

Sustainable Leadership as a Governance Mechanism in the ESG Era: A Systematic Review of Organizational Transformation in the Hospitality Sector

Santos Manuel Cavero López ^{1,*} , Ignacio Ruiz Guerra ¹  and Jesús Barreal Pernas ² 

¹ Department of Business and Management, Commerce and Tourism Faculty, Complutense University of Madrid, 28003 Madrid, Spain; ignacio.ruiz@ucm.es

² Department of Quantitative Economics, Universidade de Santiago de Compostela, Baixada Burgo das Nacións s/n, 15782 Santiago de Compostela, Spain; jesus.barreal@usc.es

* Correspondence: sacavero@ucm.es; Tel.: +34-683-197-710

Abstract

In the ESG era, the hospitality sector faces an urgent need to transform its governance models. However, a conceptual gap exists regarding the specific mechanisms that drive this transformation. This study addresses this gap through a systematic literature review to propose a novel integrative framework. Unlike previous reviews that analyze sustainable leadership and ESG governance in isolation, this paper positions sustainable leadership as the central mechanism that catalyzes the systemic integration of ESG criteria into the sector's organizational culture and strategy. The proposed framework articulates how this leadership style facilitates a cultural, strategic, and operational transformation by balancing economic performance with social well-being and environmental protection. Specifically, within the hospitality context, sustainable leadership is shown to be key in fostering organizational resilience, responsible innovation, and participatory governance. The analysis also identifies critical barriers to implementation, such as cultural resistance, the lack of clear metrics, and the need for specialized leadership training. The unique contribution of this article is to offer a conceptual model that articulates the causal relationship between leadership and applied ESG governance, presenting sustainable leadership not merely as a management style, but as the fundamental component for building resilient and legitimate hospitality organizations in the long term.

Keywords: sustainable leadership; ESG governance; corporate sustainability; organizational ethics; organizational transformation; corporate social responsibility; hospitality sector



Academic Editor: Gabriela Topa

Received: 11 September 2025

Revised: 16 October 2025

Accepted: 22 October 2025

Published: 3 November 2025

Citation: López, S.M.C.; Guerra, I.R.; Pernas, J.B. Sustainable Leadership as a Governance Mechanism in the ESG Era: A Systematic Review of Organizational Transformation in the Hospitality Sector. *Merits* **2025**, *5*, 22. <https://doi.org/10.3390/merits5040022>

Copyright: © 2025 by the authors. Licensee MDPI, Basel, Switzerland. This article is an open access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) license (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

1. Introduction

In the current context, characterized by accelerated globalization and a growing awareness of the environmental and social challenges threatening the planet, the hospitality sector finds itself at a crucial juncture that demands a rethinking of its management and governance models. Traditionally oriented towards maximizing economic profit and immediate customer satisfaction, hospitality organizations now face multidimensional pressures. These stem from the increasing demand for sustainability, transparency, and social responsibility from not only increasingly informed and discerning consumers but also from institutional investors, governmental regulators, and the local communities involved in their activities.

Furthermore, this global scenario is compounded by phenomena such as climate change, natural resource scarcity, social inequalities, and a loss of institutional legitimacy, which impose an ethical and strategic imperative that transcends mere financial profitability to incorporate broader, cross-cutting objectives. Consequently, conventional leadership and governance models, focused on the short term and exclusively on economic metrics, are proving insufficient to address the complex demands and expectations of the contemporary hospitality sector. This generates a pressing need to adopt integrative approaches based on ESG (Environmental, Social, and Governance) criteria that promote holistic, ethical, and sustainable long-term management [1,2].

However, the effective and sustainable adoption of ESG criteria in the hospitality industry cannot be conceived merely as compliance with external regulations or the superficial implementation of international standards. On the contrary, it requires a profound internal transformation within the organizations themselves, particularly concerning their organizational culture and leadership style.

This transformation implies that hospitality leaders must adopt a holistic and strategic perspective that transcends immediate financial objectives, incorporating a long-term vision that genuinely integrates a commitment to collective well-being, social justice, and environmental preservation. These principles must permeate every dimension of management and organizational decision-making. In this regard, sustainable leadership emerges as a fundamental catalytic factor, characterized by a deep responsibility towards the environment, an ethical commitment to the common good, and the capacity to foster governance that promotes transparency, inclusive participation, and organizational resilience. This is especially crucial in a sector as interdependent and sensitive as hospitality, where decisions have direct impacts on local communities, ecosystems, and global value chains [3].

Furthermore, sustainable leadership in hospitality organizations involves the ability to manage multiple interests and diverse expectations from stakeholders—ranging from employees and suppliers to customers and regulatory authorities. This requires establishing effective channels for communication, collaboration, and accountability that strengthen both internal and external legitimacy. Such leadership necessitates the development of specific competencies [4], including applied ethics, responsible innovation, and adaptive management in the face of the uncertainty and crises inherent in a world of increasing volatility and complexity [5]. Likewise, this leadership must foster an emotional and cognitive commitment that mobilizes entire teams and organizations towards the adoption of sustainable practices, while also incentivizing continuous learning and the creation of value based on social and environmental criteria that complement economic efficiency [1].

This context calls for a critical theoretical analysis of the role of sustainable leadership as a key structural process for organizational governance in the ESG era, focusing on its relevance and application within the hospitality sector. This is undertaken through an exhaustive and systematic literature review, which examines the primary approaches to ethical, transformational, and sustainable leadership, as well as the conceptual frameworks linked to responsible and participatory governance. Based on this analysis, the paper proposes an integrative framework that articulates sustainable leadership with sustainability-oriented governance. It provides conceptual tools to rethink and strengthen the role of leaders in guiding sustainable, inclusive, and resilient organizational transformation processes that respond to the growing challenges of contemporary tourism [2,5].

In summary, this research not only contributes to the academic literature on leadership and ESG governance but also offers relevant guidance for managerial practice in the hospitality sector. It encourages organizational actors to adopt initiative-taking and strategic stances in pursuit of genuine sustainability that transcends rhetoric to become a tangible

reality, capable of generating shared value, enhancing competitiveness, and ensuring long-term organizational survival and reputation.

While the literature has extensively explored sustainable leadership and ESG governance in isolation, a conceptual gap exists regarding the specific mechanisms through which leadership catalyzes the systemic integration of ESG criteria into organizational culture and strategy. This limited attention is particularly notable in the hospitality sector—an industry with unique socio-environmental challenges and where academic research has not delved deeply into how leadership models translate into applied and effective ESG governance frameworks. This study, therefore, addresses the need to propose an integrative model that connects leadership theory with the practical governance challenges in this industry, articulating the causal relationship between them to fill the gap.

To develop this research, the article is structured as follows. First, the theoretical framework is presented, which defines the concepts of sustainable leadership and ESG-based governance while exploring the synergistic relationship between them. The methodology section then details the systematic literature review process, following the PRISMA model to ensure rigor and transparency in source selection. Subsequently, the results section presents the integrative framework, which positions sustainable leadership as the articulating mechanism for ESG strategy. Finally, the practical implications of this framework for the hospitality sector are discussed, and the study's conclusions are presented, highlighting its contributions, limitations, and future lines of research.

While the literature has independently explored sustainable leadership [3,5] and ESG governance, a notable gap persists in articulating the two concepts. The issue is not a lack of studies on each topic separately, but the absence of an integrative model that explains the causal mechanisms through which a specific leadership style translates into systemic and effective ESG governance, and this deficiency is especially critical in the hospitality sector for two main reasons: first, much of the existing research has focused on isolated Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) practices without linking them to a structural transformation driven by leadership; and second, leadership models applied to hospitality are often generic and fail to address how to manage the sector's unique complexities, such as its intensive interaction with multiple stakeholders and its profound socio-environmental impact. Therefore, this article explicitly addresses this gap by proposing a conceptual framework that details how sustainable leadership acts as the fundamental catalyst for a genuine ESG governance model adapted to the specific challenges of the hospitality industry.

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1. Sustainable Leadership: Definition and Characteristics

Sustainable leadership has established itself as a key concept within contemporary organizational management, particularly in response to the environmental, social, and economic challenges that organizations face in a globalized and rapidly transforming world [6]. Transcending traditional practices focused exclusively on financial or productive outcomes, sustainable leadership proposes an integrative vision that articulates a commitment to creating enduring value through the conscious balancing of economic, social, and environmental impacts, a perspective also known as the triple bottom line [3] (p. 7).

2.1.1. Conceptual Definition

Avery & Bergsteiner [3] define sustainable leadership as an approach focused on creating enduring value through the balanced integration of economic, social, and environmental outcomes, while simultaneously promoting organizational resilience and intergenerational responsibility. This implies that sustainable leadership is not merely limited to optimizing short-term financial indicators; rather, it emphasizes a holistic per-

spective that considers economic prosperity within the broader context of social well-being and environmental conservation, with an intense sense of responsibility towards present and future generations.

Building on this, Maak et al. [5] (p. 465) expand upon this concept by highlighting that sustainable leadership also integrates a profound ethical vision that acknowledges not only the interests of shareholders or owners but also those of the multiple stakeholders who influence and are affected by organizational activities. These include employees, local communities, suppliers, customers, and the environment in its broadest sense. Consequently, this form of leadership involves a conscious commitment to universal values such as transparency, integrity, social and environmental justice, and empathy—elements that form the foundation for responsible and legitimate organizational practices.

2.1.2. Distinctive Characteristics of Sustainable Leadership

Sustainable leadership is distinguished by a set of characteristics and behaviors that differentiate it from other traditional or exclusively financially oriented leadership models [7]. Among the most relevant characteristics are the following:

- **Long-term vision:** Sustainable leaders adopt a strategic perspective that transcends immediate goals and focuses on extended time horizons. They design plans and policies that ensure the future viability and well-being of the organization, its stakeholders, and the natural environment [3] (p. 9). This prolonged temporal orientation is key to coordinating efforts that protect valuable resources and solidify relationships based on trust and stable commitment.
- **Ethical responsibility:** Sustainable leaders assume an active commitment to organizational ethics, establishing and promoting fair, equitable, and transparent practices that strengthen trust and legitimize the organization in the eyes of its stakeholders [5] (p. 470). This implies consistency and authenticity in managerial conduct, where discourse and action align to form a reliable and exemplary model.
- **Inclusive participation:** Sustainable leadership fosters inclusion and open dialog among the organization's diverse internal and external actors, valuing diversity and recognizing that collaboration and co-creation are essential drivers of innovation and sustainable development [8]. Active stakeholder participation is thereby transformed into a strategic resource that enriches decision-making and strengthens institutional legitimacy [9] (p. 22).
- **Adaptability and resilience:** In the face of the growing volatility, uncertainty, and complexity of the current environment, sustainable leaders prepare and guide their organizations to confront crises, disruptive changes, and emerging challenges. They promote a flexible, resilient, and learning-oriented organizational culture focused on continuous improvement and renewal [3] (p. 13). Consequently, organizational resilience becomes a strategic capability for ensuring continuity and relevance in dynamic environments.
- **Commitment to responsible innovation:** These leaders drive innovation processes that rigorously consider their social and environmental impacts, avoiding negative externalities or unforeseen consequences that could harm the community or the environment. This responsible approach to innovation seeks to generate creative and viable solutions that balance economic development with social justice and environmental sustainability [1] (p. 231).
- **Transparent and authentic communication:** From a practical standpoint, sustainable leadership entails a communication style characterized by clarity, honesty, openness, and consistency in interactions with teams and stakeholders. Leaders function as role

models and sources of inspiration, motivating individuals to adopt practices aligned with sustainability and thereby reinforcing collective commitment [5] (p. 467).

