
| RESEARCH ARTICLE

Navigating Sustainability in The Tourism and Hospitality Industry: An Exploratory Study of Sustainable Practices, Antecedents and Effects.

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| ABSTRACT

In light of sustainability seated in front-row in the tourism and hospitality industries, organizations are motivated to adopt green practices to meet consumer consumption needs along with societal and environmental responsibilities. The research contributes qualitatively to the way in which industry practitioners initiate change, the reasons for it and how they go about doing this, along with challenges met. This paper pinpoints major trends that underscore the current sustainability landscape in tourism and hospitality based on interviews with managers, sustainability officers, and frequent patrons. Results indicate that sustainability programs help improve customer contentment, encourage functional efficiency, and increase brand position, however, also incur limitations including cost barriers and mandate training. The study indicates that even after positive initial experiences using sustainable practices, stakeholders need ongoing support to maintain sustainable behavior within this area.

| KEYWORDS

Sustainability Tourism, Eco-Friendly Practices, Operational Efficiency, Community

| ARTICLE INFORMATION

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1. Introduction

As one of the largest economic sectors in the world, the tourism and hospitality industry has undergone an extraordinary transformation in recent years in response to the growing phenomenon of environmentally aware tourists who expect service providers to adopt responsible and sustainable practices. With global tourism receipts reaching \$1.7 trillion (UNWTO, 2020) in 2019 alone, the environmental and societal negative aspects of customary tourism approaches are coming into focus as pressures from rapid tourism growth escalate. This increased viscosity in environmental and social impact is drawing industry stakeholders to implement sustainable practices and thus minimize the negative impact, whilst delivering to the expectations of consumers.

In particular, sustainable tourism and hospitality means “the minimization of tourist resource use, waste generation, and the use of toxic substances and energy” as well as “the maximization of local community benefits through local sourcing and community partnerships” (Gössling & Peeters, 2015) [3]. In hospitality, sustainable practices have been identified as a quality that leads to differentiation of the brand, and enhances loyalty, as more consumers tend to purchase products from firms who reflects their value of being ecologically responsible (Kim et al. A recent study by Han et al. The same author (2019) highlights the fact that customers are ready to pay more for sustainable services which suggests that the clear clue in consumer preferences is changed to sustainability.

To be fair, the journey of sustainable tourism and hospitality is never easy, but always difficult. Sustainable practices can involve substantial investments in new technologies and processes, potentially placing a burden on small-and-medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) budgets especially (Meyer et al., 2021). Moreover, the nature of high employee turnover in hospitality that needs frequent

manpower renewal also presents challenges for sustainability practice since new staff members need to be trained constantly on sustainability practices (Rahman & Reynolds, 2021).

However, the opportunity for tourism and hospitality businesses to benefit from sustainability is enormous. Healthier practices do increase operational efficiency, but they also benefit brand image and customer loyalty, which can ultimately lead to an increase in profits. Studies reveal that a firm commitment to sustainability is perhaps what distinguishes a brand in the competitive marketplace and offers opportunities to capture the eco-aware traveler segment focused on sustainable tourism (Jones, Hillier & Comfort, 2017). Consequently, gaining insights into the drivers, effects and barriers of sustainability in this field has become a major task for scholars, practitioners and policy makers [2].

This research examines the qualitative side of sustainability in tourism and hospitality to understand why businesses are moving towards sustainable practices; how they can accommodate such changes in their operations; as well as challenges businesses encounter while making these transitions. Drawing insights from the industry and guest's perspectives, this research extends an in-depth analysis of sustainability practices and a rationale towards transforming practices leading to effective objective oriented sustainable strategies in future tourism and hospitality industries.

Research Questions:

Why do tourism and hospitality businesses choose to implement sustainable practices?

How do these businesses view sustainability effects on their operations and guests?

What are the problems businesses face in sustainable practice implementation and sustainability maintenance?

This study draws on the works of scholars like Gössling & Peeters (2015) and Kim et al. to help answer these questions. We elaborate on this body of work by providing qualitative insights into sustainability (2017). This research will provide nuanced insights into the role of sustainability in tourism and hospitality that, both practitioners making efforts to strike a balance between economic growth with social responsibility and environmental stewardship will find useful.

2. Literature Review

This push for sustainability in tourism and hospitality has gone beyond a trend to an important response to heightened environmental consciousness and consumer preference towards responsible business practices. In the last decade, various scholars have evidenced that the implementation of sustainable practices in hospitality can lead to increased customer satisfaction, lower costs and broader operational efficiency as well as improved brand reputation (Jones et al., 2017). This business transformation reveals itself in a number of ways, from energy savings and waste management to sustainable procurement and community engagement, corresponding with the needs expressed by green travelers (Gössling & Peeters, 2015; Meyer, Peng, & Nolan, 2021).

