



Sustainable Initiatives of Forbes Five-star hotels in Tokyo : Balancing Sustainability and Average Customer Spending under COVID-19

Item Type	event;event
Authors	Nakai, Ayako
Download date	2025-01-13 02:50:35
Link to Item	https://hdl.handle.net/20.500.14394/49509

Sustainable Initiatives of Forbes Five-star hotels in Tokyo : Balancing Average Customer Spending under COVID-19

Introduction

Deloitte (2014) predicted that sustainability would become a defining issue for the hospitality industry in the near future. Owing to social pressure, the hospitality industry has adopted various sustainable initiatives. Jones, et al. (2014) examined the sustainable initiatives of the top 10 global hotel chains such as Marriott, Hilton and Holiday Inn, that have implemented sustainable initiatives, including water energy conservation, energy efficiency, recycling and waste management, and donations to local communities.

In 2015 the Sustainable Development Goals set up by United Nations General Assembly attracted public attention (The United Nations, 2015). Jones et al. (2016, p.1) argued that “the industry increasingly looks to deploy sustainability within both its marketing messages and the customer experience.” In their case study of the Disney Hotel in Paris, a notice attached to the bathroom suggested saving natural resources. This can be classified as a typical global sustainable initiative.

However, Forbes five-star hotels in Japan have undertaken unique and luxury sustainable initiatives to boost their brand assets in addition to green behavior, attract customers, and maintain average customer spending (ACS) amid the COVID-19 pandemic, circumstances that made it very difficult to retain customers. In fact, the number of Japanese guests from January to December in 2021 was 31,076 million (-35.3% compared to that of stay guests in 2019). Furthermore, compared to the number of international stay guests in 2019, that of stay guests from foreign countries in 2021 was 421 million (-96.4% ; The Japan National Tourism Organization, 2021). Moliner, et al.(2021) found that sustainability certifications have a positive impact on occupancy, Average Daily Rate(ADR), and Revenue Per Available Room (RevPAR).

This study examined Japanese Forbes five-star hotels’ sustainable initiatives linked with Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Some five-star hotels, such as Mandarin Oriental The Hotel Group and The Capitol Hotel Tokyu, apparently supports SDGs on their official websites (Mandarin Oriental The Hotel Group, 2020; The Capitol Hotel Tokyu, 2022a). The term “five-star hotels” is based on the star rating systems of Forbes Travel Guide. The independent star ratings for Forbes Travel Guide (2022) are regarded as reliable and exquisite by hotels and guests.

The research questions were as the follows,

- (1) What sustainable initiatives have Forbes’ five-star hotels in Tokyo undertaken amid the COVID-19 pandemic?
- (2) Can their sustainable initiatives contribute to attracting guests and

maintaining ACS amid the COVID-19 pandemic?

Literature Review

Sustainable development and sustainability. Sustainable Development is a concept and movement led mainly by the United Nations (UN) not only by the public or researchers. According to Elliott (2013), the report of the World Commission on Environment and Development (WCED, 1987) established by the UN, used the term, “sustainable development.” The term became political agenda, thanks to the report mentioning the term many times. Sustainable development is “development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs (WCED, 1987, p. 43).” In 1992, the “Earth Summit” was held in Rio De Janeiro. Its main goal was to identify practical actions for sustainable development. In 2002, the UN World Summit on Sustainable Development was held in Johannesburg to re-energize political discussions and promote cooperation between the North and South to improve sustainable development.

Sustainability has been described from three perspectives, environmental, social and economic. According to Goodland (1995), environmental sustainability is “maintenance of natural capital.” Environmental Sustainability requires unpolluted atmosphere, water, and soil whereas economic sustainability should be maintained to protect natural resources. To achieve economic sustainability, different countries have made efforts to improve innovation and smart specialization (Boons et al., 2013). Social sustainability aims to reduce poverty, which related to the unsustainable usage of natural capital.

The movement of pursue Sustainable Development reached the climax because the SDGs including fighting climate change, and poverty for peace set up by the United Nations in 2015 General Assembly, finally attracted public attention by setting 17 SDGs, such as Goal 3 (Good health and well-being), Goal 11 (sustainable cities and communities), Goal 12 (responsible consumption and production), and Goal 13 (climate action).

