

## RESEARCH ARTICLE

# Organizational Greenwashing and Work Engagement: Evidence From the Hospitality Industry

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## ABSTRACT

Current research on organizational greenwashing primarily focuses on its impact on customers, while its effects on employees—crucial internal stakeholders—remain underexplored. Drawing on Affective Event Theory, we investigate the relationship between organizational greenwashing and the work engagement of hospitality employees. Utilizing a 2-week time-lagged survey (Study 1,  $N = 324$ ) and an online experiment (Study 2,  $N = 226$ ), we provide corroborating evidence that greenwashing behaviors by hospitality firms lead to employees' contempt for the organization, which subsequently decreases their work engagement. Additionally, family motivation negatively moderates the relationship between contempt for the organization and work engagement, indicating that the negative impact of contempt on work engagement is attenuated when employees have a high level of family motivation. This research enhances the theoretical understanding of how organizational greenwashing affects employees' job-related behaviors and offers practical implications for hospitality firms to prevent and manage greenwashing practices.

## 1 | Introduction

The hospitality sector plays a significant role in the global economy, contributing approximately 10.4% to total global GDP (Majeed and Kim 2023). However, its environmental impact is also noteworthy. Reports indicate that the annual carbon dioxide consumption per guest per night in hotels is 55.7 metric tons (Majeed and Kim 2023). Additionally, energy consumption, transportation emissions, and food waste within the hospitality industry further contribute to environmental degradation (Zhao et al. 2022).

With increasing public awareness of environmental protection, organizations face growing pressure to fulfill their responsibilities to safeguard the environment (Song et al. 2020; Wang et al. 2024; Yang et al. 2019). In response, hospitality

organizations are adopting measures to establish a green corporate image and attract eco-conscious customers. These measures include pursuing certifications from environmental organizations (Majeed and Kim 2023) and reducing waste and pollution (Zhao et al. 2022). For instance, luxury hotels like Shangri-La and InterContinental Grand Stanford Hong Kong have obtained ISO 14001 certification (Chan 2009). Initiatives such as conserving water and energy, minimizing solid waste, and recycling durable materials are also being implemented. However, these green practices often result in higher operational and labor costs, leading some hospitality organizations to view them as burdens (Zhao et al. 2022).

To cut costs while preserving a green image, some hospitality organizations engage in greenwashing, indicating a gap between their environmental advocacy and actual practices (Gatti

et al. 2019). The term “greenwashing” coined by American environmentalist Jay Westerveld in 1986, refers to deceptive environmental behaviors aimed at personal gain. Thirty-seven years later, greenwashing has become increasingly prevalent and sophisticated (Gatti et al. 2019). For instance, towel reuse programs and energy-saving reminder signs implemented by hotels are often viewed as “symbolic” marketing tools, with minimal genuine efforts to reduce environmental pollution.

With the rise of greenwashing, researchers have increasingly focused on this issue (Bernard and Nicolau 2022; Deng et al. 2024; Hameed et al. 2021; Vangeli et al. 2023). Most studies have concentrated on the negative effects of greenwashing on consumers, including their attitudes, behaviors, and intentions (Bernard and Nicolau 2022; Bladt et al. 2024; Chen and Chang 2013; Thi et al. 2019; Vangeli et al. 2023). However, the impact of greenwashing on employees—important internal stakeholders—remains under-explored (W. Li et al. 2022; Robertson et al. 2023; Xiang et al. 2024). To our knowledge, only a handful of studies have examined this area, finding that organizational greenwashing reduces employees’ eco-friendly behaviors and ethical voice (Tahir et al. 2020; Xiang et al. 2024), negatively affects their job effectiveness and extra-role contributions (W. Li et al. 2022) and positively affects their turnover intention (Robertson et al. 2023). Current research is not only limited but primarily focuses on the relationship between perceived organizational greenwashing and employees’ work-related behaviors, with little attention given to its effects on employee attitudes. Yet, employees’ attitudes are crucial predictors of their behavior and performance (Glavas and Kelley 2014; Lee et al. 2023; Lyu and Zhu 2019). To address this gap, this study aims to investigate the link between employees’ perceptions of organizational greenwashing practices and their work engagement, defined as an individual’s commitment, satisfaction, and enthusiasm for their job (Harter et al. 2002).

Drawing on Affective Event Theory (hereafter, AET) (Weiss and Cropanzano 1996), we investigate the mediating mechanism through which organizational greenwashing negatively impacts employees’ work engagement. AET suggests that an attribute of the social context in the organization leads to an affective reaction which then, in turn, leads to changes in employees’ job attitudes and behaviors (Judge et al. 2006; Weiss and Cropanzano 1996). Applying AET, we propose that organizational greenwashing may lead to employees’ contempt for the organization, which, in turn, decreases their work engagement. Contempt is an emotion of alienation that signals a perceived gap between oneself and targets viewed as less competent or unethical (Hajj and Vongas 2022). According to AET, when employees perceive organizational greenwashing as false and unethical, it is likely to trigger feelings of

contempt. This emotion can subsequently undermine their work engagement. Therefore, the secondary aim of this study is to explore the mediating role of organizational contempt.

AET also suggests that individual characteristics can influence how people interpret workplace events and their emotional responses, which in turn affects the extent to which their attitudes and behaviors can change (Weiss and Cropanzano 1996). In this study, we focus on the moderating effect of family motivation on the relationship between contempt for the organization and work engagement. Family motivation refers to the degree to which individuals are driven to ensure or improve their family’s living standards through their work (Menges et al. 2017). Those with higher family motivation tend to view their work as a means to support family income and enhance living conditions, often exhibiting stronger work engagement as a result. Based on AET, we propose that family motivation moderates both the direct relationship between hospitality employees’ contempt for the organization and their work engagement, as well as the indirect relationship between perceived organizational greenwashing and work engagement through contempt. Specifically, when employees possess high levels of family motivation, the negative impact of contempt for the organization on work engagement is diminished, thereby alleviating the indirect effect of organizational greenwashing on their work engagement.

