



## Green attributes of restaurants: What really matters to consumers?



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### ABSTRACT

This study examined which of a restaurant's green attributes consumers deem most important and how consumers' attitudes toward various green attributes affect their behavioral intentions. Demographic effects on consumers' preferences for green attributes and behavioral intentions were also assessed. A quantitative analysis of 382 usable questionnaires revealed that although consumers generally perceived environment-focused attributes to be most important, those who valued food- and administration-focused attributes were more likely to pay more, wait longer, and/or travel farther to dine at a green restaurant. Women tended to rate higher than men in all three categories of green attributes. Consumers in a family with at least one child valued food-focused attributes more than those living in a household without children. Younger consumers were more willing to pay more, wait longer, and/or travel farther to dine at a green restaurant. Theoretical and practical contributions are discussed.

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### 1. Introduction

Today's consumers have become more ecologically conscious than before (Dewald et al., 2014). It comes as no surprise that the demand for environmentally friendly products has grown during the past decade (Jang et al., 2011). Indeed, research has documented that consumers not only favor eco-friendly products and businesses that are serious about environmental practices more than before (Han et al., 2009), but are also willing to pay more for green products that are less harmful for the environment (e.g., DiPietro et al., 2013b; Kim et al., 2015; Laroche et al., 2001; Susskind, 2014). A great number of consumers consider themselves to be environmentally concerned patrons at restaurants, meaning that when they dine out, they want to feel as if they have done something good for the environment rather than simply having a good meal (Parker, 2011).

The increasing demand for eco-friendly travel and hospitality products has effected numerous changes to the hospitality and tourism industry. For example, many hospitality firms now recognize sustainability as a critical strategic issue facing the industry and have devoted massive marketing efforts toward sustainability (Bonn et al., 2016). Concurrently, a large percentage of restaurateurs plan to invest in energy-saving equipment and water-saving devices (National Restaurant Association, 2013), and

many restaurants have already offered more locally and sustainably grown organic options on their menus (Bonn et al., 2016)

Committing to green practices is found to generate more benefits for a company than simply attracting consumers' attention to the business (Schubert et al., 2010). Existing literature has suggested that green practices can affect the sustainability of natural environments (Dutta et al., 2008), reduce operational costs (First, 2008; Schubert et al., 2010; Susskind, 2014), improve a business' corporate image and customer ratings (Hu et al., 2010; Namkung and Jang, 2013; Peiró-Signes et al., 2014), increase consumers' purchasing and word-of-mouth intentions (Barber and Deale, 2014; Manaktola and Jauhari, 2007; Vieregge et al., 2007), and foster long-term success of a company's financial performance (Singal, 2014).

Although the prominence of restaurants' green practices and their positive effects has been widely documented in hospitality literature, not many studies have compared consumers' perceived importance of various green attributes. At the same time, though many hospitality scholars have measured the impact of restaurants' green attributes on consumers' willingness to pay more or revisit the restaurant (e.g., Hu et al., 2010; Jang et al., 2011; Kim et al., 2015), past research tends to overlook consumers' other transactional intentions and behaviors. For example, consumers might demonstrate a stronger acceptance of tradeoffs for achieving sustainability, including the sacrifices of comfort, time, and money (Sigala, 2014). In the restaurant setting, such tradeoffs can also include a willingness to wait longer and/or travel farther, since consumers feel that their experience with a green restaurant is worth the extra effort. Moreover, current literature shows

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inconsistent findings regarding how consumers' demographic backgrounds influence their preferences for green attributes of restaurants and/or their behavioral intentions in terms of gender (e.g., DiPietro et al., 2013a; Hu et al., 2010), age (Hu et al., 2010; Schubert et al., 2010), income (e.g., Newell and Green, 1997; Schubert et al., 2010), and other variables, which suggests that this line of research deserves additional attention.

In response, the purposes of this study are threefold: (a) to compare consumers' perceived importance of various green attributes of restaurants; (b) to explore the impact of consumers' perceived importance of various green attributes on their behavioral intentions (i.e., willingness to pay more, wait longer, and/or travel farther to dine at a green restaurant), and (c) to examine the influence of consumers' demographic backgrounds on their preferences for green attributes and behavioral intentions. The research findings of this study are expected to guide restaurateurs in making informed business decisions about a restaurant's green initiatives. Restaurant owners and managers would be able to allocate their time and company resources wisely by focusing on the green initiatives that are deemed most important to their target customers.

## 2. Literature review

### 2.1. Green attributes of restaurants

*Going green* means "being environmentally responsible and utilizing practices that minimize the damage done to the environment" (DiPietro and Gregory, 2012, p. 2), and green practices are those that organizations can engage to minimize their carbon footprint and reduce harm to the environment, including the overuse of resources as well as any use of non-recyclable products, ineffective recycling processes, and harmful chemical products (DiPietro and Gregory, 2012; Schubert et al., 2010). Jang et al. (2011) defined a *green restaurant* as one that implements green practices, including recycling and composting, water and energy efficiency, and waste management, as well as offers the option of locally grown or organic food on the menu.

