Food is good for you (and the planet): balancing service quality and sustainability in hospitality[1]

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Abstract

Purpose of the paper: Although environmental awareness is growing among hospitality customers, some environmental initiatives may lower personal comfort and overall service quality; therefore, hospitality managers need to find a balance between service quality and environmental preservation. The aim of the research is twofold: first, to investigate whether various environmentally sustainable practices affect customers' behavioral intentions differently, and second, to investigate if customers display more positive intentions toward a specific practice that is supposed to enhance overall service quality (i.e. serving local food).

Methodology: The empirical research is conducted through an online survey of 237 respondents. Respondents were asked to rate on a 5-point Likert scale the extent to which different sustainable practices affect their hotel selection process, their expected satisfaction during the stay, and their willingness to pay a higher price.

Results: Results show that all environmentally sustainable practices positively influence the hotel selection process and expected satisfaction, though to differing extents, but that few practices positively influence customers' willingness to pay a higher price. Local food is the initiative that stimulates the most positive behavioral intentions across all the dimensions.

Research limitations: The study addresses almost only Italian respondents and, at the moment, examines behavioral intentions rather than actual behaviors.

Originality of the paper: The study supports the idea that environmental sustainability is a multidimensional concept, and that different practices have different effects on customers' intentions. It adds to current knowledge that initiatives such as serving local food, which are also considered to enhance service quality and are connected to personal health, can produce a significantly more positive impact.

Key words: environmental sustainability; hospitality; local food; service quality; customers' behavioral intentions; willingness to pay

1. Introduction

The natural environment plays a key role in tourism destinations' attractiveness and competitiveness, and tourism and hospitality are now facing increasing challenges in terms of environmental preservation (Gössling, 2002). Hotels and lodging facilities are in fact both victims of and contributors to environmental degradation (Reid *et al.*, 2017), and they can

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and should actively engage in environmentally sustainable (ES) practices (Tencati and Pogutz, 2015). In response, several initiatives are being increasingly implemented by hospitality companies to limit their impact on the natural environment, generally related to waste management, energy and water saving, green purchasing, and raising customers' awareness (e.g. Holcomb *et al.*, 2012).

Environmental concerns are also increasing among hospitality customers, who are now more conscious about impacts related to tourism activities (Verma and Chandra, 2017); previous studies have found a positive impact of ES initiatives on customers' attitudes and behaviors in terms of hotel choice (Boley and Uysal, 2013), customer satisfaction (Melissen, 2013; Cucculelli and Goffi, 2016), and willingness to pay a premium price (Xu and Gursoy, 2015). Hence, there is evidence that ES initiatives may increase business competitiveness and long-term sustainability (Gössling *et al.*, 2011).

However, ES practices vary depending on how they compromise personal comfort and service quality, and therefore produce mixed effects on customers' attitudes and behaviors. Previous literature reports that customers are less willing to engage in ES practices that reduce their personal comfort during the stay (Manaktola and Jauhari, 2007), but are more likely to appreciate those practices connected to quality, health, and personal dimensions (Iraldo *et al.*, 2017).

Food quality is a key component of the quality of the overall tourist experience. Food freshness and healthiness are important components of food quality (Namkung and Jang, 2007), and local food, which tends to be both fresh and healthy, thus meets the growing interest of customers in healthy lifestyles and healthy eating (Kim *et al.*, 2013). Local food is perceived as safe and natural (Draper and Green, 2002), and responds to customers' quest for authenticity (Sims, 2009; Cafiero *et al.*, 2019). Local purchasing, and local food, is also more sustainable than processed food in that it reduces environmental impacts associated with transportation and packaging, supports the local economy, and helps the preservation of local cultures. Buying local also clearly reduces costs associated with transportation (Gössling *et al.*, 2011; UNEP, 2015).

In sum, among the various ES practices that can be implemented by the hospitality industry, serving local food represents a "win-win" for hosts, guests, and the natural environment. Local food is sustainable from a triple bottom line perspective, it may better respond to customers' expectations for health and authenticity, and it can increase overall service quality.

As customers' behavioral intentions toward ES practices are expected to vary depending on how service quality and personal comfort are compromised, customers should display even more positive intentions toward hotels serving local food, given that this provides a healthier option relative to processed food and is considered to enhance service quality.

Via an online survey of a sample of 237 respondents, this study aims to examine the impact of different ES practices commonly implemented by the hospitality industry on three customer behavioral intentions: hotel selection process, customers' expected satisfaction during the stay, and customers' willingness to pay a higher price. The research further examines

whether customers' behavioral intentions are more positive toward one specific ES practice that does not threaten comfort or quality; that is, the serving of local food.

The main findings show that all ES practices have a positive effect on hotel choice and customers' expected satisfaction, though to a differing extent, but that few practices have a positive influence on willingness to pay a premium price. Local food, in particular, received the highest rating in the hotel selection process and in customers' expected satisfaction, and stimulated greater willingness to pay a higher price than all other initiatives. In addition, customers' behavioral intentions toward the ES initiatives varied depending on respondents' demographic characteristics, including gender and education.

