

# THE IMPORTANCE OF SOCIAL SUSTAINABILITY PRACTICES IN THE POST-PANDEMIC CONTEXT

Consumer perceptions regarding social sustainability practices within the hospitality industry are ever more important for hospitality businesses. Consumers are increasingly conscious of whether a business pursues sustainable practices, both in its treatment of employees and in supply chain purchases. Consumers' views on how well a business performs on these indicators can impact on consumer decisions and business viability. UCF Rosen College of Hospitality Management researcher Dr. Cynthia Mejia and collaborators have undertaken a study to understand how much importance restaurant consumers attach to specific social sustainability actions, and the way in which consumers perceive restaurants to be performing in the areas most important to them.

**S**ocial sustainability has become increasingly important for businesses in recent years, including those within the hospitality industry. In essence, social sustainability addresses social justice and fairness, and the way in which societies direct their efforts to creating greater equitability. In 2015, the UN proclaimed 17 sustainable development goals to address issues such as climate change, social inequalities, racial injustices, and discriminatory employment practices, including how well businesses treat their employees. The U.S. National Restaurant Association has identified sustainability as a key menu trend in recent years, and restaurant initiatives include efforts to ensure sustainable supply chains and reduce food and consumer waste, to support planet and environmental targets.

Increasingly, the public expects businesses to address social problems and implement social sustainability initiatives to uphold social justice. Many businesses, including those within the hospitality industry, are impacted by the perceptions consumers hold regarding how businesses behave on matters of social sustainability. Dr. Cynthia Mejia explains, "the hospitality industry in particular is a "high touch" business in terms of the contact between hospitality employees and customers." The nature of work carried out by employees within the hospitality industry is perceived by the public as physically



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## RESTAURANT CONSUMERS AND SOCIAL SUSTAINABILITY

The researchers defined the quasi-post-pandemic phase as the point at which operating restrictions were lifted or eased for restaurant businesses in the U.S. One unique aspect of their study was the use of importance performance analysis (IPA) methodology, enabling them to understand how consumers perceived and assessed the performance of restaurants on sustainability measures. In this way, customers' assessments of organizational performance were evaluated and included marketing programs and organizational-environmental sustainability.

The study included 19 key social sustainability items linked to the triple bottom line model of sustainability, specifically environmental, economic, and social sustainability. Examples include 'The restaurant ensures all staff are paid fairly and accurately;' and 'The restaurant is a socially inclusive recruiter.' An initial survey was pilot tested and then refined. The final survey was comprised of 45 items rated on a five-point Likert scale (to represent people's attitudes to a topic), with possible responses ranging from 'not important' to 'very important' to assess how important a particular dimension was to the consumer; and 'very poor performance' to 'very good performance' to assess how the consumers perceived the performance of the restaurants. The survey also included demographic questions.

demanding and low-paid. Workers within the hospitality industry were particularly hard-hit with the closure of businesses during the COVID-19 pandemic; millions of restaurant workers lost their jobs and over 100,000 restaurants were forced to close, some of them permanently. During the pandemic, issues of social justice were prominent in the wider social discourse. Dr. Mejia and colleagues were interested in understanding consumers' perceptions around social justice within the U.S. restaurant industry as it re-opened, particularly as many consumers have themselves faced economic challenges. To this end, the researchers designed a study to find out the importance that consumers placed on social sustainability within this quasi-post-pandemic period, and whether consumers felt that restaurants were performing well on those measures of social sustainability.

Data were collected from research participants using Amazon Mechanical Turk (mTurk), to include individuals representative of the U.S. population in terms of their gender, race/ethnicity, and income.

