

# Communicating sustainability in Spanish hotel chains: The use of websites as a legitimation tool

## *Comunicar la sostenibilidad en las cadenas hoteleras españolas: el uso de las páginas web como herramienta de legitimación*



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Received: 05/11/2022 - Accepted: 15/02/2023 - Early access: 16/03/2023 - Published: 01/07/2023

Recibido: 05/11/2022 - Aceptado: 15/02/2023 - En edición: 16/03/2023 - Publicado: 01/07/2023

### Abstract:

This study analyses the discursive legitimation of sustainability in hotel chains websites. Key legitimation strategies are examined in relation to different factors, namely the company's size, its ownership structure, and the type of website. Data were extracted from the webpages of the 35 largest hotel chains in Spain according to turnover in 2021. Research was organized in three steps: first, content analysis was performed; second, sustainability discourse was quantified; and third, an index of sustainability content was developed. The study found that 76% of the selected hotels used websites to disseminate sustainability information, but the volume of sustainability discourse was different regarding size, ownership structures and website types. The "planet" dimension was rated with the best sustainability index. The study provides theoretical insights into the mechanisms of sustainability legitimation on corporate

### Resumen:

*Este estudio analiza la legitimación discursiva de la sostenibilidad en las páginas web de las cadenas hoteleras. Las estrategias clave de legitimación se examinan en relación con diferentes factores, a saber, el tamaño de la empresa, su estructura de propiedad y el tipo de sitio web. Los datos se extrajeron de las páginas web de las 35 cadenas hoteleras mayores de España según facturación en 2021. La investigación se organizó en tres pasos: en primer lugar, se realizó un análisis de contenido; segundo, se cuantificó el discurso de la sostenibilidad; y tercero, se desarrolló un índice de contenido de sostenibilidad. El estudio encontró que el 76% de los hoteles seleccionados usaban sitios web para difundir información sobre sostenibilidad, pero el volumen del discurso sobre sostenibilidad era diferente en función del tamaño, las estructuras de propiedad y los tipos de páginas web. La dimensión "planeta" fue calificada con el mejor índice de sostenibilidad. El estudio proporciona información teórica*

### How to cite this article:

Fernández-Vallejo, A. M. (2023). Communicating sustainability in Spanish hotel chains: The use of websites as a legitimation tool. *Doxa Comunicación*, 37, pp. 167-191.

<https://doi.org/10.31921/doxacom.n37a1855>



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and booking websites. From a practical standpoint, the study offers guidance for managers in the tourist sector aimed at improving their corporate communication efforts and generating suitable engagement between firms and stakeholders.

**Keywords:**

Sustainability communication; legitimization; websites; hotel chains; Spain.

*sobre los mecanismos de legitimación de la sostenibilidad en los sitios web corporativos y de reservas de las cadenas hoteleras. Desde un punto de vista práctico, el estudio ofrece una guía a los directivos del sector turístico para mejorar sus esfuerzos de comunicación corporativa y generar un compromiso adecuado entre las empresas y los grupos de interés.*

**Palabras clave:**

*Comunicación de la sostenibilidad; legitimación; páginas web; cadenas hoteleras; España.*

## 1. Introduction

Tourism sustainability practices require not only activities but also communication. Communication is a constitutive element of all things corporate, involved as it is in almost every act of business and also in sustainability activities, where it plays a crucial role. It is necessary to inform the stakeholders in the tourism sector about the company's commitments: "businesses cannot hope to enjoy concrete benefits from sustainability unless they intelligently communicate about their initiatives to relevant stakeholders" (Maignan and Ferrell, 2004), in order to legitimize and justify sustainability actions. Communicating sustainability in this sector, as in others, has two goals: firstly, to make the target audience aware of how the services and products offered will meet their needs whilst also addressing economic, social and environmental issues, and secondly, to allow a dialogue between stakeholders and company (Villarino and Font, 2015). Hence the relevance of communication is such that sustainable action is hardly imaginable without communicative facilitation.

This study will examine the characteristics of sustainability communication on corporate websites, drawing from discursive legitimization theory. Discursive legitimization involves complex discursive practices employing a variety of strategies (Breeze, 2012) in order to defend and/or justify the institutions' or corporations' actions. In the context of tourism sustainability communication, discursive legitimization aims to create a favourable framework within which firms can operate, enjoying sufficient stakeholder acceptance to implement sustainability activities and ultimately generating positive engagement between firms and stakeholders (Villagra *et al.*, 2015). This discursive perspective will allow us to approach sustainability discourse as a complex issue in which various expectations and assumptions are involved. First, this sector is a complex multi-stakeholder context with particular actors, namely host communities, incoming tourists, the natural environment, and cultural and artistic heritage (Reisinger and Crotts, 2010). Second, the critical stakeholder is becoming ever more demanding, there are more sustainability rankings, more surveillance institutions, and more local and international sustainability policies, which in turn are making citizens more sensitive towards the issue. Third, sometimes sustainability messages have been perceived as a mere tool to improve the corporate image, sincerity therefore being questioned in what has come to be known as greenwashing communication (Camilleri, 2016), in other words, greenwashing communication happens when the different tourism corporations cheat and confuse customers, disclosing positive information about fake eco-friendly initiatives and hiding negative information regarding environmental performance (Swestiana *et al.*, 2022). Fourth, in other companies the very opposite can happen. A lack of sustainability communication (talk) can be perceived negatively, in spite of the presence of sustainability practices (walk) (Wickert *et al.*, 2016).

