SUSTAINABLE PRACTICES AS A DRIVER OF BRAND VALUE AND SATISFACTION: IS IT THE SAME FOR ALL GUESTS?

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Abstract

Purpose – This study examines the influence of Integrated Marketing Communication (IMC) for sustainability on sustainable practices within the hotel sector, and its impact on brand equity and guest satisfaction. It further assesses the moderating effect of guests' generational cohorts.
Methodology/Design/Approach – Employing a quantitative approach, the research analyzes data from 280 guests at Spanish hotels using Partial Least Squares (PLS) regression.
Findings – Findings highlight the significance of IMC for sustainability in driving sustainable practices, which positively affect brand equity and guest satisfaction. The study also uncovers generational differences in the impact of sustainable practices on brand equity.
Originality of the research – This study contributes to the existing literature by highlighting the strategic role of sustainability and IMC in the hotel industry, particularly in enhancing brand equity and guest satisfaction. The examination of the moderating role of generational cohorts provides new insights into the nuanced ways in which different age groups perceive and value sustainability in their lodging choices. By doing so, it offers hotel managers a valuable guide for tailoring their sustainability initiatives and marketing communications to meet the diverse expectations of their guests, thereby achieving competitive advantages in a rapidly changing environment.
Keywords IMC, Sustainable practices, Brand equity, Satisfaction, Generational cohort, Hotels

INTRODUCTION

Sustainability is a factor associated with the achievement of important benefits both from the perspective of organisations and society as a whole (Yu et al., 2021). Furthermore, as a consequence of the increase in challenges facing society, the economy, and the environment, the attention paid to these issues has grown exponentially (Elkhwesky et al., 2022). Companies' interest in sustainability is driven both by compliance with increasingly strict regulations and standards, and by the opportunity it represents to differentiate themselves from competitors (Justavino- Castillo et al., 2023). The appeal of sustainability is also reinforced by the significance, both spatial and temporal, of the factors that threaten organisations and the markets in which they operate. Specifically, for the hotel industry, sustainability has become an important strategic objective for tourist destinations around the world, which aims to protect the environment and promote social inclusion (Guzmán-Pérez et al., 2023).

Recent years have witnessed a renewed interest in the IMC concept among professionals and academics alike, observing it through the scope of sustainability (Bordian et al., 2022; 2023). Effective sustainability communication in the hotel industry is critical to ensure stakeholders recognise and appreciate a company's investment in sustainable initiatives (Preziosi et al., 2019). If the communication strategy is managed effectively, the company can benefit from positive consumer reactions, increased sustainability awareness, and stronger brand equity (Devkota et al., 2023; Preziosi et al., 2019). However, research has found that tourism companies' communication about implemented sustainability initiatives lacks persuasiveness, interactivity, and consistency (Tölkes, 2020). Therefore, the need to investigate the IMC concept for sustainability is based not only on its novelty but also on the need to prevent customers from receiving confusing and/or contradictory messages about hotel sustainability practices due to the increasing media and communication fragmentation (Hudson & Hudson, 2017).

In the literature, several researchers have examined the impact of sustainable management practices on consumer purchasing behaviour and satisfaction (Berezan et al., 2013; Modica et al., 2020). However, most previous studies in the hotel sector focused only on one aspect of sustainability, such as environmental, measured through the ecological practices developed by this type of companies (Modica et al., 2020), or social, through corporate social responsibility (Martínez-Falcó et al., 2023). To address this gap in the literature, this study attempts to provide a comprehensive view of sustainability and its effects on brand equity and guest satisfaction.

Furthermore, previous works highlight the importance of the demographic characteristics of guests when analysing sustainability in the hotel context. However, in their literature review on the drivers of green consumption, Kumari et al. (2022) reveal that, although information on the demographic characteristics of respondents is collected in almost all the studies analysed, the number of studies that have analysed these variables as moderators is very small. One of the variables that has received attention

from academics is the generational cohort. Since generational cohorts are basic demographic groups to which an individual belongs, it is important to examine the impact of age in consumer behaviour studies to establish theoretically sound research models (Moon, 2021). This work focuses on three generations: a) Generation X (born between 1965 and 1980); b) Generation Y or Millennials (born between 1981 and 1994); and c) Generation Z or Centennials (born after 1995) (McCrindle, 2014). The reasons for knowing the similarities and differences between these three generations are two-fold: on the one hand, the growing interest that exists in the literature to understand them given that they represent the majority of the people on the planet (Thangavel et al., 2021) and, on the other hand, Generations Y and Z represent "*an essential stakeholder in building a sustainable future*" (Yamane & Kaneko, 2021).

