NAVIGATING MULTI-LEVEL PARADOXES IN SUSTAINABLE HRM: INSIGHTS FROM MALAYSIA'S HIGHER EDUCATION AND HOSPITALITY SECTORS

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ABSTRACT

Purpose: *This study examines how organizations navigate paradoxical tensions associated with Sustainable Human Resource Management (Sustainable HRM) across multiple levels of analysis. Focusing on a private university and a luxury hotel in Malaysia, we explore **(1)** what paradoxes emerge at macro (institutional), organizational, HRM functional, and individual levels in pursuing sustainability, and **(2)** how actors respond to these tensions and with what outcomes.*

Design/methodology/approach: *We adopt a qualitative multi-level comparative case study design. Data were collected via 32 semi-structured interviews with stakeholders ranging from government officials and top management to HR managers and front-line employees, supplemented by field observations and document analysis in each case. Thematic analysis and cross-case comparison were used to identify patterns of paradoxes and management strategies.*

Findings: *Both organizations face **nested paradoxes** in implementing Sustainable HRM. At the macro level, national development goals versus regulatory inconsistencies create external pressure paradoxes. At the organizational level, leaders espouse sustainability values yet confront financial and operational pressures, yielding a mission vs. margin tension. HRM departments struggle between supporting long-term employee well-being and meeting short-term performance metrics. Individuals experience value conflicts, for instance between personal commitment to sustainability and immediate job demands. These tensions are interlinked – top-down mandates that emphasize sustainability without resource support led to **vertical misalignments**, while differing departmental priorities caused **horizontal conflicts**.*

*Actors employed a range of responses. **Acceptance** (acknowledging but not addressing tensions) often resulted in superficial compliance (e.g., symbolic "green" initiatives with minimal impact) and **cynicism among employees**. **Coping strategies** – such as compartmentalizing responsibilities (creating separate sustainability roles/teams) or making incremental trade-offs – helped alleviate immediate strain but maintained underlying contradictions*

*Sectoral context influenced the paradox landscape: The university, with its academic culture, faced stronger **belonging tensions** (identity of being a scholarly institution vs. behaving like a business) and tended towards delayed gratification responses (planning long-term changes that were slow to implement). The hotel, under market and global brand pressures, encountered more **performing tensions** (guest satisfaction vs. eco-standards, labor cost vs. service quality) and often opted for quick fixes or technical innovations to balance efficiency and sustainability. Despite these differences, the fundamental lesson is consistent: a **multi-level, systemic approach** is necessary for managing sustainability tensions – misalignment at any level (policy, strategy, HR practice, or individual behavior) can undermine overall sustainability outcomes*

Implications: *The findings contribute to paradox theory by empirically illustrating nested sustainability paradoxes and highlighting the role of HRM as a critical mediator in such tensions*
*We propose a framework for **Multi-Level Paradox Navigation in Sustainable HRM**, emphasizing alignment across levels and the cultivation of a paradox mindset among leaders. Practically, organizations should audit for vertical and horizontal misalignments in their sustainability approach – ensuring, for example, that HR policies (hiring, rewards) reinforce rather than contradict sustainability values, and that employees at all levels are involved in sensemaking around sustainability goals. Leadership should encourage open dialogue about tensions (rather than glossing over them) and support creative experimentation that seeks win-win solutions (both/and thinking). For HR managers, the study underscores their strategic role: by adjusting performance management, training, and employee involvement mechanisms, HR can help convert abstract sustainability ideals into practical actions that employees embrace rather than resist.*

Keywords: Sustainable HRM; Paradox Theory; Systemic Tensions; Nested Tensions

INTRODUCTION

Organizations worldwide are under mounting pressure to become more sustainable – economically, socially, and environmentally. This has led to the evolution of **Sustainable Human Resource Management (Sustainable HRM)**, an approach that infuses HR policies and practices with sustainability principles such as long-term orientation, employee well-being, social responsibility, and environmental stewardship. For instance, companies are adopting "green" recruitment and training programs, promoting work-life balance, and engaging in community initiatives as part of their HR strategy, aiming to support the **triple bottom line** (people, planet, profit). However, as many practitioners have discovered, pursuing these noble goals is far from straightforward. Organizations frequently encounter situations where sustainability objectives seem to conflict with other business imperatives – creating **paradoxical tensions**.

A paradox in organizational life refers to "**contradictory yet interrelated elements that exist simultaneously**" (Smith & Lewis, 2011). Unlike a simple trade-off where a clear choice can be made, paradoxes are persistent and require managing two opposing forces at the same time. In the context of sustainable HRM, paradoxes abound. Consider a company that wants to invest in comprehensive employee development and well-being programs (a sustainable HRM practice aligning with social sustainability) but simultaneously faces intense pressure to reduce costs and improve short-term productivity. Enhancing employee well-being may, in the immediate term, increase costs or reduce working hours, potentially clashing with productivity targets. This is a classic **performance paradox**: *employee welfare vs. financial performance*. Similarly, organizations might espouse diversity and inclusion (social sustainability) yet have a performance culture that unwittingly sidelines those efforts – *"do we prioritize compassion or competitiveness?"* is the implicit tension. Or from an environmental angle, HR might be tasked with reducing the company's carbon footprint by engaging employees in green practices, but employees and managers could resist if those practices seem to inconvenience operations or customers – a paradox of *"short-term convenience vs. long-term responsibility."*

Such tensions are not merely hypothetical. Recent research on corporate sustainability suggests that managers often struggle with **"walking the talk"**, i.e., aligning day-to-day practices with sustainability values, due to conflicting demands. These struggles have been conceptualized as **paradoxes or dilemmas** in the literature on sustainability management (Hahn et al., 2015; Van der Byl & Slawinski, 2015). Notably, paradox theory has gained traction as a lens to understand sustainability issues: it encourages embracing a "both/and" perspective instead of an "either/or" mindset, recognizing that long-term success may require simultaneously attending to divergent goals (e.g., pursuing profit and public good)

However, **empirical studies focusing specifically on paradoxes in the domain of HRM and at multiple organizational levels remain scarce**. Many studies of sustainability tensions focus on the organizational level or the strategic decision-making level (e.g., CEOs balancing goals). Few examine how these tensions play out down the line – within HR departments and among employees on the ground. Likewise, sustainable HRM research often catalogues best practices or outcomes (such as improved retention or reputation), but tends to underplay the messy reality of implementation, where ideal practices meet organizational constraints and contradictions. This is a significant gap because HR managers are often the ones caught in the middle, translating broad sustainability agendas into concrete policies like performance appraisals or training programs, where they may face resistance or contradiction with traditional metrics. Moreover, employees' perceptions of authenticity in their organization's sustainability commitment hinge on how well intentions align with actions – misalignments (say, a company preaches well-being but overloads staff with work) can generate employee cynicism and disengagement, undermining the sustainable HRM effort.

Another underexplored aspect is the **multi-level nature** of these paradoxes. Organizational phenomena do not occur in a vacuum; they are influenced by broader institutional contexts and by individual agency. We suspect that many sustainability paradoxes are in fact **"nested" or systemic**. For example, at the *macro level*, government policies and cultural expectations might themselves be paradoxical – encouraging businesses to pursue sustainability, yet maintaining economic incentives that reward unsustainable behavior. These macro tensions can trickle down and manifest as corporate-level paradoxes (e.g., a company feeling torn between regulatory compliance and competitive viability). At the *micro level*, individual employees and managers interpret and react to these tensions in their work, potentially creating a paradox of values (personal vs. organizational). In other words, paradoxes can be **interconnected across levels** – a concept known as *nested paradox* (Schad et al., 2016; Smith & Besharov, 2019). Studying paradoxes at one level alone might miss these linkages and misdiagnose why certain tensions are so persistent.

