A Study on Multi-Level Paradox of Sustainable HRM:

A Comparative Case Study in Malaysia's Private

Higher Education & Hospitality Sectors

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ABSTRACT

Sustainable human resource management (HRM) is increasingly central to corporate sustainability, yet its implementation is marked by persistent tensions between competing objectives — profitability vs. employee well-being, short-term imperatives vs. long-term societal goals. This thesis applies paradox theory to examine how such tensions manifest as multi-level paradoxes and how they are navigated in practice. Focusing on two Malaysian service sectors — private higher education and hospitality — the research addresses a gap in understanding the nested and systemic nature of sustainable HRM paradoxes. Rather than treating these challenges as isolated dilemmas, the study demonstrates that contradictions span institutional policies, organizational strategies, HRM practices, and individual values, forming interconnected webs of tension.

A qualitative comparative case study design was adopted, analysing a leading private university and a prominent hotel. Data were collected through 36 semi-structured interviews across 4 hierarchical levels, complemented by observations and documents. This approach enabled a rich, multi-perspective account of sustainability tensions. Thematic analysis and cross-case comparison identified paradoxes at macro, corporate, functional (HRM), and individual levels, and traced their interdependencies. The findings reveal that macro-level tensions (e.g. national sustainability mandates vs. market imperatives) cascade into organizational paradoxes (e.g. strategic ambitions vs. operational constraints), which then materialize in HRM dilemmas (e.g. progressive initiatives vs. cost-driven policies), and finally, in employees' daily struggles (e.g. personal sustainability values vs. work demands). These tensions are both horizontally misaligned within levels and vertically nested across levels, amplifying their complexity.

The cross-sector comparison highlights contextual influences. In private higher education, paradoxes centre on balancing educational and social missions with financial self-sufficiency, where academic quality and sustainability commitments often collide with enrolment targets and ranking pressures. In hospitality, tensions emerge between luxury service standards and resource-intensive operations, versus environmental conservation and workforce sustainability in a labour-intensive industry. Both cases underscore that while the paradox of "sustainability vs. performance" is common, its manifestation is exclusive and sector contingent.

The study also identifies strategies of paradox navigation. Leaders, HR professionals, and employees engaged in temporal separation, structural separation, and selective prioritisation. More integrative efforts included: sustainability committees, revised HR policies aligning incentives with sustainability goals, and cultural initiatives fostering innovation. Nonetheless, integrative solutions were difficult to sustain, often undermined by counteracting forces at other levels. Successful navigation depended on fostering a paradox mindset — accepting contradictions as enduring and seeking ways to engage both poles, rather than resolve them outright.

Overall, this study reframes sustainable HRM challenges through a paradox lens. By documenting the nested, multi-level nature of paradoxes and the varied strategies used to navigate them, it contributes to paradox theory, sustainable HRM, and the practice of managing sustainability in organizations. The study underscores that sustainability cannot be achieved by resolving tensions but by embracing paradox — recognising contradictions as enduring features of organizational life and working with them as a source of resilience, innovation, and long-term sustainability.

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ACRONYMS

CFO – Chief Financial Officer

COVID-19 – Coronavirus Disease 2019

CSR – Corporate Social Responsibility

DOSM – Department of Statistics Malaysia

ESG – Environmental, Social, and Governance

GDP – Gross Domestic Product

HEI – Higher Education Institution

HR – Human Resources

HRM – Human Resource Management

ISO – International Organization for Standardization

KPI – Key Performance Indicator

MY – Malaysia

NGO – Non-Governmental Organization

RQ – Research Question

SDGs – Sustainable Development Goals

Sus-HRM – Sustainable Human Resource Management

UNDP – United Nations Development Programme

VC – Vice-Chancellor

CHAPTER 1

Introduction

1.0 Overview

This thesis begins with an illustration of its practical, personal and research rationales of this study: background and context (Section 1.1), Based on these angles, the study introduces its research aim and questions (Section 1.2). Section 1.3 presents its significance, while Section 1.4 outlines the structure.

1.1 Background and Context

Of late, organizations have increasing interest and pressure to adopt sustainable human resource management (Sustainable HRM or sus-HRM); as part of a broader pledge to corporate sustainability and responsible business practices (Kramar, 2014). Sus-HRM extends the focus of Human Resource Management (HRM) beyond short-term performance, by incorporating long-term considerations for the well-being of employees, society, and the environment. In principle, Sus-HRM seeks to achieve a balance of economic, social, human, and environmental outcomes in managing people, or employees (Ehnert et al., 2016). This shift reflects the influence of global sustainability frameworks such as the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (UN SDGs), in which urges businesses and institutions to align their strategies with sustainable development objectives. In 2015, Malaysia, along with 192 other nations, adopted the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (Ministry of Economy Malaysia, n.d.), signalling national commitment to these goals. Therefore, organizations in Malaysia face growing expectations to support sustainable development through their policies and practices, including HRM practices that promote long-term societal and environmental well-being.

In the HRM literature, the concept of sustainability has evolved over time. Early discussions often focused on socially responsible HRM, emphasizing ethical practices and employee well-being as part of corporate social responsibility initiatives. A more holistic approach to managing people has been discussed since the early 2000s, often described as Sustainable HRM or "triple bottom line HRM," which emphasises the integration of economic viability, social equity, and environmental protection (Ehnert, 2009). While Green HRM gained

prominence slightly later, with a narrower emphasis on environmental practices within HR policies and processes (Renwick et al., 2013), Sustainable HRM was conceived more broadly, linking human resource practices to long-term organisational, societal, and ecological sustainability. Rather than following one another in a strict sequence, the two approaches have evolved in parallel, with overlapping concerns but distinct emphases.

Scholars note that Sus-HRM signifies the next phase of HRM thinking, reframing strategic HRM to incorporate multiple bottom lines and a longer-term horizon. Instead of focusing solely on organizational performance and economic outcomes (traditional strategic HRM), Sus-HRM explicitly includes goals like employee well-being, social justice, and environmental stewardship as key outcomes. For example, pioneering scholars like Thom and Zaugg (2004) define sustainable HRM as "HR approaches that are long-term-oriented and socially responsible", highlighting the importance of sustaining the human resource base and regenerating talent over time, rather than exhausting it for short-term gains.

Although the growing agreement on the importance of sus-HRM, organizations often face significant challenges when trying to implement it. Competing demands and paradoxical tensions frequently arise - paradox in organizational terms refers to "contradictory yet interrelated elements that exist simultaneously and persist over time" (Smith & Lewis, 2011, p.382). In other words, conditions where two opposing objectives or pressures must both be attended to, even though achieving one may undermine the other. In the context of sustainability, organizations must constantly balance economic performance with social and environmental responsibilities, an example of a paradoxical tension. For example, an organization might need to invest in costly employee wellness, or green technologies that pay off only in the long-term, while also being pressured to cut costs to meet short-term financial targets. Such tensions are not easily managed through choosing one side over the other; as doing so can create negative consequences (e.g. focusing solely on profit harms employee morale and performance, whereas focusing solely on social goals can threaten economic survival). Paradox theory suggests that; in many instances, the effective approach is to accept and manage these tensions simultaneously, rather than trying to eliminate one side of the balance

A complex attribute of sustainability-related paradoxes is that; they manifest across multiple levels of analysis - from broad societal expectations and regulations, down to individual employees' behaviours and beliefs. These are known as multi-level paradoxes or nested

paradoxes, where tensions at one level (e.g. national policies) influence and shape tensions at another level (e.g. corporate sustainability strategy or personal values):

At the macro level, the government or regulators push industry to achieve ambitious sustainability targets (e.g. committing to carbon reduction or social equity), while at the same time, businesses operate in an economy that incentivizes short-term growth and cost-cutting. Therefore, it created a paradox between long-term sustainability goals and immediate economic imperatives. At the corporate (organizational) level, top management might voice strong support for sustainability (e.g., social or green values) but find it difficult to allocate resources toward those goals without jeopardizing profits or operational efficiency — thereby producing a strategy paradox. The HRM (functional) level encounters its own set of paradoxes: HR managers are tasked with implementing sustainability-oriented practices (e.g. fair hiring, employee well-being programs, or environmental training) while simultaneously meeting conventional HR metrics for efficiency and productivity. Finally, at the individual level, employees and managers experience paradoxes internally. For instance, an employee might individually value sustainability and wish to contribute to societal good, but feel compelled to prioritize tasks that directly improve performance appraisals or career advancement, even if those tasks conflict with sustainability ideals. Likewise, managers may struggle between being an agent of change championing new sustainable practices and an agent of stability meeting immediate targets and maintaining team productivity.

These tensions are nested in the sense that they are interconnected: a misalignment at the top (e.g. external mandate not matched by internal resources and practices) can cascade downward, exacerbating tensions at lower levels. Managing such multi-level paradoxes in Sus-HRM is indeed challenging. Organizations in different sectors encounter these tensions in distinct ways. This research focuses on two specific service sectors in Malaysia that are particularly important: private higher education institution (private HEI) and hospitality. These sectors were chosen because they are both critical to Malaysia's socio-economic development, yet under real pressure to become more sustainable.

The private HEI sector in Malaysia has expanded rapidly over past decades, serving the dual goals of; meeting domestic demand and turning Malaysia into a global education hub. Private universities face paradoxical tensions; deliver quality education and research (academic excellence), vs. operating as financially self-sustaining entities without the level of government subsidy possessed by public universities. They are expected to contribute to

social progress (e.g. education, knowledge dissemination, community engagement) and align with national sustainability agendas (e.g. integrating sustainable development into curricula and campus operations). However, private HEIs must compete in a market-driven setting, attracting students and research grants in an increasingly competitive higher education market. These circumstances can create tensions (e.g. investing in green campus infrastructure or community projects might enhance a university's societal impact and reputation, but simultaneously strain university budget and require trade-offs with other initiatives). Culturally, academics and university administrators may also struggle with identity-linked paradoxes; should the university prioritize being a commercial enterprise that treats education as a product, or a custodian of societal values that centres around sustainability principles?

The hospitality sector is another vital part of Malaysia's economy — tourism and hospitality contribute significantly to GDP and employment (~14% of GDP and over 20% of employment in recent years). The industry faces sustainability tensions, as it must provide high-quality service and comfort to guests (a resource-intensive undertaking) while responding to calls for environmental conservation and social responsibility in tourism. Hotels in Malaysia are under growing pressure to adopt "green hotel practices" (e.g. energy conservation, waste management, local community engagement), reinforced by initiatives like the Malaysia Green Hotel Certification introduced by the government. Top hotels have started winning sustainability awards and positioning themselves as eco-friendly destinations, by recognizing that consumer starting to value corporate responsibility. However, behind the scenes, managers often struggle with paradoxes such as *luxury service vs. reducing resource use*, or maintaining profit margins in a price-sensitive market vs. investing in staff well-being and sustainable operations. The labour-intensive nature of hospitality work also means HR departments and practices are central. Traditionally, the sector suffers from high employee turnover and demanding work conditions, in which can conflict with the goal of sustaining a well-trained workforce for quality service. Thus, a hospitality organization's HR department might implement "green HRM" initiatives (e.g. training staff in green practices, rewarding teams for environmental ideas), yet, only to find these initiatives at odds with standard HR practices like cost-driven arrangement.

Malaysia's context adds extra complexity to these paradoxes. As a developing economy with aspirations for high-income status, Malaysia's policymakers seek to balance economic

growth with social equity and environmental protection. For instance, businesses might receive mixed signals (e.g. pushed to pursue sustainability through awards and incentives, but not penalized for unsustainable practices), leading to horizontal inconsistencies among regulatory bodies. In addition, cultural values (e.g. a tendency towards hierarchy and top-down decision-making in many Malaysian organizations) might influence how paradoxes are experienced and managed, as well as, whether employees feel permitted to discuss about sustainability issues or whether leaders prefer incremental changes over radical shifts.

In short, the foundation of this study is of tensions and contradictions at multiple levels. Sus-HRM provides a guiding vision for integrating sustainability into people management, but in reality, organizations struggle with paradoxical demands (Hahn et al, 2014). By understanding these systemic and nested paradoxical tensions in specific contexts through the experiences of a sustainability leader in respective sectors — this study may offer insights into how organizations might better navigate sustainability paradoxes, and possibly turn them into opportunities for innovation and learning, instead of treating them as impossible dilemmas (Smith & Lewis, 2011).

1.2 Problem Statement and Research Questions

Sustainable HRM (Sus-HRM) as a field that progressed normative arguments and frameworks for developing HR practices to be more sustainable, yet there is a notable gap — between these ideals and what organizations achieve. A recurring issue observed both in practice and highlighted by scholars is the sustainability implementation gap, as organizations often espouse sustainability values, but struggle to fully realize them in day-to-day operations and HR practices (Aust et al, 2020; Ehnert, 2013).

Traditionally, research in HRM has often highlighted a persistent gap between rhetoric and reality — where the progressive claims of HR have rarely matched actual practice (Legge, 2005). More recent work, however, suggests that the problem is not simply one of unfulfilled promises. Instead, attempts have been made to embed sustainability into HRM, but such efforts frequently stall when deeper structural and contextual obstacles are left unaddressed (Kramar, 2014; Ehnert et al., 2016). One key reason for this limitation, as posited in recent studies, is the prevalence of unresolved paradoxes. Organizations may unknowingly undermine their own sustainability goals by failing to recognise and respond to contradictory yet interrelated demands at multiple levels. It is in this context that paradox theory offers a

valuable lens for understanding how these persistent tensions emerge and how they might be navigated more constructively.

Multi-level paradoxes in Sus-HRM, such as conflicting objectives between policymakers and businesses (macro level), between senior management and HR departments (corporate vs. functional level), or between what an organization says and what individual employees encounter (organizational vs. individual level) — all of which can result in incompatible and ineffective sustainability initiatives.

There is a lack of empirical studies that integrates a paradox perspective in studying sustainable HRM across multiple levels. Studies on Sus-HRM may focus on single levels (e.g. organizational-level HR policies, or individual employee outcomes), or take up tensions in a simplistic manner (e.g. considering trade-offs at one level). Conversely, the paradox theory literature has mainly developed through conceptual works (Schad et al., 2016), and case studies in Western contexts (Jarzabkowski et al., 2013). These studies often addresses organizational contradictions in general or at leadership levels, rather than specifically examining HRM functions or in a developing economy context. This research argues that a deeper understanding of how sustainability paradoxes play out from the national context down to individual employees — or how actors navigate these paradoxes. Thus, crucial for advancing both theory and practice in sustainable HRM.

The problem statement of this research is; although there is increasing implementation of sustainability objectives in HRM, organizations face multi-level paradoxes that hinder effective implementation of Sustainable HRM. Besides that, there is inadequate understanding of how these nested tensions manifest and can be navigated, particularly in non-Western / developing economies contexts, such as Malaysia's private higher education and hospitality sectors.

Based on this problem statement, the study is organized around four research questions (RQs) that address the gaps:

RQ1: What are the paradoxes across the macro, corporate, function-specific (HRM), and individual levels that affect Sustainable HRM in organizations?

This question seeks to discover and map out the key tensions or contradictions at each level –
such as, regulatory vs. market pressures (macro), organizational mission vs. financial survival
(corporate), HRM sustainability initiatives vs. traditional HR goals (functional), and personal
values vs. job expectations (individual). It asks, what paradoxical demands exist? and how do
they appear at each level?

RQ2: How do leaders and employees navigate these paradoxical tensions?

This question investigates the responses and strategies of different actors when faced with
sustainability paradoxes. It looks at the behaviours of corporate leaders, HR managers, line
managers, and employees - how do they make sense of the tensions? Do they attempt to
prioritize one side, find compromises, or use innovative approaches to address both?
Essentially, it investigates, what do people do in practice to cope with, or manage the
paradoxes?

RQ3: How do these paradoxes influence Sustainable HRM outcomes in organizations?

In this question, the focus is on the implications of paradoxes for the effectiveness of
sustainable HRM. Are sustainability goals being undermined by misaligned HRM practices
due to these tensions? Conversely, can paradoxes lead to better outcomes (e.g. more creative
HR solutions)? This question links the presence of paradoxes to tangible outcomes like the
success of HR sustainability initiatives, employee attitudes, or organizational performance on
sustainability metrics.

RQ4: How does sectoral context (private higher education vs. hospitality) shape the nature of
Sustainable HRM paradoxes and the ways they are managed?

Acknowledging that context counts, this question compares the two sectors. It probes
differences and similarities in paradoxes between a university and a hospitality setting: Are
certain tensions unique to the academia context or the hospitality industry? Do cultural or
operational differences lead to different management strategies? Understanding the
contextual influence ensure that conclusions are not over-generalized and highlights any
sector-specific insights or best practices.

RQ5: How can paradox theory be extended to explain the nested, multi-level, and sector-
contingent nature of sustainability tensions?

This final research question is theory-oriented and seeks to move beyond merely applying paradox theory to organizational phenomena. It aims to critically interrogate and extend the theory by assessing whether current paradox frameworks sufficiently capture the complexity of tensions in sustainable HRM, especially as they manifest across levels (macro, organizational, functional, individual) and vary by sector (higher education vs. hospitality). In doing so, this research contributes to the evolution of paradox theory by testing its applicability in a developing economy context, and by potentially introducing refinements or expansions to existing conceptual models.

Taken together, these five research questions are designed to offer a holistic investigation into the paradoxes of sustainable HRM. **RQ1** identifies the tensions; **RQ2** explores the responses of actors to these tensions; **RQ3** evaluates their impact on Sus-HRM outcomes; **RQ4** situates these dynamics within the sectoral and institutional contexts of Malaysian service industries; and **RQ5** elevates the study's theoretical ambition by critically engaging with and contributing to paradox theory itself. This layered inquiry allows the thesis to bridge empirical practice and conceptual development — offering both actionable insights for HRM practitioners and a refined theoretical lens for scholars studying paradoxes in sustainability and organisational life.

1.3 Significance of the Study

Addressing the above research questions is important for several reasons. Theoretically, this study aims to contribute to two bodies of literature: Paradox theory and Sustainable HRM. Paradox theory in organizational studies has called for more empirical research on how multiple, interconnected paradoxes are experienced in practice (Schad et al., 2016; Smith & Lewis, 2011). By providing in-depth empirical examination of nested paradoxes within organizations, the research answers these calls, as well as extends paradox theory to a new empirical context (Hahn et al., 2015). In particular, demonstrating the presence of systemic, multi-level, and nested paradoxes in sustainability will reinforce theoretical arguments in showing that tensions are inherently part of organizational life and involve holistic thinking

Moreover, the study integrates paradox theory with the HRM field by focusing on the HR function and workforce consequences. Sus-HRM academics have noted that majority of the sustainability discourse in HRM has been normative, by using paradox as an analytical lens. Thus, this research provides a more nuanced theoretical understanding of the tensions HR

practitioners face when trying to be sustainable, moving beyond viewing sustainability solely as a set of practices to be adopted. This can expand sustainable HRM theory to acknowledge and incorporate contradictions (Ehnert, 2009; Kramar, 2014) and possibly identify conditions under which sustainable HRM initiatives thrive or falter.

In practical terms, the significance of this study is pronounced for organizational leaders and HR professionals — especially in the sectors examined. For decision-makers in higher education, understanding multi-level paradoxes can explain why well-intended sustainability programs (e.g. campus greening or community engagement) may encounter resistance or produce limited impact. For instance, due to misalignment between what the government expects, what university management prioritizes, and what faculty value or roles. By explaining these dynamics, the study can help university leaders and HR departments design effective interventions (e.g. aligning incentives with sustainability goals, fostering cross-level communication to reduce misalignment). For hospitality managers, the findings can advise on the design of HR policies that reconcile service excellence with sustainability. For example, how to engage employees in environmental initiatives without compromising service standards, or how to maintain profitability while improving service quality. Learning from a comparative perspective may also allow cross-pollination of ideas; a hotel might pick up insights from how a university mobilizes intrinsic motivation for sustainability, while a university could learn from the hotel's operational innovations for efficiency.

Furthermore, this research holds implications for policymakers and industry bodies in Malaysia and similar developing settings. As Malaysia works towards its sustainable development commitments, understanding the ground-level challenges through a paradox lens can improve policy formulation. If the study reveals that inconsistent regulations (e.g. horizontal paradox at macro level) puzzles organizations, policymakers can strive for more unified sustainability policies across ministries and sectors. If it shows that organizations respond better when sustainability is framed as an opportunity, rather than a compliance, ministerial bodies can adjust communication and incentive strategies accordingly. Industry associations in education and hospitality could use the insights to develop guidelines or training for managing sustainability tensions, thus raising the overall capability of the sector to implement sustainable practices.

To conclude, the study is significant in its contextual contribution. Much of the literature on Sus-HRM and paradox management is grounded in Western, or developed corporate settings.

By focusing on Malaysia's private sector and two service industries, the research adds geographic and sectoral diversity to knowledge. It provides one of the limited in-depth qualitative analyses in Southeast Asia, offering perspectives that might differ from Western settings due to cultural, economic, and institutional differences. Similar efforts to extend paradox theory into non-Western contexts have also begun to emerge, such as studies of paradoxical tensions in Chinese state-owned enterprises (Zhang et al., 2015), Indian organizations (Prasad, 2012), and cross-cultural sustainability contexts (Meyer & Höllerer, 2014). This contextual addition is important, as it can either challenge existing assumptions (e.g. how cultural norms influence paradox management), or reinforce the universality of certain dynamics (e.g. showing that some paradoxes are common across borders). Whichever the case, it helps build a more thorough, globally relevant understanding of Sus-HRM.

1.4 Structure of Thesis

This thesis is organized into eight chapters:

Chapter 1 (the present chapter) has introduced the research background, identified the gap concerning multi-level paradoxes in sustainable HRM, formulated the research questions, and explained why the study is both theoretically and practically significant. Chapter 2: Literature Review will delve into relevant literature on sustainable HRM and paradox theory, and Chapter 3: Context and Framework will present the circumstances and conceptual framework guiding the study. Chapter 4: Research Methodology describes the research design, cases, data collection, and analysis methods to investigate the research questions, as well as reflections of research quality and ethics. Following that, Chapters 5 and 6: present the detailed findings from the two case studies - University-MY and Hotel-MY respectively; each examining paradoxes and responses from macro to individual levels within that organizational context. Chapter 7: Cross-Case Analysis and Discussion compares insights across the two cases and discusses them in light of the theoretical framework and existing literature. Finally, Chapter 8: Conclusion and Recommendations reviews the study's key conclusions, outlines research questions and highlight the study's contributions to knowledge, discusses practical recommendations for managers and policymakers (higher education and hospitality sectors), and suggests directions for future research on sustainable HRM and paradoxes.

CHAPTER 2

Literature Review: Sustainable HRM and Paradox Theory

2.0 Overview

The chapter involves a critical review of literature relevant to multi-level paradoxes in Sustainable HRM (Sus-HRM). It begins with tracking the different perspectives of the sus-HRM concept; from a more focused notions of socially responsible HRM and green HRM — to a more comprehensive triple bottom line approach encompassing economic, social, and environmental outcomes. The review then introduces paradox theory as a theoretical lens, defining paradoxes and highlighting how a paradox perspective differs from traditional trade-off philosophy in sustainability management

Key constructs from paradox theory; including the notion of nested and systemic tensions are examined to establish how contradictions exist across organizational levels simultaneously. Next, the chapter examines empirical and theoretical work on sustainability-related tensions at various levels: macro (national/institutional/sectoral), corporate (organization-wide strategy), functional (HRM practices), and individual (employees and leaders). It discusses how these tensions manifest and reviews studies on the response to such paradoxical demands by organizations and leaders. This chapter also outlines relevant background information on Malaysia's higher education and hospitality sectors, which form the empirical focus of this study. Given their significance within the national sustainability discourse and their role as early adopters of sustainability practices, these sectors provide a pertinent context for examining the tensions and paradoxes that underpin sustainable HRM.

In particular, this literature review finds limited research integrating *Sus-HRM* and *Paradox Theory* and a need for more multi-level, qualitative studies (especially in non-Western contexts) to understand how sustainability tensions are navigated in practice. The identified gaps justify the research questions, and the study's comparative case study approach. The chapter concludes by synthesizing the insights into an integrated conceptual framework of multi-level paradoxes in sus-HRM and expressing how this study contribute to filling the conceptual and empirical gaps.

2.1 Perspectives of Sustainability and HRM: Socially Responsible HRM, Green HRM and Sustainable HRM

Sus-HRM has emerged over the past two decades as an expansion of strategic HRM; that explicitly features sustainability principles. Scholars generally describe HRM for sustainability in three (3) viewpoints:

CSR-oriented HRM (also referred to as socially responsible HRM) has its intellectual roots in the early Corporate Social Responsibility literature that emphasised employment practices as a central dimension of social responsibility. Early contributors such as Carroll (1979) and Walton (1982) highlighted the social responsibilities of firms toward employees and communities, laying the foundation for later integration with HRM. Building on these early CSR debates, researchers began explicitly connecting HRM to CSR in the 1990s and early 2000s, with discussions of socially responsible HRM focusing on ethical employment practices, employee welfare, diversity, and community involvement as part of a firm's broader CSR agenda (Cohen, 2017). Similar recent analyses further develop these ideas, synthesising how CSR and HRM intersect in theory and practice (Voegtlin & Greenwood, 2016; Jamali et al., 2015). HRM was seen as a vehicle to achieve social goals alongside financial ones. Policies fostering fair labour practices, philanthropy involving employees, and programs to enhance work-life balance, can be viewed as socially responsible HRM. This expanded the purpose of HR beyond economic or performance considerations, as it aligns with broader societal values and practices. It set the footing for perceiving employees and communities as key stakeholders in corporate responsibility. However, in this perspective/stage, environmental concerns were a not central focus of HRM — emphasis was mainly on the social aspect of sustainability (e.g. employee well-being, equity, community impact).

As environmental sustainability gained significance, HRM scholars and practitioners began to consider how HR practices could support environmental management initiatives. Green HRM can be defined as the integration of environmental management into HR policies and practices. Early work by Jabbour and Santos (2008) highlighted HR's central role in fostering environmental sustainability (e.g. through training and development on environmental practices, incentivizing eco-friendly behaviour, as well as hiring or evaluating employees based on environmental values). Renwick, Redman, and Maguire, (2013) conducted a comprehensive review of Green HRM, highlighting that HRM can drive pro-environmental behaviour in organizations by aligning recruitment, performance appraisal, compensation,

and development with environmental objectives. Definitive Green HRM practices include incorporating environmental criteria in job roles and appraisals, engaging employees in waste reduction or energy-saving programs, and welcoming suggestions for improving the company's environmental performance (Guerci & Carollo., 2016). The rise of Green HRM marked the inclusion of the "planet / environmental" dimension into HRM's responsibility, and complementing the people / social-oriented CSR efforts. Nonetheless, Green HRM maintained a relatively narrow focus on environmental practices or outcomes (e.g. to satisfy regulatory compliance or cost savings via operational efficiency), as well as was implemented as separate programs, but not part of an all-inclusive strategy

More recently, the concept of Sus-HRM has been advanced to integrate economic, social, and environmental goals; echoing earlier triple bottom line notions (Elkington & Rowlands, 1999). Sus-HRM identifies that HR systems must balance multiple stakeholders demands (shareholders, employees, society, environment) simultaneously to ensure long-term organizational sustainability. This encompasses ensuring the organization's human capital is developed, so that; the company can achieve financial performance and contribute positively to employees' quality of life and to environmental, as well as social well-being (Stankevičiūtė & Savanevičienė, 2018; Richards, 2022).

A central feature of Sus-HRM is its long-term orientation, as it shifts the focus towards the ability of HRM to sustain the HR base from within the organization; while balancing short- and long-term outcomes. In this concept, rather than viewing training as a cost to be minimized, sus-HRM emphasizes continuous employee development (despite being costly in the short run) to ensure future skills and adaptability — reflecting a long-term investment logic. Correspondingly, Sus-HRM would advocate for employee well-being and fair treatment not only as ethical imperatives, but as means to sustain workforce motivation and productivity over time. Scholars like Ehnert *(2009)* and Kramar *(2014)* were early proponents of this approach, defining sustainable HRM as managing human resources in a way that simultaneously achieves economic success, employee well-being, and societal benefits over the long haul. In practice, this mean HR initiatives such as health and wellness programs, flexible work arrangements, career development plans, diversity and inclusion strategies, and community engagement – aligning with corporate sustainability objectives. The triple-bottom-line approach, tensions inherent in trying to *"do all"* become more evident. Through aiming to satisfy diverse stakeholders' demands (e.g. profitability and cost control and employee welfare and environmental responsibility), sustainable HRM explicitly confronts

competing objectives. For example, providing extensive training and benefits supporting social sustainability for employees, but may conflict with short-term cost saving goals. Therefore, Sus-HRM brings to the critical questions of how organizations can cope with these competing demands — where paradox theory becomes highly relevant, as discussed later.

It is important to note that the literature on sustainability and HRM is evolving. Some authors have proposed expansions or changes in the paradigm to strengthen HRM's contribution to sustainability (Aust et al., 2020; Kramar, 2014). One prominent concept is "*Common-Good HRM*", suggested by Aust, Matthews, and Muller-Camen, *(2020);* which argues that HRM should explicitly aim to serve the "common good" (societal and environmental well-being), rather than focusing on organization's instrumental needs. Common Good HRM is presented as a new phase; that could help organizations address global challenges like the UN Sustainable Development Goals by making HRM practices more stakeholder-inclusive, and incorporating long-term societal value. This reflects the growing recognition that current state of HRM may not be enough; a more radical rethinking and treating employees as not only means to organizational outcomes, but also as citizens or stewards of sustainability. This view is believed as necessary to truly resolve the tensions between profitability (economic), people (social), and planet (environment). These calls emphasized that traditional strategic HRM models are being challenged by sustainability imperatives, requiring HRM to innovate in strategy-making and involve employees at all levels in sustainability efforts (Lopez-Cabrales & Valle-Cabrera, 2020).

The notion of Common Good HRM, while conceptually compelling in its aspiration to embed societal and environmental value into HRM practices has attracted critique for its normative idealism and limited operational feasibility across diverse institutional contexts. Scholars have questioned its applicability in settings where institutional logics remain heavily shaped by market-driven imperatives, hierarchical governance structures, and narrow stakeholder conceptions (Rizal et al., 2024; Aust et al., 2024). Within the Malaysian private service sector, such barriers are particularly pronounced, as studies have documented persistent tendencies toward profit-maximisation, centralised decision-making, and minimal employee or community participation in strategic dialogues (Yusliza et al., 2019; Miles & Croucher, 2016; Bakar & Mustaffa, 2011). These contextual realities render the widespread adoption of Common Good HRM problematic because its underlying assumptions may conflict with prevailing institutional logics.

In sum, this evolution underscores that tensions are intrinsic to HRM; while organisations strive to deliver financial, social and environmental outcomes simultaneously, HR departments must also pursue regenerative objectives to reconcile these competing demands. Much of the existing literature on sustainable HRM is conceptually oriented, offering normative frameworks and ideal-type models (Ehnert, 2013), whereas empirical studies that test how these models operate in situ remain comparatively scarce (Aust et al., 2020, Guerci et al, 2019). In practice, efforts to integrate all three dimensions frequently give rise to paradoxical tensions — highlighting the need for a robust analytical lens. Paradox theory, with its focus on persistent, contradictory yet interdependent elements, offers a powerful framework for understanding why integrative sustainable HRM solutions emerge in some contexts but weaken in others — discussed further in the next subsection.

2.2 Paradox Theory: Understanding Persistent Tensions and Contradictions in Management

Paradox theory provides a lens for examining contradictory yet interrelated elements that exist simultaneously and persist over time (Hahn & Knight, 2021; Schad et al, 2016). In an organizational setting, a paradox is a situation where two or more objectives or propositions appear logically inconsistent or in tension, yet both are necessary and enduring (Lewis, 2000). Unlike a simple problem that can be solved or a dilemma where a recognizable choice can be made, paradoxical tensions do not have regular, one-time resolutions — while conflicting demands continue to coexist. An organization might need to innovate (e.g. explore new possibilities to foster sustainability), while also maintaining efficient routine operations (e.g. exploit current capabilities to maintain economic performance); or a manager need to promote individual initiatives and autonomy, while also fostering collaborative unity and control. These are paradoxical because each side is essential, but pursuing one relentlessly tends to undermine the other.

Key characteristics of a "paradox" noted in the literature include: (1) Persistence: the tensions persist over time, rather than being resolved entirely; (2) Interrelationship: the opposing elements are not fully separable - they can even be mutually reinforcing in some ways; and (3) Dynamic: the balance between elements can change, and how actors experience the tension may evolve, but the underlying polarisation remains.

Smith and Lewis (2011) propose a typology of paradoxes frequently encountered by organisations, identifying four primary categories: (1) learning, (2) organising, (3)

performing, and (4) belonging. In the pursuit of sustainability, these paradoxes are especially pronounced, highlighting inherent tensions between environmental, social, and economic imperatives.

Learning paradoxes pertain to tensions between continuity and change; between exploiting existing competencies and exploring new sustainability-oriented practices (Slawinski and Bansal, 2015). Organisations committed to sustainability often face pressures to innovate rapidly, adopting emerging technologies or sustainability standards while maintaining proven, efficient routines (Hahn et al., 2015). For example, a university might be torn between maintaining traditional curricula that attract established student demographics and investing in new sustainability-focused programmes, risking uncertain returns and requiring significant organisational change (Painter-Morland et al., 2016).

Organising paradoxes address the structural tensions organisations face in achieving coherent sustainability objectives. Such paradoxes include tensions between centralised control—providing unified, organisation-wide sustainability strategies—and decentralised empowerment—allowing diverse units autonomy to tailor initiatives to local conditions (Jarzabkowski et al., 2013; Schad et al., 2016). In Malaysia's hospitality sector, for example, corporate sustainability policies developed centrally may clash with the practical constraints or cultural specificities encountered at regional or local hotel branches, complicating effective policy implementation (Yusliza et al., 2019).

Performing paradoxes emerge from competing metrics of organisational success, particularly pronounced in sustainability contexts where stakeholders have diverse and often conflicting priorities (Hahn et al., 2015). Organisations are increasingly pressured to simultaneously deliver financial profitability, social responsibility, and environmental stewardship (Epstein et al., 2015). For instance, managers and non-managerial employees in Malaysia's key sectors face demands to deliver financial returns to shareholders, while simultaneously investing in costly sustainability certifications and community engagement programmes that reflect broader societal expectations (Bakar and Mustaffa, 2011).

