

Promoting Ethical Actions against Unethical Hotels

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Abstract : *This paper presents the investigation of consumers' intentions to adopt negative and discursive ethical actions with regard to a hotels' choice. Within the ethical tourism research area, the usual approach has been to examine consumers' preferences towards green and/or ethical hotels. This approach, although very useful in consumer research, "suffers" from a social desirability effect especially in cases, which examine a topic related to the social welfare. In this study, an opposite approach has been put under examination: it was hypothesized that a consumers' association needs reliable information with reference to consumers' intentions to reject (boycott) or sign a petition against an unethical hotel chain in conjoint with the most suitable for these actions promotion media. On the basis of this research information, the consumers' association shall build an optimum strategy for its members and for the general public to adopt it.*

The Conjoint Analysis has been utilized to formulate distinct types of the consumers' association strategy based on 2 chosen attributes, namely: action (boycotting, petition signs) and media (flyers, e-mail/sms, social media post). The orthogonal design provided 6 combinations of the associations' potential strategies and the respondents were asked to both rate and rank the relevant cards.

A structured questionnaire was administered to 450 households in the Thessaloniki urban area provided 420 usable questionnaires. Besides the cards of the combinations, the questionnaire included selected demographics (age, education, gender, income and occupation). The respondents were approached through personal interviews taken by trained marketing senior students. The sampling method was a combination of the two-stage area sampling and the systematic sampling.

The conjoint results surprisingly revealed that the most important factor of the respondents' rating is the media and not the action (76.515% and 23.485% of the overall performance determined respectively).

Both ranking and rating results indicated that boycotting through social media is the most preferable combination. Analysis of Variance revealed that young (25-34 years of age) and University graduates are those to participate in boycotting promoted by social media more willingly than their counterparts are.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Tourism, although undeniably one of the most increasing business field worldwide, it has long been seen as an unsustainable sector in its present impact and development (Weeden, 2001). The large numbers of people, who are being transported and lodged every single day, reflexly put too much stress on the physical and human environment of the destination countries. In addition, there are certain "unethical" hotel practices that enhance environmental and human deterioration. For example, destruction of shores and woods, dangerous management of hazardous waste, overconsumption of water and energy, children labour or extraordinary exploitation of workers, refugees etc.

The usual approach has been to examine consumers' preferences towards green and/or ethical hotels (Cleverdon and Kalisch, 2000; Tallontire *et al.*, 2001; Ritchie *et al.*, 2005, p. 189; Han *et al.*, 2010; Lee *et al.*, 2010). The relevant topics are considered to be included in the, so called, positive ethical consumption. This approach, although very useful in consumer research, "suffers" from a social desirability effect especially in cases, which examine a topic related to the social welfare. On the other hand, scant research has focused on the opposite side of the phenomenon or in other words on the negative and discursive ethical consumption patterns in tourism. Boycotting campaigns or sign-a-petition calls seem rather neglected in the literature. It is apparent that marketing communities, either academic or professional, have not found, so far, solid evidence that a large enough to be profitable segment of ethical consumers exists in the market place. It is to be noted that Klein *et al.* (2003) - who examined an actual ongoing boycott - found that in overall 67% of their sample were not boycotting, 17% were tempted to boycott and just 16% were boycotting.

Nevertheless, both practitioners (Goodwin and Francis, 2003) and academics (Weeden, 2001) seem to increasingly recognise that there is a niche market, which seeks for holidays providing more than just two sunny weeks in any given luxurious premises. It has been previously claimed that there is a number of lodging customers that look for hotels, which

follow eco-friendly practices (Manaktola and Jauhari, 2007; Han *et al.*, 2010). Also, that there is a definite consumers' segment, which puts pressure for corporate social responsibility (Goodwin and Francis, 2003) and would hypothetically be willing to get engaged in negative and/or discursive actions towards unethical business practices.

These types of action are usually organized by NGOs or consumers' associations or internet groups and societies (Klein *et al.* 2003). These organizations need reliable information about consumers' intentions to follow their strategic plans. They also need to know consumers' preferences regarding the appropriate communication media to promote such kind of strategies, due to the fact that these initiatives seem absolutely unable to find their way to the mass media channels. The aim of this research study was to examine consumers' intentions to adopt suggestions made by a consumers' association against an unethical hotel chain. The conjoint analysis was employed to explore which combination of action (boycotting or petition signs) and promotion media (flyers, e-mail/sms, social media posts) would be more likely adopted by the consumers.