This paper addresses these gaps by posing the question: **How do multi-level paradoxical tensions influence the implementation of sustainable HRM practices, and how do organizational actors navigate these tensions?** We examine this question through an in-depth qualitative study of two organizations in Malaysia – one in the private higher education sector and one in the hospitality sector. These sectors and context were chosen for their relevance to sustainability and rich paradoxical contexts. Education institutions juggle academic and commercial missions, whereas hotels juggle service excellence and environmental responsibility; Malaysia provides a setting where sustainability is on the policy agenda, but economic growth and cultural norms add complexity to organizational responses.

Through integrating the literature from paradox theory, SHRM, and the specific empirical context; built a strong justification for the study's approach. The gaps identified - particularly the lack of empirical multi-level studies and the need to incorporate actor perspectives emphasize the contribution of research questions

RQ1 What are the salient paradoxical tensions encountered in pursuing sustainable HRM in the selected Malaysian organizations at macro, organizational, HRM, and individual levels?

RQ2 How do organizational actors (leaders, HR professionals, employees) interpret and respond to these paradoxes, and what strategies (if any) are used to manage them?

RQ3 How do tensions and responses at different levels interact (e.g. reinforcing or mitigating each other), and what does this reveal about the nature of nested paradoxes in sustainability?

RQ4 How does sectoral context (private higher education vs. hospitality) shape the nature of SHRM paradoxes and the ways they are managed?

By comparing a university and a hotel, we also aim to tease out **contextual influences on paradox management** (RQ4 in the broader study). We thereby contribute not only to the theoretical discourse on paradox by providing concrete, contextualized examples of nested paradoxes, but also to the practice of sustainable HRM by highlighting strategies that either alleviate or aggravate these tensions in real organizational settings.

In the sections that follow, we first review relevant literature on sustainable HRM and paradox theory to build our conceptual foundation. Next, we outline our methodology – a multi-level comparative case study – describing how data were collected from interviews, observations, and documents and analyzed thematically. We then present the findings, starting with a within-case narrative for each organization to illustrate key paradoxes and responses, and then moving to a cross-case analysis to draw out common themes and differences. In the discussion, we integrate these findings with extant literature, developing a conceptual model of **multi-level paradox navigation in sustainable HRM** and addressing theoretical and managerial implications. We conclude with recommendations and avenues for future research.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Sustainable HRM has been described as an extension of strategic HRM that explicitly incorporates a long-term, multiple-stakeholder perspective, aiming to "sustain" both the organization's human capital and contribute to sustainable development. Key principles include fairness, employee well-being, development and retention of talent (to avoid depletion of the workforce), external partnership and community engagement, and environmental care in people management (Stankevičiūtė & Savanevičienė, 2018). Several frameworks have been proposed: for example, Ehnert's (2009) paradox framework for sustainable HRM points out that HRM must balance **efficiency and resilience**, **short-term and long-term orientation**, and **internal and external focus** – inherently paradoxical demands. Similarly, Kramar (2014) identifies dimensions like ethical HRM, green HRM, and socially responsible HRM under the umbrella of sustainability, noting tensions between them and traditional business goals.

The pursuit of sustainable HRM often pits **economic performance against social or environmental performance**, reflecting the broader sustainability paradox of *"profits vs. planet/people."* A fundamental challenge is that the benefits of sustainable HRM (e.g., higher employee engagement, brand reputation, avoidance of ethical scandals) often materialize in the long run, whereas the costs (investments in training, higher labor costs due to fair wages or improved working conditions) are felt immediately. This creates a **temporal paradox** (short-term vs. long-term) which organizations must navigate. If short-term pressures dominate, sustainable HR initiatives risk being undercut or abandoned, a phenomenon observed in many organizations that, for example, initiated well-being programs in good times but cut them when facing an economic downturn.

Another tension is the **internal vs. external focus**: HR traditionally focuses on internal stakeholders (employees, management) and internal outcomes (productivity, retention), whereas sustainability pushes HR to also consider external stakeholders (community, environment, future generations). This broadening of HR's scope can conflict with existing HR metrics and reward systems that don't account for, say, community impact or environmental footprint (Boudreau & Ramstad, 2005). Mariappanadar (2014) introduced the concept of "harm of HRM practices" on external stakeholders, urging that truly sustainable HRM should minimize negative externalities (like layoffs causing societal harm). Yet, integrating that into decision-making poses paradoxical questions: can a company justify keeping surplus staff (to avoid harm of layoffs) even if financially it appears inefficient? The **belonging paradox** here is the organization's identity – is it a profit-oriented entity accountable only to owners, or a community member with social responsibilities? Many organizations oscillate between these identities, creating inconsistent signals to HR managers.

Paradox theory provides a useful theoretical lens to examine these issues because it explicitly deals with managing contradictions. At its core, paradox theory suggests that attempting to choose one side of a paradox to the exclusion of the other often leads to a vicious cycle – the neglected side resurfaces with a vengeance (Smith & Lewis, 2011). For example, if a company focuses only on short-term performance and ignores well-being, it may later face burnout and turnover that hurt performance – the initial solution undermines itself. Conversely, paradox theory advocates approaches that accept both sides and find ways to achieve a **dynamic equilibrium** or creative integration of opposites. This might involve strategies such as:

- **Differentiation:** separating efforts so that each pole of the paradox is attended to in different domains or times (e.g., having an "exploration" R&D unit vs. an "exploitation" unit in ambidexterity terms; or rotating periods of intensive work with periods of rest).

- **Integration:** finding synergies or reframing the problem to encompass both needs. For sustainability, integration could mean redefining success metrics to include sustainability indicators alongside financial ones, thereby forcing consideration of both simultaneously (Epstein et al., 2018), or innovating business models (e.g., circular economy approaches) that by design turn environmental responsibility into profit drivers.

- **Transcendence:** at a cognitive level, leadership can craft a vision or culture that transcends the dichotomy (Abdallah et al., 2011). For instance, some firms adopt the mindset "doing good is good business," effectively dissolving the perceived paradox in their narrative. However, transcendence is not one-and-done; it has to be continually enacted and may breed new tensions.

The **multi-level aspect** of paradoxes is increasingly recognized in the literature (Hahn & Knight, 2021). Schad and Bansal (2018) argue for a systems perspective on paradox, noting that paradoxical tensions exist embedded in systems of

relationships – what they term "systemic paradoxes". For example, they point out that sustainability issues are inherently systemic: achieving sustainability requires cooperation across organizations, industries, and society, each with different logics and interests, leading to inter-organizational paradoxes (competition vs. collaboration). Within a single organization, Jarzabkowski et al. (2013) observed how multiple paradoxes interrelate (they studied an outsourcing case where paradoxes of performing, belonging, and organizing were all at play). The notion of **nested paradox** describes how a paradox at one level (e.g., a tension in national policy) can **trigger** or **exacerbate** tensions at a lower level (organization), and vice versa (micro-level paradoxes can accumulate to create pressure on macro systems).

