



Drivers, barriers and key practices of corporate sustainability strategy implementation in hotels

Vanessa Guerra-Lombardi^{*}, Raúl Hernández-Martín, Noemi Padrón-Fumero

Department of Applied Economics and Quantitative Methods, University of La Laguna, Tenerife, Spain

ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:

Hotels
Corporate sustainability strategy
Strategic management
Human resources

ABSTRACT

This paper analyzes the implementation of corporate sustainability strategies (CSS) in hotels, identifying key factors and practices as perceived by middle-managers. Using qualitative methods, we conducted initial and in-depth interviews with owners, top-managers, and 37 middle-managers from various departments of a hotel chain in the Canary Islands. An existing literature-informed CSS implementation framework guided our analysis, revealing nine key factors that act as drivers, barriers, or both to CSS implementation. We identified crucial practices including paper-use reduction, employee well-being, plastic-use reduction, energy efficiency, recycling, water management, air quality, social contribution, food waste management, and green chemicals, noting varying relevancies across departments. Particularly, work-wellbeing, plastic-use reduction, and energy efficiency showed the highest alignment with CSS. Our findings offer insights into the practical application of CSS, underscoring the importance of tailoring department-specific practices to overarching sustainability goals to bolster organizational sustainability strategies.

1. Introduction

The tourism industry, and notably hotel companies, are increasingly aware of the need to address sustainability issues (Sakshi et al., 2020). Particularly, as tourism is an activity that requires intensive use of public resources, and involves constant pressure from stakeholders (Bani-Melhem et al., 2022; Han, 2021; Khatter et al., 2019, 2021; Lee et al., 2010; Mensah, 2014; Merli et al., 2019; Prud'homme and Raymond, 2016). While other industries, such as manufacturing, transportation, or the construction industry are making significant efforts in adopting sustainable practices (Goh et al., 2020; Gonzalez-Rodriguez et al., 2019; Jiang and Wong, 2016), the hotel industry faces substantial difficulties in acknowledging and fulfilling corporate social responsibilities (Khatter et al., 2019; Manninen and Huisken, 2022). Disjointed practices have been undertaken by some hotels, while others have developed formal policies (Alzoun et al., 2016; Kularatne et al., 2019), but companies have historically focus on economic motivators to address sustainability, often overlooking environmental and social dimensions of sustainability (Alameeri et al., 2018; López-Gamero et al., 2023).

By contrast, academic research has usually focused its efforts on the environmental dimension of sustainability integration in business (Aragon-Correa et al., 2015; Hsieh, 2012; Khatter et al., 2019; Mensah,

2006, 2014; Scanlon, 2007). Indeed, few studies have analyzed corporate sustainability performance on the basis of indicator frameworks (Azapagic, 2004; Hörisch et al., 2014; Nikolaou and Tsalis, 2018; Veleva and Ellenbecker, 2001), which can provide valid quantitative information, but they might oversimplify the complexity of implementing sustainability strategies (Pham et al., 2023). However, there is evidence showing that environmental practices positively affect the development of economic and social sustainability (López-Gamero et al., 2023). Therefore, it highlights the complex nature of sustainability and stresses the importance of implementing corporate sustainability with a strategic approach covering economic, social, and environmental aspects (Goh et al., 2020; Pan et al., 2021).

In addition, other authors have addressed the study of sustainability practices implementation from the perspective of top and executive management (Mensah, 2006, 2014; Scanlon, 2007; Prud'homme and Raymond, 2016; Khatter et al., 2021), but there is a paucity of research into departmental middle-managers' perceptions in the accommodation sector (Christie and Tippmann, 2024; Tarakci et al., 2023). However, middle-management is a source of relevant strategic and operational information, since they occupy an intermediate place in the organizational hierarchy (Schuler et al., 2023; Tarakci et al., 2023). Moreover, evidence shows the significant impact that middle-management

^{*} Corresponding author.

E-mail addresses: vguerral@ull.edu.es (V. Guerra-Lombardi), rahernan@ull.edu.es (R. Hernández-Martín), npadron@ull.edu.es (N. Padrón-Fumero).

perspective has on understanding how strategy is implemented (Knezevic Cvelbar et al., 2024; Pham et al., 2023). Furthermore, it is important to effectively address employees' perceptions, expectations, and values as crucial aspects of long-term planning, along with the priority of resilient organizations to optimise their organizational capital (Colmekcioglu et al., 2022; Filimonau et al., 2023).

Consequently, this study aims to address this literature gap and provide valuable information to this field. This paper answers the following research questions: (RQ1) What are the key practices perceived by middle-managers that are directly related to Corporate Sustainability Strategy (CSS) objectives? (RQ2) What are the implementation factors that act as drivers and/or barriers to the implementation of CSS in hotels? and (RQ3) To what extent do middle-managers perceive that the key practices are aligned with the corporate sustainability goals? By answering these questions, this study aims to contribute to the understanding of the implementation of CSS and provide guidance for the development of effective corporate in hotel companies.

2. Literature review

2.1. Sustainability concept in the hotel industry: strategy implementation context

The integration of sustainability in the hotel industry is pivotal, yielding numerous organizational benefits and prompting questions about what and how to implement. At a conceptual level, corporate sustainability is addressed with different terms, such as CSR, corporate environmental responsibility (CER), or corporate sustainable governance (CSG), more recently (González-Rodríguez et al., 2019; Holcomb et al., 2007; Khatter et al., 2019; Patwary et al., 2022), among others. However, these concepts essentially stem from the widely employed academic notion of the "triple bottom line" (TBL) (Elkington, 1994), which represents a departure from traditional profit-focused accounting paradigms by incorporating social and environmental considerations alongside the economic aspect (Antolín-López et al., 2016; Goh et al., 2020; Pan et al., 2021; Van Marrewijk, 2003). The TBL captures the complex nature of sustainability (Beusch et al., 2022; Presenza et al., 2020), contrasting it with more economic focused management strategies and grounding this broad concept in the company's operational context.