Belonging paradoxes, meanwhile, concern identity tensions arising at the individual level, highlighting conflicts between personal values, group affiliations, and organisational missions (Ashforth & Reingen 2014: Lewis, 2000). Sustainability-oriented missions often accentuate these tensions as employees grapple internally between alignment with corporate profitability demands and personal commitments to sustainability values (Heiberg, 2018). Such internal

conflicts reflect deeper identity-based struggles, suggesting paradox theory's usefulness in unpacking these tensions.

Recognising these paradoxes is essential not only to understand how sustainability efforts are managed but also why they frequently falter in practice. Thus, this study adopts paradox theory to critically analyse how these tensions manifest and are navigated within the Malaysian private higher education and hospitality sectors, offering empirical insights that enhance theoretical understanding of sustainability tensions at multiple organisational levels.

These categories are not mutually exclusive, and often overlap. In fact, research suggests paradoxes can coevolve and trigger one another (Sheep et al, 2017; Jarzabkowski et al., 2013). For example, a performing paradox can spark an organizing paradox (e.g. corporate leaders respond by introducing conflicting new controls), or a belonging paradox (e.g. employees question their identity or purpose within competing goals). This interconnected nature is significant in the complex fields like sustainability; as performing environmental and social goals might demand new ways of organizing, leading to individuals to re-examine their roles.

It is helpful to distinguish a paradox perspective from the more conventional trade-off logic often found in mainstream management literature. Traditional approaches tend to frame conflicting organisational demands (particularly those arising from sustainability) as dilemmas that require choosing between competing goals (Hahn & Figge, 2011). An empirical study by Didonet, Fearne, and Simmons, (2020) found that firms are compelled to prioritise short-term financial performance over longer-term environmental commitments, especially under competitive or resource-constrained conditions. This is evident in many emerging economies, where sustainability initiatives are frequently deprioritised in favour of economic growth or profitability, despite formal commitments to environmental goals (Jayanti & Gowda, 2014).

Conversely, some organisations have prioritised environmental or social imperatives to enhance legitimacy, at the cost of immediate financial return. For instance, research on early adopters of CSR in Asia highlights cases where firms engaged in extensive community development or environmental stewardship, experience reduced investor confidence due to perceived inefficiency (Tilt, 2016). Such scenarios reflect the enduring influence of instrumental rationality in corporate decision-making, where trade-offs are resolved in favour of the most measurable or strategically economic outcome. However, as sustainability

challenges grow in complexity: this trade-off perspective increasingly appears insufficient. It fails to account for the persistent and interdependent nature of economic, social, and environmental goals, and the dynamic tensions they generate over time. A paradox perspective, by contrast, recognises that these tensions are not only inevitable but potentially productive when engaged constructively (Smith & Lewis, 2011; Hahn et al., 2014). Rather than seeking resolution through prioritisation, the paradox lens encourages organisations to explore integrative strategies; ones that accept contradiction and navigate competing demands simultaneously.

The underlying assumption is that management cannot fully satisfy both, so, an optimal compromise or a one-time choice is pursued. Paradox theory suggests that with a shift in mindset and approach as such, organizations can transcend simple trade-offs and continuously attend to both sides of the tension. This does not mean the tension vanishes — rather, embracing the tension as a source of creativity and transformation. Through accepting the paradox (e.g. acknowledging both goals as imperative), managers and employees might find groundbreaking ways to achieve synergistic outcomes, or at least lessen the negative interaction between sustainability goals. For instance, rather than seeing cost control *vs.* employee well-being as a trade-off, a paradox lens would encourage asking how to achieve cost efficiency through employee well-being (e.g. satisfied or healthy employees more productive, and less prone to turnover). A growing body of research in corporate sustainability argues that engaging with tensions, rather than suppressing them, can lead to superior sustainability outcomes (Carmine & DeMarchi, 2022; Ivory & Brooks, 2018; Bansal & Song, 2017) . In this way, companies openly cope with the paradox might discover practices that deliver value on both horizons and dimensions. Yet, as discussed in 2.6, different types of responses materialise in actual practice (Jarzabkowski et al., 2013)

Although there are known promises of paradoxical thinking, recent scholarship has begun to question some of paradox theory's core assumptions. One argument relates to the ontological status of paradox: "*are such tensions objective features of organizations*, or *are they constructed through perception and discourse?*" Hahn and Knight (2021) address this by proposing a *"quantum"* ontology of paradox that is both; inherent and socially constructed, thus emphasizing the paradoxical nature of paradox itself. In this view, contradictions have a latent presence in organizational systems, that becomes salient only when actors enact or recognize these contradictions in a particular context. This dual perspective helps reconcile

the earlier divide between viewing paradoxes as pre-existing "in the world", vs. seeing them as products of actors' interpretations.

Moreover, scholars have warned that paradox theory's emphasis on accepting tensions ("both/and" approach) may overlook power dynamics and contextual constraints. Berti and Simpson (2021) highlight the dark side of organizational paradoxes, establishing how contradictory demands can undermine actors that lack freedom or resources to respond on their own terms. The scholars draw attention to practical situations, such as a subordinate being ordered to "respond" by a superior, which inherently contain a contradiction and leave the subordinate with no right way to respond. These types of paradoxes derive from power relations that restrict actors' capacity to cope with tensions, thus turning what might be a productive task for a well-empowered manager into a pathological double bind for someone with less authority. These insights recap that not every actor can engage with paradoxes equally due to structural inequalities that can transform generative tensions into sources of stress or paralysis.

Similarly, other critiques like Berti and Cunha (2023) argue that assuming paradoxes are always best met with both-and balancing is problematic — targeting the implicit normativity of paradox recommendations. While embracing tensions can encourage creativity, the uncritical contention on integration may actually limit the range of sustainable responses to contradictions, or even generate appeasement in the face of injustice (e.g. silently enduring unsustainable situations under the guise of "balance"). Besides that, Seidemann (2024) examines the universality of paradox theory, noting that the field often takes for granted that all organizational tensions are paradoxical, and that both/and responses are superior. She cautions that this assumption of both/and mindset carries risks and blind spots, as it may conceal scenarios where difficult either/or choices, or alternative logics are more appropriate. Krautzberger and Tuckermann (2024) propose a process model for navigating paradox through a "meta-both/and" approach. Rather than treating integrative both/and solutions and either/or trade-offs as mutually exclusive, their meta-level framework systematically combines them. They argue that an organization can respect both/and, as well as either/or as complementary tactics and consciously alternate between them: pursuing integration where possible but also resorting to trade-offs or separations when a tension cannot be jointly satisfied. This flexibility moves beyond a one-dimensional prescription, and acknowledges that effective paradox management may require oscillating between embracing a tension, and momentarily easing it by taking an either/or decision.

Overall, the scholars highlight that while a paradox perspective encourages acknowledging competing demands; one must also consider who is facing the paradox, under what conditions, and with what capabilities to respond. This enriched the paradox stance — which recognizes the dual (constructed and inherent) nature of tensions, the influence of power and context, and the need for a portfolio of response strategies.

2.3 Paradox in Sustainability Literature

While the types of paradoxes described above remain useful as analytical devices, the sustainability-focused literature has pushed the study of paradox further. In recent years, paradox theory has been explicitly applied to the field of Corporate Sustainability, as organizations face increasing pressure to achieve economic success and positive social/environmental impact simultaneously. Scholars (Hahn et al., 2015; van der Byl & Slawinski, 2015) have noted that corporate sustainability is paradoxical in nature because managers have to achieve economic, social, and environmental goals simultaneously. This has been described as the key sustainability paradox: the need to meet the conflicting demands of the triple bottom line.

Early sustainability literature often framed corporate responsibility as the pursuit of "win–win" solutions or the business case for sustainability; implying that organisations should prioritise strategies that simultaneously enhance profitability and generate social or environmental benefits (Kramer & Porter, 2011). Porter and van der Linde (1995) argued that proactive environmental initiatives can lead to resource efficiency and innovation, ultimately improving competitiveness. Correspondingly, Hart and Milstein (2003) suggested that sustainability-oriented strategies open up new market opportunities while reducing long-term risk exposure. While such win–wins are desirable, subsequent research demonstrated that this perspective was often overly optimistic. As more recent critical analyses suggest; certain sustainability tensions inevitably demand difficult either/or choices, thus challenging the notion that a "both/and" solution as the necessary response (Berti & Cunha, 2023; Seidemann, 2024)

A paradox perspective recognises that tensions persist because not all sustainability initiatives yield immediate or tangible returns. For instance, investments in renewable energy or employee well-being programmes may increase operational costs in the short term, even if they deliver longer-term resilience (Hahn et al., 2010). Moreover, managers frequently perceive trade-offs in day-to-day decision-making (e.g. balancing cost pressures with

commitments to environmental standards) highlighting that the simultaneous pursuit of economic, social, and environmental goals inherently involves contradictions rather than straightforward synergies/integration (van der Byl & Slawinski, 2015).

The encounter between paradox theory and sustainability has been explored through various conceptual lenses. Some studies apply paradox thinking to specific organizational functions, while others examine tensions across multiple dimensions of sustainability. With particular reference to the HR function (to be discussed in more detail later in this chapter). For example, Ehnert (2009) applies a paradox perspective to people management and highlights several key contradictions — identify an efficiency–responsibility paradox (pursuing economic performance goals while maintaining social responsibility), a consumption–reproduction paradox (deploying employees to meet immediate objectives while sustaining their long-term well-being and capacity), and a present–future paradox (addressing current workforce needs versus investing in future human resources). Beyond such function-specific insights, sustainability paradoxes have also been conceptualized across multiple dimensions. For example, Hahn et al. (2015) argue that corporate sustainability entails inherent tensions along a performance dimension (balancing economic vs. social/environmental goals), a temporal dimension (short-term vs. long-term priorities), and a contextual dimension (internal organizational imperatives vs. external stakeholder expectations). Slawinski and Bansal (2015) researched on intertemporal tensions, exploring how business leaders juggle short-term pressures with long-term sustainability investments These approaches illustrate that paradoxical tensions in sustainability can manifest both within particular organizational domains (such as HRM) and across broader strategic, temporal, and contextual dimensions of business practice.

Another way in which sustainability paradoxes have been theorised is through the distinction between symbolic vs substantive organisational responses. This perspective draws attention to the tension between superficial expressions of sustainability, and the actual integration of sustainable practices into core operations. Symbolic responses are often deployed as legitimacy mechanisms, allowing organisations to demonstrate responsiveness to institutional pressures without necessarily altering their underlying practices (Marquis et al., 2016). Particularly during early phases of institutional change, such symbolic gesture (e.g. signing sustainability pledges or releasing CSR reports) may serve to maintain external legitimacy, even when they fall short of internal transformation. Nonetheless, scholars have highlighted the paradoxical nature of this dynamic. On one hand, symbolic actions can help organisations

navigate complex stakeholder environments and buy time to develop more substantive capabilities. On the other hand, overreliance on symbolic responses can lead to decoupling, whereby organisational talk is not matched by action — eroding trust and undermining long-term sustainability goals (Hengst et al., 2020; Crilly et al., 2012). Truly substantive sustainability initiatives often require significant structural change, resource investment, or shifts in performance priorities, which may disrupt short-term efficiency or profitability. This creates what can be described as a paradox of authenticity versus legitimacy (Berrone et al., 2009). Organisations are caught between the desire to appear legitimate in the eyes of stakeholders and the need to engage in deep, sometimes disruptive, changes that reflect authentic sustainability commitments.

Corresponding to the abovementioned issues, recent literature stresses adopting a systems perspective on paradox in sustainability, moving beyond an organization-centric perspective. Schad and Bansal (2018) put forward that sustainability tensions are embedded in complex systems; paradoxes manifest at multiple levels (individual, organization, industry, societal) and influence one another. The authors asserted that global climate change creates system-level paradoxes that cascade down to industries and firms (e.g. organizations facing a paradox of addressing demands vs. emissions reduction), and even to individuals (e.g. employees torn between personal habits and environmental values). A systemic paradox perspective urges researchers and practitioners to consider cross-level interactions, and the possibility that a confined solution to a tension might shift the tension elsewhere in the system, rather than eliminating it.

To further elaborate the interwoven and systemic nature of paradoxes, Cunha and Putnam (2019) emphasise the concept of bundled or nested paradoxes, whereby tensions across levels are not only simultaneous but mutually reinforcing; a useful lens for understanding sustainability challenges across macro, organisational, and micro levels. Ivory and Brooks (2018) highlight the value of a paradox mindset (whereby individuals are able to engage simultaneously with contradictory goals) in shaping more adaptive and resilient sustainability strategies within organisations.

More importantly, a recent systematic review by Carmine and De Marchi (2023) highlights that much of the empirical work at the intersection of paradox and sustainability tends to examine tensions at a single level of analysis (e.g. individual, organisational, or systemic per se) often isolating specific types of paradoxes. Their review categorises the literature into

three principal streams: *paradoxical tensions* (i.e. identifying contradictions in sustainability efforts), *paradoxical frames* (i.e. how actors cognitively engage with tensions), and *paradoxical strategies* (i.e. the actions taken to manage or respond to those tensions). Crucially, one of their main contributions is a framework that emphasises the importance of connecting paradoxes across levels, proposing that a more holistic and multi-level lens is necessary to grasp how sustainability contradictions unfold and interact. This insight raises important questions for the present study into challenges for sustainable HRM as practiced by services organisations in Malaysia, namely:

How do paradoxes at the macro or systemic level cascade down and manifest within organisational strategies or sus-HRM practices?

At the same time, how might individual level responses by leaders and non-managerial employees, such as employee coping behaviours or managerial sensemaking, mediate or even exacerbate tensions at higher levels?

By drawing on Carmine and De Marchi's (2023) multi-level framing, this study aims to explore the dynamic and systemic interplay between paradoxical tensions, and navigation — not in isolation, but as embedded within broader institutional, organisational, and individual contexts. These questions serve not only to fill a critical empirical gap but also to advance theoretical understanding of how paradoxes in sustainability are enacted, negotiated, and sustained across levels. The next sub-sections will build on this by exploring how the literature address specific tensions at different levels of analysis.

2.4 Multi-Level Sustainability Tensions: Macro, Corporate, Function-Specific (HRM), and Individual Perspectives

An important foundation of this study is that sustainability-related paradoxes are multi-level, occurring at and across the macro (external environment), organisational (strategy and culture), functional (HRM practices), and individual (employees and leaders) levels. Much of the existing literature on sustainable HRM has concentrated either on the *organisational* level, for instance linking HR practices to corporate sustainability strategies and performance outcomes (Jackson et al., 2011; Mariappanadar, 2012), or on the *individual* level, with studies emphasising employee well-being, commitment, and pro-environmental behaviours (Ren & Jackson, 2020; Guerci & Carollo, 2016). While these contributions provide important insights into how HRM can advance sustainability at specific levels, they often give less consideration to higher-level contextual influences such as regulatory frameworks, industry logics, or

societal discourses that shape organisational and individual practices. Consequently, scholars have increasingly called for sustainable HRM research to adopt a more systemic and multi-level perspective, one that recognises how paradoxes are nested across levels and how tensions at the macro level cascade into organisations and individuals (Seidemann, 2024; Ehnert et al., 2016; Kramar, 2014).

In short, this study argues that Sus-HRM by its nature — connects the organization with broader system, and which deeply affects individuals within the organization. In this section, the remainder of this chapter will examine how the extant literature identifies what paradoxical tensions have been documented or imagined at each level, and how those might interact. In Chapter 3, the study will discuss literature continue addressing the macro level, features of but from the context-specific perspective of the Malaysian context.

2.4.1 Macro-Level Paradox (National and Institutional Context)

At the macro level, organizations are rooted in a national and institutional context that can generate paradoxical pressures. These comprise government regulations, cultural values, socio-economic conditions, and industry norms — which may simultaneously encourage and constrain sustainability attainment.

One common macro-level paradox is economic development vs. environmental protection at a country-wide scale (George et al., 2018; Voegtlin & Greenwood, 2016). Governments pursue economic growth (e.g. to improve livelihoods) while also facing pressure to enforce environmental conservation and social equity. As a result, policies that can send mixed signals to businesses. For example, a government might offer incentives for foreign investment and industrial expansion (e.g. favouring growth and job creation), but also introduce stricter environmental regulations or mandates. Organizations operating in such situation feel a paradox: they are expected to contribute to economic development, but they must not prioritize costs with relation to environment or society. This reflects a growth vs sustainability paradox at the institutional level. In developing economies like Malaysia, this tension can be severe as the motivation to attain developed-nation status and improve incomes contradict with commitments to global sustainability agendas (Wong & Chua, 2021).

Another common macro-level paradox is regulatory pressure vs. autonomy for organizations (Schneider & Meins, 2012). Organizations supports business-friendly regulations and flexibility in how they run their business, yet they also value clear sustainability standards and level playing fields that regulations provide. For instance, universities and hospitality

organizations in Malaysia might experience government pushes for sustainability (e.g. green campus initiatives or tourism sustainability certifications), but also struggle with bureaucracy or limitations on these initiatives (e.g. reporting burdens or limitations on certain profitable actions). In the higher education sector, a tension exist between national education goals vs. market competition: governments want universities to lead on sustainability education and model social responsibility, yet private higher education institutions operate in a market and must compete for students and financial viability (Tien, 2018; Tilbury, 2011). These dual pressures often collide, as efforts to embed sustainability in teaching and research may require resource allocations, or curriculum changes that weaken short-term market competitiveness and student recruitment priorities.

Cultural norms and social expectations also play a role (Jamali & Karam, 2018; Jamali & Neville, 2011; Waldman, 2011). In some cultures, there is a high expectation for businesses to contribute to community well-being aligning with sustainability, yet also a strong emphasis on financial success and shareholder value. These societal values can be conflicting, leading to what might be labelled as a cultural paradox (e.g. companies that are socially and environmentally responsible, but we also celebrate fierce profit-making). In Malaysia, a multi-cultural society with strong community values; organizations might face expectations to take care of employees and society (e.g. uphold the concept of "gotong-royong" or communal help) at the same time, operating in an increasingly internationalized and competitive capitalist economy. Relevant to our study, Malaysia's government has shown commitment to sustainability in recent years, such as launching the Malaysia Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) Roadmap and encouraging sustainability reporting. However, the implementation of these initiatives were inconsistent (Ahmad et al, 2020), and organizations might witness strategic inconsistencies at the macro level: one ministry promoting green initiatives, while another ministerial body prioritizes industrial expansion — leading to conflicting pressures. These contradiction among institutions and ministerial bodies can themselves be paradoxical, especially for organizations attempting to comply. This raises important questions: *How do macro-level contradictions influence sustainability implementation within leading sustainability-oriented organization; particularly in service-oriented sectors? At the same time, how do organisations and managers respond when regulatory efforts simultaneously enable and constrain sustainability strategies?*

These questions are especially pertinent in emerging economies, where regulatory infrastructure is evolving and institutional arrangements may be both enabling and

ambiguous. Arguably, the macro context discussed generates both, enabling and opposing constraining conditions for sus-HRM. Conditions for sustainable HRM often foster paradoxes, such as short-term economic national priorities versus long-term sustainability commitments, or *global vs. local institutional norms.* Such tensions are well recognised in the literature, where scholars argue that sustainable HRM is inherently shaped by contradictory temporal, spatial, and institutional demands (Ehnert et al., 2016; Kramar, 2014; Guerci & Carollo, 2016).The literature suggests that sustainability leaders act as mediators or translators of these macro tensions, finding ways to navigate regulatory uncertainties and turning policy conditions into strategic advantages (e.g. transforming sustainability mandates into innovative practices) (Bansal & Song, 2017; Hahn et al., 2014). However, research specifically linking macro-level paradoxes to HRM outcomes is rare (Stahl et al., 2020). So, this is a gap this study addresses through examining how national-level influences trickle down to create paradoxical tensions in organizational and HRM practices.

2.4.2 Organizational-Level Paradox (Corporate Strategy)

At the corporate or organizational level, sustainability paradoxical tensions have been widely documented, also framed as part of the Corporate Sustainability paradox. Organizations often struggle between meeting economic performance targets and fulfilling their sustainability mission or values — creating *profitability vs sustainability* commitments paradox. Even companies that champion sustainability face budgetary pressures to control costs and increase revenues (Filho et al., 2025; Goh & Jie, 2019; van Bommel, 2018). This is essentially a *performing paradox* at the organizational level - multiple stakeholders demanding different outcomes. The literature shows that some organizations attempt to address this by integrating sustainability into strategy, and creating a business case for sustainability. Even so, decision-makers can feel the "pinch" of contradictory system of measurement (e.g. quarterly earnings metrics vs. social impact metrics). Hahn et al. (2014) concluded that leaders engage in paradoxical cognitive framing to either see such trade-offs as manageable or to compartmentalize resolutions. Those with a paradoxical frame of mind might set dual objectives (e.g. the company aim for 15% revenue growth, AND 15% less carbon footprint). Besides, this framing accept lower margins in some areas in exchange for long-term resilience, while those who do not might prioritize one and downplay the other.

Besides that, there exist a gap between high-level sustainability strategies and on-the-ground operational practices; essentially a strategic direction vs operational implementation paradox (Bromley & Powell, 2012; Maon et al, 2009). Although top management may plan for

ambitious sustainability goals, but the operational side of things encounter constraints of resources, time, and capabilities. Previous researchers refer to this as the implementation gap, where corporate sustainability policies do not fully translate into practice (Al-Mubaraka, 2019). For instance, a study of hotel chains by Do, Nguyen, Nguyen, and Trinh (2020) found that announce a strategy to eliminate unsustainable food sources (strategic goal), but individual hotel managers worry about customer complaints or supply issues (operational realities) – resulting in inconsistent implementation. The discussion of horizontal inconsistencies within the organizational production channels points out that misalignment across levels can amplify paradoxes because employees see the inconsistency and become pessimistic, which further complicates the tension between; what the firm says, and the firm's actions.

Furthermore, organizations aiming for sustainability set long-term visions which require investments immediately, but they also have short-term targets and KPIs to achieve (e.g. yearly financial results, enrolment numbers, guest satisfaction results). This *temporal paradox*: *long term strategies vs short term,* is extensively written in literature *(Margolis et al., 2009; Epstein et al., 2015)*. Organizations may employ mechanisms like separate budget for long-term projects, or dual reporting to keep both temporal dimensions in focus. However, the inherent tension remains; managers can be *"short-term actors"* by cutting costs, but that undermines long-term sustainability. Moreover, managers can invest heavily in future-oriented initiatives and risk short-term loss. Slawinski and Bansal *(2015)* found that; organizations that accepted intertemporal tensions and created dialogues around them were better at maintaining progress on long-term sustainability issues, however, organizations that treated sustainability as something to do only after meeting short-term goals tended to constantly avoid significant action.

Another source of tensions at the organisational level lies in conflicts between stakeholders' contrasting expectations and cross-functional tensions within organizations, as different departments or functions experience the sustainability agenda differently (Sharma & Bansal, 2017; Siltaoja et al., 2015). Cross-functional tensions represent another understudied area of sustainability paradoxes within organisations. Sustainability often demands integration across multiple departments (such as marketing, operations, finance, and HR) each with distinct priorities, logics, and performance metrics. This can generate cross-functional paradoxes, where the push for sustainability-aligned branding by marketing teams may conflict with the financial caution or efficiency-focused mandates of operations and finance. While some

studies have noted the challenges of aligning functional silos in sustainability implementation (Silvestri et al., 2024; Engert & Baumgartner, 2016), empirical examples remain relatively sparse, particularly in service-oriented contexts such as hospitality and higher education.

The existing literature advocates for strong integrative leadership and cross-functional governance mechanisms as a means to navigate such tensions (Bocken et al., 2014; Lozano et al., 2016). Yet, more research is needed to examine whether such structures genuinely facilitate paradox navigation, or whether they merely obscure tensions through superficial coordination. This suggests a pressing need for empirical research that moves beyond rhetorical calls for integration to explore how sustainability-related paradoxes are experienced, negotiated, and sometimes resisted within and across organisational functions.

The literature on the two sectors of interest in this study have already identified some types of organisational level paradoxes:

Prior research on universities and sustainability notes paradox of educating for sustainable development vs. operating a sustainable campus is evident because; sometimes a university teaches sustainability concepts, but failed to implement them institutionally due to cost (Wright & Nyberg; 2016; Stephens & Graham, 2010). Besides, regulatory pressure vs. institutional autonomy also arises (Mok, 2019). Private universities must follow strict education ministry guidelines (e.g. incorporating environmental responsibilities or community engagement standards), but the government also guard their autonomy in establishing curricula and budgets.

In the hospitality sector, organizational paradoxes often circle around *service excellence vs. environmental responsibility*. Hospitality providers are expected to provide top-notch guest comfort and luxury, which can be resource-intensive, yet they also position themselves as "green hotels" championing environmental conservation and waste reduction. This is a direct manifestation of *a performing paradox* — satisfying the customer against achieving sustainability goals (Font et al, 2017). Hospitality operators also face short-term market pressures vs. long-term reputation (Jones et al., 2014). Cutting cost on sustainability might save money in the short-term or during tough times, but could damage the brand's promise and long-term customer loyalty, if public find it inconsistent with the hotel's known values. As a result, leading hotels often set both types of goals and innovate (e.g. finding eco-efficient luxury solutions). The literature on sustainable tourism underlines such paradoxes, and hospitality operators contribute to economic development and cultural exchange but can

also harm local environments and cultures. In other words, tourism operators grapple with preserving the very attractions (e.g. pristine beaches; cultural heritage) that their business depends on, while still profiting from them — exhibiting the utilization vs. preservation paradox (Bramwell & Lane, 2011). Therefore, several questions need addressing: *How do sustainability initiatives initiated in one department (e.g. board members, HR well-being policies), come into tension with other departments' operational demands, or key performance indicators? At the same time, how do internal functions with diverging incentives and accountability frameworks respond to shared sustainability objectives?*

These questions emerging from this section are particularly salient in contexts where formal governance structures are weak, or where leadership does not actively result in integrative responses (Crilly et al., 2012). In conclusion, the abovementioned paradoxes frequently come to question. Many of these are recorded in general sustainability management research, but there is a need to connect them explicitly to HRM — which is addressed in the next sub-section. This is due to how an organization handles these paradoxes relies on HRM systems: through incentive structures favour short-term sales, or reward sustainability-related achievements. This question pivots the chapter to the functional (HRM)-level itself.

2.4.3 Function-Specific (HRM) Level Paradox

Within the HRM domain, Ehnert (2009) provides one of the most influential frameworks by identifying three paradoxes that are particularly salient for people management: the *efficiency–responsibility paradox*, which captures the tension between driving organisational performance and ensuring social responsibility toward employees; the *consumption–reproduction* paradox, which reflects the pressure to maximise employee output in the short term while safeguarding their long-term well-being and employability; and the *present–future paradox*, which juxtaposes immediate organisational needs with investment in future human resources. These paradoxes illustrate that HRM is not merely an operational function, but a critical site where sustainability tensions become visible and contested.

Ehnert's discussion of efficiency-responsibility is synonymous with *economic productivity vs employee well-being* — a core paradoxical tension in HRM is balancing the welfare, health, and development of employees. In the context of sustainability, this tension is significant because social sustainability centres around treating employees compassionately and ensuring decent work conditions. However, organizations often feel pressured to do more with less (e.g. without reinforcing workforce), which can lead to work intensification, longer hours, or

precarious contracts that contradict well-being objectives. This tension is comparable to a *performing-belonging* paradox focused within HRM; *performing* in the sense of achieving high labour productivity and financial results, while *belonging* in the sense of nurturing a supportive workplace where employees feel valued and protected (Ehnert, 2009; Guerci et al., 2015). Sus-HRM literature highlights that many firms remain trapped in a compliance-driven approach (e.g. minimal legal compliance on labour concerns), rather than a truly strategic approach to employee sustainability. Ehnert et al., (2016) argue that in many sectors, HRM's role in sustainability is limited; to ensuring legal compliance and taking a supporting role in corporate social responsibility programs, instead of transforming how employees are managed in daily operations. This shows a gap between rhetoric and reality. Also, developed a problem for HR managers who supports improving employee well-being, but face top-down mandates to cut labour costs, or increase productivity.

Moreover, HRM is often stuck in a *temporal paradox* of its own, or a present-future paradox (Ehnert, 2009). Bankrolling in employees (e.g. training, career development, succession planning, etc.) is essential for long-term sustainability, as it ensures the organization has the skills and leadership succession for future challenges and retain valuable knowledge (Tang et al., 2018). Nevertheless, such investments are often among the first to be cut when budgets are low, because payoff in sustainability investments is not immediate. The tension between pressing labour cost optimization (e.g. keeping headcount numbers, obtaining maximum performance), versus nurturing employees for future roles and broader contributions, is indeed well recognized (Kramar, 2014). Accordingly, Sus-HRM scholars (Ren & Jackson, 2020; Ehnert et al., 2016) argue for practices like continuous learning opportunities, talent development aligned with sustainability competencies, and fostering adaptableness. The paradox is that; these efforts may produce intangible results, which is hard to justify to finance departments strictly monitoring financial metrics. Some organizations address this by setting up employee development as part of their sustainability commitment and even reporting it in sustainability reports (e.g. training hours per employee, internal promotion figures) to give it the prominence equivalent to other sustainability metrics.

Besides that, HRM practices can either increase control over employees (e.g. control policies, strict appraisal criteria), or empower them (e.g. involvement in decision-making, autonomy) — essentially a control vs. empowerment paradox. Sustainability often requires employee engagement and bottom-up ideas which implies greater empowerment and influence (Jackson et al., 2014). Yet, organizations may be hesitant to give up control or mainly operate in

cultures of hierarchy that value top-down direction (e.g. high-power distance culture). Malaysia, in particular, is widely recognised as a high-power distance society (Jehanzeb & Mohanty, 2020), this paradox could be particularly apparent in Malaysian workplaces and making it a challenge for HRM. This may lead to a paradox; HRM must implement certain standards which is a control function, but it also should empower employees to be champions of sustainability (e.g. encouraging them to innovate locally, or green teams); achieving the right balance is complex. If HRM leans on control, employees may perceive sustainability initiatives as 'extra work' or mere compliance; but if it leans on empowerment without structure, efforts may become fragmented. HR's role in spearheading sustainability vs. supporting sustainability; another tension is in the identity of the HR function or department itself when it comes to sustainability (De Stefano et al., 2018): *Should HR lead in embedding sustainability into the organization (e.g. shaping culture and values, integrating sustainability into all HR practices)? Otherwise, should HR support other departments that typically lead sustainability (e.g. dedicated sustainability office or committee)?*

Indeed, can be an influential change agent for sustainability because it influences employment (e.g. hiring employees with sustainability attitudes and competencies), training (e.g. developing sustainability knowledge), performance management (e.g. setting objectives related to sustainability), and rewards (e.g. recognizing sustainability accomplishments). On the other hand, HR departments are often occupied with administrative responsibilities and may not have expertise in environmental issues (Buller & McEvoy, 2016). This creates a tension in practice; HR managers acknowledge the importance of sustainability but feel it is not part of their core tasks, or HR leaders may take initiative but lack top management directive. The literature suggests that in organizations truly committed to sustainability, HR has re-invented itself as a strategic partner that embeds sustainability into the employee lifecycle (Bombiak & Kluska, 2018; Poon & Law, 2022). For instance, allocate a portion of bonuses and career progression to sustainability performance. The gap between such leading practices and the norm (e.g. HRM only support isolated CSR events) is an area of concern. It reflects a paradox of identity for HR: being a guardian of people and values, vs. being an enforcer of managerial decisions. Thus, if sustainability is a core organizational value; the HR function must reconcile its multiple identities to support that value.

In both case settings, it is plausible that sustainability-related tensions emerge at the HRM level in distinct and context-specific ways:

In higher education contexts, sustainability-related tensions at the HRM level often emerge in distinct and context-specific ways. For example, research shows that universities face competing pressures between the strategic ambition to embed sustainability into teaching, research, and campus operations, and the financial imperatives of student enrolment and market competition (Lozano et al., 2015). These tensions can manifest within HRM practices, where faculty and staff are expected to integrate sustainability competencies into curricula and research, while simultaneously delivering performance outcomes linked to institutional rankings, revenue generation, and international competitiveness (Findler et al., 2019). Such studies highlight that sustainability in higher education is not only about formal commitments but also about managing paradoxes between educational, social, and economic demands, thereby making HRM a critical arena in which these contradictions are negotiated. This raises an important question: *How do HR policies and academic performance metrics foster or suppress sustainability-related contributions?*

Further tensions may surface in recruitment and workforce planning (Kramar, 2014). Should HR prioritise hiring staff with sustainability-related expertise, even if it risks sidelining other core institutional needs? And if staff with strong sustainability commitments are brought in, how are their contributions evaluated in performance management systems? A tension might arise if staff are motivated by social or environmental values, yet appraised predominantly against conventional KPIs such as publication counts, teaching load, or grant income. What role, then, does HR play in mediating this tension between motivation and institutionally imposed metrics? As the literature suggests, the HR function is often a critical site where strategic tensions become operationalised (Ehnert et al., 2016; Guerci et al., 2019). Further empirical inquiry is needed to understand how these tensions are experienced and navigated in practice, particularly in contexts where sustainability is both a rhetorical ambition and a contested organisational reality.

