SUSTAINABILITY IN THE ITALIAN HOSPITALITY INDUSTRY: CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES

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ABSTRACT

The hospitality industry has recently identified sustainability as a key priority, driven by increasing consumer demand, regulatory requirements, and the long-term benefits of responsible tourism. Hotels worldwide are implementing environmental, social, and economic sustainability measures, yet many face challenges in fully integrating these principles into their business strategies. This study aims to address this gap by examining sustainable practices in Italian hotels, with a focus on the extent of adoption, the barriers encountered, and the opportunities for growth. A qualitative research approach was adopted, involving the conduction of semi-structured interviews with managers of five hotels located in different regions of Italy. The findings reveal a strong awareness of sustainability, with hotels adopting initiatives such as energy-efficient technologies, waste reduction programs, and partnerships with local communities. However, the analysis also uncovers several constraints that impede the full implementation of these practices. These include financial constraints, bureaucratic complexities, and a lack of institutional support. While some hotels leverage sustainability as a key differentiator in a competitive market, others struggle to justify the upfront investment costs. The study emphasises the necessity for targeted financial incentives, comprehensive staff training, and more accessible sustainability certification frameworks to facilitate widespread adoption. Future research should explore consumer perceptions of sustainable hospitality and assess the long-term economic impact of sustainability initiatives in the tourism sector.

Keywords: Sustainability, Hospitality Industry, Environmental Practices, Social Sustainability, Economic Sustainability, Sustainability Barriers, Green Technologies.

INTRODUCTION

The concept of sustainability has evolved into a pivotal aspect of the contemporary hospitality industry, exerting a significant influence on operational decisions, customer preferences, and the long-term viability of businesses. The heightened awareness of climate change, resource depletion, and the

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social implications of tourism has exerted mounting pressure on hotels to adopt sustainable practices (Legrand *et al.*, 2022; Mbasera *et al.*, 2016; Shahzad *et al.*, 2024; Yasmeen *et al.*, 2024). The hospitality industry accounts for a considerable proportion of global energy consumption and waste production, positioning it as a pivotal sector for sustainability transformations (Gössling and Peeters, 2015; Legrand *et al.*, 2022). The transition towards more sustainable models is not merely an environmental necessity but also a response to evolving market expectations, where travellers are more inclined to choose accommodations that align with their values (Li *et al.*, 2024, 2021; Warren at al., 2018).

Italy, as one of the world's most visited countries, presents unique challenges in the implementation of sustainability initiatives. The tourism sector plays a crucial role in the national economy, contributing approximately 10% to GDP (Coscarello and Manella, 2024). However, the rapid expansion of tourism has given rise to concerns regarding its environmental and social impact, particularly in culturally and ecologically sensitive areas. Many Italian hotels, particularly small and family-owned establishments, recognise the importance of sustainability but struggle to adopt structured sustainability programmes due to financial and regulatory barriers (Ruhanen *et al.*, 2015; Smith *et al.*, 2022).

Given this theoretical framework, the following study aims to explore how sustainability is perceived and implemented within the Italian hospitality sector, focusing on the environmental, social, and economic dimensions. Through a qualitative analysis of semi-structured interviews with hotel managers, the research seeks to understand the motivations behind sustainability adoption, the barriers encountered, and the potential benefits of sustainable business practices. The study also investigates the role of sustainability certifications – such as the ISO 21401 – in influencing industry standards and the extent to which regulatory frameworks support sustainability transitions. The results provide valuable insights for hoteliers, policymakers, and industry stakeholders striving to enhance the sustainability of Italy's hospitality sector.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Environmental Sustainability and Technological Innovation

The hospitality industry has become increasingly cognizant of its environmental impact, with the sector now being recognised as a significant contributor to energy consumption, water usage, and waste production (Gössling and Peeters, 2015; Legrand *et al.*, 2022). The transition towards more environmentally sustainable operations is not merely an ethical imperative but also a strategic business decision, as environmentally conscious travellers increasingly prefer accommodations that are environmentally sustainable (Legrand *et al.*, 2022; Mihalic, 2016; Mishra and Kumar, 2024).