Therefore, addressing the integration of sustainability within businesses from a strategic approach is crucial and would facilitate the grounding and integration of practices at the operational level. Understanding the processes involved in strategy implementation is crucial for contextualizing the implementation of sustainability, given its inherent complexity, and would help to achieve the effective execution of the initially formulated plan (Beusch et al., 2022; Presenza et al., 2020). Strategy implementation in organizations has been a highly developed line of research and several implementation factors have been identified, such as effective communication, time management, coordination, appropriate business environment, employee commitment and participation, monitoring and evaluation, and anticipation of fortuitous events (Alexander, 1985; Miller, 1997).

Okumus (2003) offers a framework for strategy implementation by categorising the implementation process into four groups: external context, internal context, operational process, and outcome. These different areas include factors related to the uncertainty of the environment, the organizational structure, culture, and leadership, operational planning, resource allocation, people, communication, and control, in that order. Finally, the outcome dimension represents the expected and unexpected results of the process (Okumus, 2003). More recently, Prud'homme and Raymond (2016) established a conceptual framework, based on the literature, of an implementation process specifically on sustainable development practices in hotels. This framework encompasses global and specific context dimensions, which determine

the extent to which the practices are implemented; an initial decision-making stage; the implementation process, where the implementation factors act; and finally the identification of practices and their evaluation (Prud'homme and Raymond, 2016).

These frameworks (Okumus, 2003; Prud'homme and Raymond, 2016) can assist in addressing the complexities of implementing CSS in the hotel industry, when adapted to its peculiarities (Chan et al., 2018), significantly enhancing the efficiency of CSS. Understanding the implementation process of sustainability strategies becomes essential in translating sustainability concepts into business operations, facilitated by the TBL approach (Goh et al., 2020; López-Gamero et al., 2023; Pan et al., 2021). Two important considerations for this adaptation include understanding the components of a strategy implementation process—practices implemented and implementation factors—and the agents involved—stakeholders, such as middle-managers—.

2.2. Motivation for decision-making, implementation factors and sustainability practices

In order to address sustainability in hotels, there is evidence that top and executive management's motivating factors for deciding to implement it include management systems (Beusch et al., 2022), staff satisfaction (Bibi et al., 2021), training and information (Razumova et al., 2015), financial efficiency (Alzboun et al., 2016; Chan et al., 2018; Kularatne et al., 2019), market positioning (Bianco et al., 2023), availability of resources (Manninen and Huiskonen, 2022), existing or future legislation (Salem et al., 2022), stakeholders' interests (Khatter et al., 2021; Mensah, 2014; Prud'homme and Raymond, 2016) and guests' preferences (Bani-Melhem et al., 2022; Han, 2021; Lee et al., 2010; Merli et al., 2019).

Resulting from this decision to implement sustainability strategies, hotel companies develop plans with the aim of integrating sustainability into their operations strategically (Beusch et al., 2022). Nevertheless, some efforts can result in disjointed practices, while others achieve formal policies (Alzboun et al., 2016; Kularatne et al., 2019). With that in mind, it is important to consider the differences that may arise between what is proposed in the CSS and the outcome obtained. Therefore, it is imperative to gain a deeper understanding of the factors which affect the implementation, such as the organizational culture, the business brand, the corporate commitment, the staff motivation and initiative, the knowledge, training, and communication, the management support, and other external factors (Manninen and Huiskonen, 2022).

In terms of the most common sustainability practices adopted by companies, according to literature, Chan (2009) identified five primary action groups: energy, water, air, paper, and chemicals. Hsieh (2012), drawing on previous studies (Bohdanowicz, 2005; Mensah, 2006), expanded on these actions to include waste management, carbon footprint reduction, biodiversity preservation, noise pollution reduction, green building design, sustainable food practices, environmental education for staff and guests, green procurement, and environmental partnerships. Mensah (2014) found that popular green practices included using energy-saving lighting, linen and towel reuse, staff environmental training, eco-friendly cleaning products, and community support. Recent research by Khatter et al. (2019) and Prud'homme and Raymond (2016) has shown that key practices have been implemented in marketing, suppliers, sustainable jobs and benefits, assured benefits for the community and culture, education and interpretation for the community and tourists, contribution to the protection of natural zones, land use planning, and management of water, energy, transportation, greenhouse gas emissions, harmful substances and waste issues. Additionally, extensive lines of research are focused on specific sustainability practices geared towards customer behavior, such as towel reuse, water conservation, and recycling promotion (Dimara et al., 2017; Dolnicar et al., 2017, 2019; Han, 2021; Knezevic Cvelbar et al., 2024; Lee et al., 2010), among others.

However, there is a scarcity of knowledge regarding the effectiveness

and alignment with the formulated strategy of the implemented practices, which would be crucial for an appropriate operationalization of the strategy. Furthermore, there is a shortage of studies addressing both key sustainability practices and implementation factors. Therefore, this study is aimed at obtaining cross-sectional results, thus attaining a more holistic comprehension of the overall context of the sustainability strategy implementation framework.

2.3. Middle-management: strategic key players

In contemporary organizational research, an imperative exists to delve into stakeholder perceptions to discern the determinants of their engagement with environmental conservation initiatives (Khatter et al., 2021). While existing literature extensively addresses stakeholder engagement with 'green' practices, the focus predominantly gravitates towards customers (Byrd, 2007; Mathew and Sreejesh, 2017) and top and executive managers (Mensah, 2006, 2014; Scanlon, 2007; Prud'homme and Raymond, 2016; Khatter et al., 2021), with limited attention paid to lower levels employees (Knezevic Cvelbar et al., 2024; Pham et al., 2023), losing crucial operational information (Prud'homme and Raymond, 2016).

