

# INHERENT COMMITMENT TO SUSTAINABILITY AMONG BASQUE ADVENTURE TOURISM ENTERPRISES DESPITE CRISIS

*Asunción Fernández-Villarán\**

Universidad de Deusto. Bilbao  
<http://orcid.org/0000-0002-2647-8526>

*Nagore Uresandi\*\**

Universidad de Deusto. Bilbao  
<http://orcid.org/0000-0002-5544-2995>

## ABSTRACT

Existing literature in the field of sustainable tourism highlights a number of barriers that impede the implementation of practices in this area. However, few studies have addressed the case of adventure tourism. Adopting a case study approach, this paper discusses a number of drivers of success identified by adventure tourism enterprise owners in Basque Country to contribute to the implementation of sustainable tourism practices. Adventure tourism has important social, economic, and environmental impacts on sustainability. The study focuses on learning how sustainable practices have changed in these companies because of the COVID-19 crisis.

**Keywords:** Adventure tourism; sustainability drivers; COVID 19.

**Compromiso inherente con la sostenibilidad de las empresas vascas de turismo activo a pesar de la crisis**

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\* Facultad de Ciencias Sociales y Humanas. Universidad de Deusto. Avenida de las Universidades, 24. 48007 BILBAO (España). E-mail: [asun.fvillaran@deusto.es](mailto:asun.fvillaran@deusto.es)

\*\* Facultad de Ciencias Sociales y Humanas. Universidad de Deusto. Avenida de las Universidades, 24. 48007 BILBAO (España). Ceo and Founder IN2destination research and consultancy in tourism. E-mail: [nago-reuresandi@deusto.es](mailto:nago-reuresandi@deusto.es), [nagore.uresandi@in2destination.com](mailto:nagore.uresandi@in2destination.com)

## RESUMEN

La literatura existente en el campo del turismo sostenible destaca una serie de barreras que dificultan la implementación de prácticas sostenibles en esta área. Sin embargo, encontramos escasos estudios que se centren en el caso del turismo activo. A través de un estudio de caso, este trabajo analiza un número de impulsores o facilitadores de éxito, identificados por los propietarios de empresas de turismo activo en el País Vasco, que contribuyen a la implementación de prácticas sostenibles. El turismo activo tiene importantes impactos en la sostenibilidad económica, social y medioambiental. El estudio se centra en conocer cómo han cambiado las prácticas sostenibles en estas empresas debido a una crisis como la del COVID-19.

**Palabras clave:** Turismo activo; facilitadores de la sostenibilidad; COVID-19.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Before the COVID-19 pandemic, many destinations suffered tensions due to the volume and/or attitudes of visitors, the rising cost of housing, etc. In fact, these impacts of tourism, particularly overtourism, have been an important area of academic research since the beginning of the twenty-first century (e.g., Muler *et al.*, 2018). Globally, COVID-19 pandemic initial phases caused a decrease—or almost a disappearance in some destinations—of tourism activity (UNWTO, 2020). This situation endangers the survival of the sector. However, every crisis has two faces, and it serves us to take some time to reflect on and rethink the tourism model of the future.

Since the 1990s, Porter's value chain has been adapted to the tourism sector, it has undergone various modifications to adapt it to tourism destinations and view the value chain of the tourism sector as a set of interrelated activities performed at that destination that add value to the tourism experience (Fernández-Villarán *et al.*, 2020). Dubbeling *et al.* (2011) proposed a value chain management model based on customer relationships. We cannot forget that the ultimate aim of the tourism value chain is to provide value to customers (Grönroos, 2008). This suggests that the value chain of services should focus the value analysis on activities closely related to the client (Fernández-Villarán *et al.*, 2020). In this sense, several authors have highlighted the importance of the activities that the client carries out at the destination to generate value (e.g. Morales-Zamorano *et al.*, 2020). We refer to cultural, sports, nature, food, and wine activities, beyond those related to transport, accommodation, and food. There are two main reasons for the interest in these activities. First, they represent an increase in spending at the destination with the consequent direct effect in economic and employment terms in the tourism sector and an indirect effect in other non-tourism industries (Álvarez and Fernández-Villarán, 2012). Second, if these activities are properly managed in an orderly manner, they contribute to the decongestion of certain areas and allow for a more balanced distribution of tourism flows in the territory. Therefore, this article focuses on one of the activities that can be done at a destination: adventure tourism.

Adventure tourism is one of the fastest growing sectors in the tourism sector. According to the Global Adventure Tourism Market Report (Chouhan, Vig and Deshmukh, 2019), in 2019, the global adventure tourism market size was USD 988.8 million, and it is expected to reach USD 3150.3 million by the end of 2026. Europe dominates the global market, with more than one-third of its share in terms of value.

