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**IN SEARCH OF GREEN-BASED SUSTAINABLE  
COMPETITIVENESS AND GREEN TRANSFORMATIONAL  
LEADERSHIP IN SMALL AND MEDIUM-SIZED HOTEL FIRMS:  
A CASE IN SOUTH ASIAN CONTEXT**

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**ABSTRACT**

*The global hotel industry, including Sri Lanka, has embraced green initiatives for more than two decades to sustain a competitive edge. However, environmental commitment varies by organizational capabilities, resources, and target markets, leading to differences in individual hotel competitiveness. In this context, it is significant to understand what is meant by green initiatives and their sustainable competitiveness from the Sri Lankan hoteliers' perspectives as green can have multiple interpretations and perceptions from the specific organizational culture of a hotel. In this context, the concept of transformational leadership also cannot be ignored. Presently, there is a scarcity of empirical research that explores what is meant by going green from a transformational leadership perspective and what matters in achieving green-based competitiveness that offers both financial and non-financial performance advantages to hotel firms in the Sri Lankan context. In order to fill this void in empirical literature in the Sri Lankan context, the study explored various meanings attached to green-based sustainable competitiveness from a means-and-ends perspective as it relates to transformational leadership in the hotel industry by drawing a purposive sample and undertaking qualitative interviews with the hotel industry professionals. The qualitative data narratives were analyzed thematically, which resulted in a unique set of competitive themes in green initiatives, which highlighted lean culture, stakeholder relationships, and continuous innovations as an organizational orchestration dimension while guilt culture and religiosity as customer orchestrations dimension of competitive advantage in green strategy in the industry. More importantly, the effect of Green Transformational Leadership can be seen*

*in the better, Green-based sustainable competitiveness in the SME sector. The study sheds interesting insights and implications for the hotel industry.*

**Keywords:** Green-Based Sustainable Competitiveness, Sri Lanka, Green Transformational Leadership, Small & Medium Hotels

## **1. Introduction**

Environmentally sustainable business strategies are on the rise all over the world. Among these, eco-friendly or green business practices have been gaining importance as a strategic business tool for winning competitive advantage. In this context, proponents of the Dynamic Capability (DC) Based View (Teece et al., 1997) and the Natural Resource-Based View (NRBV) (Hart & Dowell, 2011) insist that firms need to create and possess dynamic capabilities to sustain a competitive advantage from green practices in a dynamic business environment. Therefore, in order to achieve green-based competitiveness firms need to set, green-based strategies where they should have the capabilities to execute those strategies. Finally, through green innovation firms can achieve green-based competitiveness.

As firms note the positive gains that can accrue through environmentally friendly marketing strategies (Luo & Bhattacharya, 2006) and the potential pitfalls associated with non-environmentally friendly strategies, going green is beginning to take the centre and top strategic stage in boardrooms around the world. Therefore, to face this newly emerged, green-based sustainable competitiveness, leadership involvement is highly essential. Sustainability, green, and transformational leadership are interrelated concepts. Green and transformational leadership can influence positively their subordinates to achieve environmentally proactive strategies (Huang et al., 2021) which ultimately leads to sustainability. For example, Jiang et al. (2017) find that in order to achieve sustainability of a company, they need to bring environment-specific transformational leadership. Mainly, idealized influence, individual consideration, intellectual stimulation, and inspirational motivation of transformation leadership help to motivate the subordinates to achieve green or environmental goals, not only environmental protection but also encourage independent thoughts and innovations to improve environmental performance (Rehman & Yaqub, 2021; Dranev et al., 2018; Soto-Acosta et al., 2018). As a result, firms can understand and deploy the priorities of the environmental strategy and finally achieve sustainability. For example, Widisatria and Nawangsari (2021) prove that there is a positive relationship and significant influence on green transformational leadership on sustainable corporate performance. Based on the above details it can be identified that the present market is facing a green-based sustainable competitiveness, and the leaders have a significant

role in there. This research discusses the competitiveness and the role of the leadership in small and medium-sized hotel firms.

Focusing on the hotel industry, the tourism industry is one of the largest and fastest-growing global industries; the global tourism industry is expected to regain an accelerated growth in many economies and be instability after the COVID-19 pandemic soon (Ranasinghe et al., 2020). The hospitality and tourism industry continues to be one of the main contributors to global greenhouse gas emissions, particularly carbon dioxide emissions (Pang et al., 2013). As an important sector within the industry, the hotel industry not only consumes considerable water and energy (Su et al., 2013; Wu et al., 2010) but is also one of the largest polluters and consumers of natural resources in this field (Kasim, 2007). Previous studies suggested that the sustainable development of the hotel industry requires effective energy conservation and carbon reduction (ECCR) measures to reduce the negative impact of the greenhouse effect imposed by hotel operations (Teng et al., 2012). Additionally, sound environmental performance is considered a useful marketing strategy that not only can respond to public concern about the environment but can also generate economic benefits (Erdogan & Tosun, 2009).

