

# CSR Activities of Tunisian Eco-Labeled Hotels

**Katalin Asvanyi, Hager Chaker**

Corvinus University of Budapest, Institute of Marketing and Media

katalin.asvanyi@uni-corvinus.hu, hager.chaker@gmail.com

*Abstract: The purpose of this study is to compare the CSR content on hotel websites and in guest reviews. Our research results outline the difference between the CSR activity hotels and the real consumer experience, so called value-action gap (VAG). The survey was conducted on the five hotels in Tunisia that obtained Tunisian Eco-Label. Through content analysis, we reviewed information on CSR available on hotel websites, and reviewed a total of 4017 French and 7029 English reviews on TripAdvisor, of which 166 guest comments reflect CSR activity. The results of the research have shown that hotels inform guests on their websites of their CSR activities in varying degrees of detail. The comments were mainly positive in the CSR categories, but not all CSR topics were included. Two Value-action Gaps (VAG1, VAG2) were identified. The results of this research can greatly contribute to building CSR strategy for hotels*

*Keywords: CSR, guest review, hotels, sustainability, value action gap*

## Introduction

The importance of sustainability has come to the forefront since the 1970s, a trend that has been reinforced by industrialization processes (Hsieh, 2012). Today, tourism accounts for 8 percent of carbon emissions (Lenzen et al., 2018) and hotels are responsible for 9 percent of energy use (IEA, 2018). Nowadays, hotels are increasingly adopting simple and cost-effective CSR practices such as recycling, reusing products, and reducing waste. The need for responsible and sustainable endeavours does not only come from the industry, but hotel guests are increasingly looking for sustainable solutions when traveling (Yi et al., 2018). Designing sustainable hotels is an industry solution that enhances the satisfaction of environmentally friendly guests. By rethinking comfort factors, water and energy use, and sustainable products, luxury hotels are adhering to international standards and emphasizing the importance of society and the environment (Cherapanukorn-Focken, 2014) and therefore, they are able to meet today's conscious consumer expectations.

# **1 Literature review**

## **1.1 Value-Action Gap (VAG)**

Outlining the value-action gap (VAG) is essential for measuring the sustainability of CSR initiatives, as it shows the gap between prior service plans / values and actual actions (Persson - Vejseli, 2013). One of the positive examples of VAG-based solutions was demonstrated in the Swedish hospitality sector. Gothenburg hotel management has managed to bridge the gap between value and action with the help of a well-known local environmental certificate, Miljöbas (Björnefors - Kjellsson, 2014). First Hotel Chain and Hotel Riverton were among the first to obtain this certification (First Hotel, 2019; Hotel Riverton, 2019). The reason for this certification is that, unlike other local eco-certifications, Miljöbas imposes less stringent requirements on applicants, making standardizing green practices easier for hotels. Nevertheless, the performance of Gothenburg hotels is not negligible, as their sustainability efforts have successfully bridged the gap between environmental values and real action.

In contrast to Swedish hotels, the failure of VAG bridging can be found in the United Arab Emirates and other countries (Al-Aomar-Hussain, 2017; Rowe, 2018). Baker et al. (2014) found that hotel visitors do not exhibit consistent behaviours; there was a mismatch between the consumers' behaviours and the eco-friendly attitudes. While hotel guests show an interest in environmentally friendly and sustainable solutions, in real decision situations, sustainability considerations are often overlooked. The phenomenon can be linked to the adverse effects associated with sustainable practices. In particular, sustainable practices in the hospitality sector often lead to decreased luxury and comfort, which in turn creates an erroneous perception that the hotel chain is adopting the green practices to cut costs (Baker et al., 2014). This is also contradicted by several surveys which show that the possibility of cost reduction was only a secondary consideration when introducing sustainability efforts (Smith et al., 2015). However, the guests were less motivated to select a hotel solely based on the availability of green packages.

Bocken (2017) pointed out that hotel management plays a key role in shaping consumer decisions, as many marketing tools can be used to encourage sustainable consumption. One of these options could be, for example, the introduction of loyalty programs and other related incentives that can enhance the use of green products and services and thus improve the success of sustainability (Smith et al., 2015).