2.1.3. Foundations and Theories Underpinning Sustainable Leadership

Sustainable leadership draws up both traditional and emerging leadership theories [10] and integrates perspectives that emphasize ethics, social responsibility, and organizational transformation [4]. The following are among the most significant of these:

- Ethical leadership: Based on the premise that leadership should be guided by moral principles and universal ethical values, it promotes justice, honesty, and care for others. It also emphasizes the importance of the leader's character and integrity as a foundational pillar [5].
- Transformational leadership: focused on the leader's ability to inspire and motivate profound changes within the organization and its members [8], it employs a vision that promotes growth, innovation, and commitment to transcendental goals, such as sustainability [1].
- Responsible leadership: this expands the focus to the leader's responsibility towards multiple stakeholders and society at large, promoting practices that acknowledge and balance economic, social, and environmental expectations [11].
- Systems perspective and the triple bottom line: Sustainable leadership incorporates a holistic view that understands the organization as an open and dynamic system. Its activities must simultaneously contribute to economic, social, and environmental well-being as an indispensable condition for its legitimacy and enduring success [3].

2.1.4. Practical Relevance of Sustainable Leadership

Practical application shows that sustainable leadership manifests in the ability to integrate ESG objectives into strategic planning, operational processes, and organizational culture. This ensures that corporate actions are oriented towards a balanced development that effectively responds to regulatory, social, and market expectations. For this reason, sustainable leaders function as agents of change who promote responsible innovation, institutionalize ethics within organizational practices, and foster a genuine commitment to collective well-being. These practices not only increase the organization's resilience and reputation but also its capacity to generate shared value with its stakeholders in the medium and long term [12].

The foregoing confirms that sustainable leadership stands in contrast to authoritarian, transactional, or purely short-term, financially oriented leadership models, all of which have proven insufficient for managing the complexity and risks associated with sustainability. Sustainable leadership, in contrast, promotes a style centered on emotional and ethical commitment, social and environmental responsibility, and active collaboration—elements that are critical for successfully confronting contemporary challenges and ensuring organizational legitimacy and continuity [5]. This type of leadership is a multidimensional integration of values and competencies aimed at building resilient and legitimate organizations. It represents a fundamental strategic and ethical response for companies to adapt to global challenges, especially in sensitive sectors like hospitality. Its relevance, therefore, becomes even clearer when analyzing the governance framework to which it must respond, as presented in the following section.

2.2. Governance and ESG Criteria

2.2.1. The Evolution of Corporate Governance Towards Sustainability

In recent decades, corporate governance has undergone a significant transformation in its conception and scope, expanding its focus beyond mere financial oversight and

traditional regulatory compliance to incorporate a comprehensive commitment to sustainability, ethics, and social responsibility. This shift responds to the growing demands from various stakeholders—including customers, investors, communities, regulators, and employees—who call for greater transparency, accountability, and management that considers impacts beyond immediate economic performance [2] (p. 2837). The ESG framework appeared within this context and has become a global benchmark for guiding organizations towards responsible and sustainable management by integrating environmental, social, and governance criteria into strategic and operational decision-making processes [13]. ESG governance, therefore, puts forward an integrated approach that requires organizations to systematically evaluate and manage the risks and opportunities arising from these three key dimensions, setting up internal processes that ensure alignment with ethical principles and the expectations of diverse stakeholders.

2.2.2. The Pillars of the ESG Framework

This framework is structured around three interrelated components that encompass three aspects of organizational performance and management:

- **Environmental:** This pillar refers to the practices, policies, and actions aimed at minimizing the negative environmental impact generated by the organization. This includes the efficient management of natural resources, the reduction in polluting and greenhouse gas emissions, biodiversity conservation, proper waste management, and the promotion of a circular economy, among others [14]. In the hospitality sector, this involves adopting measures for the rational use of water and energy, the sustainable management of solid waste, the reduction in the carbon footprint, and the implementation of environmentally friendly technologies and processes to ensure the protection of local ecosystems, which are often sensitive to tourist destinations [2] (p. 2837) and [1] (p. 229).
- **Social:** This dimension focuses on the management of relationships with employees, local communities, customers, and other stakeholders [15]. It involves promoting fair labor conditions, occupational health and safety, respect for human rights, inclusion and diversity, support for community development, and the creation of an inclusive and equitable work environment [16]. In the hospitality sector, the social dimension is particularly important due to the industry's significant impact on local communities, where harmonious relationships must be fostered, decent employment promoted, and local cultures and traditions respected. Furthermore, employee satisfaction and well-being, as well as ethical and respectable customer experience, are critical factors for the success and reputation of hotel establishments [9] (p. 35).
- **Governance:** Encompassing the internal systems, structures, and processes that ensure the organization operates with integrity, transparency, and accountability, this dimension includes the composition and diversity of the board of directors, accountability systems, anti-corruption policies, regulatory compliance, risk management, and effective stakeholder participation in decision-making [16]. Good governance is therefore fundamental for building trust in the organization and for promoting a corporate culture that respects ethical principles and ESG objectives. In hotels and hotel chains, robust governance ensures that internal policies translate into tangible practices that meet social and environmental expectations, thereby mitigating reputational and legal risks [2] (p. 2837) and [9].

2.2.3. The Impact of Integrating ESG Criteria in the Hospitality Sector

The effective implementation and integration of ESG criteria into corporate governance positively impact not only an organization's reputation and legitimacy but also its financial

performance and its ability to generate sustained value over time [14]. Indeed, Eccles et al. [2] (p. 2840) show that companies that genuinely adopt ESG criteria tend to develop more robust internal processes, greater transparency, and better risk management, which translates into superior long-term sustainable financial performance.

This evidence is particularly relevant for the hospitality sector, where risks related to climate change, social management, and ethical governance can directly affect operations, public perception, and competitiveness in increasingly demanding and globalized markets. Specifically for the hospitality sector, it is argued that: the environmental pillar allows hotels to reduce operational costs through energy efficiency and water conservation, lessen their impact on natural resources, and better adapt to growing environmental regulations; the social dimension strengthens relationships with employees and communities, improving service quality and generating a social license to operate; and finally, the governance pillar aligns leaders and governing bodies with ethical and responsible practices that bolster investor confidence and institutional sustainability in dynamic scenarios [1] (p. 229).

As the work of Rockström et al. [14] highlights, it is necessary to set up a fundamental scientific framework of planetary boundaries that define a safe operating space for humanity, thereby avoiding irreversible damage to key ecological systems. This concept is crucial for understanding and grounding the environmental dimension within ESG governance, as it underscores the need for organizations to respect these limits to ensure long-term sustainability and intergenerational responsibility. Specifically, within the hospitality sector, integrating these planetary boundaries into corporate strategy and governance processes enables organizations to adopt practices that minimize significant environmental impacts, such as the efficient use of natural resources, the reduction in polluting emissions, and sustainable waste management. Consequently, ESG governance not only responds to regulatory and social demands but also aligns with scientific evidence that guides development in a manner compatible with the planet's capacity.

2.2.4. ESG Governance: Structures, Processes, and Challenges

ESG governance involves adopting structures and processes that facilitate the effective integration of environmental, social, and governance criteria at all organizational levels. Priority measures include the following: (a) diversified and specialized boards of directors that include members with expertise and awareness in sustainability to ensure these topics are on the strategic agenda and part of corporate oversight; (b) clear policies and codes of ethics that define the behaviors, responsibilities, and standards guiding the actions of all members of the organization; (c) transparent reporting and auditing systems that enable the implementation of reliable procedures for measuring, reporting, and verifying ESG performance, thereby facilitating both internal and external accountability; and (d) active engagement and dialog mechanisms that involve various stakeholders in decision-making and continuous evaluation, fostering inclusive and participatory governance.

However, the effective adoption of ESG criteria in governance simultaneously faces significant and diverse challenges. These include the difficulty of objectively measuring social and environmental impacts, resistance to cultural change within organizations, the effective integration of multiple and sometimes conflicting stakeholder expectations, and the need for committed and skilled leadership to drive these transformations [2] (p. 2845). As these challenges are particularly acute in the hospitality sector—due to the multitude of actors involved and the heterogeneity of impacts—implementing effective ESG governance is essential. This requires dynamic and adaptive processes that ease constant interaction among leaders, employees, communities, customers, investors, and regulators, and that promote legitimate and effective sustainability.

2.2.5. Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) and Creating Shared Value

A critical component of ESG governance is the management of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR), understood as the voluntary commitment of organizations to go beyond legal compliance [17] to actively contribute to social and environmental well-being [9]. In the hospitality sector, CSR not only enhances the corporate image but also establishes a relationship of reciprocity and trust with local communities and other stakeholders, which is key to business sustainability [18].

The strategic integration of CSR within the ESG framework aims at creating shared value, whereby organizations generate economic benefits while simultaneously driving social development and environmental protection. This consolidates a sustainable and ethical business model that responds to the expectations of an increasingly conscious and demanding public [15].

2.3. *The Relationship Between Sustainable Leadership and ESG Governance in the Hospitality Sector*

In today's hospitality industry, the growing pressure to adopt responsible management models driven by ESG criteria has highlighted the critical importance of sustainable leadership as an essential mechanism for the effective implementation of ESG governance. Therefore, the relationship between sustainable leadership and ESG governance should be understood as a synergistic interaction wherein the former acts as a catalyst and strategic driver for hospitality organizations to internalize ESG values at all levels, from strategy formulation to daily execution.

2.3.1. Sustainable Leadership as a Strategic Enabler of ESG

In the hospitality sector, characterized by its dynamism, diversity of actors, and strong interdependence with natural and social environments, sustainable leadership emerges as a fundamental agent of change. This means that these leaders do not merely seek economic success but also integrate a commitment to the common good and environmental responsibility into their vision—pillars that are essential for the genuine adoption of ESG practices [3]. At the same time, Voegtlin & Scherer [1] (p. 245) note that these leaders promote transparency, ethics, and the active participation of stakeholders, which are key elements for ensuring accountability and strengthening trust between the organization and its interest groups. In hotels, this trust translates into sustainable relationships with customers, employees, local communities, and regulatory authorities, thereby enhancing reputation and helping adaptation to regulatory changes or crises.

For the reasons said, it is concluded that sustainable leadership drives a resilient and adaptive organizational culture, one that can respond to the volatility and uncertainty characteristic of global tourism. It is a leadership style that strengthens organizational learning by linking responsible innovation with ethical management, which is crucial for preventing abusive practices or environmental damage in destinations that depend on their natural and cultural value for their tourist appeal [19,20].

2.3.2. ESG Governance as a Structural Framework: The Role of Leadership

ESG governance refers to the set of structures, policies, and processes that integrate environmental, social, and governance criteria into business management. In hotels, this governance must extend beyond regulatory compliance to become a dynamic framework that promotes accountability, participation, and transparency throughout the entire value chain. In this sector, sustainable leadership plays a significant role by designing and implementing governance mechanisms that involve diverse stakeholders and strengthen organizational legitimacy. As Maak et al. [5] posit, these leaders function as agents who

mobilize resources and align behaviors with ethical and responsible practices, promoting policies that reflect an ethical and long-term vision.

Thus, for example, ESG governance in the hospitality context encompasses boards of directors with sustainability expertise, environmental and social impact audits, anti-corruption policies, community consultation processes, integrated reporting systems, and mechanisms to ensure diversity and inclusion within the organization. These are all areas where sustainable leadership is decisive in ensuring effectiveness and continuity [21].

2.3.3. Sustainable Leadership, Responsible Innovation, and Creating Shared Value

Within ESG governance, sustainable leadership drives the development of a culture of responsible innovation in hotels, understood as the capacity to generate solutions that balance economic objectives with social and environmental protection. This innovation includes both the design and adoption of clean technologies and strategies for the efficient use of natural resources, as well as the creation of culturally and socially responsible tourist experiences that minimize negative externalities [21]. Thus, in a sector as resource-intensive and sensitive to social perception as hospitality, responsible innovation sponsored by sustainable leadership translates into competitive advantage, resilience, and a strengthened reputation. This is reflected in greater loyalty from conscious consumers, a better work environment, and more harmonious community relations, thereby generating shared value and contributing directly to ESG objectives [12].

