

CORPORATE STRATEGY TO HUMAN CAPITAL: THE ENVIRONMENTAL, SOCIAL AND GOVERNANCE TRANSITION IN HOSPITALITY WITH A BIBLIOMETRIC APPROACH

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Abstract: Within The Environmental, Social, and Governance (ESG) framework has become a defining paradigm in the transformation of the hospitality industry, shifting the focus from profit-oriented models to integrated sustainability and accountability systems. In this context, understanding how ESG research evolves and what dimensions dominate the discourse becomes increasingly important. The aim of this study is to analyse the development of ESG-related research in hospitality between 2009 and 2025, with particular attention to the transition from financial governance to human capital-oriented approaches. Despite the expansion of the field, the literature remains fragmented, characterised by conceptual ambiguity with Corporate Social Responsibility, inconsistent measurement practices, and limited integration of ESG dimensions within service-based industries. The research is based on a bibliometric analysis of 987 publications indexed in the Web of Science database. The methodological approach combines performance analysis with science mapping techniques in order to identify publication trends, intellectual structures, and conceptual developments within the field. The results indicate a significant increase in research activity after 2019, accompanied by a shift in thematic focus. Earlier studies primarily emphasised financial performance, environmental efficiency, and external stakeholder perceptions. In contrast, recent research highlights the growing importance of employees as key drivers of ESG value creation. This reflects a redefinition of the Social dimension, which increasingly functions as an internal governance mechanism centred on employee engagement, well-being, and organisational behaviour. At the same time, the Environmental and Governance dimensions remain strongly interconnected through performance metrics and regulatory requirements, resulting in an imbalanced ESG structure. The internal social dimension is less standardised and insufficiently integrated into strategic decision-making processes. The study concludes that this imbalance limits the effectiveness of ESG implementation in the hospitality sector. The findings suggest that future development depends on the systematic integration of human capital considerations into governance frameworks, particularly in response to emerging European sustainability regulations. The contribution of the paper lies in identifying the internal social dimension as a key frontier of ESG research and in providing a structured overview of the field's evolution, offering both theoretical clarification and practical relevance for sustainability-oriented management in hospitality.

Keywords: esg, corporate social responsibility, bibliometrics, human capital, hospitality industry, employee engagement, governance

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INTRODUCTION

Within the tourism and hospitality industry, a profound transformation is underway, driven by a global mandate for sustainable accountability. The Environmental, Social, and Governance (ESG) framework has emerged as the primary apparatus for this change, compelling firms to look beyond immediate profits towards long-term value creation (Back, 2024). Unlike its predecessor, Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR), which often focused on qualitative reputation and ethical obligation, ESG demands a data-driven, systematic approach to sustainability designed to satisfy the rigorous requirements of modern capital markets (Broadstock et al., 2021; Gillan et al., 2021).

This conceptual evolution is unfolding alongside a decisive regulatory shift within the European Union, where ESG principles are now established, and revision is in motion. Between 2024 and 2025, the European Commission initiated a comprehensive “sustainability omnibus” reform package aimed at simplifying and recalibrating the Corporate Sustainability Reporting Directive (CSRD) and the Corporate Sustainability Due Diligence Directive (CSDDD) (Juhász & Dunay, 2025). This initiative sought to reduce reporting complexity while preserving the strategic intent of mandatory ESG integration across value chains. Following this proposal, both co-legislators advanced the package through accelerated procedures. The European Parliament adopted a negotiating position in late 2025, while the Council of the European Union

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reached a provisional political agreement with Parliament in December 2025. The revised framework, awaiting final formal adoption, implies a narrowed reporting scope and reinforced protections for small and medium-sized enterprises. This regulatory trajectory transforms ESG from an emergent managerial practice into a legally enforceable governance architecture, intensifying the need for scholarly clarity on how these mechanisms function within service-based industries.

A substantial body of research has emerged around quantifying the performance outcomes of this regulatory and strategic shift. One clear stream of inquiry validates the financial merits of ESG, demonstrating its role as a driver of economic value. Key studies have established, for example, that superior ESG performance can directly lower a hotel's cost of capital (He et al., 2024) and measurably improve firm efficiency, challenging the outdated notion that sustainability investments detract from the bottom line (Lu et al., 2025). Yet this relationship is conditioned by context; the work of Jain & Banerjee (2025) reveals that under the strain of economic uncertainty, the protective financial benefits of ESG may be most strongly associated with the 'Social' pillar, highlighting the nuanced ways in which different aspects of sustainability contribute to corporate resilience.