This work makes several contributions to the literature on sustainable practices in the hotel context and has several useful practical implications for hotel managers. From a theoretical perspective, this study proposes the analysis of sustainability through a tool that allows diagnoses about, on the one hand, its level of implementation by the hotel and, on the other hand, its importance when it comes to growing brand equity and the level of guest satisfaction in the hotel environment. Furthermore, this work dives into the critical relevance of IMC as a fundamental driver of sustainable practices to redefine the relationship between hotels and their customers. Finally, this work also attempts to fill the gap in the literature by examining the moderating effect of the classification of guests based on the generational cohort to which they belong in all the relationships discussed above. From a practical perspective, this article will help hotel managers develop and implement sustainable strategies to improve relationships with their guests.

1. LITERATURE REVIEW AND HYPOTHESES DEVELOPMENT

1.1. Sustainable practices

In the literature, it has been identified that sustainability represents a key element in the development of a competitive advantage for hotel companies (Acampora et al., 2022). To face current market threats, organisations must be supported by the three basic pillars of sustainability: economic sustainability, social sustainability, and environmental sustainability (Hakovirta & Denuwara, 2020). Elkington (1997) called this triple axis the Triple Bottom Line (TBL), a theory that maintains that the responsibilities of organisations must encompass all the vertices of sustainability, and not focus solely on their economic performance. Furthermore, the TBL goes one step beyond those works that retained issues related to the environment as the only dimension of sustainability by including, in its configuration, social, economic, and environmental elements. Social sustainability refers to the impact that activities carried out by a company trigger on its stakeholders, both internal (employees) and external (customers, suppliers, distributors, and society in general) and focuses on maximising its wellbeing (Gopalakrishnan et al., 2012). For its part, the environmental dimension focuses on minimising the negative environmental impacts of an organisation's actions and is related to the amount of resources used and the amount of waste generated by it (Hassini et al., 2012). Finally, economic sustainability is related to an organisation's ability to manage its own resources to generate and maintain long-term profits while minimising negative social and environmental impacts (Kleindorfer et al., 2005).

From the perspective of the hotel sector, sustainability is important for these types of companies to develop competitive advantages that allow them to achieve over time, among other things, the reduction of the negative impact on the environment, the reduction of costs, and social recognition (Yu et al., 2021). However, although sustainable practices in the tourism sector are not linked to obtaining short-term economic benefits, they can help achieve greater social and environmental benefits, which leads to greater economic performance (Shi & Tsai, 2020). Environmental and social protection on the part of hotels can lead to attracting a large number of guests, thus increasing their competitive position in the market (Shi & Tsai, 2020). Therefore, it is important that hotels incorporate economic, environmental, and social issues into their strategic planning (Elkhwesky et al., 2022).

1.2. Integrated Marketing Communication (IMC)

According to Lee and Park (2007), IMC is identified as a concept in which the company systematically coordinates its different messages and numerous communication channels, integrating them into a coherent set of marketing communications to send a clear and consistent message and image about the company and its offers to the target market. Various contributions (e.g., Porcu et al., 2019; Šerić et al., 2015) have highlighted the need to coordinate all sources of an organisation and its communication messages by adopting the IMC approach. For example, Šerić et al. (2015) conceptualise IMC by stressing its relevance as a tactical and strategic consumer-centric business process aiming to deliver a clear and consistent message to nourish long-lasting profitable relationships with customers and other stakeholders.

From scholars' and practitioners' perspectives, being able to influence initiatives that lead certain people to adopt pro-environmental behaviours, such as participating in recycling or similar activities, is of great relevance (Cornelissen et al., 2008). Thus, communication is presented as an important tool when managing, informing, and even educating consumers about the company's offers and activities related to sustainability (Bordian et al., 2023). Despite the novelty of the IMC concept, the literature presents a few insights into whether the messages related to company sustainability presented on various sources are, in fact, perceived as consistent and whether this can affect customer perception of a company's sustainable practices (Bordian et al., 2022; 2023).

Some studies recommend that a company's persuasive and consistent communication about sustainability triggers an environmentally friendly attitude in consumers, which in turn increases tourists' participation in environmentally friendly activities and generates a better perception of the tourism company brand (Tölkes, 2020). Moreover, according to the recent literature findings, company communication for sustainability activities helps to educate clients by promoting their ecological knowledge and leading to a positive perception of brand-related outcomes (Bordian et al., 2022; 2023). Along similar lines, Preziosi et al. (2019, 10) empirically proved that "*communication has the crucial role to explain and reduce information asymmetry to facilitate guest appreciation of green practices*". Nevertheless, creating congruent perceptions among consumers might be difficult if they receive incomplete and confusing media images and messages (Tölkes, 2020).

