

Connecting the Dots: Exploring Means-End Theory in the Context of Customer Decision-Making for Sustainable Practices in Hospitality

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Abstract:

Understanding customer decision-making towards sustainable hospitality practises is crucial in today's environmentally sensitive society and this study examined means-end theory (MEC) to display how customers' decisions are influenced by product features and perceived outcomes and values as the study presented a Consumer Decision Map (CDM) using quantitative methods to reveal consumer behaviour's main decision patterns. Consumers' environmental concerns and willingness to pay more for hotels with strong green initiatives are strongly correlated and this emphasised over the importance of MEC and social identity theory and how values influenced consumer decisions. Similarly, the study also shed light on how hotel type affects consumers' willingness to pay (WTP) for sustainability as the luxury and mid-priced hotel visitors are more likely to pay for green efforts, suggesting a sustainability-based market distinction. Further investigation established that attitudes towards sustainability, perceived costs and benefits while perceived behavioural control are key to sustainable consumer behaviour (SCB) among luxury hotel customers under which the study focused over the need to expand the means-end theory (MEC) to fully understand SCB in the context of perceived costs and rewards.

Keywords: context, perceived, sustainability, willingness

Introduction

Customers' decisions are majorly influenced by product attributes and the quality of services being offered to users (Sundari and Panchanatham., 2022). Consumers purchasing decisions are majorly dependent on how they perceive products/services. Customers' loyalty to a brand and their willingness to pay a higher amount depends on customers' happiness and their satisfaction towards products/services. The hospitality industry has revolutionized in the last decade with the aim to sustain itself within highly diverse markets and to accommodate the changing demands of consumers. With a resourceful marketing approach, hospitality

companies have positively influenced customers and their decision-making to purchase products or to avail of services (Chou et al.,2020). Customers are majorly attracted to hospitality services, i.e. discount/promotional offers provided to consumers. Customer loyalty is highly dependent on brand marketing tactics being utilized by hospitality companies with the objective of growing their business globally (Gontur et al., 2022). Implementing innovative tactics to engage customers through online digital branding supports businesses in developing a sustainable reputation among the audience. The hospitality sector has adopted the trend of restructuring its business operations while bringing improvement within the products to support sustainability measures. A study conducted by Yousaf et al.(2021) concluded that hospitality companies are aware of implementing green practices to adequately contribute towards environmental obligations. Therefore, by offering green products/services, hospitality companies have been offering value-added amenities to improve customer satisfaction rates. Findings by Papadopoulou. (2024) mentioned that hospitality companies have adopted sustainable practices to maintain trustworthy relationships with audiences. Their strategic efforts to contribute towards environmental concerns potentially increase brand awareness and service growth among customers. Nowadays, customers are willing to pay to achieve green products/services as consumers prioritize green products. Various theorists have presented concepts to identify and measure those factors that contribute to influencing customers' decisions. Customers' decisions pertaining to availing of products/services depend on how they perceive as it controls their behaviours and actions while deciding to attain a specific product/service. Findings by Urbański and Ul Haque.,2020) mentioned that environmentally conscious consumers adopt environmentally friendly practices.

1.1 Research aim

Current investigation aims to measure role of means end theory in understanding customers decision making for sustainable practices in Hospitality industry.

1.2 Research objectives

- To evaluate insights about means end theory and how it influence on customers decision making process while selecting for products/services in hospitality industry.
- To analyse, based on means-end theory, the factors that customers consider when purchasing a product or while availing services in the hospitality sector.
- To measure the role of sustainable practices adopted by hospitality companies while influencing customers' decisions within the selection of products/services.

1.3 Research questions

- What is means end theory how it influence on customers decision making process while selecting for products/services in hospitality industry?
- What factors customers consider while purchasing a product or while availing services in hospitality sector based on means end theory?
- What role do sustainable practices play as adopted by hospitality companies while impacting customers' decisions within the selection of products/services?

1.4 *Significance of the study*

This investigation focuses on predicting insights about means-end theory while measuring how the concept presented in theory highlights knowledge about the customer's decision-making process while considering products/services from hospitality businesses. Based on the study, readers would be aware of factors prioritised by customers while selecting products/services from varied hospitality companies. Additionally, the research would examine how hospitality companies have adopted a sustainable approach to accommodate customers' choices.

Literature review

Sustainability in the hospitality industry has emerged and amplified as organizations and the public tend to consider the effects of their actions on the environment. The Means-End Chain (MEC) theory forms the basis for conceptualizing customers' decision-making about these perceptions of product attributes and the end states. Nevertheless, as was demonstrated in the case of MEC and sustainable hospitality practices, a stronger focus on other factors that might influence the consumer's decision-making process is needed to understand the issue better.