Sustainability in tourism and hospitality industry. The Green Economy Report focusing on tourism issued by The United Nations Environment Program (UNEP, 2011, p.421) defined the impact of tourism on the environments. The report suggested that tourism industry, including the hospitality industry, should change or reduce (1) energy and Green House Gas (GHG) emissions, (2) water consumption, (3) waste management, (4) loss of biological diversity, and (5) the effective management of cultural heritage. Various studies have shown that the hospitality industry has an enormous effect on natural resources, such as water. Sloan et al. (2013) reported that a large amount of water is consumed by hotel stay guests, ranging between 100 and 2,000 liters per guest

per night.

Berezan, et al. (2013) conducted a quantitative study and concluded that sustainable hotel practices impact guest satisfaction and improve royalty to hotels. Jones, et al. (2014) analyzed the sustainable initiatives of international hotel chains, such as green behavior and, contribution to local communities, according to their official websites, and formal sustainability reports.

Baker, et al. (2014) implied that if guests are educated to minimize their concerns of cost cutting and their convenience is increased, they willing to pay more accommodation fees. The research of Xu and Gursoy (2015) focused on sustainable hospitality supply chain management, which provides raw food materials, equipment, and furniture from various suppliers. According to Jones et al. (2016), their personal reflections based on previous studies suggested that the hospitality industry should extend its sustainability reporting to embrace materiality and to address the issues of sustainable consumption and economic growth.

Wood (2017) stated that multinational brand hotels, such as Hilton Accor Hotels, InterContinental Group, Marriott, and Wyndham need to conserve energy and reduce carbon impacts. Yusoff et al. (2020) used questionnaire distributed to human resource managers and executives in three-, four- and five-star hotels in Malaysian to analyze the relationship between environmental human resource management practices, such as recruitment and selection, training and environmental performance. Moliner, et al. (2021) show that certified sustainable hotels in Florida are more competitive than non-certified hotels. Sustainable certification has the potential to increase the ADR and RevPAR of certified hotels.

However, previous research overviewed the needs and practices of hotels whose names were not described, and the initiatives of each hotel were not identified. In addition, there have been few studies of the relationship between sustainable initiatives and room rates (i.e., Baker et al, 2014; Moliner. et al., 2021). This study described how each five-star hotel in Tokyo made an effort to promote sustainability in a unique way, attract guests, and retain ACS amid the COVID-19 pandemic.

Method

The official websites of the nine five-star hotels were the main data source for the study and were collected from April 2020 to October 2022. During the time of data collection, the state of emergency was issued four times by the Japanese government in Tokyo (from April 7 to May 25, 2020; from January 8 to March 21, 2021; from April 25 to June 20, 2021, from July 12 to Sep 30, 2021). In addition, until October, 11, 2022, Japan required on-arrival tests at the quarantine station, self-quarantine in places, and refraining from the use of public transportation. Before then, as it was almost impossible

for international tourists to stay at five-star hotels, hotels adopted various interesting sustainable initiatives to attract domestic tourists at that time. Therefore, the data collection date was set between April 2020 and October 2022. The nine five-star hotels in Tokyo, according to Forbes Travel Guide (2022), are:(1) The Peninsula Tokyo, (2)Takanawa Hanakohro (a ryokan-styled hotel), (3)Palace Hotel Tokyo, (4)Mandarin Oriental Tokyo,(5) Shangri-La Tokyo, (6) The Ritz-Carlton Tokyo, (7) The Prince Gallery Tokyo Kioicho,(8) The Capitol Hotel Tokyu, (9) Hotel New Otani Tokyo, Executive House Zen. Taylor and Perry (2005) stated that websites are necessary for timely communication. It is beneficial for researchers to interview hotel employee in order to understand the background of practicing sustainable initiatives. However, it is neither categorized as official information nor the adoption of sustainable initiatives, which all hotel team members should know and enact. Therefore, official websites are used as the resource information in this study. Although Holcomb et al. (2010) utilized content analysis to research websites, in the present study, the key themes related to sustainability and SDGs' goals were extracted.

Furthermore, by staying at each of these five-star hotels for one night, the author observed their sustainable initiatives and took part in some events focusing on SDG's goals.

