MASTER THESIS IN TOURISM

How can hotels and OTAs in the collaborative economy increase demand for sustainability in the hotel industry from the younger generation in Denmark?

Master thesis author: Alberte Egholm

Supervisor: Carlos Pastor Chan Santana

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AALBORG
UNIVERSITY

Abstract

This study contributes with knowledge of the younger consumer group in Denmark, as well as the collaboration between relevant stakeholders of the hotel industry, including; hotels, OTAs, and certifications. In light of the current climate crisis and the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, and as the number of people who can afford to travel keeps growing, sustainable operations of hotels as part of the tourism industry are becoming increasingly important. As a result, many hotels are taking steps to operate more sustainably, implementing environmentally friendly practices, and seeking assistance from certification companies. However, consumer demand is crucial for a market of sustainable hotels to develop and be embraced. Research points toward increased interest in sustainable accommodation types from consumers. However, understanding of especially the younger generations, including Generation Z and Millennials' attitudes and demand towards sustainability focused hotels is narrow. As the younger generation will be society's primary consumer and working group by 2030, understanding their attitude and demand towards sustainability in the hotel industry is increasingly relevant.

Therefore, this study investigates the younger generation of consumers in Denmark and their attitude toward sustainability in the hotel industry. As most hotel consumption takes place online in the collaborative economy, the study focuses on how stakeholders such as hotels and OTAs can enable interest and demand from the younger generation of consumers in Denmark.

To investigate this, a mixed-method and abductive design has been applied to conduct the research of this study, including both qualitative and quantitative primary data, such as semi-structured interviews with six different informants and an online survey with 100+ respondents primarily based in Denmark. The study's findings show that there exists a gap between the younger generation in Denmark, their interest and appreciation of sustainability in the hotel industry, and their actual hotel decision-making and behavior. The study shows how the younger generation lacks understanding and awareness of sustainable practices of hotels and certification criteria and how the generation perceive sustainable products as expensive and out of their reach, which affects their interest and demand for sustainability in the hotel industry. Additionally, the younger generation is concerned about greenwashing. This study therefore suggests that more awareness, trust, and identification of sustainability in the hotel industry is needed. It is argued that collaboration between OTAs, hotels and

certifications in formulating sustainability and increasing sustainability-focused branding will enable more effective understanding, awareness, and trust of sustainability in the hotel industry from the younger generation in Denmark. This is needed in the collaborative economy to create demand from the younger generation and develop a market of sustainable hotels in the future.

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Introduction and Research Question

The global agendas - from the Brundtland Report to the SDGs

In 1987 The World Commission on Environment and Development (WCED) published a path-setting report called "Our common future", also known as the "Brundtland Report". The report included guiding definitions and principles for sustainable development and has played a significant part in laying the foundation for how sustainable development is understood today (Mondini, 2019). More recently, The Paris Agreement, which entered into force on 4 November 2016, sent a signal of global consensus toward a decarbonized economy and development (Scott et al., 2016). In addition, the Paris agreement marked the first time that both industrialized and developing countries committed themselves to implementing measures for climate protection and adaptation to climate change to limit global warming to 1.5 degrees Celsius (Scott et al., 2016). The same year as the Paris Agreement came into force, the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) as part of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development came into force. The SDGs are based on goals developed by World leaders in September 2015 (UN, 2022). While a strong interconnection between the Paris Agreement and the SDGs exist, the agendas are significantly different. Where the Paris agreement focuses mainly on decarbonization, the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the SDGs address more holistically issues connected to sustainable development. The SDG goals range from hunger and poverty reduction, climate protection, and nature conservation to peace and justice (Scott et al., 2016).

It is argued by scholars that society at this time is experiencing a Sustainability Revolution and Sustainability paradigm shift (Burns, 2012). This can be seen by the many sectors that are increasingly attempting to work towards the SDGs and sustainable development to tackle the current climate crisis. The sustainability paradigm shift entails many new design initiatives, and new values and practices focused on sustainability being implemented at various levels in various sectors (Burns, 2012). This is, for example, seen with the many types of sustainability reporting and certifications increasingly spreading across sectors worldwide, including sectors such as Food and Beverages, Retail, Healthcare, Construction, Energy, Agriculture, Transportation, and many more (Statista, 2020). The sustainability paradigm is also expressed by the implementation of the ESG criteria, which are used and measured in several industries, including tourism and travel. The ESG advocates a holistic perspective to sustainable development, considered within a global political, socioeconomic

and ecological context. Investors often use this set of standards for a company's operations to screen potential investments (Boffo, 2020; Amel-Zadeh & Serafeim, 2018). Meeting the global decarbonization goals as required by the Paris agreement and following the path for the 2030 Agenda has already caused changes and adaptations in business strategies. However, there is still a vital need for further changes and implementation in most sectors (Burns, 2012).

The world has arrived at a point where to stay within the safe boundaries of global warming; it needs to decarbonize its economy in the near future (Gössling & Higham, 2021). The attention towards sustainability is causing growing pressure on companies to act environmentally responsible (Akturan, 2018). As a result, more and more green companies are occurring, and existing companies are engaging more in green business models (Akturan, 2018). While working towards the SDGs and decarbonization is crucial for the planet's future, it is also becoming increasingly important for companies to survive on the market. Secretary-General of the World Tourism Organization, UNWTO, has suggested that, *"The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development with its 17 [SDGs] sets the path that we all must embrace. ... the private sector, which is the key player in tourism, ... is beginning to recognise that the SDGs offer true business opportunities as sustainable business operations can spur competitiveness and increase profit"* (UNWTO-UNDP, 2017 in Hall 2019, 1045).

The global agendas influence on the tourism industry

Like many other sectors, the global tourism system therefore has to decarbonize over the coming 30 years if global goals of stabilizing climate change are to be met (Gössling & Higham, 2021). Attention is increasingly turning towards the tourism industry and the need for policies and change towards reaching the Paris agreement and reducing the industry's negative impact on the environment and society. While the covid-19 pandemic decreased tourism's direct gross domestic product worldwide by half, the sector is still one of the world's largest industries, accounting for 6.1 percent of the global gross domestic product (GDP) in 2021 (Statista, 2022a). Due to the many different products and services connected to the tourism industry, it has been argued as a challenging industry to define. Statistics not based solely on the direct GDP tourism point toward the industry accounting for an even higher percentage of the world GDP (Statista, 2022a). However, the industry is not only notable in terms of world GDP but has a significant carbon footprint associated with it.

Tourism accounts for roughly 8% of the world's total carbon emissions (Sustainable Travel International 2022). Hall (2019) argues that despite the interest, overt attention, and the World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) expressing that tourism as a sector will contribute to the SDGs, empirical measures suggest that the tourism industry is less sustainable than ever on a global scale. As the number of people who can afford to travel keeps growing, the need for solutions and policies to solve the negative impact of tourism is increasingly necessary, relevant, and pressing (Sustainable Travel International 2022).

Trends and demand for sustainable accommodation in the tourism industry

Accommodation and hotels are a vital part of tourism and one of the industry's key components (World Tourism Organization, 2021; Statista, 2022a). While the carbon emission of airplanes and other forms of transportation accounts for the most significant part of tourism's total carbon footprint (49%), the accommodation sector plays a significant part contributing at least 6% of tourism's total carbon footprint (Sustainable Travel International 2022). Hotels, homestays, and rental homes generate emissions when accommodating people for their travels and the accommodation sector consumes and requires high amounts of resources and energy to operate functionally (Sustainable Travel International, 2022). For example, many accommodations rely on heating and air conditioning to keep guest rooms pleasant in hot or cold climates. These energy-intensive systems create CO2, as do the water heaters used to warm showers, pools, and spas. In addition, electricity used to power lights, TVs, refrigerators, laundry machines, and other equipment is a significant contributor, especially in areas with outdated or inefficient systems (Sustainable Travel International 2022). Hotels, for some time, have been associated with damaging impacts on especially the environment through the emissions of greenhouse gasses and the consumption of natural resources. This has triggered a development of "green hotels," with many hotel chains taking part in green programs and taking steps to be environmentally responsible (Nimri et al., 2020). Consumers are increasingly becoming interested in green and environmentally responsible companies and products (Pizzetti et al., 2021).

A green hotel can be defined as a hotel that has implemented and operates with policies and initiatives to reduce its negative impact on the environment. This will most often include initiatives concerning recycling, water, waste, pollution, energy consumption, and what is

done to conserve biodiversity and nature (Yi et al., 2018; GSTC 2022a). While hotels' emission and consumption practices are highly relevant concerning decarbonization, sustainable practices of hotels cannot be limited to decarbonization efforts (GSTC 2022a). Following the agenda of the SDGs, sustainable-oriented hotels can contribute to minimizing the tourism industry's carbon footprint but also need to support the economic, social, and cultural value of a destination, benefitting both locals and guests. Developing the accommodation sector with the implementation of green and other sustainable initiatives is essential to achieving decarbonization and holistic, sustainable development of the tourism industry (GSTC 2022a).

Interest in sustainable accommodation in the collaborative economy

Booking.com's Sustainability Report (2022) shows the apparent increase in interest toward more sustainable ways of traveling and accommodation types. The research behind the report is based on a survey set conducted in February 2022 of 30.000+ respondents across 32 countries.. The report shows that travelers not only value sustainable ways of traveling but also have intentions to make future trips more sustainable. While the report points out that not all travelers are actively looking for sustainable properties, it argues that the majority are open to consideration of sustainable accommodation choices if options are presented to them (Booking.com, 2022a). While hotel operations are essential, the guest's and consumer's demand and interest in hotels' sustainable initiatives are essential factors and drivers for the change in the actual operations of the hotels (Booking.com, 2022a). Getting travelers to choose hotels with sustainable and environmentally friendly operations is mentioned as one way of putting sustainable development of the industry into concrete practice (Statista, 2022a).

When consumers book accommodations nowadays this is most often facilitated through collaborative economy platforms, such as OTAs (Dredge et al., 2016, 5). The collaborative economy is described as a disruptive business model that originated with the rise of the Internet and has developed comprehensively since changing consumer behavior landscape and ways of consumption (Kuhzady. et al., 2020, 2-3). In the sharing of accommodations in the collaborative economy, the accommodation as the services is not owned by the platform but by a third-party provider (Dredge et al., 2016).

The younger generation and sustainable accommodation

Much literature on sustainability taps into the younger generation and their lifestyles, choices, and consumer behavior (Deloitte, 2022; Heath & Yarick, 2021). Heath & Yarick (2021) argues that generation Millennials and Z have a deep interest in and concern for the environment and a desire to serve a higher purpose (Heath & Yarick, 2021). The younger generations are additionally pointed out as requiring businesses to do more for the environment (Deloitte, 2022). As the younger generation will be the central working force and consumer group in society in 2030, they will have an essential say in whether society will be driven and develop sustainably, as well as what products and services will be demanded (Yamane & Kaneko, 2021). Therefore, the interest in and demand for sustainability in the hotel industry will be essential in acquiring a more sustainable hotel industry in practice. Therefore, it is necessary to understand how this generation, particularly, is positioned toward sustainable hotel types. The insights from the Booking.com Sustainability Report 2022 show growing interest and demand for sustainable accommodation types. However, apart from respondents age being 18+ and travel habits, they are not characterized further. This study, therefore, aims to investigate the attitude toward sustainable accommodation more limited concerning the younger generation as users of collaborative economy platforms and the future central consumer group in society. With this said, the study aims to answer the following research question and sub-questions:

Research question: How can hotels and OTAs in the collaborative economy increase demand for sustainability in the hotel industry from the younger generation in Denmark?

