in-person survey was conducted with 327 tourists who stayed in three-, four-, and five-star branded hotels. The research sample was designed by a nonprobability convenience sampling procedure (Trespalacios et al. 2005). Current hotel customers, and people who had stayed in hotels during the last year, were approached in the tourist centre, in areas near to hotels and in commercial areas of intense pedestrian traffic in Kyiv. In total, 303 valid questionnaires were obtained. The sample profile is presented in Table 1.

1 When the fieldwork was carried out, it was important to understand whether hotels had successfully adapted to new challenges in response to new market demands. Unfortunately, the present situation in Ukraine is one of great uncertainty due to the war that began in February 2022, which presents s a disturbing, adverse, and highly volatile scenario. Despite this, we believe that this paper could still provide significant findings for developing the Eastern European tourism sector, and enrich existing knowledge about the research subject. Furthermore, regarding Ukraine, some of the results achieved from this work could serve as a starting point for reconstructing the tourism and hotel sector during the post-war period.

2 The Green Key Award is a leading standard of excellence in the field of environmental responsibility and sustainable operation within the tourism industry and currently has more than 2900 award-winning hotels in 57 countries. The evaluation of the level of environmental performance of the hotel is based on 12 key criteria developed by the Green Key organisation and includes environmental management in the company, monitoring of water and energy consumption, waste management and development of environmental awareness between staff and guests, and cooperation with the local community in which the hotel operates (Green Key Certification Service, 2018).

Table 1. Sample profile

Gender:	**%**	**Monthly income**	**%**
Men	42.9	Less than 1,000 euros	50.5
Women	57.1	1,000–3,000 euros	37.6
Age:	**%**	Other	11.9
18–25 years	40.9	**Frequency of stay at the hotel:**	**%**
26–35 years	40.3	Once a year or less	46.5
36–45 years	10.6	2–4 times per year	38.6
Over 46 years	8.2	More than 4 times per year	14.9
Level of education:	**%**	**Purpose of the trip:**	**%**
Bachelor's degree	26.4	Leisure	51.2
Master's degree	55.8	Business	48.8
Other	14.4		

Source: own elaboration.

3.2. Measurement of Variables

Items related to the different variables that were analysed have been taken and adapted from various scales used in marketing literature (see Table 2). Seven-point Likert scales were used, with 1 indicating complete disagreement and 7 indicating complete agreement.

Table 2. Variables analysed and origin of measurement scales used

Construct	Scale
Ecological knowledge	Teng, Lu & Huang (2018)
IMC consistency for sustainability	Adapted from Lee and Park (2007)
Brand equity	Adapted from Christodoulides et al. (2015)
Satisfaction	Williams and Soutar (2009), Wang et al. (2018)

Source: own elaboration.

The items related to guests' ecological knowledge were taken from Teng et al. (2018). IMC consistency for sustainability was measured using two items from the dimension "unified communications for consistent message and image" from Lee and Park (2007), which were adapted for hotels and sustainability framework from the perspective of hotel guests. Brand equity items were taken and adapted from a cross-cultural study by Christodoulides et al. (2015). For the purpose of this study, taking into account the European context and the lack of brand equity research for the Ukrainian hospitality industry, the brand equity scale was treated as unidimensional, as mentioned in the following analysis of results, due to the discriminant validity issue between dimensions of the

original scale. Finally, according to the works of Williams and Soutar (2009) and Wang et al. (2018), six items were developed to measure satisfaction. These items measure total satisfaction with the stay and satisfaction with the hotel that implements sustainable practices. Table 3 includes all the items employed in the measurement scales with their mean values and standard deviation.

4. Analysis of Results

Once the model was determined, the measurement instrument was first validated and then the structural model was subsequently calculated using the SmartPLS 3 software (Hair et al. 2017). The two-stage variance-based structural equation model (SEM) analysis was chosen, as it corresponds with the nature of the collected data and characteristics of the research (Hair et al. 2017). Our data do not have a normal distribution, which is controlled well by Partial Least Squares (PLS). Additionally, the use of PLS is advisable when handling complex constructs and advanced data analysis (e. g., multigroup analysis) (Chin 1998; Hair et al. 2017).

