

How is sustainability integrated in luxury hotel marketing? The case of Swiss hotels

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Abstract

Luxury hotel marketing increasingly promotes sustainability, yet how this communication aligns with the experiential and symbolic foundations of luxury remains insufficiently understood. While prior research has often framed luxury and sustainability as conflicting concepts, limited attention has been paid to how sustainability is strategically embedded and communicated in service-based luxury contexts from a managerial perspective. Addressing this gap, the present research examines how sustainability is integrated into the marketing communications of Swiss luxury hotels, with a focus on underlying motivations, practices, and challenges. A qualitative multiple-case study approach is adopted, triangulating semi-structured interviews with hotel managers, academic literature, industry reports, and online travel reviews. Findings show that sustainability is incorporated through environmental, socio-cultural, and managerial practices and is communicated mainly via dedicated online channels, destination-based experiences, and collaborations with local actors. The study identifies implicit versus explicit communication strategies, and key challenges related to measurement, greenwashing concerns, and audience alignment. By mobilizing signaling theory and the Online Communication Model, the research reveals how sustainability communication operates through complementary visible and embedded signals, allowing hotels to convey sustainability while preserving exclusivity and experiential value.

Keywords: sustainable luxury; hospitality marketing; experiential luxury; case study methodology; destination ecosystem; signaling theory.

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1. Introduction

Communicating sustainability in luxury hospitality raises a fundamental tension. Luxury brands rely on symbolic value, exclusivity, and experiential richness, while sustainability communication is often associated with transparency, accountability, and responsibility-oriented claims. In the context of luxury hotels, this tension becomes particularly salient, as marketing communication must simultaneously preserve the experiential and emotional foundations of luxury while responding to growing expectations regarding sustainable practices (e.g., Shrivastava *et al.*, 2025).

Existing research on sustainable luxury has primarily examined this tension from the perspective of consumers, focusing on attitudes, intentions, and perceived value. While these studies provide important insights into how sustainability influences luxury consumption, they offer limited understanding of how sustainability is strategically integrated into luxury service-based contexts such as hospitality. As a result, the communication processes through which luxury hotels articulate, frame, and operationalize sustainability remain underexplored (Athwal *et al.*, 2019).

In this study, luxury is described as a set of high-quality, high-priced goods or services that trigger the hedonic and eudaimonic happiness of customers. These two outcomes – and the underlying experiences – are achieved by signaling authenticity, aesthetics, exclusivity (Holmqvist & Diaz Ruiz, 2020; Ko *et al.*, 2019), as well as sustainable practices (Batat *et al.*, 2025). The literature explains that the first type of happiness relates to pleasure and enjoyment, while the second requires meaning and purpose (Batat, 2022). Indeed, the term “eudaimonia” means “well-being”, and, in this context, it refers to choices and actions that are congruent with personal values and the true self (the “daimon”), contributing to its growth (Ryan, 2001). This implies that the decision of high-end travelers to stay in green luxury hotels can be a consequence of their pursuit of eudaimonic happiness and wellbeing, since the hotel’s (markedly) sustainable practices are supposedly in line with their identity and values (Jain *et al.*, 2025). Following this description, by extension, the new generation of luxury hospitality providers consists of five-star hotels that offer the highest levels of comfort, service, maintenance, and décor (Hotelleriesuisse, 2020), rooted in both individual and collective well-being (Batat *et al.*, 2025). Thus, luxury services are described as extraordinary, exclusive experiences (Wirtz *et al.*, 2020) that offer not only pleasurable moments, but also well-being and self-realization (Iloranta, 2019).

Scholars argue that marketing communication is essential for luxury brands, enabling them to emphasize intangible benefits and build an emotional connection with prospective customers, as brand status depends significantly on the imaginary and perceptions of consumers (Kyrrousi *et al.*, 2022). Furthermore, incorporating sustainability into marketing, driven by consumer demand, can provide luxury hotels with a competitive edge, especially among customers who exhibit “green” behaviors or have an interest in “slow travel” (Rishi *et al.*, 2015). Findings suggest that luxury hotel messages emphasizing sustainability, rather than customer service, tend to drive higher booking intentions, especially among clients who care about environmental issues (Amatulli *et al.*, 2021).

The importance of sustainability in luxury hotel marketing also makes it valuable to examine how it is communicated, especially given the apparent paradox between (pro-self) luxury services and pro-social behavior (Alghamin & Ndubisi, 2022; Athwal *et al.*, 2019). Additionally, scholars highlight the challenge of balancing the exclusivity expected of luxury brands with the digital accessibility demanded by newer consumers, such as Millennials (Oliveira & Fernandes, 2022). Although this topic holds significant research potential, luxury marketing communication is still described as “an uncharted research area” (Kyrrousi *et al.*, 2022, p. 1), with a similar consideration can be made about sustainable luxury, for which there has been a call for more studies (Pereira *et al.*, 2021; Athwal *et al.*, 2019).

This study addresses the research gap by examining how sustainability is integrated into the marketing communications of luxury hotels in Switzerland, along with the motivations behind this choice. Switzerland provides a relevant context due to its strong commitment to be positioned as a sustainable tourism destination (Switzerland Tourism, 2024a). This gap is particularly relevant given the growing prominence of sustainability in tourism and hospitality markets. Recent research indicates a growing, yet ambivalent, interest in sustainable travel experiences, combining heightened environmental awareness with increasing fatigue toward a lack of “sustainability in action” (Booking.com, 2024).

To achieve our research objective, we opted for a qualitative case study, triangulating evidence from multiple sources: semi-structured interviews with luxury hotel managers, academic literature, industry reports, as well as online travel reviews from two hotel groups and four five-star hotels. Findings were then used to create a framework illustrating the reasons (i.e., “why”) and activities (i.e., “how”) involved in integrating sustainability into luxury hotel marketing communications. The theoretical significance of this study lies thus in the exploration of marketing communication practices within luxury hotels that invest in sustainability. Leveraging on signaling theory (Shahid *et al.*, 2024), it contributes to the literature (e.g., Amatulli *et al.*, 2021; Pereira *et al.*, 2021; Sahin *et al.*, 2020) by investigating whether the promotion of experiential luxury within hospitality can be successfully performed and how it should be integrated. This research is relevant because, on the one hand, the concept of luxury is changing – from “more and more” to “less is more” – because of a variety of factors, including demand (Liu *et al.*, 2023). On the other hand, the subjectivity and inconspicuousness of experiential luxury (Iloranta, 2019) can open the door for a full integration of sustainability principles within the understanding of luxury as a concept – something which was anticipated in broader business research (e.g., Hennings *et al.*, 2013) but never explored (to the best of our knowledge) from a hotel-manager viewpoint. Consequently, the practical significance of this study lies in the exploration of reasons, challenges and solutions for the fruitful integration of sustainability in luxury hotel marketing by comparing diverse hotels on this subject; an activity that managers do not necessarily have the resources to perform. Indeed, there is an important difference between acting sustainable, knowing how to act, and knowing how to communicate that act – a topic of interest for luxury hotels that have integrated sustainability in their business model (e.g., Wurst, 2023).

2. Theoretical background

2.1. *Aligning sustainability and luxury: a signaling theory perspective*

Although for many years luxury and sustainability have been perceived as opposites (Alghamin & Ndubisi, 2022), the pressure of accountability and a heightened sensitivity toward sustainable purchasing from the demand side have led to a reconsideration of the relationship between these two concepts (e.g., Jestratijevic *et al.*, 2020). In this regard, scholars identify numerous communal elements. The functional dimension of luxury includes quality and durability; the latter is at the core of sustainability, while craftsmanship and authenticity create the foundation for high quality products and services (Hennings *et al.*, 2013).