Sub-questions:
1. *How does consumer behavior theory shed light on the importance of increased understanding and awareness of sustainability from the younger generation in Denmark?*
2. *How can increased branding and trust in hotels' sustainable practices in the collaborative economy accommodate the needs of the younger consumers in Denmark?*
3. *What are the challenges of the certification system, and how can OTAs, hotels, and certifications collaborate to increase demand and awareness of sustainability in the hotel industry?*

Literature review

Value belief norm theory

Much literature on consumer behavior touches upon concepts such as values and intentions. Here the value belief norm theory (VBN) is a relevant model for understanding consumer behavior. The VBN is an extension of Schwartz's (1977) norm activation framework, initially aimed at investigating altruistic intention and behavior in social contexts. The norm activation framework uses three key concepts to explain prosocial and altruistic behavior formation: being aware of consequences, the ascription of responsibility, and personal norms (Schwartz, 1977). According to Schwartz norm activation framework, individuals' awareness of conceivably harmful consequences and their ascribed responsibility for possible consequences if they do not behave in a pro-socially manner triggers personal norms that determine a particular behavior.

Taking the norm activation framework and developing it under the new environmental paradigm, Stern et al. (1999) developed the VBN theory. Stern et al. (1999) extended the original norm activation framework and integrated values and the ecological worldview in the pro-environmental context to develop the VBN framework. The VBN theory is, therefore, a broadened version of the norm activation model that better accounts for pro-environmental intention and behavior. The VBN theory assumes that values and ecological worldviews activate pro-environmental personal norms and that these determine an individual's eco-friendly intention and behavior. As in the norm-activation framework, the awareness of adverse consequences is a key factor in creating a feeling of responsibility for a specific behavior (Stern et al. 1999).

Theory of planned behavior

Another key model and concept for consumer behavior is the theory of planned behavior (TPB). Ajzen (1991) proposes in the TPB model the perception that the key predictor of individual behavior is the intention to engage in the behavior. This intention is determined by attitude toward the behavior, subjective norm, and perceived behavioral control. Following the TPB model, the intention is based upon whether an individual holds willingness and openness toward a behavior and whether an individual is planning to engage

in a particular behavior (Ajzen, 1991). As outlined by Han & Kim (2010) The TPB model is an extended version of the TRA model. However, the TPB model includes both volitional and non-volitional control when explaining an individual's behavior. Here volitional can be understood as actively and consciously controlling or engaging, and non-volitional as more unconsciously.

Central for both the TRA and TPB models is that they perceive individual intention as the most accurate predictive factor for behavior (Han & Kim, 2010). In a pro-environmental context and study Han (2015) argues for a combination of the TPB and VBN. The author argues that behavior can be explained as driven by individuals' recognition of the impact of adverse consequences for valued objects from both volitional and non-volitional factors, as is the focus of the TPB. Nevertheless, values, personal norms, and a sense of obligation to take pro-environmental actions, as the focus of the VBN, are also considered key drivers of behavior (Han, 2015).

Intention-behavior gap

Han (2015) additionally points to consumer behavior theories, such as the TPB model being successfully applied and validated in a large variety of hospitality and tourism settings, also concerning pro-environmental behavior and hotel decision-making. However, Caruana et al. (2016) point out how planned behavior, values, and intention often differ from end decisions and consumer behavior. The author argues that especially concerning environmental issues, many consumers indicate concern about environmental issues, but only a few translate this concern into action (Caruana et al., 2016). This points toward the so-called "attitude-behavior "and "intention-behavior" gaps, meaning an inconsistency between consumers' values, attitudes, and intentions toward a specific topic and their actual behavior (Caruana et al., 2016). Concerning tourism, literature has been concerned with the gap between planned and actual behavior. March & Woodside (2005) points to how intention is an important construct that relates significantly to actual behavior but shows that tourism "strategy" and planned behavior vary from actual behavior and actions. The authors point to how many additional and contextual factors, beyond intention and values, interfere with or constrain an individual's ability to act upon values and intentions (March & Woodside, 2005).

Nudging

A relevant concept concerning consumer behavior and influencing people's choices is the concept of 'nudging'. Following Thaler and Sunstein (2008), this refers to influencing people's behavior without restrictions by making changes to the choice environment that guides and facilitates people's decisions. This will often be rooted in attempts to enable behavior that benefits society. Nudging often relates to individual choices that happen automatically. The concept does not necessarily involve increased information flows and provision since it affects people's behavior without them thinking about it (Lehner, 2016; Thaler & Sunstein, 2008).

Price and hotel decision-making

Baruca & Civre (2012) explains how when guests choose hotels and make a purchase, they weigh different factors and indicators and choose the ones that are most important and relevant to them given the context, their values, needs, and options (Baruca & Civre, 2012). The same authors, supported by Lockyer (2005), touch upon how price and location are among the top factors determining consumers' hotel decision-making. Added to the list of essential factors are characteristics such as service, quality, facilities, and reputation (Baruca & Civre, 2012, 78 & Lockyer, 2005, 529), yet several additional factors can influence decision-making in relation to hotels. As argued by Varkaris & Neuhofer (2017) the list of important factors increasingly includes marketing and social media, and Verma & Chandra (2018) has argued that sustainability can now also be added to the list as an essential and determining factor for consumers' hotel choice and decision making (Verma & Chandra, 2018).

New forms of connected consumption

The sharing economy, also known as the collaborative economy, is defined by the European Commission as *"a complex ecosystem of on-demand services and temporary use of assets based on exchanges via online platforms"* (EU 2015). Botsmann & Rogers (2011), together with Kuhzady et al. (2020), describes this economy as a disruptive business model that originated with the rise of the Internet and has developed comprehensively since. The

collaborative economy has outdated many modes of business and changed the consumer behavior landscape and consumption (Botsmann & Rogers, 2011; Kuhzady. et al., 2020).

While sharing is not a new phenomenon, the sharing economy refers to forms of exchange and services provided and facilitated through online platforms. Nica & Potcovaru (2015) point out how the sharing economy through technological systems, platforms, and marketplaces generates new chances for connected consumption. Because of the online emergence of the sharing economy, the system is, as argued by González et al. (2021), highly engaged in and supported by the younger generations, including Millennials and Generation Z, as these generations are technological and digital in nature.

Menor-Campos et al. (2019) present how consumption in the collaborative economy is enabled by either direct interaction or through an intermediary. In other words by Toni, M. et al. (2018), collaborative consumption is characterized by the possibility of gaining access to goods and services by paying for the experience of temporarily accessing these, but with no transfer of ownership taking place (Toni, M. et al., 2018). One of the main reasons underlying the success of the sharing economy is, as argued by Pappas (2017), to be the benefits it provides to both service and product providers and consumers (Pappas, 2017). The sharing economy is generally explained and agreed to be a tool for opening up access to "underutilized resources" through "sharing"' (Kuhzady. et al., 2020, 2-3). In the collaborative economy, individuals and companies are given the opportunity to augment their income and share others' goods and services.

OTAs in the collaborative economy

The collaborative economy is highly important for the sharing of tourism-related services, including accommodation (Kuhzady et al., 2020). In the Hotels segment, it is estimated that 80% of total revenue will be generated through online sales by 2026 (Statista, 2022b). The collaborative economy takes place through various forms of online technological systems or platforms where sharing is enabled directly or by an intermediary (Palgan, et al., 2017; Menor-Campos, A. et al., 2019). Talwar et al. (2020) explain how online travel bookings can be made directly on a service provider's website or through online travel agencies (OTAs). OTAs as intermediaries and online B2C platforms can therefore be considered platforms that are a dominant part of the collaborative and sharing economy (Palgan et al.,

2017; Menor-Campos et al., 2019). OTAs sell travel and tourism-related products such as hotel rooms, airline tickets, cabs, and holiday packages through websites and apps. The dominance of OTAs in the collaborative economy shows in the fact that Booking.com, which as per 2021, was the most dominant OTA in the industry, had about 653 million reservations through the platform. Among these bookings, hotel room nights were by far the most common type of reservation (Statista, 2022c). Chang et al. (2019) describe how OTAs as platforms require and hold a large amount of hotel data. The hotel data is branded and marketed on the OTA platforms, and often this marketing also includes price comparisons, discounts, and review comments.

Branding and marketing

Forgacs (2006) states that branding is one of the most important trends in the global hotel industry. Concerning the branding and marketing of hotels, the concepts of brand awareness, image, and brand equity are essential. Brand image is recognized as one of the most important concepts in marketing. It can, following Keller (1993) be defined as consumers' perceptions about a brand, equaling the brand associations held in consumer memory (Keller, 1993). Following Aaker (1991), brand awareness has to do with the ability of consumers to easily recognize or recall that a brand belongs to a particular product category. Brand equity is defined by Aaker (1991; 15) as "*a set of brand assets and liabilities linked to a brand, its name, and symbol, that add to or subtract from the value provided by a product or service to a firm and/or to that firm's customers".* Brand equity, in that sense, connects the relationship between customers and brands and to the added value as well as trust that consumers give to a product based on the brand (Aaker, 1991; Haudi et al., 2022).

Brand equity is essential for brand competitiveness, attracting and maintaining customers (Haudi et al., 2022). It is pointed out by Soler & Gémar (2017) that there exist varying definitions of the different components of brand equity. However, most include, amongst other factors, the importance of brand image and awareness for substantial brand equity. A clear image and strong awareness connected to a brand is therefore perceived as beneficial for brand equity. Brand loyalty, value, and quality are additional essential factors that make up brand equity (Soler & Gémar, 2017). Argued by Tiago & Verríssimo (2014) marketing and branding has for long been essential for the survival and competencies of companies,

yet digitalization has only intensified this, and Varkaris & Neuhofer (2017) shows how online marketing and branding is increasingly affecting consumers' hotel decision-making. To attract customers it is increasingly important in the collaborative economy to have a sustaibstial brand equity (Haudi et al., 2022).

Process and credibility of certifications

With the sharing of services and resources through online platforms, certification as a concept has become increasingly important. Fudurich & MacKay (2020) state that certification is a voluntary procedure that assesses and gives a written or documented assurance that a service, business, product, process, or management system lives up to specific requirements (Fudurich & MacKay, 2020). The authors explain how common components of certification programs include standards, assessment, certification documents, and recognition. A standard is typically some outlined requirements that must be met, and the assessment is the verification process confirming whether the requirements of the standards are met. Here third-party assessments are perceived as the most trustworthy since they entail that an independent party has done the evaluation. This process can result in the certification being obtained, including the provision of a document or label that ensures that the product, service, or business lives up to the standard. Concerning certification, recognition is another key term, referring to when other main stakeholders recognize or accept a given standard or certification process and highlight it as credible (Fudurich & MacKay, 2020). It is pointed out how the use of environmental certifications is growing. In the environmental context, certification typically includes assurances of implemented environmental management systems and practices concerning environmental issues such as energy use, water use, greenhouse gas emissions, waste handling, and more (Fudurich & MacKay, 2020).

Certifications in the hotel industry

Atkinson & Rosenthal (2014) argues that certification and eco-labels work like seals of approval for a product's or service's environmental qualities, assuring the truthfulness of claims and working as stamps of trust for consumers (Atkinson & Rosenthal, 2014). Spenceley (2019) shows how certifications can work as a tool to drive responsible environmental, social and cultural behavior by providing a quality product to tourists and

verifying claims made by businesses that can counter greenwashing attempts. Additionally, certifications can help businesses such as accommodations identify weaknesses and gaps in their sustainable performances and support and drive improvements (Spenceley, 2019). Certifications are highlighted by Khan (2010) as a tool to develop a sustainable tourism industry, amongst other reasons, since it supports the integration of practices oriented toward better use of resources (Khan, 2021). In the accommodation industry, there is a dominant focus on certifications that not only focus on the environment but includes social and cultural operations criteria. This is, for example, seen with the criteria GSTC Criteria set by the Global Sustainable Tourism Council. The criteria are seen as the minimum relevant that tourism stakeholders should strive to achieve and extends beyond the environmental impact by including an extensive focus on the social, cultural, and economic impacts and obligations of accommodations (GSTC 2022a). Many relevant and recognized certification schemes for the accommodation industry rely on the criteria of the Global Sustainable Tourism Council (GSTC 2022a).

