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Why Don't Restaurants Want to Promote Their Sustainability? Insights From New Zealand

Sara Naderi Koupaei¹  | Paul W. Ballantine²  | Lucie Ozanne¹ 

¹Department of Management, Marketing and Tourism, UC Business School, University of Canterbury, Christchurch, New Zealand | ²UC Business School, University of Canterbury, Christchurch, New Zealand

Correspondence: Sara Naderi Koupaei (sara.naderikoupaei@canterbury.ac.nz)

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ABSTRACT

Restaurants are increasingly promoting their sustainability attributes. However, this research fills a notable gap in knowledge in relation to the online promotion of sustainability by restaurants in non-Michelin award countries, and where there is no specific sustainable restaurant certification to identify the online promotion of sustainability attributes. The websites of 164 award-winning or nominated New Zealand restaurants were subject to content analysis. Results showed that seasonal and local produce were the most widely promoted sustainability measures. Unlike international sustainable restaurant schemes, there was little emphasis on sustainably harvested fish, Fairtrade, and animal ethics. However, interviews with restaurant chefs, managers, and owners demonstrated that many restaurants do not promote their sustainability practices because of greenwashing concerns and their personal values. The results highlight the online promotion of restaurant sustainability practices and the extent of sustainability practices outside of formal certification or award systems.

1 | Introduction

Given their position in the food system, the restaurant and food services sector are a potentially major contributors to the United Nation's Sustainable Development Goals. However, while restaurants can contribute to local food chains, employment generation, and healthy food choices they are simultaneously associated with problems of food and packaging waste management and unsustainable resource use (Filimonau et al. 2017; Principato et al. 2018; Gössling and Hall 2022). As part of the restaurant sector's sustainable transition, many international and regional sustainability awards and certifications with different criteria have appeared, e.g., Michelin Green Star (Michelin Guide 2021), Sustainable Restaurant Association (SRA), and the Green Restaurant Association (GRA), with corresponding effects on restaurant reputation and branding (Huang and Hall 2023).

The development of new information technologies and the widespread adoption of social media by consumers have substantially changed restaurant marketing strategies (Martin-Rios et al. 2020). In order to make their presence known to customers in a highly competitive environment, restaurants have become active on social media networks (Hallak et al. 2018), while a restaurant's website is often the most important source of information of a restaurant's reputation, recommendations, reviews, and ratings (Daries et al. 2018). However, surprisingly given its potential importance for consumers, there is very limited analysis of what sustainability features are promoted online (Yoon et al. 2020; Bhargava 2021; Huang et al. 2022, 2023a).

Gastronomic research on online presence and promotion is potentially of significant value for understanding the relationships between restaurants and sustainability (Nyberg et al. 2022; Wang and Ko 2024). Huang et al. (2023a) used

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content analysis to examine the practices of 210 Chinese Michelin Restaurants which are promoted online and found that sustainability practices were identified by only 14% of websites and local context on 46% (see also Huang et al. 2024). A companion study of 135 Michelin Three Star restaurants (Huang and Hall 2023), found that sustainability practices were promoted by just under half of all the restaurant websites they examined, with the use of local food being the most promoted. A study of the websites of 355 Michelin Green Star restaurants also found that local food was the most promoted sustainability practice with it being noted by 88% of restaurants (cite?). However, these previous studies of the online promotion of sustainability practices of destination restaurants or other sustainability awards examines restaurants that are potentially predisposed towards such promotion given that they occur in Michelin assessed regions. Therefore, this paper examines the prevalence of sustainability attributes in online promotion in a non-Michelin award country, New Zealand. New Zealand is an appropriate location for such analysis given it promotes its food and hospitality products internationally as part of its 100% Pure brand which reinforces the relationship of the restaurant sector to the agriculture and tourism industries (Hall and Gössling 2016), and while a significant contributor to economic activity and employment (IBIS World 2023) the hospitality and restaurant sector is a significant contributor of waste (MFE 2023). Although, according to a Restaurant Association of New Zealand briefing, sustainability is “not just a buzzword” (Hunt 2022).

Therefore, this research aims to fill a significant gap in knowledge in relation to the online promotion of sustainability by restaurants in non-Michelin award countries and in a country with no sustainable or green restaurant certification of its own. We achieve this through an online content analysis of restaurants that have received awards (restaurant association, food magazine) in New Zealand. The content analysis is followed by a series of interviews with managers and chefs of restaurants regarding their online promotion of sustainability practices. The paper first provides a brief review of the sustainable restaurant literature before discussing the method and the results of the analysis. The results highlight that although there are similarities with previous international research, there are also substantial differences with implications for understanding the role of sustainability attributes in online restaurant promotion in a new context.

2 | Literature Review

2.1 | Sustainability and Restaurants

Sustainability is a multidimensional concept which is reflected in a ‘triple bottom line’ approach to business (Khan et al. 2021). The restaurant and food services sector is often portrayed as being environmentally unsustainable (Maynard et al. 2020; da Rosa et al. 2021). As a result, there is interest in a shift or transition to “eco-friendly” (Arun et al. 2021) “green” (Cho and Yoo 2021), or “sustainable” restaurants (Iraldo et al. 2017; Gössling and Hall 2022), and “the imperative of adopting sustainable practices within the culinary sector” as part of “a 360° vision of gastronomy” (Navarro-Dols 2024).

There are several national and international sustainable and green certification programs, e.g., Green Restaurant Association (GRA), Green Table Network (GTN), Sustainable Restaurant Association (SRA), and National Restaurant Association (NRA) in the foodservice and restaurant sector. However, there is no accepted academic or industry definition of what constitutes a ‘green’, ‘ecological’ or ‘sustainable’ restaurant (Chaturvedi et al. 2024; Gössling and Hall 2022). Compared to a ‘traditional’ restaurant, a green restaurant is often perceived as deliberately attending to the ‘three Rs’ (reduce, reuse, recycle) and the ‘two Es’ (efficiency, energy [conservation]) (Kumar et al. 2023). Although the terms green and sustainable are often used inter-changeably, ‘green’ is often used more in a North American context and ‘sustainable’ in a UK context, perhaps reflecting the lead of restaurant associations in these countries.