For green restaurants, green food and green practices are important factors that influence patronage decisions (Hu et al., 2010). Generally, green practices that can be widely observed in restaurant businesses include employing energy- and water-efficiency equipment, using locally-grown and organic food, offering healthy menus, forbidding disposable cups and to-go containers, offering biodynamic and sustainable wines, training employees to adopt green practices, recycling and disposing of cooking oil, conserving energy, and reducing pollution (Dutta et al., 2008; First, 2008; Gázquez-Abad et al., 2015; Schubert et al., 2010).

Hospitality scholars often conceptualize the green practices of restaurants under the framework of corporate social responsibilities (CSR). CSR is defined as a company's "commitment to improve societal well-being through discretionary business practices and contributions of corporate resources" (Du et al., 2010, p. 8). Guided by the CSR framework, scholars have proposed three dimensions of green practices: health concerns, environmental concerns, and social concerns (e.g., Choi and Parsa, 2006; Schubert et al., 2010; Susskind, 2014). Nevertheless, some practices grouped in Choi and Parsa's (2006) dimension of social concerns, which include community involvement, socially responsible design, socially responsible marketing, and fair human resource practices, might have somewhat deviated from the definitions of *green* or *green practices* in restaurants. Moreover, Choi and Parsa's (2006) dimension of social concerns failed to take into account the operational aspect of certain emerging initiatives taken by restaurants, such as providing more training for employees in adopting green practices (e.g., Manaktola and Jauhari, 2007; Mohr and Webb, 2005) and

attaining a green certificate from a non-profit organization (e.g., DiPietro et al., 2013b). Because restaurateurs usually have to invest a large amount of administrative hours in training and attaining a green certificate, we propose a modification of the CSR framework and classify the green attributes of restaurants into three categories based on our review of related literature. Though food- and environment-focused dimensions remain in the framework, social-concern attributes are replaced with an alternative dimension: administration-focused attributes. Alternatively, despite the increased recognition of different dimensions, a three-dimensional framework has yet to be validated. Since these three dimensions remain to be subsumed under the broader concept of green practices, a single, second-order factor measurement model consisting of three first-order factors deserves empirical validation.

#### 2.1.1. Food-focused green attributes

Food is a way to vitalize and deliver green practices to consumers in the foodservice sector. In general, organic, locally and sustainably grown food can be considered to constitute green food (LaVecchia, 2008). According to Roddy et al. (1994), organic food is produced in farms that are considerably limited in their use of fertilizers and pesticides, and because organic farming prohibits most synthetic pesticides and restricts the use of natural pesticides, thereby leaving very few pesticide residues on food, consumers tend to feel that organic foods are a better choice than non-organic ones (Baker et al., 2002). In that sense, *locally grown food* is defined as a kind of food produced and consumed in a specific geographical area (Jones et al., 2004). Buying local, as it is termed, lowers the usage of fossil fuels for shipping and transportation, thereby decreasing air pollution (Weber and Matthews, 2008).

Research evidence has generally suggested that food-focused green attributes such as organic or locally-grown food ingredients may appeal to customers, particularly health-conscious ones, who tend to prioritize their health and form their purchasing decisions based on such attributes (e.g., Hu et al., 2010; Jang et al., 2011). In their analysis, Hu et al. (2010) confirmed that people who care more about their health are more likely to purchase green products. It is argued that offering green food could reinforce a restaurant's eco friendly image, helping the restaurant draw customers' attention and increase patronage. Vieregge et al. (2007) found that roughly 67% of participants preferred locally grown products, and 70.9% would visit a quick service restaurant more often if the restaurant provides locally-grown food.

#### 2.1.2. Environment-focused green attributes

In practice, several environment-focused green initiatives have been executed. Gilg et al. (2005) emphasized the three Rs—reduce, reuse, and recycle – and two Es—energy and efficiency – as the core definitional elements for distinguishing green from non-green initiatives. Drawing upon related literature (Dutta et al., 2008; First, 2008; Cordano and Frieze, 2000), we identified five categories of environment-focused green initiatives revolving around the notions of three Rs and two Es: (1) recycling and composting (First, 2008), (2) renewable power (Fahmy et al., 2012), (3) pollution prevention and reduction (Cordano and Frieze, 2000), (4) energy efficiency and conservation (Lee et al., 2013), and (5) water efficiency and conservation (First, 2008).

#### 2.1.3. Administration-focused green attributes

Within the modified taxonomy of green attributes proposed earlier, administration-focused green attributes consist of green certifications, CSR, and employee training for green practices. A great number of green certification programs have been introduced in the foodservice industry, such as Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design (LEED) Certification, Green Seal Certification, Green Restaurant Association Certification, Certified Green

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