

Malaysian Hotels Towards Sustainability Practices: Are They Ready?

Juliana Anak Langgat¹*

¹Faculty of Business, Economics and Accountancy, Universiti Malaysia Sabah, Kota Kinabalu,
Sabah, Malaysia

*Corresponding author's email:
juelanggat@ums.edu.my

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ABSTRACT

There has been a rising trend in the expansion of the tourism and hospitality industry which has contributed towards strengthening the economy and prosperity in many countries globally. The increase in visitors has given a tremendous boost to local businesses but has also created increasing concern about the sustainability of the Malaysian hospitality offer. This study aims to investigate the current sustainability practices in the Malaysian hotel industry. There are ten hotel managers from 3 – 5 star rated hotels in Malaysia has participated in this in-depth semi-structured interviews. The gathered data were transcribed and coded to gain a better understanding of the results. The findings of this study have identified there are four practices initially implemented by Malaysian hotels in the early stages of environmental practices, namely; water and energy savings, waste management and using local suppliers. Also, the findings of this study provided several suggestions where the implementation of said practices could be successfully undertaken.

INTRODUCTION

The hospitality industry is one of the largest industries globally and, regretfully, contributes adversely to the environment (Jones, Hillier, & Comfort, 2014). As the hospitality industry is reliant on resources, it is, therefore, a significant contributor to many of the issues that compromise our ecosystem. Since the

1990s, sustainability practices in the hospitality industry have received significant interest and attention from researchers (Buckley, 2012). Likewise, the issues surrounding sustainability (Mensah, 2006) have continued to grow in relative importance and significance (Nicholls & Kang, 2012a, 2012b). Sustainability development has been influenced by human activity for many years and has, in turn, adversely affected the ecosystem. This impact on the ecosystem can be seen in many negative outcomes as documented by Nicholls and Kang (2012a, 2012b) and the hospitality industry has been identified as impacting sustainable development (Buckley, 2012).

Researchers and environmental protection groups have increasingly become concerned about the impact of the hospitality industry on the environment and the need for sustainable practices to be introduced (e.g., Dief & Font, 2010; Nicholls & Kang, 2012a, 2012b; Hu, 2012; Kasim & Ismail, 2012; Kim et al., 2017). As a result, the industry has been experiencing increasing pressure to address these issues, as hospitality operators have only recently become fully aware of the impact caused by these issues and quickly realized that the performance of their business also relies on the ability to demonstrate and implement sustainability practices.

PROBLEM STATEMENT

The current research trend in sustainable hospitality is to focus on the implications of green practices to specific business operations (e.g., Miao & Wei, 2013), specific communication techniques (e.g., Hu, 2012; Theotokis & Manganari, 2015) and for specific consumer profiles (e.g., Millar, Hind, & Magala, 2012). The hotel industry is trying hard to achieve green integration (Leonidou, Leonidou, Fotiadis, & Zeriti, 2013; Peiró-Signes, Segarra-Oña, Verma, Mondéjar-Jiménez, & Vargas-Vargas, 2014). Notably, these trends are stimulating great interest among industry players. Most hotels that practice sustainability

is self-driven and encourage a more systematic management system, having realized the benefits and advantages to be gained (Bonilla-Priego, Najera, & Font, 2011). On the other hand, even though substantial consideration has been given, there is some evidence to suggest that the adoption of green practices is due to the pressure from stakeholders and/or through government regulations (Lynes & Dredge, 2006). For example, in the case of hotel investors, hospitality managers are reminded to report every single detail of their operations to the investors, including environmental management and, ethical and social responsibility considerations.

Some hotels have obtained a green practice certification to highlight their environmental performance and contributions which, in turn, help to strengthen their competitive advantage and to differentiate them from others (Han & Kim, 2010). However, it is still questionable as to whether this form of certification is a strong indicator of green adoption within the hospitality industry (Segarra-Oña, Peiró-Signes, Verma, & Miret-Pastor, 2012). To become more competitive and attract attention from the market, the majority of the more substantial hotel chains have shared their sustainability and Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) programmes. For example, the Hilton Hotel is well known for it is at "Hilton's we Care!" programme which is implemented and practised according to environmental concerns and has adopted a world environmental protection and awareness approach rather than from a sustainability context or perspective (Bohdanowicz, Zientara, & Novotna, 2011).

While green practices in hotels have been implemented for the past 20 years in European countries, the issue of sustainability only started receiving attention in Malaysia in 1997 (Yusof & Jamaludin, 2013). The numbers of Malaysian hotels implementing sustainable practices are still low and the figures have not been seen to increase (Tourism Malaysia, 2016).

