

# Guests' perceptions of circular economy practices in hotels: reduce, reuse and recycle is not enough

**Florent, Girardin**

*EHL Hospitality Business School  
HES-SO University of Applied Sciences and Arts*

**Luciano, Lopez**

*EHL Hospitality Business School  
HES-SO University of Applied Sciences and Arts*

## Abstract:

Circular economy (CE) practices aim to limit the negative impact of industries by reducing both the use of non-renewable resources and the wastes resulting from companies' activities. In a hospitality context, hotels, restaurants and other companies can implement a range of practices with the intention to achieve a more circular business model. In this research, we conduct an online experiment to empirically test the effect of hotels' CE practices on guests' attitude and willingness to pay a price premium (WTP). We show that the "3Rs" CE practices, (Reduce, Reuse, Recycle) do not lead to higher WTP. By contrast, the CE practices that involve a "Rethink" or "Redesign" component of the hotel processes or infrastructure do in fact increase WTP. By using a mediation analysis, we also show that attitude towards the hotel mediates the effect of CE practices on WTP. Our research has concrete implications both for hotel owners and managers who wish to implement CE practices in their hotels and for academic researchers in hospitality.

**Keywords:** Circular Economy, Guests' Perceptions, Willingness to Pay

## 1. Introduction

"If you would like to have your bath towels replaced, please place them on the floor", is the tried-and-true message that is omnipresent in hotels nowadays. The message is then marketed by hoteliers as part of their sustainability efforts to reduce their consumption of resources and their CO<sub>2</sub> emissions. While some guests will undoubtedly welcome this initiative, others may regard this practice as diminishing the quality of the service they are being provided or even a deceitful attempt to cut costs at the expense of guests' comfort. Consequently, contingent on the perception of the majority of clients, the impact of the practice on hotel brand perception, willingness to stay, or willingness to pay can be positive or, unexpectedly, negative.

This risk of sending a counterproductive signal to clients can happen for any circular economy (CE) practice that is mainly put in place to reduce the use of resources like water or energy without necessarily changing the production processes towards a more sustainable world (Reike et al., 2018). Put differently, when a company implements a CE practice, it may or may not be rethinking and overhauling the relevant process. To take an example, a room could be cleaned only every other day to reduce the use of resources. Alternatively, the cleaning staff could be trained to optimize the use of resources and products. While the former practice does not imply much commitment from the hotel, as it is primarily a cost-cutting measure, the latter implies a substantial commitment from the hotel as training and overseeing the cleaning staff may be costly and will affect the overall production process.

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In both cases, the objective is to reduce the use of resources. Nevertheless, guests' perception differs considerably because in one instance the hotel has rethought or redesigned its processes to reduce the use of resources without impacting guests' well-being, but not in the other one (Blomsma et al., 2017).

Surprisingly, despite its increasing importance, CE has only received scant attention in the hospitality and tourism literature (Naydenov, 2018; Rodríguez-Antón & Alonso-Almeida, 2019). Indeed, while the concept of sustainability is increasingly investigated in tourism research, the implications of CE in tourism have not been extensively studied. Interested readers about the differences between CE and sustainability can refer to Geissdoerfer et al. (2017) who have done a thorough analysis of the two concepts. Their research's central conclusion is that sustainability and CE have different goals: sustainability is "open-ended [with a] multitude of goals depending on the considered agent and her interests" (Geissdoerfer et al., 2017, p.765), while CE is a "closed-loop, ideally eliminating all resource input into and leakage out of the system" (Geissdoerfer et al., 2017, p. 765). In other words, to be considered as CE, a practice must aim towards narrowing, slowing, and closing the loop of resource usage and waste (Geissdoerfer et al., 2017; Pieroni et al., 2019). For instance, the use of organic food without any objective to reduce waste may be classified as a sustainable practice. By contrast, using organic food combined with an effort to reduce food waste, while using the remaining waste as an input to produce another resource (e.g. biogas), can be considered a CE practice. However, the distinction is not always straightforward, as sustainability and CE are umbrella concepts (Sorin & Sivarajah, 2021).

In light of the above, there is a clear lack of research about consumers' reactions to specific CE practices in a hospitality context. Even though some recent research suggests that consumers "are willing to consider green and circular economy practices when choosing their hotels" (Bica et al., 2020, p. 290), to the best of our knowledge, no empirical research has investigated the causal relation between the implementation of CE practices in a hotel or restaurant and guests' perceptions. Therefore, the current research aims to fill this gap by evaluating the impact of hotels' specific CE practices on guests' general attitude towards those hotels as well as their willingness to pay a price premium.