These results represent an important contribution to the literature on environmental sustainability in the hospitality industry and highlight several practical implications for hospitality managers and operators, helping them to solve the conflict between quality and sustainability.

The rest of the paper is organized as follows: the theoretical background is presented in Section 2, the methodology is explained in Section 3, the findings of the research are displayed in Section 4 and further discussed in Section 5, and the conclusions and main research implications are set out in Section 6.

2. Theoretical background

Environmental sustainability is a concept involving different dimensions, and different kinds of ES practices can be implemented. Previous studies have generally categorized interventions into areas such as waste management, energy and water conservation, and procurement policy, but interventions also extend to measures such as informing customers about such initiatives and involving them in basic ES behaviors (e.g. Holcomb *et al.*, 2012; Reid *et al.*, 2017). According to the Green Hotels Association, "Green hotels are environmentally-friendly properties whose managers are eager to institute programs that save water, save energy and reduce solid waste - while saving money - to help protect our one and only earth" (Green Hotels Association, 2017).

Environmental concerns are a becoming a priority for both customers and companies (Dangelico and Vocalelli, 2017), and consumers' behaviors are gradually changing toward a more sustainable orientation (Galati *et al.*, 2019). This applies equally to hospitality customers (Boley and Uysal, 2013), and tourists who are increasingly conscious of environmental impacts related to tourism activities (Mahachi *et al.*, 2015; Verma and Chandra, 2017). However, not all customers take into account the hotel's environmental policy when evaluating the overall service experience (Abrate *et al.*, 2020), and not all customers accord the same importance to ES practices (Miao and Wei, 2013). Hence, not all ES practices produce the same effect on customers' behavioral intentions, in terms of hotel selection process, expected satisfaction and willingness to pay a higher price, as discussed further below.

2.1 Customers' behavioral intentions

Environmental sustainability can have a positive effect on customers' behavioral intentions and thereby increase business long-term sustainability and competitiveness (Gössling, 2002). Although intentions and actual behaviors may not always correspond (Juvan and Dolnicar, 2014), there is evidence in previous research that environmental sustainability is becoming an element of influence in purchasing choice, and that ES behaviors may increase a hospitality company's overall bookings (Boley and Uysal, 2013). With increasing environmental awareness, customers may prefer lodging facilities that are moving toward sustainability and may be more likely to stay in a hotel that adopts measures to minimize its environmental impacts (Mahachi *et al.*, 2015). A study in the Indian context (Verma and Chandra, 2017) reveals that some elements of environmental sustainability (e.g., greenscaping) may affect the hotel selection process more than other variables (such as price and location). A true commitment to the environment can have a positive influence on hotel choice and therefore create a win-win situation for both the natural environment and hospitality companies (Bohdanowicz and Zientara, 2008). A study of a sample of Italian travelers shows that a reduction in energy consumption and pollution, availability of eco-friendly transportation, promotion of local products, opportunity for direct contact with nature, local people, and local culture are the main motivations for choosing sustainable accommodation; less importance is accorded to any environmental certification (Fermani *et al.*, 2016).

Literature also suggests that environmental sustainability may not only lead to higher customer demand, but also to increased customer satisfaction during the stay (Melissen, 2013). The image of being "green," if supported by an effective green marketing strategy, has been found to improve customers' loyalty, trust, and satisfaction (Martínez, 2015). There exist market segments that place high value on ES behaviors (Sirakaya-Turk *et al.*, 2014), and sustainability can be perceived as a relevant part of overall service quality (Iraldo *et al.*, 2017).

Cucculelli and Goffi (2016) show that factors directly relating to sustainability have a positive impact on the competitiveness of small Italian destinations. A sustainable tourism policy, together with the quality of natural resources and local empowerment in the tourism sector, have a significant impact on destination competitiveness in terms of tourist satisfaction. Moreover, the study provides evidence that factors that closely relate to sustainability have a larger impact on competitiveness than indicators not directly related to sustainability.

An overall ES supply chain may positively affect customers' loyalty, satisfaction, and even willingness to pay a premium price (Xu and Gursoy, 2015). In line with growing market pressures toward sustainability, lodging facilities that adopt ES behaviors may benefit from premium pricing and increased sales (Martínez, 2015). A study in the Spanish context shows that implementing ES measures can generate room prices that are higher by 5.15% on average (Sánchez-Ollero *et al.*, 2014). Willingness to pay increases even more with practices related to service quality and customers'

personal sphere (Iraldo *et al.*, 2017), since customers are more inclined to appreciate sustainability practices close to their personal dimension (Edwards-Jones *et al.*, 2008).