As in most crises, during the one caused by COVID-19, organizations have had to deal with the three main sustainability dimensions: economic, social, and environmental. The pandemic has caused adventure tourism companies to implement hygienic-sanitary measures in their facilities, especially in the development of their activities (ICTE, 2020). This has led companies to direct their efforts toward new (closer) market segments in the face of the decline and near disappearance of international markets. Faced with this complex economic situation, this study tries to shed light on the importance of sustainability at a time when companies are especially concerned about profitability and even survival. There is a need to balance the goals and needs of current activities with the long-term objectives of sustainability.

To carry out this work, we use the definition of corporate sustainability from Bergman *et al.* (2017: 10), for whom it is a “systematic business approach and strategy that takes into consideration the long-term social and environmental impact of all economically motivated behaviors of a firm in the interest of consumers, employees, and owners or shareholders.” Since crises have a significant impact on a company’s relationship with society, this approach considers sustainability as quick reactions during crises to all stakeholders’ concerns. According to Sigala (2020), to understand the impact of COVID-19 on the tourism sector and on sustainable practices, it is necessary to examine and understand the COVID-19 experiences that are perceived by stakeholders. Of these, we focus on companies that offer adventure tourism activities at their destinations. Therefore, this study addresses whether adventure tourism enterprises (ATEs) are more or less sustainable during a crisis, and specifically if COVID-19 has influenced their sustainable attitudes, beliefs, and practices, and if so, how.

This study is expected to contribute to the literature in the following ways. First, despite the growing interest in identifying the drivers that facilitate the implementation of sustainable practices in companies (Álvarez *et al.*, 2019) or in small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) (Yadav *et al.*, 2018), prior research examining sustainability drivers in adventure tourism is scarce. However, we found studies on drivers and barriers in the tourism industries. Revell and Blackburn (2007) analyzed environmental measures in construction and restaurant sector enterprises and concluded that the non-inclusion of environmental measures was a result of a combination of factors. Azilah and Anida (2012) focused their study on environmental management in the food service industry in general, and the restaurant sector in particular, highlighting food services’ impacts on the environment, and drivers of and barriers to change. Hasanli and Ashwell (2020) investigated the drivers and challenges of small accommodation providers engaging in sustainability practices. Midget *et al.* (2020) identified barriers to sustainability in SMEs. Thus, this study contributes to the tourism literature by exploring the relative importance of external and internal sustainability drivers in adopting sustainability initiatives in the adventure tourism industry. Second, there is extensive research on adventure tourism (e.g. Cheng *et al.*, 2018), but very little research has examined the contribution of ATEs to sustainable tourism destination development (Gross and Sand, 2019). Most literature reviews regarding adventure tourism focus on the analysis and structure of the supply side (Buckley, 2007) in destination planning and management

(Cheng *et al.*, 2018), or on the demand side (Van Onslen, 2010). Thus, this article aims to capture the prominent drivers, pressures, and motivations of ATEs in adopting sustainability practices. Specifically, the importance of crises is a motivator that promotes sustainable strategies and practices. Third, this is one of the few attempts to analyze the influence of COVID-19 on ATEs. Fourth, it contributes to the corporate governance literature by exploring the role of internal drivers in sustainable practices, which has not yet been studied in the adventure tourism field.

The remainder of the paper is structured as follows: The next section provides a literature review. The third section establishes the theoretical foundations of the study and formulates the hypotheses. The fourth section outlines the research methodology, followed by the documentation of the findings. Finally, the last section discusses the findings, conclusions, and suggested implications, and lists the limitations of the study.

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

### 2.1. Sustainability drivers to adopt sustainable practices

From Azilah's (2007) literature review, we can conclude that there are several factors that drive sustainable practices in tourism companies. In developing this research, we relied on a review of the literature carried out by Yadav *et al.* (2018), which led the authors to determine that there are two types of driver: external and internal. External drivers include governments, customers, networks and alliances, suppliers, communities, surrounding competitors, and the tangible aspects of the business sector. Internal drivers include organizational culture, employees, brand image and reputation, competitive advantage and strategic intent, environmental management capability (EMC), and firm size. These are described below. They formed the basis for the research interviews that provided the basis for this study.

The government is the major external factor that drives enterprises to adopt sustainability initiatives (Gandhi, Thanki and Thakkar, 2018; Petrini, Back and Dos Santos, 2017). According to researchers, legislation and regulation (Baden *et al.*, 2011); financial support (Agheli, 2017) in the form of loans, grants, and tax concessions; and other economic benefits facilitate easy adoption and behavioral change in enterprises toward sustainable practices. Baden *et al.* (2011) also suggested that excessive legislation would not bring good results, as social and environmental management should be implemented on a more voluntary basis. According to Nulkar (2014), regulations oblige companies to pay attention to the impacts of their activities, especially environmental ones.

The second external driver is customers. Different scholars (e.g., Agheli, 2017; Sáez-Martínez, *et al.*, 2016) have shown that customers influence the behavior of enterprises toward sustainability through a proactive demand for green products, processes, and services. Baniya *et al.* (2019) also suggested that international travelers will pay more to support travel industry organizations that practice sustainability. However, Revell and Blackburn (2007) argued that neither supply chain pressure nor consumer demand drives sustainable practices.

