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Characteristics of Green Hotels' Potential Customers: A Case of Vietnamese Domestic Tourists

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Abstract: Despite the fact that the green wave has spread globally over the hotel industry, the characteristics of an environmentally friendly tourist has not yet been clearly clarified and is still controversial. Therefore, the objective of this study is to describe the demographics and behavioral qualities of Vietnamese domestic tourists who are willing patrons in a green hotel. The results show that the distinguishing characteristics of green travelers seeking green lodging are that they belong to the young generation, are female, have high educational accomplishment, and have high levels of participation in daily eco-friendly activities.

Keywords: Characteristics, environmentally friendly tourist, demographic, behavioral qualities, Vietnamese.

1. Introduction

There is a growing concern regarding preserving our natural environment by ways of sustainability and eco-friendly practices. The concept of business sustainability has received substantial attention from not only academicians but also practitioners. More and more customers demonstrate their ecological consciousness and preference for green firms and environmentally friendly products/services [1]. Those who normally search for goods with the environment in mind are called green

consumers [2]. In the context of tourism, they are referred to as green tourists, environmentally friendly tourists or ecotourists. As stated by Dolinicar and Matus (2008), green tourists are a broader concept than ecotourists [3]. Green travelers behave in tourism general contexts, whereas ecotourists represent a subset of green tourists in nature-based tourism.

There have been a number of studies on the characteristics of green consumers in general as well as ecotourists who are involved in eco-tourism, however, the profile of green tourists in the general tourism context or a particular sector such as hospitality is not well researched [4, 5]. Despite the current popularity of green consumers, the green tourist segment in the lodging industry and their characteristics,

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such as socio-demographic, psychology and so on, are still quite obscure [1, 4, 6]. These have led to a lack of knowledge about potential green travelers who are willing to stay in environmentally friendly hotels. This subsequently causes difficulties for hoteliers to distinguish green tourists from others or to create marketing campaigns targeting them specifically.

The purpose of this research, therefore, is to determine the profile of eco-friendly tourists who show their willingness to stay in a green hotel, based on their demographic, psychographic and behavioral characteristics. The result of the study is expected not only to fill in the theoretical gap related to the characteristics of eco-friendly tourists, but also to provide hotel managers with a description of prospective clients that can be used as a market segmentation tool and to directly contribute to their marketing process.

2. Literature review

2.1. *Market segmentation in tourism and hospitality*

Market segmentation is defined as a strategy that divides a large and heterogeneous market into smaller and more homogenous ones [7, 8]. The purpose of this process is to group individuals based on their similar characteristics, so that the company can shape their products and services in an appropriate and effective way to meet the needs of this group. In other words, it helps the business answer questions about the target customers they will serve. Like other business arenas, it is also crucial for lodging corporations to segment and identify those tourist clusters that are most attracted and willing to consume their services instead of those of other competitors. Besides that, in the context of increasing competition, various new types of hotels and services have been born. Accommodation businesses that operate in a niche market like green hotels must have a sense of positioning their products and

create appropriate marketing campaigns to attract the most suitable travelers [5].

In tourism, the tourist market can be segmented in a variety of ways, in which the socio-demographic feature is probably the most commonly used [9-15]. According to Dolnicar and Matus (2008), Kotler and Armstrong (2011), the distinguishing of one type of tourist from another is determined by four key categories: sociology (age, gender, education); psychology (personality, lifestyle, motivation); geography (origin and destination of the trip); and, behavior (traveler activities) [3, 8]. Although demographics are the most common and easiest tool to use, using one of the three remaining could generate better results (16, 17). However, it is unfortunate that the studies of tourist segmentation in the hospitality sector in any of the categories have been incomplete [1, 6]. Attempts to understand demographics, other psychological and behavioral characteristics of tourists are not sufficient to completely describe their profile.