## **1.2 Corporate Social Responsibility among Sustainable Hotels**

The sustainability of the hotel industry is influenced by both external and internal factors (Garay-Font, 2012). External factors are related to the interests of stakeholders while internal factors are basically tied to the personality and expertise of the leader, such as ethical issues and profit realization considerations. CSR is already playing an important role in international hotel chains such as Hilton, Fairmont, IHG, Marriott or Scandic (Turner, 2010). The Marriott chain deserves special mention, which, by supporting the LGBTQ community, demonstrates the group's commitment to social equality and acceptance (Marriott, 2019). Other hotels use green stars to indicate their commitment to protecting the environment (Ozdipciner et al., 2016). According to reports from the Hilton Group, the hotel group has doubled its social spending in recent years, halving its ecological footprint (Hilton, 2018). The strategy was based on trends in previous hospitality decisions. Overall, hotel chains focus on different factors in their CSR strategy, but are primarily geared to consumer needs and hotel services.

Global surveys of the hotel industry show that corporate social responsibility and conscious attitudes towards sustainable practices have become stronger among companies (Martínez - Del Bosque, 2013, Martínez et al., 2014). Financial savings from CSR practices also contribute to accelerating change. Consumer loyalty and positive public opinion are the pillars of successful CSR, which can indirectly increase the company's profit-making ability (Alles – Marques, 2011, Turner, 2010).

A report from Melia Hotels International also confirmed that the hotel chains owe their industry recognition and awards to their CSR policies. One of the hotels has been awarded the “Best Initiative in Corporate Social Responsibility and Ethical Conduct” thanks to the CSR initiative (Melia Hotels, 2014). However, it should be noted that sustainable practices may not be ubiquitous due to lack of consumer confidence and lack of recognition of sustainability constraints (Jones et al., 2016; Villalonga, 2018). According to Chun (2016), materialist principles reinforce consumer skepticism about corporate social responsibility.

However, the lack of empirical data limits the value of online advertised services. Holcomb et al. (2017) also emphasize the lack of literature on CSR initiatives and the lack of specialized literature due to the limited availability of activities. However, further commitment (sensitization) in the tourism sector is needed, and in many cases, cost-effectiveness and luxury conditions override CSR considerations (Coles et al., 2015). Adaptation of sustainable practices also requires the development / improvement of a governmental support environment (Robin et al., 2016), which may ultimately contribute to bridge the VAG.

After reviewing sustainability practices and the benefits of CSR, it has become clear that hotels can greatly improve the progress of their current CSR activities, and there are many ways to overcome VAG. Further prospects for development

depend on whether the development of a sustainable brand can override materialist consumer demands.

## **2 Methodology**

### **2.1 Data collection**

The Tunisian Government and more precisely the Tunisian Ministry of Tourism and the Tunisian Ministry of Environment introduced the Tunisian Ecolabel certification in 2009. The awarding system of the Tunisian Ecolabel is a voluntary certification system under which the Ecolabel is awarded after verification of the conformity of the product to a set of technical and ecological criteria throughout its life cycle. The "Ecolabel" certification offers the company a better visibility and competitiveness of its products / services through credible information dedicated to consumers, a better management of the environment through a rational use of natural resources and a reduction of its impacts on the middle (Institut National de la Normalisation et de la Propriété Industrielle, 2019).

To help companies certify their products / services, the International Centre for Environmental Technologies of Tunisia offers support programs provided by specialized experts. For the hospitality sector, the criteria aim to limit the main environmental impacts of the three phases of the service life cycle (purchasing, service provision, waste), thus promoting more responsible tourism. In particular, they aim to reduce energy consumption as well as water consumption. They also aim to optimize waste management, promote the use of renewable resources and less harmful substances for the environment and promote environmental communication and education (Ecolabel Tunisien GRECO, 2009).

In order to examine hotel sustainability and CSR practices and understand how guests are experiencing hotel sustainability and responsibility activities during their stay at the hotel, all selected hotel websites (English and French versions) and all of their English and French guests' reviews on TripAdvisor needs to be compared, which helps to discover value-action gaps (VAG) between the two sides. In Tunisia, only five hotels were awarded the Tunisian Ecolabel certification, and these hotels are analysed in our study. Three research questions were analysed by qualitative content analysis.

- RQ1: Which CSR activities do hotels communicate on their websites?
- RQ2: Which CSR topics are mentioned in hotels' guests' reviews?
- RQ3: In which CSR topics are there value-action gaps?