For this study the Spanish hotel sector during 2021 was chosen. This context offered an interesting setting for empirical research, for at least three reasons. First, given that most of the literature is based mainly on Anglo-American countries, these results provide much-needed evidence from a different institutional context (Nekhili et al., 2017), especially taking into account that the Spanish hotel sector has achieved great importance worldwide as evidenced by the high presence of Spanish hotel chains in world rankings (Ubeda-García, 2021). Second, the tourist industry is a fundamental pillar of the Spanish economy, which employed 12.4% of the workforce in 2019 (Instituto Nacional de Estadística, 2020) and generated 12% of the GDP, occupying the second place in the international arrivals ranking. Third, 2021 is a crucial year for the recovery of this sector. In 2020, because of the COVID-19 pandemic, the Spanish tourism sector suffered the largest drop in GDP in its history, plummeting from 12% to 4%, a decline that was one of the most dramatic in the world (Hosteltur, 2021).

The objective of this paper is therefore to analyse the discursive legitimization of sustainability, observing Spanish hotel companies on their websites. By conducting content analysis, this research seeks to identify key legitimization strategies regarding different factors, namely the companies' size, their ownership structure, and the kind of website used. Unlike sustainability reports, which are characterized by rules, regulations, laws and deadlines, with GRI emerging as an international model for such reports (Gray and Milne, 2013), sustainability contents on websites lack any regulation, guideline or specific convention that stipulates what they can or should say. Against this background, this study will answer the following research questions:

RQ1. How do Spanish hotels legitimize their environmental sustainability policies on websites?

RQ2. Are the discursive legitimization patterns/strategies different depending on company size, ownership, or kinds of website?

RQ3. If there are differences, how are these manifested?

Beyond its empirical value, this research makes several important contributions to the literature. First, this study attempts to provide insights into which factors, beyond institutional, geographical, political or social factors, can determine sustainability legitimization on hotel chains websites. Despite the strategic importance of corporate communication on websites, it is not yet clear whether other factors (such as size, ownership structure or website kinds) within the same sector influence the sustainability information published on such websites. Second, the present paper also contributes to the literature on family and non-family businesses by extending and enriching the current knowledge of sustainability communication in family firms, especially in hotel chains. Prior empirical research provides evidence of several differences between family and non-family firms in sustainability behaviour and its disclosure (Cuadrado-Ballesteros et al., 2015). However, despite the predominance of family businesses across the Spanish tourism sector, no studies have investigated how the family status of firms influences sustainability communication on websites. Third, given that this paper considers the different websites used (corporate versus booking page), it adopts a different perspective, allowing us to improve the existing knowledge of the relationship between usability, design and addressees (Foris, 2020).

This paper is structured as follows. The first section provides the theoretical background, which covers the relevant literature on legitimization, sustainability information and websites. The second section illustrates the data and methods used to test the hypothesis, and explain and discuss the empirical results. The third section reports on and discusses the main findings of the empirical study, and the last section concludes and outlines avenues for future research.

## 2. Theoretical background

### 2.1. Pursuit of legitimization via sustainability

“Legitimation” is a critical issue for companies in the 21st century. The legitimization of a political party, business or any group organisation is understood as “the social acceptance or the general perception that the actions of said entity are desirable, proper, or appropriate within some socially constructed system of norms, values or beliefs” (Suchman, 1995). Legitimation emerges as a precondition to avoid the high risks inherent in the innovative strategies or activities, in the case of sustainability initiatives that are understood to be desirable and appropriate by different stakeholders involved in the company.

This process has been studied from the social point of view, looking at how the legitimacy of the organization is recognized socially, and from the communicative point of view, by referring to the communicative process of legitimization (Glozer *et al.*, 2019). It will be this communicative process that this study will focus on.

Regarding sustainability issues, legitimization communication processes are aimed at generating reasons and motives that justify what is being done in the organization, without necessarily assuming that an accusation has been made, but rather pre-empting any risk of accusation or an uncomfortable situation (Breeze, 2012). The classic promotional elements (self-praise and positive opinion) are combined with self-defence aspects aimed at safeguarding the image or anticipating specific issues, minimizing or hiding the aspects that may be more negative or sensitive to society (Malavasi, 2010, Breeze, 2021). Thus, communication is understood as an instrument designed to reduce possible risks in a polyphonic context where as many interests as voices coexist (Belova *et al.*, 2008). The organization seeks social approval within the environment in which it operates in order to strengthen corporate reputation and brand, as well as to generate trust among stakeholders (Wen Cheng, 2016). Thanks to this discourse, companies, at least temporarily, can influence and control social contexts and perceptions regarding what is legitimate or not (Scherer *et al.*, 2013). To achieve this approval by all interest groups, it is necessary to create, through a complex and rational discourse, a consensus in which all interests remain aligned (Stohl *et al.*, 2017).