Beyond corporate balance sheets, a second, complementary stream of research investigates the stakeholder-mediated pathways through which ESG creates value. For external stakeholders, particularly customers, ESG initiatives serve as a potent basis for brand differentiation, capable of promoting stronger brand engagement and even commanding price premiums (Yu et al., 2024; Yu et al., 2025). Internally, the effects are equally significant. Recent studies demonstrate that an organisation's commitment to ESG positively influences employee job satisfaction, green behaviour, and retention (Li et al., 2025; Su & Swanson, 2019), building upon foundational theories linking corporate responsibility to organisational commitment (Reyes Rendón et al., 2024). This is further evidenced by recent explorations within the Hungarian hospitality sector, where internal CSR initiatives have been shown to act as vital strategic tools for enhancing employee morale and organisational support (Bannour & Varga, 2025). Yet these studies, while confirming the growing salience of employee-level ESG outcomes, each examine isolated causal pathways rather than charting the broader intellectual shift from financial governance to human capital concerns. How and when this reorientation took hold across the discipline remains structurally undocumented, a gap this bibliometric analysis is designed to explore.

Despite this demonstrable progress, scholarship also highlights significant hurdles that define the field's current frontier. A primary challenge is the persistent conceptual ambiguity between CSR and ESG, which complicates both theoretical development and practical application (Legendre et al., 2024). This is intensified by fragmented and non-standardised corporate disclosure practices, which present a major obstacle to reliable empirical research (Bernard et al., 2025; Kim et al., 2025). It is precisely this combination of proven relevance, stakeholder complexity, and conceptual fragmentation that necessitates a rigorous, systematic mapping of the field.

Addressing the fragmentation in the ESG-hospitality literature requires a methodology capable of objectively synthesising vast amounts of information. Bibliometric analysis provides such a framework, allowing for the statistical examination of publication data to uncover the structural features, intellectual cornerstones, and emergent trends within a research domain (Donthu et al., 2021; Zupic & Čater, 2015). This study employs such an approach to move beyond subjective narratives and provide a structural map of the field through the end of 2025.

This research aims to isolate the specific theoretical mechanisms driving the discourse, specifically charting the transition from external reputation to the internal social governance of the workforce.

To guide this investigation, the following Research Questions (RQs) are posed:

RQ1: How have publication trajectories and citation velocities evolved, and do they reflect a distinct paradigm shift from CSR-centric to ESG-focussed discourse?

RQ2: Which scholarly communities and collaborative networks are defining the governance of the field, and how are they clustered around specific strategic or behavioural themes?

RQ3: What constitutes the „intellectual base” of the domain, and how do foundational works support the divergence between the „financial business case” and the „psychological consumer case”?

RQ4: How has the conceptual structure of the field evolved temporally, specifically regarding the interplay between the Environmental, Social, and Governance pillars and the emergence of „internal social” dimensions?

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Data Collection and Search Strategy

To ensure the reliability and reproducibility of the analysis, data were retrieved from the Web of Science (WoS) Core Collection, selected for its stringent indexing standards and high-quality citation metadata essential for network analysis (Zupic & Čater, 2015). The data retrieval covered the period from 2009 to 2025, capturing the field's complete trajectory from early CSR discourse to the current ESG regulatory era.

The search strategy employed a boolean query designed to capture the intersection of responsibility frameworks and the hospitality sector: TS=(„ESG” OR „CSR” OR „Corporate Social Responsibility” OR „Environmental Social Governance”) AND TS=(„hotel*” OR „hospitality*”). This query searched titles, abstracts, and author keywords to ensure comprehensive coverage. As seen in Figure 1, the initial search yielded 1,011 documents.

These records underwent a manual screening process to ensure relevance and data hygiene. Non-English publications and documents falling outside the subject scope were removed. Notably, a rigorous check was performed to exclude false positives, such as biological taxonomy papers that coincidentally shared acronyms (ESG). Following these exclusion criteria, a final corpus of 987 high-quality publications was retained for analysis.

