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The Recursive Production of Unlabeled Social Sustainability

*The Duality of Structure and the Institutionalisation of Social Sustainability
in a growing hospitality company*

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Abstract

Title	The Recursive Production of Unlabeled Social Sustainability: The Duality of Structure and the Institutionalisation of Social Sustainability
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Supervisor	Roland Paulsen, Lund University (Sweden)
Purpose	The purpose of our thesis is to shed light on the influence employees at the operational level of hotels can have on integrating social sustainability practice.
Methodology	For the purpose of in-depth understanding, qualitative methods have been used for this thesis. The empirical data was collected through twelve interviews and two observations.
Philosophical grounding	We built our research on Giddens' (1984) structuration theory. This allowed us to zoom in and out of the research by looking at the relation between broader organisational structures and the everyday practices of our subjects, examining how each continuously shapes the other.
Theoretical Framing	The theoretical vehicles used besides structuration are Self-Determination Theory (SDT) and Communities of Practice (CoP)
Contributions	Our contribution to existing research is the addition of an integrated view on social sustainability practice at the operational level of hospitality organisations. This bridges existing literature on the need for shared vocabulary and stronger structures for social sustainability with the perspective of the duality of structure.
Keywords	Duality of structure, Structuration, Social Sustainability, and Triple Bottom Line

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Happy reading to all others, we hope you enjoy the thesis in front of you!

Carien Meinders & Roos Gerbers

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Abbreviations & Glossary

CoP	Communities of Practice
DE&I	Diversity Equity and Inclusion
ESG	Environmental Social Governance
HR	Human Resource
IOS	Institutionalised Organisational Structures (The concrete, installed organisational arrangements at The Summer; distinct from Giddens' <i>structure</i> in the duality of structure)
SDT	Self-Determination Theory
socsu	Social sustainability
TBL	Triple Bottom Line
Structure	Rules and resources, recursively implicated in the reproduction of social systems. Structure exists only as memory traces, the organic basis of human knowledgeability, and as instantiated in action (Giddens, 1984, p. 377)

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1.Introduction

1.1. Setting the Stage

“Good initiatives don’t only have to come from above [higher management]. In an ideal world, they should reinforce each other. Managers need to take the lead, and directors need to ensure that this is considered important enough to allocate budget for. And then, as far as I’m concerned, you can get ideas from across the entire organisation if you listen to them.”

- Simon

Simon, who during one of our interviews formulates exactly what Giddens (1984) introduces through the duality of structure. The duality of structure, central to the structuration theory upon which this thesis is built, explains how social structures and human action continuously shape one another. To make sense of this, we understand structuration through the image of a backpack. Everyone carries a backpack filled with experiences, norms, rules, knowledge and resources. What we carry influences how we act and what we see as possible or impossible. At the same time, every action can also shape the backpacks of others. We inspire, influence, guide or sometimes force people to add, remove or rethink what they carry with them.

Power is important here, because not everyone has the same ability to decide what becomes important enough to carry forward. Some actors have more authority, resources or legitimacy to shape the organisational backpack. Yet, as Giddens’ (1991, p. 155) dialectic of control suggests, less powerful actors are never completely powerless. Through their knowledge, initiative and daily practices, they can still influence, resist or redirect other people’s backpacks. If something is not recognised, repeated or supported, it may slowly disappear from the backpack. However, when people continue to carry and enact practices, it can also become part of the backpacks of those with more power.

This backpack refers to structures. We do not see structure as something solid, but rather as something that exists only when acted upon — taken out of the backpack and shared with others through conversation or practice. This is based on Giddens' (1984, p. 54) explanation of structure: rules and resources are internal to individuals, forming both the medium and outcome of actions, and being both constraining and enabling.

In this thesis, we use the duality of structure to analyse the integration of social sustainability (hereafter called socsu) into organisational practice. Socsu refers to the people side of sustainability: the organisational conditions and everyday practices that support well-being, inclusion, participation, freedom and social connection. We do not treat socsu merely as a fixed checklist or policy outcome, but as something produced and maintained through the way people work together, make decisions and give meaning to their daily practices. Why is socsu less integrated into practice and repeatedly missing in people's backpacks? It is most often environmental sustainability that we talk about, but why? Socsu is frequently approached from a predominantly legal or compliance-based perspective (Ajmal et al., 2018), but this narrow focus risks overlooking the broader organisational and human dimensions required to balance socsu with environmental sustainability. In practice, translating social sustainability ambitions into concrete organisational outcomes presents considerable challenges (Ajmal et al., 2018; Boström, 2012; McGuinn et al., 2020). Although the importance of socsu is well recognised within academic discourse, it remains comparatively underexplored in organisational practice (McKenzie, 2004; Boström, 2012; Ajmal et al., 2018; Nilsson et al., 2024). This research aims to address this misalignment by examining how people (and their backpacks) can drive socsu integration.

1.2. Problem Statement

The overarching problem this research addresses can be captured in the question: “Why don't we talk about people when we talk about sustainability?” Existing literature points to missing vocabulary, measurement tools and prioritisation. Our narrower focus is what the institutionalisation of socsu in hospitality organisations reveals that existing literature overlooks. In the Triple Bottom Line framework, people, planet and profit are presented as equally important (Elkington, 1997). In practice, however, the three pillars are rarely equally prioritised (McKenzie, 2004; Murphy, 2012; Boström, 2012). The planet pillar is supported by certification, reporting standards, measurable targets and recognisable organisational language. The profit pillar is embedded through financial structures, investor expectations and performance systems. The people pillar, by contrast, remains less visible, less measurable and less institutionalised (Ajmal et al., 2018; Boström, 2012; McGuinn et al., 2020; Alhazemi, 2025).

In hospitality this is a relevant challenge, as social sustainability is not only a strategic concern but enacted through relationships with employees, guests, communities, and other stakeholders. Recent work by Dias et al. (2026) already examined institutionalisation on a more strategic & managerial level, what remains less visible is practising, recognising and reproduction at operational level where employees enact the people pillar in daily work before it necessarily becomes formalised or named as sustainability.

In the literature, two dominant responses are seen to address the problem of institutionalisation. On the one hand, some argue for more structure for socsu, through clearer definitions, metrics and governance frameworks (Boström, 2012; Ajmal et al., 2018; Nilsson et al., 2024; McGuinn et al., 2020). On the other hand, others argue that organisations lack the commitment or intrinsic drive to prioritise the people pillar to the same extent as the planet and profit pillars (Banerjee, 2008; Porter & Kramer, 2006; Ryan & Deci, 2000; Gagné & Deci, 2005). Both explanations contain important insights, but neither is sufficient on its own. More structure can create visibility and accountability, but it can also produce compliance without meaning. Motivated individuals may generate meaningful practices, but without organisational recognition their efforts remain fragile and dependent on individual commitment. The recursive dynamic between these explanations remains underexplored, and it is exactly this angle that we address by exploring their co-constitution in the institutionalisation of socsu.

This study contributes to the complex field of socsu institutionalization. Because socsu is difficult to integrate due to the dominance of the environmental and profit pillars and the context-dependency of the social pillar, we aim to show how individuals can influence existing structures. This may eventually support the systemic integration of the people pillar of the TBL through socsu practice.

1.3. Research question

Based on this problem, the main research question guiding the study is:

RQ: "How is social sustainability practised, recognised, and reproduced in operational teams of hospitality organisations, and under what conditions does it move from individual practice to institutionalised practice?"

To explore this question, The Summer offers a relevant case because it is a hospitality organisation where sustainability is already part of the organisational identity, while the translation of social sustainability into operational practice remains less straightforward. As the organisation combines formal sustainability ambitions with daily service work, it allows us to examine how socsu is practised by operational employees, how it is recognised or left unnamed, and under what conditions these practices become more durable. The case is used as a setting through which the journey from individual practice to institutionalised practice can be studied.

1.4. Disposition

This research consists of six chapters, which we briefly introduce here. *Chapter two*, the literature review, sets out the theoretical foundation of the research. Firstly, socsu as a concept is reviewed by exploring sustainability literature, and the challenges that make this pillar difficult to recognise and sustain. Secondly, three analytical frameworks are introduced; Self-Determination Theory, structuration theory and communities of practice.

Chapter three, the methodology, explains the qualitative research used, the abductive case study design, and the case company, The Summer, describing the gathering of data through semi-structured interviews, observation and a focus group. Finally, it explains how the empirical data is analyzed using the framework of Rennstam and Wästerfors (2018).

Chapter four, the empirical analysis, presents three findings that show how socsu is enabled, conducted and fragmented at The Summer. Together these findings illustrate how structures and motivation interact in the production and recognition of social sustainability. We compare the integration of socsu here with environmental sustainability practices to show how the different pillars are institutionalised. Profit is so deeply embedded as a pillar, that we choose to focus primarily on people and planet in this chapter.

In *chapter five*, the discussion, presents the findings in relation to the theoretical framework, developing the main theoretical contribution of the research by exploring the duality of structure in socsu practice and explaining how individuals have influence on the institutionalisation of socsu while also taking into account structures of domination, signification and legitimation in mind.

Chapter six, the conclusion, answers the research question. It summarizes the theoretical contribution, outlines the practical implications for organisations seeking to strengthen socsu, and identifies opportunities for future research.

2. Literature review

This chapter provides the theoretical foundation for understanding how socsu is practised, recognised and reproduced in organisations. The chapter first examines socsu as a concept, starting with the Triple Bottom Line and the under prioritisation of the social pillar. We then introduce the socsu Compass, highlighting that formal frameworks are not enough to make socsu visible in practice. Lastly, the theoretical lens is developed through structuration theory, Self-Determination Theory and communities of practice — together, these explain how socsu emerges through structure, motivation and shared organisational practice.

2.1. Social sustainability as an underdeveloped pillar

This chapter examines socsu as a concept that remains difficult to define, recognise and sustain in organisational practice.

2.1.1. Introduction to sustainability

Since the introduction of the Triple Bottom Line by Elkington (1997), organisations have worked to balance people, planet and profit as equally important dimensions of sustainability. Yet the social pillar does not receive the same treatment as the other two pillars (Murphy, 2012, p. 15).

The literature offers different explanations for this imbalance. One perspective argues that the social pillar remains weak because organisations lack structural frameworks, definitions, metrics and governance mechanisms to institutionalise socsu, suggesting that clearer definitions, metrics and stronger governance are needed (Bostrom, 2012, p. 12). Others suggest that socsu is primarily driven by financial benefits rather than by a genuine commitment to the people pillar (Banerjee, 2008, p. 58).

This creates an important tension in the literature, while some scholars see stronger institutionalisation as the solution, others warn that formal structures alone may reproduce existing organisational priorities and fail to challenge the dominance of economic logic. Both perspectives contain important insights, but neither is sufficient on its own (Boström, 2012, p. 12). The literature review develops a more precise account of what produces and sustains socsu in organisational practice.

2.1.2.From sustainability to socsu

The Brundtland report established sustainability as an integrated concern for economic, environmental and social development (World Commission on Environment and Development, 1987) and is seen as the foundation on which organisational sustainability frameworks were built.

In an organisational context, Carroll (1991) developed the CSR pyramid as a framework for understanding corporate social responsibility through four responsibilities: economic, legal, ethical and philanthropic. In this framework, economic responsibility forms the foundation, implying that financial viability is a necessary condition for an organisation's continued existence. However, Carroll (2016) later clarifies that the pyramid should not be read as a strict sequence, since organisations are expected to fulfil all four responsibilities simultaneously. Elkington (1997) translated this sustainability logic into the Triple Bottom Line (TBL) which frames organisational sustainability as a balance between three pillars: people, planet and profit. Equality between these three dimensions means that organisations move beyond only focusing on financial performance.

However, in practice the equality that the TBL proposes has not been realised. Organisations implement the concept of TBL in a way where economic and environmental dimensions are prioritised over the social (McKenzie, 2004). The underrepresentation of the social pillar is not primarily explained by oversight, but reflects deeper structural and political dynamics, including how influential groups shape which concerns are included in sustainability frameworks (Murphy, 2012, p. 15).

The environmental pillar of sustainability has developed over time — becoming an institutionalised infrastructure. To become more visible, measurable and manageable for organisations, the concept is supported by certifications, frameworks, metrics, and standardized practices. For example, BREEAM, Green Globe, carbon reporting and CO2 metrics give the planet pillar a standardised and auditable vocabulary that the people pillar lacks (Alhazemi, 2025).

Conversely, socsu remains harder to define, more difficult to measure and less supported by formal systems. Institutionalising is a challenge and socsu becomes a concept that is less prioritised (Ajmal et al., 2018). The result is a structural asymmetry: even in organisations that

are genuinely committed to all three pillars, the social dimension is consistently the one that slips when resources are constrained, where priorities compete, or when performance must be communicated to external stakeholders (Boström, 2012). This raises a critical question: why does the people pillar remain so difficult to capture, prioritize and sustain within organisations?

2.1.3. Defining socsu

Part of the answer lies in the concept itself. The vagueness and interpretive flexibility of socsu are reasons for its broad appeal and frequent neglect, according to McKenzie (2004), he argues that socsu is the most contested and least independently defined concept in sustainability literature. As long as socsu is only understood in relation to the other pillars, it will always be an unequal participant and only support the environmental and economic pillars. This concern is structural, a concept that cannot stand on its own term, cannot generate its own institutional momentum (McKenzie, 2004).

Hutchins and Sutherland, (p. 327, 2008) (cited in, Ajmal et al., 2018) further emphasize the lack of conceptual clarity, they note that socsu stays underdeveloped in academic literature and is only touched upon in relation to legislative issues. As a result, the concept lacks a coherent theoretical foundation, which complicates its implementation and evaluation in practice. Without a shared understanding of what socsu is, organisations cannot systematically produce it, measure it, or hold themselves accountable for it (pp. 328 - 331).

Ajmal et al. (2018) attempted to address this fragmentation by distinguishing between internal and external perspectives. The external perspective refers to the broader societal expectations placed on organisations, including aspects such as social cohesion, equity, community well-being, and access to resources. In contrast, the internal perspective focuses on organisational practices, such as employee well-being, labour conditions, human rights, and fair governance. This thesis focuses on the internal dimension, as it examines how socsu is practiced, recognised and reproduced within organisational life.

Despite the efforts to bring structure to the concept, socsu remains fragmented and conceptually ambiguous, which has important implications for its measurement and evaluation. Unlike environmental and economic performance, which can be measured by using indicators, socsu involves intangible and context-dependent factors that resist standardisation (McGuinn et al.,

2020). Existing frameworks such as ESG, the SDGs and the Global Reporting Initiative serve as attempts to translate the abstract concept into measurable indicators, covering areas such as, labour conditions, human rights, diversity, and community impact (Alhazemi, 2025). However, the social dimension consistently proves harder to translate into comparable metrics than the environmental and economic dimensions (Ajmal et al., 2018). It is measured less rigorously (Porter & Kramer, 2006), reported less consistently (McKenzie, 2004) and rewarded less reliably by capital markets and governance systems (Friede et al., 2015).

The motivations driving organisations towards socsu further complicate its development. In the literature two dominant motivational logics are identified; normative drivers are grounded in ethical responsibility, and social justice and strategic drivers are grounded in reputation, legitimacy and long-term financial performance (Porter & Kramer, 2006; Banerjee, 2008). Yet, unlike environmental sustainability, socsu commitments do not achieve the institutional pressure, and therefore remain predominantly voluntary, normative and difficult to audit (Porter & Kramer, 2006; Banerjee, 2008).

To give analytical clarity to what socsu can look like in practice, we adopt the SoSu Compass developed by Nilsson et al. (2024) as a conceptual reference point rather than a full analytical framework. In this framework socsu is organised around four interconnected dimensions: equity, well-being, participation & freedom and social capital. Each dimension encompasses a range of specific practices and conditions that organisations can work toward (Nilsson et al., 2024). Rather than treating socsu as a compliance checklist, the Compass frames it as a set of living conditions that require active production and maintenance.

However, the Compass also highlights a central tension, it offers a way of mapping socsu, a structured language for understanding what is and how it might appear in practice. Yet, having a framework for socsu does not automatically mean it will be realised in practice (Nilsson et al., 2024). This requires attention to both the structures that shape what is possible and the acts who enact socsu through everyday work.

2.1.4.Socsu; from commitment to practice

When socsu is translated from ideas into everyday organisational practices, it often becomes clear that frameworks alone are not enough. Structural and operational barriers consistently prevent organisations from translating their social commitments into meaningful and lasting outcomes (Ajmal et al., 2018).

This struggle is evident in service-intensive industries, such as hospitality, where the social dimension is highly visible, in employee well-being, labour conditions, community relationships and retention. Yet, the sector is vulnerable to the cost pressures and short-term financial logics that characterize competitive market environments (Yadav & Kestwal, 2024). In this sector, socsu is not enacted only through policy documents or reporting frameworks, but through the daily interaction between stakeholders (Dias et al., 2026).

