



MESTRADO EM ESTRATÉGIA DE INVESTIMENTO E
INTERNACIONALIZAÇÃO

**The impact of sustainability practices on guests' return intentions:
The mediating role of customer retention in the hospitality sector**

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Lisboa
2025

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Dissertação apresentada ao Instituto Superior de Gestão
como requisito parcial para a obtenção do grau de Mestre
em Estratégia de Investimento e Internacionalização

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Lisboa
2025

O artigo foi submetido para publicação no **Frontiers in Sustainability** [Scopus Q2 – Environmental Science (miscellaneous)] e aguarda resposta.

Esta dissertação está organizada e formatada de acordo com a 7ª edição das Normas APA (American Psychological Association; <https://apastyle.apa.org/>).

Agradecimentos

Em primeiro lugar, quero agradecer a Deus, por me conceder a oportunidade de chegar até aqui e por me dar forças em cada passo desta jornada.

O meu agradecimento especial para a minha orientadora Professora Rosa Isabel Rodrigues, que com o seu conhecimento, paciência e dedicação, me guiou em cada fase do trabalho. O seu apoio incondicional e as suas orientações precisas foram fundamentais para a realização desta dissertação. Agradeço profundamente pela sua paciência e por acreditar em mim.

Agradeço também ao meu esposo, Irfan Gani, por todo o amor, paciência e compreensão ao longo deste percurso. O seu apoio constante foi essencial para que eu pudesse dar o meu melhor.

Aos meus pais, Hajira e Mahomed Makda, o meu mais sincero agradecimento. O vosso amor, apoio e ensinamentos moldaram-me e fizeram-me a pessoa que sou hoje. Sou eternamente grata por tudo o que fizeram por mim.

Aos meus irmãos, Samiyah, Shaheeda e Cadir, obrigada por estarem sempre ao meu lado, pela amizade e pelas palavras de encorajamento nos momentos difíceis. O vosso apoio foi e sempre será fundamental na minha vida.

Aos meus filhos, Zayan, Zaydan e Zidan, a quem dedico todo o meu amor e carinho. Vocês são a minha maior motivação e fonte de alegria.

A cada passo que damos, é importante reconhecer e agradecer àqueles que tornam a nossa caminhada mais leve e significativa. Que este trabalho seja um reflexo do esforço individual, mas também do apoio e amor que recebo daqueles que caminham ao meu lado. Agradeço de coração por cada apoio, por cada palavra de incentivo, e por cada gesto de paciência e compreensão. Juntos, conseguimos chegar até aqui. Este trabalho é de certa forma de vocês também.

A todos, o meu sincero obrigado, por me acompanharem e por estarem sempre presentes.

Resumo

Num contexto em que a sustentabilidade deixou de ser uma opção para se tornar uma exigência, o setor da hotelaria enfrenta uma crescente pressão para alinhar as suas práticas com os princípios da sustentabilidade. Neste cenário, torna-se essencial compreender de que forma os pilares ambiental, social e económico influenciam a fidelização dos clientes e, consequentemente, à sua intenção de regressar ao mesmo hotel. Participaram no estudo 348 clientes que estiveram hospedados numa unidade hoteleira, pelos menos duas noites. Esta investigação seguiu uma abordagem quantitativa, com um desenho transversal, tendo como objetivo testar as hipóteses formuladas. A recolha de dados foi realizada através de um questionário aplicado a uma amostra probabilística. Os resultados demonstraram que as perceções positivas em relação às práticas sustentáveis implementadas pelos hotéis têm um impacto significativo na intenção de regressar, sendo esta relação fortemente mediada pela fidelização do cliente. Os dados obtidos demonstram que os pilares ambiental, económico e social contribuem de forma distinta para esse efeito. Assim, reforça-se a importância de uma abordagem integrada da sustentabilidade no setor hoteleiro, não apenas como um compromisso ético, mas como um fator estratégico na fidelização dos clientes e no estímulo à sua intenção de regressar.

Palavras-chave: sustentabilidade, triple bottom line, fidelização do cliente, intenção de regressar, indústria hoteleira.

Abstract

In a context where sustainability has shifted from being an option to becoming a requirement, the hospitality sector faces increasing pressure to align its practices with sustainability principles. Within this scenario, it is essential to understand how the environmental, social, and economic pillars influence customer loyalty and, consequently, their intention to return to the same hotel. The study involved 348 customers who had stayed at a hotel for at least two nights. A quantitative, cross-sectional approach was adopted to test the proposed hypotheses. Data were collected through a questionnaire administered to a probabilistic sample. The results revealed that positive perceptions of sustainable practices implemented by hotels have a significant impact on the intention to return, with this relationship being strongly mediated by customer loyalty. Furthermore, the findings show that the environmental, economic, and social pillars contribute differently to this effect. These results reinforce the importance of an integrated approach to sustainability in the hospitality sector, not merely as an ethical commitment but as a strategic factor in fostering customer loyalty and encouraging their intention to return.

Keywords: sustainability, triple bottom line, customer loyalty, return intention, hospitality industry.

