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Sustainability in the hospitality industry

Some personal reflections on corporate challenges and research agendas

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this commissioned paper is to offer some personal reflections on sustainability within the hospitality industry.

Design/methodology/approach – The paper opens by identifying sustainability as a teasing paradox for the hospitality industry and a short discussion of the characteristics of sustainability. It then explores the growing interest in corporate sustainability and offers a review of the range of academic research into sustainability within the hospitality industry literature. More generally, the authors suggest three fundamental sets of issues that currently face the industry, namely, defining sustainability within the industry, materiality and independent external assurance and sustainable consumption and the industry's commitment to continuing economic growth.

Findings – In addressing these three sets of issues, the authors make a number of suggestions. First that definitions of sustainability within the hospitality industry can be interpreted as being constructed around business imperatives rather than an ongoing commitment to sustainability. Second that materiality and external assurance are not treated comprehensively within the industry, which undermines the credibility of the sustainability reporting process. Third that the concept of sustainable consumption and any critique of the industry's commitment to economic growth are conspicuous by their absence in the both the research literature on sustainability and in sustainability reporting within the industry.

Practical implications – The paper suggests that the hospitality industry may need to examine how it defines sustainability, to extend its sustainability reporting to embrace materiality and external assurance and to address the issues of sustainable consumption and continuing economic growth if it is to demonstrate a worthwhile and enduring commitment to sustainability.

Originality/value – The paper provides some accessible personal reflections on sustainability within the hospitality industry and, as such, it will be of interest to academics, students and practitioners interested in the hospitality industry and more widely within the business and management community.

Keywords Economic growth, Materiality, Hospitality industry, Sustainability, Sustainable consumption, External assurance

Paper type General review



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Introduction: sustainability and the hospitality industry

In outlining future trends in the hospitality industry [Deloitte \(2014, p. 41\)](#) argued:

Sustainability will become a defining issue for the industry in 2015 and beyond. Rising populations and increasingly scarce resources will provide a challenging business environment in which sustainability will need to be embedded within all facets of the industry, rather than regarded as a standalone issue.

At the same time, [Sloan *et al.* \(2013, p. 1\)](#) suggest that:

[...] a clear understanding of the issues surrounding climate change, global warming, air and water pollution, ozone depletion, deforestation, the loss of biodiversity and global poverty is essential for every future manager in the hospitality industry.

However, throughout much of the hospitality industry, the concept of sustainability provides a teasing paradox. At the operational level, for example, on the one hand, the industry increasingly looks to deploy sustainability within both its marketing messages and the customer experience, while, on the other hand, the headline accent is often on conspicuous consumption, which, in many ways, is the antithesis of sustainability. In the euro Disney Hotel in Paris, a notice attached to the bathroom doors reads “To preserve nature every little counts! Please leave the towels you wish to change in the bathtub. Thank you for helping to protect the environment”. The menu at The Hewlett Arms in Cheltenham advertises “sustainably caught British fish battered with homemade tartare sauce and minted peas”. At the same time, a travel magazine advertisement for the Gore Hotel in central London invites potential guests to “be seduced by luxury in London”, while a newspaper advertisement for a Viking Cruise offers the opportunity to “sleep easy in a comfortable king-sized bed” and promises “whichever room you chose from the spacious 270 sq. ft. Veranda Staterooms to our enormous Explorer suites – you can enjoy supreme comfort and style”.

At the corporate level, several of the major international hotel chains increasingly stress their commitment to sustainability and to integrating it into their core business strategy while pursuing continuing growth which makes a range of demands on environmental resources ([Jones *et al.*, 2014](#)). Christopher J. Nassetta, the President and Chief Executive Officer of Hilton Worldwide, for example, endorsed the executive summary of the company’s Corporate Responsibility Report by asserting “sustainability is a priority for Hilton Worldwide and a central part of how the company does business” ([Hilton Worldwide, 2012, p. 3](#)). In a similar vein, the [Intercontinental Hotel Group \(2013, webpage\)](#) reports “we are committed to designing, building and operating more environmentally sustainable hotels”. At the same time, commitments to sustainability are often couched within the idiom of continuing economic growth. Marriott, for example, emphasises “our sustainability strategy supports business growth and reaches beyond the doors of our hotels to preserve and protect our planet’s natural resources”. In his statement, accompanying the [Wyndham Worldwide, 2011 Sustainability Report](#) Stephen P. Holmes, the Chairman and Chief Executive Officer, claimed that the company’s “commitment to global sustainability comes at a time of both exciting growth and serious economic challenges facing our industry” ([Wyndham Worldwide, 2011, webpage](#)).

In light of these apparent contradictions, this paper offers some personal reflections on sustainability within the hospitality industry, and, as such, its aim is to stimulate, challenge and provoke debate and discussion rather than to offer a definitive and

comprehensive review of either current corporate sustainability strategies and practices or the academic literature on sustainability within the hospitality industry. The paper includes an outline discussion of the origins and characteristics of the concept of sustainability, a review of the growing interest in corporate sustainability within the business world and an outline of the scope and flavour of research on sustainability in both the general business and management and the hospitality literatures, and a discussion of three fundamental sets of issues the authors believe the hospitality industry needs to address in pursuing sustainability, namely:

- (1) variations in the way sustainability is defined within the hospitality industry;
- (2) materiality and independent external assurance; and
- (3) sustainable consumption and continuing economic growth.

Sustainability: origins and development of the concept

In recent decades, the term sustainability is being increasingly widely used across many walks of life, and in some ways, it seems to be used to mean all things to all people but “the idea of sustainability is not a mere mind game played by modern technocrats, nor the brainwave of some tree-hugging eco-warriors [...] it is our primal world cultural heritage” (Grober, 2012, p. 13). The events and ideas underpinning the concept of sustainability certainly have a long history. Du Pisani (2006, p. 83) provides a succinct summary of the historical roots and evolution of the concept of sustainability and looks to demonstrate “how the idea of sustainability evolved through the centuries as a counter to notions of progress” (Du Pisani, 2006, p. 83). He concludes by arguing:

[...] that the roots of the concept of sustainability can be traced back to ancient times, but that population growth, increases in consumption after the Industrial Revolution, and the danger that crucial resources such as wood, coal and oil could be depleted boosted awareness of the need to use resources in a sustainable way. Fears that present and future generations might not be able to maintain their living standards stimulated mode of thinking that would inform discourses which prepared the way for the emergence and global adoption of sustainable development (Du Pisani, 2006, p. 87).

In recent times, the terms sustainable development and sustainability began to receive much more widespread attention and currency especially from the 1980s onwards following the publication of the “World Conservation Strategy” (International Union for Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources, 1980) and “Our Common Future” (World Commission on Environment and Development, 1987). Increasing interest in sustainability reflects a growing concern about a range of major challenges and problems facing societies, environments and economies at a variety of spatial and temporal scales. These concerns include continuing population growth and urbanisation and the pressures this is putting on natural resource consumption and food supplies; climate change; growing levels of pollution; the loss of natural habitats; and water stress and the increasing scarcity of water resources in some areas of the world. In theory, the concept of sustainability is being increasingly seen as offering a potential solution to these problems. Diesendorf (2000, p. 21) argued that sustainability can be seen as “the goal or endpoint of a process called sustainable development”. Arguably, the most widely used definition of sustainable development is that offered in “Our Common Future”, namely, “development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs”

([World Commission on Environment and Development](#), 1987, p. 43). That said, there is no universally agreed definition of sustainability and there are a number of contested meanings.

More specifically, there are sets of definitions that are based around ecological principles which focus on conserving natural resources and protecting fragile ecosystems on which ultimately all human life depends. [Goodland](#), (1995, p. 3), for example, defined environmental sustainability as “the maintenance of natural capital” arguing that it:

[...] seeks to improve human welfare by preserving the sources of raw materials used for human needs and ensuring that the sinks for human waste are not exceeded in order to prevent harm to humans.

There are also broader definitions that include social and economic dimensions along with environmental and ecological goals and to meet human needs in an equitable manner. For the [USA Environment Protection Agency](#) (2014, webpage), for example:

[...] sustainability creates and maintains the conditions under which humans and nature can exist in productive harmony, that permits fulfilling the social, economic and other requirements of present and future generations.

