
Marriott's strategic sustainability priorities in the Chinese hotel industry

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Abstract: Using Mihalic et al.'s (2012) hotel sustainability business framework as its lens, this study provides an empirical analysis of a leading western hotel chain's sustainability priorities in its entry and subsequent operations in China's emerging hotel industry. A qualitative study of company documentation and semi-structured interviews with 12 senior managers at Marriott International in China indicated that seven sustainability strategies were prioritised by the chain (i.e., domestic employee development and satisfaction, resource allocation and education, guest satisfaction, domestic government engagement, the power to change participation, and the need to establish a positively differentiated labour-market position). This study and proposes a range of sustainability research opportunities in emerging hotel industry contexts. In addition to this, a range of practical implications for sustainability management in emerging hotel industry settings are presented.

Keywords: strategic sustainability; Marriott hotels; Chinese hospitality industry; emerging markets.

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1 Introduction

The concept of strategic sustainability has been addressed in the tourism management literature in myriad ways since it was first adopted in the early 1980s; *inter alia*, it has been considered as a key component of effective destination management (Alonso-Almeida et al., 2017; Zhang et al., 2015), environmental impact management (McLennan et al., 2017; Milder et al., 2016), supply chain management (Cvelbar and Dwyer, 2013; Kaur and Sharma, 2017), human resource management (Lee and Ok, 2015; Stalcup et al., 2014), financial management (Chan et al., 2009; Chathoth and Olsen, 2005), and market differentiation (Barber, 2014; Teng et al., 2015). Commonly demonstrated benefits of sustainability identified in the literature include improved environmental performance, improved financial performance, increased private-sector investment, increased employee commitment, and customer satisfaction (see Parnell, 2008; Stalcup et al., 2014).

Despite ample evidence positively linking sustainability performance to desirable economic, social, and environmental outcomes in the tourism industry generally, there have been calls to generate a finer-grained understanding of how the concept operates specifically in the hospitality sector (Chen et al., 2016; Maio and Wei, 2016; Matrecia et al., 2011). These calls have occurred for three main reasons. Firstly, the hospitality sector is viewed as one that has significant economic, social and environmental impacts (see Chung and Parker, 2010; Xu and Gursoy, 2015), and provides a discrete context within which to examine how sustainability is prioritised and managed within the tourism industry (see Cvelbar and Dwyer, 2013; Mihalic et al., 2012). Secondly, Melissen (2013) notes that the hospitality sector offers insights into the more complex sustainability management priorities that occur in the tourism industry (i.e. in addition to the sustainability priorities related directly to tourists, the sector also provides insights into those related to non-tourists, local organisations and supply chain members, government/public agencies, local labour markets, etc.). Thirdly, the proliferation of Western organisations entering emerging markets offers an opportunity to explore which sustainability best-practices are prioritised in industries where regulatory controls over such issues are scant and/or not rigorously enforced (Chen et al., 2016; Spillan et al., 2008). Taken together, these issues represent a broad research opportunity to empirically explore what constitute the economic, social and environmental sustainability priorities of Western hospitality organisations operating in emerging hospitality industry contexts (see Melissen, 2013; Welsh and Dragusin, 2009). By empirically exploring this opportunity, this paper seeks to contribute to the scant research in this field (see Sitawati et al., 2015; Stylos and Vassiliadis, 2015), and present a model of the sustainability priorities and strategic best practices evident in a leading Western hospitality organisation operating in an emerging hospitality industry.

2 Literature review

Research into the salient characteristics of sustainable tourism management has tended to focus on three main areas of inquiry. The first relates to the commercial priorities that underpin the viable, long-term economic performance of tourism organisations; empirical evidence has established a positive correlation between sustainability practices and, *inter alia*, increased profitability (Park and Lee, 2009), increased firm value (Kang et al., 2010), enhanced brand image (Kucukusta et al., 2013), and increased employee and customer satisfaction (Lee and Ok, 2015; Maio and Wei, 2016). Secondly, the tourism literature has focused on the conservation of a location's socio-cultural heritage (see Melissen, 2013; Milder et al., 2016). These studies tend to extend beyond understanding protection merely in terms of saving a natural environment and/or an artefact from degradation or destruction, to instead generate an understanding of how the inherent value of a location's socio-cultural heritage helps to define the present, and communicating this understanding to visitors (Hribar et al., 2015). Thirdly, the tourism literature has focused on research concerning the optimisation of environmental resources and/or the minimisation of environmental harm (see Assaf et al., 2012; Chan et al., 2015). These studies tend to focus on policies relating to energy and water-saving, waste management, carbon footprint reduction, and ecosystem protection etc. in order to better understand their relationship with actual environmental impact (Alonso-Almeida et al., 2017; Kasim et al., 2014). Despite the close alignment of tourism sustainability research with the United Nation's World Tourism Organization's (UNWTO's) (2013) definition of sustainability management, there remains a lack of empirical analysis of sustainability priorities and practices in specific tourism industry settings (Sitawati et al., 2015). As noted, this deficit is particularly salient in the international hotel industry, where in response to increasingly competitive pressures, the full concept of sustainability has only recently begun to be understood and addressed (Stylos and Vassiliadis, 2015; Xu and Gursoy, 2015).