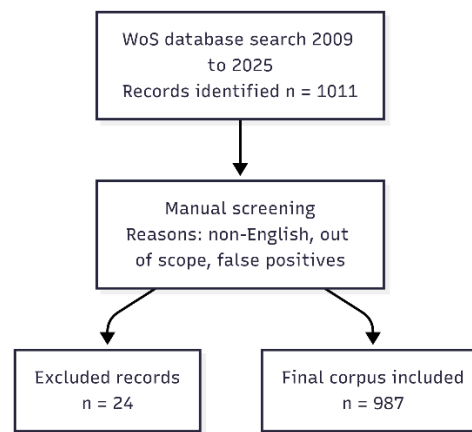


Figure 1. Research Process

Data Processing and Keyword Normalisation

A critical methodological step involved the cleaning of bibliometric data to ensure the semantic accuracy of the network maps. A thesaurus file was constructed to standardise keyword variations (e.g., merging „corporate social responsibility” and „CSR”; plurals like “hotel” and “hotels”). Furthermore, to reveal the underlying mechanisms of the field, a strict exclusion protocol was applied to generic search terms. High-frequency header words such as “csr”, “esg”, “hospitality industry,” „tourism,” and „hotel sector” were programmatically excluded from the keyword co-occurrence analysis. As noted by Donthu et al. (2021), the neutralisation of search terms is essential in science mapping; it removes „noise” and allows the analysis to focus on the substantive concepts (variables, theories, and outcomes) rather than the context itself.

Bibliometric Analysis and Network Metrics

The analytical protocol was executed in two phases. First, a performance analysis quantified the field’s growth trajectory. Second, science mapping was employed to visualise structural relationships. Following established protocols in management science (Abdi Khalife et al., 2021; Donthu et al., 2021), we utilised VOSviewer for network visualisation (Van Eck & Waltman, 2010). To complement the visual analysis with statistical rigour, the network data were exported and processed using the Python networkx library (Hagberg et al., 2008). The Degree Centrality, to identify the most connected and visible concepts. The Betweenness Centrality, to detect „bridge” concepts that connect disparate thematic clusters. The Eigenvector Centrality, to identify high-influence nodes connected to other influential nodes.

This multi-method approach allowed for the construction of three distinct structural maps: the social structure (co-authorship networks), the intellectual structure (co-citation analysis of references), and the conceptual structure (keyword co-occurrence), providing a holistic view of the field.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The Trajectory of Scholarship

Addressing the first research question, the analysis of publication activity reveals a non-linear growth trajectory, characterising a field that has transitioned from sporadic academic interest to a central paradigm of hospitality management. As illustrated in Table 1, the field experienced an exponential surge in visibility post-2018.

Annual total citations rose from 617 in 2018 to a peak of 2,247 in 2023. This rapid accumulation of impact correlates strongly with the global intensification of sustainability mandates and the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. The data suggest that the pandemic’s external shock acted as a catalyst, forcing a re-evaluation of corporate resilience. The sustained high citation volume through 2024 (2,030) and 2025 (1,695) confirms that this is not a transient trend but a structural realignment of the discipline; however, it is plateauing. We interpret this sustained citation plateau not as stagnation but as evidence of normalisation. ESG principles have become structurally embedded in hospitality scholarship, transitioning from an emerging topic to a baseline research paradigm.

Table 1. Annual evolution of total citations of n=987 papers (2016–2025)

Year	Total Citations Received	Year	Total Citations Received
2016	401	2021	2132
2017	465	2022	2230
2018	617	2023	2247
2019	1094	2024	2030
2020	1441	2025	1695

The dissemination of this research is highly concentrated in top-tier sector-specific journals, as shown in Table 2. The International Journal of Hospitality Management dominates the discourse (28 papers, 5,238 citations), followed by Tourism Management. Notably, Corporate Social Responsibility and Environmental Management appear as a key venue (Avg. Citations: 135.0), indicating that hospitality research is increasingly engaging with broader management science debates.

Table 2. Top journals by impact and citation volume

Source Title	Paper Count	Total Citations	Recent Citations (3y)	Avg Citations per Paper
International Journal of Hospitality Management	28	5238	1707	187
Tourism Management	9	1774	628	197
International Journal of Contemporary Hospitality Management	13	1458	566	112
Corporate Social Responsibility and Environmental Management	8	1080	695	135
Tourism Management Perspectives	5	634	232	127

When analysing the most influential publications, it is necessary to acknowledge a methodological limitation: the prevalence of „CSR” and „ESG” terminology in the results is, to some extent, a function of the search query itself. However, the thematic focus of the high-impact papers reveals a profound shift that transcends this terminological influence.

