

Article

The Role of Sustainable Service Innovation in Crafting the Vision of the Hospitality Industry

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Abstract: The purpose of this study was to examine the key characteristics of sustainable service innovation in the hospitality industry. We conducted a content analysis based on the interview records for 17 experts (including three academic scholars, three government officers and 11 top-level managers) with an average of 20 years of experience in the hospitality management domain in Taiwan. The analytical results conform to Amabile's (1988) componential theory of creativity and innovation and show that 11 characteristics are major indicators of sustainable service innovation in the hotel management field. These include the following characteristics: market position, customer satisfaction, service orientation, environmental thinking, employee involvement, incentive mechanism, human resource development, environmental services, cultural resource management, government policy and school education. Accordingly, using the integrated theory of sustainable service innovation and professional opinions from experts, we provide theoretical and practical implications for current and future trends on sustainability and innovation in the hospitality industry.

Keywords: service; sustainable; innovation; hospitality; content analysis; trends

1. Introduction

Innovation, the heart of success in the hospitality industry, enables hotels to adopt novel ideas, improve service processes, enhance operational efficiency levels, meet customer needs, earn sales and achieve profitability, engage in corporate social responsibility and maintain competitive advantages in rapidly-changing markets [1–5]. Furthermore, when hotel companies strive for sustainability, this may be conducted to achieve competitiveness through organizational and technological innovations via sustainable practices [6–11]. In consideration of the creation of novel products, services, processes or markets with regard to environmental, social, financial and sustainability matters, the spectrum of sustainable innovations may be used at diverse levels from the adoption of new ideas to systems in all aspects of society [8,9,12–14]. In other words, by equating sustainable thinking with innovative approaches, organizations can in turn acquire top-line and bottom-line benefits for their social responsibility and innovation efforts [3,6,15,16]. Accordingly, through the concept of sustainable innovation, hoteliers and managers can promote sustainable services while striking a balance between economic, environmental and societal concerns [2,17–20].

Although the significance of sustainability and innovation in hospitality services cannot be overemphasized, there remains a lack of systematic research that aims to reveal the full picture in this domain. In addition, it is understood that the determinants of innovative service quality improvement rely on organizational implementation [5,21–23]. Hotel company attitudes can play vital roles in the success of innovation adoption and sustainable relevant practices [24–28]. Accordingly, the objectives of our study are two-fold. First, we attempt to understand ways to define the meaning of sustainable service innovation through different academic, industrial and government perspectives. Second, we intend to identify key innovation elements regarding quality services and procedures to guarantee the inclusion of these quality services in the hospitality realm.

We adopt Amabile's [29] componential theory of creativity and innovation as the necessary basis for overall innovation, and we explore the main characteristics of sustainable service innovation in hotel businesses and operations. Combined with in-depth and semi-structured interviews with experts from relevant government authorities and universities and in management positions, a content analysis was used to analyze our interview data [30]. Through repeated coding and after reviewing research notes, sustainable service innovation was separated into diverse fundamental categories. These characteristics are themes that have been extracted from our interview transcripts and that can be regarded as the foundations of innovation in hotel services.

Our study contributes to the literature on sustainable service innovation research as follows. First, the results of this study are not only in accordance with Amabile's [29] componential theory of creativity and innovation, but also present strong applications to the field of hospitality research. Second, we show that sustainability serves as a linkage for achieving business competitiveness that revolves around innovative approaches. In other words, sustainable innovations can present companies with ways to adopt solutions differently [5,16,23]. These features together help create chances for companies to build and broaden their business landscapes in ways that mitigate social or environmental effects, even generating more benefits or novel features [31,32]. Accordingly, this study presents a new finding that companies that apply sustainability in innovative processes can enhance their potential as innovative leaders in relevant domains. Finally, we offer a clear framework for current and future trends in the implementation of sustainable service innovation. These include features of market positioning, customer satisfaction, service orientation and environmental thinking in the organizational motivation realm; features of employee involvement, incentive mechanism, human resource development and environmental services in the management practices realm; and features of cultural resource management, government policy and school education in the resources realm. Through the constructive assessment of novel ideas, an active reward system for creative work and the development of new processes and services, these 11 characteristics can supplement one another while guaranteeing the success of sustainable service innovations in the hospitality industry.

2. Materials and Methods

2.1. Literature Review

A major area in the research on organizations concerns the generation, adoption and implementation of innovation [24,33]. Innovation refers to the fulfillment of novel ideas held within an organization [2,17,22,34,35]. These ideas address issues that encourage new administration processes that mobilize support for change, that increase the need to overcome challenges and that involve individuals within organizations; in addition, all of these ideas can equally contribute to innovation [24,27]. Thus, a large body of research has attempted to identify the structural components of innovation [2,17,22]. According to Amabile's [29] componential theory of creativity and innovation, innovation is composed of three key elements: organizational motivation, management practices and resources. In addition, each of these elements is essential for innovation in any field. According to Amabile's definition [29], organizational motivation refers to basic attitudes, orientations and support for organizational innovation processes and activities.

