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Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) Communication in Ski Tourism

Impact of Different Communication Styles on Customer Perception and Sustainable Behavior

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Abstract

Due to the reliance on low temperatures and snowfall, ski tourism is particularly vulnerable to the effects of climate change. Swiss ski destinations have reacted to the challenge by investing into a more sustainable infrastructure as well as communication measures to highlight their individual contribution to the mission of carbon neutrality to their customers (e.g., the Swisstainable program). However, events such as the warm winter of 2022 or the use of contentious technologies like snowmaking complicate the perceived authenticity of these efforts from the customer's perspective. Consequently, the question arises whether proactive communication of sustainability efforts can also be detrimental from a brand strategy perspective. Initial studies in the tourism industry on greenhushing, namely the concealment of sustainability efforts, indicate that this phenomenon is widespread. Especially the hospitality industry tries to avoid indirectly criticizing their guests for their consumption. At the same time, these studies also show that active customer involvement in sustainability efforts results in higher approval rates among guests than deliberately concealing the same activities. In a survey experiment amongst 434 winter tourists from the German-speaking Alpine region, this study examines whether ski destinations can increase both positive customer perception and desired sustainable behavior, such as arrival by public transport, by involving customers in their CSR messages. The results highlight the effectiveness of CSR-focused brand messages from ski destinations and demonstrate that greenhushing is not desirable from the customer's perspective. Additionally, it was found that by directly involving guests in CSR-communication, their psychological distance to the topic was reduced and sustainable behavioral intentions could be increased. Ski destinations can use these findings to sharpen their marketing strategy and simultaneously increase desired sustainable behavior among guests.

Keywords: Greenhushing, Ski Tourism, Sustainable Customer Behavior, Sustainability Communication, CSR Communication

1 Introduction

Due to the necessity of low temperatures and snowfall, the threat of climate change to ski tourism is considered high (Scott et al., 2022; Steiger et al., 2017; Steiger & Scott, 2020). Forecasts from the Alpine region also suggest that issues such as lack of snow certainty could likely be addressed in the medium term through snow making ("snow cannons") or expansion of ski-destinations into higher areas (Vorkauf et al., 2022). At the same time, guests' climate awareness is growing, and destination loyalty decreases due to unreliable snow conditions (Bausch et al., 2019). The need for action has long been recognized by the Swiss tourism industry and was formally addressed in 2008 with a promise to reduce greenhouse gases in the tourism industry (Müller & Weber, 2008). Since then, several ski destinations have sought sustainability labels and technological innovations to demonstrate their contribution to the mission of carbon neutrality to their guests. Seeing how the branding of many Alpine tourism areas is based on the image of pristine nature, the perceived authenticity of such sustainability branding is vital.

However, events like warm winters or the use of controversial technologies like snow making hinder the maintenance of such an authenticity (Scott et al., 2022). Even if snow cannons could be used sustainably, they are perceived as unsustainable technology in the public's mind due to their energy and water consumption (Rice et al., 2022; Spandre et al., 2019). As a result, guests might consider the sustainability of individual destinations to be insufficient despite previous efforts (keyword perceived greenwashing, see: Szabo & Webster, 2021).

Currently, various Swiss ski resorts are marketing their green innovations, such as the project in St. Moritz to capture 100% of the water used for snowmaking (Schweiz Tourismus, 2023). Yet, from a brand strategy perspective the question arises whether these achievements should be touted to differentiate oneself from the competition or should rather be kept quiet to avoid potential discrepancies between brand image and public perception (Font et al., 2016).

Initial studies on so-called 'Greenhushing' indicate that this phenomenon is widespread in the hotel industry specifically to avoid indirectly rebuking guests for their consumption (Coles et al., 2016; Ettinger et al., 2021; Font et al., 2016; Font & McCabe, 2017). At the same time, these studies also show that active involvement of guests in sustainability efforts leads to higher approval rates than deliberately concealing the same activities (Ettinger et al., 2021). Successful communication strategies of ski destinations must therefore be authentic enough to fend off accusations of greenwashing and encourage guests to behave more sustainably.

The aim of this study is to examine this area of tension. In an experimental survey with four conditions among 434 winter sports enthusiasts from the German-speaking Alpine region, the following two questions will be answered:

RQ1: Do sustainability-focused advertising messages from ski destinations have a negative effect on the brand perception and visit intentions of potential customers?

RQ2: Does involving potential customers in the sustainability-focused advertising messages of ski destinations lead to positive effects on their brand perception and visit intentions?