Furthermore, organisations practice socsu without recognising it as such. This phenomenon is not unique to sustainability. Polanyi (1966) researched tacit knowledge, arguing that the most deeply held knowledge is often the hardest to articulate. This means that practices that have become routines resist conscious reflection precisely because they no longer require it. A similar process is described by Bourdieu (1977), through the concept of Habitus, where people act and think almost automatically because of deeply ingrained ways, without them consciously reflecting on each decision. Applied to socsu, this suggests that organisations may practice the ‘people’ pillar in everyday practice, while lacking the language, tools or strategy to reflect, measure or reproduce it.

This is reinforced by the asymmetry in organisational language. Where environmental sustainability has developed a rich and widely shared vocabulary, carbon footprint, certification scores, CO2 emission — wordings people can refer to in daily conversations and recognise as sustainability, socsu lacks this shared vocabulary (Boström, 2012). This issue can be understood through the lens of sensemaking. Weick (1995) describes sensemaking as the process through which organisational members create shared interpretations of ambiguous situations. Applied to socsu, this suggests that naming is not merely a matter of communication but can shape whether certain practices become collectively recognisable. If employees lack a shared language for socsu, practices related to the dimension of the SoSu Compass: care, participation,

inclusion, freedom, or well-being (Nilsson et al., 2024), may remain difficult to connect to sustainability as an organisational category.

2.2. Theoretical foundations for understanding operational practice

This section develops the theoretical lens through which empirical findings are analysed. It brings together structuration theory, Self-Determination Theory and communities of practice to explain how socsu is produced, sustained or weakened in organisational practice. Each perspective highlights a different part of this process, namely the relation between structure and agency, the conditions for intrinsic motivation, and the movement from individual practice to shared organisational practice.

2.2.1. The duality of structure: agency and structure as inseparable

According to Giddens (1984, p. 377), structures consist of “rules and resources, recursively implicated in the reproduction of social systems. Structures exist only as memory traces, the organic basis of human knowledgeability, and as instantiated in action”. Meaning that structure is not a visible or fixed object with existence independent of the practices through which it is continuously reproduced. Moreover, structure does not refer to organisational charts or formal hierarchies, but to underlying rules and resources that shape what people are able to do in a given context. A chart may be shown, but if people do not recognise and reproduce its meanings in their everyday practices, metaphorically “putting it in their backpack”, the structure remains non-existent.

From this point, throughout this thesis we distinguish between two senses of the term 'structure'. When we write ‘structure’ or ‘structural properties’, we refer to the rules and resources defined above. When we refer to the concrete, installed organisational arrangements we use the abbreviation IOS (Institutionalised Organisational Structures). IOS are what Giddens (1984, p. 26) calls the 'institutionalised features' of social systems. They are the empirical sites at which

structural properties are drawn upon and reproduced; they are not structures themselves according to Giddens — although in daily-practice almost always referred to as structures.

To understand what institutions are in this theory, Giddens (1984, p. 26) argues that institutions can also be understood as the more stabilised and time-space-extended forms that structural properties take when they are repeatedly reproduced through practice, what he describes as “the more enduring features of social life” (Giddens 1984, p. 52). This research focuses on The Summer, which is understood here as an institution which is a product of reproduced structures.

Societal theories, like structuration, have different views on what a society is, and how theories can be used in research. It is important to understand that structuration theory can be used on institutions, as Giddens (1984, pp. 171-174) sees societies as “clusterings of institutions” across time and space, held together by definite structural principles that produce a specifiable overall pattern. On this reading, institutions are not just contained within societies; they are the constitutive units through which societies acquire structural coherence in the first place. Applying structuration to an organisational case is therefore not a stretch beyond Giddens' framework but consistent with his own definition of how societies are made up. As also confirmed by Prasad (2005, chapter 11) who introduces this philosophical lens as a useful mechanism for empirical research and earlier examples research using structuration Orlikowski (1992); Barley (1986); Pozzebon & Pinsonneault (2005).

In research, social theory is often divided between two incomplete positions: whether people are mainly shaped by the structures around them or guided by their own intentions and choices (Prasad, 2005, ch.11). Both offer important insights, but neither alone explains why some phenomena become institutionalised whereas others of similar character do not. Structuration offers a useful perspective here, as it considers broader forces, such as institutional expectations, economic pressure, organisational hierarchies and power relations, alongside individual freedom, reflexivity and the capacity to act differently (Giddens, 1984). Structuration theory therefore considers both as inseparable and recursive. Considering only one dimension would be incomplete (Giddens, 1984, pp. 33-65).

To deepen this understanding of structuration theory, Giddens (1984) offers a theoretical framework capable of considering both dimensions (see figure 1). To explain this duality, we return back to the Backpack metaphor — actors carry rules, meanings, experiences and resources that shape what they see as possible. Yet, through interaction, actors also influence

what others carry and what becomes collectively recognised. The metaphor helps clarify that structures are not external objects, but socially carried and reproduced conditions for action. Agency is not simply a matter of individual freedom. Actors are knowledgeable and reflexive: they monitor their own actions, interpret the context around them and adjust their behaviour accordingly (Giddens, 1984, pp. 35–65). This is what Giddens calls the duality of structure; the same structures that influence what people are able to do are also recreated through people’s everyday actions.

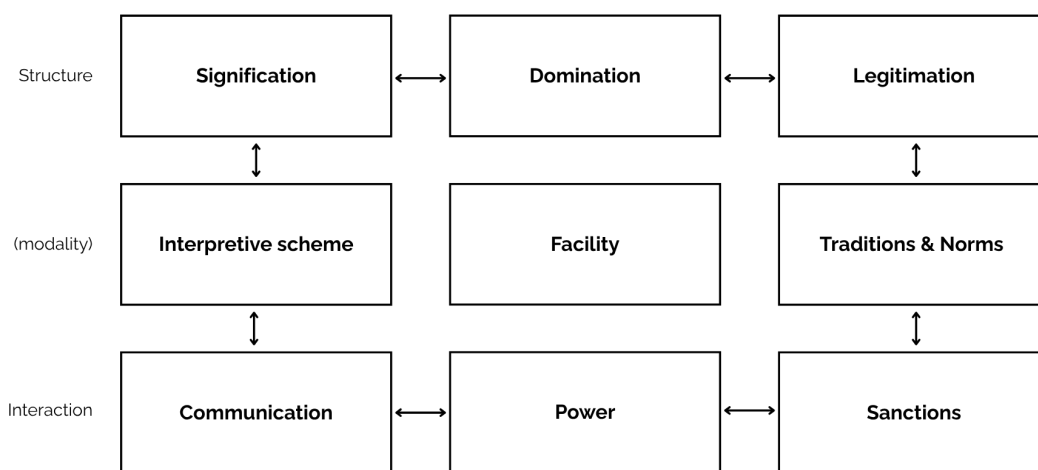


Figure 1: Duality of structure based on Figure 2 by Giddens (1984, p. 56)

Giddens (1984, pp. 35-65) identifies three modalities that exist in every society. Structures of signification refer to how meaning is created through the rules, codes, symbols and conventions we use to interpret and communicate. Structures of domination refer to the mobilisation of power through resources. These resources can be allocative, such as money, technology or material capacity, or authoritative, such as coordination, decision-making power and control over people. However, power is not only top-down. Giddens’ dialectic of control suggests that even less powerful individuals can shape what becomes organisational practice through everyday initiatives, resistance or reinterpretation. Structures of legitimation concern what we consider right and wrong — the moral codes, laws, values and normative expectations that determine what behaviour is acceptable or punishable. Importantly, these three social structures do not operate independently; they are interconnected. What is considered legitimate shapes

what can be named; what is, named can be shared; and who holds authority shapes what is considered legitimate. Together, they form the structural environment in which agents act, and which agents continuously reproduce or transform through their actions.

Building on this, the following sections explore how socsu becomes either sustained or weakened in practice. The discussion first considers what drives individual agency, before turning to how individual motivation can become shared organisational practice.

2.2.2. Intrinsic motivation: within agents

Intrinsic motivation concerns the individual, but it should not be understood as a purely individual trait. The conditions under which people become and remain genuinely motivated are shaped by the environments in which they act (Ryan & Deci, 2000; Van den Broeck et al., 2016). Structural conditions can either support or undermine the basic psychological needs through which motivation is generated and maintained (Deci & Ryan, 1985; Ryan & Deci, 2000).

Self-Determination Theory makes this precise. Deci and Ryan (1985) identify three basic psychological needs: autonomy, competence, and relatedness, whose fulfilment or frustration determines whether intrinsic motivation flourishes or erodes. Autonomy refers to feeling that one's actions come from personal values and choices rather than external pressure. Competence means feeling capable and effective in what one does. Relatedness refers to experiencing meaningful connection and care from others (Ryan & Deci, 2000). When the work conditions support these three needs, intrinsic motivation is more likely to grow (Ryan & Deci, 2000; Gagné & Deci, 2005).

In this thesis, "freedom" refers to the organisational expression of autonomy (Ryan & Deci, p. 74, 2000), which is the structural circumstance that allows workers to act according to their own motivation. It is the existence of space inside structure that allows for the emergence of motivated action, not the lack of structure (Gagné & Deci, 2005).

The distinction between intrinsic and extrinsic motivation matters because they produce different forms of action (Deci & Ryan, 1985; Ryan & Deci, 2000). Intrinsic motivation leads to different forms of behaviour than extrinsic motivation that is based mainly on external

rewards or pressure. People who are intrinsically motivated tend to show greater persistence, produce more thoughtful and creative work, remain engaged for longer, and experience greater well-being (Ryan & Deci, 2000; Gagné & Deci, 2005). This is especially important for work that is complex, contextual, relational, and difficult to standardise. In these cases, extrinsic motivation may lead to compliance but is less able to sustain the ongoing commitment and engagement needed to keep a practice alive over time (Gagné & Deci, 2005; Van den Broeck et al., 2016).

However, the literature also shows that formalising or controlling practices is not automatically beneficial. The crowding-out effect is particularly relevant here. It refers to the process through which external controls can weaken intrinsic motivation, especially when introduced into areas previously sustained by personal commitment or internal motivation (Deci, Koestner & Ryan, 1999; Frey & Jegen, 2001). Rather than adding motivation, such mechanisms can undermine what already exists (Deci, Koestner & Ryan, 1999; Frey & Jegen, 2001).

This can be explained through the concept of the locus of causality (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Motivation remains internal when people feel that their actions come from their own choices and values. However, when external control becomes more dominant, the reason for action can start to feel external. The practice may still continue — but feels more like compliance than commitment (Ryan & Deci, 2000; Gagné & Deci, 2005). As a result, the intrinsic motivation sustainable a practice may gradually reduce (Deci, Koestner & Ryan, 1999; Frey & Jegen, 2001).

Mills (1940) offers a complementary perspective by showing how motivation becomes socially available. He argues that motives are not fixed internal states, but vocabularies through which actors make sense of and justify their actions in a particular social context. From this perspective, what employees describe as intrinsic motivation is not only an inner psychological condition, but also depends on whether an organisational vocabulary exists through which motivation can be named and recognised. Where shared language for socially committed action is absent or underdeveloped, motivated practices may remain difficult to articulate, even for the actors themselves. This shows that intrinsic motivation becomes socially legible (Mills, 1940).

This is important for understanding how organisational practices are governed and sustained. Motivation is not simply something people either have or lack, nor is it something that can easily be created through incentives. It is shaped by structural conditions that either support or

undermine the psychological needs through which motivation develops (Ryan & Deci, 2000; Gagné & Deci, 2005). It can also be weakened by the wrong kind of structure. This does not necessarily happen intentionally, but often through well-meaning attempts to formalise, secure, and make practices accountable (Gagné & Deci, 2005; Frey & Jegen, 2001). This is the risk of crowding-out: structure can begin to weaken the agency it depends upon.

At the same time, even motivation supported by structural conditions faces another challenge. If it remains individual, it stays fragile. For practices to become durable, they must become shared, moving from individual agency to reproduced structure (Giddens, 1984). This is what the following section examines.

2.2.3. Communities of practice: from agent to shared practice

Relying on individual motivation is insufficient for organisational practices to become durable. When a practice depends on one motivated employee, it remains vulnerable: if that individual leaves the organisation, the practice may disappear with them. For a practice to endure, it must move beyond the individual, become shared by several employees, embedded in collective understanding and transmitted through social interactions (Wenger, 1998).

The concept of communities of practice (hereafter named CoP), developed by Wenger (1998), is a useful analytical lens. Wenger helps explain how individual motivation can become a shared organisational practice, through participation, interaction and collective meaning-making. In this thesis, CoP is used as an analytical lens, not as a full theoretical framework. This limited use responds to critiques that CoP can romanticise participation, overlook power relations and assume a level of trust that may not exist in practice (Roberts, 2006, pp. 626-632).

CoP is not simply a group of people working together or being part of the same department. It is connected by three features: joint enterprise, mutual engagement and shared repertoire. Joint enterprise is the shared understanding of what people want to achieve, not assigned from management, but develops through the group's own engagement with its work. Mutual engagement is the relationship and everyday collaboration through which people learn from each other, be accountable and develop shared ways of working through participation rather than instruction. Shared repertoire refers to the routines, tools, languages and concepts. That

helps members make sense of their practice, communicate with one another, and carry the practice forward (Wenger, 1998, ch. 2).

Wenger's theory distinguishes between a CoP and a formalised working group and introduces "reification" to describe how living practices become transformed into IOS, such as policies, documents, procedures or job descriptions (Wenger, 1998, ch. 1). Reification is not inherently negative — it could help a practice stabilise, be visible and allow it to go beyond the community that produced it. However, when IOS overtake rather than support the living practice, participation becomes mandatory, outcomes become tied to measurements, or shared repertoire is replaced by a checklist. As a result, the community may lose its meaningful function. The community may become a working group, might look like a community from the outside, but it does not create the same conditions for shared learning, commitment and meaning making.

Individual motivation needs a community to become durable and travel through an organisation, yet CoP remains fragile. The reason is not that the people are incapable, but because they depend on voluntary participation, shared ownership, freedom to experiment and time to engage, and those are exactly the more vulnerable conditions to formalise. This creates a central tension — while a community can facilitate the spread and longevity of motivated practice, over-formalisation can undermine the very conditions necessary for the community to flourish (Roberts, 2006, pp. 626-632). This tension connects the agency discussed in the previous section to the broader structural question addressed in the next section.

2.2.4. The duality applied

The three theoretical frameworks should not be read as parallel explanations, but as integrated analytical lenses for examining how organisational practices are created, maintained and challenged.

Structuration theory is the ontological foundation, practice is produced through the interaction between structures and agency, while structures are reproduced by the ongoing actions of the agents who inhabit them. However, this does not explain under what conditions these agents are genuinely motivated to reproduce enabling structures.

The SDT explains the psychological condition under which circumstances intrinsic motivation is generated and sustained. Autonomy, competence and relatedness activate the agency side of the duality by shaping whether individuals are able to reproduce, extend or transform structures; the crowding-out effect weakens this process. Yet, SDT remains focused on the individual motivation, it does not oversee how this becomes shared organisational practices.

CoP addresses this social mechanism. Joint enterprise, mutual engagement and shared repertoire turn individual motivation into collective understanding. The reification and crowding-out effect align: when reification overtakes rather than supports a CoP, it produces what the crowding-out effect predicts at the individual level — the form of practice survives but loses the meaning and motivation that once sustained it. In Giddens' terms, what was an enabling structure becomes a constraining one.

Together, the frameworks show to have durable practices they depend on alignment of structure, motivation and collective meaning. Autonomy, competence, and relatedness may be promoted when enabling IOS are in place. These circumstances facilitate the growth of intrinsic motivation. Over time, when driven, people interact with one another, their behaviours can become shared practices through shared language, routines, stories, and understandings. In this way, individual agency can become a reproduced structure.

This also enables us to identify the points at which practice becomes fragile. Motivation may be crowded out if systems compromise relatedness, competence, or autonomy. Motivated activity may vanish when the individual departs if it stays individualised. CoP may maintain the appearance of practice but lose the common meaning that made them effective if they become overly structured. The integrated framework therefore helps us analyse not only how practices are created and sustained, but also how they can weaken, become hollow, or fail to endure.

2.3. Summary of theoretical concepts

The literature review developed the analytical lens for this study. It showed that socsu remains underdeveloped compared to the environmental and economic pillars, partly because it is vaguely defined and often practised without being named or recognised. The socsu Compass

was introduced as a conceptual reference point for clarifying what socsu can include. However, having a framework for socsu is not the same as producing it.

Structuration theory explains how practices are produced through the interconnection between structure and agency. SDT helps explain when and why people feel motivated to act, and how that motivation can be weakened through the crowding-out effect. CoP then shows how individual motivation can become shared across an organisation, making practices more durable over time.

Together, the three frameworks offer an integrated analytical lens for examining how socsu is produced, recognised and reproduced: through structural conditions that make action possible, motivational conditions that give action meaning and collective practices through which action becomes durable.

3.Methodology

3.1. Introduction

In the following chapter, our chosen method of study will be shown. Firstly, we will start with the philosophical grounding, describing how the study has a social constructionist and critical approach to create an understanding of how the employees of The Summer see socsu. Secondly, how an ethnographic lens is contributing to our study. We will describe how we used the structuration theory during our research, having a dialogue between the theory and empirical material. Finally, we will outline the procedures used to analyse the results, along with a discussion of source criticism and ethical considerations.

