

Sustainability communications in the hospitality industry: Exploring the role and identity of sustainability managers.

Abstract

This paper explores the professional identity of sustainability managers within the hospitality industry. Professional identity explores professional sense of self, as shaped by their own beliefs and values, but also influenced by the social and cultural context of their work environment. These values typically include a strong commitment to sustainability and ethical standards and a willingness to implement change within their organisation. Sustainability commitments vary throughout the hospitality industry, creating difficulties aligning these initiatives with sustainability targets and goals such as the SDGs and the global plastics treaty, whilst increasing environmental legislation is forcing compliance. The paper uses identity theory and social identity theory to explore the multifaceted relationships between the social structure of a workplace and individual behaviours within the hospitality industry, to explore how their professional identity informs how they communicate sustainability initiatives to employees and consumers.

1.0 Introduction

The sustainability strategies of the hospitality industry remain primarily concerned with energy and water reduction, improved waste management and biodiversity protection (Velaoras *et al.*, 2025; Jones *et al.*, 2016). Whilst increased focus on recycling efforts and the promotion of sustainable practices across the industry has gained increased academic attention (Khatter, 2023; Ioannidis *et al.*, 2021). Hospitality companies are slowly prioritising CSR (Jones & Wynn, 2019), in part due to increased awareness of the benefits to communicating sustainability. This includes improved reputation (Fu *et al.*, 2019), financial benefits (Levy & Park, 2011) and stakeholder support (Lii *et al.*, 2011), whilst improving company reputation and brand loyalty (Aragon-Correa *et al.*, 2015). This is challenged by higher operating costs, which often deter companies from implementing sustainability strategies (Khatter, 2023) and inefficient environmental indicators where food waste and carbon footprint are often not included (Bux & Amicarelli, 2022; Campos *et al.*, 2024), preventing an accurate comparison of sustainability across the hospitality industry being established.

Increasingly, companies are hiring sustainability managers to signal their commitment to sustainability (Risi & Wickert, 2017; Strand, 2013), with many studies exploring the positive link between the sustainability manager presence and improved environmental performance (Kanashiro & Rivero, 2019; Wiengarten *et al.*, 2017). For example, the characteristics of an experienced sustainability manager can lead to employee willingness to adopt the sustainability vision of the company, increasing employee engagement (Peters *et al.*, 2018) whereas for external stakeholders including consumers, sustainability managers play a role in

aligning a company's sustainability strategies with societal expectations (Cai *et al.*, 2024), thereby improving a company's sustainable brand image.

Current literature exploring the professional identity of sustainability managers in the hospitality industry explore how professional identities interrelate with the expectations of the business (Kiefhaber *et al.*, 2020) and the characteristics of shaping professional identity for sustainability (Mikkola, 2009). The professional identity of sustainability managers is paradoxical in nature, often resulting in contradictory identities between personal views and organisational goals (Wright *et al.*, 2012), influencing managers' approach to communicating sustainability to employees and consumers. This study will explore the role and identity of sustainability managers, including how managers perceive their professional identity, their values and attitudes towards sustainability and how this informs how they frame sustainability to employees and consumers. Identity theory and social identity theory will be used to explore the multifaceted relationships between the social structure of a workplace and individual behaviours. In addition, through the research questions, the paper contributes to the sustainability communications literature by exploring how professional identity informs and helps us to understand their processes and practices.

1. How do CSR managers construct their professional identity in relation to sustainable hospitality practices?
2. How does the professional identity of sustainability managers inform their framing of sustainability practices?
3. What input do CSR managers have in shaping hospitality corporate sustainability communications?
4. What is the role of CSR managers in driving sustainable behaviours and addressing concerns around greenwashing in hospitality?

