

Shaping brand equity through sustainability: A qualitative study of the lived leadership experiences of resort managers

Soriano, Wilma Clarisse ✉

Polytechnic University of the Philippines, Philippines (wcsoriano@gmail.com)

Received: 25 September 2024

Available Online: 8 November 2024

Revised: 5 November 2024

DOI: 10.5861/ijrse.2024.24841

Accepted: 8 November 2024

ISSN: 2243-7703

Online ISSN: 2243-7711

OPEN ACCESS



Abstract

In this era of dynamic progress and rapid change, different industries around the world have included sustainability as part of their core activities in their business operations. Specifically, in the sector of hospitality, where the expectations of the guests are evolving along with environmental and social concerns, businesses are increasingly focusing on adopting sustainable practices to enhance their appeal and meet the demands. This phenomenological qualitative research investigated the lived experiences and perceptions of the resort managers about the sustainability initiatives in their establishments and their impact on their brand equity. Data was gathered through triangulation, employing a combination of nine in-depth interviews with managers and three sets of focus group discussions with supervisors to strengthen the rigor and credibility of the study. Based on the research findings and analysis, the participants described their sustainable resort programs such as green practices, corporate social responsibility, and economic initiatives. The managers also explained how these practices contributed to shaping positive brand equity through increased brand awareness, recognition, credibility, reputation, and loyalty. Furthermore, the study revealed that perceived quality and service standards emerged as mediating forces and leadership appeared to be a moderating variable. The research findings shed light on the implementation of sustainability in resort businesses, which could significantly support the drive for a more sustainable future in the hospitality industry. The study also provides application and grounding into the lack of scholarly studies about the investigation of mediating and moderating factors in a qualitative methodology.

Keywords: phenomenological qualitative research, resort sustainability, brand equity, perceived quality, service standards, leadership, mediating factors, moderating variable

Shaping brand equity through sustainability: A qualitative study of the lived leadership experiences of resort managers

1. Introduction

Sustainability affects the lives of present and future generations; it is becoming more and more important to society nowadays. It just serves to highlight the growing consciousness among people of the need to safeguard all living beings on Earth. Businesses are including sustainability in their core activities as progressively people are becoming concerned about social and environmental issues. Individuals are also more inclined to purchase products and services from companies that integrate sustainability into their operations. Moreover, these initiatives are in line with the Sustainable Development Goals of the United Nations. Particularly apparent in the industry of hospitality, where the effects on the environment and economy are evident. It is a huge factor to incorporate sustainability practices and programs as according to an investigation conducted by The Business Research Company (2024), the hospitality sector is predicted to rise significantly in the coming years. It will reach \$6189.59 billion in 2028, with a compound annual growth rate (CAGR) of 5.5%. In 2023, Asia-Pacific was the world's largest hospitality market. As part of the Asia-Pacific Region, the hospitality sector of the Philippines has recovered significantly, with 2024 emerging as a promising year for the business (Manalac, 2024).

One of the provinces in the Philippines, Rizal, is not only known as the “Cradle of Philippine Art,” but it also has a lot to offer. Specifically, the city of Antipolo is one of the go-to-destination when people would like to connect with nature and relax in beautiful resorts. Antipolo City Mayor Jun Ynares declared on October 23, 2022, that the city has been named the most visited town in the province of Rizal in 2021. According to him, the city was named the top tourist destination in the province of Rizal by the Department of Tourism (DOT) Region IV-A at the recently completed 1st Gawad Sikat Rizal. As mentioned by the Department of Tourism, the city receives 75 percent of all visitor arrivals in the province.

Since Antipolo City has a lot of resort establishments, it opens an opportunity for an investigation into the sustainability programs of these businesses and how it can contribute to a positive brand equity. Balancing environmental protection and initiatives that have social impact while generating profits foster a culture of responsibility and innovation. Resorts may draw in environmentally concerned guests, increase their perceived level of quality and brand equity, and set themselves apart in a competitive sector by implementing sustainable practices. Because consumers are associating a growing number of environmentally conscious choices with better quality and moral standards, sustainability can lead to a positive brand image. By developing emotional bonds with guests who value ethical purchasing, resorts may become the leaders in the hospitality industry.

In this research, the term sustainability signifies the capacity to continually maintain or sustain a process over time, while simultaneously establishing an orderly balance between environmental preservation, social welfare and economic growth (Mollenkamp, 2023; Santander Universidades, 2022). Brand equity refers to the value premium that a business generates from a product or service. It denotes the value a brand brings to a business, beyond its physical assets. It also sums up the emotions, perceptions, and attitudes employees and consumers associate with a brand. In essence, brand equity refers to the value of a brand (Hayes, 2024; Williams, 2023; Williams, 2024). Furthermore, perceived quality is defined as subjective and is influenced by various factors, including the own experience of the individual. It is an intangible and overall feeling about the characteristics of the products or services to which the brand is attached. In the context of resort businesses, the dimensions of perceived quality are accommodation quality such as cleanliness and comfort, facility quality like amenities, environment, ambiance and aesthetics, transaction quality particularly to the convenience in payments and ease of booking, and communication quality such as effective dissemination of policies and reminders (Ribeiro & Providencia, 2021; Roumeliotis, 2015).

Within the scope of this study, service standards refer to consistent levels of service performance and enhance customer experience. It is a set of standards that a company establishes to ensure the delivery of a superior standard of service. The standards outline aspects such as the expected way employees should engage with guests, resolve issues, and act appropriately as representatives of the organization (Eilertsen, 2022; McIntyre, 2023). Also, leadership is a social process that enables individuals to align their collective direction, work together to achieve results, and execute strategic plans (McKinsey & Company, 2022; McCauley, 2024).

Investigation of mediating and moderating variables is included in the paper. Qualitative inquiry can be employed in mediation studies to identify potential mediators, uncover causal pathways, and examine context-related factors. It may also be utilized to investigate and suggest possible moderating effects. Consequently, data gathering methods such as focus groups, participatory observation, and personal interviews are suggested to ascertain contextual elements that influence the relationship between an antecedent and an outcome in a natural setting. A mediator illustrates the connection between two variables, while a moderator influences the strength or direction of the relationship between variables (Bate et al., 2012; Memon et al., 2019; Moitra, 2024). Specifically, the research gap that this study is trying to address is the lack of qualitative scholarly studies about the sustainable resort practices, the contribution of sustainability on shaping a positive brand equity, and identification of mediating and moderating variables that can intervene or influence the relationship of the variables.

