

An Examination of the Sustainable and Green Practices of Portuguese Hotels

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Abstract: The concept of sustainability in the hospitality and hotel industry has been the topic of much discussion and debate in tourism and leisure management literature over the last decade. Key industry stakeholders including hospitality and hotel operators, policymakers and DMO's have been tasked with the challenge of transitioning operations towards more heightened levels of sustainable practice which has stemmed from EU, national and local level policies and guidelines. In Portugal, several strategies and plans have been developed with the aim of improving sustainable practices in hospitality and hotel industry, which focus on developing a more sustainable, competitive, and resilient sector moving into the future. However, there exists a current gap in knowledge in relation to the adoption and utilization of effective tools and models to measure and monitor sustainability performance in the hospitality and hotel industry in Portugal. It has been acknowledged that GDP from tourism in Portugal experienced a 75% drop, with overnight tourist stays in Portugal decreasing to 60% following a period of disproportionate impacts experienced during the COVID-19 pandemic. Such shortfalls have accentuated the need to effectively measure and monitor sustainability performance moving into the future as destinations now begin to re-emerge and re-imagine the way they operate. Through the adoption and utilisation of sustainable approaches and practices, the hospitality and hotel industry in Portugal could save costs in the short and longer term, they could benchmark success year on year and ultimately lead to the development of more sustainable and competitive industries moving forward. This research, while in its early stages, will aim to critically examine what, if any, sustainable and green practices are being adopted and implemented at present by Portuguese hotels. It will also permit an insight into whether or not Portuguese hotels are currently measuring and monitoring sustainability performance and looking to achieve greater levels of sustainability within the industry.

Keywords: sustainable practices, green practices, hospitality industry, Portugal, COVID-19

1. Introduction

Over the last decade, several tourism and hospitality management studies have focused on the need to sustainably develop and manage the industry as a result of continued growth and increasing environmental concern arising from such growth (Legrand *et al.*, 2013; Kasim, 2015; Melissen and Sauer, 2018). As tourism numbers continue to grow, so does the demand for hotels and their facilities, what can create intense pressures on destinations and increases concerns in relation to the overuse and shortage of resources (UNWTO, 2011; Lavanya and Jeyakumar, 2019). This is the case in Portugal where in 2022 are expected over 1500 new 4 and 5 star hotel rooms just in Lisbon (Milheiro, 2022). Therefore, for hotels to minimise any negative impacts while still maintain integrity and ensuring positive customer experiences, it is essential that a sustainable management system is adopted and implemented (Kasim, 2015; Alameeri *et al.*, 2018). Through an effective sustainable management system with clear sustainable management practices, hotels can not only minimise the potential for overuse and negative implications but they can also maximise cost saving and greater support for services (Bader, 2005; GSTC, 2016), ultimately creating a competitive advantage in host destinations.

2. Literature review

The hospitality industry, which has been known as one of the largest and fastest expanding business (Kilkenny, 2011; de Grosbois, 2012; UNWTO, 2018), has been noted to create many positive outcomes for destinations in terms of income generation and employment creation (Nunkoo and Gursoy, 2019). Growth in the industry through tourism has also been noted to generate a demand for local food and crafts and new facilities developed for tourism purposes can also benefit local people (Saarinen, 2009). In Portugal, the hospitality industry was said to be worth €901m in 2019 (Horwath HTL, 2019), however, revenues fell to less than a third in 2020 as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic (Statista, 2021). The outlook for the industry is looking up once again with revenue in the hotel sector projected to reach annually growth of 12.72% until 2026, when hotel guests are expected to

amount to 3.9m (Statista, 2021). This may, however, present a challenge for the industry in relation to how best to manage such growth in the future.

A number of scholars (Clarke, 1997; de Grosbois, 2012; Gardetti and Torres, 2016; Lim, 2016) have mentioned that although the hospitality industry remains customer-focused and attentive to contemporary trends and political challenges, it does fall behind in the adoption and promotion of sustainable practices. Archer, Cooper and Ruhanen (2005) and later Gardetti and Torres (2016) discussed how continued growth in the hospitality industry is capable of leading to a loss of regional identity and authenticity, greater inflation and increased economic leakages and overcrowding leading to environmental damage, litter generation and pollution. However, sustainable practices have been identified as positive contributions to the tourism and hospitality industry given their ability to enhance positive outcomes for the hotel itself while at the same time reduce, mitigate and manage negative effects (Sakshi *et al.*, 2020). Sakshi *et al.* (2020) recognised that hotels and business should aspire to reach effective standards of sustainability across the economic, socio-cultural and environmental resource base, given that sustainability hinges on the integrated planning and management of these three interdependent systems (World Economic Forum, 2019). Research has shown that hotels have begun to adopt sustainable practices in an effort to manage impacts, however, concerns have been raised about the effectiveness of such practices in achieving sustainability or improving sustainability performance within the hotel sector (Legrand *et al.*, 2013; Gardetti and Torres, 2016; Raga, 2018). In light of such impacts, it will be necessary to determine if hotels in Portugal are implementing sustainable practices to manage the impacts they so often create.

Portugal is aspiring to become one of the most sustainable, competitive, and safe, destinations in the world, through economic, social, and environmental development across the country (Turismo de Portugal, 2017). In Portugal, tourism is a crucial economic activity, with revenues growing yearly and 2019 was the year with the highest number ever registered (Turismo de Portugal, 2021a). To sustain such growth moving into the future while managing the destinations social, economic, and environmental development will require effective sustainable measures and approaches to be adopted and implemented by policymakers, tourism officers and hospitality and hotel managers. It is these tourism stakeholders that have a fundamental role in preparing for a responsible and sustainable recovery of the industry. Actionable plans, policies and guidelines are needed to encourage the adoption of sustainable practices and standards in the industry and to transition the industry towards greater sustainability levels (Maguire, 2020). Through Agenda 2030 and the goals of sustainable development as well as the Paris Agreement on Climate Change and the European Green Deal (Turismo de Portugal, 2021b), destinations including Portugal have been attempting to develop strategies and plans to achieve the goals of sustainability and manage potential impacts. However, the uptake and adherence to such plans by the hospitality sector in Portugal is at present, unknown (Jesus and Franco, 2016). As such, it will need to be examined in order to determine the commitment and support for such standards within the industry to strengthen its efforts in making tourism and hospitality effectively more sustainable for future generations.

3. Methodology

As such, this research sets out to examine if hotels in Portugal are adopting and implementing sustainable practices and measuring and monitoring their sustainability performance. For the purpose of taking this research forward, a mixed methods approach to research will be adopted. Creswell and Creswell (2018) noted that using both quantitative and qualitative data in a single study is preferable to examine complex research questions. A quantitative content analysis of the sustainable practices of hotels will form the first stage of data analysis. This will then be supported through the development of strategic open ended questions which will be used to conduct qualitative in-depth interviews with a representative sample of hotel managers in Portugal.

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