According to prior studies [21,36–38], organizational motivation can pertain to attitudes toward taking risks, to the importance of innovation, to mechanisms for rewarding individual enthusiasm in regard to creativity and to prepared strategies for leading future trends. Most importantly, organizational support for innovation establishes a friendly environment for encouraging information exchange and the communication of ideas, as well as a reward system for recognizing the initiation of creative ideas. Although innovation efforts can fail, organizations must do their best to eliminate obstacles (e.g., criticism) or issues that hamper the implementation of innovation procedures. In the hospitality industry in particular, innovation continues to emerge as an important means of maintaining a sustainable competitive advantage [17,39,40]. As an essential requirement of hotels in a rapidly-changing market, hotels cannot escape from motivations to provide clear visions for innovation.

The second component relates to management practices, which refer to the management activities of all departments in an organization. Earlier studies have proposed that encouragement from supervisors, the establishment of challenging and achievable targets, organizational support, the allowance of considerable autonomy and the clarification of task goals serve as representations of management practices [21,38,41–43]. In addition, allowing employees to trust and communicate with colleagues, creating work teams with diverse skills and interests, challenging others through constructive thinking and performing tasks with commitment also constitute management practices [22,36,44,45]. For hotels, the development of useful and creative products, services and procedures may depend on proper management practices [43,46,47]. Thus, both researchers and practitioners have stated that hotel managers must adopt the aforementioned methods to encourage innovation, to meet customer requirements, to enhance operational profitability levels and to add value for companies.

Finally, the resource component refers to everything that helps assist the work domain in regard to innovation in an organization [21,34]. Sufficient resources create high potential for success in innovation. Thus, scholars have shown that organizations can offer funds and time for initiating creative ideas, can hire experienced employees with the required capabilities, can supply necessary materials and information and can offer mechanisms of on-the-job training [21,48–50]. In regard to services in the hospitality sector, despite mounting efforts in both service innovation and novel product development, more focus must be placed on resources needed to nourish and accelerate this process [17,39,51,52]. Furthermore, with sufficient knowledge and experience in arranging resources for creative products and services in the hotel industry, customers can experience more satisfaction and loyalty and can contribute to the hotel business through repeat purchases [3,5,23].

However, while prior research has proven that innovation in services serves as the driving ingredient for sustainable hotel operations [3,40,51,53,54], few studies have examined these innovations from a systematic perspective on sustainability. Rather than focusing on general innovations that focus on the implementation of new organizational and technological capabilities [11,13,24,55–58], scholars have proposed a need for more research in sustainable innovation [7,12,15,16,31,59]. Sustainable innovation refers to the creation of novel products, services, processes or markets with regard to environmental, social, financial and sustainability matters [9,19,20,32,60]. In consideration of sustainability issues (economic, environmental and social) from incremental innovation to radical innovation, the spectrum of sustainable innovations may be used in diverse ways (e.g., the adoption of new ideas to systems in all aspects of society) [8,9,12]. More specifically, the advantages of sustainability in innovation are both tangible and intangible (e.g., improving corporate images, enhancing services or products quality levels, cutting costs, and attracting and retaining more talented employees) [7,15,61].

Furthermore, sustainable innovations can present ways in which companies can adopt solutions differently. All of these factors help create opportunities for companies to build and strengthen their business models in ways that mitigate social or environmental effects, even generating more benefits or novel features [15,16,60]. In this vein, it is concluded that companies that adopt sustainability in innovative processes can positively increase opportunities to become innovative leaders in relevant domains. In the hospitality industry in particular, hotel companies must essentially coordinate sustainability and innovation for customer value proposition [3,5,10,14,23]. In following customer trends, sustainable service innovations refer to means of acquiring more market share by changing

customer preferences that competitors are unable to manage [16,31,32]. As a result, conceptualizing of innovation efforts and reducing environmental impacts connect to the core of how companies compete in the hospitality sector. This indicates that sustainability serves as a linkage for winning business competition that revolves around innovative approaches. In other words, service innovation implementation concerns the future sustainability of the hospitality industry. Accordingly, in integrating Amabile's [29] componential theory of creativity and innovation with professional opinions on sustainability development, this study provides a deep and proactive perspective that augments sustainable service innovation in the hotel industry.