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Technological innovation is among the most impactful measures in this regard, playing a critical role in enhancing energy efficiency, reducing waste, and optimising resource management (Kholijah, 2024).

However, energy consumption continues to be a predominant environmental concern for the hotel sector. According to recent studies, the hospitality sector accounts for nearly 1% of global carbon emissions, with a significant share derived from electricity and heating needs (UNWTO, 2023). The integration of renewable energy sources such as solar panels, geothermal heating, and wind power has been widely advocated as a sustainable solution (Kholijah, 2024; Legrand *et al.*, 2022). A notable example is the adoption of solar energy in numerous Italian hotels, particularly in coastal and rural regions (Mejjad *et al.*, 2022). Nonetheless, the integration of solar energy has been gradual, primarily due to the substantial initial investment costs and the necessity for government incentives (VDA Group, 2022).

The development of smart energy management systems has also been a key factor in optimising electricity use. IoT-based solutions, including motion-sensor lighting and intelligent climate control systems, are gaining popularity in high-end and eco-certified hotels (Gössling and Peeters, 2015; Legrand *et al.*, 2022). These innovations contribute significantly to energy savings, with studies indicating that smart thermostats alone can reduce heating and cooling costs by up to 30% (Gössling and Peeters, 2015). However, the adoption of these technologies remains uneven, as many small and mid-sized hotels struggle to justify the upfront costs without clear long-term financial returns (Ruhanen *et al.*, 2015; Smith *et al.*, 2022).

Another critical aspect of environmental sustainability is waste reduction. A significant number of hotels have phased out single-use plastics, opting for alternatives such as biodegradable packaging, reusable water bottles, and bulk dispensers for toiletries (UNEP, 2022). While these measures align with global efforts to eliminate plastic pollution, compliance remains inconsistent, with some hotels implementing these practices solely to meet regulatory requirements rather than as part of a long-term sustainability strategy (Calisto *et al.*, 2021; Khatter, 2023).

Technologies aimed at conserving water have also gained traction, particularly in Mediterranean countries facing seasonal water shortages (UNEP, 2022). The adoption of advanced filtration systems, water recycling programmes, and low-flow fixtures is becoming increasingly prevalent in eco-conscious hotels (Gössling and Peeters, 2015). Nevertheless, a significant challenge persists: many hotels lack the necessary infrastructure and technical expertise to implement comprehensive water management systems (Legrand *et al.*, 2022).

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Social Sustainability and Community Engagement

The concept of social sustainability in the hospitality industry encompasses a wide range of factors, extending beyond the reduction of environmental impacts to the fostering of positive relationships with local communities, the assurance of fair labour practices, and the promotion of cultural preservation (Elbelehy and Crispim, 2024; Zientara *et al.*, 2025). Furthermore, integrating community-based tourism initiatives and ethical business practices has been recognised as a means of enhancing both brand reputation and social equity (Dangi and Petrick, 2021).

Hotels, as key players in the tourism sector, assume a pivotal role in shaping local economies. By sourcing food, crafts, and services from local providers, hotels contribute to the redistribution of economic resources and support regional development (Bozzato, 2021). A significant number of Italian hotels, particularly those located in rural areas, have established partnerships with local farmers, wineries, and artisans. This ensures that guests experience authentic regional offerings while supporting local businesses (Mejjad *et al.*, 2022). This practice is not only conducive to sustainability, but also aligns with changing consumer preferences, as contemporary travellers increasingly seek cultural authenticity in their accommodations (Gössling and Peeters, 2015).

Another salient dimension of social sustainability is that of fair employment practices. The provision of ethical labour conditions, including fair wages, worker training programmes, and diversity in hiring, has been demonstrated to contribute to higher job satisfaction and reduced staff turnover rates (Legrand *et al.*, 2022). However, many hotels face challenges in balancing fair wages with profitability, particularly in highly seasonal destinations where fluctuating demand complicates workforce planning (Sheoran, 2025).

Cultural sustainability is a particularly salient issue in Italy, where many hotels are located within historical buildings or UNESCO-listed sites. The *Albergo Diffuso* model, which was pioneered in Italy, is a prime example of how hotels can integrate cultural preservation into their business model. This decentralised hospitality concept involves the transformation of existing historical buildings into guest accommodations, thereby reducing the environmental impact of new construction while revitalising rural and depopulated areas (Bozzato, 2021).