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List of acronyms and abbreviations

AMOS	-	Analysis of Moment Structures
AVE	-	Average Variance Extracted
B	-	Unstandardized beta
CFA	-	Confirmatory Factor Analysis
CFI	-	Comparative Fit Index
CI	-	Confidence intervals
CR	-	Composite Reliability
HI90	-	Higher bound at 90%
LO90	-	Lower bound at 90%
M	-	Mean
Max	-	Maximum
Min	-	Minimum
MSV	-	Maximum Shared Variance
p	-	p-value
RMSEA	-	Root Mean Square Error of Approximation
SD	-	Standard-deviation
SE	-	Standard error
SEM	-	Structural Equation Modelling
SPSS	-	Statistical Package for the Social Science
SRMR	-	Standardized Root Mean Square Residual
TLI	-	Tucker-Lewis Index
χ^2/df	-	Chi-Square/ Degrees of freedom

Introduction

In a global scenario marked by environmental challenges, social inequalities, and economic instability, sustainability has become a cross-sectoral requirement across various industries, including hospitality (González-Rodríguez et al., 2020). The growing concern about climate change, the scarcity of natural resources, and the social responsibility of organisations has significantly influenced consumer preferences, with customers increasingly valuing products and services that align with the principles of sustainable development (Miller & Torres-Delgado, 2023). Within this framework, sustainability is no longer perceived as merely an ethical choice but has emerged as a strategic imperative for building competitive advantage and fostering customer loyalty (Pereira-Moliner et al., 2021).

In the hospitality sector, the incorporation of sustainability principles translates into the adoption of practices that minimise environmental impacts, promote social justice, and ensure long-term economic viability (Han & Hyun, 2018). These practices, in addition to contributing to the preservation of future generations, are fundamental to meeting consumer expectations, as customers increasingly pay attention to organisations' commitment to sustainable development. According to Shoukat and Ramkissoon (2022), guests value experiences that reflect their personal and social values. This appreciation is evident in the preference for hotels that use clean energy, support the local economy, or engage in initiatives that positively impact surrounding communities (Khatter et al., 2021). Thus, the decision to return to a hotel is influenced not only by the tangible quality of services but also by the perceived responsibility and authenticity of the hotel (Tostões, 2022).

This trend aligns with the concept of conscious consumption, whereby individuals take ethical and sustainable criteria into account when making purchasing decisions (White et al., 2019). Consumers seek not only to satisfy functional needs but also to feel that their choices contribute to greater causes, such as environmental protection or social inclusion (Han et al., 2019). By choosing a hotel that adopts sustainable practices, guests develop a symbolic connection with the brand, reinforcing their commitment and increasing the likelihood of returning (Uludag et al., 2024).

Against this backdrop, this study aims to analyse the impact of the three pillars of sustainability — environmental, economic, and social — on customers' intention to return to the same hotel, considering the mediating role of customer loyalty. It is assumed that management practices strategically oriented towards creating shared value not only enhance brand image but also

foster the development of long-term customer relationships (Qiu et al., 2019). Therefore, this study addresses the need to deepen the understanding of the psychological and behavioural mechanisms that link sustainable practices to loyalty and return intention, contributing to the consolidation of a more resilient, competitive, and sustainable business model.

1. Theoretical background

1.1. Sustainability in the hospitality industry

The incorporation of sustainable practices in the hospitality sector, beyond significantly contributing to environmental preservation and social progress, also serves as a differentiating and strategic factor in strengthening the competitiveness of hotels and fostering long-term relationships with customers (Wong & Kim, 2020). The tourism and hospitality sector — a core component of the global economy — encompasses a wide range of establishments dedicated to providing accommodation, food and beverage services, event organisation, and leisure activities (Page & Connell, 2020). Hotels can be categorised into different typologies (e.g., hotels, resorts, guesthouses) depending on the type of service offered, star classification, target market segment, or geographic location (Migdadi, 2024).

With the increase in environmental awareness and the pressure exerted by consumers and stakeholders, there has been a growing demand for sustainable practices within the sector. This has led to the adoption of measures such as improving energy efficiency, implementing responsible waste management, using renewable energy sources, and reducing carbon footprints (Murphy & Gouldson, 2020). Guests appreciate personalised and authentic experiences that align with their values, preferring establishments committed to environmental and social well-being (Shoukat & Ramkissoon, 2022). Differentiation based on service quality, innovation, and sustainability has become an essential vector for the success and longevity of hospitality businesses (Pereira-Moliner et al., 2021). In this context, it is crucial to understand how sustainable strategies, when linked to the construction of loyal customer relationships, influence return intentions (Tostões, 2022).

The three pillars of sustainability — environmental, economic, and social — play a central role in how hotels operate, position themselves in the market, and interact with various stakeholders (Miller & Torres-Delgado, 2023). Environmental sustainability refers to minimising the ecological impact of hotel operations through the efficient use of natural resources, ecosystem conservation, and the implementation of practices such as recycling,

water and energy management, and waste reduction (Khatter et al., 2021). Economic sustainability entails balancing business profitability with social responsibility and efficient resource management, promoting financially viable and resilient business models committed to long-term value creation (Njoroge et al., 2020; Qiu et al., 2019). Social sustainability focuses on valuing human capital and local communities, fostering inclusion, equity, professional development, and partnerships with social initiatives that promote education, health, and culture (Jäggi, 2022).