2.0 Literature review

2.1 Identity theories and professional identity of sustainability managers.

Identity theory primarily explores the individual role behaviours, expressed by internalised meanings and expectations associated with their role (Stets & Burke, 2000; Stryker & Burke, 2000). Social identity theory differs by exploring how people view themselves as members of a group or category (Hogg *et al.*, 1995; Stets & Burke, 2000). This is relevant to current identity work on professional identity that explores how sustainability managers express different identities in various work situations as well as in their social life (Wright *et al.*, 2012).

Professional identity is defined as “an individual’s self-definition as a member of a profession” (Chreim *et al.*, 2007), determined through their own values and reflected through how they understand their work identity (Frostenson *et al.*, 2022). Identity is shaped by both their own views and ideas but also the response and opinions of other actors. This is confirmed by Carollo & Guerci (2018) who discuss three main tensions affecting the

professional identity of sustainability managers; business vs values orientated, the organisational vs the outsider and short-term vs long-term. Whilst it is clear that sustainability managers should adopt a balanced approach towards sustainability (Mikkola, 2009), this does not always translate into practice. CSR professionals are sometimes conflicted between their own sustainable beliefs and values and the pragmatic decisions of a corporation, where decisions are often made to prioritise short-term sustainability trends over long-term sustainability efforts. (Carollo & Guerci, 2018). These conflicting views are likely to deter managers from expressing their environmental views, being likely to downplay these values within the workplace (Wright *et al.*, 2012).

Wright *et al.* (2012) explores three identities of sustainability managers; green change agent, rationale manager and committed activist. The first identity, the green change agent, acknowledged how sustainability managers valued sustainability practices as important in both their work and personal lives, leading them to challenge and implement sustainable practices within their work (Wright *et al.*, 2012). Within this identity, sustainability managers felt they were able to link their personal views of sustainability with business economic needs to meet the demands of the business, as well as societal and environmental demands (Iatridis *et al.*, 2022), often attracting sustainability managers to the role (Vu *et al.*, 2024; Heucher *et al.*, 2024). The second identity, the rationale manager's identity, was often aligned with business needs, including economic performance and shareholder value (Wright *et al.*, 2012). For this identity, sustainability managers often feel obligated to introduce sustainability strategies based on the related costs and economic benefits, causing their professional identity to align with the economic interests rather than contributing to the wider sustainable development (Iatridis *et al.*, 2022). The final identity, the committed activist often viewed environmental concerns as important, often in contrast to the business needs, where sustainability managers were willing to leave organisations whose sustainability values are not aligned with their own (Wright *et al.*, 2012).

2.2 The role of sustainability managers in the hospitality industry

As companies continue to implement CSR into their practices, it is not surprising that the role of a sustainability manager is linked to the economic, social, environmental and ethics affecting a company (Velte & Stawingo, 2020; Baumgartner & Winter, 2014). By focusing on the triple bottom line, sustainability managers can create a work culture that emphasises the social and environmental issues related to the business (Casey & Sieber, 2016). Sustainability managers are often perceived as experts, with the ability to implement long-term sustainability initiatives that are beneficial to the company and its stakeholders (Kanashiro & Rivero, 2019). Therefore, they are tasked with creating and communicating responses to wider discussions of sustainability among external stakeholders, whilst implementing internal sustainability practices, managing employee engagement (Wright & Nyberg, 2012). The skill set includes project management, gaining relevant knowledge and

communication and collaboration with stakeholders (Shinnaranantana *et al.*, 2013). Other reasons for recruiting include increasing their ability to integrate CSR practices into the organisation and increasing the efficiency of CSR initiatives, leading to increased knowledge and improved reputation (Wiengarten *et al.*, 2017). Increasingly, the role has advanced to include contributing towards the creation of CSR reporting (Argento *et al.*, 2018).