From a marketing perspective, personal values and intimate self-disclosure – that is, revealing one’s engagement in sustainability – matter for successful promotion of sustainable luxury (Shan & Xu, 2025). Indeed, this phenomenon occurs because high-end products and services are identitarian and reflect one’s personal orientation (Hennings *et al.*, 2013). This personal, emotional dimension arguably explains the rising importance of meaningful experiences over conspicuous brand names. Within the phenomenon of quiet luxury, simplicity allows wealthy customers to send discreet signals that can only be captured by their own kind (Eckhardt *et al.*, 2015) – since showing off to the masses is not a concern for them (Taylor *et al.*, 2025). Eventually, simplicity – in contrast to abundance and conspicuousness – is part of sustainability and thus creates an additional point of contact between these two concepts, paving the way to the promotion of sustainable luxury brands (e.g., Islam *et al.*, 2022). Furthermore,

customers opting for voluntary simplicity are arguably interested in human and environmental well-being – thus, taking a holistic approach to consumption desires (Cristini *et al.*, 2022). Pressure from customers has been identified as an important driver for luxury hotels to start communicating about sustainability (Mariani, 2022).

Signaling theory helps framing the alignment between luxury and sustainability for a unique value proposition (Shrivastava *et al.*, 2025), and its appropriate communication (e.g., Zhang *et al.*, 2026). This theory examines contexts in which two parties face an information imbalance. In such situations, the actor possessing the information – that is, the sender – must determine which elements to disclose to the other party – that is, the receiver. Signals are typically defined as actions or characteristics that, whether intentionally or unintentionally, shape others' beliefs or transmit information within a market setting. While the sender decides how to formulate and transmit the signal, the receiver is responsible for evaluating and interpreting the information conveyed (Osburg *et al.*, 2024). Brands can use visible cues to communicate otherwise unobservable qualities and shape consumer judgments. For instance, established luxury labels may reduce consumers' reluctance toward repurposed goods by signaling reliability and craftsmanship. High-priced sustainable luxury can function as markers of prosocial commitment, enabling consumers to display altruistic or status-oriented motives. Accordingly, some consumers may choose sustainable luxury not only for environmental or social reasons but also for the prestige associated with these signals (Ye, 2025).

2.2. Sustainable luxury marketing: a supply viewpoint

The concept of sustainable luxury dates back to Bendell and Kleanthous (2007), who described it as brands that prioritize sustainability as a core value and apply it concretely throughout their supply chains, respecting both people and the planet. Engaging younger audiences, such as Generations Y and Z, who show strong interest in sustainability (Brydges *et al.*, 2022), requires clear communication on these efforts (e.g., Pencarelli *et al.*, 2020). Since the introduction of the concept, research has explored this theme extensively, with Athwal *et al.* (2019) categorizing studies related to sustainable luxury marketing into three thematic groups: consumer perspectives, cross-cultural aspects, and organizational issues and activities. The latter mainly consists of the efforts in communicating properly about sustainable initiatives to avoid “greenwashing” accusations, overcome challenges arising from possible conflict between luxury imaginary and eco-friendly activities, and ensure supply chain transparency – including information about local sourcing.

The concept of “green marketing” finds its origins in the late 1980s (Peattie & Crane, 2005), and refers to business practices aimed at creating, marketing, pricing, and delivering products with a minimal impact on the environment (Tiwari *et al.*, 2011). The phenomenon of “greenwashing” occurs when enterprises engage in symbolic communication about pro-environment actions, that are not backed by genuine actions (Ruiz-Blanco *et al.*, 2022). Recent studies highlight regulatory efforts to combat greenwashing, as vague and misleading sustainability claims have eroded public trust (Peng *et al.*, 2024). These efforts include sanctions and clearer guidelines that define deceptive claims, aiming to improve disclosure transparency.

Even when firms adopt sustainable practices, they may hesitate to promote them for fear of being seen as insincere or exaggerated, which could harm their reputation (Chan, 2013). This phenomenon, known in the literature as “green hushing”, consists in under-communicating the hotels' sustainable actions (Shen *et al.*, 2020). In the hospitality sector, customers may suspect that certain environmental messages are only meant to cut operational expenses, such as encouraging guests to reduce energy consumption or reuse their towels (Majeed & Kim, 2022). Thus, to mitigate “greenwashing” concerns, Majeed and Kim (2022) suggest implementing appropriate green marketing activities and independent certifications.

For luxury hotels, sustainable marketing is particularly challenging due to the potential for greenwashing accusations *as well as* perceived conflicts between luxury and eco-friendly services (Peng & Chen, 2019). This dilemma affects the broader luxury sector, from watchmaking to tourism. Yet, scholars argue that sustainability can align with the luxury essence, as both highlight quality, creativity, and preservation. For this reason, luxury groups consider sustainability as a key success factor. Yet, they may still limit their communication on the topic to appeal to a broader audience (Kapferer & Michaut-Denizeau, 2020). In the tourism sector, sustainability arguably represents a key component for business success (Amatulli *et al.*, 2021). Addressing this claim, a study by Amatulli *et al.* (2021) shows, for instance, that sustainability-focused communication, as opposed to service-focused, leads to a higher willingness to book a luxury hotel room – thus, providing strong support for hoteliers to engage in sustainable marketing activities.

In addition, an evolving view of luxury supports the integration of sustainability. Modern concept of luxury emphasizes non-material, experiential values such as time, space, tranquility and cultural authenticity – over material opulence (Spode *et al.*, 2019). This perspective aligns well with green initiatives, as providing unique, immersive experiences in nature or meaningful cultural connections enhances the perception of luxury while supporting environmental responsibility. In this sense, sustainable luxury emphasizes quality over quantity and caters to travelers seeking self-fulfillment and authenticity.

Engaging in sustainable practices should also involve efforts toward supply chain transparency, with companies clearly communicating – for example, on their websites (Suluo *et al.*, 2023) – about sourcing and suppliers (Jestratišević *et al.*, 2020). In the hospitality context, marketing research shows that effective communication on locally sourced products is important for restaurants, and advertising messages focused on community-benefits and preservation can be enticing for customers (Kim *et al.*, 2022). By extension, strong connections with local suppliers and culinary heritage arguably creates a unique selling proposition for luxury hotels, adding authenticity through storytelling and encouraging guests to further explore local sources (Franco *et al.*, 2022). Millennials and Gen Z members, who account for 30% of new customers in the luxury goods market since 2019, are particularly receptive to this type of communication and arguably driven by “authentic, purpose-driven, transparent brands” (Bharwani & Mathews, 2023, p. 231).

2.3. *Digital marketing for luxury tourism and hospitality*

Digital marketing encompasses “all marketing efforts that use an electronic device or internet”, including the use of channels such as website, email, social media, and search engines (Desai, 2019, p. 196). The range of available digital tools, for both suppliers and consumers, has made digital marketing highly interactive, user-centered, and measurable, driven by both supply and demand factors (Piñeiro-Otero & Martínez-Rolán, 2016). Taking a communication perspective, the key pillars and processes of digital marketing activities have been outlined within the Online Communication Model (OCM), which underlines the importance of aligning material (software and hardware) with human resources *within a market context* to maximize the appeal of online content to audiences that bring their own values and preferences *also* in the online environment (Mele & Cantoni, 2018). These OCM elements can be expressed in terms of content and functionalities, technical (accessibility) tools, managers, users, and external environment (**Figure 1**). Following the model, managers should refrain from merely “targeting” prospects or clients. Instead, they are encouraged to foster meaningful dialogue through active listening – supported by digital analytics – and by delivering carefully tailored content that integrates the promotion of sustainable practices (Kalbaska *et al.*, 2018). These features make the model arguably suitable to guide the investigation on sustainability integration in luxury hotel marketing.

