



CO₂ Neutrality of Small and Medium-Sized Hotels – Publicity Stunt or Sustainable Competitive Advantage?

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Abstract: *The topic of climate protection is steadily gaining importance in public discussion. This paper shows that CO₂ emissions are also gaining significant influence on booking behaviour in tourism. At the same time, it can be demonstrated in the context of a large-scale survey that with a growing desire for CO₂ neutrality, higher accommodation rates are also accepted.*

Large hotel chains already regularly have integrated sustainable thinking into their daily routine. SMEs currently have some catching up to do. While hotel groups are accused of greenwashing, SMEs can generate a competitive advantage through individual, traceable measures.

1. INTRODUCTION

Tourism is an important sector for many economies. Among European countries, tourism is particularly important in Austria, Spain, Greece, Cyprus, and Malta (Augsbach, 2020). However, the exact weight of tourism cannot be determined thanks to economic indicators. Schrader and Laaser (2020) attribute this to the fact that in tourism-related sectors such as gastronomy, retail or culture, it is not possible to clearly distinguish between generally available and tourism-induced purchasing power (Schrader & Laaser, 2020). This agrees with Spörel (1993), who laments the lack of generally accepted methods and definitions for quantifying tourism as an economic factor (Spörel, 1993). Nevertheless, there is now a consensus that tourism brings positive economic effects and is therefore an effective component of regional development (Mayer & Stoll-Kleemann, 2020). The positive impulses also indirectly contribute to strengthening other economic sectors, such as crafts and agriculture. A development that has strengthened continuously in recent years until the outbreak of the Corona pandemic (Bundesministerium für Wirtschaft und Energie, 2020). For example, annual tourism consumption in Germany alone increased by 3.2% between 2010 and 2015, corresponding to an increase of 8.9 billion euros. The directly resulting gross value added recorded a nominal growth of 8.5% in the same period (Mattes, Becker, & Neumann, 2017). This result is generated by 2.9 million employees working in occupations directly related to tourism. This means that the tourism industry provides a similar number of jobs to the health care sector or the retail trade (Mattes et al., 2017). If the indirect profiteers are also considered, the gross value added increases by another 76 billion euros. In addition, the number of employees will then grow by a further 1.25 million (Federal Ministry for Economic Affairs and Energy, 2020).

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Despite these positive framework conditions, according to Wiener (2020), the industry was already in crisis before Corona (Wilke, 2009). According to Škodová Parmová (2017), this can be attributed to increasingly dynamic and complex market activity (Spielhagen, 1996). On the one hand, tourists act very price-sensitive. A development that, according to Laesser & Bieger (2020), is further intensified by the negative impact of the Corona pandemic on private incomes (Laesser & Bieger, 2020). On the other hand, technological progress ensures increasing competition among destinations (Bohnenstengel et al., 2011; Milanez-Schenk, 2013). For example, the expansion of transport infrastructure ensures that destinations that were previously unreachable become accessible. Another example is booking and rating portals on the Internet. These provide extensive transparency in terms of prices and services (Moser, 2011). While, according to Moser (2011), this poses a threat to the existence of many hotel businesses, establishments that are well-positioned in online marketing can generate an advantage here. This is because targeted marketing communication can generate authentic reviews, which can lead to better findability online and even to a significantly higher booking rate (Hummel, Pfeiler, & Kleina, 2020).

All in all, these changes mean that tourism SMEs and international tourism groups have to compete more and more in the favour of the limited number of overnight guests (Enz & Škodová Parmová, 2020). According to Sdrolias et al. (2016), it is, therefore, necessary to develop an individual profile to compete (Sdrolias et al., 2016). Theoretically, competition is desirable in an economy, as it forces suppliers to permanently improve their products, services, and processes. Consumers thus permanently benefit from better or more affordable goods (Leschke, 2020). However, competition in the hotel industry now goes far beyond what Adam Smith called for in the 'concept of the invisible hand'. Therefore, the outcome is no longer the optimal allocation of overnight accommodation, which is in the overall interest (Keim, 2020). Instead, Enz & Škodová Parmová (2020) observe destructive market tendencies. These lead to a consolidation of the market (Enz & Škodová Parmová, 2020). As a result, small and medium-sized hotel businesses are increasingly disappearing (Will, 2018). In particular, the existence of providers who fail to convey a USP is at risk (Zehrer, 2020). They are bought up by investors and integrated into national or supranational groups (Altendorfer, 2020; Tophotel, 2019).

If small and medium-sized hotel businesses want to sustain their position in this market environment, they must expand their competitiveness (Hoffmann, Lennerts, Schmitz, Stölzle, & Uebernickel, 2016; Pfeil, 2016; Rauch, 2019). Large hotel chains also pursue this goal. In doing so, they focus on growth and mergers, whereby synergy effects can be used and higher efficiency can be achieved (Maurer, 2015). SMEs, however, can develop a USP by sharpening their profile and consistently aligning their range of services with their central target groups (Gardini, 2020).

One of the greatest challenges of the 21st century is climate change. This has a major impact on tourism demand (Pröbstl-Haider, Lund-Durlacher, Olefs, Damm, & Stolba, 2021).