In the hospitality sector, sustainability ambitions often generate a distinct set of HRM-level paradoxes, particularly given the labour-intensive and cost-sensitive nature of the sector. Scholars have observed tensions between the need for standardised service protocols (which guarantee consistent customer experiences), and initiatives that encourage frontline employees to engage in sustainability practices (waste reduction, eco-friendly service innovations, or guest involvement in environmental initiatives) (Jones et al., 2016). Research further suggests that empowering employees to adopt sustainability-oriented behaviours can

conflict with managerial priorities for efficiency, uniformity, and cost control, highlighting how HRM practices in hospitality become a crucial site where sustainability paradoxes are negotiated (Renwick et al., 2013; Kim et al., 2017). This raises a question: *Can frontline empowerment be meaningfully achieved within rigid service standard frameworks for brand consistency?*

A second, and perhaps more entrenched, tension relates to labour cost management versus social sustainability commitments. The hotel industry is characterised by high staff turnover and reliance on casual or contract labour, particularly to accommodate fluctuating occupancy rates. Yet sustainable HRM frameworks advocate for fair wages, decent working hours, secure contracts, and overall worker well-being as integral to sustainability goals (Baum, 2018; Guerci & Corallo, 2016). As seen in empirical study of Malaysian hotels by Chin, Mohamad, and Lo (2023), HR in these organizations push for investing in employee welfare, while operations push back due to cost implications. So, how do sustainable hotels reconcile the economic imperative to maintain labour flexibility with the ethical imperative to offer stable, fulfilling employment? Under what conditions can HR managers advocate for long-term investment in employee welfare without facing resistance from operations managers focused on short-term cost containment? These tensions are not simply operational dilemmas but reflect deeper value conflicts between economic efficiency and social sustainability. However, existing literature provides limited empirical insight into how such paradoxes are experienced and managed in hospitality contexts, particularly in emerging economies like Malaysia.

In sum, research specifically focusing on paradoxes within HRM practices is still progressing. Ehnert's *(2009)* pioneering work used paradox as a lens to theorize sustainable HRM, identifying underlying paradoxes by making sure the workforce is resilient even if not maximally efficient in the short-term. Poon and Law *(2022)* expand this idea by noting several HRM paradoxes, and calling for recognition of the role of employees in navigating them. The review highlight that while conceptual research has identified tensions, the cognitive and practical response of HR managers and organizational actors in dealing with those tensions are still under-studied.

2.4.4 Individual-Level Paradox (Employees and Leaders)

It was observed that a paradox at one level can trigger tensions at another. This multi-level interplay is a central core of the study. Thus, after reviewing how each level has been

considered in literature, it becomes clear that a systemic, multi-level analysis is needed to fully understand sus-HRM paradoxes.

At the individual level, paradoxes manifest in how employees and leaders experience, and make sense of the contradictory demands assigned to them. Individuals internalise organisational tensions, which can lead to stress, defensiveness, or, conversely, spur creativity and more integrative problem-solving (Lewis, 2000; Miron-Spektor et al., 2011). For instance, employees who care about sustainability may find their personal values, contradict certain tasks or goals in their job (or vice versa) — resulting in *personal values vs organizational demands* paradox (Hahn et al., 2014). This is a kind of belonging paradox; the tension between one's self-identity or values and the identity of the organization or role (Kreiner et al., 2006). When individuals encounter such tensions, they may cope by compartmentalizing (e.g. separating personal and work identities), or by becoming change drivers trying to reform the organization from within (Sonenshein, 2010). The literature suggests that unresolved value conflicts can lead to job dissatisfaction or turnover (Jarzabkowski & van de Ven, 2013; Blazejewski et al., 2020). Paradox theory adds that individuals can also learn to living with paradox, as well as offering meaning in working through tensions (e.g. feeling that they can gradually influence the organization). Some literature suggests that individuals can find meaning in "living with paradox"; particularly when they feel empowered to influence change (Lewis, 2000; Putnam et al., 2016). Nevertheless, empirical evidence remains limited especially in service-sector contexts.

Additionally, employees in sustainability-leading organisations frequently occupy multiple roles that may pull in different directions. Sustainability managers, for example, are often expected to be both idealistic advocates and pragmatic realists; simultaneously promoting new ideas and accommodating existing organisational constraints (Smith & Lewis, 2011). Similarly, line managers might be tasked with hitting performance targets while also championing sustainability initiatives. Similarly, line managers might be tasked with hitting performance targets while also championing sustainability initiatives. Studies have shown that such dual responsibilities often create dilemmas at the individual level. For example, Sharma and Good (2013) highlight how middle managers are caught between corporate imperatives for efficiency and emerging sustainability demands, frequently lacking the time and resources to pursue both effectively. These tensions exemplify what may be understood as a performing paradox at the individual level.

This dual responsibility can result in time and resource allocation dilemmas, contributing to what may be understood as a performing paradox at the individual level. In this study's context, a department head may be expected to integrate sustainability into the operations (a relatively new mandate), while also increasing profitability and economic growth. Balancing these demands without compromising either is not only problematic, but potentially unsustainable for the individual. This raises a critical research question: *How do individual role holders make sense of and respond to competing performance expectations in sustainability-focused roles?*

Managers who attempt to advance sustainability face their own paradoxes, often embodying the contradictions they aim to manage. The emerging literature on paradoxical leadership describes how leaders are expected to be both visionary and pragmatic, directive and participative, values-driven and adaptable (Zhang & Han, 2019). In sustainability contexts, this might involve projecting optimism about win-win solutions while being candid about the trade-offs required — thus balancing authenticity and persuasive vision. Leadership and management in such environments involves constant tension between conflicting demands of delivering financial results for shareholders, ensuring a supportive environment for employees, as well as upholding social and environmental responsibilities.

While Sajjad et al. (2024) suggest that effective sustainability leaders adopt both-and thinking, as well as the use practices like integrative decision-making and communications, more empirical research is needed to understand how these paradoxes are enacted. Further investigation is needed on — *How do sustainability leaders personally experience and respond to these conflicting pressures?*

As for employees who are tasked with sustainability tasks, a common tension is whether to fully engage with the organization's sustainability initiatives, or to become sceptical if they see contradictions (Ashforth & Reingen, 2014). If employees perceives the organization saying one thing and doing another (e.g. talking about well-being, but still pushing unpaid overtime), they experience cognitive dissonance. They can either engage positively by voicing concerns or trying to improve the situation (which can be risky), or disengage and become cynical as to treating sustainability as a facade. This is a mental paradox for the employee involving hope vs. scepticism (Latif et al., 2022) Paradoxically, a certain level of appropriate doubt might drive improvement (e.g. employees pushing leaders for more reliability), but too much of it leads to low-spiritedness and cynicism. Managing this paradox

at the individual level often comes to leadership and developing employees empowered to speak up. Unless employees are expected to silently live with pretence.

In both cases, individual respondents (e.g. managers, HR professionals, and non-managerial staff) are likely to report such personal tensions. Prior research indicates that exploring individual experiences provides valuable insight into the micro-foundations of paradox management, like cognition and emotion shape how individuals respond to contradictory demands (Lewis, 2000; Jarzabkowski et al., 2013). Significantly, scholars emphasise that the systemic and nested nature of paradox means that tensions at macro, corporate, HRM, and individual levels are interconnected and mutually reinforcing (Cunha & Putnam, 2019; Schad & Bansal, 2018).

2.4.5 Inter-Level Dynamics of Paradoxical Tensions

A growing theme in the sustainable HRM literature is that HRM itself becomes a site where nested sustainability tensions converge and are operationalised (Kramar, 2014; Ehnert et al., 2016). External institutional pressures (macro level) and internal strategic tensions (organizational level) often manifest in HRM policies (meso level), which, in turn, create micro-level tensions for individuals. For example, these initiatives may unintentionally provoke identity tensions or value misalignments at the individual level (Klapper et al., 2020). Thus, sus-HRM functions as a critical arena where cross-level tensions are both enacted and experienced. By understanding why such tensions arise requires acknowledging the inherently pluralistic and conflict-laden nature of sustainability (Lewis & Smith, 2022; Hahn et al., 2015; Hahn & Figge, 2011). Sustainable organisations must simultaneously pursue economic, social, and environmental goals: a triad that often contains competing imperatives (Byl & Slawinski, 2015). In the HR context, this translates into efforts to meet shareholders' financial demands, employees' expectations for well-being, and regulators' environmental standards - goals that frequently clash (Aust et al., 2020). Sustainability tensions are not anomalies but systemic features of organisations operating in multi-stakeholder environments (Wannags & Gold, 2020; Margolis et al., 2009). Importantly, these tensions rarely stem from one source; they result from interacting dynamics across macro, meso, and micro levels (Hahn et al., 2015; Hahn et al., 2018).

Organisations often face *"institutional complexity"* (Greenwood et al., 2011). Research shows that in many developing countries, firms tend to prioritise short-term financial viability over long-term environmental goals, especially when institutional support for sustainability is

fragmented (Khan et al., 2025). External stakeholders include governments, NGOs, investors, and consumers - often imposing incompatible demands and making it difficult for firms to satisfy expectations simultaneously (Salman et al., 2023). Cultural factors compound this complexity — collectivist societal values push organisations toward social responsibility, but prevailing capitalist norms reward financial outcomes. This duality creates an institutional paradox in which firms must "give back" while also maximising profit, without clear guidance on how to reconcile the two.

At the organisational level, tensions emerge from efforts to embed sustainability into core strategy, operations, and HR practices amid finite resources and competing demands (Ehnert et al., 2016). Even companies that espouse sustainability struggle with implementation. A common paradox is the conflict between short-term financial targets and long-term sustainability investments (Slawinski & Bansal, 2015). This is especially acute in resource-constrained sectors such as private services industry. Research shows that cost-cutting decisions (e.g. reducing staff or deferring sustainability programs) can undermine strategic goals and employee morale, while excessive spending on green initiatives can risk financial viability (Baum, 2018). In Malaysian universities, for example, public mandates for sustainability clash with private institutions' dependence on tuition and academic rankings, leading to superficial sustainability measures (Tilbury, 2011). In hospitality, similar dilemmas arise: installing eco-friendly technologies may be applauded by regulators and green consumers, but resisted internally, if they disrupt operations or affect guest satisfaction (Chan & Hawkins, 2012). Similarly, functional silos within organisations may also exacerbate tensions, with sustainability teams advocating transformative change; while finance or HR teams resist due to cost or risk concerns (Pedersen et al., 2025).

At the micro level, employees and managers alike bring their own cognitive frames, values, and role identities into the organisation, which influence how they engage with sustainability goals and policies (Guerci et al., 2019; Carollo & Guerci, 2018). Individual-level tensions can manifest when employees perceive dissonance between their values and the organisation's sustainability posture, leading to disengagement or cynicism (Zhang et al., 2019). Conversely, employees who lack environmental awareness or a sustainability mindset may resist organisational initiatives, especially if seen as burdensome or performative. Wry and York (2017) describe how individuals navigating multiple institutional logics may experience psychological conflict. Moreover, some individuals possess greater capacity for "paradoxical thinking" (Smtih & Tracey, 2016; Smith & Tushman, 2005), enabling them to embrace

competing goals, while others may adopt defensive strategies like avoidance, compartmentalisation, or blame-shifting (Lewis, 2000; Hahn et al., 2014). These micro-level variations influence whether sus-HRM efforts are embraced, rejected, or distorted during implementation.

Macro, corporate, functional (HRM), and micro-level paradoxes can be analytically distinguished, and proven to be deeply interwoven in practice. Scholars increasingly point to the cascading and recursive nature of sustainability tensions: macro-level contradictions (e.g. contradictory policy agendas) shape organisational strategies, which are then interpreted and acted upon by individuals (Schad et al., 2016; Gehman et al., 2018). For example, M Saaida (2023) found that when one ministry promotes environmental reforms while another prioritises economic growth, organisations receive conflicting mandates that are passed down to HR managers — who must navigate inconsistent sustainability goals in operations and KPI design. The reverse also holds; micro-level rigidity or cynicism can amplify organisational tensions and fuel resistance to external pressures. Zhang et al. (2019) demonstrate how organizational cynicism mediates negative effects of workplace politics on innovation, suggesting that cynical attitudes among employees can escalate and reinforce sustainability resistance at higher levels. The interdependence across levels means that addressing tensions at one level without considering others may merely relocate the problem. Hahn et al. (2018) and Jarzabkowski et al., (2013) call for more research into how these multi-level interactions unfold over time. As such, misalignment across levels intensifies tensions, while fostering alignment can facilitate more adaptive and resilient responses. Therefore, recognising multilevel dynamics is key to managing tensions in an integrative and transformative manner.

Researchers used rich metaphors to describe these multi-level, interwoven tensions. Fairhurst and Putnam (2024) identify "nests" of tensions — situations where a tension at one organizational level crosses boundaries into others. They also describe "paradox families", where clusters of related tensions share a common "family resemblance" (for instance, a parent paradox of sustainability spawning child paradoxes in different departments). Multiple paradoxes can collide and entangle, making it hard to isolate any single issue. These images underscore that sustainability paradoxes seldom occur in isolation; rather, they interact vertically (through hierarchy) and horizontally (across functions and stakeholders). Vertically, a tension might cascade from the top down to frontline employees (e.g. who then face higher work demands with fewer resources). Horizontally, tensions emerge among peers and departments at the same level This horizontal dimension reflects the fact that organizations

juggle multiple paradoxical goals simultaneously, within a given level (e.g. balancing people, planet, profit).

Crucially, the vertical and horizontal dimensions of nested paradoxes interact. A misalignment across levels (vertical) can intensify horizontal conflicts, and vice versa. If top management sends mixed signals about priorities, middle managers may each interpret sustainability versus financial trade-offs differently, leading to cross-departmental friction. Instances like operational silos, or "turf wars" between departments (horizontal tensions) can worsen the organization's overall response to external sustainability pressures (vertical tension). This interdependence means that addressing a paradox at one level without considering others may simply shift or deflect the tension elsewhere. Accordingly, Hahn et al. (2018) and Jarzabkowski et al. (2013) call for more research into how these multi-level interactions unfold over time, noting that solving a surface-level problem can create unintended consequences if deeper contradictions persist unaddressed. Misalignment among levels will intensify tensions, whereas fostering alignment (e.g. ensuring that institutional policies, organizational strategies, and HR practices share coherent sustainability objectives) can enable more integrative responses.

The recognition of nested paradoxes raises important questions that set the stage for this study. *How do sustainability tensions cascade vertically through an organization?* Likewise*, how do they propagate horizontally across different teams, functions, or stakeholder groups within the organization?* And *what strategies allow actors to navigate these intertwined contradictions without simply shifting the pressure elsewhere?* These questions will guide the inquiry into vertical and horizontal dynamics of tension in later chapters. By appreciating the multilevel, systemic nature of paradoxes, we lay the groundwork for examining how organizations and their leaders can confront sustainability tensions in a more holistic, both/and manner.

The next section turns to how organizations and actors attempt to navigate such paradoxes. In the following part of this chapter, the chapter reviews navigation and responses to sustainability tensions, essentially linking the identification of tension causes to the practical challenge of navigating them.

2.5 Sustainability Paradox Navigation

Building on the concept of nested sustainability paradoxes spanning multiple levels (section 2.4.5), effective navigation of these tensions requires careful alignment both vertically (across

hierarchical levels) and horizontally (within the same level). Paradox theory emphasizes that misalignment among levels can deepen tensions. For example, when strategic sustainability goals at the top are not supported by mid-level policies or front-line practices, thus by fostering alignment (ensuring that institutional policies, organizational strategies and HRM practices share coherent objectives) enables more integrative responses. This mirrors Cunha and Putnam's (2019) insight that paradoxes usually bundle across levels: horizontal inconsistencies in one area (e.g. conflicting departmental priorities) can trigger or exacerbate vertical tensions in the organization. Accordingly, scholars call for navigation approaches that attend to both the vertical cascade of tensions and horizontal clashes within a level.

Paradoxical leadership refers to leaders and employees adopting a both–and mindset and guiding their organizations to embrace competing demands rather than enforce simplistic trade-offs. Given the complexity of sustainability tensions that cut across strategic and operational domains, leaders and managers must actively maintain alignment across levels (vertical coherence), while also mediating conflicts among functions or stakeholder groups (horizontal coherence). Effective sustainability leaders frame challenges in paradoxical terms – articulating visions that encompass dual goals (e.g. profitability and responsibility) – thereby signalling that a both/and approach is expected. By consistently talking about balancing "profit with purpose" or short-term and long-term aims, top management can shape an organizational culture in which employees understand that contradictory objectives should be pursued concurrently. Abdallah et al., (2011), suggest that paradoxes can be transcended; not merely managed, through iterative sensemaking processes that transform tensions into new ways of organising and thinking. Research by Hahn et al. (2014) supports this, showing that leaders who communicate integrative visions help staff internalise paradoxical thinking. In contrast, if leadership oscillates unpredictably between priorities or sends mixed signals, it breeds confusion, scepticism and vertical misalignment – middle managers may interpret priorities differently, leading to cross-departmental frictions. Therefore, leaders who role-model integration (e.g. transparently weighing multiple outcomes in decisions, or allocating resources in ways that reflect both economic and social goals) signal that neither side of a paradox will be neglected. Such actions help ensure that what is espoused at the top is enacted throughout the organization, lowering the "say–do" gap that often undermines sustainability efforts. Byl and Slawinski (2015) caution that inconsistency between sustainability discourse and practice erodes stakeholder trust and employee engagement, ultimately reproducing the very tensions the organization professes to address. Therefore,

maintaining credibility requires that leaders align words and deeds across levels — a core aspect of vertical alignment in paradox navigation.

Another critical paradoxical navigation task is managing relationships with external stakeholders in a paradoxical manner. This involves both addressing external demands (e.g. investor pressure for short-term returns and regulators' or community expectations for sustainability) and ensuring internal consistency. Actors may need to present different emphases to different audiences – highlighting efficiency and risk management to investors while championing values and social impact to employees – yet do so within an authentically integrated overall strategy. The paradox here is that actors often must adopt multiple narratives for multiple stakeholders without losing coherence. Managing this requires integrity and transparency, so that each stakeholder perceives a genuine commitment to both objectives. When done well, such dialogue can convert potential trade-offs into mutual gains (e.g. justifying short-term sustainability costs to investors by framing them as long-term risk mitigation). However, if actors handles separately to each stakeholder in an inconsistent way, they deepen horizontal conflicts and invite cynicism. In scholarly terms, this aligns with paradox theory's emphasis on comfort with ambiguity and plurality: leaders and employees must tolerate, and embrace contradiction as they negotiate externally imposed paradoxes. Research has linked this capability to emotional and cognitive complexity. For instance, Metcalf and Benn (2013) argue that leading sustainable organizations is akin to tackling "wicked problems", as it demands cognitive flexibility and emotional resilience to continually confront tension, rather than resort to easy answers.

Overall, the literature indicates that embracing paradox – rather than denying or superficially resolving it – is what separates truly sustainability-oriented organizations from those making isolated, inconsistent efforts. Managers and HRM professionals who cultivate a paradox mindset in their teams (e.g. acknowledging enduring contradictions and encouraging creativity in addressing them) can transform tension into a source of innovation and learning. In contrast, ignoring or suppressing tensions often leads to negative outcomes such as employee disillusionment, missed sustainability targets, or damage to organizational reputation. The expectation in the present study is that the Malaysian case organizations, recognised as sustainability leaders in their sectors, will exhibit such paradox navigation behaviours — leveraging both vertical alignment and horizontal engagement to cope with multi-level contradictions. This understanding informs the analytical approach of this thesis. Notably, a key framework guiding the analysis is the typology of paradox responses

developed by Putnam et al. (2016), which categorises how actors respond to tension. The following subsection outlines this framework, which is central to interpreting the findings of this research.

2.5.1 Typology of Responses to Paradox

Individuals and organizations immersed in sustainability initiatives inevitably find themselves pulled between competing demands (e.g. delivering financial returns versus advancing social and environmental goals) resulting in persistent paradoxical tensions. On one hand, such tensions can be beneficial if approached constructively: research suggests they can spur creativity, learning and even superior performance when embraced as synergistic opportunities (Carmine & De Marchi, 2023). On the other hand, unresolved or poorly managed tensions often generate anxiety, conflict and dysfunctional outcomes (Schad et al., 2016). Accordingly, Putnam et al. (2016) provide an influential framework distinguishing three broad categories of response:

(1) coping strategies that prioritise one pole of the paradox (essentially an either/or approach), (2) both–and integrating strategies that attempt to accommodate and balance competing demands simultaneously, and

(3) "more-than" embracing strategies that fully accept paradox and seek to transcend or transform the tension into a new state.

This typology is central to the present study's analysis, as it offers a conceptual lens to classify and evaluate how the case organizations navigate their sustainable HRM tensions. It also echoes earlier paradox theory insights that managers generally oscillate between defensive responses that simplify choices, and more complex responses that actively engage with contradictions. Below, each category in Putnam et al.'s framework is elaborated, along with examples from the literature, to provide theoretical scaffolding for later empirical interpretation.

A common reaction to paradox is an *either–or* mindset: favouring one side of a tension while neglecting the other. Coping responses include defensive mechanisms such as suppression, denial, or compartmentalisation, whereby paradoxes are treated as dilemmas to be solved (Putnam et al., 2016). These responses simplify decision-making in the short term, but often come at a cost. They may reduce immediate anxiety, yet research suggests they ultimately exacerbate tensions and dysfunctional behaviours (Smith & Lewis, 2011; Schad et al., 2016). In the literature, coping typically leads to symbolic or performative actions which fail to

resolve the underlying contradictions between economic growth and environmental responsibility (Hahn et al., 2015; Hahn & Knight, 2021). Empirical studies from Soin and Huber (2023) observe that a research-intensive UK university often treat sustainability as peripheral, implementing initiatives through student-led green committees or facilities departments, while core performance metrics remain unchallenged. Such compartmentalisation enables institutions to maintain the appearance of engagement without confronting the deeper trade-offs sustainability entails. In the hospitality sector, Bohdanowicz and Zientara (2014) found that large international hotel chains (although committed to sustainability codes and certifications) often confined environmental initiatives to symbolic gestures, and continuing carbon-intensive practices (e.g. frequent refurbishment cycles, overseas procurement, high energy usage). These cases highlight how organisations may engage in coping, not due to unawareness, but as a pragmatic strategy to maintain institutional legitimacy without unsettling established priorities.

Both–and responses embrace opposing demands simultaneously: treating them as interdependent rather than mutually exclusive. Organizations and individuals using this strategy aim to acknowledge, explore, and creatively reconcile contradictory goals (Putnam et al., 2016; Smith & Lewis, 2011). This may involve *"paradoxical thinking";* reframing tensions as opportunities — or strategic indecisiveness, in which attention oscillates between competing poles over time (Lewis & Smith, 2022). Another common tactic is integration, where managers and employees seek practices that partially satisfy both sides. For instance, an organisation implement eco-efficiency measures that cut costs, and reduce environmental impact; or embed sustainability metrics within performance appraisals to promote both productivity and social responsibility (Hengst et al., 2020). Besides, Guo et al. (2020) found that integrative both-and responses in Chinese hotels, as managers shifted from either-or to "ambidextrous" both/and approach — improving information exchange, performance and creativity. Such responses treat paradox as a source of creative tension, offering potential for innovation, shared value, and long-term viability. However, the effectiveness of integrative strategies are influenced by contextual conditions and capabilities. Without continuous commitment and support, these efforts risk sliding back into superficial balancing acts that fail to address systemic paradoxes (Jarzabkowski et al., 2013; Schad & Bansal, 2018).

One of the more progressive responses in Putnam et al.'s (2016) typology is *acceptance*, whereby leaders fully embrace the persistence of paradox rather than seeking to resolve it. Acceptance involves recognising that conflicting objectives (e.g. such as profit and

sustainability) are both legitimate and enduring. Instead of choosing, balancing, or mitigating, leaders decide to *"live with"* the tension and use it as a dynamic force for learning and transformation. This approach is characterised by reflexivity and a long-term perspective. Actors adopting acceptance might engage in sensemaking dialogues where conflicting perspectives can co-exist, or encourage paradoxical thinking across the organisation (Cunha & Putnam, 2019). Rather than viewing paradox as a burden, these leaders cultivate cultures where contradiction is expected, explored, and even celebrated. Acceptance-oriented responses have been found to enable deeper integration of sustainability into strategic identity and culture (Wright & Nyberg, 2016). This is supported by Albertsen's (2025) meta-analysis across 32 empirical cases, showing the importance high organisational commitment, stakeholder engagement, and strategy-practice alignment — translating paradox navigation into societal sustainability outcomes. In higher education, this might involve aligning academic freedom with institutional sustainability through revised KPIs and leadership development; in hospitality, it could mean training frontline employees to reconcile guest satisfaction with environmental standards. Nevertheless, achieving and sustaining this stance requires high tolerance for ambiguity and a supportive organisational infrastructure. Many institutions struggle to progress beyond coping or partial both–and strategies under resource constraints or institutional inertia (Hahn et al., 2018)

Lastly, Fairhurst and Putnam (2023) defined a further extension within the acceptance response — *"more-than"* — that seek to transform paradoxical tensions, rather than simply balancing or absorbing them. These responses harness the dynamic interplay between opposites to create new perspectives; involving reframing paradoxes so that opposing forces become incorporated within a new, integrative whole, or transcending by shifting outside existing boundaries. Rather than looking for a midpoint, "more-than" approaches develop new spaces of ambiguity where opposites are treated as equally valued and interdependent, enabling multi-stakeholder dialogue and collaborative learning. Importantly, these strategies preserve the dynamic interplay of tensions and cultivate a variety of responses; by opening up rather than close off meanings and use tensions to enhance awareness of paradoxical circumstances. Through situating paradoxes within new relationships and cultivating spaces for generative dialogue, "more-than" responses show how actors can go beyond acceptance, and leveraging tension as a source of creativity and transformation.

In summary, Putnam et al.'s (2016) typology provides a valuable framework for classifying organizational responses to paradox. It prompts us to ask: How and why do organizations

change between these response types? What conditions enable movement from coping toward integration or acceptance, and what barriers might keep an organization stuck in a defensive posture? Additionally, to what extent are response strategies shaped by context – such as sector-specific logics, resource availability, or leadership orientations – and more importantly, how do these strategies play out in the HRM function where paradoxes are acutely experienced? These questions are central to the empirical investigation in later chapters. As the next chapter (chapter 3) demonstrates, understanding these responses is important for interpreting how different actors in Malaysian higher education and hospitality sectors engage with Sustainable HRM paradoxes in practice.

2.6 Critical Perspectives on Sustainability and Sustainable HRM: Dialectics, Structural Constraints, and Political Economy

While the earlier review highlighted paradox theory's both/and approach (e.g. both economic and sustainability) to managing tensions in sustainable HRM, a growing body of critical literature urges cautiousness against optimistic or normatively idealistic assumptions. These critical perspectives interrogate the limitations and contradictions of corporate sustainability and sustainable HRM — arguing that some tensions are rooted in deeper structural conflicts that disregard simple managerial reconciliation. In contrast to paradox theory's prominence on synergistic "win–win" solutions, dialectical scholars emphasize that; power imbalances, political-economic structures, and the possibility that certain conflicts are intractable under current conditions. By engaging with these critiques, this study acknowledge that sustainable HRM's challenges cannot be fully understood without examining the macro context of capitalism, labour relations, and societal power dynamics.

One of the criticisms comes from Banerjee's (2011) critical perspective on corporate sustainability. This scholar argues that many organisational efforts to "embed" sustainability are frequently full of unexamined assumptions, and thus may not deliver genuine social or environmental benefits. Besides that, Banarjee questions the potential "dark side" of corporate sustainability by asking whether these initiatives are a form of greenwashing. His analysis extends the discussion of sustainability beyond internal managerial practices to the larger political economy in which firms operate. This critique highlights that corporate sustainability programs, even when well-intentioned, often ignore issues of power, inequality, and externalities. For instance, conflicts over land and resources between firms and communities, cannot be resolved by simplistic notions of balance, or learning within an organization. In essence, this perspective challenges the normative idealism of much

sustainability rhetoric, reminding us that what appears as a "paradox" within a firm (e.g. balancing profit and social good), may in fact reflect structural injustices or even exploitative practices.

Similar critiques have emerged in the human resources and employment relations field. Dobbins and Dundon (2017), for example, analyse the ideal of "sustainable labour–management partnership", and conclude that it is largely a fantasy, or an illusion that clashes with economic realities. Using a political economy lens, they demonstrate that attempts at enduring cooperation between employers and workers are systematically undermined by multi-level influences. At the system level, globalised neoliberal capitalism imposes competitive pressures, and profit imperatives make it increasingly difficult" for managers to keep genuine partnership "bargains" with labour. At the societal level, liberal market economies that rely on voluntarism (e.g. weak institutional supports for collective representation), thus genuine workplace mutuality remains rare. Lastly, dominance effects – such as the influence of powerful economies and multinational corporations – further push power asymmetries in favour of capital, thus inhibiting meaningful employee voice or equity. In short, these structural constraints imply that the tensions between efficiency (employers' priorities) and equity/voice (workers' interests) are not simply resolved through partnership acts. Dobbins and Dundon's analysis suggests that what paradox theory might frame as a manageable tension between stakeholder interests is, in practice, a deeply rooted contradiction of interests. Their sceptical view also posits sustainable HRM practices (e.g. labour–management cooperation) will remain precarious or symbolic, rather than truly transformative.

Las Heras et al. (2024) apply a Marxian lens to organisational paradoxes; shedding light on the dialectical tensions in even the most idealistic of enterprises, — worker cooperatives. Their study theorises that cooperatives operating within a capitalist market economy inevitably confront a "solidarity paradox", defined as the inherent impossibility of overcoming market competition through limited solidarity strategies". In other words, even organisations founded on principles of democracy, equity and mutual benefit, find themselves torn between the logic of solidarity, and the pressures of survival in a competitive market. The authors argue that this tension is more than a simple paradoxical duality as it is a manifestation of a deeper contradiction. By invoking a dialectical perspective (rooted in Marxian theory), it emphasize that such contradictions tend to persist and persist, thus challenging the notion that managers can permanently neutralise them. This view contrasts

with mainstream paradox theory by suggesting that resolution may require structural change (e.g. altering market constraints or ownership structures), rather than managerial strategies. The illustration reinforces a broader point; certain organizational tensions (e.g. those between worker well-being, collective governance, and market imperatives) may reflect structural downsides of our economic system.

The divergence between paradox theory and these critical/dialectical perspectives is significant. Paradox theory, as discussed earlier in this chapter, encourages managers and researchers to embrace competing demands simultaneously, or to seek integrative solutions and "both/and" synergies (e.g. achieving financial performance and employee well-being, rather than sacrificing one for the other). It assumes that with the right mindset, leadership and learning processes, organisations can "work through" tensions and even leverage them for innovation and sustainability. In contrast, a dialectical or political economy perspective interrogates who benefits, and who carry the costs of these so-called synergies. Critical scholars caution that some tensions signal irreconcilable interests or power asymmetries. From a dialectical view, attempts to simply accommodate both sides of a contradiction might temporarily mask the underlying conflict, but they do not eliminate it. Therefore, unresolved contradictions can intensify over time or shift to another level. In sum, by featuring these critical perspectives adds important balance and depth to the discussion of sustainable HRM. While earlier sections celebrated the potential of paradox theory in fostering sustainability (e.g. encouraging managers to attend concurrently to people, planet, and profit), the dialectical and political economy critiques serve as a sober counterpoint. It remind that this study's multi-level paradoxes unfold within a real world of structural constraints (e.g. market pressures, regulatory regimes, and unequal power relations) that shape what is possible. By positioning the study within this broader intellectual terrain, it improves rigor and reflexivity: embracing the valuable insights of paradox theory for understanding complexity, while also remaining mindful of its potential blind spots. This critical reflexive stance strengthens the theoretical foundation of the thesis —setting the stage for nuanced analysis of the multi-level sustainable HRM paradoxes in the chapters that follow.

2.7 Conclusion

In conclusion, this chapter has provided an extensive review of literature relevant to multi-level paradoxes in Sustainable HRM. It began by charting the evolution of sustainable HRM from its early roots in socially responsible HRM and Green HRM to a holistic triple-bottom-line approach, underscoring how the pursuit of economic, social, and environmental goals

inherently generates persistent tensions. By applying paradox theory to this domain, the review illuminated a central idea: sustainability challenges are rife with contradictions that are persistent, interdependent, and dynamic, rather than one-off dilemmas that can be easily resolved.

Key paradoxes were identified at multiple levels – from macro-level tensions (e.g. national development vs. environmental conservation mandates) and organizational-level contradictions (e.g. profitability vs. responsibility, short-term vs. long-term orientation), to functional HRM-level dilemmas (e.g. performance pressure vs. employee well-being, control vs. empowerment in people management) and individual-level conflicts (e.g. personal sustainability values vs. work demands). Crucially, this chapter highlighted that these tensions are nested and interconnected across levels. Misalignments vertically (for instance, between an institution's sustainability strategy and its HR practices or between policy goals and implementation on the ground) can amplify horizontal paradoxes (such as cross-departmental goal conflicts), and vice versa. Recognizing this multilevel, systemic nature of paradoxes is important because addressing a tension in isolation (at one level or in one department) may simply deflect it elsewhere if deeper contradictions persist. Therefore, a major insight from the literature is the importance of vertical and horizontal alignment: ensuring that sustainability objectives are coherent across hierarchy levels and among different functions, so that efforts at one level support (rather than undermine) efforts at another.

The chapter also underscored the role of paradox navigation capabilities – particularly leadership and HRM practices in framing and managing these tensions productively. Managers who foster a both/and culture, maintain alignment, and encourage open dialogue were noted as crucial in leveraging paradoxes for positive outcomes. This involves articulating integrative visions, role-modelling how to attend to dual goals, and creating structures (e.g. KPIs, communication forums) that keep contradictory priorities in view. Such behaviours and capabilities help transform paradox from a source of paralysis into a source of innovation. At the same time, the literature warns that if paradoxes are ignored or if espoused commitments are not backed by aligned actions, organizations risk cynicism, lost credibility, and failure to achieve either objective. Thus, embracing paradox is presented not as a lofty ideal but as a practical necessity for sustainable HRM. Figure 1 illustrates nested, multi-level paradoxes cascading vertically from macro to micro levels, with horizontal misalignments at the organizational level (e.g. cross-departmental goal conflicts) exacerbating overall tension.
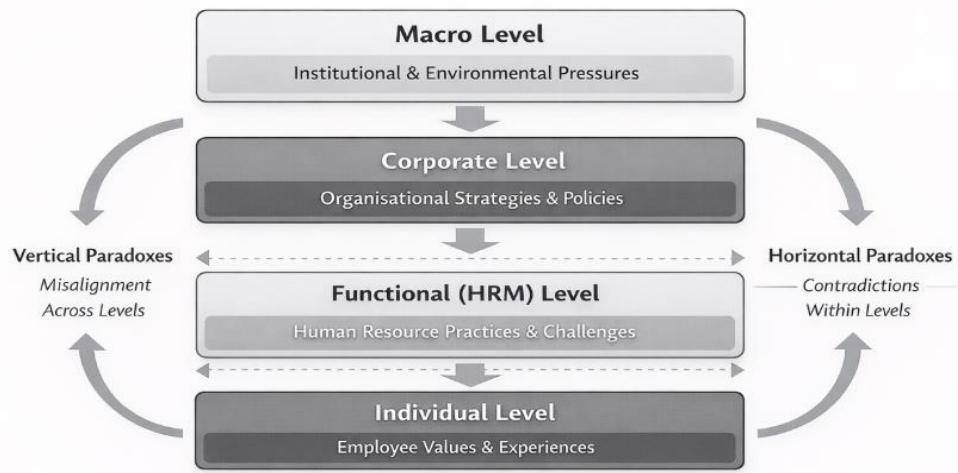
Figure 1: Framework for Understanding Multi-Level Paradoxes

Figure 1: Framework for Understanding Multi-Level Paradoxes

Looking ahead, Chapter 3 will build upon this theoretical foundation by detailing the research context and developing the study's conceptual framework. First, the specific context of Malaysia (and the two focal sectors: private higher education and hospitality) will be outlined, to ground the paradoxes in real-world conditions. Then, drawing on the paradox theory insights from this chapter, a conceptual model (Figure 1) will be presented to guide the empirical inquiry. This model integrates the multi-level perspective on paradoxes with the notions of vertical/horizontal dynamics and the response typology by Putnam et al. (2016), thereby linking the literature review to the study's design.