Other studies, however, find that not all customers value ES measures (Abrate *et al.*, 2020; Xu and Gursoy, 2015) and that sustainability alone does not always increase customer demand (Geerts, 2014). Some ES behaviors may even lower customer satisfaction (Haastert and Grosbois, 2010), and generally pro-environmental attitudes of people traveling are not the same as when such people are at home (Miao and Wei, 2013). Moreover, even when customers are concerned about sustainability and patronize hotels that have adopted practices aimed at reducing their impacts, they may not be willing to pay more (Manaktola and Jauhari, 2007). In particular, hospitality customers have been found to display a negative attitude toward ES behaviors when personal comfort and luxury are compromised (Line and Hanks, 2016; Miao and Wei, 2013). Quality is a key attribute to ensure the competitiveness and long-term survival of hospitality companies and should not be compromised in the pursuit of sustainability (Manaktola and Jauhari, 2007). Research in the Canadian small hospitality industry found that careless customers do not make an effort to reduce their energy and water consumption (Haastert and Grosbois, 2010); ES behaviors can be perceived as a tool aimed at cutting costs and therefore they can represent a threat both to service quality and overall customer satisfaction (López-Gamero *et al.*, 2011).

Many studies have highlighted the important role of demographic characteristics in understanding customers' attitudes, behaviors, and intentions. Basic characteristics such as gender, age, and education can have a significant impact on sustainable behavioral intentions.

Female customers have been found to be generally more conscious of the need for environmental preservation (Mohai, 1992). A study in the hotel context showed that women are more willing to stay in a green hotel, to recommend it, and to pay for it (Han *et al.*, 2011; Han *et al.*, 2009). However, a study of Italian travelers provides evidence that even if women are generally less willing to exploit the natural environment than men, they are less eco-oriented when choosing accommodation (Fermani *et al.*, 2016). Age-related differences have also been found to affect sustainable buying behaviors, and younger customers generally tend to display more green purchasing intentions (Evanschitzky and Wunderlich, 2006). However, studies related to the hotel context provide mixed results, or even show that age does not have any significant role in explaining customers' sustainable intentions (Han *et al.*, 2011). A study of a sample of Italian respondents shows that adults are generally more willing to pay extra for sustainable accommodation than younger travelers; however, findings related to hotel choice are mixed (Fermani *et al.*, 2016).

Finally, customers with higher levels of education tend to be more environmentally conscious and purchase sustainable products (Keaveney and Parthasarathy, 2001). However, Han *et al.* (2011) found that hotel customers' willingness to visit a green hotel and their intentions to recommend it and to pay more for it are not necessarily related to education level.

In sum, in addition to demographic characteristics, customers' behavioral intentions toward ES initiatives are highly dependent on the degree to which service quality and personal comfort are compromised; hospitality managers must take into account sustainability-related issues but at the same time meet standards for hospitality and comfort (Font *et al.*, 2008). In other words, hospitality has to find a balance between service quality and environmental preservation (Haastert and Grosbois, 2010).

2.2 Serving local food

The Green Restaurant Association (2007) defines green food as being organic and local, and highly encourages purchasing food via sustainable, organic and local channels. Local purchasing clearly reduces transportation costs (Wang *et al.*, 2013); it also lowers environmental impacts associated with transportation in terms of reduced GHG emissions and packaging waste (Gössling *et al.*, 2011). Products that are supplied closer to their final destination involve fewer environmental costs in terms of transportation, packaging, and cooling. Hence, the more processed a product is, the more energy it consumes (UNEP, 2015).

Moreover, local food, and local purchasing in general, is a way to support the local economy both directly through payments and indirectly through the creation of jobs (UNEP, 2015), to maintain regional identities and support agricultural diversification (Gössling *et al.*, 2011), and to foster local and sustainable development, especially in marginalized areas (Montanari and Staniscia, 2009).

Local purchasing and local food therefore contribute to sustainability from a triple bottom line perspective, supporting the economic, social, and environmental dimensions of sustainability. Several studies show that customers quite often associate organic food with environmental preservation and that customers' positive attitudes toward the environment have a strong influence on organic food decision-making process (De Magistris and Gracia, 2008; Seegebarth *et al.*, 2016).

Moreover, local food is also associated with the visitors' demand for quality, health, and authenticity. Some ES practices, in fact, can be perceived as a relevant part of overall service quality, and this is especially true for those practices that enhance luxury and comfort, that focus on health-related dimensions (Iraldo *et al.*, 2017), or that are very close to the customers' personal sphere, such as organic food, seasonal food, or food from small and local producers (Edwards-Jones *et al.*, 2008).

Food quality has obvious implications for customer satisfaction and food freshness and healthiness are important components of the overall food quality (Namkung and Jang, 2007). It is also consistent with the growing interest of customers in healthy lifestyles and healthy eating (Kim *et al.*, 2013). Local food is generally considered safe and natural (Draper and Green, 2002), and may provide a healthier option than processed and preserved food (UNEP, 2015). A research on a sample of Italian consumers (De Magistris and Gracia, 2008) provides evidence that having a healthy lifestyle and following a healthy and balanced diet are among the major predictors of organic food buying. Fresh and healthy food (i.e. local food)

can make a difference to customer satisfaction, provide superior value to customers, and even contribute to the formation of revisit intentions (Kim *et al.* 2013). A study in the US reports that almost all customers would pay more to eat in a green restaurant (Schubert *et al.*, 2010). Research on the Italian wine market shows that customers are willing to pay more for "natural," i.e. organic and local, wine (Galati *et al.*, 2019); further, Italian customers are willing to pay more for local and organic olive oil as well (Perito *et al.*, 2019). Moreover, a study on culinary tourism in central and southern Italy provides evidence that tourists interested in local wine and gastronomy generally show good levels of spending capacity (Montanari and Staniscia, 2009).

