

Sustainability Practices in the Hospitality Industry: Evidence from Chain Hotels in Kandy

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Abstract: The tourism and hospitality industry has typically been at the forefront of integrating sustainability practices in its overall operations globally. Nonetheless, there has been a continued paucity in the tourism and hospitality academia, with limited research being conducted on adopting sustainable practices and their impacts on developing tourism destinations. Therefore, this research primarily focuses on exploring the current context of sustainability practice adoption and its implications from the perspective of a developing tourism destination through a case study research based in Kandy, Sri Lanka. This research initially builds on the works of Mihalič, Žabkar, & Cvelbar (2012), where their Hotel Sustainable Business Model is used as a benchmark in exploring the sustainability practices within Kandy, Sri Lanka. This study employed a qualitative research methodology, where semi-structured interviews were conducted with eleven senior managerial employees representing 11 chain hotels in Kandy, Sri Lanka, selected through a purposive sampling. The interview findings were further validated using participant observation facilitated through individual field visits across all chosen establishments in the sample. The key results of the research suggested that hotels in Kandy, Sri Lanka, had already adopted a wide array of sustainability practices, especially across the environmental and socio-cultural bottom lines of their operation. The findings further suggested that despite all hotels emphasizing their economic progression, most practitioners had a limited understanding of how economic indicators related to their sustainability commitments. The overall findings also indicated that hotels belonging to larger hotel chains had a greater tendency to implement sustainable practices, while hotels belonging to smaller ones showcased significant inconsistencies in their overall sustainability practice adoption. Furthermore, this research provided theoretical and practical implications for future researchers and local hospitality practitioners by providing a comprehensive overview of the current context of sustainability practice adoption in Kandy, Sri Lanka.

Keywords: Sustainability, Sustainable Practices, Sustainable Tourism, Sri Lanka Tourism

1. Introduction

Over the past few decades, sustainability has progressed phenomenally, with the concept now being a mandatory strategic concern in almost every industry (Hoffman, 2018). Even in the global hospitality industry, sustainability has become a growing consideration, resulting in industry practitioners integrating sustainability practices into their mainstream operations (Jones et al., 2014). However, sustainability continues to face the longstanding issue of ambiguity, with no clear standards stipulating what constitutes sustainability practices (Arowoshegbe et al., 2016). This apprehension is further evident in developing tourism destinations such as Sri Lanka, both from an academic and practical perspective, as there has been a paucity of research and industry involvement in implementing and monitoring sustainable practices within the hospitality industry.

Following several setbacks in the form of COVID-19 and a prolonged economic crisis, Sri Lanka's tourism industry is currently witnessing a resurgence in the sector (Perera et al., 2023). Moreover, the local tourism industry has started to gravitate towards creating a more resilient, inclusive, and sustainable tourism sector, given the prominence the concept is garnering worldwide (World Bank, 2022). Despite this phenomenal focus on sustainability from a policy standpoint, the operationalization of the concept within the local tourism sector remains challenging due to the haziness around identifying, implementing, and monitoring sustainability initiatives within the destination. Hence, this paper attempts to address this longstanding practical knowledge and population gaps connected with adopting sustainability practices in the hospitality industry in Sri Lanka by undertaking a comprehensive case study of Chain Hotels in Kandy District, Sri Lanka (Miles, 2017). Thereby this study hopes to shed light on academia by contextualizing the present situation of sustainable tourism adaptation capability of developing tourism destinations through a case study perspective.

The present study aims to identify the current context of sustainability practices employed by the hospitality practitioners in Kandy, Sri Lanka, about existing sustainability practices in the contemporary tourism academia. Secondly, the paper also attempts to explore the reasonings behind local hoteliers' adoption or non-adoption of sustainability practices by critically evaluating their sentiments towards adoption across all three pillars of the Triple Bottom Line.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Measuring Sustainability