In summary, this research aims to make four key contributions. First, it expands the literature by examining the impact of organizational greenwashing on employees’ attitudes, specifically work engagement. This broadens the existing research, which primarily focuses on the effects of greenwashing on customer perceptions and employees’ job-related behaviors. Second, we utilize AET to explore the mediating role of contempt for the organization. This uncovers a novel pathway through which the adverse effects of organizational greenwashing influence employees’ engagement in their work, providing a new theoretical perspective on how greenwashing affects employees. Third, the moderating effect of family motivation enhances our understanding of the boundary conditions under which organizational greenwashing and contempt for the organization impact employees. This not only contributes to the literature on organizational greenwashing but also adds to that of contempt for the organization. Finally, while organizational greenwashing is prevalent in the hospitality sector, research focusing on employees remains limited (Zhao et al. 2022). The empirical evidence from our study advances the understanding of greenwashing in the hospitality industry and highlights its potential harm to employees, serving as a reminder for hospitality managers. The theoretical framework of this research is illustrated in Figure 1.

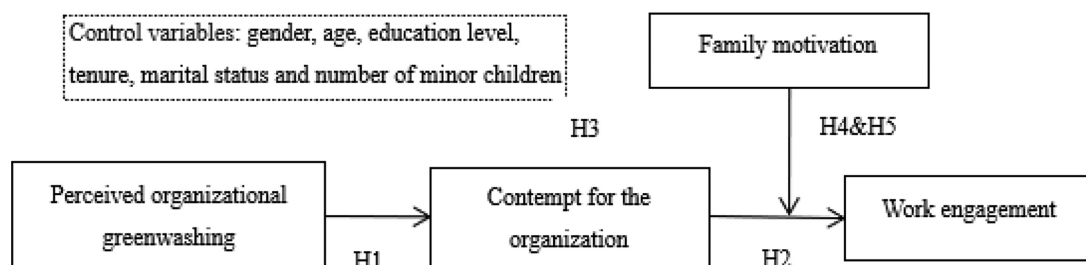


FIGURE 1 | Theoretical framework.

## 2 | Theory and Hypotheses

### 2.1 | Organizational Greenwashing

Organizational greenwashing, a widespread phenomenon, is usually defined from the perspective of information communication (D. Li et al. 2015). Some researchers conceptualize organizational greenwashing as an organizational behavior where disinformation is released to fabricate an illusion of ecological accountability (Furlow 2010; Mitchell and Ramey 2011). Organizational greenwashing can also be defined as the practice of selectively highlighting a company's environmentally friendly accomplishments while concealing its actions that are not environmentally responsible (Lyon and Maxwell 2011) or taking superficial measures without genuinely striving to enhance its ecological footprint (Delmas and Burbano 2011; Walker and Wan 2012).

In conclusion, the practice of organizational greenwashing highlights the disparity between an organization's environmental claims and its genuine practices (Wu and Liu 2022). It implies that the organization uses a green image to gain positive responses from customers and other stakeholders rather than engage in real endeavors to protect the environment (Lucia et al. 2021; Robertson et al. 2023). Typical organizational greenwashing behaviors include selective information disclosure, false claims and policies, dubious certification and labeling, false cooperation with NGOs, ineffective public welfare projects, and misleading images (Lyon and Montgomery 2015).

Despite the prevalence and harmful impact of organizational greenwashing (Bernard and Nicolau 2022; Thi et al. 2019; Vangeli et al. 2023), there is still a scarcity of empirical studies on its adverse impacts, necessitating additional investigation (De Jong et al. 2018; Lyon and Montgomery 2015). Most of the existing literature on organizational greenwashing has concentrated primarily on the impact of such behavior on consumer perceptions (Majeed and Kim 2023; Szabo and Webster 2020), leaving its impact on internal stakeholders, i.e., employees, understudied (Al-Ghazali and Sohail 2021; W. Li et al. 2022; Robertson et al. 2023; Tahir et al. 2020). For instance, researchers have found that organizational greenwashing triggers consumer suspicion and confusion (Thi et al. 2019) and reduces the perceived quality of green products (Chen et al. 2014), and it affects consumers' willingness to purchase negatively (Thi et al. 2019). However, only a few studies have investigated the harmful impact of organizational greenwashing on employees' work-related behaviors, including green behavior (Tahir et al. 2020), task performance, and organizational citizenship behavior (W. Li et al. 2022). In this study, we advance the literature by linking organizational greenwashing with hospitality employees' work engagement, which is an important attitudinal outcome (Harter et al. 2002).

### 2.2 | AET

AET is a theoretical framework that work environment and workplace events evoke employees' affective reactions, which further shape their attitudes and behaviors. AET has been widely used to explain employees' emotional responses to workplace events, especially negative events, and subsequent

outcomes in organizations (Ilies et al. 2006). For example, applying AET, researchers demonstrated that customer aggression behaviors could trigger employees' negative affective reactions (e.g., job stress), which further affected their job performance (Cano et al. 2009; Rupp and Spencer 2006). Some researchers showed that different workplace stressors (e.g., role ambiguity, role conflict, and hassles) for employees could lead to emotions such as anger and anxiety, which could increase counterproductive behavior (Rodell and Judge 2009).

In this study, we adopt AET to construct the theoretical framework of "event-emotion-attitude" to explore the effects of organizational greenwashing on hospitality employees, as well as its mechanisms and boundary conditions. According to AET, events refer to "a change in circumstances, a change in what one is currently experiencing" (Weiss and Cropanzano 1996). Here, organizational greenwashing, an intentional behavior that is harmful to the environment and society, can be experienced by employees and considered as negative work event. When employees perceive organizational greenwashing behavior, their negative emotions towards the organization might be triggered, which further influences their work attitude. Specifically, we intend to investigate how the contempt for the organization mediates the connection between perceived organizational greenwashing and work engagement. Moreover, we also examine the moderating role played by family motivation in the direct relationship between contempt for the organization and work engagement and the indirect one between organizational greenwashing and work engagement via contempt for the organization.

### 2.3 | The Mediating Role of Hospitality Employees' Contempt for the Organization

#### 2.3.1 | The Effect of Perceived Organizational Greenwashing on Hospitality Employees' Contempt for the Organization

AET states that employees' emotional arousal can be attributed to certain events in the workplace (Iqbal et al. 2023; Weiss and Cropanzano 1996). Especially, negative workplace events usually trigger employees' adverse emotional states through cognitive appraisals (Joyce et al. 2013). Based on AET, this study proposes that employees' perception of organizational greenwashing behavior leads to employees' negative appraisals of the organization, including moral disapproval and lack of worthiness; thus, their contempt for the organization could be generated.