Furthermore, Malaysia has witnessed a constant increase in the arrival of tourists over the past six decades, which has made a significant impact on local businesses and resources. The most recent data from the Malaysia Tourist Board (2015) indicates that 25.7 million people visited the country in 2015, compared to 7.4 million who visited the country in 1990. Consequently, the increase in visitors has given a tremendous boost to local businesses but has also created increasing concern about the sustainability of the Malaysian tourism offer. An earlier study by Siti et al. (2011) indicated that while most hotels and resorts in Malaysia were aware of environmental issues, the implementation of sustainability and green initiatives remained negligible due to perceived unattractive benefits. This service industry is more concerned about generating profit than implementing green sustainability measures and practices. Therefore, this study is to investigate the current sustainability and to identify the factors that will influence the said practices in the Malaysian hotel industry.

METHODOLOGY

This study was conducted using an in-depth semi-structured interview. The in-depth semi-structured interview was designed to investigate the current sustainability practices implemented in Malaysian hotels. The interviews were conducted with ten hotel managers of 3 – 5 stars rated hotels in Malaysia. All ten interviews were conducted face-to-face. The face interviews allowed the researcher to *'adapt the questions as necessary, clarify doubts, and ensure that the responses are properly understood, by repeating or rephrasing the questions'* (Sekaran & Bougie, 2009). The hotel managers of 3-5 star rated hotels were chosen as the key respondents because they can justify the research objectives and able to provide the most reliable answers (Guest, Brunce, & Johnson, 2006). Table 1 shows the in-depth interview informants.

Table 1 In-depth interview informants

Informants	State	Property Type
HM1	Sabah	4-star rated hotel
HM2	Sabah	4-star rated hotel
HM3	Selangor	4-star rated hotel
HM4	Negeri Sembilan	4-star rated hotel
HM5	Kelantan	5-star rated hotel
HM6	Johor	5-star rated hotel
HM7	Sarawak	4-star rated hotel
HM8	Sarawak	5-star rated hotel
HM9	Sabah	3-star rated hotel
HM10	Sabah	4-star rated hotel

The gathered data were transcribed and coded to gain a better understanding of the results. The data were analysed using three stages of the coding method in qualitative data analysis as follows: (1) open coding, (2) axial coding, and (3) selective coding (Strauss, 1987;

Neuman, 2009). The samples sized used for the qualitative phase were determined using the saturation approach as suggested by Glaser and Strauss (1967). The saturation point was identified when there is limited information gathered after the new data is collected.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Current Sustainability Practices in Malaysian Hotels

There were 7 out of 10 informants who shared their opinions on the current sustainability practices in Malaysian hotels. Table 2 revealed the current situation of the sustainable practices in Malaysian hotels.

Table 2 Current sustainability practices in Malaysian hotels

Informant	Current Practices									
HM1	Not many hotel practising. We are not fully practising the sustainability practices.									
HM2	It was not really good. We are not 100% going into the practices.									
HM3	Not all hotels practising it. We only do the basic practices.									
HM4	Our hotels do not ready for that direction.									
HM5	Not many hotels are going into sustainability practices.									
HM6	Do not fully practising only basic practices.									
HM7	Implement basic practices.									
HM8	The practices are going on in our hotel.									
HM9	Basic practices only.									
HM10	We are certified as 'Green Hotel' and have started practising it since 2007.									
Current Practices	HM1	HM2	HM3	HM4	HM5	HM6	HM7	HM8	HM9	HM10
Less participation	X	X	X		X	X	X		X	
Not ready				X						
Ongoing practices	X	X	X		X	X	X	X	X	
Certified green hotel										X

Based on the findings from the interviews, the Malaysian hotel industry is aware of the environmental issues associated with their existing operations, but the initiatives adopted to deal with the issues have been to-date, insignificant and unclear (Siti et al., 2011). In fact, since 2016, only ten hotels in Malaysia have been certified as green hotels by Tourism Malaysia. Accordingly, this demonstrates that the sustainability agenda has still not yet reached a sufficient level of practical understanding to develop proactive actions in this industry. The face-to-face interviews with the ten informants also highlighted that most of the hotels in Malaysia do not fully implement sustainability practices in their hotels. While these hotels are aware of the impact of their operations on the environment, little effort has been expended to prevent or reduce the impacts (Siti et al., 2011). Furthermore, it was found that most hotels in Malaysia created

or developed their initiatives to implement environmentally friendly practices in hotels. The following are some examples of relevant statements from the informants.