Arguably more critically, [Hudson](#) (2005) argued that definitions of sustainability range from “pallid blue green to dark deep green”. The former definition [Hudson](#) (2005, p. 241) suggests centres on “technological fixes within current relations of production, essentially trading off economic against environmental objectives, with the market as the prime resource allocation mechanism” while for the latter “prioritizing the preservation of nature is pre-eminent” ([Hudson](#), 2005). [Hudson](#) (2005, p. 241) also suggests that the dominant view of sustainability “is grounded in a blue-green discourse of ecological modernization” and “claims that capital accumulation, profitable production and ecological sustainability are compatible goals”. Further he contrasts this view with the “deep green” perspective which “would require significant reductions in living standards and radical changes in the dominant social relations of production” ([Hudson](#), 2005, p. 241). At the same time, a distinction is often made between “weak” and “strong” sustainability, with the former being used to describe sustainability initiatives and programmes developed within the existing prevailing economic and social system while the latter is associated with much more radical changes for both economy and society ([Roper](#), 2012).

Although the notion of sustainability has gained considerable, but not universal, political support and has become increasingly widely used, to a variety of ends, in many areas of economic and social life, it has also attracted criticism. Three sets of criticism have been identified ([Robinson](#) 2003). The concept is seen as vague, in that it means all things to all people. [Clark](#) (2005, Webpage), for example, writing in *The Times* newspaper argued “In the absence of any precise meaning the concept of sustainability is pointless. It could mean virtually anything and therefore means absolutely nothing”. There is also the criticism that the sustainability has attracted those who essentially use the term to promote what are in reality unsustainable activities as discussed later in this paper. Some advocates of sustainability have also attracted criticism for failing to recognize that the current rates of economic growth are simply unsustainable. As such, support for popular conceptions of sustainability draw attention away from the need to consider and plan for different ways of organising how people relate to the natural world

and from the importance of the fundamental and widespread social and political change which may need to be an essential part of a transition to a genuinely more sustainable future. Indeed, [Mansfield \(2009, p. 37\)](#) has argued “it is striking the extent to which politics–relations of power– have been written out of the discussions about sustainability”. That said, a number of critics interpret the increasing corporate interest in sustainability merely as a thinly veiled and cynical ploy, often described as “green wash”, which is cynically designed to entice consumers who want to adopt what they see as environmentally and socially conscious purchasing decisions, while, at the same time, simply brushing environmental and social concerns under the carpet. Such moves towards sustainable marketing have, for example, been characterised by [Hamilton \(2009, pp. 573-574\)](#) as “shifting consciousness’s” towards “what is best described as green consumerism”. This he sees as “an approach that threatens to entrench the very attitudes and behaviours that are antithetical to sustainability” and argues that “green consumerism has failed to induce significant inroads into the unsustainable nature of consumption and production”. Perhaps more radically [Kahn \(2010, p. 43\)](#) argues that “green consumerism” is:

[...] an opportunity for corporations to turn the very crisis that they generate through their accumulation of capital via the exploitation of nature into myriad streams of emergent profit and investment revenue.

As interest in sustainability has grown, attempts have been made to develop theoretical frameworks to integrate nature and society. In a wide-ranging review of the models developed to provide a conceptual underpinning for sustainability, [Todorov and Marinova \(2009\)](#) presented a fivefold taxonomy which embraced quantitative models, physical models, standardising models, conceptual models and pictorial visualisation models. The first two sets of models are restricted to specific disciplines; the third focuses on the construction and subsequent application of indicators used to measure sustainability. The final two sets of models look to integrate the environmental, social and economic dimensions of sustainability. Of the last two sets of models, pictorial visualisation models received particular commendation from [Todorov and Marinova \(2009, p. 1218\)](#) who argued that, although such models are “static”, they are “powerful in reaching a broad audience”. The most commonly used of these pictorial models is the simple three-dimensional model of sustainability, with environmental, social and economic issues being represented in a simple Venn diagram as three overlapping circles.

[Barter \(2011\); Zink \(2005\)](#) and [Gavare and Johansson \(2010\)](#) have used interpretations of stakeholder theory in an attempt to provide some conceptual underpinning for sustainability. In essence, stakeholder theory centres on the belief that companies should be sensitive to the interests and concerns of a wide variety of stakeholders, including suppliers, customers and society at large, as well as those of their shareholders, and that this will ultimately enable them to enjoy greater long-term business success. [Wheeler *et al.* \(2003, p. 16\)](#), for example, suggested that the concept of sustainability is intimately and implicitly bound up with stakeholder theory and argued that “stakeholder concepts are highly relevant and useful to thinking about sustainability”. In developing their model of stakeholder management for sustainability, [Gavare and Johansson \(2010\)](#) argued that companies must be increasingly sensitive to the needs and concerns of a wide range of stakeholders, while

Steurer *et al.* (2005, p. 264) explored the relationship between sustainability and stakeholder theory and examined how “corporations are confronted with economic, social and environmental stakeholder claims”.

There have been attempts to develop a more critical theoretical approach which looks to embrace the competing perspectives on sustainability outlined earlier in the paper. Amsler (2009, p. 127), for example, suggested that “the contested politics and ambiguities of sustainability discourses” should be positively embraced to develop a “critical theory of sustainability”. She further argued that current debates should be located “within a broader tradition of social criticism” and that “competing interpretations of sustainability” should be viewed as “invitations to explore the complex processes through which competing visions of just futures are produced, resisted and realized” (Amsler, 2009, p. 125). In a similar vein, Castro (2004) argued for a more radical theory of sustainability and called into question the very possibility of sustainable development ever emerging under capitalism and claimed that economic growth intrinsically relies upon the continuing and inevitable exploitation of the world’s natural and social capital.

Corporate sustainability

During recent years, the concept of sustainability has consistently moved higher up boardroom agendas and growing numbers of companies increasingly acknowledge sustainability as one of the emerging drivers of competition, and as a significant source of both opportunity for, and risk to, long-term competitive advantage. Carroll and Buchholtz (2012, p. 4), for example, suggest that “sustainability has become one of business’ most recent and urgent mandates”. In reviewing current trends in corporate sustainability strategy and performance, Ernst & Young and the GreenBiz Group (2012, p. 4), for example, argued that:

[...] over the past two decades corporate sustainability efforts have shifted from a risk-based compliance focus where rudimentary, voluntary sometimes haphazard initiatives have evolved into a complex and disciplined business imperative focused on customer and stakeholder requirements.

A survey of business managers and executives undertaken by MIT Sloan Management Review and The Boston Consulting Group (2012, p. 4) suggested that “70 per cent of companies have placed sustainability permanently on management agendas” and that:

[...] despite a lacklustre economy, many companies are increasing their commitment to sustainability initiatives, the opposite of what one would expect if sustainability were simply a luxury afforded by good times.

A range of factors help to explain this trend:

- the statutory requirement to comply with the growing volume of environmental and social regulations within many jurisdictions;
- concerns over both the increasing costs and the growing scarcity of natural resources;
- increased public awareness of the growing importance shareholders attach to environmentally and socially conscious investment decisions; and
- growing media coverage of the disruptive activities of a number of anti-corporate pressure groups.

Many companies are increasingly seeking to emphasize their public commitment to sustainability in an attempt to help to differentiate themselves from their competitors and to enhance their brand and corporate reputation. That said, [Salzmann et al. \(2005, p. 27\)](#) suggested that, within the business and management community, many managers have an “insufficient understanding” of the “key arguments” or the “business logic” for “adopting corporate sustainability strategies”.

The term “corporate sustainability” is certainly now in widespread use throughout much of the business world, and it is generally recognised as *an* “essentially contested concept” ([Visser, 2007, Webpage](#)). [Polentz \(2011, webpage\)](#) suggested to “ask ten different experts to define corporate sustainability you are likely to receive ten different answers” and argued that:

[...] part of the problem in defining such an amorphous term arises from its continuing evolution along with the ever-increasing entry of new stakeholders, an inconsistent set of state and federal laws and the constant onslaught of newly adopted federal and state laws.

A number of definitions focus on business continuity rather than environmental and social issues. [Dyllick and Hockerts \(2002, p. 131\)](#), for example, define corporate sustainability as:

[...] meeting the needs of a firm’s direct and indirect stakeholders (such as shareholders, employees, clients, pressure groups, communities etc.), without compromising its ability to meet the needs of future stakeholders as well.

