

Sára Hegedüs / Kitti Boros / Kornélia Kiss / Zsófia Fekete-Frojimovics

Interpretation and Practice of Sustainable Tourism Among Accommodation Providers

Abstract

Even though sustainable hotel initiatives can increase guests' satisfaction, only a few studies have been conducted on operationalising sustainability. This study focuses on the interpretation of sustainability among accommodation providers and the practices they implement regarding sustainability. In-depth interviews with the managers of hotels and guesthouses are used as the qualitative method to obtain necessary data. The critical selection criterion was the appearance of sustainability in management, especially in communication. The findings show that accommodation providers associate sustainability primarily with environmental aspects, several interviewees describe themselves as “unusual”, and only a few respondents reported that they share their experiences with other service providers. An important implication of the study is that greater emphasis should be put on education and cooperation among service providers.

Keywords: sustainable tourism, responsibility, interpretation, sustainable practices, accommodation providers

1. Introduction

Although thousands of articles have addressed the sustainability of tourism over the last two decades, the sector is still a long way from achieving it (Buckley, 2012). Theories and practices are inconsistent regarding the interpretation of sustainability and the relationship between sustainability and tourism (Albrecht et al., 2021).

Tourism has faced several challenges in recent years such as over-tourism before the pandemic (Veríssimo et al., 2020) or the severe socio-economic and geopolitical impacts the sector has suffered recently (Abbas et al., 2021). Several studies (Bhaskara & Filimonau, 2021; Gössling et al., 2021) agree that the sector needs to respond to these obstacles with a greater focus on sustainability. That is why examining the theories and practices regarding the relationship between sustainability and tourism has become more critical than ever.

Interpretation of sustainability by market players and consumers plays a crucial role in how sustainability can be achieved in tourism, which is only possible through the consistency of theory and practice. In addition to definitions and associations attached to sustainability by respondents, its interpretation also means the sustainable practices they report about. Although several studies (Kularatne et al., 2019; Myung Ja & Hall, 2020) were carried out on sustainable practices in hotels or restaurants, there have been few empirical investigations into interpretation issues.

This article presents the results of the first phase of a comprehensive study examining a wide range of service providers regarding sustainability. The paper focuses on accommodation providers, whose significance also lies in the fact that, due to personal values and psycho-social factors (Ashraf et al., 2019), customers are more

Sára Hegedüs, Corresponding Author, Assistant Lecturer, Budapest Business University, Tourism Department; PhD Student, Corvinus University of Budapest, Hungary; ORCID ID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6169-6206>; e-mail: hegedus.sara@uni-bge.hu

Kitti Boros, Assistant Lecturer, Budapest Business University, Tourism Department; PhD Student, Corvinus University of Budapest, Hungary; ORCID ID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4849-3265>; e-mail: boros.kitti@uni-bge.hu

Kornélia Kiss, PhD, Associate Professor, Centre of Excellence for Visitor Economy, Head of Department, Department of Tourism, Budapest Business University, Budapest, Hungary; ORCID ID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8475-7494>; e-mail: kiss.kornelia@uni-bge.hu

Zsófia Fekete-Frojimovics, PhD, Associate Professor, Centre of Excellence for Visitor Economy, Head of Department, Department of Hospitality, Budapest Business University, Budapest, Hungary; ORCID ID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1642-6615>; e-mail: fekete-frojimovics.zsofia@uni-bge.hu

willing to use and pay for hotel services of suppliers committed to sustainability practices than of those who are not (Franco et al., 2021). Sustainable initiatives of hotels are essential tools to increase the level of guest satisfaction (Moise et al., 2021). Our research was carried out in Hungary among managers of hotels and guest houses linked to a sustainability approach. Our study seeks to answer the questions of which interpretations accommodation providers attach to sustainability (Q1) and which practices they implement regarding sustainability (Q2). To answer these research questions, we used the qualitative method to the qualitative method and conducted semi-structured, in-depth interviews. The analysis used the inductive method, considering the triangulation principle. The theoretical contribution of the research is that the interpretation of sustainability and sustainability practices need to be examined in parallel and that key sustainability opportunities identified by theory in tourism are not reflected in the understanding of accommodation providers or practice. Another notable finding is that providers feel exceptional or unusual, even from different perspectives.