Contempt is a negative emotion directed at a specific target, such as another person and an organization. It encompasses moral disapproval, feelings of disdain, and perceptions of a target's lack of worthiness (Fischer et al. 2007; Matsumoto and Ekman 2004; Miller 1997). Moral disapproval indicates that contempt arises as a reaction to breaches of societal norms and ethical standards (Rozin et al. 1999). Feelings of disdain indicate that contempt encompasses the perception that another person is of lower status, potentially not meriting one's effort or consideration due to their flawed character traits (Fischer et al. 2007). The perceived lack of worthiness of the scorned

target reflects that one finds that there is a vertical gap between the self and the target, and that the self is superior to the less competent or immoral target (Fischer et al. 2007; Morris and Keltner 2000). In the current research, we propose that when employees perceive organizational greenwashing behavior, it might trigger their contempt for the organization from three aspects.

First, organizational greenwashing, which is often manifested in the form of selective disclosure of information by the organization to demonstrate its environmental efforts, as well as exaggeration about its environmental performance, is unethical (Marquis and Toffel 2012). As internal stakeholders, hospitality employees could easily identify the inconsistencies between the “stated actions” and real actions (Schons and Steinmeier 2016), i.e., organizational greenwashing. Moreover, organizational greenwashing behaviors actually harm the interests and well-being of consumers and society (Schons and Steinmeier 2016). As AET specifies, hospitality employees might be morally disapproving of organizational greenwashing behaviors and consequently generate contempt for the organization.

Secondly, perceived organizational greenwashing might make hospitality employees generate feelings of disdain towards the organization (Nyilasy et al. 2014). Perceived greenwashing disrupts employees’ positive organizational identification by exposing contradictions between the organization’s public image and its true practices (Santos et al. 2022). AET posits that identity threats trigger emotional responses through cognitive appraisals of social comparison (Weiss and Cropanzano 1996). When employees recognize their organization’s hypocrisy, they experience diminished self-other similarity—a key driver of contempt (Fischer et al. 2007). This cognitive dissonance erodes trust and respect, manifesting as feelings of disdain towards the organization (Nyilasy et al. 2014).

Finally, organizational greenwashing damages employees’ perception of the organization’s value. As a form of deceptive environmental protection behavior, organizational greenwashing offers no genuine benefits to the environment or society, leading hospitality employees to potentially view their organizations as lacking in value or integrity. Furthermore, greenwashing, which signifies a superficial commitment to environmental protection, can obscure the real environmental issues that require attention, thereby impeding genuine progress in environmental conservation efforts. In this way, hospitality employees might perceive their organizations as even more worthless, which leads to the employees’ contempt for the organization.

In summary, organizational greenwashing behaviors cause hospitality employees to generate contempt for the organization from three aspects. Therefore, this study predicts that perceived organizational greenwashing behavior will increase employees’ contempt for the organization. Hence, we propose the following hypothesis:

**Hypothesis 1.** *Perceived organizational greenwashing behavior is positively associated with hospitality employees’ contempt for the organization.*

### 2.3.2 | The Effect of Hospitality Employees’ Contempt for the Organization on Their Work Engagement

Work engagement refers to a mindset associated with work, defined by the complete immersion of an individual’s physical, cognitive, and emotional resources into their job tasks (Rich et al. 2010). Work engagement encompasses three key components: vigor, absorption, and dedication. Vigor represents an individual’s willingness to put forth efforts at work while maintaining a positive emotional state and persistence in the face of obstacles (Schaufeli et al. 2002). Absorption denotes a condition of complete focus, intense engagement, and profound immersion in one’s work tasks (Salanova et al. 2005). Dedication is characterized by having a strong identification with one’s work, being enthusiastic and inspired by one’s work, and pursuing the meaning of one’s work (Schaufeli et al. 2002).

According to the AET, an individual’s emotions generated from workplace events are closely related to his or her work attitudes (Weiss and Cropanzano 1996). Positive emotions release signals for sustained action along a certain goal (Ames and Johar 2009). Therefore, when employees generate positive emotions from workplace events, they are inclined to establish more ambitious objectives for their tasks and anticipate favorable outcomes by increasing their level of engagement (Ilies and Judge 2005; Liu et al. 2017). In contrast, negative emotions are a kind of subjective distress in individuals, which causes them to become more reserved and cautious (Fredrickson and Branigan 2005).

In the current study, we propose that, as a negative affective response to organizational greenwashing, contempt for the organization undermines hospitality employees’ work engagement. First, employees’ contempt for the organization is full of dissatisfaction and disgust with the organization; thus, their positive emotional state at work is undermined. This strong negative emotion will inhibit the generation of an energetic state at work. As a result, contempt for the organization reduces an employee’s vigor. Second, research has shown that when individuals hold a type of negative emotion, i.e., contempt for the organization, their attention is narrowed and distracted, which interrupts the concentration of individual cognitive resources (Sun et al. 2021). In this way, the individual’s immersion in the work, i.e., absorption, might be hindered. In conclusion, the contempt employees feel towards their organization erodes their affiliation and commitment to their job, consequently reducing the likelihood that they will derive a sense of significance, fervor, inspiration, pride, and challenge from being deeply involved in their work, which translates to decreased work engagement. As a result, such employees might decline to be dedicated to their work. In summary, when having high levels of contempt for the organization, hospitality employees respond to such negative emotions by decreasing their energy, focus, and dedication at work. Therefore, this study predicts that hospitality employees’ contempt for the organization exerts a negative impact on their work engagement. Thus, we propose the following:

**Hypothesis 2.** *Hospitality employees’ contempt for the organization decreases their work engagement.*

Combining Hypothesis 1 and the above discussion, we propose that hospitality employees’ perception of organizational

greenwashing behavior triggers their contempt for the organization, which further reduces work engagement. This is because when a hospitality organization engages in false environmental-friendly activities and organizational greenwashing behaviors that exaggerate environmental endeavors, employees may perceive the organization as an inferior, unethical, and reprehensible party. With the negative emotion of contempt for the organization (Ng et al. 2021), it is challenging for employees to sustain a high energetic state; their attention is distracted, and their sense of work identification is weakened. As a result, hospitality employees' work engagement is further decreased. To sum up, this study puts forth the following hypothesis:

**Hypothesis 3.** *Hospitality employee' contempt for the organization mediates the relationship between perceived organizational greenwashing behavior and their work engagement.*

### 2.3.3 | The Moderating Role of Family Motivation

The AET suggests that the impact of work events on an individual's emotions and subsequent attitudes and behaviors might be different among individuals with different characteristics (Weiss and Cropanzano 1996). In the current research, we focus on hospitality employees' family motivation, which refers to employees' willingness to make efforts for the well-being of their family (X. Zhang et al. 2019). Family motivation indicates that if employees associate their work with family responsibilities, they can obtain more income to maintain family life through hard work, thus making the work vibrant. Different from the past view that sees family as a hindrance to employee job performance (Lapierre et al. 2012), recent research has proven that family motivation can benefit employee work-related attitudes and behaviors, such as work engagement and work performance (Menges et al. 2017).