2.3.4. Organizational Resilience and ESG Risk Management Under Sustainable Leadership

The current global context subjects the hospitality industry to climatic, economic, social, and regulatory risks that demand initiative-taking, sustainability-oriented management. This requires sustainable leadership that contributes to developing the organizational resilience necessary to anticipate, adapt to, and recover from these risks [19]. Through robust ESG governance, these leaders can implement risk management systems that consider environmental impacts as well as social risks arising from interactions with communities and employees. These resilient capabilities allow hotels to maintain their operational continuity and competitiveness while advancing in their compliance with ESG criteria, thereby consolidating relationships of trust and legitimacy with investors and other key stakeholders [20].

2.3.5. Stakeholder Engagement: A Linchpin Between Leadership and Governance

To effectively integrate ESG criteria into hotel management, it is essential for sustainable leadership to promote a participatory and inclusive governance model that encompasses the diversity of actors and perspectives within the ecosystem in which the hotel operates. Active stakeholder engagement strengthens the quality, legitimacy, and acceptance of sustainable policies. Undoubtedly, sustainable leadership facilitates this participation by creating spaces for dialog, consultation, and co-creation with employees, communities, customers, suppliers, and regulatory bodies [9] (p. 30). This not only enriches decision-making but also fosters the construction of shared commitments and alignment around ESG objectives, reinforcing internal cohesion and external reputation.

In summary, the relationship between sustainable leadership and ESG governance in the hospitality sector constitutes an integrative, strategic, and adaptive approach that transforms organizational management towards more just, transparent, and sustainable models. Sustainable leadership acts as the driver and enabler of the effective implementation of ESG criteria, promoting an ethical, resilient, and responsible-innovation-oriented culture, which is essential for addressing the sector's growing environmental and social challenges. This link between leadership and governance strengthens organizational legitimacy, contributes to creating shared value with stakeholders, and positions the hospitality

sector on a sustainable path of long-term growth and competitiveness, aligned with the global demands for responsible development.

3. Materials and Methods

This study adopts a qualitative approach based on a systematic review of the scientific literature on sustainable leadership, ESG governance, and organizational transformation, with a special focus on the hospitality sector. The methodology’s primary objective is to ensure rigor, transparency, and reproducibility in the identification, selection, and analysis of relevant academic sources that contribute to understanding the role of sustainable leadership as a governance system in the ESG era.

3.1. Approach and Design

The PRISMA (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses) model is used as the methodological reference to guide the review process. This model provides a structured framework for the search, selection, evaluation, and synthesis of scientific evidence, thereby minimizing bias and easing the study’s traceability. The rigorous application of the PRISMA model ensures that the information gathering is exhaustive, systematic, and consistent with the article’s goals. Figure 1 presents the PRISMA flow diagram.

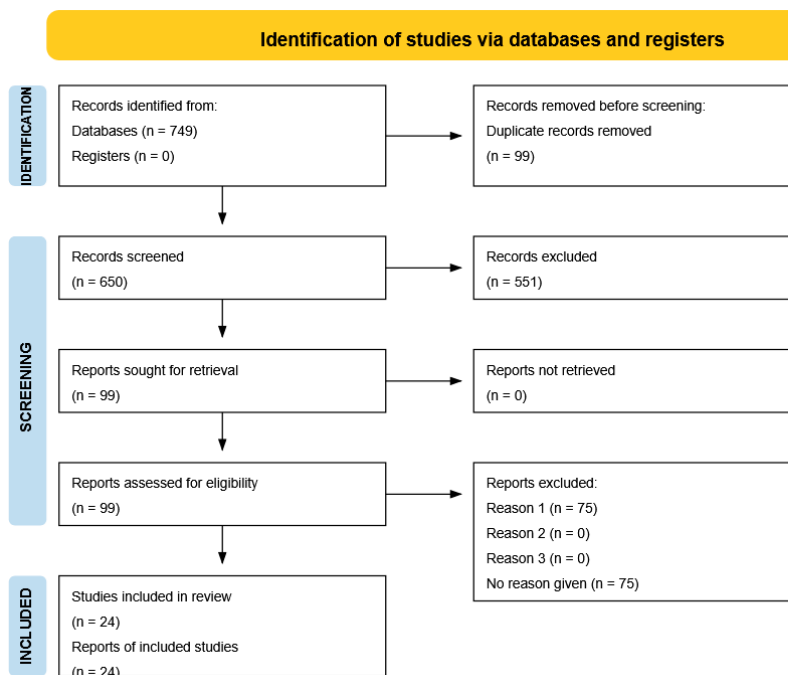


Figure 1. PRISMA flow diagram (databases and registers included).

The study selection process followed a systematic, multi-stage approach, as detailed in the PRISMA flow diagram presented below. The initial identification phase yielded a total of 749 records from the consulted databases. After the removal of 99 duplicates, 650 unique articles proceeded to the screening phase. During this stage, titles and abstracts were reviewed, resulting in the exclusion of 551 records that were not relevant to the study’s objective. The remaining 99 reports were sought for retrieval and assessed in their entirety for eligibility. Following an in-depth reading and analysis, an additional 75 reports were excluded, primarily because they lacked a robust theoretical framework that articulated sustainable leadership as an ESG governance mechanism. This rigorous filtering process culminated in the final selection of 24 studies, which constitute the core corpus for this systematic review.

This structured approach guided the entire selection process, which was designed to be exhaustive and replicable in accordance with the PRISMA model. The initial search phase was conducted between June and September 2025, focusing on the high-prestige academic databases Scopus and Web of Science (WoS), chosen for the recognition and quality of their indexed articles. For document retrieval, Boolean search strings were designed and applied to systematically combine key terms in English. These strings, which included terms such as “sustainable leadership”, “ESG governance”, “corporate sustainability”, “responsible leadership”, and “hotel sector”, were searched in the title, abstract, and keyword fields of the documents to maximize the relevance of the results obtained.

To ensure the utmost transparency and reproducibility, the exact Boolean search string used in both languages is presented side-by-side on Table 1:

Table 1. Boolean search string used in English and Spanish.

Language	Full Boolean Search String (Applied to Title/Abstract/Keywords)
English	((“sustainable leadership” OR “responsible leadership”) AND (“ESG governance” OR “corporate sustainability” OR “environmental, social and governance” OR “ESG”) AND (“hotel sector” OR “hospitality”))
Spanish	((“liderazgo sostenible” OR “liderazgo responsable”) AND (“gobernanza ESG” OR “sostenibilidad corporativa” OR “ESG”) AND (“sector hotelero” OR “hostelería”))

Source: own elaboration.

Once the initial set of records was collected, well-defined inclusion and exclusion criteria were applied to filter the selection. The inclusion criteria required that studies be published in indexed, peer-reviewed scientific journals, have an explicit focus on sustainable leadership and ESG governance, and be written in English or Spanish.

The main search period was set between 2011 and 2024 to capture contemporary developments, although seminal works prior to 2011 were selectively included for their foundational nature. On the other hand, the exclusion criteria were used to discard documents that offered general descriptions of social responsibility without a direct link to leadership, non-generalizable case studies, technical reports, and any type of grey literature that lacked a peer-review process. Furthermore, the Boolean search string used for Spanish was a direct translation of the one used for English to maintain consistency: (“liderazgo sostenible” OR “liderazgo responsable”) AND (“gobernanza ESG” OR “sostenibilidad corporativa”) AND (“sector hotelero” OR “hostelería”). Similarly, the data aggregation process consisted of combining the search results from both languages into a single dataset before the de-duplication and screening phase. It is relevant to note that the three members of the research team are fluent in Spanish, which allowed them to directly interpret and analyze the literature in this language with the same level of rigor and nuance as the English literature, thus ensuring consistency in the evaluation of all selected articles.

The choice of Scopus and Web of Science (WoS) as the sole sources for this review was a deliberate methodological decision to ensure the highest quality and rigor in alignment with the standards for systematic reviews [2]. These databases are widely regarded as the gold standard due to their stringent indexing criteria for peer-reviewed content and their established use in high-impact academic research, which is indispensable for a cross-cutting topic like sustainable leadership.

Other broader platforms like Dimensions or Google Scholar were deliberately excluded to maintain a strict focus on the highest-impact literature and to avoid methodological “noise”, while platforms like Dimensions offer broader coverage of research outputs (including grants, patents, and clinical trials), WoS and Scopus were selected specifically for their

historical completeness in journal indexing and citation data relevant to management and social sciences, and their proven efficacy in maintaining a high quality control threshold for peer-reviewed literature, which aligns with the PRISMA standard [21], prioritizing quality over unfiltered breadth helped avoid indexing a large amount of grey literature and non-peer-reviewed material, which would have contradicted the study's exclusion criteria. To use both repositories effectively, the same Boolean search string was executed independently in each, and then all results were aggregated to unify the dataset. The first crucial step was a meticulous de-duplication process to remove records that appeared in both databases, this combined approach leveraged the complementary strengths of each repository, as although there is overlap, each one indexes unique journals, which ensured more robust coverage and reduced the risk of missing key studies.

3.2. Search Strategy

The literature search was conducted between June and September 2025, focusing on high-prestige academic databases with broad coverage in the social sciences and management, such as Scopus and Web of Science (WoS). These were selected for their recognition within the scientific community and the quality of their indexed articles.

Boolean combinations and key terms in English were used, chosen based on an exploratory analysis of the field and relevant preliminary reviews. The primary keywords included: "sustainable leadership", "ESG governance", "corporate sustainability", "responsible leadership", "stakeholder engagement", "organizational transformation", "resilient organizations", "hotel sector" and "environmental, social and governance". These terms were searched in the titles, abstracts and keywords of the documents to maximize the relevance of the results.

To ensure the transparency, validity, and reliability of the research method, the search strategy was based on a precise and systematic Boolean string. This string was designed to be broad enough to capture all relevant literature, yet specific enough to exclude irrelevant studies. The exact search string, adapted for the syntax of each database (WoS and Scopus), was as follows: (("sustainable leadership" OR "responsible leadership") AND ("ESG governance" OR "corporate sustainability" OR "environmental, social and governance" OR "ESG") AND ("hotel sector" OR "hospitality")). This structure combines three conceptual pillars: the first group of terms focuses on leadership; the second on the concepts of sustainability and governance; and the third narrows the scope to the hospitality sector. The use of the AND operator ensures that retrieved articles contain at least one term from each of the three concepts, guaranteeing high relevance. Meanwhile, the OR operator allows for the inclusion of synonyms and closely related terms within each pillar, thereby maximizing the search's comprehensiveness. This string was applied to the title, abstract, and keyword fields to ensure complete coverage of the topic.

3.3. Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

To define the scope of the material for analysis, inclusion criteria were established to focus the review on high-quality and relevant theoretical and empirical studies:

- Studies published in indexed, peer-reviewed scientific journals, ensuring academic quality and methodological rigor.
- Works with an explicit focus on sustainable leadership, ESG governance, and organizational transformation processes.
- Articles written in English or Spanish to ensure comprehensive understanding and analysis. The selection of articles in English and Spanish was based on a dual strategy to maximize both global reach and regional relevance. English was included as the lingua franca of scientific research, ensuring the inclusion of most of the international

literature. Spanish was added to incorporate significant academic contributions from Spain and Latin America, regions of great importance to the global hospitality sector. Crucially, the exclusion of other languages, such as French or Mandarin, was a deliberate methodological decision based on the linguistic competencies of the research team. This delimitation was necessary to ensure that all selected articles could be analyzed in-depth, guaranteeing consistency in evaluation and minimizing the potential inaccuracies and bias arising from relying on external translation or partial comprehension: this approach prioritizes the rigor of the qualitative analysis over global linguistic breadth.

- The period of 2011–2024 was established as the primary period for the systematic search to analyze contemporary developments in the field. Additionally, seminal works published prior to 2011 were selectively included based on an explicit theoretical necessity: these works are the foundational pillars that established the core conceptual constructs essential for the analysis. Specifically, the inclusion criterion required that they define the origins of the three main conceptual streams underpinning the study: Stakeholder Theory (foundational to ‘S’ and ‘G’ components), the Triple Bottom Line/CSR Evolution (core to the integrative view), or Ecological Sustainability (core to the ‘E’ component). This selection process ensures the theoretical framework is fully grounded in its conceptual origins, avoiding methodological ‘cherry-picking’ by adhering to explicit, traceable criteria.