Results

Promoting wellness: Goal 3 (Good health and well-being). The Peninsula Tokyo received gold accreditation by Earth Check, one of major global sustainability certificates in 2020, and adopted the concept and program of Peninsula Wellness. Ten Peninsula Hotels in the world have common programs of Peninsula Wellness, which takes a holistic approach from three perspectives: physical fitness, mental health and nutrition, that connect with SDGs Goal 3, good health and well-being. The Peninsula Tokyo, launched the new Peninsula Wellness, which included Japanese culture, in May, 2022. Guests can enhance physical strength through yoga lessons, which are based on a program created by a leading Japanese yoga expert, Ken Harakuma. Guests can enjoy acupressure (shiatsu) elaborated by Tokujiro Namikoshi, improve mental health through meditation using a special app, Breathe, and eat nutritious Japanese vegetarian food (*shojin ryori*) related to Zen Buddhism, whose ingredients are sourced from a sustainable supply chain.

Peninsula Wellness contributes to guests' good health and well-being. The price of the Peninsula Wellness Plan started at 170,000 per room (85,000 yen per person) for a standard room (Nihonheizai Shinbun, 2022). The stay plan was priced at more than three times the price of the standard room through an online booking site (Ikyu, 2022). Sustainable luxury and health-conscious guests spend willingly pay more, as Baker et al. (2014) previously suggested. In fact, the Peninsula Wellness Stay Plan seemed to be

popular among guests. Therefore, the stay plan, originally valid until December, 17, 2022, was extended until December, 17 2023 (The Peninsula Tokyo, 2023).

Aaker (2014) suggested that brands should be energized to be interesting and exciting, which encourage people to talk about them. Peninsula Wellness appeared in a Japanese notable newspaper, Nihonkeizai Shinbun (2022), because the hotel broke through the existing image of wellness, changing from simple *shojin ryori* to iconic and adopting Japanese acupuncture.

Preserving tradition and culture: Goal 11 (sustainable cities and communities). The Capitol Hotel Tokyu (2022a) renewed its official website to introduce sustainable initiatives. Therefore, it launched a special event focusing on Japanese tea and reflected on the importance of Japanese culture (PR Times, 2022). The consumption of Japanese tea per person has gradually decreased (from 727g in 1965 to 599g per person in 2021). The number of abandoned Japanese tea fields has increased, which constitutes a problem in Japanese tea leaf production areas. However, the hotel focused on Japanese tea and held an event to support the community related to SDG Goal 11: sustainable cities and communities. The hotel chef offered sweets using Japanese tea and Mr. Oskar Brekell, Swedish Japanese Tea Master, prepared different Japanese teas and taught them how to serve in the spacious suite. The guests, including the author, watched a video about Shizuoka, a famous Japanese tea production area, and the dedication of the farmers to maintaining the Japanese tea fields. The event ticket costs JPY 18,000 yen per person. Normally, afternoon tea sets in five-star hotels range between 7,500 yen to 10,000 yen. However, the event charged the guests almost twice that, yet all the seats were sold out. Guests who are interested in preserving Japanese culture and tradition took part in the event and asked the Swedish Japanese Tea Master questions about Japanese tea. Even if the price of a Japanese tea afternoon event was more expensive than the usual price, the event showed that the concept of sustainability encouraged guests to participate positively in it.

Palace Hotel Tokyo (2022) started to serve afternoon tea sets with beautiful *urushi* dishes, traditional Japanese lacquerware, on May, 17, 2022. This traditional lacquerware, called *wazimanuri*, is produced in Ishikawa Prefecture. The official website emphasizes that the lacquerware is made of natural materials such as wood and lacquer, and that the hotel values harmony with nature. The hotel posted a special video on the official website featuring the *urushi* painter, Akagi Akito, living in Ishikawa Prefecture, in the northern area of Japan. The almost 9 minute- video shows how to extract the special lacquer, *urushi*, how to cut wooden pieces and design the dishes from the trees, and how to paint *urushi* so many times. The hotel focuses on hard work of the artist to preserve traditional techniques and support local artists in Japan, which is connected to SDGS, Goal 11.

The Ritz Carlton Tokyo launched campaign “Bonsai Afternoon Tea,” on January

6, 2021(valid until January 26, 2021).The afternoon tea makes special sweets, including Japanese tea powder, and *matcha* while exhibiting traditional Japanese potted plants, and *bonsai* in the hotel. The price of Bonsai Afternoon Tea was 9,400 yen per person. The hotel collaborated with Saitama City in Saitama Prefecture, which is well known for its traditional industry, Omiya Bonsai. The hotel exhibited *bonsai* in the main entrance, the lobby lounge, and the lobby on 45th floor. *Bonsai* is not popular among the young Japanese women and middle-aged women who favor afternoon tea. However, the decoration of *bonsai* is a good opportunity for them to experience traditional Japanese culture. Because *bonsai* seemed to attract many guests, Bonsai Afternoon Tea was renamed as East Meets West Afternoon Tea the next year and provided again between January 6 and March 14 (The Ritz Carlton Tokyo, 2022). Thanks to the uniqueness of the event, East Meets West Afternoon Tea was introduced to popular online sites (Let's Enjoy Tokyo, 2022; Fashion Press, 2022).

