

THE EVOLVING LANDSCAPE OF SUSTAINABILITY IN THE HOTEL INDUSTRY: NEW APPROACHES AND THEIR SUCCESS

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Summary

Due to the growing importance of environmental protection, the countries of the world are striving to formulate regulations that protect the Planet, and these directly affect and apply to various businesses as well. In addition to these regulations, many large companies have recognized the importance of sustainability. On the one hand, large companies can achieve greater results with their efforts in a given time, and on the other hand, in parallel with the global spread of the idea, the purchase of sustainable products, the use of such services, and the preference of companies that take this into account are becoming more and more important for customers and buyers. Slowly but surely, sustainability is gaining strength in tourism and hospitality as well. In addition to environmental protection, waste management and reduction, energy saving and efficiency, and the reduction of harmful emissions are all increasingly important. All this, besides of protecting the environment, helps to reduce the energy costs and other expenses of companies after the implementation of the necessary investments. The aspirations appear, for example, in hotels ("green hotel"), restaurants and other areas of tourism. For companies, sustainable operation not only achieves the goals and results mentioned but also serves as a great marketing opportunity. Consciously planned and properly advertised, their activities can gain a competitive advantage and they can use their sustainability efforts as a strong attraction. The methodology includes two primary data collection methods, which are an interview with a hotel general manager and a questionnaire research done on the web with 129 participants. With the current research the author aims to provide information on Hungarian hotels' sustainability efforts, their possibilities, achievements and further, still untapped potentials. The research includes an analysis of the institutional background, such as the Green Hotel award, the marketing value of such efforts, and the professional attitude towards the topic of sustainability from various actors of the hotel industry. Additional aim of the study is to provide insights into the attitudes of hotel guests towards sustainable tourism and identify the barriers and opportunities for the hotel industry to achieve sustainability. The findings of this research will inform hotel managers and stakeholders about the importance of sustainability in the industry and guide them in developing strategies to meet the growing demand for sustainable tourism.

Keywords: sustainability, hotel industry, Green Hotels

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Introduction

A widely recognized example of sustainability in hotels is the request frequently placed in bathrooms, asking guests to reuse towels. This simple practice helps reduce water and detergent use and minimizes pollutants, aligning with long-standing environmental goals for hotels and enabling guests to contribute directly. However, today's climate and environmental efforts in the hotel industry extend well beyond such initiatives. Growing concerns for the planet require that large companies, including hotel operators, as well as individuals, including tourists, adopt more comprehensive measures.

The increasing importance of climate and environmental protection significantly influences tourism, hotel operations, and guest attitudes (Gyurkó-Gonda, 2024). Although efficiency and profitability are essential to global tourism as it continues to expand, these priorities often conflict with

environmental goals. It is therefore crucial to evaluate individual companies' environmental initiatives—from waste management and energy-efficient technologies to selecting eco-conscious suppliers (Alreahi *et al*, 2023).

It is also evident that modern trends are prompting more tourists to prioritize sustainability, consciously choosing hotels that commit to climate and environmental protection. The preference for "green" hotels has become more prominent, potentially creating a competitive advantage for companies that prioritize sustainability. However, the question remains: how important is sustainability to tourists when balanced against other needs and the potential environmental impacts of travel? The Hungarian Hotels and Restaurants Association has played a significant role in promoting "green" practices within Hungary's hotel industry. Since 1994, its Environmental Protection Section has issued awards for the Green Hotel title, valid for two years, with the potential for an "evergreen" designation for consistently high performance. (Association of Hungarian Hotels and Restaurants website, 2023)

Individual hotels must work within their capacities to protect the environment and reduce the negative effects of their operations, influencing employees to embrace sustainable practices.

Material and Methods

The methodology of this research includes two primary data collection methods: an interview with a hotel general manager and an online questionnaire survey. The interview provided qualitative insights into the practical applications and challenges of implementing sustainability efforts within a hotel setting. The online questionnaire, completed by 129 participants, gathered quantitative data regarding consumer attitudes and behaviors related to sustainable tourism.