2.2. *Involvement - Behavioral characteristics*

The theory of involvement was primarily introduced by Sherif and Cantril (1947) and was applied in marketing for segmentation purposes and explaining consumer behavior in decision-making [18, 19]. Involvement is described as the relevance degree of something that is perceived by each person based on their individual characteristics such as needs, values and preferences [20]. Indeed, as stated by Lee and Lou (1995), the involvement of consumers with a product depends on their assessment of how important the product is [21]. Basically, someone will never buy or use a product or service that is completely useless for them. Conversely, if these goods are very valuable or help them reach a certain goal, consumption is inevitable. Applying this argument in this study, an environmentally friendly hotel room is considered important to a traveler when it is well-matched with his/her interests, needs, goals or beliefs, and subsequently the level of involvement with this room will be high.

Among several involvement forms, one frequently discussed is enduring involvement. Enduring involvement arises in cases where the knowledge and expertise of the consumer is of a high level [21]. Take tourists who are high involved in environmental caring for example. For tourists who regularly carry out environmental protection activities in their daily lives (such as recycling, use of energy-saving equipment), their involvement with eco-friendly hotels' rooms would be high, since they are familiar with these activities, and have certain knowledge of the attributes of green hotel rooms. The research by Amendah and Park (2008) points out that holiday makers who are more engaged with the environment are willing to pay more to travel to an environmentally friendly destination [22]. Accordingly, the higher the level of enduring involvement, determined by the tourist's involvement with environmental protection at home, theoretically, the greater the significance of a green hotel room.

2.3. Green tourists personal characteristics

A green consumer is someone whose decision-making process of buying something is affected by environmental concerns [2, 23]. They are typically "female, pre-middle aged, with a high level of education (have finished high school) and of above average socioeconomic status" [24, p.504]. Thus, green tourists normally have a strong environmental attitude and behave in an environmentally friendly manner when on vacation. As stated by Dolnicar (2004), socio-demographic and behavioral characteristics are inherent to environmentally caring tourists [25]. Besides that, attitudes towards environment and willingness to pay more for green accommodation also distinguish eco-friendly tourists from typical tourists [26].

According to social theory, since women and men are socialized in a different way, their roles and behaviors in society are diverse [27]. Moreover, it is suggested in the consumer behavior literature that gender also affects consumer behavior and trends. Women not only

show greater consciousness about the welfare of others [28], or the relationship between individuals [29], but also are likely to possess environmental awareness and environmentally friendly consumption intentions [30, 31].

Although many studies have confirmed the significant role of age in the process of decision-making and purchasing behavior [32-34], the impact of age on green consumers' behavior is not consistent. Findings from earlier researches reveal that eco-friendly tourists tend to be middle-aged [35, 36]. On the other hand, some researches indicate that young people are more likely to be involved in green consumption. The reason given is that the younger generation have superior capacities to search and process information, so their knowledge about green products' attributes and their consumption will be better [34, 37].

The relationship between education, income and purchasing behavior are also identified in the literature [33, 34, 38]. Individuals with higher education and incomes tend to be more environmentally conscious and enthusiastically intent on buying green products [39, 40]. In summary, green tourists probably have specific demographic characteristics. They are likely to be women, younger, more highly-educated and earn more money than the average.

Thus, the theoretical framework and five hypotheses are proposed below:
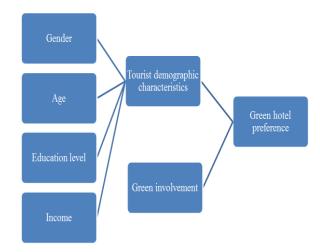

Figure 1. Theoretical framework.

H_1: Females have a higher preference for green hotels.

H_2: Young tourists have a higher preference for green hotels.

H_3: Highly-educated tourists have a higher preference for green hotels.

H_4: Tourists who have a higher salary would have a higher preference for green hotels.

H_5: Preference for green hotels is positively influenced by a tourist's demographic characteristics and their involvement with environmental protection.

3. Methodology

Since this study focus on domestic travelers - clarified by UNWTO as a resident traveling in their own country, in this case Vietnam, the questionnaire was delivered directly and randomly to participant respondents at several tourist attractions in Hanoi in July 2018. The distribution at Hanoi's attractions is aimed at expanding the origin of the respondents, thus ensuring the overall representation of domestic tourists in Vietnam. The sampling frame for this study was environmentally friendly tourists who were willing to stay in a green hotel and who had had recent experience using hotel services in the last 12 months. The process of data collection took place in two phases. The author firstly introduced the research goal and explained specialized terms such as "hotels". Since the concept of a green hotel is novel in Vietnam and not all participants are experts in the hospitality field, this step attempted to eliminate all possible misunderstandings. The respondents were then asked whether they have stayed in a hotel recently and of their willingness to stay in a green hotel. If the answer was yes, then they were requested to fill in the survey form and return it to the investigator right after they were finished.