2. RELEVANT LITERATURE

Ethical consumerism refers to the affected by ethical criteria consumer behaviour, which takes into account the societal norms or, in other words, “*what is good for the society*” (Smith, 1990). In an effort to categorise all possible activities included in the ethical consumption concept, Tallontire *et al.* (2001) proposed three types of ethical consumerism namely positive, negative and consumer action. The later form has been named “discursive” by Michelletti *et al.* (2005). The **positive type** concerns the choice of ethical products or service (e.g. eco-efficient products, organics, green hotels etc).

The **negative ethical consumption** (boycotting) includes the refusal of buying products offered by business that challenge consumer ethics regarding environmental destruction, exploitation of workers or local producers in the underdeveloped countries, child labour, animal rights etc.

There have been some studies, which examined boycotting of certain products or firms. Important influential factors that motivate compliance to boycotts have been found to be: *perception of boycott success* (Sen *et al.*, 2001; Klein *et al.*, 2003), *cost of boycotting* (Sen *et al.*, 2001; Klein *et al.*, 2003), *social pressure* (Sen *et al.*, 2001; Klein *et al.*, 2003), *social image of boycotters* (Kozinets and Handelman, 2004), *moral self-expression* (Kozinets and Handelman, 2004), *self-realization* (Kozinets and Handelman, 2004), *self-enhancement* (Klein *et al.*, 2003), *express uniqueness* (Kozinets and Handelman, 2004), *freedom from guilt* (Kozinets and Handelman, 2004; Klein *et al.*, 2003), *target's egregiousness* (Klein *et al.*, 2001; Klein *et al.* 2003).

Tilikidou and Delistavrou (2011) examined consumers' intentions to reject (boycott) a hotel due to unethical practices. Conjoint analysis formulated 10 hypothetical hotels on the basis of four attributes, namely ownership, price, environmental damage and unethical labour practices. Among ten hotels, evidence was provided that consumers' would mostly reject that hotel, which had set the price of 700 Euros for a 7-days package, belonged to a local entrepreneur and had been accused of both environmental damages and unethical labour practices.

The **discursive ethical consumption** refers to a channel of communication among consumers, to the formulation of public opinion through a framework of social debate, as well as to a number of continuously transforming cultural activities, which are based mainly on computer and network innovations. This type does not include direct involvement in purchasing decisions. In fact, it is undertaken by ethical consumers, who initially aim to share information about business practice against their moral values. These people express their opinions through their participation in collective actions, such as petition signing, culture jamming, attempts to engage in dialog with business and the general public, adusting, protests, voluntary helping or joining ethical campaigns, etc (Berry and McEachern 2005). The ultimate scope of discursive behaviour is to press companies, organisations and governments to change their unethical practice (Michelletti *et al.* 2005). Discursive consumption is the most recently developed type of consumers' action. Actually, it has never been thoroughly investigated so far (Michelletti *et al.* 2005).

With reference to the appropriate media to promote these kind of actions Worcester and Dawkins (2005) pointed out that a key subject in order to transform consumers' ethical concerns into actual ethical behaviour is effective communication of ethical issues to mass consumers' audiences. Besides traditional advertisement or promotion tools, social media, for example, enable customers to talk to one another in mass numbers, a process, which might be viewed as multiplication of traditional word-of-mouth communication (Mangold and Faulds, 2009). So, suggestions have been made that informal channels of communication might be found largely more effective than conventional media in the case of ethical consumption (Worcester and Dawkins, 2005).

Ethical tourism has been previously suggested as a potentially very good example of a consumers' trend towards more ethical consumption patterns (Goodwin and Francis, 2003). Ethical tourism is now an established term having its roots within the sustainable tourism development (Weeden, 2001). Although it is rather difficult to distinguish clearly between sustainable tourism and ethical tourism, it has been claimed that ethical tourism is a concept that goes beyond environmentally friendly tourism (Weeden, 2001).