A total of 290 valid responses were extracted. The majority of participants were between 30 and 39 years old (42%), and men made up 58% of the research sample. White/Caucasians were predominant (78%), followed by Black or African Americans (10%) and a smaller number of Asian participants. Close to half of the participants held a four-year college degree and the majority of participants were in full-time employment. Regionally, the top U.S.-based regions of survey respondents were from Florida (11%), California (10%), Texas (7%), and New York State (5%). Annual household income ranged





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consumers perceived social sustainability practices within U.S. restaurants and can be directly translated into business guidelines. Drawing from the study's performance and importance ratings, Dr. Mejia and collaborators created indicators regarding the sustainability practices that were most important to consumers. Significantly, this has important implications for restaurant managers and offers guidance on areas where sustainability practices should be focused in the post-pandemic period.

First, the study highlights that restaurants should concentrate their efforts on promoting healthy eating. Although this was considered important to customers, they felt that this was an area where restaurants were not performing as well. Second, it is recommended that restaurants continue to perform well in areas consumers considered to be important and in which restaurants scored highly. These included disability access, fair staff pay, and local community embeddedness. Actions, such as promoting sustainability and sponsoring local events, were considered low priority for consumers (i.e., lesser importance and lower performance rating). It is possible that consumers might have been quite discerning in the priority they assigned to specific social sustainability practices within this quasi-post-pandemic phase. Given economic considerations impacting household income, there could potentially be a shift in the emphasis consumers might place on specific sustainability practices when making purchasing decisions within the hospitality industry.

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from U.S. \$50,000 to U.S. \$74,999. Popular restaurants frequented included mostly fast food outlets, such as McDonald's, Chipotle, Burger King, and Domino's Pizza.

### CONSUMER RATINGS OF IMPORTANCE AND PERFORMANCE OF SUSTAINABILITY PRACTICES

To understand consumer behaviour, Mejia and her collaborators asked participants which restaurants they frequented during the pandemic. Most participants (66%) described themselves as patronizing environmentally friendly restaurants, and financially responsible restaurants (51%), with fewer (44%) saying they had patronized socially conscious restaurants. The data analysis revealed that the top three factors considered to be important to consumers were fair pay for staff, accessibility for people with disabilities, and embeddedness of the restaurant in the local community. Consumers were more neutral in how importantly they viewed other factors such as staff feeding programs, adherence to grievance policies, inclusive recruitment practices, and use of sustainable suppliers.

Least important to consumers were restaurant practices such as educating the public on sustainability, cutting employee hours equally, and raising money for charity.

### TRANSLATING RESEARCH INTO BUSINESS GUIDELINES

This is the first study to specifically apply IPA methodology to understand how

## RESEARCHERS IN FOCUS

### RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

This research evaluates consumer perceptions of restaurant sustainability behaviors in the quasi-post-pandemic context, following heightened social justice discourse emergent during the pandemic.

### REFERENCES

Mejia, C., Bağ, M., Zientara, P., & Orlowski, M. (2022). Importance-performance analysis of socially sustainable practices in U.S. restaurants: A consumer perspective in the quasi-post-pandemic context. *International Journal of Hospitality Management*, 103:103209. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijhm.2022.103209>

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### PERSONAL RESPONSE

#### What were your greatest surprises when you looked at consumers' ratings of the importance that they attached to specific sustainability practices?

Our greatest surprise was how 'promotes healthy eating' was viewed as highly important, given that most restaurants frequented in this study were in the quick service and fast-casual industry segments. This finding reveals that consumers view the promotion of healthy eating choices as a responsibility connected to corporate social sustainability.

#### Should the hospitality industry undertake ongoing research to understand shifting sustainability priorities for consumers in their purchasing decisions?

As this study was conducted during the quasi-post-pandemic context when some furloughs and layoffs were still in effect in the U.S. restaurant industry, a longitudinal data-collection approach is planned to assess the shifting sustainability priorities of consumers while the restaurant and foodservice industry returns to normalcy.

## Dr. Cynthia Mejia



Dr. Mejia has over 20 years of industry experience in F&B and hotel operations management, primarily working for luxury hotel brands both in the U.S. and in Singapore. Her areas of research include hospitality human resource management, cross-cultural organizational management, technology acceptance, empathy across the services industries, and hospitality education.

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