## 2.2 Analysis framework

The first step in analysing the CSR content on the website and the TripAdvisor feedbacks was to collect the categories previously used in the research on this topic and to develop a proprietary category system. Yi et al. (2018) analysed reviews of top green hotels on TripAdvisor., 737 of the 7,370 comments had 'green' feedback, which was largely positive. The guests highlighted the reflective roofing system, the rainwater treatment system and the green training of the guests. De Grosbois (2012) examined the websites of the 150 most popular hotels in the world for CSR communication in 5 topics: environmental goals, quality of employment, diversity and accessibility, social and community well-being and economic well-being. He noted that many hotels report their commitment to CSR, but few initiatives are reported on their websites and their results are not very well documented. Ettinger et al. (2018) examined the website and the feedback from TripAdvisor of 47 Austrian CSR certified hotels, using De Grobois (2012) categories. Jogdan and Sawant (2018) analysed online CSR reports from four hotel groups in India with qualitative content analysis interpreted in eight major categories. Among the CSR initiatives, energy, waste and water management, sustainable development, diversity and inclusion, community well-being and environmental awareness were the most mentioned activities, so they typically prefer environmental CSR. While CSR linked to the development of tourism, as heritage preservation is overshadowed. Millar and Baloglu (2008) conducted a consumer survey of 12 green items in hotels, which found that towel replacement, energy-saving bulbs and selective trash were the most commonly accepted green items, while soap dispensers or low water pressure were already negatively rated. Ásványi and Komár (2018a,b) examined Hungarian Green Hotel award-winning hotels and comments received on szallas.hu, analysing information on hotel sustainability in eight categories. Inoue and Lee (2011) specifically examined the relationship between CSR and corporate financial performance in the tourism sector, which was evaluated on five topics: employee relations, product quality, community relations, environmental issues, and diversity issues.

Based on these previous researches we categorized CSR related information to eight categories: responsible attitude, environmental responsibility, responsible products, local environment, education of guests, equal opportunities, local community and attitude of employees. Each of these categories represents a grouping of codes and keywords belonging to the same topic. For example, to be classified in the responsible attitude category, the guests' comments and hotels' websites' details and descriptions needs to contain at least one of the following keywords: green hotel, green program, green policy, responsible attitude, sustainability, environmentally friendly and logo. The second category, environmental responsibility is represented by keywords such as recycling, towel and linen reuse, water, energy, led, glass, paper, plastic, waste and dispenser. The keywords organic, bio, fair trade, local and environmentally friendly belong to the

responsible products category. The fourth category, local environment contains the codes: organic garden and green environment. The category education of guests has the words guest incentive and green programs. Accessible, disables and barrier free belong to the equal opportunities category. Community is in the seventh category, local community. Finally, staff and employees are the keywords in the attitude of employees category.

## **3 Results**

### **3.1 Analysis of hotel websites**

All five hotels have both an English-and French language websites and we thoroughly examined both websites for each hotel. We found that, for each hotel, there is the same information, word by word, in both the English and French versions. Therefore, they show the same values. Four of the hotels are 4 star hotels and one is a 5-star hotel. They are all in different locations. However, all of them are all-inclusive beach resorts. On the one hand, local environment, equal opportunities and local community are the only three categories that were mentioned in all of the hotels' websites. Indeed, as all of the hotels are located by the beach, local environment has a great value. Only one category, responsible products, wasn't mentioned at all in any of the websites. Responsible attitude and environmental responsibility were mentioned in three of the hotels' websites, while guests' education and employees' attitude were mentioned in only two websites.

The Fiesta Beach hotel is the most specific of the five hotels about its CSR activities. Besides mentioning the five hectares of palm trees garden and describing the rooms that are built in local style and designed to naturally keep the freshness, its specifically describes how their concern is to serve and take care of customers, to ensure the well-being of staff, support humanitarian and social activities and preserve the environment for tourism development. Furthermore, they explained how the Directorate General is fully committed to putting all the human and material resources available to the quality and environmental security team by preventing, reducing and avoiding as much as possible the pollution of the atmosphere, land and water as well as by reducing consumption of natural resources and recycling waste and sorting to protect the nature. The hotel's website also gave details about encouraging customers, suppliers and other stakeholders to get involved in environmental protection, training and sensitizing the hotel staff to protect the environment and comply with environmental policy and, finally, continuously improving environmental protection and promoting good environmental practices to avoid anything that harms the environment. The

website didn't stop at that but described all of the above elements with many details and thorough explanations and description (Fiesta Beach Hotel, 2019).

The Marco Polo hotel didn't give any detailed description but just mentioned that it asserts clearly its commitment for sustainable development by adopting the ten universal principles related to human rights, labor standards, environment and fight against corruption. The hotel also ensures to conduct business in an environmentally responsible manner ranking CSR and the protection of the environment as main priorities (Marco Polo Hotel, 2019).

Marhaba Palace and Salem, almost didn't give any environmental related description. they only mentioned their green surrounding gardens, the good accessibility for wheelchairs and their proximity to local stores, shops and restaurants (Marhaba Palace Hotel, 2019., Salem Hotel, 2019).