Energy conservation is widely recognized as one of the areas where more sustainable practice can be used in hospitality. The hospitality industry, especially hotels, largely consumes energy for lighting, heating and air conditioning, which is strongly related to environmental protection as well as economic objective (Bohdanowicz, 2005). In turn, numerous hotels have implemented energy-saving technologies like LED lighting and smart thermostats, along with renewable energy, for example solar electricity. Studies have also indicated that these actions decrease carbon emissions while not only saving costs but providing significant savings to ensure a win-win for environmental protection and business profitability (Mensah, 2019).

And then there is also managing waste, and that is essential for sustainability in tourism and hospitality. In this regard, food waste is a critical case, as an average restaurant wastes around 10% of their stored food unit (Papargyropoulou et al., 2016). Different methods to reduce waste, including composting, portion management and inventory control, have been established as highly effective ways of minimizing food wastage and reducing its environmental impacts. Additionally, there are hotels and restaurants beginning the zero-waste principle that could reduce waste generation by managing resources a circular model and lots of recycling programs. Such practices not only have organizational efficiency, but also appeal to environmental value-orientated customers (Kim, Lee, & Fairhurst, 2017).

Sustainable sourcing is becoming not just a necessity to meet consumer demand and empower residents at the local economic level. In order to reduce their carbon footprint, a lot of hospitality businesses have moved towards sourcing their ingredients locally and seasonally (Rahman & Reynolds, 2021). This evolution is most notable in respect to the farm-to-table trend that focuses on short-term partnership with local farmers and vendors. According to Han et al. According to Lee et al (2019), such businesses can continue running sustainably and profitably, as consumers are willing to pay a higher price for organic food that is grown locally.

Community involvement is yet another aspect that adds to sustainable tourism and hospitality; it is increasingly appreciated among businesses that they should give back in some form or other to the respective communities where they operate. Tourism and

hospitality enterprises cultivate relationships with local residents by employing local staff, purchasing from local suppliers and sponsoring community events and contributing to regional economic development (Kim & Stepchenkova, 2018). Such a trend not only strengthens brand image, but also contributes to creating devoted customers who appreciate CSR (Jones et al., 2017).

The advantages of sustainability are widely acknowledged, but there are also key challenges. The initial costs of green technologies and the limited access to eco-friendly suppliers are significant impediments, as is the continuous demand for retraining staff, especially in small and medium-sized firms (Meyer et al., 2021). Secondly, high staff turnover in hospitality makes sustainability difficult because [sic] sustainability needs to be trained repeatedly (Rahman & Reynolds, 2021). Yet, the benefits for sustainability are cited in studies to be more significant and long-lasting: better service experience for consumers, efficiency of operations, and better brand-value. Hence, it has been recommended that sustainability stays non-negotiable for the industry sector, and 'business as usual' can be carried forward only a little at a time through these challenges.

3. Methodology

Design/methodology/approach through a qualitative lens, this study investigates sustainability practices within tourism and hospitality through the eyes of industry practitioners by identifying their motivations, perceived impacts of sustainability efforts, and challenges faced. The focus on qualitative design reflects our goal of gaining an in-depth exploration of participant understandings that can provide a rich, highly contextualized and nuanced account of sustainability—one not necessarily possible through more quantitative approaches (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The inherently nuanced, context-specific features of sustainability initiatives, make qualitative research particularly well positioned to reveal the details of these practices (and how they are enacted or maintained).

3.1 Data Collection

Data were gathered through semi-structured interviews with 15 participants including hotel managers, sustainability officers and frequent guests who interact with green hospitality options. We decided to use semi-structured interviews as they give space for participants to speak freely about their experiences within the areas of interest, while still retaining focus on areas of interest (for example: motivations for sustainable practice adoption, perceived benefits and impacts, operational challenges faced) (Kallio et al., 2016). The interviews lasted roughly 30-45 minutes and were either in-person or virtual, depending on location.

3.2 Sampling Strategy

Participants were selected using purposive sampling (Palinkas et al., 2015), to ensure all have high experience or interest in sustainability in the context of tourism and hospitality. This approach allowed the inclusion of specific insights from people with direct familiarity with sustainable practices in the industry. The sample included individuals from small independent businesses as well as larger chain establishments to capture a range of insights about sustainability practices and challenges experienced by business types.

