

Why should hotels turn green? Exploring emergent sustainable behaviors on lake Garda

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Abstract

Although sustainability has been widely addressed within tourism research in the last decades, the debate on this complex and multidimensional topic is still far from its conclusion and current literature is moving the focus from theory building to theory testing.

Since pressures on natural resources preservation are continuously increasing, the aim of this study is to investigate which are the emergent environmental behaviors adopted by hotel companies and the motivations that lie behind their implementation.

The empirical research is conducted through semi-structured interviews to hotel managers operating in a tourist destination on lake Garda (Italy).

According to previous literature, we argue that perceptions about sustainability are still not univocal among hoteliers, and that the motivations behind sustainable behaviors are more than often a compromise between two opposing forces: institutional and instrumental, i.e. legitimacy and profitability. Moreover, since environmental tools are not yet largely adopted in the hospitality industry, we also presume that sustainability is an innovative practice from which it is still possible to derive social and economic advantages.

The present study offers some useful contributions from a theoretical perspective, since it adds to the current literature on sustainability by originally connecting this compelling topic to the rooted neo-institutional theoretical framework, but also some practical implications for all the subjects involved in the hospitality industry by enhancing the awareness on this critical issue.

Keywords

tourism; hospitality; sustainability; legitimacy; innovation; lake Garda

1. Introduction

Nearly 30 years have passed since the release of the 1987 Brundtland Report and although the topic of sustainability has been largely addressed within tourism research the debate is still far from its conclusion, both from a theoretical perspective but also from the practical one (Saarinen, 2014; Ruhanen et al., 2015). Sustainability has not yet reached the status of widespread paradigm in tourism nor in other industries, however nowadays the call for more responsible environmental, economic and sociocultural behaviors is becoming even more compelling and in the last 50 years the world population has grown from 3.5 to more than 7 billions, creating dramatic pressures on natural resources. The present study addresses the environmental dimension of sustainability since we believe that tourism industry, due to its particular nature, should be more concerned with this precise level of sustainability: natural resources are a critical aspect for tourism destinations and the preservation of them, rather than their consumption, allows destinations to survive and to maintain attractiveness and competitiveness. Among the different subjects involved in tourism industry, this study addresses the particular business of hospitality, since hotels are specific to tourist use, differently from other tourism facilities that can be shared with residents (e.g. restaurants or shops).

The aim of this paper is to investigate which emerging environmental behaviors are in place in the lodging industry of a specific tourist destination and which are the rationales behind them, focusing on the individual executives perspectives and understandings on environmental sustainability.

Following previous literature on neo-institutionalism (Suchman, 1995; Deephouse and Suchman, 2008), we argue that sustainability is driven by the need of the organizations to be legitimized, i.e. to be in compliance with norms and rules and to be consistent with stakeholders beliefs and expectations. However, according to a more instrumental perspective, organizations also pursue profitability in order to survive, and profits can be enhanced both through cost saving and revenue increasing. Sustainability does not always combine well with profitability, but some environmental practices are aimed at reducing the consumption of costly resources, while others can provide better corporate image and reputation if they are properly communicated to consumers, and companies may have the possibility to increase the final price. Since companies have to face a trade-off between social and economic outcomes, we argue that sustainability is driven by both instrumental and institutional rationales.

As we mentioned above, sustainable behaviors are not yet largely adopted by tourism organizations, among others, and therefore we believe that environmental sustainability can still be considered as an innovative practice within the specific industry we chose to examine, i.e. hospitality. According to our theoretical framework, innovation too can be viewed as a trade-off between institutional and instrumental perspectives: when an innovative practice is perceived as efficient both in terms of cost saving and revenue increasing, it starts to be adopted by a few entrepreneurs which can benefit from a first mover advantage. Later on, the behavior starts to be perceived as efficient and legitimate, it is diffused among competitors and the first mover advantage is dissipated. Depending on the quantity and impact of the environmental practices that are adopted and spread, the innovation can present different degrees of institutionalization, and due to the relative newness of environmental tools and behaviors in many tourism destinations, we also argue that sustainability is in the early stages of the institutionalization of the innovation process (Vargo et al., 2015), and therefore this emergent practice can still provide advantages to its early adopters.