The hotel sector in the Tourism industry is a key contributor to the Sri Lankan economy by pumping foreign exchange and generating a significant number of direct and indirect employment opportunities that generate needed foreign currency in the Sri Lankan economy. Hence, the key stakeholders have many expectations for it to be instability soon from 2022. Consequently, the hotel sector in Sri Lanka implies a lot for the competitiveness of the industry along with environmentally friendly or green practices in the sector. The hotel sector has been financially crippled by the COVID-19 pandemic from 2019- to 2021, it has plans to be reestablished as a booming sector in Sri Lanka soon and be a dynamic competitive player in Asia (Ranasinghe et al., 2020). It is evident that new thinking and innovative solutions are always needed to ensure the future success of tourism in Sri Lanka (Jayawardena & Biyagama, 2013; Liyange & Jayawardena, 2013).

In the above context, the study argues the need for more focus on Environmentally Sustainable Operations (ESO) in hotels in Sri Lanka to attract high-end tourists through value creation as well as improve long-term competitive advantage in the areas of financial and non-financial performance in a dynamic market posture. In implementing such kinds of changes, the leaders of the hotel industry can play a major role. The effect of leadership on Green-based sustainable Competitiveness cannot be ignored. Green transformational leadership is stimulating subordinates to achieve environmental goals. It deals with a conducive and user-friendly environment for creative outcomes in the long run (Chen & Chang, 2013; Jung et al., 2003). Thus, there is a dearth

of empirical investigations that identify the unique role that transformational leadership plays in securing green base competitiveness as a key dimension in sustainability.

Accordingly, the study selected the hotel industry in Sri Lanka as the empirical site to explore its green practices and associated competitiveness. This was due to the recently observed phenomenon related to the adoption of green practices as a competitive tool in this highly volatile industry. The aim of the study is to discover a unique set of competitive themes that underline green practices implemented by transformational leaders and in connection to long-term competitiveness in a dynamic environment with special reference to SMEs in the hotel industry.

## **2. Literature Review**

### **2.1. Sustainability**

The concept of sustainability was first coined in the late 1980s and can be identified as “development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs” (World Commission on Environment and Development, 1987, p.43.) Innovation is a key element to achieving sustainability and innovation can be obtained in a culture that embraces and feeds learning and change in the best way (Senge et al., 1999). In addition, two theoretical helps to support this view. Firstly, stakeholder theory describes that sustainability is about meeting the needs of all the company’s stakeholders, namely, the company itself, customers, employees, suppliers, and society at large. As explained by (Raub and Rice, 2019), the hospitality industry needs to create active partnerships with their stakeholders in order to achieve the goal of sustainability. Secondly, theoretical approaches based on the political economy also supported sustainability. For example, the critical theory of sustainability argues that economic growth relies upon the exploitation of both natural and social capital (Castro, 2004).

### **2.2. Transformation Leadership**

Transformational leadership can be used to transform the follower’s self-concept to achieve the organization’s values. This is done in four ways name idealized influence, individual consideration, intellectual stimulation, and inspirational motivation (Avolio & Bass, 2002). As a result, transformational leaders can be thought to possess qualities essential for promoting a positive social exchange with their followers, as these leaders are equipped with invigorating proactivity, the propensity to enthuse, adaptability, provide meaning and challenge and build trust and inspire (Bass & Avolio, 2004).

### **2.3. Sustainability, Green, and Transformational Leadership**

Green and general transformational leadership were empirically different but related. A green transformational leader can identify as a leader with a clear vision, charisma, individual inspiration, motivation, and unconditional support to employees toward gaining the set environmental goals (Mittal & Dhar, 2016). Hence, compared to general transformational leadership pro-environment behavior can be observed in green transformational leadership (Robertson & Barling, 2017). Green transformation leadership has a significant impact on employee behavior, organizational development, green performance, product innovation and service innovation, and external environmental factors of a firm (Cheung and Wong, 2011; Halbesleben et al., 2003). However, the findings on the relationship between green transformation leadership and environmental performance are inconsistent especially relevant to the hospitality industry (Hoch et al., 2018; Yang et al., 2017).

#### **2.4. Green-Based Competitiveness**

In order to acquire competitive advantage, firms have tried to use green-based competitiveness in recent years. To achieve that most companies are considering green innovation. The performance of innovation depends on two areas competitive strategy and managerial capacities (Oslo, 2018). Green products and the manufacturing process are positively associated with firms' competitive advantage (Chen et al., 2006).

#### **2.5. Connections between Green-Based Sustainable Competitiveness and Green-Based Transformational Leadership**

Innovation needs a focus on sustainable competitiveness where companies achieve their economic goals through protecting the environment (Barbieri et al., 2010). Hence green innovation can direct companies to achieve green-based sustainable competitiveness. Further, Pujari et al. (2003) highlighted that green product choices for customers can achieve green-based sustainability. Therefore, a green-based sustainable competitive advantage can be achieved when the company is successful. In this process, they add superior value to the customer which the competitors cannot easily imitate. However, in order to attain a competitive advantage, the firm needs to evaluate and renew itself with the aim of better meeting environmental demand (Ribeiro & Neto, 2021).