For the luxury industry, digital marketing is an inevitable business shift, which is expected by Millennials, baby boomers and even older generations; a dynamic that comes with benefits (Oliveira & Fernandes, 2022) and several challenges, including the tension between exclusivity and (digital) accessibility as well as creating a seamless customer experience across all touchpoints (Abtan *et al.*, 2016). Indeed, research shows that when luxury goods are perceived as too democratic – that is, accessible and mass-produced –, they lose their appeal as symbols of conspicuous consumption, making them less attractive (Shukla *et al.*, 2022). However, luxury's traditional focus on conspicuous consumption is now evolving to coexist with the emergence of inconspicuous behavior and interest in social connections (Shukla *et al.*, 2025), where greater accessibility, due to globalization and ICT, allows luxury to appeal to a wider socioeconomic audience. New values, especially among younger consumers, increasingly include personal fulfillment, intrinsic experiential value, self-directed pleasure, and sustainability (Atkinson & Kang, 2022). Indeed, Generation Z, as an emerging consumer segment in the luxury sector, has been recognized as a force that has pushed toward increased accessibility, digitalization, and sustainability within the industry. Compared to the preceding generations, their interest in social media, ethical consumption, and experiences over possession has driven luxury brands toward a stronger focus on sustainable participation and digital presence, with virtual platforms becoming an opportunity for enhanced personalization and interactivity (Ye & Kim, 2024).

Other elements that characterize the luxury industry, making it unique, include its reliance not only on marketing but also on consumer perception, with much of its brand equity built within consumers' imaginary (Kyrousi *et al.*, 2022). In luxury advertising, the goal is often less about selling products directly than creating an aspirational image, which can be undermined by sales growth or over-exposure in the media (Kapferer & Bastien, 2009). The object of luxury has changed, with “traditional” categories like clothing, watches and jewelry, now joined by the rise of “experiential luxury”, including hotels, restaurants, or spas (Guido *et al.*, 2020) – which is arguably a manifestation of the social megatrend that prioritizes experiences over possessions (Lehmann, 2020).

Research on digital marketing for luxury hospitality and tourism has investigated the importance of websites for luxury hotels (Baloglu & Peckan, 2006), customer segmentation (Zhang *et al.*, 2022; Huh *et al.*, 2019; Wu & Yang, 2018), and repurchase intentions (Peng & Chen, 2019a). A literature review identifies four macro groups in luxury tourism marketing research: consumer consumption and behavior, service marketing, and brand management (Iloranta, 2022). An analysis of the literature on luxury hotels – conducted by Chu *et al.* (2016) – has revealed that marketing and technology are the most frequently researched themes, and that there is a noticeable lack of qualitative research addressing the “how” questions. In a qualitative study, Kapoor and Kapoor (2021) explain, for instance, that social media marketing can be beneficial for luxury hotels by helping them build a strong social footprint, engage with current or potential customers and enhance brand recall through authentic storytelling. Given the time-intensive nature of social media management, luxury hotels tend to contract external agencies to perform the job for them. Other qualitative research shows that sustainability initiatives in luxury hotels can positively impact customer satisfaction online, including on social media platforms (Pereira *et al.*, 2021). The reason(s) and the process behind their integration remain, although, underexplored in scientific research, suggesting a significant area for further academic inquiry.

The integration of sustainability into luxury hotel marketing has emerged as both a necessity and a challenge, given the historical perception of luxury and sustainability as contradictory concepts. Recent shifts in consumer values – particularly among younger, environmentally conscious travelers – have prompted luxury hotels to align their offerings with principles of well-being, authenticity, and environmental responsibility. However, despite growing interest, the literature reveals a significant gap in understanding how sustainability is effectively communicated in luxury hospitality contexts. While prior research has explored sustainable luxury from consumer and organizational perspectives, little is

known about the actual marketing practices adopted by luxury hotels, especially from a managerial viewpoint – including the motivations that drive these practices.

3. Methodology

To explore the reasons (“why”) and methods (“how”) behind the integration of sustainability in luxury hotel marketing communications, we opted for an in-depth qualitative case study. This research approach was considered appropriate for our purpose since it had already been successfully applied in previous research on sustainability and hospitality (Gutiérrez-Martínez & Duhamel, 2019). Qualitative research is well-suited to provide “rich, in-depth knowledge from multiple viewpoints”, while shedding light on processes and reasons underlying tourism phenomena (Jennings, 2012, p. 309). This research followed a multiple-case study design, and the unit of analysis (i.e., “the case”) was the integration of sustainability in luxury hotel marketing. The rationale for multiple-case design was literal replication, through the selection of cases that would provide exemplary outcomes in relation to the focus of enquiry (Yin, 2018). Developing convergent evidence, data triangulation was obtained through multiple sources of evidence: semi-structured interviews, online travel reviews (OTRs), academic literature, and industry reports.

To select interview participants, we used maximum variation sampling (Saunders *et al.*, 2019), a purposive technique allowing the identification of “information-rich cases for the most proper utilization of available resources” – which results in a list of (very diverse) participants with relevant information and experience for the phenomenon of interest (Etikan *et al.*, 2016, p. 2). In Switzerland, at the time of the study, we found a total of 57 five-star (or 5-star superior) hotels holding the “Swisstainable” label which measures and certifies sustainable practices undertaken by accommodation providers and offers guidance to customers (Switzerland Tourism, 2024b). Through professional contacts, we secured participation from representatives of 4 luxury hotels and 2 luxury hotel groups (each representing multiple hotels in Switzerland). This corresponded to approximately 10% of the original pool of hotels. These varied in terms of characteristics, sustainability efforts, and locations (**Table 1**). As performed in previous research (Pereira *et al.*, 2021), we conducted one interview per hotel with one or two key informants each. Following the recommendation from Eisenhardt (1989), multiple investigators (3) were involved in designing the interview instruments and protocols.

Interview questions were structured according to a theoretical framework, namely the OCM, which describes the characteristics, actors, and processes involved in online communication, summarized as content, accessibility tools (e.g., user interface), managers, users, and the external environment (e.g., outside environment, trends, and competitors) (**Figure 1**). These components are then part of an iterative process of evaluation and design. The external environment has an influence on the expectations and behavior of visitors as well as on the decisions of the managers (Cantoni *et al.*, 2003). The original framework was designed for online communication via websites; however, its characteristics allow for application across diverse platforms. In this study, its use as a guiding structure is justified by its clear mapping of online communication actors, objects, and contexts, as well as its relevance for examining the integration of sustainable practices into marketing activities (e.g., Kalbaska *et al.*, 2018) – specifically, for what concerns the responsibility of managers to include the dimensions of sustainability into promotional content and the importance of persuading users of the benefits associated with sustainable practices. Finally, interview questions were adapted from the literature, previous qualitative research on sustainable practices in luxury hotels (Pereira *et al.*, 2021), and an industry report on effective marketing for eco-conscious hotels (Cendyn, 2024). Consequently, after formal introductions, interviewees were asked about the integration of sustainable practices, online communication strategies, their knowledge of eco-conscious customers and their perceptions, as well as marketing performance evaluation activities. The relationship between the interview and the OCM is outlined in **Table 3** (Annex).