2.2. Methodology

Our research methodology used the qualitative research method. We first interviewed the experts regarding this industry and then used content analysis for the interview records. After the in-depth interviews, a grounded theory was adopted to analyze the interview data with repeated coding and reading. Sustainable service innovation was then coded into fundamental categories with diverse descriptions [30,62,63]. These descriptions represent the ideas and meanings derived from the interview transcripts. Regarding research reliability, we read the biographies of participants and collected relative information, such as their provided books, documents and reports from the news. To guarantee the validity of this study, we also improved the research content with researchers' interviews and reflection notes. Those notes were observations on sustainable service innovation processes in this study and, hereafter, economic, environmental and social implications. Therefore, these systematic methods provide a theory for a specific phenomenon [30,64].

2.2.1. Participants

This study data were composed of experts' professional opinions of hotel sustainable service innovations and human resource developments. These experts' conceptions were derived from their specific experience with the tourism and hospitality industry. These experts had an average of more than 22 years' experience in relevant government authority, university and management positions in the hotel management field. Scholars with teaching experience in hospitality and strong academic reputations were selected. Their publications, such as journals or books, were selected as choice standard supplements. The government officers were selected based on their reputations and experience in supervising the tourism and hospitality industry. In addition, practical industry experts were chosen according to their positions and experience in hotel operations and relative businesses. Finally, the interview participants were composed of 17 experts: 3 academic scholars, 3 government officers and 11 top-level managers (see Table 1).

Table 1. Background information of study participants.

Code	Type	Interview Date	Position	Experience
GA	Government official	14 November 2014	Section Chief	20 years
GB	Government official	18 November 2014	Deputy Director General	22 years
GC	Government official	20 November 2014	Section Chief	30 years
IA	Practical industry	22 September 2014	Chairman	20 years
IB	Practical industry	27 September 2014	CEO and Chairman	30 years
IC	Practical industry	2 October 2014	Operation Director	25 years
ID	Practical industry	5 October 2014	Vice President of human resources	11 years
IE	Practical industry	7 October 2014	General Manager	17 years
IF	Practical industry	9 October 2014	Deputy General Manager	20 years
IG	Practical industry	15 October 2014	Executive Director	18 years
IH	Practical industry	16 October 2014	CEO	25 years
II	Practical industry	27 October 2014	General Manager	19 years
IJ	Practical industry	30 October 2014	Operation Director	11 years
IK	Practical industry	19 December 2014	Marketing Director	22 years
SA	Scholar	27 September 2014	Associate professor	35 years
SB	Scholar	4 October 2014	Associate professor	20 years
SC	Scholar	6 October 2014	Professor	25 years

2.2.2. Procedure

Prior to the interview process, we conducted a literature review in hospitality management, innovation management, service management, environmental protection and hospitality education. Thus, we distinguished the key characteristics of sustainable service innovation in the hotel industry. We then sent semi-structured and open-ended questions to our participants and ensured they had time for the interview. This arrangement was to help researchers ask questions more accurately and also afford participants more opportunities to provide valuable input. Typically, the duration of the interview was 2 h, and the interview location was selected at these experts' convenience. All interviews were recorded with audio, and confidentiality was guaranteed. To address research quality concerns, full transcriptions were produced immediately following the interviews. In total, 218,600 words were garnered from our participants. To systematize the experts' responses, we focus on the following questions in Table 2: "What is the meaning of sustainable service innovation?" "Please define the framework and effort to promote sustainable service innovation." "Please describe the relationship with the interested party." "Please describe the difficulty and solution for sustainable service innovation," "Do you have any suggestions for human resource development in sustainable service innovation?" The data were examined in two phases: preliminary and main analyses. The preliminary analysis was performed according to prior relevant literature reports, and the analysis of full transcripts with participants' response was performed with regard to sustainable service innovation. We then conducted the main analysis to determine the key attributes of this study using the qualitative method. The results will be presented in the following sections.

Table 2. The semi-structured, open-ended interview questions.

No.	Questions
1.	What is the meaning of sustainable service innovation?
2.	Please define the framework and effort to promote sustainable service innovation.
3.	Please describe the relationship with the interested party.
4.	Please describe the difficulty and solution for sustainable service innovation.
5.	Do you have any suggestions for human resource development in sustainable service innovation?

3. Results

The results of our qualitative analysis demonstrated the opinions of experts with regard to service innovation to build sustainable businesses in the hotel industry. Based on Amabile's [29] componential theory of creativity and innovation, the characteristics of each concept were grounded in three dimensions: (1) organizational motivation includes the characteristics of market position, customer satisfaction, service culture and environmental thinking; (2) management practices contained the characteristics of employee involvement, incentive mechanism, human resource development and environmental services; and (3) resources are related to the characteristics of cultural resource management, government policy and school education. These characteristics are discussed in the following paragraphs, and the critical perspectives are presented using typical quotations from the experts' in-depth interviews. The participants' identifiers were also listed after the quotations. The analysis of these characteristics is attributed to their professional knowledge or past experience in promoting the innovation and maintenance of sustainable businesses in hospitality services. The professionals' conceptions are summarized in Table 3.