The results show that Greenhushing is not desired by guests. A two-sided sustainability communication that directly involves guests is more effective than one-sided communication aimed at just informing them. Sustainability communication with active involvement of guests reduces their psychological distance to the topic of sustainability and promotes positive behavioral intentions such as the use of public transportation and visiting sustainable ski resorts.

2 Background

2.1 Greenhushing und -washing

Sustainability communication or corporate social responsibility (CSR) communication (hereinafter referred to as CSRC) is mostly depicted in literature as an objective transmission of information about the economic, social, and environmental sustainability to a company's stakeholders (Coles et al., 2013). It aims to both convey positive brand values and create a control mechanism for sustainable behavior (Font et al., 2016). In the context of ski tourism, the focus is primarily on environmental sustainability to address the dangers of climate change to the industry and to sensitize guests to the issue, urging them toward more sustainable behavior (Ettinger et al., 2021, p. 619).

Although open CSRC is desired by most stakeholders (Gollnhofer, 2017), its impact from a corporate perspective was recently called into question. Font et al. (2016) reported in their study of 31 tourism companies that the majority deliberately do not communicate their sustainability efforts. This so-called "Greenhushing" represents, alongside "Greenwashing" – the feigning of corporate sustainability (Nyilasy et al., 2014) – the other side of the CSRC coin. Of course, this phenomenon is nothing new; Delmas & Burbano, p. (2011, p. 67) reported over a decade ago about "silent green companies." However, due to its spread among tourist companies, the topic has regained relevance (Acuti et al., 2022; Ettinger et al., 2021; Font et al., 2016; Swestiana et al., 2022). Particularly in tourism, the line for Gen Z customers between boycotting (punishing companies by abstaining) and "buycotting" (punishing companies by exclusively purchasing sustainable alternatives) is a thin one (Seyfi et al., 2023). As an industry predominantly driven by hedonism, it is crucial to clearly address the numerous ethical concerns of potential customers (Malone et al., 2014).

Typically, four arguments for Greenhushing from a corporate perspective are put forward: (1) The importance of CSR measures for customers is considered low, (2) internal motivation or a the corporate culture sees CSRC as a secondary priority, (3) there is a fear that sustainable products are perceived as less effective, or (4) there is a fear that their own CSRC will be perceived as Greenwashing (Acuti et al., 2022; Falchi et al., 2022) or that it creates incongruity with the internally perceived level of sustainability (Lewis & Carlos, 2022). In the context of tourism, the last argument is particularly relevant. As shown by Coles et al. (2016), CSRC by "silent green" tourism SMEs was seen as "either superfluous or potentially dangerous to their own reputation." With the viral spread of guest opinions and condemnations across various platforms, this fear might be justified for many firms (Topal et al., 2020). Therefore, companies make the decision to "protect" guests from the consequences of their own consumption through Greenhushing.

However, this argument is short-sighted. From the perspective of politics and environmental organizations, Greenhushing prevents the development of a pro-social sustainability movement and facilitates Greenwashing within an industry (Lewis & Carlos, 2022). From a corporate perspective, a deliberate silencing in the present makes sustainable positioning in the future more difficult. This, in turn, can complicate the call for guests to engage in sustainable behavior (Dolnicar, 2020).

2.2 Guest Reactions to CSRC

Despite reported cases of Greenhushing and their commercial logic (Coles et al., 2016; Font et al., 2016), many studies show that customers prefer honest reporting over Greenhushing (Dolnicar, 2020; Ettinger et al., 2021; Morsing & Schultz, 2006).

The reluctance to communicate sustainability-oriented measures can generally affect "green trust" and the corresponding word-of-mouth (Christis & Wang, 2021; Ginder et al., 2021; Thakur et al., 2023), as customers may feel a higher uncertainty regarding the CSR position of the company (Acuti et al., 2022). Moreover, it has been shown that "green satisfaction," defined by Y. Chen (2013) as "a pleasurable level of consumption-related fulfilment to satisfy a customer's environmental desires, sustainable expectations, and green needs," depends on the perceived efficiency of the company's sustainability efforts (Hellmeister & Richins, 2019). Thus, concealing sustainable achievements can lead to increased "green dissatisfaction" among guests (Thakur et al., 2023). Such a loss of trust also negatively impacts customer loyalty (Martínez, 2015; Mele et al., 2019). This situation is particularly problematic for tourist establishments, which typically rely on return visitors and regular customers.