On this ground, both government measures to reduce CO₂ emissions and changed private preferences are leading to a change in booking behaviour. This is particularly important for the hotel industry. According to Gössling et al. (2021), a significant proportion of tourism-related greenhouse gas emissions is attributable to accommodation (Gössling, Lund-Durlacher, Anton-schmidt, Peters, & Smeral, 2021). For this reason, particularly strong effects are to be expected there when it comes to reducing the societal as well as individual ecological footprint. The resulting consequences are discussed heterogeneously. In addition to negative effects, positive impulses are also expected from the new behaviour of consumers (Böhm, 2008; Pröbstl-Haider,

Haider, Wirth, & Beardmore, 2015). This suggests that accommodation businesses with a sustainable orientation can achieve a competitive advantage. For example, CO₂ neutrality could be used as a selling point. On the one hand, this requires that consumers consider the carbon footprint of a destination in their booking decision. Conversely, the willingness of consumers to accept an additional price for a sustainably designed hotel operation is required. Whether this is the case is clarified in this chapter.

2. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

The aim of the research project described here is to determine, whether SMEs in the hotel industry can attract and retain overnight guests better than conventionally positioned providers through CO₂ neutrality. Making business operations climate-neutral is a serious intervention in entrepreneurial thinking and action. It is therefore of particular importance to provide the management of small and medium-sized enterprises with an empirically verified basis for decision-making, as in SMEs, decisions are often not made rationally. Moreover, the business management expertise of managers who have come into function, not infrequently for family reasons, is not commensurate with their position (Enz, 2019). Nevertheless, there is a consensus that SMEs are the basis of a stable and successful market economy (Bondareva & Zatrochová, 2014; Dobošová, Hupková, Beňuš, Mihálová, & Synetska, 2020).

3. DEFINITION OF SMES

Even if there is agreement today on the importance of SMEs for an economy, the definition of this term is still the subject of much debate. As early as 1991, Kosmider identified over 200 approaches to describing SMEs (Kosmider, 1991). This multitude results from the multifaceted nature of the companies to be defined. Thus, the spectrum ranges from the Ich-AG (Kinne, 2020) to globally operating hidden champions (Röhl & Engels, 2021). Therefore, the idea of a universally valid definition can be considered discarded today. Instead, the pragmatic approach has prevailed, according to which an appropriate definition is made in each individual case (Becker & Ulrich, 2011; Enz & Škodová Parmová, 2020). Qualitative, as well as quantitative criteria, are considered (Botzkowski, 2017). This paper defines a company as an SME if it meets the criteria set by the European Union. Accordingly, a company is classified as an SME, if it employs a maximum of 250 people and its annual turnover does not exceed the limit of 50 million euros (Enz, 2020; Enz & Škodová Parmová, 2020).

4. DEFINITION OF SUSTAINABLE HOTEL OPERATION

Today, the term ‘sustainability’ is an integral part of the vocabulary of business administration (Biermann & Erne, 2020). In the public perception, sustainable thinking is equated with environmental protection and social conscience (Dämon, 2016; Schareika, 2019). This perception dates back to the Brundtland Report published in 1987. There, guiding principles for sustainable development as we understand it today were formulated for the first time (Krause, 2021). This represents a concretization of the demands for managing global growth made in 1972 by Meadows et al. in the Club of Rome’s report on the state of humanity (Meadows, Meadows, & Randers, 2000).

However, as Ott (2020) points out, many definitions exist for the term sustainability (Ott, 2020). Sustainable thinking in management is not automatically a commitment to a better world but follows purely economic considerations. For example, Landesbank Baden-Württemberg (2021)

points out that sustainability can be a competitive advantage that allows enforcing higher margins. Furthermore, the state bank emphasizes that sustainable management does not necessarily lead to poorer returns (Landesbank Baden-Württemberg, 2021). In this context, Drucker (2021) points out that lasting competitiveness and lasting profitability are key sustainability goals from a business perspective (Drucker, 2021). However, there is no contradiction behind this; rather, a social maturation process emerges, as outlined by Maslow in the development of his pyramid of needs in the mid-20th century (Rother, 2021). While rich economies can afford to worry about animal welfare and environmental protection, in developing countries providing for the population is at the top of the agenda.

Governments have an advantage here: they are unrivalled in their territory. The situation is different with private-sector companies. They may compete with less demanding social competitors or have to serve consumers who are not willing to purchase products and services more expensively for higher moral standards. According to Krause (2021), companies can therefore only pursue social and ecological aspects of the social community that supports this and if an appropriate market environment is created (Krause, 2021).

For this research, the term ‘sustainability’ is used in the sense of a common definition. The authors understand sustainable action as measures that contribute to bringing the economic activity into harmony with the interests of humans, animals, and nature and are thus suitable for reducing the ecological footprint of a hotel. It is therefore about concepts that go beyond economics and also take ecology and social issues into account (InfraCert GmbH Institut für Nachhaltige Entwicklung in der Hotellerie, 2020).

