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ABSTRACT

This study draws on dual-processing theory and post-materialism assumptions to uncover the role of attitudinal and materialistic values in determining the degree to which consumers are willing to pay premium prices for sustainable tourism services. Findings from a large-scale survey of Swedish potential ecotourists reveal that, while attitude and environmental beliefs relate positively to willingness to pay premium (WTPP) for ecotourism, materialistic values exert a negative effect. In line with the theory of affect heuristics, study results further suggest that by giving rise to the intensity of feelings toward the offering, ecotourism interest alters the interplay of affective and evaluative antecedents, so that greater interest amplifies the influence of affective attitude and materialistic values on WTPP while simultaneously attenuating the effect of environmental beliefs.

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1. Introduction

With the growing recognition of environmentalist movements, finite resources and high environmental costs, marketers are being increasingly urged to re-evaluate their practices and implement more environmentally sustainable approaches. Service firms in particular can gain competitive advantages by demonstrating environmental concerns and contribute to conservation causes (Kotler, 2011). Ecotourism, defined as “traveling to relatively undisturbed or uncontaminated areas with the specific objective of studying, admiring and enjoying the scenery and its wild plants and animals, as well as any existing cultural manifestations (both past and present) found in these areas” (Orams, 1995, p. 4), is one of the fastest-growing tourism sectors globally and therefore constitutes a viable sustainable service study setting (Hultman, Kazeminia, & Ghasemi, 2015). In the environmentalism context, consumer materialism is often regarded a dark-side variable and a consistent premise in research on factors preventing transition from environmental awareness to a more sustainable consumer behavior (Kilbourne & Pickett, 2008).

Research traditionally measures willingness to pay (WTP) for public offerings, such as ecotourism, using contingent valuation methods,

which assume that individual decisions follow rational rules. As such, ecotourists' WTP decisions would reflect economic preferences for personal and non-personal benefits they obtain from consumption or preservation of the tourism offering itself (Reynisdottira, Song, & Agrusa, 2008). Behavioral economics research doubts the contingent valuation method though, given its systematic biases and low sensitivity to scope.

Specifically, Kahneman, Ritov, Schkade, Sherman, and Varian (1999) explain that WTP evaluations are rather a function of affective attitude—that is, the feelings or moral satisfaction expected to be drawn from the action. Studies building on dual-processing theory (e.g., Chaiken, 1980) advance the role of cognitive and emotional antecedents by suggesting that the amount a person would be willing to pay for a public offering such as ecotourism derives not only from beliefs about the benefits of preserving the environment but also from the feelings he or she would expect to experience from the action (Hsee & Rottenstreich, 2004; Kahneman et al., 1999). Social-psychological models add to current findings by considering the effect of value orientation on forming pro-environmental behavior (Ajzen, 1991; Dittmar, Long, & Bond, 2007; Podoshen & Andrzejewski, 2012), though the value's emotional influence has only recently been subjected to empirical research, and thus many aspects remain unexplored.

This study aims to add to the sustainable service literature by shedding light on the role of attitudes and materialistic values on the willingness to pay premium prices (WTPP) for sustainable services—specifically, ecotourism offerings. The study draws from dual-processing theory by investigating how affective and cognitive aspects of materialism play out in the formation of attitudes and WTPP decisions.

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As such, the research makes several contributions to theory and practice. Specifically, the study aims not only to validate previous findings on the effect of affective attitude and environmental beliefs on WTPP for public and sustainable offerings but also to contribute to the literature by uncovering the cognitive and affective effects of materialistic values. The proposed framework (Fig. 1) examines how emotional intensity toward the sustainable offering (operationalized as the expressed interest in ecotourism attractions) influences the role of materialistic values, as well as the interplay of experiential and rational thinking, over the course of WTPP decisions. Moving forward, Section 2 reviews the literature and develops hypotheses. Section 3 discusses the study's sample, measures, and analytical techniques. Section 4 presents the findings. Finally, Section 5 concludes with implications, limitations, and opportunities for future research.

2. Conceptual framework

2.1. Attitude toward ecotourism: a dual-processing approach

According to dual-process models (Chaiken & Maheswaran, 1994), two major processing systems account for the formation of human attitudes: rational and experiential. Applied to the current context, when rational evaluations occur, individuals develop attitudes based on their environmental beliefs—beliefs that are shaped by associating a behavior with certain attributes or consequences (Ajzen, 1991). In contrast, experiential processes form attitudes based on affective and heuristic cues (Chaiken & Maheswaran, 1994). If the feelings anticipated from a certain behavior are pleasant, the individual forms a favorable attitude and becomes motivated to potential pay price premiums to reproduce that feeling. While the cognitive belief-based evaluations depend on rational cost–benefit evaluations, feeling-based evaluations indicate the sign and strength of an individual's feelings about the decision stimulus or action.