Table 3. Summary of the professionals' conceptions of service innovation.

Samples	Organizational Motivation				Management Practices				Resources		
	Market Position	Customer Satisfaction	Service Orientation	Environmental thinking	Employee Involvement	Incentive Mechanism	Human Resource Development	Environmental Services	Cultural Resource Management	Government Policy	School Education
GA	●		●						●	●	●
GB	●	●		●				●	●	●	●
GC			●	●		●		●		●	●
IA	●	●	●			●	●	●			●
IB	●		●		●		●	●		●	●
IC			●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	
ID	●	●		●		●	●	●	●	●	
IE		●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●		●
IF	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●		●
IG	●	●	●		●	●	●	●	●	●	●
IH				●	●		●	●	●		●
II	●			●		●	●	●	●	●	●
IJ		●	●		●	●	●	●			
IK		●	●		●	●	●		●	●	●
SA	●	●		●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●
SB		●	●	●		●			●	●	●
SC	●		●	●	●		●			●	●
Total	10	10	12	12	10	12	11	13	11	12	14

● The symbol means the professionals' conceptions of characteristics in three dimensions.

3.1. Organizational Motivation

3.1.1. Market Position

Many experts revealed that clear market position was a vital characteristic for hotels for sustainable service innovation. Market position means choosing a proper and competitive posture for a business' long-term profit [65,66]. In other words, the selection of a market strategy by companies in an industry can be diverse, dependent on their position in the existing market [67]. Certain experts adopted the following phrases to define their methods for creating market position strategies.

"Practically, I think the most important point was to clarify how to operate a hotel, and how to make a sustainable innovation service possible. Without clear market position, distinct targets, and a thorough market study, you can't create segmentation with others." (IA)

"First of all, hotels have to emphasize their positions in the market. The market position chooses different markets and customers . . . and then how do you create segmentation from the competitors, and how do you create very significant differentiation?" (IB)

"We look forward to seeing whether our hotels group can be distinctive, different from others, and provide more novel thinking than conventional hotels. Through these differentiations, our characteristics and brand can gradually have more visibility and then, hopefully, we can maintain long-term sustainable profit." (IG)

"Consumers will naturally see your uniqueness or your differences. In this stage, your products and services have differences, and you won't have to compete with others only based on price orientation." (SA)

3.1.2. Customer Satisfaction

Many experts agree that providing high quality services for customers and satisfying them are critical missions for hotels. Strengthening the customer satisfaction influences may be valuable to hoteliers in establishing their reputations, positive corporate positive images and even growth and stability [68–70]. Therefore, hotels should focus on innovative services that incorporate more concern about customers' feelings, meeting their expectations and enhancing their intentions to repurchase [71].

"You have to provide satisfactions for customers at different levels, so we continually ensure our employees have a better understanding of market trends. For example, we encourage employees to join exchange programs, or we invite excellent experts to Taiwan. Through these constant contacts and exchanges with the outside, our employees can maintain a better understanding of the newest information in the market." (ID)

"If your products and services are not innovative, you can't meet the needs of your customers, so you must keep doing these activities . . . You have to keep ahead of your competitors, and let your customers feel your hotels are the best in the market." (SA)

"Sustainable service innovation has to continuously place innovation in software and hardware, and make changes in this software and hardware. Thus we will ensure consumers have a strong impression when they consume, and help enterprises sustain operation and development." (IA)

"Sustainable service innovation cannot be separated from a basic principle, meet the needs of customers. Customer demand, of course, always changes with time. However, the most important innovation is in accordance with the needs of customers, even occasionally exceeding their expectations." (SB)

3.1.3. The Culture of Service Orientation

The nature of service orientation is based on the fundamental culture or faith that encourages employees to implement it. Research has shown that a service orientation can be accelerated through innovation [53,72]. To contribute to the survival and performance of hotels, the objective of experts is to integrate the characteristics of service orientation, as well as innovation efforts to drive the development of new services.

“This is emphasized: take the initiative to ask customers, understand their needs, and then arrange where he needs to go, provide food or drink, or arrange his itinerary. So our service culture is quite different at the beginning . . . ” (IC)

“The first impression of customers when they come in is to test what we can do for them, so why not just meet their expectations . . . I think our service culture caused customers to have expectations, and we won’t let them down. This is how we approach each new service.” (IJ)

“We are not only selling rooms, we sell Taiwanese services. This is why we provide high service quality to customers. In integrating service innovation, it was possible to integrate human value-adding as well as industrial value enhancement . . . ” (IG)

3.1.4. Environmental Thinking

Most experts accept that environmental thinking is a critical trend in service innovation. Using environmental protection, education and relative activity efforts, hotel companies can revitalize the local economy, attract more customers and promote the concept of environmental thinking. In this way, hotel companies can occupy more important roles in corporate social responsibility and provide a better environment for future generations [71,73,74].