Ultimately, the customer perception of CSRC is highly context-dependent (Szabo & Webster, 2021) and often influenced by the social desirability of the topic (Webb et al., 2008). Since many aspects of ski tourism are perceived as unsustainable (Duglio & Beltramo, 2016; Rice et al., 2022) but still maintained by millions of people in Switzerland (Turuban, 2020), the question arises as to which CSRC can address customer concerns long-term while also promoting sustainable behavior.

3 Hypotheses

Tourism is primarily a hedonistic activity where guests try to escape their everyday life and experience new things (Malone et al., 2014). Therefore, it is observed that international travellers often are more satisfied with their tourism experience. The psychological distance (hereinafter abbreviated as PD) from their everyday life gives more weight to their hedonistic experiences (Ponsignon et al., 2021). Thus, previous studies on Greenhushing have found that CSRC by tourism businesses can lead to cognitive dissonance among guests, as it contrasts hedonistic consumption with societal issues like climate change (Ettinger et al., 2021; Font et al., 2016).

At the same time, various forms of CSRC can be used to reduce the PD of guests towards sustainability, thereby lessening cognitive dissonances (Ettinger et al., 2021). Since direct involvement of guests in brand messages in past studies had an impact on guests' PD (Ettinger et al., 2021; Kim et al., 2016), we define the first hypothesis as follows:

Hypothesis 1: Compared to the control group and one-sided CSRC, both two-sided CSRC and two-sided CSRC with rewards show a reduced PD.

At the same time, it is assumed that by reducing the PD, the perceived authenticity of the CSRC increases and perceived greenwashing decreases (H. Chen et al., 2018).

Hypothesis 2: Compared to the control group and one-sided CSRC, both two-sided CSRC and two-sided CSRC with reward are perceived as more trustworthy and are less suspected of greenwashing.

Both effects should make guests more positive towards the destination and the proposed sustainability measures (Ginder et al., 2021; Morsing & Schultz, 2006). Jointly developed sustainability measures create trust among environmentally conscious individuals. However, lacking CSRC can reduce guests' engagement for the environment (Zhang & Jeong, 2023).

Hypothesis 3: Compared with the control group, both the one-sided, the two-sided, and the two-sided CSRC with reward have a positive effect on (a) the intention to behave sustainably and (b) the intention to visit the ski destination.

Finally, it is assumed that the effect of CSRC on guests' sustainable behavior intention depends on how successfully it reduces the PD towards the sustainability topic (Kim et al., 2016; Ryoo et al., 2017).

Hypothesis 4: The effect of CSRC on the intention to behave sustainably during a vacation is mediated by the PD regarding sustainability.

4 Methodology

To test the hypotheses, a survey-experiment was conducted among winter tourists from the German-speaking Alpine region (CH, DE, AT, FL). The aim of the survey was to investigate the impact of three different forms of CSRC as well as a control group on customer response. The division of the groups and the forms of CSRC are presented in Table 1:

Table 1: Groups and Operationalization

Group	Abbreviation	Operationalization
G1	Control Group	An advertisement for the anonymized ski resort "Alpina", which promotes information about the area (e.g., ski slopes, parks, etc.).
G2	One-sided Communication	An advertisement for the anonymized ski resort "Alpina", which promotes information about the area (e.g., ski slopes, parks, etc.) and sustainable efforts (e.g., solar lifts, water-saving measures, etc.).
G3	Two-sided Communication	An advertisement for the anonymized ski resort "Alpina", which promotes information about the area and sustainable efforts, and also calls on guests to support the sustainability mission of the ski resort by traveling via public transport.
G4	Two-sided Communication with Reward	An advertisement for the anonymized ski resort "Alpina", which promotes information about the area and sustainable efforts, and also calls on guests to support the sustainability mission of the ski resort by traveling via public transport, which would also be rewarded with a discount.

Source: Own Illustration

For the operationalization of the different forms of CSRC, real, anonymized advertising messages from the ski resorts Arosa, Laax, and Engelberg were used. Each post was also enriched with anonymized images of the ski resort and its equipment in use (snow cannons, snow grooming equipment, etc.), which increased the authenticity of the advertising text while also confronting the groups with potentially unsustainable business practices (Scott et al., 2022).

The data were collected in two steps. In the first step, a convenience sample of 50 students was recruited via the "Surveycircle" platform to test the operationalization of the CSRC through the texts and the comprehensibility of the questionnaire. The test raised no critical questions from participants, and the results suggested successful operationalization of all variables.