Table 3 ranks publications by Recent Citations (last 3 years), offering a view of the current research frontier rather than historical accumulation. While Martinez et al. (2013) remain the historical leader (focusing on Customer Loyalty), the contemporary discourse has pivoted sharply towards the Internal Social dimension.

Five of the top ten trending papers Su & Swanson (2019), Ahmed et al. (2020), Raza et al. (2021), Tian & Robertson (2019), and Mao et al. (2021) are explicitly dedicated to Employee outcomes. These studies investigate employee well-being, green behaviour, engagement, and psychological capital. This indicates that while the field historically focused on the external „Business Case” (Customer Loyalty/Firm Performance), the current research priority is the human capital mechanism, specifically, how ESG practices influence the workforce.

Table 3. Top 10 high-impact publications ranked by recent citation velocity (3y) of n=987 papers

Title	Authors	Source Title	Publication Year	Total Citations	Average per Year	Recent Citations (3y)
CSR and customer loyalty: The roles of trust, customer identification with the company and satisfaction	Martinez, Patricia; Rodriguez Del Bosque, Ignacio	International Journal of Hospitality Management	2013	645	46.07	181
Perceived corporate social responsibility's impact on the well-being and supportive green behaviors of hotel employees: The mediating role of the employee-corporate relationship	Su, Lujun; Swanson, Scott R.	Tourism Management	2019	293	36.63	155
Impact of CSR and environmental triggers on employee green behavior: The mediating effect of employee well-being	Ahmed, Mansoor; Sun Zehou; Raza, Syed Ali; Qureshi, Muhammad Asif; Yousufi, Sara Qamar	Corporate Social Responsibility and Environmental Management	2020	216	30.86	148
Corporate social responsibility and employees' voluntary pro-environmental behavior: The role of organizational pride and employee engagement	Raza, Ali; Farrukh, Muhammad; Iqbal, Muhammad Khalid; Farhan, Muhammad; Wu, Yihua	Corporate Social Responsibility and Environmental Management	2021	199	33.17	146
How and When Does Perceived CSR Affect Employees' Engagement in Voluntary Pro-environmental Behavior?	Tian, Qing; Robertson, Jennifer L.	Journal of Business Ethics	2019	295	36.88	139
Corporate social responsibility and firm performance in the hotel industry. The mediating role of green human resource management and environmental outcomes	Ubeda-Garcia, Mercedes; Claver-Cortes, Enrique; Marco-Lajara, Bartolome; Zaragoza-Saez, Patrocinio	Journal of Business Research	2021	198	33	133
Effects of tourism CSR on employee psychological capital in the COVID-19 crisis: from the perspective of conservation of resources theory	Mao, Yan; He, Jie; Morrison, Alastair M.; Coca-Stefaniak, J. Andres	Current Issues in Tourism	2021	255	36.43	131
A review of the business case for CSR in the hospitality industry	Rhou, Yinyoung; Singal, Manisha	International Journal of Hospitality Management	2020	218	31.14	111
Corporate social responsibility (CSR) and customer loyalty in the hotel industry: A cross-country study	Latif, Khawaja Fawad; Perez, Andrea; Sahibzada, Umar Farooq	International Journal of Hospitality Management	2020	160	22.86	110
Can corporate social responsibility protect firm value during the COVID-19 pandemic?	Qiu, Shangzhi (Charles); Jiang, Jianing; Liu, Xinming; Chen, Ming-Hsiang; Yuan, Xina	International Journal of Hospitality Management	2021	192	32	108

The Governance of the Field

Addressing the second research question, the analysis of the social structure with the co-authorship network analysis reveals the „invisible colleges” that define the governance of ESG scholarship in hospitality. As depicted in Figure 2, the network is not a singular, monolithic entity, but rather a collection of distinct collaborative clusters, each steered by high-productivity thought leaders. Moving forward, Table 4 presents the most productive authors in the domain. The field is

defined by a dichotomy of leadership. Lee, Seoki emerges as the central figure in terms of citation impact (2,281 citations) and productivity (22 documents), anchoring the field's intellectual history. In contrast, Han, Heesup (21 documents) and Ahmad, Naveed (16 documents) represent the high-velocity, contemporary wing of the research, characterised by rapid publication cycles and strong collaborative density. The network topology reveals three primary clusters (Table 5) that function as distinct schools of thought, mirroring the thematic evolution identified in Section 3.1.