In the academic sphere, Xu and Gursoy (2015) reviewed extant literature to determine the extent to which sustainability was addressed within the context of a hospitality supply chain. Whilst environmental issues were extensively covered, the attention given to the social dimension was much less evident, as were specific aspects of economic performance (e.g., customer perceptions of an organisation's economic performance and its impact on future purchase intentions) (Xu and Gursoy, 2015). The tendency for hotel industry studies to focus narrowly on methods for reducing negative impacts on the natural environment (see Stalcup et al., 2014) is largely due to the highly visible resource-intensive nature of hospitality organisations, and their consumption of food, water, energy and physical space (Kahn and Liu, 2016; McLennan et al., 2017). The proliferation of Western hotel chains entering highly lucrative emerging economies where sustainability practices are scant and/or not rigorously enforced, has led to increased calls for close examination of their priorities in this regard (Alonso-Almeida et al., 2017; Milder et al., 2016). Indeed, the pressure from stakeholder groups to demonstrate sustainable priorities in all areas of operation is recognised as one of the most pressing challenges facing hoteliers in the 21st century (Bader, 2005).

One theoretical framework that has been developed for the specific purpose of examining the range of sustainability priorities and attitudes of hotel managers operating in an emerging economic context is Mihalic et al.'s (2012) hotel sustainability business

model (HSBM – see Table 1). As with previous models of sustainability management and reporting (e.g., *inter alia* the triple-bottom line approach, the Global Reporting Initiative, and Green Globe’s sustainability certification), the HSBM comprises three criteria that align with the traditional economic, social, and environmental aspects of sustainability. Unlike its predecessors (which have been criticised for their over-reliance on reporting and compliance, their emphasis on efficiency gains, and providing bases for deliberate and inadvertent green-washing – see Jones et al., 2014; Millar, 2015), the HSBM has been developed to elicit managerial attitudes and priorities towards economic, social, and environmental sustainability management in the hotel sector specifically.

Table 1 Mihalic et al.’s (2012) hotel sustainability framework

<i>Economic</i>	<i>Social</i>	<i>Environmental</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Tangible (i.e., financial sustainability) • Intangible (i.e., marketing sustainability) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Human capital • Cultural capital • Power to change participation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Resources • Biodiversity • Environmental education

The economic sustainability criterion of the HSBM relates to managers’ attitudes towards the generation of prosperity and the cost-effectiveness of all revenue-related activities under the control of the hotel organisation (Mihalic et al., 2012). The economic sustainability criterion has two constituent elements: ‘financial sustainability’, and ‘marketing sustainability’. The financial sustainability element of the HSBM relates to the economic rent that can be attained through the generation of required satisfaction levels (i.e., returns on investment in service quality, market research, staff training, etc. – see Chen et al., 2016), which collectively represent “... a precondition for sustaining a tourism business” [Mihalic et al., (2012), p.703]. The marketing sustainability element, on the other hand, relates to managers’ perceptions about the intangible assets that underpin the hotel organisation’s ability to establish and protect a unique and sustainable competitive position in the markets that they serve (e.g., reputation management processes, relative value propositions, etc.). The economic sustainability criterion of the HSBM, therefore, attempts to capture both the tangible and intangible assets that relate to the creation and maintenance of a viable and positively differentiated position for a hotel in a highly competitive industry setting (Mihalic et al., 2012).

The social sustainability criterion of the HSBM emphasises the need to respect and protect human rights and indigenous cultures, ensure that there is a just distribution of the benefits and burdens of tourism development amongst stakeholder groups, and that any form of exploitation is avoided (Mihalic et al., 2012). This criterion has three extended constituent elements: ‘human capital’, ‘cultural capital’, and ‘power to change participation’. The human capital element relates to the need to understand and develop the innate set of skills, capabilities, attitudes and behaviours that a hotel’s internal stakeholders (NB: primarily their direct employees) have towards sustainability. When a hotel organisation is able to audit and effectively measure its employees’ level of sustainability competency, it is in the best position to undertake any remedial actions necessary (i.e., training and development opportunities, changing compensation and benefits structures, initiating performance management processes, etc.) to achieve its mission and vision in this regard (Mihalic et al., 2012). The cultural capital element

relates to the need for hotel organisations to recognise and protect the inherent value of extant culture and cultural heritage in their development decisions (e.g., indigenous beliefs and rituals, heritage sites of significance to local peoples, local language and dress codes, original place names, etc.). The power to change participation relates to the responsibility of tourism organisations to actively communicate their mission and vision statements (as they relate to their sustainability priorities) to external stakeholders in order to educate and raise awareness of sustainability issues in the whole of the supply chain. Such strategic commitment should go beyond merely complying with the existing legal and regulatory frameworks enjoining a hotel to undertake sustainable development (Xu and Gursoy, 2015; Zhang et al., 2014), to identification of opportunities to influence the sustainability behaviours of stakeholder groups (Wijesinghe, 2014). The social sustainability criterion of the HSBM, therefore, attempts to capture the range of tourism practices that intersect with people and cultural heritage in a way that treats them as ends in themselves, and not merely means to an end (Mihalic et al., 2012).