Supporting local communities: Goal 11(sustainable cities and communities). In 2021, Mandarin Oriental Tokyo joined the second event, Nihonbashi *Gururi*, to have strong bonds with local city of Nihonbashi. The history of the city dates back to the Edo era, and there are still historical and authentic small shops in the area. Nihonbashi used to be the main city, which was the starting point of the five major streets, and residents of Nihonbashi enjoyed a hyper-recycling society life during the Edo era. The theme of the second event is that Nihonbashi reconstructs genuine sustainability and transmits information about it. The hotel distributed Nihonbashi guidebooks to its guests (Nihonbashi Gururi, 2021). The guide book introduced different shops, such as a Japanese fish cake shop that opened in 1688 during the Edo era, and Japanese kitchen knife shop dating back to 1792 during the Edo era. If the guests shows their room key to the local shops, they can receive a variety of rewards. The year 2021, when the guide book started to be distributed to hotel guests, was crisis moment for local shops because of the multiple states of emergency that had been declared. As a result, the hotel tried to support local shops and the community.

Shangri-La Tokyo (2022) donated part of the sales of bath salts to maintain the *Kuromatsu* tree, in the Imperial Palace Garden. The hotel staff participated in Chiyoda ward, where the hotel exists, cleaning and joining other activities to support local communities. In addition, the hotel donated drinking water to the vaccination venue in Chiyoda Ward and has promoted sustainable initiatives. To encourage hotel staff to actively participate in Corporate Social Responsibility activities related to SDGs goals, the hotel gives one point to the staff members every time they join in the CSR activities and has set a new policy to increase the amount of the bonus for staff who receive four points. By participating in measures supporting local communities, hotel staff are rewarded. Although these initiatives do not lead to profit, the image of the hotel was enhanced during the COVID-19 pandemic. According to the results of a questionnaire

by the top 2 Japanese advertising agency, Dentsu (2022), Japanese people tend to have a positive image of companies that actively engage in sustainable initiatives.

Sustainable and luxury dinner : Goal 12 (responsible consumption and production).

In 2020, five-star hotels began taking responsibility for consumption and production in a luxury and sustainable manner. The Capitol Hotel Tokyu organized the “Sustainable Table”. The hotel collaborated with the Japan Sustainable Restaurant Association (JSRA) and an executive chef of the Onodera group, Hitoshi Sugiura, who is a pioneer of vegan dishes. The price per-person was 20,000 yen, including a course meal and beverages. The first event focusing on plant-based food as well as locally produced food was held on May 15, 2020 during the state of emergency due to the COVID-19 pandemic. At that moment, the Japanese people refrained from going out for dinner. However, sustainability attracted more than 70 guests. Therefore, the second event on August 21 2022, was organized by changing the theme of the dinner, food loss, and using substandard vegetables, and the third event focusing on sustainable seafood and plant-based meat was held on October, 23 2022.

Sustainable Table attracted many guest who were concerned about sustainable development; therefore, the event was conducted three times in 2022. In 2022, stricter coronavirus measures without an emergency declaration were issued several times before the events (between January 21 and February 13, between March 7 and March 21), and Japanese people were affected by the mood of self-restraint. However, the concept of sustainability motivated people to take action to learn about food loss and taste plant-based meat. The website of the famous Japanese magazine, Hanako featured the Sustainable Table and introduced the importance of the event related to SDGs (Hanako, 2022). Eventually, the fourth event is planned to be held on February 18, 2023 (The Capitol Hotel Tokyu, 2022b).

The Prince Gallery Tokyo Kioicho launched a new stay plan, Steiff Dream Gourmet Stay (Prince Hotels and Resorts, 2022). The hotel collaborated with Steiff, Teddy Bear Company. Guests can have luxury dinners, including variety of fresh vegetables and soy meats. Guests can enjoy using sustainable Teddy Bears made from pet bottles (starting 35,954 yen per person, approximately 72,000 yen per room). In September 2022, when the author booked the hotel via Marriott official site, the price of the standard room was 44,000 yen per room (22,000 per guest). Steiff Dream Gourmet Stay plan seemed successful to increase ACS.