The integrated and effective implementation of these three pillars contributes to the sustainable development of the sector, strengthens the hotel's value proposition, enhances guest satisfaction, and boosts customer loyalty. Therefore, sustainability is no longer solely an ethical or legal responsibility but has become a strategic element critical to consolidating business competitiveness and long-term sustainability (TravelPerk, 2023).

1.2. Relationship between sustainable practices and the intention to return to the same hotel

Return intention is a key indicator in hotel management, as it reflects guests' predisposition to return to the same hotel based on their previous experiences. This behaviour is often interpreted as an expression of customer loyalty and has a direct impact on the financial and operational sustainability of hospitality businesses (Viet et al., 2020). Among the main factors influencing return intention are service quality, personalised attention, problem-solving effectiveness, the comfort of facilities, and perceived value for money (Padlee et al., 2019). The opportunity to experience memorable stays, marked by positive emotions and interaction with the local culture and community, tends to significantly increase return intentions (Bec et al., 2019). Such positive experiences enhance the perceived value of the service and create emotional bonds that encourage repeat visits (Viet et al., 2020).

Environmental, social, and economic practices — the three fundamental pillars of sustainability — can directly influence consumers' perceived value and, consequently, strengthen their intention to return to the hotel (Pereira-Moliner et al., 2021). Environmental measures such as efficient management of natural resources, reduction in energy and water consumption, and waste minimisation policies can significantly enhance a hotel's image among customers increasingly aware of environmental issues (Han & Hyun, 2018). The adoption of socially responsible practices that promote employee well-being, involve the local community, and value cultural authenticity also positively impacts guest satisfaction, contributing to the

strengthening of emotional ties (Pereira-Moliner et al., 2021). In the economic dimension, transparency and responsibility in financial management, including fair pricing practices and clear communication of value, consolidate customer trust and loyalty (Njoroge et al., 2020). Therefore, return intention can be understood as a behavioural manifestation of loyalty, strongly influenced by the effective integration of the three pillars of sustainability into hotels' operational and communication strategies. Understanding the nature of these factors enables the development of integrated strategic approaches capable of fostering long-term customer relationships, enhancing institutional reputation, and ensuring sustainable growth (Zou et al., 2022).

Based on this evidence, the first research hypothesis was formulated:

Hypothesis 1: The environmental (H1a), economic (H1b), and social (H1c) practices implemented by hotels influence customers' intention to return.

1.3. Influence of the three pillars of sustainability on customer loyalty

Customer loyalty is recognised as one of the main strategic objectives in the hospitality sector, being influenced by several factors, among which sustainable practices stand out (Han et al., 2019). In this context, the three pillars of sustainability — environmental, economic, and social — play an important role in building long-term relationships between guests and hotels (Shoukat & Ramkissoon, 2022).

Customers value the preservation of natural resources, the reduction of negative impacts on ecosystems, and the environmental responsibility demonstrated by hotels (Khatter et al., 2021). When these actions are perceived as authentic and consistent, they foster customer identification with the hotel's values and promote loyalty (Sun et al., 2022). Sustainability is also reflected in efficient resource management aimed at ensuring financial viability without compromising service quality (Yusof et al., 2017). The adoption of energy-efficient technologies, the promotion of local products, or the reduction of operational costs can directly benefit guests, both at the level of the experience and the final price (Qiu et al., 2019). When customers perceive that resources are managed responsibly and transparently, they tend to develop a higher degree of trust and loyalty towards the hotel (Pereira-Moliner et al., 2021).

Respect for workers' rights, investment in the continuous training of teams, and support for local social and cultural initiatives reflect a concern for collective well-being (Jäggi, 2022). Studies conducted by Uludag et al. (2024) show that guests recognise and value such engagement, especially when they perceive that their choice contributes to relevant social

causes. The perception of a genuine commitment to sustainable practices reinforces the emotional engagement with the hotel, consolidating lasting relationships that go beyond mere momentary satisfaction (Shoukat & Ramkissoon, 2022).

Based on the reviewed literature, the second research hypothesis was formulated:

Hypothesis 2: The environmental (H2a), economic (H2b), and social (H2c) practices implemented by hotels have a positive impact on customer loyalty.

1.4. Mediation model

The relationship between sustainable practices implemented by hotels and customers' intention to return does not occur exclusively through a direct pathway (Han et al., 2019). This intention may be influenced by attitudinal or emotional mediating variables (Uludag et al., 2024). Within this context, customer loyalty emerges as a central mediating variable, acting as a bridge between the perception of sustainable practices and the intention to return to the same hotel (Sun et al., 2022).