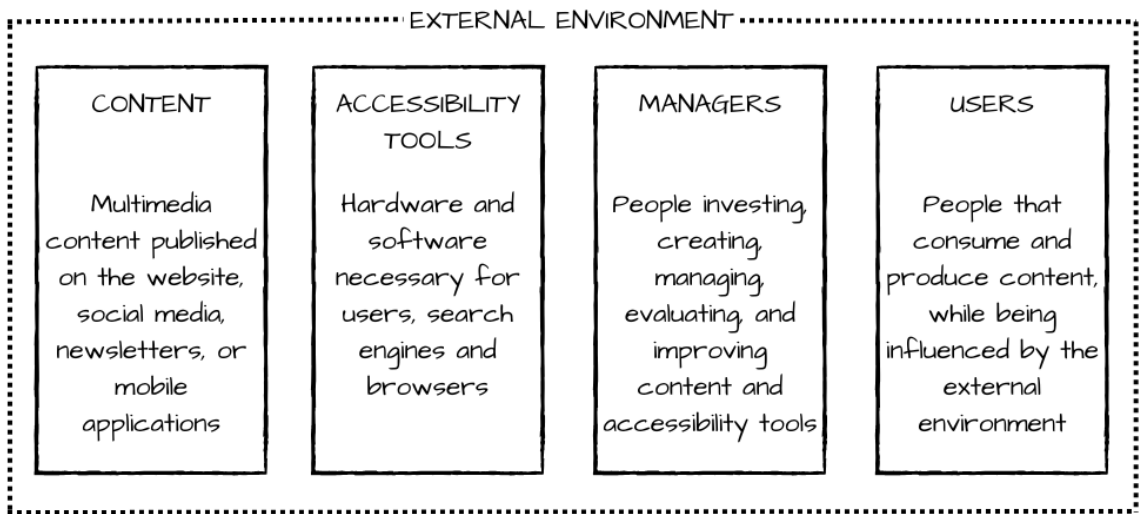


Figure 1. Authors' own adaptation of the Online Communication Model (Cantoni et al., 2003).

All semi-structured interviews – except one written response from a manager (#lux1) who could not be available for an online or on-site interview – were conducted online between March and May 2024, in German, French, or English depending on participant preference. With explicit consent from the hotel managers, all conversations were recorded to ensure accurate transcription. Furthermore, anonymity was guaranteed by assigning participant codes and by making properties unidentifiable. The duration of the interviews ranged from 30 to 45 minutes. The semi-structured format was chosen for its flexibility to explore topics in depth, follow-up on unexpected answers, and let interviewees express their viewpoints “without the constraints of scripted questions” (Tracy, 2020a, p. 158).

Interview data were triangulated with academic literature, industry reports, and OTRs extrapolated from the Customer Experience Platform (TrustYou, n.d.) which aggregates OTRs about hotels, from over 220 sources, into categories (e.g., sustainability) and sub-categories (e.g., sustainable sourcing) through automated semantic analysis. The number of categories varies depending on whether a certain topic is mentioned in the reviews with the tool tracking the frequency of these mentions; a single review may include mentions across multiple categories or sub-categories. For data triangulation, the “sustainability” category and the sub-categories “excursion” (within “location”) and “biking” (within “sporting activities”) were pre-selected for analysis, given the importance of natural attractors in Switzerland (Mele & Egberts, 2023). Combining an inductive approach – which is common in qualitative research (Tracy, 2020b) – this selection was confirmed following an exploration of the data provided by the Customer Experience Platform (TrustYou, n.d.).

The “sustainability” category captures those mentions related to socio-economic and environmental dimensions, such as the local sourcing of food and beverage. The “excursion” sub-category contains references to tours and activities that highlight the aesthetic and experiential value of the destination, including slow-mobility options, like biking and waterside walks, which are important for sustainable mobility (Maltese et al., 2017). The selection of this sub-category was supported by the idea that sustainable luxury hotels should promote responsible activities that respect and value the destination’s cultural and natural resources (Luxonomy, 2023). Over a two-year range (01.06.2022–31.05.2024), we investigated whether the topic of sustainability emerged from the OTRs for the sampled luxury hotels.

OTRs were analyzed for two main reasons. First, as part of data triangulation, the purpose was to strengthen the validity of the findings by cross-verifying claims made by hotel managers with real-world guest experiences and perceptions. The combination of interviews with destination stakeholders with customers viewpoints expressed in OTRs had been also done in past tourism research to investigate the creation and marketing of an experience (e.g., Heimtun & Haug, 2022). Second, this data source provided unfiltered, spontaneous feedback from guests, offering insights on sustainability perceptions by actual customers – who also consider user-generated content as an instrumental source of information, where sustainability-related considerations can be reported (Pacheco *et al.*, 2024). Therefore, OTRs complemented the managerial viewpoint and helped assess whether marketing messages would resonate with the audience.

Within data triangulation, industry reports (or guides) were meant to bring insights produced by organizations, agencies, and businesses related to the luxury sector. Anytime it was applicable, their purpose was to validate or challenge findings from interviews and academic literature, as done in previous tourism research (e.g., Bramwell & Meyer, 2007). Furthermore, we integrated them to contextualize the findings within a wider hospitality landscape, while highlighting trends or best practices that would not necessarily emerge from interviews. A total of 6 industry-produced documents (reports or guides) were included in the data triangulation process (Annex, **Table 4**).

Table 1. *Interviewees' information.*

Interview code	Interviewee(s) role	Affiliation	Location(s)	Other information
#lux1	CEO of Hotel Operations, PR Director	Hotel Group	City and mountain	International sustainability certification ¹
#lux2	Purchasing and Sustainability Director	Hotel Group	City and mountain	International sustainability certification ¹
#lux3	Marketing and Communication Manager	Independent Hotel	City	International sustainability certification ¹
#lux4	Manager in charge of sustainability	Chain Hotel	City	International sustainability certification ¹
#lux5	Director	Independent Hotel	Mountain	Family hotel
#lux6	General Manager	Independent Hotel	Mountain	Historic family hotel

Note: ¹ The name of the certification has been anonymized to avoid the identification of the properties.

To summarize, this study aims to explore how sustainability is incorporated into the marketing strategies of luxury hotels in Switzerland, and to understand the motivations, methods, and challenges associated with this integration. Our unit of analysis (i.e., “the case”) was the integration of sustainable efforts in the marketing activities of luxury hotels, which functioned as “the context” in the case study design. Data triangulation strengthened our findings and helped to delineate content themes in the corpus. First, a within-case analysis provided familiarity with the data and allowed for the identification of preliminary categories (e.g., “highlighting sustainability on online platforms”). Second, a cross-case comparison, combined with other data sources, allowed us to reject or confirm the preliminary findings

and to identify similarities and differences among the cases (Eisenhardt, 1989). Consistent with prior research (Gutiérrez-Martínez & Duhamel, 2019), this process led to the development of final themes (e.g., “sustainability marketing”) that enhanced the understanding of the phenomenon under study.

4. Findings

Data triangulation from interviews, scientific articles, industry reports, and OTRs, revealed three macro-themes: (1) integration of sustainability practices, (2) sustainability marketing, and (3) communication challenges. Each theme is supported by evidence from multiple sources. Extracts from the sampled OTRs offered examples of the language and wording used by clients. Findings from the Customer Experience Platform (TrustYou, n.d.) (**Table 2**) indicate that while sustainability-related mentions are present in the sampled OTRs, their absolute frequency is substantially lower compared to mentions of other categories, such as hotel, food, and room reviews. To provide a context, over a seven-year period, an average of only 10% of the comments on TripAdvisor’s top 10 green hotels mentioned sustainability elements (Yi *et al.*, 2016).

This outcome can be explained by different elements. First, previous academic research indicates that only one out of three luxury segments places emphasis on sustainability. For most customers, however, top priorities remain cuisine, design, and facilities when selecting a 5-star hotel (Mele *et al.*, 2024). Moreover, sustainability may now be perceived as a standard expectation rather than a distinctive feature worth mentioning in reviews (e.g., Philip, 2022). From these premises, the following subsections explore the integration of sustainability in luxury hotels, its role in marketing, and the associated communication challenges. Information from interviews is either presented as direct quotation or summarized; in both cases the property number is indicated for transparency. Findings from the interviews were triangulated with academic literature, industry reports, and extracts from OTRs. References are provided throughout to allow a clear distinction between sources.