The two systems work together over the course of a decision; however, they may influence each individual decision differently depending on the individual characteristics and decision task (Slovic, Finucane, Peters, & MacGregor, 2002). Behavioral economics researchers suggest that WTP for public goods are essentially affective and thus derived more from the expected feelings from the action than from the rational cost–benefit analysis of the offer (Kahneman et al., 1999). Two explanations are possible: first, environmentally friendly consumption tends to be driven by intrinsic motives, so compared with other forms of consumption intended to satisfy extrinsic motives, they are more likely to be decided on using an experiential feeling–based system. Second, individuals lack knowledge about the true value of an environmental product (e.g., how much they value less carbon emissions or the number of whales in the ocean); therefore, they tend to consult their feelings over the decision-making course as compensation for the objective information (Kahneman, 2003; Peters, 2006).

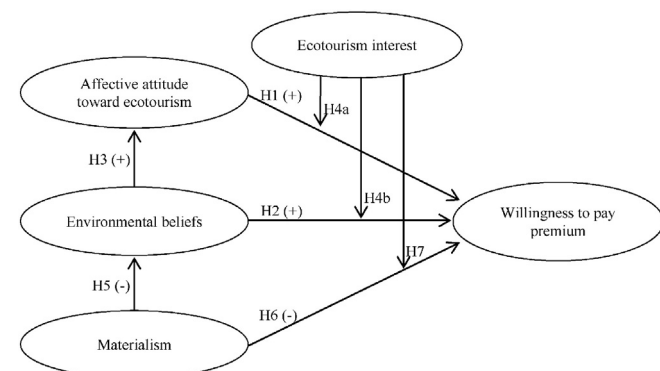


Fig. 1. Conceptual model.

Gregory, Lichtenstein, and MacGregor (1993) explain that people's beliefs about an environmental item lack monetary representation, and when asked to evaluate an offering, they respond depending on the context and available cues. Ajzen and Driver (1992) argue that though feelings are the dominant indicator of WTP for added tourism fees, beliefs still have a significant effect. Similarly, Meneses (2010) finds that affect is a more important factor than cognition in the formation of attitudes toward environmental issues.

The current study examines both environmental beliefs and affective attitude's roles in forming WTPP. Affective attitude, in the current context, is in part an outcome of cognitive operations (anticipated emotions). The research model therefore incorporates the direct effect of beliefs on emotional attitude. Environmental beliefs are conceptualized on the basis of the new ecological paradigm (Dunlap, Van Liere, Mertig, & Jones, 2000), which measures "broad beliefs about the [fragile] biosphere and the [adverse] effect of human action on it" (Stern, Dietz, & Guagnano, 1995, p. 85) and is one of the most widely used conceptualizations when evaluating environmental beliefs (Royne, Levy, & Martinez, 2011). Thus, the first set of hypotheses for the model is as follows:

- H1.** Affective attitude is positively related to WTPP for sustainable offerings.
- H2.** Environmental beliefs are positively related to WTPP for sustainable offerings.
- H3.** Environmental beliefs are positively related to affective attitude.

2.2. Moderating role of ecotourism interest

Affective heuristics theorists (Finucane, Alhakami, Slovic, & Johnson, 2000; Slovic et al., 2002) argue that when people like an object, they tend to act on the basis of affects and judge the object's benefits as high, thus forming consistent positive feelings about the activities that affect those objects. For example, someone who likes marine wildlife is more likely to positively evaluate actions that protect the wildlife (Kahneman et al., 1999). Accordingly, Irwin (1994) reports that WTP rankings for different environmental attractions do not differ substantially from attractiveness rankings. Similarly, Perkins and Grace (2009) reveal that tourists' greater intention to engage in ecotourism, as well as their actual behavior, is a consequence of their ecotourism interests and explicit preferences for such attractions. Visitors' feelings about a national park are also indicative of their cognitive evaluations of the place and intentions to perform place-related protective behaviors (Halpenny, 2010).

On this basis, interest in environmentally friendly consumption likely influences the interplay of affective and cognitive evaluations, whereby higher interest gives rise to the intensity of affect toward such offerings, which in turn makes affective evaluations predominant in predicting WTPP. Hsee and Rottenstreich (2004) also demonstrate that insensitivity to scope (as a sign for affective judgment) in WTP evaluations varies depending on whether the individual is induced to rely on feelings or cognitions, with greater insensitivity in the case of feeling-based judgments. Thus:

- H4.** Ecotourism interest moderates the effects of affective attitude and environmental beliefs on WTPP, such that during higher levels of ecotourism interest, (a) the positive effect of affective attitude is strengthened while (b) the positive effect of environmental beliefs is attenuated.

2.3. Value orientation: materialism

Value is an "enduring belief that a mode of conduct or end-state of existence is personally or socially preferable to an opposite or converse mode of conduct or end-state of existence" (Kahle & Xie, 2008, p. 575).

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