3.2.Philosophical grounding

Our ontological approach is that of social constructionism (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2009), which holds that reality is constantly created via the relationships, language and practice of social actors rather than being an objective phenomenon existing independently of human action and interpretation. This indicates that socsu at The Summer is socially produced, reproduced and sometimes contested through the daily choices and interactions of the people who inhabit the organisation, instead of a static, quantifiable condition waiting to be discovered.

Therefore, for this research we adopted a critical epistemological approach, as stated by Prasad (2005), believing in the socially constructed nature of reality sharing that standpoint with interpretivism. However, the critical approach takes this one step further, in recognising that these constructions are mediated by power and conflicting interests. In our research this stand is central. Rather than simply understanding how sustainability is experienced by the employees of The Summer, we aim to understand why certain pillars of sustainability are made visible, while others remain overlooked and unnamed, and whose interests are served by this imbalance. For instance, we explore how the invisibility of the people pillar cannot be easily explained by individual perception of communication failure. Through this approach, we can reflect on deeper structural conditions, the common meaning, normative expectations and power dynamics that influence what can be determined, quantified and replicated as sustainability within an organisation. Instead of seeing these structural conditions and the power relations as

the natural background in which people behave, a critical epistemological stance makes them the central point of analysis.

We draw upon the structuration theory developed by Giddens (1984), and his duality of structures. The theory moves beyond the division between structures and agency and treats structures as people using these but at the same time reproducing and sustaining them, forming the duality of structure.

This perspective aligns closely with our research question. In hospitality practice socsu is not a fixed policy or measurable outcome. These are actions being embedded in the daily practices of employees who choose to practice it. These actions are also constantly changed by the surrounding organisational arrangements and beyond, which both enable opportunities and limit others. The structuration theory allows us to compare the interconnection of the structure and agency, instead of a focus on the separation of these. At The Summer is seen that individuals actively sustain socsu in their daily work, consciously and unconsciously, while also being influenced by compliance-driven structures reshaping the conditions under which these people operate.

3.3. Qualitative research approach

For our research we adopted a qualitative approach. Using this approach data collection often includes interviews and observation, as Styhre (2013) explains, focusing on how people experience processes and make sense of their surroundings. Given that our study aims to understand how socsu is produced, recognised and threatened within the organisational context of The Summer, qualitative research is very suitable. The phenomenon we are studying is unable to be measured by quantifiable indicators; it requires attention to meanings, expressions and interactions of the employees who enact it on a daily basis.

Additionally, an abductive research approach is adopted, meaning a combination of induction and deduction, moving back and forth between empirical data and theory (Alvesson and Sköldböck, 2009). Structuration theory from Giddens was used as a guiding framework, setting the expectation to find a tension between structure and agency in relation to socsu practice. As the empirical material developed, however, it introduced nuances and patterns that the

theoretical framework alone could not have anticipated, which required us to return to and refine our analytical lens. This iterative openness to surprising findings, rather than forcing the data into predetermined categories, is what the abductive approach made possible.

3.4. Case study design

To enrich the research we have chosen for a case study design, seen more often in research to guide the execution of research. A case study involves a single organisation being studied in detail, making it possible to conduct a variety of qualitative research methods, instead of relying on one approach — in our case of semi-structured interviews, observations and a focus group in a Dutch hospitality chain, to gain deep understanding of how socsu is understood and operated.

A case study investigation could be seen as a generalisable; however, as Ryen (2004) highlighted, the aim of qualitative research is not to produce findings that could be statistically generalised. Instead, the strength lies in depth, nuance and contextual understanding, rather than broad coverage (Lee, Collier and Cullen, 2007). Building on this, our case was not chosen to be representative for the research, but because The Summer is rich in analytical potential. The organisation has sustainability as a core value and additionally is having a structural transition. This combination makes the organisation valuable to research how structure and agency interact and the richness and complexity of this case allows us to generate meaningful theoretical insights. The next section will explain more about the case company, The Summer.

3.5. Case company: The Summer

The research was conducted at The Summer, a pseudonym for a Dutch hospitality group. They currently are operating four hotels, three in Amsterdam and one in London. In their portfolio, other locations are in development in Lisbon, Dublin and Amsterdam. The chain is responsible for both the development and the operations of their properties, with sustainability at the centre of their values. The Summer received a Green Globe certification – an internationally recognised sustainability standard for the travel and hospitality industry – and Great Place to Work certification, which benchmarks employee experience and workplace culture. Together these reflect the organisation's performance on both its environmental commitments and its

people practices, as further documented in their Environmental, Social and Governance (hereafter mentioned as: ESG) report (The Summer, 2026).

At the time of data collection, The Summer was undergoing a structural transition, a shift from a dual-investor construction to a single investor, a large pension fund, following an ESG-focused role. This transition forms part of the organisational context and is drawn upon analytically where relevant.

Data collection was primarily conducted at The Summer locations in Amsterdam, focused on operations but for deeper understanding we also conducted interviews at the Head Quarters. This gave access to employees across different levels of the organisation, which is important given the research focus on how socsu is practiced and recognised across all layers, especially focused on the operations of the organisation.

The relatively flat organisational structure, as mentioned often by employees and in their online recruitment page (The July, 2026), is an environment in which employees across levels interact informally and ideas can move between departments. Combined with the prior connections with the organization of one of the authors created a condition in which employees were openly speaking about their experiences at The Summer.

To provide contextual clarity, Figures 2 and 3 present the formal hierarchy of The Summer at the time of the research. These figures help situate the case organisation by showing the formal reporting lines and governance IOS within which employees' accounts of sustainability, freedom and decision-making were embedded.

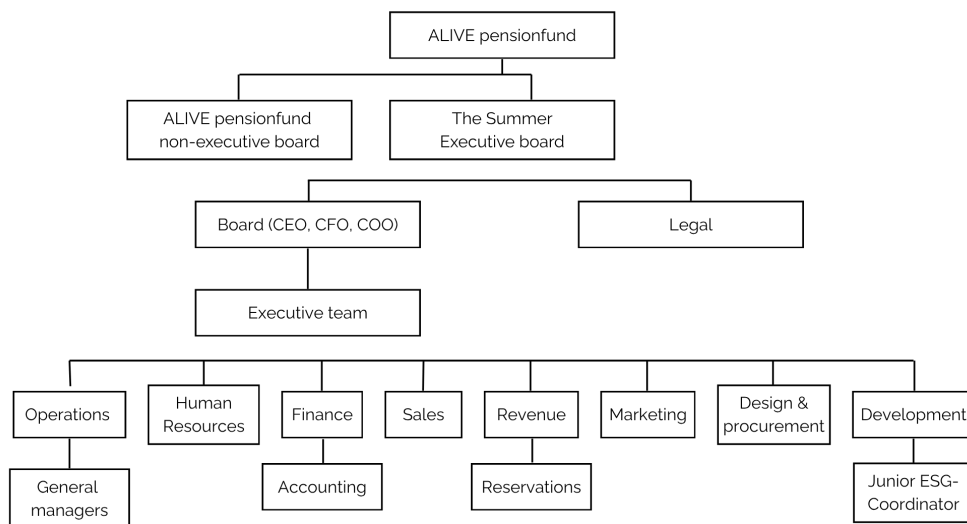


Figure 2 Organisational structure – general (Kick, personal communication, 16 April 2026)

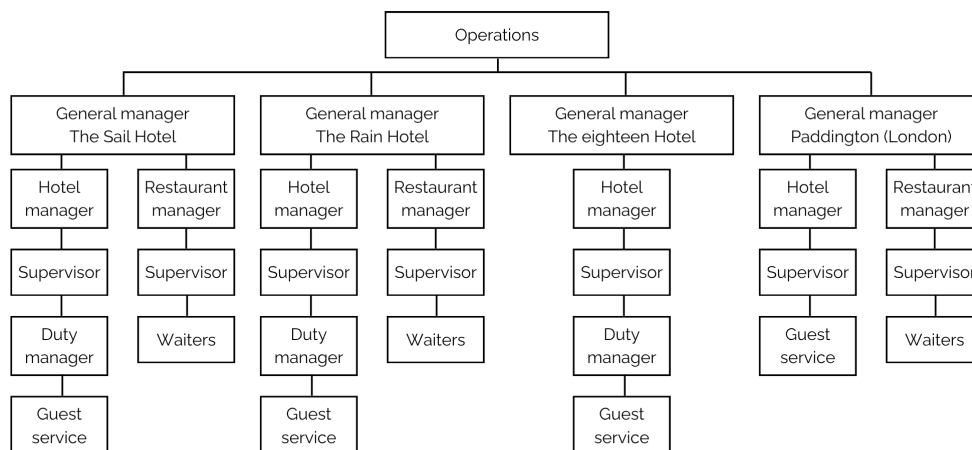


Figure 3 Organisational structure – operational (Kick, personal communication, 16 April 2026)

3.6. Construction of data

This qualitative research focuses on how employees practice, recognise and reproduce socsu within their organisation and under what structural conditions the interplay between

intrinsically motivated individuals and organisational structure allows it to move from individual practice toward institutionalisation. Drawn on by Schaefer and Alvesson (2020, p. 35), this type of research should ideally make use of more than one data source of evidence. As Bowen (2009) adds, using a combination of methodologies in the study of the same phenomenon; reduces bias, seeks convergence and establishes credibility We conducted data by three methods: semi-structured interviews, a non-participant observation and a focus group. In addition to these data sources, we were granted access to The Summer's internal ESG report. We treated this document as contextual material rather than as a primary source of employee experience. It helped us understand how sustainability was formally articulated and arranged within the organisation, and allowed us to compare formal sustainability instructions with the way employees translate sustainability in everyday practice. The working language at The Summer is English, making it the primary language of data collection across all ten interviews, the language in the received ESG report, and the language for the observation and focus group. The exception were the Dutch-speaking employees, with whom interviews were conducted in their native language to ensure the richest and most natural articulation of their experiences

3.6.1.Semi-structured interviews

The primary source for this study is semi-structured interviews, with the purpose to gather insights into interviewees viewpoints, by interpreting the meaning of the responses (Kvale, 1996). This allowed us to explore how employees interpreted sustainability, motivation, structures and IOS from their own point of view. We conducted twelve interviews with employees with different roles as table 1 demonstrates. The variety of positions enriched our research, because they all had different relationships to sustainability work and organisational decision-making. We were able to investigate how the same organisational structure is experienced and reproduced from multiple angles.

Name (pseudonym)	Role	Team
Mabel	Junior Duty Manager	Operations
Nathan	General Manager	Operations
Tony	Chef	Operations
Simon	Head of reservations	Operations
Flora	Junior Duty Manager	Operations
Thomas	Rooms division manager	Operations
Erina	Head of Operations	Executive team, leading operations & part of executive board
Sascha	Junior ESG coordinator	Development
Kate	HR - recruitment	HR
Kick	Asset Manager	Development
Andrea	Finance	Head Quarters

Table 1 Overview of interviewees

The interviews lasted around 30 to 75 minutes, depending on what was discussed, and were all recorded with consent of the candidate. By asking open-ended questions, interviewees could share their perceptions of sustainability, their experiences within the organisation, and their views on recent changes, without leading them towards our theoretical framework. As we were open to unexpected insights, this abductive approach enriches our research.

3.6.2. Observations

In addition to the interviews, we conducted an observation, by joining the Green Operations team – referred to interchangeably within the organisation as the Green Team – meeting online.

This voluntary cross-organisational team – people from all hotels on an operational level – come together on a monthly basis to work on sustainability initiatives for improving operational practice across the hotels. Conducting this observation is in line with Schaefer and Alvesson (2017) recommendation to minimise biases and enrich data. The observation's goal was to determine whether the dynamics and practices mentioned in the interviews were evident in organisational interactions, particularly in the ways that sustainability was defined, discussed, and given meaning in a group context, as well as who took part in this process.

During the meeting we took detailed notes that were directly relevant to our research. The observations indicated and gave depth to our understanding of the data derived from the interviews. The Green Operation team meeting showed that sustainability is primarily made visible through the planet pillar. Environmental sustainability was discussed through concrete initiatives, responsibilities and recognisable languages, in contrast with socsu, which appeared less explicitly named and less structurally organised. For our research this was relevant because it supported one of the central tensions identified in the interviews: socsu may be present in everyday practices, in the form of participation, freedom and employee well-being, but it is not recognised or reproduced as sustainability.

The observation therefore did not function as an independent source but as a way to deepen the interview material. Helping us to understand how organisational structures of signification shape what becomes visible as sustainability, and what stays implicit. The observation strengthened our analysis of the imbalance between the planet and people pillars, while also showing how shared language, routines and meeting arrangements contribute to the durability of certain sustainability practices over others.

3.6.3. Focus group

Besides the interviews and observation, a focus group was organised at the biggest location of The Summer in Amsterdam. The aim was to investigate conversations between employees, and whether socsu was recognised or spoken about in an informal group setting. Focus groups can give insights into interactions between group members, in this case, employees, they can then function as co-researchers in terms of steering conversations and coming with interesting insights, but they can also help identify group norms, provide insight in articulation of

knowledge, and highlight different views of group members on the same phenomenon. (Kitzinger, 1994, pp. 103–121)

The insights could have given us a deeper understanding of the structures guiding sustainability practice at The Summer. Even though we sent the invitation and several reminders through the internal communication platform, no staff formally enrolled. On the actual day, we were visible and available for several hours, still participation stayed very limited. One employee briefly joined and once more the planet pillar was prominent in this conversation.

The limited participation was partially viewed as analytically interesting rather than a methodological failure. When one of the employees explained that the low attendance probably had to do with the stress within the company due to the structural change, it validated the patterns seen in the interviews, especially the hesitance of employees to speak openly about the change in ownership structures, and being uncertain about what could be shared specifically about this. As a result, the focus group functioned not as an independent data source, but as an additional observational moment. It gave depth to the understanding of how organisational context may shape employees' capacity to engage, express themselves freely and give meaning to socsu.

3.7. Method of analysis

After the conduction of the interviews, we were left with the transcripts of the interviews, notes of the observation and focus group. We both took part in all interviews, as not only after the coding the data is being interpreted but already at the moment you enter the field (Rennstam and Wästerfors, 2018). For that reason, immediately after the interviews, we discussed our impressions of the conversation.

For the analytical stage of our research we have used the framework from Rennstam and Wästerfors (2018), arguing qualitative analysis involves three main activities: sorting, reducing and arguing. We found this framework especially well-suited to our abductive approach, as it doesn't impose a rigid, step-by-step process but instead reflects the more iterative way we moved back and forth between our data and theoretical ideas.

The first stage is *sorting*, examining the transcripts of the interviews and focus group and the notes from the observations. We did this individually, marking text that was relevant to our research question and writing interpretative remarks in the margins. Then we compared our readings and organised the material thematically, by looking for recurring themes in the text (Rennstam and Wästerfors, 2018). Rather than coding the material through fixed categories from the beginning, we allowed the first round of sorting to remain open to empirical patterns. Through this process, three broad thematic clusters emerged: employees defining and explaining sustainability, how structural conditions enable or constrain sustainability practices and how individual motivation connects to those practices. For example, statements about Green Globe, ESG routines, Green Operations, investor expectations and the experienced freedom to take initiative were initially grouped under structural conditions, while accounts of passion, personal engagement and intrinsic commitment to sustainability were grouped under motivation. Statements in which employees struggled to define socsu, or immediately associated sustainability with the environmental pillar, were grouped under recognition and visibility. To identify what counted as socsu practice in the empirical material, we drew on the SoSu Compass (Nilsson et al., 2024) as a conceptual reference point. Its four dimensions, equity, well-being, participation and freedom, and social capital, provided a shared vocabulary for recognising socsu practices in the data without imposing a fixed coding scheme, allowing us to surface instances where employees enacted these dimensions without naming them as sustainability. In a similar way, intrinsic motivation is used both as a theoretical concept from SDT and as an empirical language through which employees described their engagement, ownership and commitment to socsu related practices.

The second stage is *reducing*, as not all data is equally relevant, we step away from less relevant details to come to the focus of our main argument (Rennstam & Wästerfors, 2018). From the three themes that we came up with at the sorting, we reduced the material by focusing on the data that was most clearly showing the relationship between, structure, agency and socsu. We did this by setting aside material that did not directly support our main argument, such as general descriptions of hospitality work, broad statements about sustainability that could not be connected to organisational practice, and interviews that were interesting but not directly related to our research question. A process of repetition and reflexivity was done, by going over the excluded data several times, to make sure we were not overlooking any important insights and to be open for any surprising data.

The third stage is arguing, also the most demanding from all stages. The goal of the analysis is to develop a theoretically grounded argument that is supported by the empirical data and adds to the existing knowledge, rather than to provide a collection of interesting quotes (Rennstam & Wästerfors, 2018). Our central argument, that socsu becomes durable only when intrinsically motivated practices are recognised, enabled and reproduced through IOS, emerged from the reduced empirical data and bringing that into conversation with the Structuration Theory from Giddens.

3.8. Source critique and reflexivity

As our data is conducted with employees from different hotels, functions and backgrounds we tried to maximise the diversity and reduce the risk that only one point of view is taken into consideration for our research. This is in line with Schaefer and Alvesson (2017), stating interviewing people that are involved in the same processes, but come from different backgrounds and perspectives tend to be more credible precisely for the reason of diversity.