4.1. Integration of sustainability practices

Sustainable practices at the sampled properties addressed the natural environment, sustainable management, and societal aspects. One interviewee (#lux3) underlined efforts focused solely on environmental sustainability and hotel management, whereas the others *also* emphasized their investments in social sustainability. These commitments were certified via national labels – namely, the “Swisustainable” certificate – and international ones, like Green Globe (2024). Research shows that green certifications enhance the effectiveness of advertising for luxury hotels by making their offered services more tangible in a high-involvement context (Sahin *et al.*, 2020).

Interviews revealed that sustainability principles extended beyond processes or products (e.g., recycling rates and gastronomic offerings) to include hotel infrastructure initiatives, like offsetting CO₂ emissions through geothermal energy and heat recovery. This approach to integrating sustainability in luxury hospitality aligns with previous research, which highlights the importance of preserving natural ecosystems not only for diversity and abundance, but also to enhance location attractiveness (Pereira *et al.*, 2021). Indeed, the latter influences hotel selection and significantly impacts guest movements (Shoval *et al.*, 2011). Activities at the destination and experiences related to its heritage also emerged from the interviews, as reported in this extract:

“[...] I would say that almost all year round, we regularly have packages that allow clients to enjoy a fairly local experience. For example, we have packages where the client, in addition to their overnight stay, gets a guided city tour by electric bike or can go for a walk through the vineyards. There are also small electric tuk-tuks. So, there's a driver and then six seats in the back.” [#lux3, translated from French]

Overall, studies on OTRs suggest that implementing sustainable practices (even in luxury hotels) does not generate discomfort for guests, “as long as the staff courtesy keeps quality standards” (Brito *et al.*, 2023, p. 1545). Furthermore, sustainable gastronomic offerings, for instance, attract guests because of their local, authentic appeal (Sims, 2009). This trend was also evident in the analyzed OTRs, like the following one (from #lux5):

Superb welcome, beautiful room, idyllic setting. The Spa is great. Small downside that explains the 4-star rating: the service at the [...] restaurant: it is not the highest level, despite the top-notch food. It is worth trying the local products. I highly recommend this hotel [...] [Translated from French, review published on TripAdvisor on 05.11.2023]

Interviews reveal that socio-cultural sustainability in luxury hospitality primarily involves long-term employee retention, collaboration with local producers, and the valorization of landscapes – an element of strong cultural significance in Switzerland and a key asset for tourism. As noted in the literature (Mele & Egberts, 2023), visitors benefit from Swiss landscapes both aesthetically and experientially. At the same time, these landscapes hold significant economic and socio-cultural value for local communities, who also benefit from visitor spending. This extract shows an example of how the regional landscape and terroir – that is, wine-related heritage in a Swiss city – are valorized through on-site or nearby wine and cheese experiences, connecting guests with the local culture and environment:

In [this city], as I said, [we offer] wine and cheese [experiences] as [there is] our cheese maker also coming to the resort, and wine as well. So, you do white wine tasting with local wineries at the hotel, or you do that on the inner winery on [the] premises of a wine maker. [#lux2]

Thus, interview results align with previous research on luxury hospitality and sustainability in protected areas, which highlights how supporting the local ecosystem contributes to profitability and enhances reputation (Pereira *et al.*, 2021). The topic of sustainability received positive mentions in the OTRs, as demonstrated in the following example (from #lux1 properties):

A modern and sustainable hotel that impressed us — not only with its attentive and always friendly staff — but also with its view. Many small and very well-thought-out details make the stay a pleasure. [Translated from German, review published on Google on 08.04.2024]

Sustainability is also found to be addressed as a human resources and cultural issue, entailing the willingness to create a shared mindset among hotel staff and improve internal practices (#lux2) also by attending courses on the topic (#lux4). Employee retention, internal communication, and valorization of staff contributions are elements that emerged as key aspects of workforce sustainability, as shown in this extract:

What is certainly a major topic for us is social sustainability, by ensuring that we can retain employees in the long term, by trying to be sustainable as a company—so that we, as a family business, can continue to develop. [...] We publish a newsletter [...]. Many of the articles in this newsletter are written by current and former employees, aiming to bring our guests closer to the stories behind our staff, or to share where long-standing employees have gone after leaving or retiring. [#lux6, translated from German]

These activities are related to employee well-being, which in turn boosts performance, motivation, and workplace loyalty – with substantial improvements in business outcomes (EHL, 2025), since satisfied employees arguably lead to satisfactory hospitality experiences (Tourobs, 2023). Finally, sustainability

extended to the wellness offerings (#lux1, 5-6), featuring measures like staggered opening hours, reduced water temperatures, regional product use, and seasonal activities connected to nature.

Table 2. Sustainability-related mentions and subcategories extracted through the Customer Experience Platform (TrustYou, n.d.).

Interview code	Total reviews	Total mentions	Sustainability-related mentions	Subcategories
#lux1	5026	9122	25 (0.49%) ¹	Eco-friendly hotel, sustainable sourcing, waste reduction, slow mobility (biking), valorization of the destination (excursions)
#lux2	6112	14292	19 (0.31%)	Sustainable sourcing, valorization of the destination (excursions)
#lux3	2691	4039	7 (0.25%)	Waste reduction, slow mobility (biking), valorization of the destination (excursions)
#lux4	796	1524	1 (0.12%)	Valorization of the destination (excursions)
#lux5	969	2991	23 (2.37%)	Sustainable sourcing, eco-friendly hotel, and energy efficiency, valorization of the destination (excursions)
#lux6	3430	4083	9 (0.26%)	Eco-friendly hotel, valorization of the destination (excursions)

¹ Relative frequency of sustainability-related mentions over the total number of reviews. Since a review can contain the mentions of multiple sub-categories, this should be considered as an indicative value only.

4.2. Sustainability marketing

Sustainability marketing and communication, as revealed through interviews, are managed internally, sometimes by a dedicated team of people (#lux 1, 4-6), with support from the marketing and HR departments (#lux5). External parties contribute by offering energy-saving training for employees (#lux3), copywriting and public relations to spread sustainability messages (#lux2), and gathering detailed information and insights on the topic (#lux1). This aligns with a broader trend of luxury brands establishing dedicated teams to handle sustainability marketing communications, addressing concerns about unsustainable and irresponsible practices (Nallaperuma *et al.*, 2022).

Findings suggest that the primary channels for communicating sustainability to customers include the hotel's website dedicated section, social media platforms, and newsletters. Other methods mentioned by interviewees include the hotel's magazine (#lux3), interviews with local actors (#lux 4, 6), initiatives like sustainable guest programs and university lectures (#lux1). Specific marketing activities performed at the properties include showcasing sustainable features on websites and other platforms, launching online campaigns aimed at eco-conscious audiences through dedicated channels (#lux1, 5-6), and maintaining a blog focused on sustainability efforts (#lux1). Research highlights the value of blogs in enhancing Search Engine Optimization, brand awareness, and customer engagement (Almeida & Magalhães, 2022). Social media platforms, like Facebook and Instagram, are particularly relevant for connecting with younger luxury consumers (Oliveira & Fernandes, 2022; Achille *et al.*, 2018), as they enable the sharing of sustainability-related stories and partnerships, including collaborations with local suppliers (#lux 1, 5-6). The platform LinkedIn can also be occasionally used for these communications (#lux3).