3.3 Data Analysis

The interview data was analyzed using thematic analysis, following Braun and Clarke (2006): familiarizing with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes within themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes and writing the report. Using this method, access to the most prevalent themes connected with motivations, impact, and challenges of sustainability practices was gained. NVivo software was used to assist with the coding and organization of data as it allowed us to store and analyze large amounts of qualitative information in a systematic way (Edlund & McDougall, 2019).

Five key themes emerged from the thematic analysis, including (1) reasons for implementing sustainable practices; (2) effects on guests and operational efficiency; and (3) constraints to sustainability, e.g., working capital or supply chain logistics. By analyzing the qualitative data afforded by each of these elements, this study sought to shed light on sustainability initiatives being practiced within industry, and hopefully enhance understanding of some enablers & barriers which potentially influence sustainable practices in tourism/hospitality contexts.

3.4 Reliability and Validity

Triangulation was applied to improve the quality of study findings by comparing data from different participants and types of establishments (Shenton, 2004). Moreover, we performed member checking with some of the participants (not all) by sending them initial results to check the accuracy and relevance of our findings and confirm or clarify themes. This helped to validate the findings and ensure that the interpretations were a true reflection of participants' point of view.

3.5 Ethical Considerations

Prior to data collection, ethical approval was obtained and informed consent was sought from all participants. Participant identification was kept in confidence by removing identifiable participant information, and all data were stored securely. These ethical protocols were designed to protect participants' privacy and ensure that their participation was responsible.

4. Results

Content analysis of the interviews yielded common themes pertaining to the industry drivers, influencer outcomes and process barriers/ facilitators surrounding sustainability implementation in tourism and hospitality. These themes shed light on the various factors driving sustainability efforts as well as the business advantages and hurdles confronted by sector practitioners.

4.1 Life Cycle of Sustainability Practice Adoption

Aligning with brand values and fulfilling customer expectations were among the leading motivations behind many more sustainable practices. Most of the respondents said that integrating sustainability is in line with their brand principles and it also helps cater to environmentally conscious guests who search for hotels practicing responsible tourism. An example would be one hotel manager who said, "Our guests are asking more often now about our policies on the environment and are pleased we concentrate on what waste we will reduce and where our produce is locally sourced." Identify your Purpose – this is the motivation behind the move as customers are becoming more aware of issues around environmentalism and are pushing businesses to react. Also, most respondents reported that their organizations have engaged in sustainability to stay competitive, as more businesses adopt environmental practices as a part of their business model.

Some other participants also pointed out about sustainability leading to cost optimization. Operational costs would be lowered, the businesses stated, thereby increasing their environmental and financial appeal as a result of reduced waste and saved energy. As one sustainability officer at a mid-sized hotel described it, "Replacing our energy-guzzlers with more efficient lighting and water-saving fixtures has cut back on our utility bills substantially. This result is consistent with the literature that states sustainability practices will eventually be justified in terms of financial benefit, impacting operational efficiency and profit margins (Mensah, 2019).

4.2 Effect on Operations and The Guest Experience

One of them was the effects that sustainability actions have on guest experience and satisfaction. Participants felt that guests appreciate seeing evidence of an operator's level of conservation, such as through recycling programs, biodegradable packaging and the promotion of energy conservation. Guests reportedly consider these efforts as a reflection of the establishment's values and commitment to larger environmental goals. One restaurant manager noted how customers would often compliment their use of compostable packaging and locally sourced ingredients which increased the overall experience of dining out, leading to positive word-of-mouth.

Enhanced operational efficiency driven largely by simplified resource management was also a cited benefit. Many respondents mentioned that sustainability measures like inventory management aimed at reducing food waste or energy-efficient equipment have resulted in streamlined processes and lower costs. Our waste management system has helped us reduce unnecessary costs that can be utilized for other guest services, said a hotel manager. Such finding provides evidence that sustainable practices implement protection of environmental goals as well as providing efficient use of resources, ultimately supporting bottom line improvement.

4.3 Local Involvement and Outreach

Through our analysis we determined that community engagement is an important facet of sustainability for many participants—viewing partnerships with local suppliers and participation in community events as vital elements of their greening initiatives. Many mentioned that sourcing locally minimized the carbon footprint but also helped foster links with local producers and ensuring a vibrant economy. One hotel manager said, "Our guests enjoy that we buy farm-to-table produce; it saves on transportation costs and creates fresh ingredients while benefiting the community. This localized focus improves the brand and can even create loyalty by building guests who appreciate locally sourced items.