It is not easy to achieve green-based sustainable competitiveness. In order to do that the firm needs the support of its employees. For that firms need to employ green-based transformational leadership. Transformational leadership can transmit firms' value to their employees and direct them to achieve the goals they need (Shamir et al., 1998). Transformational leadership can transmit firms' value to their

employees and direct them to achieve the goals they need (Shamir et al., 1998). Green-based transformation leadership can transform the personal values of the employees into green-based firm values (Bono & Judge, 2003). For example, Baker and Demerouti (2008) highlight that job resources can be built by transformational leadership. And Lee et al. (2014) showed that green leadership can positively influence green competitiveness. In addition, green transformational leadership plays a key role in introducing new products while gaining a competitive advantage for organizations. These leaders use their abilities, knowledge, and empathy to achieve the set goals (Chen & Chang, 2013). Also, green-based transformational leaders specialize in how to collaborate with external stakeholders in order to gain specialized knowledge to innovate where it directs to achieve a competitive advantage and finally sustainable competitiveness (Dechant & Altman, 1994). Consequently, the study crafted three research questions as to what environmental or green practices have been adopted by the hotel sector presently, how the identified green practices are perceived by the hotel sector as important for its competitiveness, and what meaning the green practices have been attached from transformational leadership perspective by key stakeholders in the industry.

### **3. Methodology**

Qualitative data from in-depth interviews were analyzed to derive the existing uncovered themes in the industry. Hence, interviews with managers were employed as the key strategy to generate evidence and findings. There are different methods to analyze the research findings in qualitative research. This study has employed purposive sampling to select the respondents for in-depth interviews. The purposive sampling was appropriate for selecting the hotels and the respondents representing different categories of hotels to understand the diverse set of attitudes on green practices and competitiveness (Malhotra & Birks, 2007). Hence, 25 hotels were purposively selected, covering every important category of the hotels as well as small and medium-sized hotels. The 25 hotels were selected from the list of hotels that were registered under the Sri Lanka Tourism Development Authority under the SME category. From each selected hotel, the general manager, one customer contact employee, as well as one middle manager, were selected. In selecting the respondents, it was made sure to include only the respondents who had been working for more than three years in the same hotel. A semi-structured discussion guide was used as the interview tool and the interview protocols were derived from the research questions of the study.

Although many different qualitative research paradigms are useful for data analysis and interpretation, a common sequence of steps can be observed across several paradigms (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

They are:

Step-1: Devising and affixing codes to field notes derived from observations, interviews, or documentary evidence.

Step-2: Noting the researcher's reflections on the observations (e.g., as margin notes and journal entries).

Step-3: Identifying preliminary patterns, themes, and relationships.

Step-4: Conduct a more focused investigation of observed commonalities and differences in the next wave of data collection.

Step-5: Arriving at interpretations.

Step-6: Verifying these interpretations (e.g., using a member check of study participants, triangulating from different data sources, or getting another member of the research team to examine the chain of evidence).

The thematic analysis method was used in this study to analyze in-depth interview data. This is a relatively under-explored phenomenon in an emerging economic context like hotels and green practices, and the qualitative thematic analysis is much suited (Bryman & Bell, 2011). The process of thematic analysis involves the identification of themes through "careful reading and re-reading of the data" (Rice & Ezzy, 1999; Sharma, 2021). This can be considered as a form of pattern recognition within the data, where emerging themes become the categories for analysis. The coding process involved in thematic analysis is recognizing (seeing) an important moment and encoding it (seeing it as something) prior to a process of interpretation (Boyatzis, 1998). According to Boyatzis (1998), a "good code" captures the qualitative richness of the phenomenon. Encoding the information organizes the data to identify and develop themes from them. Boyatzis (1998) defined a theme as "a pattern in the information that at minimum describes and organizes the possible observations and at maximum interprets aspects of the phenomenon".

It is important to understand the emerging patterns in qualitative data analysis. According to Eisenhardt (1989), patterns can be identified in two ways. The first system of pattern involves identifying the categories or themes and subsequently checking for similarities and differences among the cases. Thus, themes or dimensions can be derived from literature and subsequently, a case-wise comparison is made. The second system permits the comparison of pairs of cases and the identification of existing similarities and differences without having any prior dimensions or categories. Interestingly this nature of comparison can result in emerging new categories and concepts that investigators did not foresee (Eisenhardt, 1989). The meanings and actions of managers and employees were recognized by observing the patterns of behavior in different cases and identifying the similarities and dissimilarities of underpinning interpretations. The key was to develop empathy with the data to understand the informants' realities and the process through which they disclosed information (Gamage, 2004). The

extract of the main findings is presented in terms of narratives and then emerging themes are specified in the following section.

#### **4. Results/Analysis and Discussion**

The data gathered through the interviews held with 25 senior managers, 25 middle managers, and 25 customer contact employees of the hotels were analyzed. The important expressions made by the three parties have been highlighted. Some interviews conducted in Sinhala were translated into English by the researchers. Based on the guidelines provided by Miles & Huberman (1994), and Yin (2003), available representative narratives from the interview data are presented to exemplify the results of the qualitative data analysis.

##### **4.1. Themes from the Qualitative Interviews**

The following analysis focuses on deriving significant insights from the interviews held with hotel managers and customer contact employees. It captures underlying themes that describe hotels' behavior regarding green-based competitiveness, which mainly looks into the means and ends of green practices of the hotels in the light of green market-focused learning, green market-related flexibilities, and sustainable competitive advantage. The emerging themes underlie a set of theoretical concepts or categories that are reflected in the empirical findings. In this analysis, the purpose was to reflect common concepts that uncover contextual truths that the quantitative analysis cannot reveal about green practices that are associated with the green-based leadership of a hotel. The following section discusses the five main themes that emerged from the narrative analysis.