## 2. Literature Review

The literature on specific CE actions' impact on the hospitality sector is scarce compared to the diversity and volume of existing research on sustainable tourism (Sorin & Sivarajah, 2021). While the concept of sustainability is increasingly applied in tourism research, the implications of CE in tourism have not been extensively studied. However, Manniche et al. (2021) argue that the tourism sector holds great potential for developing a more circular economy. Their report identifies potential CE drivers and barriers for hospitality establishments in the South Baltic area. On the one hand, the CE concept can serve as a reliable tool to engage tourists in consuming resources more mindfully and thus play an essential role in transformational tourism (Reisinger, 2013). Touristic visits could act as learning platforms for guests to understand the impacts of their current behavior and how they could change (Breiby et al., 2020; Reisinger, 2013). On the other hand, the extent to which tourists demand circular hotel and tourism products and services is unclear. Against this backdrop, our research is a first attempt to better understand tourists' reactions regarding hotels' CE practices.

Despite the lack of literature regarding CE in the tourism sector, it appears that the European Union (EU) has recently realized the potential of CE in tourism (Naydenov, 2018). Indeed, the CenTOUR initiative was launched in 2020 to "foster innovative circular solutions in the tourism sector through transnational cooperation and knowledge transfer, by focusing on SMEs and their local value chains"

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(CenTOUR, 2020, p. 3) and to help reach the targets of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. Institutions such as the EU, the World Economic Forum (WEF), in collaboration with the Japanese and Dutch governments (Lacina & Di Caro, 2021), and the Government of China (2008), are beginning to launch initiatives for circular tourism and circular hospitality practices. Seeing such institutions launching CE initiatives provides opportunities for future research on CE in the hospitality industry; it has also raised questions about whether the money invested in CE initiatives is used efficiently.

Given the increasing interest in CE in the context of tourism and hospitality industries, there is a need for a better understanding of what CE means in hospitality and how hospitality businesses can implement CE practices.

### 2.1. Existing circular economy practices in the hospitality industry

Scholars have started to assess existing CE practices of hotels and restaurants. For example, Rodríguez-Antón & Alonso-Almeida (2019) have determined that, so far, the transition to a circular business model in the hospitality industry has focused mainly on energy, water and recycling measures to promote sustainability. Some circular initiatives have also been deployed in this industry in building and construction, refurbishing and redecorating, and operations. Hotels rely mainly on eco-innovations as the determinant of their transition towards a circular business model. However, Florido et al. (2019) argue that these eco-innovations are not sufficient. The CE goes beyond eco-innovations to become a central part of the host-guest relationship by including and involving guests from an environmental perspective and making them participants in their actions to contribute to sustainability. The authors reveal that the imperative factor to effectively transition towards a more circular activity in the hotel sector is an establishment’s awareness and responsiveness to environmental issues. Other researchers have identified concrete examples of CE actions that hotels have implemented. For example, Jones & Wynn (2019) have found that Martin’s Hotels, a Belgian hotel chain, has included a CE model in its *purchasing*, waste, and renovation projects. Accordingly, it prioritizes local, natural, recycled, recyclable, and seasonal products to maximize waste recycling. Menegaki (2018) has identified examples of CE practices in a sample of 25 4- and 5-star hotels in Greece and found that the most hotels’ CE practices concern water consumption and waste recycling. Menegaki (2018) found that the strength of Greek hotels is in designing waste out of the system, as many of the examined hotels donate food leftovers, second-hand linens and used equipment. In Hungary, Naydenov (2018) found an example of a leisure farm hotel with a ‘waste=money’ principle, where visitors can pay part of their entrance fee with reusable waste (plastic, paper, aluminum), which the hotel can then recycle and reuse. In their “handbook for transitioning toward a circular economy within the tourism and hospitality sectors in the South Baltic Region”, Manniche et al. (2021) provide examples of best CE practices in the tourism and hospitality sectors. One example of a frontrunner is the Crowne Plaza Copenhagen Towers, built in 2009. The hotel has a water-based climate control system, which allows for cooler temperatures during the summer and enables the storing and reusing of heated energy to heat the hotel during winter (Manniche et al., 2021). Additionally, the hotel has linked smart booking technologies to smart home features to control and monitor water and energy use in guest rooms.

