

# The COVID-19 crisis and sustainability in the hospitality industry

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – This paper offers some reflections on changes in the relationships between sustainability and the hospitality industry following the onset of the Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) crisis. (Covid-19 is officially a pandemic, but the term “COVID-19 crisis” is used throughout this paper because the authors feel that it captures the wider impacts of the crisis, rather than just focussing on the disease itself).

**Design/methodology/approach** – The paper describes the COVID-19 crisis, emphasises the role of hospitality in economic and social life and reviews how the crisis has changed the relationships between sustainability and the hospitality industry.

**Findings** – The paper reveals the dramatic effect the crisis has had on sustainability in the hospitality industry. That said, though the crisis has offered a vision of a more sustainable future, this vision may pose a major challenge for the industry and for many of its traditional customers.

**Research limitations/implications** – The paper outlines some of the theoretical, operational, strategic and research implications of the crisis for the hospitality industry and for hospitality scholars.

**Originality/value** – This paper provides a reflective review of changes in the relationships between sustainability and the hospitality industry following the onset of COVID-19.

**Keywords** COVID-19, Crisis, Sustainability, Hospitality industry, Sustainable consumption

**Paper type** Research paper

## Introduction

Sustainability within the hospitality industry has attracted considerable attention from researchers (Jones *et al.*, 2016), although Ertuna *et al.* (2019) claimed that research on sustainability in hospitality management and tourism was underdeveloped. Research has focussed on the sustainability of a range of activities and operations within the industry, including the hotel sector (Guix-Navarrete *et al.*, 2019), cruising (Bonilla-Priego *et al.*, 2014), tourism (Jorgensen and McKercher, 2019), restaurants (Cavagnaro and Gehrels, 2009), theme parks (Milman *et al.*, 2010) and events (Boggia *et al.*, 2018). Research has also explored the origins of sustainability within the hospitality industry (Mackenzie and Gannon, 2019), and a number of the themes (Jones and Wynn, 2019) and frameworks (Boluk *et al.*, 2019) were used to analyse sustainability. Within the hospitality industry, the concept of sustainability has also been applied to a range of natural disasters and emergencies (de Sausmarez, 2007; Loperana, 2016; Seraphim, 2018), but the focus has usually been on the local, regional or the national level. Gosling *et al.* (2020), for example, argued that previous work on pandemics has focused on their impact in individual countries, rather than on systemic challenges. However, the Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) crisis is widely seen as a truly global problem. More specifically, the crisis has posed wide-ranging problems for the hospitality industry and has steered it, to use a metaphor from the cruising industry, into uncharted waters. There are fears that following the COVID-19 crisis, corporate financial support for



sustainability initiatives will be dramatically reduced and possibly totally withdrawn, as companies concentrate their strategic thinking and resources on returning to some sense of normal business operations. That said, counter arguments suggest sustainability will continue to be important in re-establishing, and potentially strengthening, the relationship between the hospitality industry and both the natural and social capital on which it ultimately depends.

This paper reviews, and reflects on, some of the changes in the relationships between sustainability and the hospitality industry following the onset of the COVID-19 crisis. The paper offers a brief description of the crisis, emphasises the role of hospitality in everyday economic and social life and explores some of the changes between sustainability and the hospitality industry. This is not a conventional academic piece of work *per se*, in that, it is neither an empirical nor a conceptual paper, but it looks to rehearse, and reflect on, the arguments about the changing relationships between sustainability and the hospitality industry. However, the paper does include a cameo literature review focussed on sustainable development, crisis management, consumption and neoliberalism to reference and provide some context for the issues raised in the paper. The paper was written in May 2020 and revised in June 2020.

### **COVID-19 crisis**

COVID-19, a newly discovered coronavirus, is an infectious disease. Coronaviruses, which can affect humans, as well as a range of other mammals and birds, were first identified in 1965, and since then, they have been responsible for a number of disease outbreaks. Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS), for example, emerged in China in 2002–2003 and then spread to almost 30 countries in Asia, Europe and both North and South America. The most common symptoms of COVID-19 are fever, a cough, shortness of breath and general fatigue, and many people infected with the disease do not require any specialist medical treatment. However, people with over 70 years of age and those with underlying medical conditions may be prone to serious illness, and in some cases, the virus may prove to be fatal.