Evidence suggests that middle-managers play a pivotal role in strategy implementation (Pham et al., 2023; Schuler et al., 2023; Tarakci et al., 2023), since they are tasked with translating top-management's strategic vision into concrete actions at lower organizational levels, thus bridging the gap between strategy formulation and execution (Wilden et al., 2023). Research has consistently demonstrated the substantial influence that adopting a middle-management perspective can have on comprehending strategy implementation within organizations (Woolbridge et al., 2008). Without the involvement of middle-management, the implementation of the strategy would be rendered unfeasible. For instance, specifically in the context of sustainability, there is a potential risk of greenwashing attributable to a deficiency in the integration of strategic objectives (Majeed and Kim, 2022).

However, the precise impact of middle-managers' actions on strategy outcomes remains underexplored. Thus, further research to support effective guidance of middle-managers in strategy implementation by top-management (Christie and Tippmann, 2024) would be necessary. Therefore, by exploring sustainability strategies implementation through the perceptions of middle-managers, valuable insights could be obtained into the dynamics of strategy implementation and its impact on organizational performance, thereby informing the design of effective CSS implementation.

3. Methodology

This research is based on the case study approach, given its proven utility during the preliminary stages of research (Prezenza et al., 2020) in investigations concerning strategy integration (Manninen and Huiskenon, 2022), which has been tackled through exploratory interviews, in-depth interviews, and analysis of official documents of the analyzed company.

In this regard, the phenomenon of sustainability strategies implementation in the hotel industry is not uniform across destinations (Alzboun et al., 2016; Beusch et al., 2022; Kularatne et al., 2019). Rather, it depends largely on the leadership exhibited by certain key players, as illustrated by the hotel chain analyzed in this case study. The studied organization stands out for its strong commitment to sustainability, as evidenced by its receipt of awards, certifications, and strategic collaborations, along with its CSS implementation—internally developed and with the participation of the staff (Hotel chain, 2018)—since 2018. These attributes highlight the company's leadership in promoting and implementing sustainable practices in a successful destination, making it a relevant and illustrative case for studying the integration of sustainability strategies in the hospitality sector.

The company locally owns five hotels with almost 3000

accommodation places, ranging from three-star to five-star, displaying a profound social commitment and attachment to the destinations in which it operates. This translates into an extraordinary consciousness and dedication to its role and position within the community, demonstrating a deep-rooted commitment to the well-being and development of the local area. In connection to this, the Canary Islands is a popular coastal tourist destination in Europe. Statistics on non-resident overnight stays in tourist establishments across European regions NUTS 2 in 2019 show that the Canary Islands lead the rankings, surpassing regions like Adriatic Croatia, Catalonia, Venice, the Balearic Islands, London, and Paris (Eurostat, 2021). Moreover, in 2023 Tenerife was the tenth region, among the 1.166 European regions NUTS 3, in number of overnight stays (Eurostat, 2024). Hence, this case study stands as a prime example of sustainability integration within the hospitality sector. Consequently, the insights gleaned from this research offer valuable guidance for other stakeholders facing similar challenges in different destinations, facilitating successful implementation of sustainability strategies.

While our primary data analysis is based on the 37 in-depth interviews, during the fieldwork, several meetings and exploratory interviews were held with the ownership, management, HR and sustainability and innovation managers of the hotel group. In this way, valuable initial information was obtained to design in-depth interviews, learn about the company's operations and culture. Moreover, the consultation of documents enabled us to gain a deeper understanding of the research context. (Table 1). This valuable information significantly enhanced the depth and breadth of our case study analysis.

The sample for in-depth interviews was selected by the authors, with the support of HR and Sustainability/Innovation supervisors, based on certain criteria to ensure a diversity of viewpoints related to CSS implementation in the company and a reliable representation of all departments: Management (which includes Human Resource, Accounting, Administrative, and Sustainability/Innovation centralized, back-office areas), Food & Beverage (which encompasses Restaurant, Bar & Lounge, and Kitchen), Reception, Housekeeping, Engineering & Maintenance, and Animation & Recreation. Our selection criteria required interviewees to be from various business units, hold different job

Table I
Qualitative research strategy.

Data category	Description	Purpose for analysis
Exploratory meetings and interviews (n = 8)	Meetings with the ownership (n = 1) Exploratory interviews with the top management (n = 3) Initial interviews with HR and Sustainability/Innovation supervisors (n = 4)	Valuable initial information obtained to design the interview protocol (Appendix B) for in-depth interviews and learn about the company's operations and culture.
Documents (n = 16)	Hotel chain strategy document (n = 1) Schedule of strategy roadshow (n = 1) Hotels environmental disclosures and certifications (n = 5) Hotel chain website (n = 1) Newspaper articles (n = 5) Hotel chain internal newsletter (n = 3)	Gaining insights into the research context and validating the perceived alignment of key practices with CSS by middle-managers.
In-depth interviews (n = 37)	In-depth interviews with departments' middle-managers (n = 37) (Appendixes A and B)	Main data source used for analysis as it provided valuable insights into middle-managers' perceptions regarding the alignment of key practices with CSS, as well as the factors acting as barriers/drivers of implementation.

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positions, having a minimum of three years of tenure within the company, and not all of them had to be involved in the sustainability roadmap's development phase, thus helping to prevent bias, and making our findings more reliable.

The data presented in Table II offers a comprehensive overview of the demographic profile and key characteristics of the 37 interviewees (Appendix A), representing around 40% of the population and leading more than 1000 employees. According to company's provided statistics, males account for approximately 55% of the staff, while females make up about 45%. The average age of the middle-managers is 48 years, and their average tenure is 15 years. These statistics confirm the representativeness of the sample within the broader middle-manager population.