CHAPTER 3

Context: The Sustainability Agenda in the Malaysian Higher Education & Hospitality Sectors

3.0 Overview

This chapter sets the stage for an in-depth exploration of the national and sector-specific factors influencing Sustainable Human Resource Management (sus-HRM) in this study. It will explain these contextual factors, as well as outlines the integrated framework adopted to examine multi-level paradoxes in the Malaysian private HEI and hospitality contexts. The analytical value of investigating of Sus-HRM through the lens of paradox theory has already been outlined in Chapter 2. As organizations increasingly align their strategic priorities with sustainable development principles, they confront paradoxical tensions spanning multiple hierarchical and functional levels — creating complex and dynamic management. Malaysia's development trajectory, added with its pronounced commitments to sustainability; provides a particularly fruitful ground for exploring these multi-level paradoxes because of inherent tensions between rapid economic growth, and environmental or social responsibilities.

This chapter will first detail the sustainability context specific to Malaysia, highlighting macro-level factors such as national sustainability policies and regulatory environments. Following this, the chapter elaborates on sector-specific paradoxical tensions observed within two focal sectors: private higher education institutions and hospitality organizations. The chapter will subsequently introduce an integrated conceptual framework designed to capture the nested nature of paradoxes spanning macro, corporate, functional-HRM, and individual employee levels.

3.1 Sustainability in the Malaysian Context

The observed setting for this research is Malaysia, focusing on a private university (University-MY) and a hospitality organization (Hotel-MY); both organizations considered pioneers in sustainability within their respective sectors. Understanding the context is imperative because paradoxical tensions and their management can be influenced by cultural, economic, and sector-specific factors. The sub-section below provides an outline of relevant contextual elements from academic, grey literature and reports.

3.1.1 Malaysia's National Sustainability Project

Malaysia's strategic vision documents its ambitions and evolving development goals. The earlier *Vision 2020* had aimed to achieve developed nation status by 2020, while the current *Shared Prosperity Vision 2030* (SPV2030) refines these aspirations with a focus on inclusive and sustainable growth. SPV2030 clearly seeks "sustainable economic growth together with fair, inclusive, and equitable development" (Ministry of Economic Affairs Malaysia, 2019), acknowledging that economic progress must be largely shared. In line with the United Nations Agenda 2030, the government commits to rising incomes across all segments of society, while moving up the value chain. Since its independence in 1957, Malaysia has endeavoured to balance rapid growth with social equity, attempting to bridge development gaps in its multi-racial society (Economic Planning Unit, 2021). This balancing act is reflected in current policy targets (e.g. Malaysia is on the verge of attaining high-income country status, but it simultaneously emphasizes reducing income disparities among regions and ethnic groups).

Particularly, income inequality remains relatively high with a Gini index of ~39 in recent years, above the average of developed economies (World Bank, 2023). The Gini index provides a standard measure of income inequality — ranging from 0 to 100 — where 0 represents perfect equality and 100 represents perfect inequality (all income is concentrated in one person). Malaysia's score of around 39 places it in the category of moderate-to-high inequality, higher than most advanced economies which typically record Gini values in the low-30s, but lower than many developing nations where figures above 45 are common (World Bank, 2023). Thus, national agendas stress "shared prosperity" to guarantee that growth benefits the underserved communities. In comparison to its regional peers, Malaysia boasts one of the highest GDP per capita levels in Southeast Asia (3rd after Singapore and Brunei) and is recognized as a newly industrialised country (UNDP Malaysia, 2021). Its economy is also vastly globalized; as Malaysia is one of the most open economies worldwide, with trade flows amounting to over 130% of GDP (World Bank, 2022). This openness mindset has brought benefits and reflects Malaysia's leadership in sectors like electronics (e.g. leading exporter of electrical appliances and machineries) and commodities. Overall, the nation's growth trajectory and development planning exemplify a dual commitment: to achieve advanced-economy status through industrial and service-sector growth, and to do so in a way that is socially inclusive and sustainable in the future.

Malaysia has formally and significantly committed to the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (UN SDGs) as part of its national sustainability project. As a signatory to the UN's 2030 Agenda, Malaysia affiliated its national policies with 17 SDGs, integrating them into national development planning frameworks. The Eleventh Malaysia Plan (2016–2020) was the first to explicitly map its strategic thrusts to UN SDGs, and this alignment has deepened under the Twelfth Malaysia Plan (2021–2025). The government formulated a dedicated "SDG Roadmap" for 2016–2020 and a Phase II for 2021–2025 to guide the implementation of Agenda 2030 (DOSM, 2021; Economic Planning Unit, 2021). A National SDG Council, chaired by the Prime Minister, was established as the apex body to steer and monitor SDG implementation across ministries. This council is reinforced by a multi-stakeholder National Steering Committee; contained in the Economic Planning Unit, and six Cluster Working Committees that involve representatives from government agencies, societies, the private sector, academia, youth, and UN agencies.

Such an inclusive governance structure ensures a *"whole-of-nation"* approach to UN SDGs, extending coordination to state-level SDG committees and local establishments. In terms of specific commitments and targets, Malaysia's national goals are closely intertwined with the SDGs:

Poverty eradication (SDG 1) has been nearly achieved at the extreme poverty level - by 2019, as absolute poverty fell to 5.6% (from 7.6% in 2016) and the government is now focusing on addressing pockets of extreme poverty and post-pandemic setbacks (*UNDP Malaysia, 2021).*

Quality education and healthcare (SDGs 3 and 4) are high priorities, with Malaysia boasting near-universal enrolment in basic education and a strong public healthcare system that has delivered outcomes comparable to developed countries *(Ministry of Education Malaysia, 2020; WHO, 2022).*

On *gender equality (SDG 5)* and *reduced inequalities (SDG 10),* national policies (including SPV2030) emphasize increasing labour force participation of women and upliftment of disadvantaged groups *(Ministry of Economic Affairs Malaysia, 2019).*

Malaysia is also actively pursuing *climate action* and *environmental sustainability* in line with *SDG 13* and others. Malaysia pledged an unconditional 45% reduction in GHG-intensity by 2030 (2005 baseline) and committed to net-zero by 2050 in its 2021 NDC update (Ministry of Environment and Water Malaysia, 2021).

Malaysia has programs for *clean water* and *sanitation (SDG 6)* and *affordable clean energy (SDG 7),* such as expanding treated water access in rural areas and aiming for a larger share of renewables in the electricity mix *(Ministry of Natural Resources, 2022)*.

In conclusion, Malaysia's hold of the UN SDGs is comprehensive: as it spans high-level policy integration, specific quantitative targets (e.g. on carbon emissions, poverty, education outcomes), reporting to international forums, and multi-stakeholder engagement domestically. This commitment provides an important context for Sustainable HRM, as organizations in Malaysia (including universities and hospitality businesses) are increasingly expected to contribute to these national and global sustainability targets.

3.1.2 Key Sectors in Economic and Sustainability Plans

Two sectors in particular; private higher education and hospitality/tourism, play pivotal roles in Malaysia's national economic strategy and sustainability agenda, and they are salient for understanding sus-HRM in the Malaysian context.

The private higher education sector: particularly Malaysia's extensive network of private higher education institutions (HEIs), is a strategic sector underpinning national development and sustainability objectives. Malaysia views education as a catalyst for building a high-skilled, knowledge-based economy, as well as for lifting societal well-being. Over the past three decades, the country has expanded tertiary education capacity; with the private sector playing a leading role. Policy reforms in the 1990s (e.g. the Private Higher Educational Institutions Act 1996) encouraged the growing of private universities and colleges to complement public universities (Ministry of Higher Education Malaysia, 2020; Morshidi, 2006). This led to a rise of institutions and programs aimed at both retaining local students, while attracting foreign students.

The private HEIs now account for a large share of enrolments and have become a significant sector in their own right. From an economic standpoint, the private education sector is regarded as a major source of revenue and the government actively promotes Malaysia as an international education hub (Economic Planning Unit, 2021; Ministry of Higher Education Malaysia, 2020). It is the aspiration of the Ministry of Higher Education to capture a large share of the global higher education market, positioning Malaysia as a regional centre of educational distinction (StudyMalaysia, 2022). Tens of thousands of international students study in Malaysia; nearly 60,000 in private universities alone as of 2022 (DOSM, 2023),

contributing to the economy via tuition fees and living expenditure and fostering cross-cultural exchange.

In national development plans, higher education is tightly linked to sustainability — quality education (SDG 4) is seen as central for human capital development, innovation, and social mobility. Private HEIs are expected to support national human capital needs for a high-tech economy, while also easing the financial burden on the state. At the same time, Malaysia's education blueprints emphasize values of equity and quality; as it reflect an intent to ensure that the expansion of private HEIs does not compromise access for lower-income groups or the quality of education (Ministry of Education Malaysia, 2015). The higher education sector (especially private institutions) is vital to Malaysia's economic modernization, and is explicitly raised in national plans as part of a sustainable development strategy (through trans-national education and student mobility), as well as contributing to social outcomes like employment and innovation. This sector's workforce and HR practices are therefore of great interest in the context of Sustainable HRM, towards balancing the need to balance academic excellence, business viability, and social responsibilities.

The hospitality and tourism industry has been intentionally cultivated as a growth engine and a platform of diversification. Since the 1990s, government campaigns, such as *"Malaysia Truly Asia"* have successfully boosted international arrivals, making Malaysia one of the world's top destinations by visitor numbers (Tourism Malaysia, 2020). Pre-pandemic, tourism became Malaysia's second largest source of foreign exchange earnings (World Travel and Tourism Council, 2019), reflecting its significances; beyond just hospitality firms to the wider economy. In 2022, tourism and travel services accounted for an estimated 14% of Malaysia's GDP (WTTC, 2023), suggesting a major contribution to national output and jobs. The sector's role is emphasized in recent plans: under the Twelfth Malaysia Plan (2021–2025), the government set an ambitious target of 24.3 million international tourist arrivals by 2025, projected to generate around RM73 billion in tourism earnings (Economic Planning Unit, 2021). These targets (to rebound and surpass pre-COVID tourism activity) illustrate how fundamental tourism is to Malaysia's growth forecasts and recovery plans.

Moreover, Malaysia aspires to develop tourism in a sustainable manner too - by leveraging its rich natural and cultural legacies, while mitigating environmental impacts. A National Ecotourism Plan 2016–2025 was instituted to guide sustainable tourism development, focusing on increasing tourism's economic contribution in harmony with environmental

conservation and community wellbeing (Ministry of Tourism and Culture Malaysia, 2016). Under this plan, ecotourism initiatives seek to attract high-value tourists, protect biodiversity, and involve local communities, aligning tourism with the country's sustainability plans.

In summary, the hospitality/tourism sector is not only a key driver of economic growth and employment in Malaysia, but also a pivotal point in national sustainability strategies (e.g. promoting eco-tourism, cultural heritage preservation, and community-based tourism, as part of achieving the UN SDGs).

3.1.3 Potential Sources of Paradoxes in Malaysia's Sustainability Project

Even though Malaysia's "national sustainability project" has creditable objectives, it is also characterized by paradoxical tensions and trade-offs at the policy level. The pursuit of rapid economic growth and industrial development has at times clashed with environmental protection and social equity — echoing the core paradoxes of sustainable development.

A probable tension is the economy vs environment paradox: Malaysia's growth has relied on resource-intensive industries (e.g. palm oil, oil and gas, and manufacturing) that have environmental externalities, yet the country also strives to conserve its rich natural heritage and meet climate commitments. Malaysia has experienced significant deforestation as a result of agricultural and industrial expansion. Between 1990 and 2010 alone, it lost about 8.6% of its forest cover, largely due to logging and the expansion of palm oil plantations (Global Forest Watch, 2021; Raihan et al., 2018). This land-use change may drove economic gains (palm oil is a major export, employment source), but at a high environmental cost of biodiversity loss and carbon emissions.

The government faces the challenge of reconciling these opposing demands; to promote growth for economic prosperity, while enforcing conservation and moving toward a low-carbon economy. The paradox is evident in contemporary policy debates: Malaysia is committed to "green growth", and has promised not to sacrifice its environment in attaining high-income status (Economic Planning Unit, 2021). However, it remains a substantial producer of fossil fuels and palm oil. Balancing these competing priorities requires trade-offs and innovative solutions (e.g. investing in sustainable palm oil certification, implementing environmental impact assessments for projects, and moving towards renewable energy). Policymakers acknowledge that environmental management requires greater attention as Malaysia nears high-income levels (UNDP Malaysia, 2021; World Bank, 2022). National

climate pledges (e.g. 2050 net-zero target) create pressure to transform the energy and industrial sectors, which could divert traditional growth paths. Thus, the fundamental paradox of growth vs environment is at the front of Malaysia's sustainability journey, forcing a search for strategies that can deliver economic development with environmental sustainability simultaneously.

Another high-level paradox may well exist: industrial economic development vs social equity. Malaysia's industrialisation and globalization have yielded uneven benefits across different communities and regions, thus raising the issue of how to ensure inclusive development. On one hand, pro-business policies, infrastructural mega-projects, and foreign investment in industries have driven national income upward. On the other hand, disparities persist, such as rural vs urban development gaps, inter-ethnic income differences, and a skilled vs less-skilled workforce divide. The push to compete globally can exacerbate inequality, if not managed; for example, high-tech industries may prosper in major urban centres, while rural areas reliant on smallholder agriculture lag behind (Khazanah Research Institute, 2018). Malaysia's policymakers have long been aware of social inequities, and have implemented redistributive and affirmative programs (e.g. empowerment policies and regional development initiatives) to promote social cohesion alongside growth. The Shared Prosperity Vision 2030 explicitly arose from recognition of this paradox, aiming *to "address wealth and income disparities"* while continuing to grow the economy (Ministry of Economic Affairs Malaysia, 2019). There is an inherent tension in attempting to achieve a competitive, investor-friendly economy and simultaneously ensuring that vulnerable groups (e.g. low-income households, indigenous communities in east Malaysia, etc.) are not left behind by progress. The government's challenge is: to create high-paying jobs and spur innovation, while also strengthening social safety nets, equitable education access, and rural development (Wong & Chua, 2021). This tension surfaces in policy trade-offs, such as subsidy reforms, minimum wage hikes, or education budget allocations, - all of which must balance efficiency with equity. Notably, despite substantial poverty reduction, Malaysia's Gini coefficient remains higher than many advanced economies, signalling room for improvement in distributive outcomes (World Bank, 2022). Every step toward industrial sophistication (automation, digitization, attracting multinational corporations) must be weighed against its social ramifications, such as potential job displacement or regional inequalities - illustrating the paradox of development progress.

The paradoxical tensions are specifically labelled: economic growth vs. environmental sustainability, and development vs. equality; critical backdrop for the present study's focus on Sustainable HRM and paradox theory. They indicate that at the national level, Malaysia's sustainability project is not a linear path, rather a balancing act requiring both/and thinking, much as paradox theory suggests. The country's experience highlights how pursuing multiple objectives (economic, environmental, social) can lead to conflicting demands that must be navigated concurrently, rather than solved definitively.

This context sets the stage for empirical chapters, where similar themes are expected to emerge in interviews with Malaysian higher education and hospitality sector stakeholders. In those sectors, organizations and HR professionals likely feel the "pinch" of national paradoxes. For instance, universities are pressed to expand and commercialize (for financial viability) while upholding educational quality and inclusivity, and hotels or resorts must deliver profit and growth while adopting green practices and supporting local communities. Recognizing the national-level paradoxes discussed above provides a conceptual, as well as practical rationale for examining paradoxes in Sustainable HRM at the sectoral and organizational level. It underscores that the pursuit of sustainable development in Malaysia inherently involves managing tensions between competing objectives. The following chapters will build on this contextual foundation, exploring how Malaysian higher education and hospitality organizations interpret and respond to these paradoxes in striving for sustainability and human capital development.

3.1.4 HRM in Malaysia and Conventional Practices

The role of HR professionals in modern organizations is increasingly contested, a spectrum between strategic business partner and social conscience. In Western management thought, a dominant view holds that HRM should be an engine of competitive advantage – aligning people practices tightly with corporate strategy to drive performance. Ulrich's influential model redefined HR managers as "strategic partners" and change agents rather than administrators (Ulrich, 1996). This business-case perspective extends even into areas of sustainability: as HR is expected to champion initiatives such as "green" HRM, or diversity programmes as they add shareholder value or improve organizational reputation (Renwick et al., 2013). However, critics argue that such an instrumental approach sidelines HR's ethical obligations (Marchington, 2015; Boddy & Boulter, 2025). A social justice view of HRM asserts that the function must also safeguard employee well-being and broader societal

interests — not simply as a means to profitability, but as an end in itself (Guerci et al., 2019). Although scholars have noted that; while HRM could play a vital role in advancing corporate sustainability goals, it has so far failed to deliver on this promise due to its preoccupation with short-term business needs (Mariappanadar, 2012; Kramar, 2014).

Human Resource Management (HRM) in Malaysia has progressed under strong government influence and a unique cultural context. As part of the Vision 2020 national agenda, the Malaysian government has emphasized building a knowledge-based economy by investing heavily in training and development (Mahadi et al., 2020). The Human Resource Development Fund (HRDF) was established in 1993 to compensate employers for approved training programs, reflecting Malaysia's commitment to continuous human capital development (HRD Corp, 2021). Culturally, Malaysia's multi-ethnic and predominantly Muslim society also shapes HRM practices. Research suggests that management approaches rooted in Western or Protestant work ethics may not align well with the Islamic work ethic prevalent in many Malaysian organizations (Ali & Al-Owaihan, 2008). HR managers, therefore, must navigate diverse values and motivational factors among Malay, Chinese, and Indian employees to maintain harmony and productivity (Ramasamy, 2017; Tay & Yean, 2023).

These contrasting philosophies and context of HRM become especially pronounced when comparing Western practices with Malaysia's conventional approach. In many Western firms (at least in rhetoric) HR leaders are expected to help craft corporate strategy, foster innovation, and spearhead sustainability initiatives as true strategic partners (Boxall & Purcell, 2022). By embedding principles such as the triple bottom line into HR policies, organizations in the West increasingly task HR departments with delivering positive social and environmental impact (Ehnert et al., 2016). In Malaysia, however, the HR function has traditionally been more constrained. Studies consistently find that Malaysian HR professionals are viewed mainly as administrative experts, rather than strategic players, even in large companies (Rowley & Abdul-Rahman, 2007; Halim et al., 2019). This indicates that HR managers in Malaysia are often confined to routine personnel tasks — hiring, payroll, compliance — with restricted voice in decision-making or long-term planning. Structural and cultural factors contribute to this dynamic: Malaysian businesses tend to be hierarchical and relationship-oriented, which can limit HR's authority to challenge the status quo, or push expansive programmes beyond basic compliance (Chew, 2005). Even well-intended international HRM practices frequently falter when transplanted into the local context. For

instance, performance appraisal systems and integrated feedback systems imported from abroad often clash with Malaysian workplace norms around authority and harmony (Teh, 2006) Consistent with this pattern, surveys of Malaysian HR professionals indicate that they primarily fulfil administrative roles, and are less involved as strategic partners in their organizations (Salleh et al., 2015). Consequently, HR's involvement in progressive agendas such as sustainability or employee rights has remained cautious and incremental in Malaysia. There is a gap between the strategic, proactive HRM advocated in global literature and the conventional HRM prevalent in Malaysia.

3.1.5 Sustainable HRM in Higher Education

The higher education (HE) sector presents distinctive HRM challenges world-wide, as universities are noticeably different from typical corporate environments. HR managers in universities must balance the needs of diverse employee groups; from faculty members and researchers to administrative and support staff, and this presents a unique challenge not usually found in other industries (Beerken & Derwende, 2007). Human resource management in HE encompasses specialized areas such as faculty recruitment and promotion, academic staff development, and ensuring diversity and inclusion among staff and students (Crossman & Bordia, 2008.). This sector inherently has a mission paradox; private HEIs are expected to contribute to society through knowledge dissemination, critical thinking, social advancement, yet private HEIs must also ensure financial sustainability, sometimes behaving like corporate entities.

Literature on Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) in Malaysian higher education advocates the growing interest in sustainable practices, but face challenges like lack of expertise among faculty members, rigid curricula, and limited support from management; especially when sustainability doesn't clearly attract students or funding (Lim et al., 2022). Universities and colleges often operate under tight budget constraints and complex regulatory requirements, while also upholding academic traditions like academic freedom and shared governance in decision-making. Such factors complicate HRM practices in universities, as leaders must juggle financial pressures with the need to maintain academic standards and employee autonomy (Painoli, 2023). The result is that HR professionals in higher education often have to be flexible and consultative: looking for ways to support institutional goals, without undermining the shared and autonomous culture that academics expect.

In Malaysia's higher education sector, many of these global HRM issues are also evident, sometimes amplified. Malaysian universities (both public and private) have expanded rapidly in recent years, and they face ongoing challenges in attracting and retaining qualified academic staff. A recent review highlighted that various environmental factors (e.g. fast-changing technology and skill requirements, financial and political constraints) significantly impact the recruitment and selection of academicians in Malaysia (Mansor et al., 2023). For instance, limited backing and budget cuts can constrain hiring and salary competitiveness, while government policies and administrative procedures can hinder the hiring of suitable talent. Moreover, social and cultural expectations may play a role, as universities must consider work culture and even ethnic or gender representation when hiring, to align with national goals of campus diversity objectives (Ministry of Higher Education, 2020). These challenges mean Malaysian HEIs often struggle to fill academic positions with top talent (Da Wan & Morshidi, 2018). Nevertheless, studies indicate that effective HRM practices can make a positive difference. Recent studies shows that clear career development opportunities, fair performance evaluations, and recognition has been shown to improve Malaysian academics' job satisfaction (Salleh et al, 2015; Amin & Mahmood, 2020).

A specific tension widespread in academic circles is academic autonomy vs. corporate strategy: faculty members may want to pursue sustainability topics in teaching/research, while university management might prioritize programs that generate income (e.g. business, marketing) or research that brings grants (Smith, 2010). So, a paradox can emerge if sustainability is not seen as profitable – as the university could advertise itself as a sustainability leader (e.g. build reputation and align with national priorities), but internally struggle to allocate sufficient budget or curricular freedom for it.

Another tension is the breadth of sustainability vs. specialization (Leal Filho et al., 2025); Should the institution embed sustainability broadly in all courses (may offsetting specialized content) or have specific sustainability programs which may attract only a small number of students? Managing this requires strategic clearness and perhaps integrating both approaches (e.g. a general sustainability module for all students and a specialized degree route).

In summary, while universities in Malaysia share the common universal HRM concerns of the higher education sector - they must also navigate local challenges like talent shortages and bureaucratic hurdles and tensions - making the position of HRM crucial in achieving Malaysia's higher education ambitions.

3.1.6 Sustainable HRM in the Hospitality/Hotel Industry

Baum (2018) highlights how hospitality organizations face particularly critical paradoxes; associated with the need to meet high service expectations, while simultaneously managing environmental constraints. De Grosbois (2016) similarly critiques the symbolic nature of many sustainability claims in the hospitality sector, where sustainability initiatives is often leveraged for marketing rather than embedded in core service design. The hospitality sector, and hotels in particular; is another area where HRM plays a pivotal role, facing its own set of industry-specific challenges. Globally, high employee turnover and talent shortages have long overwhelmed the hotel industry. Hospitality jobs are often characterized by comparatively low wages and demanding work schedules, thus leading to difficulties in attracting and retaining trained employees (Baum, 2015; Kundu & Gahlawat, 2018). As a result, hotels grapple with a changing workforce, as well as continuously recruit and train new staff.

Contemporary international literature pinpoints three critical HRM priorities for hotels worldwide: maintaining service quality through employees, investing in effective training and development, and improving staff recruitment and selection processes (Ladkin & Buhalis, 2016). These focus areas are vital because service quality in hotels is directly tied to front-line employees' performance, and consistent training is needed to meet customer service standards. However, researchers observe that many hotel organizations still handle these HR issues in a reactive manner, not through strategic planning (Nieves & Quintana, 2018). There are calls for a more progressive HRM approach in hospitality; one that moves beyond traditional personnel administration to create a stable, committed workforce as a source of competitive advantage (Marinakou & Giousmpasoglou, 2019). In practice, this would imply HR taking on a role in workforce planning, career development paths, and aligning HR policies with the hotel's service strategy.

Tourism is a key industry for Malaysia, and hospitality companies and hotels are key players to deliver sustainable tourism in practice. Sustainable tourism and hospitality have a wide range; from eco-certifications, energy-efficient building operations, waste management, to community-based tourism practices and cultural preservation. Recent research on Malaysian hotels (Langgat et al., 2023) shows that many organizations are at early stages of sustainability adoption. A paradox in tourism is that increasing tourist numbers are economically beneficial, but can strain local environments and cultures. Thus, sustainable

tourism advocates for moderation and sensible management, which can conflict with growth targets of businesses and tourism-oriented organizations.

In the Malaysian hospitality industry, these HRM challenges are clearly manifest and documented in the literature. This sector is a major driver of tourism and economic growth, but high labour turnover and skills gaps persist. A review of HRM practices in Malaysian hotels found numerous shortcomings that mirror global trends: a shortage of talented and experienced personnel, persistently high employee turnover rates, lack of adequate training programs, low employee motivation, and even subpar service quality in some establishments (Miah & Hafid, 2019). Goh and Jie (2019) identify persistent learning and resource tensions, particularly in hotels that aim to implement green practices, while maintaining guest satisfaction amid rising operational demands and inconsistent competencies among staff. This indicates that many hotels in Malaysia may under-invest in HRM, or struggle to implement effective HR strategies. The consequences of these HR issues can be serious (e.g. insufficient training and low morale can lead to poor customer service, affecting a hotel's reputation). Encouragingly, it was also noted that improving HRM practices (e.g. better training, fair rewards, and career opportunities) is linked to higher job satisfaction among hotel employees. (Miah & Hafid, 2019; Bustamam et al., 2014). This suggests that Malaysian hotels can gain competitive benefits by strengthening their HRM systems. Noticeably, larger multinational hotel chains in Malaysia have started to adopt more progressive HR initiatives by including collaborations with educational institutions for talent pipelines, and implementing clear advancement tracks for employees to address talent and turnover problem.

Furthermore, the hospitality sector often bring in lower-wage jobs (Baquero, 2023; Walker, 2016). Guaranteeing social sustainability means improving job quality for those employees (e.g. decent work, living wages, growth opportunities). While some hotels may achieve high marks for environmental performance, they may simultaneously fail the social dimension if they rely on exploitative labour practices — such as low wages, insecure contracts, or unsafe working conditions (Giousmpasoglou, 2024). So, a paradox can arise if a hotel tries to keep labour costs low, and invest in expensive green tech. Ideally, a sustainable strategy will find ways to do both; by training staff to operate green initiatives, leading to qualifying staff's better pay.

In conclusion, the hotel sector exemplifies the importance of HRM in Malaysia's service economy — tackling widespread issues of high turnover, skill shortages, and service quality, while managing paradoxical tensions through strategic human resource practices.

3.2 Research Gaps in Multi-Level Paradoxes of Sustainable HRM — Insights from the Malaysian Context

Malaysia's collectivist inclinations and community orientation could be supportive of sustainability (e.g. emphasis on community well-being aligns with social equity), but high-power distance might make employees less inclined to speak up about paradoxes or unsustainable practices by superiors (Dai et al., 2022). Despite the sustainability discourse in Malaysia is relatively growing, leading companies usually have either; external pressures (e.g. multinational clients) or visionary leaders. Therefore, being a leading organization of sustainability in Malaysia imply that these case organizations faced even more uncertainty and had to develop their approach in isolation (few peers or competitors to learn from), which might intensify paradoxes (e.g. no established plan to convince stakeholders that sustainability goals can be achieved). Although the literature suggests that general principles of paradox management is relevant, local context can also influence which tensions are most prominent and which strategies are feasible.

Malaysia thus represents a particularly productive context for extending paradox theory and Sustainable HRM research, given its relative under-representation in the global literature and its unique institutional and cultural dynamics. While much of the paradox literature has emerged from Western economies with well-established sustainability frameworks (Smith & Lewis, 2011; Hahn et al., 2014), far less attention has been paid to how such tensions manifest in emerging economies like Malaysia, where state-led development agendas, cultural collectivism, and hierarchical workplace norms intersect. Through analysis in Chapter 2 and 3, several research gaps have been highlighted. Firstly, while paradox theory has been applied to sustainability at the macro/institutional level, but there is limited research precisely examining paradoxes in the emerging HRM practice related to sustainability. Much of the HRM literature on sustainability has adopted a normative orientation, emphasising prescriptive models and the development of concepts such as Green HRM, rather than critically engaging with the paradoxical tensions that emerge when sustainability goals intersect with organisational and HR practices (Poon & Law, 2022; Ehnert et al., 2014). This study addresses this by using paradox theory to analyse HRM practices and roles in sustainability implementation, thereby bridging Sus-HRM and paradox literatures.

Secondly, there is a lack of multi-level empirical studies that collect data from macro, organizational, and individual level actors together. Many studies focus on one level —for example, interviews with top managers about strategic tensions, or surveys of employees about perceived CSR and its effects (Yassin & Beckmann, 2025). By designing a multi-level case study, this research responds to calls for integrative approaches that show how tensions at different levels interact. The understanding of interactions can contribute to paradox theory by providing concrete illustrations of multi-level and nested nature of paradox in an emerging economy context, thus responding the call to extend paradox research into additional settings and complex systems.

Another gap is methodological. Much of the paradox literature in sustainability either uses conceptual reasoning, or case studies at the organizational level per se. The human element, or how individuals within those organizations actually perceive and navigate paradoxes has been under-explored (with some exceptions in leadership studies). Poon and Law (2022) criticize that past paradox studies of Sus-HRM ignored organizational actors' thought-processes and actions. This study's use of qualitative interviews with actors at multiple levels (e.g. macro-level, corporate, HR managers, line managers, and staff) allows us to capture the mindsets and behavioural aspects. Contribution in methodology by illustrating an approach to study paradoxes qualitatively across levels, providing empirical evidence for future research in other contexts. This aligns with the notion of exploring micro-foundations of paradox navigation in sustainability, in which Luo et al. (2020) identify as a necessary area.

To conclude, the review points out a gap in understanding the Malaysian, or developing economy context in paradox theory. Most of the foundational paradox literature (Smith & Lewis, 2011; Schad et al., 2016) and sustainability paradox case studies (e.g. in Europe/North America) assume certain institutional contexts. By studying Malaysia, this work can shed light on how cultural and institutional differences influence tension perception and responses. Do the findings support the acceptance of certain paradox categories, or do unique tensions emerge? How might the collectivist culture influence paradox management strategies? (e.g. avoiding of open confrontation) The findings could suggest improvements or extensions to paradox theory to account for the context, thereby broadening the theory's applicability.

3.3 Conclusion

This chapter has established the theoretical grounding for our investigation into multi-level paradoxes in sustainable HRM. The review have traced how Sus-HRM captures multiple,

potentially conflicting objectives (economic, social, environmental) and inherently gives rise to tensions. Fundamentally, this chapter highlighted that these paradoxes are nested and interrelated, reinforcing the need for a holistic study. The concept of nested paradox implies that resolving or mitigating a tension at one level, may depend on addressing related tensions at another; a multi-level analysis can capture the full illustration. This insight directly informs the research questions, which revolve around identifying paradoxes across levels, understanding responses by various actors, and examining cross-level dynamics (e.g. how HRM practices reconciles between organizational strategy and individual experience in paradox management).

Through integrating the literature from paradox theory, Sus-HRM, and the specific empirical context; built a strong justification for the study's approach. The gaps identified - particularly the lack of empirical multi-level studies and the need to incorporate actor perspectives emphasize the contribution of this research. In chapters 2 and 3, the claims supports the formulation of research questions, which can be summarized:

RQ1 What are the salient paradoxical tensions encountered in pursuing sustainable HRM in the selected organizations at macro, organizational, HRM, and individual levels?

RQ2 How do organizational actors (leaders, HR professionals, employees) interpret and respond to these paradoxes, and what strategies (if any) are used to manage them?

RQ3 How do tensions and responses at different levels interact (e.g. reinforcing or mitigating each other), and what does this reveal about the nature of nested paradoxes in sustainability?

RQ4 How does sectoral context (private higher education vs. hospitality) shape the nature of Sus-HRM paradoxes and the ways they are managed?

RQ5 How can paradox theory be extended to explain the nested, multi-level, and sector-contingent nature of sustainability tensions?

Having established the theoretical foundation and rationale for these questions, the next chapter will detail the research methodology adopted to investigate them. The study's methodological approach: a qualitative, multi-level comparative case study design using interviews, observations, and document analysis have been chosen by the complexity of the phenomena identified in earlier chapters. This approach is well-suited to capture the richness of paradoxical experiences and strategies in context, answering calls in the literature for more nuanced, system-oriented research into sustainability paradoxes.