From the perspective of sustainability, energy consumption and the associated CO₂ emissions as well as water consumption and waste generation are of decisive importance in hotel operations (Smola, 2021). Furthermore, purchasing behaviour, regionality, mobility and dealing with cultural heritage play an important role (InfraCert GmbH Institut für Nachhaltige Entwicklung in der Hotellerie, 2020). Since a large part of the other aspects is considered when preparing a carbon footprint at the company level, this paper focuses on this aspect. In this prioritization, the authors also consider that CO₂ emissions are a delineated issue that is easy for consumers to understand.

5. REVIEW OF THE IMPORTANCE OF CO₂ EMISSIONS FOR SMALL AND MEDIUM-SIZED HOTELS

The debate about climate change and its consequences has intensified noticeably in recent years. At the same time, calls for more effective climate protection are growing louder. Klein et al. (2020) attribute this to the fact that the consequences of climate change are now also being openly felt in Central Europe (Klein, Schwalb, Ruhbaum, Fricke, & Grotewold, 2020). However, Poushter & Huang (2019) find that the expression of fear of climate change is strongly influenced by the individual political worldview. Thus, supporters of bourgeois parties are far less concerned about climate change than people who feel they belong to the left spectrum (Poushter & Huang, 2019). Against this background, Schaller & Carius (2019), in agreement with Lockwood (2018), see the danger that climate protection could become an issue of the elites, while large parts of the population get the feeling that only further expenses are to be shifted onto them (Lockwood, 2018; Schaller & Carius, 2019). Against this backdrop, a market review is undertaken. This is intended to show the current state of knowledge of the importance of sustainability for hoteliers and overnight guests.

6. SUSTAINABILITY IN THE ACCOMMODATION SECTOR

Both holidaymakers and business travellers are now more aware of climate change and the associated sustainable thinking. They are increasingly paying attention to or demanding compliance with environmental standards (Meier, 2021; Smola, 2021). This has led to the fact that hosts can no longer avoid the topic of sustainability. Therefore, the aspect of ecology is currently relevant for product marketing in the hotel industry (Škodová Parmová, Dvořáková Líšková, Kain, & Korousová, 2017).

6.1. Hotel groups in dealing with sustainability goals

As a result, national and international hotel groups have already positioned themselves. They already have extensive experience with socially critical issues. For example, extensive compliance obligations are part of everyday life for groups, especially for listed companies (Schockenhoff, Roßkopf, & Arnold, 2021). High-profile compliance with these regulations has now emerged as an effective marketing tool (Gilbert, 2020). This is because, as Kehl (2015) agrees with Gaul (2001), ethical behaviour can contribute enormously to corporate success (Gaul, 2001; Kehl, 2015). According to Gilbert (2020), with neutral certification and appropriate customer communication, this can be developed towards a differentiation advantage in Porter's sense (Gilbert, 2020; Porter, 2009). Building on these experiences, hotel chains now are openly committing to general, often international standards of sustainability. It is not uncommon for this to extend to the publication of sustainability reports. For example, Steigenberger Hotels AG is committed to sustainability as part of a corporate social responsibility strategy. The central goal is to make the hotel group climate-neutral by the year 2050. This is to be achieved through resource-saving building standards as well as through activities in the procurement of food and beverages (Steigenberger Hotels AG, 2021). The sustainability goals of Maritim Hotels are formulated similarly. These focus on energy consumption, sustainable purchasing and waste separation (Maritim Hotelgesellschaft mbH, 2021). ACCOR SA, Six Continents Hotels Inc. and Marriott International Inc. are also committed to sustainability in these areas (Accor SA; Marriott International; Six Continents Hotels, 2021). All chains also consider and claim ethical treatment of staff as a sustainability issue. Even if there are brand-specific differences in the focus of the sustainability goals and the way of dealing with them, all hotel chains have one thing in common: they want to promote sustainability where it also offers a business benefit in monetary terms or an advantage in recruitment. This phenomenon can be seen in other industries as well. It can contribute to the seriousness of the efforts being questioned and the associated measures being reduced to a marketing tool such as greenwashing (Groneweg & Reckordt, 2020; Rauterberg, 2020).

6.2. SMEs in dealing with sustainability goals

In contrast to the manageable number of hotel groups, the hotel industry in Germany is divided into small parts. The Federal Statistical Office (2020) recorded 12,343 hotels as well as 6,802 bed and breakfasts, and 4,940 guest houses. In addition, there are youth hostels, recreation and holiday homes, holiday flats and private room rentals (Graefe, 2020b). The market is similarly atomistic in other European countries. In 2019, for example, a total of 9,383 accommodation establishments were registered in the Czech Republic (Graefe, 2020a), while in Austria there were approximately 68,400 (Mohr, 2021).

Because of the large number of market participants at the SME level, the authors of this paper decided to conduct the qualitative review based on German hotel associations. Synonymous to the term ‘hotel association’, the term ‘hotel cooperation’ can also be found in the literature. These are voluntary associations of economically and legally independent hotel businesses, which often call themselves private hotels. The history of these alliances partly goes back to the 1970s. Originally, they were advertising associations or purchasing associations (Flair Hotels e. V., 2021b). Today, the spectrum also includes aspects of management consulting as well as training measures and further education offers for owners and employees (AKZENT Hotels e.V., 2021a). In Germany, 60% of the hotels are currently operated as private establishments that do not belong to a chain. Approximately 30% of them belong to hotel cooperations (HSI Hotel Suppliers Index GmbH, 2021).