Sustainability managers play a key role in advancing the sustainability strategies of a company (Greenwood *et al.*, 2012), being responsible for supervising corporate sustainability strategies including its implementation and results (Strand, 2013). This responsibility includes developing a clear and concise corporate sustainability vision, consisting of goals, target and action plans (Xavier *et al.*, 2019). To achieve this, they should identify key environmental issues affecting the organisation and train and educate employees on the sustainability strategies (Greenwood *et al.*, 2012; Baumgartner & Winter, 2014). Additionally, the implementation of strategic decisions, allocating resources and setting clear measurable targets that are aligned with the sustainability initiatives of a company enable sustainability managers to improve the sustainability performance of a company (Zhu *et al.*, 2013; Haldorai *et al.*, 2025). Within the workplace, creating a culture of sustainability within the workplace, sustainability managers have the potential to engage employees with the sustainability practices of the organisation (Haldorai *et al.*, 2022).

Despite companies increasingly incorporating sustainability into their business practices, sustainability managers are often just an assistant in the process, with the tasks within the role unclear (Borglund *et al.*, 2023). Further challenges include managing the attitudes of others towards sustainability, difficulties engaging stakeholders with the sustainable practices, resource challenges including insufficient staffing, structural challenges such as a lack of support from management and difficulties implementing sustainability practices (Loos & Spraul, 2024; Borglund *et al.*, 2023). Additionally, financial pressures influence the choices and actions sustainability managers can take to meet business performance (Epstein & Buhovac, 2010).

2.3 Framing of sustainability messages

Sustainability managers often feel conflicted between their sustainable values and the CSR goals of their organisation (Visser & Crane, 2010), subsequently affecting how sustainability managers are framing sustainability to employees and consumers. The most documented framing within the literature is a business case framing. Within this framing, sustainability managers focus on how environmental and social aspects align with the economic objectives of a company (Hahn *et al.*, 2014), where short-term economic gain is prioritised (Benkert, 2021). Reasons for implementing this framing include, prioritising the triple bottom line framework for sustainability (Rodriguez *et al.*, 2018; Liute & De Giacomo, 2022) and capitalism (Molthan-Hill, 2015). In this framing, sustainability strategies are implemented once a “business case” is established, usually through cost and resources reductions (Molthan-Hill, 2015). In addition, companies are often focused on competitive advantage,

where CSR is often prioritised to reduce risk, improve brand image and increase market reach (Hockerts, 2015).

In contrast, a sustainability minded frame is often paradoxical in nature, where managers are more accepting of the conflicts between environmental, social and economic concerns of a business (Hahn *et al.*, 2014). In this framing, managers' approach to corporate sustainability is influenced by their own sustainability values in addition to the needs of the business (Benkert, 2021). Whilst the business case framing primary focus is at an organisational level, a sustainability minded frame addresses sustainability concerns at an organisational and societal level (Hahn *et al.*, 2024). This framing is likely to be implemented by the green change agent identity, where managers encouraged organisational change (Wright *et al.*, 2012).

3.0 Methodology

The study is exploring the role and identity of sustainability managers working in the UK hospitality industry. Semi-structured interviews with 15-20 managers who either work in a designated sustainability management role, or sustainability is a part of their job role. The interviews were conducted to explore four main areas designed to answer the research questions: professional identity, the role of a sustainability manager, the sustainability strategies employed by a company, and sustainability communications. The recruitment strategy for the study included identifying potential participants on LinkedIn. The many functions of LinkedIn enable the search for individuals with specific work experiences, job roles and qualifications (Griffiths *et al.*, 2025). In this instant, search criteria included “sustainability manager” “hospitality” and “UK”.

Questions were designed to address key areas of sustainability communications including single-use plastics, food waste and companies' engagement with the SDGs. By responding to the same questions, key themes of the data could be developed and analysed. Interviews were coded using Nvivo. Thematic analysis has been chosen to analyse the data, identifying the themes or patterns in the responses (Braun & Clark, 2006). Collection of emerging themes is often used to understand data analysis (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006). For this study, thematic analysis will be used to identify the best practices, difficulties and recommendations to implement company strategies at an employee level.

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