Jang et al. (2011) define sustainable restaurants in relation to (1) sustainable food practices, e.g., increasing the amount of organic and local food on offer, and (2) environmentally friendly and responsible operational practices, e.g., waste reduction, water and energy conservation, while Gössling and Hall (2022) also note social aspects of sustainable restaurants such as staff wellbeing and contribution to their local community. Wang et al. (2013) identified green restaurants as being distinguished by four areas of activity: (1) environmental management policies; (2) sustainability strategies; (3) environmental conservation initiatives; and (4) having low emissions. Kwok et al. (2016) provided a different approach to green restaurants attributes, classifying them in terms of administration (e.g., accreditation); food (e.g., ethically sourced); and environment (e.g., conservation measures). In contrast, Teng and Wu (2019) placed more emphasis on kitchen operations. Yet another approach is that of Filimonau and de Coteau (2019) who discuss environmental sustainability in restaurants with respect to food (e.g., reducing kitchen and plate waste) and non-food related items (e.g., water conservation). Gössling and Hall (2022) arguably provide the most comprehensive definition of a sustainable restaurant, referring to the provision of:

...dining services and related dishes and food products which respond to a customer's desire for good food and positive sensory and dining experiences while minimizing the use of natural resources and toxic materials as well as waste, pollutants, and emissions. This is done in a manner that seeks to maximise staff and community social and economic well-being and environmental and public health over the life cycle of the food service so as not to jeopardise the needs of the future (Gössling and Hall 2022, 30).

Nevertheless, while there is substantial literature on consumer perceptions of green and sustainable restaurants, there are limited studies on restaurant sustainability from a production perspective, and even fewer in relation to social sustainability (Sloan et al. 2015; Gössling and Hall 2022).

In addition to international green and sustainable restaurant certifications, several national restaurant associations, such

as the US National Restaurant Association (NRA), have also launched sustainability initiatives (Huang and Hall 2023). Restaurants may also adopt general environmental and energy efficiency initiatives, such as the internationally recognised Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design (LEED) programmes (Gössling and Hall 2022). Awards may also be offered for restaurant sustainability; for example, the Michelin guide now awards ‘green stars’ as part of their award and recommendation programme (Huang et al. 2023a; Noguer-Juncà and Fusté-Forné 2022).

To illustrate the variation that exists in the restaurant sector with respect to sustainability, Table 1 shows the extent to which various categories and elements of sustainability are incorporated in seven sustainable restaurant schemes as well as those identified by the national restaurant associations of the United States and New Zealand. What is readily apparent is the range in approaches to sustainability certification and membership accreditation, with the greatest degree of commonality being in the food area, with attention being given to certified foods (e.g., sustainably harvested fish and organic foods, animal welfare, and local foods). Offering vegetarian and healthy meals is a common menu element, while several features of the kitchen and building, such as water and energy conservation/reduction, waste reduction, recycling, and reuse, are widely promoted. Social sustainability has limited profile, although staff training and education is clearly seen as important, along with community support and donations to food banks. Interestingly, one characteristic that is missing from Gössling and Hall’s (2022) analysis of the attributes of sustainable restaurants is that of provision of information regarding food allergens, even though they note the importance of this in their work. Given growing concerns over the content of food as well as dietary requirements, the disclosure of food allergens by restaurants would seem to be a potentially significant sustainability attribute from a health and wellbeing perspective (Endres et al. 2021; Sisto et al. 2022).

Given customer demand for ‘green’ products and services, some restaurants have developed and promote environmentally friendly practices, many of which are displayed on their menu and online (Gössling and Hall 2022; Huang et al. 2023a; Noguer-Juncà and Fusté-Forné 2022). However, it is important to recognise that the meal that ends up on a customer’s plate has components including production, transportation, preparation, provision, and serving (Lopez et al. 2019). From a lifecycle perspective, how the meal’s ingredients got to the plate may be much more significant for the environment than what happens in the kitchen. For example, in helping to develop the US Green Seal Standard for Restaurants, Baldwin et al. (2011) identified food procurement as being responsible for 94.7% of the total environmental impact of restaurants. Such a perspective reinforces the importance of understanding the inputs and outputs from a restaurant meal and the accompanying service and highlights the importance of understanding restaurant sustainability with respect to what happens in the back of house (production, preparation, and provision) and in the front of house (dining room and serving), with each area constituting sustainability issues of varying importance to customers, staff and owners.

2.2 | Sustainable Restaurant Practices as an Online Marketing Tool

Restaurants are one of the businesses that have been most affected by online innovation (Gonzalez et al. 2022). A restaurant’s online activities can attract customers, influence consumer restaurant selection and decision-making, and reinforce brand relationships and loyalty, and purchase intentions (Yilmaz and Gültekin 2016). The menu is an essential advertisement for communicating with customers whether in-house or online. Menus contain information about menu item position, description, label, and characteristics as well as nutrition, allergy requirements and ingredients and is a key factor, together with other restaurant attributes, such as the restaurant or chef’s story, in attracting and satisfying customers (Huang et al. 2023a). Brandau (2013) suggests that three in four smartphone users choose restaurants through the assistance of online search results, with an estimated 80% of consumers looking at restaurant menus online before they decide where to eat. As a result, restaurants are leveraging their online presence to interact with their potential and existing customers (Singh and Verma 2020; Vrontis et al. 2021). However, there is a relative lack of research that considers the sustainability elements that are promoted in the restaurant’s menu (real or virtual), with such research focused on restaurants in Michelin-reviewed and recommended countries (Huang et al. 2023a), with New Zealand-based research being extremely limited (Bhargava 2021).