Interviews were conducted face-to-face and lasted between 45 and 60 minutes. One of the benefits of employing this technique is that it enables the researcher to gain a comprehensive understanding of real-life scenarios, resulting in a holistic perspective (Creswell and Creswell, 2018; Neumann, 2016). The interview questions were designed to explore participants' perceptions about the key sustainability practices implemented, the drivers and barriers to implementation, and the alignment of the results with the CSS goals. In this regard, open questions were asked about: a) the broad concept of sustainability, b) business culture, c) pandemic crisis influence, d) the CSS implemented, e) operational performance of the department, and f) the perceived alignment of the implemented practices with the corporate strategy (Appendix B).

Interviews conducted amid the pandemic recovery period for the destination (February and March 2022), marked by occupancy rates ranging from 70% to 80% (Promotur. Turismo de Islas Canarias, 2022). The COVID-19 pandemic has caused significant global changes, altering lifestyles, work dynamics, and social interactions. Inevitably reflects this unprecedented crisis. Recognizing the significance of the pandemic, we incorporated a dedicated block of questions in our interviews (Appendix B) to gather insights into the changes and impacts perceived by participants. The pandemic's impact is undeniable and ongoing. However, this makes the research conducted during this time especially valuable. It reveals significant shifts in mindset and perception, particularly regarding sustainability integration in hotels.

During the analysis phase, initial data on the company's culture, the implemented CSS, and the operations obtained from the first open interviews with the ownership, management, HR and sustainability and

Table II
Overall statistics about respondents.

Demographic variables	Characteristics	Frequency	%
Gender	Female	16	43.2
	Male	21	56.8
Age	25–35	4	10.8
	36–45	11	29.7
	46–55	16	43.2
	>56	6	16.2
	<5	7	18.9
Years of tenure with the hotel chain	6–10	6	16.2
	11–20	15	40.5
	>21	9	24.3
	<6	7	18.9
Department	Management (Human Resource)	3	8.1
	Management (Accounting)	5	13.5
	Management (Administrative)	3	8.1
	Management (Sustainability/Innovation)	2	5.4
	Food & Beverage (Restaurant)	5	13.5
	Food & Beverage (Bar & Lounge)	3	8.1
	Food & Beverage (Kitchen)	3	8.1
	Reception	4	10.8
	Housekeeping	4	10.8
	Engineering & Maintenance	3	8.1
	Animation & Recreation	2	5.4

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innovation managers were analyzed and contextualised by means of a content analysis of official documents and the public hotel chain website (Table I). Subsequently, the interviews were transcribed verbatim, coded, and analyzed. Efficient and systematic coding is imperative to extract information for this study (Bazeley and Jackson, 2007).

To complete the analysis process, a CSS implementation framework has been developed, based on Okumus (2003) and Prud'homme and Raymond (2016) frameworks of strategy implementation, to help identify the different stages and contexts of the implementation of CSS in hotels, in which key practices are performed and implementation factors influence the process (Fig. 1). The focus on the operational process, in which this type of strategy has its greatest weight, is noteworthy. Implementation factors can originate from the external or internal contexts of the company, as well as from the operational process itself. These implementation factors can act, in turn, as drivers or barriers to implementation, resulting in key practices, which may be aligned or unaligned with the original CSS goals (outcome).

Lastly, regarding the validity of the analysis, two coders independently coded the data to ensure reliability (Menter et al., 2011). The codes were then reviewed and agreed upon through an iterative process until consensus was reached. The data was organised into themes and patterns to identify the key findings (Edwards-Jones, 2014). The analysis of the interviews and their content were carried out using the qualitative data analysis software program Maxqda.

4. Findings and discussion

4.1. Factors perceived as drivers and/or barriers for CSS implementation

Analyzed by departments, perceptions of middle-managers indicate that the implementation factors act as drivers and/or barriers to CSS. Fig. 2 illustrates factors ordered by the number of departments that perceive them as drivers. From this figure, factors that act only as drivers are positive work environment, corporate commitment and support, positive staff attitudes and initiatives.

Social exchange theory (SET) (Ap, 1992) provides a useful guide for understanding the relationship between sustainability and the work environment. According to this theory, social exchanges involve the mutual exchange of resources between individuals, based on the expectation of reciprocity. In the workplace, employees may exchange their skills, time, and effort to the extent that they perceive corporate support (Vieira de Souza Meira and Hancer, 2021). In addition, when employees feel valued and supported —e.g., by means of family conciliation, such as flexible working arrangements or parental leave policies—, they are more likely to reciprocate with increased engagement, loyalty, influencing their personal attitudes and initiatives (Aust et al., 2020; Liu-Lastres et al., 2022; Muisyo et al., 2022).

Furthermore, when a CSS is prioritised and supported by top-management (corporate commitment and support), it can help create a culture of sustainability within the organization, with a positive impact on employee behavior and decision-making (Chan, 2011). In connection to this, in the case of corporate commitment to sustainability initiatives, financial motivations play a crucial role. When sustainability practices are aligned with an organization's financial goals, it becomes easier to gain support and investment from top-level management. Financial benefits, such as cost savings from energy-efficient practices or increased revenue, provide an incentive for an organization to prioritise sustainability strategies (Khatter et al., 2021).

Alternatively, detected factors which only act as barriers include lack of time, guests' behavior, and inconveniences arising from external collaboration (Fig. 3). It is worth noting that lack of time is perceived as the most significant barrier to implementing key practices. Indeed, the complexity to prioritise sustainability practices over essential job functions, which often carry a high workload, is systematically claimed in the interviews. This is specially connected to the insufficient clarity in procedures or the absence of suitable tools, among other factors.