Environmentally conscious customers tend to value hotels that adopt sustainable environmental practices. According to Khatter et al. (2021), such initiatives not only meet the expectations of an increasingly environmentally aware segment of consumers but also enhance the organisation's credibility and reputation. These practices increase guest satisfaction and emotional engagement, promoting loyalty, which acts as a mediator between the positive perception of environmental initiatives and the intention to return (Han et al., 2019).

Management practices that demonstrate a balance between operational efficiency and a commitment to economic sustainability are also highly valued by customers. Research by Qiu et al. (2019) shows that strategies promoting profitability without compromising service quality (e.g., the use of sustainable technologies, the adoption of fair pricing policies) are perceived as indicators of responsibility and organisational maturity. When these practices are communicated clearly and consistently, they strengthen guests' trust, thus enhancing their loyalty (Njoroge et al., 2020). Khan et al. (2020) further emphasise that trust is a decisive factor in customer loyalty.

Initiatives such as supporting cultural projects, hiring local employees, or investing in continuous training are perceived as indicators of corporate social responsibility (Lee & Song, 2015). When guests recognise such engagement, they tend to identify with the hotel and develop an emotional connection to their experience (Jäggi, 2022). This connection translates into a higher degree of loyalty, acting as a mediating mechanism between the perception of social

Based on these considerations, the third research hypothesis was developed:

Figure 1 presents the conceptual model of the study, highlighting the proposed relationships between the variables and the respective research hypotheses.

```

graph LR
    EP[Environmental pillar] --> CL[Customer loyalty]
    EcP[Economic pillar] --> CL
    SP[Social pillar] --> CL
    CL --> ITR[Intention to return]
    ITR --> EP
    ITR --> EcP
    ITR --> SP

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Source: Author's own work

This research, adopting a cross-sectional design, employed a quantitative approach to analyse the interactions among the studied variables and to test the proposed hypotheses. Data collection was conducted through the administration of a questionnaire, using probabilistic sampling. This method allows for more representative results, thereby increasing the validity and generalisability of the study's conclusions (Wang, 2024).

2.1. Sample

The study involved the participation of 348 customers who stayed in hotel establishments between January and March 2025, with 50.6% of the sample comprising male respondents. The participants' ages ranged from 19 to 76 years, with a mean age of approximately 40 years ($SD = 11.92$). Table 1 presents a detailed description of the participants' sociodemographic characteristics.

Table 1

Sample characteristics

Sociodemographic variables	n = 348
Sex	
Male	176 (50.6%)
Female	172 (49.4%)
Age group ($M = 40.40$; $DP = 11.92$)	
≤ 30 years	74 (21.3%)
31 – 40 years	114 (32.8%)
41 – 50 years	90 (25.9%)
≥ 51 years	70 (20.1%)
Nationality	
Angolan	62 (17.8%)
Brazilian	24 (6.9%)
Spanish	20 (5.7%)
Mozambican	88 (25.3%)
Portuguese	94 (27.0%)
South African	28 (8.0%)
Other nationality (e.g., English, Ukrainian, Indian)	32 (9.2%)
Educational qualifications	
Secondary / vocational education	167 (48.0%)
Higher education	181 (52.0%)

Note: M = Mean; SD = Standard-deviation

Source: Author's own work

2.2. Data collection instruments

Triple Bottom Line Scale. To assess the sustainable practices implemented by hotels, fifteen items originally developed by Poudel et al. (2014) and later validated for the Portuguese population by Almeida et al. (2025) were adapted. This scale covers the three pillars of sustainability: (i) environmental (e.g., *The activities promoted by this hotel encourage the conservation of natural areas*); (ii) economic (e.g., *The activities promoted by this hotel create new markets for local products*); and (iii) social (e.g., *The activities promoted by this hotel*

provide opportunities for participation in local cultural activities). The internal consistency of the three subscales proved satisfactory both in previous studies and in the present research, with Cronbach's alpha values ranging between 0.73 and 0.89.

Customer Loyalty Questionnaire. Customer loyalty was assessed based on an adaptation of seven items originally developed by Suárez et al. (2007) and subsequently used by Martinez et al. (2014; e.g., *This hotel is always my first choice*). The Cronbach's alpha coefficients obtained ranged between 0.86 and 0.90, indicating adequate internal consistency.

Behavioural Intention Questionnaire. The intention to return to the same hotel was assessed using three items adapted by Rodrigues et al. (2024), based on the scale proposed by Mason and Paggiaro (2012; e.g., *I intend to return to this hotel in the future*). In both the present study and previous studies, the scale showed satisfactory internal consistency, with Cronbach's alpha coefficients ranging between 0.81 and 0.85.

Control Variables. Age and gender were used as control variables. According to Khan et al. (2020), personal characteristics such as age and gender influence customer loyalty in the hospitality sector. Hou and Wu (2020) add that younger customers tend to be more aware of environmental and social issues and are therefore more likely to return to hotels that implement sustainable practices. Moreover, Moise et al. (2021) show that gender influences perceptions and responses to green practices adopted by hotels, with women generally being more receptive to such initiatives. When sustainable practices are aligned with customers' values and expectations, they reinforce brand identification, increase loyalty, and enhance return intentions (Norazah & Norbayah, 2015).

2.3. Procedure

Data collection was conducted online through the administration of a survey. The survey link was shared with guests from various hotels after obtaining prior authorisation from hotel managers. At the beginning of the questionnaire, the objectives of the study were presented, and participants were assured of the anonymity and confidentiality of their responses. The statistical analysis of the data was carried out using SPSS (version 30) and AMOS (version 29).

2.4. Statistical analysis

The verification of multivariate normality was conducted using Mardia's coefficient (1980), which assesses skewness and kurtosis indices, as well as the associated statistical significance (p-value). The results indicated that this assumption was met ($Mardia_{skewness} =$

4.648, $p = 0.584$; $Mardia_{kurtosis} = 8.824$, $p = 0.421$), as the standardised value of Mardia's coefficient exceeded 5% ($p > 0.05$; Hossain et al., 2022; Mardia et al., 2024). Moreover, skewness values (ranging from -1.12 to 0.97) and kurtosis values (ranging from 0.50 to 1.25) fell within the recommended interval of [-1.5; 1.5], making them suitable for the application of structural equation modelling (Lam & Zhou, 2020).

Although the primary aim of this study was to analyse a mediation model, Harman's single-factor test was performed, including all items, to assess common method bias (Kock et al., 2021). The results revealed a single-factor solution accounting for 47.1% of the total variance, suggesting that the model was not compromised by this type of bias.

Regarding convergent validity, the results showed Average Variance Extracted (AVE) values greater than 0.50. Composite Reliability (CR) values exceeded the threshold of 0.70, in accordance with the criteria established by Cheung et al. (2024). In parallel, it was found that the Maximum Shared Variance (MSV) remained lower than the AVE, as recommended by Acar et al. (2023), supporting the discriminant validity of the model.

Finally, it was observed that, with the exception of age and gender, all variables were significantly correlated (Table 2). These results suggest that the sociodemographic variables mentioned do not interfere with the relationship between the pillars of sustainability, customer loyalty, and the intention to return to the same hotel.

Table 2

Descriptive statistics, composite reliability, and correlations among study variables

Variable	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	CR	AVE	MSV	1	2	3	4
Intention to return	3.60 ¹	1.07	0.91	0.88	0.86	(0.85)			
Environmental pillar	3.35 ¹	0.94	0.90	0.64	0.77	0.810**	(0.86)		