Promoting high-quality local food is also one possible way to achieve differentiation and attract customers that are interested in the typical traits of a destination (Woodland and Acott, 2007). Locally distinctive food contributes to the creation of a destination image (Cohen and Avieli, 2004); the possibility of enjoying a genuine gastronomic experience may represent a strong motivation for selecting a specific tourist destination and food has long played and still plays a key role in attracting tourists to Italy (Hjalager and Corigliano, 2000; Karim and Chi, 2010).

Moreover, local food is associated with service quality since it responds to the customers' quest for authenticity (Sims, 2009), and local and authentic food is considered to better represent and preserve a destination's local culture. Italy is acknowledged worldwide for the richness of its gastronomy (Cucculelli and Goffi, 2016), and culinary tourism has grown considerably in the recent years, becoming one of the most dynamic segments of the Italian tourism (Ferrari and Gilli, 2015). Wine and cuisine represent an important part of the local Italian culture, and Italy's destination image is strongly connected to gastronomic values (Karim and Chi, 2010). In a study on destination image held by US travelers, Italy was mostly associated with "food, cuisine, pasta, wine" (Baloglu and Mangaloglu, 2001). In a recent study on tourism destinations imagery, Italy was ranked as top preferred food destination by a sample of more than 1000 European and Asian tourists (Cardoso *et al.*, 2020). Local gastronomy and local food, as vital expressions of local culture and traditions, should thus be used to promote tourism and foster local development, especially in smaller tourist destinations (Cafiero *et al.*, 2019).

The same demographic characteristics that affect customers' attitudes and intentions toward sustainability may also affect their behavioral intentions toward local and organic food. Healthier eating and organic food are generally associated with "femininity" (Shin and Mattila, 2019), and, in a recent study on green restaurants, gender exerted a significant moderating effect on visit intentions (Moon, 2021). However, in the same study, age showed mixed results: although older respondents had a higher intention to visit green restaurants, they experienced lower levels of satisfaction than younger respondents (Moon, 2021). The vast majority of studies on organic purchase behaviors however agrees that more educated customers are more willing to purchase organic food (Dimitri and Dettman, 2011). A choice experiment on Italian consumers' attitudes toward organic food shows that the most educated respondents significantly prefer organic apples, while

again age shows inconsistent results (Ceschi *et al.*, 2018). Italian tourists interested in high quality food and wine generally display medium-high levels of education and spending capacity (Montanari and Staniscia, 2009). Last, in a study of the Italian wine market, younger customers and those with a lower level of education were more willing to pay for natural wine (Galati *et al.*, 2019); however, education was relatively high for the majority of respondents.

In sum, serving local food provides advantages for both hosts and guests; since it has a positive impact from a triple bottom line perspective, it may better respond to customer expectations for health and authenticity, and it may increase the overall service quality. In addition to demographic characteristics, customers' behavioral intentions toward ES practices are expected to vary according to the impact of each practice on quality and personal comfort. Customers therefore are expected to display more positive intentions toward the specific practice of serving local food, as it provides a healthier option to processed food and is considered an important component of service quality.

This study aims to examine the impact of different ES practices, including local food, commonly implemented by the hospitality industry, and provide support for the following hypotheses:

Hypothesis 1: Different ES practices in the hospitality industry have a different impact on hotel selection process, customers' expected satisfaction, and customers' willingness to pay a higher price.

Hypothesis 2: Serving local food has a positive influence on hotel selection process, customers' expected satisfaction, and customers' willingness to pay a higher price.

3. Methodology

3.1 Measures

A questionnaire was developed to test the research hypotheses. Previously validated measures for (a) hotel selection process, (b) customers' expected satisfaction, and (c) customers' willingness to pay a premium price were adapted from prior studies on customers' pro-environmental attitudes in the hospitality industry (Line and Hanks, 2016; Martínez, 2015; Xu and Gursoy, 2015).

Various ES practices were derived from the existing literature (e.g. Reid *et al.*, 2017; Holcomb *et al.*, 2012); in particular, 10 practices dealing with different dimensions of sustainability and that require a different level of compromise in terms of personal comfort were included in the questionnaire: two practices related to waste management (separate collection of waste and refillable soap and shampoo dispensers), two practices related to water conservation (rainwater recycling and a towel reuse program), two practices related to energy conservation (energy saving through LED lighting and renewable sources of energy), two practices dealing with customer involvement (informing customers about an environmental policy and involving customers in basic ES initiatives),

and two practices related to sustainable purchasing (eco-friendly detergents and local food).

Finally, the respondents' demographic information was collected, including age, gender, city and country of origin, profession, income, education, frequency of traveling, and motivations for traveling.