According to Xu and Gursoy (2015), sustainable supply chain management encourages customers to have positive perceptions and actions towards the hospitality industry. Using substandard vegetables for dinners appealed to hotel guests who were aware of food waste and sustainability. Baker et al. (2014) stated that customers’ eco-friendly attitude is favorably related to intentions to pay more for sustainable products.

Reducing plastics and adopting NORDAQ: Goal 13(climate action). For the first time in hotel industries in Japan, Mandarin Oriental Tokyo in 2021 adopted sustainable premium water (NORDAQ), a Swedish brand, as Sweden is an environmentally advanced country (PR Times, 2021). NORDAQ is patented premium water made from a special water purifier. The NORDAQ can be bottled in hotels, and the glass bottle can be reused as much as possible, reducing plastics and CO2 during transportation. In April 2021, when the author stayed at Mandarin Oriental Tokyo, the price of the corner room was only 40,000 yen per room. The cost of bottled mineral water seemed a heavy burden for the hotel. Adopting NORDAQ was an excellent choice as not only sustainable initiatives but also for the cost reduction of mineral water. Subsequently, Westin Hotel Yokohama, which opened in 2022, also adopted NORDAQ.

According to PR Times (2021), Mandarin Oriental Tokyo started to provide large refillable 100 % recycled bottles for shampoos and conditioners to reduce plastics. The brand of amenities was Natural Bisse, made in Spain. The products were produced based on environmental standards. Although economy hotels already implemented actions to use large bottles of shampoo, Mandarin Oriental Tokyo started to adopt them amid the pandemic. Before 2021, when the author stayed at the hotel, the original amenities involved collaboration with Italian Bottega Veneta, By adopting large refillable 100 % recycled bottles, the hotel was successful in boosting both the image of sustainable hotels and reducing the costs of amenities.

Conclusion

This study analyzed the sustainable initiatives of Forbes five-star hotels during the COVID-19 pandemic, in line with many earlier studies that have investigated deluxe, up-scale, or economy hotels. The five-star hotels adopted different SDGs initiatives to attract guests and improve their reputation by targeting these goals, especially Goal 3(good health and well-being), 11(sustainable cities and communities), 12(responsible production and consumption), and 13(climate action). A previous study noted the difficulty of balancing sustainability and economic growth (Jones, et al., 2016). However, most Forbes five-star hotels have succeeded in implementing luxury sustainable initiatives, attracting guests 'interest, and maintaining ACS amid the COVID-19 pandemic. There are various sustainable initiatives implemented by five-star hotels such as (1) promoting wellness, (2) preserving tradition and culture, (3) supporting local communities, (4) sustainable and luxury dinner, and (5) reducing plastics and adopting NORDAQ.

For instance, the Peninsula Wellness Stay Plan, promoting good health and well-being, attracted guests who concerned about a healthy life style, even though the price of stay plan was almost three times that of a standard room. To support sustainable communities in the Japanese tea production area, the Capital Hotel Tokyu organized Japanese Afternoon tea event in the suite, which cost more than twice the usual amount,

taught the guests how to serve delicious Japanese tea and introduced them to Japanese tea leaves. By encouraging responsible production and consumption, the Prince Gallery Tokyo Kioicho launched Steiff Dream Gourmet stay, charged double the price of a standard room to give teddy bear made from pet bottles as a gift and use substandard vegetables for luxury dinners. Baker et al. (2014) suggested that guests will pay additional fees if they understand the eco-friendly concept. As a climate action, Mandarin Oriental Tokyo adopted the patented purified water NORDAQ and large bottles of famous brand shampoo, which cuts the cost of amenities in an elegant way.

Forbes Five-star hotels can contribute to the behavior change of guests who are interested in sustainability by launching various luxurious events, stay plans and adopting excellent recyclable amenities.

Moliner, et al. (2021) state that sustainability enables hotels to be more competitive in terms of occupancy and ADR. Sustainable events do not demand huge investments and do not always require hotels to renew the facilities. Furthermore, sustainable initiatives would energize the brand equities of hotels, draw the attention of the media and potential guests. These initiatives can be used worldwide in the hospitality industry to achieve sustainable goals and economic growth.

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