Finally, preceding chapters has positioned the study at the intersection of paradox theory and Sus-HRM, highlighting its potential to contribute to both theory and practice by showing how early adopting, or sustainability leader organizations grapple with multi-faceted tensions in striving for sustainability.

CHAPTER 4

Methodology

4.1 Research Design and Philosophical Positioning

The conceptual framework developed in Chapter 2 (Figure 1) depicts sustainable HRM tensions as a system of nested, multi-level paradoxes. It draws on paradox theory to show how contradictions at the macro level (e.g. national policies vs. market imperatives) cascade into organisational strategy and HRM practices and, ultimately, into individual experience. It also highlights horizontal misalignments within organisations that can amplify tensions. This multi-level model is a "sensitising" tool that shaped methodological decisions in this study. Thus, the framework informed the choice of research design, sampling, data collection and analytic strategies, ensuring that the methods were compatible with the theoretical lens, as well as interpretation attentive to the systemic and nested nature of sustainability paradoxes.

In order to investigate the multi-level experiences of Sustainable HRM (sus-HRM) paradoxes, this study adopts a qualitative, interpretive research approach situated within a multiple-case study design. The interpretive paradigm is suitable because the research questions involve understanding subjective experiences (e.g. how leaders/employees perceive and navigate tensions) and contextual influences (e.g. national and sectoral context) that are deeply textural, and best acquired through qualitative data. The aim is not to test predetermined hypotheses or simply quantify variables, but to generate rich insights that advance theoretical understanding. While elements of inductive reasoning are present in the sense that themes emerge from the empirical material, the study is more accurately abductive in orientation — it begins from existing paradox and sustainability theories to sensitise the analysis, while allowing empirical findings to challenge, or extend these theoretical frames.

Building on Carmine & De Marchi (2023) and Hahn et al., (2015), this study aligns with the research streams that focus on understanding how paradoxes interact across levels, and how employees engage with them in practice, instead of merely defining paradoxes as conceptual constructs. By embedding paradox theory into function-specific HRM practices and individual responses, this study makes a distinct empirical contribution to sustainability and sus-HRM literature.

The choice of a case study methodology (Yin, 2014; Merriam, 1998) is driven by several factors. Firstly, the research deals with a contemporary phenomenon (e.g. sustainability paradoxes) within its real-life context and specific organizations, where boundaries between phenomenon and context are unclear. Case study allows an in-depth exploration of this bounded system using multiple data sources. Secondly, given that the study covers multiple levels of analysis (macro, corporate, functional HRM and individual) and multiple perspectives, a case study provides the flexibility to incorporate various types of suggestions (e.g. through interviews, documents, observations) and triangulate them for a holistic understanding. Thirdly, by employing a multiple-case design (University-MY vs. Hotel-MY), it allows a comparative analysis which strengthens the findings through the logic of replication — seeing if similar paradox patterns and dynamics occur in different contexts, or how and why they differ. This enhances the reasoned generalizability of the results. Nonetheless, the aim is not statistical generalization, but to generate conceptual generalization — where replication logic across cases tests and strengthens theoretical propositions across contexts (Käss et al., 2024).

Ontologically, this research embraces a critical realist stance enriched by a social constructivist epistemology, reflecting my belief that sustainability paradoxes are both "out there" in the world and constructed in our minds. In practical terms, the data analysis acknowledge a mind-independent reality – for instance, environmental limits and regulatory structures that objectively shape sustainability tensions, while also recognising that our knowledge of these tensions is socially constructed and fallible (Easton, 2010). This dual positioning stems from personal conviction that issues like the climate crisis are not merely discursive inventions; as they involve material biophysical and social conditions (e.g. rising CO_2 levels and legislative mandates) that press upon organisations (Bhaskar, 2013). At the same time, what is deem a "paradox", or a "solution" emerges through human interpretations, dialogues, and values. By adopting this blend aligns with recent paradox scholarship that conceptualises paradoxes as both inherent and socially constructed (Schad & Bansal, 2018). Hahn and Knight's (2021) quantum ontology of paradox shows how inherent material factors and actors' constructed meanings co-constitute paradoxes. Therefore, this synthesis offers a balanced ontological foundation for studying sustainable HRM tensions — it prevents an excessively relativist outlook by compromising that genuine structural tensions underlie sustainability challenges, but it also avoids determinism — by asserting that people actively enact and shape how those tensions play out.

This philosophical stance is operationalised by using a critical realist lens; looking beneath participants' narratives for underlying structures or mechanisms that might be generating their reported tensions (Danermark et al., 2019). Rather than taking interviewee accounts at face value alone, the accounts were treated as windows into subjective experience and the objective context. For example, when interviewee described a "tension" between short-term performance pressures and long-term sustainability goals, it will be interpreted through two layers: (1) the constructed reality of how they perceive and articulate that tension, and (2) real situational factors (e.g. market forces or policy constraints) creating that tension across the cases (Hahn & Knight, 2021). Methodologically, an abductive analytic strategy was employed; emerging themes from the qualitative data were related back to paradox theory, allowing me to hypothesise about deeper causal patterns and refine those insights against the evidence (Timmermans & Tavory, 2012). This iterative reflection ensured that multiple realities within each case were understood on their own terms, while still probing for cross-case commonalities and generative mechanisms. In line with critical realism's views, the study aimed to identify latent paradoxical structures and navigation — the "iceberg" beneath the surface – that explain observable dilemmas (Easton, 2010). Such a dual-level analytic approach resonates with calls in sustainability paradox research to examine the surface manifestations of tension and the deeper structures that give rise to them, as well as a deeper understanding on how paradoxes are navigated (Schad & Bansal, 2018; Albertsen, 2025).

4.2 Case Selection and Rationale

The prominence on multi-level and nested paradoxes demanded a methodology capable of capturing phenomena in context and across levels. A qualitative case study was selected because case studies are able to explore existing bounded systems through in-depth data collection involving multiple sources of information and report a case description and case themes. By embedding the unit of analysis at macro, corporate, functional HRM and individual levels within each case, the study responded to calls for systemic approaches to paradox. Two contrasting cases in the service sector: a private university (University-MY) and a luxury hotel (Hotel-MY) were deliberately chosen following Yin's (2014) replication logic. Multiple cases allow theoretical replication; similar findings across cases strengthen propositions, while contrasting results refine them. The conceptual framework hypothesised that multi-level paradoxes would be present in both sectors but manifest differently; the comparative design thus, provided a means to test and extend the framework across contexts.

Purposive sampling was used to select information-rich cases and participants that could illuminate the paradoxes. Consistent with the framework, stakeholders were recruited across four levels; stratified sampling ensured that vertical cascades and horizontal misalignments could be traced across the macro–micro continuum. Furthermore, the participants were selected not only for their positional knowledge, but also in their willingness, and ability to articulate their experiences.

The selection of two cases in Malaysia that fit specific criteria. The organizations operate in industries / sectors facing sustainability pressures, and have stated commitments or initiatives related to sustainability, as well as recognized (e.g. informally or via industry knowledge) as leaders or active players in sus-HRM or sustainability practices in respective sector. Thus, studying these leading organizations, paradoxes are likely to surface rather than being entirely ignored. Within those criteria, the study selected cases to contrast between different contexts - one in higher education and one in hospitality to explore sectoral influences.

Case One; "University-MY" (pseudonym) is one of the leading accredited private universities in Malaysia, established in the early 2000s. It has an urban campus with approximately 10,000 students and 500 academic and administrative staff. The university offers a range of programs from business and engineering to humanities. It was chosen because it has publicly expressed a commitment to sustainability. For instance, it signed a pledge to integrate sustainable development into its curriculum and operations, and it publishes an annual sustainability report. University-MY won a national "Green Campus" award and several other recognitions relating to its green infrastructure; suggesting that the university is actively engaging with sustainability, therefore likely encountering paradoxes in doing so.

At the same time, as a private entity, University-MY is tuition-dependent and competes with other private and public universities. It has a reputation for innovative teaching and industry partnerships, but has to maintain financial health through student recruitment and program development. University-MY provides a rich context where macro-level influences (e.g. national / sectoral policies, societal expectations on graduate employability, etc.), corporate strategy (e.g. vision and branding of *sustainable institution vs. enrolment indicators*), HRM policies (e.g. faculty hiring, appraisal, etc.), and individual experiences (e.g. staff and faculty motivations) can all be observed.

Case Two; "Hotel-MY" (pseudonym) is a five-star hotel property that is part of an international chain, located in a prime tourist destination in Malaysia. It has about 500 rooms and 350 employees. The hotel has been recognized for its environmental pledges and initiatives — it holds Green Hotel Certifications nationally and internationally, as well as featuring in travel media for its eco-friendly practices (e.g. having its own herb garden, solar-heated pool, conservation centres, etc…). It also engages in community initiatives such as local youth training programs and engaging with underprivileged communities. As part of a global chain, it adheres to certain corporate sustainability standards (e.g. performance targets for energy, water, etc.), which indicates a formal commitment to sustainability.

However, being a luxury resort, it simultaneously strives to deliver top-notch service and maintain profitability in a competitive hospitality market. The tourism industry's ups and downs (e.g. post-pandemic recovery) form part of its context. Hotel-MY was selected to represent the hospitality sector because it is likely to have internal data on implementing green HRM (e.g. staff training on green practices), and because the nature of hotel work (departments like housekeeping, food & beverage, front office, each facing their own tensions) allows examination of cross-functional matters. Moreover, being part of a chain, versus University-MY being relatively autonomous; could highlight differences in external oversight impact.

By choosing these information-rich cases, the study adhere to purposive sampling aimed at depth and learning (Patton, 2014). The two cases are not meant to be statistically representative of all universities or hotels, but rather illustrative of the phenomenon. Moreover, the contrasting sectors allow a form of theoretical replication: if similar paradox dynamics appear in both cases despite differences, those aspects of theory are strengthened; if differences appear, we can refine theory to account for contextual factors. The study also considered macro-level stakeholders relevant to each case to incorporate the external perspective. For University-MY, this included an official from the Ministry of Higher Education and a person from an accreditation body to understand policy pressures, as well as an industry association member in education. For Hotel-MY, macro stakeholders included a representative from the Tourism Ministry or local tourism board and hospitality industry association leaders. Including these in data collection (as described below) ensures we capture macro-level data as part of the case context; echoing Yin's approach allows defining the "case" boundary to include context. Essentially, each case was a multi-level embedded

case: University-MY and Hotel-MY with four (4) embedded units of analysis (macro context, organization, HR-functional, individuals).

Ethical approval and access were arranged by reaching out to top management of each organization with a briefing about the study's purpose, as well as assurances of confidentiality. Both organizations were promised anonymity in reporting (pseudonyms University-MY and Hotel-MY). They granted access under these conditions and helped facilitate employee participation.

4.3 Data Collection Methods

Data collection spanned approximately 18 months (October 2022 to April 2024) involving; multiple methods to allow for triangulation (e.g. semi-structured interviews, observations, document analysis) and comprehensive coverage. The primary data source are from Semi-Structured Interviews. The researcher conducted a total of 36 interviews across the two cases — ensuring coverage of four (4) levels of actors in both sectors. The Tables 1 and 2 below lay the particulars of each participant

Table 1: Participants Representing Private HEI Sector

N	Participant	Organization	Delegation	Level of Analysis	Details of Contact
1.	M1	Ministry of Higher Education	Senior Officer	MACRO	9 Nov 2022, 43 mins interview
2.	M2	Ministry of Education	Senior Quality Assurance Officer	MACRO	10 Nov 2022, 55 mins interview; on-site observation
3.	M3	University-MY	Deputy VC	CORPORATE	6 Dec 2022, 70 mins interview
4.	M4	University-MY	Sustainability Director 1	CORPORATE	12 Jan 2023, 50 mins interview; on-site observation
5.	C1	University-MY	Dean 1	CORPORATE	24 Jan 2023, 46 mins interview
6.	C2	University-MY	Senior Manager	CORPORATE	26 Jan 2023; 25 mins interview
7.	C3	University-MY	Dean 2	CORPORATE	27 Feb 2023, 57 mins interview
8.	C4	University-MY	Head of Programme	CORPORATE	8 Mar 2023, 32 mins interview

9.	H1	University-MY	HR Director	HRM	26 Mar 2023, 28 mins interview; on-site observation
10.	H2	University-MY	HR Manager	HRM	4 Apr 2023, 47 mins interview
11.	H3	University-MY	HR Officer 1	HRM	6 Apr 2023, 30 mins interview
12.	H4	University-MY	Training Manager	HRM	17 Apr 2023, 41 mins interview
13.	H5	University-MY	HR Officer 2	HRM	2 May 2023, 38 mins interview
14.	I1	University-MY	Professor	INDIVIDUAL	7 Jul 2023, 33 mins interview
15.	I2	University-MY	Senior Lecturer	INDIVIDUAL	10 Jul 2023, 39 mins interview
16.	I3	University-MY	Junior Lecturer	INDIVIDUAL	3 Sep 2023, 50 mins interview; on-site observation
17.	I4	University-MY	Administrative Officer	INDIVIDUAL	28 Sep 2023, 45 mins interview
18.	I5	University-MY	Maintenance Staff	INDIVIDUAL	1 Nov 2023, 27 mins interview

Table 2: Participants Representing Hospitality Sector

N	Participant	Organization	Delegation	Level of Analysis	Details of Contact
19.	M5	Ministry of Tourism	Senior Officer	MACRO	14 Jan 2023, 62 mins interview
20.	M6	Ministry of Tourism	Director of Communications	MACRO	25 Jan 2023, 58 mins interview
21.	M7	Hotel-MY	General Manager 1	CORPORATE	3 Mar 2023, 46 mins interview
22.	M8	Hotel-MY	General Manager 2	CORPORATE	8 Mar 2023, 49 mins interview
23.	C5	Hotel-MY	Senior Executive	CORPORATE	12 Apr 2023, 40 mins interview
24.	C6	Hotel-MY	Sustainability Manager	CORPORATE	8 Jul 2023, 41 mins interview; on-site observation
25.	C7	Hotel-MY	Operations Manager	CORPORATE	16 Jul 2023, 34 mins interview

26.	C8	Hotel-MY	Restaurant Manager	CORPORATE	2 Sep 2023, 27 mins interview; on-site observation
27.	H6	Hotel-MY	HR Director	HRM	27 Sep 2023, 30 mins interview
28.	H7	Hotel-MY	HR Manager	HRM	29 Sep 2023, 42 mins interview; on-site observation
29.	H8	Hotel-MY	Training Supervisor	HRM	14 Oct 2023, 26 mins interview
30.	H9	Hotel-MY	Training Coordinator	HRM	11 Nov 2023, 52 mins interview
31.	H10	Hotel-MY	HR Officer	HRM	3 Dec 2023, 25 mins interview
32.	I6	Hotel-MY	Front Desk	INDIVIDUAL	4 Feb 2024, 28 mins interview,
33.	I7	Hotel-MY	Restaurant Server	INDIVIDUAL	10 Feb 2024, 46 mins interview
34.	I8	Hotel-MY	Housekeeping Staff	INDIVIDUAL	21 Mar 2024, 51 mins interview
35.	I9	Hotel-MY	Guest Relations Officer	INDIVIDUAL	3 Apr 2024, 38 mins interview
36.	I10	Hotel-MY	Environmental Engineer	INDIVIDUAL	6 Apr 2024, 44 min interview; on-site observation

At the Macro level, total of 4 interviews with external stakeholders relevant to that organization. For the private HEI case, 2 interviews were done with a Ministry of Higher Education senior officers managing private institutions. For the hotel case, 2 officials from the Ministry of Tourism's sustainable tourism division. These macro-level interviews provided insight into the institutional pressures, expectations, and contradictory external demands placed on the organizations.

At the Corporate level, 6 interviews (per case) with top management and members of the board. In University-MY; the Deputy Vice Chancellor, the Director of Sustainability (similar role overseeing sustainability initiatives), the Chief Financial Officer, and a dean in one faculty (perspective in academic leadership). In Hotel-MY; General Managers, the Director of Operations, the HR Manager (who is also part of management team), and the Sustainability/ESG Manager (if such a role exists; in this case, the hotel had an executive doubling as CSR coordinator). These interviews aimed to uncover how senior leaders view

sustainability against other goals, paradoxes they recognize, and strategies or directives they use to handle them.

At the Functional (HRM) level, 5 interviews per case with HR, and related functions. University-MY; the HR Manager, an HR officer involved in staff training and development, and two department heads (one academic department head and one head of admin services) to see how HR policies are implemented across functions. Hotel-MY; aside from the HR Manager already covered, we interviewed the Training Manager (handles HRD and could discuss about green training or staff well-being programs), and two line-managers (one from Housekeeping, one from Food & Beverage) to get a sense of how HR policies and paradoxes play out in departmental management of employees.

At the Individual level, 5 interviews per case with employees/line staff. In University-MY; one senior lecturer (to represent faculty view), one junior lecturer, one administrative staff (from operations or facilities), and one support staff (e.g. a lab technician or library staff). The rationale was to get voices from different layers (faculty vs. non-faculty, senior vs. junior) about their experiences. In Hotel-MY; one frontline service employee (e.g. a receptionist), one operational staff (e.g. housekeeper), one supervisor-level staff from a department, and one employee who is known as a "sustainability champion" (in which, the hotel had a green team with volunteer staff- we interviewed one member of that team). These interviews explored how employees perceive the company's sustainability efforts, what conflicts they feel (e.g. do they feel pressure to meet both guest expectations and green procedures?), and how it influences their work life.

All interviews were conducted using a semi-structured guide tailored to the role of the interviewee. Generally, topics covered included: (1) understanding of sustainability in their context, perceived goals/KPIs and (2) any conflicts among them, examples of tensions or trade-offs they encounter, (3) how they or the organization deal with those, (4) any notable incidents illustrating paradoxes, and (5) thoughts for improving the situation. With senior respondents, questions were about (6) strategic decisions and contradictions; with HR and middle managers, about (7) policy implementation and conflicts; with employees, about (8) daily experiences and feelings about the organization's sustainability stance. Each interview lasted between 30 to 90 minutes. Interviews were conducted mostly in English, being the working language in both organizations, while occasionally supplemented by Malay when interviewees felt the need to express certain local terms or proverbs (these were later

translated). All interviews were audio-recorded with consent, and transcribed. Participants were assured their identities would be protected internally, in which coded transcripts attached with generic labels.

Besides the interviews, the researcher (Khairuddin, Ashman) spent time on-site in each case to observe the environment and everyday practices, as a non-participant observer. At University-MY, he visited the campus multiple times, observing things like: a staff meeting where sustainability was discussed, a student event related to sustainability week, the HR department's office setup (sustainable practices), and general campus life (e.g. waste sorting bins, energy saving signs or lack thereof, etc.). The researcher also observed an administrative meeting about annual planning to see if and how sustainability vs. other priorities were debated — this produced insight into horizontal tensions between departments. At Hotel-MY, observations included: a guided tour of the hotel's sustainability features by the ESG manager, sitting in on a daily operations briefing, and observing front-line service interactions (to sense any tension between, say, sustainable practices and guest service). The researcher informally chatted with employees during breaks (notes taking were made if relevant issues were mentioned). Observation notes were recorded in a 'logbook', focusing on instances or evidence of paradoxes (e.g. noticing that despite "green" messaging in the hotel, the hotel used high amount of water — an inconsistency; or at the university, hearing a leaders emphasize revenue in a meeting, after talking about social or environmental mission — also an inconsistency.

Furthermore, the researcher collected and reviewed a variety of secondary documents from each case and linked external sources:

Internal strategy documents were provided for this study. University-MY provided some of its strategic plan summary (which included sustainability goals), HR policy manuals (to see if sustainability or long-term employee development aspects are stated), and an internal report on their sustainability initiatives. Similarly, Hotel-MY shared HR policy documents (e.g. employee handbook sections on health, training, etc.), and internal presentations on its green initiative achievements.

The researcher obtained publicly available documents. University-MY's sustainability report and any CSR reports were analysed. Besides, the university's website sections on mission and values, news articles or press releases about their sustainability or community

engagement. As for Hotel-MY, parent company's sustainability report (to see what top-down goals exist) and any local news coverage or promotional material describing its sustainable practices was obtained. Macro-level documents was also examined, such as relevant policy documents of: Twelfth Malaysia Plan 2021–2025, Malaysia's Higher Education Blueprint, Tourism Ministry Guideline on green hotel certification, as well as industry reports (e.g. a report on sustainability in higher education, or a hospitality industry white paper on sustainable tourism). These provided context on what external pressures or expectations might shape paradoxes.

Further, document analysis helped validate what interviewees revealed, and often times provided concrete examples or data points. For example, if a manager said, "We have a target to reduce energy by 10%", the researcher could find in the corporate report if that's the case. Or if the employees felt performance evaluations don't include sustainability, we could check the HR policy to confirm. Documents also sometimes revealed rhetorical paradoxes (e.g. ambitious claims in a report vs. what actually happens, indicating a gap in implementation). Triangulation methods allowed us to cross-verify the information. For instance, if employees grumbled that HR doesn't incentivise sustainability efforts, the researcher could triangulate that with HR manager interview and policy docs. If a manager claimed, "sustainability is part of everything we do," triangulation allows deep observation, and see if daily operations contradict, or support that.

A conscious effort was made to remain adaptive throughout data collection; if new themes emerged (e.g. a particular paradox that was not anticipated), it is probed those in following interviews. The researcher followed theoretical sampling logic within the case studies (Small, 2009; McClintock et al., 1979). For instance, after interviews indicated a strong tension between HR and finance, it was logical to interview someone from finance (e.g. CFO) to get that perspective explicitly.

Ethical considerations in data collection were paramount. Informed consent was obtained from all interviewees, who were told about the study's aims and participation is voluntary. Besides that, they can skip questions or stop anytime. Given the sensitivity of discussing internal conflicts, confidentiality was further stressed. The researcher used codes and removed identifiers from transcripts. In writing up results, quotes are attributed to generic roles (e.g., "Senior Manager, Hotel-MY") to protect identities. For observations, the researcher only observed in settings where he had permission. If private or sensitive matters

arose during an observation (e.g., an HR disciplinary meeting unrelated to our study), we did not record those details. Finally, the researcher remained neutral and did not intervene or judge in any observed process. The presence of a researcher can influence behaviour (observer effect), but over time as trust was built, people acted more naturally. The researcher also tried to minimize disruptions (e.g. for the hotel, avoiding busy or high occupancy times).

4.4 Data Analysis

The framework's categories (macro, corporate, functional (HRM) and individual paradoxes; vertical/horizontal misalignments; navigation / response strategies) informed the analytic tools, and also leaving room for inductive discovery. The data analysis progressed in multiple stages, following qualitative analysis appropriate practices (Miles et al., 2014), using within-case analysis and cross-case analysis techniques. According to Miles et al. (2014), qualitative analysis involves iterative cycles of data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing, enabling the researcher to move from raw transcripts toward conceptual insight while remaining grounded in participants' meanings. For transcription and familiarization, all interview recordings were transcribed. Then, reading each transcript multiple times to get immersed in the content. Observation notes and documents were also reviewed thoroughly. Notes were written to capture initial impressions, interesting quotes, or possible codes (e.g., noting whenever an interviewee used words like "balance," "conflict," "trade-off," which often signalled a paradox).

The interpretation was guided by the framework's theoretical assumptions. A critical realist stance underpinned the analysis: it acknowledges that there is an objective reality independent of individual perception, but also acknowledges the role of subjective interpretation in defining reality. Thus, interview accounts were treated as windows into both social constructions and underlying structures. For example, while HR managers described "balancing productivity targets vs. well-being programmes," the analysis considered their perceptions, and also external pressures (e.g. regulatory mandates or industry competitiveness) that might be generating the tension. This layered interpretation aligns with critical realism's goal of identifying generative mechanisms beneath observable events. The study sought to illuminate how sustainability efforts produce persistent contradictions (e.g., profit vs. planet) and how actors navigate them over time. Instead of treating tensions as problems to be solved, the interpretation examined how actors engaged both sides of the paradox— a "both/and" logic emphasised in paradox research — and what outcomes ensued.

The conceptual framework's distinction between vertical and horizontal misalignment is valuable in this stage, as it helped trace how misalignments at one level (e.g. national policy inconsistency) propagated downward and how horizontal conflicts (e.g. departmental silos) stalled real integration.

Coding (Thematic Analysis) is employed - a thematic analysis approach, supported by qualitative data analysis software (NVivo 12 was used). The researcher began with a coding scheme informed by conceptual framework (deductive codes) but remained open to inductive coding for new themes. Deductive codes included broad categories like:

"Macro Paradox," "Organizational Paradox/Tensions," "HRM Paradox/Tensions," "Individual Paradox/Tensions," "Responses/Strategies," "Outcomes/Consequences," "Sector Context."

Under each, sub-codes were added. For example, in *"Organizational Tensions,"* sub-codes were *"Mission vs Financial," "Short-term vs Long-term," "Policy vs Implementation"* etc., as these came up frequently.

The researcher also coded for each RQ, for instance; anything describing what paradox (RQ1) got coded under a taxonomy of paradoxes, anything about how navigate (RQ2) under strategies, as well as dynamics of inter-level paradoxical tensions (RQ3). Inductively, some codes emerged from the data that was not pre-planned. One such code was *"COVID-19 related tensions",* as many interviewees referenced how the pandemic intensified paradoxes (e.g. caring for employees vs. survival layoffs). Another emergent code was *"Communication gaps,"* referring to how miscommunication exacerbated tensions (e.g. staff not understanding top management's sustainability intent, creating paradox of intention vs. perception). Furthermore, coded data are done level by level. A quote from the ministry official like "Private universities must innovate to attract students, but we also expect them to contribute to societal needs" would be coded under Macro paradox of *"Market vs Social expectation".* A quote from an employee — like *"I was told to use less paper, but then the admin insists on hard copies"* gets coded as Individual tension of *"Inconsistency in practice".* This systematic coding resulted in a set of themes for each case.

Within-case analysis are done after coding, as the researcher analysed each case separately. Additionally, writing case study narrative to synthesize the findings for University-MY and

Hotel-MY. The researcher also use pattern matching to see if anticipated paradox patterns appeared, and explanation building to understand why certain tensions existed and how they were managed in that case (Yin, 2014). Key themes or phenomena in each case are explored (e.g. University-MY, one key theme was *"horizontal misalignment between departments"*, evidenced by HR and academic departments having different priorities). The study identified what responses were common (e.g. lots of "coping" but few "innovative integrations") in University-MY and Hotel-MY. Essentially, answering RQ1-3 for each case in narrative form.

As part of validity, member checking was done informally; by discussing initial findings with a contact in each organization (e.g. follow-up chat with the University's Sustainability Director to see if our characterization of their tensions resonated; similarly with the Hotel's HR manager). This helped refine some interpretations and ensured, avoiding misunderstanding context. The use of data displays to organize evidence: one matrix listed each identified paradox with quotes from macro, organizational, HR, individual level in separate columns to visualize the multi-level nature.

Once a clear picture of each case was gathered, the researcher then compared across the two — essentially performing cross-case analysis. Techniques used included constant comparison (for each theme, see how it manifested in the other case) and creating joint displays. For instance, we made a table of "Paradoxes identified in cases" and noted which were common. The researcher also compared responses. By comparing, the researcher could address RQ4 on sectoral differences. Cross-case patterns were examined. For instance, by answering the following question: did both cases show a particular outcome when paradoxes were poorly managed? Yes, both had instances of employee cynicism and initiative failure when tensions were ignored. And conversely, both had some success stories when tensions were tackled creatively. The researcher also asked if any surprising paradox emerged in one case and not the other, and why — deepens contextual understanding, as differences like this may stem from sector-specific challenges.

Finally, the study ensured trustworthiness by several means: credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability. Triangulation of sources, member checking, and presenting direct quotes as evidence in the thesis to let readers see the basis for credibility. Besides that, thick description of cases so readers can gauge similarity between contexts. The study also maintained an audit trail with documentation of how codes were developed, and co-coding was done with a research assistant for part of the data to ensure consistency (differences in

coding were discussed and resolved by refining code definitions).To maintain confirmability, the researcher remained reflexive about biases (e.g. I noted my own surprise or expectations in memos to ensure they didn't unduly colour coding).

4.5 Analytical Strategy: Discovery of Underlying Patterns of Tensions

To guide the analysis of sustainability tensions, this study adopted the four classical paradox domains proposed by Smith and Lewis (2011): *performing* (e.g. profitability vs. sustainability), *organizing* (e.g. centralized control vs. decentralized innovation), *belonging* (e.g. values alignment vs. institutional demands), and *learning* (e.g. short-term vs. long-term development). These categories provided an analytical framework for coding and interpreting emerging data across macro, corporate, functional (HRM) and micro levels.

However, in applying this typology, it became apparent that not all observed tensions qualified as paradoxes in the strict theoretical sense — defined as *"persistent contradictions between interdependent, yet mutually desirable elements"* (Smith & Lewis, 2011; Lewis, 2000). Many of the tensions encountered in the data aligned more closely with paradoxical tensions or contradictions, particularly where one pole was institutionally mandated but not equally valued or embraced by individual actors. Acknowledging this distinction allowed for a more nuanced coding and categorisation process, ensuring that tensions were not prematurely or inaccurately labelled as paradoxes.

Importantly, although Smith and Lewis's framework was originally developed to explore intra-organisational dynamics, this study extended its application to a multi-level context. The coding strategy traced how tensions manifested and interacted across macro (policy/institutional), meso (organisational/HRM), and micro (individual) levels. For instance, performing tensions were not limited to internal business dilemmas but reflected broader institutional funding structures and sector-wide expectations that shaped organisational strategies. This multilevel and systemic application of paradox theory aligns with recent methodological calls for broader, more dynamic engagement with paradoxical tensions (Jarzabkowski et al., 2013; Schad et al., 2016).

To systematically capture these cascading effects and underlying contradictions, the analysis operationalized Chen & Eweje's (2022) framework, which emphasizes identifying the multiple underlying reasons, or generative mechanisms, behind each paradoxical tension. In

line with a critical realist insight, recognizing these generative mechanisms provided a more explanatory understanding of sustainability tensions. It strengthened the view that paradoxes in Sus-HRM are not just abstract dualities, but the outcome of interacting forces across levels, namely misaligned policies, cultural expectations, resource allocations, and personal interpretations.

By applying this integrative lens to the data, the researcher is able to identify and interpret the compounded causes of each paradox, rather than treating tensions as isolated occurrences. This approach proved valuable in a multi-level study: as it illuminated how different-level factors intertwined to produce what interviewees experienced as a single tension. In practice, analytic memos and data displays (matrices) listing each paradox along with its various cited causes, echoing the use of tables to show instances of underlying reasons. For example, this made evident a tension labelled *"green initiative vs. cost-saving"* in a hotel was not only a straightforward economic trade-off; it was reinforced by national policy gaps, customer expectations, and internal reward systems, all acting together. Thus, bolstering the credibility and depth of our qualitative analysis. It ensured that interpretation of paradoxical tensions accounts for the nested, multi-level nature of causation — a critical consideration given the study's aim to unpack how macro, organizational, and micro forces that collectively shape Sus-HRM dilemmas. Furthermore, this methodical investigating of causes, or reasons; enhanced sensemaking of participants' accounts, as it aligned with how many interviewees themselves explained their challenges (e.g. attributing tensions to several simultaneous pressures). Adopting this approach also demonstrates methodological rigor, as it triangulates tensions with their antecedents, therefore reducing the risk of researcher bias in attributing causality.

In summary, the incorporation of multi-reason discovery technique into our analytic process is justified by its ability to extend the multi-level paradox framework into the data analysis phase. It operationalized the framework's principles by guiding how we parsed the interview data, enabling us to uncover why paradoxes occur in these Malaysian service organizations and how those reasons compound across levels. This adaptation not only complements pioneering strategy in a new context, but also strengthens our study's contributions by offering a richer, causally nuanced understanding of sustainability paradoxes in HRM.

4.6 Safeguarding Rigor and Ethical Considerations

In ensuring rigor and quality, several measures and strategies are used to ensure the quality and credibility of the research findings. As described earlier, the researcher perform triangulation of data types (e.g. interviews, observations, documents), and perspectives (across hierarchy and external vs. internal). If multiple sources come together on the same point, assertion in that finding increased. In cases of discrepancy, the study reported on the discrepancy and tried to explain it (e.g. staff say one thing, management another — which is a finding regarding perception gap). After the cross-case analysis was complete, member checking is initiated. The researcher shared an executive summary of key findings with senior contact from each case for feedback on data accuracy. Both contacts confirmed our findings as resonant and meaningful, alongside minor factual corrections were made. The researcher maintained a reflexivity in a journal throughout, recording personal reflections after interviews (e.g. an interviewee seemed to downplay an issue, maybe due to social desirability, I'd mark that observation). As mentioned, a second coder independently coded a subset of transcripts, with the coding scheme to see if they found similar themes. Lastly, the study include rich descriptions and direct quotes to support each theme, allowing readers to see evidence (important for qualitative validity) in the thesis. The goal was to provide enough detail that the reader could almost assess the interpretation process themselves.

A further methodological consideration relates to the challenges of gaining and sustaining organisational access, and the consequences this had for researcher positionality, potential bias, and the representativeness of participants. The access to both case organisations was negotiated through formal organisational gatekeepers, a process commonly recognised as both necessary and methodologically consequential in qualitative organisational research (Buchanan & Bryman, 2007; Alvesson & Ashcraft, 2009). In this study, access was secured via senior management approval, supported by explanations of the research purpose, and strong assurances regarding confidentiality, anonymity, and ethical compliance. This approach was particularly relevant within the Malaysian context — hierarchical structures and respect for authority form organisational engagement with external researchers (Kennedy & Mansor, 2000.). While senior endorsement facilitated participation by formalizing the study internally, it also introduced dynamics of gatekeeping that required reflexive attention.

Existing methodological literature warns that organisational gatekeepers may (intentionally or unintentionally) influence the pool of participants made available to the researcher; thus, potentially privileging individuals perceived as cooperative, articulate, or aligned with

organisational narratives (Welch et al., 2002). Although participation in this study was strictly voluntary, and interviewees were repeatedly reassured that their responses would remain anonymous and have no organisational repercussions, it remains possible that some employees moderated their accounts, or avoided particularly critical reflections. This is especially prominent in sustainability research, where organisational image management and legitimacy concerns are well documented (Marquis et al., 2016). In order to mitigate these risks, the researcher remained attentive to indications of social desirability bias, recording instances where responses appeared cautious, or overly aligned with official sustainability rhetoric. These observations were documented in reflexive field notes and later triangulated with data from multiple hierarchical levels and documentary sources.