However, despite the numerous benefits of heritage-based hospitality, it is important to acknowledge the structural challenges that are often associated with this practice. Maintaining historical buildings requires significant investments in restoration, and hoteliers often struggle with restrictive building regulations that limit sustainability upgrades such as solar panel installations (Legrand *et al.*, 2022).

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Economic Sustainability and Competitive Advantage

The concept of economic sustainability in the hospitality industry pertains to the capacity of business entities to maintain financial viability while implementing sustainability initiatives (Khatter, 2023). There is a widespread perception among hoteliers that sustainability is an additional expense (Chan, 2021). However, a growing body of evidence shows that sustainable operations can result in long-term profitability and competitive advantage (Khatter, 2023; Knoppen and Knight, 2022).

The adoption of sustainable practices can result in cost savings, primarily through the reduction of energy consumption, waste, and water usage. More precisely, hotels which invest in energy-efficient appliances, LED lighting, and smart thermostats can reduce their operational costs by up to 20% per year (Menegaki, 2024). Furthermore, hotels often attract loyal customers willing to pay a premium, as travellers become increasingly aware of their environmental impact (Li *et al.*, 2024, 2021; Warren at al., 2018).

Luxury hotel brands have been particularly successful in marketing their sustainability initiatives, integrating green certifications and eco-conscious branding into their business strategies (Legrand *et al.*, 2022). However, the absence of immediate financial returns continues to act as a significant impediment to investment in sustainability measures for small and independent hotels. Financial constraints continue to be a primary obstacle to sustainability adoption, particularly for smaller hospitality businesses (Bozzato, 2021; Khatter, 2023), with managers expressing their reluctance to invest in sustainability certifications such as ISO 21401 due to high certification costs and administrative complexity (de Paula *et al.*, 2021). While governments and industry associations can play a crucial role in offering financial incentives, such support remains fragmented and inconsistently applied across regions, as evidenced by the case of Italy (Legrand *et al.*, 2022). In particular, the utilisation of public-private partnerships and green financing programmes has been posited as a potential catalyst for enhancing sustainability adoption, through mechanisms such as the provision of low-interest loans or tax reductions for hotels undertaking investments in energy efficiency and waste reduction initiatives (UNWTO, 2023). Absent such measures, sustainability risks remaining the preserve of high-end hotels rather than becoming an industry-wide standard.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative research design based on a multiple case study approach, allowing for a comprehensive understanding of sustainability practices in the Italian hospitality sector (Yin, 2009).

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This method is particularly suited to studying real-world applications of sustainability initiatives and their effectiveness in influencing consumer behavior (Tisdell *et al.*, 2025).

The primary method of data collection consisted of semi-structured interviews with hotel managers, allowing for an in-depth understanding of their perspectives on sustainability, the challenges they face, and the strategies they implement. This allowed to capture detailed, experience-based insights that quantitative surveys might overlook (Tisdell *et al.*, 2025). Interviews were conducted with managers from five hotels located in three different regions of Italy (i.e., Abruzzo, Marche, and Emilia-Romagna), ensuring a diverse sample in terms of geographic location, hotel size, and level of sustainability engagement (Hays and McKibben, 2021). Participants were selected using purposive sampling technique, prioritizing hotels that had either implemented sustainability initiatives or had expressed interest in doing so. Each interview lasted approximately 45 to 60 minutes and followed a flexible structure, allowing respondents to elaborate on key themes while ensuring consistency across interviews. The questions covered areas such as environmental management practices, community engagement, economic sustainability strategies, and perceived barriers to sustainability adoption.

The collected data were transcribed and analyzed using a Grounded Theory approach (Holt *et al.*, 2022), allowing themes and patterns to emerge organically from the interview responses. The analysis followed three key stages: open coding, where initial themes were identified; axial coding, where relationships between themes were established; and selective coding, where the findings were synthesized into a comprehensive framework. This process ensured that the analysis remained data-driven and reflective of participants' lived experiences.