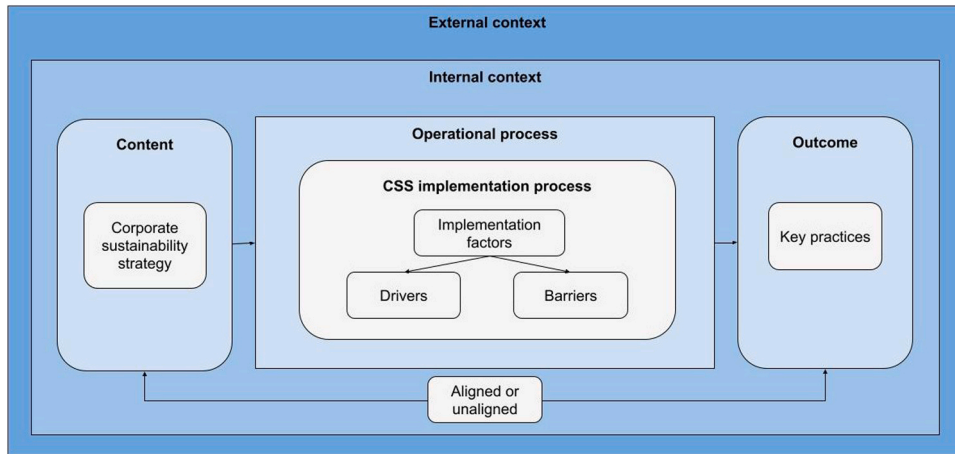


Fig. 1. Corporate sustainability strategy implementation framework. Prepared by authors and developed from Okumus (2003) and Prud'homme and Raymond (2016).

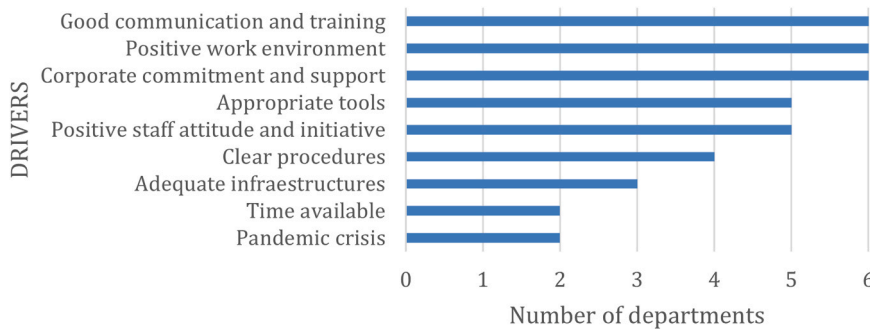


Fig. 2. Drivers in corporate sustainability strategy implementation. Prepared by authors.

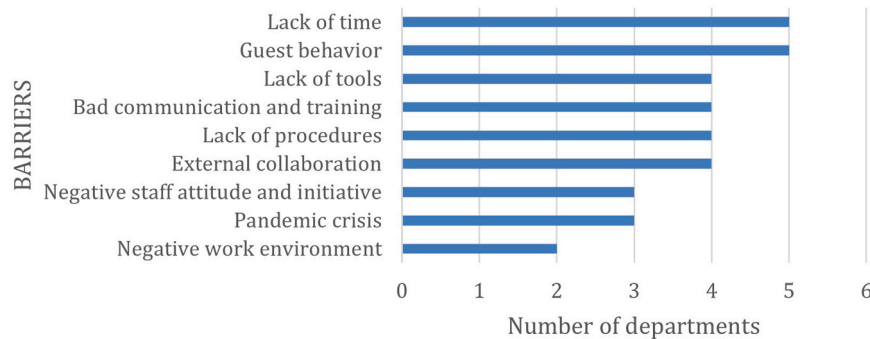


Fig. 3. Barriers to corporate sustainability strategy implementation. Prepared by authors.

Guest behavior is perceived as an important barrier to sustainability implementation. In fact, guest behaviors can undermine implementation efforts and it may be difficult to change due to its hedonic nature. For instance, hotel guests can show strong preferences for environmentally friendly hotels (Chia-Jung and Pei-Chun, 2014; Dimara et al., 2017; Laroche et al., 2001; Majeed and Kim, 2022), but this attitude can change when inconveniences and discomfort occur during their stay due to sustainability practices (Baker et al., 2014; Merli et al., 2019). In this context, evidence shows that guest behavior could be addressed by performing adequate communication (Dolnicar et al., 2017), or establishing sharing-based schemes in which customers can achieve benefits by engaging in behaviors aligned with sustainability practices (Dolnicar et al., 2019).

Collaborating with external entities not aligned with sustainability

may be incompatible with a company's sustainability goals, leading to conflicting outcomes (Chan et al., 2018). For example, partnering with suppliers not committed to initiatives like reducing paper use can create challenges during transactions. This may force adaptations to methods that oppose sustainability goals, impeding overall sustainability efforts. Despite it being perceived as a barrier, some respondents saw it as an opportunity for the company to demonstrate its leadership in sustainability, extending their brand reputation not only across the hospitality industry, but also across the supply chain throughout the destination.

As mentioned, the identified factors can serve both as significant drivers and barriers, simultaneously. These factors include communication and training, pandemic crisis, tools and proceedings, highlighting their great importance in the implementation process.

The pandemic crisis is identified both as a barrier and as a driver to

sustainability. Interviews point out that, during 2020 and 2021, it hindered sustainability efforts by disrupting supply chains and increasing the use of single-use plastics due to strict contact limitations. Many eco-friendly suppliers also left the market during this time, forcing hotels to temporarily use non-sustainable alternatives. Nonetheless, these challenges were temporary, as they decreased once restrictions eased. On the contrary, the crisis contributed to accelerate the digitalization of processes, as it precipitated a transition to remote work in departments where feasible, a change that has persisted in time.

Communication and training are perceived as key drivers for the implementation of strategies in a general context within the hospitality industry (Peng and Litteljohn, 2001; Prud'homme and Raymond, 2016), and these results show it to be equally true for sustainability strategies. In the case of activities oriented to effective communication and training, it ensures that employees understand the importance of sustainability initiatives and the actions to achieve the final goals, also promoting staff proactive attitudes and identification with the company's culture and principles. Comprehensive training equips employees with the knowledge and skills necessary to carry out sustainability practices correctly.

