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Sustainability communications across multi-stakeholder groups: A critical review of the findings from the hospitality and tourism sector.

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Abstract

Contribution: Stakeholder involvement in CSR is essential to ensuring pro-environmental attitudes and behaviours across multi-stakeholder groups. Despite increased awareness of the benefits surrounding a collaborative approach to sustainability communications, its success is limited by difficulties engaging with active online conversations with stakeholder groups. Whilst previous research defines the effectiveness of sustainability communications, this paper contributes to knowledge through the development of a theoretical framework which explores the processes to achieving pro-environmental attitudes and behaviours in stakeholder groups. The research will also consider social media as an opportunity to communicate CSR information to all stakeholder groups.

Introduction

The hospitality and tourism industries have been scrutinised for their corporate irresponsibility, with companies often criticised for prioritising short-term financial goals over long term sustainability efforts (Epstein, & Wisner, 2001). Limited product differentiation, competitiveness of the industry, and increased stakeholder demand for sustainability information (Buhalis, 2000) has identified the need for sustainability strategies to be introduced. Whilst consumers behaving unethically away from the home adds to the difficulties surrounding implementing pro-environmental behaviours (Tolkes, 2018). The prioritisation of sustainability communications enables companies to diversify from their competitors and drive competitive advantage (Dodds, & Holmes, 2020).

Their success is often limited by sustainability communications being perceived as a marketing strategy used to enhance their competitiveness (Untari, & Satria, 2019). Companies would therefore benefit from differentiating their sustainability communications from their competitors and ensuring transparency in their reporting. Although sustainability remains an issue in the hospitality and tourism industries, there are difficulties communicating sustainability information due to stakeholder difficulties processing sustainability information and consumer disinterest in CSR (Tolkes, 2018), with a lack of community involvement, conflict, competitiveness, and varying interests of stakeholders contributing to these difficulties (Chamidah, Guntoro, & Sulastri, 2020). Although some studies have acknowledged hospitality and tourism consumers to be environmentally conscious, consumers are unlikely to engage with sustainability information (Han, McCabe, Wang, & Chong, 2018; Tolkes, 2018) benefitting from communications which mainstream sustainability. This also identifies the need for interactive communications which are targeted towards specific stakeholder groups. Targeted communications are necessary due to varying knowledge, beliefs, and values (Cvitanovic, van Putten, Kelly, Feldman, van Stevenick, Mackay, Badullovich, & Gourlay, 2020) with stakeholders reacting to different types of sustainability information. By prioritising collaborative sustainability communications, companies can increase stakeholder awareness of sustainability whilst encouraging pro-environmental attitudes and behaviours.

The literature acknowledged how companies have transitioned from the use of sustainability reports to the use of collaborative, interactive communications which involves stakeholders in

their sustainability decisions (Chamidah, Guntoro, & Sulastrri, 2020). In recent years, there has been extensive research on social media as a viable source of sustainability communication, with benefits including direct interactions with stakeholders, the ability to enforce the authenticity of CSR activities and encouragement of pro-environmental behaviours. This paper will add to current literature by identifying the processes to achieving pro-environmental behaviours across multi-stakeholder groups through a theoretical framework. The literature acknowledges that there are challenges to implementing CSR, including difficulties controlling stakeholder criticisms, negative stakeholder influences and comments left on social media platforms. The paper will extend this through exploring how the challenges to engaging stakeholders can be mitigated through the theoretical framework.

Literature review

Defining sustainable coffee

Table 1: Strategies of communications in use in the hospitality and tourism industries.