Greenwashing

Pizzetti et al. (2021) explain how greenwashing can be defined as when there is a discrepancy between words and deeds and when a company operates with poorer environmental performances than what is communicated. This often includes exaggerating the company's environmental performance. The concept of greenwashing is relevant in relation to marketing and branding, as is shown by Delmas & Burbano (2011), that marketing and advertising have a history of being criticized for greenwashing. Additionally, the concept of greenwashing extends into the topic of certification as scholars argue that there is a risk concerning certifications and greenwashing as some certification schemes are not credible due to a lack of external auditing (Haaland & Øystein 2010, 382: Font & Harris, 2004).

Methodology

Motivation and Knowledge contribution

This study contributes to academia with insights on the younger generation in Denmark and their attitudes, perception and behavior towards sustainability in the hotel industry. Additionally it contributes with insights and suggestions to how hotels and OTAs positioned in the collaborative economy can enable interest and demand towards sustainability in the hotel industry from the young generations, soon to be the main consumer groups.

The research topic derives from a motivation sparked through the experience with working for an OTA representing hotels focused on sustainability. Here it was observed how the younger generations' expresses a high level of interest in sustainability in the hotel industry online, yet that this interest does not transfer equally into behavior and hotel bookings.

The study has not been developed for one specific organization, but aims to be usesull for general knowledge on the topic of sustainability in the hotel industry, and to be of value for several stakeholders wanting to push sustainable development in the hotel industry. Neither is the study a case study based on one specific case, but includes multiple perceptions and experiences from a triangle of stakeholders including: hotels, OTAs and young consumers. Hereby the study captures a broader picture of the context of sustainability in the hotel industry and collaborative economy. With most of the respondents and informants being based in Denmark or working for companies based in Denmark, the study is focused around a Danish context. However it is evaluated that several insights are able to be transferred and are of relevance beyond the Danish context.

Research design: Abduction and Mixed methods

The research has used a mixed method approach by combining both qualitative and quantitative data sources. It includes data from desktop research, netnographic data, an extensive online questionnaire survey and six qualitative interviews. The combination of different data sources and evidence has helped to triangulate data and created validation of the insights gained (Dubois & Gadde, 2002). Therefore the use of mixed methods has helped create higher credibility of the study (Schoonenboom & Johnson, 2017). Combining

data sources has been an effective way to strategically understand and confirm the relevance of the analytical focus based on different sources of empirical data (Schoonenboom & Johnson, 2017). Some methods, including the desktop research have served to create background knowledge for entering the research process, and have been used ongoingly throughout the research process. Other methods including the collection of some of the primary data, was collected in a certain phase of the research process.

As the study derives from a somehow empirical curiosity and motivation as a practitioner, the first part of the research process can be characterized as inductive. Despite the noticed interest on social media platforms, the process started out with few insights on how specifically the younger generation conceives sustainable accommodation. From here the study moved to an abductive method.

Dubois & Gadde (2002) describes how abduction is characterized by an evolving framework. While abduction is positioned closer to the inductive approach, it uses theoretical frameworks more than what is the case in inductive methods. Abduction differs from both deduction concerned with testing theories and frameworks, and induction where the researcher seeks to enter the field with as few presumptions as possible. The abductive method is characterized by a research framework that is being modified by empirical findings and theoretical insights gained during the research process. The abductive approach is therefore an ongoing movement between the empirical and model worlds, hence moves between framework, data sources, and analysis (Dubois & Gadde, 2002). Therefore changes in the view and choice of theory has happened as empirical observations were gained (Dubois & Gadde, 2002).

Evolving framework and research question

The framework has evolved as data from online surveys, desktop research and interviews was collected and as new insights were gained. The focus and framework of this study initially started out by focusing on hotel's perception of the increased demand for sustainability, then moved on to investigating the concrete sustainable initiatives of hotels from the perspective of the younger generations. From here the focus developed towards understanding what characterizes the younger generation attitude towards sustainable accommodation and how to increase their interest and demand for sustainable

accommodations types. Eventually the framework was directed towards important stakeholders in the travel industry such as hotels and OTAs and how these can meet the needs of the younger consumers in the best possible way to secure demand for sustainable hotels. The abductive method has meant that the research questions were modified ongoingly as knowledge on the topic expanded and the analysis developed. Some insights and parts from the desktop research and framework that did not not fit into the final product, have still been important for the development of the paper and the learning experience.

Interpretivism

The study is positioned in interpretivism and social constructivism, and the analysis of the empirical data has been done using an interpretive method. Chowdhury (2014) explains how interpretivism believes that people's knowledge of reality is a social construction by human actors, and that the researcher when interpreting the empirical data and the social world adds own views and analytical focuses. In contrast to positivism, interpretivism accepts and believes in multiple perspectives of reality, rather than one reality and truthful perception, and is in that sense closer to traditions of hermeneutics and phenomenology (Chowdhury, 2014). In line with this social constructivism accepts that knowledge cannot be separated from social environments, as an active and ongoing product and construction of social interaction, interpretation and understanding (Gredler, 1997; Vygotsky, 1962). Interpretivism views data as never being value free, since the researcher unavoidably uses own preconceptions and views in order to guide the research process. Interpretivism does not amplify the subjectiveness of the researcher's interpretivisme, but recognizes it as an inevitable part of the research process (Chowdhury, 2014).

Interpretivism integrates both qualitative and quantitative methods, but in its nature puts a high focus on the value of qualitative data in pursuit of knowledge (Chowdhury, 2014). Interpretivists look for meanings and motives behind people's actions and believe that the understanding of what a particular action and behavior means requires that one interpret what the actors are doing (Chowdhury, 2014). In interpretivism it is believed that in what people say and state hidden patterns and meanings exist and that these can become clearer when interpreted by the researcher. By interpreting data researchers are able to go beyond what is said and what has occurred (Chowdhury, 2014). The data from the online survey and the interviews was coded interpretatively by reading through the data adding, collecting

and coding interpretations of what was said and pointed out by the informants. This was done with the aim and belief to be able to comprehend another layer of meaning of what was expressed by respondents and informants.

Interpretivist research acknowledges the inevitable subjectiveness of a research process, but aims at developing correct understandings of what the objects of the interpretation is. Connected to the interpretive methods acknowledgement of subjectiveness and various realities, interpretive research is sometimes criticized in terms of validity, reliability and generalisability. Therefore, as often in interpretive research, this study has highly prioritized triangulation of data.

Age group and informants

The age group included in this study includes people from age 18-35, covering people from both Generation Millennials, born between 1981 – 1996, and from Generation Z, born between 1997 – 2012 (Pew Research 2019). A generational group can be defined and understood as a group that is in the same age column and that amongst other characteristics shares common values, understandings and personalities (Bathmanathan et al., 2018). The age group was limited to the younger generations for several reasons. The generational group is the current and future central working force in society, able to affect society and purchase and demand different products and services, including in the hotel industry. Additionally Generation Millennials and Z are presented as being highly focused on sustainable and environmental issues by several scholars and reports (Deloitte 2022; Heath & Yarick, 2021).

Secondary data: Desktop research and Literature review

The desktop research and secondary data collection served to create background knowledge and as an entering point to the research field. However the desktop research was maintained throughout most of the research process as theory to understand and reflect upon the new insights was needed. The literature review as part of the desktop research served an important purpose in order to understand the research topic and potential focuses that could be included. The literature review was based on a list of keywords that evolved from the

initial desktop research, yet it was adjusted ongoingly as the research process and insights developed.

The secondary data collected has provided understanding of the current knowledge on the subject, but also potential gaps and conflicts. For example it gave a feeling of the market for sustainable accommodation with the sustainability report done by Booking.com (2022) on travelers' choices in relation to sustainable accommodations. This helped identify the lacking focus on the younger generation and prepare for what needed to be covered and asked in the online survey as well as qualitative interviews in relation to the target group of this study. Insights on consumer behavior from the literature review was also highly incorporated into the online survey.

Primary data: Nethnographic insights

Kozinets (1998) defines the nethnographic method as systematically studying and obtaining data on the cultures and communities that exist online and have emerged from Internet-based communications (Kozinets, 1998). The focus on the younger generation and their interest in sustainability partly derives from a netnographic observation on the Instagram social media account for the OTA, EcoHotels.com. The OTA only represents eco-certified accommodations and hotels (Ecohotels.com 2022a). On the OTAs Instagram account it was observed that younger followers', many located in Denmark, showed a high level of interest and support for sustainable accommodations in the collaborative economy. Shown below is the reach in followers and demographics from the fairly new OTA, EcoHotels.com's instagram profile:

Followers and non-followers
Based on reach

61.5K
Followers ●

115K
● Non-followers

You reached +72.7% more accounts that weren't following you
compared to Aug 6 - Sep 4.

Age Range
of your followers

All   Men   Women

13-17	1.4%
18-24	16%
25-34	39.5%
35-44	27%
45-54	11.7%
55-64	3.2%
65+	0.9%

Top Locations
of your followers

Cities   Countries

Denmark	39.4%
United States	14.5%
United Kingdom	6.3%
Norway	4.1%
Brazil	3.2%
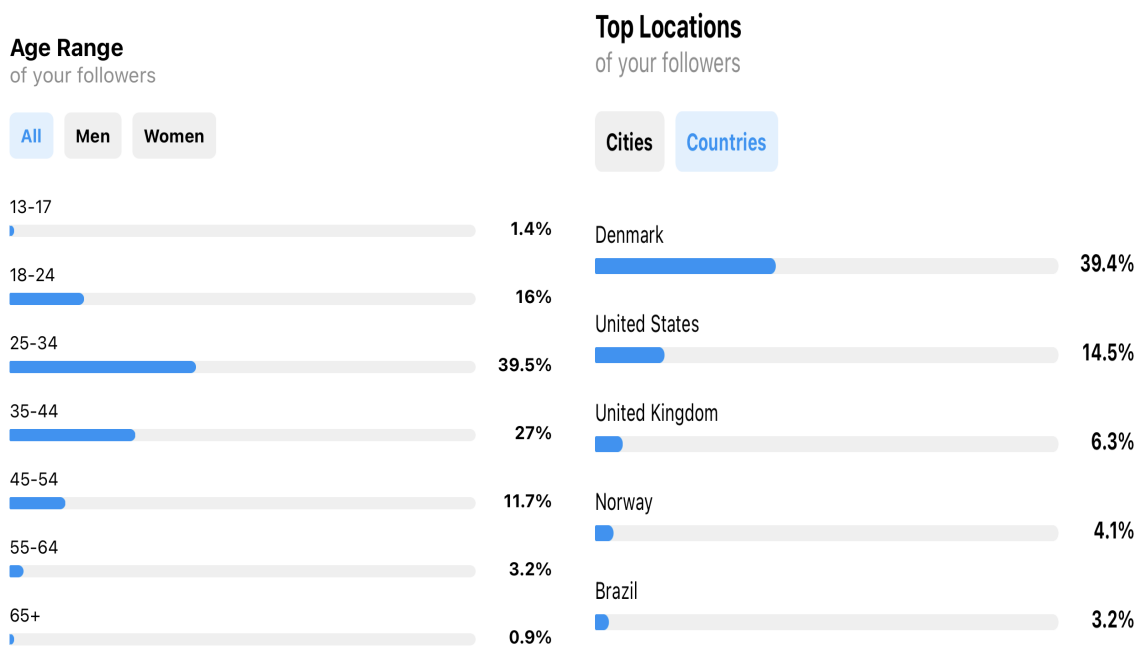
(Appendix 1). EcoHotels.com Instagram reach and demographic of followers

The OTA, EcoHotels.com has around 60.000+ followers on Instagram, with more than 50% of these being between the age 18 - 34, and around 40% from Denmark. The high number of EcoHotels.com's instagram reach underlines the online interest of sustainability in the hotel industry by the younger generations and a collaborative economy platform. Netnography is considered an excellent tool for studying virtual communities, but also as a great exploratory tool to study general topics (Kozinets, 1998). The netnographic observation from instagram both sparked interest for the research topic, but also served as data in self on the younger generation showing that this generation is digital of nature and engaged in collaborative economy platforms (González et al., 2021). This insight additionally served as foundation for formulating some of the questions in the online survey and the qualitative interviews, and helped triangulate data.