Among all the issues that are published on websites, this study will focus on sustainability, specifically on the different contents related to this topic, given its growing importance in recent decades and even more so in hotel chains (Gössling, 2018). We can assume, according to Ruiviejo and Morales (2016), that there are sectors that tend to be especially sensitive to sustainable issues and their communication on sustainability must be carefully treated, aiming at modifying or improving the traditional perception that exists about them. In sum, this study will attempt to answer the following research question: what are the processes of legitimization in the sustainability communication on tourism sector websites?

### 2.2. Sustainability communication and websites

It is commonly accepted that corporate websites are vital instruments for communication between firms and their stakeholders (Simões *et al.*, 2005). They form part of the total corporate communications strategy, and support and centralize the mix of digital media (García *et al.*, 2017). They are at the root of corporate communication for companies of any size and, without them, it is not possible to imagine companies today. They constitute the best promotional window. Websites offer the most comprehensive source of information about a given firm, including sustainability activities (Kim and Rader, 2010).

In the past, corporate annual reports were the most important means to disseminate information about sustainability. Over the last few decades, websites, in many cases, have become primary sources to convey sustainability information (Lodhia, 2018). Websites enable companies to share their sustainability efforts with a close, rapid and open dialogue. It has been demonstrated that websites of corporations have the dialogical features to bring about a productive exchange about sustainability concerns (Siano et al., 2016; Fernández-Vázquez, 2021). They make it easier to provide information regarding the different informational needs of each group of stakeholders. This tool, along with social media, has resulted in a transformation of the sustainability communication model (Siano et al., 2016). Not only is it necessary to inform stakeholders about sustainability, it is also necessary to develop a mutual dialogue between firms and stakeholders, where stakeholders are involved in the sustainability strategy (Castelló *et al.*, 2013). This framework of sustainability communication, underpinned by stakeholder theory (Freeman, 2015), guarantees legitimation in the eyes of stakeholders, because they find that their opinions and needs are met, thanks to the two-way communication that takes place.

Previous literature has studied the sustainability information on websites focusing on various factors that determine dissemination patterns, such as sector, country of origin, profitability, size or ownership (Gomez and Borges-Tavarez, 2017; Iaia *et al.*, 2019). Other authors have identified the differences between traditional offline forms of sustainability information and the content of webpages (Branco and Rodrigues, 2008), or between the sustainability contents on social media and on webpages (Lodhia *et al.*, 2020). But few studies have focused on analysing the content of webpages in terms of sustainability legitimation, bearing in mind at the same time three factors, namely size, ownership and kind of webpage.

### 3. Data, methodology and hypothesis

#### 3.1. Data collection

This study considers the 35 largest hotel chains in Spain according to turnover (see Appendix 1). The list of 35 chains was acquired from an annual listing of the 100 largest chains hotels in Spain published by Hosteltur (2022), a Spanish magazine that has been considered the most important publication B2B in the Spanish tourism sector. After identifying the hotels, we grouped them according to revenue, ownership and website types (see Table I). Firstly, although the sample strictly consisted of large companies, it appeared to be more useful to organize them in three categories regarding turnover: more than €500M (group A), between €500M and €100M (group B), and less than 100 (group C). In a second step, public and private companies were distinguished; concerning the latter, we identified both family and non-family chains, by analysing directly the “who we are” and/or “history” sections of webpages (Iaia, 2019). Finally, we addressed the two types of website, namely corporate websites and websites converted into online booking platforms (Li *et al.*, 2017), which are the most frequent, as this sample reveals (25% of corporate websites versus 75% of booking websites). Currently, most hotel websites perform as a low-cost distribution channel, given the easy access to information on hotel reservations anytime and anywhere. Thus, hotel chains avoid the high commissions charged by online travel agencies (OTAs) (Law, 2019). These classifications regarding size, ownership and types of website allow for a holistic and heterogeneous overview of sample in order to analyse to what extent these variables determine sustainability legitimation via webpages in the Spanish tourism sector.

**Table I. Organisational characteristics and website kinds**

<b>1) Size of chain (turnover millions of euros)</b>	
Turnover more than €500M (group A)	9
Turnover between €500M and €100 M (group B)	16
Turnover less than €100M (group C)	10
<b>2) Ownership form</b>	
Private	34
Not familiar	22
Familiar	11
Public Investment	1
<b>3) Website kind</b>	
Corporate website	9
Booking page	26

**Source: created by the author**

**Note: n=35**

### 3.2. Research method and hypothesis

Thematic content analysis was selected as a method to answer RQ1, RQ2 and RQ3. It has been broadly used in empirical research on sustainability communication on non-financial reporting, websites and social media (Lock and Seele, 2018; Moyaert *et al.*, 2021). This analysis provides a systematic categorization of themes (patterns) and features (Krippendorf, 2018). This analysis was conducted exclusively on website sections, and excluded pdf sustainability documents uploaded on websites (such as sustainability policies or reports) and sustainability news linked to companies' blogs or external media.