Crucially for HRM, individuals (employees) are the ones who ultimately enact or resist sustainability initiatives. Their sensemaking of paradoxes (Hahn et al., 2014 talked about managers' cognitive frames – business case vs. paradoxical frame) will influence behavior. If employees perceive sustainability initiatives as hypocritical or as additional work without compensation, they may disengage (a paradox of *espoused vs. practiced values* emerges, affecting trust). Conversely, involving employees in paradox management (like soliciting ideas for how to meet both productivity and well-being goals) can yield grassroots innovations and buy-in (creating a *sense of shared purpose* that can mitigate the sting of paradox).

Contextual factors likely shape how paradoxes manifest. In a **service industry** like hospitality, the immediacy of customer satisfaction and direct financial metrics (occupancy, revenue per room) might mean sustainability efforts are constantly measured against short-term guest feedback and cost. The industry's culture often emphasizes "guests come first," which can conflict with "planet comes first" if a guest feels inconvenienced by a green policy. In contrast, in **higher education**, the outputs are longer-term (graduates, research) and the culture values ideals and social impact (at least in mission). One might expect university staff to philosophically support sustainability strongly – yet private universities also must be run efficiently, and faculty often face paradoxes like "publish or perish" vs. "community engagement/teaching focus," which can sideline sustainability efforts in curriculum or operations if not aligned with immediate career rewards.

National culture can also play a role. In more collectivist societies (like Malaysia), there may be a higher willingness to sacrifice individual gains for collective good, which could aid sustainability (e.g., employees accepting certain inconveniences for the environment). At the same time, if hierarchy is strong, employees might be less inclined to speak up about tensions, so paradoxes may remain latent until they become acute.

Research gaps: From this review, two main gaps stand out. First, there is a lack of **empirical multi-level studies** that trace sustainability tensions from the macro context into organizational strategy, through HRM practices, and down to individual experiences. Such studies would provide a holistic understanding of where the bottlenecks or misalignments occur (for example, is the issue mostly that top management doesn't walk the talk, or that middle management filters the message, or that employees misunderstand it, or all of the above?). Second, we need more nuanced insight into **how organizations actually deal with these paradoxes over time** – not just success stories but also the common pattern of oscillation or drift (where an organization might swing from one priority to another, or implement a program and then let it wane). Understanding common failure modes is as important as best practices.

Our study aims to contribute to filling these gaps by delivering rich case evidence of multi-level paradoxes in two distinct organizational contexts. By doing so, we hope to refine paradox theory application in sustainable HRM – possibly identifying which paradoxes are generic and which are context-specific – and to derive practical guidance for organizations and HR professionals on navigating these choppy waters.

METHOD

Given the complex, context-dependent nature of the research question, a **qualitative case study approach** was adopted. We conducted a comparative case study of two organizations – an anonymized private university ("University-MY") and an anonymized five-star hotel ("Hotel-MY") – both located in Malaysia. The case study method enables an in-depth exploration of phenomena within real-life settings and is well-suited for studying processes and nuanced social dynamics such as how paradoxes are navigated (Yin, 2014). By selecting two contrasting cases, we employ a **theoretical replication** logic: we anticipated that both cases would reveal the presence of multi-level paradoxes (thus reinforcing certain theoretical patterns), while differences between them would shed light on how context influences paradox management (Yin, 2014).

Research Context and Case Selection: Malaysia provides an intriguing context as the country is actively pursuing sustainable development (having ratified the SDGs and developed national sustainability roadmaps) but its industries still face pressures of a developing economy – growth, cost competition, and sometimes weaker enforcement of regulations. The two sectors chosen are service-oriented and people-centric:

- *University-MY:* A leading private higher education institution with ~8,000 students and diverse academic offerings. It has made public commitments to sustainability (e.g., campus greening, integrating Sustainable Development into curriculum) but operates in a competitive education market and relies on tuition fees. We expected paradoxes around academic vs. commercial goals, and the challenge of practicing sustainability while meeting enrollment and financial targets.

- *Hotel-MY:* A luxury hotel which is part of an international chain, known for its eco-friendly features (it has won a green hotel award). It must delight guests and maintain profitability while also adhering to corporate sustainability mandates (energy saving, community involvement). Anticipated tensions included service quality vs. environmental measures and short-term cost vs. long-term brand reputation.

Data Collection: We employed multiple data sources to triangulate findings:

- *Semi-structured Interviews:* We conducted 32 interviews (16 per case) with individuals representing four "levels": (1) external stakeholders (e.g., regulators, industry association, community partner), (2) top management (university VC, hotel GM, etc.), (3) HR and middle managers, and (4) non-managerial employees. Each interview lasted ~1 hour, covering questions about sustainability initiatives, perceived conflicts/tensions, examples of handling them, and outcomes. For example, we asked senior managers how they balance sustainability with other priorities, and employees whether they see any gaps between the organization's talk and actions. Interviews were recorded and transcribed.

- *Direct Observations:* The researcher spent time on-site at each case (approximately one week spread over several visits to each). We observed meetings (one sustainability committee meeting at the university, one daily briefing at the hotel), day-to-day activities (e.g., noting whether policies like recycling were followed on the ground), and informal interactions. These observations provided context and sometimes contradicted or reinforced interview claims (for instance, management might claim "everyone is onboard" but observation might show lukewarm participation in green programs).

- *Document Analysis:* We collected organizational documents such as sustainability reports, HR policy manuals, internal memos about sustainability initiatives, and relevant external documents (industry sustainability guidelines, media articles). These helped understand formal commitments and policy context. For example, University-MY's strategic plan explicitly mentioned becoming a "sustainable campus," and Hotel-MY's parent company report set certain KPIs for all hotels (like carbon reduction targets). We also reviewed any available data on outcomes (e.g., employee survey results if provided, or turnover rates pre/post initiatives).

Using these sources in combination increases confidence in findings via triangulation. For instance, if employees reported cynicism, we could see in employee survey or exit interview summaries (documents) whether "lack of trust" was an issue, and maybe even observe behaviors indicating disengagement.

Data Analysis: We followed a **thematic analysis** approach, facilitated by qualitative analysis software NVivo. We first coded each case's data inductively and deductively. Deductive codes stemmed from our interests (e.g., codes like "macro-level pressure," "organizational strategy tension," "HR practice tension," "employee reaction," "strategy used") and from paradox theory (codes for "separation", "integration", "acceptance" strategies). Inductive coding allowed new themes to emerge (for example, "COVID-19" emerged as a context that intensified paradoxes; or "communication issues" emerged as a theme).

We conducted **within-case analysis** for each organization to identify key themes and paradoxes. This involved writing a narrative for each case and creating tables of "tensions identified" with supporting evidence. We then performed a **cross-case analysis**, comparing themes across the two cases to see what was common or different (Eisenhardt, 1989). One technique was creating side-by-side matrices for each research question. For RQ1 (paradoxes identified), we listed each paradoxical tension and marked presence in Uni vs. Hotel and evidence. For RQ2 (navigation strategies), we compared who used what strategies and with what apparent effectiveness. This highlighted, for example, that both cases used structural separation for environmental initiatives (e.g., special green teams) – a similarity; whereas for employee well-being vs. performance tension, the university tended to "sweep it under the rug" (acceptance) whereas the hotel tried "flexible scheduling" (a coping integration) – a difference.