Riadh Palms has the second best detailed website thoroughly mentioning the hotel's CSR strategy and importance. It ensures mastery of energy consumption resources, mastery of air emissions and noise and conduct of the necessary actions for the prevention of the environment. The website also mentions the promotion of the traditions and the local culture, whether by the food served at the hotel, by the proposed visits or activities offered by the hotel or the decoration used. Moreover, the hotel invites its customer and its employees and all stakeholders to adhere to its charter and to support sustainability efforts (Riadh Palms Hotel, 2019).

Table 1: Mentioned CSR values of hotels

| <b>Hotels / Categories</b>          | <b>FIESTA BEACH</b> | <b>MARCO POLO</b> | <b>MARHABA PALACE</b> | <b>RIADH PALMS</b> | <b>SALEM</b> |
|-------------------------------------|---------------------|-------------------|-----------------------|--------------------|--------------|
| <b>Responsible attitude</b>         | X                   | X                 |                       | X                  |              |
| <b>Environmental responsibility</b> | X                   | X                 |                       | X                  |              |
| <b>Responsible products</b>         |                     |                   |                       |                    |              |
| <b>Local environment</b>            | X                   | X                 | X                     | X                  | X            |
| <b>Guests' education</b>            | X                   |                   |                       | X                  |              |
| <b>Equal opportunities</b>          | X                   | X                 | X                     | X                  | X            |
| <b>Local community</b>              | X                   | X                 | X                     | X                  | X            |
| <b>Employees' attitude</b>          | X                   |                   |                       | X                  |              |

Source: own edition

### 3.2 Analysis of guest reviews

All the guest reviews were downloaded from the TripAdvisor regardless of when it was written. The data was downloaded in November 2019. From a total of 13366 reviews, 7029 English comments and 4017 French comments were found, of which 107 English and 59 French guest reviews with CSR content were analysed. For the English reviews, the percentages of CSR-related comments typically ranged from about 1 to 1.5%. Hotel Fiesta Beach had above average CSR comments (18.9%), which is probably due to its website providing relatively detailed information on its CSR activities. However, for the French reviews, the percentages of CSR-related comments are significantly low (from 0.06 to 2.23%). This shows the importance of the guests education category which was only mentioned 3 times in all the French comments.

Within the CSR comments, each comments related to CSR was treated as a separate factor. For the English reviews, we were able to analyse a total of 345 CSR-related factors in the 7029 comments containing CSR. For the French reviews, we were able to analyse a total of 181 CSR-related factors in the 4017 reviews mentioning CSR. In the first round, we examined whether the given factor appears in the comment in a positive or negative way. It is to be noted that, although a factor is negative in the field of CSR, in many cases guests evaluate it as positive. For example, changing towels and linen every day served as a positive image of the hotel. However, in our analysis, we considered it a negative factor and this according to the CSR area and not the guests' sentiments or opinions. We found that, in both languages, there were much higher positive comments than negative ones. In the English reviews as well as the French ones, both local environment and employees attitude categories had the highest positive factors. This is due to the fact that the hotels are located in such a beautiful environment by the sea with nice big gardens that, according to the guests, were being tended to everyday all day long. It is also due to the fact that all the hotels are family holidays resort and, therefore, guests enjoyed the extra attention and friendliness of the staff. Environmental responsibility had very high negative comments because of the excessive use of plastic cups. Although, and as explained by the hotels, the use of the plastic cups is necessary in the beach and around pool area for safety reasons, it is possible to trade the disposable cups for reusable ones and to stop using straws. The guests' education is rarely mentioned but when it is, it is mainly as a negative factor. Indeed, many of the guests were bothered by other guests who didn't care about food waste. As described in the comments, many of the guests would pile food on their plates during the breakfast, lunch and dinner open buffets and then barely touch the food at all. Some of the guests also wouldn't mind throwing their trash everywhere and in inappropriate places (i.e.: cigarettes in the sand, plastic cups in the sea).



Overall, the reviews confirm that there is a significant difference between the CSR activities seen by the hotels under review on the website and the practices seen and known by the guests.