Therefore, based on all the considerations above, we attempt to examine whether IMC for sustainability influences guests' perception of the company's sustainable practices by proposing the first research hypothesis:

H1: *IMC for sustainability positively and significantly affects tourists' perceptions of sustainable practices.*

1.3. Brand equity

Brand equity is aligned with the growing interest of organisations in making consumers the cornerstone of their businesses. In this sense, brand equity is related to a series of company decisions with the aim of influencing consumer perception and behaviour (González-Mansilla et al., 2019). Under this premise, this concept has become a valuable intangible asset of organisations, since it is capable of providing added value to services (Gil-Saura et al., 2023).

Aaker (1991, 15) defines brand equity as "*a set of brand assets and liabilities linked to a brand name and symbol, which add to or subtract from the value provided by a product or service*". Therefore, this construct has stimulated growing interest in recent years, both in marketing management in general (Keller, 2016) and in the tourism context in particular (Gómez & Molina, 2012). From a more general perspective, brand equity is explained as the set of associations generated by customers in relation to the attributes they perceive and the benefits that brands generate for them (Keller, 1993).

The literature conceptualises brand equity from two different perspectives, as a multidimensional construct or as a global construct. From a dimensional perspective, brand awareness, perceived quality, brand loyalty, and brand image are the main pillars on which the definition of the construct that has had the greatest support in the literature has been based (Aaker, 1991; González-Mansilla et al., 2019; Keller, 1993). Brand awareness represents the consumer's ability to recognise or remember a brand with or without external help (Aaker, 1991). Zeithaml (1988, 3) defines perceived quality as "*the perception that the customer has about the overall quality or superiority of a product or service*", this being one of the main elements in the consumer's decision-making process (Aaker, 1991; Zeithaml, 1988). Loyalty, understood as the measure of the bond between a customer and the brand, represents a strategic asset for organisations, which can generate important advantages (Aaker, 1991). Finally, brand image refers to verbal, visual descriptions and sensory impressions and are understood as "*anything linked in memory to a brand*" (Aaker, 1991, 109). However, some authors consider that brand equity must be understood as a whole, from a more comprehensive and broader vision and, therefore, they define the construct as a unidimensional factor made up of a set of elements that refer to the previously mentioned dimensions (Yoo & Donthu, 2001).

Polonsky and Rosenberger (2001) explain that sustainability is a crucial factor for the development of competitive advantages, thanks to the differentiation that this variable allows hotel companies to achieve compared to those that do not implement sustainable practices. Recent studies have attempted to examine the impact of sustainable practices on brand equity (Shanti & Joshi, 2022). Works such as that of Sev (2009) state that the inclusion of sustainability as a key element in the strategy of organisations must satisfy the needs included in each of the dimensions of sustainability. Hotels that have implemented actions linked to sustainability have managed to improve the perception that customers develop towards them (Sev, 2009). The implementation of sustainable practices in hotels is seen, in the eyes of the guest, as a differentiating value proposition compared to other competitors, which increases customer loyalty towards this type of establishment and promotes the image of the organisations (Polonsky & Rosenberger, 2001).

Brand equity, as an element that generates competitive advantages, is put forward as a key factor for hotels, given the intangible nature of their offer (Shanti & Joshi, 2022). Furthermore, the hotel brand is one of the determining aspects in the choice of accommodation for clients. In this sense, given the effect that sustainable practices trigger on guests' perceptions of hotels, Shanti and Joshi (2022) try to examine these links through their empirical study. The authors manage to confirm the effect of sustainable practices on some dimensions of brand equity, namely brand awareness, brand image, and perceived quality. Their findings are similar to those achieved in the work of Moise et al. (2019), in which the presence of a significant relationship between ecological practices and the four dimensions of brand equity (awareness, image, perceived quality, and loyalty) is confirmed. Therefore, based on the findings that relate sustainable practices and brand equity, we state the following hypothesis:

H2: *Sustainable practices positively and significantly affect the brand equity developed towards hotels.*

1.4. Satisfaction

Consumer satisfaction, in the field of marketing, is perceived as the key to the success of exchanges between organisations and consumers since it is considered the foundation of customer loyalty. Since the late 1970s, interest in the study of satisfaction increased significantly, giving rise to numerous works addressing the nature of the construct through its antecedents and consequences (Hunt, 1982). The study carried out by Howard and Sheth (1969) is seen as one of the most representative, since it is considered the starting point of this research tradition. These authors relate satisfaction to the degree of correspondence between the current consequences of the purchase and consumption of the brand and what the customer expected about the product or service prior to purchase. Therefore, the consumer will be satisfied if the actual consequences are equal to or greater than those expected (Howard & Sheth, 1969).