Economic pillar	3.40 ¹	0.94	0.89	0.82	0.86	0.803**	0.857**	(0.87)	
Social pillar	3.46 ¹	0.99	0.90	0.80	0.73	0.740**	0.895**	0.826**	(0.86)
Customer loyalty	3.49 ¹	0.96	0.93	0.81	0.78	0.852**	0.880**	0.854**	0.867** (0.91)
Age	40.40	11.92	-	-	-	0.097	0.073	0.090	0.116 0.070
Sex	-	-	-	-	-	0.109	0.120	0.092	0.163 0.141

Note: $N = 348$; ** $p < 0.001$; M = Mean; SD = Standard-deviation; CR = Composite Reliability; AVE = Average Variance Extracted; MSV = Maximum Shared Variance

¹Scale ranging from 1 to 5; Cronbach's Alpha are in brackets

²Sex codes: 0 = female; 1 = male

Source: Author's own work

Subsequently, confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) was conducted to assess whether the observed variables adequately represented the underlying latent constructs, as proposed by Alavi et al. (2020). The results indicated that the model demonstrated an adequate fit to the sample. [$\chi^2_{(262)} = 3.17$, $p < 0.001$, CFI = 0.91, TLI = 0.90; SRMR = 0.03, RMSEA = 0.07, LO90 = 0.07, HI90 = 0.08].

3. Results

In order to contextualise the present study, the descriptive statistical data were first presented. It was found that 52.3% of the hotels were located in Portugal, while 47.7% were situated in Mozambique. Regarding star classification, 28.2% corresponded to three-star hotels, 52.3% to four-star hotels, and 19.5% to five-star hotels. Furthermore, the average length of stay was approximately one week (Min. = 2; Max. = 11; M = 4.90; SD = 1.91), with more than half of the respondents indicating that they had stayed between three and five nights.

When asked about their intention to stay at the same hotel again, 89.1% of the participants responded affirmatively. The main reasons associated with this intention are detailed in Table 3. Conversely, among the 10.9% of customers who responded negatively, the main reason cited was the poor quality of service provided.

Table 3

Determinants of customers' intention to return to the hotel

Main determinants of the intention to return to the hotel	n = 310
Location	94 (30.3%)
Customer service	86 (27.7%)
Breakfast	50 (16.1%)
Comfort	15 (4.8%)
Price	25 (8.1%)
Cleanliness	17 (5.5%)
Other reasons (e.g., security, atmosphere)	23 (7.4%)

Source: Author's own work

Structural Equation Modelling (SEM) with maximum likelihood estimation was used to test the mediation model, assessing whether the relationship between the three pillars of sustainability and the intention to return was mediated by customer loyalty. The indicators revealed that the proposed model demonstrated a satisfactory fit [$\chi^2_{(266)} = 3.53$, $p < 0.001$, CFI = 0.90, TLI = 0.89; SRMR = 0.03, RMSEA = 0.08, LO90 = 0.08, HI90 = 0.09].

Hypothesis 1 suggested that the three pillars of sustainability — environmental (H1a), economic (H1b), and social (H1c) — influence the intention to return to the hotel. Multiple regression analysis revealed that both the environmental pillar ($\beta = 0.495$, $t = 6.622$, $p < 0.001$) and the economic pillar ($\beta = 0.421$, $t = 7.114$, $p < 0.001$) had a positive and significant impact on return intention. However, the social pillar did not present a significant effect ($\beta = -0.050$, $t = -0.738$, $p = 0.461$). The model explained 70.1% of the variance in return intention ($R^2 = 0.701$), with statistically significant model adjustment [$F_{(3, 344)} = 268.979$, $p < 0.001$]. These results suggest that the more favourable customers' perceptions are regarding the sustainable practices implemented by the hotel, the greater their intention to return.

Hypothesis 2, which postulated that the environmental (H2a), economic (H2b), and social (H2c) pillars have a positive impact on customer loyalty, was fully supported. The results revealed a positive and significant effect of the environmental pillar ($\beta = 0.340$, $t = 6.026$, $p < 0.001$), the economic pillar ($\beta = 0.307$, $t = 6.882$, $p < 0.001$), and the social pillar ($\beta = 0.309$, $t = 5.981$, $p < 0.001$) on customer loyalty. The model, with an $R^2 = 0.830$, demonstrated a high explanatory power regarding the variation in customer loyalty [$F_{(3, 344)} = 557.976$, $p < 0.001$].

Finally, Hypothesis 3 proposed that customer loyalty mediates the relationship between the three pillars of sustainability and the intention to return. The results of Model 4 of the PROCESS macro (Hayes, 2018) confirmed this mediating effect in all cases. The direct effect of the environmental pillar on return intention remained significant ($\beta = 0.307$, $p < 0.001$), while a significant indirect effect mediated by customer loyalty was also observed ($B = 0.619$, $SE = 0.067$, 95% CI [0.482, 0.746]). Similarly, a significant direct effect ($\beta = 0.304$, $p < 0.001$) and an indirect effect through loyalty ($B = 0.570$, $SE = 0.059$, 95% CI [0.453, 0.682]) were identified for the economic pillar. Finally, it was found that the direct effect of the social pillar on return intention was not significant ($\beta = 0.006$, $p = 0.926$); however, a strong indirect effect through loyalty was observed ($B = 0.838$, $SE = 0.065$, 95% CI [0.707, 0.962]; see Table 4).

Table 4

Indirect effects of sustainability pillars on return intention via customer loyalty: Results from PROCESS mediation analysis

Effects	Bootstrapping CI			
	B	SE	Lower	Upper
<i>Total indirect effect</i>				
Model 1: Pilar ambiental → Lealdade do cliente → Intenção de regressar	0.619	0.067	0.482	0.746
Model 2: Pilar económico → Lealdade do cliente → Intenção de regressar	0.570	0.059	0.453	0.682
Model 3: Pilar social → Lealdade do cliente → Intenção de regressar	0.838	0.065	0.707	0.962

Note: B = Unstandardized beta; SE = Standard error; CI = Confidence intervals

Source: Author's own work

These results suggest that even when a sustainable practice does not have a direct impact on return intention, as observed with the social pillar, its influence may operate indirectly through the strengthening of customer loyalty to the hotel. This finding may be related to the fact that social practices are often less visible or less salient to customers compared to environmental initiatives (e.g., waste reduction, energy efficiency) or economic initiatives (e.g., support for local producers). Moreover, it was found that the social pillar influences return intention indirectly, suggesting that although social actions may not directly affect customers' decision to return, they contribute to strengthening the emotional bond with the hotel, which translates into a significant indirect effect.

4. Discussion

This study aimed to understand how sustainable practices in the environmental, economic, and social domains influence customers' intention to return to the same hotel, by analysing the mediating role of customer loyalty. The results obtained supported the three formulated hypotheses, although some relevant nuances were observed among the pillars of sustainability.