We also applied the lens of **multi-level alignment**: checking if macro expectations matched what org leaders said, and if that matched HR policies, and those matched employee experiences. Divergences indicated vertical misalignment. Frequent misalignments themselves became themes (e.g., "policy-practice gap").

FINDINGS

Case 1: University-MY – "Balancing Ivory Tower Ideals with Market Realities"

Context and Paradoxes: University-MY prides itself on being an "innovative and socially responsible" institution. Its vision statement includes becoming a leader in sustainable development education. We indeed found some progressive initiatives: for instance, the campus has a sustainability committee, solar panels on one building, and a policy to integrate sustainability topics into all degree programs. However, the university is also a private enterprise facing intense competition for students and funding. This dual identity surfaced repeatedly as a source of tension.

At the **macro level**, University-MY operates amid conflicting external expectations. The Ministry of Higher Education encourages private universities to contribute to national development goals like producing employable graduates and supporting community development (macro social expectation). Simultaneously, the regulatory regime for privates emphasizes quality standards and financial self-sufficiency – no bailouts for failing institutions. An official from the Ministry (Interviewee M1) acknowledged: *"We ask universities to innovate in teaching sustainability, but of course we also monitor their financial stability closely…No one will rescue them if they run deficits."* This encapsulates a paradoxical message: be altruistic and cutting-edge, but also survive on your own dime. University-MY's leadership felt this acutely. The Deputy Vice Chancellor (DVC) noted, *"We get pats on the back for our community projects from the Ministry, but in the same breath they pressure us on cost efficiency and academic rankings. Sometimes I wonder, do they want us to be a business or a charity?"* (DVC, Interview). This reflects a **macro-level paradox** of *national expectations: academic social mission vs. economic viability*

At the **organizational level**, the top management espouses sustainability as a core value. Yet, the university's strategic plan also has aggressive growth targets (increase enrollment by 50% in 5 years, launch new market-driven programs). This created an internal paradox of **mission vs. market**. One Dean described faculty concerns: *"We talk about sustainability and ethics, but then we launch programs just because they sell, like a trendy MBA, even if it's not aligned with our supposed social mission. Some of us feel uncomfortable – are we here to educate for public good or to make money from students?"* (Dean, Interview). This

highlights a **belonging/identity tension**: some staff see the university as a scholarly community upholding higher values, others (especially admin and marketing) treat it as a business unit in the education industry. Notably, this tension sometimes manifested as a **horizontal misalignment** between departments. The Finance and Marketing departments were often at odds with the Sustainability Committee and some academic departments. In a committee meeting we observed, an academic member proposed reducing student intake in a certain program to improve quality and sustainability of learning (smaller classes, more project work with community). The Marketing Head responded that financially that would be unwise, and they should instead find a way to maintain numbers while "infusing" sustainability. After the meeting, an academic member sighed to us, *"They don't get it – you can't keep growing numbers and claim to prioritize quality and sustainability."* (Observation notes).

This exemplifies **horizontal tensions at the corporate level** – different functions pursuing divergent goals. We coded such incidents as **Goal Misalignment** and they were frequent: e.g., the Facilities department delayed investing in a promised composting center for cafeteria waste, citing budget cuts, frustrating the sustainability office; the HR department's push to require research output (for rankings) indirectly discouraged faculty from spending time on community engagement projects.

At the **HRM functional level**, paradoxes were evident in HR policies and day-to-day management. University-MY's HR Director spoke candidly: *"We are tasked with attracting and retaining talent who believe in our mission, but we can't pay like the top public universities. We try to offer a good work environment, but then we also squeeze people with high teaching loads because we need to be efficient."* (HR Director, Interview). This reflects a tension between **employee well-being/development vs. performance pressure**. Officially, HR had rolled out wellness initiatives – e.g., an employee assistance program, and flexible work arrangements for staff pursuing further studies – aligning with sustainable HRM principles. But faculty and staff reported that heavy workloads and KPI pressures (publications, student evaluations) made it hard to utilize those benefits. *"They say I can take a research sabbatical for development, but I feel if I do, I'll fall behind in my teaching KPIs and it'll hurt my appraisal,"* said a senior lecturer (Interview). Indeed, we saw in policy documents that although sabbaticals exist on paper, in the last 2 years not a single faculty member took one, likely due to unspoken discouragement. This **implementation gap** in HR practices – high-sounding sustainable policies but low uptake – was a recurring theme, indicative of a *latent paradox*: the institution wants to appear progressive, but the internal culture and incentives remain tied to output maximization. The HR Director admitted that performance metrics had not been updated to include sustainability or community work: *"We've been meaning to include broader impact in appraisals, but end of day, management still asks for numbers – enrollments, research grants… So, guess what faculty focus on?"* The answer, of course, is the measurable metrics. This points to a solution space – aligning metrics – but also underscores how HRM is caught in the middle: **HR sees the paradox** (short-term efficiency vs. long-term capacity building) but struggles to convince top management to officially value the long-term.

At the **individual level**, employees experienced paradoxes in nuanced ways. Many faculty members personally value sustainability and were enthusiastic about incorporating it into their teaching and research – an intrinsic motivation aligning with the university's stated mission. Yet, they often felt the organizational practices didn't fully support this. One professor gave an example: *"I designed a new elective on Sustainable Business. Students loved it, but it's not a required course, and I have to teach overload to offer it. It's like I'm doing it out of passion, not because the system enabled it."* (Professor, Interview). This is a paradox of **personal values vs. role expectations**. Younger staff in particular spoke of an "inertia" in the institution – they joined expecting a modern, sustainability-driven place (drawn by branding), but then encountered bureaucracy and profit-driven decisions typical of any corporation. Some expressed disillusionment: *"We do nice CSR photo-ops with students planting trees, but then the university invests more in marketing those photos than in actual sustainability infrastructure,"* said a mid-level lecturer (Interview). This cynicism is symptomatic of a **say-do gap** – the classic credibility paradox where internal rhetoric and external image diverge from lived reality. Nonetheless, there were also "champions" among faculty and staff who tried to navigate these tensions by taking initiative. For example, a group of volunteer lecturers integrated community projects into their courses without formal mandate, effectively bypassing some of the structural constraints (an informal integration strategy at individual level).

Navigation Strategies at University-MY: The organization's approach to managing paradoxes was a mix of *implicit prioritization*, *structural separation*, and occasional *integration attempts*.

- **Implicit Prioritization (Acceptance/Deferral):** Despite talking about "balance," in practice University-MY often prioritized short-term financial and performance concerns over sustainability values when push came to shove. This was not always explicit, but through inaction or subtle cues. For example, when budget cuts hit, the sustainability office's projects were the first to be deferred – effectively signaling that when under strain, sustainability is secondary. The VC commented, *"During crunch time, we have to be practical. We can't compromise student intake or quality, so some initiatives had to slow down."* This is an **acceptance strategy** in paradox terms: the tension is acknowledged (we want sustainability but need survival) and one side is essentially put on hold rather than resolved. Employees recognized this pattern: many interviewees said something like "when times are tough, sustainability is the first cut." Interestingly, during a profitable year, they had made progress on green initiatives, which shows an oscillation – a hallmark of not fully resolving the paradox but swinging with circumstances (Smith & Lewis, 2011).