2. Literature review

2.1. Sustainability, responsibility and tourism

In recent decades, it has become increasingly clear that tourism, in addition to its economic benefits, has several negative environmental and social impacts (Budeanu, 2005; Lenzen et al., 2018), although, with sustainable and holistic tourism development, the sector may also have positive impacts on nature conservation or societies and cultures (Archer et al., 2012). However, as Sharpley (2000) demonstrated, the sustainable development framework is not directly applicable to tourism.

The interpretation of sustainability in the tourism context is defined in the three-pillared framework, while tourism goals are still embedded in the approach to economic growth (Manumpil et al., 2023; Mihalic, 2020). Critical sources (Higgins-Desbiolles et al., 2019) argue that it is not even possible to put the sector on a sustainable path under the constraints of economic growth, but many researchers (Bramwell et al., 2017; Passafaro, 2020) agree that sustainable tourism is to be considered a normative orientation.

The sector has been adopting the sustainability approach too slowly, and there is a gap between theoretical approaches and practical implementation (Mihalic, 2020; Sharpley, 2020). The tourism sector is still a long way from achieving sustainability (Buckley, 2012), or as Sharpley (2020, p. 2) stated, “sustainable tourism research and policy appear to occupy a parallel universe to the practice of tourism”.

Since the beginning of the 21st century, the approach to sustainability has become more widespread, but research shows that it has been adopted too slowly. Therefore, responsible tourism has come to the fore, putting the sustainable approach into practice through action or behaviour. Although sustainable and responsible tourism originates from different conceptual frameworks and have partly different foci (Saarinen, 2021), practically sustainability means the theoretical pillars, while responsibility is identified with action and behaviour (Mihalic, 2020).

2.2. Interpretations of sustainable and responsible tourism

Despite the extensive and continuously growing literature (Zhang et al., 2022) on sustainable and responsible tourism, the contribution of the theory to practical implementation is limited (Waligo et al., 2013). One reason for this is the term “sustainable tourism” is somewhat contradictory or, according to Wheeler (2012), even paradoxical. The interpretation of the term sustainability is debated; there is currently no consensus on the meaning, neither in academia nor in practical use (Albrecht et al., 2021; Mihalic, 2016). A prime example is the ETIS system developed by the European Commission as a complex tool for destination managers to gather information and measure their performance with sustainability, which is unexpectedly slow to show sector-changing results (Font et al., 2021).

Only a few pieces of research have been undertaken in operationalising sustainability by consumers or market participants; however, how sustainability is interpreted may also influence its practical implementation. Some researchers (Mauri, 2020; Ritch, 2015) investigated the perceived meaning of sustainability in general by consumers, identifying three main topics attached to sustainability; “problems and solutions”, “individual behaviour”, and “environment ecosystem” (Mauri 2020). A recent supply-side study (Albrecht et al. 2021) focused on the concept of sustainability and its operationalisation by destination managers. It showed that the future dimension and complexity often appeared in the associations. Some respondents identified sustainability with environmental issues; however, the effects on local communities were also significant.

Tourism sustainability is to be considered (Passafaro, 2020), which means continuous quality improvement and transformation of social structures and behavioural systems towards sustainable development. However, all this is difficult for some actors in tourism to adopt; instead, the idea and criteria of being responsible provide an interpretable framework. According to Goodwin (2011), responsible tourism focuses on the activities of tourism actors and can be interpreted as a pledge to move towards sustainability. It may even be stated that without market-driven, market-driven tourism, there is no future for regulator market-driven tourism (Saarinen, 2021).

2.3. Sustainable practices

Green hospitality appeared in the literature in the mid-1990s (Melissen & Roevens, 2007), and more and more research began to address the phenomenon. The environmental impacts of tourist accommodation are substantial (Filimonau et al., 2021). Several studies point out that hotels, especially their owners and shareholders (Khatter et al., 2021), have a crucial role in sustainable tourism development. Therefore, the sustainability of these players in the sector is paramount.

In the early 2000s, three areas of sustainable tourism practices were identified: 1) energy management, 2) waste management, and 3) water conservation (Bohdanowicz, 2005; Chan et al., 2009; Li et al., 2023; Mensah, 2006). Although these sustainability practices are still paramount today, the environmental and social impacts of accommodation facilities and their efforts to minimise negative consequences are more complex.

