Visibility of Sustainability Certifications in Tourism Enterprises: A Content Analysis of Electronic Platforms in Balıkesir Province

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Abstract: In the contemporary landscape, sustainability emerges as a pivotal indicator of corporate commitment to environmental stewardship. This study aims to elucidate the extent to which tourism enterprises, particularly those in Balıkesir Province known for leveraging natural resources, manifest their sustainable practices and certifications in electronic media. Content analysis, one of the qualitative research methods, was used in the study. The sustainability certificates of 118 accommodation facilities with tourism operation certificates operating in Balıkesir Province and the electronic platforms on which they share them were examined. It was determined that only 9 of the 118 accommodation facilities examined had an "Environmentally Friendly Facility" certificate. It was observed that only 7 of these 16 facilities displayed these documents on their websites. Additionally, very few facilities have a "Green Key" certificate. This study makes a unique contribution to the literature on the environmental responsibility fulfillment of tourism businesses and the practices to be developed to solve environmental problems. Through the findings of the study, suggestions are offered to all stakeholders necessary for sustainable tourism, especially accommodation businesses. The study's outcomes highlight the need for enhanced visibility of sustainable practices in electronic environments, thereby underscoring the imperative for tourism enterprises to augment their commitment to environmental sustainability.

Keywords: Accommodation facilities; Sustainable tourism; Green practices; Balıkesir Province; Content analysis; Environmental certification

1. Introduction

As global environmental challenges escalate, the role of tourism enterprises, particularly accommodation facilities, in mitigating these issues becomes increasingly critical. These entities are adopting measures to curtail their environmental impact and are striving to contribute to sustainability by diminishing such adversities. Despite being a significant revenue source for numerous countries, tourism, if not managed conscientiously, can become a principal contributor to the degradation of natural, historical, and cultural assets. Environmental ramifications stemming from tourism activities have been extensively documented. As identified by Türküm (1998), these include the degradation of green spaces, agricultural lands, and forests, along with the pollution of water resources. Furthermore, the issue extends to overcrowding and the consequent deterioration of natural and cultural assets. It has been observed that tourism activities, often perceived as environmentally benign, can adversely affect various environmental factors (Yıldız & Kalağan, 2008).

The phenomenon of tourism is characterized by the consumption of natural, man-made, and socio-cultural resources. The essence of the issue lies not in the consumption of these resources per se, but in their potential misuse under the guise of tourism. The sector must pivot from unconsciously 'consuming' to sustainably 'using' these resources, as many of the problems associated with tourism stem from exceeding capacity limits (Akis, 1999). Therefore, there is a pressing need for more research in this area to translate sustainability knowledge into practical applications within tourism, to scrutinize current practices for altering behaviors and attitudes, and to identify and rectify deficiencies. In light of these considerations, this study focuses on examining the sustainability practices,

certifications, and their visibility in electronic environments of accommodation facilities certified for tourism operations in Balıkesir Province. Balıkesir, situated in Turkey's Marmara Region, has been chosen for this study owing to its diverse and rich tourism potential. It serves as an exemplary locale that demonstrates the need for sustainable practices in tourism, given its array of resources and significant tourism capacity.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Concept of Sustainability

The discourse on sustainability was first prominently addressed at the 1972 United Nations Conference on the Human Environment (UNCHE) in Stockholm. Subsequent scholarly engagement with the concept intensified, culminating in a seminal definition by the Brundtland Report of 1987. This report articulated sustainability as the principle of satisfying present needs without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs (Brundtland, 1987).

Sustainability encompasses the harmonious management of social, economic, and environmental resources. Economic sustainability is reflected in the enduring production of goods and services, the management of state finances, and the maintenance of sectoral equilibrium. Social sustainability, as described by Gedik (2020), involves preventing the overuse of natural resources, fostering renewable resources, preserving current conditions to some extent, reducing waste, and ensuring equality in access to resources, education, health, gender equality, and political accountability. Scoones (2007) expands on this by highlighting sustainability as an intersectional approach that enhances global and local well-being and shapes the future of ecological, economic, and socio-political dynamics.

