



# Effects of temporal distance and related strategies on enhancing customer participation intention for hotel eco-friendly programs

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## ARTICLE INFO

### Keywords:

Temporal distance  
Foot-in-the-door  
Outcome simulation  
Eco-friendly program  
Green hotel

## ABSTRACT

Hotel eco-friendly programs (HEFP) depend on the support of both internal and external customers. While hotel environmental management has received considerable attention, little research focuses on how customers evaluate and respond to HEFP, particularly in the context of variable temporal distance. This study thus examined the effects of different temporal distance strategies on promoting customer participation in HEFP. Based on data collected from 235 undergraduate students, this study employed two  $2 \times 2$  between-subjects design experiments by using foot-in-the-door and outcome simulation strategies for the hypotheses testing. The analytical results indicated that the foot-in-the-door strategy significantly increases distant-future HEFP intention while the outcome simulation strategy significantly enhances near-future HEFP intention. Implications for green hotel management strategies were also discussed.

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## 1. Introduction

Environmental protection and sustainability have become some of the most important and “hottest” issues across business sectors worldwide. With the growth of environmental awareness and concern among the public, numerous corporations have begun to introduce environmental management measures and focus on eco-friendly products or services (McDaniel and Rylander, 1993). Environmental claims about commercial products and services have been considered as a strategy for green marketing communication (Noci and Verganti, 1999; Schuhwerk and Lefkoff-Hagius, 1995). With green marketing proliferating across several industries, the “green” opportunity is also appearing in the hotel industry as a basis for effective marketing strategies that can help hotel firms differentiate themselves from otherwise similar competitors (Han et al., 2010; Leonidou et al., 2013). Holcomb et al. (2007) suggest that the way hotel firms deal with environmental issues is likely to affect their long-term competitiveness. Previous studies also claimed that hotel environmental programs or initiatives are a useful strategy to enhance corporate social responsibility (Bohdanowicz et al., 2011; Butler, 2008; Lee et al., 2010). The use of eco-friendly programs not only can respond to the demand for

environmentally friendly consumption, but can also bring various benefits to hotel firms themselves, including reduced energy consumption and operational costs, and enhanced corporate brand image, brand equity, and public recognition (Erdogan and Tosun, 2009; Han et al., 2010; Namkung and Jang, 2012; Teng et al., 2012).

While prior research has considered hotel eco-friendly programs (HEFP) as a capability that enforces competitive advantage, little attention has been particularly paid to customer responses and evaluations of HEFP for shaping an eco-friendly marketing strategy. Given that customers are directly influenced by the services provided by hotel firms, they are actively exposed to hotel green marketing activities (Leonidou et al., 2013). A lack of understanding on using effective strategies to promote customer participation in HEFP may elicit negative customer responses toward HEFP and thus reduce corporate competitive advantages. Specifically, studies on green hotels found that guests tend to perceive HEFP would inconvenience them and compromise their comfort, and therefore are unlikely to cooperate with hotel environmental practices (Kasim, 2004). This result highlights the need to develop effective strategies to stimulate favorable customer responses toward HEFP.

Although researchers have investigated the effects of hotel green marketing strategies, few studies have considered that customers may have different representations of HEFP at different temporal distances (e.g., before versus upon arrival at the hotel), which could be used to increase their positive attitude and evaluation of HEFP. That is, a universal strategy for promoting HEFP at

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different temporal distances (i.e. distant and near-future HEFP) may not be appropriate to achieve the effectiveness of green marketing. Liberman and Trope (1998) proposed the construal level theory (CLT) and claimed that temporal distance systematically influences how individuals construe future activities, and that construal eventually would change their preferences and evaluations. According to CLT, individuals use two different levels of construals, high and low, to represent information on distant and near future events (Liberman and Trope, 1998; Trope and Liberman, 2000, 2003). It thus can be posited that customers have different representing information about HEFP at different temporal distances. Given the assumption mentioned above, an investigation into how CLT can be used in HEFP not only can provide additional value to the extant literature but also can help managers and marketers to develop effective green marketing strategies that can enhance customer favorable responses and involvement in HEFP. Furthermore, the application of CLT on HEFP can also provide an innovative and economic benefit for hotel operators since it does not require a large amount of monetary investments for the improvement of hotel environmental performance.

The objective of this study is to develop and examine the effects of strategies for both near and far temporal distances, namely foot-in-the-door (FITD) (Freedman and Fraser, 1966) and outcome simulation (Taylor et al., 1998) respectively, to enhance customer participation intention for HEFP. This investigation highlights the need to use different approaches to fit time-dependent changes in customer preferences and evaluations of hotel greening policies. The results and implications of this study can help hotel managers and marketers devise innovative strategies within the limited budget to effectively motivate customers in support of environmentally friendly consumption and “going-green” activities.