Documents limited to general descriptions of social responsibility without a link to leadership were excluded, as were non-generalizable case studies and technical reports or grey literature lacking peer review, thereby ensuring the coherence and relevance of the analyzed corpus.

To maximize the comprehensiveness of the review, a decision was made to use both Scopus and Web of Science (WoS) in combination. Although they are different repositories with considerable overlap, each has unique coverage of certain journals and publishers; therefore, using them together significantly reduces the risk of omitting relevant studies and strengthens the validity of the findings. To ensure consistency between both searches, the same structural Boolean string was applied, adapted to the syntax of each platform: (“sustainable leadership” OR “responsible leadership”) AND (“ESG governance” OR “corporate sustainability” OR “ESG”) AND (“hotel sector” OR “hospitality”).

This string was designed this way to ensure that every result mandatorily contained at least one term from the three conceptual pillars (leadership, sustainability, and hospitality), ensuring high thematic relevance. Once the searches were executed, the results from both repositories were exported and aggregated into a single dataset. This process involved consolidating all records in the Mendeley Desktop reference software (Version 1.19.8). We selected Mendeley due to its robust and widely recognized automated de-duplication feature, which streamlines the reliable identification and removal of duplicate records from large, aggregated sets like ours, ensuring data integrity. The subsequent manual verification of the remaining records and the systematic de-duplication process conducted within the software guarantees maximum transparency and replicability, creating a complete and verified corpus for analysis before initiating the screening phase, which is a fundamental pillar for the methodological robustness of the review.

To further refine the corpus and ensure the homogeneity and high quality of the analyzed material, additional exclusion criteria related to the publication type were applied. Books and book chapters were explicitly excluded, as although they can be influential, their peer-review process often differs in rigor from that of scientific journals. Similarly, conference proceedings were discarded, even peer-reviewed ones, given that they frequently present preliminary results or abbreviated versions of research that are later published

more completely. Finally, doctoral and master's theses were also excluded; while they contain valuable original research, their extensive format and specificity do not align with the objective of this review, which is to synthesize consolidated findings published in the standardized format of scientific articles.

3.4. Selection and Analysis Process

The initial database search identified 749 records. After removing duplicates, a screening of titles and abstracts was conducted, leading to the exclusion of 650 articles for thematic irrelevance, as they did not directly address the interrelation between leadership, governance, and sustainability. This resulted in a selection of ninety-nine articles for in-depth reading and analysis. A subsequent full-text reading of these ninety-nine articles led to a final selection of twenty-four key studies, including only those that proposed robust conceptual models or theoretical syntheses explicitly articulating sustainable leadership as a mechanism of ESG governance.

The remaining seventy-five articles, although dealing with related topics, were excluded because they had an overly specific focus, were purely descriptive, or lacked a solid theoretical basis for the purpose of this integrative analysis. The twenty-four selected works, which form the conceptual and empirical basis of this paper, were chosen primarily based on a criterion of conceptual and theoretical relevance rather than on a uniform chronological distribution. Thus, the observed date distribution (with works from 1995 and a concentration in the 2011–2019 period) is the result of a rigorous three-level process:

- Inclusion of seminal works (pre-2011): It was determined to be methodologically indispensable to include a select number of publications from before 2011. This includes articles such as those by Shrivastava [13] on ecological sustainability, Carroll [18] on the evolution of CSR, and Freeman et al. [9] on stakeholder management. These works are the theoretical pillars upon which the entire contemporary discussion of sustainable leadership is based, and their omission would result in an incomplete theoretical framework lacking due to acknowledgment of its conceptual origins.
- Focus on the consolidation of the field (2011–2019): The literature analysis reveals that the period between 2011 and 2019 was particularly fertile for the consolidation of robust theoretical models explicitly connecting leadership with sustainability and ESG criteria. During these years, key authors such as Avery & Bergsteiner [3], Eccles et al. [2] and Maak et al. [5] published their integrative frameworks; thus, the concentration of articles in this period reflects the maturation and definition of the field of study.
- Criterion of theoretical saturation (post-2019): The absence of articles published after 2019 in the final selection does not imply a lack of relevant research. On the contrary, post-2019 literature is abundant but tends to consist of empirical studies, application cases, or reviews that validate and utilize the conceptual models already established by the twenty-four selected works. Given that the goal is to construct an integrative conceptual model, priority was given to the works that propose such models, reaching a point of theoretical saturation where new articles no longer contribute new fundamental frameworks but rather apply existing ones.

In conclusion, the final selection of 24 articles deliberately represents a corpus that includes the theoretical foundations (pre-2011), the key conceptual models (2011–2019), and the ideas that achieve theoretical consolidation (up to 2019), providing the most solid and comprehensive basis for this study's conceptual proposal. To this end, the analysis employs thematic review to identify recurring patterns, tensions, and fundamental contributions related to sustainable leadership, ESG governance, and their role in organizational transformation, with an emphasis on applicability to the hospitality sector. This perspective allows for the synthesis of multidimensional information and the construction of an

integrative framework that links theory and practice in this emerging field. Table 2 presents the summary table of the final 24 studies:

Table 2. Summary table of the final 24 studies.

Title	Authors	Year	Methodology	Main Findings/Contributions
What we know and don't know about corporate social responsibility: A review and research agenda	Aguinis, H., & Glavas, A.	2012	Literature review	Analyses 588 journal articles and 102 books to provide a multilevel and multidisciplinary overview of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) research
Authentic leadership development: getting to the root of positive forms of leadership	Avolio, B. J., & Gardner, W. L.	2005	Conceptual model development	Proposes a model on how authentic leaders foster the development of authentic followers through increased self-awareness and self-regulation
Sustainable leadership practices for enhancing business resilience and performance	Avery, G. C., & Bergsteiner, H.	2011	Conceptual paper	Presents an alternative leadership model based on 23 practices that enhance business performance and resilience, contrasting sustainable ("honeybee") practices with shareholder-focused ("locust") ones.
Similar but not the same: differentiating corporate sustainability from corporate responsibility	Bansal, P., & Song, H. C.	2017	Conceptual and historical analysis	Differentiates corporate sustainability (systems-focused) from corporate responsibility (normative-focused), arguing that although they have converged, their origins and approaches are distinct.
Organizational resilience: development of a conceptual framework for organizational responses	Burnard, K., & Bhamra, R.	2011	Conceptual framework development	Conceptualizes resilience as an organizational meta-capability and proposes a framework with three stages (anticipation, coping, and adaptation) to guide future empirical research.
Corporate social responsibility: evolution of a definitional construct	Carroll, A. B.	1999	Historical and conceptual review	Traces the evolution of the CSR concept since the post-World War II period, highlighting its institutionalization and expansion to include various stakeholders.
Leading change toward sustainability: a change-management guide for business, government and civil society	Doppelt, B.	2010	Theoretical and methodological framework	Provides a framework and methodology for managers to transform their organizations towards sustainability, using examples from companies like Nike, Starbucks, and IKEA.
The impact of corporate sustainability on organizational processes and performance	Eccles, R. G., Ioannou, I., & Serafeim, G.	2014	Empirical study with a matched sample	Companies that voluntarily adopted sustainability policies in the early 1990s show superior performance in both the stock market and accounting results compared to those that did not.

Table 2. Cont.

Title	Authors	Year	Methodology	Main Findings/Contributions
The investor revolution	Eccles, R. G., & Klimenko, S.	2019	Interview analysis	Based on interviews with 70 executives, it concludes that institutional investors are prioritizing environmental, social, and governance (ESG) factors, which will force companies to be accountable for their ESG performance.
Cannibals with forks: the triple bottom line of 21st-century business	Elkington, J.	1997	Conceptual and practical essay	Introduces the “triple bottom line” concept, arguing that future business success will depend on the ability to simultaneously satisfy profitability, environmental quality, and social justice.
A stakeholder approach to strategic management	Freeman, R. E. & McVea, J.	2001	Theory development	A foundational work in stakeholder theory, which understands the company as a value-creation system for all its stakeholders, thus connecting capitalism with ethics.
Managing for stakeholders: survival, reputation, and success	Freeman, R. E., Harrison, J. S., & Wicks, A. C.	2007	Theory development	Promotes stakeholder theory as a practical, efficient, and ethical way to manage organizations in complex environments, leading to greater strategic flexibility.
ESG and financial performance: aggregated evidence from more than 2000 empirical studies	Friede, G., Busch, T., & Bassen, A.	2015	Meta-analysis	Reviews over 2000 studies and finds a positive relationship between ESG performance and financial performance in most cases, at both the corporate and investment levels.
Leadership that gets results	Goleman, D.	2000	Empirical and conceptual research	Argues that emotional intelligence is a more significant factor for leadership success than any single leadership style, and that the best leaders adapt their style to the situation.
Tensions in corporate sustainability: towards an integrative framework	Hahn, T., Pinkse, J., Preuss, L., & Figge, F.	2015	Conceptual framework development	Proposes a framework for analyzing tensions in corporate sustainability, arguing that companies must simultaneously integrate economic, environmental, and social dimensions.
Corporate social responsibility in developing countries as an emerging field of study	Jamali, D., & Karam, C.	2018	Literature review	Highlights that CSR research in developing countries is limited and often consists of case studies, and notes that CSR frameworks developed in the West may need adaptation.

Table 2. Cont.

Title	Authors	Year	Methodology	Main Findings/Contributions
Responsible leadership in a stakeholder society—a relational perspective	Maak, T., & Pless, N. M.	2006	Conceptual paper	Defines responsible leadership as a relational and moral phenomenon that contributes to the creation of social capital and, ultimately, to the common good and a sustainable business.
Business statesman or shareholder advocate? CEO responsible leadership styles and the micro-foundations of political CSR	Maak, T., Pless, N. M., & Voegtlin, C.	2016	Conceptual paper	Distinguishes between an instrumental and an integrative responsible leadership style, concluding that the integrative style is more effective for addressing the challenges of political CSR in complex global environments.
Leadership: theory and practice	Northouse, P. G.	2018	Theoretical synthesis and textbook	Offers an academically sound compendium of major leadership theories, approaches, and models, including case studies and practical exercises for application.
Responsible leadership: pathways to the future	Pless, N. M., & Maak, T.	2011	Conceptual mapping and editorial	Outlines the emerging field of responsible leadership, specifying a definition and comparing it with other related leadership theories to map out future research avenues.
A safe operating space for humanity	Rockström, J., Steffen, W., Noone, K., Persson, Å., Chapin, F. S., Lambin, E., ... & Schellnhuber, H. J.	2009	Conceptual framework and quantification	Proposes a “planetary boundaries” framework, identifying nine biophysical processes that regulate Earth’s stability and quantifying the thresholds humanity should not cross.
The role of corporations in achieving ecological sustainability	Shrivastava, P.	1995	Conceptual paper	Explores how corporations can transition toward ecological sustainability, addressing concepts like strategic environmental management and the need for a shift in business paradigms.
Responsible innovation and the innovation of responsibility: governing sustainable development in a globalized world	Voegtlin, C., & Scherer, A. G.	2017	Theoretical development	Develops a theory of responsible innovation that links it to political CSR, arguing that companies have a role in the governance of global sustainable development.
Components of CEO transformational leadership and corporate social responsibility	Waldman, D. A., Siegel, D., & Javidan, M.	2006	Empirical study	Investigates the relationship between CEO transformational leadership and CSR, finding that certain components of this leadership style are associated with the strategic and social dimensions of CSR.

Source: own elaboration.

Two independent reviewers conducted the selection process to minimize bias. In each phase, both reviewers applied the inclusion and exclusion criteria autonomously. Discrepancies regarding the eligibility of an article were first resolved through discussion and consensus between the two. If a disagreement persisted, a third reviewer was consulted to make the final decision, thereby ensuring the rigor and objectivity of the selection. This

methodology also grounds the decision not to include works published after 2019, which is based on the principle of theoretical saturation.