From a corporate perspective, sustainability is the pursuit of sustainable development in conjunction with profitability, respect for human and stakeholder rights, environmentally conscious management of products and services, combating corruption in business practices, and stakeholder engagement in decision-making processes (Hoşhut & van het Hof, 2015). However, the challenge of managing sustainability and inducing significant lifestyle changes is formidable. As suggested by Hanse (2011), businesses must balance global concerns with local actions, setting boundaries for effective management within their sphere of control. By doing so, they can design and implement sustainability programs that yield positive outcomes within their jurisdiction.

2.2 Sustainable Tourism

Tourism, as an industry heavily reliant on resources, necessitates a sustainable approach at local and global levels. However, sustainability in this context is complex and demands a more nuanced and comprehensive analysis (Lu & Nepa, 2009). Traditionally, the development of tourism includes economic, social, cultural, and environmental considerations. Sustainable tourism development extends this to embrace agriculture, politics, economy, ecology, social, cultural, and technological aspects at national, international, regional, and community levels. These dimensions are intertwined and mutually reinforcing, as identified by Choi & Sirakaya (2006).

The rise of industrialization and economic growth has led to issues like excessive resource utilization and environmental degradation. In response, the concept of sustainability has emerged as a solution-seeking paradigm. Significant milestones in this journey include the 1972 United Nations (UN) Environment Conference in Stockholm, the 1984 Tokyo Conference, the 1987 Brundtland Report by the UN World Commission on Environment and Development, the 1992 UN Environment and Development Conference in Rio de Janeiro, the 1997 Kyoto Protocol in Japan, and the 2001 Johannesburg Earth Summit (Akdu, 2019). Although the term 'sustainable development' was not explicitly used at the 1972 UN Environment Conference, the interplay between the environment and economy, central to sustainable development, was highlighted. This meeting emphasized the relationship between development and the environment (Yurtsal, 2019).

The landmark 1987 report by the UN World Commission on Environment and Development (Brundtland, 1987), commonly referred to as the Brundtland Report, marked a pivotal shift in the global understanding of development. This report, which initiated the concept of "Our Middle Future," critiqued the traditional development paradigm focused on the exploitation of living resources, advocating instead for sustainable development. This paradigm shift, representing a fundamental change in the approach to economic and social development, gained worldwide resonance and became a central theme in discussions on environment and development during the 1990s. Although the term 'sustainable development' was not explicitly coined at the 1972 UN Environment Conference, the integral relationship between the environment and economy, which forms the essence of sustainable development, was emphasized. This conference critically examined the conventional production models of countries that overused non-renewable natural resources beyond their regeneration capacity, highlighting the necessity for sustainable development (Yurtsal, 2019). Furthermore, Çavuş & Tanrısevdi (2000) highlight the intricate relationship between sustainable development and tourism, focusing on environmental aspects such as air, water, soil, biodiversity, and the interaction between people and their surroundings. This perspective illuminates the interplay between tourism

and the natural and cultural environment, its impacts on resource abundance, and its role in shaping a sustainable development outlook in various industries.

Sustainable tourism has been defined as a balance between economic development, the protection of environmental resources, and the satisfaction of local people and tourists (Hunter, 2002). It entails a complex, symbiotic relationship among tourists, local communities, businesses, regional attractions, and the natural environment (Edgell, 2006). A defining characteristic of sustainable tourism is its ability to cater to the needs of both local residents and visitors while preserving and enhancing tourist destinations as economic resources (Edgell Sr, 2019). The United Nations Environment Programme-UNEP outlines twelve key objectives of sustainable tourism, addressing its economic, social, and environmental impacts. These objectives include economic sustainability, local prosperity, quality of employment, social equity, visitor satisfaction, local control, social welfare, cultural richness, physical integrity, biodiversity, resource efficiency, and environmental purity. The overarching goal is to mitigate the negative impacts of tourism on society and the environment, thereby enhancing the quality of life for all stakeholders (United Nations Environment Programme-UNEP, 2005).