By following the Stemler (2001) protocol, several coding criteria were identified, and "0" or "1" were used to determine the presence or absence of the criteria (Appendix 2). In the first step (RQ1), coders identified the presence or absence of sustainability issues. Then, they reviewed the webpage to identify the different sustainability issues. To establish these coding criteria, the study used the taxonomy of sustainability topics proposed by Confetto and Covucci (2021) regarding corporate sustainability content on the webs. This taxonomy consists of four main sustainability dimensions, namely planet, people, profit, and governance (Breeze and Fernández-Vallejo, 2020). Each, in turn, includes four themes, which might include up to three or four topics. This

framework takes as a starting point at the same time the so-called Triple Bottom Line (TBL), theorized by Elkington (2007), as well as the scheme used for GRI 200, 300 and 400 series.

The two coders who were in charge of the coding conducted a pre-test on a sample consisting of 5 hotel chains. The coders analysed this set of webpages separately to ensure inter-rater reliability; coder reliability was calculated by using Krippendorff's alpha. The agreement level between coders was 0.85, which exceeds the acceptable level of 0.75 and indicates good reliability, as suggested by Riffe *et al.* (2019, pp. 123ss).

In the second stage of this research (RQ2 and RQ3), sustainability discourse was quantified using the number of words as a measurement unit. This theme-amount approach has frequently been used to analyse legitimations in sustainability narratives in sustainability reports (Li and Haque, 2019).

The working hypothesis is that the sustainability discourse volume will be greater in the biggest companies, including both family and public ones, as well as in those that use corporate websites, because, as it will be further explained below, they are the most sensitive to sustainability issues (Hypothesis 1).

First, regarding size, the working hypothesis is that large firms will provide more space for sustainability issues on their website than smaller firms (H1a). The rationale is that large organizations tend to implement and communicate more robust sustainability practices than smaller ones because they are more vulnerable to public opinion and social media reactions (Ali *et al.*, 2015; Wickert *et al.*, 2016). At the same time, the expectations from diverse stakeholders increase with regard to incorporating sustainability initiatives into their strategies as well as sustainability communication efforts, since they have more resources for sustainability performance and communication (Elalfy, *et al.*, 2021).

Secondly, concerning ownership structure, the family business literature (Gómez-Mejía, 2007) suggests that the family's attachment to sustainability is higher when the firm is owned and managed by the founding family. The family identity brand, based on traditional values and integrity, with a strong, deep relationship with employees, customers, suppliers and the surrounding community, triggers more socially responsible behaviour that results in more sustainability communication (García-Sánchez *et al.*, 2021). On the other hand, the companies with public investment feel more obligated in terms of sustainability implementation and communication because they also have more exposure to public opinion and at the same time they have to become a leader in society to foster change in organizations regarding sustainability efforts (Domingues *et al.*, 2017). Based on these studies, the second hypothesis is the following: sustainability communication will be more extensive in the family and public chains than in the non-family ones (H1b). Indeed, some authors have explored the use of the website for sustainability communication by public sector agencies (Joseph *et al.*, 2014).

Third, it is hypothesized that sustainability communication will be more extensive on the corporate website than on booking webpages (H1c). By communicating sustainability initiatives, corporate websites aim to generate suitable engagement between firms and every stakeholder, while the booking webpages are created to attract potential customers or customers to sell to. Hence, since the target audience is far narrower in the booking webpages, as they are B2C websites (Su and Liang, 2019) where only clients or potential clients engage, and the design is much easier to increase website functionality (Law, 2019), we argue that sustainability information in these types of pages is likely to be less extensive.

After quantifying sustainability words to analyse the different sustainability issues disseminated on websites, an index of content sustainability was developed for each chain (Branco and Rodrigues, 2008). The index for each chain is obtained by calculating the sum on scores obtained by firms possessing the various topics that constitute the dimension, and dividing this by the maximum number of possible points and then by the current sample number, as described below:

where:

$$IDi = \frac{\sum_{ej=1}^e ej}{e/n}$$

IDI Index by chain = content sustainability index by dimension (one for each dimension, namely planet, people, profit, governance)

ej = topic content (1 if the company publishes information, and 0 otherwise)

e = maximum number of possible points by dimension (17 by planet, 28 by people, 14 by profit, and 13 by governance)

n = 35

According to the four main dimensions and the indexes obtained, we address the following hypotheses (H2): Hypothesis 2a. We argue that the index obtained on the environmental dimension will be higher than for the other dimensions (social, economic, governance). Because the hotel sector is highly resource-consumptive, environmental issues are one of the most important sustainability concerns of this sector, and in particular it is worth mentioning that there are four critical areas: water resources, recycling, renewable energy, and energy conservation system (Edgell, 2019).

With regard to the contents about social, economic and governance aspects, it is expected to find a stronger emphasis on social aspects than economic or governance issues (Hypothesis 2b). The tourism sector will be more inclined to disseminate information about social issues than economic or governance ones as its social impact is very important and it receives high pressure from governmental, non-governmental organizations and society. In addressing social issues, a range of themes can be identified, including diversity and equality of opportunity, employees' work/life balance, training and development, human rights, customer health, safety and security (Alarcon and Cole, 2019).