In connection to this, well-designed procedures, and availability of appropriate tools, result in more effective performance. When there is a lack of clarity in procedures or appropriate tools, there is a higher likelihood of misunderstandings, errors, waste of time, and inconsistencies, which can hinder the effective performance of job duties and the progress of sustainability practices (Khatter et al., 2021). Furthermore, different departments identified and prioritized different sustainability practices based on their specific functions, which led to variations in perceived relevance and alignment with CSS goals. For this reason, not only the clarity of procedures and the provision of tools is necessary, but also their adaptation to the different functions developed in the different areas of the company.

4.2. Key sustainability practices perceived and alignment with CSS

On the other hand, regarding the key practices perceived by middle-management, paper-use reduction, work wellbeing, plastic-use reduction, energy efficiency, recycling, water management, air quality, social contribution, food waste management, and green chemicals are identified. The perceptions of middle-management coincide with the practices and specific actions proposed by the CSS, which demonstrate that the strategic practices implemented by the company are acknowledged by its middle-management. This recognition serves as a foundational premise for our subsequent analysis, particularly in evaluating the extent to which these practices align with the overarching objectives of the strategy.

In relation to this, various actions are undertaken to reduce paper usage, including digitalization, paper reuse, and minimizing paper in favor of alternative materials. Actions aimed at improving work wellbeing involve offering career advancement opportunities, ensuring economic stability, and supporting family conciliation. Efforts to reduce plastic use include promoting reusable containers, minimizing single-use plastics, and incorporating alternative materials like biodegradable materials and glass. Energy efficiency actions focus on self-supply methods and improving lighting efficiency. Recycling efforts involve waste separation and material reuse. Food waste management strategies encompass improving cooking efficiency, reusing cooking oil, establishing vegetable gardens, and implementing composting projects. Additionally, water management actions aim to reduce water consumption, promote water reuse, and explore self-supply options. Lastly, social contribution initiatives involve promoting local gastronomy and supporting circular economy projects.

In Table III, key practices are contextualised by means of the perceived relevance of each one and their alignment with the CSS desired goals (outcome) by departments. In this sense, it is remarkable that not all departments identify the same practices, relevance and

Table III
Relevance and alignment of key practices with the CSS by departments.

Departments	Key practices	Perceived relevance	Alignment with CSS	
Management (Human Resource, Accounting, Administrative, and Sustainability/Innovation)	Paper-use reduction	High	Strongly aligned	
	Work wellbeing	Medium	Strongly aligned	
	Air quality	Medium	Weakly aligned	
	Plastic-use reduction	Low	Weakly aligned	
	Energy efficiency	Low	Strongly aligned	
	Recycling	Low	Strongly aligned	
	Food waste management	Low	Strongly aligned	
	Water management	Low	Strongly aligned	
	Social contribution	Low	Strongly aligned	
	Food & Beverage (Restaurant, Bar & Lounge, and Kitchen)	Plastic-use reduction	High	Strongly aligned
Food waste management		Medium	Strongly aligned	
Work wellbeing		Medium	Strongly aligned	
Energy efficiency		Medium	Strongly aligned	
Recycling		Medium	Weakly aligned	
Paper-use reduction		Medium	Weakly unaligned	
Water management		Low	Neutral	
Social contribution		Low	Neutral	
Housekeeping		Energy efficiency	High	Neutral
		Paper-use reduction	High	Strongly unaligned
	Water management	Medium	Neutral	
	Plastic-use reduction	Medium	Strongly unaligned	
	Recycling	Medium	Strongly unaligned	
	Work wellbeing	Low	Strongly aligned	
	Green chemicals	Low	Strongly aligned	
	Food waste management	Low	Strongly unaligned	
	Social contribution	Low	Strongly unaligned	
	Engineering & Maintenance	Energy efficiency	High	Strongly aligned
Water management		High	Strongly aligned	
Green chemicals		High	Strongly aligned	
Work wellbeing		High	Strongly unaligned	
Recycling		Low	Strongly aligned	
Plastic-use reduction		Low	Strongly aligned	
Social contribution		Low	Strongly aligned	
Reception		Work wellbeing	High	Strongly aligned
		Paper-use reduction	High	Neutral
		Plastic-use reduction	Low	Strongly aligned

(continued on next page)

Table III (continued)

Departments	Key practices	Perceived relevance	Alignment with CSS
Animation & Recreation	Recycling	Low	Strongly aligned
	Water management	Low	Strongly aligned
	Work wellbeing	High	Strongly aligned
	Recycling	High	Strongly aligned
	Energy efficiency	Medium	Strongly aligned
	Paper-use reduction	Medium	Strongly aligned

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Note. Low, medium, and high relevance is based on the number of perceptions obtained for each practice, as a result of the coding analysis. Additionally, five categories were obtained in accordance with the number of positive and negative perceptions among the total. Therefore, practices with a high number of positive perceptions resulted strongly aligned, followed by weakly aligned, neutral, weakly unaligned and strongly unaligned. The neutral category refers to practices with equal amounts of positive and negative perceptions.

alignment, as each department performs different functions. Recognizing the level of alignment of key practices with CSS by department is crucial to identifying areas for improvement and optimization in the implementation process.

As shown in Table III, in the Management department, practices such as paper-use reduction and work wellbeing are highly relevant and strongly aligned with the CSS. Digitalization and remote work are integrated due to its back-office nature. However, practices like air quality and plastic-use reduction exhibit weaker alignment, largely due to issues stemming from external collaboration.

In the Food & Beverage department, plastic-use reduction is highly relevant and strongly aligned with CSS goals, reflecting effective implementation. Similarly, food waste management, work wellbeing, and energy efficiency practices are moderately relevant but strongly aligned, supported by initiatives such as food waste composting projects and systematic lighting management. However, recycling and paper-use reduction are moderately relevant but weakly aligned, while water management and social contribution practices show low perceived relevance and alignment, suggesting areas for improvement considering the department's significance in these aspects.