While the ideals of sustainability and sustainable tourism are universally acknowledged for their global benefits, their feasibility and measurability are crucial. Sustainable tourism should be viewed not merely as a developmental tool but from a broader perspective (Mcminn, 1997). To evaluate the interconnections within sustainable tourism effectively and critically, where factors such as quality of life, equity, and environment are developed in an integrated manner, a more comprehensive conceptualization of sustainable tourism is required (Lu & Nepa, 2009). Responsible tourism, therefore, seeks to minimize negative economic, environmental, and social impacts. It aims to enhance the economic benefits for local communities and improve working conditions and access to the industry. Furthermore, it involves local communities in decision-making processes that affect their lives and standards of living. The natural environment, as a legacy from the past, belongs to future generations. Responsible tourism contributes positively to the preservation of global natural and cultural heritage and the maintenance of diversity. Emphasizing the importance of recycling, conservation of energy and water resources, and minimization of waste production is paramount in this regard (İlban et al., 2023).

Measuring sustainable tourism requires a holistic approach that considers various factors. Sustainable certification and standards serve as tools for measuring or evaluating sustainable tourism steps, such as environmental impacts, protection of natural areas and biodiversity, monitoring the effects of tourism on local culture and communities, contribution to the economy, and awareness of sustainable tourism practices. Compliance with internationally recognized sustainable tourism guidelines, the use of indices, indicators, or sustainability reporting tools are essential to measure set standards. Through such measures, the unpredictability, uncertainty, and complexity of sustainability issues can be addressed, enabling the implementation of more feasible programs and management strategies.

2.3 Documentation and Certification in Sustainable Tourism

Globally, a variety of eco-labels and certification systems are utilized in the tourism industry. Renowned eco-labels and certifications, endorsed by accredited organizations such as International Organization for Standardization (ISO), Visit, and Eco-Management and Audit Scheme (EMAS), include Blue Flag, Green Key, Travelife, Green Globe, EU-Ecolabel, and CittaSlow (Öztürk et al., 2017). Furthermore, specific to Turkey, noteworthy certifications are detailed below.

- Sustainable Tourism Certificate

In Turkey, under the auspices of the Ministry of Culture and Tourism and the Turkish Tourism Promotion and Development Agency (TGA), the Turkish Sustainable Tourism Program Criteria (TR-I) were formulated. This initiative, in collaboration with tourism sectors and international organizations, seeks to foster sustainable growth in the tourism sector and cultivate a shared understanding among all tourism stakeholders. The criteria delineate obligations that accommodation facilities must fulfill within the scope of sustainable tourism (Bakanlığı, 2023).

- Safe Tourism Certificate

The Safe Tourism Certification Program, unique in its global precedence, is a collaborative effort primarily involving the Ministry of Culture and Tourism, the Ministry of Health, and the Ministry of Transport. This certification program focuses on hygiene and health inspections in various tourism-related areas, including accommodation, food and beverage facilities, congress centers, art facilities, theme parks, and marine tourism. Authorized companies issue safe tourism certificates, conducting audits and reporting based on international standards and the specific characteristics of the applicant. These inspections and reports are documented and regularly reviewed for compliance (Türkiye Turizm Tanıtım ve Geliştirme Ajansı, 2023).

- Green Star

Initiated in 2008, the Green Star project, a collaboration between the Ministry of Culture and Tourism, the European Union, and the Republic of Turkey, is a national label awarded to accommodation facilities demonstrating environmental sensitivity and support for sustainable tourism. The environmentally responsible

accommodation facility certificate, part of this initiative, is granted to facilities that comply with seven fundamental criteria: general management, training, environmental compliance, energy and water, chemicals and waste, food and beverage and other services and policies. This certification is contingent upon holding a tourism management certificate from the Ministry (Yurtlu et al., 2021).