The third external driver is networks and alliances. The limited resources of enterprises lead to a greater dependence on external support, which favors the opportunity to establish alliances with other companies and thus increase sustainable practices (Petrini *et al.*, 2017; Revell and Blackburn, 2007; Shi and Tsai, 2020).

The fourth external driver is suppliers. Suppliers are a significant driving force for enterprises in their motivation to form green supply chain networks in tourism industries (Yadav *et al.*, 2018). Yu, Niegel and Bell (2007) showed that, in China's case, supply chain pressure existed more for enterprises that internationalized their operations than for domestic ones. Baylis *et al.* (1998) suggested that the influence of supply chain pressure varies according to sector. They found that firms that showed marginally higher levels of motivation to make sustainable improvements due to supply chain pressure were close to consumer markets.

The fifth external driver is the surrounding community. Local community pressure is one of the most important drivers to promote environmental practices (Yadav *et al.*, 2018). In various countries, environmental pressure groups are one of the major forces that makes enterprises incorporate environmental sustainability into their practices (Williams and O'Donovan, 2015).

Competitors are the sixth external driver. The importance of competitors was highlighted by authors such as Sáez-Martínez *et al.* (2016), who pointed out the importance of enterprise cooperation, not only with suppliers but also with competitors and other agents.

The seventh and final external driver is the tangibility aspect of the business sector. Tangibility here refers to products and services offered by enterprises (Yadav *et al.*, 2018). More tangible sectors are the ones that offer greener products and services.

Regarding internal drivers, the first refers to organizational culture. We found different studies that analyzed the importance of the owners' attitudes, beliefs, values, and interests as factors that lead to the implementation of sustainable practices in enterprises (e.g., Nulkar, 2014; Petrini *et al.*, 2017; Yadav *et al.*, 2018). Several authors have identified owners' lack of knowledge about the impacts and benefits of sustainability as one of the most important factors in undertaking this type of strategy (Petrini *et al.*, 2017). Some entrepreneurs consider sustainability to be a higher cost that does not produce economic benefits. However, various studies have shown a positive correlation between the implementation of sustainable activities or practices and an increase in benefits (Nulkar, 2014).

The second internal driver is employees. Employees were found to influence enterprises in their orientation toward sustainability (Agheli, 2017; Yadav *et al.*, 2018).

The third internal driver is brand image and reputation. Many researchers consider corporate image to be a key driver of the environmental performance of enterprises (Agheli, 2017; Gandhi *et al.*, 2018; Sáez-Martínez *et al.*, 2016; Williams and Schaefer, 2013).

The fourth internal driver is competitive advantage and strategic intent. The multitude of benefits regarding cost reduction, waste reduction, recycling, and differentiation provides a competitive advantage to enterprises, which motivates them to adopt sustainability actions. The vast majority of small businesses adopt sustainability initiatives because they relate them to cost savings (Agheli, 2017; Williams and Schaefer, 2013). A study carried out by Nulkar (2014) showed that companies with the highest rates of green and sustainable practices believe that these practices gave them a competitive advantage that positively affected the competitiveness of the company. In other cases, some authors have found that SME owners resisted making environmental improvements because of the perception that they rarely result in economic benefits (Rutherford *et al.*, 2000).

The fifth internal driver is EMC (assets, skills, and technologies), which supports enterprises in responding more decisively and timely to environmental demands from stakeholders (Yadav *et al.*, 2018). Enterprises with greater environmental experience show

better and more proactive responses toward sustainability practices (Sáez-Martínez *et al.*, 2016). Considering the resource shortage of enterprises, the most innovative organizations in terms of sustainability are those that have found ways to compensate for the shortage of resources. Opting for sustainability can lead to the differentiation of enterprise products or services and generate competitive advantages (Williams and Schaefer, 2013).

The sixth and final internal driver is the size of the firm. The size of the firm has turned out to be a significant motivator for the environmental performance of enterprises. The larger the company, the greater its chances of implementing sustainable strategies and practices (Yadav *et al.*, 2018).

## **2.2. Adventure tourism**

There is no single and consensual criterion to define the economic activity that in Spain is known as active tourism and internationally is designated as adventure tourism. Some authors, such as Buckley (2000), embrace adventure active tourism within NEAT (Nature, Eco-and Adventure Tourism), as all are forms of nature-based tourism.

We find different definitions of this type of tourism (Gross and Sand, 2019; UNWTO, 2019). All of them point out the following characteristics of adventure tourism: it includes services or activities for recreation, leisure, or sports, with different degrees of physical intensity and includes a certain accepted element of risk. They are held outdoors and feature natural spaces and scenery. Therefore, adventure tourism companies are not sports service companies, since they do not organize or sell sports, but rather offer activities suitable for members of the general public, not specifically trained, who are mainly seeking fun, knowledge, experiences in nature, experimentation, or personal development through activities that take place mainly in the natural environment. In this sense, the Adventure Travel Trade Association (2021) defines adventure tourism as a type of tourism containing at least two out of the following three components: 1) physical activity, 2) a connection to nature and the environment, and 3) an immersive cultural experience. According to the Global Report on Adventure Tourism (UNWTO, 2014), the most frequently cited reasons people engage in adventure travel are relaxation, exploring new places, spending time with family, and learning about different cultures.