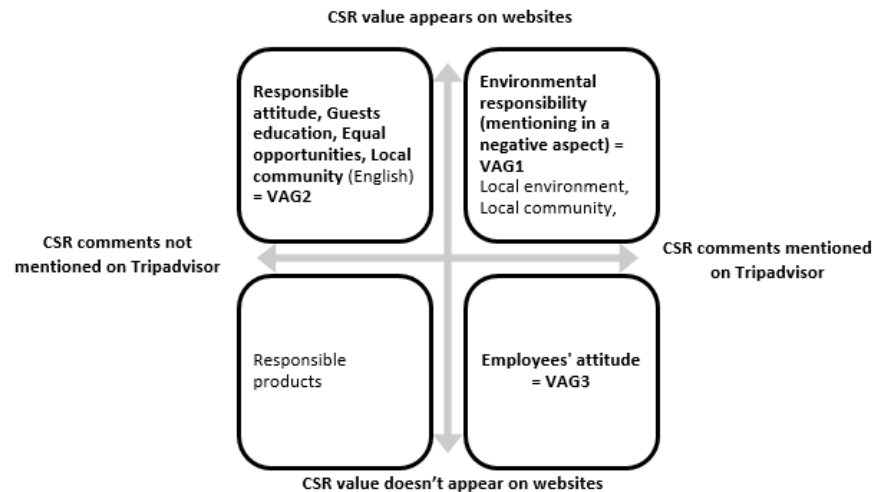


Figure 1. Value-action gaps, Source: own edition

After analysing hotel websites and TripAdvisor feedbacks, we compared the two results to answer our third research question: which CSR topics formed the value-action gap (*Figure 1*). For the Fiesta Beach Hotel, the CSR information available is extensive and covers many areas of CSR, but, although feedback shows seven categories out of eight it is still considered a GAP as in each category only one or two factors are mentioned. The CSR attitude of the hotels has been mentioned only two times by the guests. Concerning the environmental responsibility, although the website emphasizes that towels and sheets are changed only on request each day, in practice, the opposite is true, although only a minority of guests find it difficult to get fresh towels every day. Responsible products are never featured on the website and in the reviews, so in this CSR category, guests experience what the hotels write on their website. The education of the guests is not strong enough, as there are some cases mentioned. Which is unfortunate because guests' education can be a key factor for the hospitality sector to become more responsible. The beauty of the local environment is very welcomed by the guests.

Value-action gaps could be seen between CSR topics on hotel websites and guest reviews on TripAdvisor. On the one hand, there are topics that appear as values on the website, showing that they are important CSR activities in hotel operation, but the guests experience the opposite of that, which they also mention in comments mainly related to environmental responsibility. Towel reuse and plastic cups were the most common (*VAG1*). On the other hand, we can find information in certain CSR categories on the hotels website, but guest reviews do not include the topic at

all, such as the involvement of the local community and the attitude of the employees. That is, the value appears but is not perceived or noteworthy by the guest on the activity level (*VAG2*). Thirdly, we may experience a value-action gap in the sense that the hotel itself does not display the CSR topic in its values, but is nevertheless highlighted by guests as a positive aspect of the hotel's CSR activity, which applies most to the employees' attitude category (*VAG3*).

### Conclusions

Based on the results of the research, *the following steps should be considered for successful CSR practices*: to *implement* not just mention the CSR activities on websites or formulize them as future goals; to strengthen the *environmental responsibility* activities; to expand the use of *responsible products*, as this is always valued positively by guests; to make *local environment* green where possible, as Yi et al.(2018) environment encourages tourists to be more environmentally conscious; to *educate guests* in a more detailed, frequent, and understandable way, using interfaces that truly deliver information to guests, such as towel change in the bathroom, behaviour towards all-inclusive buffets, turning off all the lights and AC/heating system before leaving the room and throw garbage in indicated containers; to emphasize on equal opportunities and widen accessibility; to work with the *local community* and possibly involving guests; to make *employees' commitment* to CSR visible, since this is not reflected at all in staff feedback; to highlight *economic responsibility*; to request *more and more detailed feedback from guests*, as they highlight the value-action gaps that need to be solved.

The study evaluates the CSR activity of hotels by analysing guest reviews, adding *new results to the literature on responsible accommodation*. However, based on the results, we see that there may be differences between responsible and sustainable accommodation strategies and real hotel practices, as we have experienced a value-action gap in three ways.

In our study, we examined only the websites and guest reviews of five Tunisian eco-labelled hotels to explore the value-action gap. However, looking at top green hotels in other countries and taking into account different national and cultural differences may increase the validity and generalizability of the research. The study is limited to only 5 hotels, so it would be worth increasing the number of hotels analysed to generalize the conclusions. Unfortunately, it has been announced that the Tunisian Ecolabel has been cancelled, so in the future we would like to examine closely the reasons of this failure as well as observe the practices of hotels in Tunisia that have standardized labels.

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