Sustainability as a standalone concept makes zero sense without having valid indicators and measuring tools to measure its progression (McCool et al., 2001). One of the earliest attempts at streamlining the operationalization of sustainability concepts was first evidenced through the Triple Bottom Line (TBL) approach proposed by Elkington in 1997 (Stoddard et al., 2012). In its simplest sense, TBL is a framework that measures business performance and organizational success by explicitly integrating the economic, social, and environmental bottom lines (Elkington, 1998; Alhaddi, 2015). Given the balanced conception of all three facets of sustainability, the TBL concept has been applauded by academics and leveraged by industry practitioners in several settings to formally measure and report the sustainability commitments of their respective businesses (Sanchez-Chaparro et al., 2022). Nonetheless, the TBL concept has faced criticism from several academics, primarily due to its inability to measure an organization's social and environmental performance in a meaningful, consistent, and comparable way (Pava, 2007). Moreover, TBL is a generic theory that applies to any industry at a macro level. Therefore, over the years, many tourism and hospitality academics have developed frameworks to identify and measure sustainability from a tourism and hospitality industry perspective.

2.2 Sustainability Frameworks in the Tourism and Hospitality Industry

Given the industry's highly fragmented and diverse nature, sustainable tourism has often been riddled with identification and measurement-related challenges (Budeanu et al., 2016). Nonetheless, leading academics in the tourism sphere have proposed multiple frameworks and methodologies to systematically engage and measure the sustainability commitments of tourism and hospitality firms over the years. For instance, the United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) was the first to take the initiative in proposing Indicators of Sustainable Development for Tourism Destinations; where in 2004 the organization presented a sustainable tourism framework comprising 29 strategic directions covering all three facets of the TBL (Stukalo et al., 2018). Following the foundation laid by UNWTO, a plethora of tourism and hospitality academics proposed a wide array of frameworks for sustainability measurement. Torres-Delgado & Saarinen (2014), in their review of sustainable tourism indicator sets, identified seven frameworks that present a variety of sustainable practices, while Punzo et al. (2022) in their recent paper aimed at developing composite indicators for the tourism industry, identified ten former sustainable tourism-related frameworks proposed by previous authors. Interestingly, regardless of minor discrepancies, almost all proposed sustainable frameworks within the tourism academia have gained some form of inspiration from the TBL concept, with the vast majority of frameworks using the three underlying pillars of TBL as the foundation to develop their proposed frameworks. Nonetheless, Punzo (et al., 2022) further argued that despite the prevalence of many sustainable tourism frameworks, most of them remain as theoretical conceptualizations with marginal empirical implementation. This conundrum is further evidenced in the case of the hospitality sector, where there is a scarcity of indicator sets proposing practically feasible sustainability practices that hoteliers can implement to achieve sustainability.

2.3 Sustainability Practices in Sri Lankan Hotels

Over the past decade, Sri Lanka's hospitality sector has witnessed a positive movement towards sustainability, with many established hotels incorporating sustainable practices into their operations (Wijesundara, 2017). Nonetheless, from an academic perspective, it is evident that sustainability-related studies have not received the attention they deserve compared to the industry's prominence on the concept (Wickramasinghe, 2016). Despite the existence of a notable amount of studies about sustainable practice adoption in the local hospitality industry, most papers in the Sri Lankan context either focus on one pillar of the TBL or provide a deep dive on one particular sustainability initiative as opposed to holistically assessing the overall sustainability practices adopted by local hotels (Ratnayake & Miththapala, 2011; Arachchi, Yajid, & Khatibi, 2015; Pathirana, Herath, Scott, & Gardiner, 2020).

2.4 Hotel Sustainability Business Model (HSBM)

Hotel Sustainability Business Model (HSBM) proposed by Mihalič, Žabkar, & Cvelbar (2012) is an innovative framework that has been developed, combining the criteria of UNWTO's sustainable tourism model (UNWTO, 2004) with the TBL model to measure sustainability orientation in the hospitality sector. As the TBL and UNWTO models were generic and focused on either the macro or destination level, Mihalič, Žabkar, & Cvelbar (2012)

developed one combined model to measure sustainability practices that are inherently specific to the hospitality sector. In HSBM, the standard three dimensions of TBL (Economic, Environmental, and socio-cultural) were expanded to incorporate another three additional requirements, i.e., customer satisfaction, environmental education, and power to change participation. HSBM introduces 36 indicators under eight sub-categories. The marketing and profitability dimensions are integrated into the economic business bottom line, and categories such as biodiversity, resources, and environmental education are incorporated under the environmental pillar. Lastly, the social business line is broken down into human capital, cultural capital, and power to change participation.