Implementing environmental management practices contributes to ecological protection, image building, and cost-savings in accommodation (Forte, 1994; Mensah, 2006). Dodds (2008) highlighted additional benefits such as gaining a competitive advantage, customer loyalty, recognition, and employee retention. There are hotels worldwide that have recognized the importance of this and have introduced these practices in several areas, such as the housekeeping department, food and beverage production and service, laundry, guest rooms, and conference and meeting facilities. Although several hotels refrain from using green practices despite the monetary advantages, many hotel managers are reluctant to introduce green practices due to implementation costs (Tzschentke et al., 2008).

As guests become more environmentally conscious, sustainable practices at accommodation facilities are essential to increase guest satisfaction (Moise et al., 2021). Customers are also willing to pay more for sustainable hotels than those not (Franco et al., 2021) committed to sustainability. As a result, accommodation providers began introducing simple, sustainable practices such as recycling and reusing programs. This practice has been implemented on a large scale to engage program participants and raise awareness (Butler, 2008). Raising awareness amongst customers is especially important, as subjective norms significantly impact visiting intention (Ashraf et al., 2019).

Nevertheless, recent research shows that the sustainability approach (Özgit & Zhandildina, 2021) and its application are not yet conventional among tourism service providers. Although competencies for sustainability are present in the sector, sustainability practice is still challenging for companies and public institutions (Alberton et al., 2022). A difficulty for consumers and businesses regarding sustainability practices is the lack of a standardised set of criteria for eco-certifications (Bucar et al., 2019).

Summarising the theoretic foundation, it is visible that the practical and academic interpretations of sustainability are diverse (Mihalic, 2020; Sharpley, 2020). However, for long-term sustainability, it is necessary to reach a consensus in academic and practical terms (Albrecht et al., 2021). Frameworks and guidelines should be defined, followed by the practice, regularly monitored and supervised. It is essential to investigate the interpretation theories of those who manage tourism in practice to narrow the above-discussed gap between theory and practice. We conclude that examining the interpretations and practical implementation of the relationship between sustainability and tourism is essential. We based our primary research design on the above-mentioned theoretical construct.

3. Methodology

The theoretical framework of our research was provided by the interpretations and practices of sustainable and responsible tourism explored in the literature review. Our study seeks to answer the questions of which interpretations accommodation providers attach to sustainability (Q1) and which practices they implement regarding sustainability (Q2). Our exploratory research seeks a deep understanding of viewpoints, motivational and (corporate) behavioural patterns, tends to be descriptive, and focuses on the depth of experience (Daley, 2004); with all this in mind, we have considered the qualitative method suitable.

Our research focused on Hungarian accommodation providers; the primary selection criterion was the appearance of sustainability in management, especially in communication. The selection was carried out using the following method. Three key expressions (in Hungarian) were used in the browsing process: “sustainable accommodation”, “green accommodation”, and “environmentally conscious accommodation”. Then, the top ten search results were reviewed, articles (between 2019 and 2021) or an accommodation website. Most of the results were from articles and accommodation websites related to the Green Hotel Award of the Hungarian Hotels and Restaurant Association (Magyar Szállodák és Éttermek Szövetsége [MSZÉSZ], n.d.), and some results were shown on Szallas' blog.hu (Szallas.hu, 2019). The hotel search results were included in the list of Green Hotels, while smaller guest houses and eco-accommodation facilities were added to our sample as new results.

Two accommodation categories have emerged in the above search: the first includes hotels with a Green Hotel rating, and the second includes guest houses and smaller bed and breakfast facilities. In total, 30 accommodations met the above criteria, of which 14 (6 owners of guesthouses and 8 top managers of green hotels) were interviewed when we found that research had reached the saturation point. No further interviews would provide any new information.

Table 1 shows the list of interviewees (type of accommodation and position)

Table 1
Interviewees

Nr.	Accommodation type*	Interviewee position
1	Guest house	Owner
2	Guest house	Owner
3	Hotel*** and camping	Managing director
4	Hotel***** (member of an international hotel group)	Sales director
5	Guest house	Owner
6	Guest house	Owner
7	Guest house, camping and event centre	Owner
8	Hotel**** (member of an international hotel group)	Sales director
9	Hotel*****	Managing director
10	Hotel*****	Deputy director (responsible for operations)
11	Hotel*****	Sales director
12	Hotel*****superior	Managing director
13	Hotel*** (member of a Hungarian hotel chain)	Sales director
14	Guest house	Owner

Note. Source of sampling: blog.szallas.hu Green Hotel award.