Table 4. Top 5 most productive and influential authors

label	cluster	Documents	Citations	Avg. citations
Lee, Seoki	1	22	2281	104
Ahmad, Naveed	2	16	760	48
Han, Heesup	2	21	703	33
Mattila, Anna S.	1	10	688	68.8
Hur, Won-Moo	10	10	560	56

Table 5. Primary research clusters and key contributors

Cluster ID	Lead Author	Thematics	Total Authors	Author names identified to the clusters
1	Lee, Seoki	Strategic & Financial Performance	8	'Gao, Yixing (Lisa)', 'Guzzo, Renata F.', 'Kang, Kyung Ho', 'Kim, Bora', 'Lee, Minwoo', 'Mattila, Anna S.', 'Yeon, Jihwan'
2	Han, Heesup	Employee Behaviour & Psychology	7	'Ahmad, Aqeel', 'Ahmad, Naveed', 'Ariza-Montes, Antonio', 'Comite, Ubaldino', 'Han, Heesup', 'Samad, Sarminah', 'Yu, Jongsik'
3	Koseoglu, Mehmet Ali	Cross-Cultural & Review	7	'Karaman, Abdullah S.', 'Kilic, Merve', 'Kim, Seongseop (Sam)', 'Koseoglu, Mehmet Ali', 'Okumus, Fevzi', 'Uyar, Ali', 'Wong, Antony'

Cluster 1 represents the foundational strategic and market-oriented perspective within the field. It is primarily concerned with corporate strategy, financial performance, and consumer-facing outcomes such as satisfaction, loyalty, and brand positioning. This cluster establishes the core “business case” for sustainability, framing ESG as a driver of competitive advantage and economic value creation. Cluster 2 reflects a behaviourally oriented and internally focused research stream with strong thematic cohesion. It concentrates on employee behaviour, pro-environmental actions, and the psychological mechanisms underpinning ESG implementation. The emphasis lies on how organisational practices influence workforce attitudes, engagement, and sustainability-related behaviours.

Cluster 3 functions as an integrative and bridging domain within the literature. It is characterised by bibliometric analyses, systematic reviews, and cross-cultural comparisons that connect strategic and behavioural perspectives. This cluster synthesises existing knowledge while highlighting the ongoing shift in the field from externally driven performance narratives towards the internal dynamics of human capital and organisational behaviour.

Intellectual Structure of the Theoretical Foundations

In addressing the third research question, the social structure shows who is currently authoring, while the co-citation analysis uncovers the theoretical bases they rely on. As illustrated in Figure 3, the network clusters distinct schools of thought.

