Sustainability marketing myopia: the lack of sustainability communication persuasiveness

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Abstract
Sustainability communication in accommodation businesses tends to be factual and descriptive, as companies are concerned with product-based messages that focus on what they do; they appear not to understand the potential benefits of constructing messages that would influence consumers to behave more sustainably, which is effectively sustainability marketing myopia. An analysis of 1,835 sustainability messages from award-winning businesses shows that messages communicate facts not emotions, and benefits for society as a whole rather than for the individual customer. The messages are explicit, but passive and not experiential hence they positively affect the cognitive but not the affective image of the business. The lack of message normalization and customer focus reinforces the image of sustainability being a niche concern. We reflect on the reasons for these shortcomings and highlight opportunities to improve persuasive communication, which we have now applied commercially in more than 400 website analyses and 60 training courses.

Keywords
content analysis, online, awards, responsibility, green, tourism for tomorrow

Introduction

Sustainability marketing encompasses a philosophy and a range of activities. It aims to satisfy consumers' needs or wants and create a favourable position for the business in the marketplace by communicating how the business addresses environmental, social and economic concerns (Bridges and Wilhelm, 2008; Mitchell et al., 2010). Communicating sustainability has a dual focus: firstly, to make the target audience aware of how the products offered to them will meet their needs whilst also addressing economic, social and environmental issues, and secondly, to allow a dialogue between stakeholders about the company as a whole (Belz and Peattie, 2012). Yet the poor understanding by marketeers on how to communicate sustainability effectively, and by sustainability professionals on how to market it, has changed little over time (Belz and Peattie, 2012; Roberts, 1996; Crane, 2000; Arnold, 2009; Ottman, 2011).

Businesses with a strong green focus often suffer from sustainability marketing myopia (the result of being product, instead of customer, focused) and therefore emphasise some aspect of their sustainability credentials rather than focusing on consumer needs. This generates confusion in consumers as they receive vague information that is not relevant to their decision-making (Rex and Baumann, 2007; Levitt, 1984; Ottman et al., 2006). Hence, products marketed for their environmentally friendly or fair trade characteristics suffer from sub-standard product performance, or are perceived as such, generating scepticism (Kreps and Monin, 2011; Crane, 2000; Peattie and Crane, 2005). Sustainability claims often result in greenwashing, which is the strategic disclosure of positive sustainability information about a company's performance while omitting negative information (Lyon and Maxwell, 2011), and this generates cynicism due to products being falsely marketed as sustainable (Bertilsson, 2014; Belz and Peattie, 2012; Forehand and Grier, 2003). While

sustainability communication offers opportunities for differentiation in the marketplace, it puts businesses at risk of stakeholders' backlash (Lyon and Maxwell, 2011; Smith and Brower, 2012; Peattie and Crane, 2005). Publicly moralizing about sustainability can create a perception of less competence and reduce likability through an image of being judgmental (Kreps and Monin, 2011). People dislike those who claim to be morally superior because they are made to feel inferior by comparison, or because they feel this threatens their consumer rights (Gössling and Buckley, 2014).

The aim of this study is to understand how accommodation businesses communicate their sustainability achievements. We explore the likely persuasiveness of messages, against criteria from the literature, to develop a working framework. We then apply this framework to evaluate 1,835 sustainability messages in 40 accommodation business winners of sustainability awards and we identify multiple shortcomings in the persuasiveness of these messages. We then reflect on how this study contributes to the sustainability marketing literature by providing a better understanding of the characteristics of successful sustainability communication methods and suggesting aspects for improvement.

Literature review

Persuasion is defined as "human communication designed to influence others by modifying beliefs, values or attitudes" (O'Keefe, 2002: p2) in a conscious attempt through the transmission of a message (Bettinghaus and Cody, 1994). Desirable messages that compel customers to act or change their behaviour can be said to be persuasive. Communication does not necessarily involve persuasion, but persuasion always involves communication - the difference is the intent: in persuasion, the source expects a reaction from the receiver (O'Keefe, 2002). The potential of being a sustainable consumer could be triggered with a persuasive communication strategy, without necessarily targeting the consumer's "greenness"- messages can appeal to the product/service performance, convenience and status amongst other similar products/services (Ottman et al., 2006; Griskevicius et al., 2010). Thus, how sustainability messages are written or displayed allows one to identify the ability of the source businesses to engage customers in behaving more sustainably. Based on well-known persuasion models (see for example Meyers-Levy and Malaviya, 1999; Du et al., 2010; McGuire, 1989), we suggest that message persuasiveness can be broken down into four dimensions: *type of action, structure, content and authority*, which in turn are made up of a series of variables as explained below.