HSBM provides an ideal platform for this research to explore the sustainability commitments of chain hotels in Kandy for many reasons. Firstly, HSBM is a highly context-specific model that has been precisely curated to identify and measure sustainability practices within the hospitality industry. Secondly, the model has been empirically validated in the context of the Slovenian Hotel Industry with sequencing studies conducted by (Cvelbar & Dwyer, 2013; Wickham, French, & Wong, 2020; Tegegne & Singh, 2021) acknowledging or validating the model's merits in their respective studies. Finally, given the lack of research conducted in Kandy about sustainable tourism, the HSBM provides a solid base by identifying sustainability practices-related themes that could be used to assess Kandy's current sustainability commitments.

Mihalič, Žabkar, & Cvelbar's (2012) initial study was an empirical and quantitative research that intended to recognize how essential each of their proposed indicators was for the hoteliers in Slovenia. However, given the primitive nature of sustainability practice identification-related research in Sri Lanka and the assumption that the respondents in the chosen sample may not be able to comprehend and provide valid feedback on their sustainability efforts due to discrepancies between their sustainability practices and the ones presented in a structured survey, this paper builds on a qualitative approach where the HSBM's indicators were used as a guideline in discovering the sustainable practices adopted in the chosen destination. Hence, the proposed 36 indicators of HSBM were narrowed down to 28 to suit the context of this study. *Profitability of Assets, Profitability of Capital, Profit margin, Economic Value Added, and Total Revenue per Employee* under the finance sub-line (Economic) and *Employee Salaries* under the Human Capital sub-line (Social) were excluded from this study due to the inherent confidential nature of such financial indices. Two other indicators under the marketing sub-line (Economic), i.e., *guests who evaluate quality as very high* and *guests who evaluate quality vs. price ratio as very high*, were also excluded from the indicator list given the supply-side nature of the research. The consolidated 28-indicator framework used in the case of this research is presented in Table 1 below:

Table 1: HSBM with indicators

Business Bottom Line	Business Sub line	No.	Basic Indicators & Code
Economic	Financial	1	Average Room Rate (ARR)
		2	Average Occupancy Rate (AOR)
	Marketing	3	Share of Highly Satisfied Guests (HSG)
		4	Share of returning guests – At least 3 times (SRG)
		5	Share of guests who would recommend the hotel (SGR)

Business Bottom Line	Business Sub line	No.	Basic Indicators & Code
Environment	Resources	6	Energy Consumption (ECP)
		7	Renewable energy usage (CRS)
		8	Water Consumption (WCP)
		9	Water Recycling (WRC)
		10	Quantity of solid waste (QSW)
		11	Recycling Waste (RCW)
		12	Direct CO2 emissions (COE)
	Biodiversity	13	Selecting Plants that are adapted to a particular environment (SPE)

Business Bottom Line	Business Sub line	No.	Basic Indicators & Code
	Environmental education	14	Planting at least a tree per year (PTT)
		15	Environmental activities for the employees (EAE)
		16	Environmental activities for guests (EAG)
Social	Human Capital	17	Employee satisfaction (EMS)
		18	Training of employees (TRE)
	Cultural Capital	19	Number of local cultural events in the hotel (CEH)
		20	The proportion of local dishes on offer (LDO)
	Power to change Participation	21	Cooperation with municipality (CMU)
		22	Cooperation with local residents (CLR)
		23	Satisfaction of local residents with tourism (SLR)
		24	Cooperation with NGO's (CNG)
		25	Participation in sustainable tourism development of destination (OSD)
		26	Monitoring the implementation of hotel's sustainability strategy (MSD)
		27	Environmental quality standards (EQS)
		28	Number of other ecological quality labels (EQL)

3. Methodology

3.1 Geographic Location

Acclaimed as one of Sri Lanka's most prominent tourism destinations, Kandy is a UNESCO World Heritage city renowned for its unique religious, cultural, and natural offerings (Welagedara, 2016). As the provincial capital of the Central Province, Kandy's incredible tourism product is supplemented with all auxiliary services and amenities to support the tourism industry (Sivesan, 2019). Moreover, as per (SLTDA, 2023) records, Kandy currently has a total room inventory of 3,786 rooms, accounting for 7.5% of the entire room inventory in the country, making the city a prominent destination from a hospitality perspective as well.