The findings partially confirmed Hypothesis 1, as the environmental (H1a) and economic (H1b) pillars positively influenced the intention to return, whereas the social pillar (H1c) did not show a significant direct effect. The importance attributed to environmental practices confirms that guests value hotels' ecological commitment, especially when these actions are visible, authentic, and consistent with their personal values (Sun et al., 2022). In the economic domain, the perception of efficient and transparent management reinforces customers' trust and

their intention to return (Qiu et al., 2019). This result aligns with the studies by Khan et al. (2020), which highlight the appreciation for sustainable, balanced, and long-term value-oriented business models. In contrast, the social pillar did not show a significant direct impact, which may be related to the lower visibility of such practices during guests' stays (Jäggi, 2022). The literature suggests that the effects of social initiatives tend to manifest indirectly, depending on the degree of customer identification with the supported causes (Zou et al., 2022).

The full confirmation of Hypothesis 2 demonstrates that the three pillars of sustainability — environmental (H2a), economic (H2b), and social (H2c) — contribute significantly to customer loyalty. These results are consistent with the studies by Pereira-Moliner et al. (2021), who indicate that the perception of authentic and well-communicated ecological practices increases guests' trust, brand identification, and commitment. Viet et al. (2020) further add that the perception of a balance between cost and quality, combined with responsible financial conduct, strengthens customer loyalty to the hotel. Uludag et al. (2024) reinforce this perspective by stating that loyalty is fostered when customers recognise efficient, transparent management oriented towards fair value creation. Moreover, the data analysis revealed that engagement with the local community and commitment to collective well-being generate emotional bonds that enhance customers' sense of belonging, which is consistent with the findings of Murphy and Gouldson (2020).

The confirmation of Hypothesis 3 highlights that customer loyalty mediates the relationship between sustainable practices and the intention to return, with particular emphasis on the social pillar, whose effect was found to be exclusively indirect. This result underscores the relevance of loyalty as a psychological mechanism that translates the perception of sustainability into loyalty behaviours (Han et al., 2019). Research by Shoukat and Ramkissoon (2022) shows that customers do not automatically react to organisations' sustainable actions, but rather to how these actions are perceived, felt, and internalised. Consistency between communication and practice, coupled with a perception of authenticity, is essential for increasing trust and encouraging the intention to return. This mediation becomes particularly relevant in the case of social practices, whose effectiveness depends on the emotional involvement and identification of customers with the hotel's values (Sun et al., 2022).

4.1. Theoretical and practical contributions

From a theoretical perspective, this study contributes to a deeper understanding of sustainability within the hospitality sector by adopting an integrated and critical approach to

analysing the impact of the three pillars of sustainability on customers' return intentions. Furthermore, it challenges the prevailing assumption in the literature that the environmental, social, and economic pillars exert homogeneous effects on consumer behaviour. The findings revealed a significant differentiation in the weight attributed to each pillar. It was found that the environmental and economic pillars exert a direct and significant influence on return intention, while the social pillar has only an indirect impact mediated by loyalty. These results suggest that the effectiveness of sustainable practices depends not only on their implementation but, more importantly, on how they are perceived and experienced by customers. In particular, the findings raise the hypothesis that social actions, often less visible or less understood, require specific communication and engagement strategies to translate into return behaviours.

Additionally, the mediating role of customer loyalty highlights the importance of emotional and relational dimensions in consolidating the bond between the customer and the hotel. The results demonstrate that loyalty emerges as a consequence of sustainable practices and of customers' identification with the brand's values.

From a practical standpoint, the results provide relevant insights for hotel management in designing loyalty strategies based on sustainability. The fact that only practices perceived as visible and authentic influence return intention emphasises the need to communicate sustainable commitments and actions clearly, consistently, and in an emotionally engaging manner.

Regarding the environmental pillar, it is important to note that the effectiveness of initiatives such as the reduction of plastic use or the adoption of renewable energies depends on their visibility and coherent integration into the guest experience. Perceived authenticity plays a central role in transforming sustainable practices into competitive advantages.

In the economic domain, although efficiency and transparency in management are not always directly perceived by guests, the perception of balance between price, value, and quality strengthens trust and, consequently, loyalty. Thus, a subtle yet effective communication approach focused on long-term, sustainable management is recommended.

With respect to the social pillar, the results suggest that it is necessary to make social responsibility actions more visible by humanising them through the sharing of real stories, faces, and projects. Enabling customers to participate, even symbolically, in the hotel's social initiatives enhances emotional engagement and strengthens loyalty.

This research also highlights that loyalty goes beyond traditional benefit programmes, such as points cards or discounts. The creation of emotional bonds, based on shared values and authentic experiences, proved essential for stimulating return intentions and positive word-of-

mouth. Hotels that manage to translate their sustainable practices into meaningful and emotionally engaging experiences will be better positioned to build long-term relationships with their customers.

4.2. Limitations and suggestions for future research

Despite the relevant contributions this study makes to the understanding of sustainability in the hospitality sector, some limitations must be acknowledged, which may constrain the generalisability and depth of the results obtained.