The study will make a substantial contribution to the existing knowledge in the industry of hospitality as it illustrates how incorporating and promoting sustainability practices may greatly improve the value of the brand resulting in increased competitive advantage. The study has also socioeconomic impact for the country because if the resorts have higher brand equity because of sustainability initiatives, it can boost the economic growth through increased job creation and tourism. It could also translate into more resort establishments that participate in local community development and environmental preservation. In comparing the practices of resorts in Antipolo City with the global leaders in sustainability, this study provides a benchmark for local managers, as it highlights the best practices that would offer practical insights into local implementation. Resort businesses can contribute to a sustainable future, benefiting both the economy of the country and society at large.

Statement of the Problem - This phenomenological study aims to describe the perceptions and lived experiences of resort managers regarding the sustainability initiatives in their establishments. The researcher seeks to understand how these practices are implemented and how sustainable programs impact the brand equity. Specifically, the study aimed to answer the following sub-problems:

- How do the managers of resort businesses implement sustainability initiatives in their organizations?
- How do sustainable resort practices impact brand equity?
- What mediating variables might emerge, and how do they intervene in the relationship between sustainability and brand equity?
- What moderating variables may occur, and how can they moderate the overall relationship between the variables?

Theoretical Framework - Based on literature and studies, there is no existing one theory that includes sustainability and brand equity. Hence, the following separate theories were used as guide for the research. The author used the triple bottom line of the entrepreneur and novelist John Elkington. It goes beyond typical business performance metrics. It examines how a firm helps people, the environment, and the economy. (University of Wisconsin, 2022). The first is "People (Social Pillar)" which the company's social impact on stakeholders and value for present and future generations. Next is "Planet (Environmental Pillar)." This section addresses how a business impacts the environment and ecological processes. The "Profit (Economic Pillar)," also called "prosperity" is the bottom line that evaluates a company's economic impact (Jonker, 2023). Another theory

used is the Keller's Brand Equity Model, also known as Customer Based Brand Equity (CBBE) model created by marketing professor Kevin Lane Keller. It provides a framework to help organizations in understanding and developing the value of their brands (which denotes the value that a brand contributes to a product or service beyond its fundamental characteristics). The Triple Bottom Line highlights the importance of making profit while prioritizing environmental and social aspects. Meanwhile, the Customer-Based Brand Equity (CBBE) focuses on the management and establishment of positive brand equity. Together, these models allow holistic analysis on how integrating or implementing sustainability can affect or influence the overall value of the brand.

Conceptual Framework - The figure below exhibits the conceptual framework of the research based on the variables that reached saturation point during the data gathering and analysis. It shows that sustainable resort programs such as green practices, corporate social responsibility, and economic initiatives may result in service standards and positive quality perception, and it can lead to increased brand equity. It also indicates the role of leadership and its challenges in moderating the relationship of the overall variables.

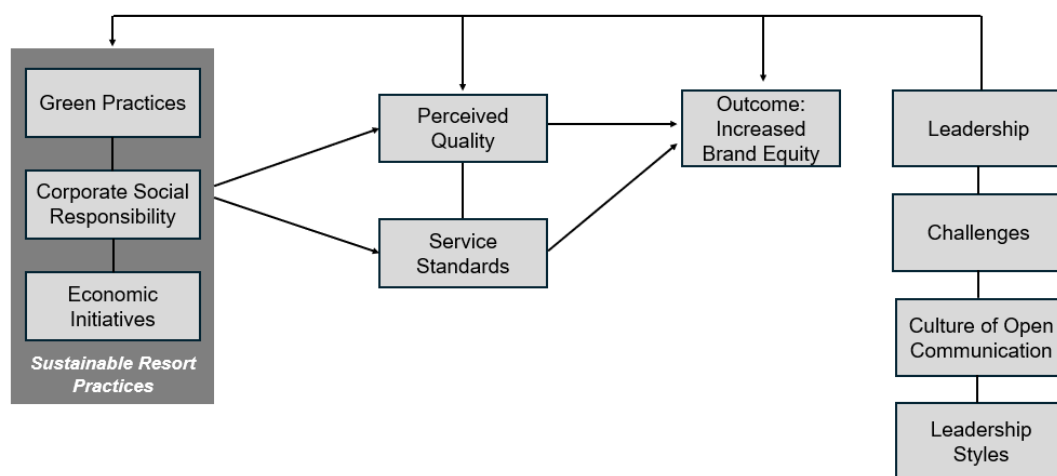


Figure 1. The conceptual framework of the study

2. Literature and Studies Review

2.1 Sustainability in Resort Businesses

As cited by the University of Canterbury (2023), one of the most used and widely adopted definitions of sustainability is "meeting the needs of the present generation without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs." Sustainability is the relationship between people and the planet, focusing on the quality of a state or process that allows it to be maintained indefinitely. Sustainable development includes environmental, social, and economic sustainability, aiming to balance ecological, economic, and social objectives, reduce carbon emissions, promote renewable energy, and ensure fair resource access (Patterson, 2024). Furthermore, Eusebio-Sison and Dellova (2023) stated, implementing sustainability methods increases a company's efficiency on a variety of levels, including work quality, a good record, image improvement, and significant investor commitment that impacts operations.

In the qualitative study of Amrullah and Ahmad (2024) about the implementation of green actions in the resort, it revealed that the energy and water efficiency is the most dominant indicator followed by using environmentally friendly products, preventing pollution, and recycle and compost. The research highlights green practices like turning off lights, using LED lamps, promoting energy efficiency, using biodegradable packaging, using safe cleaning materials, and using straws made from papaya leaf stems. Moreover, in the published journal of Hangdaan et al. (2019) about the CSR of resorts in Laguna, their research unveiled that Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) refers to the obligation of a company to generate profit and engage in ethical interactions

within the community setting. The study highlights the importance of sustainability in the hospitality and tourism sector, emphasizing the need for goodwill, respectful treatment, and economic initiatives like employment and fair rates in resorts, ensuring the economy can sustain itself without compromising resource management.