“Our business philosophy focuses on environmental protection. As for food, we try to connect with the local economy, and we also try to use and find local food ingredients from farming, fishing, and some seasoning.” (II)

“We think, in addition to advocating energy saving for customers, there should be more attention focused on environmental impacts and visitor participation . . . , just let the customers as well as our local employees have a chance to participate in environmental protection. They can thus band together.” (IH)

“Education is training the future employer and service personnel in this industry to have this concept of environmental protection. With this concept, they can go in the right direction. If some people do not understand this concept, it is important to educate these people . . . ” (GC)

“Basically, we put a lot of effort into the low carbon policy. For instance, in Sun Moon Lake and Carp Lake, we have a plan to convert all ships to electric boats approximately 106 to 108 ships. We also encourage mass transit because it is also a form of energy saving and carbon reduction.” (GB)

3.2. Management Practices

3.2.1. Employee Involvement

Employee involvement is one of the key attributes of employee participation [75]. Higher involvement by employees can lead to innovation implementation success, employee job satisfaction and improved work-life balance [76]. Accordingly, high involvement work practices can be regarded as vital elements for high quality innovative services in hospitality [77]. Experts therefore suggest that hotel companies should place more emphasis on providing work opportunities with variety, autonomy and significance for employees. Thus, with a better understanding of their opinions toward company innovation strategies, as well as high participation in decision-making, sustainable services can be maintained.

“In innovation process design, there is a very important concept that you can choose either top down or bottom up. If the innovation is top down, this must be followed by a management level goal. However, if bottom up ideas were presented by the following people . . . I was going to help them, coach them, and guide them in the correct direction.” (SA)

“Constantly encourage your employees to provide their own inspirations and feelings to discuss with everyone. We’ve always been very encouraging in this regard, especially in downward communication and horizontal communication. We work very hard to do these, but there is still room for improvement.” (IC)

“Our innovative service is you have to trust your employees, and you have to trust their judgment ... I think in the service elements, you can think about many things, and some things we can do with employees.” (IJ)

“In our culture, we focus on high quality services and this requires high involvement by our employees. For example, we provide housekeepers for each room to meet customers’ diverse requirements. These employees are quite different from those in normal hotels, which only emphasize service speed or efficacy. Conversely, we stress the value of customized services by our well-trained employees.” (IK)

3.2.2. Incentive Mechanism

Incentive mechanisms can encourage individuals to provide more novel and sophisticated approaches for service improvement [78]. The major features of these innovative motivations were based on organizational support, encouragement and trust for their employees [79]. Thus, nearly all experts agree that developing a friendly environment and strong reward system for innovation will stimulate employees to express their ideas and ultimately benefit a company’s future operations.

“Promotions, performance appraisals, bonuses, verbal encouragement, honorary leaves of absence, support for travel, or sending a cake to his department to thank an employee for his contribution all encourage creativity. With plenty of ways to encourage employees, these must make them feel creativity is very important.” (SA)

“We encourage our departmental employees to come up with new ideas. If the idea is feasible, we will comprehensively implement it and include it in our SOP. The proposed staff can obtain his monetary reward, vacation, commendation, or be accorded a merit.” (SB)

“If you provide a novel opinion to the company, we adopt it, and it also generates good results, we will give this employee a bonus ... we have set up such an incentive policy to support innovate ideas.” (IF)

3.2.3. Human Resource Development

Certain experts consider human resource management as a vital characteristic in future hotel industry development. The professional development of human resource management focuses on the competencies and performance of employees and is linked tightly to services, customer satisfaction and company competitiveness [80]. Regarding human resource management development as the foundation of organizational capabilities [81], many experts also advocate that improvements in human resources are needed in on-the-job training and education to compete successfully in the hospitality sector.

“We designed a series of service improvement courses to train our new staff, junior employees, and supervisors. Within these nine courses, we introduce what service quality is, what customer needs are, how to understand and interpret the body language of customers, and how to adopt a positive attitude to communicate with customers ...” (IE)

“Human resource development is finding employees with a positive attitude, talent, and a willingness to serve people, and providing proper training ... These will promote employees’ cohesiveness, raise company profitability, and improve the company’s positive image.” (SA)

“Service is a source of fulfillment. If employees could have a passion for service and a willingness to think from the viewpoint of customers, they will have the ability to innovate services. Through a reward system design, employees will try to do something different. Ultimately, these efforts will become new and mature methods for innovative services.” (IG)

“Maintaining our current employees is much better than hiring new staff. There have been many on training expenses. We must value our employees and retain them in the proper positions.” (IJ)

3.2.4. Environmental Services

Compared to conventional services, recent research has argued that environmental services, such as green practices and ecosystem services, can create different market segmentations [82] and attract

increased interest in high market values for enterprises [83]. Thus, experts suggest that hotels can stress their motivations and efforts for service innovation via environmentally-friendly actions and create potential distinctions from other service business competitors.