Hotel managers can go beyond the online promotion of sustainable practices *at their properties* by informing guests about (sustainable) experiences or activities to be done *at the destination*. Indeed,

luxury hotels can act as orchestrators of local ecosystems – in gastronomy, for example – “by enhancing the position of both their firm and the destination” (Franco *et al.*, 2022, p. 3445). Examples shared by interviewees include activities with local providers and associations, regional picnics, eco-friendly tours, and encouraging the use of public transport or electric vehicles. Among the local providers, farms were mentioned by one interviewee:

We try to communicate on the menus, for example, when we use an animal from a farmer in the neighboring valley, by mentioning it by name. This often leads to guests stopping by during their hikes to see where the meat they ate the day before came from. And in the summer, we occasionally organize picnics on these farms. We arrange these for our guests, where we have a picnic on the farm featuring their products, which are prepared by our chefs. [#lux6, translated from German]

Farms hold an important cultural value in the Alps, where visitors can “enjoy the scenery and taste products that they perceive as typical and unique” (Pachoud *et al.*, 2020, p. 10). Mountain farms are thus captured by the guests’ gaze, as shown in the following review extract (from #lux6 property):

[...] If you want to have an exceptionally good time in a stunning place with relaxed people, this is the place for you, for example for hiking or trying out cable cars. You can walk straight into a lonely high mountain valley with farms. [...]. [Translated from German, review published on TripAdvisor on 03.03.2023]

Interviews reveal that corporate clients (#lux 3-4), and guests from European, American, and Anglo-Saxon markets (#lux 1, 3) show greater interest in sustainability-related information. Swiss guests, in contrast, tend to view sustainability as a legal obligation rather than a lifestyle choice, which applies for the Anglo-Saxon guests instead (#lux1); while guests from the Middle East have limited awareness of sustainability issues (#lux3). One interviewee (#lux6) estimated that at least 30-35% of their guests were interested in sustainability, often indicated by their use of public transportation. Finally, a hotel group representative (#lux2) declared that they would not collect data on client perceptions of sustainability, while another (family hotel, #lux5) noted minimal interest among their clientele (91% Swiss, 42-48 years old, families). Interviews also highlighted that sustainability was not a factor hoteliers considered in customer segmentation – for which demographics and travel purpose (leisure vs. business) were rather used.

Sustainability-related inquiries vary, with some guests expecting bike racks or alternatives to plastic bottles (#lux4); questions are also asked about the local sourcing for gastronomic products (#lux 1, 3-4). One interviewee reported that sustainability-related inquiries and concerns were particularly relevant for business travelers and MICE (Meetings, Incentives, Conferences & Exhibitions) events (#lux2); while two respondents from two independent hotels declared that they hardly had any questions concerning this topic (#lux 5-6). What follows is an extract from the interview with #lux2 about marketing sustainability for MICE:

I think there is still some more things to be done [...] in the MICE business. The conventions are [...] asking for more sustainable activities [...]. From the marketing and sales side, [...] our key clients like the big companies [...] are asking certificates. So, you fall off a list from some performance of artists or [...] hotel operator or as a congress venue, if you are not certified. [#lux2]

Findings about hotel audiences are supported by existing literature, which points to the importance of sustainable experiences for US-Americans (AHLA, 2025; Eastman *et al.*, 2021), British and Canadian customers. These last two markets not only prioritize eco-centered values more than others (e.g., France) but also adopt a broader view of sustainability that extends beyond environmental protection

(Cervellon & Shammass, 2013). Furthermore, scholars suggest that sustainable consumption is still in its infancy in the Middle East – hence, there may be gap between positive attitudes toward sustainability and actual behavior (Hammad *et al.*, 2019). Finally, sustainability is emerging as a key factor in location selection of locations in the MICE and business travel sector (Weber, 2019).

4.3. Communication challenges

Numerous obstacles have been identified through the interviews when it comes to the communication or promotion of sustainable practices by luxury hotels. First, a portion of the clientele does not seem to be interested in or sensitive to sustainability issues (#lux 3-4). According to an interviewee, this applies especially to visitors from the Middle East and India (#lux4):

The most eco-conscious travelers are Europeans, like those from Germany or even the Swiss ones [...]. The least [eco-conscious] are guests from India [...], Middle East, for whom [this] is really not a priority. [#lux4, translated from French]

Second, different customers have diverse expectations in terms of sustainability, which increases the complexity of a communication strategy on the topic (#lux2). Challenging points include communicating the match between sustainability and luxury without making it appear as a contradiction, towel re-use, and the lack of products that are out of season (#lux6). Another interviewee (#lux5) also mentions that social issues – which are part of sustainability – are difficult to communicate; staff turnover and employees' integration of sustainability values add another layer of complexity to the matter (#lux2). Finally, the representatives of one hotel group (#lux1) underline that the greatest challenge is communicating sustainability appropriately for the reference audience(s). The timing, amount, and depth of the communication content must be chosen according to the recipient. Indeed, it must not sound like lecturing; it should be rather understood as added value to the experience. Furthermore, as reported by the representative of one property (#lux3), the right balance must be found between marketing communications and the actions undertaken by the hotel, to avoid any greenwashing critique.

The interviews reveal that measuring the success of sustainability-related communication is challenging. Indeed, because of its complexity, none of the luxury hotel representatives confirmed the use of a measurement system to assess the impact of sustainability messages on consumer behavior. One interviewee (#lux2) mentioned customer satisfaction surveys as a starting point, while the representatives of one hotel group (#lux1) highlighted that persistence and repetition were key for the success of any communication effort:

That is very difficult to measure. It simply takes a long breath and repeated communication in exchange – according to the motto “Constant dripping wears away the stone”. [#lux1, translated from German]

The lack of a measurement system corresponded in most cases to a lack of information, from the managers' perspective, on the possible changes brought by sustainable marketing activities. One interviewee (#lux3) mentioned the lack of data on the subject from the OTAs' and social media platforms; other hotel managers describe sustainability as a topic for hoteliers rather than guests (#lux 5-6). Finally, the representatives from a luxury hotel group (#lux1) reported one change in consumer behavior that they could observe:

[...] 10 years ago, for example, we would have received complaints if we did not provide small shampoo bottles in the bathrooms instead of a big soap and shampoo suspenders (which is almost normal today) [...]. The same applies to the change of towels and bed linen, which are only changed every 3 days, unless

the guest requests otherwise. Nowadays, much more is questioned by guests. [#lux1, translated from German]

The information provided by the interviewees was triangulated with other data sources, including the sustainability-related mentions and subcategories extracted through the Customer Experience Platform (TrustYou, n.d.). The platform revealed that some guests expressed their negative views about the scarcity of sustainable-certified food (#lux2) or the presence of plastic bathroom bottles for the shampoo (instead of refillable containers) (#lux3). These are just examples indicating that, at least for a part of the customers, sustainability is an important matter (and not only for the hoteliers). This observation is in line with the results from research about luxury guest segmentation (Mele *et al.*, 2024) and industry insights about the importance of sustainable practices for eco-conscious travelers (Cendyn, 2024). Furthermore, interview data reveal that interest in sustainability may also be expressed indirectly by clients:

In fact, I would say that the main interest – which is not an explicit request [about sustainability] – is something that clients really like: [that is], having in their dish [...] a lot of local products. Our teams communicate this at the restaurant, and our chef works with providers for chicken, fish, vegetables, and fruits whose distance is less than 100 km [from the hotel]. There are a lot of local resources used in the kitchen. Clients really appreciate this; they are even surprised [...]. [#lux3, translated from French]

Addressing the challenge of the diverse expectations in terms of sustainability raised by one interviewee (#lux2), in one OTR we indeed found a guest appreciating sustainably sourced local products, while expecting the temperature in the heated bathtub to be higher:

[Great] location, bedding, common areas, outdoor bath, quality of the breakfast (with local products). Quality of the cuisine [...]. [...] The temperature of the heated bathtub would benefit from 3 extra degrees. [#lux5, translated from French, review published on Booking.com on 30.12.2023]

The barriers mentioned so far share as a common denominator the difficulty in matching the luxury realm of 5-star hotels with eco-friendly practices, combining indulgence and responsibility, high-end comfort and environmental consciousness (Glion, 2024). This challenge is recognized in academic research (e.g., Amatulli *et al.*, 2021). Yet, a paradigm shift is taking place, with sustainability becoming a competitive element for luxury hotels; “high quality, superior durability, and deeper value” represent a solid base “for the design and marketing of products that preserve fundamental social and environmental values” (Hennings *et al.*, 2013, p. 25). As reported by one hotel manager, sustainability can be a differentiator for certain markets:

I believe most of our guests consider it important. [...] And I think in Switzerland and Germany, sustainability is probably a widely recognized topic. [#lux6, translated from German]

5. Discussion and conclusion

This study analyzed the integration of sustainability in luxury hotel marketing, by taking the case of Swiss hotels. In line with the research objective, the OCM (Cantoni *et al.*, 2003) served as the theoretical framework guiding data collection within the case study methodology. Overall, findings from data triangulation show that luxury hotels can integrate marketing communications about sustainable practices by assigning the task to an internal team; employee training is essential for the consistent application of sustainable principles and their communication in off- and on-line environments, like the hotel’s website and social media channels. Despite the numerous barriers that hotel managers encounter in the promotion of sustainable practices – e.g., fear of greenwashing, guests’ diverse expectations in terms of sustainability – their implementation underscores, on the one hand, the

significant relevance that sustainable living has for both companies and consumers (Zuniga, 2024). On the other hand, by valuing the local ecosystem (e.g., farms, vineyards, local products), luxury hotels contribute to the preservation of the uniqueness and attractiveness of the destination, including the pull factors that appeal to present and future guests. In other words, the location becomes a source of sustainable competitive advantage for entrepreneurs, which is “hard to imitate and substitute for” (McKeever *et al.*, 2015, p. 62).

From a consumer perspective, these activities appear to be especially relevant to two types of guests, who (clearly) stood out from the interviews: the Anglo-Saxon and corporate guests, including MICE events. The former come from a public system where sustainability transparency is high (Navarro-Galera *et al.*, 2017). In terms of business travel, the relevance of a sustainable travel policy for companies can be a product of several factors, including public accountability, especially for large organizations that are “Publicly Limited Companies”, customer pressure, organizational culture, as well as the recruitment and retention strategy. Indeed, “a business travel policy that shows that the organization cares about their staff and the environment can help to attract the best talent to the organization” (Roby, 2014, p. 30).

From a psychological perspective, the destination-based experiences identified through the interviews (e.g., farm picnics, vineyard tours) can become transformative because they potentially allow guests to reconnect with nature, support local communities, and experience authenticity (Teoh *et al.*, 2021). These experiences may arguably fulfill eudaimonic needs – such as meaning, purpose, and congruence with one’s values (Hamby *et al.*, 2023) – rather than just hedonic pleasure. This can be especially relevant for the “quiet luxury” segment, where customers seek discreet, meaningful and identity-relevant experiences over conspicuous consumption (Cho & Cho, 2025). Using these findings, we have elaborated an explanatory model of sustainability integration in luxury hotel marketing. The framework illustrates the relationships between drivers and activities, which are then operationalized through explicit and implicit signaling mechanisms for strategic content diversification (Figure 2).

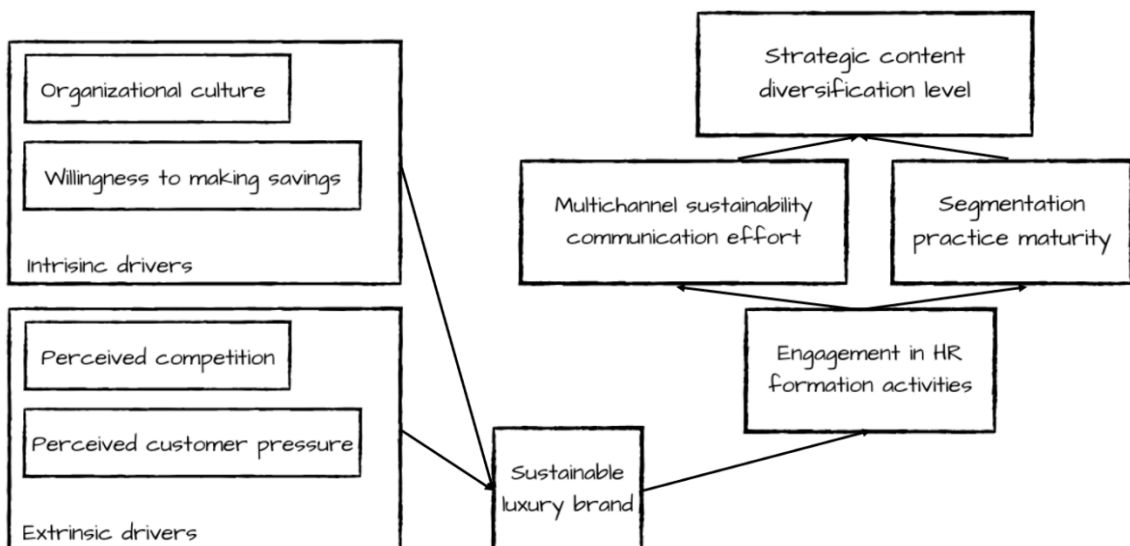


Figure 2. A framework on the key drivers and activities for sustainability marketing in luxury hotels.

Intrinsic and extrinsic drivers contribute to the formation of sustainable luxury brands, where sustainable attributes become part of the value proposition. Within a sustainable luxury hotel,

managers invest in human resources (HR) formation activities. Such training needs to include big data analytics, to uncover guests' expectations and preferences (i.e., segmentation) as well as improve the prediction of their pro-sustainable choices. This is part of the appropriate development of an effective marketing strategy for hotels, which includes multichannel communication activities on websites and social networks (Hornig *et al.*, 2023). A better knowledge of sustainable communication and digital analytics addresses the challenges related to segmentation and diverse preferences in terms of sustainability – leading to content diversification. The potential lack of interest of (some) luxury hotel guests toward sustainability is thus countered by shifting the communication from the *sustainable features* of a product to the *benefits* that these bring to them, without mentioning explicitly the altruistic attributes (Font *et al.*, 2018). This signaling choice arguably mitigates greenwashing concerns, since the topic of sustainability is addressed in an honest way (Christis & Wang, 2021) taking the customer perspective (i.e., “what do I gain from it?”). The combination of low-cost sustainability activities (e.g., efficient energy use) with appropriate marketing communications and sustainable supply procurement – within a sustainability differentiation strategy – contributes to the competitive advantage of a hotel (e.g., revenues and customer satisfaction). In particular, “hotels need to overcome customer skepticism regarding the credibility of promoting sustainability [...] through more effective communication with all stakeholders” (Walsh & Dodds, 2017, p. 682), since communication plays an important role in brand creation (Nandan, 2005)

5.1. Theoretical implications

Our research findings offer three main theoretical contributions. First, guided by the OCM (Kalbaska *et al.*, 2018), this qualitative study identifies drivers and activities involved in marketing sustainability for luxury hotels (**Figure 2**). Therefore, it brings novel insights into hospitality research, where the investigation of the communication-side of sustainable practices is scarce (Kim *et al.*, 2019). Specifically, we show that managers actively frame sustainability as an experiential and value-enhancing attribute rather than a moral or functional claim. This perspective contributes to the literature (Schuck *et al.*, 2026; Grigorescu & Ion, 2022) by repositioning sustainable luxury as a result of a strategic value proposition design and narrative construction, rather than the sole reflection of consumer psychological states.