In the literature, there is a general consensus when it comes to explaining satisfaction as an overall response following an evaluation process of the purchasing process. Oliver (1997) analyses satisfaction taking into account the various forms and cognitive interpretations of affect. For their part, Westbrook (1980) explains the construct as an overall evaluative judgment, while Fornell (1992) refers to it as a general evaluation. Following this same line of study, Day (1984) interprets satisfaction as an evaluative response.

In recent years, the hotel sector has been under pressure, both from environmental groups and not-for-profit organisations demanding greater respect for both nature and society (Modica et al., 2020). Furthermore, the increased level of awareness among consumers has caused many companies, especially hotels, to see the need to implement sustainable measures in their businesses. In this sense, as guests' interest in sustainability has grown, academic attention has been focused on analysing the links between sustainable practices and satisfaction (Modica et al., 2020).

Although it is true that there are numerous calls for research on the impact of sustainable practices on consumer perceptions, their interest usually focuses on analysing how each of the dimensions of this construct impacts customer satisfaction (Modica et al., 2020). In this way, the literature states that the environmental dimension of sustainability triggers a positive effect on consumer satisfaction (Berezan et al. 2013). For their part, subsequent studies also indicate that the degree of customer satisfaction can increase when hotels implement social and environmental actions (Gao & Mattila, 2014; Yu et al., 2017). Furthermore, the analysis of economic sustainability in consumer satisfaction yields positive results, stating that good financial performance can contribute to the development of guest satisfaction (Lo et al., 2015). In light of the above, we present the following research hypothesis:

H3: *Sustainable practices positively and significantly affect guest satisfaction toward hotels.*

As we have observed previously, brand equity and consumer satisfaction are constructs that have received special attention due to their impact on the development of competitive advantages for organisations and their direct link with consumer perceptions (González-Mansilla et al., 2019). For this reason, some studies examine the relationship between brand equity and satisfaction (Moise et al., 2019), where brand equity, articulated through its dimensions, acts as a driving factor of satisfaction (Wu, 2011).

In the tourism sector, specifically, the hotel sector, the effect triggered by the dimensions of brand value on guest satisfaction has been tested (Ekinci et al., 2008; Nam et al., 2011; Ruiz-Molina et al., 2023). Ekinci et al. (2008) concluded that service quality is an antecedent of guest satisfaction; while Nam et al. (2011) demonstrated that brand equity dimensions have a positive impact on guest satisfaction. For their part, Moise et al. (2019) confirm the energising effect of brand equity on satisfaction, through three of its dimensions: awareness, loyalty, and perceived quality. However, this work fails to confirm the driving effect of brand image on guest satisfaction. Recently, Ruiz- Molina et al. (2023) confirmed the positive link between hotel image and guest satisfaction. According to these results, we assume overall brand equity can drive the satisfaction of guests staying in hotels and propose the following hypothesis:

H4: *Brand equity positively and significantly affects guest satisfaction towards hotels.*

The implementation of sustainable practices is one of the main elements used by hotel organisations with the purpose of modifying customer perceptions and increasing their brand equity (Modica et al., 2020). Furthermore, the degree of perception that customers develop towards brands is also an important factor for guest satisfaction with accommodation (Nam et al., 2011). Therefore, brand equity can play a fundamental role in the sustainable practices □ satisfaction relationship. Acting on aspects related to the dimensions of brand equity (brand awareness, brand image, perceived quality, and loyalty towards the accommodation), generates value for the customer and, therefore, facilitates an increase in guest satisfaction (Ruiz-Molina et al., 2023).

In summary, it is logical to consider that brand equity plays a mediating role in the relationship between sustainable practices and satisfaction, since sustainable actions can help improve the perception that customers develop towards this type of organisations and, therefore, directly and indirectly (Shanti & Joshi, 2022), increase guest satisfaction by developing more attractive and personalised solutions. In light of this, the following hypothesis is justified:

H5: *Brand equity has a mediating effect on the sustainable practices guest satisfaction relationship.*

1.5. Generational cohort

Literature in the field of services suggests that there are differences in consumer behaviour depending on the generational cohort to which they belong (Seabra et al., 2020). One way to differentiate consumers is by generation, understood as a group of people whose birthdates are close, who have received similar education, cultural, and social influences, and who adopt a similar attitude and way of thinking (Kotler & Keller, 2012). Segmenting by generations allows us to better understand groups of guests who share habits and behaviours, which differentiate them from other generations and make them act, think, and travel in a different way (Seabra et al., 2020).