We have conducted a qualitative study in a specific tourist destination on lake Garda (Italy), through semi-structured interviews to hotel managers operating in the location. The interviews were aimed at revealing the adoption of environmentally sustainable tools and

behaviors and the motivations for their implementation or lack thereof, i.e. how and why environmental sustainability is adopted.

Our findings confirm that environmental sustainability is still far from reaching the status of a widespread paradigm, since only few basic behaviors are implemented, and mostly in family hotels. More importantly, we find just partial support for our first hypothesis, since on the instrumental side sustainability is driven by cost saving while revenue increasing does not seem to be a motivation at all. From the institutional perspective, environmental behaviors are implemented in order to be in compliance with laws and regulations, but there is lack of evidence regarding the fulfillment of stakeholders beliefs and expectations, and sustainability indeed is not communicated to the public. Moreover, due to the scant level of awareness on the managerial side and to the small quantity and impact of environmental behaviors commonly adopted, our findings suggest that in this specific destination environmental sustainability is still a not fully institutionalized innovation, thus supporting our second hypothesis, even if we found no evidence of first mover advantage.

Thanks to the qualitative nature of this research, we could have a more in-depth investigation on the sustainability issue and its understanding from the individual managerial perspective, and besides the organizational boundaries some additional relevant issues related to the broader concept of destination came out: the tourist destination we examined has apparently reached its maturity stage and is still enjoying the fruits of its attractiveness, but it also seems to rest on its laurels. According to some interviewees, sustainability is one of the possible solutions to escape decline, which is the last stage of the destination life cycle, and to succeed instead in the destination rejuvenation.

Although sustainability is not at all new issue, the present study differentiates from previous research by offering, at our knowledge, a unique overview of the individual managers perspective and it adds to the literature by providing important contributions about sustainability from a theoretical perspective, but also some useful managerial implications.

Of course there are some shortcomings, since this study is limited to the specific setting it explores and further research could extend the analysis to other destinations, but also replicate the study in the future in order to see how the sustainable innovation either provides benefits or becomes a more institutionalized practice.

2. Theoretical background

The concept of sustainability has started drawing attention in Western society since the '80s, and in particular with the release of the Brundtland Report (World Commission on Environment and Development, 1987), both from an academic and a managerial point of view (Saarinen, 2014)□. Tourism, as many other human activities, needs to be sustainable in order to safeguard its future development, and sustainability has to be achieved in a holistic way, encompassing the economic, sociocultural and environmental levels.

Even if the topic has been largely addressed in the literature (Hunter, 1997; Ruhanen et al., 2015)□, perceptions and awareness of sustainability are still not univocal, and the call for a more responsible and sustainable approach is nowadays even more compelling (Estol and Font, 2016; Saarinen, 2014). Tourism industry is especially concerned with the environmental level of sustainability since natural resources are a critical factor that allows tourism destinations to remain attractive and competitive, and eventually to further develop (Gössling, 2002; Williams and Ponsford, 2009; Waligo et al., 2013; Martini and Buffa, 2015)□. Environmental pressures are therefore increasing, in order to prevent the consumption of the destinations, but rather to allow their future preservation, and among the different subjects involved in the tourism value chain, hotels and lodging facilities can play a significant role

(Ayuso, 2006; Holcomb et al., 2007)□. As we stated before, hotels are facilities that are not shared with residents and are probably one of the more prominent and visible part of the tourism value chain in the final consumer perceptions.

We chose to focus on the environmental dimension of sustainability only, and not to make reference to the other two levels of the triple bottom line. This choice is driven by the fact that, for the aforementioned reasons, we believe this dimension to be the most compelling one in the tourism industry, and of course narrowing the focus allows us a more in-depth examination of the topic.

The aim of this paper is thus to investigate the presence of environmental tools and techniques that are adopted within the hospitality industry in a specific tourism destination and the rationales behind the decision of implementing them. Decision-making is a managerial process in which both the advantages and the disadvantages of a certain choice have to be taken into account, and we argue that, more than often, decisions are driven by a compromise between social and economic outcomes. Hotels, as other companies, are embedded in a specific environment and need to be legitimate within its boundaries, but of course they are profit-making organizations too and the legitimate choice is not necessarily the most efficient one.