## 2. Literature review and hypotheses development

### 2.1. Customer attitude and behavioral intention for eco-friendly initiatives

As customers have become increasingly aware of environmental problems, the issue of environmental protection has been widely discussed (Roberts, 1996). Given that a sustainable environment is vital for service quality and the attractiveness of tourist destinations, it is in the interest of hospitality firms to ensure the long-term environmental sustainability of tourist activity (Bohdanowicz et al., 2011). This implies that hotel firms seeking for long-term competitiveness should feature environmental protection prominently on the business agendas and initiate eco-friendly programs to reduce the negative impact of the environment, especially those caused by human activities. This situation also provides an opportunity for companies to differentiate themselves and obtain competitive advantages by offering green products or services through various green marketing tactics (McDaniel and Rylander, 1993; Noci and Verganti, 1999; Pizam, 2009; Roberts, 1996; Schuhwerk and Lefkoff-Hagius, 1995).

Indeed, numerous studies have investigated the impacts of individual perceptions, personal characteristics, and perceived attributes on the evaluation and choice intention of green hotels or restaurants. Lee et al. (2010) indicated that perceived value, quality attributes, and the overall image of a green hotel serve as critical antecedents of customer revisit intention. Namkung and Jang (2012) further demonstrated that restaurant green practices could effectively improve customer perceptions of green brand image and green behavioral intention. Hu et al. (2010) showed that customer environmental concerns and prior knowledge of green restaurants have been identified significantly influencing subsequent green buying behavior. Han et al. (2010) applied the Theory of

Planned Behavior model to the formation of customer intention to visit a green hotel and found that green attitude is significantly associated with hotel visit intention. Finally, a comparative study of Greece and the United States showed that consumers in both countries are more likely to patronize and demonstrate strong willingness to pay premium price for hotels implementing eco-friendly practices (Choi et al., 2009). To increase customer support and participation in HEFP, hotel strategies for HEFP should respond to customer requests and interests that eventually could enhance their stay intention at the hotel.

However, customer attitude toward eco-friendly products and services is not always consistent with their subsequent intention and behavior (Ajzen and Fishbein, 1977; Glasman and Albarracín, 2006; Guagnano et al., 1995). Although customers may have concerns regarding environmental issues, a lag has been found between environmental concerns and green buying behavior (Chang, 2011; Hanas, 2007). Previous studies demonstrated that a high proportion of customers are willing to purchase green products, but only a few actually make such purchases (Luchs et al., 2010; United Nations Environment Programme, 2005). To provide a possible explanation, researchers have identified ambivalent attitude resulting from maintaining both positive and negative purchase evaluations as a critical factor influencing the effect of green marketing strategies. For example, consumers tend to select products that are harmless to the environment due to emotional benefits of green buying behavior (e.g., feeling proud); however, they may simultaneously consider the inferior quality and higher cost deriving from purchasing green products (Chang, 2011). Similarly, hotel guests may be willing to take measures to protect the environment, but compulsory environmental practices are inevitably considered a negative impact on guest convenience and the overall accommodation experience. As Kasim (2004) noted, guests are unlikely to sacrifice the comfort and services provided by hotel firms to conform to the requirements of environmental practices.

According to the discussion mentioned above, previous studies have made considerable attempts to find the mechanisms of customer attitude and preference of HEFP. However, little research has focused on how customers represent HEFP at different temporal distances. To fill the void of the literature on changing customer environmental behavior, the current study provided a new approach on hotel green marketing strategies in which considered examining the effect of temporal distance on customer evaluation and participation intention for HEFP.

### 2.2. Construal level theory

Liberman and Trope (1998) proposed “construal level theory” to explain how different temporal distances influence individual representations, evaluations, and preferences (Trope and Liberman, 2000, 2003). CLT hypothesizes that temporal distance, defined as the perceived temporal proximity of an event, changes individual representations of the event by influencing how people mentally construe it. Individuals use more abstract mental models, or higher level construals, to construe information regarding the distant future than that about the near future. More specifically, distant-future events generally use high-level construals, which are simpler, more abstract and more decontextualized. High-level construals concern the essential features of the events and why they need to be done. In contrast, near-future events generally use low-level construals, which include more concrete, contextual and incidental details. Low-level construals concern the incidental features of events, including the associated action steps. To date, CLT has been broadly applied to several research fields, including mental simulation (Zhao et al., 2007), technology-based innovation (Ziamou and Veryzer, 2005), social distance (Kim et al., 2008;

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