Primary data: The Online survey

To enable credibility of data and predictions a larger scale online questionnaire survey was done. The survey was done in the early stage of the data collection and collected during February and March 2022. The questions from the survey were aimed to enable understanding of the younger generation's perceptions towards, knowledge about and actual behavior in relation to sustainable travel and accommodations types.

The survey was done in the earliest phase, so that it could generate and direct the focus of the qualitative interviews and enable in-depth knowledge. Before the online survey was finalized and posted, different persons within the target groups answered it, and the survey was adjusted to their comments and critique. The survey was anonymous and addressed to people between the age of 18-35, who planned on staying at a hotel when traveling within the next 12 months of the time the survey was posted. The target age group and purpose of the survey was clearly stated when the survey was posted and in the introduction to the questions. The survey was formulated in English to avoid excluding different nationalities. The survey was posted in university forums and several SoMe channels, including LinkedIn, Facebook groups, and Instagram. To obtain higher representativity, the survey was shared by several people, enabling respondents from their networks to take part and influence the answers. The survey was additionally posted in three danish facebook groups for questionnaires in Denmark. In these cases, the survey was posted with a Danish introduction.

Sample set of respondents

Overall the online survey had 127 respondents, yet there was partial dropout in completion of some of the questions. The following Table 2 shows the key demographic data characteristics of the respondents:
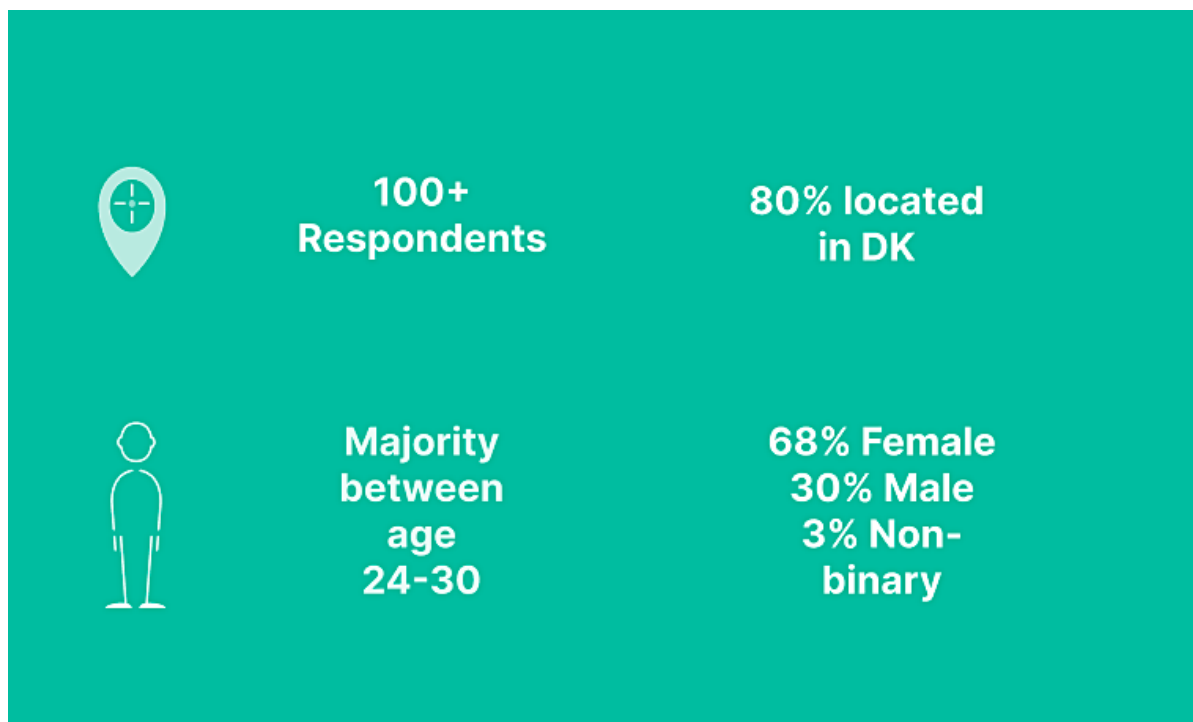

Table 2 (Appendix 2).

The survey took the form of a mixed-method survey. It includes both quantitative closed ended questions, with a set of predefined answers provided for the respondents. These questions provided statistical data and insights on age, location, which gender respondents identified with, as well as for example the number of sustainable accommodations that respondents had stayed at. However the survey predominantly had a qualitative character, with many questions being open-ended. The open-ended questions served to capture experiences, practices, positionings, and discourses and to avoid excluding any perspectives or direct the respondents' answers (Braun et al., 2021; Bernard, 2011). The open-ended questions for example asked what would encourage respondents to book sustainable accommodation more often.

The closed ended questions could be coded and analyzed in the used survey program, while other questions had to be coded manually by reading through all individual answers and noting down what was most frequently appearing and what interpretively was considered interesting. A list of key words and interesting quotes was prepared based on the answers for each question. Since many of the questions were open-ended it therefore required that each answer was examined and considered. Finally different categories of various cross themes from the different questions were prepared. The cross-theme keywords included; Price and Budget, Awareness, Responsibility, Transparency, Clear examples, Credibility and Greenwashing, as well as Environmental and Social initiatives of hotels. To explore the questions and data from the online survey further a presentation of the survey and the codings of the various questions is attached as Appendix 2. .

Primary data: Qualitative Interviews

To gain in-depth knowledge of the insights that were discovered in the online survey and based on the desktop research, qualitative interviews were done with six different informants. All interviews were semi-structured with an interview guide of a set of predetermined, yet open-ended questions to follow (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006). The semi-structured form of the interviews allowed a good and precise structure when facilitating the interviews. As Kvale (1994) points out, a strength of the semi-structured type of interview is that the format allows a great balance between fixed structure and being able to dig further into topics that arise during the interview (Kvale, 1994). All interviews were scheduled in advance.

The three stakeholder categories of informants included: OTAs, Younger consumers and Hotels. The different stakeholders were chosen to create a triangle of data perspectives on sustainability in the hotel industry with specific focus on the interest and demand towards this topic from the younger generation. All interviews lasted between 30-60 minutes and were transcribed and coded afterwards. Some quotes throughout the paper might have been slightly rewritten for the sake of the reader's understanding. The following Table 1 shows the different informants and their respective category and relevant information:

Name of informant	Information and category
Patricia Plesner, CEO: EcoHotels.com	**OTA, EcoHotels.com.** A relatively new OTA started in 2020. The OTA only represent eco-certified hotels, with 20.000+ hotels available in 150 countries (EcoHotels.com 2022b)
James Leadley, Sustainability Communication Manager: Booking.com	**OTA, Booking.com.** One of the world's leading OTAs started in 1996. The OTA offers more than 28 million total reported accommodation listings all over the world. Booking.com recently implemented the 'Travel Sustainable Badge' as a filtering option on their platform. The badge is meant to assure travelers that propertes with the badge have had the impact of their sustainability practices assessed through Booking.com's independently verified criteria model. Over two million accommodation display their sustainability practices with this feature on Booking.com (Booking.com 2022b, Booking.com 2022c)
Cecilie Jones, Young traveler	**Young consumer.** 29 years old, Based in Copenhagen, Travels approximately 4 times a year (Appendix 3).
Nolwenn Pernin, Young traveler	**Young consumer.**

	24 years old, Based in Copenhagen, Travels approximately 3 times a year (Appendix 3).
Daniel Sørensen, Sustainability Coordinator at Guldsmeden Hotels	**Hotel, Guldsmeden Hotels.** Hotel chain with 5 hotels located in Copenhagen. The hotel chain is focused on sustainability and expresses that sustainability is a fundamental element of the hotel chain's operation. All hotels located in Copenhagen, Denmark are certified with either Green Key or Green Globe certifications (Guldsmeden Hotels, 2022: EcoHotels.com 2022c). The hotel chain has a strong brand among the younger generation (Appendix 2).
Gitte Nielsen, Daily Manager at Savoy Hotel	**Hotel, Savoy Hotel.** Hotel with 66 rooms located in Copenhagen. The hotel is focused on sustainability and certified with Green Key certification. Savoy Hotel welcomes many younger and international guests (Savoy Hotel, 2022; Appendix 2).

The interview guides were moderated to the different informants and the category of stakeholder they belonged to. For example, some of the questions directed towards the younger travelers included a higher focus on their needs as consumers, preferences when booking accomodations and whether they recognized the insights from their online survey.

The questions for the OTAs were more directed at perceived challenges of driving a more sustainable accommodation industry, how to communicate about sustainability and meet the needs of travelers. Same for the questions covered in the interviews with hotels, which additionally touched upon challenges in implementing and communicating about sustainable practices. The qualitative interviews were used to follow up on topics from the survey. For example, while the online survey did not explicitly ask the respondents to prioritize key factors when booking accommodation, it showed a high focus and mentioning of price and location which was accordingly investigated further during the qualitative interviews.

After the completion of each of the qualitative interviews, the interviews were transcribed and coded manually. Also here, the use of coding was helpful to systematically structure themes and hereby capture the most frequent, interesting, and accurate data points to direct the analysis.

Ethical considerations

As mentioned by the American Anthropological Association (1998) when doing research it is important to do no harm, be open about research purpose and receive consent of informants (American Anthropological Association, 1998). Throughout the process of this study and the data collection, the purpose and focus of the research has been transparently communicated. The online survey was collected with all informants being anonymous. The recording and transcribing of all interviews was done with the consent of the informants. All informants have given consent to being quoted in the study (American Anthropological Association, 1998) implying that a safe and trusted setting for the interviews was established. The informants that have shown interest in receiving the insights from the study will be given access to the paper. The data and quotes from the different informants have not been compiled and presented during the various interviews in any ways that could potentially lead to negative outcomes internally between informants.

Bias and positioning

As noted, interpretivism considers that empirical data will be seen and interpreted differently based on different researchers' horizons and varying questions that researchers are taught and inspired to ask (Chowdhury, 2014). The research topic for this study has been inspired by working with sustainable accommodations from the position of an OTA. The positioning therefore relies on the perception from an organizational stakeholder in favor of and supporting a more sustainable accommodation sector, yet additionally seeking to profit as a platform in the collaborative economy. Additionally being within the target age group the research positioning has included the perception of younger consumers. The positioning as working for the OTA, EcoHotels.com, undoubtedly has created an unavoidable bias. While the positioning including the perspective from OTAs has contributed with important insider perspectives, it has undoubtedly meant that the study has taken on a research perspective with a more positive perspective on OTAs and the possibilities enabled by the collaborative economy platforms than several other scholars such as Gössling & Hall (2019).

Representativity of study

The age group included in this study is considered to be a group that in general is perceived as caring about sustainability and sustainable behavior. While the online survey was done anonymously, it should be noted that a significant part of respondents are likely to be from personal and academic networks or sporadically part of these networks. As these networks are somehow focused on sustainable development, the respondents from the online survey, and additionally the younger consumers interviewed are likely to have a higher interest in sustainability than the average young person. It would be interesting for other studies to get information and data on groups of the younger generation, who are not connected to a network focused on sustainability.