Firstly, although the sample size was adequate for the statistical analyses performed, the sampling was non-probabilistic and concentrated predominantly on guests from specific geographical regions and sociodemographic profiles. This limitation may restrict the applicability of the results to other cultural, economic, or territorial contexts where the perception of sustainability and its influence on loyalty and return intention might differ.

Secondly, the methodology relied exclusively on customers' subjective perceptions of the sustainable practices observed during their stay. While suitable for capturing consumer representations, this approach may not fully reflect the actual effectiveness or authenticity of the practices implemented by hotels. This issue is particularly relevant for the social pillar, whose direct impact was not confirmed, suggesting a possible discrepancy between the actual practices and their visibility or comprehension by guests.

Moreover, the study adopted a cross-sectional design, capturing the relationships between variables at a single point in time. Since loyalty is a dynamic and cumulative process, the lack of a longitudinal perspective limits the understanding of how the relationship between sustainable practices and return behaviours evolves over time.

Based on these limitations, several recommendations for future research are proposed. First, expanding the sample to include diverse geographical and cultural contexts is suggested, in order to test the robustness of the model across different markets and consumer segments. Replicating the study in cultures with varying levels of environmental and social awareness may offer valuable insights into the specificity of the effects observed.

In addition, a deeper exploration of the social pillar using qualitative methodologies, such as interviews or focus groups, is recommended. These methods would allow for a richer understanding of the perceptions, emotions, and symbolic interpretations associated with corporate social responsibility practices, clarifying why this pillar primarily exhibits an indirect effect.

Furthermore, it would be pertinent to conduct longitudinal studies that track the evolution of customer loyalty over time. Such an approach would enable the analysis of phenomena such as reinforcement, erosion, or transformation of loyalty, depending on the consistency and authenticity of the sustainable practices perceived by guests.

Finally, it is recommended that future studies segment the analysis by customer type, comparing, for example, domestic versus international tourists, or regular versus first-time visitors. This line of research could identify potential differences in perception, valuation, and responsiveness to sustainable practices, thereby contributing to the development of more personalised and culturally sensitive loyalty strategies.

Conclusion

This study demonstrated that positive perceptions of sustainable practices implemented by hotels significantly influence guest behaviour. The findings validate the importance of the three pillars of sustainability — environmental, economic, and social — in building long-term relationships with customers. The results showed that environmental and economic practices exert a direct impact on return intention, whereas the social pillar acts mainly through an indirect effect mediated by customer loyalty. This finding reveals that, although all three pillars contribute to value creation in the hospitality sector, their effectiveness strongly depends on how they are perceived and experienced by customers. More than the mere existence of practices, their visibility, authenticity, and ability to generate emotional engagement are critical. Customer loyalty emerges as a key mediating variable, functioning as the mechanism that transforms positive perceptions of sustainability into actual return behaviours.

The findings reinforce the idea that hotels that communicate their sustainable actions clearly and consistently, while demonstrating authenticity in their commitment, are more likely to foster higher levels of customer loyalty. The promotion of experiences that align with guests' personal values proves to be a decisive factor in strengthening competitiveness in the market. These results reiterate that sustainability should not be seen merely as a regulatory requirement or a market trend but rather as a structural pillar of the value proposition in contemporary hospitality.

The proposed model distinguishes itself by simultaneously integrating the three pillars of sustainability and by highlighting the mediating role of loyalty in the relationship between sustainable practices and return intention. Unlike previous approaches that postulate a direct,

linear relationship between sustainability and return behaviours, this study demonstrates that affective loyalty is an essential prerequisite for converting the perception of sustainability into the intention to return.

In addition to offering relevant theoretical contributions, this study presents significant practical implications for the strategic management of hotel units, underlining the need to align authentic sustainable practices with effective communication strategies focused on creating emotional bonds. The results also suggest new research avenues aimed at analysing the dynamics between sustainability, customer experience, and loyalty building. Understanding these relationships can help identify the strategic factors that underpin competitive success in the hospitality sector.

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Appendix 1 - Statement from the Ethics Committee of ISG/CIGEST



Ethic Commission ISG / CIGEST

Reference: CIG_0010.12/2025

Date: April 29, 2025

Requested by: Professor Rosa Rodrigues

Title: "The impact of sustainability practices on guests' return intentions: The mediating role of customer retention in the hospitality sector"

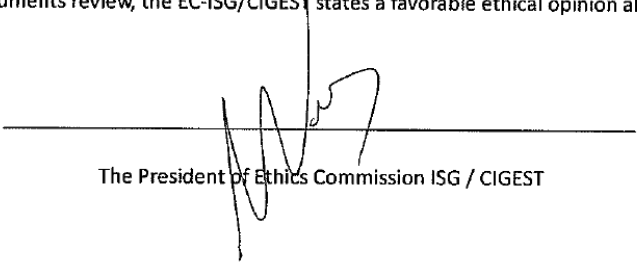
Authors: Rosa Isabel Rodrigues and Sajeeda Khalid Dedat

The Ethics Committee of Instituto Superior de Gestão / CIGEST reviewed your application to obtain ethical assessment for your manuscript. Documents were analysed by professor Miguel Varela, Professor Ricardo Ferro and Professor Mariana Marques.

The commission has reviewed the manuscript and the applied questionnaire, validating that anonymity and confidentiality have been assured. Also, the commission notices that an informed consent was presented to the participants.

None of the researchers participating in this study took part in the decision making and voting procedure for this assessment.

Based on the documents review, the EC-ISG/CIGEST states a favorable ethical opinion about the request.



The President of Ethics Commission ISG / CIGEST

Ethics Commission ISG / CIGEST, Rua Professor Reinaldo dos Santos, nº 46 A, 1500-552 Lisboa (Benfica)

Appendix 2 - Official confirmation of manuscript submission to Frontiers in Sustainability

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