##### ***Lean with Green***

The following is an experience shared by the manager of a five-star hotel presents the active commitment of the hotels to minimize or prevent pollution with a focus on cost reduction through the contribution of employees. *“Every month we have meetings, and we always welcome the suggestions and complaints of our customers as well as employees. We have a reward system for this as well. New ideas to minimize the cost and prevent pollution will be considered for the performance evaluation of employees as well. With all these we have been able to report our sustainability to the world: we use the GRI format introduced by the Global Reporting Initiative (GRI). Some reveal information on our sustainability performance– including carbon emissions, water use, and human aspects.”* In addition to pollution prevention, the following narrative by a manager of an unclassified hotel communicates they are involved in reducing the cost of water and electricity through natural means. *“Every year we have a planning system to reduce the water bill, electricity bill. Now we have a plan for the solar system as we think it matters for the future. Waste*



*management is more important, and we are always using our system to have proper management on this."*

The above two comments have some relation to what King and Lenox (2001) described Green as '*the good public spill-over of Lean*'. They explained these positive side-effects in the efforts towards waste reduction and the cutting back of pollution. In a similar tone, the following manager shed the idea that understanding eco-needs would provide ways to respond with eco-friendly services and products as well as get a cost advantage in a dynamic marketplace. *"I like to work with some experiments to reduce the cost. Tourists are always concerned about natural things. They like to see natural lights, not the ones we usually use. Some small things will count a lot. I think the future is all about how we are dealing with nature as well as with the environment. So, we have to understand customers in terms of their eco-needs. It will pave the way to acquire cost savings, customer satisfaction, and environmental quality."*

The above narratives discover that efforts to enhance the environmental quality/performance of the services will improve customer satisfaction and cost-based improvements. These aspects of green initiatives have the inherent properties of a lean environment. Although green business practices and lean practices cannot easily be integrated, Lean also focuses on waste reduction, product and service designs for cost-based savings, employee involvement as well as enhancement of customer relationships (Dues et al., 2013). Thus, it can be inferred that a lean environment can catalyze the implementation of green initiatives. It means that green market-focused learning and capability development have common properties and synergies in achieving sustainable competitive advantage in the hotel sector as the connection of Lean and Green touch on the efficient use of energy (and resources) and the reduction of waste and pollution (Yang et al., 2011; Mohan et al., 2022; Verma & Sharma, 2021). Both green and lean are also treated as global-level business best practices in improving competitiveness in any industry. Now, lean and green practices are commonly established in the Apparel sector in Sri Lanka. Hence, it is possible to conceptualize green and lean connections in the hotel sector as well due to its global presence.

### ***Religion in Green***

The following manager from a four-star related hotel said that the value system underlying green practices is not foreign to Sri Lanka. They implied that it used to be part of the national value system the Sri Lankan value system. It has roots in the ancient Buddhist civilization, the Sinhala kingdom, and our cultural heritage which existed in Sri Lanka. *"Sri Lanka, we have more than 5000 years of civilization. If you read Buddhism the concept of green has been there for many years. So, it is all about implementing what we did in Sigiriya, Polonnaruwa again. This is our*

*culture, and this is our tradition. We need to respect that. That is the way it can be communicated to our customers.*" With the above remarks, a manager from an unclassified hotel further elaborated the following idea Sri Lankans had a green lifestyle in the past, which was promoted by the religious value system in the country. This means the traditional religious (especially Buddhism-based) value system makes a close tie between man and nature. It also revealed that enhancing the link between man and nature cannot be ignored. Owen and Vidarsa (2007) argued that religious traditions in Buddhism and Hinduism foster environmental protection. This has been supported by different studies (Lee and Han, 2021). Hence, eco-friendly attitudes and behavior in Sri Lankan tourism are essential drivers of competitive advantage for the industry. Green culture should be taken into account as a core competence in developing the industry in Sri Lanka as well as differentiating Sri Lankan hospitality from the other competitors in the region.

*"It is divine to our guests. They highly respect our hotel due to its commitment to eco-friendly practices that protect the environment and animals. The beauty of green is not only aesthetic nature but the spiritual feelings they experience. One guest from Australia murmured that she felt here like a holy place, our sincerity in protecting surroundings here."* This is shared by a customer of an unclassified hotel. Religiosity can be particularly relevant in understanding attitudes and behaviors toward the protection of the natural environment. Religious traditions and movements include worldviews, ethical precepts, and spiritual elements that shape perceptions about the natural environment and can act as guiding principles regarding how acts and choices affect nature (Biel & Nilsson, 2005).

From a Buddhist perspective, several Vinaya rules prohibit monks from polluting green grass and water with saliva and urine. As per the Vinaya Pitaka, 205-206, these were the common agents of pollution known during the Buddha's day and rules were promulgated against causing such pollution. Cleanliness was highly commended by the Buddhists both in the person and in the environment. They were very concerned about keeping water clean, be it in the river, pond, or well. These sources of water were for public use and each individual had to use them with proper public-spirited caution so that others could use them with the same degree of cleanliness. Rules regarding the cleanliness of green grass were prompted by ethical and aesthetic considerations. Moreover, the grass is food for most animals, and it is man's duty to refrain from polluting it with his activities. These imply the attitude of Buddhism towards pollution prevention, which is an important religious property in Buddhism.