Additionally it should be noted how the hotels included and interviewed in this study receive a large amount of international guests, and how the insights on the younger generations for this study is mainly representative for the younger generations in Denmark. Therefore there will be some characteristics and insights from this study that cannot be transferred to or perceived as representative for other international young consumer groups and their attitude towards sustainability in the hotel industry, nor their engagement in the collaborative economy.

Analysis 1. Presentation of tables: Consumer behavior and the importance of increased sustainability awareness in the hotel industry

The first analytical section will answer the sub-question: *How does consumer behavior theory shed light on the importance of increased understanding and awareness of sustainability from the younger generation in Denmark?*

This section presents how the younger generation's attitude toward sustainable accommodations is characterized by openness, interest, and appreciation. However, drawing on consumer-behavior theories, the section argues that these characteristics can not be

considered equal to end behavior. It will be argued that it is increasingly important to create awareness of sustainability in the hotel industry to enable interest and demand for sustainable hotels from the younger generation.

Openness and appreciation towards sustainability in the hotel industry

The data for this study confirms that Generation Z and Millennials are environmentally conscious and focused on sustainability (Deloitte, 2022; Heath & Yarick, 2021). A high level of interest and appreciation of hotels' sustainable practices from the younger generations confirms the insights from Booking.com's 2022 Sustainability report about the increased interest in sustainable accommodations (Booking.com 2022a) and shows that this applies to the younger generation in Denmark. In the interview with the informant from Boooking.com, the interest amongst the young generation towards sustainable accommodations was mentioned:

"I was talking to some hostels owners, who have a very young demographic - and what they found is that their guests care a lot about sustainability and will reward the hostels with loyalty based on seeing sustainable practices at the hostels - because that's what the young want….. " (James Leadley, Booking.com, Appendix 3).

The online survey and the interviews with the young travelers showed pro-sustainable and environmental values as well as an appreciation of sustainability in the hotel industry:

71% of respondents considers sustainable accomodation as important for the travel industry

44% of respondents pay attention to and value the sustainable practices of hotels they stay in

Table 3 (Appendix 2).

It is here relevant how the demand for sustainability in the hotel industry from the younger generations is crucial for developing a more sustainable accommodation sector. As the informant from the OTA, EcoHotels.com, pointed out what is important to guests will be important to hotels:

"The more important sustainability is going to be for the young travelers, the better the hotels will be at implementing it…" (Patricia Plesner, EcoHotels.com, Appendix 3)

Following some of the most recognized consumer behavior theories such as the TPB and VBN theories, individuals' intentions to engage in behavior are connected to the individual's openness, willingness as well as pro-environmental values and personal norms towards a specific behavior and topic (Stern et al., 1999; Han, 2015). Following this and Han (2015) showing that consumer behavior theories such as the TPB model have been successfully applied concerning pro-environmental behavior and hotel decision-making, the data for this study showing interest and appreciation of sustainability in the hotel industry from the younger generation in Denmark suggest that this consumer group is prone to choose and book in favor of hotels with sustainable initiatives implemented. Verma & Chandra (2018) additionally argues that sustainability is now an essential and determining factor in the

current context of consumers' hotel choice and decision-making. Supporting this, as presented above in Table 3: it shows that 71% of online survey respondents think sustainable accommodation is important for the travel industry (Appendix 2).

However, as shown below in Table 4, data from the online survey contradicting shows only 24% of respondents have stayed at sustainable hotels to their knowledge, while 65% are not sure whether they have stayed in sustainable accommodation types, and 11% of respondents have not.

Table 4 (Appendix 2).

From the qualitative interviews with young consumers it was stated that sustainability is not the most determining or noticed factor when searching for hotels. The following quote expresses this:

"To be honest I don't look into it in advance, but if I see some sustainable practices I think it's great - then it's kind of a quality stamp. I think it is an important thing for the travel industry to start focusing more on - but it's mostly when I'm there on the destination that I notice those practices and the small things - like the shampoo is organic ect. but it is not something I'm looking for specifically when I am booking a hotel." (Cecilie Jones, Young consumer, Appendix 5).

This shows how sustainability is not the most determining factor for younger travelers' hotel decision-making, but that hotels' sustainable practices are valued. However the low percentage of respondents from the online survey that to their knowledge had stayed at sustainable hotels, implies that despite the appreciation and interest towards sustainable

hotels from the young generation in Denmark, there exists a gap between this interest of sustainability in the hotel industry and the actual hotel decision making and behavior.

Lack of understanding and awareness of hotels' sustainable practices

It has been argued by scholars such as Caruana et al. (2016) and March & Woodside (2005) that a gap between intention and pro-environmental values and behavior often exists and that various external factors play into individual decision-making and behavior, especially in relation to traveling plans (Caruana et al., 2016; March & Woodside, 2005). As a result, intention is often far from equal to end decisions and actual consumer behavior (March & Woodside, 2005: Caruana et al., 2016). As shown, openness and appreciation of the younger generation can not be considered equal to actual bookings, hence demand of sustainable hotels.

In relation to the attitude-behavior divide, it is relevant how the data for this study revealed that there is significant lack of awareness, and understanding of hotels sustainable practices as well as misperception of price and options of sustainability focused hotels.

Below in Table 5 it is presented how data from the online survey shows that young regular travelers from Denmark amongst other sources, rely on OTAs, such as Booking.com and Tripadvisor as well as social media platforms when searching for hotels. This was confirmed during the qualitative interviews with the young consumers, and confirms as González et al. (2021) points out that the younger generations are digital of nature and highly engaged in the collaborative economy (González et al., 2021).

Table 5 (Appendix 2).

As mentioned, Booking.com has recently launched its 'Travel Sustainable badge', which lists the implemented sustainable practices of hotels rewarded with the badge and signals that these hotels have had the impact of their practices assessed through Booking.com's independently verified criteria model (Booking.com, 2022b). The data for this study shows that the young generation in Denmark often uses Booking.com, and the following list of key themes that emerged from the coding of the online survey is therefore interesting.

As shown in the following presented Table 6, themes including "more awareness", "transparency", "clear examples of practices" and "clear examples of impact" were amongst the most prominent topics in relation to what would make online respondents book sustainable accommodation more often.
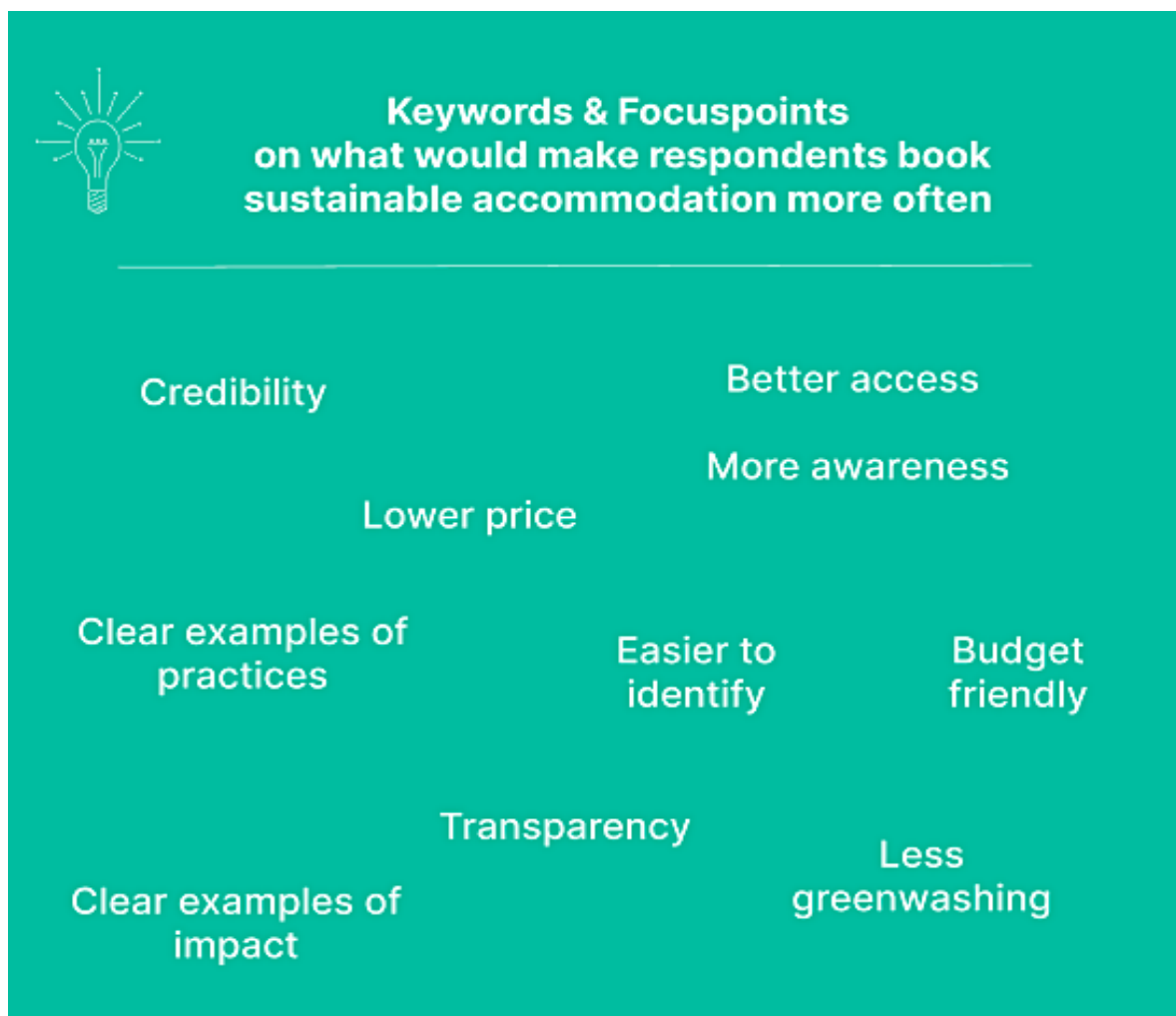

Table 6 (Appendix 2).

This shows how the younger generation in Denmark is requesting more explicit examples of sustainable practices from hotels and the impacts these have, together with more awareness of sustainable accommodation types. In addition, themes such as lower price, easier identification, and less greenwashing were also present in the online survey. While the younger generation uses Booking.com's platform, which has launched the 'Travel Sustainable Badge' providing examples of hotels' sustainable practices, the younger generation still requests more transparent and understandable examples. The young consumers expressed this during the interviews:

"First thing is to increase general awareness amongst the younger generation about sustainability and about sustainability in the hospitality and accommodation industry" (Nolwenn Pernin, Young consumer, Appendix 5).

"I would like more clear information about what the sustainable accomodations do and the actual impacts - about the environment, the people working for the hotel and the community around" (Nolwenn Pernin, Young consumer, Appendix 5).

"You don't really understand what their sustainability means - I think it is really about taking it completely down to earth, like explaining it to a kid [....] Make it as simple as possible" (Cecilie Jones, Young consumer, Appendix 5).

Despite as argued by Millar et al., (2012) that consumers' sustainability awareness concerning consumption and hospitality services appears to be growing, data for this study stands in contrast to this, and points to a need for more transparent and understandable examples of what sustainability looks like in the hotel industry.

Additionally, the numbers from the online survey showing that 65% of respondents are not sure whether they have stayed in sustainable hotels to their knowledge are interesting since as shown in the earlier presented Table 3: 44% of respondents from the survey said that they pay attention to sustainable practices of hotels (Table 3, Appendix 2).

It is here relevant how past experiences, according to Nimri et al. (2020), affect whether travelers are likely to be familiarized with green hotel initiatives, in relation to the following Table 7, showing that the majority of respondents from the online survey finds that options for sustainable accommodations is limited (Table 7, Appendix 2).