- Environmentally Friendly Business Plaques

In 1993, the Ministry of Culture and Tourism introduced the Campaign for Environmental Awareness in Tourism, awarding the "Environmentally Friendly Establishment Certificate" (pine symbol) to qualifying accommodation establishments. The criteria for this certification evolved over time, aligning with broader developments, and in 2008, it was renamed the "Environmentally Friendly Accommodation Facility Certificate." This certificate aims to promote environmentally conscious construction, management, and environmental awareness in tourism accommodations (Ertaş et al., 2018). With the introduction of the Green Star Campaign in 2008, this certification was superseded by the green star certificate (Öztürk et al., 2017).

- White Star

The Hoteliers Federation of Turkey (TÜROFED) initiated the Livable Environment Project, aspiring to enhance the sector's contribution to environmental and resource protection. The White Star Project, supported by TÜROFED and sponsors, aims to regulate the consumption of water, electricity, energy, chemicals, and solid waste in tourist establishments. The project's primary goal is to position Turkish tourism as an "Environmentally Friendly Tourism Destination" on the international stage. Establishments contributing to this objective are awarded the white star label (Kızılırmak, 2011).

3. Research Methodology

This study employed content analysis, a systematic qualitative research method allowing for the investigation of content based on pre-established categories (Elo & Kyngas, 2008). The research focused on the websites and Instagram accounts of 118 tourism-certified accommodation facilities in Balıkesir Province. The review process involved identifying content relevant to sustainability, leading to the formulation of sustainability criteria, as delineated in Table 1. Qualitative content analysis facilitated the extraction of information regarding the general intent and expression of the identified categories within the context of the study (George, 2003).

Statistical analysis was conducted using SPSS 26 software. The initial phase involved analyzing the frequencies and percentages of the sustainability criteria in relation to the levels of accommodation establishments, with these frequencies and percentages presented in Table 1. Subsequently, Chi-Square Automatic Interaction Detection (CHAID) analysis was employed to identify factors influencing the dependent variable. CHAID analysis was selected for its superiority in handling both categorical and continuous variables compared to other techniques. This analysis follows a stepwise approach, initially identifying the most significant predictor and then subdividing the data based on this predictor. Each subgroup is then independently re-analyzed to further subdivide and analyze the data (Saraçlı & Gazeloğlu, 2018). The type of each predictor determines the permissible groupings of its categories to construct the contingency table with the highest chi-square test significance (Kass, 1980). The outcomes of this analysis are depicted in Figure 1. Furthermore, Multiple Correspondence Analysis (MCA) was applied to elucidate the relationships between the levels of categorical variables. MCA is a technique utilized to identify, explore, summarize, and visualize the information contained within a data table of N individuals defined by Q categorical variables (Blasius & Greenacre, 2014). The results of the MCA are illustrated in Figure 2.

Table 1 presents a comprehensive analysis of sustainability criteria across various levels of accommodation establishments. Nine sustainability criteria were identified: Environmentally Friendly Facility Certificate, Sustainable Tourism Certificate, Safe Tourism Certificate, Barrier-free life infrastructure, Green Star, Green Key, sustainability information on Instagram profile, environmental policy, and sustainability policy. The establishments were categorized into eight types: boutique hotels, two-star hotels, three-star hotels, four-star hotels, five-star hotels, private accommodation, hostels, and four-star holiday villages. The distribution of the "Environmentally Friendly Facility Certificate" among accommodation establishments reveals a limited adoption: only nine establishments, including one boutique hotel, two three-star, three four-star, and three five-star hotels, hold this certificate out of the total 118 establishments examined. Similarly, the "Sustainable Tourism Certificate" is held by merely seven establishments.