2.2 Impact of Sustainability on Brand Equity

Branding is required for businesses to gain recognition and be remembered for their products or services. Heitmann et al. (2020) define brand equity as the premium value that a brand receives when it is recognized and admired. As conveyed by Anpar Research (2023), brand equity refers to the value of a brand that transcends its tangible assets. It encompasses factors such as reputation, customer loyalty, and market share. Brand equity refers to the whole value that a brand holds for its customers and the market, including all intangible elements. With reference to the influence on sustainability on brand equity, Sujanska and Nadanyiova (2023) said in their study that businesses that adopt sustainable practices and prioritize environmental and social responsibility are more likely to succeed in a dynamic business climate, as consumers are becoming more interested in sustainability and ethical behavior. By adopting sustainable practices, firms can cultivate a favorable reputation, establish customer confidence, and achieve enduring success. Ijomah et al. (2024) confirmed that consumer views of sustainable business practices have a crucial role in influencing their attitudes towards brands. Consumers are increasingly examining organizations' operations beyond their profit margins, with a particular emphasis on their environmental effect, social responsibility, and ethical standards. Perceptions of sustainability are influenced by media, peer influence, and individual values. Consumers are more likely to trust brands dedicated to sustainability. Brands that are authentic in their efforts attract environmentally conscious customers, making it crucial for brands to understand and address sustainability perceptions to improve brand loyalty (Adebayo et al., 2024).

An important advantage of incorporating sustainable practices into business operations is improved client retention. Sustainable brands are commonly seen as dependable, accountable, and dedicated to upholding ethical principles. This notion enhances the formation of more profound emotional bonds with consumers, hence augmenting their loyalty and willingness to make repeat purchases (Agu et al., 2024). Iyelolu et al. (2024) emphasized the significance of sustainability initiatives in influencing a brand's image and reputation in the marketplace. Sustainability-focused brands enhance credibility, attract consumers, and appeal to growing market segments by prioritizing environmental conservation, social accountability, and ethical conduct, setting them apart from competitors and appealing to similar values. Additionally, Gupta et al. (2023) conducted qualitative research consisting of in-depth interviews with 10 Fijian resort managers and 15 hotel guests. The findings indicate that the implementation of sustainable measures has significantly and positively impacted guests' inclination to revisit Fijian hotels and resorts. The results also indicated that customers are willing to pay a higher price for environmentally friendly initiatives in hotels and resorts in Fiji.

2.3 Mediation of Perception of Quality and Service Standards

Malik et al. (2022) has published research on the relationship between corporate sustainability and brand equity. Based on the study, the perceived quality is significantly influenced by corporate sustainability factors, including economic, social, and environmental aspects. Companies should prioritize social and environmental aspects in their brand evaluation, alongside economic impact, to make a meaningful impact on society's sustainable development. This approach helps create brand equity, as it positively influences customer perceptions and encourages companies to address social issues and eliminate moral and ethical problems. It is supported in the research conducted by Son and Lee (2015) which they examine the impact of sustainable practices on the formation of brand equity. The results demonstrated a clear correlation between the implementation of sustainable policies and their favorable impact on quality, brand image, and purchase intention. It is backed in the study of Sun and Kim (2024), they used sustainability as the independent variable, overall brand equity as the dependent variable, and perceived quality as the mediator. In their study, they proved that sustainability increases perceived quality which leads to positive brand equity. Moreover, in the results of

the research of Singh et al. (2015), they have noted service quality as a significant positive mediating variable in the hospitality industry like hotels. They added that it is imperative for the company to exercise great caution in guaranteeing consistently high service quality. Failure to do so will result in a negative behavioral intention of satisfied guests to continue going to the establishment.

2.4 Moderating Role of Leadership

Achieving sustainability is a complex objective that necessitates the collaboration of individuals working together. Leadership bears the responsibility of fostering a culture of sustainability throughout the organization by making it a strategic priority. They ensure the seamless integration of sustainability into policies, processes, and decision-making frameworks at every level (Chaudhary, 2023). Leadership serves as a moderating variable in the investigation conducted by Daulay et al. (2020). They stated that the level of commitment of an employee is a critical factor for an organization. When each employee demonstrates a high level of dedication, they will deliver excellent performance for the organization and exceptional service to the community. Leadership is regarded as a critical dynamic force that drives and coordinates the organization to achieve its objectives by influencing individuals both within and outside the organization to achieve the desired objectives in certain conditions and circumstances. Furthermore, according to the Green Business Benchmark (2024), taking initiative-taking measures to promote sustainability is playing a significant role in bringing about global change by reducing environmental and social harm in various sectors and fostering strong work environments that prioritize green practices and people with a sense of purpose. Active leadership in sustainability promotes ethical practices, enhances communication, increases employee engagement, and prioritizes well-being. It enhances reputation, consumer trust, and drives sales growth, ensuring long-term corporate success and fostering a resolute, environmentally conscious work culture.

Raeburn (2024) asserts that leaders can enhance adaptation by cultivating a culture of continuous learning, promoting transparent communication, offering avenues for people to acquire new abilities, and providing support to their teams throughout periods of change. Moreover, the unity and cohesiveness of a team are of utmost importance in achieving successful collaboration, fostering creativity, and enhancing overall productivity. Consequently, cultivating team cohesiveness is a fundamental aspect of good team leadership. Leaders should make an intentional effort to effectively involve employees in their work by establishing trust, as this can facilitate their participation in sustainable initiatives (Riisla, 2021; Li, 2019).

3. Research Methodology

Research Design - The author used qualitative research for this study. As defined by the University of Texas (2024), qualitative research is a naturalistic inquiry approach that aims to gain a thorough understanding of social events in their natural setting. Instead of relying on logical and statistical techniques, qualitative researchers explore human phenomena through a variety of inquiry systems. The study utilized phenomenological research design to explore human experiences, utilizing qualitative research to gain a deeper perspective on phenomena beyond quantitative investigations (Valeri and Baggio, 2020). Phenomenology is well-suited as the qualitative research design for the study as it aids in understanding how practices impact brand equity by examining managers' experiences, providing valuable contextual insights that other qualitative approaches may overlook. It is backed by the study of Alhazmi and Kaufmann (2024), he mentioned that this research design allows researchers to take part in flexible activities that can explain and help to understand complicated phenomena such as multiple facets of human social experience.

Participants of the Study - The respondents for this study are nine (9) managers of resort businesses in Antipolo City, Rizal. They are the chosen participants because they have direct involvement in the operations in the establishment, and they are the leaders who are responsible for implementing sustainable practices on the ground. They play a key role in decision-making on how sustainability aligns with their overall business strategy and shaping a positive brand equity. They also engage with a variety of stakeholders, such as employees, guests,

suppliers, and local community partners. As leaders in their respective resort establishments, these factors make the managers well-positioned to offer relevant perceptions and lived experiences on how sustainability is being implemented and how it influences the overall value of their resort's brand. Bekele and Ago (2022) cited Creswell and Morse in their published journal. They mentioned that Creswell recommended between 5 and 25 interviews for a phenomenological study and Morse mentioned that 6 to 8 interviews are enough for a homogeneous sample. In line with this, nine interviews with resort managers are sufficient to get variations, data saturation, and generalization of the findings.