Finally, in relation to governance issues, it is hypothesised that communication about this topic will have more presence than profit issues (H2c). Adding governance in sustainability planning aids in the alignment of all three remaining pillars of sustainability: social, environmental, and economic (Alibašić, 2007). In the case of the hotel sector, this goal would be to allow shareholders to justify sustainability-related investments and to make appropriate management decisions. By identifying governance as a component of sustainability, chains are able to better measure and manage sustainability in all four areas of sustainability and to enhance social, environmental, economic, and governing performance. In this sense, drawing on Confetto and Covucci (2020), we expect that issues related to ethics (1), certification and awards (2), local and international laws (3) and SDGs initiatives (4) will



emerge more than others. In addition, it is necessary to remember that the Spanish government did implement environmental policies decades before others, making Spain one of the most eco-friendly tourism destinations in the world (TUSPAIN, 2017).

#### 4. Findings and discussion

Of the 35 sampled hotel chains, the results show that 26 companies (74.2%) included sustainability-related information in some place on their webpages. Initially, it can be pointed out that the degree of sustainability disclosure is high for websites. Hotel channels, on average, communicate substantial information about sustainability via their websites. Nevertheless, as was expected according to the theoretical background, differences between companies still depend on other factors.

With regard to the size of the companies, only 10% of the companies with more than €500M in revenue fail to provide any information, while this percentage increases to 25% and 30% for the companies whose revenue is less than €500M (Table II). This offers some confirmation of hypothesis 1, which points to larger chains being more engaged in providing sustainability initiatives, but no significant differences emerge.

If we pay attention to ownership, we can say that the working hypothesis 2 is proven again, since family (83.3%) and public chains (100%) communicate more than non-family (78%) ones, although the difference is small (Table II).

On the other hand, in terms of type of websites (Table II), 100 percent of companies with corporate websites report sustainability issues. This result is consistent with the sustainability communication theory laid out by Morsing and Schultz (2006). According to Morsing and Schultz (2006), stakeholders, as key elements of corporate strategy planning, should be informed about sustainability initiatives and, at the same time, they should be involved and act proactively in these areas. However, it is striking that in the case of booking pages, the percentage of hotels disclosing sustainability matters is similar (54 with sustainability communication versus 46% without sustainability communication). These results reveal that, although booking pages are exclusively designed to attract traffic in order to turn it into sales, 54% already find it important to mention sustainability practices on their webpages. Consequently, these results are in agreement with hypothesis 3.

**Table II. Sustainability information**

Chains characteristics	Sustainable information	
<b>1) Size of chain (turnover millions euros)</b>	YES	NO
Turnover more than €500M (group A)	8 (0.89)	1 (0.11)
Revenues between €500M and €100M (group B)	12 (0.75)	4 (0.25)
Revenues less than €100M (group C)	7 (0.70)	3 (0.30)
<b>2) Ownership form</b>		
Private		
Familiar	9 (0.84)	2 (0.16)
Not familiar	17 (0.78)	6 (0.22)
Public Investment	1 (1.00)	0
<b>3) Website type</b>		
Corporate website	8 (1.00)	0
Booking page	14 (0.54)	13 (0.46)

Source: created by the author

In relation to how much sustainability information is disseminated on the webpages (RQ2 and 3), we can establish a clear relationship with size, ownership form and kind of website. The average number of words are 3618 words for the largest companies (group A), whereas for groups B and C the means are 930 and 570, respectively. Concerning ownership form and kind of website, family companies dedicate an average of 4125 words versus 1709 (non-family companies) to this, and in turn corporate webs have an average of 4900 words versus 1720 (booking pages). These results (Table III) demonstrate, yet again, H1a,b,c.

**Table III. Word no. on average by organizational characteristics and website kinds**

<b>1) Size of chain (turnover in million Euros)</b>	Word no.
Turnover more than €500M (group A)	3618
Revenues between €500M and €100M (group B)	930
Revenues less than €100M (group C)	570
<b>2) Ownership form</b>	
Private	
Familiar	4125

Not Familiar	1709
Public Investment	5870
<b>3) Website kind</b>	
Corporate website	4901
Booking platform	1719

Source: created by the author

With regard to the sustainability issues disseminated (H2), hypothesis H2b stating that the sections on social and environmental issues will be longer than those about other issues (social, economic, governance) can be answered in the affirmative (Table IV). By applying the indicators of the taxonomy (Appendix 2) as a guideline for determining to which of the 4 dimensions the content belongs, this study determines that hotel companies give greater attention to environmental initiatives than the others. Thus, environment issues make up 0.33 points while social, governance and economic issues make up 0.15, 0.13 and 0.04, respectively.

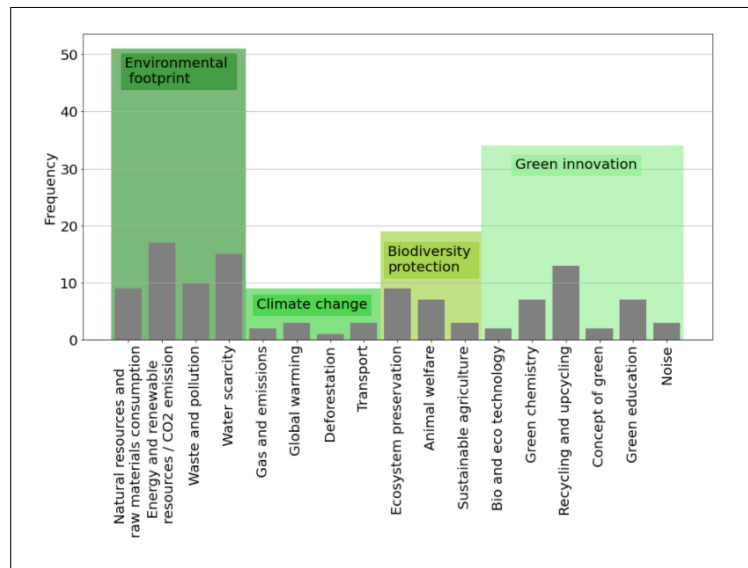
**Table IV. Final index by dimensions**

<b>Dimensions</b>	<b>Index</b>
Planet	0.33
People	0.15
Governance	0.13
Profit	0.04