Previous research related to the service sector has identified contradictory behavioural contrasts between generations. In this sense, Ham et al. (2022) point out that the older the consumer is, the more likely they are to purchase products from environmentally friendly companies. The same result has also been reached by Casalegno et al. (2022) who suggest that older people buy more sustainable products. Regarding the purchase and consumption of organic foods, in their review on generational differences, Kamenidou et al. (2020) show that, although all generations have favourable attitudes towards organic foods, Generation Z is the one that is least likely to purchase this product type. In the hotel context, Kim (2012) highlights that older guests have stronger intentions to stay and pay more to stay in hotels that have implemented sustainable measures.

However, in their study, Moon (2021) demonstrates that, although older customers showed a greater intention to visit an organic restaurant, as the number of visits to this type of restaurant increased, the intentions of older customers decreased, while the intentions of younger customers increased. Su et al. (2019) indicate that younger consumers tend to be more concerned about environmentally related issues and purchase more green products. Furthermore, Millennials have more brand awareness and are more satisfied regarding purchasing green products and services than previous generations (Wang et al., 2018). Also, Benckendorff et al. (2016) note that Millennials are particularly concerned about economic, environmental, and social issues and are therefore interested in sustainability practices related to these areas.

Finally, it should be noted that authors such as Gray et al. (2019) point out that there are no significant differences between generational cohorts with respect to the perceived severity of environmental problems or support for future actions to prevent them. Regarding the relationship between brand equity and satisfaction, authors such as Bordian et al. (2023) and Llopis-Amorós et al. (2019) show that there are no differences between Millennials and Centennials. Therefore, based on the above discussion, we suggest the following hypothesis:

H6: *The generational cohort moderates the relationships between: a) IMC and sustainable practices; b) sustainable practices and brand equity; c) sustainable practices and satisfaction; d) brand equity and satisfaction.*

Considering all this, Figure 1 shows our research model.

Figure 1: **Proposed research model**
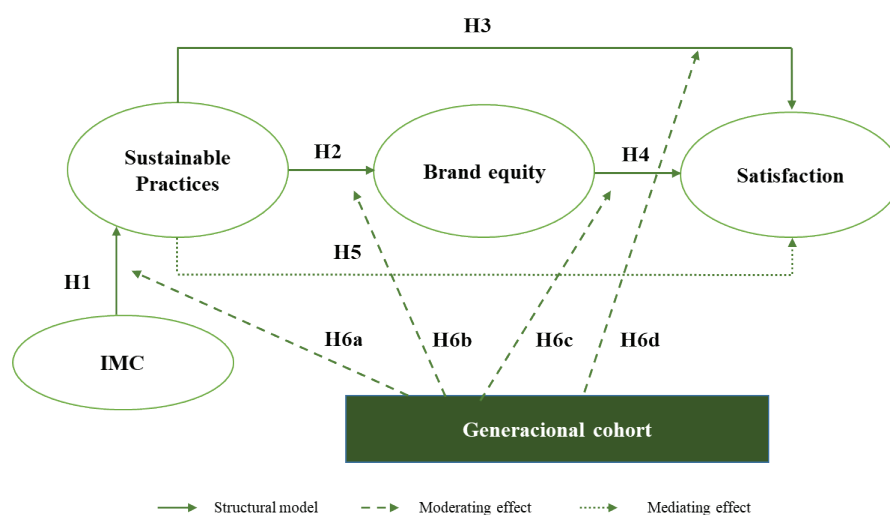
2. METHODOLOGY

To achieve the intended objective, a quantitative investigation is proposed through which the population under study was recruited through a panel held in Spain in October 2020. Regarding the screening questions, potential participants were asked if they had visited the hotel between June and September and stayed more than one night in the accommodation; those who responded "yes" were invited to continue with the survey. Sampling quotas were applied by age and region of the country, which allowed us to collect 280 valid questionnaires. Regarding the sample, among those surveyed, 59.30% were men and 40.70% were women; the majority were between 36 and 45 years old (26.10%), had completed higher education (59.3%), and were working as an employee (71.80%).