Effective forms of communications	Research paper
Marketing strategies. <i>Strategy to engage stakeholders with the sustainability strategies of the company (Sun, Liu, Chan, Zhang, & Chen, 2021).</i>	Janjua, Krishnapillai, & Rehman, 2022. Zhang, et al. 2022 Sun, Liu, Chan, Zhang, & Chen, (2021). Chamidah, Guntoro, & Sulastrri, (2020). Goodman-Smith, Miroso, & Miroso, (2020). Sahin, Baloglu, & Topcuoglu, (2020). Vinzenn, Priskin, wirth, Ponnappureddy, & Ohnmacht, (2019). Kim, Malek, & Roberts, (2019). Chigora, & Mutambara, (2019). Liu, Yuen, & Jiang, (2019). Landon, Woosnam, Keith., Rubin, & Ling, (2019). Tolkes, & Butzmann, (2018). Font, English, & Gkritzali, (2018).
Stakeholder interactions. <i>Supplying information through interactions with one or more stakeholder (Fang, Yamanaka, & Trencher, 2021)</i>	Ghani et al. 2022. Chakraborty, & Takenaka, 2023 Fang, Yamanaka, & Trencher, (2021) Chan, Nozu, & Zhou, (2021). Kamil, Abdoellah, Agustin, & Bakti, (2020). Cvitanovic, van Putten, Kelly, Feldman, van Stevenick, Mackay, Badullovich, & Gourlay, (2020). Tolkes, (2020). Poponi, Palli, Ferrari, Filibeck, Forte, Franceschini, Ruggeire, & Piovesan, (2020). Heslinga, Groote, & Vanclay, (2019). Ulus, & Hatipoglu, (2016). Noor, Rasoolimanesh, Ganesan, & Jaafer, (2015).
Environmental messaging. <i>Framing messages to engage stakeholders in sustainability communications (Cvitanovic, van Putten, Kelly, Feldman, van Stevenick, Mackay, Badullovich, & Gourlay, 2020)</i>	Bernard, Rahman & Douglas, 2023 Taff et al. 2022 Cordero-Gutier et al. 2023 Cvitanovic, van Putten, Kelly, Feldman, van Stevenick, Mackay, Badullovich, & Gourlay, (2020) Chan, Nozu, & Zhou (2021) Shen, Qian, & Chen, (2020) Goodman-Smith, Miroso, & Miroso, (2020). Chigora, & Mutambara, (2019). Landon, Woosnam, Keith., Rubin, & Ling, 2(019). Font, English, & Gkritzali, (2018). Babakhani, Ritchie, & Dolnicar, (2017). Arana, & Leon, (2016). Noor, Rasoolimanesh, Ganesan, & Jaafer, (2015). Pulido-Fernandez, Andrades-Caldito, & Sanchez, Rivero, (2015).
Environmental certification.	Tanaka, Tiku, & Takashin, 2022

Meeting certain requirements to be viewed as sustainable (Shen, Qian, & Chen, 2020)	Obsung et al. 2022 Shen, Qian, & Chen, (2020). Dodds, & Holmes, (2020). Poponi, Palli, Ferrari, Filibeck, Forte, Franceschini, Ruggeire, & Piovesan, (2020).
Environmental policies. Outlines the commitment to reduce impact on the environment (Kamil, Abdoellah, Agustin, & Bakti 2021).	Tanaka, Tiku, & Takashin, 2022 Zhang, et al. 2022 Kamil, Abdoellah, Agustin, & Bakti (2021). Djosetro, & Behagel, (2020). Arana, & Leon, (2016). Pulido-Fernandez, Andrades-Caldito, & Sanchez, Rivero, (2015).
Company websites/CSR reports Sustainability statements recorded in a report or webpage (Ettinger, Grabner-Krauter, Ozaki, & Terlutter, 2021).	Ettinger, Grabner-Krauter, Ozaki, & Terlutter, (2021). Untari, & Satria, (2019). Legrand, Huegel, & Sloan, (2013).
Social media. Use of official social media platforms to communicate sustainability strategies, reaching a wider audience than traditional sources (Kapoor, Balaji, & Jing, 2020).	Mazza, 2023 Oncioiu et al. 2022. Partlova, Dusek, & Sagapova, 2022 Fait et al. 2022. Cordero-Gutier et al. 2023 Abrams, Molder, & Leong 2023 Wut, Xu, & Wong, 2023. Chen, & Cheng 2023 Kapoor, Balaji, & Jiang, 2020. Sultan, Sharmin, Badulescu, Stiubea, & Xue, (2021). Shen, Qian, & Chen, (2020). Stadlthanner, Andreu, & Font, (2020). Han, McCabe, Wang, & Chong, (2018). Deddens, (2011).