The literature distinguishes between two types of adventure tourism activity according to the associated risk: hard and soft (Cheng *et al.*, 2018). This study focused on the soft adventure segment. It generated the highest revenue in the global market, as these activities possess moderate to low risks, and thus attract a large customer base. Moreover, adventure travelers are focusing on less-risky adventure activities and are more open to other elements such as the natural environment, learning, and meaningful lifelong experiences, which boost adventure tourism's market growth.

Adventure tourism is not sustainable (Knowels, 2019). However, when adventure tourism is managed properly, it can contribute to the sustainable development of destinations through environmental education and conservation by residents and tourists, or economic and job growth (Martínez Quintana and Blanco Gregory, 2013). Furthermore, adventure travel offers a practical sense of sustainable development. Different authors show how nature, landscape, and tourism entrepreneurs' environmental consciousness can influence tourists in different

ways (Hoppstadius, 2019; UNWTO, 2014). The transformative experiences of adventure travel are a way to help clients understand how their immediate and sometimes ongoing support can help preserve a destination's key cultural and natural capital (UNWTO, 2014).

### **3. METHOD**

#### **3.1. Study location**

The Basque Country is an autonomous community in North Spain, with over two million inhabitants. Traditionally, it receives over three million tourists, and the main foreign markets are France, the United Kingdom, Germany and Italy. Most visitors' main purpose is leisure tourism. Adventure tourism, as a main purpose, represents 8% of the total number of tourists, for both Spanish residents and non-residents. There are 76 companies qualifying as ATEs, 51 of which are associated with Aktiba, the Basque Active Tourism Association. These companies offer visits to natural parks, trekking, biking, ornithology, surfing in all its variations, sailing, scuba diving, kayaking, fishing, golf and much more. Adventure tourism activities are based on natural and rugged outdoor locations, and the participants interact with their environment.

Adventure tourism is an essential tourism product in the Basque Country, as defined by the current tourism strategic plan, as it helps spread the benefits of tourism to rural areas and is performed by companies that tend to be committed to sustainability practices. Tourists spend an average of 92€ per person on activities in the Basque Country (Basquetour, 2020a). More importantly, most, if not all, of the income stays in the destination, because these adventure tourism companies are all Basque Country companies, with their sole fiscal address within the Basque Country (Basquetour, 2020b). This means that these companies directly contribute to the economic sustainability of their destinations. However, they have been heavily hit by the COVID-19 crisis, with a decrease of 91% in their bookings, temporary workers laid off since March 2020, and permanent employees within the Records of Temporary Employment Regulation.

#### **3.2. Data Collection and Analyzing Methods**

The purpose of this study is to explore and understand the sustainability drivers to adopt sustainable practices on ATEs in The Basque Country through a case study approach.

Qualitative analysis is useful in tourism studies when the aim is to answer questions about groups or human interactions, to describe a phenomenon of interest, or to predict future trends (Veal, 2006), as in the case at hand, where we desire to understand the commitment toward sustainability by ATEs under the pressure of COVID-19. The advantages of case studies lie in their holistic factor, which provides researchers with the opportunity to study a phenomenon within its natural setting, deliberately considering its context (Connolly, 1999). Second, there is their heuristic value, meaning that case studies are an appropriate tool for discovering concealed issues (ibid.). Third, they are claimed to be "highly interactive and flexible... [allowing] the researcher to explore emerging themes,

take advantage of opportunities that may arise in a given case situation, and ultimately improve the study's validity and reliability" (Connolly, 1999: 201-202).

Case studies are often criticized for their lack of generalization. However, it could be argued that case studies' validity is based on them "standing alone", focusing on a process, on its uniqueness, and for that purpose, they require delimiting boundaries between the context and the case, as well as a specific focus; otherwise, their holistic aspect will lead to less in-depth research (Yin, 2009). Therefore, even if a study identifies numerous concepts meriting investigation, in order to confer depth, the researcher must define precise boundaries, unavoidably leaving out certain related topics, which are then recommended for further research.

Stake (1998) distinguished three types of case study: intrinsic, meaning that the inherent interest of the researcher is this particular case itself; instrumental, where a particular case is examined to *provide insight into an issue or refinement of theory* (p. 88); and collective, which is described as several instrumental cases. This case study is intrinsic and instrumental, since the objective was to provide insight into the case study of the Basque Country adventure tourism companies at the same time that its results suggest a refinement of theory.