“You should let your customers notice your efforts. Tell them we are a green and environmental thinking company. For example, we have solar panels on our roof as well as a water resource management system. You should make your customers feel that these are environmental service efforts using hardware along with software upgrades. In my opinion, prevention is better than a cure.” (IA)

“We already have a basic resource recovery system. Currently, I think the concept of environmental sustainability is much more popular. I have seen more and more customers who carry their own equipment and appliances. This means they are not going to waste resources. This is very good news and deserves more encouragement.” (IC)

“We have had environmentally friendly housing projects for many years. In my estimation, if you bring your own toothbrush, toothpaste and soap, the housing price is reduced by NT\$200. If you don’t need to change the sheets, you can get an additional discount. I think the most direct way is environmentally friendly housing.” (IE)

3.3. Resources

3.3.1. Cultural Resource Management

In recent decades, the usage and development of cultural resources has generated more attention and recognition for the public [84]. Thus, with their high interests and involvement in cultural activities, numerous environmental, cultural, economic and ecological factors can interact with innovative approaches [85]. In addition to these arguments, many experts advised that offering culturally-based management practices to provide solutions in ecosystems can contribute to sustainable service development.

“Because Tainan city already has some good resources, such as culture, art, history or many places of historic interest and scenic beauty, and has proper packages for traveling. In my opinion, we look at how to integrate marketing plans with the city’s image, and how to introduce the characteristic of this city to the world . . . ” (II)

“I think revitalizing local community creates an interface for external communication. In Taiwan, it could be a great benefit for the community. This requires young people to stay in the country to build the connection through communication ... We use our resources to connect with other corporations and seek the opportunity to do promotion.” (IH)

“Our hotels are the early pioneers in inexpensive, cultural and creative hotels. This has created many imitators, and attracts more innovative competitors to this industry. We would like to see the entire industry become more lively and creative. We will also keep generating novel ideas and interacting with competitors through healthy and constructive competition and ultimately create a bigger market.” (IG)

“We focus on bringing the Japanese hot spring culture to Taiwan. In addition, we also integrate local traditions, histories, cultures and people to be a brand resort hotel in the Beitou district in Taipei.” (IK)

3.3.2. Government Policy

Government policy encouraging service innovation has been a global trend. Support for such concerns may be provided through various means, such as encouragement and reward for innovative practices, training opportunities for service people and promoting environment-friendly services. In general, experts have indicated that resources and policies provided by the government can establish a framework for innovation development and assist in implementing them in the hospitality industry.

“As for government departments, energy saving and carbon reduction policies focus on traffic and building facilities. For example, energy efficiency in lighting, air-conditioning, reclamation of waste paper, and others ...” (GA)

“We plan to establish a platform, which we call a green consumption market, to integrate stores, environment-friendly products, hotels, the tourism industry, and the car rental industry. We have a preliminary plan with regard to this issue.” (GC)

“The Tourism Bureau has training courses for entry-level and even senior managers in recent years. As for hotel renewal, we also adopt the paradigm from the Tourism Bureau. Actually, in the past few years, this policy has strongly affected many old hotels’ renewal plans ...” (IG)

“Government authorities should play the role of promoter to encourage more investment in the hospitality & tourism industry and create a better environment to allow tourists to enjoy these improvements ...” (IK)

3.3.3. School Education

Because of prosperous growth in the hospitality market, hospitality management programmers are some of the most rapidly growing majors in Taiwan [27,86,87]. However, a large gap exists between universities and the practical industry. Experts have revealed that the real problem in hospitality education could be a lack of connection with the real world. Therefore, experts suggest that universities exert more efforts in understanding the demand of hotels, enhancing students’ language abilities, providing students with opportunities to study overseas, developing strong internship projects and linking the curriculum to practical training in hospitality education.

“The more contact with the industry, the more real world could be taught. I think the mental system could be a good direction for education. Because instructors come from the industry, schools can thus have more connection with practical industry. Based on this, I think it is a way to cultivate students’ abilities ...” (IA)

“Students in Taiwan need to cultivate a global perspective. First, for foreign language aptitude, we can hire foreign lecturers to strengthen language capacity. Moreover, in international etiquette, how you communicate with foreigners is quite different from how you communicate with people in Taiwan. Knowledge of different cultures, customs, and habits should be strengthened.” (IF)

“I think the capacity of students is usually not a problem; the problem is in the process of training at the school. For example, students’ enthusiasm for this industry is worn out during their internships. So maintaining students’ passion for and devotion to the tourism and hospitality industry voluntarily is the key point.” (IG)