Based on AET, the current research predicts that an employee's family support motivation will moderate the direct relationship between contempt for the organization and work engagement, as well as the indirect one between organizational greenwashing and work engagement via contempt for the organization. For employees with high levels of family motivation, due to their greater family living pressure and stronger demands for maintaining and improving family life (Hobfoll et al. 2018), they often place great importance on the compensation obtained after completing work (Tariq and Ding 2018). Even though such employees feel contempt for the organization, they will try not to reduce the extent of their work effort due to their own negative emotions towards the organization, considering their family responsibilities. On the contrary, for hospitality employees with low levels of family motivation, because their family living conditions are more secure, they attach less importance to seeking compensation, making them more focused on their own emotional responses (Tariq and Ding 2018). Therefore, such employees are more affected by the negative emotion of contempt for the organization, which further reduces their subsequent work engagement.

Based on the above arguments, the influence of perceived organizational greenwashing on employees' emotional responses and subsequent work attitude might be moderated by

family motivation. When the level of family motivation is high, hospitality employees will complete the work requirements as required and still be highly engaged with work because they are concerned about their family responsibilities. Therefore, family motivation reduces the negative influence of perceived organizational greenwashing on employee work engagement via contempt for the organization. To summarize, this study predicts that family motivation can weaken the indirect impact of perceived organizational greenwashing on reducing employee work engagement via contempt for the organization and the direct impact of contempt for the organization on work engagement. Thus, this research posits the following hypotheses:

**Hypothesis 4.** *Hospitality employees' family motivation moderates the relationship between contempt for the organization and work engagement. Specially, the negative impact of contempt for the organization on work engagement is mitigated when employees have high level of family motivation, while the negative impact is strengthened when they have the low level of family motivation.*

**Hypothesis 5.** *Hospitality employees' family motivation moderates the indirect effects of perceived organizational greenwashing on employees' work engagement through their contempt for the organization. The higher the motivation, the weaker the indirect effect.*

## 3 | Overview

Drawing on the AET, this research predicts that perceived organizational greenwashing behaviors lead to employees' contempt for the organization, which further decreases their work engagement. Moreover, we propose that the relationship between contempt for the organization and work engagement is weaker when employees' family motivation is high. To test these hypotheses, we employed a mixed-method design, consisting of two studies. The first study employed a two-phase time-lagged survey design, which captured the complex dynamics in real organizational settings and verified the relationships among variables. To better investigate the causal relationships proposed in the theoretical model and eliminate any potential common method bias, we further conducted Study 2, i.e., a scenario-based experiment with a between-subjects design. This constructive replication across diverse research contexts strengthens the validity of our findings and deepens the theoretical understanding of the conceptual model.

## 4 | Study 1

### 4.1 | Methods

#### 4.1.1 | Sample and Procedures

We conducted questionnaire surveys in three hotels located in Northern China. The hotel selection followed a three-stage process. In Stage 1, we screened for green policy commitments (e.g., energy/food waste/single-use plastic initiatives), star diversity (3–5 stars per China's GB/T 14308-2021), and  $\geq 5$  years

of operation. In Stage 2, we contacted 26 hotels, with five (19.2%) agreeing. In Stage 3, we selected three hotels (3-, 4-, and 5-star, about 200 employees each) through HR manager negotiations to ensure matched employee-operational data across two time points, balancing industry representation and regional consistency.

A 2-week time-lagged survey was carried out at these hotels, with data collection taking place in two phases. We asked the HR departments to provide the name lists of employees and selected participants randomly among the employees. In the first survey, participants rated their demographic information, perceptions of organizational greenwashing, family motivation, and contempt for the organization. In the second wave, employees reported their work engagement.

With the assistance of HR managers in the three hotels, a total of 400 hotel employees participated in the initial phase of the research. After matching the responses from two waves, 324 valid questionnaires were finally obtained, generating a valid response rate of 81%. Among the participants, 58.6% were female, and 55.8% were between 25 and 45 years old. Moreover, the average tenure in their organizations was 3 years. A total of 73.1% were married. Meanwhile, 62% had one or more minor children.

#### 4.1.2 | Measures

The scales were initially created in English, and to maintain semantic parity, we adhered to the standard back-translation method for translation into Chinese. Survey responses were measured on a 5-point Likert scale, with 1 indicating “strongly disagree” and 5 representing “strongly agree.”

Organizational greenwashing. We adopted the scale developed by W. Li et al. (2022), which consisted of four items. A sample items was: “My company presents ambiguous information about its environmental behavior.” The Cronbach’s alpha was 0.91.

Contempt for the organization. The scale we utilized was developed by Ng et al. (2021), which consisted of three items. A sample items was: “In the past period of time, I have been full of contempt for the organization.” The Cronbach’s alpha was 0.88.

Family motivation. The scale we utilized was developed by Menges et al. (2017), which consisted of five items. A sample items was: “I care about supporting my family.” The Cronbach’s alpha was 0.80.

Work engagement. We adopted the 9-item scale developed by Schaufeli et al. (2002). A sample items was: “I am passionate about my work.” The Cronbach’s alpha was 0.92.

We included gender, age, education level, tenure, marital status, and number of minor children as control variables.