The structured questionnaire consisted of two main sections. The survey started with the assessment of respondents' preference for 21 popular green hotel attributes. The items were adopted from previous qualitative research [41]. The level of preference for the attributes was rated using a 5-point Likert scale (1 = very unfavorable, 3 = neutral, and 5 = very favorable). The latter section asked participants about their socio-demographic characteristics (for instance age, gender, education level, income). The respondents were also asked how many green activities they performed at home which determined their involvement - green behavioral characteristics. They could select from a list of five activities (waste sorting, reuse and recycling activities, use of energy efficient equipment, use of low-flow water fixtures, and buying organic groceries) or they could write down other answers.

4. Finding and discussion

4.1. Demographic characteristics

After eliminating unqualified questionnaires that were either incomplete or chose only one answer, 230 responses were retained for analysis. From Table 1, we can see that in the total of 230 domestic tourists who were willing to stay at a green hotel, over half were female (53.9%). The majority was of working age. 33.5% and 27.8% of respondents were aged between 25-40 and 41-60 years old respectively. An overwhelming number of people (63%) had graduated, of which 13.9% had postgraduate certification. Respondents' incomewas mostly 5-10 million VND per month (31.7%).

It can be initially concluded that green hotel potential customers are women, of pre-middle age, who have obtained a university degree and who earn a monthly income from 5 to 10 million VND. However, the question is whether there is a difference in preference for green hotels among individuals with different demographic characteristics (e.g. males versus females, young persons and older persons…). Therefore, a general linear model was used that aims at testing the simultaneous effect of all

characteristics, rather than using ANOVA analysis for each. The result indicated in Table 2 shows that there is no difference in preferences between individuals who have dissimilar income levels (sig = 0.074). The other three factors (age, gender and education level) have an impact on personal preference for green hotel properties. The influence of the level of education, in particular, seems less important.

Indeed, the preferences for environmentally friendly attributes in hotels for males and females, in different age groups and at different education levels are not the same (Table 3). Green hotels are more accepted by women. The average preference rated by females for this type of hotel is 3.7, which is 0.3 higher than that of men. Moreover, the younger and more educated tourists are, the higher their preference for green hotel attributes. Indeed, the level of preference for green hotels of young tourists,

aged between 18 and 40, is higher than both the middle-aged group and the elderly. Visitors who have obtained college and university degrees have a similar preference, which is higher than that of high school graduates, but lower than those with a post graduate degree. Thus, among the four hypotheses about individual characteristics, the first three hypotheses 01, 02, and 03 are confirmed by the study. There is not enough evidence to confirm hypothesis 04.

These socio-demographic features are similar to findings from previous research [31, 34, 40]. So, hotels that have already applied or will apply environmentally friendly methods and use them as a distinctive feature of their business strategy, need to position their target customers who have a demographic profile as follows: female, young (aged 18-40) and highly educated.

Table 1. Demographic profile of travelers

		Number	**Percent**
Age	18-24	47	20.4
	25-40	77	33.5
	41-60	64	27.8
	Above 60	42	18.3
	Total	**230**	**100**
Gender	Female	124	53.9
	Male	106	46.1
	Total	**230**	**100**
Education Level	High school	39	17.0
	College	46	20.0
	Bachelors	113	49.1
	Post Graduate	32	13.9
	Total	**230**	**100**
Income	Below 1.5 million VND	14	6.1
	1.5 -< 3.5 million VND	37	16.1
	3.5 -< 5 million VND	46	20.0
	5 -< 10 million VND	73	31.7
	10 -< 20 million VND	52	22.6
	20 million VND or higher	8	3.5
	Total	**230**	**100**

Source: The authors.