In the Housekeeping department, energy efficiency is highly relevant but neutrally aligned with the CSS, largely due to guest behaviors in hotel rooms. However, paper-use reduction is highly relevant but strongly unaligned, underscoring a significant area for improvement, particularly in relation to the lack of digital communication tools. Water management, plastic-use reduction, and recycling are moderately relevant but strongly unaligned, and similarly, food waste management and social contribution practices are considered of low relevance and strongly unaligned, highlighting challenges in a department focused on cleaning tasks. Despite being rated low in relevance, work wellbeing and green chemicals practices demonstrate strong alignment, showing areas of success although sustainability integration challenges within the department.

The Engineering & Maintenance department perceives energy efficiency, water management, and green chemicals practices as highly relevant and strongly aligned with the CSS, as well as for recycling, plastic-use reduction, and social contribution, reflecting commendable sustainability efforts. However, work wellbeing is highly relevant but strongly unaligned, indicating a need for better recognition in a department where employees usually feel undervalued despite their high level of qualification.

In the Reception department, work wellbeing practices are highly relevant and strongly aligned with the CSS. Plastic-use reduction,

recycling, and water management practices, though rated low in relevance, show strong alignment, indicating effective implementation. However, paper-use reduction practices are highly relevant but neutral in alignment, suggesting the need for improving integration in a customer-facing department requiring digital tools to reduce paper usage.

Finally, the Animation & Recreation department perceives work wellbeing and recycling practices as highly relevant and strongly aligned, indicating effective implementation. Energy efficiency and paper-use reduction practices are moderately relevant but also strongly aligned.

The alignment of the key practices is strongly related to the implementation factors previously identified, which act as drivers and/or barriers. In this sense, a better understanding of the practices addressed within CSS, identified together with the factors that positively or negatively impact their implementation, may help to more effective sustainability strategies implementation in hotels.

5. Conclusions and implications

This study examined how middle-managers in hotels perceive CSS implementation, including key practices and their alignment with corporate goals, as well as the factors influencing the process as drivers or barriers. The analysis has been developed by interviewing middle managers from different departments of one large hotel chain in the Canary Islands.

Drawing from previous literature, a sustainability strategy implementation framework was developed to aid in understanding the implementation process. In this context, the theoretical contributions of this study are fourfold. Firstly, this paper contributes to the literature on strategy implementation by providing valuable insights into the perceptions of practices and challenges faced by middle-managers in the CSS implementation process. The development of a CSS implementation framework expands the theoretical resources for examining strategy implementation within the hotel context. This framework aids in identifying the diverse stages and contexts involved in CSS implementation in hotels, being of particular importance the operational context, where such strategies hold significant importance (Okumus, 2003; Prud'homme and Raymond, 2016).

Secondly, the Stakeholder theory (Freeman, 1984) underscores the role of stakeholders in shaping organizational outcomes (Byrd, 2007; Khatter et al., 2021; Mensah, 2014; Prud'homme and Raymond, 2016). Moreover, the Stakeholder theory is strongly connected with the Resource-Based View (RBV) (Barney, 1991), which suggests that firms vary in their strategies due to their possession of diverse resources and emphasizes the internal identification of assets, capabilities, and competencies that can yield strategic advantages. In this study, middle-managers are analyzed as primary stakeholders, due to their pivotal role in strategy implementation, and studied in relation to implementation factors, many of which are internal company resources. Therefore, this study stresses the importance of middle-managers' perspectives and calls for further research in this area (Radaelli and Sitton-Kent, 2016; Wooldridge et al., 2008).

Additionally, the study underlines the importance of guest preferences, attitudes, and behaviors, which can significantly influence the success of sustainability initiatives. Proactive engagement and communication with guests about sustainability initiatives can raise awareness, inspire behavioral changes, and enhance overall guest satisfaction and loyalty. Thus, research on influencing guest behavior (Dolnicar et al., 2019, 2017) and engaging other business stakeholders can uncover opportunities for sustainability in the tourism industry (Antolín-López et al., 2016; Byrd, 2007; Khatter et al., 2021; Mensah, 2014). In connection with this, the SET (Ap, 1992) has been useful in explaining how stakeholders may engage with collective strategies and practices to the extent that they perceive individual benefits. Future research could be conducted in this line.

Finally, this research implies a better understanding of sustainability practices in hotels through the lens of a TBL approach (Elkington, 1994), which is paramount for comprehensively considering not only economic factors, but also social and environmental aspects of the organizational strategic performance (Goh et al., 2020; Pan et al., 2021). By evaluating practices in terms of their effects on profit, people, and the planet, organizations can ensure a more holistic and responsible approach to sustainability, balancing economic growth with social equity and environmental stewardship.

Our work also has practical implications. By analyzing key practices and factors, hotels can enhance the effectiveness of CSS implementation. The role as drivers and barriers of internal factors such as communication and training, adequate tools, and effective procedures, indicates the importance of decision-making and prioritization within the process of implementing sustainability practices. Indeed, effective communication and comprehensive training programs are essential pillars, calling for clear and transparent communication channels to ensure that employees are well-informed about sustainability goals, initiatives, and their role in achieving them. Likewise, robust training programs provide employees with the necessary knowledge and skills, besides adequate tools, helping them to embrace sustainable practices in their daily tasks.

Understanding employees' perceptions and behaviors is indispensable to promote the implementation of sustainability initiatives, consequently shaping pro-environmental organizational performance (Filimonau et al., 2023; Knezevic Cvelbar et al., 2024). In this regard, our results point to the relevance of the HR department as a key player in sustainability implementation. HR plays a crucial role in fostering a culture of sustainability, attracting, and retaining employees who align with sustainability values, and providing training and support for employees to adopt sustainable practices. Recognizing HR as a strategic partner in sustainability efforts can enhance organizational commitment and ensure the long-term success and integration of sustainability principles into the company's DNA. Therefore, integrating sustainability into HR policies and practices, improving employee engagement and empowerment, and aligning recruitment and onboarding, may solidify the implementation of sustainability practices within the organization.