The content on a business’ website has evolved into a ‘cover letter’ for any business as it is usually the first page consumers see (Ismailova and Kimsanova 2017). It has been suggested that for some destination restaurants, such as the Michelin-starred, the website is often the most important source of information for consumers that provides general information of the restaurant’s reputation, recommendations, reviews, and ratings in food guides and media (Yilmaz and Gültekin 2016; Huang et al. 2022, 2023a). Therefore, a website must not only provide information, but also encourage consumers to learn about the brand while, in the case of restaurants, motivate them to book a table or order online. There are differences in how customers search for content online (Wang et al. 2019). For example, users seek more formal content when they are on a desktop or laptop (Bu et al. 2020), while tourists and visitors tend to search for more casual and lifestyle content on social media (Mohammad Arif and Du 2019). Sensory appeals to customers through photos can also create mental impressions and encourage eating at a restaurant (Marquez Diaz 2022). However, there is relatively little research on restaurant online promotion of sustainability practices (Yoon et al. 2020; Huang et al. 2023a), especially outside of Michelin assessed countries, as well as the reasons for inclusion and promotion.

3 | Research Methodology

This study employed a sequential mixed methods approach to examine New Zealand restaurant online promotion of sustainability practices. The first stage used website content analysis to investigate the sustainability attributes of the top restaurants

TABLE 1 | Dimensions of sustainable restaurant and foodservices.

	SRA	GRA	GT	SPE	REAL	LF	GMIC	RANZ	NRA
Primarily operating in	UK and international	North America	UK, Canada, Africa, Italy	Canada	USA	London, UK	USA, Canada, Singapore, HK	NZ	USA
Founded	2010	1990	1997	2001	2012	2011	2003	1972	1919
Supply chain sourcing and procurement									
Sustainably harvested fish	•	•	•	•	•	•	•		•
Organic meat and/or vegetables		•	•		•		•	•	
Local/regional meat and/or vegetables	•	•	•	•	•		•	•	•
Antibiotic free meats				•	•				
Animal welfare in meat purchasing	•	•			•	•		•	•
Fair Trade products	•		•			•			
Certified ethically produced products	•	•	•				•		
Sustainably/eco-certified products			•		•		•		•
Seasonal menu			Identified in literature and by the RANZ						
Environmental practices									
Energy reduction	•	•	•				•	•	•
Water reduction	•	•	•				•	•	•
Water recycling	•	•					•		
Healthy eating/portion size control	•			•	•	•		•	
Vegetarian/vegan	•	•		•	•		•	•	•
Low-carbon menu options		•						•	•
Sustainable restaurant design (recycled materials, passive energy, renewables, etc.)		•	•					•	•
Sustainable kitchen design		•	•				•	•	

(Continues)

TABLE 1 | (Continued)

	SRA	GRA	GT	SPE	REAL	LF	GMIC	RANZ	NRA
Waste reduction, reuse, and recycling	•	•	•		•		•	•	•
Food redistribution/ donation		•					•	•	•
Composting		•					•		
Air quality		•					•	•	
Waste to animal feed/ environment		Identified in literature on local food systems, e.g., restaurants growing their own, shells being returned to oyster beds							
Sustainably/ eco-certified packaging [plastic/paper], e.g., recyclable/ compostable		Identified in literature							
Social, economic, and work practices									
Community engagement and local partnerships	•		•			•	•	•	•
Responsible marketing and communication	•			•	•			•	•
Living wage						•			
Staff education and training on sustainable practices	•	•	•	•				•	•

Abbreviations: GMIC, Green Meeting Industry Council; GRA, Dine Green/Green Restaurant Association; GT, Green Tourism; LF, London Food Link: 'Good food for London'; NRA, National Restaurant Association; RANZ, Restaurant Association of New Zealand; REAL, REAL US Healthful Foods Council; SPE, Sanitas Per Escam (Health through food); SRA, Sustainable Restaurant Association/Food Made Good.

Source: Modified and expanded from Gössling and Hall (2022).

identified in two different categories, those awarded Cuisine hats in the *Cuisine Good Food Guide*, and those nominated for the RANZ awards in 2023. This method is appropriate for developing a list of attributes for evaluation and for studying the online content of destination restaurants, as this sector has a substantial online presence and are often perceived as potential sustainability 'ambassadors' (Daries et al. 2018; Huang et al. 2022, 2023a, 2023b).

Cuisine was the first New Zealand bi-monthly food and wine magazine and has existed in website form since December 2000 (Cuisine Magazine 2023). The *Cuisine Good Food Guide* reports "the best restaurants, chefs and innovators of the year across New Zealand's culinary scene" (Cuisine Good Food Guide 2024). To be recognised by the guide restaurants must have been open for at least one month before assessment, and are visited anonymously and judged for their meal by food and

wine experts. The Hat rating is between 14 (good) to 20 (Best of the best) (Cuisine Good Food Guide 2024). Established in 1972, the RANZ is an umbrella organisation that represents restaurants and cafés on all issues (RANZ 2024). The two sources were selected because they provide a means to identify potential exemplars of restaurant best practice; Cuisine hats being awarded by experts, and the RANZ awards having elements of both public and expert assessment.

The content analysis element of the study was conducted in January 2024 using the elements identified in Table 1. The study analysed 100 restaurants and cafés nominated for the RANZ awards and 82 in the Cuisine Good Food Guide 'hatted' restaurant list. Eighteen restaurants were both RANZ nominated and had received recognition from Cuisine. Ten of the RANZ restaurants did not have a website at the time of analysis. The Instagram and Facebook pages of the restaurants and

cafés that had websites were also examined. However, there was virtually no difference in online presentation between the three forms of online presence as they all carried the restaurant menu. Therefore, the results presented here focus on the website results.

The second stage of the research consisted of interviews with chefs and managers of restaurants and cafés that were identified in the content analysis. All restaurants and cafés were contacted by email and/or phone and invited to participate in a face-to-face or online interview regarding their sustainable practices and online presence. Interviews proceeded until data saturation was reached, with 20 interviews being conducted. The profile of the restaurants and cafés involved at the interview stage is also broadly representative of the overall profile of businesses examined in the content analysis. The interview manuscript was subject to thematic analysis because of its ability to identify common themes and patterns in the dataset (Braun and Clarke 2006).