Within the framework of qualitative content analysis, the central websites of the hotel cooperations were examined to see whether they indicate that the affiliated accommodation establishments show sustainable commitment in the sense of this research work. For this purpose, the website was searched for relevant content. To find sub-pages that might not be recognizable, an additional search was carried out using Google. The hotel cooperation was queried with the term ‘sustainability’. The results were then evaluated. If it was recognizable that this was a general goal of the hotel association, the category was evaluated as fulfilled — independent of the question of how many of the cooperation hotels implement this aspect.

Table 1. Which modules are used centrally in a comprehensible way?

	Climate neutrality	Energy	Sustainable purchasing	Disposal	Water	Ethical handling of personnel	External certification	Further measures	E-charging	Points achieved
AKZENT HOTELS	✓	×	×	×	×	×	✓	×	×	2
Best Western Hotels Germany	✓	✓	×	×	✓	✓	×	✓	✓	6
CPH Hotel Marketing GmbH	×	×	×	×	×	×	×	×	×	0
Flair Hotels e.V.	✓	×	✓	×	×	×	✓	✓	×	4
Landidyll Hotels e.V.	×	×	✓	×	×	×	×	×	×	1
PrivateCityHotels	×	×	×	×	×	×	×	×	×	0
Relais & Châteaux Hotels Germany	×	×	×	×	×	×	×	×	×	0
Ringhotels Germany	×	×	✓	×	×	×	×	×	×	1
Romantic hotels	×	×	✓	×	×	×	✓	×	×	2
Wellness Hotels Germany	×	×	×	×	×	×	×	×	×	0

Source: Authors

The evaluation presented in Table 1: Which modules are used centrally in a comprehensible way? shows that the hotel cooperations currently deal with the challenge of sustainability in very different ways. As many as four out of ten alliances have not defined the topic as a central component of their work. In the case of CPH hotels, which are strongly oriented toward business travellers, this can still be explained by the fact that corporate buyers are in many cases concerned with keeping the costs of business trips as low as possible (Schulz, 2021). The interest in aspects besides the room rate can therefore be classified as low among these buyers. However, it

is striking that with PrivateCityHotels, Relais & Châteaux Hotels Germany and Wellness Hotels Germany, three providers of the sophisticated accommodation segment have not yet listed any central measures for sustainability. The highest score of six points is achieved by ‘Best Western Hotels Germany’ — an association of independent German hotels that is, however, integrated into international hotel cooperation.

At the same time, the review makes clear that numerous SME hotels are dealing with the topic of sustainability without having already found a clear line. CPH Hotelmarketing GmbH, for example, has published a brochure with best practice examples — without defining concrete measures or formulating guidelines (Gratenau, 2021). In contrast, the AKZENT cooperation has positioned itself. It allows guests to make a hotel stay CO₂-neutral for an extra charge. In addition, member companies are encouraged to be certified in terms of sustainable operations. However, it is not comprehensible how many bookings are actually processed in a CO₂-neutral manner — and how the additional costs are made up. The criteria considered within the framework of hotel certification are also not comprehensible. Aspects such as the use of regionally produced food or attractive working conditions are not apparent to the guest — although they are part of the philosophy of the cooperation hotels (AKZENT Hotels e.V., 2021b). Only Flair Hotels communicate stringently here. Everything that contributes to distinguishing the culinary offer as high-quality and regional from the competition is also included in the sustainability balance. However, energy consumption and the treatment of staff are not the subjects of the association’s communication (Flair Hotels e. V., 2021a). This may be because these are primarily operational topics — which, from the hoteliers’ point of view, are not relevant to the booking decision of the guests.

As the qualitative market analysis has shown, hotel chains already deal with the topic of sustainability consistently and internally. Here, the hierarchical directive relationships within the groups prove to be advantageous, as all brands and houses belonging to a hotel group can be committed to implementation (Yalcin, 2020). By contrast, it could be a disadvantage that groups can only take measures that can also be reliably implemented in all branches.

The private hotels do not yet use the topic ‘sustainability’ to a large extent at all or hardly as a sales argument in customer communication. This contradicts the position of the German Hotel and Restaurant Association. With Viabono, this association has created its umbrella brand for the marketing of sustainable hotels. In addition, the German Federal Association of Gastronomy offers its certification and consulting system (Meier, 2021). In addition, two new Pan-European hotel cooperations have emerged, Greenline Hotels (GreenLine Hotels GmbH, 2021) and Biohotels (be-oh Marketing GmbH, 2021), which have declared sustainable hotel management to be a central feature.

In summary, it can be stated that almost all SME hotels today deal with sustainability issues. However, this is largely done unconsciously within the framework of hotel management. Cost pressure ensures that measures are taken to save water or detergents. Self-produced food is used to deliver special quality. Photovoltaic systems and charging columns are set up because there are extensive subsidies available. Holistic thinking that bundles these necessities into a sustainability concept to create a resilient sales argument, in contrast, is still largely desideratum. This can be attributed to the personal characteristics of SME owners. They have a fundamentally different willingness to change than is found in corporations (Stejskalová, Štrach, & Rolinek, 2018).

