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The Value Proposition Of Green Foodservice: A Qualitative Examination

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Abstract: *This study investigates the advantages of suztainable practices beyond legal compliance as sustainability becomes increasingly important in the foodservice sector. The study examines the financial, customer-focused, and environmental benefits that foodservice businesses that have incorporated sustainability into their operations have to offer using a qualitative methodology. Semi-structured interviews with chefs, restaurant managers, and sustainability officers from different culinary enterprises that operate sustainably were used to collect data. Three main elements emerge from the data: environmental effect, consumer loyalty, and cost savings. Businesses claim significant cost savings via energy-efficient procedures, trash reduction, and buying in bulk from regional vendors. Because environmentally conscientious diners like firms that share their beliefs, sustainable operations have also been related to improved brand image and customer retention. Finally, the beneficial ecological effects—like a smaller carbon footprint and resource preservation—showcase how sustainability benefits both business and the environment. This study highlights that sustainability is a strategic strategy with multifaceted benefits for foodservice operations, rather than just a compliance concern.*

Keywords: sustainability, foodservice, cost savings, customer loyalty, waste reduction, environmental impact, qualitative research

1. INTRODUCTION

In today's foodservice sector, sustainability has transcended its traditional role as a regulatory requirement and emerged as a vital source of competitive advantage. Contemporary literature highlights a variety of factors driving this shift, underscoring the need for foodservice businesses to embed sustainable practices into their core operational strategies. A key driver is the rising consumer demand for environmentally responsible practices, especially among younger, more eco-conscious demographics. These consumers increasingly expect net-positive impacts rather than mere compliance. As a result, companies are beginning to recognize sustainability as a means of differentiation rather than just a legal obligation. Lichtenthaler (2021) emphasizes the importance of evolving from a "no net loss" mindset to one that actively contributes to environmental betterment—a shift that is essential for achieving sustainable leadership, particularly in foodservice contexts. This proactive approach allows businesses to not only meet regulatory standards but also enhance their brand positioning, ultimately boosting customer satisfaction and loyalty (Chaturvedi et al., 2022).

Modern businesses are increasingly expected to respond to consumers' growing environmental awareness by implementing strategies that extend beyond mere regulatory compliance. The integration of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) into corporate strategy has become essential, particularly in industries with high environmental impacts. Zhang (2021) notes that firms in heavily polluting sectors face mounting pressure to adopt environmental practices that exceed compliance standards. CSR not only shapes environmental strategy but also significantly contributes to a company's overall performance (Kraus et al., 2020). This trend corresponds with rising consumer awareness of environmental issues and the growing importance placed on companies' sustainability efforts (Sharabati et al., 2023). Environmentally responsible companies often gain a competitive edge, as consumer perceptions increasingly influence purchasing decisions.

Beyond minimizing environmental harm, sustainable practices offer opportunities for innovation and operational growth. Foodservice enterprises, in particular, must understand and harness the full spectrum of sustainability's benefits to remain competitive. Emerging literature supports the assertion that success in today's food industry depends on embedding sustainability across business models. Strategic innovations that incorporate sustainability into food manufacturing and supply chains address environmental challenges while fostering growth and differentiation (Ojo et al., 2020). This is reinforced by Industry 4.0 advancements, which highlight the importance of transitioning toward sustainable food systems to enhance both environmental stewardship and operational efficiency (Herrero et al., 2020). Additionally, sustainability initiatives drive product innovation aligned with consumer demand for healthier and eco-friendly options. The European Union's Farm to Fork strategy exemplifies how policy frameworks can guide the food sector toward sustainability by promoting transparency and encouraging sustainable consumption. Such initiatives not only build consumer trust but also create new avenues for operational and market expansion (Singh et al., 2023).

The integration of sustainability into business operations has demonstrated measurable effects on both operational

effectiveness and customer perception. Key initiatives such as energy conservation, waste reduction, and sourcing from local suppliers contribute significantly to cost savings and improved financial performance. Nsour et al. (2023) illustrate how digital transformation aligned with sustainability, such as electronic insurance systems, can streamline operations and reduce costs. Similarly, Amaral et al. (2020) highlight that sustainable building practices—including efficient resource and waste management—can mitigate financial risks while promoting environmental responsibility. Beyond internal operations, sustainability also influences consumer behavior. Ethical and environmental considerations are increasingly shaping customer loyalty, with consumers favoring businesses that align with their values. Foodservice enterprises that embed sustainability into their core strategies often report higher customer satisfaction and a strengthened brand image, ultimately gaining a competitive advantage through enhanced market positioning.