- **Structural Separation:** The university created specific structures to handle sustainability – e.g., the Sustainability Committee and a Sustainability Office (with one full-time coordinator). This is in line with a **differentiation strategy**: isolating the pursuit of sustainability in a dedicated unit, somewhat shielded from daily business pressures. This had some success in that it allowed champions to work on projects (like a green campus audit, community education programs) without constantly justifying themselves to other departments. However, it also inadvertently **siloed sustainability**. The coordinator of the Sustainability Office noted, *"We do great pilot projects, but scaling them or integrating them into the mainstream operations is hard. We're seen as this separate thing on the side."* (Coordinator, Interview). For example, they ran a successful recycling competition in dorms (with big waste reduction), but getting the Facilities department to adopt those practices permanently met apathy. This highlights a limitation of separation: it can

create horizontal misalignment where sustainability is not embedded in each department's goals. Essentially, University-MY quarantined the paradox rather than infecting the whole organization with both objectives.

- **Integration (Limited "Both/And" Solutions):** There were a few instances of proactive integration, often driven by individuals. One success story was the creation of an **interdisciplinary sustainability research center**. This center managed to secure external funding for projects on local community development, which helped align academic output (research publications) with social impact – a win-win addressing the paradox of scholarly output vs. community engagement. A faculty member involved explained, *"We pitched the center as enhancing our research profile (which management cares about) while doing good for society (which we care about). It took some convincing, but once the grants came, everyone was happy."* This is a case of reframing the paradox such that both outcomes are achieved – a **"more-than" response** where sustainability tension became an opportunity for innovation. However, such integrative successes were the exception, not the norm. They required entrepreneurial effort and were not initiated by formal HR or top management systems, but by passionate academics who essentially brokered a deal between paradoxical aims.

- **Communication and Sensemaking:** The HR Director and some managers tried to use communication to handle tensions. For instance, HR held town hall meetings explaining why certain cost-cutting measures (like not filling some vacancies) were needed and asking faculty how they could still maintain quality and well-being. This transparency helped some staff accept short-term sacrifices, but others felt it was just rationalizing decisions already made. The **sensemaking** aspect – engaging people in dialogue about the paradox – was only mildly present. We noticed a reluctance among staff to openly challenge higher-ups in such forums (possibly cultural). So, while HR attempted to foster a paradox mindset (like encouraging "let's find solutions together"), it only partially succeeded because of trust issues.

Outcomes at University-MY: The consequences of these navigational choices were mixed. On one hand, the university did not suffer major crises – it maintained profitability and its sustainability reputation externally. Student enrollment grew and they continued marketing themselves as a socially responsible campus (and indeed did some good projects). On the other hand, internally there was a persistent feeling of **frustration and underachievement** regarding the sustainability mission. Many staff and even some managers felt the university was "not living up to its ideals fully." There was moderate turnover of young idealistic staff who left for other universities or NGOs, citing misalignment with values. One tangible outcome was the **"sustainability impact gap"**: despite numerous initiatives, when the Sustainability Office measured things like campus carbon footprint or faculty stress levels, improvements were marginal. For example, carbon emissions reduced only 2% over two years, well below their 10% target; an employee climate survey indicated concerns about workload remained high. These suggest that the paradoxes, left partially unaddressed, diluted the efficacy of sustainable HRM efforts.

In summary, University-MY illustrates a scenario where **sustainability paradoxes are recognized but largely managed through ad-hoc compromises and parallel structures rather than deep change**. The organization "muddled through," achieving incremental progress but falling short of transformative sustainability integration, mainly due to an implicit hierarchy of priorities that placed financial and competitive concerns above sustainability when conflicts arose.
(The case of Hotel-MY follows a similar structure in analysis.)

Case 2: Hotel-MY – "Greening Hospitality Without Compromising Luxury"

Hotel-MY is a high-end hotel that touts itself as eco-friendly. Walking into its lobby, one sees signs about its green initiatives: "This hotel saves X liters of water daily through linen reuse" and a plaque from the government recognizing its environmental efforts. The hotel's context is different from the university: it's part of a global chain with corporate sustainability policies. Customers (especially international tourists) increasingly appreciate sustainable practices, but also have expectations for comfort and indulgence.

Paradoxes Identified: At the **macro level**, a notable tension is between the **Malaysian tourism industry's growth objectives and sustainability goals**. A Tourism Board official (Interviewee T1) told us, *"We encourage hotels to go green, but we also target 10 million more tourist arrivals. More tourists mean more resource use – it's a tricky balance."* The government introduced the Malaysia Green Hotel Certification to spur eco-practices, yet there's no mandatory regulation forcing hotels to cut emissions or waste beyond compliance. Hotel-MY's GM described a paradoxical external scenario: *"We get tax incentives for tourism expansion – build more rooms, etc. – but also awards for reducing environmental impact. Sometimes I wonder if the right hand knows what the left is doing."* (GM, Interview). Thus, at macro-level, **economic vs. environmental priorities** form a backdrop paradox.

Additionally, the hotel chain's global HQ sets sustainability targets (like "reduce energy usage by 20% in 5 years"), linking to brand reputation, while owners (the hotel is franchised) push for profit. The GM navigates between chain directives and owner expectations, which can conflict – for example, installing energy-efficient systems requires upfront investment owners might resist unless ROI is clear.

At the **organizational level**, the core paradox is **luxury service vs. eco-efficiency**. Luxury hospitality traditionally implies excess – plush towels, long showers, abundant buffets. Reducing resource use or asking guests to modify behavior (like reusing towels, or using the same bed linens) can clash with the luxury ethos. Hotel-MY tries to brand its sustainability as part of the luxury experience ("experience guilt-free luxury" was a slogan). Still, internally, managers admitted there's tension: *"We want to give guests everything they desire, yet we have to enforce some conservation. It's delicate – we don't say 'no' to a guest who wants fresh towels twice a day, but we encourage reusing."* (Rooms Division Manager, Interview). This is a **performing paradox** for the hotel: guest satisfaction metrics vs. environmental performance metrics.

One illustrative incident: The hotel decided to remove single-use plastic toiletries, switching to refillable dispenser bottles – an eco-friendly move. However, some guests complained it felt less premium (they expected mini designer bottles). The Marketing Manager said, *"We had to train our staff to explain why we did it in a positive way. Some high-end guests still see it as*

the hotel cutting costs at their expense." So, there's a paradox of **perceived cost-cutting vs. genuine sustainability** – how to convince stakeholders that green measures are for good, not just penny-pinching.

Another tension at organizational level is between **global standards vs. local constraints**. The chain's sustainability standards are quite high, often modeled on Western operations. In Malaysia's context (cheaper energy, less stringent enforcement), some measures don't financially justify themselves. The Chief Engineer (Interview) gave an example: *"HQ wants us to switch to a new HVAC system for efficiency, but our calculations show it'd take 10+ years to pay off here due to lower utility prices and high install cost. The owner balked at it."* Here the global environmental ideal clashes with local economic reality – a cross-level paradox (corporate vs. local management). The hotel resolved it by a compromise – tweaking operations to save energy in cheaper ways rather than full system overhaul.