Different sources of communications are accessed by different stakeholder groups, identifying the need for targeted sustainability messaging. Previously, research has focused on CSR reports and webpages, targeted towards suppliers and investors, as these sources require prior understanding of sustainability issues (Wehrli et al. 2017; Tolkes, 2018). With increasing research on consumers, the focus of the literature has transitioned to more collaborative types of communications, including marketing strategies and social media. Marketing strategies have included the use of multifactual campaigns designed to appeal to the economic, environmental, and social values of stakeholders (Goodman-Smith, Miroso & Miroso, 2020; Zhang et al. 2022), enabling companies to appeal to potential consumers. Social media is one of the most researched forms of interactive sustainability communications in the literature, due to its collaborative nature where stakeholders can engage with companies to discuss their sustainability strategies (Kapoor, Balaji, & Jiang, 2021; Shen, Qian, & Chen, 2020), enabling companies to gain feedback on how their sustainability strategies are understood by the relevant stakeholder group.

Less documented forms of sustainability communications include environmental certification and policies. Environmental certification is designed to legitimise environmental action. When used effectively, this form of communication can raise awareness of the sustainability issues being monitored (Dodds, & Holmes, 2020), providing a way for companies to monitor and communicate the success of sustainability initiatives. However, a lack of awareness of the meaning of environmental certifications (Poponi et al. 2020) prevents them from being effective in encouraging pro-environmental attitudes and behaviours. Environmental policies encourage sustainable practices in the hospitality and tourism sectors without hindering its economic success (Pulido-Fernandez et al. 2015). The use of policies enforces sustainable behaviours in stakeholders and isn't initially a source of sustainability communication.

However, current literature has identified how the communication of policies has enabled a shared understanding of the sustainability issue across the industries (Kamil et al. (2021; Arana & Leon, 2016). This has led to companies utilising the use of policies to encourage sustainable behaviours through ensuring shared understanding of resources and creating an open dialogue (Djostro, & Behagel, 2020).

Methodology

A systematic review was chosen to investigate the effectiveness of the types of sustainability communications used in the hospitality and tourism industries. The systematic review was completed using Web of Science and Scopus using the search terms “sustainab* communicat*” “effective or effectiveness” and “hospitality or tourism”, limiting the results to peer reviewed research. 214 abstracts were initially read, with articles being excluded for irrelevance, duplicated articles, non-empirical studies, and language. A total of 56 papers were included as part of the systematic review.

Initial results

The initial results to the systematic review explore how companies can engage multiple stakeholder groups when communicating their sustainability strategies, considering the challenges and limitations to engaging each stakeholder group with sustainable behaviours. The typologies of sustainability communications are considered, exploring how companies are using different forms of communications to appeal to different stakeholder groups. Based on the results of the systematic review, the following 7 initial propositions have been discussed:

- 1: Effective marketing strategies are likely to influence stakeholder attitudes towards sustainability information.
- 2: A collaborative approach to sustainability is more likely to engage stakeholders with sustainability information.
- 3: Environmental messaging is more likely to promote sustainable behaviours in stakeholders.
- 4: Environmental certification is likely to improve stakeholder trust in sustainability communications.
- 5: Environmental policies are likely to encourage sustainable practices in the hospitality and tourism industries.
- 6: Interactive communications are more likely to be effective in changing sustainability behaviours when compared to CSR reports & webpages.
- 7: The difficulties responding to consumer conversations on social media platforms is likely to lead to negative perceptions of CSR in consumers.

Discussion

Figure 1: Theoretical framework of the processes to achieving pro-environmental behaviours across multi-stakeholder groups.