The interview was conducted with Gyula Kanel, the general manager of the four-star Hotel Moments Budapest, operated by the Continental Group. This qualitative approach was chosen to obtain in-depth knowledge about the hotel's environmental strategies, challenges, and operational practices related to sustainability. The online questionnaire, distributed using Google Forms and promoted via email and social media, aimed to capture the attitudes and willingness of Hungarian-speaking consumers towards sustainability in tourism and hospitality. The survey was conducted in Hungarian during autumn 2022.

With this research, the author aims to provide a comprehensive overview of Hungarian hotels' sustainability efforts, including their opportunities, achievements, and areas for further development. The research includes an examination of institutional frameworks, such as the Green Hotel award, the marketing value of sustainability initiatives, and the professional attitudes toward sustainability among various hotel industry stakeholders. Additionally, the study seeks to offer insights into hotel guests' attitudes toward sustainable tourism and to identify the barriers and opportunities for the hotel industry to achieve greater sustainability.

Literature Review and Contextual Framework

Sustainability has become a central focus in the hotel industry, enabling accommodation providers to contribute to the three pillars of sustainable development: economic, social, and environmental. According to Roxana Elena Popșă (2023), awareness of environmental responsibility is increasing

among both hotels and their guests. Many hotels are now implementing green certifications, recycling programs, and energy-saving measures to meet the demands of eco-conscious travelers. These sustainability efforts are not only essential for reducing environmental impact but also serve as a strategy to attract a clientele that values responsible tourism. Incorporating these practices provides hotels with a unique competitive advantage, fostering brand loyalty and appealing to guests who prioritize eco-friendly options (Popşa, 2023).

Innovation also plays a crucial role in advancing sustainability within regional hotel markets. Research by Benkő, Dávid, and Farkas (2022) indicates that the potential for innovation varies across regions, with larger hotels in Northern Hungary more frequently adopting advanced environmental measures, while smaller hotels often face challenges related to limited resources and qualified staff. Supporting innovation through targeted policies and incentives could help smaller hotels in Hungary adopt sustainable practices, contributing to broader regional development and enhancing the sector's sustainability efforts.

The economic benefits of sustainable practices are well-documented in the literature. Studies show that initiatives like implementing energy-efficient lighting and water-saving technologies can lead to long-term cost savings for hotels. These practices not only reduce operational costs but also improve the economic sustainability of hotels, encouraging further investments in eco-friendly measures. This perspective aligns with experiences in Hungarian hotels, where even modest sustainability investments can yield significant financial benefits, highlighting the practical advantages of adopting green practices.

At the policy level, adopting international sustainability standards, such as those of the Global Sustainable Tourism Council (GSTC) and the UN's Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), would align Hungarian hotels with global expectations. These frameworks provide a systematic approach that aligns local initiatives with internationally recognized criteria, making Hungarian hotels more attractive to global travelers who prioritize sustainable accommodations.

By drawing on these varied insights from academic literature, the Hungarian hotel industry is well-positioned to integrate sustainability as a core operational principle. The consistent evidence that green practices enhance competitiveness, reduce costs, and build customer loyalty strongly supports the case for broader adoption of sustainable practices across the sector.

Efforts of Great International Hotel Chains

Large international hotel chains aim to meet the objectives of CSR (Corporate Social Responsibility) by incorporating projects into their operational standards. While environmental and climate protection represent only one facet of CSR, the CSR commitments of these chains often extend to other critical areas, such as protecting children from exploitation, collaborating with local communities, or avoiding the use of overfished seafood in their restaurants. Examples of such corporate initiatives include Accor Hotels' Planet 21 program and the IHG hotel group's Green Engage system (Accor Hotels website, 2022; IHG website, 2022).

For example, Novotel hotels feature beds made from FSC-certified wood and bedding produced from recycled bottles. Additionally, their cleaning products and bathroom soaps are sourced from environmentally responsible suppliers. Accor's sustainability efforts extend to their restaurants, where they emphasize using high-quality ingredients sourced locally and minimizing food waste (Accor Hotels website, 2022).