In the next sections we are presenting the institutional and instrumental perspectives, complementary views that drive the decision of implementing environmental practices.

These emergent environmental behaviors still represent a sort of innovative practice, and we believe that innovation too is driven by a compromise between institutional and instrumental motivations. Hence, we are also presenting the concept of environmental sustainability as an institutionalization of the innovation.

2.1. Sustainability and legitimacy

Within the neo-institutional framework, legitimacy is “a generalized perception or assumption that the actions of an entity are desirable, proper or appropriate within the socially constructed system of norms, values, beliefs and definitions” (Suchman, 1995)□. There can be different dimensions of legitimacy: cultural or sociopolitical (Archibald, 2004), pragmatic, moral or cognitive (Suchman, 1995; Deephouse and Suchman 2008)□, but in all cases legitimacy can be defined as consistency between the company's behavior and the surrounding environment, in which the organization is embedded.

The process of legitimation involves two categories, or entities, which are defined sources and subjects of legitimacy (Ruef and Scott, 1998)□. Sources are the entities empowered by the society to assess legitimacy of companies and organizations, while the subjects are the organizations themselves. Sources of legitimation can in turn be divided in two categories: on the one hand we find the State and the normative system, and on the other hand there are other entities that have a significant influence both on the organization and on the society, and that are generally defined as the company's stakeholders (Freeman, 1984). Of course not all stakeholders have the same power (Mitchell et al., 1997)□, there exists in fact a sort of hierarchy depending on their relative impact and influence both on the company and the society, and companies should be able to understand the relative importance and respond in a different manner to external pressures in order to conform to the different expectations. Moreover, it is worth noting that the subjects, or organizations, should not be considered just as passive recipients of external judgements, but they too can have an influence and try to manipulate the stakeholders perceptions. In particular, organizations are able, or should be able, to show to the public their desired image, or corporate identity, while at the same time to hide or justify the negative, or less legitimate aspects. As we stated before, they are able to recognize pressures coming from various institutions and select the one to conform to, depending on the relative impact. This ability to control the impressions others form of them,

or Impression Management (Leary and Kowalski, 1990)□, requires indeed a good corporate communication mix from the organization.

If we narrow the perspective to the tourism industry, with respect to the sources of legitimation, stakeholders in tourism have generally been classified into six groups: on the one hand we still have the government or the local administration, and among the others we can find tourists, industry, local community, special interest groups and educational institutions (Butler, 1999; Byrd, 2007; Markwick, 2000)□. However in this study we focus just on two groups, local administration and tourists: the former represents the normative source of legitimation, while tourists, among all other categories, are indeed the consumers of the natural and environmental resources of the destination, in which we are interested in. Subjects of legitimation are instead all the organizations operating in the tourism field, but again, the narrower the perspective the more detailed examination we get, this study addresses just one category of organizations, which is the hospitality industry, and hotels in particular.

According to this framework, hospitality organizations will implement sustainable behaviors both to be in compliance with normative dispositions coming from the local administration, and to convey the stakeholders (tourists) a corporate image which is consistent with their beliefs and the increasing environmental pressures, thus fulfilling their expectations (Greenwood and Hinings, 1996; Brønn and Vidaver-Cohen, 2009; Thomas and Lamm, 2012; Hörisch et al., 2014)□. In order to achieve a legitimate status, however, just the implementation of environmental tools will not be sufficient: organizations will need to disclose through corporate communication both administration and stakeholders (tourists) the sustainable behaviors they are currently adopting.

2.2. Sustainability and profitability

Organizations pursue legitimacy, which, according to the neo-institutional perspective, plays a fundamental role for companies survival, but is not enough for companies competitiveness. In other words, organizations are not exposed just to institutional pressures, but they have to cope with instrumental purposes and strategic goals too and one of the main goal for a profit-making organization is of course to enhance profitability. The most legitimate behavior is not always the most efficient one (Baccarani, 2008), and companies have to manage a sort of trade-off between the contrasting but complementary purposes of legitimacy and profitability (Clercq and Voronov, 2011)□. Environmental sustainability, even if legitimate, may be in contrast with financial objectives, since most sustainable tools require strong initial investments and structural modification in order to be implemented. Moreover, some firm-specific characteristics may affect the decision, such as firm ownership structure, size and age. Of course this is not always the case, since sustainability can also lead to cost savings (Abrate et al., 2015; Testa and Vigolo 2015) also thanks to a more efficient supply chain (Christopher and Gaudenzi 2015), and in certain cases even to revenue increasing because customers may be willing to pay more in order to be provided with a less impacting final product or service, due to the increasing awareness about the sustainability issue.