In a similar vein, [Texas Instruments \(2014, Webpage\)](#) used:

[...] the term sustainability primarily in relation to the operation of our business. We believe responsible, sustainable business can meet current resource needs without compromising the needs of future generations.

While sustainability has become an increasingly important corporate concern in the business world, the hospitality sector has perhaps been somewhat slower to react. Although [Sloan et al. \(2013 p. 24\)](#) reported that “the hospitality industry set about incorporating the philosophy of sustainability in the early 1900’s”, but [Cavagnaro and Gehrels \(2009, p. 181\)](#) suggested that “the hospitality industry is not considered to be one of the most sustainability aware sectors”. That said, just three years later, [van Rheede and Blomme \(2012, p. 257\)](#) argued that “the hospitality industry is starting to take responsibility for environmental sustainability”. In a similar vein, [Williams and Ponsford \(2009, p. 402\)](#) acknowledge that there is “growing knowledge concerning how to move tourism towards greater sustainability” but argue that “progress in transitioning from concepts and principles to pan-industry practice is limited” and suggest that “this may be due to a lack of collective leadership amongst tourism’s stakeholders”. The vast majority of the reporting and research on sustainability within the hospitality industry has been initially focused on the major players in the sector, and it is important to recognise that much less is known about if, and how, the smaller companies, operators and individuals who make a significant contribution to consumer provision within the industry are addressing sustainability.

The increase in corporate commitments to sustainability has been accompanied by a growing volume of business and management research. While much of the early work had a strong environmental emphasis, it has increasingly been broadened to address many dimensions of corporate sustainability including the business case for corporate

sustainability (Salzmann *et al.*, 2005); supply chain management (Seuring *et al.*, 2008); innovation (Boons and Ludeke-Freund, 2013); entrepreneurship (Hockerts and Wustenhagen, 2009); marketing (Hult, 2011); leadership (Jones *et al.*, 2014); human resource management (aet. al 0.2011); and management information systems (Dao *et al.*, 2011). A range of research has also been undertaken across the extractive industries (Franks *et al.*, 2010), in the manufacturing and service sectors generally (Gunasekaram and Spalanzani, 2011) and on a number of sector specific studies (e.g. on manufacturing Egilmez *et al.*, 2013; on health care, (Pammolli *et al.*, 2012); on retailing, (Jones *et al.*, 2011); and on the global hotel industry, (Jones *et al.*, 2014).

While this paper does not seek to offer a detailed review of these literatures, a common theme runs through many of them, namely, that such work is still in its infancy and much remains to be done. Jackson *et al.* (2011, p. 102), for example, suggests that “we seek to stimulate the field of human resource management to expand its role in the pursuit of environmentally sustainable business”, while Dao *et al.* (2011, p. 63) argued that “Management Information Systems research on sustainability has been somewhat constrained in the realm of green IT, which focuses mostly on the reduction of energy consumption”. In a similar vein, Ashby *et al.* (2011, p. 498) claim:

[...] while there is clearly academic recognition of the need to integrate economic, environmental and social sustainability, given the broad nature of these fields there is a tangible need to develop a better and more focused understanding of sustainability specifically in relation to supply chains while Dey *et al.* (2011, p. 1237) stress that “there has been very little work done to understand the role and the importance of logistics in an organizations’ quest towards sustainability.

In a similar vein, while Chabowski *et al.* (2011, p. 55) suggested that “recent changes in the business environment have prompted marketing scholars to pay particular attention to sustainability” but that “there is a paucity of research on the topic in premier marketing journals”. Looking to the future, the authors suggest marketing research on sustainability should be focused on a number of areas including relating a company’s sustainability focus, its social and environmental focus and its legal and ethical intent to marketing assets which enable these “marketing assets” to “influence financial performance” (Chabowski *et al.*, 2011, p. 63).

Research on sustainability in hospitality industry literatures

Research output on sustainability within the hospitality industry is growing rapidly and a number of research agendas are receiving attention, but rather than attempting to review all of this research, the current authors offer a selection of illustrative examples to provide a flavour of the nature and range of work being undertaken in this field. In providing an introduction to a recent text on sustainability within the hospitality industry, Jauhari (2014) focuses on a number of key themes including designing green hotels, minimising energy consumption, the role of technological innovation in achieving sustainability, sustainable tourism, marketing sustainability to consumers and how human resource management practices can help to contribute to sustainability. A wide variety of themes and issues addressing sustainability within the hospitality industry have emerged within the literature and a few illustrative examples provide some insights into this work. Hassan (2000, p. 239) looked to develop “a model of competitiveness that focuses on environmental sustainability factors associated with travel destination” and examined “the relationships among all stakeholders involved in

creating and integrating value added products to sustain resources while maintaining market position relative to other competitors". Williams and Ponsford (2009, p. 396) drew attention to what they describe as "tourism's environmental paradox" in that tourism simultaneously seeks often fragile and sensitive environmental resources as "core ingredients and compelling backdrops for the production and consumption of tourist experiences" and "it also requires the protection of the ecological integrity and abundance of these resources for sustained competitiveness". Williams and Ponsford (2009) stressed the urgent need for a more systematic approach to evaluating and managing this paradox.

Kasim *et al.* (2014, p. 1090), for example, have highlighted what they describe as "the global phenomenon of the crisis in the quality and quantity of water supplies and how tourism and hotels specifically may have contributed to this situation" and they propose a "water management framework [...] that leverages on the concept of innovation" and that offers examples of how "hotels of different sizes, with differing financial, technical, knowledge and managerial capacities could address the challenge of implementing water management and obtain commercial benefit". In looking to examine ways of improving sustainability in the hospitality industry, Gil-Saura and Ruiz (2011) drew attention to how the application of information and communication technologies could contribute to a reduction in energy demands. Jayawardena *et al.* (2013) outlined key sustainability issues and trends within the Canadian tourism and hospitality industry and they examined the role of innovation in addressing sustainability challenges within the industry. Ajagumma (2006, p. 253) examined the impact of crime and harassment on the sustainability of the tourism industry in Jamaica and suggested that it requires "immediate, radical changes in attitudes, values and practices of the business community, the government, the media as well as co-operation from local residents". Duarte and Borda (2013) have examined the relationship between accessibility and sustainability focusing on people with reduced mobility or limited mobility and how the industry is increasingly looking to address the needs of these groups.

Sigala (2008) explored the value of employing general supply chain management concepts within tour operators' business in integrating sustainability into tourism supply chains. Sigala (2008, p. 1590) suggests that "sustainability in tourism is a multi-sectoral and a multi-disciplinary concept", and, as such, it "depends on the performance of all products, suppliers and links within the tourism supply chain". Following a case study of TUI Travel, one of the world's leading leisure travel groups, Sigala (2008, p. 1598) argued that applying supply chain management as "a critical management tool" had enabled the identification of a number of "good practices that policy makers and tourism suppliers can adapt for enhancing tourism sustainability". Under the headline title "From Farm to Fork", O'Donovan *et al.* (2012, p. 500) investigated the direct supply chain relationship in the food industry to the hospitality industry in the south east of Ireland. Although the authors stress that their work is exploratory they suggest that there are strong "social, economic, organisational and market rationales for a more concerted effort to promote higher levels of direct supply chain relationships in the hospitality sector" (O'Donovan *et al.*, 2012, p. 500).

Prud'homme and Raymond (2013) explored the impact of sustainable development practices in the hospitality industry on customer satisfaction in a number of hotels in the province of Quebec in Canada. This research revealed that customer satisfaction is positively influenced by the hotels' adoption of sustainable development practices and

that hotel size and ownership also influence the level of customer satisfaction. [Manaktola and Jauhan \(2007, p. 364\)](#) explored “the factors which influence the consumer attitude and behaviour towards green practices in the lodgings industry within India”, and their research revealed that consumers “patronise the hotels that have adopted green practices” but that they are “not willing to pay extra for these services”. [Zhang et al. \(2012\)](#) used panel data from over 600 US hotels to construct a performance measurement system for environmental sustainability. Their investigation suggested that customer behaviour and operational decisions are two key drivers of environmental sustainability and revealed that “there is a positive link between environmental sustainability and operating performance” and that “the performance frontier varies across market segment and location characteristics such as degree of urbanization and climate change” ([Zhang et al., 2012, p. 377](#)). [Rodriguez-Anton et al. \(2012\)](#) analysed the role of sustainability management systems in the hospitality industry within Spanish hotels. Their research revealed that hotels that principally look to target leisure and tourist customers that are particularly concerned about environmental management, while those which tend to primarily attract business customers are more concerned with human resource management and labour relations than environmental issues.