Hence, the authors conducted half an hour interviews from July to September 2020. The selected data collection method was semi-structured in-depth interviews with 16 owners or managers of adventure tourism businesses based in the Basque Country, Spain. The interviewees were selected randomly from the list of members of Aktiba, since it is the only inventory of ATEs in the Basque Country, those ATEs outside this association cannot be found in any official records. The only factor taken in to account was that there needed to be a balance between one-person sized companies to larger 5 or 10 employee's companies so that the two visions could be embodied in the study. All contacted participants agreed to be interviewed; they were actually eager because they considered their industry and adventure tourism to be understudied and not visible enough in front of the institutions.

Concerning the content of the interviews, a number of closed questions were integrated and organized as five dimensions: general information; sustainable practices; COVID impact with four options; external sustainability drivers to adopt sustainable practices drivers (Table 1); and internal drivers (Table 2). According to the actual circumstances of The Basque Country, more-detailed interview topics were designed for each of the various dimensions. Moreover, regarding general information and sustainable practices, several items were included in order to understand 1) the company structure, 2) the business model, and 3) sustainable practices.

In order to address COVID impact, the interviewees were asked if they had modified their sustainable practices as a consequence of COVID-19. They were given four options:

1. We were doing it already and we continue despite COVID-19.
2. We were doing it, but we have now stopped.
3. We were not doing it, but we have started now.
4. We were not doing it and we do not do it now either.

Those four options were offered for all the questions addressing external and internal drivers. The interviews addressed questions in order to find out which were the most relevant



drivers for the companies to be sustainable and whether COVID-19 was affecting this. The following two tables list the external and internal driver variables covered in the interviews.

**Table 1**  
**EXTERNAL DRIVERS THAT STEER THE IMPLEMENTATION OF SUSTAINABILITY PRACTICES**

Dimension	Variable	Author
Government	Financial support: access to public funding	Agheli, 2017; Nulkar, 2014; Revel and Blackburn, 2007.
Customers	Proactive demand for green products, processes, and services	Agheli, 2017; Baniya <i>et al.</i> , 2019; Sáez-Martínez <i>et al.</i> , 2016
Networks and alliances	Establish alliances with other companies and thus increase sustainable practices	Petrini <i>et al.</i> , 2017; Revell and Blackburn, 2007
Suppliers	Domestic supply chain	Yadav <i>et al.</i> , 2018
Surrounding community	Our organization tends to be involved in sustainable activities because of pressure from external stakeholders, notably consumers	Baniya <i>et al.</i> , 2019
Competitors	Involvement in sustainable activities makes business competitive	Baniya <i>et al.</i> , 2019
Tangibility	Sustainable products and services	Yadav <i>et al.</i> , 2018

**Table 2**  
**INTERNAL DRIVERS THAT STEER THE IMPLEMENTATION OF SUSTAINABILITY PRACTICES**

Variable	Indicator	Authors
Organizational culture	Owners' attitudes, beliefs, values, and interests	Baniya <i>et al.</i> , 2019; Nulkar, 2014; Petrini <i>et al.</i> , 2017; Yadav <i>et al.</i> , 2018.
Employees	Sustainability is important for the company's bottom line	Aghelie, 2017; Baniya <i>et al.</i> , 2019; Yadav <i>et al.</i> , 2018
Brand image and reputation	Involvement in sustainable activities also increases the company's reputation with consumers	Agheli, 2017; Baniya <i>et al.</i> , 2019; Nulkar, 2014; Williams and Schaefer, 2013
Competitive advantage	Sustainability is important for the company's strategic competitive advantage	Baniya <i>et al.</i> , 2019; Nulkar, 2014.
Environment management capability	Companies with greater environmental experience show better and more proactive response toward sustainability practices	Baniya <i>et al.</i> , 2019; Sáez-Martínez <i>et al.</i> , 2016

Beyond the structured part, the researchers were also open to the interviewees bringing up key issues, circumstances, or other key elements that might affect their stance toward or against sustainability in their specific case. The researchers then compared all different subjects and extracted conclusions from the comparisons. This approach provides flexibility to the interviewer, allowing them to redirect the interview based on how it proceeds and their knowledge of the interviewee (Veal, 2006). In line with this, three coding phases were used for the data analysis. In the first phase, the aim was to detect drivers not covered by the literature, using the tables shown before, if any. The second phase looked after commonality regarding drivers among respondents and the indication of weight or priority among them. Finally, in the third phase, the aim was to better understand the companies by going through all of the interviewees again in order to identify factors that could explain the results.

## **4. FINDINGS**

### **4.1. General Information**

Regarding the adventure tourism interviewees in this Basque Country case, most were owners, managers, or founding partners of the companies; they were mostly male. Regarding age, it was equally divided between over 50 years old, 40-49, and 30-39.