According to Buddhism, several Suttas from the Pali Canon indicate that Buddhism accepts that there is a close relationship

between human morality and the natural environment. This impression has been outlined in the theory of the five natural laws (Pancaniyamadhamma) in later commentaries (Eppsteiner, 1998). As per this view, in the universe, there are five natural laws at work: namely, physical laws, biological laws, psychological laws, moral laws, and causal laws. This means that the physical environment of any given area conditions the growth and development of its biological component, i.e., fauna and flora.

Furthermore, the well-known Five Precepts (panchasila) form the minimum code of ethics to which every lay Buddhist should adhere. Its first precept involves abstention from injury to life. Buddhism also prescribes the practice of metta, "loving-kindness" towards all creatures in all quarters without restriction (Eppsteiner, 1998; Kuan, 2021; Julian, 2021). This is also reflected in the Karaniyametta Sutta (Sutta-nipata) which says:

“May creatures all be of a blissful heart.  
 Whatever breathing beings they may be,  
 No matter whether they are frail or firm,  
 With none excepted, be they long or big,  
 Or middle-sized or be they short or small,  
 Or thick, as well as those seen or unseen,  
 Or whether they are dwelling far or near,  
 Existing or yet seeking to exist,  
 May creatures all be of a blissful heart.”

Thus, the Buddhist-based religious perspective emphasizes the importance of achieving a harmonious relationship between humankind and nature with a focus on spiritual development and humility towards nature. In the search for such a cooperative attitude towards nature, an eco-friendly service environment is inspiring and appealing to guests. Further, as proposed by (Sharpley & Jepson, 2011), spiritual experience in tourism is becoming a key concern in the postmodern era. It is the main method of being different and gaining a competitive advantage. Hence, the above particulars bring a connotation that green commitments of hotels can activate the religious and spiritual mindfulness of guests as it sounds sacred.

### ***Salesmanship and Stakeholder Relationships in Green***

The managers as well as customer contact people revealed the following realities about their green practices. They made the following expressions that implied the strategic role of green-centered salesmanship in the hotel sector.

*“My lower-level managers are thinking that green is all about green (laughing). It is all about marketing. I already communicated with them, and I think accepted. But once it comes to day-to-day practice, I have to*

*get involved with that. Some guests are special, and I meet them as they are the ones bringing others.” – A general Manager.*

*“Once we have green practice, they like to discuss that with us, taking photos. Sometimes they posted that to our hotel. Even some tourists are coming with that reference. They are expecting that from us. I think if you have this practice this is better than advertising as in this industry good recommendation is a must.” – A customer contact employee.*

All of the above interestingly disclose that green practices of the hotel create salesmanship for hotels and play a role of customer relationship building driver as well as customer retention driver. According to Grewal & Sharma (1991), the salesmanship of a salesperson is a critical personality factor that affects customer satisfaction and long-term, profitable business relationships. This also has an immediate and long-term influence on the guests through social and emotional bonding.

The following remarks emphasized that the relationship orientation of hotels needs to extend beyond the direct customer relationship orientation. The success of green market-focused learning practices requires more than the relationship with guests of hotels. *“Sometimes I have a myopic idea whether we have to satisfy whom on the green. I think number one should be customers. But I think now we are deviating from this from many other stakeholders than customers. There should be a fundamental understanding of value creation. This has to be addressed. Customers are coming to us because of our quality and value. They will experience and share this with others. So, it is our part to understand that in a practical way in order to maximize the wealth of shareholders.”*

These point out that the hotels have to develop and maintain relationships with many stakeholders in and outside the industry in green matters. Green practices have an impact on all parties in society. The effective management of relationships with key stakeholders contributes to marketplace success (Brammer & Millington, 2008). When implementing green practices, these relationships with stakeholders may be directed to achieve cost reductions, acquire new technology, research & development, and image building as well as develop future markets (Rowley & Berman, 2000; Alhawari et al., 2021).

### ***Continuous Innovation for Green***

Hotel managers believe that when they undertake green enthusiastically, they have to craft innovation-based green strategies and reshape the competitive rules to obtain competitive advantages (Porter & Van der Linde, 1995). Green innovations are the improvement of products or processes about energy-saving, pollution-prevention, waste recycling, green product designs, and corporate environmental management practices (Chen et al., 2012). The following extracts report

the strategic importance of innovation in greening hotels. *“Now we can see the growth of tourism in the country. But we have to be pre-emptive. Now tourists are not that concerned about basics. They need innovativeness. The green creates an opportunity for us. We are a group of hotels and have a green department now and with this, we adopted a green culture to the organization. There are certain standards we have to maintain on this, it is all about handling the pressure, but we like that. Ultimately it comes with something novel. One such success story is our construction of a wetland system in lake and reed beds. It is my first experience in Sri Lanka. It has a lot of eco-friendly features.”*

A manager (unclassified hotel): *“I am very concerned about value-creating. We have to deal with many people in business operations and their ideas should be listened to carefully. Some ideas will do wonders. We need to respond to this if it is increasing the value or creating value for our tourists. Not the person but the ideas, not the formal but sometimes informal one to one meeting are work effectively on this.”*

The following remarks further add to the notion that green innovations should be continuous as green initiatives can be quickly imitated by competitors. Guests as well as other external stakeholders are also demanding green. Thus, continuous innovation is a must to secure a competitive advantage and respond to the continuous changes in the environment. Green innovations are the best way to improve the performance of environmental management to satisfy the requirement of environmental regulations (Chen et al., 2012; Song and Yu, 2018; Chu et al., 2018).