Lastly, the environmental sustainability criterion of the HSBM emphasises the conservation and management of natural resources such as there is no avoidable harm done to air, land and water quality as a result of hotel development activities (Mihalic et al., 2012). It also has three constituent elements: 'resources', 'biodiversity', and 'environmental education'. The resources element relates to the hotel's use and/or conservation of natural resources (i.e., water, electricity, carbon pollution controls etc.) in its day-to-day operations, and has been extended to include consideration of a hotel's chosen supply chain partners, piecemeal contractors, and customers (Bohdanowicz, 2005). The biodiversity element relates to the hotel's need to protect the local ecosystem within which it operates and includes understanding the protective measures needed to care for native wildlife and guard against the introduction of invasive species. The 'environmental education' element relates to the need for hotel management to communicate and adhere to the sustainability principles it espouses in its mission and vision statements, and to educate, communicate and influence 'by example' the standards it expects from its external stakeholders. This can be particularly important in emerging environmental contexts where sustainability practices are not widely known or valued by the local businesses, government or populace therein. The environmental sustainability criterion of the HSBM, therefore, attempts to capture both principles and practices associated with ecosystem protection as well as the education and communication behaviours necessary to educate external stakeholders as to the hotel's expectations in this regard (Mihalic et al., 2012).

Given that the sustainability concept has yet to be institutionalised within China's emerging hotel industry (see Noordzy et al., 2016), it has fallen upon Western hotel organisations to provide an industry leader role in order to raise awareness and knowledge of sustainability best-practices in the industry – including policy-makers in the Chinese Government (Melissen et al., 2016; O'Neill, 2016). In light of this, there have been recent calls in the literature for finer-grained empirical research into the economic, social and environmental sustainability priorities of leading Western hospitality organisations operating in emerging hospitality industry contexts. Given the express intent of their framework, therefore, this study adopted Mihalic et al.'s (2012) HSBM to investigate the following research question: *What are the strategic sustainability priorities of a leading Western hotel organisation operating in the emerging Chinese hotel industry?*

3 Method

In order to address this research question, this study comprised a primary data analysis of Marriott International's (hereafter 'Marriott's') entry and subsequent operations in the emerging Chinese hotel industry. Two major factors influenced the selection of Marriott as the case organisation: Firstly, Marriott is an internationally renowned Western hotel chain that has secured a sustained and profitable position in the emerging Chinese hotel industry (Wong and Wickham, 2015). By 2016, Marriott had successfully established 260 hotel properties in China (with a view to increase this to 300 by 2020) and had established a market leadership position with a 4.1% share of the Chinese hotel market (Xu, 2016). Secondly, its entry into China represents a revelatory case where its senior management can reflect upon the sustainability priorities that operated in that context. In total, twelve senior managers directly involved in Marriott's entry and subsequent operations in China were recruited to provide primary data relating to the organisation's sustainability priorities; of these, there were three general managers, three marketing directors, three human resource directors, and three sales directors (see Table 2).

Table 2 Number of interviews

<i>Respondents' position</i>	<i>Interviews (n)</i>
General managers	10
Marketing directors	12
Human resources directors	12
Sales directors	12

The semi-structured interview questions were designed to cover the necessary sustainability issues, but were framed in an open-ended manner, to allow the respondents sufficient latitude for introspection and open reporting of their own perspectives. In total, 46 semi-structured interviews were conducted in English, each lasting between 60 and 120 minutes. In addition to the semi-structured interview data, secondary data relating to Marriott's sustainability priorities and policies were collected from documentation available on the organisation's official website. Using the literature review as a guide, the researchers initially organised the primary and secondary data by the sustainability factors included in Mihalic et al.'s (2012) HSBM (see Table 3).

All of the primary data collected were converted into MS Word® document format and entered into an NVIVO database that had been codified according to themes emergent from extant literature. The data were then interrogated to determine the extent to which the sustainability factors represented in the HSBM were present. At regular intervals, inter-coder reliability checks were undertaken to ensure that the data were coded consistently with the first-round coding rules. Data were then further interrogated to detect any relationships that existed between the HSBM factors, and Marriott's sustainability priorities when entering the emerging Chinese hotel industry. The creation of the codified database, the interpretation of the data during the coding process, and verification of the conclusions, were all facilitated by the use of the NVIVO software package. In the method literature, it is emphasised that computer software programs such as NVIVO, are of significant value in qualitative analysis and any subsequent theory building (Weitzman and Miles, 1995). Where it was appropriate, data were allocated to more than one 'node' for analysis; using the NVIVO software, the contents of each of the

initial nodes were reviewed to identify common themes that arose in the data pertaining to sustainability priorities. In order to facilitate the theory building process, research ‘memos’ were maintained about the data, their categories, and the relationships between them as they emerged. Using the memo capability within the NVIVO package, final memo reports were generated; from these memo reports, the emergent themes were identified. The emergent themes from the analysis form the basis of the Results and Discussion sections that follow.

Table 3 First-round coding categories

<i>HSBM element</i>	<i>First round coding rules</i>
Economic (financial)	Captured any data relating to financial variables and their implementation with regard to sustainability principles and/or planned sustainable outcomes
Economic (marketing)	Captured any data relating to marketing variables and their implementation with regard to sustainability principles and/or planned sustainable outcomes
Human capital	Captured any data relating to human resource management variables and their implementation with regard to sustainability principles and/or planned sustainable outcomes
Cultural capital issues	Captured any data relating to heritage and/or national culture variables and their relationship to sustainability principles and/or planned sustainable outcomes
Power to change participation	Captured any data relating to influence over stakeholder groups and its relationship to sustainability principles and/or planned sustainable outcomes
Resources	Captured any data relating to resource procurement, usage and/or disposal decisions and their implementation with regard to sustainability principles and/or planned sustainable outcomes
Biodiversity	Captured any data relating to wildlife and the company’s policy development as it related to sustainability principles and/or planned sustainable outcomes
Environmental education	Captured any data relating to any communication variables relating to environmental performance and its relationship to sustainability principles and/or planned sustainable outcomes