“Teachers in the school should know the industry better. Teachers should have better understanding regarding the organizational structure of the hotel and how to work in this industry. Then, they could go back to instructing their students. In my opinion, it could be more practical and help students to survive longer in this industry with the right ideas.” (II)

4. Discussion and Conclusions

This study examined sustainable service innovation in the hotel industry. In applying a content analysis to assess our research conclusions, the three key components of innovation (organizational motivation, management practices and resources [29,34]) were adopted to establish a theoretical framework. The results of our research were obtained through a systematic approach that involved interpreting and summarizing experts’ professional opinions. These data were collected via in-depth and semi-structured interviews that provided the participants with opportunities to express their opinions based on their experiences in innovative hospitality services. Furthermore, the experts’ concepts were organized into different categories based on logical explanations.

In our qualitative study, we interviewed 17 experts (including three academic scholars, three government officers and 11 top-level managers) with an average of 20 years of experience in the hospitality management domain. While certain experts exhibited a distinct understanding of service

innovations, most of the experts expressed common values in this field based on their prior knowledge and experiences. These data provide us with inspiration and confidence in the fact that the participants were suited to our study focus. Furthermore, one valuable issue is related to perspectives on professional discussions. While studies and concepts on innovation in the service industry have been common [1,10,11,13,14,17,38,39], few deep and open discussions have been held on sustainable hotel services. Therefore, the research results provide solid evidence of the need for future studies on hotel services and innovation.

Most importantly, our research contributes to the innovation literature as follows. First, while certain previous studies have discussed Amabile's [29] componential theory of creativity and innovation in hospitality management [22,27,42,88,89], none have attempted to integrate this perspective in accordance with the professional opinions of relevant government authorities and university and management professionals. Therefore, the results of this study address a gap between theory and practice and serve as a distinct example for future innovation research in the field of hospitality.

In addition, this study shows that sustainability serves as a linkage for winning business competitions revolving around innovative approaches. More specifically, sustainable innovations create opportunities for companies to adopt solutions differently [5,16,23]. Through such efforts, companies can create and broaden their business landscapes in ways that mitigate social or environmental impacts, even generating more benefits or novel features [31,32]. As a result, this study presents a new finding that hospitality companies that adopt sustainable innovative processes can promote opportunities to become innovative leaders in relevant domains.

Furthermore, although prior research has shown that innovation in services is the driving ingredient behind sustainable hotel operations [3,17,51,53,54], few such studies have examined innovation from the perspective of sustainability. Through deeper consideration of novel services, products and processes in social, environmental, financial and sustainability issues, this study shows that sustainable innovation may be applied at various levels through the application of new ideas to systems in all aspects of society. Rather, innovation sustainability tangibly and intangibly improves corporate images, enhances service and product quality, cuts costs, attracts customers and helps retain more talented employees [7,15,61].

Finally, this study's findings identify the following innovation characteristics: characteristics of market positions, customer satisfaction, service orientation and environmental thinking for the component of organizational motivation; characteristics of employee involvement, incentive mechanism, human resource development and environmental services for the component of management practices; and characteristics of cultural resource management, government policy and school education for the component of resources (see Figure 1). Through the constructive assessment of novel ideas, through an active reward system for creative work and through the development of new process and services, these characteristics can supplement one another and promote the success of service innovations in the hotel sector.