In the second step, a sample of 441 winter tourists from the German-speaking Alpine region was recruited via the research platform "Prolific". Participants were selected using the platform's filter function. All participants were paid for completing the questionnaire. The questionnaire was divided into four parts:

1. Information and Introductory Text: Participants were informed that they would be confronted with a real, but anonymized, advertisement from a Swiss ski destination.
2. Operationalization: Participants were randomly and evenly distributed into the four groups: G1: Advertisement without direct sustainability reference, G2: Advertisement with sustainability reference, G3: Advertisement with sustainability reference & guest involvement, G4: Advertisement with sustainability reference, guest involvement, and reward.
3. Scales: Subsequently, all participants were confronted with the same scales. A 7-point Likert scale was used to collect all variables. To reduce common method variance, some items were reverse coded, and the order of items within a page was randomized (Jordan & Troth, 2019). Perceived greenwashing, green trust, intention to behave sustainably, and visit intention were measured using the scales from H. Chen et al. (2018). Green identity and perceived individual effectiveness regarding sustainability were measured using the scales according to Ettinger et al. (2021). The PD scale was used according to Ryoo et al. (2017).
4. Demographics: Finally, all participants were asked about their familiarity with winter sports, age, gender, employment status, nationality, and educational level.

At the end, participants had the opportunity to contact the research team or ask questions.

5 Results

The data from the 441 participants were processed by one author and reviewed and cleaned by another. From the entire sample, 7 participants who failed the attention test were excluded. The final sample of 434 participants was analyzed using IBM SPSS Statistics. An overview of the sample is provided in Table 2.

Table 2: Descriptive Statistics of the Sample

Categories	Subcategories	% (n = 434)
Experimental Group	Control Group	24.9%
	One-sided Communication	24.4%
	Two-sided Communication	25.8%
	Two-sided Communication with R.	24.9%
Gender	Female	52.1%
	Male	46.6%
	Diverse	1.6%
Age	18-25	38.5%
	26-50	56.7%
	51+	4.8%
Employment Status	Full-time employed	43.1%
	Part-time employed	10.4%
	Self-employed	6.0%
	Studying	35.9%
	Retired	0.7%
	Unemployed	3.9%
Education	Primary School	0.7%
	Secondary School	7.1%
	Highschool / Vocational School	25.3%
	University of Applied Sciences	8.8%
	Bachelor's Degree	33.9%
	Master's Degree	22.4%
Income Level	PhD / Doctorate	1.8%
	Up to 2'499 Euro / month	68.2%
	2'500-5'499 Euro / month	28.6%
	More than 5'500 Euro / month	3.2%
Interest in Winter Sports	A little to moderate	30.9%
	Moderate to strong	39.4%
	Strong to very strong	29.7%

Source: Own Illustration

The average age of the participants is 34.58 years. No significant difference in the demographic composition between the groups could be identified.

5.1 Trust in CSRC

To test Hypotheses 1 and 2, an ANOVA with post-hoc analysis was conducted to measure the differences between the groups in terms of PD. The analysis showed that there were significant differences between the groups regarding PD ($F(3, 430) = 87.46, p < .001$) and green trust ($F(3, 430) = 34.17, p < .001$). However, no significant difference in terms of perceived greenwashing was observed ($F(3, 430) = 0.522, p = .667$).

According to the hypothesis, the post-hoc test demonstrated that PD was highest in the control group, followed by the one-sided communication, and finally the two groups with two-sided communication. However, no significant difference could be found between the two two-sided groups. Green trust in the control group is significantly lower than in all other groups. The results are found in Table 3:

Table 3: Comparison of means between the groups

Variables	Control Group		One-sided CSRC		Two-sided CSRC		Two-sided CSRC + R		Total	
	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD
Psychological										
Distance (Ryoo et al., 2017, alpha = .893)	2.80*	1.21	3.23*	1.15	4.64**	1.06	4.78**	1.01	3.87	1.40
Green Trust (H. Chen et al., 2018, alpha = .919)	3.95*	1.16	5.10*	1.07	5.19**	0.93	5.13**	1.09	4.84	1.18
Perceived Greenwashing (H. Chen et al., 2018, alpha = .843))	3.19	1.06	3.04	1.23	3.00	1.10	3.13	1.30	3.09	1.17