"For me, honestly not all hotels practicing it, we are not 100% going into the practices." (HM3, 5-star hotel)

"For the moment our hotel does not ready to go for that direction." (HM4, 4-star hotel)

"As far as I know overall green practices now as I mentioned to you earlier, not many hotels are actually going in that direction..." (HM5, 4-star hotel)

Types of Practices

The informants were also asked to share about the types of current practices in their hotels. Table 3 below presented the findings of the interview.

Table 3 Types of sustainability practices in Malaysian hotels

Informant	Types of Practices									
HM1	Using local suppliers.									
HM2	Basic practices – Waste management and environmentally friendly chemicals.									
HM3	Energy and water saving – When shift ended all utilities will shut down.									
HM4	Using local suppliers.									
HM5	Energy and water saving.									
HM6	Waste management – Recycling.									
HM7	Put a signage to remind guest in buffet counter about the food wastage.									
HM8	Using local suppliers.									
HM9	Energy and water saving – switch on air conditioner before an event started and switch off an hour before the event ended.									
HM10	No plastic bag, limited serviette, reuse plates and cutleries during buffet, penalty charge for food wastage.									
Current Practices	HM1	HM2	HM3	HM4	HM5	HM6	HM7	HM8	HM9	HM10
Local suppliers	X			X				X	X	
Waste management		X				X	X			X
Energy saving			X		X					
Water saving			X		X				X	

Most of the hotel operations in Malaysia have only implemented basic environmentally friendly practices in their restaurant operations such as energy and water savings, using local suppliers and waste management. Notably, these practices were found to be quite common in the Malaysian hotel industry and are comparable to the previous study conducted by Yusof and Jamaluddin (2013). Furthermore, these practices, while limited were also found in earlier studies, and practices within the room department of hotel operations (Anton, Deltas, & Khanna, 2004; Potokish & Prakash, 2005; Wang, 2012).

Even though the Malaysian hotels have implemented these practices in their operations, the findings of this study have found that these practices were not entirely nor consistently undertaken. For example, energy and water savings were achieved through minimal actions such as making sure all supply of power was switched off when the hotel's operations were closed. However, no details emerged to identify whether the equipment or facilities in the hotel operations complemented or correlated to the amount of energy savings. The following are statements made from the informants about energy and water savings.

“The only thing that we can actually practice at the moment is in terms of savings water and energy. In the morning our Chinese restaurant does not open for breakfast, they only open for lunch between 12:00 noon and 3:00 in the afternoon. When the shift ends all utilities will be shut down.” (HM3, 5-star hotel)

“...what we are thinking now is energy saving... our function room, we have a panel control for the air conditioner and the light. So, the Standard Operation Procedure is before the function started, one hour before we switch on the air conditioner.” (HM9, 3-star hotel)

Regarding waste management, the majority of hotels indicated that waste from their restaurant operations was minimal as they packaged the waste and disposed of it in rubbish bins. However, some hotels have implemented a penalty charge for food wastage to their customers. The majority of hotels were using products purchased from local suppliers to produce their meals. Only meat and seafood products were imported due to the quality and variety that attracted hotel guests. Notwithstanding, this could be a

potential obstacle to procuring local produce given the difficulty of acquiring quality meat and seafood products in Malaysia. The following are the examples of the statement made by the informants.

"it depends on our menu... we are using some international raw ingredients and some local. Mostly we are using some international raw ingredients and some local. Mostly we are using imported meat. But we don't just use imported ingredients. Here, we are using local supplies because the price is cheaper and the quality is also really good. It depends on the menu." (HM7, 4-star hotel)

"We normally use local supplies for wet and dry products. But some of the products if we get the premium items, some people like those, especially those who have money. They like to spend big so we need to get them imported especially mussels. We don't grow mussels so we still need to get them imported but if there is no supply we will serve local mussels, the local mussels' flesh is small even though it is fresh." (HM2, 4-star hotel)

Factors Influencing the Sustainability Practices

Government Support and Guidelines

The informants viewed government support and guidelines as an enabler that would support the adoption of sustainability practices. They believed that the government and the hotel association should consider offering support and issuing appropriate guidelines and instructions (i.e. procedures) on how to adopt sustainability practices (Tzschentke, Kirk, & Lynch, 2008; Kasim & Ismail, 2012; Gu, Ryan, Bin, & Wei, 2013). This is extremely important given that hotel operations are contributing to environmental issues and polluting the ecosystem, for example, through the use of uncontrollable perishable products and utilities (APAT, 2002; Mensah, 2004; Trung & Kumar, 2005). This

is one of the key reasons for the poor, if not, non-adoption of such practices. Relying on hotels to take responsibility and introduce their initiatives has not been sufficient to increase the adoption rate for sustainability. The following are the statements by two of the informants.