The final questionnaire is comprised of four sections. Section 1, "The reservation," deals with hotel choice: respondents are asked to imagine that they have to make a reservation at a hotel, or another kind of lodging facility, and to rate their level of agreement on a 5-point Likert scale in selecting accommodation that implements one of the 10 previously identified ES behaviors. In Section 2, "The stay," respondents have to rate their expected satisfaction during the stay in the accommodation that implements one of the 10 ES behaviors. In Section 3, "The bill," they have to rate their willingness to pay a 5% premium for staying in an accommodation that implements one of the 10 ES behaviors. In the last section, respondents are asked for their demographic information and to leave any additional suggestions or observations, as recommended by the literature (Bell, 2006).

A pilot test was conducted prior to the full survey, to adjust the survey instrument and incorporate suggestions from respondents. One of the main purposes of a pilot test is to ensure that respondents face no problem when answering the questions (Saunders *et al.*, 2009). In this case, the original ordering of questions was adjusted to make it clearer to respondents; in particular, instead of grouping questions according to the type of ES behavior, questions are grouped into three steps in a logical order from the respondents' point of view (i.e. the reservation, the stay, and the bill).

3.2 Sample and data collection

The final questionnaire was created with the aid of the LimeSurvey platform and distributed online through social networks, mostly Facebook. A non-probabilistic convenience sampling technique was adopted (Saunders *et al.*, 2009), and a link to the survey was posted on several Italian Facebook pages related to travel, tourism, and hospitality. Over the two-month period of the survey (July-August 2018), 328 questionnaires were returned, including 91 incomplete questionnaires. The final sample size is therefore comprised of 237 usable questionnaires.

Descriptive statistics were calculated for each item, including mean, median, and standard error. Subsequently, t-tests were performed to compare differences between respondent subsamples. Last, an exploratory factor analysis was conducted. All data analysis was performed with the aid of SPSS statistical software.

Of the 237 final sample respondents, most were women (70%); the average age was 40 years, spanning a minimum of 19 years and a maximum of 78 years. The large majority of respondents were Italian (95%), with 3% coming from northern European countries and 2% from eastern European countries, though all resided in Italy. With respect to professional status, 51% were employees, 18% were self-employees, 14% were students, 7% were retired, 4% were managers, 4% were unemployed, 1% performed household work, and 1% performed other jobs. The majority of the

respondents (69%) defined their income as average, 14% as above average, 14% as below average, and 3% preferred not to answer this question. Regarding educational levels, 34% had a master's degree, 32% a high school diploma, 17% a PhD, 12% a bachelor's degree, 2% a postgraduate degree, 2% an education level lower than high school, and 1% another kind of degree.

With respect to frequency of traveling, 24% traveled 1-5 nights per year, 28% 6-10 nights per year, 20% 11-15 nights per year, and 28% more than 15 nights per year. The majority of the respondents (84%) generally traveled for leisure, while 16% traveled for business. A positive, weak correlation (+0.364) was found between frequency of travel and reasons for travel, suggesting that respondents who traveled for business reasons generally traveled more often than those who traveled for holidays.

4. Results

All ES practices have a positive influence on the hotel selection process, since they all obtained an average rating higher than 3.00, which is the median value. However, ratings range from 3.47 for having a towel reuse program to 4.72 for preferring local food to the processed option, indicating that different ES practices exert a different level of influence on the hotel selection process. Very similar trends emerge for customers' expected satisfaction during the stay: again, all ES practices are rated higher than 3.00 on average, and, again, ratings range from 3.64 for having a towel reuse program to 4.73 for preferring local food. These results support the idea that customers' expected satisfaction varies with different ES behaviors.

With respect to customers' willingness to pay a higher price to stay in green accommodation, variability in ratings increases: preferring local food to the processed option remains the most influential ES practice, with an average rating of 4.10, and the towel reuse program again receives the lowest rating, that in this case is even below the median value (2.75). These results suggest that some ES behaviors may exert a negative influence on customers' willingness to pay a premium price. These results are in line with previous studies reporting a gap between environmental concerns and willingness to pay extra for ES services (Manaktola and Jauhari, 2007).

The mean, median, and standard deviation for each ES practice in the hotel selection process, customers' expected satisfaction, and customers' willingness to pay a premium price are reported in Tables 1, 2, and 3 respectively.

An independent sample t-test was performed to assess the differences between men and women. This analysis technique takes into account the standard error of the estimates of the means for each group; therefore, the different sample size between men and women was not a concern. Results indicate that women hold more favorable behavioral intentions toward almost all ES behaviors at a 0.05 level of significance, as shown in Table 4. Choosing a hotel where separate collection is in place and paying extra for a towel reuse program were the only ES behaviors where no significant difference between men and women emerged.