During the initial exploratory analysis phase, there was an issue confirming the multidimensionality of the chosen brand equity measurement scale. Given the Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA) and preliminary Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) results, the same scale reported discriminant validity issues when treated as multidimensional. Furthermore, the authors of the scale themselves reported the same problem (Christodoulides et al. 2015). The authors recommend considering the industry's specific competitive environment and the brand's unique positioning when measuring brand equity. Thus, for the purpose of this study, a brand equity measurement instrument was analysed as unidimensional. EFA presents no further issues with other measurement scales.

The reliability of all definitive scales was confirmed using the results of CFA (see Table 3), since both the values for composite reliability and the Cronbach's alpha coefficient were higher than the recommended threshold of 0.7 (Nunnally/Bernstein, 1994) for all constructs. To assess convergent validity, total standardised loads were analysed, and all were higher than 0.6 (Hair et al. 2017). All factor loadings were statistically significant for all items. In addition, the average variance extracted (AVE) analysis confirms that the values exceeded the critical value of 0.5 established in the previous literature (Fornell/Larcker, 1981). Consequently, we are able to confirm the reliability of the scales and the convergent validity of the proposed constructs.

Table 3. Confirmatory Factor Analysis results

Measurement items	M	SD	Loadings	t values
Ecological knowledge – (Cron. α =0.874; CR=0.906; AVE=0.622)				
I have knowledge about global warming (such as greenhouse effect)	5.373	1.576	0.642**	11.984
I have knowledge of green consumption (consuming produce that is grown locally or is in season)	4.264	1.841	0.602**	13.682
I understand the interdependence of human beings and the ecosystem	5.604	1.540	0.797**	26.351
I understand how much tourism industry depends on the natural environment and the resources in it	5.594	1.564	0.860**	42.394
I understand the balance between livelihood and the need to conserve the natural environment	5.512	1.684	0.882**	55.972
I understand how tourism activities influence the biodiversity and the population of species in a region	5.191	1.734	0.897**	70.803
IMC consistency for sustainability – (Cron. α =0.815; CR=0.915; AVE=0.844)				
I believe that the hotel coherently sends its message of sustainability (environmental protection) through all the tools and communication channels (e. g., advertising, sales promotions, public relations, packaging, direct mail, POP display, banner, web page)	4.218	1.842	0.914**	80.186
I believe that the hotel ensures a consistent sustainable brand image	4.419	1.813	0.924**	91.729
Brand equity – (Cron. α =0.931; CR=0.940; AVE=0.570)				
I have heard about this hotel	4.238	2.306	0.691**	18.416
I am quite familiar with this hotel	4.277	2.099	0.737**	23.125
I can recognise this hotel among other hotels	4.634	1.997	0.757**	24.753
This hotel has strong associations	4.713	1.898	0.791**	27.356
This hotel has favourable associations	4.772	1.864	0.803**	27.766
It is clear what this hotel stands for	4.851	1.733	0.828**	44.001
This hotel is good quality	5.036	1.749	0.799**	43.455
This hotel has excellent features	5.168	1.588	0.804**	38.441
Compared to other hotels in its category, this hotel is of very high quality	4.888	1.731	0.802**	32.053
I feel loyal to this hotel	4.419	1.902	0.703**	20.455
This hotel is my first choice	4.026	2.049	0.640**	15.050
I am committed to this hotel	4.102	1.983	0.672**	18.416
Satisfaction – (Cron. α =0.896; CR=0.917; AVE=0.652)				
It was exactly what I needed	5.01	1.728	0.889**	68.307
It was a good choice	5.261	1.623	0.894**	76.298
It was a good experience	5.208	1.677	0.908**	80.832
In general, I am happy with the decision to select ecological hotels due to their environmental image	5.195	1.733	0.684**	13.263
In general, I am happy to visit ecological hotels because they are friendly to the environment	5.518	1.715	0.725**	16.914
In general, I am satisfied with the ecological hotels due to their environmental performance	5.525	1.706	0.712**	15.058

Note: M=mean, SD=standard deviation, Cron. α=Cronbach's alpha, CR=composite reliability, AVE=average variance extracted. **p <0.01. Source: own elaboration.