In the wake of the pandemic, the "Safe Tourism Certificate" has gained significant importance. The analysis showed that 16 establishments possess this certificate, predominantly among three-star (seven establishments) and four-star hotels (six establishments). Regarding the "barrier-free life infrastructure," only six establishments have adapted to this criterion. The data indicate that five establishments have been awarded the "Green Star" certificate, while only two establishments hold the "Green Key" certificate. Furthermore, a mere five establishments actively share "sustainability information" on their Instagram accounts. Regarding online presence, ten establishments have an "environmental policy," and seven have a "sustainability policy" displayed on their websites.

Table 1. Sustainability criteria across various levels of accommodation establishments

Sustainability Criteria	Existence of Criterion	Levels of Accommodation Establishments							
		Boutique Hotels	Two-Star Hotels	Three-Star Hotels	Four-Star Hotels	Five-Star Hotels	Private Accom.	Hostels	Four-Star Holiday Villages
Environmentally Friendly Facility Certificate	Yes	1 (25%)	-	2 (6.9%)	3 (25%)	3 (60%)	-	-	-
	No	3 (75%)	13 (100%)	27 (93.1%)	9 (75%)	2 (40%)	18 (100%)	13 (100%)	2 (100%)
Sustainable Tourism Certificate	Yes	-	1 (7.7%)	2 (6.9%)	1 (8.3%)	2 (40%)	1 (5.6%)	-	-
	No	4 (100%)	12 (92.3%)	27 (93.1%)	11 (91.7%)	3 (60%)	17 (94.4%)	13 (100%)	2 (100%)
Safe Tourism Certificate	Yes	1 (25%)	1 (7.7%)	7 (24.1%)	6 (50%)	1 (20%)	-	-	1 (50%)
	No	3 (75%)	12 (92.3%)	22 (75.9%)	6 (50%)	4 (80%)	18 (100%)	13 (100%)	1 (50%)
Barrier-free life infrastructure	Yes	1 (25%)	-	-	1 (8.3%)	3 (60%)	1 (5.6%)	-	-
	No	-	13 100(%)	29 (100%)	11 (91.7%)	2 (40%)	17 (94.4%)	13 (100%)	2 (100%)
Green Star	Yes	4 (100%)	-	-	-	1 (20%)	-	-	-
	No	4 (100%)	13 (100%)	29 (100%)	12 (100%)	4 (80%)	18 (100%)	13 (100%)	2 (100%)
Green Key	Yes	-	-	-	-	1 (20%)	-	-	1 (50%)
	No	4 (100%)	13 (100%)	29 (100%)	12 (100%)	4 (80%)	18 (100%)	13 (100%)	1 (50%)
Sustainability information on Instagram profile	Yes	-	1 (7.7%)	1 (3.4%)	2 (16.7%)	1 (20%)	-	-	-
	No	4 (100%)	12 (92.3%)	28 (96.6%)	10 (83.3%)	4 (80%)	18 (100%)	13 (100%)	2 (100%)
Environmental policy	Yes	3 (75%)	1 (7.7%)	1 (3.4%)	4 (33.3%)	1 (20%)	-	-	-
	No	1 (25%)	12 (92.3%)	28 (96.6%)	8 (66.7%)	4 (80%)	18 (100%)	13 (100%)	2 (100%)
Sustainability policy	Yes	1 (25%)	-	1 (3.4%)	2 (16.7%)	2 (40%)	1 (5.6%)	-	-
	No	3 (75%)	13 (100%)	28 (96.6%)	10 (83.3%)	3 (60%)	7 (94.4%)	13 (100%)	2 (100%)

4. Results and Discussion

The tourism sector, a vital economic resource for many countries, has been undergoing rapid development, propelled by technological advancements. Investments in the tourism industry, particularly in countries with high tourism potential, are escalating. However, tourism's foundation rests on three critical pillars: economic dynamics, cultural heritage, and environmental resources. The sector's swift evolution raises concerns about the sustainability of these resources, which are of societal significance. Hence, it is imperative for countries to devise development strategies that encompass not only economic but also social and environmental impacts. For this purpose, it is expected that sustainable tourism can be understood by the society in order to protect and develop resources. Even each small step made under this approach creates great and positive effects for the future. It is urgent to transform exhaustible natural resources into sustainability especially today. For this reason, accommodation facilities in tourism have great responsibilities. This study aims to reveal the picture of the visibility of accommodation facilities with data while examining their sustainability movements.