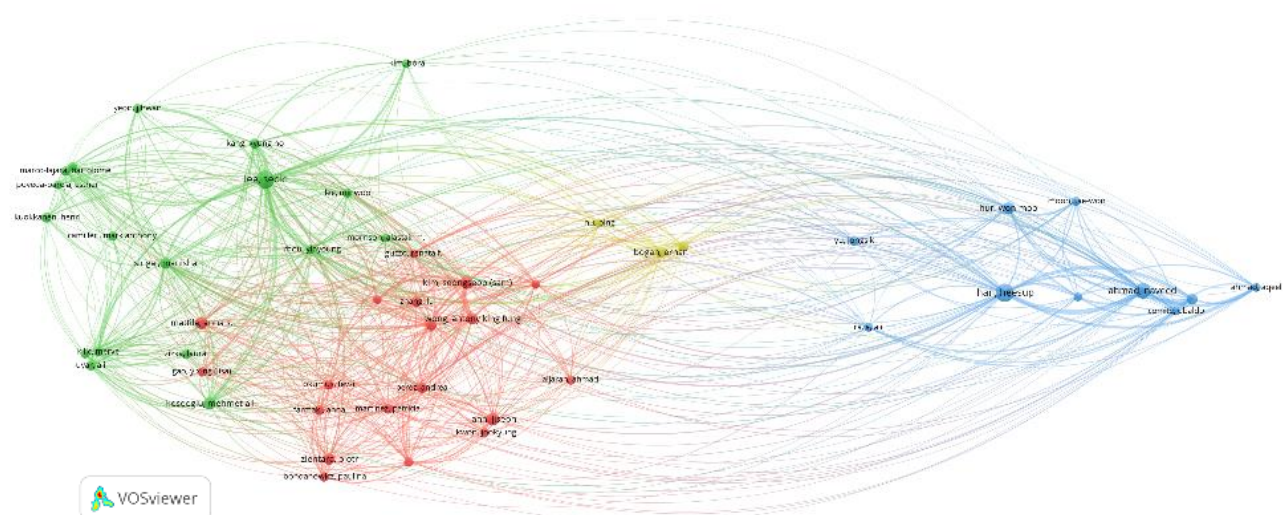


Figure 2. Co-citation network of the top 50 authors

The VOSviewer algorithm identified four distinct clusters within the co-citation network. These clusters represent the specific theoretical sub-domains of the ESG discourse.

The following table presents the thematic labelling of these clusters, derived from the analysis of the primary research focus of the central authors in each group. Table 6 describes these clusters.

Table 6. Thematic labels with the leading author's work summarised

Cluster ID	Publication Count	Theoretical Theme	Identified Author Names to Clusters
1	19	Consumer Trust & Identification (External Social)	'Martinez, P.'; 'Su, L.'; 'Zientara, P.'; 'Kim, Seongseop'; 'Wong, Antony'
2	18	Strategic Financial Performance (Governance/Environment)	'Lee, S.'; 'Rhou, Y.'; 'Singal, M.'; 'Kang, K.H.'; 'Koseoglu M. A.'
3	10	Employee Behaviour & Ethics (Internal Social)	'Ahmad, N.'; 'Hessup, H.'; 'Samad, S.'
4	3	Emerging Inquiries: Recent, smaller grouping	'Bogan, E.'; 'Dedeoglu, B.B.'

Cluster 1 represents the external social dimension of ESG, grounded in marketing and consumer psychology. It focuses on how sustainability initiatives influence customer perceptions, trust, identification, and loyalty, positioning ESG as a mechanism for enhancing brand equity and relational value with external stakeholders.

Cluster 2 reflects the instrumental and performance-oriented perspective of ESG. It centres on the relationship between sustainability practices and corporate financial performance, framing ESG as a strategic tool for efficiency, risk management, and long-term economic value creation.

Cluster 3 captures the internal social dimension, with a strong emphasis on human capital. It examines employee-related outcomes such as pro-environmental behaviour, organisational citizenship behaviour, and workplace engagement, highlighting the role of ESG in shaping internal organisational dynamics and workforce sustainability.

Cluster 4 represents an emerging and less consolidated area of research. It includes specialised and niche inquiries that extend ESG theory into new contexts, indicating early-stage thematic development that has not yet reached the structural maturity of the primary clusters.

Interpretation of Network Links: The inter-cluster connections in Table 7 reveal the flow of knowledge, as seen in the previous figure and table. The strongest link strength exists between Cluster 1 (External Social) and Cluster 2 (Governance/Environment), indicating that the link between „Customer Satisfaction” and „Financial Performance” is well-established and theoretically integrated. In contrast, the connections to Cluster 3 (Internal Social) are weaker, suggesting that this dimension is still being fully integrated into the broader strategic financial models of the field. The implication is clear: while the strategic business case linking Clusters 1 and 2 has reached theoretical maturity, the weaker ties to Cluster 3 confirm that the Internal Social dimension remains an under-integrated frontier and, by extension, the domain where the most significant conceptual advances are still available.

Table 7. Key theoretical clusters in the intellectual base (Co-citation)

cluster_A	cluster_B	Total Link Strength	cluster_A	cluster_B	Total Link Strength
1	2	583	2	4	87
1	3	154	2	3	81
1	4	91	3	4	52

Conceptual Structure and Temporal Shifts. The Tripartite Structure of ESG

Addressing the fourth research question, the keyword co-occurrence analysis (excluding generic industry header words) provides a detailed map of the field's conceptual structure. As shown in Figure 3, the network naturally divides into three distinct clusters corresponding to the Environmental, Social, and Governance pillars, highlighting the specific mechanisms researchers are testing. Table 8 summarises the composition of the three dominant clusters.