Furthermore, three (3) focused group discussions in three (3) different resorts with four (4) to five (5) participants each were also conducted to confirm the mediating and moderating variables. The participants are the supervisors of the resort establishments. Based on Deakin University (2024), 4 to 10 participants are acceptable for a focus group discussion. Triangulation was done to measure the emerging mediating variables such as perceived quality and service standards. It was also used to verify the credibility of the appearing moderating variable which is leadership. Carter et al. (2014) cited the definition of Patton about triangulation, it pertains to the utilization of many techniques or data sources in qualitative research to develop a full comprehension of phenomena. Ho and Limpacher (2023) noted that data triangulation includes interviews, observations, and documents, to gain a thorough understanding of a certain topic. It may involve the utilization of both focus groups and individual interviews as they provide access to diverse facets of the topic being studied. Employing focus groups for the purpose of triangulation not only enhances the comprehensiveness of the data, but also facilitates a deeper comprehension of the topic being investigated (Caillaud and Flick, 2017).

Tradition of Inquiry and Data-Generation Method - In this study, the author employed phenomenology as a tradition of inquiry, with an emphasis on understanding the perceptions and lived experiences of the participants. Before the data gathering, a semi-structured interview guide was prepared by the researcher. It was checked, verified, and approved by the research adviser, members of the panel, and experts to strengthen the validation and reliability. This served as a guide during the interviews with the respondents. To gather the insights and opinions of the managers, the researcher conducted one-on-one interviews. Focused group discussions were also conducted to confirm the mediating and moderating variables. Westcliff University (2022) cited Creswell's book, they mentioned that the mediating and moderating factors are part of qualitative strand during an investigation. Memon et al. (2019) added in their scholarly publication that qualitative inquiry is essential for the investigation of moderating factors.

After the in-depth interview and focused group discussions, the data was transcribed in a word processing file and stored in a secure cloud storage. The answers are in mixed Filipino and English languages, and the author translated the statements in English language for formality and ease of understanding. Thematic analysis was used to identify thematic patterns based on the interviews conducted. The researcher followed the step-by-step process of thematic analysis of Naeem et al. (2023), each stage in the process builds upon the preceding ones, leading to a thorough comprehension of the data. The author carefully selected illustrative quotes and themes for the discussion of findings and results. This systematic approach improves the replicability and consistency of the results, and it facilitates direct connections between the data, interpretation, and finally conclusions.

In the first step, the author selected significant statements from the interviews with the resort managers. Keywords were selected based on the remarks. Derived from the keywords, the codes were generated. From the codes, themes were developed and consequently, it was interpreted along with the supporting related literature and studies. To develop themes, the author began by rigorously collecting similar codes and then recognizing patterns or overarching concepts that capture the essence of these groups. The presentation of the conceptual framework was done based on the saturated themes or variables.

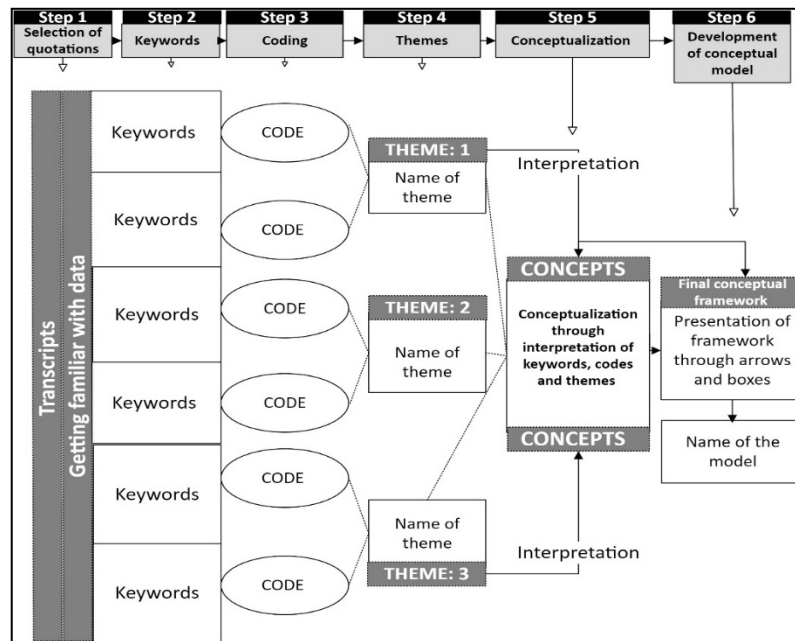


Figure 2. A systematic thematic analysis process: A novel six-step process for conceptual model development in qualitative research by Naem and other authors

4. Results

According to the data gathering and thematic analysis, the following are the results of the qualitative analysis:

Table 1

Participants of the In-Depth Interview

Participant ID	Sex	Age	Number of Years as Manager in the Resort	Number of Years Working in the Company	Number of Years in the Hospitality Industry
P1	Female	44	9	18	18
P2	Female	29	3	3	3
P3	Female	27	2	5	5
P4	Female	45	2	16	16
P5	Female	49	5	20	20
P6	Female	63	1	10	10
P7	Male	24	1	1	4
P8	Male	28	1	1	8
P9	Female	34	10	10	12

Based on the description of the participants, in terms of sex, 7 or 77.8% are female while 2 or 22.2% are male. The age group includes individuals from 24 to 63 years old and their length of years as managers ranges from 1 to 10 years. They are working in the company for 1 to 20 years and they have been in the hospitality industry for 3 to 20 years.

Master Theme 1: Sustainable Resort Programs: Harmonizing Green Practices, Corporate Social Responsibility, and Economic Initiatives

In accordance with the one-on-one interviews with the resort managers, the resorts are implementing various sustainable practices that have environmental, social, and economic impacts. Some of the green practices are using sustainable packaging materials, protecting biodiversity, and proper waste management. For corporate social responsibility, some initiatives are philanthropic efforts, community support, and taking care of the well-being of the guests and employees. Some economic activities are employment opportunities,

implementation of energy saving strategies, providing fair rate, and compliance with legal requirements.