Means-End Chain Approach in Consumer Decision Making

The MEC theory, derived from Gutman (1982), explains that consumers' decisions are made in the light of values representing the relationship between the product attributes and the outcomes or end-user goals (Kim et al., 2021). This theory has been used in different fields to understand consumer behaviour, especially in the hospitality industry. Altogether, as Gutman pointed out, when using MEC, it is easy to determine such features as profound attributes, outcomes, and values that orient consumer decisions; therefore, MEC can be considered one of the practical tools for marketers interested in matching their products to consumers' expectations. Nevertheless, its advanced application in the context of sustainable practices in hospitality has yet to be exhaustive. Several earlier works have used MEC to determine consumers' preferences towards green products. However, the ideology that underlines the concept of MEC often needs to depict a realistic, sustainable decision-making environment. For example, Akzun et al. (2024) criticize that MEC tends to overemphasize cognitive aspects of consumer decision-making processes and lack consideration of affective and social criteria which could also be highly relevant. They argue that this critique points to the wisdom that has to be embraced to have both cognitive and affective aspects of decision-making.

Social Identity Theory and Consumer Behavior

Social identification theory provides a view related to MEC, which identifies group memberships and relative norms as key factors influencing consumers' behaviour (Harwood, 2020). From the perspective of sustainable consumption, consumers may well be influenced by their concern to adhere to the posited standards of a particular reference group, e.g., an ecological fraternity. This social aspect can be highly applicable in the hospitality industry's advertising context, as social approval and peer influence influence consumer behaviour hugely. In hospitality, prior research has shown how the social identity constructs could be connected to sustainable consumer behaviour. For instance, Dolnicar (2020) have established that guests who align with green consumer segments are likely to participate in

environmentally friendly behaviours such as reusing towels and conserving energy. This made the author conclude that social identity enhances the values associated with sustainable practices, making MEC more predictive in this light. Nevertheless, organizations encounter some issues when integrating social identity theory with MEC. Critics have it that the two theories are at different levels of analysis, thus rendering it complex to determine the integration of the two theories in the process of consumer decision-making (Stylos, 2022). In addition, while social identity theory underlines the role of groups, MEC pays attention to an individual's values; thus, contradictions in their application to the study of consumers' behaviour may occur. Consequently, a broader concept encompassing both the self-organizational and external organizational factors must be adopted to better understand sustainable decision-making in the hospitality business.

Willingness to Pay (WTP) for Sustainable Business Practices

There has been much interest in WTP of sustainable practices in the context of the hospitality industry in the recent past, with many papers focusing on the determinants of consumers' willingness to pay a premium for green services. According to the studies conducted by Wei et al. (2024), the factors that influence WTP by consumers in the hospitality industry include their environmental attitude, perceived benefits, and trust in green certifications. These findings go with the MEC theory that consumers are willing to pay for what they consider valuable and as preferred by their internal scripts. However, how WTP relates to sustainable practices is a little more complex and conditional. Besides analyzing the significant positive relationship between environmental potency and WTP, other works reveal that perceived environmental consciousness costs and benefits could moderate this relationship. For example, Graci and Dodds (2008) discovered that although consumers are usually receptive to green practices, their WTP is influenced by cost reduction or actual gains associated with green practices. This creates entirely rhetorical questions, which lead to the understanding of the shortcomings of the MEC approach in revealing all the determinants of WTP. Even though MEC proves helpful for mapping product characteristics to consumer values, it may only partially capture the perceived costs of benefits that determine the WTP amount. Therefore, the scope of MEC should also incorporate economic factors and other factors that affect the hospitality industry's consumption decisions.

The Role of Perceived Behavioral Control

In this case, Perceived Behavioral Control, a concept borrowed from the Theory of Planned Behavior (Conner, 2020), will involve components such as whether the respondent feels they can carry out the behaviour in question. When considered within the broadly defined context of sustainable hospitality practices, the perceived behavioural control can affect consumers' decisions regarding more environmentally friendly behaviours, which may include, for example, the selection of green hotels or adherence to energy conservation norms while in the hotel. Several authors have pointed out that perceived behavioural control is one of the most significant factors determining sustainability consumer behaviour.