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Tab. 1: Hotel selection - Descriptive statistics

Variable	Mean	Median	SD
Towel reuse program	3.47	4	1.42
Involving customers	3.79	**4**	1.18
Refillable dispensers	3.87	**4**	1.22
Informing customers	4.22	**5**	0.96
Rainwater recycling	4.30	**5**	1.02
Energy saving	4.30	**5**	0.95
Separate collection of waste	4.32	**5**	0.98
Eco-friendly detergents	4.41	**5**	0.86
Renewable sources of energy	4.46	**5**	0.84
Local food	4.72	**5**	0.69

Source: our elaboration on SPSS

Tab. 2: Customers' expected satisfaction - Descriptive statistics

Variable	Mean	Median	SD
Towel reuse program	3.64	4	1.39
Refillable dispensers	4.00	4	1.19
Involving customers	4.08	4	1.05
Informing customers	4.23	5	0.99
Rainwater recycling	4.49	5	0.82
Energy saving	4.49	5	0.85
Eco-friendly detergents	4.57	5	0.77
Separate collection of waste	4.59	5	0.77
Renewable sources of energy	4.59	5	0.76
Local food	4.73	5	0.70

Source: our elaboration on SPSS

Tab. 3: Willingness to pay a premium - Descriptive statistics

Variable	Mean	Median	SD
Towel reuse program	2.75	3	1.44
Informing customers	2.79	3	1.42
Involving customers	3.03	3	1.37
Refillable dispensers	3.03	3	1.39
Separate collection of waste	3.10	3	1.43
Energy saving	3.13	3	1.34
Rainwater recycling	3.14	3	1.37
Renewable sources of energy	3.43	4	1.34
Eco-friendly detergents	3.50	4	1.39
Local food	4.10	5	1.23

Source: our elaboration on SPSS

Tab. 4: Gender t-test

Variable	Gender	N	Mean	SD	SD in Mean	P-value (2-tailed)
Choose_local food	M F	72 165	4.56 4.79	.977 .512	.115 .040	.015
Choose_rainwater recycling	M F	72 165	3.86 4.48	1.248 .838	.147 .065	.000
Choose_energy saving	M F	72 165	3.92 4.47	1.148 .793	.135 .062	.000
Choose_informing customers	M F	72 165	3.92 4.35	1.110 .860	.131 .067	.004
Choose_towel reuse program	M F	72 165	3.00 3.68	1.511 1.334	.178 .104	.001
Choose_involving customers	M F	72 165	3.33 3.99	1.233 1.099	.145 .086	.000
Choose_refillable dispenser	M F	72 165	3.43 4.07	1.392 1.083	.164 .084	.000
Choose_renewable sources of energy	M F	72 165	4.10 4.62	1.077 .647	.127 .050	.000
Choose_eco-friendly detergents	M F	72 165	4.03 4.58	1.061 .691	.125 .054	.000
Satisfied_separate collection of waste	M F	72 165	4.33 4.70	1.007 .609	.119 .047	.001
Satisfied_local food	M F	72 165	4.57 4.81	.962 .528	.113 .041	.016
Satisfied_rainwtaer recycling	M F	72 165	4.14 4.65	1.039 .652	.122 .051	.000
Satisfied_energy saving	M F	72 165	4.10 4.65	1.128 .631	.133 .049	.000
Satisfied_informing customers	M F	72 165	3.81 4.42	1.171 .849	.138 .066	.000
Satisfied_towel reuse program	M F	72 165	3.25 3.81	1.441 1.342	.170 .104	.006
Satisfied_involving customers	M F	72 165	3.63 4.27	1.156 .939	.136 .073	.000
Satisfied_refillable dispensers	M F	72 165	3.71 4.12	1.326 1.109	.156 .086	.014
Satisfied_renewable sources of energy	M F	72 165	4.31 4.72	.973 .611	.115 .048	.000
Satisfied_eco-friendly detergents	M F	72 165	4.32 4.68	.990 .613	.117 .048	.001
Pay_separate collection of waste	M F	72 165	2.74 3.26	1.463 1.396	.172 .109	.011
Pay_local food	M F	72 165	3.85 4.21	1.440 1.114	.170 .087	.036
Pay_rainwater recycling	M F	72 165	2.69 3.33	1.380 1.327	.163 .103	.001
Pay_energy saving	M F	72 165	2.67 3.33	1.384 1.274	.163 .099	.001
Pay_informing customers	M F	72 165	2.36 2.98	1.335 1.416	.157 .110	.002
Pay_involving customers	M F	72 165	2.65 3.20	1.436 1.303	.169 .101	.006
Pay_refillable dispenser	M F	72 165	2.65 3.19	1.396 1.355	.164 .105	.007
Pay_renewable sources of energy	M F	72 165	2.90 3.67	1.416 1.246	.167 .097	.000
Pay_eco-friendly detergents	M F	72 165	3.03 3.70	1.510 1.279	.178 .100	.000

Source: our elaboration on SPSS

Another independent sample t-test was performed to assess the differences between subsamples with different levels of education. For the purposes of this analysis, the education level was split into two groups: those with at least a bachelor's degree (156 respondents) and those with a high school diploma or below (81 respondents).