## 4.2 | Results

### 4.2.1 | Confirmatory Factor Analysis

Table 1 presents the indices of model fit (TLI = 0.922, CFI = 0.934, RMSEA = 0.075). To delve deeper into the assessment of convergent validity, this research examined the average variance extracted (AVE) for the four primary variables. The AVE scores for all variables surpassed the threshold of 0.5, with values spanning from 0.55 to 0.73, signifying robust convergent validity (Bagozzi and Yi 1988). Additionally, the discriminant validity was confirmed as the square root of each AVE value exceeded the inter-variable correlation coefficients, in line with the criteria established (Fornell and Larcker 1981).

### 4.2.2 | Descriptive Statistics

As shown in Table 2, perceived organizational greenwashing behavior was positively correlated with contempt for the organization ( $r = 0.206, p < 0.01$ ), and negatively correlated with work engagement ( $r = -0.179, p < 0.01$ ). Moreover, contempt for the organization was negatively correlated with work engagement ( $r = -0.290, p < 0.01$ ). These results supported the hypotheses initially.

### 4.2.3 | Hypotheses Testing

A hierarchical regression analysis was performed to evaluate the hypotheses, with the findings detailed in Table 3. Table 3 illustrates that perceived organizational greenwashing behavior had a significant positive effect on employees’ contempt for the organization ( $\beta = 0.172, p < 0.01$ , Model 2), thus Hypothesis 1

TABLE 1 | Confirmatory factor analysis.

Model	$\chi^2$	df	IFI	TLI	CFI	RMSEA
Four-factor model <sup>a</sup>	411.843	146	0.934	0.922	0.934	0.075
Three-factor model <sup>b</sup>	887.832	149	0.817	0.788	0.816	0.124
Three-factor model <sup>c</sup>	934.368	149	0.805	0.775	0.804	0.128
Three-factor model <sup>d</sup>	1035.672	149	0.780	0.746	0.779	0.136
One-factor model <sup>e</sup>	2277.807	152	0.472	0.403	0.469	0.208

<sup>a</sup>Model with a relationship between all variables.

<sup>b</sup>Combines work engagement and family motivation into one factor.

<sup>c</sup>Combines work engagement and contempt for the organization into one factor.

<sup>d</sup>Combines contempt for the organization and family motivation into one factor.

<sup>e</sup>Combines all variables into one factor.

**TABLE 2** | Means, standard deviations (SD), and intercorrelations between study variables.

Variable	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Gender	1.59	0.49	1									
Age	35.49	11.21	0.125*	1								
Education level	2.14	1.35	0.020	-0.311**	1							
Tenure	2.90	3.51	0.044	0.149**	-0.095	1						
Marital status	1.77	0.48	0.190**	0.617**	-0.149**	0.237**	1					
Number of minor children	0.99	0.90	0.207**	0.276**	-0.075	0.155**	0.572**	1				
Perceived greenwashing	2.16	0.80	-0.106	-0.061*	0.079	-0.026	-0.046	-0.087	1			
Contempt for organization	2.10	0.86	-0.201**	-0.203**	0.098	-0.062	-0.202**	-0.177**	0.206**	1		
Family motivation	3.94	0.67	-0.118*	0.116*	-0.032	0.088	0.141*	0.143**	-0.179**	-0.022	1	
Work engagement	3.67	0.64	0.138*	0.295**	-0.082	0.135*	0.276**	0.213**	-0.170**	-0.290**	0.222**	1

\*Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

\*\*Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level.

\*\*\*Correlation is significant at the 0.001 level.

was verified. Moreover, contempt for the organization had a significant negative impact on work engagement ( $\beta = -0.220$ ,  $p < 0.001$ , Model 5), supporting Hypothesis 2.

After adding the mediating variable of contempt for the organization, contempt for the organization negatively predicted work engagement ( $\beta = -0.200$ ,  $p < 0.001$ , Model 6); the connection between perceived organizational greenwashing behavior and work engagement remained significant ( $\beta = -0.105$ ,  $p < 0.05$ , Model 6). Thus, contempt for the organization played a partial mediating role in the relationship between perceived organizational greenwashing behavior and work engagement, supporting Hypothesis 3.

Moreover, the mediating role of contempt for the organization in the relationship between perceived organizational greenwashing behavior and work engagement was further tested using the program of PROCESS in SPSS. The results of the analysis showed that the mediating effect of contempt for the organization in the connection between perceived organizational greenwashing behavior and work engagement had a 99.50% confidence interval of  $[-0.0837, -0.0141]$ . Therefore, the mediating role of contempt for the organization was further verified.

As shown in Table 3, the interaction of contempt for the organization and family motivation positively predicted work engagement ( $\beta = 0.130$ ,  $p < 0.05$ , Model 8). This result implied that the impact of the employee's contempt for the organization on work engagement was alleviated when they had a high level of family motivation. In order to further testify the moderating effect of family motivation, we plotted the moderating effect. The results of the analysis were shown in Figure 2. As indicated by Figure 2, family motivation attenuated the negative impact of contempt for the organization on work engagement. When employees held a high level of family motivation, the negative effect of contempt for the organization on work engagement was significant ( $\beta = -0.325$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ). When employees held a low level of family motivation, the negative effect decreased and was not significant ( $\beta = -0.124$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ). Therefore, Hypothesis 4 was supported.

In addition, the moderated mediating effect was tested by SPSS26.0 software process. The moderated mediation index of the impact of perceived organizational greenwashing on work engagement via employees' contempt for the organization was 0.036 (SE = 0.0221, 95% CI = [0.0008, 0.0858]), indicating statistical significance, supporting Hypothesis 5.

## 5 | Study 2

### 5.1 | Methods

#### 5.1.1 | Participants

Participants in this study selected front-line service employees in Chinese hotels. An experimental investigation was conducted to confirm the theoretical model. A total of 300 front-line hotel employees were invited to participate in an anonymous online survey administered by Credamo, a third-party online survey administration company in China. We received completed responses from 226 employees, of which 71.7% were female, 42.0% were below 30 years old, and 91.6% had a bachelor degree or less.