IHG's Green Engage program is structured into four levels. The first level, mandatory for all 5,500 hotels within the group, includes planning efforts to reduce energy consumption. This involves monitoring energy costs and implementing energy-saving lighting. Hotels that achieve the second level start to experience the benefits of sustainability and introduce sustainable procurement in their daily processes. At the third level, sustainable building and energy management practices are required. Hotels that reach the fourth and highest level can reduce their energy consumption by up to 25% through modern, thoughtful practices. "From smart design to the use of innovative systems, everything our hotels do for sustainability can make a big difference to our planet. Your stay in our hotels means you are part of a worldwide effort to protect our environment," states the IHG program description (IHG website, 2022). The program features a web interface accessible to hotels, allowing them to track and report energy, water, and waste consumption. The platform also provides carbon footprint calculations, recommendations for greener practices, return on investment insights, and ideas for guest involvement to achieve sustainability goals.

For large-capacity hotels within these chains, some of the difficulties discussed earlier in the article come into play. The globally prescribed standards often do not account for local conditions, making adaptation challenging, and there are often limited resources for local implementation. However, if carefully managed with genuine commitment, large hotel groups and chains have a tremendous opportunity to influence global trends positively, protect the environment, and promote responsibility on a large scale. A notable example of combining environmental sustainability with social responsibility is seen in IHG's Holiday Inn Express hotels, where guests are encouraged to skip daily room cleaning, allowing the savings to be redirected toward charitable causes. This small gesture effectively combines environmental protection with social responsibility.

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If you are staying at our hotel for more than 1 night, you can request us not to clean your room on one day and we donate the saved expenses to one of the above mentioned organizations.

name: Borowd S. K. B.

room number: #609

day of no cleaning: 11/04

signature: [Handwritten Signature]

If you wish, we can inform you of the donated Amount at the end of the month:

Email address: _____

We shall of course still provide you with clean towels etc.

Your Holiday Inn Express Berlin City Centre team thanks you for your support.

Please leave this flyer at the reception desk.

Image 1: Social and environmental responsibility in one - Holiday Inn Express Berlin City Center

(source: author's own recording, April 2022)

However, a large hotel chain can also motivate and reward guests through its loyalty program by offering bonus points when they take environmentally friendly actions. For example, guests could receive bonus points in exchange for opting into sustainable practices. The efforts of major hotel chains have the potential to reach a wide audience, and with thoughtful and effective initiatives, they can achieve significant results in sustainability, a priority that benefits not only our planet but all of us.

Local Example: The Hotel Moments Budapest

I had the pleasure of talking to Gyula Kanel, director of the four-star Hotel Moments in Budapest, which opened in 2016 and is managed by the Continental Group hotel management company, about the importance of environmental protection from a professional perspective within the hotel industry. The Continental Group, which currently operates four boutique hotels in Budapest, is a key player in Hungarian tourism, representing a modern, expanding company committed to environmental consciousness.

According to Kanel, the implementation of environmentally conscious practices largely depends on factors such as hotel size, room capacity, service facilities, and the range of services offered. In smaller hotels, costs are less widely distributed, making environmental initiatives harder to fund. However, smaller hotels often have greater flexibility to implement small, impactful changes and can achieve significant results. Kanel emphasized that while larger hotel chains may struggle with adapting standardized regulations, smaller hotels can quickly test or discard new ideas if they prove ineffective. This flexibility often allows smaller hotels to be more efficient, whereas larger chains' standardized practices may be non-functional but difficult to change once in place. For example, he noted that while many hotels worldwide symbolically ask guests to reuse towels, in practice, towels and bed linens are often still changed daily or every two days. At Hotel Moments, however, only towels placed on the floor are replaced, and initial concerns about guest complaints were quickly dispelled as guests responded positively to this initiative.

Another strategy to reduce energy, water, and detergent use is to extend the interval for bed linen changes beyond every two days. "Honestly, who changes their sheets at home every other day?" Kanel remarked. His vision is that guests should feel as comfortable as they would at home and embrace environmental awareness during their stay. Naturally, this may vary depending on culture, country, and individual guest preferences. Nonetheless, Kanel is confident that guests and staff can (and should) be educated, trained, and motivated to adopt environmentally conscious behaviors. For example, the hotel plans to offer small rewards to guests who choose less frequent bed linen changes, with direct communication being essential in this regard.