*The mean difference to all other groups is significant at level 0.05

**The mean difference to the control group is significant at level 0.05

Source: Own Illustration

5.2 Effect on Customer Behavior

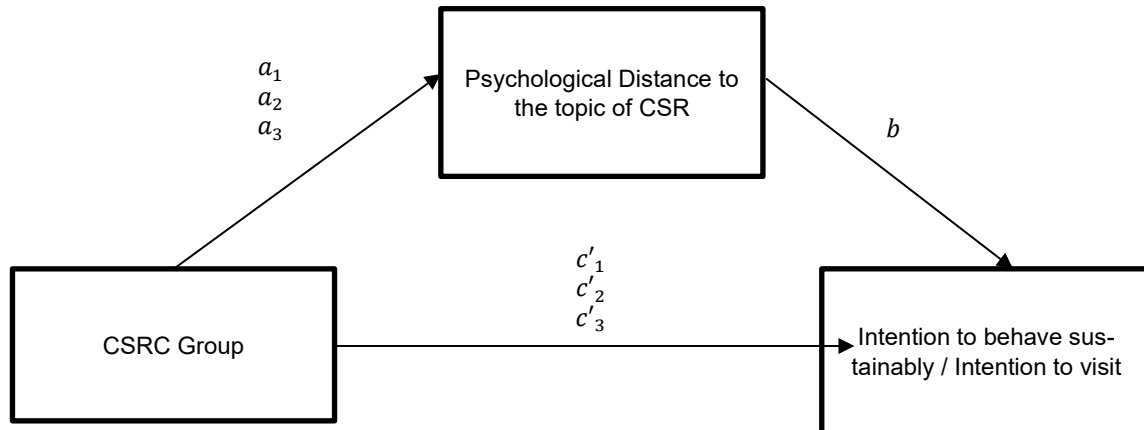
To investigate the effects of the different CSRC groups on customer behavior and to test Hypothesis 2, several analyses of covariance (ANCOVA) were conducted with the groups as the factor, the intention to behave sustainably (a) and the visit intention (b) as dependent variables, and green personality, perceived effectiveness, and affinity for winter sports as control variables. To obtain an accurate picture of the impact of CSRC on intended customer behavior, it was necessary to consider these control variables in the comparison (H. Chen et al., 2018; Ettinger et al., 2021).

The covariate green personality ($F(1, 428) = 17.536, p < .001$) and perceived effectiveness ($F(1, 428) = 91.809, p < .001$) had a significant relation to the intention to behave sustainably during a vacation. The affinity for winter sports, age, and gender showed no effect in the model and were subsequently removed. There was also a significant effect of the type of CSRC on the intention to behave sustainably ($F(3,428) = 6.730, p < .001$, partial $\eta^2 = .05$). Planned contrasts showed that the intention to behave sustainably was significantly lower in the control group compared to the other three groups ($t(434) = -3.980, p < .001$). However, there was no difference between the one-sided and two-sided CSRC types in terms of the intention to behave sustainably ($t(434) = -.701, p = .483$). Accordingly, a direct approach to sustainability was in any case more effective in motivating guests to desired behavior than not addressing guest with the topic.

The visit intention for the advertised destination had a significant relation to the covariates winter sports affinity ($F(1, 428) = 5.334, p = 0.021$) and perceived effectiveness ($F(1, 428) = 2.3944, p < .001$). However, neither green personality nor age and gender showed an effect in the model. Again, the type of CSRC showed a significant effect on the visit intention ($F(3,428) = 13.115, p < .001$, partial $\eta^2 = .06$). Planned contrasts showed that the visit intention in the control group was significantly lower than in the other three groups ($t(434) = -3.510, p < .001$). Again, there was no difference between the other three CSRC types ($t(434) = -.254, p = .800$).

5.3 Psychological Distance as Mediator

Figure 1: Mediation Modell



Source: Own Illustration

To test the last hypothesis, two mediation models were calculated. The goal was to examine how strongly the effect of CSRC was mediated by a successful reduction in PD. To measure this indirect effect, the Process Macro by Hayes et al. (2017) was preferred over a structural equation model. The independent categorical variable of the group was recoded into three dummy variables in reference to the control group. The coding can be viewed in Table 4. Figure 1 shows the conditional process model of the mediated effect of the three experimental groups. The results are presented in Table 5.