A number of studies have also examined the nature of the sustainability reporting practices within the hospitality industry. [De Grosbois \(2012, p. 896\)](#), for example, reviewed the methods and scope of corporate social responsibility reporting by the world’s top 150 hotel companies. They found that, while a large number of the selected companies reported on their commitment to a wide range of sustainability issues including environmental goals, environmental quality, diversity and accessibility, community well-being and economic prosperity, “much smaller numbers of them provide details of specific initiatives and even less of them report on actual performance achieved”. [Font et al. \(2012, p. 1544\)](#) looked to benchmark the corporate social responsibility practices of ten international hotel groups and their research revealed that corporate systems are not necessarily reflective of actual operations and that:

[...] environmental performance is eco-savings driven, labour policies look to comply with local legislation, socio-economic policies are inward looking with little acceptance of impacts on the destination and customer engagement is limited.

More specifically, [Bonilla-Priego et al. \(2014, p. 149\)](#) developed a corporate sustainability reporting index embracing labour and human rights, health and safety and environmental and economic dimensions for the cruise industry, although their research suggests that “companies disclose more management than performance data” and often “focus on soft indicators which are easy to mimic and demonstrate posturing” and that “reports echo the voice of the corporations and not the demands of stakeholders”.

These specific examples offer some broad impressions of the diversity of published work on sustainability within the hospitality industry. Such diversity would seem to be a strength, in that it suggests that there is vibrant academic enthusiasm and concern for the role and importance of sustainability within the hospitality industry. This, in turn, suggests that increasingly public corporate commitments to, and concerns about, sustainability within the hospitality industry are being reflected and pursued in the academy. However, the diversity of academic research on sustainability within the hospitality industry might be seen to be a weakness in that such work currently seems to be fragmented, in that it lacks both a coherent overall structure and a clear research

framework or to have identified a consistent methodological approach or agreed future research agendas. It is for the academics studying the hospitality industry and for its major research centres to work collaboratively to develop, agree and drive forward such research agendas and frameworks and there is some limited evidence that such frameworks are emerging ([Clarke, 1997](#); [Connelly *et al.*, 2011](#); [van Rheede and Blomme, 2012](#)), although a great deal more work needs to be done. More generally, the current authors would argue that three fundamental sets of issues face the hospitality industry. First, the industry definitions of sustainability lack clarity and precision, and, in many ways, it is difficult to escape the conclusion that commitment to sustainability is a simple ubiquitous phrase covering a large number of environmental, social and economic issues and corporate agendas. Second, the issues of materiality and independent external assurance provide a major challenge if the industry's approach to sustainability is to demonstrate transparency, integrity and credibility. Third, sustainable consumption and industry commitments to continuing economic growth pose a complex, enigmatic and arguably unpalatable dilemma, not only for the hospitality industry but also more widely for the dominant capitalist business model.

Defining sustainability within the hospitality industry and bridging the sustainability gap

There are a number of issues in and around the way sustainability is defined within the hospitality industry and that the industry must address if it is to demonstrate its commitment to sustainability. By and large, definitions of sustainability within the industry are broad general statements, and as [Goldstein and Primlani \(2012, webpage\)](#) suggested, "while other aspects of the hospitality sector are relatively straightforward to record and interpret, sustainability has remained intrinsically difficult to quantify". [Legrand and Sloan \(2009, webpage\)](#), for example, followed the World Commission on Environment and Development in defining "sustainable hospitality" as:

[...] hospitality industry development and management that meets the needs of today's guests, hoteliers and stakeholders without compromising the ability of future guests, hoteliers and stakeholders to enjoy the benefits from the same services, products and experiences.

But major players within the industry itself have generally been reluctant to publicly commit themselves to anything resembling a precise, and therefore potentially measurable, definition. By and large, their approaches to defining sustainability are loosely couched within more general business goals and strategies. [The Walt Disney Company \(2015, webpage\)](#), for example, looks:

[...] to establish and sustain a positive environmental legacy for Disney and for future generations. In doing so, the company is committed to minimizing its overall impact on the environment while encouraging and activating environmentally responsible behavior on the part of cast members and employees, guests and business associates throughout the world.

[Marriott International \(2014, webpage\)](#) claims "our sustainability strategy supports business growth and reaches beyond the doors of our hotels to preserve and protect our planet's natural resources".

While industry definitions, however loosely defined, generally tend to privilege the environmental dimensions of sustainability, the major players also clearly include the social and economic dimensions within their approaches to sustainability and they

certainly claim to address a range of issues and agendas. The environmental issues addressed include:

- climate change and greenhouse gas emissions;
- water stewardship: and energy efficiency and conservation;
- waste management and recycling;
- environmentally responsible sourcing;
- bio-diversity and the protection and preservation of natural resources;
- the reduction of environmental impacts; and
- the creation of green construction standards for new hotel construction.

Social issues embrace diversity and equal opportunities within the workplace, health and safety, labour conditions in the supply chain, human rights, supporting local communities and charitable giving, while economic issues include employment creation, providing value to customers and building shareholder value. Given this wide range of sustainability commitments, inevitably, there may be inherent contradictions in aligning what may in effect be contradictory and competing goals. [Deloitte \(2014, p. 46\)](#) recognised the tensions and argued that while:

[...] in the short term whilst brands and operators will have to balance sustainability against other competing initiatives aimed at gaining market share, sacrificing environmental responsibility should be avoided.

While [Goldstein and Primlani \(2012, Webpage\)](#) recognised that “sustainability issues have nearly every aspect of the hospitality industry” thus “necessitating the alignment of environmental, social and economic factors to promote responsible business operations over time”, in reality, such alignments may prove difficult and at best companies may have to make difficult trade-offs between pursuing wide ranging sustainability strategies and programmes.

Marriott’s corporate commitment to “reducing costs whenever possible”, for example, could be seen to be in conflict with the company’s commitment to “guest satisfaction” and to “purchasing organic and responsibility sourced food [...] and establishing relationships with local farmers” ([Marriott International, 2012, webpage](#)). At the individual hotel level, managers working to meet what may be ever more demanding operational and financial deadlines and/or to achieve performance related bonuses may, when facing problems with staff scheduling, put employees under pressure to work outside the hours that suit their work–life balance or to release employees for educational training programmes. While these tensions are commonplace in large companies looking to publicly pursue wide-ranging sustainability agendas, they might be seen to be exacerbated, in part at least, in some sections of the hospitality industry, in that a number of the leading hotel chains, for example, operate a business model based on managing and franchising hotels rather than owning them. Under this model, the hotel company does not manage employees, operations and maintenance. At Marriott, for example, the focus is on working “with owners and franchisees to ensure that brand standards are met” and to “encourage sustainable operational practices” ([Marriott International, 2012, Webpage](#)). Similarly, [Wyndham Worldwide \(2011, Webpage\)](#) reported that the majority of its hotels are independently owned and operated by franchise owners and hotel development companies. Although the company argued

that these owners and developers have a vital “role in driving the direction of our global sustainability efforts” (Wyndham Worldwide, 2011, webpage), in truth, they are, at best, one step removed from direct corporate control.

More critically, definitions of sustainability within the hospitality industry can be interpreted as being constructed around business efficiency and the search for competitive advantage and as such can be seen to be driven as much by business imperatives as by any concern for sustainability. Many of the environmental initiatives and achievements included in the sustainability reports published by the leading players in the hospitality industry designed, for example, to reduce energy and water consumption and waste but they also reduce costs. Similarly, corporate commitments to employees which focus, for example, on educational training programmes, diversity and health and safety at work help to promote a stable, loyal and efficient workforce. However, Deloitte (2012, p. 4) has argued that most companies carefully select the environmental and social data on which they report, and, as such, they determine their definitions of sustainability “based on their own intuition and experience” and on “one-to-one consultations with stakeholders or stakeholder panels”. Deloitte (2012, p. 2) argues that such approaches do not genuinely help managers and executives to establish and develop a relative ranking of sustainability issues “based upon what matters most to the business”. In essence, the world’s leading hotel chains have constructed sustainability agendas and programmes, which are driven largely, but not exclusively, by corporate commercial interests with the on business efficiency gains rather than on the maintenance of natural ecosystems and a reduction in demands on the earth’s natural resource base.