4 | Results

Results were divided into three different categories identified as sustainable food elements (Table 2), non-food sustainability elements (Table 3), and social and economic sustainability elements (Table 4) on restaurant websites. In the sustainable food category, some elements such as local food, seasonal food, and different allergy requirements were the most promoted. Seasonal food is promoted in 45.12% of *Cuisine* Good Food Guide Hatted restaurants and in 37.70% of RANZ Award Nominees websites. Local food is the other most promoted sustainability element, promoted by 58.53% of *Cuisine* Good Food Guide hatted restaurants and 47.77% of RANZ Award Nominees. Attributes such as sustainably harvested fish and sustainability or eco-certified products receive little attention in the restaurant samples.

Restaurants described New Zealand sourced ingredients in different ways. For example, Palate Restaurant in Hamilton states on its website, “Supporting local, often specialized producers creates a thriving food industry and inspiration for us when we change our seasonally inspired menus.” (<https://palaterestaurant.co.nz>). Similarly, Schnappa Rock in Northland states, “Keeping it local is important to our chefs and the team with all seafood and meat sourced directly from the best suppliers in the region.” (<https://www.schnapparock.co.nz>). In website text, comments by restaurants and cafés that they offer seasonal produce are often related to organic food. For example, Gatherings in Christchurch promotes an organic and seasonal menu: “When booking with us, you will experience a creative and ever changing menu focused on organic and seasonable vegetables” (<https://www.gatherings.co.nz>). The Cove café in Waipu highlights its own organic produce, “Our chef and his team of eight gardeners grow spray-free organic vegetables and herbs in the rich volcanic soil ensuring customers still get the ‘gate to plate’ experience” (<https://www.thecovecafe.co.nz>). Embra in Taupo, which has French and British influences on its menu, notes on its website “Seasonality and sustainability are important to us. We believe that the freshest ingredients make for the best flavours, so our menu is designed to reflect the seasons down to the month of the year” (<https://embra.nz/about-us>).

TABLE 2 | Sustainable food elements in restaurant websites.

Elements	Good food hatted restaurants	RANZ award nominees
Sustainably harvested fish	4 (4.87%)	3 (3.33%)
Plant Based Food	3 (3.56%)	5 (5.55%)
Organic food products	11 (13.41%)	18 (20%)
Local ingredients (New Zealand sourced)	48 (58.53%)	43 (47.77%)
Local ingredients (Regionally sourced)	4 (4.87%)	4 (4.44%)
Antibiotic free meats	0	0
Animal welfare in meat purchasing	0	0
Fair Trade products	0	1 (1.11%)
Certified ethically produced products	0	0
Sustainably/eco-certified products	7 (8.53%)	6 (6.66%)
Seasonal menu	37 (45.12%)	34 (37.77%)
Healthy eating/portion size control	13 (15.58%)	13 (14.44%)
Vegan Menu	4 (4.87%)	14 (15.55%)
Vegan	16 (19.51%)	27 (30%)
Vegetarian menu	10 (12.19%)	16 (17.77%)
Vegetarian	17 (20.73%)	33 (36.66%)
Low-carbon menu options	0	0
Dairy free	7 (8.53%)	23 (25.55%)
Gluten Free	15 (18.29%)	41 (45.55%)
Nuts allergy	1 (1.21%)	1 (1.11%)
General allergy	19 (23.17%)	25 (27.77%)
<i>n</i>	82	90

Dietary and allergy requirements like vegan, vegetarian, dairy free, gluten free, nut free, and general allergy are promoted in both restaurant populations. For example, Hayes Common Eatery in Hamilton states “We lavish as much imagination and attention on our vegetarian and vegan menu offerings as on our other dishes, and with fresh ingredients” (<https://www.hayescommon.co.nz>). A quarter (24.40%) of *Cuisine* Good Food Guide hatted restaurants note that they offer a vegan menu or option online and almost half (45.60%) of RANZ Award Nominees do the same. Vegetarian options are more widely available with 32.90% of *Cuisine* Good Food Guide hatted restaurants stating online that they offer a vegetarian dish or menu, as did 54.40% of RANZ Award Nominees. We found

TABLE 3 | Non-food sustainability elements on restaurant websites.

Elements	Good food hatted restaurants	RANZ award nominees
Energy conservation	3 (3.65%)	4 (4.44%)
Water conservation	1 (1.21%)	2 (2.22%)
Water recycling	0	1 (1.11%)
Sustainable restaurant design	0	2 (2.22%)
Sustainable kitchen design	0	0
Waste reduction, reuse and recycling	6 (7.31%)	9 (10%)
Food redistribution/donation	0	0
Composting	4 (4.87%)	6 (6.66%)
Air quality	0	0
Waste to animal feed/environment	1 (1.21%)	1 (1.11%)
Sustainably/eco-certified packaging	2 (2.43%)	6 (6.66%)
<i>n</i>	82	90

TABLE 4 | Social and economic sustainability elements on restaurant websites.

Elements	Good Food Hatted restaurants	RANZ Award Nominees
Community engagement and local partnership	2 (2.43%)	3 (3.33%)
Responsible marketing and communication	0	0
Living wage	0	0
Staff education and training on sustainable practices	0	1 (1.11%)
Maori Language use	2 (2.43%)	1 (1.11%)
Promote Local food network	8 (9.75%)	5 (5.55%)
<i>n</i>	82	90

the vegan menu or dish option is often available on the menu as the dish available for vegetarians.

In non-food sustainability elements (Table 3) composting, waste reduction, reuse and recycling are the most promoted elements, although they are still only promoted by a very small minority