Table 4: Dummy-Coding of the Groups

Groups (n=434)	Dummy Variable		
	X1	X2	X3
Control-Group	0	0	0
One-sided CSRC	1	0	0
Two-sided CSRC	0	1	0
Two-sided CSRC with reward	0	0	1

Source: Own Illustration

Table 5: Resulting Mediation Models

	Mediation Model: Intention to behave sustain- ably as DV		Mediation Model: Intention to visit the destina- tion as DV	
	Stand. Coeff.	p	Stand. Coeff.	p
a_1	.3097	< .001	.3097	< .001
a_2	1.4081	< .001	1.4081	< .001
a_3	1.3143	< .001	1.3143	< .001
b	.2357	< .001	.3091	< .001
c'_1	.3115	< .050	.3703	< .001
c'_2	.0474	.761	.1647	.278
c'_3	.0107	.945	.0291	.846
Relative Indirect Effect X1	.0730	< .050	.0957	< .050
Relative Indirect Effect X2	.3319	< .050	.4353	< .050
Relative Indirect Effect X3	.3098	< .050	.4063	< .050
Relative Total Effect X1 (portion mediated)	.3848 (18.9%)	< .001	.4660 (20.5%)	< .001
Relative Total Effect X2 (portion mediated)	.3794 (87.4%)	< .001	.6000 (72.6%)	< .001
Relative Total Effect X3 (portion mediated)	.3205 (96.6%)	< .050	.4354 (93.3%)	< .001

Source: Own Illustration

As hypothesized, the effect of CSRC, with the control group as the reference, is mediated by a reduction in PD regarding sustainability. The portion of the model mediated by PD is higher in two-sided communication than in one-sided communication. This is expected, as PD decreases from Group 1 to Group 4. Both results thus support Hypotheses 1 and 4.

6. Conclusion

The results of this study contribute to the debate on CSRC communication by tourism companies. Specifically, it examines whether ski destinations should engage in Greenhushing due to their vulnerability to climate warming. Compared to previous studies, which examined the topic of Greenhushing either from a corporate perspective (Coles et al., 2016; Font et al., 2016) or solely in terms of customer perception (Ettinger et al., 2021), this study not only shows that CSRC is desired by guests but also demonstrates the effects of different forms of CSRC on guests' behavioral intentions.

A two-sided CSRC approach, which directly addresses customers and involves them in sustainability efforts, reduces their PD on the subject and promotes the intention to visit and sustainable behavioral intentions on site.

6.1 Theoretical Implications

This study contributes to the theoretical understanding of CSRC and the behavior of ski guests. In particular, it suggests that PD plays a significant role as a mediator between the type of CSRC and guests' behavioral intentions. By reducing PD, CSRC can have a strong influence on the sustainable behavior of guests.

These results extend our knowledge about CSRC and show that active Greenhushing tends to reduce guests' intentions to act sustainably. This is consistent with previous research findings by Zhang & Jeong (2023), which have shown in the restaurant context that Greenhushing negatively affects the sustainable behavior of guests and that jointly developed sustainability measures increase trust in these measures. This study confirms these findings in the context of ski destinations and shows that more active CSRC, which involves guests, leads to lower PD and positively affects intended sustainable behavior.

6.2 Implications for Ski-Destinations

The results show that guests prefer two-sided CSRC over Greenhushing. Therefore, ski destinations should intensify their efforts to actively communicate information about their sustainability practices to guests. Additionally, campaigns should be designed to reduce PD on sustainability among guests by involving them with concrete behavioral suggestions in the destination's sustainability strategy (e.g. arriving via train). This involvement strengthens guests' connection to the sustainability agenda of the ski destination and increases the likelihood that they will also behave sustainably. Accordingly, the following measures are suggested:

- **Transparent Communication:** Ski destinations should openly communicate their sustainability efforts. Information about specific initiatives and their progress should be honestly communicated.
- **Guest Participation:** It is important to offer guests the opportunity for active participation in the CSR-strategy of the destination. Ski destinations can, for example, propose desired behaviors (e.g., traveling by public transport, sustainable eating, conserving behavior in the hotel, etc.) as direct suggestions.
- **Partnerships and Cooperations:** Ski destinations should expand partnerships with relevant interest groups, such as transportation companies. This can help create synergies and promote environmentally friendly options for travel and stay at the ski destination.

6.3 Limitations and Implications for future Research

The study deliberately chose to recruit participants from the German-speaking Alpine region. Although the central mechanism of effect regarding PD is likely to be similar across cultures, the discussion about sustainability is nevertheless shaped by each specific cultural context. Accordingly, all results should be understood within a German-speaking cultural context. Additionally, the study measured participants' behavioral intentions, which due to social expectations might differ from actual behavior. Based on our findings, we therefore suggest repeating the study design in a field study with industry partners. This would allow further investigation of any cultural differences between guests and additional insights into how observed sustainable behavior can be promoted by forms of CSRC.

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