### 2.2. Type of circular economy practices

In a hospitality context, the “classic 3Rs” CE strategies – Reuse, Reduce, Recycle – are mainly related to waste management policies, which is just one of CE’s goals (Ghisellini et al., 2016). In fact, the 3Rs do not necessarily contribute to moving in the direction of a more circular economy. Indeed, multiple authors (Blomsma & Brennan, 2017; MacArthur, 2013; Reike et al., 2018) have claimed that companies should go beyond the 3Rs and implement more impactful strategies by redesigning and



rethinking processes to enable higher value retention of resources over multiple product lifecycles. Similarly, Costa et al. (2020) explain that the rethink and redesign dimensions of CE are crucial for the shift from a linear economy model to a viable CE model. Hence, we argue that only hotel CE practices that include a rethink and/or redesign component are likely to impact guests' WTP because they may perceive these practices as a hotel's commitment to the planet rather than a mere cost-reduction strategy, or worse, an example of distasteful 'greenwashing'. Furthermore, the classic "3Rs" practices may be perceived as cost-reduction strategies instead of a commitment towards a better planet. Consequently, this difference in customers' perception may have an impact on their willingness to pay for a hotel room. Costa et al. (2020) explain that the rethink and redesign dimensions of CE are crucial for the shift from a linear economic model to a viable CE model. Hence, we argue that only hotel CE practices that include a rethink and/or redesign component are likely to impact guests' WTP because they may perceive these practices as a hotel's commitment to the planet rather than a mere cost-cutting strategy.

*H1: The implementation of rethink and redesign (vs. 3Rs) CE practices in a hotel leads to a higher (lower) guests' willingness to pay a price premium.*

### 2.3. The mediating role of guests' attitude towards hotels

According to the well-established theory of planned behavior (Ajzen, 1991), a behavioral intention, such as a willingness to pay for a hotel room, is impacted by the attitude towards the behavior in question, subjective norms and perceived control. The theory of planned behavior is the most widely used theory to explain a behavioral intention towards a sustainable purchase behavior in touristic settings (Garay et al., 2018). Backed by this theory, researchers have found that touristic green consumption behaviors are largely influenced by the overall attitude towards the product or service, which is formed by affective and cognitive attitude (Han, 2021). For example, Lee et al. (2010) have shown that the overall image of a green hotel increases guests' willingness to pay a premium. We assume that when a hotel implements a CE practice, the same psychological process takes place. Clients form an overall attitude towards the hotel based on affective and cognitive images. This overall attitude, in turn, influences their behavioral intentions such as WTP. Therefore, we formulate the following hypothesis:

*H2: Attitude towards the hotel mediates the relationship between rethink and redesign (vs. 3Rs) CE practices on willingness to pay a price premium.*

Our research hypotheses are summarized in the succeeding theoretical model.

## 3. Methodology

First, we selected 6 CE practices from the literature on circular economy in tourism. We classified them according to whether they include a "rethink or redesign" component or if they only include the classic "3Rs". Then, we transformed these 6 different CE practices in marketing slogans to be displayed on a hotel website with a detailed explanation for each of them (see Table 1). To test our hypotheses, we created an experiment with 7 conditions (6 CE practices + control). We recruited 706 UK citizens (67.4 % women; MAge = 39.3) on the online platform Prolific.com and we randomly assigned them to one of the 7 conditions. To ensure the reliability of responses, only participants with an approval rate above 95% and more than 50 submissions could participate in our study. They were first shown a fictitious hotel homepage and then had to answer questions about their general attitude towards the

hotel (bipolar 4-item scale: Dislike-Like, Bad-Good, Unfavorable-Favorable, Negative-Positive;  $\alpha = .96$ ) and their willingness to pay a price premium (single item). They were then asked to fill out an attention test and had to answer several demographic questions.