The virus spreads from between people directly or indirectly, via small droplets when someone with COVID-19 coughs, sneezes or exhales. Directly, when a person coughs or exhales and the droplets are inhaled by another person, and indirectly when the droplets settle on objects or surfaces, which can infect other people who touch these objects or surfaces with their hands and then touch their eyes, nose or mouth. The initial source and subsequent transmission of COVID-19 have become increasingly contested. While the disease was originally thought to have been traced to a food market in Wuhan in Eastern China, where some traders came into contact with animals that had the virus, there has also been some unconfirmed speculation that the virus was somehow accidentally released from a biosecurity laboratory within the city.

Whatever the source, a number of cases of an unusual type of pneumonia were reported to the World Health Organisation in Wuhan on 31 December 2019. During the next two months, the disease spread to other counties in Asia and to Europe and the USA, and Covid-19 was declared a global pandemic on 11 March 2020. At the time of writing, there is no vaccine for COVID-19, though several clinical trials are underway. While there has been guidance from the World Health Organisation, the battle against the virus has predominantly been fought at the national level. Medical authorities have struggled to provide appropriate numbers of beds and treatment facilities for seriously ill patients, to mobilise medical and care staff to treat patients and to provide personal protection equipment for those staff. Public policy and legislation designed to limit the spread of the

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disease has been dominated by restrictions on the general movement of people, namely, lockdown, and the closure of many businesses.

### Cameo literature review

A cameo literature review, focused on sustainable development, crisis management, consumption and neoliberalism, provides an academic context and a set of reference points for the paper. Defining sustainable development is not straightforward but the following definition, “development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs” ([World Commission on Environment and Development, 1987](#), p.43), first coined in the late 1980’s, is still widely used. More specifically, there are a variety of definitions of sustainable development, and by way of a summary, there are definitions based in ecology, and there are broader definitions, which embrace social, economic, environmental, ethical issues and governance. Some previous work on epidemics can be seen to be associated with the broader definitions of sustainability. [Hung \*et al.\* \(2018\)](#), for example, examined the SARS 2003 and the H1N1 (Swine Flu) 2009 outbreaks in Hong Kong. In both situations, the hospitality industry looked to adopt a comprehensive recovery plan to sustain businesses. In a short review, [Pine and McKercher \(2004\)](#) analysed the impact of the 2003 SARS epidemic on Hong Kong’s tourism industry and, more specifically, on hotels and airlines and concluded that while the industry quickly recovered following the outbreak, contingency planning was vitally important in managing the crisis. [Gossling \*et al.\* \(2020\)](#) provided an overview of the early events of the COVID-19 crisis, outlined its potential impact on sporting events, restaurants and cruises and suggested that the challenge for the hospitality industry was to learn how to accelerate the transition to a sustainable future. More generally, [Di Marco \*et al.\* \(2020\)](#) suggested that the interactions between changes in the environment and the establishment of infectious diseases had received limited attention from the scientific community, and that it had not been integrated into research work on sustainable development. Looking forwards, [Di Marco \*et al.\* \(2020\)](#) recommended that it would be wise to include the study of the emergence of infectious diseases within sustainable development planning.

There have been several attempts to theorise sustainability. As a general conceptual characterisation, many authors make the distinction between weak and strong sustainability. Here, [Roper \(2012, p. 72\)](#) suggested that the former gives priority to economic growth while the latter recognises the environmental limits to such growth and argued that “strong sustainability subordinates economies to the natural environment and society”. More substantially, there are two theoretical positions relevant to the current review. Stakeholder theory emphasises that sustainability is about meeting the needs of all company’s stakeholders, namely, the company itself, customers, employees, suppliers and society at large. [Raub and Rice \(2019\)](#), for example, emphasised the importance of the hospitality industry forming active partnerships with its stakeholders to tackle the challenges of sustainability. There are also theoretical approaches which are embedded within political economy. [Castro \(2004\)](#), for example, developed a critical theory of sustainability, arguing that economic growth relied upon the exploitation of both natural and social capitals. In proposing a deeper critical understanding of sustainability, [Amsler \(2009, p. 125\)](#) emphasised the need to “explore the complex processes through which competing visions of just futures are produced, resisted and realized”.