Researcher positionality further shaped both access and the nature of the data generated. As a Malaysian scholar conducting research within local organisations, the researcher occupied a complex insider–outsider position (Dwyer & Buckle, 2009). Cultural familiarity, shared language, and contextual understanding have enabled rapport-building by facilitating participants articulate nuanced experiences, especially in relation to locally embedded HRM practices and institutional constraints. At the same time, this insider status carried the risk of over-identification with participants or the inadvertent normalisation of taken-for-granted practices (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2002). Therefore, the researcher engaged in ongoing reflexive practice by deliberately questioning assumptions, and probing issues that might otherwise have been treated as self-evident. Particularly, positionality operated differently across the two cases. In the private higher education case, shared professional proximity appeared initially to heighten participant caution, with some respondents adopting guarded tones when discussing strategic tensions or internal inconsistencies. On the other hand, in the hospitality case, the researcher's perceived status as an external academic — particularly one affiliated with a western university —seemed to encourage greater openness, echoing observations that outsider researchers may sometimes elicit more critical accounts due to perceived distance from organisational politics (Dwyer & Buckle, 2009). These contrasting dynamics reinforced the importance of treating positionality not as a fixed attribute, but as relational and context-dependent.

At the macro level, questions of representativeness also warrants a reflection. While macro-level interviewees were selected for their policy influence and sectoral oversight roles, they cannot be taken as statistically representative of the broader institutional field. In its place,

they are best understood as elite informants whose accounts provide insight into dominant policy logics, regulatory tensions, and institutional expectations shaping sustainable HRM (Harvey et al, 2021). This aligns with the interpretivist orientation of the study, which prioritises analytical depth over generalisability. The limited number of macro-level participants is acknowledged as a constraint, and their perspectives are interpreted cautiously, situated alongside organisational and individual-level accounts, rather than treated as definitive representations of the national context.

Furthermore, ethical approval was obtained from the researcher's university ethics board before commencing the fieldwork. The study strictly adhered to ethical guidelines and considerations. All participants were volunteers. Although the researcher recruited through the organizations with management's help in circulating invitations, it was emphasized that participation was not tied to their job and refusal would not result in any negative consequences. This was stated clearly in the consent form. Before each interview, participants signed an informed consent form (or gave recorded verbal consent if signing was inconvenient) that explained the study's purpose, what their participation entailed, confidentiality, and the right to withdraw. For observation contexts, we obtained consent from the group being observed whenever possible (e.g., a meeting; all meeting attendees were informed of my presence and purpose beforehand by management). Besides that, several steps were taken to protect identities and maintaining confidentiality. Raw data (audio files, transcripts) were stored securely and only accessible to the research team. In transcripts and notes, names were replaced with codes. In the thesis and any publications, the usage of pseudonyms for the organizations and generic role descriptors for individuals, as well as any potentially identifying details (e.g. specific project names or unique titles) were either generalized or omitted. For example, if a respondent said, "When we launched Project A," it might write as "When we launched a major sustainability project" in the quote. Given that only two cases are involved, the researcher had to be extra cautious in not providing too much information that could indirectly identify them. Moreover, the researcher considered if discussing paradoxes (which might involve critique of management or colleagues) could cause any harm or discomfort, adhering to non-maleficence. Some participants felt hesitant to share frustrations, ensuring them that no sensitive company secrets irrelevant to our research were probed. If any participant showed signs of stress discussing an issue, the discussion would gently move on. The researcher also offered to share a summary of results with interested participants as a form of reciprocity.

In sum, by following these methodological steps; the study aimed to produce findings that are credible, insightful, and ethically gathered. The combination of a qualitative design and careful adherence to research ethics sets a strong foundation for the trustworthiness of the conclusions drawn. With the methodology outlined, the study next moves to presenting the findings for each case (Chapters 5 and 6) before proceeding to cross-case analysis and discussion (Chapter 7). These findings will discuss the real paradoxes faced by University-MY and Hotel-MY and illustrate how actors at different levels perceive, as well as manage those challenges - shedding light on the research questions and contributing to our understanding of sustainable HRM in practice.

CHAPTER 5

Findings Case One: Private HEI Sector & University- MY

5.0 Overview

This chapter presents the findings from Case One, a private university in Malaysia referred to as University-MY. The case evidence is drawn from interviews with multiple stakeholders (e.g. senior management, HR professionals, faculty members) as well as observations within the university - focusing on multi-level paradoxical tensions related to Sustainable Human Resource Management (Sus-HRM). University-MY is a leading private higher education institution (~10,000 students) that publicly champions sustainability — a sustainability committee, green campus buildings, integrating Sustainable Development Goals into syllabuses, while simultaneously operating in a competitive, tuition-driven market. This dual appeal of aspiring sustainable university and private corporation - in which provides a fruitful ground for paradoxes around *academic vs. commercial goals*, and challenges of pursuing sustainability while meeting financial targets.

In line with the conceptual framework (Chapter 3) and literature review (Chapter 2), sustainable HRM inherently involves balancing economic, social, and environmental objectives which often manifest as competing demands, or paradoxes.

Key principles of sustainable HRM (e.g. fairness, employee well-being, and long-term human capital development) can clash with short-term efficiency and profit imperatives. As Ehnert (2009) suggests, HRM must "balance paradoxical demands: *efficiency and resilience, short-term and long-term orientation, and internal and external focus"*. Equally, the pursuit of sustainability often pits "people and planet" vs "profit", reflecting the wider sustainability paradox of social/environmental vs. economic performance. These tensions are often nested across multiple levels, creating a complex system of paradoxes (Smith & Lewis, 2011; Hahn & Knight, 2021).

Following the research design, findings are organized by level; to illustrate how paradoxical tensions emerge and interact at the macro (external), organizational, HRM (functional), and individual levels within University-MY. Section 5.1 details the multi-level paradoxical tensions identified: at the macro level (5.1.1), the university faces conflicting external expectations; at the organizational level (5.1.2), internal strategic goals and cultural factions collide; at the HRM level (5.1.3), HR policies and day-to-day management practices reveal

contradictions; and at the individual level (5.1.4), staff and faculty experience personal dilemmas aligning their values with organizational realities. Throughout these subsections, anonymous role-based interview excerpts (showed by the role of the interviewee) and observational insights are provided to illustrate each tension in respondents' own words.

Section 5.2 examines how University-MY has responded to and navigated these tensions. The case reveals a mix of response strategies (e.g implicit and reactive, others deliberate) such as *prioritization/deferral, structural separation,* and occasional *integration attempts*. These strategies are analysed with reference to paradox management literature (e.g. differentiation vs. integration strategies) to understand how University-MY navigated (or sometimes merely coped with) the paradoxes. The resulting level-by-level findings, Section 5.3 discovers underlying patterns across these paradoxes. At this point, the analysis synthesizes how certain types of paradoxical tensions recur across levels in nested form.

Finally, Section 5.4 summarizes the findings for Case One, highlighting the key insights about multi-level paradoxes in sus-HRM at University-MY. This summary also lays groundwork for Chapter 7 (Discussion), where cross-case comparisons (with the second case, a hotel, in Chapter 6) and theoretical implications will be discovered. In summary, this chapter provides an in-depth, level-structured narrative of University-MY's paradoxical challenges in striving for sustainable HRM.

5.1 Exploration of Multi-Level Paradoxical Tensions

University-MY's quest of sustainable HRM is characterized by tensions that extent multiple levels of analysis. At each level (macro, corporate, HRM, and individual), actors encounter conflicting goals or expectations that can be understood as paradoxical. A paradox, in this context, refers to "*contradictory yet interrelated elements that exist simultaneously and persist over time*" (Smith & Lewis, 2011, p. 382).

In the following sub-sections, details of the paradoxical tensions identified at each level in University-MY, supported by interview excerpts and observational data. These tensions are not isolated; they interrelate and often cascade across levels, as will be discussed in Sections 5.3 and 5.4. For clarity, each level is discussed separately here, but the narrative will highlight cross-level linkages where relevant, underscoring the nested nature of paradoxes in this case.

5.1.1 Macro-Level Paradoxes: External Expectations and Constraints

At the macro level, University-MY operates within an external environment that sends mixed signals regarding the role of private universities in Malaysia. On one hand, the national policy and societal expectations encourage universities to contribute to broader sustainable development and social goals. The Malaysian Ministry of Higher Education urges private higher education institutions to align with national development agendas (producing employable, socially conscious graduates and engaging in community development), effectively pushing universities toward a public good mission.

On the other hand, a private institution like University-MY is expected to be financially self-reliant and competitive, with stringent regulatory oversight on quality and no "safety net" for failure. This creates a macro-level paradox: the university is asked to behave like a public service provider, while receiving the treatment of a market-based entity. An ex-official from the Ministry acknowledged this dual expectation, stating:

"The ministry asked universities to innovate in teaching sustainability, but of course we must monitor their financial stability too! ...no, we don't have specific policies in place to rescue them, if they experience financial deficits." (Interviewee M2)

This encapsulates the contradictory message from the macro environment: to be altruistic and cutting-edge, but also survive on your own finance. University-MY's leadership felt this pressure from above. Subsequently, the Deputy Vice Chancellor described the situation with some frustration:

"We get praises for our green and community projects from the Ministry, but at the same time, they pressure us on cost efficiency and academic rankings. Sometimes I wonder, shall the university be a business or a charity?" (M3, Interview)

This quote illustrates the macro-level tension between; the university's social/educational mission, and the economic viability demands. The Ministry praises University-MY's socially responsible initiatives and initiatives contributing to environmental sustainability, yet simultaneously stresses financial discipline and global ranking performance (similar expectation to compete like a private business). Essentially, University-MY is caught between public sector ideals and private sector realities at the macro level. This paradox aligns with what the literature describes as the fundamental "profits (economic) vs. people (social) /planet (environment)" sustainability impasse. The broader sustainability literature often

highlights that organizations in emerging economies, face pressure to deliver economic growth while also addressing social and environmental needs (Langgat et al., 2023; Jamali & Karam, 2018).

In University-MY's, the macro paradox manifests in the policy expectations. Malaysian government's higher education framework envisions universities contributing to social development (e.g. inclusive education, community engagement aligned with SDGs), even as it pushes privates to be self-sustaining and competitive. The result is a persistent conflict in the external institutional logic: are private universities an entity of social development or purely market actors? University-MY's top managers recognize that they *"can't have it both ways"* indefinitely. As one senior leader (Senior Manager, field notes) put it:

"The government tells us to expand access and quality for nation-building, but there's no bailout - we either make it or break it, on student enrolment and revenue" (C2, Field notes)

This macro paradox resulted in conditions for many of the observed internal tensions, as the university attempt to juggle these clashing imperatives. Notably, the macro-level tension is temporal and strategic. The motivation for financial sufficiency imposes short-term performance pressures (e.g. enrolments numbers, budgets), whereas the social mission (e.g. integrating sustainability into education, community outreach) often produces benefits in the long run. This reflects a temporal paradox (short-term vs. long-term) inherent in sustainable HRM (Ehnert, 2009). If short-term financial pressures dominate, long-term sustainability goals risk being sidelined – a pattern that emerged in University-MY's responses (see Section 5.4). Thus, at the macro level, University-MY must navigate a policy paradox of *"social expectations vs. financial accountability"*, which is underpinned by a temporal tension between immediate viability and sustained contribution to societal goals.

As a pioneering adopter of green campus infrastructure in Malaysia, University-MY occupies a unique position at the intersection of global sustainability ambitions and local institutional realities. This early leadership, while admirable, introduced a distinctive macro-level paradox: the university's alignment with international sustainability standards for green building certifications, SDG reporting, and global rankings, often clashed with underdeveloped local ecosystem lacking regulatory clarity, technical support, and incentive mechanisms. A sustainability manager described this challenge as a "lonely path":

"... the university adopted net-zero infrastructure and report on SDGs, but the local authorities don't even know about these certifications… sometimes, we feel like we're playing a global game, without local rules and support." (M4, Interview)

*G*lobal vs local paradox reveals a vertical misalignment between; macro-level global pressures and the national/local support systems needed to meet those goals. University-MY's aspirations to align with prestigious global frameworks (e.g. UI Green Metric, ISO 14001) were partly driven by a reputational logic to improve visibility, attracting international students, and demonstrating institutional leadership. However, local contractors, regulatory bodies, and community stakeholders were not adequately equipped to support such ambitions. Consequently, the university often translated complex global standards into incompatible local realities, resulting in bureaucratic delays and implementation irrelevancies. The Deputy Vice Chancellor similarly reflected on this tension:

"We fitted energy monitoring systems and rainwater harvesting units based on international frameworks, but when we try to get municipal support — we hit a roadblock. We ended up retrofitting, without strategic coordination; just to meet global metrics." (M3, Interview)

This exemplifies the key paradox: global credibility vs. local feasibility. While aiming to demonstrate leadership through global benchmarking, University-MY lacked institutionalised pathways and systemic embedding needed to localise those ambitions effectively. The paradox manifested not just in operations, but also in internal legitimacy. Faculty members *(Academic Staff, Interview C3; H1; H4; I1; I3; I4)* questioned whether sustainability was pursued for symbolic ranking or substantial transformation:

"Sometimes it feels like we're working purely for a global scoreboard. We project things to look good on paper, but there's a disconnect with what matters here, in terms of local student needs and local community impacts." (Interview, I4)

In sum, this paradoxical tension reflects institutional decoupling (Crilly et al., 2012): symbolic alignment with international norms without substantive integration into local systems. Global vs. local paradox highlights that green leadership in an emerging economy requires more than symbolic alignment. The University-MY's case proves the need for adaptive strategies that integrate international frameworks with local legitimacy, institutional maturity, and systemic support.

5.1.2 Corporate-Level Paradoxical Tensions: Strategic Pressures

Within University-MY, the macro pressures translate into corporate-level paradoxes that revolve around the university's identity, strategy, and internal factions. University-MY's top management promotes sustainability as a core value and strategic priority. The university's vision statement includes, becoming a leader in sustainable development education, senior leaders frequently speak of green innovation and championing socially responsible education.

Throughout the study, progressive organizational initiatives (e.g. standing Sustainability Committee, green campus initiatives, efforts to infuse sustainability into curricula) were observed. In line with the strategic plan, the university's market behaviour also emphasize aggressive growth and financial performance. For example, the strategic plan designed to increase student enrolment in the next years, as well as having to launch new market-driven academic programs to attract students. This created an internal mission vs market paradox: the goal of *educating for the public good vs. expanding for commercial success*. Several members of the academic staff and middle management voiced this concern. One Dean (Dean, Interview) described how faculty perceived a disconnect between the university's rhetoric and actions:

"We talk about sustainability, but then we launch programs mainly because they sell — like a trendy programme. Even if it's not aligned with our social mission. Some of us feel uncomfortable about this. (C1, Interview)

This quote highlights an identity tension at the organizational level: is University-MY fundamentally an academic institution serving higher ideals, or a tuition-dependent business pursuing student number? The Dean's rhetorical question: *"educate for public good or make money from students"*, — captures the paradox clearly. This tension echoes with the *belonging paradox* in organizations, in which conflicting identities (university as social institution vs. university as commercial corporation) cohabit and create discomfort among employees.

Furthermore, this *mission vs market paradox* is not intangible, because it occurs in everyday decision-making and inter-departmental dynamics. In this case, the data showed what can be termed horizontal, or cross-functional tensions among different units within the university — thus reflecting misaligned goals. For instance, throughout a sustainability committee meeting; a member proposed capping student intake in a particular program to improve educational quality, facilitate more project-based, and community-engaged learning. The Marketing

Department opposed the idea on financial grounds, arguing that reducing enrolments would be risky economically, and that the program should instead find ways to maintain or grow student numbers while integrating sustainability into the existing model *(Observation notes)*. After the meeting, one of the members *(Senior Academic Staff, Observation notes)* moaned in frustration, telling the researcher:

"Some board members, they just don't get it. You can't keep growing numbers, and claim to prioritize quality and sustainability." (C4, Observation Notes)

This occurrence illustrates an organizational-level paradox: quality vs. quantity, or educational values vs. revenue imperatives. The academic perspective prioritized the quality of learning and alignment with sustainability principles, whereas the marketing perspective prioritized growth and financial metrics. Both sides are justifiable within their logic, yet they collide, creating a paradox with no clear resolution. A smaller intake could enhance quality and sustainability of outcome, but at a cost to revenue. Whereas maintaining growth may stress on quality and weakened the values the institution proclaims.

Such horizontal tensions manifested in several domains, particularly around the intersection of research priorities and sustainability-related community engagement. While the Sustainability Office and individual schools sought to integrate initiatives such as a composting centre or community partnerships, departments like Finance and senior management frequently delayed or constrained support, citing budgetary pressures. More importantly, the Human Resources Department's drive to increase faculty research output for ranking purposes often conflicted with sustainability-oriented academic practices. For some faculty members, community projects could be reframed into research publications, thus aligning with institutional demands; however, the strong emphasis on research volume over substance, or relevance meant that integrative opportunities were undervalued. This created a friction not only between research productivity goals and sustainability work, but also over "what matters" as legitimate academic contribution — showing community research and engagement sits uneasily within a performance-driven and ranking culture.

These examples show how different sub-goals within the organization clash, echoing what is coded as "goal misalignment." While all units seemingly serve the university's overall success, their immediate priorities (e.g. financial efficiency, marketing targets, academic integrity, or social impact) can conflict; thus, showing paradoxical pulls. Significantly, these organizational tensions often map onto the larger identity paradox of the university. The

organizational culture seemed split between those who view the university primarily as a scholarly community upholding higher value and those who see it as a business unit in the education industry (field notes). Academic staff and administrators (e.g. in the Sustainability Committee or some faculties) tended to champion the former view, emphasizing social responsibility, and academic quality. Nonetheless, units like Marketing, Finance, and even some executive leaders leaned toward the latter, which is to emphasize growth, rankings, and financial stability. This split can be seen as a *belonging/identity paradox* at the organizational level that is; members of the same group hold different and opposing understandings of; "What is our role here?" This is a nested tone of the macro paradox — the Ministry's mixed message (public good vs. profitability) is reproduced internally as competing subcultures within University-MY.

Organizational-level identity paradox can be seen as reflecting, or even re-producing macro-level paradox shaped by the Ministry's dual message of *public good vs. profitability*. In the paradox literature, "nesting" has often been conceptualised as occurring within a particular analytical level (e.g. tensions cascading across different functions of HRM) or within organizational decision-making processes (Smith & Lewis, 2011). However, more recent scholarship suggests that paradoxes can also be nested across levels, where macro-institutional tensions filter into organizations and are re-enacted in micro-level practices (Schad & Bansal, 2018). In this case, the Ministry's framing of universities as both social institutions and business entities did not remain external, but became internalised and re-expressed as competing subcultures within University-MY.

The consequences of the abovementioned organizational paradoxes were evident. While University-MY managed to pursue growth, there was a hint of dissatisfaction and cynicism among faculty who felt the sustainability mission was being compromised. Some progressive initiatives (e.g. integrating social values and engagement into curricula, or implementing greener campus operations) progressed slowly when they face against short-term financial logic. Generally, the paradox was recognized by many respondents who frequently acknowledged the tension. One of the senior faculty members noted,

"We are known for sustainability, but internally, the discussion is mainly about student numbers and economic practicability. It's tough to keep everyone happy, especially when they see what actually motivates our decisions." (C3, Interview)

In summary, at the organizational level; University-MY experiences a mission vs market paradox intertwined with an internal identity split. The institution's espoused identity as an "innovative, socially and environmentally responsible university" clashes with the implemented strategy of economic growth and market competition. This resulted in conflicting priorities across departments, and a cultural divide between value-driven and business-driven mindsets.

5.1.3 Functional (HRM)-Level Paradoxical Tensions: Bridging Strategy and People

The Human Resource Management (HRM) function at University-MY sits at the middle of strategic intent and employee experience, and therefore, it reflects several paradoxical tensions influenced by the macro and corporate context. The HR department is formally appointed to develop and implement practices that support the university's goals, including its sustainability and people-oriented standards.

Over recent years, University-MY's HRM has introduced various initiatives aligned with sustainable HRM principles. For example, an employee wellness program, flexible work arrangements for staff, and a policy allowing faculty research sabbaticals to promote continuous learning and avoiding burnout. These initiatives indicate an official commitment to employee well-being and development, consistent with sustainable HRM principles of fairness, regeneration of human capital, and long-term capacity building. However, implementation and actual employee's experiences of the HRM practices reveal a paradox between rhetoric and reality; between *"caring for people"* and *"maximizing performance outputs"*. University-MY's HR Manager spoke candidly about this tension:

"The department is tasked with attracting and retaining talent who believe in our mission, but we can't provide incentives like the top public universities. ...we (HR) try to provide a good work environment, but then, we have to push people with teaching loads because of efficiency needs" (H2, Interview).

This statement encapsulates an HRM-level paradox: on one side, HR is expected to provide engaging and supportive workplace, but on the other side, resource constraints and efficiency pressures force practices that strain employees (e.g. heavy workloads). Thus, reflecting the *employee well-being vs. performance pressure* manifesting in HR policies and practices. This tension resonates with Ehnert's (2009) notions of paradox in HRM, simultaneously reflecting an "efficiency–responsibility" paradox, where pressure for short-term performance undermines commitments to employee well-being, and a consumption–reproduction paradox,

where human resources are consumed through workloads faster than they can be sustained. The tension is further illustrated by the inconsistencies between policy and practice. Formally, HR policies at University-MY include progressive elements (e.g. study leave for faculty development). In reality, these benefits were sporadically utilized due to conflicting performance demands. A senior lecturer explained the situation:

"They say I can take a research sabbatical for development, but even if I feel that I do, I'll fall behind in my teaching and research KPIs ... ultimately hurting my appraisal." (C3, Interview).

This statement was echoed by other respondents (C4, I1, I2, I3): the anxiety of missing short-term performance targets (e.g. student evaluations, publication tallies, etc.) deterred employees from taking advantage of long-term development opportunities, thereby undermining the intent of those sustainable HRM practices. Documentary evidence from HR showed that in the last one year (2023-2024), not a single faculty member acquired a sabbatical, in spite of the policy's existence — confirming the implementation gap in sustainable HRM initiatives (field data). In other words, HRM's promoted programs for well-being and development were not translating into real acceptance, due to a rooted culture of prioritizing performance delivery. This is consistent with a known challenge in sustainable HRM literature: short-term pressures can weaken long-term investments in people and planet, a clear *temporal paradox*.

Taken together, these findings illustrate how multiple paradoxes intersect at the HRM level: efficiency–responsibility, consumption–reproduction, and present–future. As Ehnert (2009) highlights, such paradoxes are not only operational but are often deeply tied to strategic imperatives, where short-term institutional logics dominate longer-term commitments to sustaining human resources. In University-MY's case, the sabbatical policy exemplifies this dynamic: formally framed as a strategic investment in academic renewal, yet undermined in practice by performance imperatives that reward immediate delivery.

Another paradoxical tension lies in the wellness and flexibility initiatives. While HR introduced flexible work options and wellness support, many employees felt unable to truly utilize them. One junior staff member remarked in a focus group:

"The flexible hours policy exists, yet, if I'm not in the office at the normal times, my boss and HR may question my commitment. ... so, nobody wants to be seen as unengaged by using flexitime." (I3, Focus Group)

Such comments suggest a cultural paradox; as the formal HRM culture promotes work-life balance, but the informal norms and workload expectations promote productivity and constant effort. This in turn, sending mixed signals to employees. Similarly, an internal survey (obtained via HR documents) showed a significant portion of staff believed "taking time for self-development or well-being is viewed undesirably in my department," highlighting an underlying tension between member self-care and managerial expectations.

The HR Director acknowledged some of these contradictions. In one interview, she admitted that the university's performance metrics and reward systems had progressed slowly to support the sustainability agenda:

"We've been intending to include broader impact in appraisals. ...for example, community work, green practices, and well-being. But ultimately; the board members still asks for numbers in enrolments, research grants. So, what exactly should my department focus on?" (H1, Interview).

This rhetorical question answered itself: faculty focus on the quantitative metrics because those drive promotions and incentives, not long-term contributions that the sustainability narrative emphasizes. The lack of alignment in HR metrics represents a structural paradox within HRM; as the department champions new values, but the traditional and dominant systems (e.g. KPIs, evaluation criteria) reinforce old priorities. This situation is consistent with Guerci et al., (2019) observation that traditional HR metrics often ignore broader sustainability outcomes. In University-MY, despite talk of community engagement and environmental impact, the "what gets measured gets done" attitude meant that; research output, student enrolment, and other immediate metrics surpassed sustainability initiatives and metrics. Thus, University-MY faces a paradox of espoused vs. enacted HRM. On paper, the HRM approach aligns with sustainable HRM (e.g. supporting employees, encouraging balance, contributing to community) but in practice, HRM is *"trapped in the middle"*, controlled by top-down performance mandates and short-termism.

The HR function sees the necessity to balance short-term efficiency with long-term workforce well-being. In the interviews, HR managers themselves expressed concern that overburdening staff could lead to burnout or turnover, harming the university in the long run. However, they struggle to convince senior management to officially prioritize those long-term aspects. This reflects Richards (2022) demands to avoid "harmful HRM practices" on

stakeholders (e.g. excessive workloads can harm employees and eventually backfire on performance), but addressing that can seem clashing with immediate institutional goals.

In summary, HRM-level paradoxes at University-MY revolve around performance vs. well-being, short-term outputs vs. long-term capacity, and policy vs. practice. The HR department's initiatives for sustainability and employee care exist alongside, and often below, a prevailing drive for efficiency and measurable results. This leads to a situation where sustainable HRM is partly implemented, but not fully realized — creating frustration among both HR professionals and staff.

The next section will explore how these tensions manifest at the level of individual employees; the ultimate "recipients" of HRM practices and organizational culture, and how individuals respond to or manage with the paradoxes in their daily work.

5.1.4 Individual-Level Paradoxical Tensions: Employees' Experiences

At the individual level, the paradoxical tensions at University-MY become personal, as it affects employees' day-to-day experiences, beliefs, and motivations. Many academic and administrative staff at University-MY are personally committed to the ideals of sustainability, which is often a factor that drew them to work at this university.

In interviews, several faculty members; especially academics and those who took on roles in sustainability initiatives, and expressed passion for sustainable development, as well as showing desire to contribute through education, research and sustainable practices. In theory, their personal values align well with the university's stated mission. However, these individuals often encounter situations where their values clash with role expectations or the institutional constraints. One common theme is the paradox of personal values vs. organizational demands. For example, one of the professors recounted her struggle to innovate in teaching by creating a new elective course on sustainable business practices.

"I planned a new elective on Sustainable Business. Students loved it, but it's not a required course. … and I have to work extra hard to promote and teach the course. It's like doing it out of passion. (I1, Interview).

This narrative shows how an employee's commitment to sustainability (e.g. developing a new course that aligns with the mission), ended up requiring extra unpaid work beyond her normal load because the formal workload model did not support it. The institutional structures did not actively support her innovation, as it was done only through her personal expense. This

left her with mixed feelings of fulfilment from pursuing her passion, but also a sense of inequity or misalignment that she had work harder without institutional support. It exemplifies a paradox were doing the "right thing" for sustainability comes at a personal cost within the current system. Another faculty member (a senior lecturer) voiced cynicism about the university's authenticity regarding sustainability:

"We do over-the-top CSR and Green Building photo-ops, but then the university invests more in marketing those photos, rather than supporting these sustainable initiatives." (I2, Interview).

This statement suggest that the lecturer perceives a credibility gap (a form of paradox at the individual's sensemaking level); the external image the university represents (e.g. glossy photos and slogans of being green and community-friendly), versus the internal reality experiences (e.g. inadequate investment in real sustainable practices, importance on marketing over substance). This credibility paradox can erode employees' trust and engagement. Some other staff described feeling cynical upon realizing that the institution's commitment might be more superficial than they hoped. Such disillusionment can lead to an identity conflict among those who joined University-MY found themselves asking whether they are in fact working for just another private business. This resonates with the idea of espoused vs. enacted value at the individual level, as employees struggle when the organization's talk does not fully match its actions.

There is also evidence of "traditional vs. modern" paradox affecting newer/younger versus older staff. Younger staff and new hires often come with high expectations that University-MY will be a modern, sustainability-driven institution. However, they soon encounter bureaucratic challenges and conservative practices typical of any established organization, which are resistant forces diminishing change. One junior admins staff mentioned,

"I was excited by the sustainability of this place, but sometimes, on the inside; it operates like a traditional university. ...lots of paperwork, and decisions about economic growth." (I4, Interview)

Such statement illustrate a paradox between; the *innovative culture* employees expect, and the *status-quo culture* that persists. The result can be frustration, or a drive to become change agents themselves, which some did, as noted in coping strategies.

Notwithstanding these challenges, many individuals did not passively accept the tensions; rather, they developed personal coping strategies to navigate them. In the paradox literature, 'acceptance' is often framed as recognising contradictions as enduring and learning to live with them (Smith & Lewis, 2011; Putnam et al., 2016). Hitherto, acceptance is not a singular or passive stance; it may involve adaptive practices that allow individuals to continue working productively despite persistent tensions. Coping strategies can be understood as the everyday, often informal tactics that actors employ to reconcile ideals with constraints— whether through reframing tensions, seeking synergies, or selectively prioritising tasks. At University-MY, sustainability champions exemplified such coping: rather than rejecting paradoxes, they sought creative ways of bridging gaps between sustainability aspirations and organizational demands, thus embodying an active form of acceptance that enabled progress within structural limits.

For example, a group of lecturers formed an informal network to integrate community projects into their courses without waiting for official approval, or curriculum changes — essentially embedding sustainability education under the radar. This can be seen as individuals creating their own micro-integration strategies, fulfilling their personal values by modifying how they teach or work, even if it means extra effort or working around some rules. One of the lecturers explained that the informal network would use a portion of their class time or student assignment projects to involve local community issues (e.g. having business students do projects with social enterprises), even though this wasn't mandated:

"No one told us to do it; we just figured if the system won't formally change, we'll still do what we think is right in our own classrooms." (I3, Interview)

Such acts establish agency at the individual level to resolve tensions in practice, even if the institution hasn't formally caught up.

However, not all individuals chose to cope internally; some resolved the paradox by withdrawing the situation. Turnover data and interviews indicated that a moderate number of staff eventually left University-MY for organizations, assuming they felt were more aligned with their values (e.g. other universities perceived as more genuinely and globally committed to sustainability). This reflects a classic outcome when paradoxes remain unresolved; individuals either become agents of change, or decide the strain is too great and seek environments where the paradox is less acute or handled differently. Such withdrawal aligns with what the paradox literature describes as avoidance responses, where individuals distance

themselves from persistent tensions rather than engaging with them directly (Lewis, 2000; Schad et al., 2016), underscoring how unresolved paradoxes can lead to turnover, rather than adaptation.

In summary, at the individual level, University-MY's employees experience nested paradoxes as personal dilemmas: their intrinsic motivations vs. extrinsic pressures, values vs. behaviours, and ambition vs. frustration. The tensions manifest in everyday choices; whether to take on extra work to uphold a principle, whether to speak up or stay silent about inconsistencies, whether to innovate within constraints or conform to norms. These micro-level experiences illustrate how deeply the macro and organizational paradoxes penetrate the workforce's mentality. The evidence from University-MY's staff underscores that sustainable HRM is not just a structural or policy challenge, but also a human and emotional one, as individuals wrestle with aligning personal and organizational philosophy — consistent with how other scholars have conceptualised cross-level nesting of paradoxes (Jarzabkowski et al., 2013; Schad & Bansal, 2018).

5.2 Navigation of Paradoxical Tensions

In this section, the response strategies that University-MY employed, either deliberately or unintentionally, in order to handle paradoxical challenges were examined. This includes structural and behavioural approaches and the degree to which these responses mitigated or even exacerbated the tensions.

Having identified the key paradoxical tensions at University-MY, the focus now turn to how the university and its members responded to these tensions. The data indicate that University-MY did not have a single, unified strategy for managing paradoxes; rather, its approach was a mix of different tactics, some planned and some emergent. These strategies can be analysed through the lens of paradox management literature, which outlines approaches like acceptance, separation, and integration (Cunha & Putnam, 2019; Putnam et al., 2016; Smith & Lewis, 2011). The findings show that all these approaches to varying extents in University-MY's case. There were also attempts at communicative sensemaking to help stakeholders cope with tensions. Below, the discussion of each observed strategy, providing examples from the case and evaluating their effectiveness:

One prevalent approach was — implicit prioritization. Essentially, when forced to choose, the university tended to favour one side of a paradox (often the economic/performance side), while conceding or downplaying the other. This corresponds to what paradox theorists call an

avoidance strategy, or more specifically a temporal separation through oscillation. University-MY would "live with" the paradox by not resolving it, but alternating emphasis depending on circumstances and capabilities. For example, during a budget-constrained year; management quietly shortened or delayed several sustainability-related projects (e.g. a campus greening campaign was put on hold; a proposal to improve staff wellness programs was halted) because, as one respondent put it, *"we had to tighten belts …core operations first."* This was not a formal policy representation, but it was understood by staff that; when times are tough, sustainability is the first to go - a sentiment explicitly mentioned by several interviewees as a pattern. The Deputy Vice Chancellor (DVC) also noted in an interview,

"During crunch time, we have to be practical. We can't compromise student intake or quality, so some [sustainability] initiatives had to slow down." (M3, Interview).

Here, "practical" implies prioritizing financial stability and core academic functions over the add-on sustainability programs. This strategy acknowledges the tension (recognizing the ideal vs. reality), but chooses one pole for the time being. This response effectively postponing the pursuit of the other pole. When conditions improved; for instance, in a year with a budget surplus or high enrolment, the university would then reinvest in some sustainability efforts (e.g. launching a new community education program and pushing forward the green infrastructure that was deferred). This *oscillation* behaviour was observed: sustainability initiatives advanced in good years and receded in bad years. The advantage of this deferral strategy is that it avoids open conflict and allows flexibility, as the university survives immediate pressures. However, the downside is it never fully addresses the root tension, and can create cynicism (e.g. "only go green when we have money").