4 Results

Analysis of the data indicated that Marriott prioritised seven sustainability practices in their entry and subsequent operations in the emerging Chinese hotel industry. These equated to two economic sustainability priorities (i.e., financial sustainability as it related to guest satisfaction, and marketing sustainability as it related to a positively differentiated labour-market position), three social sustainability priorities (i.e., ‘human’ and ‘cultural’ capital development, and ‘power to change participation’), and two environmental priorities (i.e., ‘resource allocation’ and ‘environmental education’); each of these will be discussed in turn along with their implications for sustainability management best-practices in the emerging Chinese hotel industry.

4.1 *Economic priority 1: financial sustainability via domestic guest satisfaction*

Consistent with the HSBM and its call to delineate the contribution of tourist satisfaction as a criterion of economic performance, respondents highlighted the importance of domestic employees' ability to deliver Western-style levels of guest satisfaction in building and maintaining market-share and competitive advantage:

Our competitive advantage is that we care about our people, our associates [employees]...the 'Marriott's Way' is the core capability to our success for over eighty years, which is based on the philosophy of if you treat your associates well, and in turn they will treat your customers well. (General Manager 2)

With good support and training from Marriott's international office, we were able to achieve good results from some of the newly implemented processes and systems in areas such as hotel operation standards, overall food and beverage offerings and management and general customer service...but up-skilling our associates took longer, but training and development of associates is a continuous process. (General Manager 1)

Further to this, the data suggested that domestic guest satisfaction was a sustainability priority for Marriott to the extent that it helped establish and generate profit from a positively differentiated position in the increasingly competitive Chinese hotel industry:

When Marriott first came to China no one knew what Marriott was like. They only knew what the New World, Ramada and the Renaissance were like and they thought their services and quality were fine until they had a taste of Marriott. Marriott was Western, was safe, was new and exciting and now they expect it every time they walk into a Marriott hotel. Our initial investment really paid off. (General Manager 3)

They [the acquired domestic hotels] were very well known by their customers in the 1990s but they were Chinese hotels...and when Marriott took over the customers started to associate them with the Marriott brand...we knew we had to quickly change the fundamentals of them to make them look and feel more like Marriott. (General Manager 4)

Generating financial returns from domestic guests and building domestic guests' loyalty via the effective transfer and adaptation of its Western-style rewards program was also considered important for protecting market-share given the increasing number of competing international hotel chains in the emerging market:

When we first introduced our loyalty program it was the only one in the market...we promoted it hard...it was exciting and was free and our customers loved it and it is still one of the best programs in the industry. (General Manager 2)

In the Asia Pacific, we have many more Marriott's Rewards members signed up to collect airline miles rather than hotel points. We need to work closely with airlines to build our membership and awareness. This is important in Asia, as miles have traditionally been the currency of choice. So, it is important to position your loyalty program very carefully to meet the needs of the domestic market. (Director of International eCommerce, in Babitch and Chen, 2005)

4.2 Economic priority 2: establishing a differentiated labour-market position

Respondents indicated the desire to establish and sustain a valuable marketing position in the emerging Chinese hotel industry, albeit in the domestic labour-market context:

...there are many workers in the market, but to find suitable workers that speak English with good customer skills is very difficult...we are not only competing with other hotels, we are competing with all industries including the domestic government departments for talents. (General Manager 3)

Analysis of the data indicated that one of the key challenges for a Western hotel setting up operations in an emerging industry context was the 'double-edged sword' of effective training and development programs; on the one hand, it provided a basis for Marriott's competitive advantage in the industry, but on the other, made their domestic employees' skill and ability valuable commodities across industry boundaries:

It is becoming more difficult to employ and retain younger, quality staff because there are so many opportunities now open to young people in China. (Director of User Experience, in Babitch and Chen, 2005)

...if you see some strangers talking to your top managers, you can be certain that your top managers are being poached by your competitors. (General Manager 4)

Results also suggested that one of the most valuable sustainable development activities contributing to the success of Marriott's operations in China, was the visible organisational commitment to helping domestic employees achieve high levels of job satisfaction, and thus retain skilled employees in a highly competitive labour market:

Since the Global Financial Crisis, we do not lay-off associates, but just do not replace them when they leave to try to keep the morale up. (General Manager 2)

Four of us are local Chinese and we are very proud of being a female general manager of one of the world's largest hotel company and the winner of the Top 50 Companies for Women in 2011....We encourage all female associates at our own hotel to aim high as many opportunities are available to all of us. (General Manager 4)

4.3 Social sustainability priority 1: human capital development

Respondents indicated that the development of Marriott's human capital was a sustainable priority contributing to social performance in the Chinese hotel industry. Specifically, the data supports extant literature with regard to the inherent challenges facing Western hotel chains entering this emerging industry context:

Manpower is an issue. Finding experienced associates is difficult... (Senior Vice President of International Marketing, in Babitch and Chen, 2005)

One of our immediate issues is [training] enough English-speaking associates. English language skills are still considered to be low in China and that causes us concern with regard to our service quality level. (Human Resources Director 1)