Message Type of Action

The first dimension within our framework of message persuasiveness is the *type of action*, explained by two variables: theme and beneficiary. The *theme of the message* refers to the words used to evidence the business' sustainability practices. Specific messages will be more credible to the consumer than generic claims, unsubstantiated by examples, which will generate scepticism (Becker-Olsen et al., 2006; Atkinson and Rosenthal, 2014). We used four elements to categorise the type of action, from the Global Sustainable Tourism Criteria (GSTC, 2012): sustainability management in a generic sense, socio-economic benefits, cultural heritage, and environment.

The *beneficiary of the message* refers to who is to gain from these sustainable practices: the business, customers or society. Persuasive communication works best when it articulates the benefits to the individual (Stanford, 2014), allowing the message to engage mainstream customers and not only those with sustainability values (Hedlund, 2011). The message should put the customer at the centre of the experience, even when these practices also create benefits for the business and society (Ottman, Stafford et al. 2006; Rex and Baumann 2007; Griskevicius, Tybur et al. 2010). It is the difference

between saying, for example, “we serve local food because it tastes better” versus “we serve local food to reduce food miles”, even when the sustainability impact of the action is exactly the same. The consumer’s perceptions of the company’s motivations for sustainability communication are key (Brønn and Vrioni, 2001): only those sustainability actions that have a good fit with the business raison d’être (i.e. have a good action-business fit), are altruistic and are not profit-motivated will have a positive effect on the consumer’s beliefs, attitudes and motivations (Becker-Olsen et al., 2006). For example, communicating that the cost benefits of towel reuse in hotels results in a donation to a charity increases participation (Shang et al., 2010). Forehand and Grier (2003) found that scepticism results from marketing communications that seem manipulative or deceptive, and firms can inhibit distrust by acknowledging the business-serving outcomes of sustainability practices as part of their expressed motive. This is because customers expect a company-message fit, and therefore are suspicious of salient benefits expressing uniquely public-serving motivations. Jointly acknowledging the public and business-serving benefits seems to achieve the highest trust (Ellen et al., 2006).

Message Structure

Our second dimension of message persuasiveness is the *structure* i.e. how the message is structured in order to affect a persuasive outcome. In our study this is made up of three variables; explicit vs. implicit, active vs. passive and denotative vs. connotative. First, we analyse the importance of stating *(explicit)* or not stating *(implicit)* a message conclusion (O'Keefe, 2002). An *implicit* message assumes that the audience concludes on its own without giving away the full answer and is therefore effective mainly for audiences who are familiar with the concept e.g. “locally sourced food” can be understood by consumers as a sign of quality with or without sustainability undertones according to their predisposition. Alternatively, *explicit* messages state their conclusion, making it less likely for the message to be misunderstood. The advantage of explicit messages is that audiences who are unfamiliar with sustainability can also understand the message, whereas the advantage of implicit messages is that non-familiar audiences will not be put off by a sustainability message (O'Keefe, 2002). The advantage of implicit messages is that they portray sustainability as normal (Rettie et al., 2014). While the latter may well be more desirable to reach a broader target audience, the desire for businesses to portray their sustainability achievements leads us to rate explicit messages as more positive.

The second variable of the *structure* is how specific the description of the required action is (O'Keefe, 2002). An *active* message calls for the receiver to do something; simple and clear e.g. “Reuse your towel”, whereas a *passive* message would say, “We reuse our towels for the environment” without telling the receiver what to do with the information as it is not eliciting a given behaviour. Using the *passive* voice camouflages the author of an action and diminishes the credibility of a statement by using the subjunctive tense. The more specific the recommendations that a message provides, the more persuasive it will be (O'Keefe, 2002). Gössling and Buckley (2014) argue that most carbon labels lack persuasive communication because they provide factual knowledge (allowing understanding) and procedural knowledge (allowing comparisons), but not effective knowledge (leading to behavior change).