3.2 Research Design

This research employed an exploratory, qualitative approach to gain a comprehensive understanding of the various sustainability practices currently employed within chain hotels in Kandy, Sri Lanka. Semi-structured in-depth interviews were used as the primary data collection method to gain a comprehensive overview of each hotel's sustainability practices (Brounéus, 2011). The researcher directed a set of core questions to each respondent, inquiring them on the various sustainability practices employed by their hotel across each of the three pillars of HSBM (*Example: What are the environmental sustainability practices adopted by your hotel?*). The core questions of the research were followed up with several clarifying probes based on the 28-indicator framework developed using HSBM (Table 1), allowing respondents to self-disclose any sustainability practices they may have missed out on when answering the core questions (Robinson, 2023). Moreover, participant observation was used as a supplementary data collection method to validate the respondent's claims about sustainability practices employed at their respective hotels, especially under the environmental sustainability bottom line (Ciesielska et al., 2018).

The in-depth interviews were conducted among 11 senior managerial hotel employees of 11 chain hotels in Kandy, Sri Lanka, selected through purposive sampling (n = 11). Only chain hotels (*A chain hotel was categorized as any property that belonged to a hospitality organization that operated at least two hotels under the same brand name or the same management team in Sri Lanka*) were included in this research under the assumption that they are more likely to implement sustainability practices in their operations in comparison to standalone hotels as disclosed in previous research (El Dief & Xavier, 2010; Nicholls & Kang, 2012; Van Rheede & Blomme, 2012). The data collection process took place across three days in August 2023, where the researchers personally visited all 11 hotels to conduct the interviews and engage in participant observation. The collected data was then

carefully coded and analyzed using thematic analysis to uncover recurring themes about the destination's current sustainability practices while observing all relevant ethical procedures (Clarke et al., 2015).

4. Findings

4.1 Overview

This chapter is broken down into three main sub-topics, where the research findings are explained in detail across the three main Business bottom lines of HSBM. Each sub-section in this chapter provides a detailed table showcasing the sustainability practices adopted by each hotel within the sample about the indicator set proposed in the literature review. The tables are then followed with an analysis of significant sentiments shared by the respondents relating to their commitment toward each of the bottom lines and their respective indicators.

4.2 Economic Business Bottom-line

Table 2: Economic Sustainability Practices Analysis

No.	Indicator Code	Hotel Code											Achieved (%)
		1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	
Financial Sub Line													
i1	ARR	X	√	X	√	√	x	√	√	√	√	X	64%
i2	AOR	√	x	X	√	√	√	x	x	√	√	X	55%
Marketing Sub Line													
i3	HSG	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	100%
i4	SRG	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	100%
i5	SGR	√	√	X	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	91%
Achieved (%)		80%	80%	40%	100%	100%	80%	80%	80%	100%	100%	60%	82%

The study results indicated that the selected hospitality firms had a significant focus on achieving the economic bottom line, with an overall achievement rate of 82% across all indicators. However, the respondents had mixed opinions about the financial sub-line.

The respondent from Hotel 9 shared his sentiment on financial sustainability as below:

"In recent times, our country has been struggling with a dollar crisis. As an organization, we help the country to generate dollars through tourism."

A key finding of this research was that despite all hotels significantly emphasizing the economic bottom line, most practitioners were unfamiliar with how the achievement of several indicators, especially relating to the finance sub-line, connected with their overall sustainability commitments. Hence, several hotels failed to make a connection between achieving higher room revenue and higher occupancy rates with the overall sustainability of the hotel, with most respondents opening up about the subject matter upon detailed probing.

Moreover, the respondent from Hotel 4 stated:

"All departments of our hotel make sure our every guest is leaving with a good memory. When the guests are happy, they come again and again. Most importantly, the positive word of mouth spread to the community, and they know our facilities and how well we treat our guests."

Interestingly, this sentiment was shared by all respondents with all hotels in the sample focusing on the delivery and measurement of customer satisfaction (i3) and the share of returning guests (i4), while 91% of hotels also measured the amount of bookings they received through customer referrals (i5) as well.