Since private hotels can optimally exploit individual circumstances, there is the potential to develop sustainable thinking into a competitive advantage over hotel chains — which, for their part, want to deal with the topic as efficiently as possible from a business point of view. To generate a competitive advantage, however, it is necessary that hotel guests also attach importance to the topic of sustainability and are willing to pay for it.

7. DATA AND METHODS

This paper aims to clarify whether sustainable action can be developed into a competitive advantage for SMEs in the hotel sector. For this purpose, a large-scale survey of German consumers was conducted in August 2021. A total of 223 respondents took part in the survey. The survey was conducted online using the SurveyMonkey survey software. To achieve a good participation rate, the survey focuses only on the module ‘CO emissions’. Building on Woratschek (2021) and Kettl et al. (2021), focusing on one characteristic avoids overwhelming the participants (Kettl, Schäfer, & Buchauer, 2021; Woratschek, 2021). Moreover, CO₂ emissions are precisely a central tourism issue (Hennig, 2021). This is because the consequences of tourism on climate change are of concern to many holidaymakers (Müller, 2020). In particular, the question arises how the currently particularly climate-damaging travel types ‘cruise’ (Neumeier, 2019; Rieger, 2021) and ‘skiing holiday’ (Bayerischer Rundfunk, 2020; WWF Germany, 2013) are perceived by consumers.

According to Kettler (2021), rational arguments have lost much of their effectiveness in sales. In contrast, empathy, appreciation, and understanding of the customer have become key success factors (Kettler, 2021). In contrast, purchasing decisions are strongly influenced by personal characteristics such as lifestyle, personality, and self-image of consumers. Especially concerning leisure behaviour, personal preferences are crucial (Walsh, Deseniss, & Kilian, 2019). Against this background, it needs to be clarified how important consumers currently consider CO₂ neutrality in travel accommodation. This results in the hypothesis to be tested:

H_A: The relevance of CO₂ emissions when deciding on accommodation has not increased in the last three years.

To identify the development of relevance, the respondents were asked how significant they currently consider CO₂ neutrality to be for their booking behaviour. At the same time, they were asked how important they considered this aspect to be for their booking behaviour three years ago. The evaluation could be made on a scale from ‘1’ (absolutely unimportant) to ‘6’ (crucial for booking). Compared to three years ago, the relevance of the CO₂ neutrality of the accommodation was rated on average 1.03 (95%-CI [0.87, 1.19]) points higher on the 6-point Likert scale (median 1, SD=1.22). This difference is significantly different from zero according to the paired t-test ($t(222)=12.656$, $p<.001$, $n=223$). All p-values in this article are Bonferro-ni-Holm-corrected for multiple testing. The effect size according to Cohen (1992) is $d=0.848$ (95%-CI[0.7, 1], $nboot=1000$) and can be considered strong. Therefore, the formulated hypothesis H_A must be rejected. The influence of the carbon footprint of overnight accommodation on the booking decision has increased significantly over the last three years.

Whether this is a relevant change for the hotel industry cannot yet be deduced from this. Therefore, in a second step, the respondents are asked how much they agree with the statement “The CO₂ balance of a holiday will be decisive for my travel decision in the future”. Here, too, a

6-point Likert scale was used for evaluation. The distribution of responses is shown in Figure 1. The analysis shows that 70.4% disagree with the statement.

In addition to whether an issue is considered in the purchasing decision, there is a second important issue for the hospitality industry. This is the willingness to pay for a certain service. For this reason, the willingness to pay more for CO₂ neutrality in the future is also queried. The willingness to pay more for CO₂-neutral accommodation was surveyed on a scale from 1 (not at all willing) over 5% increments up to 11 (as much as necessary to achieve CO₂-neutrality).

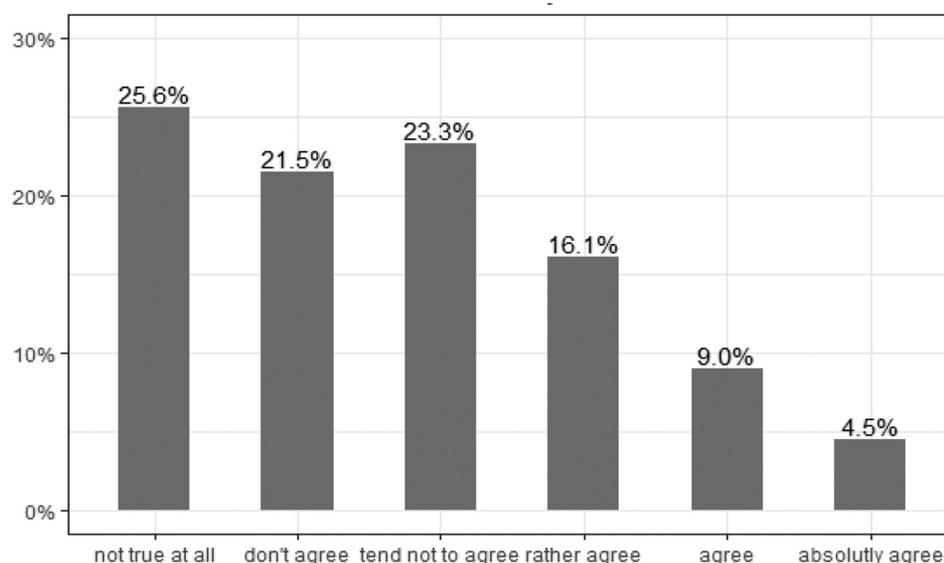


Figure 1. Distribution of agreement: Statement “CO₂ balance will be decisive for my travel decision”