The CHAID analysis examines the effects of the criteria determined based on the sustainable tourism literature on hotel types. Therefore, whether the hotels have barrier-free living infrastructure was determined as the most statistically significant criterion. It was observed that three-star hotels generally do not have this infrastructure. For these hotels, whether they have an environmental policy was determined as a significant criterion. And those without an environmental policy, whether they have a safe tourism certificate was determined as an effective criterion. According to the World Health Organization (WHO), an estimated 1.3 billion people (about 16% of the global population) are the disabled (WHO, 2022). To tap into this market, destinations and tourism businesses must implement practices catering to disabled tourists to ensure their satisfaction. Barrier-free tourism not only offers numerous opportunities to disabled individuals and their companions but also represents a substantial market, given the high global prevalence of disabilities and the tendency for these individuals to travel with companions (Cavinato & Cuckovich, 1992; Zengin & Eryılmaz, 2013).
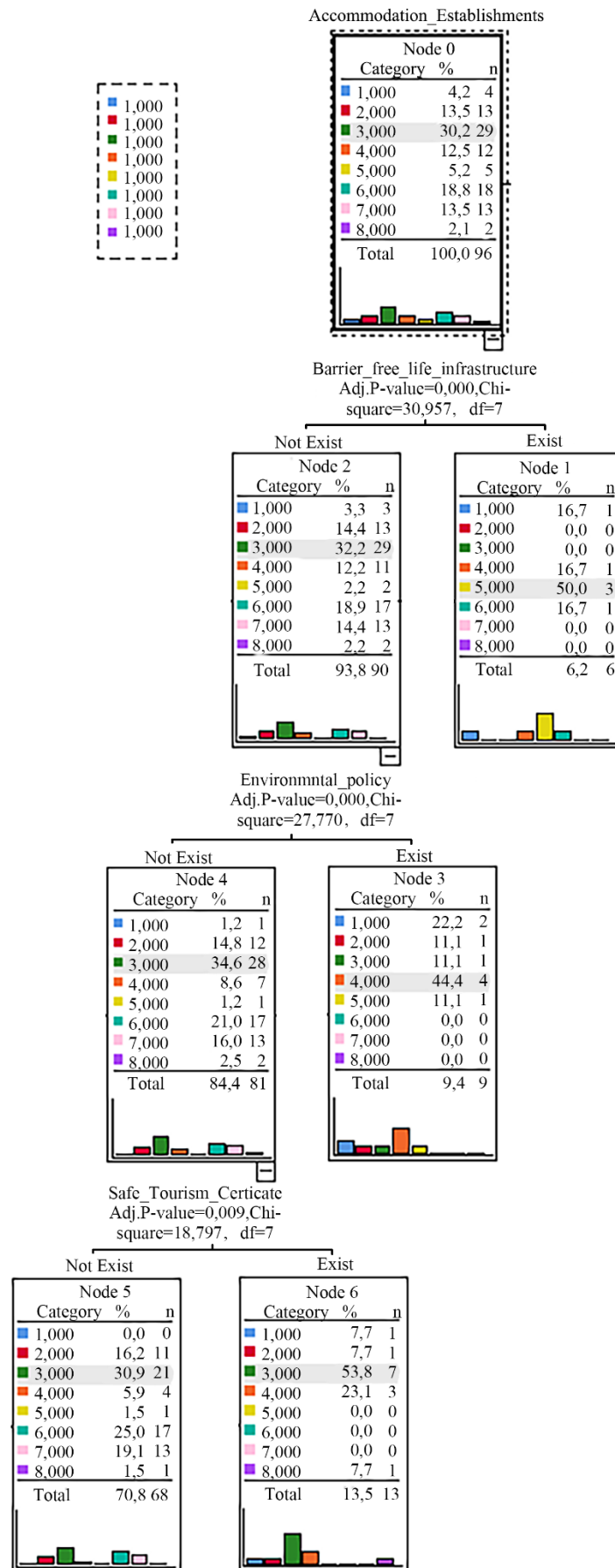
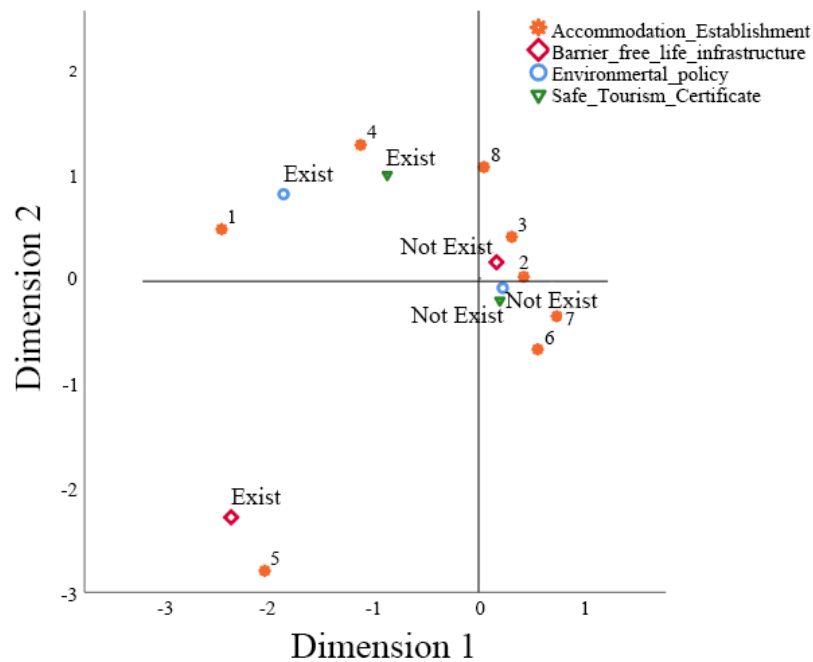**Figure 1.** Outcomes of the CHAID analysis