The third variable of the *structure* is the semantic *‘type of meaning’* of the message; as words are considered to be ‘symbols’ they have different meanings for the sources and the receivers. Thus, a *denotative* meaning expresses a definition of a word that is determined and agreed by a community

(a 'dictionary meaning'). For example, communicating "Reuse your towel for the environment in order to reduce water wastage" has limited room for misinterpretation. Conversely, a *connotative* meaning reflects the attitudes that individuals develop towards words (Bettinghaus and Cody, 1994), for example, "ecolodge" can be understood differently by different potential customers. It was found that environmental specificity increased consumer trust (Atkinson and Rosenthal, 2014), but whether or not it entices consumer action may depend on the other variables studied here. What is clear however is that *denotative* statements become a critical part of persuasion; if the message is *connotative* it will tend to be more abstract and thus less effective (Bettinghaus and Cody, 1994). Buzzwords often used to promote environmental claims (e.g. 'environmentally friendly', 'ethical', 'sustainable') lack universal meaning, which may affect the persuasive outcome (Kangun et al., 1991; Roberts, 1996).

Message Content

Our third dimension of persuasiveness is the *content*, which for the purpose of this study is made up of three variables with persuasive effects: appeal vs. logic, social norms and level of experience. First, we consider how messages are *appealing* or *logical*. *Logical* messages focus on communicating facts or statistics alone, which inform but are not persuasive enough to change behaviour (Bettinghaus and Cody, 1994). *Appeals* are emotional and have a higher chance to grab the attention of the target and trigger behaviour; they create favourable thoughts, are more memorable and vividly represented, which creates competitor advantage (Bettinghaus and Cody, 1994). A message like "5.5% reduction in energy use in 2015" is *logical*, while "Our 5.5% reduction in energy usage in 2015 makes us feel proud and motivates us to keep working" is *appealing*. Logical or rational sustainability messages are more important for travelers that claim to be experienced in sustainable travel than for those that are not, but overall most travelers prefer emotional messages (Wehrli et al., 2013).

The second variable of the *content* is the use of *social norms,* defined as "rules and standards that are understood by members of a group, and that guide and/or constrain social behaviour without the force of laws" (Sherif, 1936: p152). Research shows greater effectiveness at eliciting sustainable guest behaviour for hotel messages that use 'descriptive norms' (i.e. "the majority of guests reuse their towels") (Goldstein et al., 2008). *Social norms* explain that emotionally affecting guests leads to increased likelihood of being persuaded in their behaviour, as people are influenced by the behaviour of others (Kalafatis et al., 1999; Goldstein et al., 2008). How the request is made affects behavioural intentions; the use of social norms encourages towel reuse and reduces the importance of knowing how the savings achieved are used, for example, for profit or a donation to charity (Shang et al., 2010).

The third and last variable of the *content* is the ability to *experience* sustainability. The emotional aspects of consumption mean that increasing customer empowerment improves the experience and the outcome. For example, Jameson and Brownell (2012) devised a practical tool for effective green communication based on creating a compelling story supported by a combination of media channels and retelling the story to minimize audience effort and encourage audience participation. The contextualization of messages, by making them personal, ensures perceived behavioral control, which makes the actions seem achievable and improves customer response (Stanford, 2014). Real stories are likely to create an emotion by involving guests in the message (Kotler and Lee, 2011). Thus a message like; "I reduced my footprint by planting my own tree!" evidences that the *experience* of planting the tree contributes to the environment, unlike a message without experience such as: "5 towels reused = 1 tree planted."

Authority

Finally, we tested the authority with which these businesses made their claims. Authority refers to the person and their credentials provided by the information content. An author's qualifications and a positive reputation give more credibility to the information's veracity (Bolchini et al., 2004; Dragulanescu, 2002; Metzger, 2007). Having a credible source for the messages about environmental impact leverages more positive attitudes and more intentions to visit a place (Kim and Kim, 2013). In terms of a website's sustainability context, we suggest that *authority* refers to the evidence of the sustainability claims. Thus the variables suggested were the use of sustainability logos such as awards, eco-labels and sustainable alliances, as these are used to back up claims. The authority of these labels however has been questioned lately, as environmentally friendly labels in Travelocity have been shown to have no positive or negative impact on consumer preferences (Chong and Verma, 2013).