Results indicate that people with a higher level of education display more favorable behavioral intentions toward items related to local food at a 0.05 level of significance. Moreover, they are more likely to choose a hotel where customers are informed about ES behaviors that are in place and are more likely to be satisfied with refillable dispensers and renewable sources of energy. These findings are reported in Table 5.

Tab. 5: Education t-test

Variable	Education	N	Mean	SD	SD in Mean	P-value (2-tailed)
Choose_local food	Higher	156	4.79	.553	.044	.024
	Lower	81	4.58	.893	.099	
Choose_informing customers	Higher	156	4.31	.878	.070	.028
	Lower	81	4.02	1.084	.120	
Satisfied_local food	Higher	156	4.81	.566	.045	.014
	Lower	81	4.58	.878	.098	
Satisfied_refillable dispensers	Higher	156	4.13	1.060	.085	.012
	Lower	81	3.73	1.379	.153	
Satisfied_renewable sources of energy	Higher	156	4.69	.597	.048	.006
	Lower	81	4.41	.985	.109	
Pay_local food	Higher	156	4.22	1.145	.092	.032
	Lower	81	3.86	1.358	.151	

Source: our elaboration on SPSS

With respect to the age of respondents, no significant differences were found.

Last, an exploratory factor analysis was conducted, using the principal components method to extract factors. The ES behaviors displayed significantly different average ratings across all three dimensions investigated in this study: local-food-related behaviors always displayed the highest ratings, behaviors that lower personal comfort, such as the towel reuse program, received the lowest rating, while more "neutral" behaviors were for the most part rated as average. In any case, all ES behaviors received the lowest rating in the willingness to pay dimension. Both the Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin and Barlett's test of sphericity were satisfactory, supporting the appropriateness of factor analysis; the final rotated Varimax solutions displayed four factors, as reported in Table 6.

Tab. 6: Exploratory factor analysis

Factors	Loadings	Cronbach's alpha
Factor 1: Neutral behaviors		0.948
Choose_separate collection of waste	0.754	
Choose_rainwater recycling	0.750	
Choose_energy saving	0.776	
Choose_informing customers	0.674	
Choose_renewable sources of energy	0.812	
Choose_eco-friendly detergent	0.781	
Satisfied_separate collection of waste	0.702	
Satisfied_rainwater recycling	0.762	
Satisfied_energy saving	0.781	
Satisfied_informing customers	0.624	
Satisfied_involving customers	0.538	
Satisfied_renewable sources of energy	0.778	
Satisfied_eco-friendly detergent	0.758	
Factor 2: Willingness to pay		0.959
Pay_separate collection of waste	0.805	
Pay_rainwater recycling	0.855	
Pay_energy saving	0.871	
Pay_informing customers	0.809	
Pay_towel reuse program	0.726	
Pay_involving customers	0.873	
Pay_refillable dispenser	0.805	
Pay_renewable sources of energy	0.824	
Pay_eco-friendly detergent	0.821	
Factor 3: Low comfort behaviors		0.859
Choose_towel reuse program	0.776	
Choose_involving customers	0.541	
Choose_refillable dispenser	0.510	
Satisfied_towel reuse program	0.822	
Satisfied_refillable dispenser	0.563	
Factor 4: Local food		0.762
Choose_local food	0.830	
Satisfied_local food	0.864	
Pay_local food	0.692	
Cronbach's alpha of the total scale 0.956 % Variance explained: 71.178 KMO: 0.913 Bartlett: 7071.223 Significance: 0.000		

Source: our elaboration on SPSS

5. Discussion

Results of this study provide support for Hypothesis 1, since they show that different ES practices do not display the same influence on customers' behavioral intentions. In particular, all ES practices have a

positive influence on the hotel selection process and customers' expected satisfaction, though to differing extents, but not all ES practices positively affect customers' willingness to pay a higher price.

The exploratory factor analysis also supports the existence of four different types of ES behaviors; namely, neutral behaviors, on payment behaviors, low comfort behaviors, and food-related behaviors. These findings thus provide evidence that environmental sustainability is a multidimensional concept and that initiatives that lower personal comfort produce different effects on customers' behavioral intentions than more neutral initiatives and those related to food.

Considering the variability in ratings across dimensions and the results of the factor analysis, these findings are also in line with previous research related to the gap between customers' attitudes (such as hotel choice and expected satisfaction) and willingness to pay (Manaktola and Jauhari, 2007). Moreover, results are in line with previous studies stressing the importance of finding a balance between environmental preservation and service quality (Font *et al.*, 2008; Haastert and Grosbois, 2010; Iraldo *et al.* 2017).

In addition, in line with previous research (Han *et al.*, 2011), t-tests demonstrated that women generally display more favorable behavioral intentions than men for almost all the ES initiatives investigated in this study; respondents who held at least a bachelor's degree were also more likely to appreciate initiatives related to local food, together with other more neutral initiatives (i.e. informing customers and providing refillable dispensers and renewable sources of energy). Consistent with previous research (Han *et al.*, 2011; Ceschi *et al.*, 2018), results related to age differences were not significant.