4.3 Environmental Business Bottom-line

Table 3: Environmental Sustainability Practices Analysis

No.	Indicator Code	Hotel Code											Achieved (%)
		1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	
Resources Sub Line													
i6	ECP	√	√	X	√	√	√	x	√	√	x	√	73%
i7	CRS	√	√	√	√	√	X	√	√	x	x	√	73%
i8	WCP	√	√	X	√	√	√	x	√	x	√	x	64%
i9	WRC	√	√	X	√	√	√	x	√	√	x	√	73%
i10	QSW	√	x	X	x	√	X	x	√	x	√	x	36%
i11	RCW	X	√	X	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	82%
i12	COE	√	x	X	√	√	X	√	√	√	x	x	55%
Biodiversity Sub Line													
i13	SPE	√	√	√	√	X	X	√	√	√	√	x	73%
i14	PTT	√	√	√	√	√	√	x	√	√	√	√	91%
Environmental Education Sub Line													
i15	EAE	√	√	X	√	√	√	x	x	√	√	x	64%
i16	EAG	√	√	X	√	√	X	X	√	x	√	x	55%
Achieved (%)		91%	82%	27%	91%	91%	55%	36%	91%	64%	64%	45%	67%

The study showcased mixed results on adopting environmentally sustainable practices in Kandy. For instance, Hoteliers in Kandy resonated with most practices identified under the resources sub-line, with several hotels using solar panels and biomass boilers for renewable energy generation (i6), with nearly all the same hotels possessing effective water management practices spearheaded by the presence of in-house Sewage Treatment Plants to recycle and reuse the wastewater generated in their hotels (i7). Nonetheless, the sector had a lackluster commitment towards waste management (36%) and mitigating CO₂ emission (55%), perhaps due to the significant investment requirement in implementing waste management strategies and energy-efficient technologies in the Sri Lankan context. Furthermore, firms failed to acknowledge their contribution to increased CO₂ emissions, as highlighted by the below statement made by the respondent from Hotel 6:

“We don't need to implement additional measures here, as our available resources do not significantly contribute to CO₂ emissions.”

The higher percentages obtained under the biodiversity sub-line demonstrate the hotel's strong commitment towards sustainable landscaping, carrying out regular tree planting programs while minimizing the firm's environmental footprint.

However, compared to the above two sub-lines, hoteliers have viewed environmental education-related sustainability practices as less critical. When the respondents were inquired about the environmental education activities for guests and employees, most reported that there were no ongoing initiatives in place. However, fostering awareness among employees and guests regarding the sustainable initiatives the hotels have implemented and the goals they aim to achieve through these efforts could enhance environmental performance in the long run (Bohdanowicz et al., 2011). Moreover, proper environmental education programs are increasingly likely to have a knock-on effect on the positive progression of other sustainable initiatives of the hotels as well.

The research also discovered that most hoteliers associate the entire sustainability concept with simply catering to the "planet" pillar under the TBL. When the respondent from Hotel 4 was questioned on his generic perceptions of sustainability, he stated that;

“Mainly the green practices that we've commenced [...] we have started documentation to assess potential areas where we can reduce our electricity consumption, with the conversion of the LED, installing water saving devices, implementing waste separation and Recycling practices, Reducing, Reusing when possible.”

This statement highlights a common misinterpretation among local hoteliers, who perceive sustainability as synonymous with environmental practices that minimize the negative environmental impacts. Even though

environmental sustainability is a crucial component of sustainability, this misinterpretation can lead to neglecting vital focus areas in attaining broader social and economic sustainability.

4.4 Social Business Bottom-line

Table 4: Social Sustainability Practices Analysis

No.	Indicator Code	Hotel Code											Achieved (%)	
		1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11		
Human Capital Sub Line														
i17	EMS	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	X	91%
i18	TRE	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	100%
Cultural Capital Sub Line														
i19	CEH	√	√	√	√	√	√	x	√	√	√	√	√	91%
i20	LDO	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	100%
Power to Change Participation Sub Line														
i21	CMU	√	x	X	x	X	x	x	√	√	x	√	√	36%
i22	CLR	x	x	X	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	73%
i23	SLR	x	√	X	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	82%
i24	CNG	√	x	X	√	√	x	x	X	x	x	X	X	27%
i25	OSD	√	√	X	√	√	√	x	√	√	√	√	X	73%
i26	MSD	√	x	X	√	√	√	x	√	√	√	√	√	73%
i27	EQS	√	√	X	√	√	x	x	√	√	x	√	√	64%
i28	EQL	x	√	X	√	X	x	x	X	√	x	X	X	27%
Achieved (%)		75%	67%	33%	92%	83%	67%	42%	83%	92%	67%	67%	70%	