of restaurants. For example, only 7.31% of *Cuisine* Good Food Guide hatted restaurants and 10% of RANZ Award Nominees promoted waste reduction, reuse and recycling while composting is indicated by 14.87% of *Cuisine* Good Food Guide hatted restaurants and 6.66% of RANZ Award nominees. The results highlight that non-food sustainability elements are not promoted by restaurants overall, although they may be significant for individual properties. Interestingly, it appeared more significant for restaurants that were also connection to properties that also provided accommodation. For example, the Majestic at Mayfair in Christchurch states “we are continuously seeking new ways to minimise our impact on the environment and reduce our usage of energy, water and waste” (<https://mayfairluxuryhotels.com/eat-and-drink>). Toad Hall at Motueka states: “We follow strict recycling procedures where ultimately we become a zero-waste business, we have co-creative staff, and are working towards fully sustainable business practices. Using Solar to produce the majority of our electrical needs, Growing much of our produce needs, composting all of our food scraps, only using recyclable & compostable packaging, encouraging 4 day work weeks & having honest conversations regarding mental health and well-being” (<https://www.toadhallmotueka.co.nz>). Composting of food waste is not mandatory for restaurants as it is in some Californian jurisdictions. However, it is noted by several RANZ Award Nominees and *Cuisine* Good Food Guide hatted restaurants. For example, the Sherwood Restaurant at the Sherwood Hotel in Queenstown, which claims that the Sherwood chain “is ranked in the world’s top ten most sustainable hotels by Expedia travellers” promotes that “100% of our organic waste is composted and returned to the kitchen garden to grow more food” (<https://sherwoodqueenstown.nz>). Graze wine bar in Kelburn, Wellington, is one of the few restaurants in the content analysis that note their sustainable packaging. They claim on their website that “Where possible we use refillable containers and when we can’t, we work with suppliers to reduce packaging. We recycle everything that we can. We do not offer take away containers. We get creative in the kitchen and bar to reduce food waste and the rest is composted. We have reusable cloth napkins and hand towels for our customers” (<https://grazewinebar.co.nz/about-us/>).

Similarly, social and economic sustainability elements (Table 4) also receive little promotion. Local food networks is the most common category promoted by 9.75% of *Cuisine* Good Food Guide hatted restaurants and 5.55% of RANZ Award restaurants. Examples include Victus Coffee and Eatery in Nelson which states on its website: “We source our ingredients from local producers, use compostable packaging, and partner with local organisations to support various social causes” (<https://www.victus.nz>). In addition to supporting local food networks Victus Coffee and Eatery notes that it is a “partner with local organisations to support various social causes”, while The Mains Restaurant—on the Point in Rotorua reports under the heading of “What we do for our community” that they employ local staff wherever possible and contribute to community events, they also note that they educate staff on sustainable practices (<https://www.onthepoint.co.nz/sustainability>). However, the results of the content analysis only provide insights into what is promoted online, not on what restaurants actually do or why they do it. Therefore, the next stage of research discusses the results of interviews with managers and chefs regarding their motivations for online promotion of sustainability practices.

TABLE 5 | Details of interviewees.

Interviewee No	Gender	Type of interview	Type of restaurant
1	Male	Face-to-face	Contemporary New Zealand fine dining
2	Female	Face-to-face	Contemporary New Zealand fine dining winery
3	Male	Face-to-face	Pizza and burger
4	Male	Face time	Contemporary New Zealand fine dining
5	Male	Face-to-face	Pizza
6	Female	Face-to-face	Japanese
7	Female	Zoom	Contemporary New Zealand fine dining
8	Female	Zoom	Contemporary New Zealand fine dining
9	Male	Face-to-face	Specialist fine dining
10	Male	Zoom	Contemporary wine and food bar
11	Male	Face time	Contemporary New Zealand fine dining
12	Male	Zoom	Contemporary New Zealand fine dining
13	Male	Face-to-face	Contemporary wine and food bar
14	Male	Face-to-face	Specialist fine restaurant
15	Male	Face-to-face	International fine dining and café
16	Male	Face-to-face	Contemporary Mediterranean dining
17	Male	Zoom	International fine dining
18	Male	Face-to-face	Barbecue
19	Female	Face-to-face	Specialist café
20	Female	Face-to-face	Contemporary New Zealand fine dining winery

4.1 | Promotion and Non-Promotion of Sustainable Restaurant Practices Online

The first stage of the research highlighted what sustainable practices New Zealand restaurants promoted online. Apart from seasonality and local food use, sustainable practices, especially those that are back of house, receive little promotion. Although a content analysis reveals what practices are being implemented, it does not explain the underlying reasons. To gain insight, 20 interviews were conducted with several chefs and managers from the analyzed restaurants. Table 5 reports the interviewees' gender, the type of restaurant they were from, and the nature of the interview.

The results of interviews suggested that they are involved in far more sustainability practices than what they promote. The motivations for promoting sustainability include fostering transparency and trust, responding to customer demand, differentiating and branding the business, and serving educational purposes. For example, interviewee 16 emphasized the importance of transparency in building trust among customers. He noted that it helps customers understand the quality and source of their food and aligns customer expectations with business values, stating, "We clearly mention on our website what we're trying to achieve with organic and biodynamic practices so people can understand the importance." However, other businesses believe that promoting

sustainability can attract more people, especially those who care about the environment and prefer organic and spray-free food. Interviewee 2 highlighted their focus on organic food and wines. They believe that it is quite rare to find food not grown with sprays in a restaurant, which attracts those who specifically seek out such dining experiences.

In addition, promoting sustainability provides effective branding and clear differentiation for restaurants. Sustainability can distinguish the business, service and food from their competitors and potentially create a compelling value proposition that attracts environmentally conscious consumers who seek more than just a meal and builds brand strength as well as help the restaurant to stand out from competitors. Interviewee 3 stated that "We highlighted our sustainable supplier as they do really good practices as well to let our customers know about their good and local product". Promoting sustainability in the restaurant industry not only serves as a tool for differentiation and branding but also aims to educate customers on the importance and benefits of sustainable practices. By educating diners on how their food is sourced and the environmental impact of their choices, restaurants foster a deeper understanding and appreciation for their efforts in sustainability. Interviewee 16 noted that "Once the people understand the importance of sustainability such as local food, seasonal food and others, then they are more likely to support the business and share its values".

Interestingly, and against much of the existing restaurant literature that suggests that it is important to market sustainability to green consumer market segments (Gössling and Hall 2022; Huang et al. 2023a), there are several reasons provided for restaurants choosing not to promote themselves in this way. The main reason given by participants was that they felt it to be inappropriate to make such claims. For example, interviewee 13 stated that,

...we've actively chosen to not market ourselves as green or sustainable business because it doesn't feel right for that we do enough to justify marketing under that banner. For us as a company and as a brand it's really important to be transparent and truthful about what we do".