Table 2. Effect of demographic characteristics on green hotel preference
Tests of Between-Subjects Effects
Dependent Variable: Preference

Source	Type III Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Corrected Model	92.500[a]	92	1.005	3.578	.000
Intercept	1069.809	1	1069.809	3807.178	.000
Age	5.243	3	1.748	6.220	.001
Gender	2.936	1	2.936	10.449	.002
Education Level	2.468	3	.823	2.928	.036
Income	2.897	5	.579	2.062	.074
Age * Gender	2.443	3	.814	2.898	.037
Age * Education Level	2.664	9	.296	1.053	.401
Age * Income	4.896	11	.445	1.584	.110
Gender * Education Level	.286	3	.095	.340	.797
Gender * Income	.877	5	.175	.624	.682
Education Level * Income	7.585	14	.542	1.928	.028
Age * Gender * Education Level	4.949	6	.825	2.935	.010
Age * Gender * Income	3.759	6	.627	2.230	.044
Age * Education Level * Income	7.721	11	.702	2.498	.007
Gender * Education Level * Income	1.346	6	.224	.799	.573
Age * Gender * Education Level * Income	.000	0	.	.	.
Error	38.497	137	.281		
Total	3040.231	230			
Corrected Total	130.997	229			

a. R Squared = .706 (Adjusted R Squared = .509)
Source: The authors.

Table 3. Difference in green hotel preference (Demographic effect)

1. Gender
Dependent Variable: Preference

Gender	Mean	Std. Error	95% Confidence Interval	
			Lower Bound	Upper Bound
Female	3.714	.074	3.569	3.860
Male	3.426	.079	3.271	3.582

2. Age
Dependent Variable: Preference

Age	Mean	Std. Error	95% Confidence Interval	
			Lower Bound	Upper Bound
18-24	3.890	.109	3.675	4.105
25-40	3.889	.089	3.713	4.065
41-60	3.460	.096	3.271	3.648
Above 60	3.044	.116	2.816	3.271

3. Education Level
Dependent Variable: Preference

Education Level	Mean	Std. Error	95% Confidence Interval	
			Lower Bound	Upper Bound
High school	3.347	.111	3.127	3.566
College	3.598	.106	3.390	3.807
Bachelors	3.589	.074	3.443	3.735
Post Graduate	3.748	.126	3.499	3.996

Source: The authors.

4.2. Involvement in green activities

As can be seen in Table 4, only five of the respondents (2.2%) did not show any signs of environmental protection. Meanwhile, four participants (1.7%) have been involved in all five environmentally friendly activities that were listed in the questionnaire. The most widespread daily pursuits were using energy efficient equipment (61.3%) and reuse and recycling activities (57.8%). On the other hand, the least responsive activities were using low-flow water devices (36.1%) and waste sorting (41.7%). Interestingly, some people also wrote about other ways to protect the environment that they perform day-to-day, such as using public transport, not using plastic bags, or cleaning up the environment.

Table 4. Tourists' involvement in environmentally friendly activities

Number of activities	Frequency	Percent	Cumulative percent
0	5	2.2	2.2
1	34	14.8	17.0
2	82	35.7	52.6
3	79	34.3	87.0
4	26	11.3	98.3
5	4	1.7	100.0
Total	230	100.0	

	Number	Percent
Waste Sorting	96	41.7
Reuse and Recycle activities	133	57.8
Use Energy Efficient Equipment	141	61.3
Use Low-flow Water Fixtures	83	36.1
Buy Organic Groceries	106	46.1

Source: The authors.

Table 5. The correlation between tourists' involvement in environmentally friendly activities and preference for green hotels' attributes

		Preference	Involvement
Preference	Pearson Correlation	1	.240[**]
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.000
	N	230	230
Involvement	Pearson Correlation	.240[**]	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	
	N	230	230

** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).
Source: The authors.

Furthermore, the study has confirmed the relationship between enduring involvement and green hotels' preference, in theory (Table 5). The correlation between involvement and preference is positive and statistically significant (sig = 0.000). In other words, if environmentally friendly activities are more familiar to a tourist, the level of preference for green hotels' attributes will be higher.