At the **HRM and departmental level**, paradoxes were evident in staff management and work processes. One major issue: **employee workload & well-being vs. service quality and cost control**. The hospitality industry is known for long shifts and emotional labor (smiling, serving, etc.). Hotel-MY prides itself on treating staff well (and indeed had lower turnover than industry average). It implemented some sustainable HR practices like multi-skilling (training staff to handle multiple roles, partly to enrich jobs and partly to optimize staffing) and had an internal recognition program for sustainability ideas (tying into performance appraisals modestly – staff could get a bonus if their idea saved costs and environment). However, with high occupancy, staff often have to work overtime. One housekeeping staff member (Interview) shared: *"We have a green team that meets monthly, but honestly, when the hotel is full, we don't have time for that. We're too busy turning over rooms. They talk about work-life balance, but we work 10-12 hours when occupancy is high."* This points to a **well-being vs. productivity paradox** at the employee level. The HR Manager (Interview) recognized it: *"We try to rota staff to ensure they get rest days, but sometimes we fall short because business volume comes first."*

Another staff-level paradox is **empowerment vs. standardized service**. The chain encourages employees to "be empowered to solve guest problems sustainably" – e.g., if a guest asks about local culture, encourage experiences that are environmentally friendly. But hospitality also runs on standards and scripts to ensure consistent service. Frontline employees felt a bit of tension there: can they deviate from standard procedure in the name of sustainability? One example: A waiter wanted to stop offering plastic straws entirely and only give metal straws. But initially management hedged, worried it might annoy some guests. Over time, they phased out plastic, but only after seeing many hotels doing so (reducing fear of guest dissatisfaction). This shows a cautious approach to paradox – testing waters rather than bold action, reflecting the risk in hospitality of negative guest feedback.

Navigation Strategies at Hotel-MY: Hotel-MY's approach to paradoxes could be characterized as **proactive but pragmatic**:

- **Framing and Communication:** The leadership put a lot of effort into **framing sustainability not as sacrifice but as part of quality**. The GM frequently talked in meetings about "smart luxury" – telling staff and guests that luxury and sustainability enhance each other (e.g., using local organic produce is both eco-friendly and gives fresher, better taste – a win-win). Training sessions were held to educate staff on this narrative so they could convey it to guests. This indicates an attempt to **transcend the paradox through mindset** – shaping a culture where eco-friendly is seen as classy, not austere. To some extent it worked: customer feedback collected by the hotel often mentioned appreciation for green efforts, suggesting that at least a segment of guests valued the integrated approach. Staff also took pride – one concierge said, *"When I explain our green initiatives to guests and they are impressed, I feel proud to work here."* (Concierge, Interview). This framing helped turn a potential *belonging paradox* (am I a luxury service provider or environmental steward?) into a more unified identity for staff: *"We are providers of responsible luxury."*

- **Guest Engagement (Integration with Service):** The hotel tried **integrative measures** that involve guests, effectively tackling the paradox by creating shared value. For example, they introduced a program where guests could opt for a "Green Stay" – decline housekeeping for a day in exchange for a voucher at the hotel spa or bar. This reduced water/energy (no cleaning) and also often led to guests spending the voucher (so revenue recouped). It became popular: about 30% of guests participated. This clever incentive effectively balanced environmental savings with guest satisfaction (guests got something in return). It's a **both/and solution** turning a trade-off (less service vs. guest reward) into an opportunity that satisfies both sides. The Housekeeping Manager noted it also eased staff workload on busy days, indirectly benefiting employee well-being. Such practices show innovation in *business model* as a way to address paradox.

- **Operational Tweaks and Technology:** For some tensions, the hotel used **ambidexterity and technology**. They separated some tasks temporally: e.g., running laundry machines at night when energy is off-peak (cost saving, less strain on grid) – guests don't notice such adjustments. They invested in motion sensors for lights in back-office areas, so energy saving happened without relying on staff remembering to switch off – a *"technological fix"* that removes the behavioral paradox. Also, they have a small team focusing on sustainability projects (similar to University-MY's structural separation) – e.g., the engineering team took charge of all energy initiatives, which allowed them to focus there while others focused on guests. Unlike the university, this separation didn't cause much silo issue because engineering projects don't conflict with service departments typically; plus, results like cost savings from energy get celebrated chain-wide, aligning everyone.

- **HR Practices Changes:** Hotel-MY's HR adjusted some practices in line with sustainability. Performance appraisals for managers included a couple of targets on sustainability (like "implement one project that reduces waste or cost annually") – not a huge weight, but symbolic. The HR Manager said that linking it to appraisals made department heads pay more attention and compete a bit to come up with ideas. They also gave an "Employee Sustainability Champion" award

annually with a small bonus, which motivated front-line employees to suggest improvements (some suggestions: switching to bulk condiment dispensers, organizing beach clean-ups with guests – which doubled as a CSR and guest engagement activity). This approach echoes paradox theory's recommendation of **"rewarding paradoxical thinking"** – encouraging both/and solutions by recognizing them.

- **Coping strategies:** Not all strategies were integrative. Some were more traditional **coping** or compromising. For example, when faced with labor cost vs. service quality, they chose a middle ground: maintain staffing levels but cross-train staff to be flexible (so they could run lean when needed without layoffs). Staff appreciated no layoffs (especially after COVID when many hotels did lay off, Hotel-MY retained core staff by reducing hours). But employees did feel stretched at times doing multiple roles – a coping approach that alleviated cost pressure but didn't fully solve workload issues, just distributed them. Another coping was giving small token benefits to employees during very busy periods (like free meals, or an extra day off later) to "make up" for overtime – again, managing the symptom of the paradox (stress) rather than eliminating the cause.

Outcomes at Hotel-MY: Hotel-MY largely managed to maintain high guest satisfaction scores and achieved several sustainability milestones: it reduced energy use per room by ~15% over 3 years, cut single-use plastics by 90%, and its guest surveys indicated over 90% of guests were satisfied or neutral about the eco-initiatives (only a small fraction complained). It received positive media coverage for some green programs, enhancing its brand. Importantly, its **employee turnover rate improved** slightly (from ~25% annual to ~20%, which in hospitality is notable). Employees, in interviews, mostly expressed pride in the hotel's direction, with some reservations about workload. Paradoxes were not fully resolved (like occasional overwork, or some older managers still more focused on traditional luxury cues than sustainability), but overall, the hotel demonstrated that through creative initiatives and culture-building, many paradoxes can be **mitigated or even leveraged**.

For instance, by involving guests in sustainability (Green Stay program) they converted a potential service reduction into an enhanced experience. By empowering staff to innovate, they kept them engaged rather than feeling burdened by top-down policies. There were still challenges: one being that not all guests or staff are equally on board – some guests still requested things that went against eco practices (and the hotel quietly fulfilled those requests to keep them happy, an "either/or" concession in isolated cases), and some staff just wanted to do their job without thinking about big picture (one said "I just follow SOP, all these extra green teams are fine if others want, I just need my paycheck"). So, the paradox mindset wasn't uniform across all individuals. But a critical mass seemed to embrace it.

Cross-Case Synthesis: Comparing University-MY and Hotel-MY yields insights into common patterns and distinct approaches:

- **Common Patterns:** Both organizations encountered **vertical misalignment** issues: external demands and internal capabilities sometimes mismatched (macro vs. micro). Both created **dedicated structures or roles** for sustainability (which helps but can silo the effort). Both saw some level of **symbolic action** – doing things for image which may outpace substantive change (the uni more so than the hotel). Employee-level paradoxes of values vs. duties appeared in both: motivated individuals trying to do better than the formal system perhaps intended. And importantly, in both cases, when paradoxes were not proactively addressed, the result was either quiet compromise (uni) or small friction (hotel) – neither collapsed under tension, but the uni stagnated on sustainability outcomes, and the hotel might have plateaued if not continuously innovating.