Nevertheless, multiple potential biases must be acknowledged. One of the researchers had prior connection to the case company. This made access easier, but at the same time, there was a risk of becoming over-identified with the employees' perspectives. For that reason, we conducted the interviews together, and reflected critically on whether our interpretations were grounded in data or influenced personally. Moreover, we were aware that we might be highly focused on ideas that support the research question. In our case, as we are mainly looking for structural constraints, we would focus too much on problems and overlook what is actually working well in the organisation. To avoid this, we actively looked for examples that showed the opposite, such as situations where employees experienced IOS as helpful rather than limiting, or where socsu was actually spreading instead of staying isolated.

Lastly, the timing of our data collection is important to be aware of, as this was during a time period where The Summer was undergoing a structural transition, meaning our findings capture a specific moment in the development of the organisation.

3.9. Ethics and Confidentiality

Through the connection of the researchers, access to The Summer was arranged. All participants of the data collection were informed about the purpose of the research and their participation was entirely voluntary. Before the interview, all employees were asked for permission for recording and informed about the importance of honest responses, by assuring that full anonymity would be maintained. Additionally, The Summer and the names of the employees are a pseudonym for their real names to protect them. Our data presentation does not include sensitive organisational information that might be used to identify the company or certain individuals. However, we are conscious that using direct quotes makes it impossible to maintain total anonymity, and we have used caution when choosing quotes that support our argument without putting people's reputations at risk inside their company.

4. Findings

In the following section we will analyse how socsu takes shape at The Summer through the interaction between IOS (institutionalised organisation structures as defined above), structures, employee motivation and experienced freedom. Socsu is not treated as a fixed outcome, rather, as a set of practices that may be formally named, informally enacted, unevenly supported, or depend on motivated individuals.

The findings are developed in four steps. Firstly, we examine the structures that employees experience as enabling sustainability practices. It also shows that these conditions are more developed for the planet pillar than for the people pillar. Secondly, we explore how intrinsic motivation and experienced freedom allow socsu practices to emerge from below, while also explaining why they may remain fragile when carried individually. Thirdly, we analyse how structure and motivation shape one another over time. Finally, we synthesise these findings by showing how socsu becomes stronger or weaker depending on the alignment between structure, freedom and motivation. Environmental sustainability is used as a comparative reference point, as it is more explicitly named and organised at The Summer, making structural dynamics easier to observe.

4.1. Enabling structures at The Summer

Building on the distinction between structure and IOS introduced in Chapter 2, this section examines how shared meanings, resources and legitimacy shape socsu at The Summer.

4.1.1. Structures that enable socsu

The Summer has several structures that either directly support socsu or function as enabling conditions without being explicitly labelled as such.

Employees involved at ESG strategy level at The Summer described socsu as part of the organisation's agenda. They work with the overarching ESG strategy, which is based on the UN Sustainability Goals. As we received access to the Positive Impact Strategy (see Appendix D), we could explore how sustainability goals were formally communicated within the

organisation. This IOS seems to intend to form the basis for further structures. The Positive Impact Strategy starts with:

“Our strategy focuses on how we can create a positive impact on the well-being of each other, our guests, our surroundings and our planet.” — Positive Impact Strategy

This statement indicates that employees well-being is included within the organisation's sustainability ambitions through an IOS. The ESG strategy was mentioned by almost all of our interviewees. The fact that employees all know about the existence of the ESG strategy suggests that shared meaning around sustainability has been successfully installed as a structural condition. However, awareness alone does not guarantee that the strategy translates into practice across all organisational levels, but also whether organisational structures enable them to enact it. At The Summer, multiple sub-teams have been installed to bring the ESG strategy into practice. As Erina clarified:

“Those teams under the ESG team are what we call dedicated teams. For example, there’s the Green Team (...) But also, within development there’s a future-proof building team. And we also have a DE&I team. — Erina

Interviewees described these teams as a way of translating ESG goals into everyday practice. Since participation is mostly voluntary, the teams bring together employees from different levels who are personally interested in sustainability. Through their meetings and initiatives, they also involve colleagues beyond the team itself, extending the reach for sustainability practices within the organisation.

Although DE&I team was most directly relevant to socsu, as it was set up to improve the Diversity, Equity and Inclusion at the Summer, it was mentioned far less frequently than the Green Team. While the Green Team was recognised by all interviewees, one employee responded to the DE&I team:

“I have seen very little of that... I think I saw two posts about it or so, but I have no idea what they do beyond that.”. — Kick

This signals a dominance of environmental efforts while socsu remains concentrated among employees directly involved in its governance.

Beyond the dominance of certain teams, the sub-teams at The Summer also function as enabling structures for sustainability practices. These teams are not related to specific departments, which aligns with another enabling structure; the often mentioned ‘flat structure’ at the Summer. As Erina explained when discussing why employees stay at the company:

“I think that’s down to several factors. But also because we’re a fairly flat organisation where there really is scope for entrepreneurship and where you can share ideas and you can also be part of projects of interest or other interests you have.” — Erina

Erina reflects how the flat organisational structure is experienced by employees, not as a formal policy but as a lived organisational condition that creates room for initiatives across levels. She is not the only interviewee mentioning this, others also highlighted the freedom and openness of The Summer as an important facet of the organisational culture.

This structure of openness appears to extend to the board level, employees who present sustainability initiatives to the board describe receiving consistent support. This is one of the significant enabling structural conditions we identified, because it determines whether motivated practice from below finds a pathway upward or disappears at the first point of institutional resistance. This becomes visible in how Kick, who works at ESG strategy level and has direct experience presenting sustainability initiatives to the board, describes the response he receives:

"Our board is always very supportive, never says ‘that is a bad idea’ or ‘no budget’. Always: what a great input, let's see if we can make this feasible." — Kick

Together, the ESG strategy, dedicated teams, flat hierarchy and board-level openness created an enabling structural environment. However, their presence does not mean they support all sustainability domains equally. The next section therefore examines where these structures have limited reach, and why socsu appears less consistently embedded than environmental sustainability.

4.1.2. Absence of socsu structures

While enabling structures exist, the data reveals that they do not consistently translate into practice across all organisational layers. A pattern of structural inconsistency appears. When shared meaning, resources and normalised participation are not fully in place, socsu remains fragmented or fades into the background. As a result, practice stays concentrated within certain departments or motivated individuals.

The data suggests a central structural weakness in how the ESG strategy travels from board-level commitment into the whole organisation. Multiple employees highlighted they knew that an ESG strategy exists, but that they had only a surface level understanding of what it entails in practice. The strategy exists at board level but does not travel downwards into routines, resources and operational expectations. Sascha makes this disconnect explicit:

“Over the past fifteen years, only slide decks have been made out ESG strategy and it has only been discussed in boardrooms... They are too far removed from what the reality is.” —

Kick

This limited institutional reach is reinforced by a vocabulary asymmetry. Environmental sustainability at The Summer appeared supported by a rich structure of signification, meaning it has shared metrics, certification and language that employees across levels can use and act upon. Kick expresses this directly:

“CO2 is so sexy because it’s just very hard data... The social side is much harder.” —Kick

This asymmetry was also visible during the Green Operations meeting, where sustainability was mainly discussed through environmental initiatives, responsibilities and concrete language. Socsu does not have an equivalent structure of signification, making it difficult to become collectively visible even when it is actively being practised. Although the IOS of an ESG strategy is in place and people are to some extent aware of its existence, the implementation does not travel all the way to operational levels. This lack of structural implementation could be caused by the distance that the board has to the operations, as the employee highlights, but it does appear to be a lack in structures that can translate the ESG strategy into cross-level reach. Only when a structure makes its way to those at operational levels can it be practised. One of the structural misalignments with this implementation found is the function of the ESG

coordinator. When she described her focus the outcome was predominately on environmental sustainability:

“I would say ultimately my main goal or function is to help the company reduce its carbon emissions across its development and operations. Um, to explain a little bit of how I fit within the organisational structure, I am a part of the development team, so this is the team in charge of building new hotels. Yeah. And, um, at least how they have written into my job description, that's 80% of my function, and then the other 20% is focused on operation.” —

Sascha

While Sascha shared her personal drive for the people side, her function does not. The structural conditions available for socsu practice are not determined by the organisation's stated commitment to people, but by the priorities of the dominant resource holder. This was reconfirmed by an employee who had difficulty embedding social into the structure.

On the social side it's less deeply in the core of our concept. So I find it quite difficult to convey that to our guests here or to the team. — Nathan

His observation was echoed by other interviewees, suggesting that the social pillar is harder to make visible than the environmental pillar even when employees care about it.

As Simon explained clearly the dependency on individuals:

“It's spreading throughout the organisation, but that's purely down to the motivation of a few individuals who have the ESG strategy as a backup (...) Uh, but I don't think we've fully embedded that within the organisation yet. (...). It's still very much dependent on the individual, and you can see, for example, that one branch is more proactive about sustainability than another. Yes, and that's something we really need to address in the future.” — Simon

What Simon suggests is a lack of structural transmission. The ESG strategy exists as a point of shared meaning, but it has not yet been translated into consistent resource allocation and normalised expectations. Without these, it cannot function independently of individual

motivation. The phrase "purely down to the motivation of a few individuals" points to structural embedding being insufficient, motivated individuals fill the weakness. However, in doing so they also mask it, making the structural absence harder to see and therefore harder to address. The result, as several interviewees described, is that sustainability practice varies considerably between hotel locations depending on who is personally motivated at that location. This suggests that motivation without structural embedding can make practice possible and visionary, but also narrow and inconsistent in practice.

This structural absence becomes visible in how employees describe their own work. When asked about socsu, employees did not initially connect their everyday work to it at all.

'Up until now, I never associated [these initiatives] with social sustainability... I was looking at it more from a CSR perspective.' – Andrea

'I don't connect social initiatives to sustainability as such. It's just how we work together.' – Thomas

They both describe practices that clearly constitute socsu, however without a shared vocabulary to frame them as sustainability will not happen. They are enacted but not named, and in that way they will not be collectively reproduced.

Kate offers a contrasting example. Through her role in human resource, she is more directly exposed to the people pillar, and this changed how she understands the concept:

'The terms that came with it, I really saw that as green and now you see in practice that it's especially about the people side. That naturally encompasses much more.' – Kate

Her account suggests that her structural position gives her vocabulary to recognise socsu, rather than this being simply a matter of individual awareness or motivation. Before, she also associated sustainability with 'green' practices. This suggests that naming socsu is not simply a matter of individual awareness or motivation, it is structurally distributed. Kate who works closely with how people are supported and managed tend to develop the language to recognise these practices as socsu, while those further may experience them as "just how we work together".

Overall, The Summer does not appear to lack socsu practices but struggles to embed them consistently across the organisation. While the ESG strategy gives sustainability a formal place, the social dimension appears less clearly translated into shared language, resources and routines than the environmental dimension. As a result, several socsu practices seem to depend on motivated individuals. This does not mean that these practices lack value, but it does suggest that their organisational reach remains fragile when they are not supported by stronger structures of recognition and transmission. The following section therefore turns to the role of motivation and freedom, examining how motivated employees generate socsu practices, and why this also creates vulnerability when such practices remain individually carried.

4.1.3. When structure without freedom produces compliance

The previous section showed that socsu may remain fragile when it is not sufficiently supported by organisational structures. This section examines how some structures are experienced less as enabling conditions and more as requirements. The focus is not on whether these structures are good or bad in themselves, but on how these may shift sustainability practices from ownership toward compliance-oriented participation.

It is important to remember the current state of The Summer hotel, with a structural change on ownership and CEO level. Throughout our interviews it surfaced clearly that there are and will be more structural changes because of the instalment of the new CEO and investor. Since we can only speculate about the future, this analysis focuses on the influence of currently existing structures on employees, and on how individuals respond to the ongoing change.

Individuals give meaning to IOS in different ways, but that goals need to be met and are obligations becomes clear in our data. Among other IOS, a good example is the Green Globe certification. This is a certification focused at environmental sustainability but it clearly reveals how IOS on sustainability influences practice. As Nathan shares how the certificate is a requirement, which is non-negotiable;

I mean, getting Green Globe certification is a requirement anyway. That's just how it is. That you do that, yes. But on the other hand, we're really committed to it. — Nathan

Nathan's account suggests that certification was experienced as both a requirement and a commitment. Although participation in Green Globe was mandatory, he still described the process with enthusiasm. Illustrating how employees can attach different meanings to the same IOS; while Nathan is relatively neutral towards the certification, Tony already has a different undertone when talking about the same structure, the Green Globe Certification. He already emphasises the procedural compliance with a lack of meaning.

We are Green Globe Certified and that means we simply have to take certain actions to maintain that certificate. They all send things through that then need to be arranged. — Tony

For Tony this obligation is more of a means to an end, ticking off the boxes that are required by dominant structures, the people in the layers that decide on doing this certification. He observably gives different meaning to the same structural mechanism than Nathan. The individuals engage differently with the same procedure, which suggests that the implementation of these types of structures (certifications) will not guarantee meaningful practice, but can only mandate participation. The limit becomes mainly visible mainly for socsu, as Kate explains in her HR role:

'If it becomes a must-do or just about ticking a box, then you don't get that. People won't become enthusiastic. It won't work. Because the people side is much more about behaviour, and that's hard to influence that way.' – Kate

The people pillar is reliant on behaviour, and this resists the logic of obligation as Kate explains. By contrast, the planet pillar can be governed partly through measurable outcomes, suggesting that the type of IOS differs per pillar.

Additionally, while participation of employees is important in organisational practice, more compliance-based structures can lead to a change of work environment. This surfaced as we talked with an employee of the headquarters.

"It used to be very homey... now that we have a corporate investor they also have to show their profit to their people, so I think it will influence the way of working to be a bit more corporate, more formal, maybe a little bit more structure." — Andrea

What Andrea articulates is not merely a change in organisational atmosphere but a structural transformation of the conditions under which socsu practice operates. Andrea raises a concern that formalisation may replace rather than build on the informal conditions that have so far enabled motivated engagement. This suggests that more structure does not automatically produce more socsu, the kind of structure, and the conditions under which it is structured, determines whether it enables meaningful practice or only mandates its appearance.

Nathan, who has shown a strong personal connection to socsu reflects on what increasing formalisation could mean for the organisation:

"On the one hand, that [becoming more corporate] could mean we take some of the passion out of it. So that we really just become very much target-driven in our quest to achieve results.

Once the passion is taken out of it, what's left?" — Nathan

The concerns and rhetorical force of the question “what’s left” point to a potential tension in formalisation at The Summer. His quote does not suggest that structure is inherently harmful, but that a compliance-oriented form of structure may weaken the motivation through which socsu practices have so far been carried. When targets, metrics, and procedural accountability become the primary structural mechanisms through which sustainability is governed, there is a risk that the personal motivation behind these practices becomes less central. When this gets replaced it particularly endangers the socsu outcomes at The Summer. The risk, in structural terms, is compliance without commitment, a condition in which socsu practice continues in form, while its generative quality disappears. This is the critical limit of structure as an enabling force. It can mandate participation, but it cannot manufacture the motivated engagement that transforms participation into genuine socsu.

Structure can enable sustainability practice but can also become compliance-oriented when it is experienced mainly as obligation, target or procedure. This makes motivation important to examine more closely. Therefore, the next section turns to employees' motivated practices and experiences of freedom, asking how socsu is generated in everyday work and why it becomes vulnerable when it depends too strongly on individual engagement.

4.2.Enabling intrinsic motivation and transforming structures

This section dives into the role of motivated practices after the examination of the structural conditions around socsu. The data suggests that socsu at The Summer is often enacted by employees who experience freedom to take initiative, shape their work and involve others. The practices are not always formally labelled as socsu, but they contribute to conditions through which socsu is enacted in everyday work.

This section explores this point in three steps. Firstly, it shows how freedom allows motivated employees to generate practices that structures do not fully prescribe. Secondly, it examines how these dynamic changes when participation becomes expected, incentivised or compliance-oriented. Lastly, it shows why motivation and freedom alone are insufficient when practices remain dependent on individuals rather than being reproduced through shared organisational structures.

4.2.1. Generative motivation through freedom

This section examines how employees describe freedom as a condition that allows them to act on personal engagement with sustainability. The focus is not only on whether employees are motivated, but on how this motivation becomes visible in everyday work when they experience room to take initiative. The examples move from individual accounts of freedom and personal meaning to instances where this engagement has an influence on the community level.

As the data reveals, the inherent motivation to work at a company with the characteristic of freedom on the job starts even before applying. While one manager explained he often heard specific interest in The Summer for its focus on sustainability, another employee told us how she chose The Summer for having freedom on the job, which is seen as a structural condition of The Summer. As Mabel shares:

"I consciously chose this hotel because I didn't want to work for [a large hotel chain in NL] where you follow a script." — Mabel

Mabel suggests that freedom is not only experienced internally, but also forms part of how The Summer is perceived as a workplace. This matters because employees who value autonomy may be more likely to recognise The Summer as an organisation in which they can shape their

work. The next quote shows how this experienced freedom connects to personal engagements with sustainability in everyday practices. As this employee enthusiastically shares how his inherent interest in sustainability influences his actions on the job.