To analyse discriminant validity for the measurement instrument, we found that the square of the correlation calculated between two factors was less than the AVE of each factor (Fornell/Larcker 1981). As seen in Table 4, there is discriminant validity since the AVE is greater than the square of the covariances and no indicator has a significant influence on another factor that does not correspond to it. In addition, discriminant validity was confirmed using the values of the squared correlations (Heterotrait-Monotrait Ratio of Correlations, HTMT ratio) that are lower than 0.85 (Henseler et al. 2015).

Table 4. Discriminant validity

Factor	F1	F2	F3	F4
F1. Ecological knowledge	**0.789**	0.553	0.427	0.475
F2. IMC consistency for sustainability	0.471	**0.919**	0.613	0.503
F3. Brand equity	0.398	0.541	**0.755**	0.715
F4. Satisfaction	0.421	0.446	0.711	**0.808**

Note: Diagonal bold data represent the square root of AVE. Below the diagonal: correlations between the factors. Above the diagonal: values of the squared correlations (HTMT ratio). Source: own elaboration.

Next, the structural equations model was calculated using PLS, and the significance of the structural relationships was analysed through the bootstrapping algorithm. The explanatory power of the structural model was verified using the coefficients of determination R^2 and cross-validated redundancy indices Q^2. As shown in Table 5, the R^2 values exceeded 0.10, which suggests that the predictive relevance of the model is satisfactory (Falk/Miller 1992). Additionally, the Q^2 values were greater than 0, which also confirms the model's predictive relevance (Chin 1998). With this, an adequate explanatory and predictive value of the model is presented, which allows us to evaluate the significance of the previously established causal relationships.

Table 5. Results of the structural equation model

Research questions (RQ)	Relationships	β (standardised beta)	t value	Findings
RQ1	IMC consistency for sustainability – Ecological knowledge	0.471**	10.278	Yes
RQ2	IMC consistency for sustainability – Brand equity	0.541**	12.462	Yes
RQ3	Ecological knowledge – Satisfaction	0.165**	2.988	Yes
RQ4	Brand equity – Satisfaction	0.645**	16.554	Yes

Note: Ecological knowledge: R^2=0.222, Q^2=0.133; Brand equity: R^2=0.293, Q^2=0.163; Satisfaction R^2=0.528, Q^2=0.328. **p <0.01. Source: own elaboration.

Regarding RQ1, the results of the calculation indicate that perception of hotel IMC consistency for sustainability has a positive impact on customers' ecological knowledge. As for RQ2, IMC consistency for sustainability is also found to positively influence hotel brand equity. Moreover, the results show the significant influence of ecological knowledge on satisfaction, thus providing an answer to RQ3. Finally, with respect to RQ4, brand equity is found to exert a positive influence on customer satisfaction.

In order to address RQ5, through which we attempt to understand whether the relationships between IMC consistency for sustainability, ecological knowledge, brand equity, and satisfaction differ between leisure (N=155) and business travellers (N=148), Henseler's multigroup analysis (MGA) was conducted using SmartPLS 3 (Hair et al. 2018). The MGA proves the existence of significant differences in the parameter calculations among the previously defined groups of data. According to Hair et al. (2018), in MGA, the results will be significant with a 5% probability of error if the *p* value is less than 0.05 or greater than 0.95. If the difference is significant, the trip purpose has a moderating effect, meaning that the relationships examined are significantly different between leisure and business travellers. The results obtained are shown in Table 6.