More generally, it is important to recognise the “sustainability gap” (Fischer *et al.*, 2012, p. 621) and the challenges it poses for research and for the transition to sustainability. Fischer *et al.* (2012, p. 621), for example, claimed that “despite increasing efforts to reach sustainability, key global biophysical indicators such as climate change and biodiversity loss continue to deteriorate rather than improve”. In a similar vein, Wick *et al.* (2012, p. 1) suggested that while “public attention is captivated by the entertaining media episodes of (environmental) characteristics and hardly any attention is paid to these catastrophes’ underlying structures and root causes”. More critically, Fischer *et al.* (2012, p. 621) argue that “ongoing failure to move towards sustainability calls into question the current focus of research”. In looking to address these concerns, Fischer *et al.* (2007, p. 1) recommended two research strategies:

- (1) sustainability must be conceptualised as a hierarchy of considerations, with the biophysical limits of the Earth setting the ultimate boundaries within which social and economic goals must be achieved; and
- (2) that “transdisciplinary research programmes must confront key normative questions facing modern consumer societies”.

The importance of materiality and external assurance in sustainability reporting

Reporting on corporate sustainability is an increasingly important element in the corporate mindset as:

[...] companies are increasingly realizing that corporate responsibility reporting is about more than just being a good corporate citizen; it drives innovation and promotes learning, which

helps companies grow their business and increases their organization's value (KPMG, 2011, p. 2).

In a similar vein, the [Global Reporting Initiative \(2013, p. 4\)](#) suggests that sustainability reporting "encourages good management and serves as an incentive for the establishment of a culture of corporate transparency". That said, if sustainability reporting is to achieve these goals, then it is vitally important that companies publishing corporate sustainability reports address the issues of materiality and independent external assurance.

The concept of materiality can be traced to the auditing and accounting processes associated with traditional financial reporting, but it is increasingly seen to be vitally important in the sustainability reporting process. Materiality is basically concerned with identifying those environmental, social and economic issues that matter most to a company and its stakeholders who increasingly want to make ethically informed investment decisions. There is some consensus that sustainability includes a wider range of issues and actions than financial reporting. [The Global Reporting Initiative \(2015, Webpage\)](#), for example, defines material issues as:

[...] those topics that have a direct or indirect impact on an organization's ability to create, preserve or erode economic, environmental and social value for itself, its stakeholders and society at large.

More specifically, the [Global Reporting Initiative \(2015, Webpage\)](#), stresses the complexity involved in determining materiality suggesting that:

[...] the operations and activities of an organization lead to positive and negative economic, environmental and social impacts. Some of these sustainability impacts will be visible to stakeholders, who will express an interest in them directly. But not all sustainability impacts will be recognized by stakeholders. Some impacts may be slow and cumulative. Others will occur at a distance from stakeholders, so that causal links may not be clear.

That said, the [Governance and Accountability Institute \(2014\)](#) has emphasised that "from sector-to-sector and company-to-company, the process for determining materiality will vary" and suggest that:

[...] an energy company's greenhouse gas emissions is of high materiality to stakeholders, but at a pharmaceutical company, product safety and responsibility would be considered by many to be higher up the ranking of material sustainability issues.

More specifically, while the energy costs generated by mass global travel might be thought to be one of the main material issues within the hospitality sector, the [Governance and Accountability Institute's \(2014\)](#) research reveals that product responsibility (particularly customer privacy), labour practices (particularly training and education) and the impact of the industry within society (particularly public policy) are ranked above environmental concerns such as energy consumption and greenhouse gas emissions.

In arguing the case for "sector specific materiality and sustainability reporting standards", [Eccles \(2012, p. 8\)](#) argued that "without standards it is difficult for companies to know exactly how to measure and report on some dimensions of sustainability performance" and to make "comparisons of performance among companies and over time". The authors suggest that while a wide range of public and private sector organisations have issued guidelines on materiality for sustainability

reporting, they argue that “the proliferation of materiality guidance” (for sustainability reporting) “creates the perception of competing or duelling standards, which can and arguably does create confusion among companies” and that it has contributed to “inconsistencies” in reporting on sustainability (Eccles, 2012, p. 10). The authors further suggest that:

[...] while “not a panacea” the development of sector specific guidelines on what sustainability issues are material to that sector and the key performance indicators for reporting on them would significantly improve the ability of companies to report on their environmental, social and governance performance (Eccles, 2012, p. 13).

Eccles (2012, p. 14) conclude that a company’s failure to disclose material information in a comparable format has two downsides, namely, “companies are not adequately managing important business issues” and “risk to investors’ portfolios, such as exposure to climate change, remain hidden”.

The concept of materiality has received little attention within the hospitality industry. Marriot (2012, webpage), for example, claims in the introduction to its 2011-2012 Sustainability Report that the issues used to determine materiality are described in each section of the report; the sections on business practices, business values, environment and society include no explicit details on how materiality has been determined. More generally, while Ricaurte (2012, p. 18) has demonstrated the complexity of materiality in a hotel’s carbon footprints, he concluded that “further industry discussion and research are necessary to arrive at standard forms of calculating and communicating hotel carbon footprints”. The structure and diversity of the hospitality sector and the sheer diversity of the environmental, social and economic issues embraced by sustainability serve to highlight the scale and the complexity of the challenges involved in developing, disseminating and applying agreed materiality standards for sustainability reporting within the hospitality industry.

At the same time, there is growing awareness that external independent assurance of the information contained in sustainability reports is also vitally important in providing comparability, transparency and credibility. KPMG (2011, p. 28), for example, argued that growing investor and stakeholder pressure effectively means that companies “increasingly want to demonstrate the quality and reliability of their corporate responsibility data”. Assurance is a process designed to increase confidence in the quality and reliability of sustainability performance data. Such assurance is normally conducted in four ways. CSR Europe (2008, Webpage), for example, identified four principal methods, namely, “conducting assurance internally”, “stakeholder panels”, “expert input” and assurance by an “independent, impartial and external organisation”. However, the most widely used approach to assurance in sustainability reporting is the commissioning of an assurance statement by an independent external organisation. A number of organisations offer external assurance services for sustainability reports. Accountancy companies (e.g. PricewaterhouseCoopers) are the largest providers of external assurance for sustainability reports. A number of sustainability consultancies (e.g. Planet and Prosperity) also provide external assurance and a number of engineering firms (e.g. TruePivot) which offer technical certification and specialist engineering expertise and risk-based analysis.

CorporateRegister.com Limited (2008, p. 6) define an assurance statement as “the published communication of a process which examines the veracity and completeness of

a CSR report”. That said, the provision of assurance statements can be seen to be problematic, in that not only is there often variation between the volume, characteristics and details of the information companies provide in their sustainability reports themselves, but there is currently limited consensus on the methods companies should use to collect and report on their sustainability data. [CorporateRegister.com Limited \(2008, p. 6\)](#) argued that “the underlying processes are often opaque and company specific, so it’s difficult to know how far a report reflects actual performance” and that “unless a company can define its scope of performance disclosure, how can an assurance provider define the scope of assurance”.

External assessors work to two different levels of assurance, namely, “reasonable assurance” and “limited assurance”. In the first, the assurers undertake their work in a way which enables them to issue statements on a sustainability report “which are framed in a positive manner, e.g., the reported environmental data accurately reflect” (the company’s) “environmental performance” ([CorporateRegister.com Limited, 2008, p. 14](#)). In the second, the assurers undertake their work in a more limited way which allows them to make statements about the information in a sustainability report “which are framed in a negative manner, e.g. nothing has come to our attention which causes us to believe that the reported environmental data do not accurately reflect” (the company’s) “environmental performance” ([CorporateRegister.com Limited, 2008, p. 14](#)). Within the hospitality industry, there is at best very limited evidence of independent external assurance in the sustainability reporting process ([Jones et al., 2014](#)), but it must be noted that independent assurance can be both a contentious and an expensive process. [O’Dwyer and Owen \(2005, p. 205\)](#), for example, claim that their empirical work on the assurance process in a number of large companies calls into question the independence of the process. In addition, [O’Dwyer and Owen \(2005, p. 224\)](#) identified a considerable degree of management control over the assurance process and argued that the management “may place any restrictions they choose on the assurance exercise”.