Strategically, it represents a defensive response that maintains the status quo hierarchy of priorities (financial concerns implicitly trump sustainability, unless extra resources are available). In paradox terms, this is a *short-term* approach, not a long-term resolution. Over time, such oscillation can become a vicious cycle –some staff pointed out that by not investing in well-being consistently, the university risks burnout which will hurt overall performance in the future.

Another strategy University-MY employed was structural separation — creating separate structures or roles to handle sustainability initiatives, isolating the paradoxical goals into different "spaces." This aligns with a differentiation strategy in paradox management – addressing each side of a paradox in parallel but structurally different ways.

For instance, a dedicated Sustainability Office staffed by a full-time coordinator and supported by a cross-departmental Sustainability Committee. The idea was that this office would promote and implement sustainability projects (campus environmental programs, community outreach, integration of SDGs into curricula), without over-burdening or altering the conventional departments. In theory, this structural separation allows for focus on sustainability objectives while the rest of the organization focuses on traditional objectives – hoping to achieve both, but in their own domains. As the Sustainability Director described,

"We do come up with many project proposals, but scaling them or integrating them into operations is hard. ...as we are seen as this separate thing, on the side." (M4, Interview).

This quote reveals both the benefit and limitation of this approach. On one hand, having a separate office did result in successes: successful projects (e.g. dormitory recycling competition that significantly reduced waste, a green audit of campus facilities, and various community engagement workshops), that likely would not have happened without a dedicated team. The separation gave these champions space to innovate without constantly justifying themselves to financially driven units. On the other hand, the separation also siloed, or isolate sustainability as it did not meaningfully penetrate the rest of the university's operations. When the Sustainability Office tried to get other departments to adopt new sustainable practices (e.g. permanently implementing the waste reduction measures campus-wide, car-pooling initiative), they met inertia or apathy. Fundamentally, the structural separation contained the paradox; it prevented open clashes by keeping sustainability isolated, but it also meant the broader organization could continue business-as-usual - without genuinely embracing the new practices.

This echoes with what theory suggests; differentiation can manage immediate conflict, but risks reinforcing the divide and preventing integration (Smith & Lewis, 2011). University-MY's use of this strategy indicates an understanding that specialization was needed to push sustainability, yet simultaneously, it inadvertently signalled that sustainability was not everyone's responsibility, but rather that of a small unit. The effectiveness was mixed: some projects thrived in the niche, but overall impact was limited. Several interviewees in other departments viewed sustainability projects as "glory projects" rather than core strategy, which is an indication of high levels of separation.

Although less common, there were a few instances where University-MY managed to find integrative solutions that addressed both sides of a paradox simultaneously – a "both/and"

integration approach. These responses were driven by innovative individuals or small teams rather than by broad policy. A standout example was the creation of an interdisciplinary sustainability research centre at the university. This initiative was spearheaded by a group of entrepreneurial academics who saw an opportunity to align the university's research goals with its social mission. They pitched the idea that a research centre focusing on sustainable development issues could attract external research grants (addressing the performance/revenue goal), while also generating knowledge and community projects that fulfil the university's social responsibility goal. According to one faculty member involved,

"The research centre was designed to enhance our research profile, (management priorities) while doing good for society. It took some convincing, but once the grants came, everyone was pleased". (C4, Interview)

This case represents a successful reframing of the paradox; through identifying projects that were profitable, prestigious and also sustainable, the respondent turned a potential "either/or" into a "both/and".

In paradox theory, this is similar to integration, or transcendence – finding a higher-level solution that satisfies both ends of the paradox (Smith & Lewis, 2011; Miron-Spektor et al., 2011). The outcome here was indeed a win–win; as the centre brought in external funding and publications (immediate performance indicators), and simultaneously delivered community development programs and student involvement in real sustainability projects (advancing the social mission). It became something of a case, cited by some managers; as proof that "sustainability can pay for itself." However, it's important to note that such integrative successes were the exception, rather than the norm at University-MY. They required significant effort, informal lobbying, and creativity – essentially workarounds by change agents rather than routine practice. Moreover, they were not initiated by the central HR or top management directives; they bubbled up from passionate individuals (bottom-up). This indicates that the organizational systems were not inherently geared for integration; it happened in spite of, not because of, the dominant approach. Still, these illustrations are informative, as they show the potential for synergy, and what a more proactive paradox navigation might achieve. University-MY's challenge is that such integration has not been institutionalized; it relies on change agents. In the language of paradox management, the university has not fully *transcended* the tensions with a new narrative.

Another aspect of navigating paradoxes is how actors communicate about tensions and involve stakeholders in sensemaking (Fairhurst & Putnam, 2024). University-MY made some efforts in this regard, primarily through staff meetings, where management discussed the challenges openly. The HR Director, in particular, tried to foster what she called a "balance mindset" among staff by acknowledging the trade-offs, and inviting ideas. For example, after some cost-cutting measures (e.g. hiring freeze that increased workloads), HR organized a committee to explain why those decisions were made; in ensuring financial stability, and to ask for input on how to maintain morale and quality during the period. According to HR, this transparency was aimed at helping staff accept the short-term pain, while keeping the long-term vision in mind. Some employees appreciated these honest discussions, which aligns with recommendations in literature; that engaging people in paradox sensemaking can reduce anxiety, and spur creative thinking (e.g., inviting staff to brainstorm innovative solutions). Indeed, a few suggestions from the ground (e.g. adjusting class schedules to reduce overload on certain days, or support groups for stressed faculty) emerged, and subsequently implemented on a small scale.

However, the effectiveness of these communication efforts was limited by organizational culture and trust levels. In the staff meetings observations, many staff remained silent or spoke only cautiously. There was a noted reluctance to openly challenge or question higher management in public forums, possibly influenced by a harmony-seeking cultural norm. As a result, the dialogue was somewhat one-sided – management explained, employees listened, but real joint sensemaking (tensions are openly debated and re-framed collaboratively) was not apparent. Some faculty later privately said they felt these meetings were *"just telling us what was already decided."* This points to a question of trust: without trust, communication can be perceived as rhetorical. So, while HR's attempt at nurturing a paradox mindset is admirable, it only partially succeeded. The paradoxes were acknowledged, which is better than denial, but *collective navigation* of them remained elusive. In short, University-MY's communication strategy scratched the surface of "engaging with paradox", but did not fully integrate paradoxical thinking into its culture. This is an area where the organization could improve on (will be reflected in Chapter 7's discussion on leadership and culture). To visually summarize how these tensions and responses interaction, Figure 1 depicts the cascade of paradoxes from macro to individual level and highlights the points at which University-MY applied different response strategies.

Figure 1: Multi-level Dynamics of Paradoxical Tensions and Responses (University-MY)

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┌─────────────────────────────────────────────────────────┐
│ Macro-Level                                             │
│ External Institutional Environment                      │
│                                                         │
│ Paradox: Social Good vs. Financial Stability            │
│                                                         │
│   ◄──────────────────────────────────────────────►     │
└─────────────────────────────────────────────────────────┘
              Influences (creates context)

┌─────────────────────────────────────────────────────────┐
│ Organizational-Level                                    │
│ Internal Strategic & Cultural Context                   │
│                                                         │
│ Paradoxes: Mission vs. Market Identity;                 │
│ Espoused vs. Enacted Values                             │
│ Strategies:                                             │
│   - Structural Separation (Sustainability Office)       │
│   - Implicit Prioritization (Financial Goals dominate)  │
│                                                         │
│   ◄──────────────────────────────────────────────►     │
└─────────────────────────────────────────────────────────┘
              Shapes HRM practices & policies

┌─────────────────────────────────────────────────────────┐
│ HRM-Level                                               │
│ Human Resource Practices                                │
│                                                         │
│ Paradoxes: Performance vs. Employee Well-being;         │
│ Short-Term Metrics vs. Long-Term Goals                  │
│ Strategies:                                             │
│   - Policy-Practice Gap (Formal programs, limited use)  │
│   - Communication & Sensemaking (Town halls, dialogues) │
│                                                         │
│   ◄──────────────────────────────────────────────►     │
└─────────────────────────────────────────────────────────┘
              Impacts individual experience

┌─────────────────────────────────────────────────────────┐
│ Individual-Level                                        │
│ Employee Experience & Values                            │
│                                                         │
│ Paradoxes: Personal Values vs. Institutional Demands;   │
│ Ambition vs. Practicality                               │
│ Strategies (individual responses):                      │
│   - Individual Coping (Champions, informal integration) │
│   - Exiting the Organization (Turnover)                 │
└─────────────────────────────────────────────────────────┘
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Legend

Paradoxes: The main tensions identified at each level.

Arrows (▼): Direction of cascading paradoxical influences.

Arrows (◄─): Feedback loops highlighting potential influence upwards.

Strategies: Responses adopted to navigate paradoxes, both organizational and individual.

Following Figure 1, the multi-level dynamic of paradoxical tensions and responses within University-MY becomes evident. Macro-level paradoxes set conditions influencing organizational identity and strategy, which in turn shape HRM practices and policies, finally cascading down to affect individual employee experiences. Although primarily downward cascading, feedback loops exist (left-pointing arrows) where individual and HRM-level experiences can influence organizational strategies (e.g. high resistance prompting management reconsideration). The figure uses a flow from top (Macro) to bottom (Individual), showing arrows that represent the influence of tensions downward, and coloured boxes to indicate the primary strategies observed at each level or across levels. This helps illustrate, for example, that macro-level pressure leads to organizational/corporate paradox (mission vs. market), which then contributes to functional-HRM paradox (policies vs. practice), and ultimately individual paradox (values vs. expectations). The strategies of oscillation, and structural separation are shown as largely top-down management choices

buffering the tensions, whereas integration examples and individual coping (championing or exiting) are shown as emerging responses injecting back upwards or laterally.

University-MY's approach to navigating its sustainability tensions was deeply shaped by how its members perceived and framed these contradictions. Actors at various levels often recognized the competing demands (an awareness fostered by the university's values-driven, academic culture), but this did not always translate into integrative actions. Under pressure, decision-makers tended to revert to an implicit either–or mindset, prioritising immediate imperatives while postponing or downplaying the opposing goal. For example, top management insisted they "have to be practical," meaning that core academic and revenue needs took precedence, while several sustainability initiatives were quietly put on hold. This pragmatic framing of the paradox reveals that although University-MY's leaders acknowledged the tension between sustainability and performance, their cognitive capacity to embrace both goals concurrently was limited by survival instincts and institutional norms. In essence, even as contradictions were identified and discussed, the dominant response was to manage them piecemeal or temporally (e.g. muddling through short-term fixes), rather than tackling both sides of the paradox head-on. However, while these patterns were identified and discussed, University-MY struggled to move beyond acknowledgment towards resolution or synthesis. The strong analytical mindset meant paradoxes were often viewed as problems to be understood, but not necessarily as opportunities to be creatively reconciled. For example, the Espoused vs. Enacted Values paradox was widely recognised — employees would sarcastically observe the inconsistencies between the university's sustainability leader image, and its internal budgeting choices – this recognition mostly bred cynicism rather than real change.

In summary, University-MY's response strategies to Sus-HRM paradoxes can be characterized as:

    I.   Predominantly coping and deferral strategies (prioritizing short-term operational and financial pressures).

    II.   Structural separation strategies, isolating sustainability initiatives from core operational activities.

    III.   Selective integration moves that embed sustainability into educational practices and community engagement, creating restricted value.

IV.   A significant emphasis on symbolic management through strategic communication and external validation (global rankings, certifications) to shape internal and external perceptions of sustainability commitment.

These approaches allowed University-MY to manage operational and strategic challenges without experiencing severe disruption, but paradoxical tensions persist rather than being resolved outright. Consistent with paradox theory, these tensions are inherent and ongoing, necessitating continuous management rather than definitive resolution (Smith & Lewis, 2011). The case of University-MY illustrates how navigation through paradoxes involves ongoing, dynamic adjustments, often creating an uneasy equilibrium that requires persistent vigilance and adaptive learning. It is important to highlight the presence of proactive, "more-than" responses—such as community-engaged curricula innovations or attempts at embedding sustainability into operations, demonstrating potential avenues for University-MY to evolve its paradox management approach. Under conducive conditions, such as supportive leadership, clearer policy incentives, or effective partnerships with external sustainability experts, University-MY can transition towards more creative and integrative solutions to paradoxes.

The next section (5.4) identifies and categorizes the types of paradoxes observed across levels and examines how they relate to each other, with a summary table to concisely present these insights. This will set the stage for understanding how the tensions are interconnected (nested aspect) and what underlying themes characterize University-MY's paradoxes in sustainable HRM.

5.3 Discovery of Underlying Patterns for Sus-HRM Tensions

The case of University-MY, as detailed above, reveals a pattern of paradoxical tensions at multiple levels. In this section, the analysis synthesize those findings to uncover underlying patterns; the core types of paradoxes that recur across different levels and examine how they are interrelated. By doing so, we can better understand the nested nature of paradoxes in this context, in which a given tension at one level may be emulated or magnified at another. This analysis allows the researcher to link back to theoretical framework (Chapter 2) on paradoxes and sustainable HRM – underlining how University-MY's experience exemplifies or extends those concepts.

Several common themes emerge from the multi-level tensions, exhibiting different types of paradoxes and cross-level reflections. These themes echo the classic paradox domains (Smith

& Lewis, 2011); such as performing, organizing, belonging, and learning, albeit manifested in sector-specific ways.

Social vs. Financial Goals (Mission vs. Profit; Performing Paradox): This theme is evident at the macro level (national development vs. economic self-sufficiency), organizational level (educational/social mission vs. market-driven expansion), HRM level (employee well-being investments vs. efficiency pressures), and individual level (personal values vs. monetary/career incentives). In essence, it is the classic sustainability paradox of pursuing "people/planet" vs. "profit", appearing in different forms at each level. The recurrence of this paradox across levels suggests that it is a fundamental tension shaping University-MY's strategy and operations. At the macro level, it is manifested by policy expectations; at the organizational level, it becomes a strategic identity struggle; at HRM level, it is a practice implementation issue; and at individual level, it turns into a values conflict.

The consequences of this paradox, observed in the case, include the tendency for financial imperatives to displace social/sustainability initiatives (e.g. downsizing sustainability projects during budget crises, Section 5.4) and growing frustration or cynicism among those who champion the social and environmental side (e.g., staff seeing sustainability initiatives as "first thing to go" in tough times). This pattern aligns with literature; noting that without conscious balancing, economic pressures often dominate, undermining sustainable HRM efforts.

Short-Term vs. Long-Term Orientation (Temporal Paradox): Closely related to the above, a temporal dimension underlies many tensions. University-MY often faces choices between immediate results and long-range development. Examples include the decision to push faculty for immediate research outputs vs. allowing time for community engagement or professional development (HRM level), or focusing on annual enrolment growth vs. nurturing educational quality that pays off later (organizational level). The temporal paradox was even noted by interviewees, as in the case of study leave not taken due to short-term KPI apprehensions. This indicates a broader pattern where short-term wins are often favoured at the expense of long-term sustainability gains, leading to inconsistent behaviour (advancing sustainability only in good times).

The consequence is that University-MY achieves incremental improvements, but may be sacrificing future potential (e.g. burnout or loss of talent, as well as missing innovation opportunities that require long-term investment). This reflects what Smith and Lewis (2011)

describe as a vicious cycle: neglecting the long-term side can eventually undermine even the short-term success. In University-MY, there are suggestions of this in faculty turnover, and stagnation in original sustainability goals (e.g. carbon footprint, fair access).

Academic vs. Business Identity (Belonging Paradox): A distinct pattern is the question of "who are we?" as an institution. This question appears at macro (public good vs. private entity as defined by government stance), organizational (faculty vs. admin subcultures, mission vs. market identity), and individual (employees' personal identification with the university's values vs. real experiences). This is a belonging paradox - simultaneous but conflicting identities co-habiting. At University-MY, the academic philosophy (upholding scholarly, ethical values) and the commercial philosophy (running efficiently like a business) are both part of the organizational strategic goals, but they pull in different directions. Manifestations of such contradictions can be seen when lecturers questioning; if they work at "a university or a company," or employees disappointed when academic values are surpassed by marketing priorities.

The consequence of this identity paradox is internal conflict and a lack of unified direction. It can erode trust and organizational commitment (e.g. some employees feeling the university is not living up to its espoused identity may disengage or leave (as noted with turnover data). On the other hand, if managed constructively, embracing a dual identity (e.g. being both business-savvy and sustainably conscious) could be a source of innovation. Nevertheless, University-MY's case shows more segmentation, rather than synthesis of identities so far.

Espoused vs. Enacted Values (Credibility Paradox): Across multiple levels, there is a pattern where - what is said or intended does not fully match what is done. This includes the gap between policy and practice in HRM (e.g. well-being programs existing but not utilized), the difference between sustainability branding and actual priorities (organizational level), and the CSR image vs. investment reality (individual perceptions). This pattern can be seen as a credibility or legitimacy paradox; that is maintaining an image of "sustainability leadership" externally, while struggling to implement it internally. It is partially a result of the other paradoxes (social vs. financial and short vs. long term), but it stands out as its own theme because it directly affects stakeholder trust.

The consequences are most apparent in staff morale and culture: the say-do gap nurtures cynicism, as noted by employees who no longer take sustainability rhetoric at face value. It also poses risks for the university's reputation if not carefully managed. So far, University-

MY has managed to keep a positive external image (e.g. winning sustainability awards, marketing its initiatives), while internally things are more compromised. Over time, such divergence can lead to crises of legitimacy (e.g. students or the public detect that the commitment is low).

Internal vs. External Stakeholder Focus: Another subtle, but important pattern is the tension between focusing on internal goals (e.g. internal performance metrics, internal financial targets) and external impact (community, environment, societal stakeholders). This is related to the social vs. economic paradox, but frames it in terms of stakeholder orientation. University-MY's case showed instances where an external stakeholder focus (e.g. engaging with community, reducing environmental footprint) was sidelined by internal necessities (e.g. improving rankings, cutting costs). For example, faculty felt that doing community projects was not valued as much as internal metrics like enrolments and publications. Likewise, proposals to invest in green initiatives (benefiting society/environment) were curtailed by internal budget constraints. This reflects the internal vs. external paradox identified in sustainable HRM literature as the broadening of HRM's scope to external stakeholders - often clashes with traditional internal orientations. The consequence of leaning too much inward is a loss of opportunity to create shared value externally, as well as potentially missing out on external legitimacy that comes from real community engagement. Contrarywise, focusing too much externally without internal considerations can lead to internal strain. University-MY has not fully resolved this, but a successful case of the interdisciplinary research centre (discussed later) shows an attempt to align internal and external goals for mutual benefit.

The paradoxical patterns observed in University-MY's case reveal not only structural contradictions, but also how those contradictions are cognitively experienced in a higher education setting. Many of the tensions outlined were interpreted by participants through a values-laden and intellectual lens of an academic institution. For instance, the identity paradox (educational mission versus commercial imperatives) was often a source of open debate, with lecturers even questioning whether they now worked at "a university or a company, or a charity" reflecting a deeply felt cognitive dissonance between scholarly ideals and market-driven practices. Such remarks emphasize that University-MY's members recognized the co-existence of conflicting logics in their organization. This high level of awareness is in line with the university's knowledge-oriented culture – employees could clearly articulate gaps between espoused ideals and enacted reality (e.g. observing when sustainability rhetoric did not match resource allocation). The very framing of tensions

indicates a nuanced sensemaking of paradoxes by staff and leaders. Particularly, this cognitive capacity to dissect and discuss tensions, helped surface underlying themes (e.g. credibility gaps and temporal myopia) that might remain hidden in other contexts.

These patterns are summarized in Table 3; outlines each major paradox type, the levels at which it manifested in University-MY, specific examples of the tensions, and noted consequences in the case. This summary helps to visualize how multi-level paradoxes are nested and interlinked. Notably, many paradox types span multiple levels – illustrating the concept of nested paradox (Schad & Bansal, 2018; Smith & Lewis, 2011) wherein a fundamental tension (e.g., performance vs. sustainability) can permeate through macro structures, organizational strategy, HR practices, and individual mindsets.

Table 3: Summary of Sus-HRM Paradoxical Tensions in University-MY

Paradox Type / Theme	Levels Observed	Tension Manifestations	Unintended Consequences for Sus-HRM
Social vs. Financial Goals; Mission vs. Profit *(Performing Paradox)*	Macro, Corporate, Functional-HRM Individual	**Macro:** National social development expectations vs. financial self-sufficiency mandate from government. **Corporate:** Espoused educational/social mission vs. aggressive enrolment and revenue targets. **HRM:** Investment in employee well-being (training, benefits) vs. need to cut costs and drive performance metrics. **Individual:** Personal commitment to making a difference vs. pressures to meet profit-centred KPIs (e.g., revenue, research grants).	Sustainability initiatives cut or deferred under financial pressure (sustainability seen as secondary in crises). Incremental progress on social goals, but core business model remains profit driven. Staff frustration or cynicism when profit motives trump people/planet values; loss of trust in leadership's commitment.
Short-Term vs. Long-Term *(Temporal Paradox)*	Macro, Corporate, HRM, Individual	**Macro/Corporate:** Need to justify immediate results (financial stability, rankings) vs. building long-term educational quality and reputation for sustainability. **HRM:** Short-term productivity (high workloads, immediate output) vs. long-term capacity building (staff development, well-being, succession).	Tendency to prioritize short-term metrices, at expense of long-term objectives Oscillation pattern; as sustainability efforts advanced during "good times" and retreat in "hard times".

Paradox Type / Theme	Levels Observed	Tension Manifestations	Unintended Consequences for Sus-HRM
		Individual: Immediate job demands vs. long-term career growth or meaningful impact (e.g. publishing vs. building deep community projects).	Risk of burnout and talent loss as long-term needs (e.g. learning) are deferred; potential future performance decline (vicious cycle).
Identity Paradox; Academic vs. Business Identity (Belonging Paradox)	Macro, Organizational, Individual	**Macro:** University expected to serve public good like a public institution, yet treated as a private business entity. **Corporate:** Inner split between *"university as a social/educational institution"* vs. *"university as a competitive business"* (observed in culture: faculty vs. admin perspectives). **Individual:** Employees' self-concept as educators/advocates vs. feeling like corporate employees; generational differences in expectations (idealism vs. realism).	Internal culture clashes and siloed thinking (departments prioritizing different identities, e.g. academics vs. marketing). Mixed messaging to employees and students, causing confusion and weakening shared vision. Turnover of staff who strongly identify with the unfulfilled identity (e.g., socially motivated staff leaving due to perceived commercialization).
Espoused vs. Enacted Values (*Credibility, or Say–Do Paradox*)	Organizational, HRM, Individual	**Corporate/HRM:** Public sustainability commitments and formal policies (well-being programs, green campus pledges) vs. actual resource allocation and reward structures (favouring traditional metrics and operations). **Individual:** Leadership rhetoric about "sustainability" vs. employees' lived experience (e.g. continued high workload, lack of support for initiatives).	Staff become sceptical of leadership pronouncements and initiatives (credibility gap). Idealistic employees feel disillusioned or demotivated, which can reduce engagement and citizenship behaviours (some become apathetic, others resist). The university maintains external reputation (through marketing), but internal momentum for change slow down.

Paradox Type / Theme	Levels Observed	Tension Manifestations	Unintended Consequences for Sus-HRM
Internal vs. External Focus *(Stakeholder Paradox)*	Macro, Organizational, HRM	**Macro:** Pressure to contribute to society (external stakeholder needs) vs. lack of external support/funding (forcing internal focus on survival). **Corporate/HRM:** Efforts that benefit external stakeholders (community projects, environmental initiatives) vs. those that benefit internal goals (rankings, revenue) often seen as trade-offs. (Individual level impact is indirect, as individuals witness the prioritization of internal goals over external impact.)	Community engagement and environmental initiatives often marginalized or dependent on extra effort (not core to performance evaluation). Potential loss of societal trust or missed opportunity for impact, although University-MY avoided major fallout by maintaining community projects (mostly driven by passionate individuals, not systems). HR metrics and decision criteria remain internal-oriented, delaying integration of broader stakeholder considerations (which could benefit innovation and legitimacy).

Table 3 highlights that these paradoxes are indeed interrelated. For example, the *Social vs. Financial* theme ties closely to the *Identity* or *Belonging* paradox (the pull between being mission-driven or profit-driven is an identity question) and to the *Espoused vs. Enacted* paradox (financial pressures lead to not fully enacting the espoused social values). The *Short-term vs. Long-term* tension often underpins why the espoused values are not enacted (short-term chosen over long-term ideals), and it exacerbates the social vs. financial trade-off (because social investments tend to be long-term). Meanwhile, the *Internal vs. External focus* paradox is a specific lens on social vs. financial (e.g. "social" means external stakeholders, "financial" means internal metrics), and it also is tied to identity (is the university a private entity or a member of the community?). In other words, rather than identifying a multitude of unrelated paradoxes, University-MY faces a system of paradoxical tensions that stem from a few fundamental challenges of pursuing sustainability in a competitive sector.

The notion of nested paradox is evident: macro-level tensions create contexts in which corporate paradoxes arise, which in turn shape functional-HRM dilemmas and trickle down to individual experiences. The macro policy paradox (e.g. public expectations vs. private funding) necessitates the organization to carry both identities, which then leads to internal conflicts, and puts HRM in a bind trying to support both people and performance, ultimately leaving individuals torn between ideals and job demands. This cascading effect will be visualized in a diagram in the next section, illustrating how a tension at one level can influence another (amplifying as it goes down to individuals, who are receivers of unresolved higher-level tensions).

As paradox theory suggests, acknowledging and understanding paradoxes is a critical step to managing them constructively. Thus, before moving to the response strategies, it is important to note that diagnosing these underlying patterns provides a basis for addressing them. University-MY's stakeholders are conscious of many of these tensions (as seen in the quotes and data), which is a positive starting point. The real challenge lies in how the organization navigates these paradoxes; whether it can move from defensive reactions, to more transformative, "both-and" solutions (Lewis, 2000; Smith & Lewis, 2011).

5.4 Summary of Key Findings

The collective impact of University-MY's navigation strategies has been mixed. On the positive side, the university dodged major crises and achieved a degree of stability: maintaining financial viability and growth (student enrolment increased), and it preserved an external image of a "sustainably responsible campus." In other words, the university did enough on the sustainability front; through select projects and marketing, to uphold its reputation externally, while also ensuring competitive performance. However, on the negative side, many paradoxes remained unresolved or only partially addressed, leading to persistent tensions. There is a tangible sense among insiders that the university has "not fully lived up to its ideals." Staff surveys and interviews reflected ongoing frustration about workloads, a feeling that sustainability commitments are superficial, and values misalignment. Tangible indicators further suggest this gap: for instance, despite progressive green initiatives, the Sustainability Office's data showed only a 5% reduction in campus carbon emissions over two years (versus 10% target), and an employee survey highlighted enduring concerns about stress and work-life balance. These outcomes suggest that while paradoxes were managed in the short term, they were not entirely solved, - which in turn diluted the effectiveness of University-MY's sustainable HRM efforts.

University-MY's case demonstrates a scenario of recognizing sustainability paradoxes, but largely "muddling through" them rather than transforming them. Its cognitive culture, shaped by academic discourse, ensured that paradoxes of sustainable HRM were visible and frequently discussed. This led to some incremental adaptations (and prevented outright failure in either goal), but it also meant persistent gaps between talk and action. The university employed ad-hoc arrangements (e.g. cutting sustainability projects under duress) and parallel structures (e.g. sustainability handled in silos), or cultural changes that might integrate competing goals. This led to incremental progress – some improvements and success stories, but fell short of the kind of holistic, transformative integration that true sustainability would require. A key underlying reason is the implicit hierarchy of priorities that continued: when conflicts arose, financial and competitive concerns consistently took precedence over social commitments. This case highlights the difficulty of pursuing a "both-and" approach in a context where survival anxieties are at an all-time high, and conventional success metrics dominate.

Overall, Case One (University-MY) provides a detailed picture of nested paradox dynamics in sustainable HRM within the higher education sector. It shows how sustainability-related tensions cascade from national policies down to individual experiences, and how an organization responds can either alleviate or aggravate those tensions.

However, it is also apparent that University-MY's paradoxes are not static. There were moments of breakthrough (e.g. the research centre example, evolving KPI metrics), and there remain potential to do more; given the expression of passion among respondents. Thus, the findings from this case underscore several important insights for theory and practice:

I. Multi-level alignment is crucial: misalignment (e.g., a sustainability vision at top without corresponding changes in HR metrics or individual incentives) can stall sustainable intentions and strategies.

II. Context matters: the private university context in Malaysia, with its specific regulatory and competitive pressures, shapes how paradoxes play out and may differ from other contexts (this will be evident when comparing with the hotel case in Chapter 6)

III. Paradox management requires proactive leadership and culture: simply letting tensions play out tends to prolong status quo, whereas actively embracing paradox

(e.g. new metrics, narratives, and structures that truly integrate goals) is necessary for more substantive progress (to be discussed in Chapter 7).

These findings will be further analysed in Chapter 7, as the chapter integrate insights from both cases (University-MY and Hotel-MY) to develop a comparative perspective. In Chapter 7, we will also relate these empirical observations back to the literature to examine how University-MY's approaches align with or challenge existing theories. In sum, Chapter 5 has documented the multi-level paradoxes and responses in University-MY, revealing a complex picture of partial success and ongoing struggle in the journey toward sustainable HRM. This provides a foundation for deeper discussion on what it takes to navigate paradoxes in pursuit of sustainability in organizations, which we address in the concluding analysis of this research (Chapters 7 and 8).

CHAPTER 6

Findings Case Two: Hospitality Sector & Hotel-MY

6.0 Overview

This chapter presents the findings from Case Two, an international luxury hospitality organization in Malaysia; referred to by the pseudonym Hotel-MY. The evidence is drawn from interviews with multiple stakeholders (e.g. hotel senior management, HR professionals, department managers, frontline staff), as well as field observations within the hotel. The focus is on multi-level paradoxical tensions related to Sustainable Human Resource Management (Sus-HRM). Hotel-MY is recognized as the pioneering "green" hotel in Malaysia's hospitality sector (e.g. publicly committed to eco-certifications, energy-efficient operations, and community engagement programs), while simultaneously operating in a highly competitive, service-driven market. This dual identity of *aspiring sustainable hotel* and *profit-oriented luxury business* offers fertile ground for paradoxes around delivering exceptional *guest experience vs. adhering to strict sustainability protocols*, and pursuing long-term *social/environmental goals, while meeting short-term financial* and *customer satisfaction*.

The findings for Hotel-MY are organized by level to illustrate how paradoxical tensions emerge and interact at the macro (external), corporate, HRM (functional), and individual levels within the hotel. Section 6.1 details the multi-level paradoxical tensions identified: at the macro level (6.1.1), Hotel-MY faces conflicting external expectations and institutional pressures; at the organizational level (6.1.2), internal strategic goals and operational demands collide; at the HRM level (6.1.3), HR policies and day-to-day people management practices reveal contradictions; and at the individual level (6.1.4), employees experience personal dilemmas in aligning their own values with their job roles and guest expectations.

Section 6.2 examines how Hotel-MY has responded to and navigated these tensions. The case reveals a mix of response strategies – many of them implicit or reactive and a few more deliberate — such as temporal separation (prioritizing immediate operational needs and postponing certain sustainability initiatives), structural separation of roles (e.g. assigning sustainability tasks to a dedicated "Green Team" to avoid burdening line staff), and occasional integration attempts where sustainability and service goals were combined. These response strategies are analysed with reference to paradox management literature to

understand how Hotel-MY "managed" (or in some instances merely coped with) its paradoxes. Section 6.3 then discovers underlying patterns across these paradoxes in Hotel-MY. The analysis synthesizes how certain types of paradoxical tensions recur across levels in nested form. Table 6.1 is presented to outline the types of paradoxes, the levels at which they manifest in Hotel-MY, specific tension examples, and their consequences.

Finally, Section 6.4 summarizes the key findings for Case Two, underscoring the multi-level paradoxes in Sus-HRM at Hotel-MY and how they compare or connect with the findings from Case One. This summary also lays the groundwork for Chapter 7 (Discussion), where cross-case comparisons (against University-MY) and broader theoretical implications are discussed.

6.1 Exploration of Multi-Level Paradoxical Tensions

Hotel-MY's pursuit of sustainable HRM is characterized by tensions that span multiple levels of analysis. At each level (macro, corporate, HRM, and individual), actors confront opposing goals or expectations that are paradoxical in nature. A paradox here refers to "contradictory yet interrelated elements that exist simultaneously and persist over time" (Smith & Lewis, 2011)

The following sub-sections detail the paradoxical tensions identified at each level in Hotel-MY, supported by direct quotes from interviews and observational data. As with University-MY, these tensions at Hotel-MY are not isolated; they interrelate and often cascade across levels; macro-level pressures influence corporate strategies, which shape HRM practices, which in turn affect individual experiences. For clarity, each level is discussed separately here, but cross-level linkages are highlighted where relevant, underlining the nested nature of paradoxes in this case.

6.1.1 Macro-Level Paradoxical Tensions: External Expectations and Constraints

At the macro level, Hotel-MY operates within an external environment that sends mixed signals regarding the role and expectations of hotels in Malaysia's tourism industry. On one hand, national policy and global sustainability frameworks exhort hotels, and the broader hospitality sector to support sustainable development goals. For instance, Malaysia's National Ecotourism Plan (2016–2025) calls for tourism growth that is environmentally responsible and community-inclusive. Government agencies inspire hotels to obtain green certifications,

and adopt eco-friendly operations as part of uplifting Malaysia's international image as a sustainable tourism destination.