Figure 2. Results of the MCA

5. Conclusion

The outcomes of the MCA, which considered significant criteria identified by the CHAID analysis, indicate a disparity in sustainable practices among different types of accommodation establishments. It has been observed that one-star and four-star hotels generally possess environmental policies and safe tourism certificates. In contrast, establishments such as two-star and three-star hotels, pensions, and holiday villages are less likely to have safe tourism certificates, place importance on environmental policies, or provide barrier-free living infrastructure. This differentiation highlights the need for broader implementation of sustainable practices across all tiers of the tourism industry.

In the current era, the concepts of environmental awareness and sustainability are gaining paramount importance. Correspondingly, the tourism sector is increasingly focusing on eco-friendly practices and the principles of sustainability. Obtaining sustainability certificates allows tourism businesses to fulfill their environmental, cultural, and social responsibilities, benefiting the environment, society, and the businesses themselves. These certificates offer a competitive edge, positively influencing consumer behavior and attitudes.

To achieve the advantage of preference and long-term awareness, tourism businesses must not only adhere to sustainability standards but also actively promote their sustainable practices to raise consumer awareness. Future research could extend beyond the current study's scope to gather new data, exploring the efficacy of the visibility of hospitality industry actors in terms of sustainability, particularly concerning consumer attitudes. Such investigations will contribute significantly to understanding the impact of sustainable practices on consumer perceptions and choices in the tourism sector.

Author Contributions

Conceptualization, F.G., E.S.; methodology, B.V.; formal analysis, E.S. and B.V.; resources, F.G.; writing-original draft preparation, B.V. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Data Availability

The data used to support the research findings are available from the corresponding author upon request.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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