63% of respondents say that options and information about sustainable accommodation are limited

Table 7 (Appendix 2).

According to Nimri et al. (2020), travelers with no previous experience in a green hotel are less likely to recognize sustainable practices. They may not even recognize what a green hotel is. Yet, that sustainability is not always recognized does not necessarily have to do with experience and familiarity with staying in sustainable hotels. As mentioned by the informant from Booking.com, sustainable practices can be difficult to recognize:

The next problem we see is that a lot of sustainable practices are not easily noticeable for guests – so for instance, things like removing plastic or if a property has solar panels on the roof that can be easy to see sometimes. But there are things like water saving, like using water-reducing shower heads, you wouldn't notice as a guest – yet they can save thousands of liters of water. If properties work with local community groups – you don't see that unless it's really obvious. You wouldn't notice that as a guest, unless it is explained – so what we also have is a problem of guests not really knowing what's happening at a property" (James Leadley, Booking.com, Appendix 3).

Not all sustainable practices are self-evident. This underlines the importance of notifying about sustainability practices and supports Esparon et al. (2014)'s argument about the necessity of communicating about sustainable practices and certifications and making these visible to consumers.

It has been shown that intention and pro-environmental values do not always transfer into action and behavior (Caruana et al., 2016; March & Woodside, 2005). Considering this in light of this study's data showing a high level of uncertainty, lack of understanding of

sustainability, and that sustainable practices are not always visible, the need for more awareness and communication about sustainability is even more relevant.

Price and misperception

The lack of awareness about sustainable hotels and practices is challenging in several ways concerning enabling interest and demand for sustainable hotels from the younger generation in Denmark. Amongst other challenges, this study found that the lack of awareness leads to a misperception and misunderstanding of sustainable hotels as overly expensive and not accessible. For example, one of the young travelers expressed:

"When I think about eco hotels in general - then I think that it is expensive to book them - that is the first thing that comes through my mind" (Cecilie Jones, Young consumer, Appendix 5).

As shown in the earlier presented Table 6, "lower price" was one of the key themes that emerged from the interpretive coding of the online survey concerning what would make respondents book sustainable accommodation more often (Table 6, Appendix 2). This suggests a perception of sustainable accommodations as expensive. However, while green and sustainable accommodation types can be expensive, this is not always the case, as shown by Soler et al. (2016) with hotels in Madrid and their positioning as eco-friendly businesses that, according to the authors, did not affect prices (Soler et al., 2016). During the interview with the informant from the OTA, Booking.com, the misperception of sustainable hotels was pointed out:

"Sustainable properties are not necessarily more expensive than any other property, but there is a perception that they are" (James Leadley, Booking.com, Appendix 3).

Moreover, it was mentioned by the informant from the OTA, Booking.com, that many hostels, which in general can be perceived as budget-friendly accommodation types, have started to implement sustainable initiatives.

To triangulate data about sustainable accommodations as expensive and the limited options of sustainable accommodation types (Table 6; Table 7, Appendix 2) a number of popular destinations for young people (Earth Media, 2018) was searched for in the OTA,

Booking.com. Searching for the same random dates, the number of all available accommodations in the lowest price range (0-50 Euro) was compared with the number of accommodations with the 'Travel Sustainable Badge' available in the lowest price range (0-50 Euro) for each destination. The below list shows the results, and the complete overview of the data can be found in Appendix 6:

Destinations	All accommodations within price range 0-50 Euro	Travel Sustainable Badge accommodations within price range 0-50 Euro
Tulum, Mexico	47	17
Greek Islands	2067	337
Mexico City, Mexico	207	34
The Maldives	17	4
Marrakech, Morocco	354	87
Algarve, Portugal	463	115
Cappadocia, Turkey	125	39
Bali, Indonesia	3613	898

 (Booking.com, 2022, Appendix 6).

The desktop research showed a significantly higher number of accommodations available when the search is not limited to accommodations with the 'Travel Sustainable Badge'. Yet, it shows a relatively high number of 'Travel Sustainable properties' available for each popular destination, comparing and considering the overall number of accommodations available for the respective destinations. While this confirms that there are not the same options and availability between sustainable and all available accommodation types within the lowest price range, it shows that the perception of lack of options and high prices of sustainable-oriented hotels is debatable.

The informant from the OTA, EcoHotels.com, a platform that only accepts hotels with eco-certifications, expressed that the platform represents hotels in all price levels, including hotels for backpacking and luxury hotels. Nonetheless, the perception from the younger generations in Denmark shows, as pointed out by Agag et al. (2020), that green travel products most often are perceived as more expensive than others. This perception of sustainable hotels as overly expensive is especially challenging concerning the demand of sustainable hotels from the young generations since, as pointed out by Baruca & Civre (2012) & Lockyer (2005), price and location are generally among the top factors influencing people's hotel decision-making.

In relation to this, platforms such as EcoHotels.com that only accepts accommodations with sustainable initiatives and eco-certifications, and aims to make it transparent for customers to make more sustainable choices (EcoHotels.com. 2022b) are avoided by the younger generation due to the perception of sustainable-oriented hotels as expensive. The following quote from one of the young consumers shows this:

"When I think about Ecohotels.com and similar platforms - and actually when I think about eco hotels in general - then I think that it is expensive to book them - that is the first thing that comes through my mind - so I'm not gonna look there" (Cecilie Jones, Young traveler, Appendix 5).

The misperception of sustainable hotels as being overly expensive can, therefore, negatively affect or even exclude the young consumer groups from searching for sustainable properties when planning and booking their hotel stays. More clarity and awareness of what sustainability looks like in the accommodation industry, including attention and understanding that sustainability does not necessarily equal the highest prices, would help dissolve this perception and is needed.

This analytical section has laid out how the younger generation's in Denmark are interested in and appreciative of sustainability in the hotel industry. The section has however shown, how this openness and appreciation does not transfer into end behavior, and that sustainability is not a determining factor the the young consumers' hotel decision making. It has shown that a gap between the younger generations' interest and appreciation of sustainability in the hotel industry and their hotel decisions exists. A low percentage of informants and respondents have stayed in sustainable-oriented hotels, and many are unsure about whether or not they have stayed in hotels with sustainable practices. The section has

argued that a lack of understanding, awareness and a price-related misperception of sustainability in the hotel industry from the younger generation in Denmark are among key factors influencing and intensifying the gap. Therefore the section has argued that it is increasingly important to create awareness of sustainability in the hotel industry from the younger generation in Denmark to enable more interest and demand for sustainable hotels.

Analysis 2. Branding in the collaborative economy and trust enabled by certifications

This section will answer the sub-question: *How can increased branding and trust in hotels' sustainable practices in the collaborative economy accommodate the needs of the younger consumers in Denmark?*

This section will present how the collaborative economy enables OTAs and hotels to increase sustainability-focused branding. The section argues that increased branding and incorporation of sustainability into hotel brand image is essential due to the lack of understanding and awareness of hotels' sustainable practices. The section will outline how trust concerning the communication of sustainable practices in the collaborative economy is essential in securing the brand equity of hotels, and OTAs focused on sustainability. Finally, the section will argue that credible certifications can enable such trust.

The importance of OTAs

OTAs are dominant intermediates of the collaborative economy, facilitating the exchange of accommodations so that hotels can augment their income by getting bookings through the OTAs (Talwar et al., 2020; Palgan et al., 2017; Menor-Campos, A. et al., 2019). The informant from Savoy Hotel mentioned the importance of OTAs for hotel booking flow:

"We clearly get most of our bookings through the OTAs. Booking.com and Hotels.com. They are necessary, but it's great that something like EcoHotels.com is growing…. "(Gitte Nielsen, Savoy Hotel, Appendix 4).

This confirms, as argued by Chang et al. (2019), that OTAs create opportunities for providers and users to find each other, thereby enabling connection, sharing, and consumption between people and hotels that might not have happened otherwise (Chang et al., 2019). In that sense, as Nica & Potcovaru (2015) argues, OTAs in the collaborative economy help bring advantages by enabling connected consumption and opening up access to underutilized resources (Nica & Potcovaru, 2015). As shown in the previous analytical section concerning consumer behavior and presented earlier in Table 5, OTAs and social media platforms are key hotel information sources for the younger generation in Denmark. It can be confirmed that the young generation is digital and engaged in the collaborative economy (González et al., 2021).

Increased branding in the collaborative economy

Marketing and branding has for long been essential for the survival and competencies of companies. However digitalization has intensified this (Tiago & Verríssimo, 2014). The focus on optimization of online branding and communication was mentioned by the informant from Savoy Hotel:

"Because of the pandemic, we have not been good enough at communicating on social media and our website, and this is something that we are going to change now. We have just made a new website, where we are showing something with our green key certification and there will also be more about sustainability" (Gitte Nielsen, Savoy Hotel, Appendix 4).

It is argued by Aureo et al. (2020) that incorporating sustainability as a brand purpose is necessary to impact society and the planet positively. The above quote from the informant from Savoy Hotel points to the focus on sustainability in the branding of hotels and confirms the increasing necessity to incorporate sustainability aspects into hotel strategic brand management. This points towards as argued by Aureo et al. (2020) that even though sustainability and branding are distinctive operations, they can bring contributions to business development if integrated.

Esparon et al. (2014) argue that one reason for poor consumer demand is poor marketing. Due to the low percentage of stays at sustainable hotels from respondents in the online survey and the data showing that sustainability is not a determining factor for the younger

generation in Denmark and their hotel decision, it is relevant to consider how the marketing of sustainable-oriented hotels can improve. In addition, the need for change in terms of branding of sustainability was requested by one of the young consumers:

"I think it is a lot about branding to be honest - the whole sustainability thing needs to be branded in a different way" (Cecilie Jones, Young consumer, Appendix 5).

In relation to this it is interesting how Font & McCabe (2017) while acknowledging challenges in relation to intention-behavior gap as well as greenwashing, argues that the concept of sustainable tourism has to be marketed and branded in order for the concept to make progress. The authors argue that marketing of sustainability can play a key role in enabling more sustainable development. It is here relevant how the collaborative economy not only provides new and increased options for connected consumption (Nica & Potcovaru, 2015) but also for branding and marketing. Tussyadiah & Sigala (2018) argues that the collaborative economy is characterized by an increased elasticity that forms and creates new markets, tourism experiences, ecosystems, and possibilities in marketing. In the collaborative economy, the branding and highlighting of sustainable practices of hotels can be communicated through several online channels, brands, and actors instead of fever and thereby intensified.

It is here argued that the increased collaborative communication and marketing of sustainability can affect more clear perceptions about hotels' and OTAs' brands as connected to sustainability in consumer memory (Keller, 1993) thereby strengthening brand image. Additionally it can strengthen brand awareness, the ability of consumers to recognize the brand (Aaker, 1991) as belonging to the product category of sustainability. This is desirable since a strong brand image and awareness are beneficial for brand equity, which is highly important in terms of competitiveness, and attracting and maintaining customers (Haudi et al.,2022).

While data for this study shows that sustainability is not the most determining factor for younger travelers' hotel decision-making, it shows that sustainability is highly valued and appreciated by the young consumers. Hence if they were to choose between two hotels in the same price range, where only one of them operates with sustainable practices, they would choose the one with sustainable practices implemented. This is expressed in the following quote from one of the young consumers:

"Sustainability is not my main criteria - but if for example I would search more about the different hotels and find out that they do a lot of things for the environment, I would be like okay that's even better - one more plus for this hotel - and I'm gonna choose it." (Nolwenn Pernin, Young consumer, Appendix 5).