The interview guide was designed according to Kallio et al. (2016). The first version of the interview guide was compiled by three researchers and tested during a pilot interview; the final version was developed based on experience gained. The semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted in October and November 2021, in Hungarian, 50-80 minutes each, and online due to the epidemic, except for one personal interview. All interviews were recorded and transcribed in Hungarian. The transcripts were inductively (Chandra & Shang, 2019) coded along the research questions, using NVivo software by two researchers individually, then with the supervision of a third researcher, ensuring one of the parameters of the validity of the research, i.e., personal triangulation. If the third researcher found inconsistencies in the coding process, they suggested, based on which the three researchers made a joint decision on the coding. We first analysed the responses to the interpretation of sustainability and then the questions on responsibility and practices using an inductive procedure.

Mind maps were implemented to interpret the results. Our mind maps (edited in Cmap software) are schematic tools that aim to reduce qualitative data and analyse themes, interconnections, and findings (Daley, 2004).

4. Results

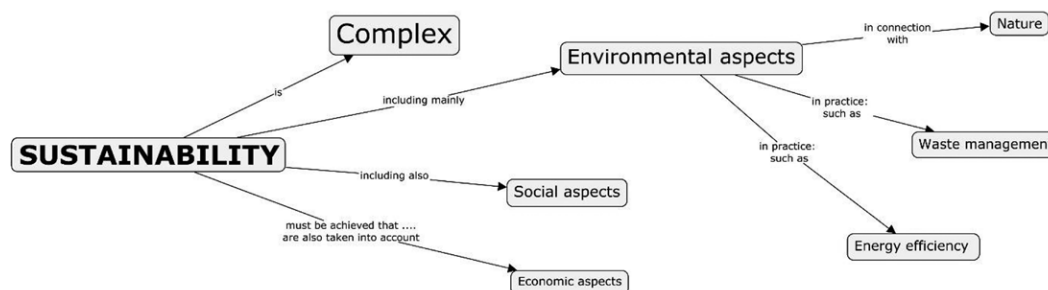
4.1. Interpretations related to sustainability

This section aims to present the interviewees' interpretations of the term sustainability. We asked them what sustainability means in general without prior explanation. Complexity concepts and next generations or future dimensions were often the first associations. A significant proportion of the interviewees displayed all three pillars of sustainability; however, a detailed interpretation of the term occurred only in two interviews.

The most typical association was the consideration of environmental aspects. In some cases, the complexity of the term was presented, besides emphasising its paramount environmental ecological elements. In other cases, social and economic factors were not even mentioned. Guest houses typically put a greater emphasis on the environmental aspect and less on the social aspect. They associate sustainability with nature and the importance of its preservation as an attraction.

When asked about specific practices, some interviewees mentioned aspects of the social dimension, such as charities. In this first part of the interview, only one respondent in the hotel segment associated sustainability with economic sustainability. Mind Map 1 (Figure 1) overviews the results detailed above.

Figure 1
Mind map of sustainability in general as interpreted by interviewees



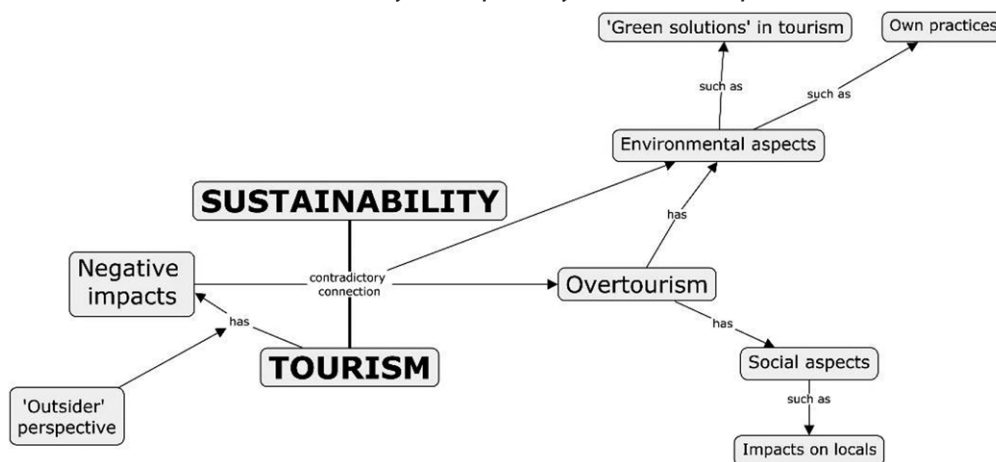
Source: Authors' editing.