"But again, low enforcement by the government. So, it's like does not exist." (HM4, 4-star hotel)

"The guidelines must be there before we start training the people. So this must come from either the ministry or the association itself before we can actually start doing our own internal training for our staff." (HM3, 4-star hotel)

Incentives

Incentives are considered to be a means of increasing the participation of hotels in adopting sustainability practices and are perceived to decrease the total cost of implementing these practices. While some hotels have the financial capacity, along with sufficient resources to accommodate the costs associated with implementing environmentally-friendly (sustainability) practices (Florida, Atlas, & Cline, 1999), most hotel managers are still not convinced about the business case to justify the implementation of such practices. Notably, offering incentives to adopt new practices could help to change the hotel manager's current perception regarding sustainability practices as future (recurring) costs. Some of the incentives that were found to motivate hotel managers' included; reducing utility payments and tax and recognition for making such changes through national award programmes. Support in the form of incentives and rewards from adopting sustainability practices has been found to motivate and encourage participation from the hotel sector (Khanna, Deltas, & Harrington 2009; Massoud, Fayad, El-Fadel, & Kamleh, 2010; Zeng et al., 2011). Even though there could be a significant implementation cost,

the incentives, in this case, could help to cover some of the expenses and other overheads involved. The following is the statement made by one of the informants.

"Incentives wise should probably being considered it will encourage the adoption such as reducing some utilities charges especially for a hotel that implement the practices." (HM3, 4-star hotel)

Public Awareness

The informants are not entirely convinced, as previously mentioned, regarding the business case to justify adopting sustainability practices, given that the demand from consumers is low. Most of the informants were aware of the issue surrounding awareness but are nonetheless waiting for the public to recognize such practices as providing value, thereby increasing demand. Sustainability awareness among the Malaysian public remains extremely low. Kasim and Ismail (2012), Vikneswaran et al. (2012), and Kamalulariffin (2013) reported that the lack of societal awareness regarding sustainability prevents the public from taking the matter seriously. Therefore, there is a need for the Malaysian government to actively enforce sustainability via the Environmental Act, with supporting campaigns, marketing, awareness programme, and other activities to increase the level of awareness among the Malaysian population. The following are the statements by two of the informants.

"The awareness is not there. I mean the association is actually organising a few activities. The response is there but the awareness is still very minimal." (HM5, 4-star hotel)

"In order to maintain certain standards or to main that these things are able to reach to the public or where awareness is crucial. So awareness is not there... Perception in the awareness is still lacking for a city." (HM6, 5-star hotel)

Sustainability Expertise

According to the informants interviewed in this study, having skilled experts available who could help and assist with implementing environmental management systems (EMSs) and environmentally friendly initiatives would facilitate the adoption of sustainability practices. Engaging in sustainable operations was found to be a meticulous process for hotel managers. Knowing that only ten Malaysian hotels had been certified as green hotels, the managers were completely aware that the certification process involves many steps and was difficult to attain. Accordingly, adopting sustainability practices has been argued to involve substantial changes in management, policies and even operations (Revilla et al., 2001). Therefore, sustainability expertise is needed to help managers ensure the right processes are in place and are being sufficiently managed. Indeed, experts in this area can also provide help and advice how hotels should operate to minimize the ecological impacts of current practices and operations (Vikneswaran Nair et al., 2012; Yusof and Jamaludin, 2013). The following is the statement made by one of the informants.

"probably, we need to hire a few key people. At the moment, we don't have any qualified person that can take that position." (HM5, 4-star hotel)

CONCLUSION

The initial findings of this study identified the current status of sustainable operations in Malaysian hotel operations (i.e., state-of-play). Four practices were initially implemented by Malaysian hotels in the early stage of environmental practices, namely; water and energy savings, waste management and using local suppliers. This proves that although the rate of application is still minimal, the Malaysian hotels have begun to take a step towards sustainability. It is seen that the hotels are willing to move towards sustainability practices where it may involve a substantial

adjustment in the operations, organisational structures as well as the involvement of the budget. However, there are factors that are capable of influencing and encouraging the adoption of sustainability practices such as; government support and guidelines, giving incentives, enhancing awareness among the societies and also providing expert could bring Malaysian hotels towards a more efficient sustainability practices and can remain to operate competitively without destroying the environment and also increase the organisational performances.

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