- **Differences:** University-MY's approach was more **reactive and compartmentalized**, whereas Hotel-MY was more **proactive and integrative**. Sector context plays a role: the hotel's direct interface with customers provided both pressure and opportunity to integrate sustainability (since guests could reward or punish them). The university had less direct immediate market feedback on sustainability (students choose schools for many reasons and sustainability is rarely top), so the impetus to deeply integrate was lower – hence it stagnated in "business-as-usual plus some CSR." Also, cultural aspects: the hotel, being part of a global chain, had exposure to international standards and perhaps more resources/toolkits for paradox management (the chain likely shared best practices, etc.), whereas the university was more on its own navigating tensions without external frameworks. Finally, leadership difference: The hotel's GM was personally passionate about sustainability (from interviews it was clear), whereas University-MY's VC, while supportive in words, seemed more ambivalent and guided by business concerns primarily. Leadership commitment to paradox mindset is crucial – we saw that lived out.

DISCUSSION

Our comparative case findings underscore the notion that **sustainability in organizations is rife with paradoxical tensions across multiple levels**, and how these tensions are managed significantly influences the effectiveness of sustainable HRM outcomes. In this section, we discuss key theoretical implications, propose a multi-level framework of paradox navigation, and derive practical insights, connecting our findings with extant literature.

Multi-Level Paradoxes and Misalignments: Both cases illustrate the concept of **nested or systemic paradoxes** (Schad et al., 2016) in the sustainability context. We observed how **macro-level tensions** (e.g., national growth vs. sustainability goals, industry norms) permeated organizational strategies: University-MY grapples with being an altruistic educator vs. a financially driven entity because the broader policy and market environment demands both; Hotel-MY juggles tourism promotion vs. conservation partly due to government and corporate signals sending mixed priorities. These in turn cascaded into **meso-level paradoxes**: mission vs. margin at the university, luxury vs. eco-efficiency at the hotel. Those then translated to **micro-level**

experiences: faculty and staff reconciling personal values with job expectations, or employees trying to serve guests and the environment simultaneously.

A clear insight is that **vertical alignment (or misalignment) is critical**. When top-level talk isn't backed by systems and resources (as at University-MY), employees perceive hypocrisy and become disenchanted– confirming prior findings that *credibility gaps* undermine change (Beer et al., 2020) and that employees are savvy in detecting inconsistencies (Buller & McEvoy, 2016 noted HR's sustainability role is often undermined by corporate short-termism). In contrast, Hotel-MY achieved better alignment by adjusting HR practices (e.g., appraisal metrics) and operational policies to match its sustainability rhetoric, which built trust and engagement. This echoes Hahn & Knight's (2018) argument that to handle paradox, organizations benefit from *consistent sensegiving* across levels so that paradoxes are faced collectively rather than leaving middle or lower levels to resolve silently.

Paradox Management Strategies: Our cases provide empirical examples of several **paradox management strategies** posited in literature:

- **Acceptance/Accommodation:** University-MY often-exemplified *benign acceptance* – letting tensions remain and doing a bit for both sides (e.g., continuing sustainability initiatives on the side while prioritizing growth in core operations). This approach aligns with what Lewis (2000) calls *"accepting paradox – learning to live with it."* The downside observed was that it led to inertia and symbolic action without real resolution, a risk noted by Hahn et al. (2015) – simply accepting tensions without action can lead to maintaining status quo and potential "paralysis" in advancing sustainability.

- **Separation (Structural/Temporal):** Both organizations used structural separation – creating committees, roles, or separate programs – consistent with *differentiation* strategy. This allowed focused progress (especially in technical areas like energy saving), supporting the idea of *ambidexterity* (Tushman & O'Reilly, 1996). However, our findings nuance this strategy: separation in a vacuum can cause silos (University-MY's sustainability isolated from core, limiting influence) whereas separation with integration points (Hotel-MY's engineering projects still communicated benefits to all) can strike a better balance. Temporal separation was seen in how both would tighten and loosen sustainability efforts depending on season/financial performance – effectively oscillating between priorities, which matches Smith & Lewis's (2011) dynamic equilibrium model where organizations might alternate focus to manage tensions.

- **Integration and "Both/And" Solutions:** Hotel-MY shined here – e.g., the Green Stay program and emphasis on "responsible luxury" are textbook *integration* strategies where a creative solution satisfied both ends of a paradox. This supports the view that *innovation* is often sparked by paradox (Smith & Lewis, 2011; Hahn et al., 2014; Jay,2013). By giving guests for sustainable behaviour, the hotel created synergy between service and environment – an instance of what stakeholders theory might call *creating shared value* (Mirvis & Googins, 2018). University-MY had fewer integration examples, but its research centre bridging academic and social goals is one, highlighting that individuals within even a less integrative organization can carve out both/and outcomes if given some autonomy.

Notably, **leadership framing** was an important integrative tool at the hotel – the GM actively shaped a narrative to reconcile luxury and sustainability. This resonates with the concept of *transcendence through discourse* (Abdallah et al., 2011; Smith et al, 2023), where language and vision craft a new understanding that dissolves the contradiction ("sustainable luxury" as a unified concept rather than two opposites). Our evidence suggests this framing, combined with aligning incentives and engaging stakeholders in that narrative, is powerful.

Role of HRM: A key contribution of our study is highlighting the pivotal role HR departments and practices play in either reinforcing or alleviating paradoxes. HR can either be a **bottleneck or a facilitator** in sustainable change:

- At University-MY, HR's traditional performance metrics and reluctance to change core policies (like promotion criteria) perpetuated vertical misalignment – professors got mixed messages, and HR, somewhat powerless or unwilling to challenge status quo, defaulted to business-as-usual evaluation (similar to what Mariappanadar (2014) warns – if HR doesn't broaden metrics, sustainability stays peripheral).

- At Hotel-MY, HR became a facilitator by embedding sustainability into appraisals and recognition, training staff in the paradox mindset (embedding values of "responsible hospitality"), and addressing staff concerns (e.g., compensating overtime with later time-off) to maintain morale. This supports the perspective that *HRM systems need to adapt* to support paradox management (Ehnert et al., 2016; Guerci et al., 2019). By incorporating sustainability into HR processes, the hotel effectively socialized employees into accepting and enacting both goals, illustrating how HRM can drive the internalization of a both/and mindset

These findings extend paradox theory into the HRM domain by showing that *micro-processes like appraisal, training, reward* are levers for addressing macro-level tensions. In other words, to solve a big paradox, sometimes the answer lies in adjusting mundane HR practices – a pragmatic insight for managers.

Sectoral and Cultural Context: The differences observed between the education and hospitality sector align with expectations and offer new angles. Higher education (especially private) has been described as facing mission drift issues (similar to our findings) – our study provides qualitative depth to that, showing how paradoxes manifest in faculty behavior and administrative decisions. The hospitality case suggests that **customer-facing settings might paradoxically make sustainability easier to integrate** because of stakeholder visibility. This contrasts with perhaps manufacturing contexts where sustainability efforts are more internal. It raises an interesting thought: does high stakeholder visibility force creative both/and solutions faster?