Despite the well-documented advantages, many foodservice companies continue to perceive sustainability as costly and complex. This study challenges that notion by emphasizing the tangible benefits of sustainable practices. Evidence from Swalehe et al. (2020) reveals that sustainability-driven operations in Kenya's manufacturing sector led to improved performance and stakeholder satisfaction, suggesting similar potential in the foodservice industry. Sullivan et al. (2021) further confirm that environmentally responsible initiatives enhance customer satisfaction and brand loyalty, both of which contribute to profitability. Additionally, Khatter et al. (2021) note that sustainable resource and waste management practices often reduce operational costs, although effectiveness may vary across sectors. By exploring the real-world experiences of foodservice workers through qualitative research, this study provides deeper insights into how sustainability serves as both a strategic advantage and a purposeful commitment.

2. METHODOLOGY

Semi-structured interviews, which are thought to provide participants more freedom to respond to questions on their own terms than standardized interviews, were used in this qualitative study (May, 1997). The experience, aptitude, and dedication of the interviewer determine the caliber of the data produced (Kumar, 2005). The 48 participants in this study were selected through the technique of purposive sampling. The participants are owners and managers of different eateries. Thirteen (26) had a typical food service system, eleven (11) had an assembly-serve system, nine (9) had a ready-prepared food service system, and ten (10) had a commissary. The data was collected on July 2025.

The interview was recorded using Google Forms. A letter asking each of the 48 individuals to take part in an interview was sent to them. Each participant received a physical copy of the letter of request. During their lean time, the interview was conducted in the vicinity of their firm. To guarantee the interview was carried out precisely and effectively, a well-organized questionnaire procedure and timetable were created. Each participant was given the same set of questions on their own opinions of the sustainable practices they were putting in place in the food service sector.

The data was coded, examined, evaluated, and verified after transcription. By listening to the transcribed interviews again and going over them again, the researcher can have a deeper grasp of the topic. Once all of the data had been meticulously recorded, coding started. The information is categorized and organized using keyword codes, which are regarded as a crucial component of qualitative research (Sarantakos, 1998). The data was analyzed, classified, and arranged into themes and additional sub-themes after the coding process. Each developing patient was assigned a unique code. The next step was to interpret the data, which included pointing out any recurrent trends as well as any parallels and divergences.

The following step was data verification, which involved reviewing the codes and transcripts once more to ensure that the comprehension was enough. This method enables the researcher to confirm or alter earlier theories (Sarantakos, 1998). At every step of the investigation, the study complied with ethical guidelines. Prior to the interviews, the participants were told of the study's goal, and their informed consent was acquired. Data was stored securely, and pseudonyms were employed to preserve secrecy and anonymity. Participants were given the assurance that their answers would only be utilized for scholarly purposes and that they would not face any repercussions should they withdraw from the study at any time. The research was carried out in compliance with the institutional requirements for qualitative research ethics.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

THEME 1: COST SAVINGS

Contrary to the belief that sustainability is expensive, adopting sustainable practices can significantly reduce waste and utility costs. By minimizing resource use and improving operational efficiency, businesses can achieve substantial financial benefits. Adade et al. (2021) showed that a waste-reducing system in healthcare saved over USD 51,000 annually, demonstrating the economic value of sustainability. Similarly, Tariska et al. (2021) found that a zero-waste approach in schools reduced energy use and greenhouse gas emissions, resulting in lower operational costs. These examples highlight that sustainability not only supports environmental goals but also delivers measurable financial returns.

> *"Reduced energy and water usage, portion control and waste tracking, and efficient purchasing and inventory systems have led to cost savings over time. Our food waste tracking system has significantly reduced kitchen waste by over 30% in the last year,*

leading to cost savings and improved staff decision-making." Participant 14

"Centralized purchasing facilitates direct local supplier collaboration for bulk sustainable goods, while limited kitchen space and high volume during peak hours make composting and waste sorting challenging." Participant 16

"Our food waste tracking system has significantly reduced kitchen waste by over 30% in the last year, leading to cost savings and improved staff decision-making." Participant 18

"Bulk orders make things easier and more efficient, requiring only a single round of preparation, which means less physical effort overall. Buying in bulk also helps us save on ingredients and avoid food waste. The only challenge is during certain months like when there are typhoons when there's little to no income." Participant 34

"Because we're an all-you-can-eat buffet, we purchase ingredients in bulk especially local produce like vegetables and pork, since they're cheaper when sourced locally. For electricity, we reduce usage by turning off appliances that aren't necessary." Participant 40

"We save more on expenses by preparing food in bulk while still keeping our customers satisfied." Participant 30

Subtheme 1.1 Waste Reduction.

Reducing food waste and unnecessary packaging can lower raw material and disposal costs in foodservice operations. Practices like portion control, composting, and reuse (e.g., making broth from scraps) help cut expenses. A study by Orr and Goossens (2024) found that for every Euro invested in food waste reduction, foodservice businesses can achieve substantial cost savings and environmental benefits.