STAKEHOLDER	PROCESS TO ACHIEVING PRO-ENVIRONMENTAL BEHAVIOURS.	OUTCOME
Consumer	Create communication strategies which inform consumers of CSR initiatives (31,44). Use collaborative communications that allow consumer feedback (6,27,41).. Ensure communications are relevant to consumer values/interest in CSR (25). Using social media, marketing campaigns and environmental messaging to appeal to consumers (1,4,29,34,36,44,46).. Use of choice editing to mainstream sustainability (49).	Pro-environmental attitudes and behaviours (20,24,29,46,50). Higher awareness of CSR. Improved brand image (20,35,44). Accidental pro-environmental behaviours (22,49).
Employees	Introducing employee diversity training (27,52). Treating CSR as part of day-to-day job (13,44,52). Training employees as the 'face of the brand' by shared values of the company (13,44). Limiting pressure on employees to engage with sustainability. (13). Keeping employees informed of sustainability initiatives (13,32). Informal sustainability communications (52).	Pro-environmental attitudes and behaviours (20,24,29,46,50).. Embracing diversity (27,52). Improving how employees view the company (13). Low employee turnover (52). Attracting and retaining employees (21,45,52).
Suppliers/ Investors	Increase supplier awareness of sustainability (9,33). Use of sustainable products/energy use (44) Maintaining sustainable behaviours throughout the supply chain (27,42). Creating a stakeholder response strategy (10,25,31,44,45) Sustainability strategies included in codes of conduct (44). Collaborative buyer-supplier communications (32,44).	Pro-environmental attitudes and behaviours. (20,24,29,46,50). Sustainable supply chain (9,27). Shared values with the company (44). Improved buyer-supplier relationship (32,44).
Government	Prioritise sustainability activities (16). Influence sustainability policies that assist collaborative action, inclusion, and participation (17,25,27). Identify important ethical issues (9,42) Seeing sustainability as a long-term goal (42).. Prioritising sustainability before policies are introduced (16).	Pro-environmental attitudes and behaviours (20,24,29,46,50).. Shared visions between Government and companies (25,27). Sustainability initiatives introduced because of policies (23,36,50). Transparency of CSR (23). Self-regulation (23,33).

A change in stakeholder attitude and behaviour towards sustainability was one of the most frequent measures of success throughout the literature, confirmed in the theoretical framework. Reasonings for this include sustainability increasingly being viewed as a long-term goal, where it is prioritised over short term financial benefits. Encouragement of CSR strategies is complicated by stakeholder's negative perceptions of communications (Sahin, Baloglu, & Topcuoglu, 2019), a lack of standardisation (Legrand, Hugel, & Sloan, 2013) and resistance to change. Stakeholders have varying sustainability interests, impacting on how they view sustainability strategies, with stakeholders unable to feel adequate need to change their behaviours (Tolkes, & Butzmann, 2018). This could be overcome by mainstreaming sustainability, where stakeholders are unaware of choosing the most sustainable option (Tolkes, 2018).

Conclusion

The research contributes to knowledge by creating a theoretical framework that considers the processes to achieving pro-environmental behaviours across the main stakeholder groups identified in the current literature. This paper added to existing hospitality and tourism literature by investigating how sustainability communications can encourage pro-environmental attitudes and behaviours across multiple stakeholder groups. The theoretical framework identified the stakeholder group, intended outcomes, typologies of sustainability communication and the processes necessary to reach the intended outcome of sustainable attitudes and behaviours across multi-stakeholder groups. In line with the more current literature used within the systematic review, the use of collaborative and interactive communications was considered as newer process of encouraging pro-environmental attitudes and behaviours across stakeholder groups.

Implications to theory:

Sustainability communications that target specific stakeholder groups can lead to improved engagement with sustainability information. The use of interactive and collaborative communications can help overcome the limitation of one-way communications by enabling feedback from stakeholders and encouraging discussions amongst stakeholder groups.

This systematic review extends the literature by identifying the processes to achieving pro-environmental attitudes and behaviours for multiple stakeholder groups. Suitable forms of communication that create engagement with their intended audience have been identified, whilst ensuring they are targeted towards the values and interests of the intended stakeholder group. Although a change in attitude or behaviour is acknowledged as the main outcome of prioritising stakeholder groups, further benefits have been developed, including shared values between a company and their stakeholders.

Practical implications

The theoretical framework offers companies a strategic approach to communicating sustainability information to their stakeholder groups. By implementing a strategic approach to sustainability communications, companies can improve their brand image and credibility, being achieved through heightened awareness of sustainability issues. The research identified the difficulties responding to negative comments left on social media, identifying how this can be

managed through companies choosing social media platforms that are relevant to their target audience, being active in consumers online discussions and using social media to communicate their sustainability strategies.

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