For employees, Kanel highlighted the importance of leading by example. While indifference can sometimes be encountered, he believes there is always a way to find motivation. Employees not only observe their work environment but also see how environmental protection can be practically integrated into daily operations. Over time, they take this awareness home, incorporating it into their lives and making it a habit. Thus, environmental awareness can gradually spread throughout society, beginning in the workplace.

At Hotel Moments, technical and operational solutions have been implemented that can yield short-term profitability not only for large hotels but also support environmentally friendly practices in new hotel designs. For instance, water-saving aerators are installed on all taps, and toilets feature reduced water flow as standard. The hotel also has an automatic shading system on the lobby's

glass roof and on large upper-floor windows, and heating is supported by a heat recovery system. In a hotel of this size, there is the capability to monitor smaller details: for instance, indoor cooling and heating temperatures are adjusted based on outdoor conditions and even weather forecasts. The high-energy fan-coil system is programmed and monitored according to room occupancy and event hall usage. While these measures primarily reduce operating costs, they also lessen the hotel's environmental impact.



Image 2: Automatically operating shading system on top of the lobby of Hotel Moments in Budapest

(source: <https://www.pinterest.at/pin/35184440817114581>, accessed on November 30, 2023)

Gyula Kanel spoke positively about implementing environmental awareness at the hotel level, emphasizing that such efforts depend heavily on the owner's willingness to invest. He added that environmental initiatives are often considered a luxury due to their high costs and slow payback; thus, during economically challenging periods, this area is often among the first to face budget cuts. For the hotel in question, the supportive attitude of the owners enables positive initiatives and new

ideas to take shape. These may be small changes, such as providing a water dispenser instead of bottled water in the lobby. Tourists, however, notice and appreciate these efforts, and the hotel actively contributes to environmental protection.

Space constraints remain a challenge for the hotel, yet they have placed selective waste collection containers in staff areas and the kitchen, separating hazardous waste, recyclables, and general trash. There is still room for improvement, such as prioritizing local suppliers and reducing delivery frequency. From this perspective, the hotel's restaurant faces challenges, as cost considerations sometimes outweigh the choice of local products. Additionally, due to the emphasis on fresh, high-quality ingredients, the environmental impact of frequent deliveries and packaging may be higher than necessary.

According to Kanel, it is crucial to distinguish between environmental trends and CSR efforts that genuinely reduce environmental impact. He believes that the hotel industry engages with environmental awareness more extensively than guests may realize. Guests increasingly expect personalized service and excellent value for money, and in the case of well-known chains, the service level promised by the brand.

In conclusion, Kanel stated that Hotel Moments is committed to environmentally conscious operations within its capabilities. An energy specialist company analyzes monthly data from the building's numerous submeters, and the owners, operators, and hotel staff work collaboratively to minimize the hotel's environmental impact through proactive attitudes and ideas. According to Kanel, sharing experiences is also of utmost importance. For example, based on the experience gained from other hotels in their group, they were able to design Hotel Moments with appropriately scaled technical capacities. This approach is essential for cost-effective, environmentally friendly building operations.

Questionnaire: The Attitude Towards Sustainability

The global tourism industry faces new challenges in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic. The industry's recovery presents opportunities to redefine "quality" by considering evolving statistics, shifting guest expectations, and the urgent need for environmental preservation. Sustainable tourism is increasingly a priority, with conscious leadership seen as key to effective implementation. Maintaining and developing social and economic systems across all regions is essential for sustainable tourism.

Insights from an online questionnaire conducted with 129 participants in autumn 2022 revealed significant findings. The survey, conducted in Hungarian via Google Forms and distributed through email and social media, aimed to measure the opinions of the Hungarian-speaking population.

The results showed that 48% of respondents viewed sustainability as important when it comes to products and services. Over half (51%) were willing to pay more for sustainable products or services, yet only 33% considered sustainability when planning their travels. However, 41% took sustainability into account when choosing accommodation, and the vast majority (82%) believed companies should be required to practice sustainability. Despite this, only 28% of respondents were familiar with the "green hotel" certification.

The questionnaire indicated high motivation and positive attitudes towards sustainability in general, though only moderate levels of commitment when choosing sustainable products or services. Motivation for sustainable tourism was lower, though slightly higher when it came to choosing

sustainable accommodation. Nonetheless, respondents showed a willingness to engage in sustainability initiatives, including financial contributions.