**TABLE 3** | Hierarchical regression analysis results.

	Contempt for the organization		Work engagement					
	M1	M2	M3	M4	M5	M6	M7	M8
Control variable								
Gender	-0.162**	-0.146**	0.077	0.064	0.042	0.035	0.066	0.051
Age	-0.117	0.111	0.213**	0.208**	0.188**	0.186**	0.175*	0.176**
Education level	0.051	0.039	0.006	0.015	0.017	0.023	0.019	0.016
Tenure	-0.010	-0.008	0.072	0.070	0.069	0.069	0.059	0.070
Marital status	-0.043	-0.052	0.060	0.068	0.051	0.057	0.047	0.037
Number of minor children	-0.081	-0.067	0.093	0.082	0.075	0.068	0.049	0.048
Independent variable								
Perceived greenwashing		0.172**		-0.140**		-0.105*	-0.072	-0.087
Intermediary variable								
Contempt for the organization					-0.220***	-0.200***	-0.205***	-0.211***
Moderator variable								
Family motivation							0.174**	0.144**
Interaction								
Contempt for the organization × family motivation								0.130*
R <sup>2</sup>	0.085	0.114	0.119	0.138	0.163	0.174	0.201	0.217
ΔR <sup>2</sup>	0.085	0.029	0.119	0.019	0.044	0.036	0.027	0.016
F	4.902***	5.799***	7.150***	7.241***	8.813***	8.282***	8.789***	8.661***
ΔF	4.902	10.312	7.150	6.977	16.671	13.558	10.785	6.196

\*Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

\*\*Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level.

\*\*\*Correlation is significant at the 0.001 level.



**FIGURE 2** | Effect of contempt for the organization on work engagement at different levels of locus of control. CFO = contempt for the organization; LOC = locus of control; WE = work engagement.

### 5.1.2 | Procedure and Manipulations

This research employed a scenario-based experimental approach with a between-subjects design, where participants were randomly assigned to one of two experimental conditions (organization greenwashing/control). In experiments, participants were exposed to experimental situations, and participants were guided to envision themselves being in a specific scenario. This scenario described an employee who worked at a hotel that claimed to be environmentally friendly and used bed linen reuse instead of single-use items. We controlled the perception of organizational greenwashing by supplementing the experimental conditions with extra details about the greenwashing practices commonly observed in the hospitality sector (Rahman et al. 2015). After reviewing the scenarios, participants were requested to express their feelings of contempt for the organization, family motivation, and work engagement. Participants were also asked to report their demographics and complete a manipulation check.

### 5.1.3 | Measures

Contempt for the organization was measured using the three items used in Study 1. Cronbach's alpha was 0.90. The assessment of family motivation was conducted using the same five-item scale as in Study 1. Cronbach's alpha was 0.67. Work engagement was evaluated with the nine items used in Study 1. Cronbach's alpha was 0.92.

### 5.1.4 | Pretest

We extended an invitation to 36 frontline service employees, of which 55.6% were female, to conduct a pretest to ascertain the efficacy of our manipulation of perceived organizational greenwashing. Participants were assigned at random to two separate groups: one focusing on organizational greenwashing and the other serving as a control group, with 18 individuals in each. Participants in the high organizational greenwashing group were presented with text that outlined specific greenwashing initiatives of the hotel, whereas those in the control group reviewed the hotel's general environmental protection measures. We then asked them to evaluate the 3 items representing contempt for the organization on a five-point scale. The results revealed that participants assigned to the high organizational greenwashing group achieved higher scores ( $M=2.43$ ,  $SD=1.13$ ) in terms of contempt for the organization than those in the control group ( $M=1.07$ ,  $SD=0.22$ ,  $t=5.22$ ,  $p<0.001$ ). These results supported our manipulation of perceived organizational greenwashing.

## 5.2 | Results

### 5.2.1 | Manipulation Check

Concluding the study, we had participants evaluate the 4-item perceived organizational greenwashing scale, which was identical to that used in Study 1, to verify the effectiveness of our

manipulation; Cronbach's alpha was 0.89. A  $t$ -test was conducted to analyze the average responses to the four items in question. As expected, participants in the high organizational greenwashing condition perceived organizational greenwashing to be significantly higher ( $M=3.01$ ,  $SD=1.06$ ) than participants in the low organizational greenwashing condition ( $M=2.04$ ,  $SD=0.57$ ,  $t=8.29$ ,  $p<0.001$ ). Thus, our manipulation was successful.

Two questions are used to prove the authenticity of the experimental scenario:

**Question 1.** Hotel's greenwashing is very common in real life.

**Question 2.** I have personally experienced similar scenarios at hotels.

The findings revealed that the majority of participants considered the scenario presented in our study to be a common occurrence in real-life situations. ( $M_{Q1}=3.57$ ,  $SD_{Q1}=0.89$ ;  $M_{Q2}=3.73$ ,  $SD_{Q2}=1.00$ ). A substantial number of participants in our study reported having encountered a comparable scenario at hotels.

### 5.2.2 | Confirmatory Factor Analysis

CFA was conducted using AMOS 26.0. The findings indicated that the four-factor model provided the optimal fit to the data [ $\chi^2(130)=260.561$ ,  $IFI=0.929$ ,  $TLI=0.915$ ,  $CFI=0.928$ ,  $RMSEA=0.067$ ]. These results validated the distinctness of the four key constructs.

### 5.2.3 | Test of Hypotheses

The ANOVA findings revealed that individuals in the condition of perceived organizational greenwashing ( $M=2.07$ ,  $SD=1.04$ ) had more contempt for the hospitality than those in the control condition ( $M=1.47$ ,  $SD=0.46$ ;  $F(1, 224)=31.419$ ,  $p<0.001$ ). Thus, Hypothesis 1 was supported. Regression analyses showed that contempt for the organization was negatively related to employees' work engagement ( $\beta=-0.382$ ,  $p<0.001$ ), supporting Hypothesis 2.

The PROCESS results indicated that perceived organizational greenwashing behavior conditionally effected on work engagement (indirect effect =  $-0.21$ ,  $SE=0.06$ , 95%  $CI=[-0.3366, -0.0989]$ ), evidencing Hypothesis 3. The interaction of contempt for the organization and family motivation also had a positive effect on work engagement ( $\beta=0.30$ ,  $SE=0.09$ ,  $p<0.01$ ), demonstrating Hypothesis 4. Additionally, perceived organizational greenwashing's conditional effect on work engagement was more negative among employees who had lower family motivation (effect =  $-0.32$ ,  $SE=0.08$ , 95%  $CI=[-0.4992, -0.1782]$ ) than among those with higher family motivation (effect =  $-0.14$ ,  $SE=0.07$ , 95%  $CI=[-0.2814, 0.0287]$ ). The overall moderated mediation effect was also significant (effect =  $0.17$ ,  $SE=0.08$ , 95%  $CI=[0.0251, 0.3330]$ ). Hypothesis 5 was confirmed.