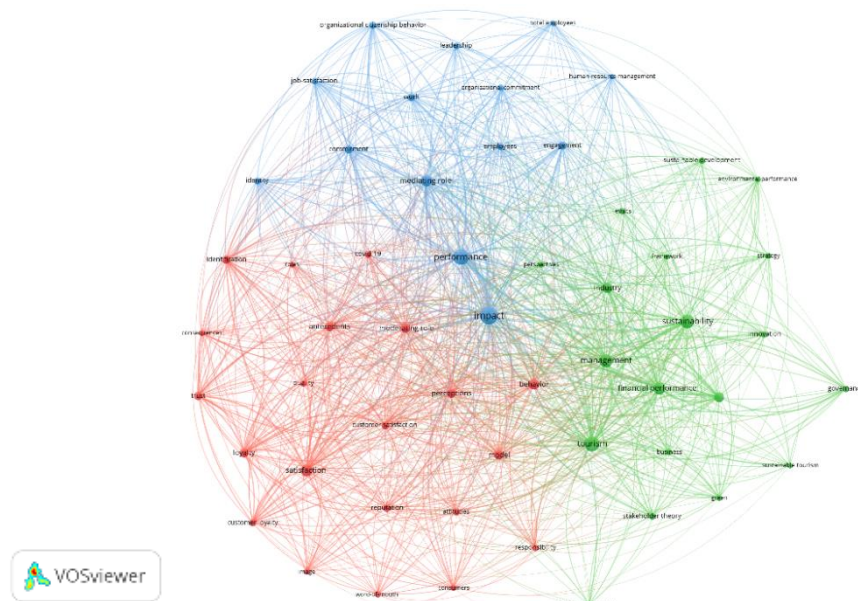


Figure 3. Keyword co-occurrence network illustrating the tripartite structure of ESG research

Table 8. Cluster strength and top labels

Cluster ID	Average Edge Weight	Top 5 Cluster Labels
1	5.1856	customer satisfaction, customer loyalty, moderating role, identification, responsibility...
2	6.2177	environmental performance, sustainable development, financial performance, social-responsibility, sustainable tourism...
3	9.0222	organizational citizenship behavior, human-resource management, organizational commitment, job-satisfaction, hotel employees...

Along with analysing the Eigenvector centrality of the keywords below in Table 9, excluding generic terms, a more precise conceptual map is drawn. In this granularity, the keyword frequency analysis maintained distinct nodes for overlapping terms to preserve a nuanced research focus. „Performance” (206 occurrences) was not merged with „financial performance” (117) or „firm performance” (82), as the former often denotes operational or environmental outcomes. Similarly, „mediating role” and „moderating role” were retained as distinct methodological nodes, reflecting different analytical approaches in the underlying literature. The Governance & Environmental Nexus (Green Cluster): This cluster represents the convergence of the ‘E’ and ‘G’ dimensions. Keywords such as Financial Performance and Environmental Performance are tightly interconnected. The high betweenness centrality of terms in this cluster indicates that they act as bridges across the entire network. This confirms the „Instrumental” view prevalent in the literature: governance is largely defined by the strategic management of environmental impacts to secure economic returns.

The External Social Dimension (Red Cluster): Dominated by Customer Satisfaction, Loyalty, and Identification, this cluster reflects the traditional marketing perspective. The presence of terms such as Trust and Perceptions suggests that the literature views the ‘Social’ pillar primarily as a reputation management tool.

The Internal Social Frontier (Blue Cluster): This cluster represents the human capital dimension, defined by Organizational Citizenship Behavior, Job Satisfaction, and Hotel Employees. This group is distinct from the consumer cluster, focusing on internal organisational dynamics rather than external market positioning.

Table 9. Topological metrics of key concepts within the network

Keyword	Cluster (Theme)	Occurrences	Link Strength	Centrality (Eigenvector)
impact	3	251	926	0.4074
performance	3	206	705	0.3406
sustainability	2	151	466	0.2413
financial performance	2	117	393	0.1911
mediating role	3	110	480	0.2430
satisfaction	1	109	435	0.2203
behavior	1	92	307	0.1500
firm performance	2	82	293	0.1483
moderating role	1	74	267	0.1403
loyalty	1	68	290	0.1475

The Shift to the Internal Social

Crucially, the temporal overlay analysis reveals a distinct chronological evolution in these themes. While Financial Performance and Firm Performance are associated with older average publication years (pre-2021), the most recent keywords are concentrated almost exclusively in the Internal Social dimension.