Sustainable tourism has significant potential to support multiple aspects of sustainability, impacting various goals and dimensions of the industry. While people are open to sustainability and willing to participate, several barriers remain, including infrastructure limitations, a lack of financial and human resources, and economic factors. Achieving sustainability in the hotel industry requires more targeted marketing with a sustainable focus, stronger local cooperation, and professional, strategic planning.

In-Depth Analysis of Findings

The findings underscore several key benefits of sustainable practices within the Hungarian hotel industry, particularly in terms of marketing potential, fostering customer loyalty, and enhancing brand image. As sustainability becomes a more prominent concern for travelers, hotels that prioritize eco-friendly practices gain a competitive advantage, attracting a customer base that values environmental responsibility.

Guests' perceptions of sustainability initiatives are crucial for their success as a marketing strategy. Research indicates that environmentally conscious guests view sustainable hotels more favorably, associating them with higher quality and strong ethical standards. This perception can significantly enhance brand loyalty and customer satisfaction. For instance, travelers who perceive a hotel as environmentally responsible are more likely to return, recommend it to others, and engage in loyalty programs. This trend is especially relevant for boutique and independent hotels, which can leverage personalized sustainability efforts to build a loyal and engaged customer base. In Hungarian hotels like Hotel Moments Budapest, visible practices such as energy-saving initiatives, local sourcing, and waste reduction are not only operationally beneficial but also resonate well with guests, creating a unique brand identity centered on sustainability.

Moreover, these practices play a significant role in shaping brand image. The study by Popşa (2023) shows that sustainable practices positively influence a hotel's reputation, positioning it as a responsible business in the eyes of consumers. This link between sustainability and a positive brand image is gaining recognition worldwide. Hungarian hotels that adopt green practices can enhance their reputation as forward-thinking and responsible establishments, aligning with broader shifts in consumer expectations for environmental stewardship.

While Hungarian hotels are increasingly adopting sustainable practices, it is insightful to consider these efforts within an international context. Globally, major hotel chains have established comprehensive sustainability frameworks, such as IHG's Green Engage and Accor's Planet 21 program, which include progressive goals for reducing carbon footprints, conserving water, and sourcing responsibly. These large-scale initiatives set industry standards that many smaller hotels, including those in Hungary, can aspire to follow. However, as Benkő, Dávid, and Farkas (2022) indicate, smaller Hungarian hotels often face challenges related to funding and infrastructure, which can hinder the implementation of advanced sustainability measures.

Despite these constraints, Hungarian hotels are making meaningful progress. They demonstrate innovation by involving local communities and suppliers, a practice that aligns well with global trends yet remains distinctly rooted in local culture and resources. This localization of sustainability practices highlights an important competitive advantage: Hungarian hotels can offer a unique, culturally immersive experience that resonates with environmentally conscious travelers.

By situating Hungarian hotels within the global landscape of sustainable tourism, it becomes evident that while challenges remain, unique opportunities also exist. Hungarian hotels could benefit from international collaborations and knowledge-sharing initiatives that provide insights into scalable sustainability models. Aligning with international standards not only boosts credibility but also broadens their appeal to a global audience increasingly driven by sustainable travel choices.

In summary, a deeper examination of the findings suggests that sustainable practices in Hungarian hotels not only contribute to environmental goals but also serve as effective marketing and branding tools. Enhanced guest perceptions, stronger brand loyalty, and alignment with global sustainability standards position Hungarian hotels competitively, meeting both local and international expectations for responsible tourism.

Results and Recommendations

The research provides a comprehensive overview of sustainability efforts within the Hungarian hotel industry, as well as consumer attitudes towards these initiatives. Qualitative insights from an interview with Gyula Kanel, the director of Hotel Moments Budapest, revealed that sustainability efforts vary significantly across the industry. Smaller hotels, despite financial constraints, demonstrate a greater ability to swiftly implement innovative and effective sustainable practices. These establishments often find it easier to test and adopt new ideas, leading to meaningful environmental impacts. On the other hand, larger hotel chains face challenges in localizing global sustainability standards. While these chains have the potential to make a substantial positive impact due to their scale, adapting broad sustainability initiatives to local contexts can be complex and resource-intensive.