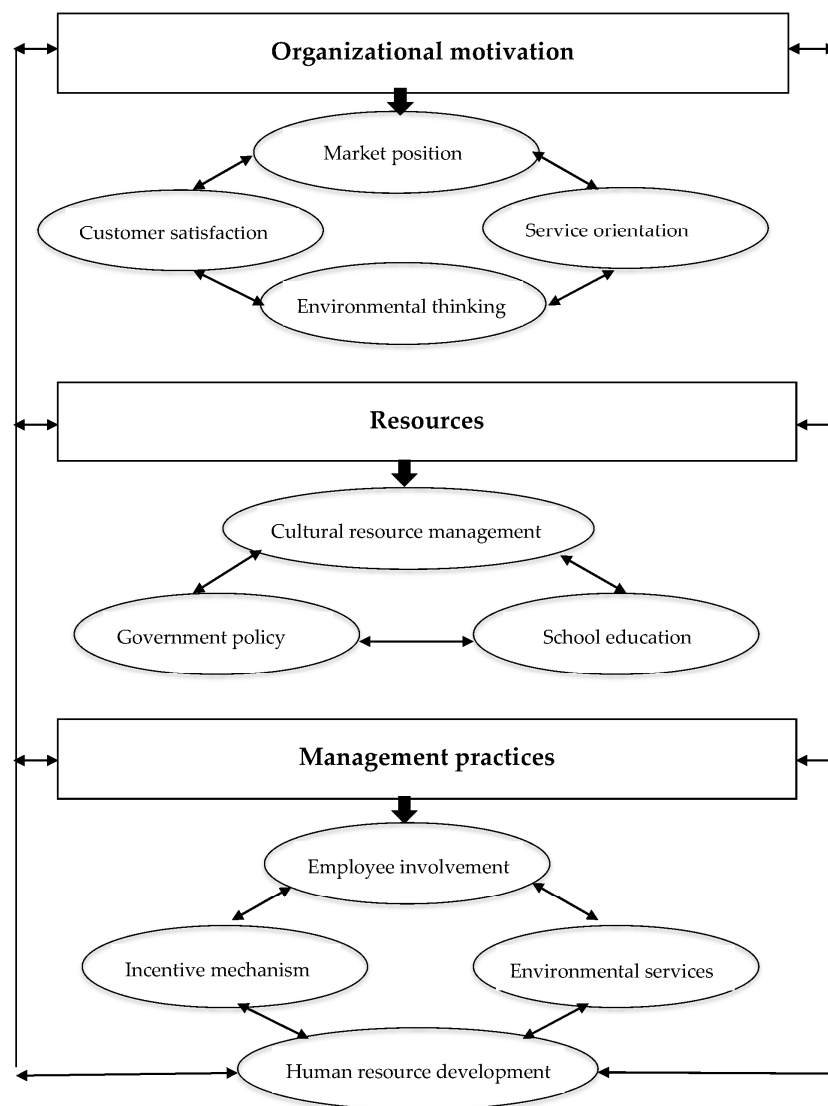


Figure 1. The framework of hotel sustainable service innovation.

5. Managerial Implications

This study was designed to identify the central characteristics of sustainable service innovation for the hospitality industry. Emphasizing the importance of sustainability and innovation today will better allow hotel companies to win the battles of business competition tomorrow. We thus suggest that hoteliers or managers may use sustainable service innovations as a means of improving their competitiveness and long-term profits. Such innovative services with fewer environmental impacts in the context of corporate cultures will help generate more customers, meet customer expectations and enhance customer intentions to repurchase. Moreover, hotel companies may promote their supply chains for more sustainable and innovative activities in regard to eco-friendly issues (e.g., reducing food and material waste). These concepts of environmental thinking employed in proactive innovative approaches not only help reduce costs, but also generate benefits.

In addition, greater employee involvement can result in sustainable innovation implementation success, employee job satisfaction and work-life balance. Accordingly, hotel companies should place a greater emphasis on providing work variety, autonomy and incentive mechanisms for employees. Through a deeper understanding of employee opinions of company innovation strategies and through high participation in decision-making, sustainable services can be maintained. Furthermore, in relation

to conventional services, environmental services, such as green practices and ecosystem services, can create unique market segmentations, while generating increased market value for enterprises. In this vein, hotels can stress their motivations and efforts of service innovation via environmentally-friendly actions, while creating potential distinctions from other service business competitors. Most importantly, sustainable environmental thinking is a critical trend of service innovation. Through environmental protection, education and relative activity efforts, hotels can revitalize the local economy, draw more customers and promote the concept of sustainable service innovation. In this way, hotel companies, through concepts of sustainability and innovation, can occupy more important roles in corporate social responsibility, while creating better environments for future generations.

6. Limitations and Avenues for Further Research

While this study adopts a qualitative method to examine key features of sustainable service innovation in the hospitality industry, it is limited in that data were collected from a collectivistic society (e.g., Taiwan). Scholars have advocated for broader perspectives in cross-cultural research to better examine the generalizability for both Western and Eastern cultures [90–93]. In addressing this limitation, future research that collects samples on the basis of individualistic societies (e.g., Europe and North America) and that provides more evidence of sustainability in service innovation is recommended. A second limitation relates to the fact that we conducted a content analysis based on interview results from 17 experts (including three academic scholars, three government officers and 11 top-level managers). Although all of these participants have more than 20 years of experience in the hospitality industry, we encourage further research for the acquisition of more data and opinions from the hospitality management domain for the robustness of theoretical and structural frameworks. In addition, this study was conducted based on a self-reported survey through the collection of descriptive statements via qualitative research. Although the results of these self-reported characteristics provide valuable and insightful information on sustainable approaches and on relevant service innovation, there is still room for improvement with regard to the reliability and validity of research designs. Therefore, future studies that use objective scales in an exploratory examination to better determine the characteristics of sustainable service innovation are recommended.

In summary, this study shows that few hospitality research studies have been conducted concerning innovation and sustainable services. Most previous research used theoretical or practical perspectives to interpret sustainability and innovation. The results of the present study contribute to the development of sustainable service innovation through integrated explanations. These findings offer an essential framework and required knowledge concerning strategies to address current and future trends in this field.

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