Despite the opportunity for Marriott to exploit the relatively lower wage-levels and working conditions prevalent in the Chinese hotel industry, it chose instead to invest in human capital, and transfer its core philosophy and mission to inform human resource management practices in the emerging market:

At Marriott, everything we do is built on our culture of ‘people first’ We are committed to providing an environment where employees have the opportunity to achieve their potential.... We are proud that our inclusive culture is the main ingredient that sets us apart from other companies. (Marriott Website, 2012a)

This supports Melissen et al.’s (2016) claim that an organisation’s value proposition is core to achieving an internal culture that values all elements of sustainability, as reflected in Marriott’s faithful transfer of its employee-centric approach to recruitment and selection in the Chinese hotel industry:

What makes a workplace feel like home? It’s a place that brings out your best, every day. Because it makes you want to be better, every day. It’s a place where your strengths are appreciated. Where people welcome you as you are. And applaud you for where you’re going. We invite you to search and apply for jobs at Marriott – and discover opportunities to explore whatever inspires you. (Marriott Website, 2017a).

Results also suggested that underpinning Marriott’s sustainable development was the priority given to ongoing training of domestic human capital:

With good support and training from Marriott’s international office, we were able to achieve good results from some of the newly implemented processes and systems in areas such as hotel operation standards, overall food and beverage offerings and management and general customer service. Up-skilling our [domestic employees] took longer; training and development of [domestic employees] is a continuous process. (General Manager 1)

Indeed, respondents indicated that continual training of domestic employees somewhat insulated the organisation from the emerging industry’s relatively low-skill base:

...we value our skilled associates and in China where hospitality skills are very hard to find, we use our in-house training programs to increase our available pool of skilled human resources. (General Manager 1)

Overall, good experienced managers are still looked upon as the person who set the brand standards in a country where human capital is still at a development stage and the ‘Marriott’s Way’ is still very effective in associates’ training and development. Hopefully, we can keep them for as long as possible before our competitors poach them away. (General Manager 1)

In addition to this, respondents indicated that the organisation’s efforts to increase domestic employee satisfaction were only considered sustainable by Marriott’s senior managers to the extent that they aligned with (and helped co-create) increased levels of hotel guest satisfaction:

We know that when our employees feel valued and respected, they’ll help make our guests feel that way too. (Marriott Website, 2017c)

As part of Marriott’s ‘Spirit to Serve’ value, we invest in our people and knowledge to provide our guests with high quality products, services and experiences. (General Manager 1)

4.4 Social sustainability priority 2: cultural capital

Respondents indicated that generating familiarity with the sustainability priorities of Marriott's salient stakeholder groups was a key priority to achieving and maintaining mutually beneficial stakeholder relationships:

As I travel the world, I see how important social responsibility is to our guests, customers, associates and of course to our communities ...to embrace the integration of social responsibility and sustainability in our business strategies. (Managing Director of Marriott International, in China Newswire, 2011)

Further to this, respondents highlighted Marriott's emphasis on information gathering and knowledge management practices relating to cultural expectations and norms across the country:

In the last three years, we have developed seventeen international sites...to learn about the different cultures, and how to tailor sites for the specific markets. We're interested in understanding Chinese consumer habits and upcoming market trends. (Director of User Experience, in Babitch and Chen, 2005)

...we promote and deploy our domestic managers to the second-tier cities to ensure our domestic guests are looked after in the domestic ways, as they understand the domestic requirements better than some of our foreign managers. (Human Resources Director 2)

In addition, knowledge of cultural capital development enabled Marriott to strategically respond to the environment and establish direct contact points between designated domestic employees and officials in the Chinese government (or their agencies):

Our US managers were not very effective in communicating with our Chinese key stakeholders. We needed domestic managers who speak Chinese and understand the local culture to work closely with these stakeholders to achieve the desired outcomes for all parties. (Human Resources Director 1)

Marriott appoints their domestic hotel owner's representative as the main contact to deal with the domestic government officials or major suppliers. (General Manager 1)

With our experienced domestic managers working closely with the domestic governments and key stakeholders, we were able to establish some very productive relationships with them [domestic governments and key stakeholders]. These relationships were and still are vital to Marriott's success. (General Manager 3)

Marriott's proactive engagement with Chinese law principles and the subsequent development of positive relationships with the Chinese government that resulted, was considered to be a sustainability priority to the extent that it provided a platform for constructive dialogue and the development of a mutually beneficial relationship between the two parties. In particular, the data demonstrated sensitivity to improving Marriott's ability to negotiate from a position of relative weakness in the Chinese hotel industry context:

We have a better understanding of domestic employment regulations and what governments are trying to achieve in the labor market...we are in a much better position to negotiate with all relevant authorities regarding employment terms and conditions. (Human Director 1)

In China, we adapt to the environment rather than trying to change the system...we have a very strong culture and we do the same things in different settings. We invest in capital and people to create unique strategies to cater for domestic governments' [needs]. (General Manager 4)

4.5 *Social sustainability priority 3: power to change participation*

Diverging somewhat from the sustainability literature's recommendation that supplier selection be based on their level of alignment with the focus organisation's environmental sustainability policies (see Cvelbar and Dwyer, 2013; Wijesinghe, 2014), the data indicated that Marriott initially prioritised relationships with Chinese hospitality supply chain members that were in a position to support its medium-term marketing priorities in that industry:

Our suppliers play a vital role in upholding Marriott's reputation for excellence with guests, associates, business partners, and other important stakeholders. We have high, yet achievable, standards for sourcing the best quality goods and services.... doing business with those who do the same will help us maintain a competitive advantage. (Marriott Website, 2012b)

After Marriott had established its market position in China, it then began the process of influencing supply chain partners (most notably in terms of their training and development programs). The data demonstrated Marriott's focus in this regard on influencing vocational training centres' curriculum to include skills and knowledge important to Marriott's culture and the attainment of its sustainability goals:

We work very closely with the domestic hospitality training schools in China. We get good students from some of these schools. (Human Resources Director 3)

Marriott International has volunteered its services to help ensure the teaching-learning resources and programs are relevant to industry needs. Marriott also provides faculty internships and industry networking opportunities for hospitality and tourism educators and students in China. (Marriott Website, 2017d)

Marriott International's educational initiatives in China encompass university, vocational and primary education. For pure hospitality education, Marriott International is working with some 100 local colleges to offer over 20,000 projected training opportunities in the next four years to students aspiring to a hotel career. (Davos, 2014)

Achieving greater impact in this way enabled Marriott to focus on augmenting their values via human resource measures not commonly practiced in China (*inter alia* innovative reward schemes, inclusive programs, internship programs, mentoring opportunities, travel opportunities etc.):

Today the company is consistently recognized as a top employer and has one of the most diverse and inclusive workforces. Current efforts include: Cross-cultural workshops, the Women's Leadership Development Initiative, and training for executive-level women for participation on corporate boards. (Marriott Website, 2017b)

Marriott is perceived as a very good employer in the Chinese market...it [is important to] show [that] Marriott was awarded the top employer in China by the Corporate Research Foundation Institute in 2012. (Human Resources Director 1)

... Our growth has been fast in emerging markets like China investing in your employees and treating them well were not common management practices in China. (Human Resources Director 1)

...our in-house training programs help the students to get up to our standards pretty quickly once they have started with us. (Human Resources Director 3)

The measures demonstrate support for Mihalic et al.'s (2012) claim that 'industry champions' (i.e. organisations that have the knowledge and skill to instigate the changes necessary for progression toward sustainable development) are critical players within emerging hotel industries. To this end, Marriott's range of (what would come to be recognised as) 'employer-of-choice' measures were considered sustainable priorities to the extent that they increased domestic employees' store of best-practice skills and abilities, whilst simultaneously increasing their employment switching costs.

4.6 Environmental priority 1: resource allocation

Respondents indicated that allocating significant organisational resources was critical in reducing Marriott's negative impacts on the natural environment, and communicating this to stakeholders was a sustainability priority in their Chinese operations:

For example, the 'Nobility of Nature' program was launched in 2010 and was designed to protect and improve water quality in both rural and urban areas in Sichuan Province and the counties of Pingwu and Yingjing: This enables us to demonstrate our shared vision of innovation, opportunity and respect for the environment while further strengthening our 20-year commitment to the people of China. (Chief Operating Officer, Marriott Website, 2010)

Water is the key to prosperity and sustained economic growth. Helping to develop viable ways to preserve the water supply and conserve water in our hotels is important to our business, our associates and our customers. (Chief Executive Officer, Marriott Website, 2010)

4.7 Environmental priority 2: environmental education

Further to this and supporting Mihalic et al.'s (2012) notion that environmental education is a tool for stimulating demand-side sustainability in an emerging economy, respondents suggested that Marriott's investment in protecting the natural environment constituted a sustainable practice to the extent that it had a positive measurable effect on stakeholder perceptions and relationships:

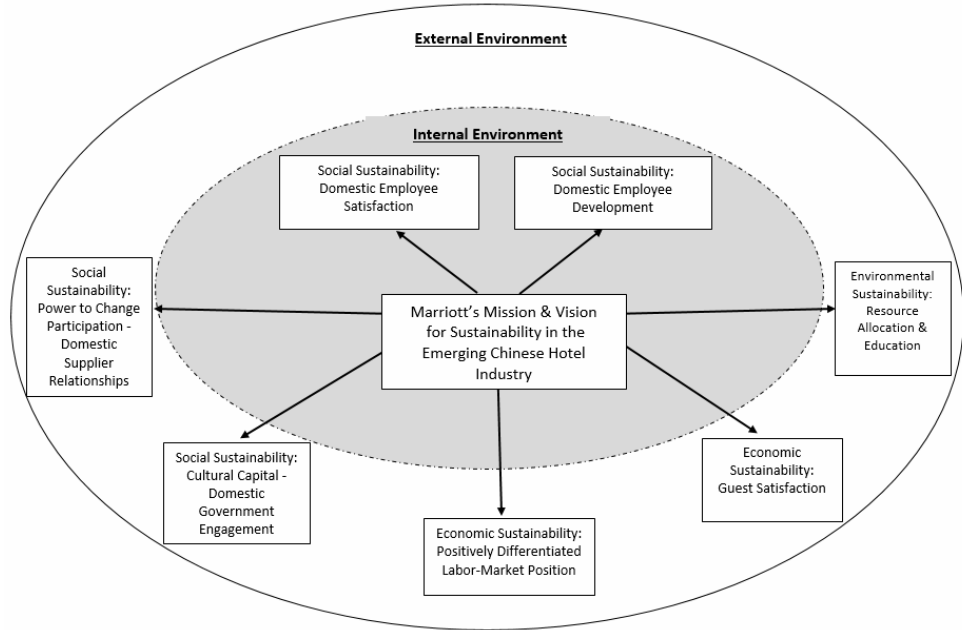
...our conservation programs show that we care about the environments we operate in...the programs are well received by the various [Chinese] domestic governments, our customers, our suppliers as well as our associates. (General Manager 1)