Table 2

Master Theme 1: Sustainable Resort Programs: Harmonizing Green Practices, Corporate Social Responsibility, and Economic Initiatives

Themes	Codes or Categories	Sample Quotations
Green Practices	Sustainable Packaging Materials Protecting Biodiversity Waste Management and Segregation Practices	“We use paper straw and take out boxes.” – P3 “In our plants here, we do not use fertilizer that has chemicals. We compost fertilizer. Our staff has trainings about IMO (Indigenous microorganism - organic fertilizer).” – P7 “Since the resort is spacious, the peacocks and squirrels are free to roam around. We also inform the guests of the proper ways to interact with the animals. Before their booking date, we send them rules and regulations.” – P8 “We are more aware now about hazardous waste management. For example, the light bulb and batteries should be separated.” – P5
Corporate Social Responsibility	Philanthropic Efforts Local Community Support Employee Training and Development Workplace Diversity and Inclusion Employee Motivation Health Program for Employees Guest Health and Safety Accessibility-friendly Amenities Support for Equity and Inclusion Partnership with Suppliers	“The company is always willing to help. For example, in Cabading Elementary School, we sponsored the building of their stage. I also received the approval from the Head Office yesterday about the request for the school painting.” – P1 “We participate in local community events especially for bikers and Taktak Cycling Community. The event is for the whole Antipolo City, and we directly coordinate with the LGU. We also sponsor in events that promotes the community and culture.” – P3 “The resort is PWD friendly. We have an elevator and CR for them. We also have a clinic.” – P4 “Whenever the owner finds out that there are TESDA trainings, we send our employees especially the room attendant and hotel staff.” – P6
Economic Initiatives	Eco-Efficiency Strategies Employment Opportunities Fair Rate Seasonal Discounts Loyalty Discount Investment in Technology Partnership with Booking Applications Digital Payment Methods Compliance in Legal Requirements	“We started using solar energy for light posts. I believe that the expenses for the solar initiative will have a good benefit in the long term. It may be costly now, but it will save us money in the long run.” – P5 “Our employees here reside in the barangays within the area.” – P7 “We have Mayor’s permit here in Antipolo and we are part of the tourism.” – P9

Master Theme 2: Shaping Brand Equity through Effective Communication and Sustainable Resort Practices

Table 3

Master Theme 2: Shaping Brand Equity through Effective Communication and Sustainable Resort Practices

Themes	Codes or Categories	Sample Quotations
Communication of Sustainable Efforts to Employees and Guests	Internal and External Communication Sustainability Awareness through social media	“The employees are aware about the programs that we have in the resort.” – P2 “We always post on social media for partnerships, marketing, and awareness as well. The guests are attracted to the resort because they see that the establishment is active.” – P3
Sustainability Contributions to Resort Brand Equity	Brand Awareness Brand Recognition and Employee Commitment Social Media Engagement Acquiring New Bookings Increasing Foot Traffic Brand Credibility and Reputation Brand Loyalty Guest Advocate Returning Guests	“The resort is being recognized because we do programs that can help others.” – P2 “We can see the effect of our efforts on the brand, especially this year, we have a lot of guests for the events and functions.” – P5 “It helps because it is being spread, the clients are the testimony of what we do here.” – P6 “The efforts that we do can sustain the credibility of the resort.” – P8

As highlighted in the table, the managers of the resorts shared their ways of communicating green practices, corporate social responsibility, and economic initiatives with employees and guests. They also remarked on the contribution of the sustainable resort efforts in shaping brand equity. It is validated in the qualitative study of Werneborg (2019) which the purpose is to get a broader understanding of the field of environmental sustainability work in connection to brand equity. His study suggests that enterprises in Sweden can enhance their brand equity by implementing environmental sustainability measures and practices that are tailored to their

specific needs and characteristics. Organizations have the option to integrate environmental sustainability initiatives as an additional component of their brand or establish the foundation of their brand around this endeavor. Through the strategic use of advertising and the brand's age, firms may effectively link their brands with sustainability, so strengthening their brand identity. Through effective communication of the environmental advantages and characteristics, as well as their vision and motivation, organizations can strengthen their brand positioning. Finally, by achieving their environmental sustainability objectives, firms establish credibility and reputation, therefore enhancing their brand image. Through the themes, and interpretation of findings, it can be unfolded that there are notable contributions of sustainable resort practices in building brand equity.

Master Theme 3: Mediation of Perception of Quality and Service Standards to Bridge the Sustainable Resort Practices and Brand Equity

Table 4

Master Theme 3: Mediation of Perception of Quality and Service Standards to Bridge the Sustainable Resort Practices and Brand Equity

Themes	Codes or Categories	Sample Quotations
Perceived Quality as a Mediator	Word-of-Mouth Recommendation	<p>“If the perception of quality is positive because of our sustainable efforts, that is our competitiveness compared to other resorts.” IDI – P8</p> <p>“Whatever customers see, it can affect the resort. Because of this, we can improve our approach and assist them. Especially now that there is social media, the good things we do here, they post it. It can help us because it is being shared with other people, and they may think of visiting here and experiencing it as well.” FGD Set 1</p> <p>“We have been using paper instead of plastic for 2 years now. Our paper straw is sealed, which is also an advantage for us because it is not being directly handled by the waiter and is also for the health of the customers. The guests experience it, which is why we have increased the number of visitors. We have a lot of changes because before we were using plastic.” FGD Set 2</p> <p>“We have a sewage treatment plant, all the waste here, once it passes through the STP, becomes clean. Those guests who are environmentally conscious will appreciate it because we are helping the environment. Even with proper segregation of trash, they can see it. It has a good effect because it can be seen in the cleanliness of the resort, and it will have a good impact on the guests. We have a clean environment, and that is our pride, and that is why we have repeat clients.” FGD Set 3</p> <p>“We follow the protocols to improve the resort more. Since the guests can compare resorts, if they have suggestions, we are trying to do our best to provide the service they need. We do not take it as negative; we take it as positive so we can improve. There is an impact on the brand because it can help the employees do well and provide good services.” FGD Set 1</p> <p>“Quality is very important. Quality of the food and how it is served. I believe that if the service and quality of the food are good, many guests will come. They are the ones who do the sales talk for you. We have ads and pages, but it is different if the guests tell others about the quality of the service and food.” FGD Set 2</p> <p>“The personality development training, such as front office, housekeeping, and Red Cross that we have can help us provide good services to the guests. It is not only for my own personal development, but it is also for the company. If the name of the resort is mentioned, people think that it is clean, the service is good, and they can enjoy the place.” FGD Set 3</p> <p>“If you provide good service, people will come back to the resort because they will remember you. They went here to relax, so they should leave feeling happy.” IDI – P4</p>
	High Satisfaction	
	Good Reputation	
	Excellent Feedback	
	Boosting Brand Awareness	
	Brand Distinction	
	Market Competitiveness	
	Guest Sensitivity	
	Resort Recognition and Visibility	
	Eco-Quality Perception	
	Nature-Driven Loyalty	
	Impression of Cleanliness and Orderliness	
	Local Community Support	
Energy Conservation Advocacy		
Flexibility and Convenience in Payment		
Service Standards as a Mediator	Service Level Expectations	
	Customer Service and Feedback Management	
	Standard Operating Procedure	
	Returning Guest Booking	
	Service Improvement	
	Accessible Accommodations and Facilities	
	Service Enhancement Through Feedback	
	Word-of-Mouth Endorsement	
	Training in Excellent Service	