"I am personally engaged with this [sustainability] too, and that also makes me incorporate it into who I am here." — Nathan

This moment shows us what Nathan meant when he previously talked about passion and how social and environmental sustainability are intertwined. Those two domains, often treated as separate, seem to go hand-in-hand when given enough freedom. Rather than proving that freedom automatically produces sustainability, Nathan's quote illustrates how freedom creates the conditions under which personal engagement can become organisational practice. In this sense, when freedom is structurally embedded, social and environmental practices may begin to reinforce each other.

Turning towards daily practice, Tony, the chef, offers an example of how motivation influences socsu. As a chef, his days are filled with preparing food, ordering from suppliers, making schedules and creating new dishes. It is easy to overlook sustainability in a machine called "the kitchen" but what Tony tells us, is how he is super motivated to transform the kitchen into a green and sustainable place even though the only sustainability mandate the kitchen has so far is on waste-management. With great enthusiasm he shares;

"Everything within my reach [on sustainability] that I can change, I do with love, yes." — Tony

Also saying:

"That's what I find really fucking great [using his creativity for sustainable dishes]. That makes me really happy." — Tony

Tony does not show he is free from structure. Rather, the quotes show how he operates within the boundaries of his structural position while still finding space to act on personal motivation. His words, "with love" and "makes me really happy", indicate that sustainability is not experienced only as an external requirement or formal task. It also appears as something that gives him energy and meaning in his work. Especially because Tony connects sustainability to creativity, his case points to the importance of freedom as a condition that allows motivated

action to emerge. In this sense, motivated practice is not produced outside structure, but through the room that structure leaves for employees to act.

While room for own ideas is an important prerequisite in freedom at work within The Summer, cohesion and shared meaning only come when this motivation transmits to others. To enable transmissions within the community the data reveals that motivation spreads by the other motivated individuals. Erina, who is part of the executive board while also being operationally active as Head of Operations, occupies a position from which she can influence board-level decisions as well as practical organisational changes. Before the interview had even formally started, she shared her intrinsic motivation for sustainability. On an individual level she would even like to work for an NGO, but for now she will live that dream by making ESG an actual part of her job. What showed us, is how motivation can influence the surrounding community.

"I believe in planting seeds. If you plant a seed with everyone who visits and they act more sustainably, you have an enormous impact." — Erina

What became clear is that motivation transmits beyond the individual. It is not about having a specific IOS that makes you do what you do. But the true inherent drive that makes you want to share with people how we can make the world a better place. It shows that intrinsic motivation and freedom produce socsu outcomes that an IOS could not have generated, because it is driven by personal conviction rather than obligation. Which was suggested by how Nathan told us that he actively tries to engage his colleagues and how the motivation spreads.

"Margot is in the Green Team and motivated herself, the oil slick spreads from within" —
Nathan

The “oil slick” metaphor shows that Nathan understands motivation as something that can move through people, not only through IOS. Motivation does not spread automatically, but motivated individuals may help others translate intention into practice when surrounded by people who share a similar commitment. When people feel heard, move in a similar direction and receive positive responses from those around them, motivation may become easier to carry into everyday work. Sustainability is therefore not only about putting an IOS in place that turns it

into compliance. It also depends on the connection between people, and on the space that allows motivation to become meaningful and inspiring for others.

Freedom can make sustainability meaningful, but this changes when participation becomes expected, incentivised or obligatory.

4.2.2. Compliance replacing motivation

Previously shown is how freedom can make sustainability practices meaningful for employees who experience room for initiative. This section examines different patterns, situations in which participation is shaped more by expectation, obligation or incentives. In these cases, sustainability practice may still take place, but employees' sense of ownership appears less clear. Recognition matters because socsu depends not only on participation, but also on the meaning employees attach to that participation.

One informative conversation on how compliance steers action came from Thomas, an operational employee who is personally more driven by social initiatives than environmental practice. When we discussed the ESG strategy with Thomas, he mainly understood the planet focus as part of the ESG strategy, which is not his drive. By describing his engagement more through expectation and contribution, he said:

"It's not really as if I've received a direct assignment for it. But if something is expected, I just want to contribute my bit. And if it's specifically in the business objective, then I'll just do it."

— Thomas

Thomas will complete whatever sustainability tasks are placed in front of him. But he will not, as Tony does, look for what is within his reach and transform it with love. He is neither disengaged nor is he resistant, his sustainability engagement appears structural instead of motivationally produced. This shows what compliance-oriented sustainability engagement produces: participation without ownership, action without investment, and presence without the motivated agency.

One of the socsu practices at The Summer is their “community day”, an event designed to build social cohesion and organisational belonging. The participation in this event was mentioned by Mabel, who is herself involved in the Green Team and describes sustainability as personally important. Her observation about community days is therefore not the complaint of a disengaged employee but the precise observation of someone who understands the difference between genuine participation and normative compliance. When describing how community day participation works, she states:

"Community days, it's not really compulsory but it's expected of you. Once or twice a year."

—Mabel

This reveals a compliance risk through showing us the structural territory between freely chosen engagement and socially sanctioned obligation. For the ESG-strategy, participation to the events may look the same; a certain number of employees being part of it. Yet, there is a difference between participation out of expectation or a community joined out of genuine enthusiasm. Here we see how norms travel through the organisation, potentially influencing generative quality.

A way to explain how compliance based engagement is a rather short term strategy is through incentives. Organisational mechanisms of incentivising are external motivators for employees to do their job. Like Thomas says above: *“And if it's specifically in the business objective, then I'll just do it”*. But when discussing incentives with the ESG-coordinator Sascha states:

"I think incentives is maybe a good way to set up or to train a new behaviour, but I think in the end there needs to be additional supports to make it a longer term thing. Because if people are constantly expecting incentives to make the right choice, that is inherently an unsustainable way of motivating people. — Sascha

Incentives can serve a legitimate short-term function: they train new behaviour and lower the threshold for first engagement. Their structural limitation, however, is that once people expect external rewards for sustainable choices, the intrinsic motivation that would sustain those choices independently has been displaced rather than developed. With this she demonstrates a compliance trap that would be fallen into by relying on incentives in the long term. And Sascha

was not the only one doubting reliance on incentives. Kick introduced us to a tension on how structural mechanisms may simultaneously undermine the motivational conditions on which genuine sustainability practice depends. With Kick being part of the board meetings and the development team, he actively participates in sustainability governance and resource allocation. The dilemma he shows is clearly linked to governance, stating:

“I have a really strong love-hate relationship with rewards. Because rewards make things very economically motivated. And I think you also need to keep it intrinsically motivated.”

— Kick

With this, outcomes of compliance by incentives like getting the job done versus keeping up the motivation could be in tension. The structural mechanisms available for producing sustainability engagement tend to work against the motivational conditions that make that engagement meaningful — which aligns with what Mabel and Nathan highlighted from operational level: to make engagement meaningful you need intrinsically motivated individuals.

Altogether this suggests that compliance-oriented mechanisms may support participation, but can also make employees' experienced ownership more ambiguous. Yet the opposite problem also appears in the data. When employees have freedom but their initiatives are not structurally recognised, supported or shared, practices may remain vulnerable. So the following section examines the fragility of individual motivation and freedom when they lack structural support.

4.2.3. Freedom without structure getting fragile

The previous section showed two sides of a dynamic. Freedom can allow employees to generate meaningful sustainability practices, but participation becomes less generative when it is experienced mainly as an obligation. This section adds a further tension: freedom alone does not make socsu durable. When practices depend mainly on motivated individuals, they may work well in specific contexts but remain difficult to sustain or reproduce across the organisation.

What we noticed in our data is not the absence of motivation through freedom, but the dependency on individuals. As we interviewed Nathan, he shared how his, of which many

socially oriented, initiatives make a difference in the company. However, all his initiatives depend on his, and his team's motivation. Telling us:

"If I weren't intrinsically motivated there, we wouldn't be where we are. It still comes mostly from bottom-up." — Nathan

This is not a complaint from his side, it is more of an observation. However, when we dive deeper, this quote tells us that the structural fragility that underlies sub-section 4.2.1. described; socsu at The Summer is genuinely productive and meaningful, but its productivity and meaning are contingent on the motivated engagement of a small number of individuals whose departure would mean disappearance of initiatives. Individual motivation and freedom, here, is revealed as a necessary but would probably be an insufficient condition for durable socsu practice.

This condition did not merely show on an individual level, but its effects could be seen further in the company, for example with Simon, who shows how the uneven distribution of motivated individuals produces a systematically uneven environment of socsu practice at different hotel locations. What Simon noticed is a difference in hotels, which he knows due to his engagement in other locations. He shares;

"It's still very much dependent on the individual, and you can see, for example, that one branch is more proactive about sustainability than another. Yes, and that's something we really need to address in the future." — Simon

This points to a pattern in which sustainability engagement differs per hotel location, not necessarily because of lack of differences in motivation, but because the structural conditions that would allow motivated practice to travel independently are not consistently in place.

Another important finding on freedom without structure, is how the environmental initiatives found through the Green Team, the team of motivated individuals, does not take shape due to a lack of structure. Structural conditions could translate motivated engagement into organisational action. According to Kick, the Green Team produces limited action. When reflecting on the current effectiveness of the Green Team, he states:

"The Green Team is all very motivated but they don't do anything. The question is: how do you get people to action?" — Kick

Raising a question, if people are motivated, what keeps them from acting? Kick shows that motivation does not automatically translate into action. Mabel points out a similar issue at organisational level, explaining that the Green Team has motivated employees however are struggling to spread this motivation beyond that group to other employees:

"People in the Green Team who are motivated, but the rest of the colleagues not really. That's just how it is, we always need someone to carry it." — Mabel

The quote suggests that the issue is not a lack of motivated individuals, but the limited extent to which their efforts are supported and shared across the wider organisation. Freedom allows employees to connect sustainability to autonomy, but these practices appear vulnerable when they remain dependent on a small number of motivated ones.

The pattern that emerges is therefore ambivalent. Freedom can make socsu meaningful in everyday practices, but it does not automatically make it durable across the organisation. This points toward the need to examine structure and motivation together, which is the focus of the next section.

4.3. How structure and motivation shape each other

This section shows how structure and motivation influence each other in the data. Motivated employees can create practices that become shared more widely, while enabling structures can give employees the room, legitimacy and confidence to act. Finally, the current organisational transition at The Summer shows how this relation may become vulnerable when power, ownership and performance expectations shift.

4.3.1. Motivation becomes structure

Motivation does not only exist in the individual and actions do not solely guide other actions, but they simultaneously produce new structural conditions. In this section we explore how motivated individuals' actions turn into shared repertoire, governance structure or even

institutional resource bases. When enabling conditions allow motivated action to leave traces in the IOS we can see how influential motivation can be.

Starting with an example given by Simon about one of his part-time front-office employees: There was someone who had zero obligation to perform this task, since he was only at the job for a few hours per week, still he came up with an idea that got institutionalised. When describing how the LCD board initiative originated and travelled through the organisation, Simon tells:

"At one point, our colleague Alla, a part-timer, came along. On his own initiative, he ordered three of those LCD drawing boards. (...) Because he just wanted to give it a go. It worked so well. So our colleagues then bought some ourselves. (...) that way, we managed to reduce our use of Post-its to practically zero. And that idea worked so well that we then shared it at a Green Operations Meeting. And that happened entirely organically - no director or manager had a hand in it." — Simon

This shows how an individual idea, that can operate freely within an enabling structural context, can become part of the organisational repertoire without institutional mandate. Alla's initiative moved from individual action to team adoption to Green Operations Meeting to company-wide practice through the structural transmission mechanism. Without the flat hierarchy, the board's openness, and the Green Operations meeting as a transmission channel, Alla's motivated action would have possibly remained a personal experiment. With the structural conditions in place, it became an institutional resource. This is intrinsic motivation and enabling structure co-producing sustainability outcomes.

Moreover, we found this not only on individual levels, it also operates at the level of governance, where motivated engagement gradually transforms the institutional position of sustainability actors within the organisation. Where Alla's story shows motivated action producing a new shared practice, Simon's story demonstrates motivated participation gradually producing new governance capacity. We see a shift in who gets involved in decisions, at what stage, and with what authority. When reflecting on how Simon's role within the Green Operations team has developed over time, he states:

"Well, I'm now a permanent member of the Green Operations team, but my role is becoming increasingly important. Initially, this was always handled by the acting general manager trainee. Well, you could tell that you'd have to start all over again every ten months. So there's a bit more stability now. And we're getting better and better at being involved earlier on. Or that an idea actually comes from us and no longer from head office or from another location."

— Simon

This shows how motivated practice can find its way into governance architecture. The Green Team is motivated to make a difference. While initially they were run by trainees that changed every year, which made it harder to transform ideas from single action to structures, Simon's more stable involvement made it easier to follow up on ideas and become involved earlier. Motivated engagement could therefore produce structural stability, which in turn enables more motivated engagement from a stronger institutional position.

Another way we faced motivation that deposits structure, was when we spoke about certificates with Nathan. Last year operations decided to get certification on the building of one of the hotels. At that point, this was not necessarily required by any mandate. It was even unprioritized which made Nathan write the texts in his own time. Pure motivation brought this sustainability certification alive. When reflecting on how the certification came to exist at The Summer, Nathan states:

"I have literally written all those pieces in my evenings and on my Saturday afternoons because it's simply not something that gets prioritised by the company. Not something the company made important, but something we said: we want this." — Nathan

This shows how motivation can spread organisation-wide, since by now almost every interviewee has mentioned this certificate. Although Nathan's drive kept the practice alive, it seemed to lack the type of organisational structure that would make it easier to embed across the organisation. Initiating that motivation can change structures, but freedom is needed to make this motivation for it to be a sustainable practice, since we see working in personal time as a misalignment with socsu, which cannot be sustained over time.

The quotes above show how motivated action can become more than individual effort when it is taken up by others and translated into shared practices. However, the relationship also works in the other direction. The motivation from employees is shaped by whether the structures in

the organisation give them time, recognition and access to decision-making. The next section will examine how structure (also IOS) can enable motivation to emerge and spread.

4.3.2. Structure enables motivation

As our data revealed, it is not only motivation that generates structures, but structures in return can also enable motivation in employees. Enabling structural conditions makes motivated action possible for more people, clarifying the reach and impact of motivated engagement beyond what individual motivation alone could achieve. As Kick highlighted before in section 4.1.1. the board created a structural condition by being supportive. This specific structure allowed Kick to share in a follow-up interview how the structure enables motivation. When asking about the initiatives coming from any level in the organisation he shares;

“Partly because you can organise these things [environmental & social initiatives] on your own initiative. And of course, you simply have the space and time to do so, and you’re not dependent on a small team or on getting approval from somewhere. Or at least not as much.

So I think the motivation is very high there.” — Kick

He shows that consistently allocating resources and legitimising sustainability initiatives regardless of their origin in the organisational hierarchy, the board transforms the motivational opportunities of the organisation. A motivated employee who knows their initiative will be supported acts differently from one who expects resistance. The structural condition of board openness does not create motivation, but it expands the organisational reach of motivation that already exists, allowing it to produce positive structural outcomes.

Additionally, besides board support, other structures also show how motivation can be supported through participation. In the following quote, we see gradual expansion of motivation within less engaged employees through an IOS, the Green Team. Simon shares with us how he sees this happening with his employees when we talk about how the Green Team has developed over time and whether everyone is equally motivated:

“But you do notice that more and more people are thinking: hey, this is actually quite fun [Sustainability practice in the Green Team] . And hey, we really can make a difference. And we really can achieve something. And that really motivates me personally.” — Simon

The structural existence of the Green Operations team creates a context within which individuals can develop motivation through participation. Simon notes that this expanding motivated engagement really motivates him personally as well-so it even goes in both directions simultaneously. The enabling structure generates new motivation for Simon, which in turn makes those who were already engaged more motivated. It seems to be a co-production of structure and motivation going on around the existing IOS of the Green Team. In this way a dynamism between motivation and structure shows how structures can enable motivation.

Together, these examples show that enabling structures do not replace motivation, but can multiply and spread it by giving employees the space, legitimacy and confidence to act. If structure and motivation can reinforce one another, then changes in organisational structure may also disturb this relation. This is particularly relevant at The Summer because employees describe the organisation as undergoing changes in ownership, leadership and performance expectations. The following section does not aim to predict the future, but uses employees' perspectives of this transition to examine how structural change may affect the conditions under which motivated practice currently takes place.