However, no direct path is observed in the relationship between perceived behavioural control and sustainable decision-making. On the one hand, some investigations made in this respect

show that with an increased level of perceived power, persons practice more sustainable behaviours, whereas other investigations have revealed that perceived barriers, such as lack of convenience or knowledge, decrease the impact of perceived control (Troger and Reese, 2021). This implies that the MEC model, specifically concerned with the cognitive factors of the decision-making process, may have to be augmented to include perceived behavioural control as a determinant of consumer behaviour. In addition, the results of interventions intended to increase perceived behavioural control may differ among hospitality businesses. For example, customers staying at a specific luxury hotel brand may be willing to change their behaviours to those that are sustainable if they believe that doing so is warranted, given their status and the images they hold about themselves (Nimri et al., 2020). While low-cost hotel customers may be motivated by perceived price advantage and utilitarian value, other customers in the mid-price hotels segment may be motivated by perceived tangible benefits. This further emphasizes the need to take a segment-specific approach when marketing sustainable practices in the hospitality industry.

Methodology

Research design

For current investigation mixed research design has been selected to identify role of means-end theory and factors that contribute in positively influencing customers to consider sustainable green products/services across hospitality sector companies. By using quantitative and qualitative research design concept presented in the theory would be measured and those aspects would be measured that supports consumers in selection of sustainable product/service for usage (Song et al., 2021). Thence with mixed research design researcher would be able to present valuable knowledge among readers of the study.

Research approach

With deductive research approach investigator would be addressing research objectives as with selection of theories that prescribes insights about consumers behaviours and their purchase intentions researcher is focusing on hypothesis development phase and within variables identification mechanism. With deductive reasoning investigator would explore relationship between variables that helps in understanding the topic thoroughly (de Mast et al., 2023). Based on statistical analysis each of the hypothesis statement is further accepted or rejected that enable researcher to present coherent knowledge among readers of the study.

Data collection process

With primary data collection process investigator would measure insights about topic of the study. To attain participants responses researcher would be focusing on utilizing questionnaire/survey approach and interview technique to gather insights about research objectives. To gather primary data with survey technique, 5-point Likert scale closed ended questionnaire would be developed (Hutchinson., 2021). With sample size of 100 participants researcher would gather primary data for the investigation.

Data analysis

To analyse primary data gathered by using interview technique researcher would be using thematic analysis approach that helps investigator for codes generation and theme construction. Further to analyse primary data collected by utilizing survey/questionnaire approach, SPSS is used which helps in the study for presenting statistical results based on respondents reviews provided in the study (Roni and Djajadikerta., 2021). By conducting various statistical tests including i.e. frequency, regression etc. relationship between research variables would be measured.

Findings, Analysis and Discussion

This section of the study would entail valuable insights regarding role of means-end theory while measuring decision making towards sustainable practices within hospitality sector. With qualitative and quantitative analysis coherent knowledge would be collected based on interviews conducted from participants of the study and primary responses being gathered via closed-ended questionnaire/survey approach.

Qualitative analysis

Based on themes generated while extracting similarities within participants responses based on interview transcript below illustration is an overview about qualitative analysis.

Sustainability responsiveness

Based on the participants' responses, it is evident that hotels should promote sustainable tourism initiatives to respond firmly to corporate social responsibilities. KSA has adopted sustained measures to practice quality dimensions while fulfilling customers' demands by adopting standards of procedures. A study conducted by Fennell and Garrod. (2022) concluded that hotels have an ethical and legal responsibility to adhere to environmental obligations and accommodate stakeholders' priorities.

Consumption of Energy-efficient resources

Respondents have illustrated within their responses that hotels should adopt energy conservation resources to support sustainability. Majority of well-reputed hotels i.e. KSA etc. have practices energy efficient technological initiatives to minimize costs and to reduce extent of wastage. Findings by Abou et al.(2023) concluded that by utilizing energy preserving appliances i.e. solar panels etc. would support hotels to mitigate energy costs as by implementing energy saving appliances it can become convenient for hotel industry to mitigate wastage.

Promoting sustainability by visiting industry seminars

Participants have mentioned the promotion of industry-wide workshops/seminars, etc., that would help stakeholders in understanding insights about emerging trends pertaining to sustainable tourism practices. Attending industry seminars would enable attendees to learn how to implement sustainable changes throughout the operational setting of the hotels. A research study by Khatter. (2023) mentioned that organizing discussions through meetings would enable

business stakeholders and specialists to present their opinions on supporting green initiatives for preserving energy and waste.

Advancements through eco-friendly practices

Respondents have demonstrated that with the integration of eco-friendly practices, i.e. circular economy, etc., the extent of wastage could be minimized as with the implication of cost-efficient practices, the hotel industry would be able to embrace circular economic principles. Using renewable materials, i.e. recycled accessories, etc., would help in improving operational dimensions while mitigating external wastage that leads to environmental disruptions (Scholz et al., 2020). By focusing on smart building technological approaches energy, energy-efficient practices would be promoted.