Within the tourism industry too, and hospitality in our case, sustainability has to be weighted in terms of the economic advantages it can provide and the compromise between social and economic outcomes depends on managerial decisions: the executive director, or the owner himself, generally decides which sustainable behavior is worth being implemented from a financial perspective, which investment can be afforded and recovered, if environmental sustainability ultimately allows profitability to be enhanced both by cost reduction or revenue increase, i.e. through costly resources saving or price increasing, thanks to the increased service quality (Holcomb et al., 2007)□.

It is true than that organizations are embedded in a specific environment and try to conform to its institutions, but if we focus only on the neo-institutional theory we may lose the

complexity of the empirical reality. Both the institutional and the instrumental perspectives, besides other firm-specific characteristics, need to be taken into account by managers when considering the implementation of environmentally sustainable behaviors. This trade-off between legitimacy and profitability leads us to our main hypothesis:

Hypothesis 1: The adoption of environmentally sustainable behaviors is the result of a compromise between legitimacy and profitability purposes: the former involves compliance with laws and regulations, and fulfillment of stakeholders beliefs and expectations, while the latter allows larger profits to be achieved either through cost saving or revenue increasing.

2.3. Sustainability as an institutionalization of the innovation

Although the sustainable paradigm has emerged nearly 30 years ago, we can still consider it as an innovative practice since it has not yet been adopted by the majority of companies (Lane, 2009; Holden, 2009; Buckley, 2012)□ and the call for a more sustainable behavior is still a compelling one. This study argues that the choice to innovate too, along with the choice of being sustainable, can be considered as a compromise between institutional and instrumental motivations, i.e. a trade-off between legitimacy and profitability, and the innovative behavior can be explained through the concept of “institutionalization of innovation” (Kimberly, 1979; Anguelovski and Carmin, 2011; Vargo et al., 2015).

According to this perspective, the process of innovation begins thanks to some particular subjects in the institutional environment, or institutional entrepreneurs, that are following their strategic, instrumental purposes, and that in the early period can benefit from a first mover advantage provided by their innovative practice. In the subsequent periods, however, institutional imitative behaviors, i.e. mimetic isomorphism (Mizruchi and Fein, 1999; Barreto and Baden-Fuller, 2006)□, lead competitors to complete the process of innovation: the new behavior becomes thus largely adopted, legitimate and institutionalized within the organizational field (Arndt and Bigelow, 2000)□, and the economic advantage dissipated. Of course, in order to be imitated and hence institutionalized, an innovation should provide benefits to the companies that implement it, and the advantages can be both of a social and an economic nature, i.e. behaviors that provide legitimacy through compliance and fulfillment of expectations, or that allow to increase profitability because of their efficiency or effectiveness (Clercq and Voronov, 2009). Nevertheless, once the innovation becomes institutionalized, the benefits are dissipated among the diverse competitors.

Shifting the perspective to sustainability in the hospitality industry, we argue that many environmental tools have not yet reached their institutionalization and some watchful and forward-looking hoteliers should take advantage of this opportunity, before it becomes a widespread behavior largely adopted among competitors.

Hypothesis 2: Environmental sustainability places itself in the initial phase of the institutionalization of the innovation process and companies can benefit from first mover advantage.

3. Research design

The study was conducted through semi-structured interviews to hotel managers operating in the destination of Sirmione, in southern lake Garda. Tourism is a very important and developed industry in Sirmione, since it is a town with less than 9 000 inhabitants but that counted with more than 350 000 tourist arrivals and more than 1 million overnight stays in 2015 (Provincia di Brescia, 2016). National tourism is less than a half, and the great majority of arrivals comes from Germany and northern Europe. From another research conducted in

Sirmione, it has emerged that natural resources and mild weather are among the most critical factors of attractiveness of the destination (Ugolini et al., 2015). Sirmione is characterized by a very peculiar geographical conformation and can be divided into three areas: the coastline, the peninsula and the old town at the extremity of the peninsula, that is almost entirely surrounded by the lake.