In addition, external factors like guest behavior and the pandemic have also been identified as both drivers and barriers within the implementation process. There are numerous strategies that hotels can use to align guest behavior more closely with their sustainability strategies, turning potential barriers into drivers of success. Evidence suggests that informing and educating customers about their sustainability efforts through in room materials and digital platforms, including incentivizing programs, providing feedback mechanisms to suggest improvements or express their appreciation, facilitating their cooperation in daily practices such as providing adequate recycling bins, can contribute to that purpose. Such strategies can complement more traditional ones such as strategic partnerships with tour operators and green certification programs.

The dual impact of the pandemic crisis exemplifies the complex nature of environmental sustainability within the hospitality industry. On one hand, the immediate need to ensure health and safety during the pandemic led to increased consumption of disposables and a step back in waste reduction efforts. On the other hand, the crisis propelled forward-thinking strategies, particularly in digitalization, which have long-term benefits for sustainability. This includes the shift towards digital check-ins and check-outs, virtual concierge services, and the use of mobile apps to manage room controls, all of which decrease the need for physical materials and reduce waste. Hotels must reevaluate their sustainability strategies to balance public health needs and long-term environmental goals. This includes revising supply chains, improving waste management for increased disposables during health crises, and investing in technologies that reduce environmental impacts. Continued emphasis on digitalization will also enhance operational efficiency and lessen environmental footprints. Recognizing the critical role of employees in crisis situations, it's essential to proactively develop their skills and

expertise to better face future challenges.

In conclusion, the pandemic has emphasized the need for the hospitality industry to adopt adaptive strategies that align with sustainability goals, including conducting risk assessments, strengthening infrastructure, and developing environmentally-conscious emergency responses. Broad sustainability efforts like reducing emissions and increasing energy efficiency are also vital for reducing climate impact and enhancing resilience. Ultimately, building climate resilience is essential for the long-term sustainability and profitability of the sector.

The analysis of key practices from each department, considering their relevance in daily actions and their alignment with the sustainability strategy, highlights room for improvement. For example, the Housekeeping department has revealed weak alignment of most practices, particularly the reduction of paper and plastic, as well as recycling. Therefore, to significantly improve the alignment of departmental practices with the hotel's overall sustainability strategy, it is crucial to enhance feedback mechanisms and adapt performance indicators adapted to each department's functions. This way, management can gain insights into the practical challenges and successes experienced on the ground.

This paper contributes valuable insights to the ongoing discourse on sustainability implementation in the hospitality industry, setting a foundation for further exploration into various contexts within the corporate sustainability strategy (CSS) implementation frameworks. While this study enriches our understanding through detailed qualitative analysis, it acknowledges a key limitation stemming from its methodology. The use of a case study approach, focusing solely on a select group of middle-managers from a single organization, might restrict the generalizability of the findings. Future research could enhance the robustness and applicability of these insights by incorporating quantitative methods, such as widespread surveys or structured questionnaires, across a broader, more diverse sample of hotels.

Funding

Work co-financed by the Canary Islands Agency for Research, Innovation and the Information Society of the Regional Ministry of Universities, Science and Innovation and Culture and by the European Social Fund Plus (ESF+) Canary Islands Integrated Operational Program 2021-2027, Axis 3 Priority Theme 74 (85%).

CRedit authorship contribution statement

Vanessa Guerra-Lombardi: Conceptualization, Data curation, Formal analysis, Investigation, Methodology, Software, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing, Funding acquisition. **Raúl Hernández-Martín:** Conceptualization, Investigation, Methodology, Project administration, Supervision, Validation, Writing – review & editing. **Noemi Padrón-Fumero:** Conceptualization, Investigation, Methodology, Project administration, Supervision, Validation, Writing – review & editing.

Appendix A. Supporting information

Supplementary data associated with this article can be found in the online version at [doi:10.1016/j.ijhm.2024.103791](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijhm.2024.103791).

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Vanessa Guerra-Lombardi is Doctoral Researcher at the Department of Applied Economics and Quantitative Methods, University of La Laguna. She holds a Degree in Tourism and a Master Degree in Human Resource Management. She is researcher of the Chair of Tourism at the University of La Laguna, and actively collaborates with the Observatory of Sustainable Tourism of the Canary Islands, member of the UN Tourism International Network of Sustainable Tourism Observatories. Her research focuses on sustainable development in the tourism industry, human resource management, green human resources, and corporate strategy development and implementation.



Raúl Hernández-Martín is Senior Lecturer of Tourism Economics at the Department of Applied Economics and Quantitative Methods, University of La Laguna. He obtained his PhD in Economics after a research stay at the University of Social Science of Toulouse. He currently holds the Chair in Tourism at the University of La Laguna. His research focuses on tourism economic impacts, tourism satellite accounts, measuring the sustainability of tourism and island tourism development and has published in *Tourism Management*, *Tourism Economics*, *Current Issues in Tourism*, or *Journal of Sustainable Tourism*.



Noemi Padrón-Fumero is Senior Lecturer of Environmental Economics at the University of La Laguna. She holds a Master Degree in Environmental Economics and Natural Resource Management from the University of Madison-Wisconsin and a PhD in Economics from Universidad Carlos III de Madrid. She has been Associate Professor at the Department of Economics in University of Pompeu Fabra in Barcelona, and visiting professor at RFF (Washington DC) and the University of Tilburg. She is director of the PhD in Tourism at the University of La Laguna. Her research focuses on environmental policy, climate change economics and tourism economics. She has published in *Environmental and Resource Economics*, or *Journal of Sustainable Tourism*.