During the review, it was observed that literature published after this date, while abundant, consisted of empirical studies, case applications, or validations that used the conceptual frameworks already established by the 24 selected papers. In other words, new publications no longer contributed to fundamental theoretical models that redefined the relationship between sustainable leadership and ESG governance but rather operated within the already consolidated paradigms. It was therefore concluded that the conceptual foundation for this study’s purpose was sufficiently developed by 2019, and the inclusion of more recent articles would have led to redundancy rather than enriching the construction of the new integrative framework.

3.5. Methodological Limitations

It is important to acknowledge certain limitations of the method employed, such as the deliberate exclusion of grey literature and non-peer-reviewed documents, which may limit the inclusion of recent practical experiences or relevant alternative approaches. Likewise, the focus on English and Spanish databases may introduce a linguistic bias and restrict the geographical and cultural diversity of the findings.

Similarly, the conceptual heterogeneity of the reviewed studies represents another challenge. Given that the theoretical and empirical approaches to sustainable leadership and ESG governance are diverse, direct comparison and in-depth analysis of specific aspects of the hospitality sector are made difficult. Nevertheless, the systematization conducted provides a clear map that facilitates future, more focused and detailed research.

3.6. Ethical Considerations

As this is a literature review with no direct interaction with human subjects or primary data collection, specific ethical approval was not required. Nevertheless, this work is committed to the correct citation and acknowledgment of the sources consulted, respecting intellectual property and current academic guidelines.

The two figures presented in this article were created using the Microsoft Copilot artificial intelligence tool (Version: 19.2509.50091.0, Release Date: September 2025). This technology was employed to generate the initial data visualizations, which were subsequently reviewed, adjusted, and validated by the author to ensure their accuracy, clarity, and proper alignment with the research findings.

To ensure transparency and methodological rigor, Table 3 presents the complete checklist in accordance with the PRISMA 2020 methodology guiding this systematic literature review. It includes the 27 essential items for thorough and structured reporting of the review process: the inclusion of this table in the Methods section demonstrates strict adherence to internationally recognized standards for systematic reviews, thereby strengthening the validity and reproducibility of the results reported herein.

Table 3. PRISMA checklist.

Section	Item	Checklist Item	Page
TITLE	Title (1)	“Sustainable leadership as a governance mechanism in the ESG era: a systematic review of organizational transformation in the hospitality sector” The article is explicitly identified as a systematic review of the role of sustainable leadership for the integration of ESG criteria in organizational governance, focusing on the hospitality sector.	1

Table 3. Cont.

Section	Item	Checklist Item	Page
ABSTRACT	Abstract (2)	Abstract examining sustainable leadership as an essential mechanism for integrating ESG criteria into organizational transformation in the hospitality sector, highlighting its strategic impact and associated challenges.	1
INTRODUCTION	Rationale (3)	Describes the context of accelerated globalization and environmental and social challenges, triggering the need to rethink hospitality management towards a holistic ESG-based approach.	1–3
	Objectives (4)	States the objective to critically analyze sustainable leadership as a key structural process in ESG governance in the hospitality sector, through a systematic review of the scientific literature.	1–2
METHODS	Eligibility criteria (5)	Inclusion criteria for studies in indexed journals, focused on sustainable leadership, ESG governance, and organizational transformation, in English and Spanish from 2011 to 2024, including relevant prior seminal works.	12–13
	Information sources (6)	Search conducted in reputable databases such as Scopus and Web of Science, using key terms on sustainable leadership, ESG, corporate sustainability, and tourism.	11–14
	Search strategy (7)	Application of Boolean combinations and keywords in titles, abstracts, and keywords to maximize relevance.	10–12
	Selection process (8)	After de-duplication and relevance screening, selection of 24 key studies from an initial 749 records, explained in detail with exclusion criteria.	13–14
	Data collection process (9)	Systematic extraction of data on conceptualization of sustainable leadership, ESG, and transformation, ensuring transparency and reproducibility.	19–27
	Data items (10a, 10b)	Definition and listing of variables of interest: leadership dimensions, ESG criteria, transformation processes, and tourism sector characteristics.	19–27
	Study risk of bias (11)	Qualitative assessment of study quality and methodological rigor, prioritizing solid conceptual frameworks and excluding superficial descriptions.	7, 11, 21, 27
	Effect measures (12)	No quantitative measures or meta-analysis applied due to qualitative focus; synthesis is thematic and conceptual.	3–9
	Synthesis methods (13a–13f)	Thematic review to identify conceptual patterns, tensions, and contributions, with graphical models supporting conceptual integration.	14
	Reporting bias (14)	Acknowledgement of publication biases due to exclusion of grey and technical literature, mitigated by rigorous selection of peer-reviewed academic sources.	3, 10, 11
	Certainty assessment (15)	Consideration of consistency and theoretical saturation contributed by selected studies, noting needed for future empirical validation.	14, 17, 27
	Study selection (16a,16b)	Detailed in Figure 1 (PRISMA Diagram): from 749 initial records, 24 key studies included after a three-stage process.	10
	Study characteristics (17)	The 24 studies offer a diverse but convergent theoretical/empirical basis on sustainable leadership and ESG, emphasizing integrative and multidimensional models.	14–16
	RESULTS	Risk of bias in studies (18)	Evaluation of conceptual and methodological quality, prioritizing works with robust foundations and avoiding non-generalizable cases.
	Results of individual studies (19)	Not applied in this research.	--
	Results of syntheses (20a–20d)	Not applied in this research	--
	Reporting biases (21)	Not applied in this research.	--
	Certainty of evidence (22)	Not applied in this research.	--

Table 3. Cont.

Section	Item	Checklist Item	Page
DISCUSSION	Discussion (23a–23d)	Interpretation emphasizing sustainable leadership as key for ESG success, highlighting transversal integration, deep cultural transformations, and shared value creation; discussing limitations and pathways for future research.	23–27
	Registration & protocol (24a–24c)	No formal protocol registered; explains adoption of PRISMA 2020 model to ensure rigor and transparency, with no subsequent amendments.	3, 10, 17
	Support (25)	Declares no external funding received.	30
OTHER INFORMATION	Competing interests (26)	Authors declare no conflicts of interest.	30
	Availability of data, code (27)	All data and contributions are included in the article; contact offered for further information; no additional external code or materials mentioned.	30

Source: own elaboration.

4. Results. Conceptual Proposal: Sustainable Leadership as a Mechanism of ESG Governance in the Hospitality Sector

Organizations are undoubtedly facing growing demands to incorporate environmental, social, and governance (ESG) criteria, and in this context, sustainable leadership is positioned as a key element. The following model (Figure 2) presents this article’s conceptual proposal, where sustainable leadership acts as the central instrument for articulating and operationalizing these principles within corporate governance. It is a type of leadership that transcends simple financial management to integrate economic, social, and environmental aspects into organizational decision-making in a balanced and strategic manner [3] (p. 5). Through an ethical and responsible vision and a long-term perspective, sustainable leadership becomes the engine that drives the cultural, strategic, and operational transformation necessary to adapt and embed ESG practices at the core of corporate governance.

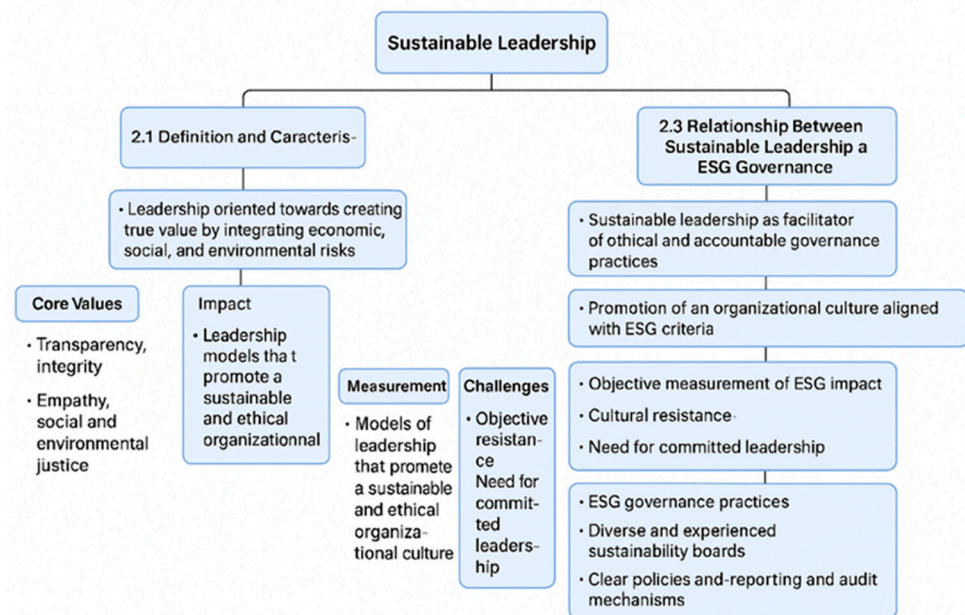


Figure 2. Conceptual framework for sustainable leadership from definition and characteristics to relationship with ESG governance.

In this sense, sustainable leadership not only facilitates the alignment of the organizational mission, vision, and values with social and market expectations, but also acts as a catalyst to promote organizational resilience, responsible innovation, and the active engagement of diverse stakeholders—indispensable elements for confronting the complexity

and volatility of the contemporary environment [5] (p. 92). Drawing from the theoretical framework, a conceptual model is proposed that positions sustainable leadership as the fundamental articulating instrument of ESG governance in the hospitality sector. This transformative function not only aligns strategy with social and market expectations but also fosters the development of resilience, responsible innovation, and stakeholder engagement. Therefore, it is argued that sustainable leadership redefines governance models, orienting them towards more just, transparent, and inclusive management capable of generating shared value and strengthening institutional legitimacy in the long term [3] (p. 5) and [5] (p. 92).

4.1. Sustainable Leadership and ESG Corporate Strategy

Sustainable leadership is positioned as an indispensable strategic factor for the effective integration of ESG criteria into the formulation and execution of corporate strategy. Its role transcends the mere formal adoption of environmental, social, and governance policies to become the engine that drives an authentic alignment between the organization's mission, vision, values and the growing demands of markets and society at large [3] (p. 5). This type of leadership is characterized by a systemic and holistic perspective that articulates financial aims with a genuine commitment to social and environmental well-being, avoiding the fragmented view that has traditionally separated these dimensions.

Eccles et al. [2] (p. 13) provide empirical evidence supporting the importance of leadership committed to sustainability for achieving superior overall performance. They argue that companies that meaningfully incorporate ESG criteria under sustainable leadership not only improve their long-term financial performance but also strengthen their internal organizational processes, generating a durable competitive advantage. This superior performance results from the leadership's ability to integrate the expectations and values of multiple stakeholders, which helps to reduce reputational and operational risks, as well as open opportunities for innovation and access to emerging markets.

Furthermore, some authors [17] (p. 94) highlight that integrating sustainability into corporate strategy through responsible leadership contributes to the creation of shared value (Figure 2), understood as the simultaneous generation of economic and social value. This perspective suggests that well-led sustainable strategies can strengthen the corporate brand, improve customer loyalty, and attract talent aligned with the company's ethical values, which in turn enhances organizational performance. For their part, Pless & Maak [11] underscore the relevance of leadership with a long-term vision, one that transcends transactional pressures to consider social and environmental impacts as key indicators of sustainable success.

Sustainable leadership, therefore, acts as an integrating agent that facilitates the transition of organizations from traditional governance models to models aligned with systemic sustainability. This requires leaders to show specific competencies, such as long-term strategic thinking, the capacity to manage complexity and uncertainty, and the ability to significantly involve stakeholders in the design and execution of ESG strategy [5]. In this way, sustainable leadership not only drives the implementation of responsible policies and practices but also promotes an organizational culture that internalizes sustainability as a guiding principle and a source of institutional resilience.