The items used to measure the analysed variables have been extracted from scales used in marketing literature and have been adapted to the characteristics of the context and objective of this study. All items were measured on a 7-point Likert scale (1 – "Strongly disagree"; 7 – "Strongly agree"). In particular, to measure sustainable practices, the scale used has been adapted from those proposed by Ozturkoglu et al. (2019) and Xu and Gursoy (2015). Regarding integrated marketing communication (IMC) for sustainability, it was evaluated through the proposal made by Lee and Park, (2007). Brand equity was measured with the scale used by Yoo et al. (2000). Finally, the satisfaction scale was adapted from the proposals of Gelbrich (2011) and Nesset et al. (2011).

We analysed the data obtained in two phases. Firstly, the measurement instrument was validated; and, secondly, the structural model was estimated. Both analyses were performed using the partial least squares (PLS) regression technique and the software used was SmartPLS (version 4.0.9.6). It is a technique that in recent years has been very well received among academics and researchers (Henseler et al., 2016).

3. RESULTS

3.1. Measurement instrument validation

The quality of the measurement instrument was validated through the PLS-SEM technique, using a PLS algorithm with a parameter of 300 maximum interactions and a paths weighting scheme. Through this procedure, we obtained information about the factor loadings, Cronbach's α, the composite reliability index (CRI), and the average variance extracted (AVE) for each of the factors that make up the causal model of this research and which are presented in Table 1. Furthermore, and in order to achieve the greatest robustness of the scales used, given that the psychometric properties of these scales have already been previously validated, we decided to eliminate item loadings lower than 0.7, as suggested by Bagozzi and Yi (1988).

Table 1: **Measurement instrument of the structural model: Reliability and convergent validity**

Factor	Item	Loading	t	Cronbach α	CR	AVE
Sustainable Practices	SP1: … environmentally sustainable products	0.839***	30.649			
	SP2: … environmentally sustainable way	0.842***	27.127			
	SP3: … they are not wasted	0.850***	28.175			
	SP4: … life of the products	0.797***	24.535			
	SP5: … recycling program in place	0.838***	34.226			
	SP6: … by the hotel	0.863***	36.446	0.950	0.957	0.691
	SP7: … environmental management systems	0.872***	41.758			
	SP8: … local community	0.767***	19.091			
	SP9: … suppliers	0.829***	30.912			
	SP10: … which it is related	0.809***	25.555			
	SP11: … sustainable production networks/civic networks	0.727	19.188			
IMC	IMC1: … communication channels	0.888***	56.633			
	IMC2: … components of communication	0.907***	50.766			
	IMC3: linguistic components of communication	0.928***	86.960	0.925	0.947	0.816
	IMC4: … ensures a consistent brand image about sustainability	0.889***	47.436			

Factor	Item	Loading	t	Cronbach α	CR	AVE
Brand equity	BE1: … instead of another (of another brand or chain)	0.843***	25.458	0.923	0.945	0.813
	BE2: … I would rather stay at this hotel than at another	0.922***	80.546			
	BE3: … I would prefer to stay in this one	0.919***	54.259			
	BE4: … I consider that the smartest option is to stay at this hotel	0.919***	74.344			
Satisfaction	SF1: … has been high	0.944***	102.790	0.966	0.974	0.881
	SF2: … I am satisfied with my experience	0.931***	79.419			
	SF3: … delighted to stay in this hotel	0.955***	124.332			
	SF4: … it's great that this hotel exists	0.918***	55.642			
	SF5: … has been pleasant for me	0.943***	92.664			

Statistically significant at ***p<0.01

The results obtained from Cronbach's α reliability coefficient are satisfactory, ranging between 0.8 and 0.9, recommended values for advanced stages of research (Nunnally & Bernstein, 1994). The analysis of composite reliability yields satisfactory results, which far exceed the minimum required, 0.7 (Chin, 1998). Furthermore, all the constructs of the structural model obtain values for the average variance extracted, greater than 0.5 (Fornell & Larcker, 1981), so we can confirm the reliability and convergent validity of the measurement instrument of the structural model.

Furthermore, analysing the discriminant validity in Table 2 through the criterion proposed by Fornell and Larcker (1981), we observed the square root of the average variance extracted (AVE), which is presented on the diagonal of the matrix, is higher than the correlation estimated between the factors, which appears below the diagonal, corroborating the discriminant validity.