Interesting patterns can be observed when examining accommodation providers' interpretations of the relationship between tourism and sustainability. Several interviewees tend to view the negative impacts of tourism from the perspective of an outsider or a non-professional, either somewhat distancing themselves from the issue or providing an opportunity to formulate solutions and good practices as counterpoints. Respondents

also noted how difficult it was to achieve sustainability in the industry. The answers regarding the relationship between tourism and sustainability were also dominated by the environmental aspect, often associated with “green solutions” in tourism or with the respondents’ sustainable practices.

Several interviewees, even in non-crowded locations, associated sustainable tourism with the phenomenon of over-tourism. The social aspects of sustainability appeared in this context, too. A striking result from the data is that only one respondent mentioned the importance of targeting nearby source markets when discussing sustainability. Mind Map 2 (Figure 2) presents the results obtained from the above analysis.

Figure 2
Connections of tourism and sustainability as interpreted by accommodation providers



Source: Authors’ editing.

Illustrative quotes representing the uncovered dimensions were collected in Table 2. The numbers after the quotations in the table are the serial numbers of the interviewees shown in column 1 in Table 1.

Table 2
Illustrative quotes – Sustainability in general and sustainable tourism

Dimension	Quote
Complexity and future	[1] <i>‘I don’t want my child and (...) all future generations to have a worse quality of life because of our irresponsible thinking (...).’</i> (#12)
	[2] <i>“Actually, for me, sustainability means that a business can be successful in the long run, (...) fitting into a social, economic and natural environment as well.”</i> (#3)
Three pillars	[3] <i>“Requirements of environmental, social and economic development should be met. So, I think sustainability means development, not growth.”</i> (#7)
	[4] <i>“The elements that were referred to as the three pillars of sustainability, namely the environmental, economic and social pillars, are intertwined (...).”</i> (#13)
Environmental aspects	[5] <i>“For me, it primarily means being close to nature and natural things that are also energy efficient.”</i> (#1)
	[6] <i>“I know it shouldn’t be limited to that, but it is always just environment protection that gets into my mind about sustainability.”</i> (#9)
Contradiction’ from ‘outsider’s perspective	[7] <i>“Unfortunately, tourism does not have a good reputation.”</i> (#2)
	[8] <i>“Tourism is one of the most polluting industries, and we know what needs to be done to make sure that it is not the first thing people associate it with.”</i> (#4)
Overtourism	[9] <i>“(...) not to overburden the destination; it is also important that the destination remains liveable for residents, too.”</i> (#8)
	[10] <i>“(...) Mountains being full (...) on some beautiful hiking days (...) has caused a lot of problems for tourists and residents alike (...).”</i> (#3)

Note. Authors’ translation. Own research sample.

4.2. Sustainability practices

Sustainability practices formed a complex pattern for both types of accommodation. Consistent with the sustainability interpretations, energy efficiency and waste management were the two most frequently mentioned areas. Practices introduced in the field of F&B and procurement, however, have been given almost the same emphasis, which enriches our knowledge of the accommodation providers' attitude to sustainability compared to the information gained through their interpretations.

Almost all respondents mentioned the category of energy efficiency. The most significant solution was the solar panel or collector, but other engineering solutions or the insulation of buildings were mentioned several times, too. Some respondents also emphasised the economic significance of these practices, mainly due to the uncertainty of energy prices.

Aspects of construction, insulation, and engineering solutions are usually considered more often by guest houses than hotels. This presumably is also because our interviewees were the owners, obviously fully involved in these processes, while in the case of hotels, interviews were chiefly conducted with employees.

Selective waste collection was the most frequently mentioned waste management practice; only two interviews didn't say it. Composting is also managed by half of the accommodation providers, and some mentioned waste prevention or minimisation, too. While some respondents don't aim to educate guests, others specifically seek to involve guests in sustainable waste management practices.

Practices introduced in the field of F&B also appeared in most interviews. The issue of food waste has been a "hot topic", primarily concerning its prevention. In addition to listing their already applied practices, interviewees often stated that finding a solution to this problem was difficult, especially in hotels. Another accommodation provider mentioned one of the good practices of a rural family hotel aimed at educating children about food waste as a best practice.