Three other literatures, namely, crisis management, consumption and neoliberalism also offer contexts for the current review. The first two of which are both directly related to sustainability, whereas the third has important policy implication. [Israeli \*et al.\* \(2011\)](#), for example, examined crisis hospitality management in luxury hotels in India and concluded

that government is an important factor in crisis management, and that hotel managers and governments must work together to develop action plans for future crisis situations. [Kim et al. \(2006\)](#) explored the implementation of the crisis management contingency concept during the SARS epidemic in South Korea, and their study emphasised the need to have a crisis management system in place for all eventualities and the importance of crisis management training. The traditional view of consumption is based on the notion of consumers' sovereignty ([Hansen and Schrader, 1997](#)) and in a transition towards a more sustainable future, for example, consumers would be the decisive agent of change. An alternative view suggests that a focus on social practices, and on collective, rather than on individual, choices, ([Shove and Spurling, 2013](#)) offers a more fruitful approach to promoting sustainable patterns of consumption. In simple terms, some social scientists ([Springer, 2010](#)), see neoliberalism as shaping contemporary political, economic and social policy processes, by emphasising free market mechanisms, a minimal role for the state and individual responsibility.

### **Role of the hospitality industry in economic and social life**

The hospitality industry is a major part of the world economy. Broadly defined, the hospitality industry embraces a wide variety of accommodation facilities, from resorts and hotel complexes to Airbnb homestays; food and drinks services and facilities, including restaurants, fast food outlets, bars and cafes, coffee shops and nightclubs; and travel and tourism, such as package holiday tours and ocean and river cruises. At the same time, a hospitality offer is often an important component of a large variety of sporting, entertainment and leisure, events and venues. Traditionally, many of the elements within the hospitality industry have essentially been considered as luxuries, which people can enjoy when they have fulfilled the basic needs of food, clothing and shelter. Indeed [Revfine \(2019, webpage\)](#), a knowledge platform for the hospitality industry, suggested that “a defining aspect of the hospitality industry is. . . that it focuses on ideas of luxury, pleasure, enjoyment and experiences, as opposed to catering for necessities and essentials”. However, the COVID-19 crisis has called such a characterisation of the hospitality industry into question.

Economically, the hospitality industry is the source of a large number of jobs, and while precise numbers are difficult to gauge, some trade estimates convey an impression of the scale of the jobs involved. Such trade estimates suggest that, across the world the hospitality industry employs some 212 million people, while in the European Union, almost 12 million people were employed in the hospitality industry in 2016 ([Hospitality Europe, 2017](#)) and the corresponding figure for the USA in 2020 was 14 million ([BrandonGaille, 2020](#)). Such estimates indicate that the hospitality industry supports the livelihoods of many millions of workers and their families. Where travel and tourism is a, sometimes the, major element in national, regional and local economies, as in Cambodia, Thailand, the Maldives and Fiji, for example, employment opportunities are particularly dependent, directly or indirectly, on the hospitality industry.

Socially, at a local level, coffee shops, cafes, bars and public houses normally provide important meeting places for many millions of people every day, and such places are often important centres of social and community life. Here people meet to relax, to socialise, to share their daily experiences, to play simple card and board games and to watch televised sporting fixtures with fellow patrons. At the same time, for many people, the hospitality experiences they enjoy may be seen to be important in defining their identity. At one level, an individual's identity may, in part, be forged by regular ocean cruises, often perceived to visit exotic destinations and unique environments, and at another level, identities may be

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shaped by performance prowess in sporting and leisure events, sports and fitness clubs and in games in café's, bars and public houses.