Moreover, 62.5% of the companies had been in business for more than 10 years, and they were all Basque Companies based exclusively in the Basque Country. Regarding size, 62.5% of the companies were formed by two or fewer people; 43.75% of the companies have most of their employees on a full-time basis, and 25% were half on full time and half on part time. Of the companies, 56.5% thought that there was an actual risk to the continuity of their business due to the COVID-19 crisis; only one company was selling more than the previous year. The remaining companies suffered heavy losses, approaching 100%.

In terms of their clientele before the pandemic, 62.5% of the companies depended on clients from the Basque Country, 18.75% depended on foreign clients, and 18.75% depended on a combination of clients from other parts of Spain in combination with foreigners and Basque residents. For 43.75% of the companies, individual clients were the main customers they were supported by, and 18.75% of companies had their income divided evenly among clients that were companies, individuals, and groups.

In the following parts of this section, sustainability drivers are analyzed in terms of relevance.

### **4.2. Committed to sustainability despite COVID-19**

Concerning adventure tourism's commitment to sustainability, regarding the contribution to the economic development of the territory where these companies operate, it is worth highlighting the commitment of all the owners to local socioeconomic development; maintaining, despite the crisis, the hiring of people from the municipality; contributing to improving the competitiveness of the territory; buying from local suppliers; offering socioeconomic benefits for the destination community; and maintaining the support,

organization, and sponsorship of leisure and cultural activities in their municipalities. All of the companies interviewed stated that they continue to protect local cultural tangible and intangible resources, respect the local architecture, and incorporate decorative items based on local cultural artifacts.

Regarding environmentally sustainable practices, they recycle; separate garbage; buy organic and biodegradable products; and train their employees in terms of waste, energy, and water management. In their interactions with clients, they raise awareness about the environment they are in, good practices, regulations, etc. Moreover, as an example, those that operate in water (lakes, rivers, or sea lines) emphasized that they follow regulations in order to avoid too many people being in the water at the same now; they do not slow down or dock to avoid environmental impacts, even if it is allowed; and so on. However, as a company, they did not measure any indicators related to sustainability, and when they communicated, there was little to no mention of sustainable practices.

They stated that all these practices were a reality before and continued to be despite COVID-19. They did not see the pandemic affecting their commitment, and the impact of the pandemic was on their financial balance. In their opinion, removing or diminishing their commitment to sustainability might save some money but would help no one, so they did not consider it worthwhile.

#### **4.3. Company survival**

As a result of the first coding phase, an internal driver mentioned by all interviewees but not present in the literature emerged: company survival. This could be considered an internal driver, not affected by COVID-19, as explained by the interviewees: if they do not implement sustainable practices and if they do not take care of the environment in which they provide their service, their business will disappear. For some, this environment means the river, beach, or natural park in which they operate, which is self-explanatory; if they damage it, their activity will not be attractive and/or a given authority might prohibit them from performing it there.

This is the most important driver, according to the interviewees.

#### **4.4. Internal drivers versus external drivers**

The second coding phase identified the following commonalities regarding external drivers: 1) companies do not conduct sustainable practices to access government aid and subsidies. This was the first external driver and was found to be irrelevant. 2) Companies believe that positioning themselves as sustainable in front of potential customers does not result in economic benefits. This was an external driver related to customers that emerged as irrelevant. They “know” (this is the word they used, despite not measuring anything related) that when customers face the choice of two services from two adventure companies, sustainability practices by any of the companies play no part in the decision. They “know” this from the customers they had prior to the pandemic. This was an external driver related to customers that emerged as not relevant. 3) Pressure by external agents has no impact on companies conducting or not conducting sustainable practices. This was

an external driver related to the surrounding community, networks and alliances, suppliers, and competitors that turned out not to be relevant. 4) The last external driver, tangibility, was not a driver affecting Basque ATEs, and their services were not tangible; hence, their sustainability was not tangible or easily perceived by customers. This did not drive them to be more sustainable.

In sum, external drivers did not prove to be relevant for Basque ATEs.

Regarding internal drivers, beyond company survival, which was already analyzed as the most important one, these are the findings that emerged very clearly as all interviewees coincided: 1) Sustainability is an across-the-board value in everything they do; it is part of the organizational culture. This is an internal driver, weighted as the most important, immediately after company survival. 2) Environment management capability, in the sense that they (interviewed adventure companies) feel that for them being sustainable is not so complex because they know how to do it, and they keep learning to keep advancing. They also understand other colleagues from other tourism businesses that see sustainability as something abstract, not really understanding what it means practically; hence, they do not implement sustainable practices beyond the usual note to customers on plastics or reusing towels in hotels. This is in line with the finding in the literature that companies with greater environmental experience exhibit better and more proactive responses toward sustainability practices (Baniya *et al.*, 2019; Sáez-Martínez *et al.*, 2016). The rest of the internal drivers were not found to be relevant as drivers of sustainability by the interviewees.