Second, our findings expand past communication research on sustainable luxury (Osburg *et al.*, 2022) by advancing that sustainability communication in luxury hotels can be integrated as a dual-layer signaling system (e.g., Kapoor *et al.*, 2026). While prior research has highlighted the paradox between luxury and sustainability (Alghamin & Ndubisi, 2022), our findings suggest that this tension is not resolved through segmentation alone (e.g., Hamilton & Wilson, 2025), but through the coexistence of differentiated signaling practices that operate at different levels of visibility and interpretation. On the one hand, explicit sustainability signals (e.g., certifications) are deployed in contexts where transparency and accountability are expected, like corporate and MICE markets (e.g., Accor, 2025). On the other hand, implicit sustainability signals are embedded within the symbolic and experiential dimensions of luxury – such as craftsmanship, local sourcing, and authenticity – allowing sustainability to be communicated without disrupting the core luxury narrative via signal incongruence (Osburg *et al.*, 2022). Indeed, acquiring or experiencing artistic productions, including luxury meals (Michael & Fusté-Forné, 2022) – as nonutilitarian objects – is a powerful signal of social status and skill (e.g., Steel, 2013; Bird & Smith, 2005). This dual-layer signaling system arguably enables brands to maintain symbolic coherence while addressing heterogeneous audience expectations – thus, having multiple, coexisting signals that are strategically orchestrated within a single brand identity.

Third, our findings nuance prior research highlighting the “openness of emerging markets to sustainable luxury”, describing it as a global phenomenon (Osburg *et al.*, 2024: 728). Specifically, our interviews suggest that cultural differences remain influential, shaping how customers *perceive*

sustainability in luxury hospitality – underscoring the importance of cultural adaptation in this context. These contributions are in line with the proposed framework (**Figure 2**), where the key challenges identified through our data triangulation point at diverse perceptions of sustainability within the customer base – up to a lack of interest – and the scarcity of resources (including knowledge) to properly segment guests.

Supported by our findings, the above-mentioned theoretical implications lead to an advancement in the conceptualization of a luxury brand, as new a construct that is not only “capable of inspiring a deep connection, or resonance, with the consumer” (Ko *et al.*, 2019, p. 406), but it also embedded (i.e., connected) into the natural and socio-cultural ecosystem that produced and supported it. This symbiotic embeddedness with the place (e.g., Hahn & Tampe, 2020) is a characteristic that brings value (McKeever *et al.*, 2015) and resources to offer authentic experiences, while underlining craftsmanship and artisanship at premium prices; a series of attributes that mirror the diverse facets of sustainability (e.g., Hennings *et al.*, 2013) and make it possible for brands to communicate about sustainable experiences without explicitly mentioning the concept in their communications (see extract about local produce in section 4.3).

5.2. Managerial implications

In terms of managerial implications, following research results, we suggest, first, luxury hotel managers to invest in digital marketing, especially social media, because of their role in the decision-making process (Zha *et al.*, 2023) and – like all luxury advertisement – their dream-making power (Kapferer & Bastien, 2009). Second, digital content should convey sustainable features implicitly, while highlighting instead the derived hedonistic benefits for hotel guests (Font *et al.*, 2018). This strategy would avoid conflicts arising from audiences that do not understand or have no interest in sustainability. Furthermore, it would contour the complications of making explicit environmental claims, which can be subject to criticism or strict regulations (e.g., Publyon, 2024). Finally, we suggest luxury hotel managers adopt a destination-centric marketing strategy that emphasizes the co-creation of sustainable experiences with local stakeholders. This would involve forging partnerships with local actors (e.g., farmers) to design meaningful guest experiences and highlighting the destination’s cultural and natural assets in the marketing material, as part of the value proposition. Such activities will arguably be appreciated also by those guests that are pushed by eudaimonic motivations, since “eudaimonic well-being can result from restorative experiences perceived as meaningful to tourists” (Wattanacharoensil *et al.*, 2024, p. 5).

5.3. Limitations and future research

This research is not exempt from limitations. First, the results of this qualitative study are based on 10% of the original pool of luxury hotels. Therefore, generalizations should be made with caution. Yet, findings are arguably applicable to geographically and culturally close destinations in Europe, like Austria and Germany. Second, OTRs were explored and categorized using a tool for automated semantic analysis. Despite its quality, some reviews with content nuances related to sustainability might have been ignored and thus excluded from the data triangulation. In addition to addressing these limitations, future research should extend the sample by including 4-star hotels and investigate the integration of the so-called “regenerative” practices, which are meant to improve the local ecosystem.

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Appendix**Table 3.** *The relationship between interview questions and the online communication model (OCM).*

Interview questions	OCM model element(s)
<i>Promoting sustainability</i> How do you integrate sustainability into your quality offering? How do you market sustainable products, services, and experiences to the larger customer base? Do you do any of the following marketing activities? If not, why? (Property descriptions with sustainability features, dedicated sections on the website, etc.) If you do any of the above-mentioned activities, who manages them? Do you promote sustainable destinations / attractions in the area? If yes, how? If not, why? In your opinion, what are the main barriers for a luxury hotel when it comes to the communication / promotion of sustainable practices?	Content; Accessibility tools; Managers; External environment
<i>The impact of sustainability marketing</i> Do you think that some of your clients value the explicit communication of sustainable practices? If yes, who are your eco-conscious clients? What kinds of sustainability-related inquiries or concerns do potential or current customers raise? Have you ever observed a change in consumer behaviour because of sustainable marketing? If yes, can you provide an example? How do you measure the effectiveness of sustainability messages?	Managers; Evaluation and design
<i>Segmenting guests at luxury hotels</i> Is your clientele made up of different segments? If yes, could you give a brief description?	Users

Note: some questions contained lists of items or examples which have been removed for the purpose of this table. The column of the OCM (Cantoni *et al.*, 2003) shows the *main* elements being addressed by the questions.

Table 4. Reports used in triangulation of semi-structured interviews and online travel reviews.

Title	Rationale ¹	In-text citation
2025 state of the industry report	The importance of immersive and sustainable experiences for U.S. travelers, including meeting the local community and unique adventures.	(AHLA, 2025)
Hospitality outlook 2025	Employee well-being (feeling valued and supported) has important consequences in terms of business performance and overall outcomes.	(EHL, 2025)
Sustainable stays: tactics for effectively marketing an eco-conscious hotel	Sustainable hotels should identify eco-conscious travelers; people who are interested in authentic and meaningful experiences, while minimizing their environmental impact.	(Cendyn, 2024)
Green luxury, a paradox? Understanding Swiss 5-star hotel guests' values and views on sustainability. Results of an online survey conducted in December 2023	The report provides information on luxury hotel guests' preferences and groups them in segments based on benefits sought, including sustainable practices.	(Mele <i>et al.</i> , 2024)
Une étude montre un lien direct entre la satisfaction des employés et l'amélioration de l'expérience client dans les hôtels allemands	The report suggests that satisfied employees lead to satisfactory experiences for hotel customers; employee wellbeing is an important part of sustainability.	(Tourobs, 2023)
Luxury in the age of digital Darwinism	Social media are important for luxury consumers, who also engage in co-creation experiences with brands.	(Achille <i>et al.</i> , 2018)

¹ Note: this column shows the relevance of each source (report) to triangulate / confront results from semi-structured interviews or online travel reviews.