### **Sustainability and the COVID-19 crisis**

Several changes can be identified in the relationships between sustainability and the hospitality industry following the onset of the COVID-19 crisis. Environmentally, the collapse in the number of air flights and the decline in the volume of motor vehicle traffic, along with the closure of large swathes of manufacturing industry, soon led to marked reductions in the emission of greenhouse gases and in pollution levels and to reports of a range of wildlife emerging into the public domain. However, it is unlikely that such environmental gains will be sustained if, or when, some sense of normality returns to the economy and to the hospitality industry. On the one hand, more optimistically, some commentators have emphasised the importance of recognising the environmental improvements generated by the COVID-19 crisis and the need to look to build strong structural environmental measures into any new sense of normality. On the other hand, there are concerns that the COVID-19 crisis has led to relaxations in environmental regulations and policies. In the USA, for example, fuel efficiency standards for cars have been reduced, and environmental monitoring and reporting standards have been relaxed; in Brazil, environmental monitoring has been scaled back in the Amazon, and, more generally, there are concerns about the growth of the carbon footprint associated with the tremendous increase in e-commerce during the crisis.

While the COVID-19 crisis may have produced some, possibly short-term, environmental benefits, it has also had a devastating impact on economies and societies across the world. The onset of the crisis led to the temporary, and in some cases, the permanent loss of employment in the hospitality industry in the majority of countries in the developed world, but the impact on millions of people employed, directly or indirectly, in the hospitality industry in less developed countries has been catastrophic. In the travel and tourism sector, for example, estimates suggested that there could be 48.7 million job losses in the Asia Pacific region (Statista, 2020), owing to the COVID-19 crisis, with millions of jobs also at risk in all other regions. In the majority of less developed countries, there is little or no organised trade union protection for workers, no government financial support for employees and no social safety nets, as there are in many developed countries and thus millions of people have been thrown into the abyss of poverty. The impact has been particularly damaging in those countries, for example in the Caribbean, whose economy is heavily reliant on tourism. Here, the temporary termination of the cruising industry, which brought up to 20,000 visitors each day, and the closure of large numbers of major hotels, has brought massive unemployment and a wide range of attendant social problems. More generally and more positively, Baum and Hai (2020) suggested that the severe restrictions on the movement of people and the closure of many national borders has had beneficial social effects in terms, for example, in a reduction in human trafficking and of child sex tourism.

Within the business world, corporate sustainability and corporate social responsibility have become increasing important strategic issues for many large companies. The hospitality industry played its part in this process as many of its leading companies developed corporate sustainability programmes (Jones *et al.*, 2014). That said, Ertuna *et al.* (2019) argued that ensuring that international corporate sustainability goals have local legitimacy, which can reflect state, community, religious and aspirations and values, is a major challenge for the hospitality industry. The COVID-19 crisis has opened some opportunities but also posed some challenges for corporate sustainability programmes. The crisis might, for example, be seen to highlight the need to respond to demands from

investors for the leading players in the hospitality industry to facilitate reductions in carbon dioxide and greenhouse gas emissions to use more renewable sources of energy and to adopt a stronger commitment to recycling waste and circular economic principles. That said, such changes have major implications for the hospitality industry's traditional business models. Nevertheless, it is impossible to ignore the reality that the COVID-19 crisis has wrought havoc on the world's financial markets and has reduced capital availability, and this may effectively force the leading players within the hospitality industry to concentrate what financial resources they do have access to, on their core business operations. Here extensive marketing campaigns designed to promote hotels, cruises and package holidays, for example, may well gain strategic priority over environmental and social initiatives that have been an important part of corporate sustainability programmes.