In other words, sustainable leadership constitutes the articulating principle that allows organizations to incorporate ESG criteria deeply and coherently into their corporate strategy, ensuring its relevance, continuity, and legitimacy in increasingly demanding and complex markets (Figure 3):

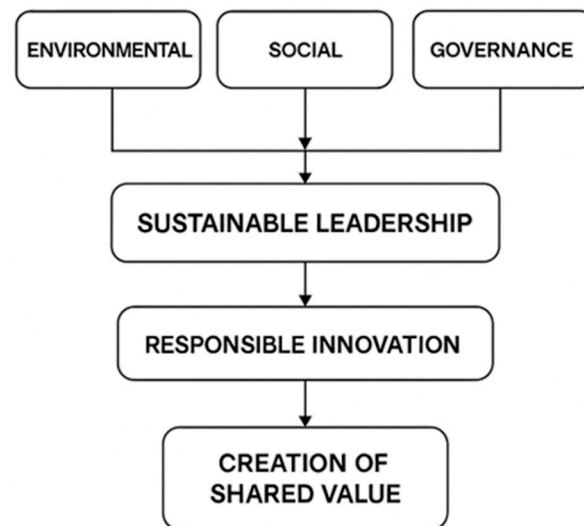


Figure 3. Creation of shared value and ESG in hotel and hospitality strategies.

4.2. The Sustainable Leader as an Agent of Cultural Change

Sustainable leadership is a key agent for cultural transformation within organizations, driving a profound change in the values, behaviors, and norms that underpin governance and responsible management according to ESG criteria [22]. This leadership model is not limited to promoting isolated policies or practices; rather, it acts as a catalyst for an ethically committed organizational culture oriented towards social and environmental responsibility—elements that are essential for long-term institutional legitimacy and sustainability [5] (p. 492). From this, it follows that sustainable leaders foster a culture of responsible innovation, understood as the capacity to generate solutions and processes that balance economic development with environmental protection and social well-being, avoiding negative externalities that could compromise sustainability goals [5] (p. 231). This orientation towards ethical innovation materializes in the creation of spaces for open dialogue and participation, where the importance of actively involving multiple internal and external stakeholders in the definition and execution of sustainable strategies is recognized [7] (p. 31).

Furthermore, trust and accountability are strengthened through transparent and authentic communication promoted by sustainable leaders, who assume an exemplary role in the dissemination and practice of ESG values at all organizational levels [5] (p. 467). This leadership style stands in opposition to authoritarian or transactional models that solely prioritize short-term financial results, emphasizing instead the emotional and ethical commitment that connects people to the organization's sustainable mission and vision. Similarly, the sustainable leader's function as a cultural change agent also implies the ability to manage tensions and conflicts between competing interests, helping dialogic and participatory processes that allow for a transition towards more inclusive, just, and adaptive organizational models [21]. Consequently, the leader becomes an architect of shared narratives that motivate staff, foster a sense of collective purpose, and promote a corporate identity rooted in ethics and sustainability.

In summary, sustainable leadership enables a cultural transformation that is a *sine qua non* for ESG policies to transcend the declarative level and be translated into institutionalized and effective practices. Through their influence on organizational culture, this type of leader eases a deep and dynamic integration of ESG criteria, giving rise to resilient, innovative, and socially responsible organizations [5] and [1] (p. 245).

4.3. Participatory and Transparent Governance

Just as sustainable leadership drives a substantial transformation in governance models, it also promotes participatory and transparent processes that strengthen the legitimacy and trust of organizations among their multiple stakeholders. Governance can no longer be conceived as a closed, hierarchical system, but rather as a dynamic framework that integrates the active inclusion of internal and external stakeholders through open processes of dialogue, accountability, and collective decision-making [9] (p. 45). Indeed, Eccles & Klimenko [20] (p. 57) highlight that openness and transparency in management are fundamental pillars for strengthening organizational legitimacy in a global context marked by growing pressure from investors, regulators, and civil society for responsible practices. This participatory governance approach translates into the incorporation of effective communication channels and integrated reporting systems that reflect not only financial results but also ESG criteria, offering a holistic view that fosters trust and reduces reputational risks [23] (p. 216).

Hence, the active participation of diverse stakeholders in governance processes implies, in practice, the creation of institutionalized spaces such as advisory committees, participatory social audits, and dialogue forums where the multiple voices of employees, customers, communities, and other relevant actors are recognized and considered. This plurality of actors contributes to the quality, relevance, and legitimacy of organizational policies, easing a more adaptive and coherent management in line with current sustainability challenges [9] (p. 40) and [1] (p. 229).

Sustainable leadership plays a crucial facilitating role here by structuring and energizing these participatory and transparent processes. Leaders function as true architects of inclusive spaces and as models of ethical conduct that incentivize collaboration and collective commitment, transforming organizational governance into a living, legitimate, and sustainable development-oriented process [5] (p. 470). This cultural change in governance not only responds to external demands for greater corporate responsibility but also becomes an internal strategic asset that strengthens organizational cohesion and resilience. Therefore, the participatory and transparent governance promoted by sustainable leadership is not merely a desirable practice but an indispensable requirement for organizations to successfully navigate the complex ethical, social, and environmental challenges of the contemporary context, ensuring the creation of sustainable value and enduring trust with their stakeholders.

4.4. Organizational Resilience and the Capacity for Responsible Innovation

Sustainable leadership enhances at least two critical organizational capabilities for confronting the complexity and volatility of the contemporary environment: organizational resilience and responsible innovation. First, it strengthens organizational resilience, which is defined as an organization's aptitude to predict, adapt to, and effectively recover from disruptive events, keeping its operational continuity and strategic direction [19], and sustainable leadership acts as an engine that fosters flexible, learning-oriented cultures capable of constant renewal in the face of social, environmental, or economic crises; and second, it promotes the capacity for responsible innovation, which involves the development and implementation of technological solutions, processes, and business models that balanced consider economic, social, and environmental impacts, promoting shared value without causing collateral damage [21] (p. 298). Consequently, sustainable leaders help these innovative processes through a management style that integrates systemic and ethical thinking, incentivizing creativity oriented towards long-term sustainability goals.

Meanwhile, Bansal & Song [12] highlight that the confluence of sustainable leadership and ESG governance generates a virtuous cycle where resilience and innovation mutually

reinforce each other, strengthening organizational culture and social legitimacy. This constructive interaction enhances the capacity for adaptation and anticipation of emerging risks while simultaneously driving the development of sustainable competitive advantages in increasingly demanding global markets.

In short, sustainable leadership not only contributes to institutional robustness in the face of external challenges but also promotes an ecosystem conducive to ethical and responsible innovation, positioning the organization as a key factor in the transition towards sustainable, regenerative, and socially inclusive business models [19,21,22].

Taken together, the preceding sections have synthesized evidence from the literature to construct a conceptual framework that posits sustainable leadership as the central, articulating mechanism for effective ESG governance. It has been argued that this leadership is the engine for strategic and cultural transformation, the facilitator of participatory governance, and the promoter of resilience and responsible innovation within organizations. Having established this conceptual model, the following section will delve into a critical discussion of its practical implications. It will analyze how this theoretical framework translates to and confronts the challenges and opportunities of the hospitality sector, thereby moving from a synthesis of the findings to their interpretation in a specific, applied context.

5. Discussion

The convergence of sustainable leadership and ESG governance presents a key strategic opportunity for the hospitality industry, a sector facing complex environmental, social, and governance challenges, along with growing demands from regulators and responsible consumers. In this context, sustainable leadership emerges as a crucial mechanism for effectively integrating ESG criteria, promoting the organizational transformation necessary to ensure long-term resilience, legitimacy, and competitiveness of hotels.

Building on the conceptual framework developed, this discussion section delves into the practical application and critical analysis of its components. The objective is to move beyond the theoretical model to interpret how sustainable leadership operates -and faces resistance- within the specific and complex context of the hospitality sector. To achieve this, the following subsections will break down its impact on corporate strategy, organizational culture, governance models, and the capacity for innovation. Furthermore, the challenges and tensions that arise in practice will be analyzed, offering a balanced view that serves as a bridge between theory and real-world hotel management.

5.1. Strategic Integration of Sustainable Leadership in Hotels

The hospitality sector is characterized by its significant impact on natural resources, its direct relationship with multiple stakeholders (customers, employees, local communities, suppliers), and its high exposure to environmental and social risks such as climate change, pressure on ecosystems, and social inequality in its operating localities. For this reason, incorporating ESG criteria into corporate strategy not only enhances reputation but also represents a source of sustainable value creation for these organizations [2] (p. 2837).

Similarly, sustainable leaders in the hospitality sector are those who succeed in aligning the organizational mission, vision, and values with social and environmental sustainability expectations. This implies transcending traditional management focused on immediate economic benefit to adopt a long-term commitment perspective that integrates responsibility towards employees, communities, and the natural environment [17]. For example, sustainable leadership does not merely approve the installation of solar panels; it fosters a culture where maintenance staff are incentivized to propose innovations for water conservation in guest rooms. Likewise, an inclusive social program could materialize in preferential contracting agreements with local agricultural cooperatives to supply the hotel's kitchen,

thus contributing to building a differentiated competitive advantage that enhances the customer experience and strengthens loyalty.

5.2. Cultural Change and Leadership as an Engine of Social Transformation

Sustainable leadership also plays a transformative role in hotel organizational culture, a fundamental aspect for ensuring that ESG policies do not remain mere words but materialize in the daily behavior of employees and managers [5]. The hospitality sector, due to its service-oriented nature and direct contact with diverse stakeholders, requires a collaborative, ethical, and transparent culture that promotes responsible innovation and respect for diversity and human rights [1] (p. 235). This leadership is essential for fostering the active participation of employees, customers, and communities, which translates, for example, into the creation of concrete dialogue spaces or the formation of advisory committees with representatives from neighborhood associations to discuss and mitigate the hotel's impact on local traffic and resources. In other words, these are actions that genuinely contribute to inclusion and a collective commitment to sustainability [9] (p. 31). In this way, hotel leaders must not only be agents of cultural change but also effective communicators of ESG values, capable of generating trust and a shared purpose throughout the organization.

5.3. Participatory Governance and Transparency in Hotel Management

ESG governance, fueled by sustainable leadership, must be structured as a participatory and transparent process that assigns diverse stakeholders an active role in organizational management [13]. In hotels, this materializes as the inclusion of employees, local communities, customers, and suppliers in decision-making, and the implementation of clear and accessible reporting systems on social, environmental, and ethical performance [20] (p. 57). Transparency in ESG management—including participatory environmental and social audits and the publication of integrated reports—strengthens legitimacy and trust, in addition to attracting responsible investment and a committed clientele [23] (p. 216). Consequently, through open and ethical governance models, sustainable hotel leaders can establish multi-sector collaboration networks that contribute to improving the quality of life and local development, easing the foundation of lasting and mutually beneficial relationships.

5.4. Resilience and Responsible Innovation in Dynamic Environments

Organizational resilience—critical for hotels in contexts characterized by uncertainty, socio-environmental crises, and global market fluctuations—requires sustainable leadership that promotes an organizational culture capable of anticipating, adapting to, and rapidly recovering from disturbances, while maintaining operational continuity and alignment with ESG objectives [19]. This includes the initiative-taking management of risks such as natural disasters, pandemics, or changes in environmental regulations. At the same time, responsible innovation, understood as the development of products and services that generate economic value without compromising social or environmental well-being, is essential for long-term competitiveness and sustainability [21] (p. 298). In the hospitality sector, this can be reflected in the adoption of green technologies, sustainable tourism programs, and inclusive business models that satisfy both customer expectations and social and regulatory demands.

In conclusion, sustainable leadership generates a virtuous cycle where resilience and innovation mutually reinforce each other, strengthening organizational culture and social legitimacy—differentiating elements for keeping leadership in highly competitive and regulated markets [12].

5.5. Challenges for Sustainable Leadership in the Hospitality Sector

Despite its advantages, the implementation of sustainable leadership in hotels faces relevant obstacles. Cultural resistance to new leadership models, particularly the predominance of hierarchical structures and a short-term financial mindset, can slow the adoption of sustainable practices [5].