Source: Own research

The result is shown in Figure 2. It becomes clear that 18.47% of the test persons are not willing to pay a surcharge for CO₂ neutrality. A further 40.54% are prepared to accept a surcharge of up to 15% compared to the current price level. However, almost half of the respondents (40.99%) are also prepared to accept a higher surcharge. A total of 6.76% of the respondents state that they are prepared to pay as much extra as is necessary to achieve CO₂ neutrality.

However, since 40.99% of the respondents state that they would also pay more than 15% for more climate protection, the result is analysed further. This involves the clarification of the hypothesis

H_B: There is no correlation between the strength of the desire for a CO₂-neutral accommodation option and the willingness to accept a higher surcharge for it.

Due to fewer responses at the highest level of the desired variable and strong similarity of responses at the lowest levels in terms of willingness to pay, the desired variable was grouped as follows:

- 1+2= "unimportant",
- 3= "rather unimportant",
- 4= "rather important",
- 5+6= "important".

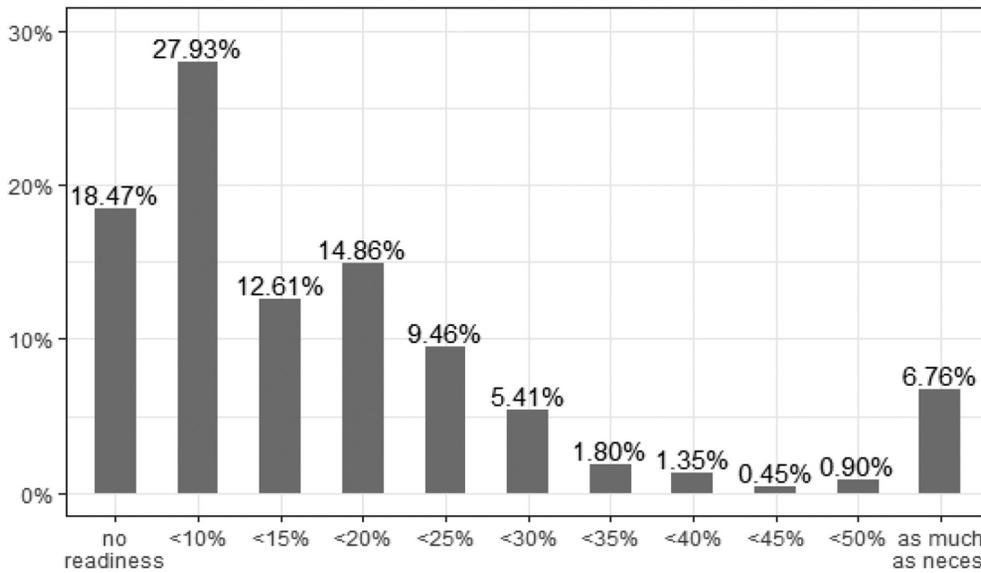
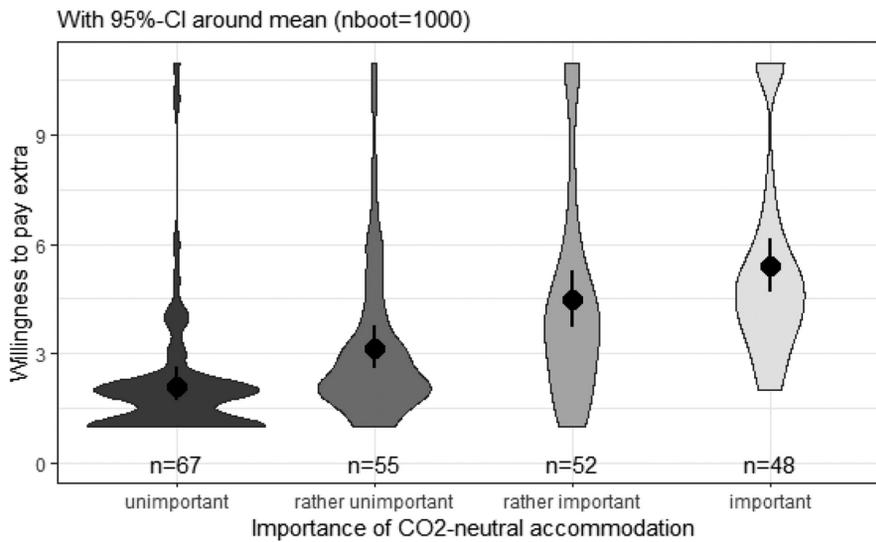


Figure 2. How much of a surcharge would be acceptable to achieve CO₂ neutrality?