Many of the leading players within the hospitality industry have emphasised their commitment to the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), designed to achieve a global transition to a more sustainable and resilient future (Jones and Comfort, 2019). However, there are fears that the COVID-19 crisis will see a reduction in the hospitality's industry commitment to the SDGs. Here, the leading players within the hospitality industry may claim that only by committing all their available resources and energies, to reopening their hotels and cruise operations, for example, and returning to some sense of business normality, will they accumulate the financial resources to continue, or more realistically, to renew, their commitment to the SDGs. At the same time, the need to make progress on the SDGs is even more pressing in many of the less developed countries where the hospitality industry is a major element in local, regional and national economies. Here, some of the social and economic gains made since the launch of the SDG's in 2016, may already be lost because of the COVID-19 crisis, and there may be major difficulties in re-establishing corporate initiatives designed, for example, to improve water supplies and basic sanitation and to work towards the elimination of poverty.

Resilience is an important theme in corporate sustainability narratives within the hospitality industry, with the focus often being on how to react positively to adversity. There are hopes that what is seen by some commentators as the industry's traditional resilience in responding, for example, to natural disasters and previous epidemics, will enable it to bounce back to some sort of normality. If some sense of normality returns to the hotel industry, for example, industry commentators have suggested that hotels will need to manage their room rates in a competitive manner and to pursue innovative marketing strategies to maximise revenue streams. Similar thoughts have emerged within the airline industry and amongst package holiday operators, where a focus on resilience in the face of adversity might provide the impetus and the opportunity to develop a more sustainable model as the threat of climate change looms ahead. Here, the focus might be on the introduction of new leaner aviation technologies and more sustainable aviation fuels. Less positively, Gossling *et al.* (2020) have warned that the COVID-19 crisis has effectively demonstrated that the tourist industry is not as resilient as industry commentators often suggest.

Sustainable development is a complex and multi-faceted concept, and in many ways, the COVID-19 crisis has highlighted some of its internal contradictions. In general terms, Van der Byl and Slawinski (2015), for example, suggested that such contradictions become apparent as companies seek to balance a variety of, often contrasting, environmental, social and economic goals. Such general tensions between the economy and both environment and society have been dramatically illustrated by the mixture of environmental gains and social and economic losses during the COVID-19 crisis. More generally, before the onset of the crisis, Jones and Comfort (2019), argued that the world's major hotel groups were privileging



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corporate economic growth above environmental and social targets. Reconciling these, often contradictory, goals presents a major dilemma for the hospitality industry. Some large companies believe that the concept of shared value, as proposed by [Porter and Kramer \(2011\)](#), which holds that corporate growth ambitions, can be accompanied by important contributions to environmental and social goals, might be seen to offer a way forward, but the COVID-19 crisis seems to provide little support for this approach. More pessimistically, in addressing the contradictions within the concept of sustainable development, [Liverman's \(2018\)](#) argument that economic growth can only be achieved at the expense of the environment, and arguably more radically that sustainability cannot be achieved under capitalism, surely resonate.

At the same time, the COVID-19 crisis has exposed some of the fragilities at the boundaries between people and nature, highlights the environmental limits that ultimately circumscribes human activities and raises the elusive issue of sustainable consumption. Well over a decade ago, [Cohen \(2005\)](#) argued that sustainable consumption posed the most difficult challenge to sustainable development. That said, the COVID-19 crisis can be seen to have pointed the way to what some commentators see as the transition to a sustainable future. While [Cohen \(2020\)](#) acknowledged that the world is struggling to come to terms with COVID-19, he argued that it has produced an outcome, which some scholars and policymakers have been pursuing for some time, namely, a transition to sustainable consumption. [Cohen \(2020\)](#) also claimed the COVID-19 crisis offered an opportunity to step back from the pursuit of conspicuous consumption, which characterises much of the developed world, and the increasing depletion of the earth's finite resources, on which such patterns of consumption ultimately depend. Further [Cohen \(2020\)](#) emphasised the importance of looking to ensure that the crisis both informs and contributes to the policies designed to promote the transition to more sustainable patterns of consumption. Any such transition would see the leading players, perhaps the majority of the players, within the hospitality industry making major changes to their traditional business models, often built around the virtually unregulated use of natural resources, high volumes of guests/visitors and low cost labour. In spite of the severity of the COVID-19 crisis, the authors remain to be convinced that neither the leading players within the hospitality industry nor the vast majority of their traditional customers genuinely have the enthusiasm to pursue this transition or to approve of legislation or policies designed to effect such a transition.