Strategic guidance to hotel businesses

Respondents have demonstrated that the integration of strategic guidance to international sustainability goals in the hotel sector would contribute towards the adoption of energy efficiency and climatic change dimensions. By promoting sustainable tourism practices, hotels would be able to improve their operational dimensions with the implication of corporate social duties and environmental goals. A study by Abdou et al.(2020) concluded that hotels should collaborate their efforts with local communities, regulatory authorities, etc., to initiate valuable and sustainable dimensions within operational settings.

International efforts towards sustainability

Participants illustrated that the hotel sector should practice and adopt sustainability standards, i.e. ISO certifications, LEED, etc., that would help them in adopting green behaviour. With the implication of green building practices, the hotel sector would mitigate operational expenses and adhere to environmental sustainability measures to maintain a responsible market position. A research study by Trišić et al.(2021) mentioned that with the integration of sustainable tourism practices and international standards, hotels would be able to improve their efforts towards sustainability.

Community-based decision-making toward sustainability

Respondents mentioned within their responses that it should be resourceful for hotel companies to engage local communities within a strategic decision-making approach as with their involvement, hotel management would be able to adhere to sustainable decisions, i.e. selection of site location, etc. By prioritizing local farmers and artisans, the hotel sector can attain organic foods and products that would support sustainability. By involving local suppliers, the availability of quality and fresh products is achieved, which helps hotel businesses fulfil consumers' priorities (Ruiz et al., 2022).

Local community-based involvement to promote sustainable initiatives

Respondents have mentioned that local community-based engagement is an essential phase for the hotel sector in supporting corporate reputation. By involving local communities, eco-friendly projects can be promoted. Additionally, providing employment opportunities to locals would enable hotels to contribute economically to a region. A study conducted by Roxas et

al.(2020) concluded that by engaging local communities, sustainable initiatives could be introduced that integrate environmental conservation projects.

Sustainable initiatives conducted lead to corporate image-building

Participants pointed out that when hotels implement sustainable practices, they are able to build their corporate reputation and fulfil their commitment to environmental obligations. Strategic decisions being executed by hotels require the involvement of its stakeholders to contribute towards environmental protection procedures while accommodating corporate social duties. A study conducted by Sonker et al.(2021) concluded that hotels that practice sustainable technologies, i.e. LED, Solar systems, etc., are able to preserve energy resources while contributing towards environmental protection practices.

Sustainability practices leading to efficient market position

Respondents illustrated that with the integration of transparent practices, hotels are able to maintain their positive image towards stakeholders. Their efforts in serving customers while practising a sustainable tourism approach provide assurance to their consumers and help create a responsible image for them. Findings by Filimonau and Magklaropoulou. (2020) mentioned that by practising energy-saving techniques, hotels would be able to minimize environmental wastage while positively contributing towards eco-friendly practices.

Quantitative analysis

To understand how customers decision making are influenced based on sustainable practices executed by hospitality companies quantitative analysis has been conducted to measure participants primary responses gathered through SPSS to statistically measure results.

Descriptive statistics

Descriptive statistics test prescribes an overview regarding average mean value of responses attained from participants and provides value of standard deviation. With mean values higher than corresponding values of standard deviation it indicates that data set is clustered across mean values however with mean values lower than standard deviation demonstrate that data set is more spread out.

Table:1 Descriptive statistics

Descriptive Statistics					
	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
@1 Rather are you willing to pay more for green products while v	50	1	5	2.16	1.167
@2 Do customers value to a company within hotel that offers sus	50	1	5	2.58	1.263
@3 Do you as a customer get motivated with perceived benefits of	50	1	5	2.24	1.080
@4 Do you prioritize to visit within hotel that offers quality	50	1	5	2.28	1.246
@5 Rather extent of perceived risk is higher in income increase	50	1	5	2.26	1.192
@6 Do customers loyalty decrease with increased perceived risk	50	1	5	2.28	1.230
@7 Rather your perceived behavior is enable you to emphasize on sel	50	1	5	2.42	1.197
@8 Rather customers are motivated and undertake positive decisio	50	1	5	2.18	1.137
Valid N (listwise)	50				

Above illustration is an overview prescribing respective mean and standard deviation values for each variable of the study. It is evident from the table that each value of mean is higher than respective values of standard deviation demonstrating that data set is clustered tightly around mean values.

Regression

Regression test is used to measure extent of relationship between each independent variable in-corresponding to dependent variable of the research.