This suggests that hotels' sustainable practices are valued and can play a part in young consumers' hotel decision-making. However, it is important to note how the younger generation needs to be aware of the practices in order for them to affect the younger consumers' decision-making. It is therefore argued that sustainable practices need to be communicated and made clear. In relation to the argument about the need for increased communication, information, and branding about sustainability, it is relevant to consider the concept of nudging. As Lehner (2016) argues, nudging can be a tool to reduce environmental impacts by guiding consumers' decisions in domains of sustainable consumption. However, nudging successfully affects people's behavior without them thinking about it or feeling restricted or forced to act in a specific way (Thaler & Sunstein, 2008; Lehner, 2016). Concerning the increased information flow of sustainability, it is therefore relevant to consider the risk that some young consumers might feel that values are imposed on them and the effect that this might have.

Trust in the collaborative economy

It should be considered evenly important that brand equity circles around the customers' added value to a brand but also connects to various other factors, including trust in the brand (Haudi et al., 2022). The communication and branding of sustainability, therefore, needs not only to be clear and understandable but also trusted by the young consumers. Concerning trust, the data for the study showed a significant focus on the role of eco-certifications. As mentioned by Spenceley (2019) and Khan (2021), certifications as tools can help make the tourism industry more sustainable by helping businesses integrate sustainable practices and better resource use. That certifications are a valuable tool to enable a more sustainable development was expressed by the informants from the hotels:

"We use the Green Key Certification to find out what to do and where we can do better in terms of sustainability" (Gitte Nielsen, Savoy Hotel, Appendix 4)

"I think that the eco-labels and certifications are going to be a really big part of the right development and this is also something Guldsmeden Hotels focus a lot on" (Daniel Sørensen, Guldsmeden Hotels, Appendix 4).

This confirms that certifications are a driver of the implementation of sustainable practices for hotels and that certifications help accommodations identify weaknesses and gaps in their sustainable performances, thereby making the businesses more sustainable (Spenceley, 2019).

Users and consumers in the collaborative or sharing economy need to have a high amount of trust placed in the service platforms and the providers facilitating the connected consumption (Huurne et al., 2017). This is connected to how consumers and transaction partners cannot inspect and evaluate goods upfront and how there is little opportunity for interpersonal interaction in the consumption. A lack of trust can potentially inhibit transactions (Huurne et al., 2017). Concerning the sharing and consumption of hotels with sustainable initiatives in the collaborative economy, this, for example, means that consumers cannot inspect the sustainable practices upfront when booking.

One of the key themes emerging from the online survey data was a concern about greenwashing (Table 6, Appendix 2). As presented in Table 6, several respondents from the online survey pointed out that they would be more prone to book sustainable accommodations if greenwashing was not an issue or a risk factor (Table 6, Appendix 2). As mentioned, greenwashing relates to when a company operates with poorer environmental performances than what is communicated and marketed (Pizzetti et al., 2021). Credible certifications, such as the ones acknowledged by Global Sustainable Tourism Council, however, ensure that a hotel has implemented practices related to environmental, as well as social, cultural, and economic sustainable practices (GSTC, 2022b; Atkinson & Rosenthal, 2014; Fudurich & MacKay, 2020).

It should be considered, as argued by Haaland & Aas (2010), that there is a risk concerning certifications and greenwashing since some certification schemes have limited credibility due to a lack of external auditing and accreditation (Haaland & Aas, 2010; Font & Harris, 2004). However, many certification schemes in the hotel context and the ones acknowledged by Global Sustainable Tourism Council are based on third-party recognition, implying credibility (GSTC 2022c; Fudurich & MacKay, 2020). The role of certifications in

securing against false claims of sustainability and hereby creating trust was mentioned by the informant from Guldsmeden Hotels:

"There is an increasing focus on and implementation of the environmental certifications. This is because you have to be much more attentive when you say you are sustainable - you have to have something to back it up with rather than just writing that you are sustainable" (Daniel Sørensen, Guldsmeden Hotels, Appendix 4).

This points out that trust is becoming increasingly important for hotels in the collaborative economy (Huurne, 2017) to back up statements about sustainability. The informant here presents certifications as a tool to enable this, implying that certifications, as pointed out by Atkinson & Rosenthal (2014), work as stamps of trust for consumers and as seals of approval about the environmental or sustainable qualities of a product or service, assuring truthfulness of claims from hotels. Concerning the trust that credible third-party certifications have, it would be considered positive that, as Fudurich & MacKay (2020) points out, the number of certifications is increasing. Nevertheless, as the last analytical section for this study will present, the current certification system is facing some challenges in order to support a more sustainable hotel industry ideally in the collaborative economy.

This section has touched upon how the collaborative economy enables OTAs and hotels to connect and increase sustainability-focused branding through several channels. The increased branding and incorporation of sustainability into hotels and OTAs' brand image is essential due to the lack of understanding, awareness, and recognition of sustainability in the hotel industry from the younger generations in Denmark. Furthermore, the section has argued that the sustainability branding of hotels and OTAs focused on sustainability is necessary for brand awareness and brand equity. Lastly, it has been argued that certifications can enable trust, which should be considered an essential factor for brand equity and increasingly crucial due to the expressed concern about greenwashing from the younger consumers in Denmark and the characteristics of the consumption in the collaborative economy.

Analysis 3. Challenges connected to certification and the need for collaborative change

The last part of the analysis will discuss the sub-question: *What are the challenges of the certification system, and how can OTAs, hotels, and certifications collaborate to increase demand and awareness of sustainability in the hotel industry?*

The section will present how, despite the trust and advantages connected to certifications, several challenges exist for the certification system to benefit consumers and support more sustainable development in the hotel industry. The section will argue that improved collaboration between hotels, OTAs, and certifications is needed to increase trust, awareness, and recognition of sustainability in the hotel industry. The section will include a focus on how such collaboration can be facilitated.

Challenges of certifications

As argued by Esparon et., al (2014), the embracement of the concept of certifications relies mainly on whether there is a market for certified products, and it is therefore essential to understand consumers' perceptions of certifications (Esparon et al., 2014). The following quotes from the interviews with the two young travelers express how certifications are perceived in relation to sustainability in the hotel industry:

"The certifications are complicated to understand" (Nolwenn Pernin, Young consumer, Appendix 5).

"Some places put stuff about whether hotels are eco-certified - but they don't put so much about it - maybe they mention that it's green or eco certified - but you are not really sure to which extent" (Nolwenn Pernin, Young consumer,, Appendix 5).

"I have been to places where I don't know if they have a stamp or certification" (Cecilie Jones, Young consumer, Appendix 5).

"The certifications should not only be mentioned, but it should be explain more easily understandable, what green key is for example, because people don't know what green key is and why this makes a hotel sustainable or not - so give some other explanation that everyone can access and understand" (Nolwenn Pernin, Young consumer, Appendix 5).

These quotes point to an additional lack of knowledge and awareness about certifications and what they stand for from the younger consumers in Denmark, confirming, as argued by Esparon (2014), that while consumers believe certifications make a positive difference to environments and communities, consumers are very much unaware and confused about what makes up certifications. Furthermore, quotes from hotels and OTAs also present a lack of understanding and confusion regarding certifications. For example, the informant from Guldsmeden Hotels expressed that it is challenging to navigate the certification system:

"There are so many different certifications. You have the green key, green globe, b corp, the swan label, the eu flower, and it can be really difficult to find your way around what each one is" (Daniel Sørensen, Guldsmeden Hotels, Appendix 4).

"Perhaps some of the certifications should be better at finding some keywords for what the certification itself means" (Daniel Sørensen, Guldsmeden Hotels, Appendix 4).

"It can be difficult for the consumer to navigate the different certifications, but hopefully it can also be something that looks good and a guiding tool for the consumer" (Daniel Sørensen, Guldsmeden Hotels, Appendix 4).

Above shows that both hotels and young consumers in Denmark find the certification system challenging to navigate due to, as argued by Mahony (2007) and Haaland & Aas (2010), a lack of transparency and clear definitions as well as difficulties in distinguishing between different eco-certificates.

The concept of certifications relies on whether there is a market for certified products, and for such a market to develop and be supported, consumers need more understanding of certifications (Esparon et al. (2014). This underlines that the lack of understanding and confusion from hotels and young consumers towards certifications is critical.

Certifications can help businesses improve practices independently of the strength of the certification brand awareness and image. Nevertheless, the role of certifications in enabling trust and identification of sustainability in the hotel industry, and with this benefitting guests, hotels, and OTAs ideally, depends on whether understanding and awareness of the certifications will increase. As argued by (Teisl, 2003), certification programs will only be able to benefit operators and consumers if consumers care about and believe the information presented to them.

While it is pointed out by Fudurich & MacKay (2020) that the number of certifications is increasing, the consumer demand for certified products is argued to build slowly (Bien, 2005). The presented perspectives from consumers and hotels show that certifications' ability to benefit relevant stakeholders is lacking. The slow demand might therefore be rooted in, as argued by Esparon et al. (2014), that the success of the certification system highly depends on whether it satisfies the needs and aspirations of the stakeholders it claims to benefit. The data for this study clearly shows that it is critical to increase the understanding and awareness of certifications in order for the concept to benefit relevant stakeholders.

The need for collaborative change

From the perspective of hotels and OTAs, the troubles of communicating about the certifications are additionally rooted in the necessary complexity of the certification system and the fact that different certifications rely on different sets of criteria and measuring points. The following quotes from informants express these challenges:

"The problem is that it has to be a little bit complicated to understand what the certifications are about, because there are many requirements included. So it can be a bit difficult to convey what the certifications really mean and what they measure…. (Daniel Sørensen, Guldsmeden Hotels, Appendix 4).

"It's extremely difficult with the transparency, and also for us as an OTA - because a lot of hotels are different - so if you're looking at 10 different hotels and they are all eco-certified, they have all gotten A+ or 12 and they are eligible to getting an eco-certificate. But when you look into why they have all gotten an A + or 12 you will see that everyone is different.

This is both super interesting but also difficult for us in terms of communication" (Patricia Plesner, EcoHotels.com, Appendix 3).

The quote from the informant from the OTA, EcoHotels.com, points towards hotels' varying sustainable approaches and practices. However, the initiatives behind the hotels' eco-certifications vary to an extent that makes it complicated for the OTA to communicate in a structured and manageable way. This further underlines confusion and challenges related to the certification systems and supports that the certification system is challenging to navigate (Mahony, 2007; Haaland & Aas, 2010) for the stakeholders that it claims to benefit.

The coding of the online survey showed an explicit request for easier identification of sustainable hotels (Table 6, Appendix 2) and a high number of 65% of respondents who were unsure whether they had stayed in a sustainable hotel (Table 4, Appendix 2). This points to the lack of understanding, knowledge, and recognisability concerning sustainable practices and certifications. As brand image and awareness relates to consumers' perceptions about a brand and the brand associations held in consumer memory as well as the ability of consumers to easily recognize or recall a brand (Keller, 1993; Aaker, 1991), the difficulties in understanding and distinguishing certifications from one another, underlines the need for improved certification brand image and awareness.

For example, one of the hotels of focus for this study, Savoy Hotel, only mentions the following sustainable initiatives on the hotel's website: limited electricity, water, and heat consumption; switching to environmentally friendly energy sources; and a small organic breakfast (Savoy Hotel, 2022). That the hotel actively communicates about sustainable practices and incorporates sustainability into brand image is an important step. Yet, the number of practices listed and communicated on the website compared to the number of criteria measured by the Green Key certification that the hotel holds is notable. The Green Key FEE certification, which is considered a leading certification standard for environmental responsibility and sustainable operation within the tourism industry, covers and measures 13 different criteria areas with several sub-areas to each of the different criteria areas (Green Key, 2022). As pointed out on the website of Savoy Hotel, the certifications mean that a hotel has to meet 78 specific criteria (Savoy Hotel, 2022).