## Conclusions and discussion

### *Conclusions*

One of the aims of this paper has been to review changes in the relationships between sustainability and the hospitality industry following the COVID-19 crisis. While the crisis has severely damaged all sectors of the global economy, the problems in the hospitality industry have been particularly acute, and the crisis has revealed a number of major changes in the relationships between sustainability and the industry. At the present time, it is difficult to predict how future trends will evolve or what future relationships between sustainability and the hospitality industry will emerge. Within the industry, many hopes are pinned on a return to, what will surely be, a new sense of business as normal, though the time scale and the extent, of such a return, remains, at best, uncertain. Currently, for example, there is little or no indication of the quick recovery within the industry reported by [Pine and McKercher \(2004\)](#) following the 2003 SARS epidemic in Hong Kong. Within any new normality, the environmental gains produced by the COVID-19 crisis may be lost, social and economic recovery may be slow and corporate sustainability programmes within the

hospitality industry may be put on hold. However, the COVID-19 crisis has also drawn attention to changes that be may essential in transitioning to a more sustainable future.

Such a transition revolves in part around the conceptualisations of weak and strong sustainability and the radical opportunities offered by [Cohen \(2020\)](#). The hospitality industry's enthusiasm to return to some sort of normality would seem largely, if not wholly, consistent with [Roper's \(2012\)](#) description of weak sustainability, which privileges economic development over environmental concerns. However, if the vision and the challenge of a transition to sustainable consumption, both [Cohen \(2020\)](#) and [Gossling et al. \(2020\)](#) recognised as being presented by the COVID-19 crisis, are to be realised, this would be much more consistent not only with strong sustainability, which puts the emphasis on environmental and social, rather than economic, gains, but also on collective, rather than on individual, approaches to consumption. In spite of the rigours of the COVID-19 crisis, the majority of consumers in the developed world may be very reluctant to privilege a new environmental awareness over conventional social and economic behaviours, or to emphasise quality of life rather than materialism. At the same time, a transition to a more environmentally sustainable future, might also pose major social and economic challenges for many people and communities, particularly in the less developed world, who depended on the hospitality industry for their livelihoods, prior to the COVID-19 crisis.

#### *Theoretical implications*

Concerns have been expressed about the limited focus on conceptual approaches to sustainability within the hospitality industry, and [Iyer and Jarvis \(2019\)](#) suggested much of the theory testing that has been undertaken has in hypothetical experimental scenarios. However, the COVID-19 crisis, a very real event, has implications for the development and refinement of theory and in the context of this paper, two issues merit attention. First, the COVID-19 crisis can be seen to pose a challenge for stakeholder theory, not least in that it might be seen to call into question how well the interests of all stakeholders can be incorporated into decision-making when companies are under severe economic pressure. How such aspects of the crisis have been, and come to be, played out within the hospitality industry as a result of the crisis may offer new perspectives on the more general development of stakeholder theory. More specifically, some commentators have suggested that the COVID-19 crisis poses a test for stakeholder capitalism, suggesting that in the wake of a dramatic fall in their revenue, some companies have effectively seemed to have abandoned the lip service they publicly paid to the notion of a wide ranging stakeholder approach, which looks to embed a company within society.

Second, the COVID-19 crisis may also be important in informing the development of more critical theoretical approaches. Here, [Amsler's \(2019\)](#) belief that sustainable development is not possible under global capitalism, and her argument that current mainstream thinking and policy discourages any genuine focus on alternative, and less harmful, ways of organising life, perhaps offers one valuable starting point for such a theoretical approach. At the same time, the COVID-19 crisis might be seen as a rejection of neoliberalism, not only in that rather than relying on their own financial resources to mitigate the crisis, many large companies, including a number in the hospitality industry have turned, almost desperately, to governments for financial support, but also in that collective, rather than individual, behaviours, have been seen to offer the best public response to the crisis. Perhaps more positively, [Higgins-Desbiolles \(2020, webpage\)](#) argued that critical theory helps to expose how tourism "has supported neo-liberal injustices and exploitation" and in advancing an approach to theorising how tourism could be socialised



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and held accountable to social and ecological limits, opens up a further potential avenue for theoretical development.