Subtheme 1.1 Energy Efficiency.

Investing in energy-efficient kitchen equipment, LED lighting, and water-saving fixtures can significantly reduce utility costs over time. Simple operational changes—such as using timers, turning off idle equipment, and optimizing usage—further enhance savings. These practices not only lower energy and water bills but also support sustainability goals. Studies show that such investments can yield up to 70% in energy savings (Li et al., 2021) and are most effective when paired with optimized usage (Turkova et al., 2023). Sundah et al. (2024) also highlight that these technologies offer both immediate cost reductions and long-term environmental benefits for businesses.

Subtheme 1.3 Bulk Purchasing.

Establishing strong ties with local suppliers for bulk purchases can lead to significant cost savings through discounts, reduced packaging, and lower transportation expenses. Local sourcing also ensures fresher products and shorter lead times. Research highlights that effective supplier selection and monitoring are key to achieving cost efficiency, with robust supplier relationships playing a vital role in reducing procurement costs (Changalima et al., 2023; Emmanuel & Kemevor, 2023).

THEME 2. CUSTOMER LOYALTY

Sustainability initiatives create positive brand associations that resonate with today's eco-conscious consumers and farmers. Integrating environmental practices into branding strengthens customer trust and loyalty. Khan and Fatma (2023) found that sustainability fosters customer engagement, leading to greater brand loyalty. Similarly, Obiebi (2025) emphasizes that Green Supply Chain Management (GSCM) enhances marketing performance and customer retention. Mendrofa (2024) supports this by showing that sustainable brand connotations directly improve customer satisfaction and loyalty. These findings highlight sustainability as a strategic advantage in building long-term consumer relationships in a competitive market.

"Mas positive ang brand image at mas trusts sa customers. Operational savings dahil sa energy efficiency at waste reduction. Kami mismong staff, mas proud sa brand na may malasakit." Participant 7

"Energy and water-saving upgrades can lower utility bills, boost customer loyalty, reduce waste disposal costs, improve staff morale, and appeal to environmentally conscious consumers." Participant 14

"We've noticed that younger customers especially value eco-friendly practices and are more vocal in supporting our choices. Our focus on minimal food waste and responsible service has helped build trust and loyalty among regulars." Participant 39

They liked it. For example, the newspaper-style wrap for fries accommodates more content and is sturdier, which customers appreciate." Participant 24

"Our customers appreciate the effort we've seen growing support, especially from younger guests who value green practices. Cost-wise, minimizing food waste and energy use

has helped with efficiency. And most importantly, we feel proud of the values we stand by" Participant 20

"It really started during the pandemic. We saw how much single-use waste was piling up and how fragile our food supply chains became. That made us think if we can make choices that help reduce waste and support local producers, why not do it? Our customers also started asking about more eco-friendly options, which pushed us in the right direction." Participant 20

"Aside from saving on costs by reducing waste, we've also built a stronger connection with our customers. People appreciate that we care. Plus, working with local suppliers has improved the freshness and quality of our menu, which keeps guests coming back." {articipant 22

Subtheme 2.1 Brand Recognition.

A company's commitment to sustainability can significantly enhance its reputation, especially among environmentally conscious consumers. Practices such as reducing plastic use, sourcing locally, and supporting local farmers appeal to customers who value ethical business behavior. Chang and Yoo (2023) note that Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) has become a strategic tool for boosting brand image and promoting sustainable development. Similarly, Le (2022) finds that socially responsible actions positively influence customer perceptions and loyalty. In the restaurant industry, sustainable sourcing and waste reduction foster stronger customer trust and emotional connection, making sustainability a valuable driver of brand reputation.

Subtheme 2.2 Customer Retention.

Consumers who value sustainability are more likely to support businesses that reflect their environmental beliefs. Transparent supply chains, green initiatives, and sustainable menu options contribute significantly to customer loyalty and long-term relationships. Research shows that integrating sustainability into operations enhances customer retention, particularly among eco-conscious consumers. Israel (2022) highlights that supply chain innovative practices (SCIPs) improve customer satisfaction and loyalty in SMEs, while Ahmed (2023) emphasizes that sustainability-driven brand identity strengthens customer retention in omnichannel retailing. These findings suggest that visible, consistent sustainability efforts can build trust and foster lasting consumer engagement.

Subtheme 2.3 Word-of-Mouth.

Customer satisfaction often leads to word-of-mouth (WOM) marketing, where satisfied customers become brand ambassadors—especially for companies committed to sustainability. When consumers feel aligned with a brand's eco-friendly values, they are more likely to share positive experiences with others, both in person and on social media (Wang et al., 2021; Ha et al., 2021). This organic promotion strengthens brand image and loyalty. A strong brand reputation built on sustainable practices fosters trust and increases the likelihood of customer advocacy (Salsabiila & Miranti, 2024; Zhao & An, 2023). As Anum et al. (2023) note, such advocacy on digital platforms can significantly influence broader consumer perceptions and behaviors.