5. Discussion

This study contributes to the growing literature examining motivations, impacts and sustainability challenges within the tourism and hospitality industry by providing an in-depth exploration of opinions towards these practices from those working with them. We contextualize these results in relation to the literature and highlight the opportunities and challenges of feasible action towards sustainability.

5.1 Reasons Why People Want Sustainability

The consistency found in the results that sustainability practices are closely aligned with brand values is consistent with prior studies, which indicate consumer demand for greener alternatives greatly affect the sustainability adoption of hospitality businesses (Kim et al., 2017). Few features have been deemed more essential to staying competitive than sustainability, and many participants commented that due to market maturation, guests come to expect environmentally responsible options. Such a synergy reinforces evidence from Jones, Hillier and Comfort (2017) suggesting hospitality organizations that present their nature-friendly policies in alignment with stakeholder customer characteristics on sustainability receive competitive advantage.

A key additional reason was savings, especially energy conservation and minimizing waste. The utility savings experienced by the participants, as well as their easier waste management circumstances, affirm the financial advantages found in research such as that of Mensah (2019) who argued that sustainable operations create long-run cost efficiencies. Past research has highlighted that the initial financial investment needed to set up eco-friendly infrastructure may deter smaller businesses (Meyer, Peng & Nolan, 2021), but regarding larger object production by these companies, the results imply that these supplier benefits would act as economic motivators for sustainability.

5.2 Effect on Business & Customer Journey

This further corroborates the findings of Han et al., highlighting a positive effect between sustainability practices and guest satisfaction as well as operational efficiency. And (2019) show that consumers are increasingly more likely to buy from clients with a green disposition. Respondents reported that guests respond positively to visible sustainability efforts—like recycling programs and local sourcing of food and beverage products—providing credibility, driving repeat business and improving the overall experience. This implies that sustainability initiatives are an effective unique selling point for the hospitality business which in return is going to strengthen their market competitiveness.

Additionally, efficient operations through resource and energy management translate to seamless operations at reduced costs. The findings are in line with previous studies showing that the implementation of sustainable practices can at least contribute positively to brand image and operate business process easier resulting less waste and minimal resource usage (Kim & Stepchenkova, 2018). It shows that sustainability is not only a matter of morals and image but also a way to boost operational performance in the tourism and hospitality industries, the findings show.

5.3 Challenges and Barriers

Although the advantages of sustainable practice are clear, the findings point to a number of obstacles, above all high up-front costs and staff training needs. Respondents also reflected that the initial cost of sustainable systems — in areas like energy-efficient lighting and waste management practices can be prohibitive, consult particularly for smaller firms. This discovery is consistent with the work of Rahman and Reynolds (2021), where cost has been identified as one of the most significant barriers to sustainability in the hospitality industry. Overcoming this barrier may depend on external assistance, like subsidies or grants, that can help make these investments feasible for smaller firms.

A major pain point that also came out of this report was the necessity for ongoing training of staff, especially considering high turnover rates. High employee turnover in the hospitality industry hinders consistent sustainable business practices, as new recruits require regular training to ensure adherence with a business's environmental and social standards. This is consistent with Meyer, Peng & Nolan (2021) who assert that continued dedication and adaptation is necessary to sustain practices in industries where the workforce changes often. We conclude that good sustainability training programs, paired with retention policies, might help overcome these challenges by making sure employees are familiar and committed to the firm's sustainability goals.

5.4 Connecting with the Community and Adding Local Value

The findings also highlight an interesting dimension of sustainability: a focus on community engagement and reliance on local resources. They mentioned the importance of using local suppliers and sourcing ingredients locally which helps boost the economy. Doing so not only cuts its transportation footprint, but it engenders close ties with the community that should bolster brand loyalty and customer satisfaction. Previous studies also identify community involvement as a benefit of sustainability (Kim & Stepchenkova 2018) noting that firms perceived to engage with local stakeholders are more likely to score higher on social responsibility.

They indicate that community engagement initiatives are viewed positively by employees and guests alike and as such provide an opportunity to differentiate hospitality businesses in the marketplace. Not just sustainable tourism, as these businesses create local and unique experiences that appeal to the environmental-friendly traveler by incorporating local culture and resources into their operations.

6. Implications for the Industry

This study highlights sustainability as a strategic focus in the tourism and hospitality business. The multitude of advantages, from higher customer satisfaction to operational efficiency and brand loyalty, showcases the diverse value that sustainability brings. The hurdles of high costs and ongoing staff training show that sustainability is not a one-time effort; in fact, sometimes it takes an outside hand.