4.3.3. Putting the duality of motivation and structure to a test

As we have covered how structure and motivation produce sustainability outcomes in a sort of recursive loop, we now turn to how this loop could be interrupted. Particularly with the current phase of The Summer, this structure could potentially change and with that ruin one of their valuable assets. As we have seen that taking away freedom at The Summer would for many employees not be an option, all while we've been also told by many interviewees that the structures are changing currently. As Simon told us that there is currently a period of insecurities, because the power dynamic is changing. During a conversation on the impact of the ownership transition on the organisation's decision-making environment, he states:

"We've gone from having three shareholders to just one. Yes, that has a huge impact on the balance of power within an organisation. It does create a bit of an uncertain period, which is what we're currently going through." — Simon

The Summer is experiencing a change in the governance level of the organisation. One shareholder will control actions in the company from now on. Even though this quote does not reveal any outcomes, it reveals the influence of a change in power. People in the organisation feel there will be changes, and know what might happen when becoming more corporate, but a real answer is not there, creating an uncertain period. This uncertainty also became visible during the attempted focus group, where no employees formally enrolled and participation remained very limited. One employee briefly suggested that the low attendance was likely connected to stress around the organisational transition, which reinforced the impression that the changing power structure may already shape employees' willingness to speak and participate openly. Some employees already faced changes. Nathan, who is the General Manager of one of the locations of The Summer, heard that the shareholders are aiming for stricter KPIs. When asking about what has changed already he comes with:

"I know that from the shareholders there is a very strong desire to establish more quarter-driven KPIs. I sense the shift toward quarterly-driven KPIs from the shareholders, I think that will be a big change." — Nathan

Flora expresses a similar concern from an operational position. She explains that with the new shareholders:

"I think more is now expected, also from the shareholders. People have to live more according to their role and really do what they have to do. I think there will be a lot of structure." – Flora

This reinforces the observation that structural change may narrow the space through which employees currently connect motivation to practice. In contrast to our findings on freedom, this would bring about a more structured landscape with more IOS at The Summer, as KPIs are compliance-oriented structural mechanisms, measuring outputs rather than motivated actions. The board's openness, the flat hierarchy, and the tolerance for organic experimentation that have characterised The Summer's enabling structural environment are not similar to a governance structure oriented toward quarterly accountability.

The structural transformation Nathan and Flora anticipate therefore threatens the organisational architecture of the recursive loop of motivation, freedom and structure, which directly relates to what Nathan mentioned before (see section 4.1.3.): “*Once the passion is taken out of it, what's left?*” highlighting a fear of when further implementation of corporate structures happens, the recursive loop will be destroyed and sustainability will potentially lose its ground in the company besides compliance-based output, with even a potential risk of losing people. Nathan observed that the new board will have the power to implement more corporate structures, leading him to be concerned that his freedom could be taken away:

“So, that’s down to the board, either the new one or the investors who appointed them. (...). There are certain moments in your career at a company when you wonder about a major change. Does this still suit me? And you have to be able to ask yourself questions like that. If so, that’s great! Then you can learn something from it too. And if not, no hard feelings, you know. I don’t know yet.”

This suggests how changing power dynamics may influence the workforce through structural mandates. Those who are most motivated, in this case Nathan, have altered the company’s landscape through motivation. They might reconsider their place in the organisation when new structures take away the enabling nature of previous structures. This highlights the importance of managing company growth without weakening the conditions that allow motivated practice to emerge.

This does not mean that formalisation necessarily undermines socsu. Rather, it shows that the relation between structure and motivation is vulnerable. The synthesis now brings the three findings together by showing how socsu becomes stronger or weaker depending on how structure, freedom and motivation are aligned.

4.4. Synthesis - the duality of structure and motivation

Sustainability, and specifically socsu, with its complex nature, appears not to be something we can measure by simple means. So far, we have explored how structures enable and constrain practice, how intrinsic motivation makes socsu generative, and how both continuously shape each other. It becomes clear that socsu is not a fixed outcome but an ongoing organisational

process at The Summer. It flourishes when structure and freedom reinforce one another but becomes fragile when it depends too much on individual motivation or is reduced to compliance-based structures. This synthesis brings the findings together by showing how socsu becomes stronger or weaker depending on the alignment between structure, freedom and motivation.

Co-production of structure and motivation does not only sustain socsu, it reinforces it simultaneously. This dynamic is not unique to Kick's experience. The LCD board initiative from Alla, Nathan's certification work and Simon's growing governance role all show the same patterns, motivated action, when structurally received, creates new conditions that make further motivated actions more likely. Kick expressing this process most directly:

"Partly because you can organise these things on your own initiative. And of course, you simply have the space and time to do so, and you're not dependent on a small team or on getting approval from somewhere. Or at least not as much. So I think the motivation is very high there. And also because once you've done it once and you see that it has an impact, that really motivates you to do it a second time. And then, at some point, you end up in a very positive spiral where you only see possibilities and opportunities, and you can actually make them happen." – Kick

Kick shows when structural conditions are genuinely enabling, the freedom enables motivation to be shared making motivated actions visible, meaningful and self-reinforcing. What is most interesting here, is how he shared that "you end up in a very positive spiral". Showing the recursive loop of how supporting motivation becomes a condition under which socsu can expand. The positive spiral Kick describes can be understood as a recursive loop that operates not only at the individual level, but also depends on alignment across organisational layers.

While talking with Simon he reveals both the aspiration and the current misalignment between that aspiration and organisational reality at The Summer. When reflecting on the ideal relationship between structural governance and motivated engagement in sustainability practice, he states:

"In an ideal world, they should reinforce each other. Managers need to take the lead, and directors need to ensure that this is considered important enough to allocate budget for. And

then, as far as I'm concerned, you can get ideas from across the entire organisation if you listen to them." —Simon

This could identify how power relations matter in the allocation of enabling structures. It is the dynamic between allocation of resources, priorities and time for initiatives that can create a landscape of shared ownership in ideas. Everyone can participate, something needed for socsu, as long as this is seen as important in the organisation, with managers and directors playing an important role. The fact that Simon says "In an ideal world" tells us that this is not yet the case at The Summer, showing a structural misalignment. The cross-level alignment that would truly allow the positive spiral mentioned by Kick to be consistent throughout the entire organisation is not yet in place.

4.5. Conclusion of the findings

In this sense, the analysis shows four possible conditions for socsu. When structure and motivation reinforce one another, practices can become more durable. When motivation exists without structural recognition, practices remain fragile. When structure exists without experienced ownership, practices risk becoming hollow or compliance-oriented. When practices are enacted but not named as socsu, they remain partially invisible. For all the four conditions, power relations matter because not all actors have the same ability to allocate resources, create legitimacy or decide which practices are recognised as sustainability. These conditions form the basis for the discussion, where the findings are connected back to structuration theory, Self-Determination Theory and communities of practice.

5. Discussion

In this chapter we will answer our research question, examining the institutionalisation of socsu on an operational level of a hospitality organisation. We will reach this by drawing together the empirical data with the theoretical framework, showing the importance of ongoing conversation, shared understanding and enabling structures. We use Giddens' (1984) duality of structure to connect employees' daily practices to the organisational conditions around them, combined with the empirical data that focused on employee's general understanding of sustainability and their daily practices at The Summer.

What our findings show is that the operational level is not only the place where sustainability strategy is implemented. It is also the place where socsu is produced. At The Summer sustainability is being practised by employees in their daily work, often before naming it as sustainability. This means that institutionalisation is not only a top-down process. It can start in operations, but still needs to be recognised, named and reproduced by the organisation.

As our initial interest for this topic started with true curiosity on why the people pillar is less institutionalised than the planet pillar within sustainability practices in hospitality, we kicked off every interview with the following question;

How would you describe sustainability in your own words?

While a few interviewees specifically mentioned the social part of sustainability, the majority of answers talked about environmental sustainability. Showing the current understanding of what sustainability means for employees at The Summer. As we aimed to understand whether people actually see social as part of sustainability practice, we asked the previously mentioned question. The relevance of this question is to surface practical consciousness of agents, since according to Giddens (1984, p. 25), their actions are restricted to what they can say about them.

When the employees did not mention social sustainability, it indicates that employees often do not see social as part of sustainability. As a shared vocabulary is important for structures to exist beyond IOS, this informed that further investigation on socsu understanding and practice is relevant to understand why socsu is the least institutionalised pillar in sustainability work.

The institutionalisation of socsu has previously been investigated at senior-manager level by Dias et al. (2026), concluding that socsu institutionalisation is a recursive dynamic requiring knowledge activation, strategic reflexivity, contextual integration, and operational embedding. This operational embedding is exactly what we zoom in on. While they see HR systems as crucial in operational embedding, we argue for a closer look at operations and their contribution to institutionalisation of socsu.

To clarify our epistemological approach in this chapter, we want to explain how we use intrinsic motivation, SDT and CoP. The concept of intrinsic motivation is treated as the subjects experience and articulation, not as an objective fact observed. In addition, SDT and CoP are supporting vocabularies for what is described during the interviews, not as parallel causal explanations.

In this chapter, we first examine the way socsu is practised; second, we examine at how and whether employees recognise socsu, third, we discuss the reproduction of socsu through action. This section is followed by a focus on the influence of individual motivation using the STD framework, and an explanation of how structures can enable reproduction, exemplified by CoP.

5.1. Socsu actions and conditions in operational work

To understand how socsu travels through the organisation, and why there is an asymmetry between the planet and people pillars of sustainability, we aim to understand the current practices at The Summer. This section dives into practice, recognition and reproduction of sustainability.

5.1.1. Practised: socsu already exists in operational work

At The Summer, socsu practice is not fully absent. It is happening: there are institutionalised targets through an ESG-strategy, employees practice it without naming it sustainability, and some employees do explicitly mention socsu as part of their job.

In the kitchen, Tony talks about a zero-waste soup that he created for food-waste reduction. His enthusiasm about the soup signalled not only environmental interest but simultaneously parts of socsu, mostly freedom and participation (Nilsson et al., 2024). In HR, Kate set up a job-

carving programme with municipal partners, just like Tony, drawing on her freedom at the job, and as a result two colleagues with distance from the labour market are now in permanent positions at The Summer, which in turn adds to equity (Nilsson et al., 2024). Nathan, the hotel manager, actively worked on building a neighbourhood hub that lifts the hotel's community practices, which is vital to institutionalization of socsu according to Dias et al. (2026). These actions did not come from strategic socsu programmes: they were moves made by employees on their own initiative.

Although these actions were not informed by policy documents, they do add to socsu. When we go back to the four dimensions of the SoSu Compass that we introduced in our literature review, consisting of well-being, equity, participation, and social cohesion, the actions of employees cover the domains of social sustainability (Nilsson et al., 2024). Kate's job-carving adds to freedom, as well as equity and well-being. Nathan's neighbourhood hub builds social cohesion. Tom's soup connects participation in the kitchen team to a wider environmental practice. The Compass dimensions are there in the practice. They just are not labelled.

When we link this back to structuration theory, employees seem to operate at the level of practical consciousness. Giddens (1984, p. 25) calls this the layer of knowing how to go on in a social setting without articulating the reasoning of one's own action. Polanyi (1966) and Bourdieu (1977) describe similar theories through tacit knowledge and habitus, explaining knowledge that is embodied rather than articulated in daily practice. What practical consciousness adds analytically is the room for agency: practical knowledge can be made discursive by the practitioner. Through the explanations of employees, we can analyse what they share and give meaning. What this means for how we see socsu practice at The Summer, is that the work travels as competent operational practice; it does not travel as sustainability.

If socsu practice is already happening at The Summer, why don't subject name it as sustainability, and why does the organisation around them not yet have the vocabulary to do so either? The difference between what is practised and what is recognised is covered in the next section.

5.1.2. Recognised: the missing vocabulary of socsu

Socsu is practiced by the employees at The Summer, but the actions are often not recognised as socsu. Although a few interviewees did mention the social side of sustainability, the main answers regarding sustainability were regarding the environmental side. When looking at the vocabulary available for the different pillars, this default is not surprising.

Signification, according to Giddens (1984, p. 58) is about signs that exist as the outcome and medium of communication. A fixed meaning does not exist, it only exists when it is communicated with others. Our findings reveal an asymmetry between the way environmental and socsu are signified at The Summer. Environmental sustainability has developed a rich vocabulary, BREEAM, Green Globe, CO2, certification scores, that is communicated routinely throughout the organisation. People can refer to it in daily conversations and recognise it as sustainability (Boström, 2012). Socsu does not yet share this kind of vocabulary, despite the practices being there. As Kick articulates, and as was also visible during the observation of the Green Operations Team, environmental sustainability is supported by the appeal of hard numbers, concrete initiatives and recognisable language, while the social side is much harder to make measurable and explicit. As a result, environmental sustainability is recursively communicated at The Summer and therefore continually reproduced, while socsu is enacted without being named.

This lack of shared signification shows how interviewees describe their own work. Andrea, when reflecting on the social initiatives at The Summer, only recognises them as socsu retrospectively, after we introduce the term in the interview. Thomas describes the people-side practices at The Summer as part of how the company works together rather than as a category of sustainability. Kate articulates a similar shift in her own viewing: before her current role she identified sustainability primarily as green, and only through inhabiting the people-side of the work did she develop a discursive vocabulary for the broader category. The surprising subject in our empirical work was Nathan, who shared social initiatives before explaining anything. His personal interest is also on the social side, which he shares with great enthusiasm, but he also shares how hard it is to convey others since it is not at the core of The Summers' concept. Nathan's enthusiasm enacts the people-side but cannot make it discursively available to those around him.

One pattern can be recognised among these different actors, across levels: socsu is happening, but the language to recognise it as sustainability is not yet shared. We argue that this is not a communication problem, but a problem of structures. Drawing on Giddens' (1984, pp. 35-44) stratification model, the work happens at the level of practical consciousness, what agents know about how to go on in their social setting without being able to give discursive expression to it. Polanyi (1966) and Bourdieu (1977) describe similar phenomena through tacit knowledge and habitus, but practical consciousness adds the analytical insight that this knowledge can be brought into discursive form. For socsu at The Summer, however, this discursive form has not yet been deliberately created at the organisational level. Without a structure of signification for socsu, practice cannot be recognised, reflected on, or reproduced as socsu work. It travels as "how we work together," durable at the level of the individual practitioner, but vulnerable when that practitioner leaves.

Recognition by individual practitioners, even when present as in Nathan's case, is not enough to let socsu travel. Structures require others to have the same vocabulary to enable socsu to be reproduced and become integrated.

5.1.3. Reproduced: transmission forecloses integration of socsu

Recognition helps employees name a practice, but transmission determines whether that practice can move beyond the individual. For motivated work to travel across people, hotels and time, vocabulary alone is not enough. It also needs structures that provide resources, legitimacy and routines through which the practice can be reproduced. Giddens (1984, p. 56, p. 94) names two forms of integration that must support such structures: social integration, the reciprocity of practices between actors in conditions of co-presence and system integration, the reciprocity that persists across extended time and space. At The Summer this system is well developed for environmental sustainability and structurally underdeveloped for socsu.

Domination, according to Giddens (1984, pp. 226-270) is the condition under which codes of signification can exist. In research this means examining the allocation and authorisation of resources, and the individuals who have power and resources to control economic and political resources through access to capital, technology, expertise and authority (Giddens, 1984, p. 58). At first glance, this is top-down. The board and investors emphasize environmental outcomes, particularly sustainable buildings. A shared signification across the company by all employees

mentioning the green buildings, reveals the domination of the investors' focus. Firstly, looking at authoritative resources, those of non-material character, with command over people (Giddens, 1984, p. 253), Sascha is the clearest example — the ESG coordinator installed by the investors mainly to improve future buildings, showing emphasis on environmental sustainability. We must also attend to the way the sub-teams are mandated. The Green Team is rather operational and widely discussed, while the empirical data shows that the DE&I team is mainly a headquarters team that few employees mention. Second, allocative resources, those of material character with command over things, Giddens, (1984, p. 253) explains how investors show priorities through allocation of capital and commodities. Our findings show that this happens at the level of ESG-strategy around environmental goals. Although the Positive Impact Strategy includes socsu, the measurement infrastructure mainly focuses on lowering emissions, which is visible through Sascha's role, and certificates focused on green buildings. Moreover, environmental sustainability is lacking support on an operational level: Kick receives financial support for ideas related to lowering emissions buildings, while the Green Team members do not get paid for the hours they dedicate to operational environmental sustainability practice. As Kick is closer to the investors, this might be a time-space challenge: system integration is hard when co-presence is not in place. Kick himself mentions that the board is too far removed from operational reality. Long-term, the priorities of investors centre on profit, as Andrea articulates; in the broader scope this can be read as a feature of modern capitalism, a money economy (Giddens, 1984, p. 192). The investors hierarchically have power over which codes of signification can exist, visible in this case through the emphasis on buildings.

Power flows in more directions than one. According to structuration and its dialectic of control, resources are always available to reciprocally influence power holders (Giddens 1991, p. 155). This is also apparent in our findings when, Kate's job-carving programme, Nathan's neighbourhood hub, Simon's LCD board, and Nathan's BREEAM work in their free time. The dialectic of control shows that agency does have power in shaping structures and that operational actions of individuals do contribute to signification. Yet the investors' dominance still seems to overshadow signification with its focus on the environmental side, particularly green buildings. The investors' command over people and things focuses on the environment, so the social system for socsu, which needs a combination of both types of resources to be coordinated (Giddens, 1984, p. 253), does not get the chance to match the level of environmental sustainability at The Summer.

This suggests that the marginalisation of socsu is not only a matter of unequal access to resources within signification, but also of how sustainability is normatively sanctioned through legitimation. Legitimation, according to Giddens (1984, p. 58), is the structural modality through which action is normatively sanctioned. Organisations are judged from the outside against what Suchman (1995, p. 574) calls 'a socially constructed system of norms, values, beliefs and definitions' system that, in the sustainability domain, can be found in certifications, reporting standards and audit instruments as found in the literature (Alhazemi, 2025). Those systems are in place at The Summer, where environmental sustainability at The Summer is mainly reinforced by several of those instruments: there is certification on the buildings, Green Globe certification and ESG reporting.