## 6 | Discussion and Conclusions

### 6.1 | Conclusion

This research focused on the impact of perceived organizational greenwashing on employees' work engagement by investigating the mediating role of contempt for the organization and the moderating role of family motivation. Drawing on the AET, we found that perceived organizational greenwashing behaviors led to contempt for the organization, which further decreased their work engagement. Moreover, family motivation negatively moderated the relationship between contempt for the organization and work engagement. Specifically, the negative impact of contempt for the organization on work engagement is mitigated when employees have a high level of family motivation. This suggests that family motivation acts as a buffer, reducing the negative influence of greenwashing on employee engagement (Lin et al. 2024).

The findings highlighted the importance of authentic environmental practices to avoid greenwashing perceptions, which can damage employee engagement (Zervoudi et al. 2025). Research demonstrates that greenwashing has evolved from a localized concern to a pervasive global issue, profoundly reshaping workplace dynamics and employee engagement (Lyon and Montgomery 2015; Robertson et al. 2023). Greenwashing erodes employee trust and diminishes organizational legitimacy (Delmas and Burbano 2011; Lee and Raschke 2023), which are critical for maintaining high levels of engagement across diverse cultural contexts. Moreover, the mediating role of contempt for the organization revealed a universal psychological mechanism that transmits the negative impact of perceived organizational greenwashing to employee work engagement. This finding also aligns with studies on organizational justice and ethical leadership, which suggested that employees' emotional responses to perceived injustices were key drivers of disengagement and turnover intentions (Brown and Treviño 2006; Colquitt et al. 2001; Ng et al. 2021). In addition, this research shows the buffering role of family motivation in the relationship between contempt for the organization and work engagement. Similarly, previous research indicated that family-centric values significantly influenced employee resilience and engagement (Yang et al. 2000). Future research should explore these dynamics in diverse settings to further enrich our understanding of the global implications of greenwashing.

### 6.2 | Theoretical Implications

This study advances the existing literature from three aspects. First, this research contributes to the research by providing new empirical evidence for the relationship between organizational greenwashing and employees' attitudinal outcomes. This study redirects the focus from external stakeholders to internal stakeholders, particularly employees, thereby addressing a significant gap in the greenwashing literature. Although prior research has extensively examined the effects of greenwashing on external stakeholders such as consumers and investors (Bladt et al. 2024; Du 2015; Nyilasy et al. 2014; L. Zhang et al. 2018), the impact on internal stakeholders remains underexplored (W. Li et al. 2022; Robertson et al. 2023; Tahir et al. 2020). Compared with external stakeholders, employees are more likely to detect

inconsistencies between an organization's CSR claims and actions, and are more prone to react emotionally to greenwashing practices (Morsing et al. 2008; Schons and Steinmeier 2016). By testifying the linkage between organizational greenwashing and employees' work engagement, this research does not only add to the insufficient research on greenwashing, but also identifies a new antecedent of work engagement.

Second, drawing on the AET, we reveal a new mechanism, i.e., contempt for the organization, which transmits the negative effects of perceived organizational greenwashing to employees' work engagement. AET posits that workplace events trigger employees' affective reactions, which in turn influence their attitudes and behaviors (Weiss and Cropanzano 1996). In the context of greenwashing, employees who detect discrepancies between their organization's environmental claims and actual practices are likely to generate contempt for the organization, as they view such behavior as deceptive and unethical (Lyon and Montgomery 2015). By unveiling the mediating role of contempt for the organization, this study enriches the greenwashing literature by identifying a new emotional pathway transmitting the negative impact of greenwashing to employees. Moreover, this finding also contributes to the growing body of research on the role of negative emotions targeting organizations (Barsade and Gibson 2007; Lindebaum and Geddes 2016).

Finally, this study contributes to the literature by identifying family motivation as a critical boundary condition that moderates the relationship between contempt for the organization and work engagement. Family motivation, defined as the drive to fulfill familial responsibilities and secure their well-being (Menges et al. 2017), serves as a buffer against the negative effects of contempt. Employees with high family motivation are more likely to remain engaged at work despite feelings of contempt, as their commitment to providing for their families outweighs their disdain for the organization (Grant and Parker 2009). This finding aligns with research on prosocial motivation, which suggests that individuals driven by external responsibilities exhibit greater resilience in adverse work environments (Grant 2008). By introducing family motivation as a moderating variable, this study not only enriches the greenwashing literature but also provides a more nuanced understanding of how individual differences shape employee responses to unethical organizational practices. This moderated mediation framework addresses the "when" question of greenwashing's impact, offering valuable insights for both theory and practice.

### 6.3 | Practical Implications

This research indicates that employees could recognize organizational greenwashing behaviors, and they would thus generate contempt for the organization, which further decreases their work engagement. Given the detrimental impact of greenwashing, organizations should prioritize authentic environmental actions to avoid greenwashing, as employees can detect inconsistencies and react negatively, leading to decreased work engagement (W. Li et al. 2022). This is vital for hospital-ity organizations, where employee work engagement is critical to delivering high-quality customer service. Organizations in other sectors must also ensure that environmental claims are

backed by substantive efforts, such as implementing sustainable practices in operations and reducing carbon footprints (Berrone et al. 2017). Essentially, organizations must integrate genuine corporate social responsibility into their strategies to foster employee identification and commitment (Aguinis and Glavas 2012). By embedding these principles, organizations can build stronger employee relationships, enhance reputations, and achieve sustainable competitive advantages across industries.

Additionally, transparent communication about environmental initiatives can enhance employee trust and reduce suspicions of greenwashing (Bowen and Aragon Correa 2014). Training programs that educate employees on sustainability and the organization's environmental goals can also foster a sense of shared purpose and commitment (Pinzone et al. 2019). Finally, involving employees in environmental decision-making processes can further increase their engagement and trust, aligning their values with the organization's actions (Graves et al. 2013).