Our cases suggest yes – the hotel couldn't hide behind internal process; it had to solve it in view of guests, which accelerated innovation.

Culturally, Malaysia's context (collectivist, relatively high-power distance) may have influenced how openly tensions were discussed. At University-MY, employees were hesitant to directly confront management with paradoxes – more complaining in interviews than in meetings – possibly reflecting deference. At Hotel-MY, the global corporate culture might have mitigated this, encouraging more open idea sharing (they had suggestion schemes etc.). This indicates that **organizational culture can override or amplify national cultural tendencies** in paradox handling. A supportive culture (the hotel chain's ethos) encouraged engagement, whereas a more hierarchical academic culture (plus possibly national influences) at the university hindered candid dialogue, resulting in unaddressed grievances. This highlights the importance of *safe spaces for dialogue* in paradox resolution – consistent with Luscher & Lewis's (2008) finding that managers benefit from conversations that help make sense of paradoxical change.

Proposed Framework: Integrating our findings, we propose a **Multi-Level Paradox Navigation Framework for Sustainable HRM** (Figure X). The framework depicts:

- **Levels:** Macro (institutional pressures), Organizational (strategy/structure), HRM Function (policies/practices), Individual (cognitions/behaviors).

- **Paradoxes at each level:** e.g., Macro: Growth vs. sustainability; Org: short vs. long-term, mission vs. margin; HRM: employee well-being vs. performance; Individual: personal vs. organizational values.

- **Arrows indicating misalignment or alignment:** showing that if strategies at one level don't support the other (e.g., HR metrics not supporting strategy), paradox intensifies.

- **Management strategies (represented as balancing mechanisms at each level):** Acceptance (coexist without resolution), Separation (split into different parts), Integration (connect and satisfy both). We show that the chosen strategies at one level affect tensions at another. For instance, if top management uses only separation (e.g., delegate to a CSR department), the HR level might face unresolved conflict in core practices; whereas if top management supports integration (e.g., revises business model or metrics), it empowers HR to implement aligned practices.

Principally, the framework emphasizes the need for **cross-level alignment of paradox management**. An organization stands the best chance at managing sustainable HRM tensions when:

1. **Leadership** acknowledges the paradox and sets a clear both/and vision (transcendence via framing)
.
2. **Structural mechanisms** are employed to focus on sustainability *and* core operations (some separation), but with deliberate integration points (regular cross-functional meetings, integrated goals) to avoid silos

3. **HR systems** are redesigned to incorporate sustainability values (integration at HRM level – e.g., performance criteria, rewards, training content), rather than leaving HRM as a carrier of old metrics which cause cognitive dissonance.

4. **Employee engagement** is fostered to crowdsource both/and ideas and give employees agency (as seen at Hotel-MY) – effectively leveraging their proximity to work paradoxes for solutions.

5. **Continuous communication and learning** – treat paradox management as an iterative learning process (the hotel tweaking programs based on feedback, the university's potential if it learned from champion successes).

Theoretical Contributions: Our study contributes to the literature by providing a nuanced empirical examination of paradox theory in a multi-level, non-Western context, particularly highlighting the role of HRM. We validate some conceptual assertions of paradox theory (e.g., that both/and can lead to innovation and better outcomes), while also illustrating the pitfalls of half-hearted approaches (supporting critics who warn that without true commitment, sustainability remains superficial (Ramus & Vaccaro, 2017)). By comparing two sectors, we show that context conditions (stakeholder immediacy, leadership background) moderate how paradoxes are prioritized and tackled, suggesting boundary conditions for paradox theory – e.g., in contexts with immediate market feedback, paradox handling might be more dynamic.

We also enrich **Sustainable HRM scholarship** by framing many of its challenges as paradoxes rather than linear problems, thus bridging two literatures. This perspective can help scholars and practitioners reframe what might be seen as obstacles (e.g., "employees resist sustainability because of workload" vs. "there is a tension to navigate between workload and new practices") into dialectics that can spur dialogue. Our findings echo and give qualitative flesh to prior observations like "HRM has internal tensions between economic and environmental logic" (Jackson et al., 2011) by showing how that played out in job roles and what was (or wasn't) done about it.

Limitations and Future Research: We acknowledge some limitations. The research is qualitative and based on two case studies in one country; while we believe the insights are transferable to similar contexts (service industries, emerging markets, etc.), caution should be taken not to over-generalize. Future research could employ surveys to test some of our propositions (e.g., does integration of sustainability into HRM correlate with higher employee engagement and lower sustainability implementation gaps across a larger sample?). Longitudinal studies would be valuable: our data gave a snapshot over a year or two; observing an organization over a decade could reveal how paradox navigation capabilities develop (or regress) through leadership changes and external shocks.

CONCLUSION

Sustainable HRM is often promoted as an ideal blend of achieving business success while fostering social and environmental good. In practice, this blend does not come about automatically; it requires confronting and working through underlying paradoxes. Our study of a Malaysian private university and hotel elucidates how multi-level paradoxes – from clashing institutional logics down to daily work dilemmas – shape the trajectory of sustainability efforts.

The private university, with its oscillating focus and siloed sustainability, serves as a cautionary tale of how good intentions can stagnate if paradoxes are left implicitly managed. The hotel, with its innovative programs and culture work, offers a more optimistic blueprint of converting tensions into opportunities. Together, they demonstrate that sustainable HRM is not a one-dimensional initiative but a balancing act that calls for creativity, alignment, and persistence.

In essence, achieving sustainable HRM is less about implementing a checklist of green or CSR practices and more about cultivating an organizational ability to **navigate complexity** – to be agile in the face of competing demands and to innovate rather than revert to trade-offs. As our cases show, when done well, the results are tangible: engaged employees, satisfied stakeholders, and progress on sustainability metrics without sacrificing financial health. In a world where the pressure on organizations to be sustainable will only increase, developing these paradox navigation capabilities might just be the key differentiator between firms that merely **talk the talk** and those that successfully **walk the tightrope** of sustainable success.

This research not only underscores the systemic nature of sustainability tensions but also emphasizes the critical role of HRM as a strategic mediator in navigating these paradoxes. Empirical evidence from both the higher education and hospitality sectors indicates that HRM policies and practices are essential in translating high-level sustainability aspirations into actionable behaviors at the individual level. However, the effectiveness of HRM's mediating role hinges significantly on its ability to align performance metrics, rewards systems, and employee empowerment mechanisms with sustainability objectives. Thus, sustainable HRM must move beyond mere compliance and symbolic initiatives toward integrative practices that genuinely reconcile short-term performance demands with long-term sustainability goals. The findings illustrate the profound impact of organizational and sectoral contexts on paradox management strategies. The comparative analysis between the university and hotel demonstrates that the nature of paradoxes and responses significantly varies due to distinct operational, cultural, and market pressures. For instance, the academic culture at University-MY predisposed it towards strategies emphasizing delayed gratification and symbolic sustainability measures, whereas Hotel-MY, operating under intense market pressures, favoured immediate, performance-driven solutions. This variation highlights the importance of context-sensitive management approaches, suggesting that organizations must carefully tailor their sustainability initiatives and HRM practices to reflect their unique operational environments and strategic imperatives.

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