RESULTS

The results of this study provide an in-depth understanding of the sustainability practices implemented in Italian hotels, the motivations behind these efforts, and the barriers encountered. Through the analysis of five interviews with hotel managers, three major themes emerged: environmental sustainability initiatives, social sustainability efforts, and economic considerations and challenges. While all hotels expressed an interest in sustainability, the degree of implementation and the perceived importance of sustainability varied significantly across the cases.

This heterogeneity aligns with previous findings in the literature (e.g., Legrand et al., 2022; Ruhanen et al., 2015), which highlight the variability in sustainability adoption based on hotel size, location, and available financial resources.

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Environmental Sustainability Initiatives

A salient finding of this study is the heterogeneity in the degree to which hotels integrate environmental sustainability into their operations. All five hotels interviewed had implemented at least some form of environmental sustainability initiative, but the scope and impact of these measures differed significantly depending on the hotel's size, location, and available resources.

Several hotels reported investments in energy-efficient systems, including LED lighting, motion sensors for climate control, and smart thermostats to optimise energy consumption. These findings are consistent with the broader literature, which underscores the role of technological innovation in reducing environmental footprints in hospitality (Kholijah, 2024; Gössling and Peeters, 2015). Furthermore, a select number of high-end establishments have gone a step further by integrating renewable energy sources, such as solar panels and geothermal heating, into their operations. However, managers of smaller hotels emphasised the high upfront costs of these technologies as a significant impediment to further implementation, reflecting concerns reported in earlier studies about the economic feasibility of such investments for SMEs (Smith et al., 2022; Calisto et al., 2021).

Another significant sustainability measure that has been adopted by the hotel industry is the management of waste and the reduction of plastic usage. Numerous hotels have replaced single-use plastics with biodegradable or reusable alternatives, particularly in guest rooms and food services. This aligns with global trends promoted by environmental policy and industry initiatives, as described by UNEP (2022) and Calisto et al. (2021). A number of hotel managers have reported a favourable response from guests, with some guests even explicitly choosing their hotel based on its environmental commitment. However, a few managers also expressed concerns about guest compliance, as some visitors still preferred the convenience of single-use products.

A further area of focus pertained to water conservation. Hotels in coastal and southern regions of Italy, where water scarcity is a growing issue, have implemented low-flow fixtures, water recycling systems, and rainwater collection tanks. However, several managers highlighted the challenge of upgrading plumbing systems in older buildings, which made it difficult to install the latest water-saving technologies.

Social Sustainability and Community Engagement

The practice of social sustainability was particularly evident in hotels that placed emphasis on the promotion of local economic development and the fostering of community engagement. A recurrent

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strategy among the interviewed hotels was the utilisation of locally sourced food and products, with some establishments entering partnerships with neighbouring farms and vineyards to provide organic and seasonal offerings. It was observed by hotel managers that this approach yielded benefits for the local economy and enhanced the guest experience by providing a more authentic and sustainable stay. One hotel had gone a step further by collaborating with local artisans to decorate guest rooms with handmade furniture and artwork, ensuring that the hotel reflected the regional culture. The adopted startegies supports the findings of both Dangi and Petrick (2021) and Elbelehy and Crispim (2024), who argue that community-based partnerships enhance both social equity and brand value.

The issue of employee welfare was identified as a key component of social sustainability. All of the hotels had introduced staff training programmes with a focus on sustainability education, ensuring that employees were aware of the importance of resource conservation and responsible waste management. A select few hotels have also been proactive in promoting fair labour practices, offering competitive wages and investing in employee well-being programmes. This echoes the conclusions of Legrand et al. (2022) and Zientara et al. (2025), who highlight the importance of internal sustainability and fair employment in improving staff retention and job satisfaction. However, smaller hotels found it more difficult to match the wages and benefits offered by larger chains, which sometimes led to high staff turnover rates.

An interesting aspect of social sustainability was guest involvement in sustainability initiatives. One hotel had introduced an eco-conscious rewards programme, where guests could earn discounts for choosing eco-friendly options, such as reusing towels and linens or participating in local environmental activities like beach cleanups. The response to such programmes was mixed, with guests displaying a range of reactions, from high enthusiasm to indifference, thus reflecting the ambivalence reported in literature on consumer-driven sustainability, which suggests a gap between attitudes and actual behaviours (Warren et al., 2018). As a result, hotels must find more effective ways to communicate the value of sustainability to their clientele.