Marriott is committed to doing business in China and to the well-being of the Chinese people.... Water is the key to prosperity and sustained economic growth. Helping to develop viable ways to preserve the water supply and conserve water in our hotels is important to our business, our associates and our customers. (Chief Executive Officer, Marriott Website, 2010)

In summary, the data concerning Marriott's experience in entering and expanding its operations in the Chinese hotel industry provides valuable insight into sustainability priorities of a leading Western hotel chain in an emerging market context and how they

were strategically implemented over time; with this contribution in mind, this study presents the following model that summarises Marriott’s sustainability priorities in the emerging Chinese hotel industry context (see Figure 1).

Figure 1 Marriott’s strategic management of sustainability



5 Discussion

By addressing the research question, this paper sought to answer calls in the literature to provide empirical research focused on the strategic sustainability priorities of a Western hotel chain operating in an emerging economy context, with: (a) an emphasis on the economic, social, and environmental priorities in the hospitality industry, and (b) their relationship to strategic implementation practices. The following sections discuss the implications of this research in those terms.

5.1 Marriott’s economic sustainability priorities in the emerging Chinese hotel industry

The results relating to the economic sustainability criteria supported the inclusion of both the tangible (i.e., financial) and intangible (i.e., marketing) elements in the HSBM. In terms of the financial element, guest satisfaction (with an equal emphasis on both international and domestic guests) was viewed as a sustainability priority by Marriott’s senior managers in the organisation’s Chinese hotel industry operations. Marriott’s guest satisfaction policies sought to better understand the Chinese hotel industry through extensive market research that identified key target segments and an understanding of how best to satisfy their needs and demand characteristics. In terms of its relationship to

business strategy, Marriott ensured that they took measures to gather and analyse a range of domestic market information so that it could localise their globally-competitive range of products and services to suit the needs of local Chinese guests *in conjunction with* those expected by their international guests (e.g., the way in which the Marriott Rewards loyalty program was adapted to better align with domestic Chinese guest needs). In terms of the marketing element, establishing a positively differentiated labour market position was viewed as a sustainability priority by Marriott's senior managers. This priority was evident in the efforts made to faithfully transfer the organisation's Western-style human resource practices to suit the Chinese labour market context (NB: practices which resulted in Marriott being awarded employer-of-choice status in China for the four consecutive years ending in 2015 – see Marriott Website, 2017c; Top Employers Website, 2017). In terms of its relationship to strategy, the transfer and adaptation of Marriott's human resource management policies and procedures to their Chinese operations was considered critical to protect the investments the organisation had made in entering the emerging Chinese hotel industry and developing their domestic employees' highly sought-after (and readily transferable) skill sets.

5.2 Marriott's social sustainability priorities in the emerging Chinese hotel industry

The results related to the social sustainability criteria supported the inclusion of human capital, cultural capital, and power to change participation as elements in the HSBM. In terms of the human capital element, domestic employee development and satisfaction were viewed as sustainability priorities by Marriott's senior managers from the outset. The results concerning domestic employee development emphasised Marriott's priority to develop the relevant skills and abilities in the otherwise low-skilled domestic employees. Marriott's employee development practices sought to ensure that Chinese residents were employed across the levels of management and received periodic training regarding their role in the management of environmental, sociocultural, health, and safety practices. In terms of its relationship to strategic implementation, Marriott's employee development practices were based on its extant organisational mission and vision that explicitly valued the socio-economic development of its employees and their local economies, as well as their collective moral in the workplace. In terms of strategic implementation, Marriott's domestic recruitment, remuneration and promotion practices helped to attract, motivate and retain talented domestic employees (i.e., establish a competitive labour-market advantage) in what was an increasingly competitive emerging industry setting.

In terms of the cultural capital element, proactive engagement with the domestic government was viewed as a sustainability priority by Marriott's senior managers. The results concerning the development of mutually beneficial government relationships emphasised Marriott's priority to establish personal connections with the various domestic government agencies, as well as developing a finer-grained understanding about how the organisation could remain engaged with all relevant international or local legislation and regulations. In terms of its relationship to strategic implementation practices, Marriott's ability to establish personal relationships with government officials provided its senior managers with a foundation for mutually beneficial negotiations in the emerging industry setting where they originally had little, if any, political leverage. In

terms of the 'power to change participation' element, developing a functional relationship with domestic supply chain organisations during the entry stage was viewed as a sustainability priority by Marriott's senior managers. The results demonstrated Marriott's commitment to engaging with domestic (and fair-trade) goods and services providers, where possible in the emerging Chinese hospitality supply chain. The data indicated that during its entry into China, Marriott was not specifically concerned with the extent to which a given supplier's sustainability practices complied with its own environmental policies; instead, a given Marriott-supply chain relationship was based on the extent to which the domestic organisation was capable of supporting Marriott's strategic objectives in the Chinese hotel industry. It was only after it had established a viable market position did Marriott then put in place sustainability policies that sought to influence the strategic priorities of their supply chain partners, and to provide guidance to the Chinese government (and hotel industry as a whole) in this regard. This finding gives pause about the perennial trade-off that exists between environmental and social sustainability and suggests that in the early stages of expansion into the emerging industry, economic considerations take priority in supply chain strategy development. It further suggests that the full array of economic, social and environmental sustainability practices may be most effective when they 'unfold' over time in an emerging hotel industry context (i.e. there needs to be careful consideration of which sustainability performance measures need emphasis across the emerging industry's life cycle).