This perspective reflects a commitment to authenticity, where the business prioritizes genuine sustainability efforts over potentially misleading marketing claims. Similarly, interviewee 14 argues, "Because you don't need to say you are sustainable when you do sustainable. I did it with my previous business and my current one to be sustainable, and it's just unnecessary." This viewpoint highlights the belief that genuine sustainable practices speak for themselves. For this interviewee, sustainability is an inherent part of their business model and personal ethos, making explicit marketing unnecessary. Their focus is on maintaining high standards of sustainability as an internalized norm rather than an outward marketing claim. Interviewee 19 shares a similar sentiment, stating, "I couldn't think of operating any other way, because it is my belief, and it is unnecessary to shout that we're sustainable. Some people don't even know we're growing our produce here." This interviewee views sustainability as an integral part of their operational philosophy, driven by personal beliefs rather than the need for external validation. They find that their practices naturally align with sustainable values without needing to advertise them, emphasizing that authenticity in operations is more important than visibility in sustainability claims.

Similar attitudes were also seen in interviewee 9. However, they also argued that it should be part of being a successful restaurant and be normalized.

...I don't promote it because my mindset in and around it, that it's so normalized and part of our business. I think to be successful restaurant, you have to do this stuff. So, I'm not really shouting about it anymore.

This interviewee believes that sustainability should be a standard practice within the industry. By internalizing it as a business norm, they see sustainability as essential to running a successful restaurant, not something needing special promotion.

The claim of being a sustainable restaurant is significant and requiring ongoing improvements and adaptations. This recognition of the ongoing process of achieving comprehensive sustainability leads some restaurants to take a more cautious

approach, focusing on perfecting their practices before making bold claims as well as the complexity and challenge of aligning day-to-day operations with broader sustainability goals. For example, interviewee 19 stated that "I don't make huge claims on our sustainability, because I still think we've got a long way to go." This viewpoint reflects their awareness of the long and challenging path to achieving comprehensive sustainability, which requires a long-term commitment and dedication to authenticity for genuine progress. Also, interviewee 13 highlighted that:

Sustainability is just from an ethos perspective, and we don't feel that we are doing enough to justify marketing under that banner. Maybe one day when we have a couple of pigs, chickens and circular economy, then it can be marketed under that banner.

Their hesitation to market their business as sustainable at this stage reflects a desire to ensure their practices align fully with their vision before making such claims. This reveals an understanding that achieving sustainability is not only about current practices but also about future goals, and it is essential to balance dreams with the current reality to maintain credibility and trustworthiness.

Several restaurant explicitly discuss the non-promotion and marketing of their restaurant's sustainability in their interviews. For example, Interviewee 9 suggests that they don't promote because the concept of sustainability has been 'normalised' and is integral to their restaurant experience. Similarly, Interviewee 13 observes, "we've actively chosen to not market ourselves as green or sustainable like there's nothing on ... it's just from an ethos perspective". The importance of the actual experience, as opposed to the marketing is also noted by Interviewee 14 "Instagram, Tik Tok, social media. For me, it's very much a story is not actually a true not real. It could be real, you know, but it's, it's not tangible. It doesn't say it doesn't feel real. And that's what it is. It's just unreal, it's not real, it might be real. The photos and things of your restaurant do obvious thing, but they're not tangible. So then they don't have the same action".

Another reason to not marketing sustainability is the fear of backlash, misunderstanding and potential accusations of greenwashing. Businesses appear concerned of exaggerating their environmental efforts and they would rather let their actions be more than their marketing. For example, while many businesses claim to be sustainable, their actions may not fully align with these assertions. The point about greenwashing is an important one although it should be acknowledged, as Gay et al. (2023, 369) point out, that "restaurants find themselves in a tricky situation where they can be criticized if they take 'wrong' actions that can be considered greenwashing and criticized if they do nothing." As Interviewee 9 stated that "Talking about sustainability becomes like a greenwashing thing and I don't want to greenwash my business until it shouts about it". By avoiding marketing of their sustainability efforts, they aim to ensure that any promotional messages genuinely reflect their operations, rather than overstated claims. Interviewee 13 highlighted the importance of avoiding greenwashing by

stating, “The concept of greenwashing is so apparent for us, it’s really important to be transparent and truthful, so the easiest way is to say less and do more.” Frustrated by how common greenwashing is, they focus on taking real, tangible actions rather than making bold, potentially misleading sustainability claims.

Restaurant promotion of sustainability is not only limited by concerns of being accused of greenwashing, but also because interviewees worried that any unfulfilled environmental claims they were to unwittingly make online could result in quick and damaging misunderstanding from consumers. Interviewee 11 stated that “People get offended quite easily. If you say online that you’re this and then have to use something else due to circumstances, it can backfire”. The Interviewee highlighted that public perception of a restaurant can quickly turn negative if they are not seen as fulfilling the promise of what they promote. By refraining from making strong sustainability claims, the restaurant therefore sought “to mitigate the risk of offending customers or being accused of hypocrisy if such deviations occur” (Interviewee 11).

The interviews also highlight the importance of understanding different cultures in the promotion of various restaurant attributes by their owners, managers and chefs and on overall attitudes towards sustainability. For example, interviewees offer a cultural perspective on the tendency in New Zealand to be modest about promoting achievements, especially regarding sustainability. One informant refers to the ‘tall poppy syndrome,’ which discourages people and businesses from bragging about their successes. This creates an environment where standing out can lead to criticism, making humility more valued than self-promotion. As a result, many of the interviewee’s are careful about publicizing their positive actions and sustainability efforts. Interviewee 3 notes it is not typically seen as a Kiwi trait to be excessively self-promotional. Instead, many restaurants take a reserved approach when discussing their sustainability practices. This mindset highlights the importance to many informants of being genuine and ensuring that actions align with values before making any public claims regarding sustainability.