Economic Considerations and Challenges

Whilst sustainability was widely recognised as beneficial in the long run, the financial burden of implementing green practices was a recurring theme across the interviews. The most significant challenges identified were high investment costs, uncertain returns, and inconsistent government support, thus confirming earlier analyses (Chan, 2021; Khatter, 2023), which highlight how perceptions of high costs remain a primary deterrent to sustainability investment.

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Some hotels, particularly those with a strong brand identity linked to sustainability, were able to leverage their environmental and social efforts as a competitive advantage. These hotels proactively marketed their eco-friendly policies and found that travellers who prioritised sustainability were willing to pay premium rates. This finding is consistent with Knoppen and Knight (2022), who argue that "born sustainable firms" often outperform competitors through dynamic capabilities. However, smaller and mid-sized hotels often lacked the marketing resources to effectively communicate their sustainability efforts. It was further noted by several managers that while eco-friendly measures had indeed been adopted, there was a struggle to highlight these practices in a manner that would resonate with potential customers.

A further significant concern pertained to the financial implications of sustainability certifications, considering the whole process too complex and expensive. Concerns about certification complexity mirror observations by de Paula et al. (2021), who note that administrative burdens can deter smaller players from seeking formal recognition.

Furthermore, the implementation of sustainability practices on a daily operational basis was identified as a significant challenge faced by many hotels. For instance, several managers highlighted the challenge of effective waste separation, citing guests' reluctance to adhere to recycling guidelines as a significant concern. Furthermore, the absence of reliable suppliers for sustainable goods, particularly in more remote areas, was identified as a significant challenge.

CONCLUSION

This study underscores the mounting significance of sustainability in the Italian hospitality sector, unveiling both encouraging advancements and entrenched challenges. The findings indicate that while many hotels have embraced sustainability initiatives, their implementation remains uneven due to financial constraints, operational challenges, and varying levels of institutional support.

A leading finding of the research is the heterogeneity in sustainability approaches across different hotel types. Luxury hotels, with their greater financial resources, are more likely to invest in high-tech sustainability solutions, such as renewable energy sources, smart energy management systems, and internationally recognised certifications like ISO 21401. These hotels also have well-structured guest education programmes, ensuring that sustainability is integrated into the overall customer experience. In contrast, boutique hotels and family-run establishments prioritise cultural sustainability and community engagement, emphasising local sourcing, artisan partnerships, and heritage conservation. However, these smaller hotels often face significant funding limitations, which restricts their ability to

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adopt large-scale sustainability initiatives. Rural and family-owned hotels encounter the most significant challenges due to their geographical isolation from major supply chains, which hinders the procurement of sustainable products and services. Furthermore, many of these hotels lack the marketing resources necessary to effectively communicate their sustainability efforts to a broader audience.

Notwithstanding the differences, the study identifies common sustainability barriers across all hotel types. The high initial costs of sustainable technologies, such as solar panels and energy-efficient infrastructure, are a significant deterrent. Furthermore, while sustainability certifications can enhance credibility, their complex application processes and high fees act as significant disincentives for many hotels. Government incentives and financial support programmes do exist, but they are often inconsistent, bureaucratic, or difficult to access, thus limiting their impact.

Another key challenge pertains to the operational aspect of sustainability, particularly in areas such as waste management and guest compliance. It has been reported that frustration has been expressed by several hotel managers regarding a lack of guest participation in eco-friendly initiatives, such as recycling programs and water conservation measures. This finding suggests that sustainability efforts should not be limited to back-end operations but should also include effective communication strategies that educate and engage guests in sustainable behaviours.

From an economic perspective, while some hotels successfully market their green credentials to attract eco-conscious travellers willing to pay premium rates, others struggle to translate sustainability into a clear competitive advantage. This disparity is particularly pronounced in smaller and mid-sized hotels, where sustainability initiatives are frequently perceived as a supplementary expense rather than a strategic investment.

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