Table 10 highlights the top trending keywords by average publication year. Terms such as Hotel Employees, Behavior, Engagement, and Leadership represent the research frontier. This temporal shift provides empirical evidence of a paradigm change: following the COVID-19 pandemic, the academic focus has pivoted from establishing the financial „business case” to understanding the resilience and well-being of the workforce. Taken together, these temporal patterns indicate that the academic community has repositioned employee resilience from a secondary outcome to a central driver of ESG value creation. This realignment reflects a growing recognition that preparedness for systemic shocks demands ethical leadership and workforce well-being as strategic buffers against burnout and attrition (Ali et al., 2022).

Table 10. Recent keywords

Keyword Label	Avg. Pub. Year	Keyword Label	Avg. Pub. Year
hotel employees	2022.79	innovation	2022.20
behavior	2022.55	work	2022.18
responsibility	2022.46	covid-19	2022.11
engagement	2022.33	leadership	2022.06
mediating role	2022.30	environmental performance	2021.75

CONCLUSION

This study employed a complex bibliometric analysis to map the intellectual, social, and conceptual structures of ESG research in the hospitality sector up to the end of 2025. By synthesising data from 987 high-quality publications, the analysis provides empirical answers to the four research questions guiding this investigation, revealing a field that

has successfully navigated the transition from a niche interest to a central strategic imperative. The summary of the research questions confirm this.

RQ1 (Publication trajectories): The field's trajectory is characterised by exponential growth, with citation impact tripling between 2019 and 2023. This validates the premise that ESG has moved to the core of hospitality management scholarship.

RQ2 (Collaborative networks): The social structure is bifurcated between a foundational group focused on Corporate Strategy and Financial Performance, and a highly dense contemporary cluster steering the research into Employee Behaviour.

RQ3 (Intellectual base): Co-citation analysis reveals the intellectual base remains rooted in mature CSR paradigms of Consumer Marketing (External Social) and Financial Strategy (Governance).

RQ4 (Conceptual evolution): Keyword temporal overlay confirms a paradigm shift where the research frontier has pivoted sharply from financial metrics towards the „Internal Social” dimension, prioritising employee engagement.

The study identifies a clear theoretical bifurcation. The “Environmental-Governance Nexus” (Cluster 2) and the “External Social” consumer perspective (Cluster 1) are highly mature domains with strong inter-cluster linkages (Table 7), indicating a consensus on the financial business case. Conversely, the “Internal Social” dimension represents an emergent theoretical frontier. As evidenced by the highest recent keyword velocities (Table 10: ‘hotel employees’, ‘behavior’, ‘engagement’), the definition of social responsibility has structurally shifted inward. This positions frameworks like Social Exchange Theory (SET) and Organisational Citizenship Behaviour (OCB), currently clustered peripherally, as the primary, albeit under-tested, theoretical lenses for future strategic ESG research.

The findings provide specific guidance for hospitality practitioners navigating ESG implementation. As our data show, the highest recent citation velocities belong to papers focusing on employee well-being and engagement. Therefore, human resource strategies focused on the „Internal Social” dimension, such as proactive employee engagement and supportive leadership (Table 10), are currently the most evidence-backed pathways for value creation. Research confirms that employee-level CSR acts as a direct enabler for economic performance by improving the quality of work-life and promoting deeper engagement (Bu et al., 2022). With the impending European Union CSRD “double materiality” requirements, practitioners must look beyond standard environmental and actively integrate human capital metrics into their strategic governance reporting to prevent talent attrition.

Limitations and Future Research

While this study provides a comprehensive structural map, it is limited by its reliance on the Web of Science Core Collection, which may exclude grey literature or niche regional journals. Based on the „Internal Social” gap identified, future research should advance in three specific directions: (1) designing causal and longitudinal studies to test the impact of specific governance interventions (e.g., fair wage governance, diversity protocols) on human capital retention; (2) examining the real-world compliance adaptations of hospitality firms in response to the post-2025 CSRD implementation; and (3) conducting cross-national comparative analyses, particularly within Central and Eastern European (CEE) contexts, to determine how regional economic pressures moderate the internal social benefits of ESG.

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List of Abbreviations: CSDDD - Corporate Sustainability Due Diligence Directive; CSR - Corporate Social Responsibility; CSRD - Corporate Sustainability Reporting Directive; ESG - Environmental, Social and Governance; RQ - Research Questions; WoS - Web of Science

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