Table 2: **Measurement instrument: Discriminant validity (Fornell-Larcker criterion)**

	1	2	3	4
1. Sustainable practices	**0.831**			
2. IMC	0.375	**0.903**		
3. Brand equity	0.349	0.623	**0.901**	
4. Satisfaction	0.409	0.624	0.817	**0.939**

Notes: Diagonal values in bold are square roots of AVE and values below the diagonal are correlations between variables

3.2. Estimation of the causal model

Once the reliability and validity of the measurement instrument has been confirmed, the structural model is estimated. In this sense, for the analysis of the proposed structural model, SmartPLS software has been used again with complete bootstrapping with 5000 subsamples (Ringle, 2015) to evaluate the hypothesised relationships, obtaining the results shown in Table 3.

Table 3: **Causal relationships estimation**

Relationship Hypothesis		Total sample		X Generation	Y Generation	Z Generation
		Standardized beta	Standardized beta	Standardized beta	Standardized beta	
H1	IMC → Sustainable practices	Supported	0.380***	0.343***	0.413***	0.496***
H2	Sustainable practices → Brand equity	Supported	0.353***	0.169ns	0.410***	0.511***
H3	Sustainable practices → Satisfaction	Supported	0.142***	0.141**	0.109ns	0.138ns
H4	Brand equity → Satisfaction	Supported	0.766***	0.780***	0.782***	0.773***

Sustainable practices: R²= 0.141, Q²=0.122; Brand equity: R²=0.122, Q²=0.130; Satisfaction: R²=0.685, Q²=0.144

Statistically significant at ***p<0.01; **p<0.05; ns = statistically non-significant

From the results presented in Table 3, it is observed that all the constructs dependent on the structural model show R^2 values above 0.1, the minimum threshold established by Falk and Miller (1992). Regarding the results of the Q^2 test, all values are greater than zero, which confirms the predictive validity of the model. Therefore, the results obtained for R^2 and Q^2 confirm the explanatory capacity and predictive relevance of the model, which allows us to continue examining the significance of the proposed structural relationships.

The results obtained through the PLS-SEM analysis allow us to support all the relationships proposed in the causal model. Regarding the hypotheses between the IMC and sustainable practices, the positive and significant relationship is supported ($\beta 1$ = 0.38, p <0.01, H1). Likewise, the positive and significant effect of sustainable practices on brand equity and guest satisfaction towards hotel accommodation has been supported by the results of the causal model estimation ($\beta 2$ = 0.35, p<0.01, H2; $\beta 3$ = 0.14, p<0.01, H3). Finally, we find support for the hypothesis that links brand equity with satisfaction with the hotel, since a significant and positive path coefficient is obtained ($\beta 4$ = 0.77, p <0.01, H4).

3.3. Analysis of the mediating effect of the brand equity

On the other hand, the analysis of the role of brand equity as a mediating variable between sustainable practices and satisfaction in the hotel sector was carried out using the bootstrapping technique of Preacher and Hayes (2008). Table 4 shows that there is a significant direct and indirect effect between sustainable practices and guest satisfaction towards the hotel. Therefore, hypothesis H5 is supported, which postulates the mediating role of brand equity in the sustainable practices-satisfaction relationship in the hotel sector. Additionally, we can confirm through the result of the VAF, which determines the size of the indirect effect in relation to the total effect (Nitzl et al., 2016), that brand equity has a partial mediating effect in this relationship (0.655).

Table 4: **Summary of mediating effect test**

Relation	Total effect	Direct effect	Indirect effect	VAF
H5: Sustainable practices → Satisfaction	0.410	0.142	0.268	0.655

3.4. Analysis of the moderating effect of the generational cohort

Finally, with the objective of contrasting the group of hypotheses that makes up the sixth hypothesis of this research, a multigroup analysis was carried out using the PLS- MGA technique. The results presented in Table 5 show the moderating effect of generational cohort on the relationship between sustainable practices and brand equity for the guest group belonging to the Gen X cohort, compared to the Gen Z cohort, on one hand, and the Gen Y cohort, on the other hand. These results agree with those works that suggest that, in the hotel sector, when making decisions, it is very relevant to consider the age range of the guests.