The table exhibits the emerging mediating factors such as perceived quality and service standards during the data gathering and analysis. In the result of in-depth interviews and focus group discussions, the statements of the nine managers and thirteen supervisors are leaning towards to both perceived quality and service standards as they shared significant remarks that are relevant for both mediating variables. This may convey that based on the triangulation, if the guests in the resort recognized the sustainable practices and they are satisfied, it increases the perception of quality and if the employees are applying what they have learned in trainings, it may positively

lead to service standards which makes the value of the brand better.

Master Theme 4: Moderating Role of Leadership and Its Challenges

Table 5

Master Theme 4: Moderating Role of Leadership and Its Challenges

Themes	Codes or Categories	Sample Quotations
Leadership Styles	Situational Leadership Transformational Leadership Participative Leadership Transactional Leadership Servant Leadership	“Listening is very important for me. I would like to hear their voices, not only my perspective. I want equality where everyone can contribute regarding ideas and improvements because we, as managers, sometimes run out of ideas. Whatever they see here that we cannot see, they will tell us, and then we will work it out so that we can implement it as well.” – P3 “My number 1 rule for them is ‘Do your job, do your duty’. If the work time is 8 a.m. to 5 p.m., they should be doing their respective tasks. If they are not doing it correctly, I give them a memo. But I make sure to be friends with all of them.” – P4
Culture of Open Communication	Employee Feedback Collection Regular Communication Standard Operating Procedure Employee Engagement	“I am always meeting the employees so that communication is always there so that if there is anything that needs to be addressed, it can be talked about.” – P1
Leadership as a Moderator	Leading by Example Team Cohesion Management Direction Excellent Management Model Leader Consistency in Standard Operating Procedure Leading Implementation Managing Difficulties	“If there is good leadership, the staff can follow. If the staff follows, they will perform well. If they perform well, the guests will come back, and they will recommend the resort to their friends and family.” IDI – P5 “Leadership has a big role because, as a leader, I will be the one who will implement, check, and monitor if they are doing well. I act as an intermediary between our brand and our guests because if our services are not good, it will hurt our brand. It really has a significant effect because quality should start with the leader. If there is good leadership, it will also reflect on the income of the company.” IDI – P7 “Leadership is needed to enhance the services of the resort. Once there are rules, regulations, or policies, it improves the quality of the work. If the staff follow it, it will not only benefit them but us too. It helps us provide not only good service for guests but for ourselves as well.” FGD Set 1 “If the ship needs a captain, the same is true for resorts to have leadership. As a leader, you are the brain of the company, and the employees will await your command. Suggestions should be balanced . The leader has a big role for the betterment of the company.” FGD Set 2 “As a supervisor, if they can see that I follow the rules and standard procedures implemented, they will also do the same. It is also necessary that the information is disseminated well so that the work or job is correct and has good quality.” FGD Set 3
Challenges of Leadership	Difficulty Embracing New Policies Different Perspective Difficulty in Consistency and Implementation Different Employee Personality Different Employee Character	“There are new policies that the employees are having a hard time to adapt.” – P3 “It is a challenge if the attitudes of the employees are different.” – P3 “The challenge is being consistent and the implementation of rules. It is a challenge for me because it is my responsibility to remind them.” – P7

It can be observed in the table some of the signification quotations for the moderating role of leadership. It can also be seen the different leadership styles and challenges. All the nine resort managers in one-on-one interviews and thirteen supervisors in focus group discussions considered leadership as a moderating factor. Hence, the study suggests that leadership can strengthen the overall relationship by overseeing staff and ensuring that sustainability efforts are implemented well maintain they are providing an excellent service. These factors can contribute to an enhanced perception of quality and service standards, and, thus, increase in the brand equity.

5. Findings

Master Theme 1: Sustainable Resort Programs: Harmonizing Green Practices, Corporate Social Responsibility, and Economic Initiatives

The resort managers shared different initiatives that they implement regarding sustainability in their respective establishments. In terms of green practices, they shared that they are using sustainable packaging materials, protecting biodiversity, and they have proper waste reduction or waste management practices to guarantee the cleanliness of the establishments. With regards to corporate social responsibility, they declared that

they are doing philanthropic efforts and collaborations with local community and suppliers. They also mentioned that they have PWD-friendly amenities, and they are not only taking care of the welfare of the guests but also the employees through providing training and personality development. Furthermore, the managers indicated some of their economic initiatives such as having energy conservation strategies, providing employment, offering fair pricing, investing in technology and partnership with booking platforms. They also noted that they are following legal requirements. These sustainability initiatives show how businesses in hospitality industry like resorts are committed to the long-term viability of their business by considering the economic aspect while also prioritizing the environment, well-being of guests, employees, and society.

Master Theme 2: Shaping Brand Equity through Effective Communication and Sustainable Resort Practices

It was established that the resorts have various sustainability initiatives. The managers communicated it through meetings, dissemination of information to the guests and social media posting. The participants expressed their views on how sustainability contributes to shaping positive brand equity. They said that because of the sustainable resort practices, it increases the brand awareness, recognition and employee commitment, social media engagement, acquisition of new bookings, improves foot traffic, credibility and reputation, loyalty and turning guests into an advocate. Therefore, these elevates the overall value of the brand.