5.3 Marriott's environmental sustainability priorities in the emerging Chinese hotel industry

The data concerning the environmental sustainability criteria confirmed the requirement for formal 'resource allocations' to be part of an organisation's environmental sustainability policies and supported the inclusion of 'environmental education' as an element in the HSBM. In particular, the results demonstrated Marriott's priority to adopt a range of marketing research and marketing communications measures to define the expectations and carefully manage salient stakeholder groups' perceptions of its environmental performance. In particular, the results suggested that Marriott implemented and deliberately communicated their array of environmental policies and performance levels as a means to interact positively with and demonstrate a level of commitment to: domestic government, domestic government agencies, local supply chain members, local communities, domestic employees, and hotel guests. Interestingly, none of the respondents reported sustainability priorities specifically relating to biodiversity or protection of indigenous species; this suggests one of two possibilities. Firstly, that the biodiversity aspect of sustainability is not a strategic priority for entry and subsequent operations in the emerging hotel industry, or alternatively, that the protection of biodiversity is assumed to be an outcome of the system of sustainability management.

6 Conclusions

The purpose of this paper was to empirically explore the strategic sustainability priorities of a leading Western hotel chain operating in the emerging Chinese hotel industry and contribute a model of the sustainability priorities evident in that context. Whilst the results reported here may be idiosyncratic to the case organisation, we believe that the

sustainability priorities detected here (and their relationship to business strategy) offer transferable insights for other academic research projects and/or hospitality practitioners seeking to similarly manage their hotel's operations sustainably. In terms of further academic research, the model presented here suggests four opportunities for research going forward. Firstly, there is an opportunity to examine the extent to which the interplay between industry life-cycle stage and resource availability affects a hotel's selection and implementation of sustainable priorities in an emerging market context. Secondly, there is an opportunity to examine the extent to which external variables (e.g., the prevailing legal framework, power of stakeholder groups, etc.) affects the selection and implementation of sustainable priorities. Thirdly, there is an opportunity to examine the extent to which a hotel chain's resource constraints (e.g., financial resources, managerial resources, etc.) impacts the sustainability priorities emphasised and implemented by their organisation over time. Lastly, there is an opportunity to explore the interplay between the economic, social and environmental aspects of sustainability and the relationships these may have with overall sustainability management and performance.

Though we concede there are numerous avenues of research inquiry to be addressed in this regard, we believe the empirical model presented in this paper provides support for using the HSBM as a lens for framing sustainability research in the hotel sector. In terms of assisting hospitality practitioners that seek to similarly expand their hotel operations sustainably, the findings suggest the following business strategies need to be considered:

- a that labour-market research be undertaken to gain a comprehensive understanding of the constraints inherent to (and therefore the domestic employee development needs) the target country's labour market
- b that measures are taken to offer training and developmental opportunities to local employees as *de facto* rewards (ensuring that they are also aligned with the strategic imperatives of the organisation)
- c that relationships are established with government officials to gain insights into what constitutes mutually beneficial policy implementation (concerning labour market policy, the natural environmental protection, etc.)
- d that there is careful consideration around which aspects of sustainability are emphasised over the industry life-cycle to maximise the outcomes of a hotel's system of sustainability management.

The findings and implications of this research need to be assessed in relation to the limitations of the selected research methodology and case organisation. The qualitative methodology adopted in this research does not allow for generalisations of Marriott's sustainability priorities in China to predict how other hotel chains might operate optimally in an emerging market context. Similarly, the accuracy of the historical data gathered here may be characterised by contextual misinterpretation of the critical decisions under review, especially where the researchers are unable to directly ascertain the motivations of the actors involved (Breisach, 1994). In addition to this, the chosen method of re-interviewing the same senior managers over a four-year period may have affected the recall and responses relating to Marriott's sustainability priorities. In terms of the chosen case organisation, it is important to note that the Marriott chain possesses a significant array of resources and capabilities that are matched by only a few major

competitors in the global hospitality sector and would not represent the majority of hotel organisations seeking to expand into emerging markets. In addition to this, Marriott's corporate philosophy is based on a Mormonism and this may have played a role in the sustainability strategies and priorities implemented in their entry and operations in the emerging Chinese hotel industry. It is a recommendation that additional research be undertaken into three key areas to further advance research in this field: Firstly, the extent to which the sustainability priorities detected in this research are evident in hospitality organisations in different industry segments (e.g., hostels, resorts, restaurants, etc.) and in other emerging markets. Secondly, further investigation into how changing strategic priorities over the different stages of an organisation's operation in a given emerging market (e.g., using the product/industry life cycle, or the Uppsala stages model) impact the salient sustainability priorities over time. This research, for example, was able to broadly analyse Marriott's 'entry' and 'growth' in the emerging Chinese hotel industry, but was unable to consider, *inter alia*, more advanced stages of their internationalisation process (i.e., the 'maturity', 'decline' and 'divestment' stages). Lastly, it is recommended that quantitative research be considered to determine the relative importance/statistical significance of each strategic factor in relation to the sustainability priorities evident in the organisation's decision making.

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