A manager (1-star hotel): *“Every month I have a meeting with my people in the hotel and advise them how much we have to work with the environment as this will create a competitive advantage in the long run. Even some of them suggest some ideas to develop this as well. Small things always play a major role. We cannot compete in the market with more money. We need creativity to continue value creation through the green. Without the renewal of our green approaches, we will be copied by others and lose the advantage.”*

A manager (unclassified hotel): *“It is important to understand the nature of tourists. He/she comes individually or as a family or as a group of members. So many expectations are there for us to understand. Expectations of them also are different. They are innovation-conscious and variety seekers. Not only that, changes in regulations and demands from external bodies have made us update our ventures and technology accordingly. Consequently, green is a way to renew our service environment, and we have to keep it up.”*

Accordingly, it can be inferred that Green has to deal with a continuous flow of innovation in order to stay dynamic in the industry. Green innovations can be a key success factor to achieve sustainable competitive advantage.

### ***Guilt as an Emotion for Green***

It was interesting to reveal that some customers, especially many Europeans, were keen on green practices. The following expressions made by hotel managers infer that guests are distinctive in their emotions toward the environment and its quality.

A manager (4-star hotel): *"We have to work with the environment, and we have to respect the environment. Most of the Europeans whom I deal with have come to this place for years. They appreciate our efforts and are worried about any action that badly influences the environment. They know how our team is working with this hotel. And what I do with all these is respect the environment, not by doing any harm. Our initiatives related to biodiversity protection and coastal area conservation have impressed some guests. Even some have donated to these projects."*

A general manager (4-star hotel): *"We have to work with the environment, and we have to respect the environment. Most of the Europeans whom I deal with have come to this place for years. They appreciate our efforts and are worried about any action that badly influences the environment. They know how our team is working with this hotel. And what I do with all these is respect the environment, not by doing any harm. Our initiatives related to biodiversity protection and coastal area conservation have impressed some guests. Even some have donated to these projects."*

A manager (unclassified hotel): *"Guests who are visiting this hotel are more concerned about the effect of us on the environment. Sometimes they like to share their ideas with us about their experiences in different countries. That I think is important. Now there is also a trend to measure the performance based on customer value linked to eco-friendly endeavours of hotels."*

In congruence with the above, the following excerpts made by customer contact employees of two hotels demarcate a difference in environmentally associated emotions between Europeans and Asians.

Customer contact employee (4-star hotel): *"Many customers asked us about this (green) such as carbon footprint, waste, water, pollution and all. So, we have been advised on green and how it has been implemented in our hotel chain. So, it is all about fundamentals to us. But according to my experience most European customers are concerned about this matter, not Asians. Sometimes we can see Indians and Chinese customers as unique as they are blind to green initiatives."*

A customer contact employee (unclassified hotel): *"I do not see any output on this. Customers from Asia will come and go. Sometimes people from the UK, France, and their neighbors ask some (stupid?) stuff about nature here which I do not know how to answer in English but refer to my manager. Such people are like a burden to us and sometimes I feel this is all about gimmicks in this sector. We have a workshop on this, but I feel it is like talk shop."*

All the above statements disclose that European guests are very much concerned about environmentally friendly practices of hotels whilst Asians do not show any special attitude towards these practices. These attitudes, emotions, and behavior held by green-conscious Europeans can be understood in the light of the term “guilt”. Guilt has been defined as “the emotional feeling associated with the realization that one has violated an important social, moral, or ethical regulation” (Chaplin, 1968). Tangney and Dearing (2002) explained that those who feel guilt are more able to empathize with others, accept responsibility for negative events, and are less prone to anger. The terms “*worried about any action that badly influences the environment*”, “*respecting the environment, not doing any harm*” and “*effect of us on the environment*” resemble guilt emotions. Supporting this view, it is also apparent that individuals in Western cultures are more guilt-oriented in their attitudes and emotions than their Asian counterparts as an individualized component of guilt coincides with the construction of Western cultures as individualist and self-absorbed (Scheff, 1995; MacDonald, 2020; Laub, 2018; Thomas et al., 2018). Hence, it is meaningful to describe that guests who are keener on eco-friendly service offerings, especially Europeans, experience guilt emotions and are more inclined to attend green hotels as a way to minimize their guilt and fulfill their moral obligation to nature. Furthermore, there is a relationship that can be seen from the effect of Green Transformational Leadership for the better, Green-based sustainable Competitiveness in the SME sector.