The issue of procurement is often intertwined with the F&B area as most accommodation establishments try to source raw materials, at least in part, from local producers and suppliers. The rate of mentioning this was higher in the case of hotels, but some guesthouses do not offer meals. Hotel professionals have also reported difficulties in this area: the prices of food produced by local producers are often higher than those of large suppliers, and the quantity is insufficient, too. It is surprisingly common in both categories to use their own vegetable or spice garden to educate guests.

Difficulties with sustainability practices were reported more frequently by hotel experts than by owners of guest houses. In the case of hotels, the decision between economic considerations and the other two aspects of sustainability is the most difficult to make.

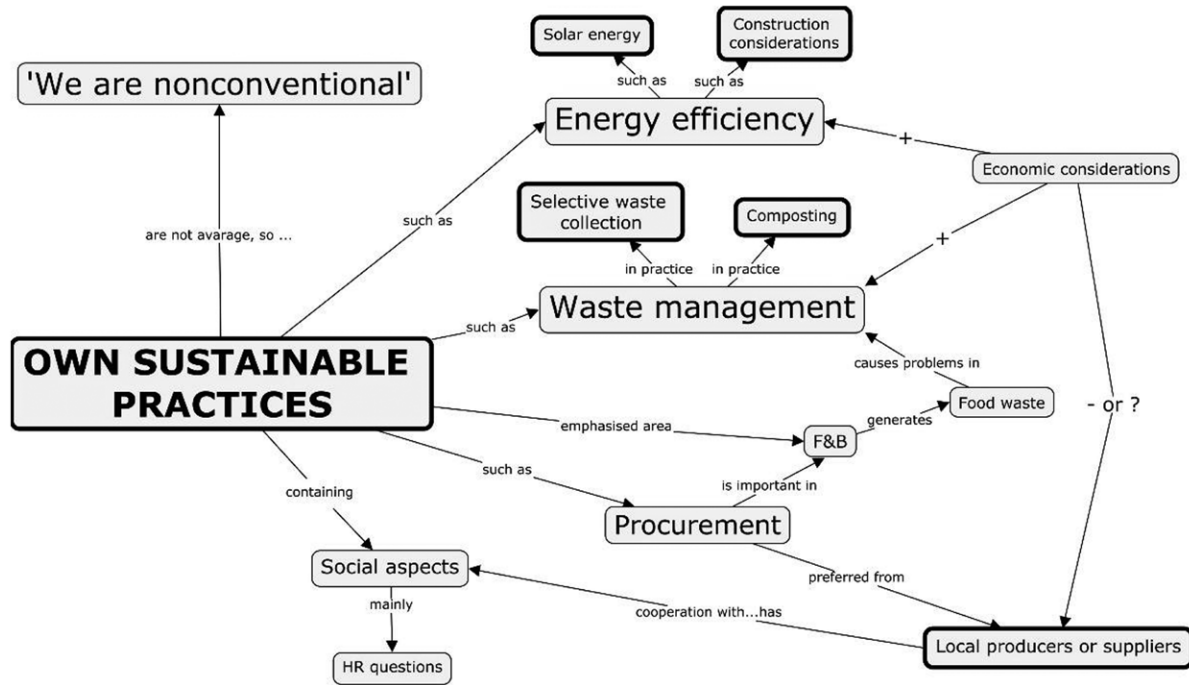
Guest houses consider sustainability a personal commitment; thus, failing to green their services can cause frustration. Some respondents reported feeling alone with the problem and not getting the necessary information to solve specific practical issues.

The social aspects of sustainability were present only to a small extent in the interpretations. Practices aimed explicitly at social sustainability include charity actions and team-building programs with a positive social impact; however, most interviewees talked only about the responsibility for their employees. An interviewee highlighted that a sustainable approach can support employee engagement and loyalty.

Purchases from local suppliers and producers have arisen primarily in the context of environmental protection, but of course, the support of local businesses is also socially relevant. Besides sourcing raw materials locally, some accommodation providers emphasize helping handicrafts or products from local producers to market.

The results obtained from the analysis above are presented in Mind Map 3 (Figure 3); the main dimensions are illustrated by quotes in Table 3.

Figure 3
Sustainable practices presented by the accommodation providers



Source: Authors' editing.