Independent external assurance can be a costly and time-consuming process. The major players in the global hospitality industry are large and dynamic organisations and the capture and storage of sustainability information and data over a wide and often geographically dispersed range of activities throughout the supply chain and the provision of external access to assurers can be a challenging, sensitive and a potentially expensive venture and one which many of the major players in the hospitality industry do not pursue. While a company’s carbon emissions may be collected and formally audited as part of its environmental sustainability commitments, details of a company’s work in local communities and on contributions to charities and information on employee satisfaction and health and well-being can be more difficult to measure and assure. At the same time, the myriad of small companies across the hospitality sector often have neither the time nor the resources to consider or to report on the sustainability of their businesses.

Nevertheless, many stakeholders have growing concerns as to how both large and small companies within the hospitality industry are both meeting and publicly reporting on their environmental, social and economic and responsibilities. This, in turn, increasingly demands the inclusion of a robust and rigorous assurance statement within corporate sustainability reports which will, in turn, help to enhance reliability, credibility and integrity of the reporting process. There is also an argument that external assurance can “identify shortcomings in underlying data collection systems,

thus providing a roadmap for improvement to the reporting company” (CSR Europe, 2008, webpage). More commercially, the provision of an assurance statement might be seen to enhance both a company’s reputation with its stakeholders and help to promote its brand identity.

Sustainability, sustainable consumption and continuing economic growth

The concept of sustainable consumption is conspicuous by its virtual absence from the research literature on sustainability within the hospitality industry, yet there is a growing awareness that the need to move towards more sustainable patterns of consumption is becoming increasingly pressing. Cohen (2010) has traced the emergence of the term sustainable consumption to the Rio Earth Summit in 1992, and since then, it has become an increasingly important policy element in national sustainable development strategies. The World Economic Forum (2012, webpage), for example, has stressed that:

[...] businesses must reshape demand by making sustainable consumption more personal and relevant to consumers, leveraging the power of technology to drive engagement and transparency and by redesigning products and services to deliver increased value with fewer resources, thus making the sustainable choice the default choice.

However, the World Economic Forum (2012, p. 6) has also argued “there is no silver bullet for achieving sustainable consumption” and this strikes a chord with Cohen’s (2005, Webpage) argument that “sustainable consumption is the most obdurate challenge for the sustainable development agenda”.

However, there is little, if any, consensus in defining sustainable consumption and it is widely recognized to be a contested concept (Seyfang, 2004). A number of definitions of sustainable consumption mirror mainstream definitions of sustainable development. The United Nations Environment Programme (2015, Webpage), for example, defines sustainable consumption as:

[...] the use of services and related products that respond to basic needs and bring a better quality of life while minimizing the use of natural resources and toxic materials as well as the emissions of waste and pollutants over the life cycle so as not to jeopardize the needs of future generations.

More simply, Dahl (1998, Webpage) suggests that “sustainable consumption refers to the need to stay within the global sustainability of resources”. Jackson (2006, p. 4) summarised a variety of definitions but noted that these adopt different positions not only on “the extent to which sustainable consumption involves changes in consumer behaviour and lifestyles” but also on whether sustainable consumption implies “consuming more efficiently, consuming more responsibly or quite simply consuming less”. Jackson (2006, p. 4) further argues that “the dominant institutional consensus” is that sustainable consumption “is to be achieved primarily through improvements in the efficiency with which resources are converted into economic goods”.

There are broader and more fundamental issues concerning the tension between the efficacy of looking to promote both sustainable consumption and continuing business growth, and the levels of resource consumption and the environmental impacts attendant upon such growth. Here it is important to recognise that there may be a variable relationship between economic growth and environmental costs in those environmental costs are often higher in countries in the early stages of economic growth

and this can be problematic in establishing, developing and promoting new tourist venues in developing countries. Many of the leading international players within the industry are firmly committed to continuing business growth. In its “2011-2012 Sustainability Report”, Marriott International, for example, clearly commits itself to continuing growth as a preface to the provision of details of its commitments and achievements to the environment, to society and to its employees. More specifically, the company emphasised that “growth is expected to remain stable in 2012” and that “as Marriott continues to grow over the next couple of years, we anticipate that our managed and franchised hotels will generate approximately 100,000 new jobs” ([Marriott International, 2012](#), webpage). Some of the major players do not explicitly recognise any tension between sustainability and economic growth while others publicly view it creatively rather than destructively. The Wyndham Worldwide hotel chain, for example, claims that its “commitment to global sustainability comes at a time of exciting growth” ([Wyndham Worldwide, 2011](#), Webpage). The Intercontinental Hotel Group recognised the tension between the continuing growth of tourism and the environmental pressures this growth can generate but argued that this very tension “creates a space for innovation ”and provides “an opportunity to find innovative solutions to the environmental, social and economic effects of our business” ([Intercontinental Hotel Group, 2013](#), webpage).

At the same time, there are arguments that economic growth, dependent in many ways on the seemingly incessant depletion of the earth’s finite natural resources, is incompatible with the concept of sustainable consumption. Such arguments are epitomised by [Jackson’s \(2006, p. 1\)](#) belief that “the consumption patterns that characterize modern Western society are unsustainable. They rely too heavily on finite resources and they generate unacceptable environmental costs”. In a similar vein, BSR, a consultancy that works with over 300 companies worldwide “to build a just and sustainable world”, has argued that “it is increasingly clear that the consumption based model of economic growth cannot be applied globally without causing immense environmental and economic disruption”. In addressing the relationship between sustainable consumption and economic growth, [Cohen \(2010\)](#) makes the distinction between “weak” and “strong” sustainable consumption. [Cohen \(2010, p. 110\)](#) suggests that the former is essentially focused on changing consumer behaviour and gives rise to “policy recommendations built up around green consumerism, eco-labelling and household investments in energy efficiency” and to strategies “grounded in product policy, lifecycle engineering, waste and material minimization and eco-efficiency”.

More generally, corporate approaches to sustainability are rooted in “the orthodox view” that “achieving sustainability is a technical issue” requiring “better knowledge, incentives and technology” ([Mansfield, 2009, p. 37](#)). [Clark and Dickson \(2003\)](#) suggested that “the need for sustainable development initiatives to mobilize appropriate science and technology has long been recognized” and advances in technology are often seen to provide the best way of promoting greater efficiency. Many of the leading players within the hospitality industry have certainly stressed the importance of technological innovation in improving efficiency across the sustainability spectrum. [The Intercontinental Hotel Group \(2013, Webpage\)](#), for example, stressed its focus on seeking to “innovate concepts and technologies” and reports, for example, that it is committed “to designing, building and operating more sustainable hotels through

innovation". However, Schor (2008, p. 310) suggested "much of the literature on sustainable consumption has focused upon technological solutions" and claims that:

[...] advocates of technological solutions argue that more intelligent design and technological innovation can dramatically reduce or even stop the depletion of ecological resources, as well as eliminate toxic chemicals and ecosystem disruption.

Cohen (2010, p. 110) argues that "modest anticipated gains are incompatible with the bold targets endorsed by scientific experts" and as such he claims that weak sustainable consumption "is just pretense". In a similar vein, Schor (2005, p. 310) argued that such approaches "fail to address increases in the scale of production and consumption, sometimes even arguing that such increases are not unsustainable if enough natural-capital-saving technical change occurs".

From within the academic business community, a number of authors have offered reflections on possible transitions to more sustainable futures. In his introduction to a series of essays entitled "Thoughts on Sustainability", Peters (2009, p. 1), for example, suggested the essays:

[...] reflect a deeply rooted questioning of the philosophical premises which have shaped Western Society, the belief in rationality, cognition, expansion and consumption, supported by a world of unlimited resources.

More specifically, Peters (2009, p. 1) asserted "we now rationally know that the present path the world is on is not sustainable, yet we do next to nothing about it" and then asks "is there something that in our nature, rather than in our nurture that stands in our way?" and:

[...] are we pre-programmed from the dawn of time of homo-sapiens to think in the short term to consume as much as possible while the going is good to favour our own clan over the common good?