Master Theme 3: Mediation of Perception of Quality and Service Standards to Bridge the Sustainable Resort Practices and Brand Equity

During the data gathering and analysis, mediating variables emerged, and the author used triangulation to verify the reliability of the collected data. Based on the data triangulation, it is evident that perceived quality and service standards can intervene in the relationship between sustainability and brand equity. The resort managers and supervisors shared instances where their sustainability efforts impact perceived quality and service standards, thereby enhancing the overall value of the brand.

Master Theme 4: Moderating Role of Leadership and Its Challenges

A moderating variable was revealed in the collection of data and analysis. In this section, the managers articulated their standpoints about the moderating role of leadership and its challenges, and they also shared their different leadership styles and how they create a culture of open communication within their organizations. According to the statements of the managers in the one-on-one interviews and supervisors in three focus group discussions, it can be established that leadership has a moderating role because it can strengthen the implementation of sustainable resort practices, manage the perception of quality, ensure adherence to service standards, and elevating brand equity.

6. Conclusions and Recommendations

As shown in the findings, the study reveals that the resort establishments in Antipolo City are implementing various sustainability programs such as green practices, corporate social responsibility, and economic initiatives. The research suggests that sustainability has a significant contribution in shaping a positive brand equity by enhancing brand awareness and recognition, fostering volunteerism and employee commitment, increasing credibility and reputation, improving relationship with guests, suppliers and community, and building loyalty. Moreover, the study reaches a conclusion that mediating variables emerged during the data gathering and analysis. Perceived quality and service standards have a mediating effect on the relationship between sustainability and brand equity. The green practices, corporate social responsibility, and economic initiatives of the resorts can enhance the perception in quality and service standards, and ultimately strengthen the overall brand equity. Leadership also appeared to be a moderating variable. The study implies that leadership can strengthen the relationship by establishing a cohesive strategy and direction for the implementation of the sustainable resort initiatives, ensuring favorable perception of quality and conformance to service standard, and fostering a long-term positive brand equity.

In light with the conclusions, the author recommends that the resort may publish an annual report about their green practices, corporate social responsibility, and economic initiatives. It can include the details about the efforts, progress, and impact. It is better to feature testimonials from the employees, guests, and community partners to strengthen the credibility and reputation of the company. Further studies are also recommended, as the participants in this research are limited to Antipolo City, Rizal. They may investigate the sustainable practices of beach resorts in different provinces of the Philippines. Potential mediating and moderating variables may also emerge, which can assist in deeper understanding of the subject matter at hand. Future researchers may also employ quantitative methods to investigate other mediating and moderating factors.

7. References

- Adebayo, V., Paul, P., & Eyo-Udo, N. (2024). Sustainable procurement practices: Balancing compliance, ethics, and cost-effectiveness. *GSC Advanced Research and Reviews*.
- Agu, E., Iyelolu, T., Idemudia, C., & Ijomah, T. (2024). Exploring the relationship between sustainable business practices and increased brand loyalty. *International Journal of Management & Entrepreneurship Research*.
- Alhazmi, A., & Kaufmann, A. (2022). Phenomenological Qualitative Methods Applied to the Analysis of Cross-Cultural Experience in Novel Educational Social Contexts. *Front Psychol*, 13:785134.
- Amrullah, A., & Ahmad, A. (2024). Implementation of Green Practices at Ko Ko Mo Resort Gili Trawangan in Increasing Income. *JMET: Journal of Management Entrepreneurship and Tourism*, 2(1), 21–29.
- Bate, S. L., Stigler, M. H., Thompson, M. S., MacKinnon, D. P., Arora, M., Perry, C. L., & Reddy, K. S. (2012). A Qualitative Mediation Study to Evaluate a School-Based Tobacco Prevention Program in India (Project MYTRI). *Field methods*, 24(2), 194–215.
- Bekele, W. B., & Ago, F. Y. (2022). Sample Size for Interview in Qualitative Research in Social Sciences: A Guide to Novice Researchers. *Research in Educational Policy and Management*, 4(1), 42-50.
- Caillaud, S., & Flick, U. (2017). *Focus Groups on Triangulation Contexts*. In: Barbour, R., Morgan, D. (eds) *A New Era in Focus Group Research*. Palgrave Macmillan, London.
- Carlevatti, J. (2021). *Continuous Process Improvement: Why Your Business Needs It*. University of South Florida. Retrieved September 24, 2024, from <https://corporatetraining.usf.edu/blog/continuous-process-improvement-why-your-business-needs-it>
- Carter, N., Bryant-Lukosius D., DiCenso A., Blythe J., & Neville, A. (2014). The use of triangulation in qualitative research. *Oncol Nurs Forum*.
- Deakin University. (2024). *Qualitative study design*. Retrieved September 24, 2024, from <https://deakin.libguides.com/qualitative-study-designs/focus-groups>
- Daulay, M., Raja, P., & Gultom, P. (2020). The Effect of Leadership as Moderating Variable for The Influence of Work Satisfaction and Achievement Motivation of Employee Commitments. *Junior Scientific Researcher, SC Research Publishing SRL*.
- Eilertsen, J. (2022). *How to Create Highly Effective Service Standards*. Retrieved September 24, 2024, from <https://www.ronkaufman.com/blog/how-to-create-service-standards-that-really-work/>
- Eusebio-Sison, M., & Dellova, R. (2023). Practices, Challenges and Lessons Learned in Selected Lodging Accommodations in Zambales: Basis for Sustainable Operations. *Inclusive Society and Sustainability Studies*, 3(1), 43–60.
- Green Business Benchmark, (2022). *The Benefits of Active Leadership in Sustainability*. Retrieved September 24, 2024, from <https://www.greenbusinessbenchmark.com/archive/active-sustainability-leadership>
- Gupta, V., Sharma, S., & Sinha, S.K. (2023), "How sustainable practices influence guests' willingness to pay a price premium in Fiji", *Worldwide Hospitality and Tourism Themes*, Vol. 15 No. 3, pp. 269-278.
- Hangdaan, K., Bustillo, J., Villamor, M., Bustillo, M., & Mandigma, E. (2019). Corporate Social Responsibility of Resorts: A Case of Pansol, Laguna, Philippines. *International Multidisciplinary Research Journal*.
- Hayes, A. (2024). *Brand Equity: Definition, Importance, Effect on Profit Margin, and Examples*. Retrieved September 24, 2024, from <https://www.investopedia.com/terms/b/brandequity.asp>