Table 5: **Results of the multigroup analysis**

Relationship		X-Z Generation *Stand. parameter*	*p-value*	X-Y Generation *Stand. parameter*	*p-value*	Y-Z Generation *Stand. parameter*	*p-value*
H6a	IMC → Sustainable practices	0.329na	0.258	0.297ns	0.493	0.339ns	0.588
H6b	Sustainable practices → Brand equity	**0.360****	0.039	**0.297***	0.063	0.360ns	0.559
H6c	Sustainable practices → Satisfaction	0.245ns	0.971	0.171ns	0.793	0.292ns	0.885
H6d	Brand equity → Satisfaction	0.213ns	0.969	0.127ns	0.960	0.211ns	0.984

Note: Statistically significant at **p<0.05; *p<0.1; ns = statistically non-significant

4. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

Currently, there is a growing concern for sustainability on the part of companies in general, and hotel companies in particular. In a changing environment, hotel companies have to adapt their service offerings to the new needs of their guests to achieve a sustainable competitive advantage. In this sense, the implementation of sustainable practices is recognised as one of the most important factors for differentiation from competitors. In response to this trend, this work, through the presentation of a theoretical model and the empirical analysis for its contrast, contributes to shedding light on the capacity of the IMC oriented towards sustainability as a precedent for the sustainable measures implemented by the hotel companies and about some of its consequences, such as brand equity and guest satisfaction. Using a sample of 280 guests and based on a structural equation model, the results confirm the chain of relationships "IMC → sustainable practices→ brand equity→ satisfaction". This study also aimed to examine the mediating role of brand equity in the relationship between sustainable practices and satisfaction. In

addition, the moderating effect of the generational cohort on the proposed relationships was analysed. The findings suggest that guest age only moderates the effect of sustainable practices on brand equity. All of this allows us to formulate a set of theoretical conclusions and practical implications that are presented below.

Firstly, the findings derived from this work contribute to reducing the gaps identified in the literature, in the convergent field that brings together IMC and sustainable practices. In this sense, the results obtained in the empirical study represent a notable contribution to the scope of this research, and add to previous contributions such as those of Bordian et al. (2022, 2023), Preziosi et al. (2019) and Tölkes (2020), who maintain that the development of sustainable practices in organisations can experience better understanding and acceptance by guests if they are supported with tools linked to communication for sustainability. Therefore, the sustainable practices promoted by IMC represent a valid tool to guide decision-making in this sector.

Secondly, the positive influence of guest perceptions regarding sustainable practices on brand equity is observed. These results support the conclusions reported by the studies of Moise et al. (2019) and Shanti and Joshi (2022) who stated that guests' perception of the sustainable practices developed by the hotel is creating a positive effect on the hotel's brand equity. On the other hand, conclusions have also been reached about the effect of sustainable practices on satisfaction, establishing that a higher degree of implementation of these measures leads to a higher level of guest satisfaction. This result coincides with those obtained by Gao and Mattila (2014), Modica et al. (2020) and Yu et al. (2017), thus highlighting the fundamental role of sustainability in the hotel industry. Furthermore, it emphasises the mediating role of brand equity in the relationship between sustainable practices and guest satisfaction.

Finally, based on the results of the multigroup analysis, we observe that older guests demonstrate greater effects of sustainable practices on brand equity, which is in line with the results of previous studies such as those by Casalegno et al. (2022) and Ham et al. (2022). This could be explained by the fact that hotels that have implemented sustainable practices are more expensive and, therefore, although younger generations are also interested in activities related to the environment and social causes, they cannot afford to stay in these types of hotels.

From a practical perspective, this study, through the proposed framework, provides valuable information for hotel management to better understand and promote sustainability-oriented practices. Hotel managers must integrate and consider sustainability as a fundamental pillar in the business strategy, promoting among their employees the idea that sustainability is not an exclusive process related to senior management, but that each of them can contribute to it. The study findings show that sustainability-oriented IMC represents a driver of improved guest perception of sustainable practices. Therefore, hotel management should develop an integrated communication strategy with multiple information channels to effectively promote its sustainable initiatives. For example, hotels should not only use public relations and advertising to communicate their sustainable initiatives, but also increase their social media presence.

Finally, it is necessary to point out some limitations of the work that could be considered as future lines of research. Firstly, a larger sample size could allow the results to be refined to a greater extent. Along these lines, given the restricted geographical scope of application of the study, it would be interesting to compare the results of this work with results obtained in other countries, thereby introducing a national culture variable in the theoretical model. Furthermore, checking the external validity of the results obtained in other types of tourist establishments could also be a research opportunity. We believe that future research should evaluate other service settings to increase the generalisability of the findings given that this research only examined results in the hospitality industry. Finally, it is worth highlighting the opportunity to advance this line of research through the introduction of new relevant variables in the model, such as the degree of participation in sustainable activities of guests in their daily lives or their knowledge of environmental and social issues, thus expanding the analysis with other constructs that would enrich and strengthen the research by adopting other approaches.

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