4.3. The impact of demographic and behavioral characteristics on hotel guests' preferences

Finally, hypothesis 05 is proven through the results of the regression of the influence of demographic and behavioral characteristics which are shown in Table 6. Accordingly, the demographic features (including age, gender, and education level) and the involvement of tourists with environmental protection activities have a substantial effect on the level of preference for the green attributes in hotels. In particular, the effect of age and involvement were most significant at a 0.5% level. As the age of tourists increase by one unit, their interest in green hotels drops by 0.329 units. At the same time, if the level of participation in environmentally friendly activities is increased

by one unit, their favor with eco-friendly hotels raises by 0.170 units. Although there is a lower level of significance, the impact of gender and education level is still recognized. The level of interest is positively relative to the educational level and is higher if the tourist is female.

The R-square value of the model was 0.299, that is, only 29.9% of the change in green hotels' preference was explained by demographic and behavioral variables. This is also quite reasonable, because the level of interest or choice of a green hotel theoretically depends on many other factors such as tourist motivations, social institutions and so on.

Thus, through the research results, we can confirm that the preference of using green hotel services by domestic tourists is affected by demographic factors and behavior. Particularly the most influential factors are age and enduring involvement. The younger the traveler, and the more active the environmental responses are, the more likely accommodation seekers are to appreciate and choose green hotels while traveling. In addition, the level of preference for green attributes in a hotel depends on several other demographic characteristics such as gender and education.

Table 6. The impact of demographic and behavioral characteristics
on hotel guests' preferences
Model Summary

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate
1	.547[a]	.299	.287	.6387

a. Predictors: (Constant), Involvement, Age, Education Level, Gender
Coefficients[a]

Model		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.
		B	Std. Error	Beta		
1	(Constant)	3.772	.185		20.438	.000
	Age	-.329	.042	-.440	-7.795	.000***
	Gender	-.217	.087	-.143	-2.502	.013*
	Education Level	.105	.046	.129	2.296	.023*
	Involvement	.170	.043	.225	3.931	.000***

a. Dependent Variable: Preference
Source: The author.

Probably, with the recent raising of environmental issues, along with community media that has had a positive impact, people's perceptions and behaviors have changed, not just in their daily lives, but even when they travel.

5. Conclusion and implications

Differentiating products or attracting new and different segments are frequently suggested for the survival of hotel managers in the competitive hotel market today [5]. Moreover, more and more lodging establishments have incorporated green practices into their operations as a response to the increase in the number of environmentally concerned tourists [42]. With the purpose of building a profile of potential green hotel customers, the research intensively investigated the effect of personal demography and behavior on the preference of tourists for the environmentally friendly attributes adopted in the green hotels.

The results reveal that socio-demographics (age, gender and education level) and involvement with green practices in daily life are the distinguishing characteristics of Vietnamese green domestic tourists. Indeed, environmentally friendly hotel guests tend to be young and highly educated women. Additionally, the evidence about behavioral characteristics (involvement) also supports hotel marketers targeting these customers. Tourists who have a high level of enduring involvement (i.e., perform a number of environmentally friendly activities at home) will have knowledge and be more familiar with green hotel attributes, and thus be more willing to stay in such a hotel.

The findings from this study offer insight into green travelers who potentially prefer to stay in an environmentally friendly hotel. This understanding about socio-demographics and involvement not only enriches green hotel research, but also clarifies the academic debate about the characteristics of green hotels'

potential customers. Specially in the context of Vietnamese domestic tourists, this research provides a case study for those developing countries who are experiencing significant pressure to respond to environmental problems. Furthermore, this research also makes a remarkable contribution in terms of practicality. It enables green hotel managers to narrow down their market to find those travelers who are interested in their products. Rather than targeting mass tourists, green hotels should focus on the younger generation who are women, and who are highly educated visitors. In particular, attention should be paid to the environmental protection activities that visitors perform daily, in order to improve their level of interest. Identifying different segments, in turn, enables targeted marketing strategies.

Although this research was the foundation, there is plenty of room for the characteristics of eco-friendly visitors to be explored. Future research could further explore other factors, such as psychographic characteristics and motivation, to understand how they impact on a guest's decision to stay in a green hotel. Another area of inquiry would be to study different types of respondents, for example, comparing domestic and inbound tourists and business versus leisure travelers.

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