Table 6: Results of Henseler's multigroup analysis

Research questions (RQ)	Relationships	Group 1 Leisure N=155		Group 2 Business N=148		Group 1 versus Group 2		
		β	t value	β	t value	β diff	p value	Sig.
RQ5a	IMC consistency for sustainability – Ecological knowledge	0.358	4.850**	0.580	11.839**	-0.222	0.994	Yes
RQ5b	IMC consistency for sustainability – Brand equity	0.506	8.284**	0.590	10.183**	-0.084	0.839	No
RQ5c	Ecological knowledge – Satisfaction	0.017	0.278ns	0.335	4.119**	-0.318	0.999	Yes
RQ5d	Brand equity – Satisfaction	0.769	21.866**	0.506	6.937**	0.263	0.000	Yes

Note: **Leisure:** Ecological knowledge: R^2=0.128, Q^2=0.067; Brand equity: R^2=0.252, Q^2=0.131; Satisfaction: R^2=0.596, Q^2=0.378.
Business: Ecological knowledge: R^2= 0.332, Q^2=0.203; Brand equity: R^2= 0.348, Q^2= 0.207; Satisfaction: R^2= 0.513, Q^2= 0.318.
β – standardised beta; Sig.- Significance. ** p <0.01, * p <0.05; ns – not significant. Source: own elaboration.

Several significant differences between the two groups have emerged from the MGA results. More specifically, the intensity of the relationship between IMC consistency for sustainability and ecological knowledge is stronger for business guests than for leisure guests. The ecological knowledge effect on satisfaction

is significant only for business guests and is not significant for leisure guests. Moreover, the relationship between brand equity and satisfaction is significantly stronger for leisure travellers, compared to their business counterparts. Finally, there are no significant differences between the two groups regarding the relationship between IMC consistency for sustainability and brand equity.

5. Conclusions, Implications, and Future Research

This article aims at reducing the gap in the literature related to the impact of hotels' marketing communication of sustainable messages on different consumer responses, measured in terms of consumer ecological knowledge, customer-based brand equity, and satisfaction. An additional contribution is provided by examining the moderating effect of the trip purpose within the proposed framework. Based on a sample of 303 Ukrainian hotel customers, the research questions were tested through structural equation modelling technique and multigroup analysis. A series of conclusions have emerged based on the results obtained.

First, our work finds empirical support to establish that IMC consistency for sustainability significantly impacts guests' ecological knowledge. These results also support recent findings from Butt et al. (2017) and Tölkes (2020), demonstrating the importance of sustainability messages in enhancing customer ecological literacy. Moreover, in accordance with the findings reported in the studies by Benoit-Moreau and Parguel (2011) and Muniz et al. (2019), the results of this study indicate that the degree to which hotels implement IMC consistency related to sustainability influences brand equity as measured by customer assessment. This finding is also in line with conclusions provided by Becker-Olsen et al. (2006), regarding the importance of communication strategies in shaping consumers' perceptions about a company's best sustainable practices and further enhancement of brand equity. It also supports the work of other studies in this area linking consumer perceptions of sustainable activities (more specifically CSR) and consumer loyalty (Lee et al., 2016), the latter considered as one of the brand equity dimensions in this study. Overall, IMC consistency for sustainability has a crucial role in explaining the significance and added value of green practices in facilitating guest appreciation of the hotel brand.

Similarly, a significant relationship between customers' ecological knowledge and guests' satisfaction with the stay at the hotel is demonstrated, which complements the findings by Davis et al. (2011), Schmitt et al. (2018), and Prayag et al. (2020). Those studies emphasise that a positive perception of sustainable practices leads to high guest satisfaction, whereas this study focuses on the role of ecological knowledge. Therefore, a customer's level of ecological knowledge has been confirmed as a significant variable in increasing the guest's degree of satisfaction with their stay.

In addition, the relationship between hotel brand equity and satisfaction is confirmed, meaning that brand equity helps to explain the degree of guest satisfaction. This finding concurs with works by San-Martin et al. (2018), Moise et al. (2019), González-Mansilla et al. (2019), and Wong et al. (2021) and highlights the importance of providing a higher standard of quality and of adapting the service to the customers' needs in order to gain guest satisfaction.

Finally, concerning the results on different guest perceptions depending on their trip purpose, in line with the work of Millar et al. (2012) and Moise et al. (2018), there is a dissimilarity in explaining the impact of IMC consistency for sustainability and creation of satisfaction between the two groups. Business travellers are more sensitive to the message provided by the hotel about sustainability and gain a higher level of ecological literacy compared to leisure guests. Furthermore, the ecological knowledge of business guests leads to a high degree of satisfaction with the stay, whereas ecological knowledge is not important when explaining satisfaction of leisure guests.