Source: created by the author

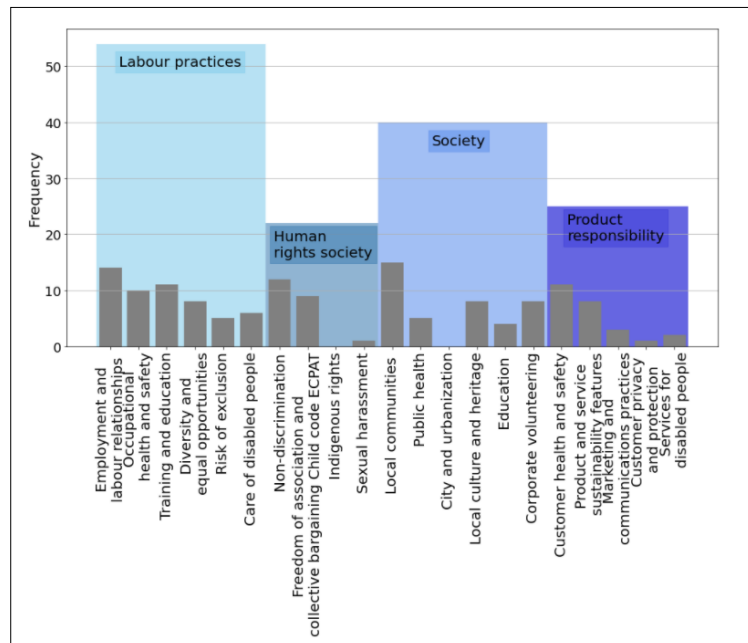
In terms of planet sustainability, as Figure 1 reveals, the chains show higher sensitivity to the environmental footprint, namely energy and renewable resources and CO2 emissions, water scarcity, waste and pollution, natural resources and raw materials consumption, in this order.

**Figure 1. Frequency of themes and topics related to PLANET**



Source: created by the author

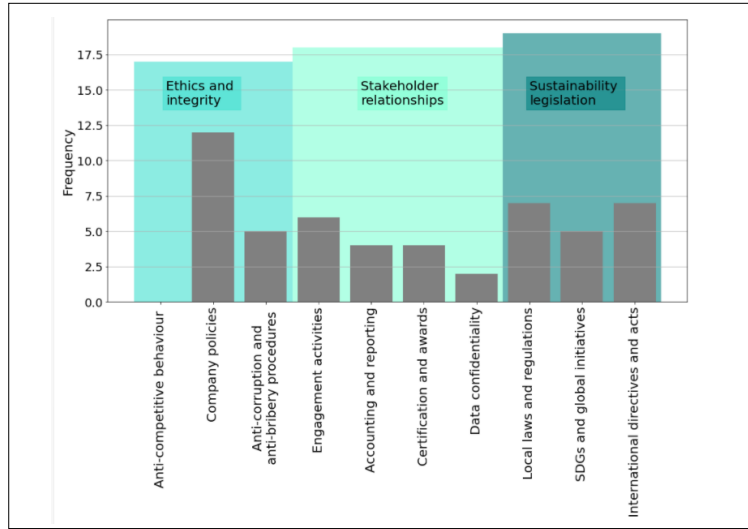
According to the people issues addressed (Figure 2), the results suggest that hotels give greater attention to labour practices (0.26), especially to issues such as employment and labour relationships, occupational health and safety, and training and education, which had the maximum rates of attention. Hence, hypothesis 2b is proven. Furthermore, in this general dimension, it would be interesting to emphasize following salient individual topics: local communities, non-discrimination, freedom of association, and collective bargaining, Child labour and the ECPAT code.

**Figure 2. Frequency of themes and topics related to PEOPLE**

Source: created by the author

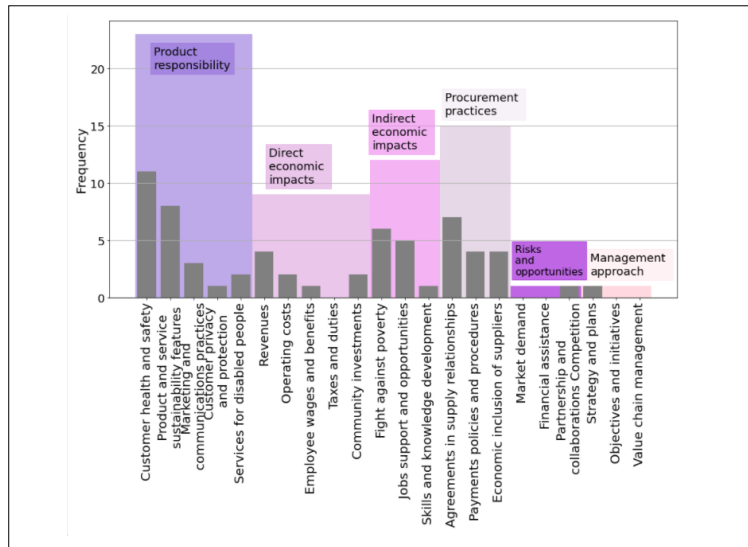
In third place on the ranking, we find governance issues. Regarding this dimension, it is clear that sustainability legislation (local, international and SDGs initiatives), as well as companies' policies, occupies the main position (Figure 3). Finally, we can notice that the hotel chains' websites are not considered to be the best place to disseminate economic information (Figure 4).