#### *Practical, operational and strategic implications*

A number of practical, operational and strategic implications also merit attention. Given that the hospitality industry currently faces an uncertain future, it is difficult to make detailed practical/operational/managerial recommendations, but some loosely framed guidance may be appropriate. At the macro level, the COVID-19 crisis is a spur to promote sustainable development much more widely, as an integral part of business continuity and recovery measures within the hospitality industry. The [World Travel and Tourism Council \(2020\)](#), emphasised the importance of the hospitality industry, governments, health experts and customers working effectively together to ensure people's safety and argued for a common set of rules to support the jobs of millions of employees and to contribute to a return to sustainable economic growth. More generally, some commentators have emphasised that sustainable development must move to the centre stage within the hospitality industry, though the full implications of such a move are rarely spelt out. More practically, [Chang et al. \(2020\)](#) proposed a wide ranging ten-point charter for tourism, travel and hospitality as part of a return to a new normality which embraces a range of measures covering social distancing, transport systems, sporting events and hotel accommodation.

In some of the countries where the hospitality industry is a major sector of the national economy, there may also be an increased role for the state, as suggested in work on luxury hotels in India, by [Israeli et al. \(2011\)](#). Here, the hospitality industry may have to cooperate more fully with governments, as they look to protect their foreign earnings and be seen to more active in supporting the welfare of their citizens. At a more local level, within hotels and on cruise ships, for example, measures could include requiring guests to test for COVID-19 prior to arrival, the screening of guests on arrival, possibly by thermographic cameras to detect high body temperatures, regularly emphasising and reinforcing, the importance of personal hygiene, ensuring that hand sanitisers are available to all guests in all public areas and in their rooms/cabins and regular deep cleaning. More generally within the hospitality industry, greater emphasis should be placed not only on the security and traceability of food within the supply chain but also on the storage of food within hotels, restaurants and cruise ships. It is also vitally important that hospitality companies have systems and procedures in place to minimise the risks to their staff. All these safety measures will come at a cost, but their importance cannot be overemphasised if the hospitality industry is to return to some sense of normality in the foreseeable future. More generally, [Baum and Hai \(2020\)](#) argued that the human right to participate in hospitality and tourism has been severely restricted by the COVID-19 crisis and questioned how long such rights, and the right to enjoy employment within the industry, will continue to be denied. Further [Baum and Hai \(2020, p. 2404\)](#) question if some governments will eventually look to rescind restrictions on international travel or will what the authors describe as "nationalistic rhetoric" effectively allow the COVID-19 crisis to continue to restrict future travel.

In many ways, the nature of the COVID-19 crisis poses unprecedented challenges for sustainability in the hospitality industry. Traditionally, while sustainability research has often been focused on a number of the industry's specific operations and activities, the COVID-19 crisis pervades all the activities and operations mentioned in the introduction to this paper, and it also has potentially profound implications for the frameworks used to analyse sustainability. While the hospitality industry is no stranger to natural disasters or crises, the global nature of the COVID-19 crisis, has taken sustainability into a new era. In the past when the outbreak of disease, or a tsunami, for example, caused major problems for

the hospitality industry in a country or a region, the major companies within the industry could often go some way to accommodate the impact of the event at the corporate level. Here, companies could deploy their financial resources, both to reduce the overall impact of the event, and to try bring their facilities in the affected areas quickly back into business. In such circumstances large companies can also look to reallocate customers to the company's hotels, cruises and package holidays in other parts of the world, and thereby protect, in part at least, their revenue streams. However, the COVID-19 crisis is global and as such it offers the hospitality companies no such opportunities. In a similar vein, restrictions on air travel effectively mean that customers have few alternatives for package holidays, save what are popularly known as staycations, within their own countries. If such staycations grow in popularity following the COVID-19 crisis, then this may bring economic benefits to small independent operators within the hospitality industry, and help to sustain the tourist economy in some areas in developed countries, but it will do little for the major players or for those communities in the less developed world who rely on international tourism.