In summary, for this study, our working framework is made up of nine variables that the sustainability communications literature has found partly help to explain the likelihood of customers to engage in more sustainable practices. While the actual inclusion of certain variables within each of the four dimensions is somewhat arbitrary, each of these variables has a role to play in exploring the potential message appeal.

Methodology

We analysed 40 websites of sustainability award-winning businesses to test our understanding of persuasiveness. The winners and highly commended accommodation businesses for the Responsible Tourism Awards analysed were: Battlesteads, Bedruthan, Beechenhill, Bohinj-park, Bulungula, Campi ya Kanzi, Ecocamp, Fauziazarinn, Feynan, Fregate, Guludo, Himalayan holidays, Huilo Huilo, Jungle Bay, Kasbah du Toubkal, La Villa Bethany, Maliba, Misool, Mocking Bird Hill, Mountain Lodges of Perú, Napo Wildlife Center, Punta Islita, Rivertime Laos, the Saunders hotel group, Shangri-la, Song Saa, The Soria Moria, Whistler Blackcomb and Wolwedans. The businesses winning the Tourism for Tomorrow Awards were: Accor, Asilia Africa, Banyan Tree, Cheli Peacock, Huaorani, Marriott, Punta Cana, Robin Pope Safaris, Semadep Camp, Singita, also The Soria Moria and YHA-Wellington. These were 36 independent accommodation businesses (Africa 13, America 11, Asia Pacific 8, and Europe 4) and 4 groups or members of chains, who differed in size and target market. They all had websites only in English or with an English version.

We conducted a content analysis of the sustainability messages on the websites of the aforementioned companies. Content analysis is defined as "a detailed and systematic examination of the contents of a particular body of material for the purpose of identifying patterns, themes, or biases" (Millar and Sammons, 2006: p5). Content analysis was chosen since it is both the most commonly used method to analyse sustainability claims and website content (Jose and Lee, 2007; Morrison et al., 2005; Law et al., 2010) and it has been used to study message persuasiveness (Kaphingst et al., 2004). It is important to remember that this study analyses text, which happens to be on websites, but it is not an analysis of the websites per se for which there are more sophisticated methodologies. Currently, there are few tourism studies looking at the content of sustainability claims, hence the undertaking of this study. Truong and Hall (2013) say little about how they coded their project's final evaluation report on tourism interventions to identify and evaluate social marketing. Equally, Gössling and Buckley (2014) do not outline their method for content analysis of carbon labels. Jameson and

Brownell (2011) use rhetorical and narrative theory approaches to understand the language used in environmental communication in hospitality businesses.

As outlined in the literature review, this study uses nine variables to tell us to what extent the sustainability message delivered by the business may or may not influence tourist behaviour. The variables were classified as dichotomous, according to how efficiently they performed their purpose of communication, and thus were given a score of either 1 or 0, to reduce the added subjectivity of scoring with Likert scales based on the experience of previous website analyses (Morrison et al., 2005; Ismail et al., 2001). Coding took place over a six week period on the live websites; a period short enough not to be subject to changes of the sustainability content. In general, we found the sustainability content to be more static than the mainstream content. Screenshots were taken only for cross-coder comparison, but not for all 247 individual web pages analysed. The sequence followed was to read all messages in a website and then identify and analyse those that had a sustainability focus or implication. The main author analysed all the messages and discussed any issues on a daily basis with the co-author until a common interpretation was reached. The first eight variables were tested for each message. For the ninth variable, authority, it was deemed unreasonable to find authority claims on every message but it was expected at least once on each website.

As an example of coding, *"Decrease your carbon footprint and increase your fun. Arrive by foot or by bike like the majority of our guests and you will have a discount up to 50% in any service you want"* would receive a 1 for being denotative (because it explains what it refers to when it says sustainability transport is either bike or foot, no room for misinterpretation), a 1 for being explicit (because it has the word sustainability), a 1 for being active (because it tells customers to come by a sustainable transport and gives incentives to trigger the 'right' behaviour) and so on for the remaining variables.