Source: Own research



	MW	Sd	M	N
Unimportant	2.09	1.82	2	67
Rather unimportant	3.13	2.13	2	55
Rather important	4.48	2.93	4	52
important	5.4	2.68	5	45

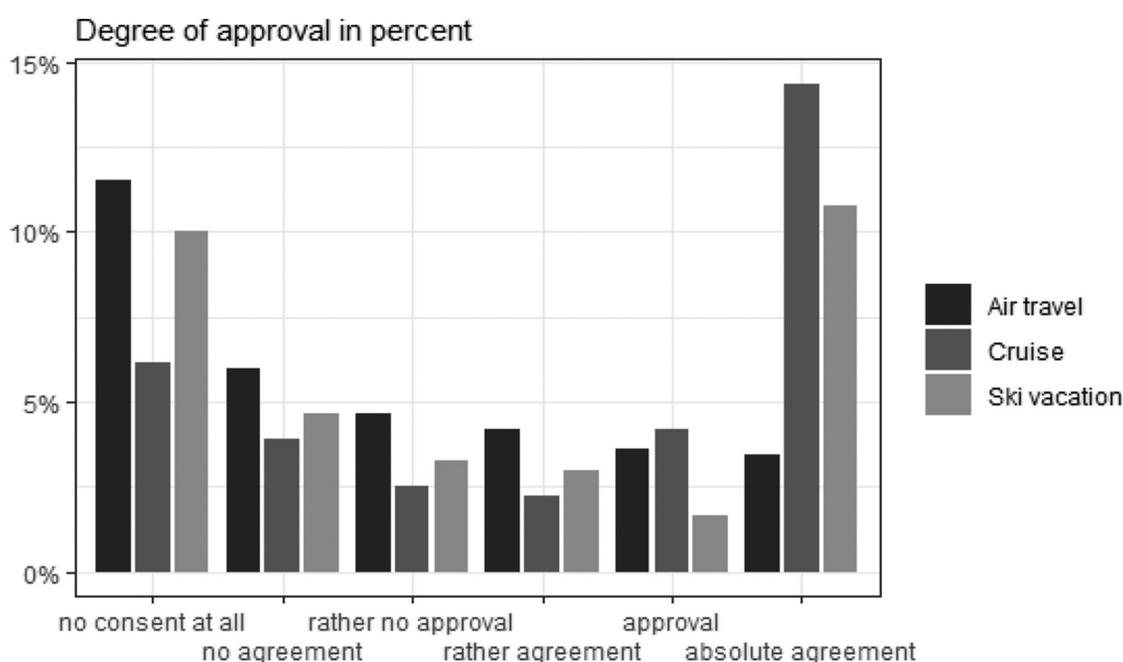
Figure 3. Desire for CO₂ neutrality and willingness to pay extra

Source: Own research

A significant linear trend was demonstrated by planned contrasts via Yuen's test with Welch-Satterthwaite correction ($t(169.993)=7.898, p<.001, r_{contrast}=0.4717$), with a greater desire for CO₂-neutral accommodation also increasing willingness to pay extra.

Thus, the formulated hypothesis H_B must be rejected. With the strength of the desire for CO₂-neutral accommodation, the willingness to pay more for this property also increases.

To verify the general willingness to make a climate-oriented change in travel behaviour, three further questions are asked. These are intended to determine the willingness to forego cruises, tourist air travel, or skiing holidays in the future due to the poor CO₂ balance. The level of agreement was again assessed using a 6-point Likert scale. As can be seen in Figure 4, this ranged from ‘no agreement at all (1) to ‘I agree 100%’ (6).



	Cruise	Cumulative approval	Air travel	Cumulative approve	Ski vacation	Cumulative approve
No consent at all	18.39		34.53		30.04	
No consent	11.66		17.94		13.90	
Rather no consent	7.62	37.65	13.90	66.37	9.87	53.81
Rather agreement	6.73		12.56		8.97	
Approval	12.57		10.76		4.93	
Absolut agreement	43.05	62.35	10.31	33.63	32.29	46.19

Figure 4. Willingness to forgo certain types of travel to protect the environment

Source: Own research

The descriptive representation in Figure 4 shows that the willingness to forego different forms of travel varies. The values on which the diagram is based are shown in detail in Table 3.

A closer look at the figures shows that in the cruise sector alone, a majority (62.35%) would consider giving up certain types of travel to protect the climate. Concerning skiing holidays, 46.19% agree with a possible waiver. For air travel, the approval rating even drops to 33.63%.

8. RESULTS

This paper deals with the question of whether small and medium-sized hotels can achieve a competitive advantage through sustainable thinking and action. This could contribute to achieving a better occupancy rate, achieving higher margins, and thus ultimately maintaining the company. Within the scope of an analysis of the German hotel market, it could be determined that the industry has already become aware of the topic. In particular, large hotel chains have already taken measures to relieve their customers of the concern that travel could be unjustifiable for ecological reasons. Furthermore, it has been shown that SMEs also already are active in certain areas.