### ***Green Transformational Leadership (Green TL) and Green-based Sustainable Competitiveness***

The managers interviewed were also asked about how their leadership is affecting Green-based Sustainable Competitiveness. The following remarks can be extracted from the managers. “*As you know this is challenging. We need to think of many dimensions. Anyway, as General manager of this hotel, I am always concerned about planning for the green and how my team is planning for this as well. Because if I only plan for environmental protection and my team does not have any idea then there will be a problem. I have to give them motivation and direction to them while setting up the example. Because we need to think about long-term.*” Chen and Chang (2013) discussed green transformational leadership with the qualities of a leader such as providing a clear environmental vision, giving direction to the team, and stimulating and encouraging the team for long-term sustainability. Furthermore, they demonstrated certain attributes such as alignment of environmental goals of managers and team, working together with subordinates to achieve goals, and Encouraging, Inspiring, and Stimulating members. This can be seen from the explanation of the following participant. “*My owner always motivates us to think about the environment and he always plans to have proper*

*green measures to attract tourists and save a certain amount of money for the hotel in the long run. Also, he encourages us to propose certain things that align with Green such as recycling, indigenous practices aligning with the environment, etc. Also, we work as a team with more motivation as we know it is important for us to do something for this world which protecting the planet. And also, we get more endorsement from our good work from both local and foreign tourists as well.*" As per these remarks, it is clear that the owner of the hotel had clearly articulated the environmental vision to subordinates while Encouraging, Inspiring, and Stimulating members to achieve the aforementioned goals. Hence the importance of Green Transformational Leadership of managers can be considered a pivotal factor for Green based on sustainable competitiveness.

## **5. Discussion of the Key Themes**

In search for the means and ends of green-based competitiveness in the hotel sector in Sri Lanka, it was interesting to notice that qualitative interviews discovered some commonly emerging themes that have a connection to green practices and their competitiveness in the Sri Lankan hotel sector. Many cases of green practices of hotels underlined those hotels had a focus on the prevention of pollution, waste management, design for a cost-effective service environment, employee participation, and enhancing customer satisfaction. These practices can be commonly found in lean-related literature as well (King and Lenox, 2001). Although green and lean orientation cannot be combined philosophically, it seems that both have some common properties in the services environment at hotels that are driven by improving the environmental quality of service offerings. At a global level, best practices green and lean can be practically applicable to the service settings of a hotel to address common issues related to pollution prevention, waste management, and effective utilization of energy and improve the customer value in a service environment. This discovery is consistent with literature that addresses similarities and differences between green and lean as well as conceptualizes lean environment can be a potential catalyst for green practices (Dues et al., 2013). Hence, the study argues that green marker-focused learning and dynamic capability development overlap to a certain extent whilst there is a potential for convergence of green and lean practices for sustaining competitive advantage in the areas of financial and non-financial performance in the hotel sector in the future.

It was noteworthy to discover that the green orientation of hotels reflected some aspects of religion. Especially, findings revealed that green had roots in caring for nature, spirituality, traditional and ancient Sinhala value system, and values promoted in Buddhist civilization. These are consistent with (Owen & Vidarsa, 2007) who captured those religious traditions in Buddhism and Hinduism to foster



environmental protection. Some hoteliers pointed out that many tourists were conscious of green practices as something sacred, noble, ethical, and aesthetic. These properties can perhaps be argued to be associated with what was promoted by the Buddha. According to Vinaya Ptaka (205-206), Buddhism enacted and circulated rules against practices causing water, air, and sound pollution and dirtiness in the natural environment as well as in the person.

Additionally, hotel customer contact employees, as well as managers, believed that commitment to green practices provided an opportunity for hotels as well as tourists to be linked to nature and have a close bond between human morality and the natural environment. This view is consistent with the theory of the five natural laws (*Pancaniyamadhamma*) which stresses that in the universe there are five natural laws at work: namely, physical laws, biological laws, psychological laws, moral laws, and causal laws, and any effect on the physical environment of any given area conditions the growth and development of its biological component, nature. This pinpoints the universal law of the “*cause and effect*” relationship. This is also allied with the Five Precepts (*Panchasila*) form the minimum code of ethics to which every lay Buddhist should adhere. Its first precept involves abstention from injury to life. Buddhism also advocates the practice of *metta*, “loving-kindness” towards all creatures in all quarters without restriction as discoursed in the *Karaniyametta Sutta (Sutta-nipata)* (Eppsteiner, 1998). Additionally, the spiritual property of green as a dimension of religion can be considered significant as spiritual experience in tourism is becoming a key concern in postmodern literature (Sharpley & Jepson, 2011). Thus, these aspects linked to a commitment to green-oriented learning and capability development can be sustainable and unique sources of long-term and enduring competitive advantage for the hotel sector in Sri Lanka.

Importantly, the interviews pinpointed that customer contact employee, and their associated personality/salesmanship acted as a vehicle for communicating the perceived value of green practices to tourists of hotels. It highlighted that salesmanship for green is the main customer retention and relationship driver as well as a major tool for satisfying customers through green. It implied that the green salesmanship of hotels created emotional as well as social bonds between hotels and tourists. This can be interpreted in light of the strong link between green practices and their associated potential for brand loyalty. This is consistent with the argument of (Grewal & Sharma, 1991) which stresses the salesmanship of a salesperson as a critical factor that affects customer satisfaction and long-term, profitable business relationships as well as marketing success (Williams & Attaway, 1996). Furthermore, this finding disclosed that the value and success of green practices originate not only simply from customer relationship building

but also from stakeholder relationship orientation as suggested by (Brammer & Millington, 2008; Lock, 2019; Guha et al., 2018). This environmental sustainability has driven relationships with key stakeholders that can pave the way for improved green market-focused learning and capability development which in turn lead to cost reductions, acquire new technology, research & development, image building as well as the development of future markets (Rowley & Berman, 2000; Hart & Ahuja, 1996) as roots to sustain competitive advantage in the Sri Lankan hotel sector.