Table 3
Illustrative quotes – Sustainability practices

Dimension	Quote
Energy efficiency	[1] "There's a significant thing about energy use here, right? They say that the price of electricity will increase. These are all worth considering. We also use several alternative heating solutions and thus protect the (...) environment (...)." (#7)
Waste management	[2] "We collect garbage selectively, not only as a service provider, but we also try to encourage guests to do so." (#12)
	[3] "We won't trouble the guests with this, (...) we make the selection of waste afterwards." (#9)
Food & beverage	[4] "Buffet breakfast and dinner produce a high volume of plate waste, not a good service from an environmental point of view, and we haven't been able to find a solution for this problem on our own." (#9)
	[5] "We could still improve our food management, (...)." (#8)
Local producers or suppliers	[1] "We strive for that, but we order not only locally. There is a powerful struggle here between economic aspects and environmental awareness." (#9)
	[2] "We also wanted to buy from local producers, but (...) it is quite a challenge." (#11)
Social aspects	[8] "Now we've gotten to the point where it's worth it for an employee to work at a place like this." (#6)
	[9] "I would like to emphasise social responsibility. We provide value to our guests by buying as many high-quality products as possible from local suppliers. Thus, we try to promote the products of local producers (...). Guests (...) get an experience they wouldn't get anywhere else." (#3)

Note. Authors' translation. Own research sample.

5. Discussion and conclusions

Our research aims to answer the questions of which interpretations managers of hotels and guest houses attach to sustainability (Q1) and which practices they implement regarding sustainability (Q2).

The general interpretation (Q1) of sustainability by accommodation providers focuses primarily on environmental aspects, which is also in line with the literature (Albrecht et al., 2021). The respondents, similarly, to the neighbouring Austrian destination experts in the research of Albrecht et al. (2021), started from less detailed, much rather superficial interpretations, which often contained the three-pillar approach (Wall, 2019). The two most highlighted areas were energy efficiency and waste management. Respondents consider sustainability a complex concept, and its contradictory tourism relationship supports the findings in the literature (Waligo et al., 2013; Wheeler, 2012). In the literature, over-tourism was often mentioned (Veríssimo et al., 2020) in relation to sustainable tourism. Although the literature revealed that a significant proportion of the ecological impact of tourism comes from transport (Lenzen et al., 2018), the interviews did not raise the importance of targeting nearby source markets. This means that crucial sustainability opportunities in tourism identified by theory do not appear in accommodation providers' interpretations or practices.

Sustainability practices (Q2) presented in the interviews can be considered the second level or the dimension of sustainability interpretations. This partly rhymes with their interpretive patterns and contradicts other topics, such as the issue of local procurement. The most critical areas of sustainable tourism practices mentioned by the respondents were energy and waste management. Practices of these two areas and water management have often been investigated as research topics in this field since the 2000s (Bohdanowicz, 2005; Chan et al., 2009; Li et al., 2023; Mensah, 2006). Procurement practices, especially in F&B, was also an important area that complemented theoretical interpretations.

Several interviews have demonstrated the importance of the personal commitment of managers or owners in terms of sustainability, supporting the results of previous studies (Haldorai et al., 2022). Only very few interviewees mentioned cooperation or exchange of experience and best practices among service providers, and some respondents reported feeling alone and not getting enough information about how others are doing it. One of the issues that emerges from these findings is that sharing experience, the discourse between service providers using sustainability practices, could help spread good sustainability practices and reinforce the feeling that "they are not alone".

In summary, while the need to reconcile the environmental, social, and economic pillars is reflected in the interpretative dimension, sustainability is primarily identified with the environmental dimension. Although the literature adopts a three-pronged approach to sustainability, the dominance of the environmental pillar is observed in the service industry when reporting on their practices. Economic considerations override socio-environmental considerations in operations. The theoretical contribution of the research findings is that interpretation and practice cannot be separated when examining sustainability. Another noteworthy finding is that sustainable service providers often feel exceptional, unusual, or out of the ordinary, even in different ways. This is also due to the lack of exchange of ideas or best practices between these accommodation providers.

6. Implication and limitations

An important practical implication of the study is that educating service providers (from professional schools to senior employees) and consumers is crucial, in line with Abbas et al. (2021) research findings. Cooperation between service providers and local enterprises (food, handicrafts, etc.) and sharing good practices would also be essential concerning the results of this research.

Our research used a qualitative method and conducted interviews with accommodation providers who are already committed to sustainability. Further research should investigate what interpretations exist and which sustainability practices are being implemented by service providers who do not have a commitment to sustainability or do not communicate it. In this research project's next phase, other service providers, such as restaurants and tour operators, will also be included.

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