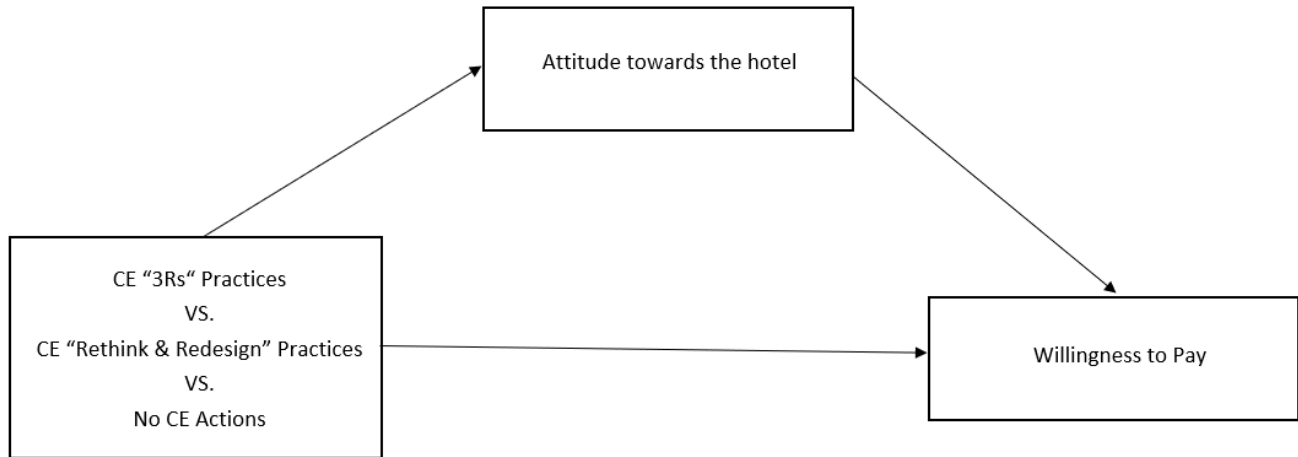
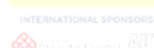


Figure 1. Theoretical model

Table 1. Slogans and explanation for hotel homepage

ID	Type of practice	CE practice	Slogan	Explanation
1	“Rethink or Redesign”	Guest can choose remotely the room temperature (via smartphone), heat and air conditioning are generated by own produced renewable energy.	“Consume renewable energy and only when you need it”	“When staying at our hotel, you consume renewable energy, and you can decide how much energy you consume.”
2	“3Rs”	Switch on air conditioning or heating system only when clients enter the room	“Energy consumption only starts when you enter your room”	“When staying at our hotel, you consume heating/cooling energy only when you are present in the room.”
3	“Rethink or Redesign”	Cook mainly with own produced food	“We grow the food you eat”	In our restaurant, most of our fruits, vegetables and herbs are own produced thanks to our roof-top gardens.
4	“3Rs”	Reduce food waste (e.g. produce on demand, share excess food)	“We reduce food waste to its minimum”	In our restaurant, we do our best to reduce food waste by producing on demand and sharing excess food.
5	“Rethink or Redesign”	Cleaning staff follow a training to reduce the use of energy and resources to clean a room	“Our staff are trained to reduce resources waste”	We provide training to our cleaning staff to reduce the use of energy and resources without compromising the quality of their work.
6	“3Rs”	Reduce frequency of room cleaning	“We carefully reduce resources waste”	We carefully reduce the frequency of room cleaning to reduce the use of energy and

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Control	n.a.	“Relax and enjoy the city while staying with us”	resources without compromising cleanliness. “When staying at our hotel, enjoy a relaxing atmosphere while discovering the city”
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#### 4. Results

A between-subjects analysis of variance (ANOVA) with CE practice (6 CE practices + control) as the fixed factor and WTP as the dependent variable revealed a main effect of CE practices on WTP ( $F(699, 6) = 3.261, p = .004$ ). Simple contrasts revealed that only CE practice 4 ( $M = 4.20, SD = .134$ ) led to a higher WTP than the control condition ( $M = 3.64, SD = .134, p = .003, 95\% CI [.191, .935]$ ). There was no difference in WTP between the other CE practices and the control condition. These results provide a first indication about the different impact of CE practices, as none of the classic “3Rs” increased guests’ WTP; whereas 1 out of 3 CE practices with a rethink or redesign dimension led to a higher WTP. To further test our hypothesis H1, we grouped CE practices by type and performed an ANOVA with the type of CE practices (“3Rs” vs. “Rethink or Redesign” vs. control) as fixed factors and WTP as the dependent variable. Results revealed a marginally significant main effect of CE practice type on WTP ( $F(703, 2) = 2.384, p = .093$ ). In line with H2, simple contrasts revealed that “Rethink or Redesign” types of CE practices ( $M = 3.89, SD = .078$ ) led to a higher WTP than the control condition ( $M = 3.64, SD = .135, p = .050, 95\% CI [-.438, .000]$ ), whereas WTP did not differ between the “3Rs” ( $M = 3.670, SD = .079$ ) and the control condition ( $p = .112$ ). This result confirms our hypothesis whereby only CE practices that include a “rethink” or “redesign” element can in fact lead to a higher WTP. It shows that promoting 3Rs has no beneficial effects on guests’ reactions.