Our unit of analysis is made of 11 hotels located in all the three aforementioned areas, their classification ranges from 2 to 5 stars, and the interviewees are only executive directors or owners, in case of family hotels. Data were collected in May 2016. We chose to interview only managers since they are the ones in charge of decision-making within the hotels, and they also carry the responsibility of the decisions they undertake. This choice allowed us a clearer and more detailed examination of the individual managerial perspectives about the sustainability issue. Interviews lasted from 30 minutes to more than 1 hour. The variability in the length is mainly due to the interviewees availability and helpfulness, but the general questions were the same for the whole group of hotels, and were focused on “how” and “why” sustainability is adopted. The first set of questions was aimed at the identification of emerging sustainable tools and techniques that are currently implemented within the hotel (the how) and then the most important part of the interview addressed the motivations behind such sustainable choices or the lack of any sustainable practice (the why).

Although case study is typically associated to exploratory research, this method can provide useful contributions for theory testing too when combined with interviews, thus supporting our purposes (Johnston et al., 1999). All interviews were recorded and then analyzed individually looking for key words regarding the adoption of sustainable behaviors and the reasons behind them. After some shared themes emerged, these were analyzed jointly and compared. The coding process thus followed three steps: the identification of positive or negative behaviors currently adopted by the hotel managers (step 1), the classification of the motivations as either related to profitability or legitimacy (step 2) and the identification and analysis of common themes emerged by the conversations (step 3). Hereafter, we list the main questions proposed to our interviewees:

- Firm name, size and age;
- Interviewee role (either hotel executive director or owner);
- Are you actually employing any tool or practice to improve environmental sustainability in your hotel? E.g. energy saving, waste reduction, renewable energy;
- Do you believe these behaviors to have positive effects?
- Did you personally decide to implement such behaviors?
- Which was the main motivation for the implementation of such behaviors?
- Do you believe the adoption of sustainable behaviors to have a positive economic effect? How? E.g. cost saving or revenue increasing;
- Do you believe the adoption of sustainable behaviors to have a positive effect on the hotel reputation or image? How?
- Do you believe the advantage to be in the short time horizon or in the long one?
- Did you encounter external pressures for the adoption of sustainable behaviors? Of what kind? E.g. local administration, tourists;
- Do you believe Sirmione to be a mature tourist destination? Or do you think a further development is still possible?

4. Empirical results

The 11 semi-structured interviews provided us with the following results, which in part confirm our hypotheses. From the first set of questions, aimed at revealing the presence or the

lack of sustainable behaviors in the accommodation facilities, it emerged that sustainability is not an issue of particular interest in the destination, in part because of the lack of managerial awareness. Hotel directors do not present univocal understandings and attitudes toward the topic of environmental sustainability and they have a scarce knowledge of what can be labeled as sustainable tool: “Could you better clarify your question? What do you mean with environmental behavior?” asked one of the managers, or even “Environmental certification? What's that!?”, while others started immediately explaining about the practices they implement. Hence, no dedicated environmental planning is adopted and only a few environmental behaviors emerged, not systematically neither equally put in place by all hotels in our unit of analysis.

One practice which is shared and given for granted by all interviewees is recycling, also because it is mandatory in Italy since 2008, but when it comes to recycling in each room, hoteliers become more nervous and some of them admit that it is a much more complicated issue: it is impossible to force customers to separate wastes during their stay and not a very comfortable task for the housekeeping: “Of course I'm not fiddling with the bins... even if this is what is required us”. Almost a half of the hotels is not so accurate in recycling inside the rooms.

Another very common environmental behavior is the adoption of energy saving lightening (led), or at least the gradual substitution of the current lightening system. “I cannot throw away and replace everything with led, because this represents a large investment for a small hotel like mine” said one of the directors. Again, this practice is widely present in the common spaces of the structure (lobby or restaurants), while it is less frequently adopted inside each room.

The interviews revealed also that just a couple of hotels employ magnetic cards, instead of the classic key, to better control for energy consumption inside the room, even if in some cases it is possible to control for air conditioning and lightening from the reception. However, some of the interviewees consider this behavior as very uncomfortable from the customer point of view.