As the literature already suggested, our findings show that similar systems are in place for socsu, but they are the ones least measurable, least strict and most often slipping away (Alhazemi, 2025; Friede et al., 2015; Boström, 2012). The ESG-strategy at The Summer entails goals on socsu, there is a "Great place to work" certification and employees recognise its existence. But they do make the asymmetry of The TBL visible by sharing how they relate to environmental certification. Nathan and Tony both describe Green Globe as a requirement, a means to an end, framing it as an externally given obligation. These framings are not contradictions, they reveal that environmental certification operates as legitimation in Giddens' sense. Subjects act upon it not because they have internally decided it matters but because the external structures normatively sanction compliance. On the social side, the ESG strategy does not have comparable instruments, which Kick articulates by sharing the appeal of hard numbers on the environmental side, simply absent in socsu. A related tension is shared by Thomas, who reports that he would definitely do things when they are part of his goals. But without clear sanction Thomas will not know what to do. As there is no certain regime that forces shared vocabulary into the system, we see how the absence of legitimation tools for socsu leaves the structure of signification underdeveloped. We argue here that it is more fundamentally a *legitimation problem*. If there are no shared norms on socsu, with no shared vocabulary enforced around it, convincing others and going through both socials and system integration of socsu becomes a structurational challenge.

The structural asymmetry is visible most plainly in what happens when an organisation tries to build a community of practice around socsu without the resources, authority and external recognition that the environmental side enjoys. The DE&I team at The Summer, installed for socsu practice, makes less progress than the Green Team. Kate describes it as more of a Headquarters Team; Sascha describes how it often reschedules meetings and has a hard time making progress due to its voluntary basis. The structure around socsu makes transmission harder because there are fewer sanctions, fewer ways to communicate it, and fewer resources allocated to building up a team that gets as much attention as the Green Team does for environmental work.

The section above shows that socsu is already practised at the operational level of The Summer, often before the organisation has the vocabulary to recognise it as sustainability. In this way recognition is not happening due to structural absence, socsu cannot be collectively named, reflected on or passed on as it is missing a shared vocabulary, asymmetric resource allocation and limited external enforcement, rather than a lack of motivation or effort. This makes the reproduction structurally less strong for socsu than for environmental sustainability, because the conditions that would allow motivated practice to travel across people, hotels and time are not yet in place for the people pillar.

The structural condition is not fixed, structure is both the medium and the outcome of the practices it organises (Giddens, 1984, p. 54). It can be reproduced but can also be transformed by the agents who act within it. The next section will focus on what happens when motivated individuals at operational level do enact socsu despite the structural conditions and under what circumstances their practice can begin to reshape the structures around them.

5.2. The power of employees in socsu institutionalisation

When we look at operational embedding of structures in hospitality organisations, our findings reveal that individual employees can make a difference in the organisational structure. As already highlighted, managers can influence sustainability, confirmed by Dias et al. (2026) who emphasize the role of HR in operational embedding of socsu institutionalisation. What we found is that beyond (senior) management, operational employees can make a difference.

5.2.1. Individual practice; motivation and reflexivity keep socsu alive but fragile

At The Summer we noticed motivation in employees throughout the interviews. While the previous section explored the structural conditions through which socsu is either reproduced or fails to be reproduced at The Summer, this section explores how employees can influence what is reproduced or transformed. This is relevant because, according to Giddens (1984, pp. 35-65), agents are knowledgeable individuals who can control their actions but also reflect on the condition under which they act. Making employees responsible for the way they act, use their knowledge and be reflexive can thus either reinforce or transform structures.

Our reasoning for linking structuration and motivation is based on how environments influence practice. As the literature explains, motivation is dependent on one's environment (Ryan & Deci, 2000; Van den Broeck et al., 2016). In structuration theory, structures shape agency and agency shapes structure. We found that besides the influence of the environment on motivation, motivation also influences the environment. However, to make this possible, the structures of signification, domination and legitimation need to enable motivation to travel beyond the individual, showing a recursive relation. Aligned with our interpret of motivational theory (Mills, 1940), motives are situated and institutional, and therefore align with the vocabularies and norms of societal situations, in this case at The Summer. We will explain how we see this dynamic between motivation and environment through our empirical findings. To understand when interviewees describe motivation we use SDT as an analytical vehicle (Deci & Ryan, 2000).

The best example in our data is Kick. He shares throughout the initial and the follow-up interview how he gets the freedom to work on projects he is interested in, which aligns with what SDT calls autonomy. He describes himself as knowledgeable about what he does, showing competence. At the same time he receives a "yes" to his new ideas, sharing with enthusiasm how the board agrees on allocating resources for them. This shows relatedness, but also reveals board openness as an enabling structural resource. Kick tells us how these functions as a positive spiral, revealing a co-constitution that can be explained by Giddens' (1984) duality of structure. The conditions Kick draws upon enable his motivation, and his motivated practice reproduces and strengthens those conditions for the next initiative. Nathan talks about motivated engagement as identity-based, taking on BREEAM certification work and neighbourhood

relationships as things he *wants* to do rather than tasks *assigned* to him, and articulating both competence in environmental detail and relatedness with the people in his hotel's surrounding district. Tom, narrating a zero-waste soup that combined freedom in cooking with food-waste reduction, describes the same combination of autonomy in approach, competence in craft, and relatedness with the kitchen team. Kate, describing the job-carving programme she initiated through HR, articulates the freedom given to her by the HR director alongside the relatedness she experiences when placed colleagues flourish in their new roles. These four employees, Kick, Nathan, Tom, and Kate, converge on the conditions that SDT predicts intrinsic motivation requires, but they articulate those conditions in their own words: as freedom, as ownership, as identity. The ability of naming these practices shows a form of reflexivity (Giddens, 1984), meaning their practice is not only motivated but consciously grounded, and therefore potentially transformative rather than merely reproductive.

We do not claim that these structural conditions caused the motivation we observe. We claim that motivated practice and these conditions are recursively co-constitutive. Subjects act under conditions they describe as enabling, and in acting they reproduce and even transform the existing structures for themselves and for others. This is the duality of structure applied to practice.

A remaining question is: “what happens when those enabling conditions are removed?”. If autonomy, competence and relatedness are what interviewees describe when narrating motivated engagement, the crowding-out effect names what happens when those conditions are displaced by external control. SDT (Deci, 1971; Frey & Jegen, 2001) identifies a familiar pattern: performance monitoring, mandatory compliance, audit requirements, incentive schemes and formalised targets do not simply add to existing motivation, they can displace it, because the reason for action begins to feel external rather than internal. The conditions for motivation described above could shift in time and space when more of these mechanisms are installed, particularly during organisational change such as the installation of a new investor and a new CEO at The Summer. The crowding-out literature handles this mechanism as something observable in laboratory and field studies (Deci, Koestner & Ryan, 1999; Frey & Oberholzer-Gee, 1997; Frey & Jegen, 2001). What is empirically interesting in our case is not that crowding-out happens but that interviewees at The Summer themselves articulate the mechanism when reflecting on the structural conditions of their own work.

Several interviewees describe the pattern from inside. Thomas shares that he does things when they are part of his business objectives, openly framing his engagement as compliance-oriented. Mabel describes community days as not compulsory but still expected. Kick explains that incentives make people take shortcuts to their goals, in effect restating the SDT mechanism in his own words. Kate articulates the same pattern: practices experienced as “a have-to-do” or as a box to tick will not produce the engagement they aim for. Sascha extends the observation structurally, arguing that incentives may train new behaviours in the short term but that reliance on them is inherently unsustainable over time. Five interviewees describe the same structural risk: that compliance-oriented mechanisms can displace the engagement they are meant to encourage. Important for socsu, as one of the often mentioned domains is freedom and participation or autonomy (Giousmpasoglou, 2024; McKenzie, 2004; Nilsson et al., 2024)

Turning back to Giddens' (1984, pp. 35-44) stratification model, what subjects articulate about the grounds of their action is discursive consciousness: the layer through which actors verbalise the conditions of practice. The interviewees who articulate the crowding-out effect do not only act under it; they reflect on it as a condition of their own action. Linking this back to the duality of structure (Giddens, 1984), this reflective capacity is itself part of how structural conditions are reproduced or transformed. Subjects who recognise that compliance-oriented mechanisms displace motivation can, in principle, resist or redesign those mechanisms in practice. At The Summer, the crowding-out condition is not only observable in subjects' behaviour but discursively available to employees, which is itself a structural property that could influence whether the recursive loop continues to operate, although this requires reflexivity from the employees.

Motivation is important for keeping socsu alive at The Summer, as well as reflexivity on what is needed to keep motivation up. Importantly, motivation held by a few individuals could be fragile: it travels with them, and it leaves with them. The question for the next section is therefore not whether socsu can be influenced by motivation, as we have explored this above, but whether and how motivated practice can become collectively durable.

5.2.2. Organisational durability; CoP as transmission tool

The previous section established that motivated practice at The Summer is a recursive product of condition interviewees describe and reproduce in action. However, individual motivation, even when widely shared, is not yet institutionalised. Using Wenger's (1998) CoP vocabulary introduced in Chapter 2, this section examines whether motivated practice can become collectively durable at The Summer. Specifically, it draws on three of Wenger's concepts — joint enterprise, mutual engagement and shared repertoire — as descriptive tools, rather than assuming that a community of practice naturally produces learning, commitment or shared ownership (Wenger, 1998, ch. 2). These concepts help identify how, and under what conditions, motivated individual practices may become organisational practices. At the same time, Giddens' concept of domination helps keep power relations in view. This is especially relevant in hospitality, where practices are often learned and reproduced through daily co-presence between teams and locations (Dias et al., 2026).

The Green Team at The Summer exhibits all three features of the CoP: joint enterprise, mutual engagement and shared repertoire (Wenger, 1998, ch. 2). It operated through regular shared meetings, a developed shared repertoire about environmental practices and a joint enterprise that has accumulated over years. At the same time, our findings also show that motivation within such a community does not automatically translate into action, especially when time, responsibility and follow-up remain unclear.

At The Summer, we see this lived in practice, where motivated practice has travelled beyond the individual. Simon's story of an LCD board initiative, proposed by a part-time team member, taken up in the Green Operations Meeting, and routinised into company-wide practice, shows the full transmission journey, from individually motivated initiative to system integrated practice that persists across hotels and beyond the originating individual. During the observation of the Green Team meeting we noticed how ideas were shared by individuals and picked up by other hotels with enthusiasm. Nathan's "oil slick" engagement with colleagues is an example of social integration through co-presence, motivation spreads from general managers to the people around him through repeated everyday encounters. Erina's description of "planting seeds" with colleagues makes the same agency visible at a different level: motivation shaped by a senior figure for those further down the organisation.

Yet transmission carries its own risk. The forms, meetings, KPIs, formalised events — the tools that let practice travel can also hollow it out. This is where Wenger's (1998) concept of reification becomes important. Reification gives practice a durable form; this can be meetings, KPIs or formalised events (Wenger, 1998, ch. 1) As we see with the Green Team this works in the sense that the monthly meetings create a moment for the community to come together, discuss new goals and learn from each other. This shows that it is not inherently negative to reify informal practice. But what Giddens makes precise on the risks is the importance of reflexivity and not settling into homeostatic loops (Giddens, 1984, pp. 35-65), which happens when actions are not reflected on and systems reproduce without reflection, unconsciously resulting in reproduction of the existing structure and therefore leading to unintended consequences. In the case of The Summer we already encounter this condition in Tom and Green Globe as a means to an end, Mabel on community days as expected, Kate on “have to be done”. When tasks become non-reflexive and causal loops form there is a risk for settling into a system where sustainability practice does not evolve further; homeostatic reproduction. Thus, reification is not inherently bad. What matters for his analysis is whether reified practice continues to be reflexive or settles into homeostatic reproduction.

Whether a community of practice at The Summer supports motivated (social) sustainability or routinises it into obligatory tasks depends on the conditions that agents work with. This brings us back to structure, and to the recursive dynamic of duality, which we explore in the following section.

5.3 Conclusion of discussion

This chapter brings the core of our research question together: socsu is practised on the operational floor — often before it is recognised; recognition is held back by a structural absence of shared vocabulary. Reproduction is structurally weaker for the social pillar than for the environmental pillar. Motivation keeps socsu alive at the individual level but leaves it fragile, and communities of practice can move motivated work toward durability, but only when reification does not settle into homeostatic compliance. We now bring these movements together into the theoretical claim of the thesis: socsu at The Summer is recursively produced, not delivered by structure alone or generated by motivation alone, but built and rebuilt through the ongoing interaction between operational practice, shared vocabulary, transmission structures, intrinsic motivation and communities of practice.

This recursive logic is empirically visible in three converging patterns at The Summer. Firstly, motivated practice influences structure. Kate's job-carving programme, set up through her own discretion, has become an ongoing structural condition through which two colleagues with distance from the labour market are now in permanent positions at The Summer. Simon's LCD board, proposed by a part-time team member, has become a routinised part of the Green Operations Meeting. Nathan's BREEAM work, done in his own time, has become a certification benchmark for his hotel. In each case, motivated individual action travels into something that did not exist as structure beforehand. Secondly, structure enables motivation. Kick describes the board's openness to his initiatives as the condition under which he keeps coming up with new ideas, Mabel describes the freedom she found at The Summer as the condition that lets her bring her values into her work. The enabling conditions are not separate from motivation; they are recursively co-constituted by it. Thirdly, several interviewees articulate this recursive logic in their own terms. Kate, drawing on a strategic talent management course, describes the relation between freedom and structure within an organisation as a “kind of dance”, in which neither side leads but together they enable people to grow. Kick describes motivated initiative meeting organisational support as a “positive spiral”: one success motivates further engagement, which in turn brings more support. Simon, reflecting on the relation between structural conditions and motivated practice, observes that “in an ideal world they should reinforce each other”. These are not imposed by us on the data; they are participant validations of the recursive dynamic.

This recursive dynamic is not a static description of how The Summer works; it is currently put under pressure. The transition to one big investor and the appointment of a new CEO together constitute what Giddens (1984, p. 244) calls an episode, a sequence of structural changes with a specifiable opening and trend, though an undetermined outcome. Kate observes that there is now more focus on costs and on travel between hotels; Nathan reflects on what is left of the passion when quarterly KPIs become the primary structural mechanisms, Kick describes the need to stay active and hands-on to keep socsu work on the agenda and the attempted focus group showed similar tension, as no employees formally enrolled and one employee linked the limited participation to stress around the organisational transition. The investor transition introduces what Giddens (1984, p. 193) calls a structural contradiction: the investor logic of measurability is in tension with the hard-to-measure character of socsu. Whether the recursive loop identified in our findings can reproduce socsu or shifts towards homeostatic compliance depends, in the months ahead, on whether agents at The Summer continue to mobilise the

dialectic of control (Giddens, 1991, p. 155): the capacity of subordinate actors to influence the conditions they work under. The recursive dynamic is, at the time of writing, being tested.

The contribution to existing literature of this thesis follows from the above. Existing literature on socsu institutionalisation has mapped the structural conditions: the lack of independent definition for socsu (McKenzie, 2004; Ajmal et al., 2018), the absence of reification tools that would let it be measured and rewarded reliably (McGuinn et al., 2020; Alhazemi, 2025; Friede et al., 2015), the ethical and social-justice frames through which it is legitimated in corporate strategy (Porter & Kramer, 2006; Banerjee, 2008). This structural problem is particularly relevant in service-intensive industries such as hospitality, where socsu is highly visible in employee well-being, labour conditions, community relationships and retention, while the sector remains vulnerable to cost pressures and short-term financial logics (Yadav & Kestwal, 2024). In this context, socsu is not enacted only through policy documents or reporting frameworks, but through daily interactions between employees, guests, communities and other stakeholders (Dias et al., 2026). The SoSu Compass (Nilsson et al., 2024) is the closest existing framework to the agency-side of our argument, in that it specifies practices and conditions that organisations can work on. What this body of work shapes is the structural conditions for institutionalisation; what it has not yet emphasised is the importance of reflexivity and practical consciousness in the agents who carry socsu in their daily work. Through our case study at The Summer we have surfaced how motivated operational practice can result in both social and system integration of socsu, and how the duality of structure makes visible the co-constitution of individuals and structures. This is why our contribution is positioned at the operational level: senior-level institutionalisation research has mapped the structures, and we have shown what happens between those structures and the people who, in their daily work, practise socsu before the organisation has the vocabulary to recognise their work as sustainability at all.

Socsu, on the evidence at The Summer, is not institutionalised through structures alone or by motivation alone. It is produced recursively, through the interaction between operational practice, shared vocabulary, transmission structures, intrinsic motivation and communities of practice.