**Figure 3. Frequency of themes and topics related to GOVERNANCE**



Source: created by the author

**Figure 4. Frequency of themes and topics related to PROFIT**



Source: created by the author

## 5. Conclusions and limitations

To answer RQ1 (Do Spanish hotels legitimate their environmental sustainability policies on websites?), this study has analysed the sustainability communication on the websites of 35 listed Spanish hotel chains by means of a thematic content analysis of their websites. The findings reveal that 77 percent of the listed chains disseminated sustainability information. This is not surprising and confirms legitimacy theory, since industries with higher sustainability impact are more likely to address their sustainability initiatives on different channels. In the case of the hospitality industry, over the last decades, the growth of hotel capacity in Spain has caused a huge expansion of hotel capacity, which has been blamed for contributing to the destruction of natural resources and cultural heritage of the nation (Rodríguez Anton *et al.*, 2012). For this reason, a large number of hotel chains (77%) already make effective use of websites as a perfect channel to legitimize their sustainable role towards society and stakeholders. These chains are conscious that sustainability communication has a definite role in the relationship between firms and stakeholders as they consider the importance of their legitimation in terms of economic, social and environmental government issues (Pérez and del Bosque, 2015). However, if we focus on companies that do not disseminate sustainability information on their own websites (33%), it is necessary to analyse which factors might account for this lack of sustainability communication (RQ2 and RQ3). We may assume that, following local and/or international laws required, the chains concerned do implement all relevant practices (Wickert *et al.*, 2016; Carrillo and Jorge, 2017).

In detail, when we think about the presence or absence of sustainability information on websites regarding size and ownership structure (RQ2 and RQ3), although the hypotheses have been tested, we should note that the differences between the biggest and the smallest, and between family and non-family ones are slight. In the four categories of chains, more than 70% of chains include some sustainability information. Consequently, we cannot conclude these factors are determinants of sustainability information. However, regarding the number of words that each category publishes, the results confirm that the size and ownership structure represent typical drivers for more or fewer words (H1a and H1b). According to this evidence, the biggest chains and the family or public ones emphasize their sustainability policies by devoting a greater number of words.

The findings related to the kinds of website suggest that corporate websites allow for more sustainability information to be displayed. On the one hand, all the firms that created corporate websites disseminated sustainability information on different sections and devoted more space (4901 versus 1719). Therefore, in the Spanish corporate websites analysed, addressing all possible stakeholders, it is observed that the hotel owners are aware of how important it is to make their sustainability commitment visible, and their behaviour is very similar to that found in other sectors (Palazzo *et al.* 2020). On the other hand, the results from booking websites show that more than half (54%) already bear in mind the significant potential effect that sustainability communication has on customers and their final buying decision. As previous studies have demonstrated (Villarino and Font, 2015; Francisc and Hoefel, 2018), when potential clients or clients know about the companies' environmental and social commitment, their trust increases and the intention to purchase the sustainable service or product is greater. For this reason, these chains try to publish their initiatives, although the number of words is clearly lower, probably because of design limits. Therefore, the recommendation for chains that do not yet communicate sustainability initiatives is to start to include this information given the business benefits for every level.

The last point of this research concerns the outcome of the issues communicated through the websites. On the one hand, it is interesting to observe that, even though there are no rules for sustainability communication, websites' sustainability information coincides to promote, first of all, their commitment to planet protection, as is also the case in other sectors, such as the oil or mining sector, which are blamed for harming the environment. In this sense, the results highlight that firms tend to prioritize the issues that could be more sensitive (Breeze, 2018): as far as the hospitality sector is concerned, their environmental footprint is perceived as a sensitive area, and so it is important for hotels to foreground their sustainable practices.

On the other hand, the results confirmed that the second big issue, people, was especially focused on labour practices and community, and that the messages were designed to build a better relationship with employees and stakeholders. Finally, although this is in the third position, the Spanish hotel chains webpages also report on governance issues. These results highlight the longstanding tradition of Spanish local laws in regulating sustainability, since Spain was one of the first countries to implement such legislation.

To summarize, we can say that in general the Spanish hotel sector websites play an essential role in sustainability communication. They can be seen as an integrated tool that addresses all stakeholders, internal and external, ranging from market-oriented communication with potential customers to communication with employees, public and civil society organizations, press and media, as well as other interest groups.