Regarding water saving, more than a half of the hotels provides the rooms with labels to ask the customer to decide for the change of towels, even if this request is not always fulfilled by less attentive customers. One manager decided to charge the extra towels, and she achieved more effective results.

Renewable energy is another complicated issue to address, according to the interviewees, and just a few structures are actually employing solar or geothermic power to warm water.

A final sustainable behavior, that is shared from lodging facilities in the old town where traffic is limited, is the use of electric vehicles to allow guests to reach the hotels, especially during the weekends or on other hot dates. Guests can generally drive in the old town, but on those days the traffic is really heavy and they are offered the possibility to leave the car outside the limited traffic area.

A very common practice, but absolutely not environmentally friendly, that has been noticed by most of the interviewees is the adoption of single-dose containers: they are a mandatory regulation for certain kinds of food at breakfast but they are also adopted for the courtesy set in the rooms, they are consumed in great amounts and very seldom recycled.

The second sets of questions of the interviews was aimed at investigating the reasons behind the adoption of the aforementioned environmental behaviors, or the lack thereof. The main motivations that emerged are basically of two kinds: compliance with administrative dispositions is the main trigger in case of recycling, whereas almost all other practices are driven by a cost saving reason, mainly deriving from energy saving. Alternative transportation is an exception: it is not related with cost saving, and just in part with administrative regulations, since it is still a voluntary choice by hoteliers and guests. We can thus find partial

support for our first hypothesis, since compliance with regulations can be connected to legitimacy, and cost saving is directly linked to profitability.

Due to the small amount of sustainable practices that are currently adopted within the destination, and to the lack of strategic attitude and planning from the managerial side, we can claim that sustainability is indeed a not yet institutionalized process. Not surprisingly then, there is no communication to stakeholders about the few sustainable behaviors that are implemented, especially renewable energy. Tourists are not provided with this kind of information, not even on the hotel institutional website, because managers do not believe that this kind of communication will help to improve the corporate image nor to achieve better profits. Hence, none of the interviewees is currently taking advantage from the innovation, and our second hypothesis too finds only partial confirmation from the research.

5. Discussion

Since both of our statements find just partial support, the results of the interviews provide a good starting point for discussion.

In the first hypothesis we presented sustainability as a compromise between two complementary perspectives: on the one hand the pursue of legitimacy, defined as compliance with norms and regulations and fulfillment of stakeholders expectations, and on the other hand profitability, that is achieved both through cost saving and revenue increasing. However, analyzing the individual managerial perceptions about environmental sustainability, it has emerged that the legitimacy purpose is important just with respect to one of the two sources of legitimation we presented: the local administration. When it comes to tourists beliefs and expectations, they are scantily taken into consideration, even if hotel managers are generally aware that the environment is perceived as a quite important issue for tourists, especially those coming from northern Europe, which present different mindset and cultural background and constitute an important part of the tourist flows: “80% of our guests are not Italian... the more you move to the north of Europe, the more sensible they are to these issues” or “since we have many German tourists, we try to be more attentive to recycling”. Profitability, on the other hand, is achieved only through the reduction of the energy cost, while hoteliers do not perceive sustainability as a possible method to increase revenues. When asked about the motivation for the implementation of solar panels: “Cost saving, nothing more than cost saving” answered one of the managers. These two facts allow us to identify the lack of corporate communication as one the main problems: in order to convey the customers a good and responsible corporate image, sustainability needs to be communicated to the tourists, that may eventually be willing to increase the final expenditure capacity. The problem, thus, lies not in the sources of legitimation, but in the subjects themselves, that are not able or not willing to properly use impression management and corporate communication tools.