THEME 3. ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACT

Foodservice companies are increasingly adopting sustainable practices to reduce their environmental impact and promote global health. As stakeholder expectations grow, corporate social responsibility (CSR) has become central to the industry's strategy. Kim and Kim (2022) found that foodservice firms are expanding CSR efforts through environmental stewardship, community involvement, and governance initiatives. These integrated approaches reflect a shift toward comprehensive sustainability strategies that support both ecological well-being and corporate accountability.

"We'd like to start composting food waste and fully switch to reusable containers." Participant 32

"As much as possible, our supplies are sourced locally. For waste reduction, we implement proper waste segregation. When it comes to packaging, we try to avoid excessive plastic waste and opt for reusable materials that can help the environment." Participant 33

"This is a business, but of course, we also need to consider whether our decisions are still environmentally beneficial." Participant 25

"In the future, we hope to be able to keep up with other businesses or cafés in terms of sustainable packaging, since our goal is also to help protect the environment." Participant 35

"First, it allows us to source ingredients locally and seasonally, supporting farmers nearby and reducing our carbon footprint. Since we cook on demand, we can control portion sizes and reduce food waste. We also use reusable plates and utensils for dine-in customers, which cuts down on single-use plastics and packaging waste.

However, this system can also make sustainability more challenging in some ways. Since everything is prepared fresh, it requires more energy and labor

daily, and if not managed well, it could lead to food spoilage. We also need to train staff regularly to follow sustainable practices in food prep and waste handling." Participant 40

Subtheme 3.1 Carbon Footprint.

Sourcing food locally reduces greenhouse gas emissions by minimizing long-distance transportation. Supporting seasonal and local goods lowers the environmental impact of logistics while fostering community sustainability. Studies highlight that short food supply chains (SFSCs) and urban farming effectively reduce emissions by bringing production closer to consumption (Haloui et al., 2024; Evola et al., 2022). Shariatmadary et al. (2023) further emphasize that disruptions during the COVID-19 pandemic revealed the environmental and logistical vulnerabilities of centralized, long-distance food systems. These findings affirm the importance of local sourcing in promoting resilient and eco-friendly foodservice practices.

Subtheme 3.2 Waste Diversion.

By recycling materials like glass, cardboard, and plastics, and composting food waste, businesses can significantly reduce landfill contributions, cut waste management costs, and meet sustainability regulations. Recycling and composting are effective waste diversion strategies that benefit both the environment and public health. Abubakar et al. (2022) emphasize that solid waste management (SWM) supports better governance and health outcomes, while Aziz et al. (2023) note that recyclable materials comprise a significant portion of municipal waste. Perkumienė et al. (2023) further highlight the importance of education and awareness in promoting sustainable waste practices, particularly in high-waste sectors like tourism and foodservice.

Subtheme 3.3 Resource Conservation.

Efficient use of power and water helps conserve limited resources and reduce operational waste. Key strategies include sustainability-focused staff training, proper HVAC control, and the use of water-saving appliances. Staff training plays a crucial role in promoting resource-conscious behavior and reducing misuse (Cacal et al., 2023). Additionally, practices like Integrated Water Resource Management (IWRM) support the sustainable use of water across operations (Cacal et al., 2023; Grison et al., 2023). Together, these approaches foster a culture of conservation and help organizations achieve long-term sustainability goals.

4. CONCLUSION

The results of this study show that there are substantial advantages to sustainability in foodservice operations that go well beyond merely adhering to environmental standards. Better waste management, energy efficiency, and more astute procurement techniques resulted in significant and long-lasting cost reductions. Businesses also saw increased customer loyalty as a result of consumers' rising eco-consciousness and brand reputation. Crucially, the environmental benefits—from reduced carbon emissions to resource preservation—confirm that sustainability is a business and environmental need. This multifaceted value presents sustainability as a workable and essential business strategy rather than an onerous duty.

5. RECOMMENDATIONS

Instead of viewing sustainability initiatives as an optional extra, foodservice businesses are urged to embrace them as a fundamental operating strategy. Investing in energy-efficient equipment, encouraging waste segregation and composting, and procuring locally are all accessible ways for stakeholders to start. To guarantee constant execution, staff members must receive education and training on sustainability goals. In order to assist small and medium-sized businesses in the shift, government organizations and trade groups should also provide incentives, technical assistance, and exposure. Foodservice companies may attain long-term environmental stewardship, improved customer connections, and economic resilience by adopting sustainability holistically.

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