- Heitmann, M., Landwehr, J., Schreiner, T., & Van Heerde H. (2020). Leveraging brand equity for effective visual product design. *Journal of Marketing Research*, 57(2), 257-277.
- Ho, L., & Limpaecher, A. (2023). *What Is Researcher Triangulation in Qualitative Analysis?* Retrieved September 24, 2024, from <https://delvetool.com/blog/researcher-triangulation>
- Ijomah, T., Idemudia, C., Eyo-Udo, N., & Anjorin, K. (2024). Innovative digital marketing strategies for SMEs: Driving competitive advantage and sustainable growth. *International Journal of Management & Entrepreneurship Research*, 6(7), 2173-2188.
- Jonker, A. (2023). What is the triple bottom line? *IBM*. Retrieved September 24, 2024, from <https://www.ibm.com/topics/triple-bottom-line>
- Malik, S., Gull, S., Nazish, S., Bukhari, Z., & Shahid, A. (2021) Corporate Sustainability and Customer-Based Brand Equity: Beverage Industry's Perspective. *Journal of the Research Society of Pakistan*.
- Manalac, A. (2024). Philippine hotel industry has promising outlook. *Philippine Real Estate News Curator*. Retrieved September 24, 2024, from <https://realestatenews.ph/national/tourism/philippine-hotel-industry-has-promising-outlook>
- McCauley, C. (2024). What Is Leadership? *Center for Creative Leadership*. Retrieved September 24, 2024, from <https://www.ccl.org/articles/leading-effectively-articles/what-is-leadership-a-definition/>
- McIntyre, A. (2023). *Customer Service Standards | The Key to Business Success*. Retrieved September 24, 2024, from <https://www.performanceinpeople.co.uk/blog/the-benefits-of-customer-service-standards-2>
- McKinsey & Company (2022). *What is leadership?* Retrieved September 24, 2024, from <https://www.mckinsey.com/featured-insights/mckinsey-explainers/what-is-leadership>
- Memon, M., Cheah, J., Ramayah, T., Ting, H., Chuah, F., & Cham, T. (2019). Moderation Analysis: Issues and Guidelines. *Journal of Applied Structural Equation Modeling*.
- Moitra, T. (2024). *Mediator vs. Moderator- Which is the best choice for you*. Retrieved September 24, 2024, from <https://www.entropik.io/blogs/mediator-vs-moderator>
- Mollenkamp, A. (2023). *What is Sustainability? How Sustainabilities Work, Benefits, and Example*. Retrieved September 24, 2024, from <https://www.investopedia.com/terms/s/sustainability.asp>
- Naeem, M., Ozuem, W., Howell, K., & Ranfagni, S. (2023). A Step-by-Step Process of Thematic Analysis to Develop a Conceptual Model in Qualitative Research. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*.
- Patterson, N. (2024). *What is Environmental Sustainability? Goals with Examples*. Southern New Hampshire University. Retrieved September 24, 2024, from <https://www.snhu.edu/about-us/newsroom/stem/what-is-environmental-sustainability>
- Riisla, K., Wendt, H., Babalola, M., & Euwema, M. (2021). Building Cohesive Teams—The Role of Leaders' Bottom-Line Mentality and Behavior. *Sustainability*.
- Ribeiro, I.M., & Providência, B. (2021). Quality Perception with Attrakdiff Method: A Study in Higher Education. In: Martins, N., Brandão, D. (eds) *Advances in Design and Digital Communication. Digicom 2020. Springer Series in Design and Innovation, vol 12*. Springer, Cham.
- Roumeliotis, J. (2015). *Perceived Quality: Why Brands Are Intangible*. Retrieved September 24, 2024, from <https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/perceived-quality-why-brands-intangible-james-d-roumeliotis/>
- Santander Universidades. (2022). *What is sustainability? Definition, types and examples*. Retrieved September 24, 2024, from <https://www.santanderopenacademy.com/en/blog/what-is-sustainability.html>
- Singh, S., Shilpa, B., & Bhakar, S. (2015). Customer Satisfaction or Service Quality – Identifying Mediating Variable and Evaluating Behavioral Intention Model in Hotel Industry: An SEM Approach. *Research of Journal of Social Science and Management*.
- Son, J., & Lee, Y. (2015). Effects of Fast Fashion Brands' Sustainability Practices on Brand Equity Formation. *International Textile and Apparel Association Annual Conference Proceedings* 72(1).
- Sujanska, L., & Nadanyiova, M. (2023). Sustainable Marketing and its Impact on the Image of the Company. *Marketing and Management of Innovations*. DOI: 10.21272/mmi.2023.2-06
- Sun, M., & Kim, J. (2023). Sustainability and Brand Equity: The Moderating Role of Brand Color and Brand Gender. *Sustainability*.
- The Business Research Company. (2024). *Hospitality Global Market Report 2024*. Retrieved September 24,

- 2024, from <https://www.researchandmarkets.com/report/hospitality>
- The University of Texas at Arlington. (2024). What is qualitative research? *UTA Libraries*. Retrieved September 24, 2024, from https://libguides.uta.edu/quantitative_and_qualitative_research/
- University of Canterbury. (2023). *What is sustainability?* Retrieved September 24, 2024, from <https://www.canterbury.ac.nz/life/sustainability/what-is-sustainability->
- University of Wisconsin. (2022). Triple Bottom Line. *UW Extended Campus*. Retrieved September 24, 2024, from <https://uwex.wisconsin.edu/stories-news/triple-bottom-line>
- Valeri, M., & Baggio, R. (2020). Italian tourism intermediaries: A social network analysis exploration. *Curr. Issues Tour*, 1–14.
- Werneborg, A. (2019). *Improving Brand Equity with Environmental Sustainability work - a qualitative study in Sweden*. Master's Thesis. Department of Business Studies, Uppsala University.
- Westcliff University (2022). *Key Point Chapter Summaries for John Creswell's Research Design Textbook on Qualitative, Quantitative, & Mixed Methods Approaches*. Retrieved September 24, 2024, from <https://writingcenter.westcliff.edu/wp-content/uploads/2022/06/Creswell-Creswell-2018.pdf>
- Wijetunge W. (2016). Service Quality, Competitive Advantage and Business Performance in Service Providing SMEs in Sri Lanka. *International Journal of Scientific and Research Publications*, 6(7).
- Williams, A. (2024). What is Brand Equity? *The Branding Journal*. Retrieved September 24, 2024, from <https://www.thebrandingjournal.com/2021/02/brand-equity/>
- Williams, C. (2023). *The Role of Brand Equity in Financial Sustainability*. Retrieved September 24, 2024, from <https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/role-brand-equity-financial-sustainability-cindy-williams/>