As with all studies, this work has some limitations which, however, may offer opportunities for future research. First, the sample includes only large-sized hotel chains, while a study on medium-, small- and micro-sized hotels would be useful to gain insights into how size could affect sustainability information on websites. Second, only information published on corporate or booking websites was extracted. Sustainability information is also conveyed via other communication channels such as social media or traditional media, and these channels could be considered in future research to investigate to what extent communication channels determine the way sustainability is communicated. Third, this sample is drawn from one country (Spain). It would be interesting to analyse sustainability communication on websites from other countries to ensure the results are not linked to Spanish cultural or institutional issues.

## 6. Acknowledgements

Article translated into English by Ruth Breeze.

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## 8. Annexes

**Annex 1. Overview of sample companies**

Hotel Chains	Size group <sup>1</sup>	Form of ownership <sup>2</sup>	Types of webpages <sup>3</sup>
1 Meliá Hotels International	A	1	1
2 Iberostar Hotels And Resorts	A	1	1
3 Riu Hotels And Resorts	A	1	1
4 Barceló Hotel Group	A	1	2
5 Nh Hotel Group	A	2	1
6 Bahia Principe Hotels And Resorts (Grupo Piñero)*	A	1	1
7 Palladium Hotel Group	A	2	0
8 H10 Hotels	A	2	1
9 Eurostars Hotel Company (Grupo Hotusa)	A	2	2
10 Princess Hotels	B	2	2
11 Be Live Hotels	B	2	2
12 Paradores	B	3	1
13 Best Hotels	B	2	2
14 Hipotels	B	2	2
15 Grupotel	B	2	2
16 Vincci Hoteles	B	1	1
17 Allsun Hotels - Alltours España	B	2	2
18 Selenta Group	B	2	2

1 Size: A=more than €500M; B=between €500M and €100M; C=less than €100M.

2 Form of ownership, 1=familiar; 2=non familiar/2\*= ONCE Foundation; 3=govt is majority owner.

3 Types of webpages, 1=corporate website; 2=booking platform.

19 Senator Hotels And Resorts	B	2	2
20 Grupo Inversor Hesperia	B	2	2
21 Ilunion Hotels	B	2*	2
22 Servigroup	B	1	2
23 Zafiro Hotels	B	1	1
24 Hoteles Elba	B	2	2
25 Room Mate Group	B	2	2
26 Hoteles Silken	C	2	2
27 Alg Europa (Amresorts)	C	2	2
28 Med Playa Hotels	C	2	2
29 Hotelatelier (Antes Petitpalace)	C	2	2
30 Magic Costa Blanca	C	2	2
31 Blue Sea Hotels	C	2	2
32 Roc Hotels	C	2	2
33 Protur	C	2	2
34 Gf Hoteles	C	1	2
35 Hm Hotels - Whala!Hotels	C	2	2

Source: Hosteltur (2021)

**Annex 2. Coding criteria**

<b>PLANET</b>	<b>Environmental footprint</b>	<b>Natural resources and raw materials consumption</b>
		Energy and renewable resources / CO2 emission
		Waste and pollution
		Water scarcity
	<b>Climate change</b>	Gas and emissions
		Global warming
		Deforestation
		Transport
	<b>Biodiversity protection</b>	Ecosystem preservation
		Animal welfare
		Sustainable agriculture
	<b>Green innovation</b>	Bio and eco technology
		Green chemistry
		Recycling and upcycling
		Concept of green
		Green education
		Noise
<b>PEOPLE</b>	<b>Labour practices</b>	Employment and labour relationships
		Occupational health and safety
		Training and education
		Diversity and equal opportunities
		Risk of exclusion
		Care of disabled people
	<b>Human rights society</b>	Non-discrimination
		Freedom of association and collective bargaining Child code ECPAT

		Indigenous rights
		Sexual harassment
	<b>Society</b>	Local communities
		Public health
		City and urbanization
		Local culture and heritage
		Education
		Corporate volunteering
	<b>Product responsibility</b>	Customer health and safety
		Product and service sustainability features
		Marketing and communications practices
		Customer privacy and protection
		Services for disabled people
<b>GOVERNANCE</b>	<b>Ethics and integrity</b>	Anti-competitive behaviour
		Company policies
		Anti-corruption and anti-bribery procedures
	<b>Stakeholder relationships</b>	Engagement activities
		Accounting and reporting
		Certification and awards
		Data confidentiality
	<b>Sustainability legislation</b>	Local laws and regulations
		SDGs and global initiatives
		International directives and acts
<b>PROFIT</b>	<b>Product responsibility</b>	Customer health and safety
		Product and service sustainability features



		Marketing and communications practices
		Customer privacy and protection
		Services for disabled people
	<b>Direct economic impacts</b>	Revenues
		Operating costs
		Employee wages and benefits
		Taxes and duties
		Community investments
	<b>Indirect economic impacts</b>	Fight against poverty
		Jobs support and opportunities
		Skills and knowledge development
	<b>Procurement practices</b>	Agreements in supply relationships
		Payments policies and procedures
		Economic inclusion of suppliers
	<b>Risks and opportunities</b>	Market demand
		Financial assistance
		Partnership and collaborations Competition
	<b>Management approach</b>	Strategy and plans
		Objectives and initiatives
		Value chain management

Source: adapted from Confetto and Covucci (2021)