The Social Business bottom line results showcased mixed results similar to the environmental pillar. Firstly, the findings suggested that the respondents perceived sustainability practices on both Human Capital and Cultural capital as crucial to their overall sustainability operationalization. Most of the firms (95%) focused on human capital development by investing in enhancing employee’s knowledge, skills, and competencies (i17, i18). These investments were primarily made towards conducting both on and off-the-job training initiatives.

The respondent from Hotel 6 commented on employee development and satisfaction as follows:

"As I mentioned before, we are receiving repeat arrivals. So, we make a good revenue. Therefore, the personal income of the employees also increases. We ensure our employees a good working environment here. It's a hassle-free working environment. Our employees have good opportunities for training and career development. The reputation, experience, and skills they receive from here provide many opportunities when they leave."

Furthermore, these firms prioritized enhancing employee satisfaction, with many hotels adopting open policy frameworks that foster transparency and accessibility within their organizational culture. Most hoteliers across the sample were able to support their human capital development initiatives with stable pieces of evidence on the actions taken within their establishments to prioritize employee development.

Moreover, the respondent from Hotel 9 stated the following about their hotel’s orientation toward the cultural capital:

"Yes, when we have festivals like Sinhala and Tamil New Year, Deepawali, and Christmas, we incorporate these cultural things into our hotel operations; for example, we decorate our hotel, buffet, and all. We are promoting our culture in that manner."

In line with the above statement, the research discovered that the orientation towards the cultural capital among all respondents was significantly high (95%), perhaps inadvertently given the rich cultural heritage of Kandy that boasts a range of cultural events, including the iconic annual Kandy Procession supplemented by indulging local cuisines.

Additionally, significant contrasts were visible among the practices under the power to change participation sub-line. The findings revealed a distinct lack of collaboration between the hotels and both municipality and non-governmental organizations (i21, i24). In the interviewing process, when the questions about partnerships with the municipality and non-governmental organizations were raised, it was proved that the hoteliers do not provide much consideration to collaborating with the municipality or non-governmental organizations in achieving sustainability, and many hoteliers responded that they are not collaborating with any type of external organization. This lack of cooperation could tarnish the hotels' capacity to actively engage in sustainable efforts that foster the community's overall welfare in the long run.

However, the findings showcased that most hotels had taken significant steps towards working with and satisfying the local communities surrounding their hotels, as evidenced in the below statement made by the respondent in Hotel 10:

"The people around (less than 30km) are being hired as staff, and we also do local purchases, including food items and daily essentials from the village. We hire daily workers from this area as well."

A vast majority of the hotels paid significant attention to local hiring and local sourcing as a part of their commitment to the local community, leading towards a higher degree of local resident satisfaction, primarily due to the inherent economic benefits provided to the community through the hotels.

The research also uncovered that hoteliers in Kandy have implemented several environmentally sustainable practices to mitigate environmental damage instead of addressing the root cause of an underlying sustainability problem. For example, while most hotels focused on the amount of waste that can be recycled to reduce waste dumped in landfills, only a smaller proportion of hoteliers kept track of the total volume of waste they produced. The research further revealed that some hotels lacked quantifiable evidence to measure their sustainability performance, which is typically obtained through quality labels (i28), as evidenced in the below statement made by the respondent from Hotel 6:

"At the moment, we don't have received any certificates regarding sustainability or the environment. But we are planning to get certificates like ISO. But anyhow, we maintain the quality standards according to the government rules and guidelines."

It was broadly understood that most hotels in Kandy did not perceive obtaining an Eco-quality label as an important sustainability commitment primarily due to the lack of awareness and the perceived value placed on such labels from an organizational and client perspective.