**Figure 1**  
**RELEVANCE OF DRIVERS IN BASQUE ATEs**

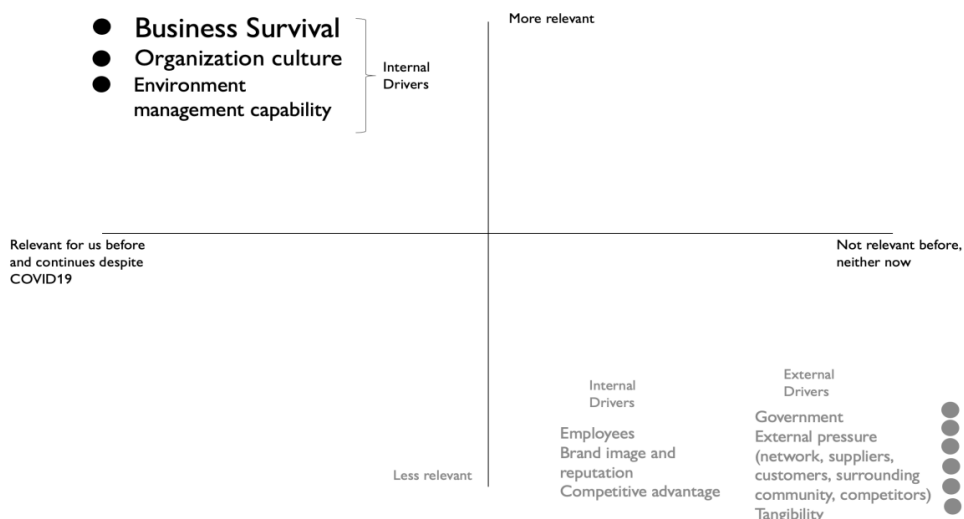


Figure 1 shows how two internal drivers, company survival and organizational culture, are the most important for the Basque ATEs. The next internal driver to be relevant is

environment management capability. The remaining internal drivers were not found to be relevant. None of the external drivers drive sustainability practices. Thus, for these companies, internal drivers are more likely to steer them to be more sustainable than external ones.

#### **4.5. Measuring and customers as external drivers**

As the interviews advanced, it was evident that none of the participants had a document, dashboard, or something where all their sustainable practices, which are many, are detailed, listed, or monitored. These interviewees spoke from memory, very often saying, “Oh wait, I also do this and this!” They practice sustainability but not in a way that demonstrates it. Moreover, none of the companies’ used measures, meaning that they do not monitor key performance indicators related to sustainability. They did not do so before the pandemic, and they stated that they were not going to change; they will keep not measuring. This has more to do with them being micro-SMEs, where it is common not to have standardized procedures. They see it as a burden; it means time invested in something they do not consider productive. However, this has a consequence in terms of the objectives of this research. When they communicate, they stated that they did not mention sustainable practices. Hence, the communities they have created in their social networks are not customers or potential sources of demand responding to sustainable practices; they are simply people that connect with adventure activities. Therefore, it could be argued that if they would measure and communicate more often—for instance, “In this way, we have reduced water consumption by 5% thanks to the work our team does and the commitment of our clients! Thank you for this!”—perhaps their social community could draw in sustainability-discerning clients and potential customers. Hence, these practices could help test the internal driver related to brand image and reputation, and the external driver related to customers; perhaps one, or both, could have some impact.

### **5. DISCUSSION**

In this study, several internal drivers of sustainability in ATEs identified in previous studies were reinforced, a new internal driver emerged, and external drivers were found to be irrelevant.

#### **5.1. Internal drivers**

SMEs comprise the majority of businesses in the adventure tourism industry in Basque Country. SMEs face significant limitations in terms of human and financial resources, and in terms of organizational capacity, which causes them to experience more difficulties in innovating, knowing the market, and being competitive (Azilah and Anida, 2012; Revell and Blackburn, 2007). However, despite the cost barriers to implementing environmental management and the lack of financial incentives to purchase high-efficiency appliances, all of the ATEs interviewed engage in sustainable business practices because of the owners’ attitudes.

Increased pressure on natural areas from tourist arrivals can have negative impacts on these previously isolated systems. ATE managers are aware of the importance of the environmental dimension of sustainability and of taking care of the landscape in which they carry out their activities. However, this concern for sustainability also extends to the social and economic dimensions because most companies carry out practices that contribute to the economic, social, and cultural development of the territory in which they carry out their activities. Our study suggests that a relatively high level of sustainable practice adoption is related to business survival. Strong interest and willingness to engage in sustainable practices among smaller tourism businesses was similarly found in Western Australia by Carlsen *et al.* (2001) and in East Sussex by Berry and Ladkin (1997).

The literature review showed how most SMEs in the tourism sector, in addition to being subject to financial and human resource constraints, do not conduct formal strategic planning (Taylor and Taylor, 2014). This fact was confirmed by our interviews, since most of the owners affirmed that they did not have written plans on equality, inclusion, or sustainability. In any case, they claimed to carry out actions that pursue these objectives, although they do so in an unplanned manner.