Finally, brand equity exerts a stronger effect in generating satisfaction among leisure travellers, compared to their business counterparts. The difference in generating satisfaction for both groups may be explained through the findings of the previous studies, where environmentally concerned tourists are likely to have higher education levels and income (Dolnicar 2010; Moise et al. 2018). Business guests tend to have an advantage in education and income compared to the population of tourists travelling for leisure purposes. As a result, these sociodemographic and economic variables could play an important role when defining satisfaction for each group.

These findings can be used to propose a set of management implications. As the results of this study show, guests' perception of company communication consistency for sustainability enhances their ecological knowledge, which leads to a more positive attitude towards a hotel brand and a higher level of satisfaction with the stay. Therefore, hotel managers should pay attention to how communication for sustainability is transmitted. The message must be conveyed consistently and coherently via different communication channels and should be truthful to improve brand positioning and avoid customer scepticism. This can include various communication programmes on different media platforms, such as announcements of CSR-related activities through social media, or published reports and sponsorship schemes. In this way, the company could increase not only guests' level of ecological concerns, but also their awareness of the advantages to revisit this hotel and, based on our findings, provide positive assessments of hotel brand equity and elevate guest satisfaction.

Our work also reveals that hotel managers must account for differences in guests' beliefs based on their trip purpose, so this must be considered as an important determinant when developing communication strategies. This finding

implies that the perception of the sustainability message is more positive for business consumers than leisure travellers, which in turn leads business consumers to experience a higher level of satisfaction with their stay, when the impact of communication consistency is mediated by ecological knowledge. As our findings suggest that satisfaction is generated differently for leisure and business travellers, adopted strategies need to match the segment identified according to the trip purpose. It is important to obtain insights on hotel guests and create communication strategies accordingly, using necessary attributes and ecological claims for each specific group of guests. Hoteliers could potentially implement discounts targeted specifically at leisure guests, for example, for not requesting new towels daily or for not using toiletry products provided by the hotel, in addition to considering price discrimination strategies. However, the recognition of "green" hotels by Ukrainian guests is still in its infancy. The development and formation of this recognition is emerging and requires greater efforts in developing a better perception of sustainable hotel practices through the use of IMC instruments to improve conditions.

Finally, some limitations of this work could be considered as future lines of research. First, given the restricted geographical scope of the study (Kyiv, Ukraine), it would be interesting to compare the results of this study by evaluating guest perceptions from hotels in other cities, even in other countries, by introducing a national culture variable into the theoretical model. Second, it would be interesting to deepen the analysis of the conceptual model under the CSR scope as this article works mainly within the sustainability context (Babiak/Trendafilova 2010). Third, given the scope of the ecological knowledge construct, an additional option could be to investigate consumer resistance and reactance to perceived educational information. Fourth, construct measurement scales present an opportunity for future research. For example, IMC for sustainability measured by its consistency could also be assessed against the other aspects related to the topic, such as interactivity, credibility, and effectiveness. Thus, further research might consider developing a measurement instrument that considers the complex nature of customer perception of IMC concerning company sustainability activities. Moreover, this study treats brand equity as a unidimensional construct, given the chosen measurement scale, analysis results, and cultural context. Further research might explore brand equity as a multidimensional concept (Aaker 1991) to strengthen its conceptualisation for the Ukrainian market. Furthermore, we have not used sophisticated techniques for controlling common method variance (CMV) in this work, which is why future studies should adopt the measured latent marker variable (MLMV) approach to detect and correct for CMV in PLS analysis, in line with Chin et al. (2013). In addition, the measurement tool could be improved if, instead of evaluating general brand equity, a scale associated with the organisation's green initiatives is used under the umbrella of "green brand equity" (Chen 2010). Finally, it would

be interesting to study the role that the relationships between retained variables and moderating variables play based on individual demographic characteristics, such as gender or age, in order to analyse the possible effects of these variables within the proposed research framework.

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