Second, the mediating effect of organizational contempt implies that this negative emotion is a core mechanism that transfers the negative impact of organizational greenwashing to employees' work engagement. Considering the harmful impact of contempt for the organization, organizations should try to reduce this negative emotion, such as fostering ethical leadership and demonstrating genuine commitment to sustainability. Research shows that ethical leaders who prioritize transparency, fairness, and environmental responsibility can significantly diminish employees' contempt for the organization (Brown and Treviño 2006; Ng et al. 2021). For instance, leaders should demonstrate a high level of environmental commitment and actively communicate the organization's environmental achievements and challenges with employees, ensuring alignment between words and actions (Robertson et al. 2023). Organizations should also establish feedback mechanisms, such as regular employee surveys, to identify and address concerns about greenwashing before they escalate into contempt (Scheidler et al. 2019). By cultivating an ethical and transparent culture, hospitality organizations can prevent the generation of contempt for the organization.

Third, according to our research findings, when hospitality employees have contempt for the organization, their family motivation alleviates the degree to which their work engagement can be impaired. As a type of special prosocial motivation, employees with a high level of family motivation pay more attention to supporting their families. In this case, the negative direct effect of employees' contempt for the organization on their work engagement and the indirect impact of organizational greenwashing on work engagement via contempt for the organization are both alleviated. Therefore, organizations should recognize the positive impact of employees' motivation to support their families on employees and organizations, and give priority to this group of employees in the recruitment, selection, and other processes. Moreover, organizations should also pay more attention to employees with high levels of family motivation by providing more support to meet their family responsibilities and concerns. For instance, implementing family-friendly policies, such as flexible work schedules and childcare support, can further enhance engagement by aligning with employees' family-centric values (Allen et al. 2015; Kossek et al. 2011).

## 6.4 | Limitations and Future Research Directions

Some limitations inevitably exist in this study. First, although the multi-wave research design reduced the risk of common method bias, it is possible that it still exists. Moreover, owing to the limitation of survey study, it is difficult to testify the causality proposed in this theoretical model. We recommend that future research employ a variety of research methodologies, such as conducting experiments, to improve the research design and further examine the causal relationships among organizational greenwashing, contempt for the organization, and work engagement.

Secondly, the research was carried out in China, a country with a distinct cultural context compared with western countries. For example, in China, there is a strong emphasis on the value of traditionality, which encompasses deference to authority, respect for parental authority, reverence for ancestors, a sense of fate, and male dominance (Yang 2003). With a high level of traditionality, employees might be less inclined to doubt their organizations' behaviors; thus, their contempt for the organization might be weakened. Therefore, restricting the research sample to China might bias the results to some degree because the impact of greenwashing on contempt for the organization can be stronger in some other cultures. Therefore, we recommend that future research replicate this study in different countries to enhance the credibility of the findings.

Third, this study only explored the effect of perceived organizational greenwashing and did not discuss its antecedents. Exploring the antecedents of perceived organizational greenwashing by employees can defuse potentially inaccurate interpretations of organizational greenwashing in advance, thus providing an opportunity to reduce organizational losses and improve organizational green performance.

Finally, although we have demonstrated the moderating role of family motivation in the relationship between contempt for the organization and work engagement, we did not pay attention to other potential moderating variables that may affect the degree to which organizational greenwashing could influence employees' work engagement via contempt for the organization. Subsequent studies could investigate additional boundary conditions to attain a more exhaustive comprehension of the repercussions of organizational greenwashing and contempt for the organization.

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### Ethics Statement

The authors confirm their compliance with ethical standards.

### Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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## Appendix A

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Perceived organizational greenwashing	<ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>1. The hotel provides only ambiguous information regarding the hotel's environmental protection.</li><li>2. Regarding the hotel's environmental achievements, this hotel provides some information that cannot be proven.</li><li>3. The hotel's environmental performance information is exaggerated.</li><li>4. The hotel selectively disclosed its environmentally-related activities, or withheld information about some environmentally unfriendly practices.</li></ol>
Contempt for the organization	<ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>1. In the past period of time, I was full of contempt for hotels.</li><li>2. In the past period of time, the hotel made me feel very despised.</li><li>3. In the past period of time, I was full of disdain for hotels.</li></ol>
Family motivation	<ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>1. I care about supporting my family.</li><li>2. I want to help my family.</li><li>3. I want to have a positive impact on my family.</li><li>4. It is important for me to do good for my family.</li><li>5. My family benefits from my job.</li></ol>
Work engagement	<ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>1. At work, I feel myself bursting with energy.</li><li>2. When I work, I feel strong and energetic.</li><li>3. I am passionate about my work.</li><li>4. Work inspires me.</li><li>5. When I get up in the morning, I want to go to work.</li><li>6. When work is stressful, I feel happy.</li><li>7. I take pride in the work I do.</li><li>8. I am immersed in my work.</li><li>9. I get to the point where I lose myself at work.</li></ol>

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## Appendix B

### Scenario (control)

Please read the following paragraph carefully.

Imagine a scenario: You are an employee of a medium-sized hotel. During your onboarding training, you were informed that environmental protection is the hotel's top priority. You also noticed that the hotel advertises itself as "environmentally friendly" or a "green hotel" on its website and in the hotel's signage. After starting your job, you find that the hotel places some environmental signs in places like guest rooms, lobby, and restaurant, which read "This hotel participates in a voluntary bed sheet reuse program," "This hotel does not provide disposable items; please contact staff if needed," and "Join us in protecting the environment."

### Scenario (perceived organizational greenwashing)

Please read the following paragraph carefully.

So far, many hotel operators claim to be "green" and actively take on environmental responsibilities, but most hotels are just putting up environmental signs on the surface, claiming to be "green," but actually lacking substantial environmental measures. Some even disclose exaggerated environmental achievements of the hotel to the public. Many people believe that hotels claim to be "green" for economic purposes. On the one hand, hotel organizations can reduce a large amount of operating costs by involving guests in the voluntary bed sheet reuse program and not actively providing disposable items. On the other hand,

claiming to be environmentally friendly is beneficial for attracting more environmentally conscious guests, increasing the hotel's occupancy rate and popularity.

Now, imagine a situation: You are an employee of a medium-sized hotel. During your onboarding training, you were told that environmental protection is the hotel's top priority, and you also noticed that the hotel advertises itself as "environmentally friendly" or a "green hotel" on its website and in the hotel. After starting your job, you find that the hotel places some environmental signs in places like guest rooms, lobby, and restaurant, saying "This hotel uses a voluntary bed sheet reuse program," "This hotel does not provide disposable items; please contact staff if needed," and "Join us in protecting the environment."