To clarify whether these measures are in line with increasing demand, a large-scale survey of private hotel guests was carried out. The aim was to clarify whether climate protection is a relevant product feature for customers, or whether the development is merely due to the general spirit of the times. As an example, the importance of CO₂ neutrality in the selection of tourist accommodation was examined.

The analysis clearly shows that tourists have developed a stronger awareness of climate protection within the last three years. Thus, a significant increase in the importance of CO₂ neutrality with the choice of accommodation could be demonstrated. At the same time, however, 70.4% of the respondents state that the CO₂ balance is not a decisive factor for future travel planning. At the same time, the majority of respondents tolerate a price surcharge of a maximum of 15% for reasons of climate protection (59.01%). Nor is there a strong willingness to forego air travel (33.63%) or skiing holidays (46.19%) in the future for environmental reasons. Only the acceptance of cruises is estimated to be lower in the future. In this case, 62.35% of respondents said they would be willing to forego cruises in the future for climate reasons.

The survey only provides a mood picture. How the actual booking behaviour would be, cannot be clarified in this work. For example, the share of cruises in the total travel market is currently 2.85% (Herrmann & Wetzel, 2018). At the same time, the share of German skiers in the total population is currently 17.6% at 14.61 million (Vanat, 2020). Against this background, the higher willingness to forego cruises and ski holidays compared to air travel could be influenced by the fact that a high proportion of the subjects want to avoid taking any of these trips for other reasons and are now legitimizing this with consideration for climate change.

9. CONCLUSION

This study shows that people have become aware of climate protection. However, there is currently no significant willingness to restrict individual travel behaviour for this reason.

At the same time, this paper makes clear that 81.53% of the respondents are willing to accept a surcharge for the CO₂ neutrality of their chosen accommodation provider. While 40.54% of the respondents would pay a maximum surcharge of 15%, 40.99% stated that they would also agree to a significantly larger price increase. This means that the issue is developing into a general quality feature, as service quality already is today, for example. Hotels that want to generate a lasting competitive advantage must meet and exceed customer expectations in such business areas (Škodová Parmová, Dvořáková Líšková, & Kain, 2018).

However, a gap exists between morality and behaviour. According to Lange (2019), knowledge of one's misconduct experimentally provides a temporarily reduced self-image. This induces a need for moral remediation, 'moral cleansing' (Gilchrist & Schnall, 2018). As O'Connor et al. (2020) agree with Lange, this could lead to the theoretical willingness to accept higher prices identified here being lower in reality (Lange, 2019, 98 ff; O'Connor, Effron, & Lucas, 2020). In addition, climate neutrality generally has different values for different target groups. For example, Novacka et al. (2019) show that sustainable action is more in demand by tourists from Western countries than by travellers from CE countries (Novacka, Pícha, Navratil, Topaloglu, & Švec, 2019).

This paper thus contributes to explaining the actions of the large hotel groups. Currently, larger investments in climate protection in tourism cannot be justified with additional revenues that can be realized in the short term. However, where measures that make economic sense anyway can also be attributed to climate protection, they provide an additional sales argument. This helps hotel guests with little interest in CO₂ emissions to justify their holidays to themselves and society. However, a target group seriously interested in improving the CO₂ balance runs the risk of being accused of greenwashing. In addition, Navratil et al. (2019) were able to prove that not all measures to reduce CO₂ emissions are equally accepted by hotel guests (Navratil et al., 2019).

At the same time, the present work confirms the assumption that climate protection and CO₂ balance are gaining importance among holidaymakers. Already within the last three years, significant growth could be identified. Likewise, it could be proven that with the growing desire for CO₂ neutrality, the willingness to pay a higher accommodation price for this also increases. Against this background, this paper is an indication that SMEs can develop a future competitive advantage with individual, credible measures to reduce their corporate ecological footprint. On the one hand, it results from the additional sales argument that arises from this. On the other hand, it results from the possibility of being able to enforce a higher margin in target groups with an affinity for sustainability.

Concerning moral cleansing, the present study also makes it clear that further research is needed for a detailed assessment of the economic significance of climate protection. In particular, the actual willingness to accept higher accommodation costs for climate protection would be an important aspect. In general, the willingness to pay is higher for purchase inquiries than for price inquiries. In addition, a binding design of price and purchase inquiries has a significant effect on the expressed maximum willingness to pay (Müller, Voigt, & Erichson, 2009). Here, a binding purchase query or the empirical evaluation of real purchase decisions could verify and deepen the developments identified in this research. This could provide accommodation operators in the SME segment with a basis for investment decisions. At the same time, it could clarify the question whether CO₂ neutrality in the hotel industry should more sensibly be offered as an optional feature — or can best be represented by general pricing. In this context, the present work also provides the incentive to develop a methodology for implementing sustainable choices in the management of small and medium-sized hotels (Stejskalová et al., 2018). This is even more significant as accommodation businesses operate in a turbulent market environment. This is because businesses and customer needs are changing at an increasing rate. If SMEs want to generate or maintain a competitive advantage, they need to constantly innovate (Jindřich, Vrchota, & Rolínek, 2018).

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