Our second hypothesis is again not entirely supported by the results: environmental sustainability is in the early stages of the institutionalization of the innovation process, since it has clearly emerged how it is still rarely nor systematically adopted by the hotels in the destination. Surprisingly, however, nobody is taking benefits from this potential first mover advantage, not even the few managers that are indeed adopting some environmental devices. In fact, for the innovation to be firstly implemented, it has to improve the efficiency and the effectiveness of the company, but then for the innovation to become institutionalized, its advantages have to be perceived by competitors, both from a profitability and a legitimacy perspective. In our case, the implementation of sustainable behaviors, e.g. renewable energy, is not equally nor systematically perceived as profitable by all the hotel managers, and that is

one of the reasons for being barely adopted. But this situation could be beneficial for the few hotels adopting it, if they were able to properly exploit it, since the profits will not yet be dissipated among competitors. This is however not the case, because they are not sufficiently communicating this responsible and sustainable practice to the ones that may be their potential source of enhanced profits. When asked whether customers were aware of the solar panels in his structure, one hotel owner answered: “Absolutely no, why should I tell them?” or another simply said: “This is not their problem”. “We are quite unique in that we use thermal water to partially warm the hotel” said one of the interviewee, but when asked whether she was disclosing this good practice, the answer was: “We tell the guests only if we are directly asked for”. Once again the lack of corporate communication is driving companies to miss an important opportunity. The other face of the coin of the inadequate level of disclosure, a part from missing the individual opportunity, is the lack of awareness of the competitors about the potential advantages of the innovation, both in terms of social and economic benefits. This prevent the isomorphic process to begin and therefore the innovation is never institutionalized. Due to the critical importance that sustainability has acquired nowadays, this fact is detrimental not from an individual perspective, but from a societal one.

Another point that is worth discussing is the variability of environmental sustainability related to some firm-specific characteristics: since environmental practices are differently adopted by the hotels we interviewed, we better investigated how legitimacy and profitability are differently perceived and weighted by hotel managers. Among star classification or the different geographical location within the destination we did not find any significant dissimilarity, but the age of the hotel came out to be a potential restraint for the adoption of sustainable tools: since the large majority of the structures operating in this area dates back to the '80s, sustainability would require a general renewal of the buildings, and this is evaluated as too costly. Recently built hotels are instead more sustainable because they were constructed following more updated environmental guidelines.

Diversity also emerged with respect to the ownership structure of the hotel, especially regarding behaviors that require large investments such as the adoption of renewable energy. In particular, nearly half of our unit of analysis is made of hotels run by families, and it emerged from our conversations that this kind of companies is more willing to invest in solar or geothermic power, while in hotels where management and ownership are separated the short term horizon makes it really difficult to afford such an investment. “My time horizon is three years long” said one of the directors, “It is a huge problem to proceed with an investment, that on the other side could potentially improve the structure, make it more attractive and profitable”. On the contrary, the owner of a family hotel said: “Many of us were involved in this project (geothermic power), but just a few could afford such an investment”. Referring to our group of hotels, we can therefore suppose that profitability purposes can better lead to sustainability when they are combined with a long term vision of the firm, and that legitimacy becomes a more powerful motivation when matched with reputational concerns, that are more typical of family organizations.

Interestingly, some behaviors in contrast with environmental preservation are nevertheless largely adopted, e.g. the single-dose containers for breakfast. According to our interviews, hotel managers are aware that these practices are causing a large amount of waste production, as it emerges from their words: “You cannot imagine the amount of plastic I threw away last year!” and the most attentive customers are noticing it as well, but this is a behavior that is generally implemented because of public health related regulations and that cannot be avoided. Regulations are also in some cases obstructing sustainability because of aesthetic or heritage protection motivations, e.g. the adoption of solar panels, and again hoteliers that would be willing to update their energetic system find additional restrictions to comply with.

Finally, a dramatic issue that came out from our interviews is the problem of traffic and parking, enhanced by the particular conformation of the destination: the peninsula in fact creates a sort of bottleneck effect and during the weekends or on other hot dates the traffic is really congested. A part from the voluntary decision to adopt alternative method of transportation inside the old town, hotel managers do not feel in charge of nor responsible for this problematic issue, nevertheless it is generally perceived as one of the most critical dilemma with respect to the destination as a whole. Many interviewees talk about “apocalyptic scenarios” referring to the traffic, while about the parking problem another manager said: “They (the local administration) must absolutely do something... I really do not understand why they are not doing anything”. But also with respect to this problematic issue, hotels are not communicating in advance to the customers the possibility to use sustainable transports within the old town: “Many of my colleagues and me, I must admit, we are not informing the guests of this possibility, otherwise we lose the advantage to have a private parking within the old town”. Again, sustainability is perceived as an obstacle, rather than a source of benefits.