More generally, some commentators have seen the COVID-19 crisis as a test for climate change, and a forewarning of the changes that individuals, businesses and governments will need to address in looking to sustain human life on earth. Such changes may include, changes in global temperatures and rainfall patterns, rises in sea levels associated with the melting of polar ice, the increased incidence of extreme weather events and shifting wildlife populations changes. If such changes become increasingly apparent over coming decades, this seems likely to bring sustainability into much sharper focus and simpler lifestyles built around self-sufficiency and collective, rather than individual, endeavour, and the recycling of resources, may increasingly become the norm. However, just how close the parallels can be drawn between the COVID-19 crisis and climate change is a matter of debate. On the one hand, there is the view that the COVID-19 crisis is a stark, and in some ways a unique, illustration of how a global catastrophe can effectively transform people's everyday lives and business models in a short space of time. Here the message is to stress the importance of governments and businesses fully integrating sustainable development, crisis management and resilience planning into their corporate and political structures and policy making. At the very least, the COVID-19 crisis highlights the need for preparedness to address the challenges of systemic crises and the consequences of failing to make such preparations. On the other hand, it seems likely, though by no means certain, that some of the changes in the climate outlined above, will take places in a continuous way over the medium term. Here the lack of immediacy, and what is often called present bias, where people place a greater emphasis and value on immediate, rather than on possible future, benefits, may see limited public enthusiasm for a more comprehensive and radical and approach to sustainable development at individual, corporate and government levels.

#### *Limitations and future research*

This paper has its limitations, in that it draws exclusively on information posted on the Internet and that it simply offers a snap shot of the COVID-19 crisis within the hospitality industry at a particular point in time and therefore lacks a wider and more balanced long term reflective analysis. However, the authors believe their review provides a useful platform for future research endeavours. Some of the changing relationships between sustainability and the hospitality industry highlighted by the COVID-19 crisis, offer a range of research opportunities, at both the theoretical and empirical levels. At the theoretical level,

as outlined above, the COVID-19 crisis may help to illuminate, and contribute, to both stakeholder and critical theories of sustainability, with reference to what is a very important economic and social arena in many countries. Stakeholder theory has been widely used to provide a framework to research sustainability within the hospitality industry, but the COVID-19 crisis may offer opportunities to test its applicability in extremis. However, to date, researchers have paid little or no attention to critical theoretical approaches to sustainability within the hospitality industry. This is perhaps not surprising, in that hospitality scholars often have a close professional relationship with the industry, an industry in which radical ideas have little or no corporate currency. Nevertheless, this is a research lacuna, which offers fertile territory for future work.

At the empirical level, the COVID-19 crisis has generated a variety of possible research opportunities. Two specific examples provide an illustration of such opportunities. Market research might profitably investigate consumers' perceptions of if, and how, hospitality companies have approached the new normality and of if, and how, the COVID-19 is changing their own behaviours. On the other side of this coin, research may also explore if, and how, different groups of stakeholders perceive their concerns have been taken into consideration by the hospitality industry, both during the crisis, and in the return to some sort of normality. More generally, case studies of individual hotels or hotel groups, or of areas and regions heavily dependent on the hospitality industry, would allow researchers to focus, in both depth and detail, on the problems caused by the COVID-19 crisis and the success of strategies and programmes employed in an attempt to return to some sort of business normality. Case studies may also be undertaken to explore if, and how, local hospitality managers, within less developed counties, look to integrate local aspirations and values into corporate approaches to sustainability, in the aftermath of the COVID-19 crisis. In looking to pursue such case studies, researchers may look to form collaborative research projects, for example, with a major hotel group or a regional tourism agency, though forging such agreements might prove difficult because of need for access to, and publication of the details of, sensitive commercial data.

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