The complexity of measuring and reporting social and environmental impacts in broad and fragmented value chains, such as that of tourism, constitutes an operational and technical challenge; the absence of clear metrics limits the capacity for continuous evaluation and improvement of leadership and ESG governance [11] (p. 10). Finally, the training and development of specific competencies for leaders in an ESG context, which remains insufficient in hotel organizations, is another obstacle. Overcoming these barriers requires training leaders to manage multiple stakeholders, make complex ethical decisions, and foster responsible innovation [5].

An added, and the most complex, challenge lies in managing the inherent tensions between the interests of different stakeholders. The sustainable leadership model assumes a synergy that can be conflictive in practice. For example, investor demand for maximizing short-term financial returns can clash head-on with the need for long-term investments in green technologies or with the demands of local communities for increased staff wages. Therefore, the true test of a sustainable leader is not only to promote sustainability when all interests converge but also to navigate these ethical and economic dilemmas, mediating between competing expectations to find shared value solutions that, while not perfect, are legitimate and sustainable over time.

5.6. Proposals for Future Research into Hotels

Literature still lacks empirical studies analyzing the direct impact of sustainable leadership on ESG outcomes and organizational transformation in the hospitality sector, particularly considering geographical and cultural diversity [12] (p. 140). Longitudinal research is needed to provide evidence of causality and the evolution of these dynamics. It is also vital to study the institutional and cultural particularities that affect the adoption of sustainable leadership in different regions, especially in emerging destinations where sustainability may conflict with economic development goals. Likewise, analyses are needed that delve into the micro- and meso-organizational processes through which sustainable leaders generate effective cultural and structural changes in hotels.

In summary, sustainable leadership is an integrative and strategic mechanism for articulating ESG criteria in the hospitality sector, transforming its practices towards more resilient, transparent, and inclusive models. To achieve this, it must confront and overcome cultural, technical, and training-related challenges, aligning its actions with the inherent complexities of this industry, which is vital for local and global development in the 21st century.

5.7. Implications for Theory

The primary theoretical implication of this article is its proposal of an integrative conceptual framework that connects two streams of literature often explored in isolation: sustainable leadership and ESG governance.

In contrast to the seminal work by Avery and Bergsteiner [3], which focused on 23 leadership practices for resilience and performance based on the Triple Bottom Line, this model advances the theory by redefining the leader's role. Specifically, it positions sustainable leadership as the catalytic mechanism of ESG governance, an indispensable structural axis for systematically integrating Environmental (E), Social (S), and, critically,

Governance (G) criteria into the corporate architecture of the hospitality sector, thereby overcoming the fragmented and management focused perspective of existing models.

This study offers several significant contributions to leadership and corporate governance theory. Its main theoretical implication is the proposition of an integrative conceptual framework that connects two streams of literature often explored in isolation: sustainable leadership and ESG governance. By explicitly articulating leadership as the catalytic mechanism for the systemic integration of ESG criteria, the paper helps to overcome the fragmented view and offers a more holistic model for understanding organizational transformation towards sustainability.

Secondly, the research redefines the role of sustainable leadership, transcending its conception as a mere value-based management style. The proposed model positions it as a fundamental governance mechanism—a structural component that is indispensable for aligning strategy, culture, and operations with ESG objectives. This reconceptualization invites theorists to consider leadership not only from a behavioral perspective but also as a functional element within the architecture of modern corporate governance.

Furthermore, the work contributes to the contextualization of leadership theory. By applying the framework to the hospitality sector, it highlights the insufficiency of generic leadership models in addressing the unique socio-environmental challenges of specific industries. This underscores the need to develop middle-range theories that explain how leadership principles manifest and adapt to contexts with complex stakeholder interactions and high environmental impacts, as is the case in hospitality.

Finally, by proposing a causal relationship between sustainable leadership practices and ESG governance outcomes, the study lays the groundwork for future empirical research. This framework offers a theoretical roadmap for formulating and testing hypotheses on how different facets of leadership (e.g., long-term vision, ethics, inclusion) directly impact ESG performance indicators, moving the research field from correlational studies to more robust causal analyses.

5.8. Limitations of the Study

Despite the rigorous methodological approach and the theoretical and practical contributions of this study, it is imperative to acknowledge a series of inherent limitations that contextualize the scope and applicability of its findings. It is important to know that these limitations do not invalidate the conclusions but, on the contrary, open new and valuable proposals for future research that can complement and strengthen the conceptual framework proposed here.

The fundamental limitation lies in the very nature of the methodology employed. As it is a systematic literature review, the findings are based exclusively on the analysis and interpretation of secondary sources. While this approach is ideal for synthesizing existing knowledge and proposing a new theoretical model, it lacks direct empirical validation. Thus, the framework that positions sustainable leadership as an ESG governance mechanism is, for now, a theoretical construct derived from literature. Its effectiveness, nuances, and barriers to implementation in a real organizational environment have not been evaluated through primary data collection, which constitutes the subsequent logical step to validate and refine the propositions presented here. The absence of original empirical data means that the conclusions depend on the quality and focus of existing research, thereby inheriting any bias or gaps it may contain.

Secondly, the scope of the review presents a potential selection bias, as the search was restricted to articles published in English and Spanish and indexed in the Scopus and Web of Science databases. This delimitation, although necessary for feasibility and to ensure an in-depth analysis by the research team, may have introduced a linguistic and

geographical bias. Relevant research published in other languages with high scientific output, such as German, French, or Mandarin, may have been omitted, thus excluding theoretical perspectives and empirical findings from non-Anglophone or Hispanic contexts. Similarly, the exclusive reliance on WoS and Scopus could have left out valuable studies indexed in regional or specialized databases in tourism and hospitality, which might offer a more nuanced and local view of the phenomenon under study.

A third limitation, and one of the most significant, is the deliberate exclusion of most studies published after 2019, a decision based on the criterion of theoretical saturation for the construction of a foundational model. While this was justified to consolidate the key conceptual frameworks that form the basis of the model, the field of sustainability and ESG governance has evolved at a dizzying pace in recent years. Factors such as the post-pandemic crisis, the growing climate urgency, new European sustainability regulations, and a radical shift in investor expectations have redefined the ESG landscape since 2020. Therefore, the proposed framework may not fully capture the new pressures, nuances, and dynamics that sustainable leaders face in the current context, which limits the contemporary validity of the analysis and underscores the need for its continuous updating.

Finally, the study faces the limitation of conceptual and methodological heterogeneity in the included works. The concepts of ‘sustainable leadership,’ ‘CSR,’ and ‘ESG governance’ are not always defined and operationalized in the same way in literature. This conceptual diversity hinders direct comparison between studies and the construction of a perfectly cohesive synthesis. The review, therefore, is more interpretive and qualitative in nature. Taken together, these limitations suggest that the proposed integrative framework should be considered a solid but not definitive starting point. A call is therefore made to the research community to address these gaps, as it is crucial to complement this theoretical synthesis with empirical studies that test the proposed causal relationships, with cross-cultural research that explores the model’s applicability in diverse geographies, and with longitudinal designs that can capture the dynamic and evolutionary nature of the integration of sustainable leadership into ESG governance over time.

6. Conclusions

The comprehensive analysis developed in this article reaffirms that sustainable leadership stands for a fundamental, strategic, and operational part of effective governance in the ESG era. This is especially true in the hospitality sector, where environmental, social, and governance challenges converge with a strong need for organizational transformation. This leadership style goes beyond superficial practices or regulatory compliance, acting as the engine that enables the genuine internalization of ESG criteria and their translation into coherent organizational processes, culture, and behaviors.

6.1. Sustainable Leadership as an Integrating Axis of ESG Governance in Hotels

One of the most relevant findings of this research is the integrative role that sustainable leadership plays in articulating the various elements that form ESG governance in the hospitality sector. In this industry, where operations directly impact sensitive natural resources, local communities, and a diversity of actors, sustainable leadership constitutes a cross-cutting mechanism that allows for the balancing of economic, social, and environmental objectives, achieved through a long-term vision and a profound ethical commitment [3,5].

This integrative leadership approach helps to overcome the traditional dichotomies between profitability and social responsibility, materializing a holistic management model that prioritizes not only financial success but also the creation of shared value across all dimensions. Sustainability ceases to be a marginal issue or a regulatory obligation and is instead transformed into a guiding principle and a driver of innovation and organizational

resilience [2]. In this sense, sustainable leaders function as agents of change who instill, throughout the entire organization, a strategic orientation based on ethics, inclusion, and intergenerational responsibility.

6.2. Deepening the Cultural and Participatory Transformation

As cultural development is another domain where sustainable leadership becomes fundamental for ESG governance, a profound cultural change is necessary for ESG criteria to truly permeate the structure and dynamics of a hotel organization. Such a change is only workable with leaders capable of inspiring, motivating, and engaging all hierarchical and functional levels [5]. These leaders promote an inclusive work environment where diversity and the active participation of stakeholders become essential elements for decision-making and value creation.

This ethical and transparent leadership fosters open communication channels, drives accountability, and eases multi-sector collaboration, allowing ESG policies to be translated into tangible and contextualized practices. Especially in the hospitality sector, where interaction with customers, suppliers, and communities is constant, a leadership style based on trust and dialog becomes indispensable for building solid and sustainable long-term relationships [9]. Thus, sustainable leadership acts not only as a conceptual framework but as a living practice that transforms the organizational culture and reinforces social legitimacy.

6.3. Participatory Governance: Building Legitimacy and Trust

Participatory governance has become a substantive factor for strengthening organizational legitimacy and reinforcing the trust of different stakeholders. It requires sustainable leadership that helps the establishment of structures and processes that promote transparency in management and the active inclusion of employees, investors, communities, and customers in decision-making spaces [20]. This type of openness can mitigate reputational and social risks while positioning hotel organizations as responsible and sensitive actors within their environments.

Consequently, and although the implementation of formal protocols—such as sustainability committees, external audits, and integrated reports—represents essential practices for consolidating this inclusive governance, it is ethical, committed, and systems-thinking leadership that energizes these processes, ensuring they are not mere formalities but rather effective instruments for continuous improvement and accountability [23]. In this way, a dynamic, adaptive, and socially legitimized governance model is deployed, one that is compatible with the values of sustainability and justice demanded by contemporary society.

6.4. Resilience and Responsible Innovation as Sustainable Competitive Advantages

As global and local environments become more uncertain and confront multidimensional crises, the organizational resilience acquired through sustainable leadership is an imperative for the hospitality sector. Sustainable leaders drive a culture that not only predicts and responds to climatic, health, or economic crises, but also learns and proactively adapts to maintain business continuity in harmony with social and environmental commitments [19]. For this reason, an innovative capacity guided by social and environmental responsibility is likewise configured as a key strategic attribute for competitiveness. Through sustainable leadership, hotels can generate tourism products and services that respond to the demands of conscious consumers, implementing clean technologies, fostering inclusive tourism, and promoting regenerative practices [21]. This innovative approach strengthens corporate reputation, expands market opportunities, and contributes to the construction of sustainable local economies.

Therefore, the constructive collaboration between resilience and innovation, driven by sustainable leadership, manifests as a virtuous cycle that consolidates the foundations for

lasting development, where sustainability is not a cost but a source of differential value and competitive advantage [12]. This capacity for adaptation and responsible innovation is key to the permanence and prosperity of the hospitality sector in a world increasingly oriented towards global responsibility.

6.5. Challenges and Pathways for Effective Implementation

Nevertheless, this paradigm faces significant challenges that demand long-range strategies. Resistance to cultural transformation rooted in traditional management models, the absence of adequate metrics and tools to evaluate the impact of sustainable leadership, and the lack of specialized training in ESG competencies all form highly relevant obstacles [5,24].

Overcoming these barriers requires, on the one hand, a genuine institutional commitment that fosters education and the development of specific skills for sustainable leaders, enabling them to manage complexity, ethics, and stakeholder diversity. On the other hand, it is necessary to design robust measurement and reporting systems that link leadership practices with concrete sustainability outcomes, helping transparency and continuous improvement.