Table:2 Model Summary

Model Summary				
Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate
1	.929 ^a	.862	.850	.616

a. Predictors: (Constant), Perceived behavioral control Independent variable, Perceived benefits Independent variable, Product attributes Independent variable, Perceived risk Independent variable

Model summary is used to measure strength of relationship between research variables as table demonstrate value of R that prescribes direction and magnitude between independent and dependent variables. Value of R is calculated to be 0.929 showing that 92% of variance in dependent variable is explained by independent variables of the study.

Table:3 Anova Test

Model		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
1	Regression	106.860	4	26.715	70.469	.000 ^b
	Residual	17.060	45	.379		
	Total	123.920	49			

a. Dependent Variable: CustomersdecisionmakingDependentvariable
 b. Predictors: (Constant), PerceivedbehavioralcontrolIndependentvariable, PerceivedbenefitsIndependentvariable, ProductattributesIndependentvariable, PerceivedriskIndependentvariable

Anova table in regression demonstrate extent of correlation between research variables as based on value of significance which needs to be lower than 0.05. As value of significance calculated in the table is 0.00 which is lower than i.e. $p = 0.05$ etc. demonstrating presence of enough evidence to reject null hypothesis statement.

Table:4 Coefficients Test

Model		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.
		B	Std. Error	Beta		
1	(Constant)	-.069	.227		-.305	.762
	ProductattributesIndependentvariable	.179	.106	.189	1.689	.098
	PerceivedbenefitsIndependentvariable	.203	.124	.189	1.638	.108
	PerceivedriskIndependentvariable	.351	.134	.353	2.627	.012
	PerceivedbehavioralcontrolIndependentvariable	.310	.148	.262	2.093	.042

a. Dependent Variable: CustomersdecisionmakingDependentvariable

The table of coefficients is used to predict the tendency of correlation between independent and dependent variables of the study as it is used to identify the magnitude and direction among variables. The value of significance illustrates the correlation among variables. For the independent variable, i.e. product attributes etc., while measured with the dependent variable, i.e. customers' decision making etc., the calculated value of significance is 0.098, which is higher than the threshold value of alpha, i.e. 0.05 etc., denoting the presence of not enough evidence to reject the null hypothesis statement.

In addition, for the independent variable, i.e. perceived benefits etc., with the dependent research variable, the calculated value of significance is 0.108, which is higher than the threshold value of alpha, indicating the presence of not enough evidence to reject the null

hypothesis statement. Further, for the independent variable, i.e. perceived risk, etc., with the dependent variable, the measured value of significance is 0.012, which is lower than the threshold value of alpha, i.e. 0.05 etc., indicating enough evidence to reject the null hypothesis statement. For the independent variable, i.e. perceived behavioural control, etc., with the dependent variable, the calculated value of significance is 0.042, which is lower than the alpha value, denoting the presence of enough evidence to reject the null hypothesis statement.

Conclusion

The current study evaluates valuable knowledge while providing insights about how customers' decision-making would be impacted based on sustainable practices being adhered to by hospitality companies. The researcher has conducted a coherent investigation to measure how mean ends theory prescribes knowledge about customers' decisions about products/services. Theory showcases that customers go through an in-depth evaluation to make a final decision while considering selecting any specific product or service related to the hospitality industry. With quantitative and qualitative analysis, a thorough inspection was performed to identify factors that influence customers' decisions while accommodating services within hospitality sector companies. The qualitative evaluation presented an overview of factors that customers consider for promoting sustainable tourism practices across the hotel sector. Evaluating how KSA has been able to manage a sustainable approach to facilitate its stakeholders has been presented in the investigation. Further quantitative evaluation has been conducted to measure factors that customers value while emphasizing considering hospitality companies to accommodate products/services.

Results of the qualitative analysis indicate that the integration of sustainability responsiveness, utilization of energy efficient resources, conducting sustainable related seminars, practising advancements through eco-friendly dimensions, adherence to community-phased decision making, etc., would play pivotal roles in the integration of environmentally responsible practices by the hospitality sector. Additionally, quantitative analysis showcases that various factors, including product attributes, perceived benefits, perceived risk, perceived behavioural control, etc., contribute to influencing customers' decision-making. Results of statistical tests, i.e. regression, etc., demonstrate an overview regarding the extent of correlation between research variables of the study. It is evident from the quantitative findings of the study that no significant relationship exists between product attributes and customer decision-making within the hospitality industry. Additionally, the results of the study demonstrate the presence of no significant relationship between perceived benefits and customer decision-making processes in the hospitality sector.

In addition quantitative findings identifies presence of significant relationship between perceived cost with customer's decision making process in hospitality industry. Further statistical evaluation demonstrate that there exist significant relationship between perceived behavioral control and customer decision making in hospitality industry.

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