Ethical tourism should include consideration and responsibility not only towards the physical environment but also towards the human environment and the cultural heritage of the destination countries (Lansing and De Vries, 2007). Therefore an “ethical hotel” is a broader term than a “green hotel”. A green hotel is the hotel that takes measures to harm

the environment less or even more to protect the physical environment by efficient use of energy, water and other materials (Green Hotels Association, 2005). An ethical hotel strategy includes environmental protection together with honest pricing, fair treatment of the locally owned firms, fair treatment and wages for all employees, honest promotion techniques etc (Weeden, 2001). With regard to previous data concerning tourists' ethical choices, Jaffe (1993) argued that customers are not willing to pay more just to fund green hotel policies. Watkins (1994) found that the 54% of consumers in US declared to be "environmentally minded travellers", who would prefer to stay in green hotels. Han *et al.* (2009) found that female customers of older age, who have favourable attitudes towards eco-friendly behaviours and positive images of green hotels, were more willing to stay at a green hotel, to recommend it and to pay more for it. A year later, Han *et al.* (2010) employed a refined TPB model and found that attitudes, subjective norm and perceived behavioural control positively affected intentions to stay at a green hotel, while intentions did not statistically differ between eco-friendly or eco-indifferent customers. Until now, no research effort has been located to focus on the negative or discursive actions within the ethical tourism research.

3. SCOPE AND OBJECTIVES

The starting point of this study was an observation made by people in charge of a consumers' association that there are certain hotel chains, which carry out some egregious acts, such as environmental harm, child labour, unpaid and/or uninsured labour etc. Therefore, a consistent to the review of the literature (Smith, 1990, Freidman, 1999, Klein *et al.*, 2003, Michelletti *et al.*, 2005) research study was designed to provide to this association the necessary information with regard to consumers' relevant intentions. This information might be used as a basis to build the most appropriate negative and/or discursive strategy against the above mentioned unethical hotel practices.

Accordingly, the scope of this study was to explore future travelers' intentions to adopt and follow negative and/or discursive actions that might be planned and promoted by the consumers' association against unethical hotels.

So, the specific objectives of this research effort were a) to find out which combination/s of action - media might be more highly ranked by consumers b) to find out what would be the ratings of a number of action-media combinations and c) what were the demographics of the consumers, who would more likely adopt the most preferable association's strategy.

4. METHODOLOGY

The conjoint analysis was employed to formulate distinct consumers' association strategies. The analysis was based on 2 chosen attributes, namely: *action* (boycotting, petition signs) and *media* (flyers, e-mail/sms, social media post). The orthogonal design provided **6 combinations** (see Table 2) of the association's potential strategies and the respondents were asked if they would participate in each one of the strategic action-media combinations (yes/no). Also, to rate each one of the combinations from 0=*not at all attractive* to 10=*very much attractive*. In this sense, each combination has been examined twice in two different measurement levels. One ordinal (yes/no), which would provide the combinations' ranking, and one ratio (from 0 to 10), which would provide the combinations' rating.

A structured questionnaire was administered to 450 households of Thessaloniki, Greece urban area and provided 420 usable questionnaires. Besides the cards of the combinations, the questionnaire included selected demographics (age, education, gender, income and occupation). The respondents were approached through personal interviews taken by trained marketing senior students. The sampling method was a combination of the two-stage area sampling and the systematic sampling (Tull and Hawkins, 1993, p. 544; Zikmund 1991, p. 471).

5. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Conjoint analysis was conducted through SPSS. Pearson's *r* and Kendall's tau were found significant ($p < 0.005$). The part - worth scores (utilities) indicate the influence of each factor level on respondents' preference for a particular combination. It is observed (Table 1) that the media (76.515% of the overall performance determined) was found to be a significantly more important factor than action (23.485% of overall performance determined). This means that there were significant variations in the consumers' preferences among the different media used for each action.

The descriptive statistics (Table 2) indicated that the preferable strategy is combination 2, which calls for a boycott against an unfair hotel chain through social media posts. The 67.1% of the respondents declared their intentions to adopt combination 2, which gained a Mean of 6.46 in rating. It is followed by combination 3 which calls for a petition signing through social media posts too. The 59.3% of the respondents declared their intentions to adopt combination 3, which gained a Mean of 5.90 in rating. The results indicated that either a boycotting or a petition sign call should be mainly distributed through social media. These results verify Xiang and Gretzel's (2010) argument with reference to the growing importance of social media in the online tourism domain.