As a substantial dimension of dynamic capabilities associated with green practices, the emerging themes emphasized continuous innovations in the hotel sector of Sri Lanka. Many hotels successful in green implementation witnessed that they usually had a culture of continuous improvement, creativity, and innovation. Especially, such hotels experienced a continuous renewal of eco-friendly products and service environments. These consist of the improvement of products or processes about energy-saving, pollution-prevention; waste recycling, green product designs, and corporate environmental management as proposed by (Chen et al., 2012; Jayawardena et al., 2013; Kazancoglu et al., 2021). Further, these findings supported those continuous innovations for green created opportunities to comply with environmental regulations and standards (Chen et al., 2012) as well as to outperform the competitive landscape (Porter & Van Der Linde, 1995) by establishing new rules of competition for green and addressing diverse requirements across a wide spectrum of stakeholders in the Sri Lankan hotel sector. It should be noted that market-focused learning on green product markets stimulates these sources of green-based continuous innovations (Weerawardena, 2003). Hence, this dimension is the main capability to accomplish a financial and non-financial measure of sustainable competitive advantage in the sector.

As the final and fifth themes emerged from qualitative interviews, it was thought-provoking to find guilt-centered emotion associated with green practices. This emotion of guilt seemed to be linked with tourists' mindfulness about the service of the hotel and its effect on the quality of the natural environment. Exclusively, these guilt-based attitudes towards the natural environment were mainly expressed by European-based tourists who were concerned about whether hotels and themselves violate social, moral, or ethical regulations (Chaplin, 1968) due to their decisions. This interpretation is consistent with the environmental values held in Western cultures which are more guilt-oriented in their attitudes and emotions than their Asian counterparts as the individualized component of guilt coincides with the construction of Western cultures as individualist and self-absorbed (Scheff, 1995). As a result of these guilt-based emotions, green practices could attract more Europeans and create an emotional selling

proposition for them over other counterparts in Europe. Accordingly, it can be rationalized that green market-focused learning and capability development of hotels should especially pay attention to understanding the guilt-based mindset of Europeans and capitalize on green guilt-based realities in their green projects to gain sustainable competitive advantage catering to European market segments.

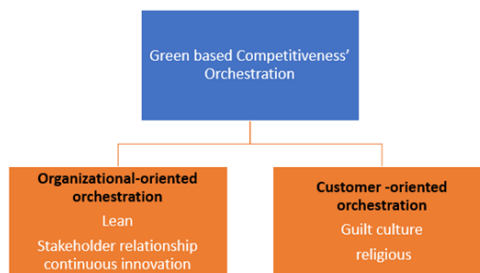
Green transformational leadership has also been observed, which can be an important factor for Green-based Sustainable Competitiveness. There is a positive relationship that can be seen between Green transformational leadership and environmental performance in small and medium enterprises (Sun et al., 2022). More interestingly (Zhang, Xu & Wang, 2020) argued that green transformational leadership plays a more refined role in promoting employees' green creativity.

## 6. Conclusion and Implications

Figure 1 represents the above-discussed main themes that have relevance for green-based competitiveness in the light of green market-focused learning, dynamic capabilities, and sustainable competitive advantage in the hotel sector of Sri Lanka. The effect of Green transformational leadership on Green-based competitiveness also can be seen and is one of the important antecedents for Green-based competitiveness.



**Figure 1:** Emerging Themes of Green-Based Competitiveness.



**Figure 2:** Green Leadership Based Competitiveness' Orchestration.

This study developed propositions that denote Green Leadership-based Competitiveness in the hotel sector in Sri Lanka. Factors such as Lean, Stakeholder relationship, and continuous innovation can be considered as “organizational-oriented orchestration” and Guilt culture and religious factors align with “customer-oriented orchestration” (refer to Figure 2). According to (Teixeira et al., 2022) Impact of factors such as lean aligns with the “Lean and Green (LG)” practices on an organization's competitive advantage (CA) through sustainable performance.

As managerial implications, it can be recommended to have two strategies: organizational-oriented orchestration and customer-oriented orchestration. In organizational-oriented orchestration, there should be a strategic focus to have better Lean, Stakeholder relationships, and continuous innovation aligned with the commitment of top management with the top-down approach. For the customer-oriented orchestration, there can be better guerrilla marketing strategies by the organization focusing on factors such as “Guilt culture” and “religious”. Thus, the research was able to extend the understanding of green-based competitiveness which can be considered a competitive advantage for the organization for sustainable development in the long run. As per Chen and Chang (2013), green competitive advantage can be considered as a condition for a company to take some position on environmental management or green innovation, where competitors cannot imitate a successful environmental strategy and can derive lasting benefits from this successful environmental management. This study highlights organizational-oriented orchestration and customer-oriented orchestration which competitors would not be able to imitate as a successful environmental strategy. Furthermore, this will lead to a sustainable competitive advantage for any organization. As mentioned earlier there is a need for more empirical studies on Green transformational leadership and its effect on this Green-based sustainable Competitiveness in a different context as well.

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