In looking to address, although not necessarily provide answers to, these questions Peters draws attention to the essays by Stubbings and by Kasozi. Stubbings (2009, p. 8), for example, argued that "we seem to have a 'hard wired' tendency to focus on the near future, whether that is the immediate future or the length of our own lifetime" and suggests that:

[...] we have not been biologically equipped by evolution to consider the long term multi-generational consequences of our actions today and certainly not those consequences that are geographically as well as temporarily removed from us.

She calls for the development of "an ecological mindset" which, *inter alia*, would be "long termist" and be focused on "thinking in terms of eons and epochs, not end of month or next quarter" (Stubbings, 2009, p. 3). In developing such a mindset, she argues, somewhat paradoxically, that "we can develop better awareness of the impacts of our choices on future generations by paying more attention to the moment" and suggests that "many of the decisions we take day-in-day-out and in business do not require expert insight for us to assess the likely consequences" (Stubbings, 2009, p. 3). Kasozi (2009, p. 14) suggests that growth has become "an unchallengeable imperative", that *questions of limitation, utility or caution are often viewed as evidence of lack of imagination, insight or courage*, that "growth is always good and always necessary" and that challenges to the growth idiom are "not the substance of true entrepreneurial spirit".

More radically, a number of social scientists offer critiques essentially based on the political economy. [Mansfield \(2009, p. 37\)](#), for example, argues that the mainstream approaches to sustainability fail to recognise “the political nature of the socio-economic processes that produce environmental degradation poverty and injustice – in short, the political nature of sustainability”. In a similar vein, [Jackson \(2006, p. 20\)](#) argued that “it is entirely fanciful to suppose that deep emission and resource cuts can be achieved without confronting the structure of market economies”. Equally pointedly, [Castro \(2004\)](#) has questioned the very possibility of sustainable development under capitalism and argued that economic growth relies upon the continuing and inevitable exploitation of both natural and social capital. Here, [Fernando’s \(2003, p. 1\)](#) assertion that “capitalism has shown remarkable creativity and power to undermine the goals of sustainable development by appropriating the language and practices of sustainable development” resonates loudly. This seems to echo [Dolan’s \(2002, p. 170\)](#) argument that “the goal of sustainable consumption needs to be seen as a political project, recognising the power relations between social groupings and between cultural value systems” as well as his warning that “this is the context within which the idea of sustainability will stand or fall”.

Concluding discussion

In concluding these personal reflections on sustainability within the hospitality industry, the authors offer a brief summary of their findings interwoven with a number of thoughts on some of the challenges companies currently face in their corporate sustainability reporting:

- on the evolution of sustainability research;
- on the future research agendas within the hospitality industry;
- on how hospitality scholars can contribute to broader research agendas within the business and management fields; and
- on research methods: and on a number of practical and theoretical implications.

During recent decades, the concept of sustainability has taken on an increasingly high profile within society and across all sectors of the economy. However, defining the concept is not straightforward, and there are a number of contrasting and contested meanings. There are, for example, sets of definitions rooted in environmental concerns which privilege the conservation of natural resources and the protection of ecosystems and there are broader sets of definitions that emphasise social and economic as well as environmental goals that look to meet human needs in an equitable manner. A commitment to corporate sustainability has certainly moved seemingly ever higher up boardroom agendas as a growing number of companies acknowledge sustainability as a driver of competition and a source of competitive advantage and look to report publicly on their sustainability strategies and achievements. That said, there is little or no consensus in defining corporate sustainability and a number of definitions focus on business continuity rather than on the environment and society.

The majority of the major players in the hospitality industry are publicly committed to strategic corporate sustainability agendas and programmes and many of them report publicly on their commitments and achievements, but there are issues around the way sustainability is defined and operationalized within the industry. Definitions of

sustainability within the industry are broad and often do not readily lend themselves to easy measurement. Many of the major players within the hospitality industry claim to be pursuing a large number of environmental, social and economic programmes, but many of these programmes are often principally focused on eco-efficiency gains, on developing and enhancing community relationships, on encouraging loyalty and stability within the work force and on promoting and disseminating positive corporate images. As such, the leading players in the hospitality industry can be seen to be adopting a weak approach to sustainability rather than pursuing programmes to reduce the consumption of environmental resources or to maintain the integrity of natural ecosystems. That said, the major companies within the hospitality industry would also want to stress the importance of recognising business imperatives and in developing good management practices in running “their companies successfully under present framework conditions while helping to lead society towards the new framework conditions of sustainability” ([World Business Council for Sustainable Development, 2010](#), webpage). Nevertheless, in some ways, the concept of sustainability is a paradox for the hospitality industry, in that, while the majority of the major players claim a strategic commitment to corporate sustainability, they often promote conspicuous consumption which in many ways is the antithesis of sustainability. More generally, sustainability is a thorny issue for the hospitality industry and, in some ways, the major companies need to address what are complex, protean and challenging issues with caution.

More specifically, there are three major sets of challenges that the leading players in the hospitality industry must look to address if they are to improve the transparency, credibility and integrity of their sustainability commitments. Companies must embrace materiality and commission independent external assurance as integral elements in the sustainability reporting process and address “sustainability budgets and returns” ([Ethical Corporation, 2015](#), webpage). First, in looking to embrace materiality, there is a thorny issue concerning the nature of the relationship between company interests and stakeholder interests. This can occur where a company, and, more specifically, its executive management team, is principally, sometimes exclusively responsible for identifying material issues within the sustainability reporting process. As such, the company might also be seen to be essentially responsible for identifying its stakeholders and for collecting, collating and articulating their views on the priorities for the company’s sustainability strategies. However, whether the leading hospitality companies can realistically and comprehensively elicit and accurately represent the views of all their key stakeholders remains to be seen. At the same time, [Cooper and Owen \(2007, p. 665\)](#) counsel caution arguing that:

[...] whilst the corporate lobby apparently espouses a commitment to stakeholder responsiveness, and even accountability, their claims are pitched at the level of mere rhetoric which ignores key issues such the establishment of rights and transfer of power to stakeholder groups.

More specifically, [Cooper and Owen \(2007, p. 652\)](#) suggested that “hierarchical and coercive power prevent the form of accountability that can be achieved through discussion and dialogue” and that arguably, at best, companies may “favour shareholders over all other interested groups”.

Second, all the major companies within the hospitality industry need to look to commission comprehensive independent external assurance as an integral element in their sustainability reporting process to improve its transparency and integrity. In theory, the external assurance of sustainability reports should be important for a number of audiences including the general public, customers, investors, employees, suppliers, regulatory bodies, governments, organised labour, non-governmental organisations and environmental and social pressure groups. [RAAS Consulting \(2009\)](#), for example, suggested that the two primary audiences are regulators and investors. However, the assurance statements contained in sustainability reports published by many of the leading players within the hospitality industry gave little or no indication of their intended audiences. Rather, [CorporateRegister.com Limited \(2008, p. 27\)](#) suggested that while such assurance statements would seem to be produced for external stakeholders, in reality, they are produced for a company's internal audiences and argued that "the language of assurance reduces its appeal to the wider audience". [O'Dwyer and Owen \(2005, p. 224\)](#) contrast this approach with "the governance structures underpinning the financial audit process", arguing that management's:

[...] reluctance to address the assurance statement to specific constituencies implies that they are primarily providing value for management thereby reflecting a perceived demand for assurance of this information from management as opposed to stakeholders.

[O'Dwyer and Owen \(2005, p. 224\)](#) concluded that this issue merited corporate attention for without it "assurance statement practice will fail to enhance accountability and transparency to organisational stakeholders".

Third, the leading players in the hospitality industry must determine the resources they are prepared to dedicate to sustainability and how they look to identify and measure the benefits of embedding sustainability within their business models. The [Ethical Corporation \(2015, Webpage\)](#), for example, has argued that "a good proxy for how seriously organisations take sustainability is, of course, how much money they are prepared to spend on it". While a low-budget commitment to sustainability is not necessarily a problem *per se*, for example, in identifying the major sustainability issues facing a company, it can send a clear message throughout the company that sustainability is low on the corporate priority agenda. Arguably, more importantly, there is the thorny issue of whether and how companies capture and evaluate the benefits of their strategic sustainability commitments and achievements in financial terms. Initially, benefits seem likely to be generated by the range of efficiency gains and savings outlined earlier, but the leading hospitality companies seem likely to continue to face challenges in measuring the returns on their investment in sustainability.