As these challenges are particularly complex in the hospitality sector -due to the heterogeneity and dispersion of its value chain, its exposure to multiple impacts and the need for direct interaction with vulnerable communities and natural environments- the implementation of sustainable leadership as an ESG governance system must consider these aspects through contextualized, participatory, and adaptive approaches.

6.6. Practical Recommendations for Hospitality Managers

For the findings of this study to transcend theory and become a tool for transformation, it is essential for managers in the hospitality sector to adopt a practical approach. Sustainability cannot be a delegated initiative; the leader must personally articulate a vision of sustainability that is authentic, aligned with the hotel's identity and local context, and passionately communicated. This exemplary leadership inspires the rest of the team and demonstrates genuine commitment. For this vision to materialize, it is necessary to integrate measurable ESG goals into the daily operations and performance evaluation systems of all employees, from senior management to maintenance staff, ensuring that responsibility is an integral part of the job and not an additional task.

A sustainable leader does not impose but rather facilitates and empowers, fostering a culture of shared ownership. It is crucial to create platforms for employees at all levels to propose, develop, and lead sustainability initiatives, thereby organically accelerating cultural change. This internal openness must extend outward through active and transparent dialogue with stakeholders. This involves establishing formal communication channels with the local community, developing long-term partnerships with suppliers who share sustainability values, and honestly communicating both successes and challenges to customers. Finally, to make all of this possible, organizations must invest in training programs for their leaders that focus on ESG competencies, such as complexity management and ethical decision-making, as a well-equipped leader is the best guarantee for navigating the dilemmas that will inevitably arise when balancing economic, social, and environmental objectives.

6.7. Contributions for Future Research

This study highlights the urgent need to advance empirical research that designs, confirms, and applies integrative models of sustainable leadership specific to the hospitality sector. For the empirical validation of the proposed framework, future lines of research should primarily include quantitative studies (e.g., large-scale surveys to measure the correlation between leadership practices and ESG outcomes) and qualitative studies [25]

(e.g., in-depth interviews with executives and key stakeholders in hotel chains). This dual approach is indispensable for measuring the real impact and effectiveness of sustainable leadership practices on concrete ESG indicators.

Longitudinal and multicultural analyses are needed to explore how leadership effectiveness varies according to the institutional, cultural, and economic context, thus allowing for the development of theoretical and practical frameworks tailored to the diverse reality of global tourism [12]. Furthermore, it is essential to investigate the micro- and meso-organizational processes [26] through which sustainable leadership influences the cultural and structural transformation of hotels, finding concrete practices, motivating narratives, and advancing strategies for managing the tensions inherent in sustainability [5].

Finally, incorporating the analysis of digital transformation, intergenerational justice, and future equity as emerging dimensions linked to sustainable leadership [27] is a promising means of broadening the scope and depth of understanding of ESG governance in the hospitality sector and beyond.

In summary, this article provides evidence that sustainable leadership constitutes the central pillar and the indispensable integrating system for consolidating effective and legitimate ESG governance in the hospitality sector [28]. Only through committed, ethical, participatory, and innovative leadership will it be possible to drive the organizational transformation necessary to confront contemporary challenges and ensure the sustainable and equitable development of the sector in the long term.

In conclusion, this study establishes that sustainable leadership is the central axis of effective ESG governance in the hospitality sector. The main theoretical contribution is an integrative model: (i) the main theoretical contribution is an integrative model that articulates the causal relationship between leadership and governance, positioning the leader as the catalyst for systemic transformation and overcoming the fragmented view of existing literature; (ii) the practical implications demand that managers move beyond isolated CSR actions to become architects of a resilient, participatory, and innovative organizational culture, integrating sustainability into the core of strategy and daily operations; and (iii) future lines of research should focus on the empirical validation of this model through longitudinal and multicultural studies that measure the real impact of sustainable leadership on ESG performance and allow for its application to be adapted to diverse global contexts.

Author Contributions: Conceptualization, S.M.C.L., J.B.P. and I.R.G.; methodology, S.M.C.L., J.B.P. and I.R.G.; software, S.M.C.L., J.B.P. and I.R.G.; validation, S.M.C.L., J.B.P. and I.R.G.; formal analysis, S.M.C.L., J.B.P. and I.R.G.; investigation, S.M.C.L., J.B.P. and I.R.G.; resources, S.M.C.L., J.B.P. and I.R.G.; data curation, S.M.C.L., J.B.P. and I.R.G.; writing—original draft preparation, S.M.C.L.; writing—review and editing, S.M.C.L., J.B.P. and I.R.G.; visualization, S.M.C.L., J.B.P. and I.R.G.; supervision, S.M.C.L., J.B.P. and I.R.G.; project administration, S.M.C.L.; funding acquisition, S.M.C.L., J.B.P. and I.R.G. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Institutional Review Board Statement: Not applicable for studies not involving humans or animals.

Informed Consent Statement: Not applicable for studies not involving humans.

Data Availability Statement: The original contributions presented in the study are included in the article. Further inquiries can be directed at the corresponding author.

Acknowledgments: For the creation of the figures presented in this study, the artificial intelligence tool Microsoft Copilot was used: the function of this technology was to assist in generating the initial drafts for data visualizations, including the PRISMA flow diagram and the proposed conceptual frameworks. It is important to note that this process was conducted under strict human supervision.

The output generated by the AI was reviewed, adjusted, and validated by the authors to ensure their complete accuracy, clarity, and alignment with the research findings. Therefore, the final responsibility for the content and accuracy of all figures lies entirely with the authors.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

References

- Voegtlin, C.; Scherer, A.G. Responsible innovation and the innovation of responsibility: Governing sustainable development in a globalized world. *J. Bus. Ethics* **2017**, *143*, 227–244. [[CrossRef](#)]
- Eccles, R.G.; Ioannou, I.; Serafeim, G. The impact of corporate sustainability on organizational processes and performance. *Manag. Sci.* **2014**, *60*, 2835–2857. [[CrossRef](#)]
- Avery, G.C.; Bergsteiner, H. Sustainable leadership practices for enhancing business resilience and performance. *Strategy Leadersh.* **2011**, *39*, 5–15. [[CrossRef](#)]
- Northouse, P.G. *Leadership: Theory and Practice*; Sage Publications: Thousand Oaks, CA, USA, 2018.
- Maak, T.; Pless, N.M.; Voegtlin, C. Business statesman or shareholder advocate? CEO responsible leadership styles and the micro-foundations of political CSR. *J. Manag. Stud.* **2016**, *53*, 463–493. [[CrossRef](#)]
- Elkington, J. *Cannibals with Forks: The Triple Bottom Line of 21st-Century Business*; New Society Publishers: Gabriola Island, BC, Canada, 1997.
- Goleman, D. Leadership that gets results. *Harv. Bus. Rev.* **2000**, *78*, 78–90.
- Waldman, D.A.; Siegel, D.; Javidan, M. Components of CEO transformational leadership and corporate social responsibility. *J. Manag. Stud.* **2006**, *43*, 1703–1725. [[CrossRef](#)]
- Freeman, R.E.; Harrison, J.S.; Wicks, A.C. *Managing for Stakeholders: Survival, Reputation, and Success*; Yale University Press: London, UK, 2007.
- Avolio, B.J.; Gardner, W.L. Authentic leadership development: Getting to the root of positive forms of leadership. *Leadersh. Q.* **2005**, *16*, 315–338. [[CrossRef](#)]
- Pless, N.M.; Maak, T. Responsible leadership: Pathways to the future. *J. Bus. Ethics* **2011**, *98* (Suppl. 1), 3–13. [[CrossRef](#)]
- Bansal, P.; Song, H.C. Similar but not the same: Differentiating corporate sustainability from corporate responsibility. *Acad. Manag. Ann.* **2017**, *11*, 105–149. [[CrossRef](#)]
- Shrivastava, P. The role of corporations in achieving ecological sustainability. *Acad. Manag. Rev.* **1995**, *20*, 936–960. [[CrossRef](#)]
- Rockström, J.; Steffen, W.; Noone, K.; Persson, Å.; Chapin, F.S.; Lambin, E.; Scheffer, M.; Folke, C.; Nykvist, B.; Schellnhuber, H.J. A safe operating space for humanity. *Nature* **2009**, *461*, 472–475. [[CrossRef](#)]
- Jamali, D.; Karam, C. Corporate social responsibility in developing countries as an emerging field of study. *Int. J. Manag. Rev.* **2018**, *20*, 32–61. [[CrossRef](#)]
- Freeman, R.E.; McVea, J. A Stakeholder Approach to Strategic Management. In *The Blackwell Handbook of Strategic Management*; Blackwell Publishers Ltd.: Oxford, UK, 2001. [[CrossRef](#)]
- Aguinis, H.; Glavas, A. What we know and don't know about corporate social responsibility: A review and research agenda. *J. Manag.* **2012**, *38*, 932–968. [[CrossRef](#)]
- Carroll, A.B. Corporate social responsibility: Evolution of a definitional construct. *Bus. Soc.* **1999**, *38*, 268–295. [[CrossRef](#)]
- Burnard, K.; Bhamra, R. Organisational resilience: Development of a conceptual framework for organisational responses. *Int. J. Prod. Res.* **2011**, *49*, 5581–5599. [[CrossRef](#)]
- Eccles, R.G.; Klimenko, S. The Investor Revolution. *Harvard Business Review*, May–June 2019 Issue.
- Hahn, T.; Pinkse, J.; Preuss, L.; Figge, F. Tensions in corporate sustainability: Towards an integrative framework. *J. Bus. Ethics* **2015**, *127*, 297–316. [[CrossRef](#)]
- Doppelt, B. *Leading Change Toward Sustainability: A Change-Management Guide for Business, Government and Civil Society*, 2nd ed.; Routledge: Abingdon, UK, 2010. [[CrossRef](#)]
- Friede, G.; Busch, T.; Bassen, A. ESG and financial performance: Aggregated evidence from more than 2000 empirical studies. *J. Sustain. Financ. Invest.* **2015**, *5*, 210–233. [[CrossRef](#)]
- Maak, T.; Pless, N.M. Responsible leadership in a stakeholder society—A relational perspective. *J. Bus. Ethics* **2006**, *66*, 99–115. [[CrossRef](#)]
- Bibi, G.; Hashmi, H.B.A.; Bhutta, Z.M.; Abbass, K.; Song, H. Promoting sustainable practices in hospitality via green HRM and increased sustainability awareness. *Sustain. Dev.* **2025**, 1–16. [[CrossRef](#)]
- Shin, H.; Jo, Y.; Lee, S.; Park, J.; Cho, J.; Kim, H. ESG for sustainability in hospitality and tourism: A theoretical and practical review with a future research agenda. *J. Travel Res.* **2025**, *2025*, 00472875251363629. [[CrossRef](#)]

27. Brohi, N.A.; Qureshi, M.A.; Shaikh, D.H.; Mahboob, F.; Asif, Z.; Brohi, A. Nexus between environmentally specific servant leadership, green knowledge sharing, green capacities, green service innovation, and green competitive advantage in the hospitality sector of Pakistan: An SDG & ESG stakeholder compliance framework. *J. Mark. Strateg.* **2024**, *13*, 411–433. [[CrossRef](#)]
28. Elshaer, I.A.; Azazz, A.M.S.; Alyahya, M.; Fayyad, S.; Aboutaleb, M.; Mohammad, A.A.A. Driving sustainability performance in hotels through green digital leadership and circular economy: The moderating role of hotel green efficacy. *Systems* **2025**, *13*, 415. [[CrossRef](#)]

Disclaimer/Publisher’s Note: The statements, opinions and data contained in all publications are solely those of the individual author(s) and contributor(s) and not of MDPI and/or the editor(s). MDPI and/or the editor(s) disclaim responsibility for any injury to people or property resulting from any ideas, methods, instructions or products referred to in the content.