6. Conclusion

This master's thesis set out to understand the institutionalisation of social sustainability in operational teams of hospitality organisations, taking a closer look at the practices, recognition and reproduction of socsu and under what conditions it moves from individuals' practice to institutionalised practice. During this thesis, initially, we noticed understanding of sustainability in employees does not often travel beyond environmental sustainability, although earlier research emphasises the need for integrating socsu to become a durable organisation. The hotel group, The Summer, served as a case study to explore the asymmetry between the people and planet and how structures influence the institutionalisation of both people and planet pillars, focusing on why the people pillar stays behind. What emerged was a recursive answer: socsu is already happening at the operational level, but it travels as practice rather than as sustainability. It is enacted before it is named, and because it is not named, the structural conditions that would allow it to travel across people, hotels and time have not yet been built around it. Showing a co-constitution between agency and structure, more specifically motivated practice – employees that can bring their motivation in actions – and structures that enable motivation to be explored and travel through the organisation – gives enough freedom while recognising social sustainability as existing and important. We conclude that hospitality organisations should be aware of the duality of structure and pay attention to recursive dynamic between individual's action and structures and the importance of motivation and participation in the operational embedding of socsu structures.

The asymmetry between the people and planet pillars, turned out to be a structural condition reproduced through the three modalities Giddens identifies. Environmental sustainability has developed structures of signification, and it has a shared vocabulary, while socsu exists only in the informal language, the allocation of authoritative and allocative resources by the investor reinforces the asymmetry, and where environmental sustainability is normatively sanctioned by certification regimes and external audit instruments, socsu operates without comparable sanctions – leaving it dependent on individuals who internally decide that it matters rather than on structures that normatively require it of everyone. The absence of shared vocabulary, asymmetric resources, and weak external legitimation mutually reinforce one another, producing a structural environment in which socsu stays fragile and individually dependent rather than becoming collectively embedded.

What we found to be important in institutionalisation of sustainability is motivated practice. Agents at The Summer who experience autonomy, competence and relatedness in their work – the conditions SDT associates with intrinsic motivation – sustain sustainability through their daily action even without organisational support. They do not only act under those conditions; they reproduce and sometimes transform those conditions for others. This is the duality of structure applied to practice: Kate's job-carving programme, Simon's LCD board, Nathan's BREEAM certification and neighbourhood hub are all instances of motivated individual action depositing new structural conditions that persisted beyond the individual who initiated them. Environmental sustainability has already showed how this can develop when other structural conditions enable further transformation and reproduction. It is now of importance for hospitality organisations to understand this dynamic and see how this could start flourishing for socsu as well.

To return to the backpack metaphor; socsu is not absent for The Summer — it is in the backpack of every employee who shows up with care for the people around them, who cooks with conscience, who builds community beyond the job description. The problem this thesis has unfolded is not that the backpacks are empty but that the organisation does not yet have the infrastructure to ask what is in them, to give those contents a shared name, or to pass them on when the person carrying them moves on. Environmental sustainability solved this problem through certification, vocabulary and resource allocation, instruments that turned what some individuals cared about into what the whole organisation is required to practice, creating an environment where people happily share what is in their backpack. Socsu is waiting for the same treatment; the backpacks will not empty themselves, that needs to be done together.

This chapter further consists of first, practical implications, second, opportunities for further research, and third, elaboration on limitations during the conducted research.

6.1. Practical implications

For hospitality organisations seeking to strengthen socsu, four implications follow from these findings. First, naming matters: organisations that do not develop a shared vocabulary for the people pillar cannot reproduce what they cannot recognise. Investing in language, not only metrics, is a prerequisite for institutional visibility. Second, structures must create space rather than mandate compliance: enabling socsu requires structures that support autonomy, competence and relatedness rather than structures that replace motivated engagement with

obligation. Third, participation must be supported as an organisational process: motivated individuals need communities through which their practices can travel, and those communities need protection from over-formalisation. Finally, organisations need to understand the recursive dynamic between structure and agency, and how IOS do not automatically mean institutionalisation of a structure.

6.2. Future research

The above outlined research concerns the institutionalisation of socsu through its embedding in the operations of hospitality organisations. As structures go beyond one specific company, this zoomed-in qualitative research opens a door for further exploration — for example time-space in the same company; doing a similar research in similar hospitality companies; doing cross-contextual research, and exploring external factors. We further explain these opportunities in this section.

First, the conducted research is based on one specific moment in time. It could be enriched by returning to The Summer for interviews or focus groups once the new investor structure is stable. This is also something Dias et al. (2026) do not address in their model on socsu institutionalisation, making it an interesting angle to investigate how ownership structures influence the institutionalisation of socsu. Above all, another moment of data collection could show the effect of time-space on socsu institutionalisation, which is relevant for the recursive dynamic between agency and structure.

Second, this thesis was conducted in a specific context; a Dutch hospitality organisation, employees valuing freedom and liberal ownership shaping sustainability, alongside investor relations that shaped the sustainability approach. Future research could investigate whether the same dynamic operates in cross contextual operations; chain hotels; hierarchical cultures; or compliance-dominated contexts.

Finally, our research treats only the internal side of socsu institutionalisation; focusing on the dynamic between employees and structures. Hospitality organisations, and particularly operational teams are in direct contact with guests, making guests part of the structure and social-integration of socsu. Future research could develop theoretical insights into structure

and agency by questioning how operational embedding of socsu influences and is influenced by guests and other stakeholder relations.

6.3. Limitations

Several limitations shaped what this thesis could and could not capture. The most significant concerns the focus group we had planned as a second observational instrument. Geographic distance from Amsterdam made it impossible to organise a second meeting after the planned data collection moment. The focus group was intended to surface shared meanings around socsu through interactional dialogue. This is the kind of data that Kitzinger (1994, pp. 103-119) argues is analytically distinct from individual interviews and that our observation of the Green Team meeting could not fully provide. Its absence places more weight on the individual interview material than we originally intended.

Another limitation is the scope of the thesis. The investor transition and new CEO appointment were in progress but not yet complete when we conducted our interviews. Several interviewees reflected on what they anticipated these changes would mean; some already noticed change, but we could not observe the final consequences. Follow-up interviews after the new CEO's installation would have added significant depth to the argument about the duality of structure under pressure, showing how the recursive dynamic between motivated practice and structural conditions actually unfolds.

Finally, as with all qualitative single-case research, the findings are not fully statistically generalisable. The interpretive approach means we captured what employees were able and willing to say at a specific moment, and social desirability effects cannot be fully ruled out. Structural transferability through the theoretical framework offers analytical reach beyond The Summer, but comparative research across multiple cases would be needed to test whether the recursive dynamic this thesis identifies operates similarly in other hospitality contexts.

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Appendix

Appendix A - General Semi-Structured

The interviews were conducted as semi-structured conversations. The interview guide below functioned as a flexible framework rather than a fixed script. The order, wording and depth of questions varied depending on the role of the interviewee, the language of the conversation, and the direction of the interview. Because the study followed an abductive approach, additional probes were added during the process when emerging themes such as freedom, motivation, transmission of initiatives, Green operations, DE&I, and the ownership transition became analytically relevant. Interviews were conducted in Dutch or English.

This guide was used as the main interview framework for interviews with employees across different organisational layers of The Summer.

A1. Introduction and Consent

- Thank the interviewee for participating and create a relaxed atmosphere.
- Briefly introduce ourselves, the master programme, and the broad research interest in sustainability at The Summer.
- Explain that the interview is confidential and that the company and interviewee names will be anonymised.
- Ask for permission to record the interview.
- Explain that there are no right or wrong answers and that we are interested in the interviewee's own experience and interpretation.
- Explain that the interviewee may skip questions or ask for clarification at any point.
- Mention that the topic is introduced broadly to avoid steering the interviewee too much.

A2. Background and Role

- Can you briefly describe your current role and responsibilities within The Summer?
- How did you arrive in this role?

A3. Personal understanding of sustainability

- How would you describe sustainability in your own words?
- Is sustainability something that plays a role in your personal life?
- In what ways does sustainability appear in your private life?
- Has your view on sustainability changed since working at The Summer?
- Do you see sustainability mainly as environmental, or are there other parts to it as well?
- Does sustainability have a different meaning for you privately than it has at work?

A4. Sustainability at The Summer

- How is sustainability shaped or organised within The Summer?
- In what ways does sustainability play a role in your daily work?
- Is sustainability mostly formally organised, or more part of the culture?
- How do sustainability ideas move through the organisation?
- Do you experience sustainability as something top-down, bottom-up, or both?

A5. Triple Bottom Line: people, planet and profit

- Are you familiar with the Triple Bottom Line: people, planet and profit?
- How do you think these three dimensions are balanced at The Summer?
- Which pillar receives the most attention in practice?
- How is the people side put into practice?
- Do you see people, planet and profit as complementary or sometimes competing?
- Can you describe a situation where financial objectives conflicted with employee well-being, community interests, or social values?

A6. Social Sustainability / The People Pillar

- What does social sustainability mean to you in an organisational context?
- Do you recognise social sustainability in your daily work?
- Which practices at The Summer contribute to employee well-being, inclusion, participation, freedom or belonging?

- Do you think social sustainability is as visible as environmental sustainability within The Summer?
- Why do you think environmental sustainability is easier or harder to talk about than social sustainability?
- How would you say the people aspect of sustainability is measured or recognised?

A7. Structures, responsibility and decision-making

- How is sustainability structurally organised within The Summer?
- Which teams, meetings, roles or routines are involved in sustainability?
- What is the role of the green operations team?
- What is the role of the DE&I team?
- How do ideas from employees reach the right people?
- What helps sustainability initiatives travel across departments or locations?
- Do you think sustainability practices are embedded across the organisation, or dependent on certain people or teams?

A8. Motivation and freedom

- What motivates you personally in your work?
- Do you experience freedom in your role?
- In what ways do you have space to work on ideas that matter to you?
- Do you feel encouraged to take initiative?
- What happens when employees are personally motivated to work on sustainability?
- Do you think sustainability at The Summer depends on intrinsically motivated individuals?
- Can motivation spread to colleagues? If so, how?
- What happens when your work becomes more formal, mandatory or target-driven?

A9. Measurement, targets and compliance

- How are sustainability goals measured at The Summer?
- Are people-related outcomes measured?

- How do people-related goals compare to environmental or financial KPIs?
- What role do certifications, reporting or KPIs play in sustainability work?
- Do targets or incentives help sustainability, or can they also reduce motivation?

A10. Organisational change and future orientation

- How do you experience the current organisational changes at The Summer?
- Do you think the new ownership or CEO will influence sustainability work?
- Do you expect more structure, reporting or KPIs in the future?
- What could be positive about this change?
- What could be risky?
- What would be your ideal future for The Summer?

A11. Closing questions

Is there anything else you would like to add?

Is there anything we did not ask, but that you think is important?

Would it be okay if we contact you again for a follow-up question?

Thank the interviewee for their openness and time.

Note! The questions above are presented as a reconstructed appendix version of the semi-structured guides used during data collection. Because of the abductive and conversational nature of the interviews, exact wording and sequence differed across interviews.

Appendix B - role-specific probes

The following probes were used flexibly depending on the role, knowledge and organisational position of the interviewee. Not all probes were asked in every interview.

B1. ESG, Development and Asset Management

- How was the ESG strategy developed?
- Who decides which ESG goals are prioritised?
- Why was the ESG coordinator role introduced?
- Why is the ESG role placed in the development team?
- How are environmental and social goals balanced in ESG work?
- How are ESG goals translated into operations?
- What role do investors play in sustainability priorities?
- How do board-level decisions influence sustainability practice?
- How does the organisation decide which sustainability initiatives receive budget, time or attention?

B2. Operations and Hotel-Level Employees

- How does sustainability appear in daily operations?
- Which sustainability practices are part of your daily work?
- How do colleagues respond to sustainability initiatives?
- Do you experience enough freedom to take initiative?
- Are sustainability initiatives mostly carried by specific people?
- How do sustainability practices differ between locations?
- How do operational pressures influence sustainability practices?
- How do guests, colleagues or managers respond when you try to change something?

B3. HR, Finance and Headquarters

- How does the people side of sustainability appear in your role?
- How does HR contribute to social sustainability?
- Are people-related initiatives connected to sustainability language?

- How do financial reporting and investor expectations
- shape sustainability priorities?
- Do you think social sustainability can be measured?
- How might formalisation affect the culture of The Summer?
- How are employee well-being, retention, belonging or inclusion discussed within the organisation?
- Are these people-related topics connected to ESG or treated separately?

B4. Green operations team and DE&I Team

- How would you describe the function of the Green Operations Team?
- How motivated are the people in the Green Operations Team?
- What helps the team turn ideas into action?
- What prevents the team from turning ideas into action?
- How visible is the Green Operations Team across the organisation?
- How would you describe the role of the DE&I team?
- How visible is the DE&I team compared to the Green Operations Team?
- Do you see overlap between environmental sustainability initiatives and social sustainability initiatives?

Note! The questions above are presented as a reconstructed appendix version of the semi-structured guides used during data collection. Because of the abductive and conversational nature of the interviews, exact wording and sequence differed across interviews.

Appendix C - Follow-up interview guide

One follow-up interview was conducted to further explore emerging interpretations around motivation, structure, the Green Operations Team, and the dependency of sustainability practices on individuals.

C1. Introduction

- Thank the interviewee for participating in a follow-up conversation.
- Ask for consent to record the follow-up interview.
- Explain that the purpose is to clarify and further explore themes that emerged during the first round of analysis.
- Explain again that answers will be anonymised and that the interviewee can skip questions.

C2. Follow-up questions

- Do you think the people in the Green operations team are motivated?
- What limits the Green operations team in turning motivation into action?
- How could the structure around the Green operations team be improved?
- Should the Green operations team remain operational, or should it become more strategically embedded?
- How does the DE&I team compare to the green operations team?
- Do Green Operations or DE&I initiatives influence how people feel at work?
- Do you see overlap between environmental sustainability and social sustainability?
- If you left tomorrow, what would happen to sustainability work in your role?
- Where does your own motivation for sustainability come from?
- What structures make it easier or harder for motivated people to act?
- What would need to change for sustainability initiatives to become less dependent on individuals?

- How do you see the future of sustainability at The Summer under the current organisational transition?

C3. Closing questions

- Is there anything you want to clarify from the previous interview?
- Is there anything we have interpreted incorrectly or should be careful with?
- Is there anything else you think is important for us to understand?
- Thank the interviewee again for their time and openness.

Note! The questions above are presented as a reconstructed appendix version of the semi-structured guides used during data collection. Because of the abductive and conversational nature of the interviews, exact wording and sequence differed across interviews.

Appendix D: Positive Impact Strategy - Summary

Source: Positive Impact Strategy, December 2023

This strategy outlines the organisation's commitment to creating measurable positive impact across three interconnected pillars: people, planet, and governance, embedded throughout all levels of the organisation via structural meetings, ESG dashboards, and reporting mechanisms.

People

Six focus areas address the wellbeing and rights of team members, guests, and the wider community:

- **Team Engagement:** Annual satisfaction surveys (target >75%), personal development plans, ESG training, and team-building activities.
- **Health & Wellbeing:** Buildings optimised for ventilation, daylight, thermal and acoustic comfort; mental health support programmes; conscious menu offerings.
- **Guest Engagement:** Guest satisfaction target >4.5/5 and NPS >75%; sustainability awareness via website, room directory, and partnerships like Hotels for Trees.
- **Community Engagement:** Minimum 4 local community events per property annually; preference for local suppliers; design rooted in local culture and heritage.
- **Diversity, Equity & Inclusion:** Gender balance target of 40:40:20 at all levels; annual pay-gap analysis; yearly DEI monitoring and reporting.
- **Human Rights:** Published Human Rights Policy covering trafficking, forced and child labour, union rights, and data protection; mandatory training for all new operational staff.

Planet

Seven focus areas govern environmental performance:

- **Carbon Footprint:** Paris-aligned net-zero target by 2050; carbon life cycle assessments for all new builds; CRREM tool used to track operational emissions; 100% renewable electricity.
- **Energy Management:** Paris Proof energy intensity targets; metering and monitoring across all properties; on-site energy generation where feasible.

- **Responsible Supply Chain:** 90% of non-food operational items to be eco-certified or reusable/recyclable; ESG credentials required for suppliers above €50k; Sustainable Procurement Policy in place.
- **Climate Adaptation:** Climate risk assessments for all new cities and assets (BREEAM WST05); design measures incorporated to ensure future resilience.
- **Sustainable Site Selection:** 100% brownfield or existing assets; all properties within 30 minutes of city centre and 10 minutes walk to public transport.
- **Pollution & Waste Reduction:** Minimum 4 waste streams per property; monthly waste monitoring; food waste minimisation; single-use item avoidance.
- **Water Management:** Water-saving fittings; leak detection systems; monthly consumption tracking; funding of clean-water initiatives such as Made Blue.

Certifications & Benchmarks

The strategy is anchored by four external frameworks: BREEAM Excellent (new builds) and BREEAM Very Good (redevelopments) for building standards; Green Globe (minimum 75%) for operational sustainability; Great Place to Work (minimum 70%) for team engagement; and GRESB for ESG benchmarking. The CRREM tool is used to track decarbonisation progress.

UN Sustainable Development Goals

The organisation is formally committed to four SDGs: SDG 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth), SDG 11 (Sustainable Cities and Communities), SDG 12 (Responsible Consumption and Production), and SDG 13 (Climate Action).