We are aware of several limitations to this study. Evidently, a content analysis by definition cannot measure persuasiveness and we can only infer likelihood of persuasiveness based on the literature. There is extensive research suggesting that information quality (in our case, message persuasiveness) impacts on user satisfaction, system use, individual impacts and organisational impacts (DeLone and McLean, 2003). We plan to conduct experiments to test these subsequently, once we have a better understanding of these variables, for which we shall deploy user reviews to measure overall website usability (Jeong et al., 2003) and assess websites against the objectives set by their owner companies to measure effectiveness (Morrison et al., 2005). We also recognise the limitations of dichotomous variables but the exploratory nature of the study weighted in favour of keeping the analysis simple to provide a first understanding of the issues.

Results

We analysed 40 websites with 1,268 pages. Of these we found that 247 pages had 1,835 sustainability messages. 28% of the sustainability messages were found on named sustainability pages and the remaining 72% were found elsewhere on the websites. Table 1 provides evidence to show that while these businesses have a range of sustainability practices in place, their communication is designed more broadly to achieve an overall favorable image for stakeholders rather than to market to consumers in order to influence their purchasing decision (Roberts, 1996; Kalafatis et al., 1999; Peattie and Crane, 2005; Gordon et al., 2011). Considering that hotels and customers alike believe the internet to be an effective way to communicate green initiatives (Chan, 2013), we would have expected greater

efforts placed on writing persuasive messages. Below we explain the reasons for the low evidence of persuasion in their sustainability communication.

Table 1. Message persuasiveness (%)

more effective	less effective
Management/Social/ Cultural/ Environmental (85%)	Generic/unspecified (15%)
Benefits Guests/Society (72%)	Benefits Unclear/Hotel (28%)
Denotative (44%)	Connotative (56%)
Explicit (85%)	Implicit (15%)
Active (11%)	Passive (89%)
Appeal (67%)	Logic (33%)
Experience (6%)	No experience (94%)
Social Norms (0.2%)	No social norms (99.8%)
Authority (20%)	No authority (80%)

We found many references to sustainable management actions (32.7%) and messages that focused specifically on environmental (25.2%), socio-economic (22.4%) and cultural (4.4%) benefits. For example, Campi ya Kanzi demonstrated their management actions in the following message: "Campi ya Kanzi has two goals: to treat you to the most memorable vacation of your life, while helping the Maasai preserve their wildlife and cultural heritages. Here you will experience true ethical and solidarity tourism. State of the art technologies have been used to make the least impact on the environment; water comes from rain cropping, electricity from 120 photovoltaic panels, hot water from solar panels, food is cooked using an eco-friendly charcoal. But most importantly the lodge is a partnership with the Maasai local community". An example of a more generic message is: "YHA is proud of our values and our commitment to sustainable operations and we look for people who reflect the integrity, respect, excellence and passion we embody". We also found vague, generic mentions of sustainability (15%).

The beneficiaries of the content of the messages are society (50.5%) such as the Asilia Africa page "Positive impact", where the angle given to sustainability is "believe in better", and amongst other things speaks about the support they provide to numerous local schools. We also found messages that expressed the benefits to guests (21.4%), for example the Lao Rivertime "Meeting Lao Culture" materials. Yet 12.5% of messages had an unclear beneficiary and 15.5% of messages benefited the hotel, for example when referring to savings made from energy and water management. There is clearly evidence that customers respond well to altruistic scores that benefit society at large (Bridges and Wilhelm, 2008; Mitchell et al., 2010; Martínez and Rodríguez del Bosque, 2013), yet it is the individuals with higher environmental affect who respond better to altruistic environmental benefits, while those with lower environmental affect respond better to personal benefits (Grimmer and Woolley, 2012). Balancing altruistic messages with some evidence of business benefit helps dismantle suspicion (Forehand and Grier, 2003), or the business benefit may arguably be there to convince other businesses to act similarly. However, if one accepts the premise that a website is primarily a marketing tool, then its main objective should be to frame messages in terms of customer benefits. It is positive message framing that helps to reach out to the majority of individuals, where the gains obtained from good actions are elucidated rather than emphasizing the work still to be done, and where the resultant customer benefits are clearly spelled out (Kim and Kim, 2013).