Hypothesis 2 is also supported by the results, showing that among the different ES initiatives, serving local food has the most positive influence on the hotel selection process, customers' expected satisfaction during the stay, and customers' willingness to pay a higher price. Local food is, in fact, the only specific ES practice that has a mean value higher than 4 and a median value equal to 5 across all customer behavioral intentions, and all items related to food, including willingness to pay extra, belong to the same factor. In line with previous studies (Montanari and Staniscia, 2009: Dimitri and Dettman, 2011; Moon, 2021), women with higher education levels are more likely to show positive behavioral intentions toward local food.

This finding may be explained not just in terms of customers' growing concerns about social and environmental sustainability (Boley and Uysal, 2013; Cucculelli and Goffi, 2016), but by the increasing attention to healthy food and healthy lifestyles (Kim *et al.*, 2013), by visitors' demand for authenticity (Sims, 2009; Cafiero *et al.*, 2019), and by the perception that quality food is a key component of overall destination image (Cardoso *et al.*, 2020) and service quality (Namkung and Jang, 2007).

Regardless of the explanation, this result is of crucial importance from a triple bottom line perspective, since it confirms that local food can provide advantages for both hosts and guests, and for the natural environment (Gössling *et al.*, 2011; Wang *et al.*, 2013; UNEP, 2015; UNEP, 2005): local

food, which has a relatively small environmental impact in terms of GHG emissions, a positive economic impact for businesses by reducing costs of transportation, and a positive social impact by supporting local economies, is also an initiative that positively affects customers' hotel selection process, customers' expected satisfaction during the stay, and even customers' willingness to pay a premium price.

6. Conclusions

The aim of this research was to investigate whether different ES practices generally adopted by the hospitality industry produce different effects on customers' behavioral intentions in terms of hotel selection process, expected satisfaction during the stay, and willingness to pay a higher price. In particular, the research aimed to examine the effect of different ES practices depending on how service quality and personal comfort are compromised, and the particular effect of an ES practice that is highly connected to customer health and represents a key component of overall service quality; namely, local food.

Both hypotheses of the study are supported by the results, implying that environmental sustainability involves different dimensions and that the ES initiatives that better contribute to overall service quality (i.e. local food) are better able to stimulate positive customer behavioral intentions across all the dimensions analyzed in the current research: hotel choice, expected satisfaction, and willingness to pay more.

In addition, results show that there may be different behavioral intentions toward ES initiatives depending on travelers' demographic characteristics, such as gender and education levels.

The research adds to previous literature on sustainability and customers' behavioral intentions in the hospitality industry by highlighting specific dimensions of environmental sustainability, rather than treating it as a single, and sometimes quite abstract, notion.

In addition, the findings provide further support to previous literature by stressing the importance of meeting hospitality and comfort standards while taking into account environment-related issues, and ultimately, finding a balance between service quality and environmental preservation (Font *et al.*, 2008; Haastert and Grosbois, 2010). In line with previous research (Cucculelli and Goffi, 2016), this study strengthens the idea that ES initiatives can create a "win-win" for both the natural environment and hospitality companies' competitiveness.

Moreover, results provide important practical implications for hospitality managers. First and foremost, results suggest that all ES behaviors should be emphasized by corporate marketing and communication strategies, since they all positively affect the hotel selection process and overall expected customer satisfaction. However, according to the results, it is possible to assess priorities for different ES behaviors, as addressing all possible behaviors would be a difficult task for hospitality operators, and indeed, some ES practices may lead to more positive results than others.

Moreover, with respect to customers' willingness to pay a higher price, a company's preference for local and organic food should definitely

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be encouraged and promoted-a finding that is also in line with previous studies (Montanari and Staniscia, 2009: Iraldo *et al.*, 2017; Cafiero *et al.*, 2019). This research argues clearly that serving local food can serve as a means to increase both hospitality companies' competitiveness and long-term sustainability.

Customers' sociodemographic characteristics such as gender and education should also be taken into account when developing communication and promotion strategies for green hotels. Hospitality managers should in any case reassure customers of the quality of the service being provided (Line and Hanks, 2016), try to make the physical environment more conducive to sustainability (Miao and Wei, 2013), and integrate these kinds of practices into a consistent and coherent marketing strategy, so that customers become more aware of the value that these ES behaviors represent for the natural environment, and understand that they are not merely a way to allow companies to cut costs.

A limitation of the study is that it addresses almost only Italian respondents, thus preventing the possibility of making comparisons across different cultures and nationalities. This is particularly significant as previous research has found that nationality can play a significant role in eco-behaviors and intentions (Fermani *et al.*, 2016), and on organic food-related choices (Seegebarth *et al.*, 2016). Further research should enlarge the sample to include respondents from other countries, especially from northern European countries, who have been found to display greater awareness of environmental preservation. Enlarging the sample may allow the derivation of market segmentation based on customer nationality. Another important limitation of the research is that only customers' behavioral intentions are investigated, while there is often a gap between intentions and actual behaviors (Juvan and Dolnicar, 2014). Further research may provide insights into real customer behaviors.

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