To test the mediation effect of attitude towards the hotel (H2), we performed a mediated regression analysis using the PROCESS macro (Hayes, 2017; model 4; 5,000 bootstrap samples). The type of CE practice (“3Rs” vs. “Rethink or Redesign”) was included as the independent variable, attitude towards the hotel as the mediator, and WTP as the dependent variable. We predicted that CE practices including a “rethink” or “redesign” component will lead to a higher WTP and that attitude towards the hotel will mediate the effect. The results support our hypothesis: the mediation analysis revealed a positive effect of CE practice type on attitude ( $b = .231, SE = .092, 95\% CI = .052; .411$ ), a positive effect of attitude on WTP ( $b = .625, 95\% CI = .539; .710$ ), no direct effect of CE practice type on WTP ( $b = .074, 95\% CI = -.118; .267$ ), and a significant indirect effect of CE practice type on WTP ( $b = .1445, 95\% CI = .032; .258$ ) whereby a rethink or redesign practice (vs. 3Rs) positively impacts attitude towards the hotel, resulting in higher willingness to pay. Table 2 provides a summary of the mediation results.

Table 2. Summary of the mediation results

	Mediator			Outcome		
	M: Attitude			Y: Willingness to Pay		
	Coeff.	SE	p	Coeff.	SE	p
Constant	5.58	0.07	0.00	0.18	0.25	0.46
X: “3Rs” (vs “rethink or redesign”) CE practice	0.23	0.09	0.01	0.07	0.10	0.45
M: Attitude				0.62	0.04	0.00
	$R = 0.10$			$R = 0.51$		

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	<i>Indirect effect</i>	<i>95% bootstrap CI</i>
X→M →Y	0.14	.04 to .26

## 5. Discussion and Conclusion

### 5.1. Discussion and implications

Our research sheds light on the different reactions hotel guests demonstrate when made aware of CE practices in a hospitality context. First, we show that not all CE practices lead to a higher willingness to pay a price premium. Therefore, hotel managers need to select carefully which CE practices they would advertise if their goal is to increase their average daily rate. In this regard, our results suggest that rethink and redesign types of CE practices are more effective than reuse, reduce or recycle CE practices to justify a price increase. Because the guests' perception of a hotel's CE practices vary, hotel managers are strongly advised to conduct market analyses before implementing CE practices and investing in communication campaigns to promote such practices.

Our contribution to the existing literature is twofold. First, by demonstrating that specific CE practices can increase guests' WTP, we add knowledge to research exploring how and through which practices hotels can improve their average daily rate and performance (Boronat-Navarro & Pérez-Aranda, 2020; Kang et al., 2010; Kang et al., 2012; Nicolau et al., 2020). Second, we contribute to the literature on CE in hospitality by providing evidence on the type of CE practices that should be promoted (Batle et al., 2018; Julião et al., 2020; Rodríguez-Antón & Alonso-Almeida, 2019). Indeed, we highlight that the impact of rethink and redesign CE practices on WTP is stronger than 3Rs practices. Additionally, we demonstrate that guests' overall attitude mediates the relationship between the type of CE practices implemented by a hotel and their WTP. This observation is in line with the well-established theory of planned behavior (Ajzen, 1991) and the existing literature, which asserts that touristic sustainable consumption is influenced by guests' attitudes (e.g., Xu & Gursoy, 2015). Mediators and moderators influencing circular or sustainable behavior is an additional strand of the literature to which we contribute (e.g., Koch et al., 2020).

### 5.2. Conclusion

Our research is a first attempt to study the causality between CE claims and consumers' reactions in a hospitality context. While CE is unquestionably a very important and current topic, its conceptualization should still be better tailored to the hospitality and tourism industry. Although our study does not aim to define CE, we have made sure to consider only practices that are circular. We believe further research is needed to better categorize the type of CE practices as they impact hotel guests differently. Our results are sometimes contrasted and call for more research to further identify which CE practices are more effective in improving guests' intentions and behavior. Additional research is needed to generalize our results and assess the effects of other CE practices. To understand the reasons behind the differences in terms of guests' reactions, the effect of potential mediators such as 'warm-glow feeling' could, for example, be tested. Based on our results, we also believe that more attention should be devoted to investigating how service companies should communicate about their CE efforts. Against the backdrop of the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic, clients' perceptions and expectations may evolve rapidly.