The informant from Savoy Hotel importantly mentioned how the work with and communication of certification requirements requires many resources and is very time-consuming:

"We are really lucky to have an intern that helps us with our certification and co2 measurements. In your everyday work at a small hotel - you don't have much time and resources for these things, and it takes ressources to get going in the beginning" (Gitte Nielsen, Savoy Hotel, Appendix 4).

Based on the above presented insights, this study argues that hotels, OTAs, and certifications must collaborate differently and support each other in meeting the needs of the younger consumers in Denmark. Due to the confusion, lack of understanding, and complexity in formulating certification criteria and the sustainable practices of hotels,' the different stakeholders must collaborate in formulating and communicating sustainability and certification criteria in an understandable and trusted manner and acknowledging where the means and expertise to do so lies.

When hotels are appointed with eco-certificates, it means that sustainable practices and actions have been implemented and measured (GSTC 2022b). However, the data shows a clear need to improve the understanding of these practices from the younger consumers as well as the possibility to increase the communication of these specific practices from hotels and OTAs.

While OTAs and hotels might compete for returning customers, as argued by (Chang et al., 2019), the stakeholders cooperate to attract new and first-time customers to hotels. Concerning this cooperation to attract new first-time customers,, this study argues that there is a need for more inclusion of the certifications. Sustainable practices are implemented and performed by the hotels, and they are the hotel's responsibility as such. Nevertheless, the practices are registered and measured by the certification companies providing expertise in sustainability.

Formulation and communication of the sustainable practices that have earned a hotel its certification could be implemented as criteria of certifications, a requirement to obtain the certificate, and what the given certificate stands for. This material should be designed in collaboration between the hotels, certifications, and OTAs so that branding and awareness

can run through all stakeholders' channels. Being eco-certified in tourism is often costly for business operators, including hotels (Mahony, 2007). Considering the difficulties in formulating sustainable practices, it, therefore, seems appropriate that the practices registered and measured by certifications are formulated with a high level of assistance from the certification companies. In turn, this collaboration and communication with support from certifications can increase awareness and ease of recognition of sustainability, which has been presented as a demand from the younger generation. In that sense, as argued by Font & McCabe (2017), marketing can support sustainability in achieving its goals.

Clearer communication, stronger brand image, and awareness of the individual certification criteria will additionally make the different certification schemes easier to recognize and help identify sustainable hotels. Increased brand image and awareness of the certifications would support the certificates' brand equity (Soler & Gémar, 2017), a foundationally important factor for the certifications' ability to enable trust (Aaker, 1991; Haudi et al., 2022).

This section has presented some of the challenges connected to the concept of certification in the hotel industry and its ability to benefit relevant stakeholders. For example, the certification system is complicated for guests and hotels to understand and navigate, as well as complex and time-consuming to be engaged in for the hotels and OTAs. For the certification system to fulfill its potential in raising awareness, trust, and identification of sustainability, the section has argued that a different kind of collaboration between hotels, OTAs, and certifications should be prioritized. Ideally, this could start with a more collaborative process in formulating the concrete sustainable practices implemented by hotels yet measured and registered by certifications.

Discussion

Concerns of intensified and increased sustainability branding

This study argues for increased awareness and information flow concerning sustainability. It has been presented how different stakeholders in the collaborative economy are in a position to improve sustainability-focused branding and collaboration to increase awareness amongst the younger generation towards sustainability in the hotel industry. Nevertheless, it is

relevant to consider how affecting the younger generations' behavior more unconsciously can bring benefits and support a market for sustainable accommodation types further.

As pointed out, a method for influencing people's choice of environment and behavior in sustainable consumption is nudging (Lehner, 2016; Thaler & Sunstein, 2008). Nudging, however, most often successfully refers to affecting people's behavior unconsciously (Lehner, 2016). Therefore, while the purpose of the increased understanding and awareness amongst and imposed on the younger generations is to affect this generation's behavior in a sustainable consumption domain, it can be discussed to what extent this falls under the category of nudging as it relates to a more conscious acquiring of knowledge and understanding.

It is worth considering the risk connected if consumers feel that specific values are imposed on them too much. In this case, it might not have the desired outcome in end behavior, as it can cause individuals to distance themselves further from the values. This risk should be considered in relation to the intensified communication of sustainability and increased information flow suggested. Nevertheless, the data for this study has shown interest and appreciation of sustainability from the young consumer group as well as a self-expressed desire to understand sustainable practices of hotels from the younger generation. Therefore the increased branding, information, and conscious awareness of sustainability are considered to support increased interest and demand for sustainability from this generation.

The attention towards greenwashing

Communication about sustainable practices and products is essential for consumers to get familiar with sustainable operations and, therefore, essential. However, marketing is not what develops and implements the actual practices, that makes a difference. The study has argued that incorporating sustainable practices as part of hotel information and increased branding both on hotel websites and through OTAs can support higher awareness of sustainability in the hotel sector from the younger generation. However, the focus of this study on how marketing can be a tool for sustainability to achieve its end goals (Font & McCabe, 2017) should not downplay the seriousness and challenges connected to greenwashing, an increasing problem and issue in the sustainability paradigm and context for this study. The study has pointed to different perceptions concerning certifications in the

tourism industry. Not all of them see certification as something exclusively positive and securing against greenwashing. Some scholars argue that there is a risk concerning certifications and greenwashing as some certification schemes lack credibility due to a lack of external auditing (Haaland & Øystein 2010, 382: Font & Harris, 2004).

Additionally, the number of certifications is increasing in the accommodation industry, and some scholars argue that certifications are increasingly influencing what consumers choose (Atkinson & Rosenthal, 2014: Fudurich & MacKay, 2020). Therefore it is important that the hotel industry and market demands credible certifications and does not end up applying and using a high amount of internal and first-party certifications uncritically. It is essential that organizations such as The Global Sustainable Tourism Council (GSTC) maintain its functions as a guiding organization for accommodations in relation to third-party certifications and that the organization keeps recognizing and relying on credible certifications.

Scholars argue that the amount of greenwashing is increasing together with the number of green businesses arising (Delmas & Burbano, 2011). It therefore cannot be underlined enough how all stakeholders in the hotel industry should be critical and observant of greenwashing as sustainability-focused branding and increased information develops. Clearer definitions of the concept of greenwashing and the boundaries of marketing and communicating as well as regulation on the topic of greenwashing, are increasingly needed and should be prioritized (Delmas & Burbano, 2011). This should be considered especially important in relation to sustainability-focused branding, as marketing and advertising have a history of being criticized for greenwashing (Delmas & Burbano, 2011).

A shared responsibility

It is worth discussing how the hotel industry and the collaborative economy function as an interconnected ecosystem. All stakeholders need to work together and take action if sustainable development of the industry is to take form and last. It has been presented that hotels, OTAs, and certifications are in a position to affect the consumers and increase awareness amongst the younger generations, thereby enabling more demand for sustainability in the hotel industry.

However, the development of a market for sustainable-oriented hotels cannot solely rely on service providers being able to guide the hand of the consumer through opportunities that arise from the collaborative economy's new markets and possibilities in marketing. As promising as these new options are, they are also characterized as fluent and by elasticity (Tussyadiah & Sigala, 2018). Legislation and regulations will have to play a crucial role in developing a solid and long-term stable hotel industry transformation. Yet, the industry additionally has to be pushed and affected by the younger generation instead of solely the other way around.

The suggested collaboration and responsibility of the service providers in enabling interest and demand should not be understood as a deprivation of responsibility from the consumers and the young generation in Denmark. The young generation is presented as being concerned about the environment and sustainability and as demanding sustainability from businesses (Deloitte, 2022). This study has discovered how the younger generation in Denmark holds openness, interest, and appreciation toward sustainability in the hotel industry. However, it has shown a divide between this interest and the younger generation's actual behavior and demand for hotels focused on sustainability. Therefore, concerning sustainability in the hotel industry, the young generation will have to increasingly live up to their current status and representation as a sustainability-demanding generation.

Conclusion

This study has shown that the younger generation in Denmark holds an interest, pro-environmental values, and appreciation towards sustainability in the hotel industry. However, the generation has low experience staying in sustainable hotels and does not include sustainability as a prominent determining factor in their hotel decision-making. The study has identified several challenging factors connected to this. The younger generation lack understanding and awareness of sustainable practices of hotels and certification criteria and perceive sustainability as expensive and out of their reach. Additionally, they are concerned about greenwashing.

As the younger generation is highly digital (González et al., 2021), the study argues that a way to facilitate more demand from the younger generation is through increased awareness and trust of sustainability. Since many sustainable initiatives from hotels are not visible and

self-evident, the communication of them is important. Most hotels' consumption takes place online in the collaborative economy and through platforms such as OTAs (Statista, 2022b; Statista, 2022c).

Therefore it has been argued that incorporating sustainability into brand image and awareness is needed from hotels and OTAs in the collaborative economy. More branding of sustainability can help improve and raise awareness from the younger generation in Denmark towards sustainability in the hotel sector, which is essential for this generation's demand for sustainable hotels and in dissolving their misperception of sustainability as overly expensive. However, the study has argued that this branding and the communication of sustainability needs to be understandable, credible, and trusted to meet the younger consumers' needs.

The study has shown that younger consumers are confused and challenged concerning understanding certifications and sustainability in the hotel industry. Likewise, hotels and OTAs are challenged in navigating the certifications that both hotels and OTAs increasingly rely on (Fudurich & MacKay, 2020) in the new sustainability paradigm. It is therefore argued that there is a need for another form of collaboration between relevant stakeholders that should include more involvement of certification companies in the formulation of the sustainability-focused information of hotels and OTAs. This would support an ideal, more effective, trusted branding and awareness creation of sustainability in the hotel industry. This is needed to enable demand from the younger generation in Denmark toward sustainability and support a market of sustainable hotel products, thereby increasing the hotel industry's ability to decarbonize faster and contribute positively to the SDGs.

Limitations and future research

The context of this study concerns the younger generation in Denmark. While it is believed that many insights have relevance and can be transferred to contexts other than the Danish one, the study cannot confirm this. Future research is therefore suggested concerning similar questions about the younger generations in other countries' interest in, awareness of, and demand for sustainability in the hotel industry.

The study has focused on how to enable more interest and demand from the younger generations toward sustainability in the hotel industry. It has not investigated to what extent the operations of sustainability-focused hotels and OTAs benefit the environment or community involved. More research and measuring of the actual reduction of resources and socioeconomic benefits that hotels and OTAs focused on sustainability enable compared with operators who are not focused on sustainability is needed. Additionally, the study does not claim to investigate or evaluate the effect of different certification criteria, Booking.coms' Travel Sustainable badge and the different sustainable initiatives implemented by hotels. As the sustainable initiatives implemented by hotels and the different certification criteria vary to the extent they do, such an assessment is beyond the scope of this study.

As part of the adductive method and an evolving framework, the focus of certification was included ongoingly as data and insights were derived, and the framework evolved. Therefore including certification companies as a relevant topic to investigate in the online survey or a necessary stakeholder to interview was not part of the initial design. As the study ended up including a high focus on the role and challenges of the certification system in relation to the hotel industry, it would have been ideal if the perspective of someone from a relevant certification company had been included. Further research is needed to understand the perspective of certification companies on the challenges concerning the transparency of criteria and collaboration with hotels and OTAs.

The scope of this study does not include a discussion of the character of the collaborative economy. Scholars have criticized the development of the collaborative economy and OTAs as the latest form of neoliberalism developments, where global corporations take out of proportion shares of revenue from even the smallest stakeholders and social entrepreneurs (Gössling & Hall, 2019). While this study acknowledges the relevance of such critique and the disadvantages of the high commissions that many hotels pay to connect to OTAs (Chang et al., 2019), the study focus on the potential of the collaborative economy and increased branding in creating awareness and support the concept of sustainability in evolving (Font & McCabe, 2017). Nonetheless, these excluded perceptions and discussions are highly relevant topics that continually should be of scholars' attention.

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