In an effort to examine the demographics of those who enhance the most preferable combination, the ratio measured variable of each one combination was examined by one-way ANOVA across the categories of each one of the demographics. Statistically significant relationships ($p < 0.001$) were found with reference to combination 2 and education (positive, linear) and age (greater mean in the 25-34 years of age category). These results verify Michelletti's *et al.* (2005)

assumption that ethical consumers are informed citizens, who possess the facilities and the skills to search for and share information about products and services they are interested in.

Table 1: Action-Media Combinations: Conjoint Analysis

Importance Values			
Media		76.515	
Action		23.485	
Utilities			
		Utility Estimate	Std. Error
Media	Flyers	-0.125	0.043
	E-mail/Sms	-0.900	0.043
	Social media posts	1.026	0.043
Action	Boycotting	0.296	0.031
	Petition signs	-0.296	0.031
Constant		5.440	0.031
Correlations			
		Value	Sig.
Pearson's R		0.999	0.000
Kendall's tau		1.000	0.002

Table 2: Action-Media Combinations: Descriptives

	Participation	Evaluation 0-10	
	% Yes	Mean	Std. Dev.
Combination 1: Flyer for Boycotting	64.3	5.48	2.881
Combination 2: Social Media Post for Boycotting	67.1	6.46	2.817
Combination 3: Social Media Post for Petition Sign	59.3	5.90	2.887
Combination 4: Flyer for Petition Sign	52.9	5.07	2.884
Combination 5: E-mail/SMS for Petition Sign	39.8	4.45	3.149
Combination 6: E-mail/SMS for Boycotting	48.3	4.88	3.252

Discussing upon the above presented results, it is to be acknowledged that there are many limitations in this study, as it has been exploratory in nature. To start with, there are not enough previous similar research results to make comparisons. Second, it should be understood that the social desirability effect is higher than the usual standards when the research study concerns ethical consumption. Third, the capabilities of conjoint analysis have been restricted as only two attributes were chosen to formulate the potential strategic combinations. Fourth, the absence of - other than demographics - variables of the respondents, for instance attitudes or psychographics limited the profile of the potential ethical travellers. Further research is needed to cover some parts of the existing research gap.

6. CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

This study was built upon a scenario that a consumers' association needs to design and implement a strategy against an unethical hotel chain and call its members and the general public to adopt this strategy. The investigation aimed to indicate whether a boycotting call or a call for signing a petition against the hypothetically unethical hotel chain would be more welcome by the public. Also, to indicate which type of media would be the most appropriate one to advertise the call more effectively. Further, to find out which would be the optimum action-media combination that would maximize consumers' compliance to the consumers' association strategic plans. Conjoint analysis revealed that consumers' participation would have been increased if they were called for a boycott against an unethical hotel chain through social media and not through flyers or e-mail/sms. The association should use social media for a petition signing too, which is consumers' secondly preferable action. It is rather hopeful that these results lead to implicit suggestions, which are easily feasible for a consumers' association strategy as social media posts are mostly for free. It is public knowledge that

associations' or NGO's messages do not easily find their way to the mass media. The results of this study verified suggestions made previously by Worchester and Dawkins (2005) that the influence of informal communication networks should not be underestimated in the promotion of ethical prompts to consumers.

From a managerial view point the results of this study provide important implications for those hotel managers, who are interested in developing an ethical strategy. Managers must learn to shape consumers' discussions (for example in social media) in a manner suitable for the promotion of their ethical strategies (Mangold and Faulds, 2009). They should find informal communicative channels for customers, employees and other stakeholders of their companies to make them act as advocates of the hotel's ethical practices (Worchester and Dawkins, 2005) through their personal engagement in social media. The managers should keep in mind that young, well educated ethical consumers are used to exchange information through social media. They are willing to actively contribute to a movement in favour of the protection of the physical and the human environment if they find a relevant call coming from social media. They are willing to pass this call further to their friends and so on. In many ways ethical consumers need to get an ethical merit for their trouble to search for information and reject a hotel due to its unethical attributes. These consumers need to feel that they are powerful enough to make a socially beneficial difference even through their holidays' consumer behaviour.

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