Most messages analysed were explicit (85%), since customers are given clear information on how the business is sustainable without having to implicitly guess how an action affects sustainability (O'Keefe, 2002). An example is the Lao Rivertime statement on their homepage that "we work in harmony with the local people and have an agreement in place, under which we use local labour and local staff and contribute $2 per lodge night to local education and community development". However, many messages were also connotative (56%) which meant customers were likely to misunderstand them because they used abstract concepts (Bettinghaus and Cody, 1994). We found extensive use of technical jargon suggesting the content had not really been written with consumers in mind. We also judged most messages to be passive (89%) because they did not elicit any behavior and gave the impression that customers cannot or should not engage (O'Keefe, 2002; Mick and Politi, 1989). For example, a message we found in several instances is "It is the perfect ecotourism destination". This is explicit because there is no need to have a high level of sustainable awareness to understand that it is an "eco message" (O'Keefe, 2002), however, it is connotative because the word 'eco' may have different meanings for different audiences as 'eco' presents an unclear definition of what it means. Furthermore, it is passive because it doesn't compel the reader to an action of how to behave sustainably in the given destination. When we saw appeals for active participation this normally meant encouraging donations, for example "Asilia Giving is an online platform for charitable giving — offering a way for individuals to offer support and stay connected to projects and initiatives in East Africa".

Messages that were both denotative (with clearly agreed meanings or definitions) and logical (outlining evidence in the form of figures and facts) contributed to a cognitive image of the business. Typical examples presented data from sustainability audits, ranging from carbon calculations to the number of local jobs created or food miles travelled. The quality attributes of the cognitive image (i.e. based on the evaluation of known attributes of a green hotel) are more important than the value attributes. The cognitive image influences both the affective image (feelings towards the hotel) and the overall hotel image (Lee et al., 2010). Lee et al also found that a positive image positively influences the number of word of mouth recommendations given and raises a customer's willingness to return. Their study corroborates the focus in our data on communicating functional (cognitive) sustainability attributes. However cognitive communication is a stepping stone for affective communication and competitive green image creation; the examples of factual communication we came across were rather dry and lacked emotive customer connections. As Lee et al. (2010) suggest, a sustainability marketing strategy based on functional attributes does not enable a company to differentiate itself from its competitors.

Sustainability messages often tried to appeal (67%) to customers by using emotional language that grabbed the customer's attention, for example, Feynan Ecolodge's "Immerse yourself in escapes embedded in beautiful natural areas, with a rich local culture, and the opportunity to create unrivalled memories". However, the most sustainability actions cannot be experienced (94%) because the customer cannot personally see the difference the action made. For example, we found the message "Switching off your lights not enough? Here are some other sustainable ideas we can adopt everyday: Unplug appliances when they are not in use". This is somewhat appealing because it explains with a fact how easy it is to be sustainable and committed to the environment, without using statistics and/or numbers to support the statement (Bettinghaus and Cody, 1994; Gilbert, 2004). However, it cannot be experienced because although there is some customer empowerment in learning how to be more

sustainable, this is not substantiated with pictures or real stories that are likely to create an emotion and involve guests in the message or the change achieved. Furthermore, customers are not compelled to act by social norms and peer pressure (99.8%), despite the overwhelming evidence that this encourages behaviour change. This message would demonstrate social norms if it included, for example, "here are some other sustainable ideas that our guests adopts everyday", as this would create a sense of belonging (Cialdini, 1993).