These findings indicate that for industry stakeholders, collaborations with government and non-government organizations could avail vital resources for the implementation of sustainability initiatives. Tax breaks or grants, for example, could help cover the costs associated with making sustainability upgrades, especially for SMEs. The establishment of industry-wide training programs that deal with sustainability are a good step towards ensuring employees can continue to adhere to the highest possible standards for the environment, especially in industries where turnover is high.

7. Limitations and Future Research

This paper sheds important qualitative light on sustainability practices in the tourism and hospitality sector. But there are caveats that need to be noted. First, the authors based their study on a small sample size (15 participants) limiting the applicability of the findings to the wider industry. Viable samples with large sample size are required in future research, for instance, across several regions and business sizes with distinct sustainability practices. Furthermore, data were collected via semi-guided interview tailored to obtain in-depth point of views but susceptible to subject bias. Future studies could integrate quantitative methods or mixed-methods approaches for a more comprehensive understanding.

A further limitation is the cross-sectional nature of the research, which only provides a snapshot of sustainability practices at one time point of data collection. There are recommendations for longitudinal research to investigate how sustainable practice influences the business in the long term and impacts customer retention. Such studies might also explore how firms adjust sustainability strategies over time in response to changing market conditions and environmental regulations.

Additionally, the research was mainly centered on industry practitioners' views. Further research could bring in how other stakeholders like customers and community members perceive sustainability practices to create a comprehensive understanding of the road ahead.

Lastly, this study emphasizes financial and operational barriers, including expensive sustainable technologies and training for personnel. Future research could focus on targeting policy interventions i.e., government subsidization or industry-level training programs, to help small and medium-sized enterprises implement sustainability practices.

Finally, different approaches to study these issues need more attention in future studies which will deepen findings and improve findings reliability thereby supporting the tourism and hospitality domain in reaching their sustainable development objectives.

8. Conclusion

This research contributes to understanding the motivations, impacts, and challenges experienced by practitioners within sustainability practices adoption in tourism and hospitality. With consumers increasingly demanding greener alternatives, sustainability has transitioned from a standalone initiative to mission critical competitive strategy and brand equity. This finding corroborates the previous studies that note environmental responsibility taken in alignment with customer anticipation benefits brand loyalty and customer satisfaction (Kim et al., 2017; Jones, Hillier & Comfort, 2017) respectively. The motivations among participants in these studies were similar, citing a desire to enhance their brand appeal and hoping the changing guest preferences around sustainable practices would play in their favor.

While sustainability facilitates operational efficiency and guest satisfaction, it was especially pronounced with subjects mentioning that energy-saving measures, waste reduction practices, and local food sourcing will lead to savings in cost and profits while creating loyal customers. Such results are consistent with prior research in the hospitality industry that has indicated sustainable behavior enhances long-term cost efficiencies while improving the overall guest experience (Mensah, 2019; Han et al., 2019). Sustainability provides this double-impact utility; economic and environmental, making it a good value strategic investment in the hospitality industry.

But the study also points out a number of barriers to greater uptake of sustainable practices. The need for investment in sustainable technologies with high initial fees and the ongoing expense of staff training were major impediments, especially for SMEs. This result is in line with Meyer, Peng, and Nolan (2021) which suggested that financial constraints are among the greatest challenges

to sustainability in hospitality. When combined with the high turnover rates characterizing this industry, this presents a substantial challenge as businesses need to continually train newly hired staff in order to maintain their sustainable practice successes (Rahman & Reynolds, 2021). This means that these issues need to be dealt with outside of the normal market-based incentive structure, for example through financial incentives or subsidies targeted at SMEs to give them room for sustainable investments.

One of the topics addressed was community engagement — many businesses found that sustainability included collaboration with local suppliers and supporting regional economies. Doing this not only minimizes transportation-related carbon emissions, but also enhances the business's local identity — which is increasingly appreciated by eco-minded shoppers. The positive impact on the image and loyalty of customers is supported by research (Kim & Stepchenkova, 2018), thus arguing for local involvement underlines the importance of sustainability as a brand value.

In conclusion, the impressions of this study highlight the full role of sustainability in marketing strategies for tourism and hospitality. With consumers becoming increasingly environmentally conscious, brand reputation, operational efficiencies and consumer loyalties are likely to be enhanced with sustainable practice (Jones et al., 2017; Han et al., 2019). Address financial, operation challenges: To overcome initial investment costs and training needs, collaborative efforts are needed between the business unit in addressing these issues along with example collaboration to cluster them together. As long as dedication and creativity remain, tourism and hospitality will play a role in the future environmental progress, meeting both natural supply and modern consumer demand.

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