### 5.3. Limitations

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The main limitation of our research is the fact that it is solely based on an online experiment with all the caveats that such experiments imply. Of course, to mitigate potential biases, the experiment has been designed to be as realistic as possible and the type of respondents has been carefully selected. As a subsequent step, we highly encourage future research to test our hypotheses with field experiments, involving real hotels, to extend our findings' reliability. Furthermore, in our experiment, we have expressly selected two hotel segments (i.e., three- and five-star hotels). Further research could focus on other hospitality sectors like camping, private lodging or other hotel types to test the reliability of our model and potentially identify differences in consumers' behavior across the different types of services and experiences.

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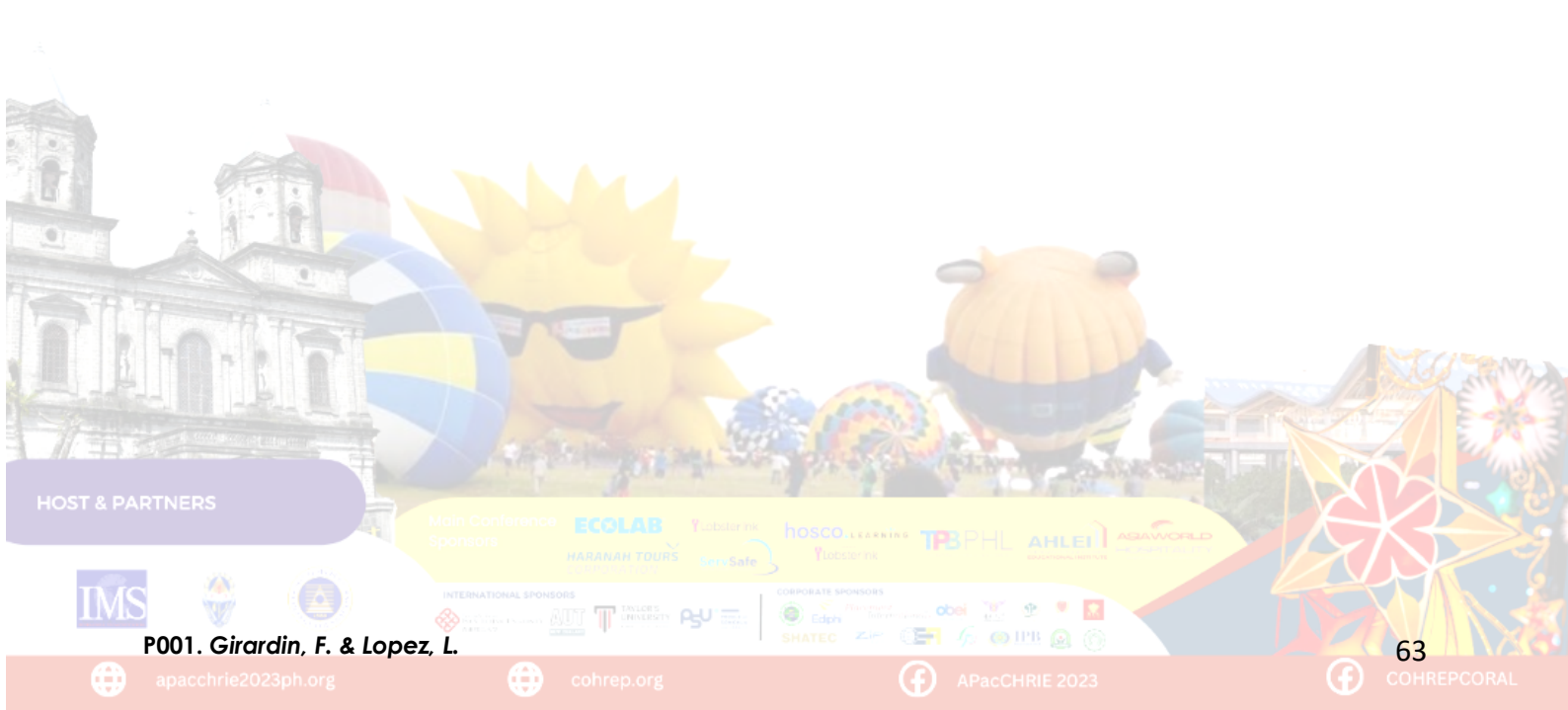
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