Finally, we checked the authority used by the companies on their websites i.e. whether or not they reassure their customers that the sustainability claims they make are reliable, to avoid greenwashing skepticism (Roberts, 1996; Crane, 2000; Arnold, 2009; Ottman, 2011) since there is evidence that credible sources of environmental impact lead to more positive attitudes and visit intention (Kim and Kim, 2013). Oddly the hotels tend not to show their sustainability logos despite displaying numerous non-sustainability logos. Considering that all the businesses we looked at have won one of two sustainability awards, it is unusual that the Tourism for Tomorrow Award is shown in only 7% of the cases and the Responsible Tourism award in only 22%. Smaller businesses displayed the logos more prominently and often on their homepage, while larger businesses hide them. Other sustainability awards were shown in 26% of cases and sustainability alliances were mentioned in 25% of cases. Where awards were mentioned, we found that these hotels usually prefer to write the name of the awards, alliances and certifications in a list without graphical display, making them less persuasive (Lowry et al., 2007). A single sustainability signal may not be enough, or signaling to the broad marketplace rather than to the eco-conscious market, as Chong and Verma's study of Travelocity found that "eco-certification has statistically zero impact on revenue for the hotel industry overall" (2013: p12). This may be partly explained because authority, in the form of an ecolabel source, is less important than message specificity (Atkinson and Rosenthal, 2014).

Conclusions

This study maps out the practices of award winning businesses against a range of persuasive communication characteristics to better understand their communication patterns. Despite abundant literature suggesting the competitive advantage of sustainability marketing, we find that all businesses could make substantial improvements on their communication. We found numerous messages that had the potential to be persuasive, by mostly having the basic actions outlined clearly, but lacked the ability to 'close the deal'. We substantiate this interpretation through the literature, which has shown how tourists prefer emotional sustainability messages that appeal to their feelings (Wehrli et al., 2013), particularly for environmentally harmful products, because the sense of relief from moral guilt by making an environmentally sound choice is greater. Yet customers do not perceive holidays as having an environmental harm from holidaying (Kong and Zhang, 2014) and do not readily want to think of holidaying as a domain for environmental sacrifices (Miller et al., 2010). This may explain why in our data we find that accommodation businesses choose to downplay such saliency by not bringing it to the customers' attention or requiring action. Messages would be more appealing if they required no effort from consumers, as opposed to transmitting rational, more cognitively-demanding information (Wehrli et al., 2013). Messages could also be more persuasive by empowering customers in the learning process of sustainability practices through actively experiencing the benefits of such practices(Kachel and Jennings, 2010; Cialdini and Goldstein, 2004), or by using 'descriptive norms' to influence behavior by drawing on a sense of belonging and social acceptance (Goldstein et al., 2008; Han and Kim, 2010). The potential for tourism businesses to improve the persuasiveness of their

sustainability communications (Lee and Oh, 2014; Gössling and Buckley, 2014), and this associated field of research, is largely unexplored. This study contributes to this field by providing further evidence of the methods of communication used by award winning businesses.

This article contributes to the literature by providing additional evidence that sustainability marketing is myopic (Levitt, 1984; Ottman et al., 2006; Rettie et al., 2014). We interpret this as a reaction against possible criticisms of greenwashing. By playing safe in how they present their claims, with an emphasis on functional, factual information, businesses aim to avoid negative attention. Clearly a balance between facts and emotive language is necessary to avoid the perception of greenwashing, but that balance is currently too far in one direction. The information communicated is written with individuals with a high level of sustainability knowledge and interest in mind, providing primarily evidence of what the business does rather than being customer focused. Communicating cognitive rather than affective data does not promote the differentiation of these hospitality businesses from the mainstream market, but, by being conservative, they avoid the skepticism that arises from the cynicism of customers regarding their motives for sustainability communications (Brønn and Vrioni, 2001; Mohr et al., 1998). Few businesses have accepted that sustainability only has a marketing value if and when it puts the customer at the center of the experience; "what's in it for me" is the key question if we are to move beyond the eco-niche (Grant, 2007), but coming to terms with that is complex (Kreps and Monin, 2011).

This exploratory research has multiple opportunities for research impact, which we are only beginning to exploit. We have used these findings to develop a consultancy service to train accommodation businesses on how to communicate sustainability more effectively. In the last three years, this has been used to write reports for several governments on sustainable tourism communication, to run more than 60 training workshops worldwide and to conduct over 400 paid website analyses for businesses that have subsequently gone on to make changes in their communications. In further studies we aim to share the reactions of these businesses towards the advice provided and the difference that it has made towards the effectiveness of their marketing actions.

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