Focusing on core restaurant values rather than prominently promoting sustainability was highlighted by several informants as a key strategy. These core values include offering an exclusive dining experience, building trust among customers, maximizing food quality, and valuing customers’ time and money. Emphasizing these core values aims to illuminate the various aspects of what these principles mean for their business success. For example, interviewee 14 stated that “people come here not because of our sustainable practices, because they trust us”. The restaurant prioritizes offering a unique dining experience where sustainability is integrated into their operations but not the main marketing message. By weaving sustainability into the background, they believe that they strengthen the trust and loyalty of their customers, ensuring the dining experience is memorable and valued. Interviewee 7 reinforced this idea, explaining that their website is designed to attract diners by highlighting the unique experience they offer. They stated, “Our website is designed to entice people to come, eat, and drink with us rather than promoting our sustainability.” This approach highlights their primary goal of creating an enjoyable atmosphere and

excellent food, where sustainability is integrated into the overall experience rather than being a separate marketing focus.

Interviewee 13 emphasized the importance of valuing the customer’s time, money, and energy by creating a great experience, noting, “People’s time, money, and energy are valuable, so we prefer to make a great experience for them.” They believe that it is more meaningful when customers can see and experience the quality and sustainability firsthand, rather than reading about it online. This underlines the power of word-of-mouth and personal recommendations over digital marketing, as real experiences resonate more deeply with customers. Another participant who focused on the offerings and experiences available in the restaurant rather than online promotion was Interviewee 19 who focused on the quality of the food produced in-house, stating, “We grow our vegetables on our site, so high nutritional content and quality are more important than promoting them.” This highlights the belief, reflected by many restaurants, that the tangible benefits and quality of their offerings speak for themselves, making direct promotion of sustainability less necessary.

5 | Discussion

About 95% of restaurants included in the first stage of the research have an official website and provide their menu there, with the menu also being offered on Facebook and Instagram. New Zealand restaurants are more likely to provide menus that include the dish names with major ingredients, prices, and dietary requirements, with many providing several types of menus (i.e., lunch, dinner, sharing, vegan, and vegetarian). The sustainable restaurant practice that has been given the most attention online is that of food localisation and seasonality. Although the gastronomic research emphasis tends to be on the broader system and localisation practices, such as farmers’ markets and farm direct marketing, rather than the specific actions of restaurants, especially in the New Zealand context (Roy 2016).

The use of organic food is an increasingly important aspect of restaurant sustainability, with its growth on the menu being reflected in wider consumer food purchases (Research Institute of Organic Agriculture (FiBL) and IFOAM – Organics International, 2019). Restaurants use organic foods for various reasons; some of which are more geared towards profit rather than principles of sustainability (Jeong and Jang 2019). However, Baldwin et al. (2011) in their assessment of the life-cycle environmental impacts of restaurants, also reported that greater use of organic food in restaurants, i.e., a quarter of all food, would significantly reduce impacts on human (respiratory illness, carcinogens) and environmental health.

Seasonality was the other most common sustainable food element overall. Non-seasonal menus can be energy-intensive and produce more food waste (Wallnoefer et al. 2021). Non-seasonal foodstuffs need to be imported and/or stored, which contributes to increased energy use because of longer transport and storage times. Gössling and Hall (2022) recommend that, to reduce energy use, restaurants should focus on seasonal food.

Sustainable food consumption and purchase by consumers can be regarded as the result of deliberate or even unconscious

actions to balance consumption, reduce waste, minimise their environmental effects, and contribute to the local economy (Sargant 2014). Green consumerism in a food context includes issues such as lowering meat intake, increased vegetable consumption, and the support of local markets (Sarmiento and El Hanandeh 2018). In response to this trend, restaurants increasingly encourage customers to purchase environmentally friendly products (Verma et al. 2019) with studies finding that when consumers have a favourable or positive image of a green restaurant, the likelihood of purchasing its products increases (Pocol et al. 2020). Restaurant consumers are also more interested in consuming a green product (e.g., vegan and vegetarian food, organic food, local food) when they perceive that it generates benefits in terms of health and taste (Hwang and Choi 2018). Nevertheless, there are significant differences between New Zealand and internationally with respect to the expression of sustainability. For example, the use of Fair Trade products is only noted by one restaurant while sustainably harvested or caught seafood and sustainability/eco-certified products also received little attention. This is in stark contrast to the usual requirements of national and international sustainable and green restaurant schemes (see Table 1) and highlights the importance of identifying particular national and regional approaches to the promotion of restaurant sustainability.

Among the non-food sustainability elements, waste reduction, reuse, and recycling are the most promoted. However, non-food elements generally receive little online promotion; although these elements are usually identified as contributing to the definition of a green restaurant (Teng and Wu 2019). As has also been noted in research on award-winning green restaurants in Europe (Huang et al. 2023a), non-food sustainability elements also receive little online promotion in New Zealand, with waste reduction and recycling the most promoted areas. Nevertheless, as the interviews suggest, the results of the content analysis of online promotion do not reflect the extent to which food waste reduction is a major focus of restaurants in their business. Instead, it is taken more as an integral dimension of restaurant management. Such a situation also perhaps reflects the need to distinguish between the promotion of front-of-house and back-of-house sustainability elements in online promotion. Indeed, the results of the content analysis and the responses received through interviews suggest that the normalization of some sustainability practices in restaurant behavior, such as the purchase of Fair Trade products, may have significant implications for the long-term promotion of those practices as they are no longer a point of difference on the menu or restaurant management.

Sustainably or eco-certified packaging is the other element in non-food sustainability elements with very limited promotion. However, food packaging is an essential part of food sustainability and the notion of sustainable restaurants, since it helps prevent food waste and spoilage along the supply chain and in the kitchen (Pauer et al. 2019). It is also becoming a sustainability issue as the packaging of foods for customers (take away or leftover foods), especially in terms of plastic use, recycling, and degradability, is an increasingly important environmental issue and customer concern, especially in relation to such issues as single-use items like takeaway coffee cups (Pauer et al. 2019).

Among the six elements in social and economic sustainability, community engagement and local partnership and promotion of a local food network are limited. However, Roy (2016) argued that sustainable behaviors in the restaurant sector depend on the degree of connectedness, trust, and relations between members in social networks, so non-economic factors such as a willingness to support local producers and the social well-being of the wider community are also important. Such networks are also strongly connected to the place in which they are situated and the place-based social and economic relationships of which they are a part (Chen et al. 2021). However, despite such initiatives and their value for restaurant sustainability, it is readily clear that front-of-house sustainability elements receive much more attention in the online promotion of restaurants than back-of-house.