The quantitative data from the online questionnaire showed that consumers generally hold positive attitudes towards sustainability, with a significant majority (82%) believing that companies should be obliged to practice sustainability, and over half (51%) expressing a willingness to pay more for sustainable products or services. However, this positive attitude does not always translate into behavior. Only 41% of respondents considered sustainability when choosing accommodation, and even fewer (33%) factored it into their travel planning. Addressing this gap will require industry stakeholders to integrate sustainability into the core value proposition of hotel services, making it an essential criterion in consumer decision-making.

Despite the overall positive attitudes towards sustainability, the research also uncovered low awareness of specific sustainability initiatives, such as the "Green Hotel" mark, with only 28% of respondents being familiar with it. This suggests that while there is openness to sustainable tourism, more needs to be done to raise visibility and understanding of these initiatives among consumers.

To address these findings, several recommendations are proposed. Firstly, hotels that have implemented strong sustainability practices should enhance their marketing and communication strategies to better highlight their efforts. By effectively communicating their sustainability initiatives, hotels can bridge the gap between consumer attitudes and behaviors, potentially attracting a more environmentally conscious clientele. Secondly, large hotel chains should focus on localizing global sustainability standards to better suit local contexts. This could involve engaging more with local suppliers, reducing delivery frequencies, and incorporating local environmental priorities into CSR strategies. By tailoring global standards to local needs, these chains can overcome the challenges of implementing broad sustainability initiatives and make them more effective.

Additionally, incentivizing sustainable choices among guests could prove beneficial. Hotels might introduce programs where guests are rewarded with loyalty points or other benefits for opting for reduced housekeeping services or participating in sustainability efforts. Such incentives promote sustainable behavior while also enhancing guest satisfaction, making the experience more rewarding on multiple levels. Moreover, the hotel industry should foster greater collaboration among stakeholders, including local communities, suppliers, and governmental bodies. Collaborative efforts can lead to the development of comprehensive sustainability programs that address the unique challenges of the industry and the region.

Finally, there is a clear need for increased awareness and education about sustainability initiatives within the hotel industry. Given the low awareness of the "Green Hotel" mark, broader educational campaigns could be conducted through partnerships with industry associations, media, and direct communication with guests. By educating consumers on the significance of sustainability marks and the impact of their choices, the industry can encourage more sustainable tourism behaviors, aligning consumer actions with their expressed values.

In summary, implementing these recommendations could significantly enhance the effectiveness of sustainability efforts within the Hungarian hotel industry, better aligning these initiatives with consumer expectations, and ultimately supporting success in both environmental stewardship and business performance.

Summary

Today, most guests may not choose accommodation solely based on environmental protection. However, it is the responsibility of hotels—like any other company—to play a role in minimizing their environmental impact. Hotels of all sizes should have the opportunity to achieve these objectives to contribute to environmental protection. Developing consistent, long-term business management strategies is essential, promoting the importance of environmental protection and sustainability and integrating practical solutions into everyday operations (Kovács, 2013). Due to their global reach, large hotel companies have a distinguished role in addressing climate and environmental protection.

Hotels that prioritize environmental protection and responsibility, even qualifying as "green hotels," can attract customers who value these efforts. Environmental protection initiatives should be highlighted in hotel marketing communication, serving as a unique attraction for specific target clientele. Incentives for environmental protection in hotels could be more widely integrated into quality assessment and assurance systems, following examples such as the Hungarian Hotels and Restaurants Association's programs and the Hotelstars rating system (Kovács – Kerekesné Dr. Mayer – Domjáné Dr. Nyizsalovszki, 2017).

Sustainable tourism is crucial for the hotel industry to achieve its goals of environmental responsibility, high sustainability, excellent guest experiences, and substantial profitability. The results of the online questionnaire indicate a positive attitude towards sustainability, but efforts are needed to strengthen the connection between sustainable tourism and guest choices. Achieving sustainability in the hotel industry will require not only committed leadership and strategic planning but also strong collaboration among stakeholders, including suppliers, government bodies, and local communities.

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