



The ethical dimension of tourism certification programs



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ABSTRACT

How much does perceived ethical obligation influence decision outcomes? This study investigates the decision-making processes involving corporate social responsibility in small and medium sized hospitality enterprises. Drawing on attitude–behavior theory we use a revised version of the theory of trying and include a measurement of perceived ethical obligation to explore these decision-making processes. A scenario based experimental design was employed, presenting four different CSR related choices to the respondents. Standard multiple regression analysis were run to test the model. The results gave moderate empirical support for the model and support was found for the proposed link between perceived ethical obligation and CSR engagement.

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1. Introduction

In tourism, corporate social responsibility (CSR) is receiving increased attention. Yet, many small and medium-sized enterprise (SME) owner/managers are reluctant to engage in CSR behavior for a variety of reasons, including lack of financial resources, time, or knowledge (Parker et al., 2010). However, increased stakeholder pressure requires tourism businesses to respond to the demand for more sustainable behavior in the industry (Font et al., 2012). With CSR being a fairly new topic in hospitality management studies, relatively little research has been undertaken (Bohdanowicz and Zientara, 2008a,b). Thus, it might be informative to investigate the decision-making processes underlying CSR-related decisions. The aim of this study was to examine the decision-making processes of managers with respect to CSR within the hospitality industry. We hypothesized that in a decision situation, managers perceiving the issue of CSR as having an ethical dimension will more likely choose to engage in CSR-related behavior. For the purpose of this study, CSR behavior was operationalized as tourism certification programs. To test our hypotheses, we examined a revised model of the theory of trying that also comprised perceived ethical obligation.

A growing amount of general literature on CSR has focused on aspects such as CSR's ideological foundations, purposes, and management, as well as the development of performance measurements and external disclosures (Kotonen, 2009; Lepoutre and Heene, 2006). Few studies have applied social cognitive theories to investigate the psychological processes and motivations underlying managers' decision making regarding CSR. One exception is

Ferdous (2010), who examined how marketing managers' behavioral intentions were related to determinants within the theory of planned behavior and how managerial intentions, in turn, were a predictor of actual behavior. Generally, Sparks and Pan (2010) noted a lack of research integrating theories of ethical decision making with models of social cognition.

While hospitality industry research on CSR is limited, some research on CSR reporting in the hospitality industry has been undertaken (Font et al., 2012; Holcomb et al., 2007). Holcomb et al. (2007) used content analysis to identify and describe patterns in websites, annual reports, and specified social responsibility reports for hotel companies. Bohdanowicz and Zientara (2008a,b) examined hotels' CSR reporting by using data publicly available via websites. Font et al. (2012) investigated the CSR disclosure-performance gap of international hotel chains. Dief and Font (2010) investigated the determinants of green marketing practices in the Red Sea hotel sector in Egypt. Their research assessed green marketing practices against the personal and organizational values of marketing managers, together with different organizational and demographic variables.

An important aspect of CSR research is that the predominant focus has been on large firms (e.g., Campin et al., 2012; Ma, 2012). Smaller businesses were for a long time considered either irrelevant or problematic within the CSR literature (Blowfield and Murray, 2011). CSR practices were perceived as universal and CSR initiatives were thought to easily transfer from large companies to smaller businesses (Blowfield and Murray, 2011). However, researchers are increasingly acknowledging that CSR needs special consideration in the SME context.

In our study, we have suggested that owner/managers of hospitality industry SMEs hold a special position due to the combination of ownership and control; ownership of these businesses is

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normally not separated to the same extent that it is in multinational firms. It can therefore be argued that this provides greater opportunities for individual beliefs and moral decision making to affect the practices of the business as a whole. This view is further supported in the literature, for example, by Quinn (1997) arguing that managers in SMEs are in a stronger position to bring in their own ethical attitudes than managers in larger firms. Also, Fassin et al. (2010a,b) emphasized that the beliefs and decision-making processes are more concentrated in SMEs than in large organizations because of fewer managers and relatively fewer hierarchical levels.

2. The research context

This study focuses on the decision-making processes toward certification programs of Scandinavian managers in hospitality industry SMEs. In the past few years the importance of CSR in the private sector has been raised in, i.e., Norway through the Report 10 on CSR to the Storting (Norwegian Parliament). Little research has been undertaken specifically focusing on CSR in a Scandinavian context. An exception is a case study by Bohdanowicz and Zientara (2008a,b) on corporate social responsibility in a hotel chain (Scandic). Additionally, some studies have focused on ecotourism certification programs in a Scandinavian context. That is, Gossling and Hultman (2006) discussed certified forms of tourism with a special focus on *Nature's Best*, an eco-tourism label developed in Sweden. Haaland and Aas (2010) examined three different ecotourism approval systems from Sweden, Costa Rica and Australia. None of the above mentioned studies have investigated CSR decision processes.