Most of the companies interviewed did not understand the impact of their activities, something that has not changed after COVID-19. The analysis carried out by Revell and Blackburn (2007) was reinforced and strengthened by the findings of this study. They analyzed environmental measures in construction and restaurant sectors' SMEs and concluded that the non-inclusion of environmental measures was a result of a combination of factors. In the present case, the interviewees stated that this fact was due, on the one hand, to the lack of funds to carry out these measurements. This supports the results of research carried out by Pešalj, Pavlov and Micheli (2018). On the other hand, many of these owners did not perceive the usefulness or benefits of making these measurements. Antlová (2009) defined it as an autocratic management style characterized by the "absence of formal organization structure, management and information systems, high level of uncertainty, insufficiently shared information, absence of standard rules and procedures, usage of subjective criteria (missing formalized system), poor integration activities, poorly defined working procedures, roles and responsibilities" (p. 148). Therefore, we can affirm that the Basque Country ATEs carry out an informal but flexible management system. In fact, in the interviews, when faced with the questions, they were aware of the sustainable practices that they carried out unconsciously and did not formally plan.

## **5.2. External drivers**

External drivers of sustainability (Yadav *et al.*, 2018) play an important role in SMEs and encourage them to bet more on sustainability. However, in our case, the results of the interviews did not allow us to confirm the importance of external drivers. For instance, more than 85% of Basque ATEs have suppliers from their region, ensuring a local supply chain and ecological criteria; they buy most of their perishable products from the Basque Country. Nevertheless, the interviewees affirmed that their favorable attitude toward sustainability is the driver for greening their supply chain networks, rather than pressure from suppliers.

Wang and Fessenmeier (2007) identified crisis as a precondition for stakeholder collaboration at a destination. Collaboration and partnership among stakeholders are key to achieving social, economic, and environmentally sustainable tourism (Kent *et al.*, 2012). Most companies organize or participate in work groups through which they collaboratively develop projects on sustainability, exchange experiences, and good practices in this field. The need to collaborate is even more important because of COVID-19. However, this practice was not modified by COVID-19.

Another interesting issue that emerged from the interviews was related to the clients. Most of the companies interviewed were engaged in so-called soft activities. According to the data on the Basque tour website, the public company of the Ministry of Tourism, Trade and Consumer of the Basque Government (<https://www.basquetour.eus>), the main products that Basque adventure tourism offers are surfing, hiking, and mountain biking. It is also worth mentioning the activities that represent a cultural experience. Adventure tourists are keen to learn about the culture of their destination, and experiencing local culture in an authentic way is a sought-after activity. However, adventure businesses' opinions about the importance that customers attach to sustainability is striking, showing that customers do not choose them for sustainability. This reinforces Hopstadius's (2019) finding that tourism in biosphere reserves is not more sustainable than other types of tourism.

## 6. CONCLUSIONS

It seems clear that in ATEs, sustainability is carried out as a transversal axis in all activities and not as a search for specific benefits, such as access to new markets, a reduction in costs, or the achievement of a competitive advantage. It is carried out because that is how it is perceived and that is the essence of tourism activities in nature. Managing it properly contributes to the sustainable development of the destination through education and environmental conservation by residents and tourists or economic and labor growth (Martinez Quintana and Blanco Gregory, 2013). What does not seem to be reflected is the health crisis they are facing, since it does not have a direct influence on the measures and drivers of sustainability in this sector of activity in this territory. The crisis affected their businesses, but not their commitment to sustainability.

The authors draw two main conclusions. First, regarding organizational culture's relevance as an internal driver, a number of conclusions from previous studies in other industries have been confirmed. Second, the findings suggest that (a) the companies have not renounced their ideals and beliefs about sustainability; (b) a new internal driver emerged, called business survival; and (c) sustainable practices are fundamental to adventure tourism and destinations as a whole. There are leaders providing opportunities for young people and encouraging environmentally sustainable behaviors and cultural tolerance. The owners expressed a desire for adventure travel companies to defend local economies where clients travel and protect the environment.

Our study contributes to improving the management of ATEs in two ways: a) it recognizes the importance of having strategic plans and providing resources for the strategic planning process, both in formulation and implementation; and b) it highlights the impor-

tance of having measurement and information systems that can help these companies communicate about their practices and connect with sustainability-discerning customers.

### 6.1. Further research

Basque ATEs were and still are committed to sustainability because they consider it an across-the-board value, even if they think that it does not have an impact on their profits. For ATEs that measure and communicate their sustainability practices, it remains to be studied whether the internal drivers of brand image and reputation and external drivers regarding customers have an impact on further driving sustainability or not. Perhaps organizational culture and business survival remain the most relevant. Research from a demand perspective and further analysis of different adventure tourist segments would provide researchers with a more comprehensive picture of adventure tourism globally. It is essential to identify the segment made up of clients committed to sustainability, who are more likely to uphold pro-environmental attitudes and sense-of-place values, as early adopters; and to determine how companies can attract these clients and what is needed to change practices in the other segments.

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