More generally, increasingly, the corporate community is currently exploring how it can make its reporting process more effective and how it can address value creation and a range of critical questions seem likely to attract attention. These issues include improving stakeholder engagement and promoting meaningful dialogue with stakeholders and identifying how stakeholders use corporate sustainability reports to impact on their own decision-making processes. While the emphasis in sustainability reporting is predominantly on external stakeholders, many companies need to do more to engage with their internal stakeholders, namely, their employees. Thus, sustainability reporting should be seen to be increasingly relevant to the business with the focus being on embedding sustainability into the core business strategy, on

enhancing the level of engagement with sustainability and sustainability reporting at main board level and on motivating middle managers to promote the value of pursuing sustainability throughout the business. At the same time, the major players in the hospitality industry need to review the balance between accessibility and substance in their corporate sustainability reporting. Social media would seem to have an increasingly important role to play here and companies should look to integrate sustainability reporting into their existing social media channels not least because it offers the opportunity to raise issues around real-time responses and to manage customer expectations and interactions speedily and more effectively. Arguably, more sensitively, if the leading players in the hospitality industry are genuinely keen to be seen to take sustainability seriously, then they may need to be prepared to share their experiences and their commissioned in-house research findings across the industry. However, this may provide a dilemma for companies which perceive their sustainability programmes and achievements as a growing source of competitive advantage.

The growing commitment to corporate sustainability has been accompanied by an increase in research by business and management and hospitality academics, and this work has embraced a range of themes and issues, but, in many ways, this work is in its infancy and much remains to be done. This research initially emerged within the business and management literature, and was principally focused on the environment, but as the concept of sustainability has gained increasing momentum and embraced social and economic dimensions, so a research focus has emerged in a wide range of the sub-disciplines under the broad business and management umbrella. This diffusion of research activity is encouraging, in that it clearly suggests that sustainability is increasingly seen to be an important issue across the business academy, and, as such, it provides opportunities to investigate what may be both subtle and substantial sustainability challenges in different sectors of the economy. The hospitality industry, for example, provides a wide range of intangible services and more specifically in travel and tourism looks to offer exciting, and often unique, experiences, and, as such, it may be seen to face a different set of sustainability challenges to manufacturing industry, where the emphasis is on the production of a wide range of tangible products.

A number of travel and cruise companies, for example, run high-profile marketing campaigns to promote visits to prized and fragile environments, such as Antarctica and the Galapagos Islands, which provide unique environmental challenges. As more parts of the world increasingly experience a wide range of environmental stresses, so research on fragile environments may offer powerful insights which may have much wider currency across all areas of economic activity. At the same time, the development of research traditions into sustainability within these different sectors of the economy, and the publication of the findings of research within these traditions in sector-specific journals, can lead to fragmentation and there is clearly a pressing need to assimilate and integrate research work undertaken within the hospitality industry within the wider corpus of sustainability research and arguably more importantly to make this research readily accessible to a wide range of corporate audiences. Achieving such ambitious academic and corporate goals is in itself a major challenge. A number of consultancies and business pressure groups, such as Deloitte, PricewaterhouseCooper and GreenBiz, are, in part, at least, helping to fulfil the latter role but, to date, there has been limited progress in integrating, publishing and disseminating the findings of academic research across the business and management disciplines.

While there is some limited evidence that a more coherent structure for sustainability research is emerging amongst hospitality scholars much work remains to be done. More specifically a number of potentially fruitful future academic research agendas can also be identified within the hospitality industry. In marketing, could include market research designed to examine the meanings of sustainability to the hospitality industry's customers and to hospitality and holiday companies and travel agents and consultants. Further work in this field might focus on if, and why, customers think sustainability is important, on the characteristics of those consumers that care about sustainability and on the extent to which such consumers are willing to change their patterns of behaviour. Research might also profitably explore the importance of sustainability to the wider groups of stakeholders in both the business travel and the tourist/leisure markets. Further work might also be profitably focused on how sustainability is currently managed within hotelier/supplier relationships and on the *locus* of and impact of power within such relationships. Research into stakeholder perceptions of the importance of external factors, including statutory regulation, corporate reputation and globalisation and internal factors, including efficiency gains in operating costs and the desire to recruit and retain creative and talented employees, would be valuable in helping to more fully appreciate the development of the leading hospitality companies' commitments to sustainability. Such research might be profitably complemented by investigations into the factors influencing, and the challenges facing, those companies which have, to date, made limited commitments to sustainability. Research into the development of information systems designed to facilitate continuous improvements in sustainability are in their infancy and here there is certainly fertile ground for future research endeavours. Finally, there is a need to explore if and how more transparent corporate commitments to sustainability are reflected in profit margins and stock market performance.

In pursuing these research agendas, a wide variety of research approaches and methods would seem to be appropriate and, while large-scale questionnaire surveys can provide large volumes of data from large numbers of stakeholders, more qualitative approaches, based, for example, around focus groups and semi-structured interviews may provide richer insights into how awareness of, and attitudes towards, sustainability influences consumer, supplier and employee thinking and behaviour. In undertaking future research on sustainability within the hospitality industry, academics will continue to draw on, and contribute to, the theoretical frameworks outlined earlier in this paper. This, in turn, will allow scholars in the hospitality industry to more fully integrate their work into the wider body of knowledge on sustainability within the business and management literature. More specifically, stakeholder theory would seem to offer particular promise. This will bring practical benefits, in that if the hospitality industry is to adopt increasingly more sustainable policies, protocols and practices, it will need to convince a diverse range of stakeholders of the ultimate merits of such an approach and that in turn may involve sacrificing short-term gains for long-term business continuity. Researchers exploring sustainability in the hospitality industry can profitably link their work to the growing body of work within the social sciences outlined earlier and this may, in turn, encourage the development of more critical perspectives in exploring the evolving, but complex and contested, role of sustainability within economy and society. More generally, cross-disciplinary research is clearly needed to address the "sustainability gap" identified earlier in this paper and

to contribute to a wider and a shared understanding of the larger issues particularly climate change.

More critically, while the major players within the hospitality industry claim a corporate commitment to sustainability programmes and a growing number of scholars within its academy are pursuing a wide range of research agendas, the issue of sustainable consumption and continuing economic growth is conspicuous by their continuing absence from these programmes and agendas. While [Mansfield \(2009, p. 37\)](#) has argued that “sustainability is a wildly popular way of thinking about how to simultaneously meet the needs of people and the environment by enhancing human well-being without undermining ecological integrity”, the current authors find it difficult to accept that the major players within the hospitality industry currently have any deep-seated interest or commitment to what has been described earlier as strong sustainability. At the same time, the authors’ perceptions of general consumer behaviour, deeply rooted as it is in the continuing acquisition of goods and services in seemingly ever increasing amounts and the increasing burgeoning of consumerism, offer little reason to believe that consumers have any realistic appetite for dramatic changes in lifestyle that a commitment to strong sustainability surely demands. More generally, corporate commitments to growth within the hospitality industry are just part, albeit a growing part, of the wider trajectory of economic growth within the global economy and are seen as central to globalisation.

As such, the authors currently find little corporate or consumer appetite for a transition to a more genuinely sustainable future. Such a scenario seems currently politically unacceptable. [Reisch *et al.* \(2008, p. 2\)](#), for example, argued that although moving towards sustainable consumption is a major policy agenda, “growth of income and material throughput by means of industrialization and mass consumerism remains the basic aim of western democracy”. In a similar vein, the [European Commission \(2012, p. 9\)](#) has recognised that “sustainable consumption is seen by some as a reversal of progress towards greater quality of life” and that “it would involve a sacrifice of current, tangible needs and desires in the name of an uncertain future”. This in turn also reflects the overwhelmingly dominant thinking within orthodox economics that growth is good and there is little enthusiasm to promote or move towards an economic system that does not promote growth. While there is, at best, only limited thinking on what such an alternative model would look like or how it would function, there are nevertheless growing common sense concerns that the growth model must fail at some point in the future. Although the increasing incidence of extreme weather events across the world is often seen being a harbinger of seemingly inevitable climate change, they quickly seem to be largely, though not entirely, forgotten and simply brushed aside. In truth, it may require a truly cataclysmic global event to trigger collective, rather than individual, self-interest, to precipitate widespread corporate and consumer engagement and action on sustainability.

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