5. Conclusive Discussion

The broader results of this study resonated with Mihalič, Žabkar, & Cvelbar's (2012) study with Hoteliers in Kandy also conducting sustainability practices under all three proposed pillars of HSBM as evidenced in Figure 1 below:

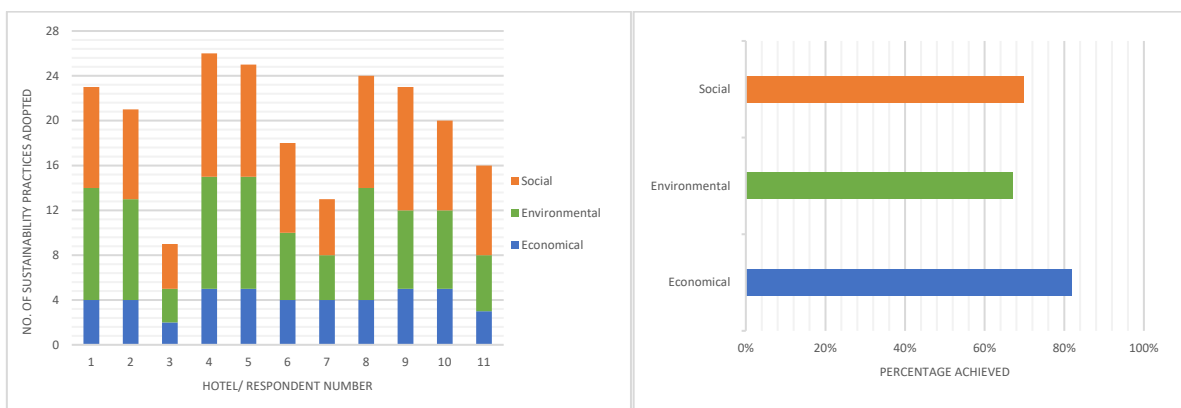


Figure 1: Overall Sustainability Practices Analysis

It was evident that even in the Sri Lankan context, the economic pillar remained the most relevant for hoteliers, given the direct tangible benefits received by the hotel through economic progression (Bader, 2005). The study also showcased that the hoteliers gave a marginally higher focus on social sustainability over environmental sustainability initiatives, perhaps due to most hotels in the sample being located closer to the center of an urbanized city, making it easier to implement social sustainability initiatives (Rodríguez-Antón et al., 2012).

Moreover, the perception of sustainability practices being expensive to implement was also evident among Kandy Hoteliers, especially in introducing environmentally sustainable practices (Fukey & Issac, 2014). It was also worth noting that none of the hotels in the sample followed all 28 sustainability practices proposed in the HSBM, showcasing clear room for improvement for all hotels in the study. It is also important to note that despite the overall picture of the research showcasing a relatively sub-par performance across some sustainable initiatives, there were contrasting differences between the sustainability practice adoption between individual hotels within the sample, with hotels typically affiliated with larger hotel chains having a greater tendency to implement sustainable practices (Weerathunga et al., 2020), while smaller hotel chains showcased inconsistencies in adopting sustainable practices. The findings suggest that resource disparities, lack of awareness about sustainability, and their varied economic stability are the leading causes for the underperformance of smaller-scale chain hotels.

This paper contributes to existing academic knowledge by providing a holistic overview of the current sustainability commitment capabilities of Sri Lankan chain hotels. The findings of this novel study could be used as a stepping stone in uncovering and critiquing sustainable practices in the hospitality industry in varied settings; especially in the contexts of developing countries. This empirical study however poses several limitations. Firstly, this paper purely focused on 28 sustainability initiatives based on HSBM, and future researchers could explore any additional sustainability practices that developing destinations may be undertaking that are unique to their respective destinations. Secondly, the sample of this paper represented a fraction of the overall Sri Lankan tourism industry, and future research could look at exploring the sustainability practices of the destination with a more representative sample and by employing a quantitative research approach.

Moreover, several recommendations also emerged for local hospitality practitioners through this research. Firstly, the study identified the unprecedented importance of inculcating sustainability training and awareness programs across all tiers of staff to ensure that sustainability is taken as a responsibility at an organizational level. The study also identified the importance of hospitality practitioners providing a balanced commitment towards all pillars under TBL when incorporating sustainability practices into the hotel's mainstream operations. Finally, this paper also provided hospitality practitioners with a fundamental framework within which they could categorize and operationalize their sustainability practices methodically and coherently.

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