5.1 | Greenhushing: The Non-Promotion of Sustainable Restaurant Practices Online

The first stage of the research highlighted what sustainable practices New Zealand restaurants promoted online. Apart from seasonality and local food use, sustainable practices, especially those that are back of house, receive little promotion. Although a content analysis shows what is being done, it does not explain why. Therefore, interviews were conducted with a number of chefs and managers of the analyzed restaurants.

The results of interviews were enlightening as nearly all the 20 restaurants interviewed suggested that they are involved in far more sustainability practices than what they promote. Interestingly, and against much of the existing restaurant literature that suggests that it is important to market sustainability to consumers (Gössling and Hall 2022; Huang et al. 2023a), the main reason given was because it was felt to be inappropriate to make such claims, while also wanting to focus on the customer's experience of sustainability rather than its online promotion. Many restaurants and café's therefore provide an interesting case of greenhushing (Falchi et al. 2022). For example, Interviewee 13's response was typical when he stated, "As a company, we're choosing to do as little marketing as possible and then with sustainability, it's just from an ethos perspective of we don't feel that we are doing enough to justify marketing under that banner". Similar concerns were expressed by restaurants about being accused of greenwashing.

The issue of greenwashing is a significant one but it usually arises in relation to businesses that do it to improve their image not restaurants that are being as sustainable as possible but are concerned about promoting that (Cavazos et al. 2022). Although it should be acknowledged, as Gay et al. (2023, 369) point out, that "restaurants find themselves in a tricky situation where they can be criticized if they take 'wrong' actions that can be considered greenwashing and criticized if they do nothing." Nevertheless, the interviews are valuable in that they identify issues with respect to sustainability promotion that have not received sufficient coverage in previous research where the assumption often appears to be that the promotion of sustainability practices is a good business practice (Gössling and Hall 2022). Furthermore, the interviews highlight the

importance of understanding the significance of different societal cultures on the promotion of various restaurant attributes by their owners, managers and chefs and on overall attitudes towards sustainability. As was raised by several respondents, in New Zealand if a person or business appears to be promoting their success too much or having too high a profile then they may be criticised; what is referred to as 'tall poppy syndrome'. The significance of such local cultural traits on sustainability promotion has also not previously been noted and this presents an interesting new line of research on sustainability promotion by restaurants.

6 | Conclusions

This study has provided the results of research on the online promotion of sustainability by New Zealand restaurants and cafés. This was undertaken via a content analysis of the websites of NZRA Award Nominees and *Cuisine* Good Food Guide hatted restaurants and interviews with restaurant chefs, managers, and owners. These restaurants and cafés potentially represent good practice in the New Zealand restaurant sector and provide an appropriate population with which to examine online sustainability promotion. The study is also valuable as it is one of the few conducted on the online promotion of sustainability in a country that does not have Michelin awards or a sustainable or green restaurant accreditation.

Restaurants can be sustainability ambassadors in terms of what they promote as well as the experience of sustainability that they can provide to their customers (Huang et al. 2023a). For example, by promoting their often local food suppliers on their menu. The sustainable practices promoted by restaurants and particularly their purchasing behaviour can influence the wider sustainability of the food system (Hall and Gössling 2013a, 2013b). In New Zealand, the most promoted elements of sustainability that are promoted online are the use of local ingredients, seasonality, and fulfilling personal dietary requirements, such as vegetarian and vegan foods. Although some elements are promoted very little or are not promoted at all.

Overall, the content analysis provides a valuable snapshot of the online promotion of sustainability in New Zealand restaurants and provides new insights into online sustainability promotion. It highlights the different emphases of restaurants and provides a basis for comparison with the international literature on sustainable and green restaurants. Importantly, the results of the content analysis provide valuable context for what is happening in the sector overall given the lack of previous research on the sustainability attributes of New Zealand restaurants and food service providers.

The interviews suggest that there are significant restaurant and societal cultural reasons for what is promoted by restaurants with respect to sustainability, an issue which has not received sufficient coverage in previous research where the assumption often appears to be that the promotion of sustainability practices is a good business practice (Gössling and Hall 2022). Interviews reveal a nuanced and complex relationship between sustainable practices and online marketing strategies. While many restaurants implement extensive sustainability efforts, these are

often not promoted due to fears of greenwashing and cultural tendencies towards modesty. Interviewees emphasized core values such as trust, quality, and customer experience over direct sustainability marketing. They believe that these values help to establish long-term customer loyalty and distinguish their offerings in a competitive market.

For some restaurants, there is a clear conscious decision to avoid making sustainability claims, as they wish to ensure they are genuinely reflected in their operations. Concerns about backlash, cultural factors, and a focus on genuine, experience-based customer engagement all underline a cautious but sincere approach to sustainability. Collectively, these strategies highlight an effort to balance authenticity, customer experience, and business success, reflecting a nuanced understanding of how sustainability integrates into their restaurant's brand identity and operations.

Although providing theoretical and practical insights, the study does have some limitations providing opportunities for future research. First, although this study investigated award-winning and nominated restaurants that are usually regarded as the standard-bearers of contemporary restaurant management, a wider range of restaurants and cafés could be employed. Second, it may be valuable to ascertain if there are significant differences in online sustainability strategies between restaurants in rural and urban areas, given how this may affect the availability of produce. Third, although the content analysis was supported by interviews with restaurants, a more comprehensive survey would be valuable in providing additional information on online promotion strategies. Fourth, it is possible that New Zealand restaurant's consumer base is different from that of other countries with respect to expectations of sustainability. However, there is extremely limited research on restaurant consumers in the country, providing a clear opportunity for future studies. Nevertheless, despite its limitations, the study provides a firm platform for future research and highlights the importance of understanding the broader business and societal culture in seeking to identify the reasons for undertaking and then promoting restaurant sustainability practices.

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Ethics Statement

Ethics clearance for this research was provided by the University of Canterbury Ethics Committee. Reference HREC 2024/30/LR-PS.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

Data Availability Statement

Data available on request from the corresponding author due to privacy/ethical restrictions.

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