These findings and discussion suggest that Sirmione has reached its maturity phase within the destination life cycle (Butler, 1980), and that the carrying capacity has probably been exceeded many years ago. Even if this is not perceived from a long term environmental perspective, it still is an important issue at least from a more immediate competitive point of view. According to our conversations with hotel executives, the destination is enjoying the fruits of its past attractiveness, thus preventing or at least slowing down the innovation process, including sustainability: “There is a sort of generalized paralysis... In fact the vessel is drifting, engines stopped”. In order to escape decline, the subsequent phase in the life cycle sustainability emerges as one of the possible solutions to allow a better integration among the different subjects involved in the destination, “to create a green image of Sirmione, an image of relax and well-being...A kind of magic ecosystem where daily life is not admitted”. In some of the hoteliers words thus, the green choice could allow the destination to succeed in its rejuvenation and remain competitive in the international panorama.

6. Conclusion

The present study was aimed at the exploration of the presence of environmentally sustainable behaviors and the rationales behind them within hotels in a specific destination on lake Garda. In particular our main hypotheses, following the neo-institutional framework, were arguing that sustainability is driven by two complementary needs of the organizations, i.e. legitimacy and profitability, and that it is an innovative practice, not yet institutionalized, from which it is still possible to derive a first mover advantage.

Our findings are just partially supporting these statements, since hotels pursue legitimization just from one source, the local administrations, but little effort is made in order to fulfill the expectations of other stakeholders (tourists). Profitability is the main driver for the adoption of environmental techniques, but only seeking cost saving since hotel managers do not sense the possibility for profit enhancing. In addition, sustainability has shown to be not yet an institutionalized innovation, from which a first mover advantage could still be derived, but this opportunity is being missed. The lack of a proper corporate communication has been identified as the most prominent reason at the basis of this managerial myopia.

This research provides important contributions to prior literature on sustainability by connecting this compelling topic to the solid theoretical framework of legitimacy and neo-institutionalism. But it also offers some useful practical implications for practitioners: firstly, long term investment horizon and reputation concerns are critical factors that intervene in the

implementation of sustainable practices, as for the indications provided by family hotels. Moreover, the present study offers important insights about the detrimental effect of the lack of corporate communication, that emerges to be a necessary tool in order to derive, or increase, both legitimacy and profitability, through the implementation of environmentally sustainable behaviors. Sustainability, in turn, needs to be acknowledged by hotel managers, both owners and directors, not as a constraint to cope with, but rather as a tool to facilitate the organization survival, its competitiveness and its legitimation within the institutional environment, and ultimately as a way to escape the decline of the destination. At this moment in time sustainable practices in fact can no longer be considered as a set possible options, but as a to-do list instead, nowadays “we must shift the world onto a sustainable path” (United Nations Development Program, 2015).

We do not expect our study to be free from limitations: the research is in fact specific to the destination of Sirmione hence, it is not statistically generalizable. Furthermore, we decided to address only one of the three dimensions of sustainability, the environmental one, we overlooked important stakeholders categories, e.g. the local community, and among the different subjects in the tourism value chain we focused just on hotels. An additional limitation of the study we have to acknowledge is the subjective assessment about the level of sustainability: we did not rely on objective indexes to evaluate the quantity and degree of environmental sustainable tools implemented by our interviewees, but rather on our shared perceptions and understandings about the topic. Of course, we also built on the managerial lack of strategic vision and planning related to sustainability.

Additional research could better investigate the economic and sociocultural impacts of tourism, also with respect to the residents perceptions. Moreover, it could be interesting to extend the unit of analysis to other destinations, not only to similar towns on lake Garda, but also to other possible competing destinations that are located in different cultural environments where sustainability is a more consolidated practice, e.g. northern Italy and the Alps. A final suggestion is the possibility to replicate the interviews in the future in order to obtain insights on how (and if) the sustainability issue has evolved.

All these suggestions are aimed at providing further empirical evidence about the kind of sustainable practices that are emerging in the tourist industry, what drives their implementation and which are the benefits of the sustainable choice, both from an individual managerial perception, but also from an enlarged societal one, and ultimately are aimed at finding an answer to our initial question, why should hotels turn green.

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