The environmental perspective dominates the various certification programs available to the Scandinavian hospitality industry. This is in line with the hospitality sector worldwide, where eco-labeling and certifications are increasingly gaining popularity (Mensah, 2013). The environmental focus in Scandinavian certification programs may also be linked to the popular view of Scandinavia as a tourism destination famous for its vast natural resources and “green” image (Gossling and Hultman, 2006). With an unspoiled environment being a significant factor behind the attractiveness of a tourist destination, it is in the interest of hospitality businesses to ensure the long-term environmental sustainability of the tourist activity (Gossling and Hultman, 2006). However, there is also a growing recognition for the hospitality industry to focus on the social perspective of CSR, i.e., support the local community and provide employee wellbeing (Mensah, 2013; Bohdanowicz et al., 2011).

3. Theoretical perspectives

Growing interest in ethical issues has led to increased effort to understand how individuals behave in the context of these issues. Within the area of business ethics, several decision-making models have been proposed (Nicholls and Lee, 2006; Sparks and Pan, 2010). Nicholls and Lee (2006) noted that most of these studies have approached the issue from an organizational perspective, with less attention being paid to individual decision-making. On the other hand, Sparks and Pan (2010) argued that decades of business ethics research have resulted in an extensive amount of theoretical and empirical literature. However, they argued that most empirical studies on ethical judgments only describe the relationships between ethical judgment and different respondent characteristics (i.e., sex, nationality, characteristics of respondents' organization, deontological and teleological evaluation). They therefore suggested that the research needs to not only describe the relationship between ethical judgments and different traits, but also to

understand that the nature of these judgments rests with knowledge of the process that produces them (Sparks and Pan, 2010: p. 406). Sparks and Pan (2010) also emphasized the need to integrate theories of ethical decision making with theories of social cognition (i.e., attitude–behavior models). Below we go through the theory of trying and ethical decision making, and relate them to CSR and the hospitality industry. A research model is developed and presented in Fig. 1.

3.1. Theory of trying

The theory of reasoned action is a well-known and supported theory on attitude–behavior relationships. According to this theory, behavior is determined by behavioral intentions that again are determined by attitudes toward the behavior and subjective norms (Fishbein and Ajzen, 1975). Ajzen (1991) argued that reasoned action is determined by one's intent at the time of the behavior. The theory of planned behavior expands on the theory of reasoned action by including a perceived behavioral control construct to explain behaviors not completely under volitional control (Ajzen, 1991). A weakness with both these models is the difficulty associated with trying to apply behavioral intentions to the study of consequence goals (Bagozzi and Warshaw, 1990). Bagozzi (1990, in Bagozzi and Warshaw, 1990) suggested that in the case of goals, two additional factors may intervene between intent and performance. First is the degree of conscious control that the individual has over the situation (Ajzen, 2002a,b); second is the degree to which the individual tries to achieve the goal (Bagozzi and Warshaw, 1990). Thus, in the theory of trying, Bagozzi and Warshaw (1990) expanded on the theory of reasoned action and the theory of planned behavior to explain striving to perform a behavior or achieve a goal. Attitudes in the theory of trying are conceptualized as three components corresponding to three classes of outcomes typical for goal pursuit: attitude toward success, attitude toward failure, and attitude toward the process. Also, the inclusion of frequency of past trying and recency of past trying in the theory of trying differs from the past behavior construct in the theory of planned behavior. A final difference between the theory of planned behavior and the theory of trying is the inclusion of perceived behavioral control in the former and the expectation of success and failure in the latter. We believe decisions regarding CSR can be seen as a process of trying. Therefore, the theory of trying was found to be the most suitable theory for this study.

3.2. Ethical decision making

One of the aims of this study was to examine whether the inclusion of perceived ethical obligation in the modified version of the theory of trying will increase the explanatory power of the model. A number of authors (Ferrell et al., 2013; Shaw et al., 2005; Mattison, 2000; Bommer et al., 1987) have suggested that awareness of ethical obligation in decision-making will influence the decision making process. That is, Mattison (2000) investigated how social workers applied the person-in situation construct to ethical decision making. Ferrell et al. (2013) discuss theoretical development in ethical marketing decision-making and emphasize that integrating ethics into decisions and organizational culture then becomes part of the value equation (p. 57).

The relationship between factors like attitudes and subjective norms in the attitude–behavior models and ethical principles is, according to Bray et al. (2011), not clear; neither do any of the previously mentioned attitude–behavior models consider ethical issues within their model measures (Shaw et al., 2000; Ozcaglar-Toulouse et al., 2006). Still, researchers have suggested including additional constructs within these models; for example, Ajzen (1991) noted that “the theory of planned behavior is, in principle, open to the

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