On the other hand, as a business in a key economic sector, Hotel-MY is expected to be a profitable enterprise that drives economic growth, creates jobs, and competes successfully in the international tourism market. The national agenda sets ambitious targets for tourist arrivals and revenue (~24 million international tourists by 2025), therefore placing pressure on hotels to maximize occupancy and service capability. These dual expectations create a macro-level paradox: the hotel is urged to *perform duties like a steward of sustainable tourism* (e.g. upholding environmental and social responsibilities), while simultaneously being *treated as a commercial organization* of growth that must achieve high performance metrics. An official from the Ministry of Tourism acknowledged this duality, asserting:

"While the ministry promote eco-tourism and asking hotels to be green leaders, but at the same time, the industry's success is measured in visitor numbers and spending. There's an expectation to boost revenue, yet also to adhere to strict sustainability standards. It's a balancing act — but not a straightforward one." (Interviewee M5)

This statement captures the contradictory macro-level message facing Hotel-MY, and other hospitality providers; contribute to national sustainability goals (e.g. environmental conservation, cultural preservation, community) *and* contribute strongly to economic development. The official's open remark "not a straightforward one" underscores that this tension lies in policy objectives that are ambitious but conflicting. Malaysia's development plans push for rapid revival and growth of tourism, while simultaneously upholding sustainability commitments — reflecting what the broader literature calls the *"economic vs. environment" paradox* in emerging economies. For Hotel-MY, this translates into external pressure to do both paradoxical directive; expand its business, and maintain top sustainability performance.

Another macro-level tension emerges from global vs. local standards. Hotel-MY is part of an international luxury hotel brand, and known for aligning with global sustainability initiatives such as UN Sustainable Development Goals and green hotel certifications. This alignment with global sustainability protocols sometimes clashes with local industry practices, regulations, and infrastructure. The hotel's Sustainability Manager described this challenge as being *"caught between global benchmarks and local realities"*. In an interview, she explained:

"Our HQ is committed to zero single-use plastics and strict waste recycling targets in all properties. We are on board, of course. But locally, waste management infrastructure is lacking. ... still, recyclables often goes to landfill here. We try to comply with global standards, but the local supply chain and recycling systems aren't developed enough". (C6, Interview)

This quote demonstrates a global vs local paradox at the macro level. The hotel strives to meet international expectations (e.g. eliminating plastics, achieving energy benchmarks set by its global brand or certification bodies) to maintain legitimacy and brand reputation globally. However, the local context; from municipal recycling capabilities to supplier practices, is not always equipped to support these goals. The result is a form of *institutional misalignment* or decoupling; where symbolic compliance with global norms is attempted, but substantive implementation is hindered by local gaps. For example, Hotel-MY removed plastic water bottles for guests in line with global policy, yet faced local supplier issues with glass bottle supplies and found that many used glass bottles still ended up in general waste. As the Sustainability Manager noted, the hotel sometimes improvises - by investing in its own small-scale recycling or sourcing alternative materials locally - but these are isolated and temporary resolutions.

Moreover, macro-level paradoxes are temporal, as well as structural. There is a short-term vs. long-term tension in the external environment: Tourism authorities demand fast economic gains (annual visitor targets, immediate post-COVID recovery), while environmental groups and international frameworks promotes long-term conservation and climate goals (e.g. carbon reduction by 2030, preservation of cultural heritage over time). The general manager (Interviewee M8) observed that "during high seasons, sustainability becomes secondary," elaborating that when tourist demand spikes, regulators and companies tend to delay or lessen sustainability measures, in order to capitalize on the prospect. For instance, during a recent peak in domestic tourism, hotels nationwide (including Hotel-MY) were encouraged by local tourism boards to offer attractive packages to boost occupancy - even if it meant, as the respondent noted, "more water usage, more waste." This reflects a temporal paradox where the *immediate economic payoff* is allowed to override *long-term sustainability commitments* – a reasoning that, ironically, perpetuates the cycle of delaying sustainability and then facing greater challenges in the future.

In sum, at the macro level Hotel-MY is navigating contradictory external pressures: an expectation to lead in sustainable hospitality and comply with ambitious global standards, versus the imperative to drive economic performance and conform to on-the-ground realities. These macro paradoxes — green ethos vs. tourism growth targets and global benchmarks vs. local infrastructure — set the stage for many internal tensions. In hospitality, research highlights that sustainability strategies often sit uneasily alongside pressures for growth and profitability, producing both opportunities for differentiation and risks of superficiality (Jones et al., 2016; Font et al., 2017). For Hotel-MY, the need to continuously justify sustainability investments, in light of profit metrics, exemplifies this paradoxical framing where external legitimacy through certifications and awards could outpace genuine local integration (Bansal & Song, 2017). The macro environment thus effectively poses a question to the hotel: Is your role to be a model green hotel or a profit-maximizing business? —with the clear but paradoxical attempt of being "both" (Hahn et al., 2015).

6.1.2 Corporate-Level Paradoxical Tensions: Strategic Pressures

In Hotel-MY, the macro pressures translate into corporate-level paradoxes revolving around the hotel's strategy, brand identity, and operational priorities. Hotel-MY's top management officially promotes sustainability as a core value and competitive advantage. The hotel's vision statement prominently feature commitments to being *"Malaysia's Eco-Luxury hotel"*, and management regularly communicates goals like reducing carbon footprint, supporting local communities, and achieving sustainability awards.

Tangible initiatives at the organizational level incorporate: a standing Sustainability Committee, periodic staff-led beach clean-ups and community charity events, as well as visible green features in the hotel (e.g. solar panels, a rooftop herb garden for the kitchen, and signage encouraging guests to save water and energy). These efforts indicate that Hotel-MY is openly attempting to integrate sustainability into its operations and culture. However, simultaneously, the hotel's business strategy and operational management emphasize aggressive performance targets common in the hospitality industry. Such performance targets include maximizing guest satisfaction scores (e.g. five-star service ratings, positive guests reviews), occupancy and revenue per room, upselling premium services, and maintaining profit margins. In turn, created an internal mission vs market paradox equivalent to the one observed in University-MY. But, in this case, it manifests as *"sustainable hospitality*

philosophy vs. commercial hospitality imperatives." A senior Hotel-MY executive described this tension:

"We say we are a green hotel, and we are, only to a certain degree. At the day, if there's a conflict between keeping a guest happy and, strictly adhering to a green regulation — we might bend the rule. (C5, Interview)

This quote highlights the belonging tension at the organizational level: is Hotel-MY fundamentally a *sustainability-driven hotel* or a *traditional luxury hotel business*? The General Manager implies it must be both, but when faced with conflict, the hotel tends to prioritize the commercial side to survive. While sustainability is valued, it is often treated as *additional or conditional*, or something that can be set aside temporarily in core service hospitality demands. This aligns with observations in the literature that many "sustainable" companies still prioritize economic and customer imperatives when under pressure.

In Hotel-MY's case, the organizational culture supports sustainability, but the service excellence culture, as well as the pressure of competitive metrics — creating a paradoxical pull in the opposite poles. One clear example of this paradox was observed in the housekeeping department. The hotel has a program to reduce water and detergent use by encouraging guests to reuse towels and linens, in which housekeeping managers are tasked with implementing. However, the hotel also prides itself on *"impeccable, indulgent service"*. Several *Housekeeping Staff* (Focus Group) revealed that in reality, "many guests ignore the towel reuse request", and if a guest leaves all towels on the floor (demanding fresh ones), the staff obliging with replacements, even if it is a one-night stay. One housekeeper said:

"We try to remind guests about saving water, but if they want new towels, we give them new towels – of course! …our manager always tells us guest comfort comes first (I8, Interview).

These comments illustrate an organizational paradox in service delivery: the hotel's sustainability program directly conflicts with its service ethos ("the guest is always right"). This is also reflected in the competing performance metrics – on one hand environmental metrics versus, on the other, customer satisfaction metrics (which influence ratings and return business). As a result, the sustainable initiative becomes more of a guest option, rather than a strictly upheld practice, thus revealing a gap between espoused values and actual practices at the corporate level.

Another tension at this level involves cross-departmental paradoxes; especially between, Marketing and Operations. Hotel-MY's marketing department actively promotes the hotel's green features and achievements. The marketing department is responsible in the launching media campaigns about sustainable sourced menu, publishing an annual Sustainability Report with glossy photos of events, and positioning the hotel as an eco-friendly choice for conscientious travellers. This has been successful in attracting a niche of eco-minded guests and generating income. However, operational managers sometimes struggle to deliver on the promises made by the marketing department. A middle manager in Food & Beverage (Restaurant Manager, Interview) shared a recent case:

"Marketing announced that our fine-dining restaurant is now 'sustainably sourced', sourcing all ingredients locally to reduce carbon footprint. It's all good intentions, but in reality, some specialty ingredients just aren't available locally year-round. We've had instances where we still have to import items because the guests expect that dish to taste a certain way. (C8, Interview)

Here, the paradox is between standardization vs. localization, and marketing vs. operational reality are intertwined. The hotel's brand and corporate parent pushes uniform high standards and international sustainability narratives, but local adaptation is needed for feasibility. Marketing, driven by competitive positioning, may at times "overreach" in communicating sustainable initiatives, and overtaking what the operational teams can implement without affecting quality. This horizontal paradox between departments highlights a misalignment: *the enthusiasm to showcase sustainability vs. the practical constraints of running a luxury hotel*. Such misalignments can breed internal frustration, in which the Restaurant Manager noted these situations caused friction in manager meetings:

"The chefs and procurement people sometimes push back, saying: we can't sacrifice quality, or budget just for this (sustainable sourcing initiatives). But then, we also fear being seen as not committed enough towards sustainability." (C8, Interview)

This reflects a belonging/identity paradox among managers — managers want to support the hotel's green identity, yet they also identify as hospitality professionals whose pride is delivering impeccable services. When those identities collide, it creates personal and group tensions that resonate throughout the organizational culture. Many of the managers and frontline staff admired the visible eco-features and enjoyed taking part in beach clean-ups, yet repeatedly stressed that guest comfort and revenue targets trumped environmental ideals;

sustainability was treated as an optional add-on rather than part of the hotel's core service identity. Based on interviews and observations, Hotel-MY's "eco-luxury" discourse was driven by its parent company (a global hotel group), rather than by a Malaysian legacy; thus, managers seemed more invested in aligning with corporate narratives than in personally valuing environmental stewardship. This is a notable contrast with University-MY, where sustainability ideals were championed by staff but hampered by managerial priorities.

Corporate-level paradoxes at Hotel-MY also extend to resource allocation decisions. The HR Director (Interview) noted an internal debate about whether to invest in a new on-site wastewater treatment system for greywater recycling. Essentially, a project that would enhance the hotel's environmental performance significantly, versus using the same budget to refurbish the facilities to maintain five-star luxury standards. She explained:

*"Both investments are needed in different ways. The water system will save money and environment in long run, but the spa upgrade keeps our quality offering for high-end guests nowadays. We really struggled to decide. ...*ultimately, the hotel went ahead with the spa upgrade. (H6, Interview)

The statement exemplifies the classic short-term payoff vs. long-term benefit calculation — upgrading guest amenities has an immediate impact on guest satisfaction and revenue. The choice reflects an *implicit prioritization* of short-term, revenue-generating projects; a pattern also seen in University-MY, but perhaps more noticeable in a hotel setting where customer experience has direct daily impact on income. The decision, while pragmatic, left some members of the Sustainability Committee feeling that *"sustainability always loses when it's up against revenue"* (Sustainability Committee member, Field Notes). This sentiment captures a hint of cynicism that can exist in the organization, especially when sustainable ideals are perceived to be frequently side-lined by commercial imperatives.

In sum, at the corporate level Hotel-MY grapples with mission drift vs. market pressures: a stated mission of being a sustainability leader, versus the operational reality of running a profitable luxury hotel. The main grounds of these tensions include competing performance criteria (sustainability metrics vs. guest satisfaction and profit metrics), inter-departmental misalignments (e.g. sustainability marketing vs. operations' capacity), and temporal trade-offs. Such dynamics mirror paradox theory's view that organizations often face contradictory demands that cannot be resolved but must be navigated through ongoing balancing (Smith & Lewis, 2011). For Hotel-MY, this results in mixed organizational signals: employees

understand that sustainability is a core value, yet they observe "guest first" in practice—a pattern consistent with research showing how luxury hotels struggle to align aspirational green missions with everyday service demands (Langgat et al., 2023).

6.1.3 Functional (HRM)-Level Paradoxical Tensions: Bridging Strategy and People

The functional (HRM) level is positioned at the intersection of the hotel's strategic intent and its employees' day-to-day experiences. As such, it reveals several paradoxical tensions that are influenced by the macro and organizational context described above. Officially, the HR department is charged with developing and implementing practices that support the hotel's dual goals of service excellence and sustainability commitment - essentially operationalizing sustainable HRM principles in a hospitality setting.

In recent years, Hotel-MY's HRM has introduced various initiatives aligned with sustainable HRM: for example, changing the recruitment process to include assessment of candidates' values on sustainability, offering training workshops on eco-friendly service practices (e.g. training housekeeping on chemical-free cleaning and energy conservation techniques), and rolling out employee well-being measures such as free health check-ups, as well as an employee benefits program to promote work-life balance. These initiatives communicate an official commitment to both the *"green"* and *"human"* sides of sustainability; consistent with the idea that sustainable HRM should enhance employee well-being, fairness, and long-term development (Ehnert et al, 2016). However, a gap exists between HRM rhetoric and employees' daily reality, exposing a paradox between *"caring for people and planet"* versus *"maximizing performance and efficiency"*. Hotel-MY's HR Director spoke frankly about this tension:

"Our HR team attempts to be very people oriented, ...we want to support our staff, engage them in our sustainability journey, give them training, working benefits. But then there's the reality: hotel margins are getting smaller. Unfortunately, we end up pushing staff to long hours to maintain service standards. (H6, Interview)

This statement captures an HRM-level paradox: on one side, HR is expected to foster a supportive, sustainable workplace (aligning with Hotel-MY's espoused values of employee well-being and environmental consciousness), but on the other side, resource constraints and efficiency pressures force HR and line managers into practices that stresses employees. The paradox can be traced back to the labour conditions of the hospitality industry. High

competition and cost pressures lead hotels to keep labour costs as low as possible, resulting in lean staffing and reliance on multitasking.

Similarly, in Malaysia, many hotels face chronic understaffing and turnover issues, which undermines well-intentioned HR programs. Hotel-MY is no exception. Despite its progressive stance, it operates with a relatively high staff room ratio, to control costs — meaning individual employee is often doing multiple tasks simultaneously. This sets up a conflict between employee well-being vs. operational efficiency. Evidence of this paradox surfaced with the issue of training for sustainability. Hotel-MY's HR policy mandates that every employee, from managers to frontline staff, undergo at least *9 hours per year* of training specifically related to sustainability and customer service excellence combined. Topics include eco-friendly skills (e.g. proper waste segregation, energy-saving protocols) and soft skills (e.g. handling customer inquiries about the hotel's green practices). In theory, this builds a knowledgeable workforce aligned with the hotel's values. In practice, however, fulfilling these training hours has proven problematic. A *HR Manager* admitted:

"To be frank, finding time for sustainability training is tough. We scheduled sustainability workshops, but when the hotel gets busy those will be postponed. Last year, we cancelled two out of four sessions because we were short on the front desk, because of high occupancy. The staff want the training - some are very interested. (H7, Interview)

This comment illustrates the short-term vs. long-term paradox in HRM: investing in employee training (long-term human capital development) is sacrificed for immediate operational needs (short-term efficiency and service delivery). The hotel's dominant focus on immediate guest service; an urgent priority that leaves little slack for developmental activities during peak periods. It aligns with Renwick et al. (2013)'s observation that sustainability training remains fragmented or sidelined in practice when organizations face day-to-day pressures. In the long run, recurrently postponing training sends a message to employees that sustainability is an "extra" rather than fundamental — reinforcing the same paradox HR is trying to resolve.

Another HRM-level tension at Hotel-MY involves performance appraisal and incentives. Formally, the hotel has started to include sustainability-related criteria in managers' performance reviews. For example, line managers are evaluated partly on reductions in energy usage, while the Executive Chef on sourcing local and reducing food waste. Yet, at the line staff level, performance measures remain tied to traditional metrics speed of service,

customer satisfaction scores, upselling success, and so forth. A *Training Supervisor* explained how this plays out the housekeeping team:

"We have all these green practices we're told to follow, like recycling and reducing waste. But there's no reward if my staff take extra time to separate recycling. Rewards depends if the room is spotless and ready on time. When in a tight schedule, they'll throw everything in the general bin to save time – as they are rarely monitored on recycling." (H8, Interview)

This highlights an espoused vs. enacted paradox within HRM systems: the espoused policy is that sustainability matters in performance, but the lived reality is that what "gets measured gets done" – and currently, the main things measured for most staff do not include sustainability contributions. This indicate a delay in aligning HRM systems with the sustainability agenda. As the HR Director admitted in her interview (continuing from earlier quote):

"We have been talking about adding sustainability KPIs for all staff, but it's complicated ...if we put too much, it might distract from core duties. And higher management still demands on the numbers in occupancy, revenue, scores. So frankly, those are the KPIs everyone focus on." (H6, Interview)

The HR Director's hesitation also points to a fear that integrating new metrics could hurt short-term performance – as *short vs. long-term* paradox cropping up again.

An additional tension is seen in staffing and contracts; specifically in balancing stable employment (social sustainability goal), with flexibility and cost efficiency (economic goal). Hotel-MY's HR would ideally like to offer more permanent contracts and career progression to lower-level staff (e.g. reducing the precariousness typical in hospitality jobs and reducing turnover). In the data, management often speaks of valuing employees as "family" and wanting to improve on employee retention. Yet, in practice, the hotel relies heavily on contract labour for roles like banquet servers, housekeeping extras during peak seasons to keep labour costs flexible. As the HR manager noted:

"We could hire more full-time staff to ease workload, but when the season slows down, we'd be overstaffed - overhead goes up. So, we use a lot of temporary staff. But that also means we're constantly retraining people and they don't feel closely connected." (H7, Interview)

This reveals a paradox of employment sustainability vs. cost flexibility, as the volatility of the hospitality business and the mandate to remain cost competitiveness. While sustainable

HRM theory emphasizes "decent work" and job security as part of social sustainability, the economic reality pushes the hotel toward more precarious staffing models - creating a tension between the *model of nurturing employees,* and the *practice of treating labour as a variable cost*.

In summary, HRM-level paradoxes at Hotel-MY revolve around employee well-being vs. efficiency, long-term development vs. short-term operational needs, espoused sustainability values vs. actual HR systems, and secure employment vs. cost flexibility. These tensions reflect the dilemmas at the core of sustainable HRM: how to simultaneously promote employee flourishing, social responsibility, and business performance (Ehnert et al., 2016; Kramar, 2014). The gap between policy and practice observed here illustrates what Mariappanadar (2012) describes as the "harm paradox" of HRM, where efficiency-driven practices undermine well-being and sustainability commitments. The postponement of training and the marginalization of sustainability KPIs echo findings by Guerci & Carollo (2016), who show that HR sustainability initiatives often remain symbolic unless fully integrated into performance systems. Likewise, reliance on contract labour underscores the employment paradox in Sus-HRM: balancing decent work with labour flexibility (Stankevičiūtė & Savanevičienė, 2018). These tensions are not unique to Hotel-MY but are symptomatic of the hospitality sector, where volatile demand and service excellence imperatives intensify paradoxes (Baum, 2015).

6.1.4 Individual-Level Paradoxical Tensions: Employees' Experiences

At the individual level, the paradoxical tensions in Hotel-MY become personal, affecting employees' daily work experiences, attitudes, and emotions. Despite abovementioned higher-level paradoxes, many of the staff members at Hotel-MY expressed personal commitment to sustainability ideals, or at least a feeling of pride in working for a hotel that is considered a sustainability leader in the sector. Based on the data, the hotel's reputation for sustainability was a factor that attracted them to the job. For instance, a young *Guest Relations Officer* shared:

"I chose this hotel because I heard it's very forward-thinking with eco-initiatives. I wanted to be part of that." (I9, Interview).

Such employees bring pro-sustainability values and ambition to contribute to meaningful environmental, or community causes through their work. However, these individuals encounter situations where their personal values clash with role expectations or

organizational constraints, leading to individual-level paradoxes. Employees may personally value sustainability, but find themselves behaving in ways that contradict those values due to job demands. For example, a *Restaurant Server* recounted a troubling experience:

"I strongly believe in reducing waste. At home, I compost and avoid single-use plastics. But at work, when a guest orders a mocktail, we still garnish with a plastic stirrer or little decorations. It's like my job forces me to do something I know is unsustainable." (I7, Interview)

This restaurant server's anecdote illustrates a micro-level paradox: her personal ethic of sustainability vs. the professional norm she must follow. The emotional consequence is guilt and frustration, as she became *complicit in wastefulness* despite personally opposing it. The reason of this tension is the inflexibility of certain service standards that prioritize aesthetics over sustainability, conflicted with employees' own ethical awareness. Over time, such internal conflicts can either erode the employee's engagement or spur them to seek change. Some employees become cynical when they perceive a gap between the hotel's public sustainability image and internal realities. A *Front Desk Agent* noted:

"We talk a lot about being green ...especially before the audits are scheduled to visit. After obtaining the certification, everyone seems to forget about their green pledges. (I6, Interview)

The consequence for the employee is a sense of disillusionment or scepticism. This mirrors the experience of the University-MY lecturer who spoke of "photo-ops" vs. real support. In this case, the equivalent might be winning a "Green Hotel of the Year" award while internally still prioritizing guest indulgences that conflict with green principles. Organizational decoupling and mixed messages is at the forefront of this paradox, which at the individual level translates into confusion about what the hotel truly stands for.

Another notable individual-level paradox involves learning tensions — stemming from the short-term vs. long-term paradox. Employees faced continuous pressure to prioritize immediate operational needs over their long-term personal and professional development. As mentioned, Hotel-MY regularly employed temporary and new hires without established competencies in green hotel practices. The constant influx of new staff, who lacked the necessary sustainability training, compelled experienced employees to focus primarily on short-term operational demands, repeatedly training newcomers on basic tasks rather than advancing their own sustainability competencies and professional development. A training coordinator expressed her frustration:

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"With so many temporary workers and new hires constantly joining, we're always busy just showing them the ropes. We hardly ever get the chance to deepen our own sustainability knowledge or implement advanced green practices. It feels like we're stuck in a loop." (H9, Interview)

Such experiences highlight a critical individual-level learning paradox: employees genuinely valued and sought long-term skills and knowledge to advance their careers and personal sustainability values. Yet, managers regularly had to sacrifice these developmental aspirations to manage immediate operational pressures related to continuous training of temporary and new hires. Consequently, employees experienced a sense of stagnation and frustration, or feeling trapped in repetitive short-term responsibilities without meaningful professional growth. This paradox had emotional and motivational consequences. Some reported feeling demotivated and undervalued, when developmental opportunities were continually overshadowed by the ongoing demands of integrating inexperienced workers. Over time, such unresolved tensions contributed to higher turnover, especially among employees who initially joined Hotel-MY motivated by its sustainability image and prospects for personal growth. An environmental engineer in the company noted:

"I joined hoping for opportunities to grow with the hotel's green initiatives. But after two years, I'm still training new hires instead of progressing myself. It feels like a missed opportunity." (I10, Interview)

Thus, the learning paradox at the individual level underscores how short-term operational demands are linked to turnover, and unexperienced new hires can undermine long-term professional development — ultimately risking employee engagement and effective implementation of sustainable HRM practices.

On the other hand, not all individual responses are negative. Many Hotel-MY employees demonstrate responses in navigating these tensions. Similar to the "sustainability champions" observed in University-MY, in Hotel-MY; some staff take initiative to make a difference within their control. For example, the environmental engineer described how he informally started collecting used guest soap bars (which normally would be thrown away), and helped organize a partnership with a local NGO that sanitizes and recycles hotel soaps for donation. He said:

"I hated how much barely used soap we throw away. I brought it up, and a few of us began saving them. It's not official policy — just something we do informally." (I10, Interview)

This illustrates an individual finding an individual solution on their own; by reducing waste (sustainability goal), while still maintaining hygiene standards for guests (service goal); essentially a micro-integration strategy. The enabling factor for the strategy was a degree of empowerment and personal passion, as the environmental manager felt strongly and found a creative way to reconcile the paradox without needing top-down instructions. Such grassroots actions, though in smaller scale, help individuals ease the discomfort of the paradox by *living their values* in small ways, and gradually influence organizational practices.

Conversely, some individuals cope by compartmentalization or prioritization. For instance, a *manager* explained his mindset:

"During trying seasons, like the last pandemic, I admit I put sustainability on the back burner. I tell my team: focus on guests and economic survivability, we'll worry about the green stuff later. ...yes, I do feel a bit guilty. (C7, Interview)

Here, the opertions manager is consciously and actively deferring one side of the paradox (sustainability), to fulfil the other (primary business performance) — an individual adaptation that mirrors temporal separation strategy. The cause is simply coping with overload; it's a pragmatic, if imperfect way to reduce cognitive dissonance (by telling oneself it is temporary). However, there is a risk — if employees consistently defer or compartmentalize, the intended integration of sustainability never fully happens, and they may experience ongoing guilt.

Another group of individuals responds by ultimately exiting the paradox. Turnover is high in hospitality generally, and in the context of these tensions; some values-driven employees eventually leave if they feel too compromised. Hotel-MY's HR records (reviewed as part of field data) show that in the last two years, several staff members explicitly cited "seeking more meaningful work" as one of the main reasons for resignation (although such reasons are often couched diplomatically). This reflects a pattern noted in paradox literature: when paradoxes remain unresolved, individuals either become change agents internally or seek environments that align better with their values. In Hotel-MY, we see both — some stay and become informal change agents, while others eventually leave, which can deprive the organization of passionate individuals who could have helped it progress.

In summary, at the individual level, Hotel-MY's employees experience nested paradoxes as personal dilemmas: intrinsic motivation vs. extrinsic pressure (e.g. acting sustainably vs. pressure to meet guest demands quickly), espoused values vs. observed behaviours (e.g.

believing in the hotel's mission vs. witnessing contradictions), and job satisfaction vs. ethical strain. Such tensions echo paradox theory's insight that individuals embody and enact organizational contradictions in their everyday practices (Smith & Lewis, 2011; Schad et al., 2016). The dilemmas employees face—whether to speak up about waste, take extra time for a green practice, or silence themselves to maintain efficiency—mirror findings that hospitality employees are caught in paradoxical expectations of being simultaneously empowered and controlled, customer-focused and sustainability-oriented (Baum, 2018). Emotionally, staff described oscillating between pride when sustainability milestones were achieved and disheartenment when inconsistencies surfaced, reflecting what sustainable HRM scholars describe as the paradox of "belonging vs. strain" at the individual level (Ehnert et al., 2016).

6.2 Navigation of Paradoxical Tensions

Facing the multi-level paradoxes outlined above, Hotel-MY has employed a range of strategies to navigate the tensions. Much like University-MY, many of these responses can be characterized as forms of coping or partial fixes, with occasional moves towards more integrative solutions, or as Smith & Lewis (2011) would term "both-and" strategies. This section analyses how Hotel-MY responded at differ rent levels to the paradoxical tensions, drawing on interview accounts and observations, and interprets these responses through the lens of paradox management theory. Key response types include avoidance/deferral, dominance/prioritization, spatial or role separation, and integration efforts. The effectiveness and limitations of each response type are examined:

One overarching observation is that Hotel-MY's response to sustainability tensions has been cautious and predominantly reactive. The HR Director frankly described the approach as *"muddling through"*; echoing the sentiment found in University-MY's case. She noted:

"We don't have an imposing strategy for balancing these things — economic, environmental and social goals. We handle issues as they come. ...if a conflict occurs, we try something to keep both sides happy, but usually it's a compromise." (H6, Interview)

This suggests an incremental adjustment strategy: parallel with what paradox theory calls "coping" by splitting or "temporal separation" (Slawinski & Bansal, 2015). Temporal deferral/prioritization has indeed been a common strategy. When tensions emerged, Hotel-MY often prioritized the pressing demand (e.g. the financial or service side) and deferred sustainability commitments to a later time. For example, during a period of financial strain, the hotel management decided to suspend the annual "Green Week" event (e.g. week of staff

volunteer and awareness activities), to focus on other revenue-generating marketing campaigns. This was framed not as withdrawal, but as postponement – a typical *deferral*. However, as a sustainability committee member noted:

"Green Week was postponed due to the pandemic and other priorities – let's hope it doesn't happen for a third year running. (I9, Interview)

Temporal separation, in this case, drifted into indefinite shelving of one side of the paradox. The advantage of this approach was short-term: it offered resources and attention for urgent needs (e.g. marketing campaign boosting bookings), avoiding an immediate internal confrontation between; values and profits. The disadvantage is that it eroded credibility and momentum for the deferred initiative, illustrating how deferral can become a form of avoidance — spreading paradox rather than resolves it.

Another frequently observed response is structural separation, essentially addressing tensions by assigning different goals to different people, units, or times. Hotel-MY created a Sustainability Committee and appointed a *Sustainability Officer* (a mid-level manager) to champion green initiatives. This can be seen as a spatial separation strategy – carving out a "safe space" for sustainability work somewhat apart from daily operational pressures. The Sustainability Officer described her role:

"I coordinate all our environmental and CSR programs. It's a bit siloed – I work with each department, but when things are hectic, I carry on what I can; mostly on my own" (C6, *Interview*)

The sustainability officer's role is *not* tied to operational KPIs, which is meant to allow her to pursue longer-term sustainability projects, without the same pressure as other service roles. This structure has yielded some successes: for instance, she managed to implement a property-wide energy audit and subsequent lighting retrofitting - by working with an external NGO and the Engineering department. These projects might never have materialized if left to departments that were busy with routine guest services. In paradox terms, the organization created a dedicated compartment for one pole of the paradox (sustainability), somewhat shielding it from the immediate demands of the other pole (operations).

However, structural separation also has limitations. It can lead to *sustainability being isolated or marginalized* – a side activity rather than integrated. This indicates an instance of over-separation: rather than solving the paradox, it can imbed a divide where mainstream

operations carry on relatively unchanged, while sustainability lives in a bubble; what some critics call the "sustainability silo effect". The consequence is that while certain projects get done, broader change in mindset or practice is limited - potentially even fostering complacency among other managers that sustainability is being "handled" by someone else. This resonates with literature that warns structural separation, if not coupled with integration later, can lead to reinforcing divisions, while not truly leveraging paradox for innovation (Smith & Besharov, 2019).

The hotel also employed prioritization (dominance) strategies in critical situations; essentially picking one side of the paradox as more important in a given context. Notably, whenever guest satisfaction was on the line, that side dominated. For instance, during a conference event hosted at the hotel, management temporarily relaxed some of the sustainability protocols (e.g. plastic food containers; laundry frequency) to ensure immaculate service delivery. This was a conscious decision: the General Manager convened a meeting and stated that for this week, "service excellence is our absolute priority – we'll offset the footprint later." This is a short-term dominance of one pole, with a promise to address the neglected pole (sustainability) later. For instance, they pledged to donate to a tree-planting campaign to "counter" the environmental impact of relaxing protocols. The advantage is clear, it avoids immediate conflict (e.g. no service compromises, keeping the client happy), and it frames the compromise as temporary.

The drawback is that it sets precedents that sustainability is expendable, when stakes are high. In the long run, staff notice these patterns; as one employee noted, *"when guests come, all our green talk goes out the window,"* which can breed cynicism. It also relies on attending sustainability later; which might not truly happen or truly compensate (was the tree-planting enough to counterbalance the plastics and laundry usage? a debatable point). This approach aligns with a trade-off decision, by favouring one objective and downplaying the other — which is simpler, but weaken long-term sustainability integration (Hahn et al., 2015).

Notably, Hotel-MY has demonstrated some integrative or "both-and" responses too; instances where efforts were made to find solutions that simultaneously considering sustainability and business objectives. These are instances of more proactive paradox navigation. One standout integrative initiative was the development of a sustainable fine-dining experience at the hotel's high-end restaurant. Instead of the usual buffet, the hotel introduced a farm-to-table tasting menu that utilized locally sourced organic ingredients, featured stories of local farmers

in the menu, and offered a reservation-only "eco-gastronomy" experience. This not only reduced waste and supported local suppliers (sustainability), but was marketed as an exclusive experience, allowing the hotel to charge a premium (economic). It became quite widespread among upscale guests and even got media attention, enhancing Hotel-MY's reputation. An operations *manager* explained the strategy:

The chef and team innovated dishes that are both sustainable and gourmet. We attracted a niche of patrons who come specifically for that – and they pay top dollar, making it one of our more profitable offerings." (C7, Interview)

This example shows integration: reframing the paradox (luxury vs. sustainability) into a new concept (luxurious *because* sustainable). It echoes the notion of transcendence or innovation through paradox that scholars advocate (e.g. creating win-win solutions). The main enabler for this was leadership support and creative freedom. The General Manager allowed the F&B team to experiment, indicating an organizational culture that, at least in some departments, encourages innovative approaches to paradoxes.

Another area of integration was green certifications and marketing. The hotel aggressively pursued recognized eco-certifications (e.g. Green Hotel awards; Sustainability awards), and used them in marketing - attracting eco-conscious travellers and clients with sustainability policies. Achieving these certifications required cross-departmental efforts (reducing energy, sourcing sustainably, staff training), effectively forcing some integration of practices. As one executive noted,

"When we got the Green Hotel awards, we saw a spike in certain market segments. For example, we receive more western travellers. It showed us being sustainable could generate new revenue streams." (C5, Interview)

In paradox terms, management found an integration at the organizational level by aligning sustainability efforts with market differentiation strategy — turning a potential cost into a profit (at least from a marketing perspective). The risk is to ensure the efforts are not just symbolic. However, maintaining certification is an ongoing process and has driven continuous improvements in operations to meet standards. Accordingly, the hotel leveraged an external demand (e.g. growing market value of sustainability) to integrate paradoxical goals internally.

Frontline employees, on the other hand, often engaged in local coping strategies to navigate daily tensions, which is another layer of response. As previously noted, some would find personal workarounds (e.g. the soap recycling initiative, or informally reusing materials mentioned earlier); seen as micro-integration efforts. Others also coped through sensemaking and communication. For example, staff would diplomatically explain certain sustainability measures to guests as part of luxury service:

"We tell guests our pool is saltwater. The new pool is not only eco-friendly, but also gentler on their skin. So, they see it as a luxury improvement. (I9, Interview)

This is a response strategy; employees use communication framing to align guest expectations with sustainability, effectively trying to resolve the paradox in the guest's mind. Such responses reduce the tension between guest satisfaction and sustainable practice by education and framing. It requires employee empowerment and skill, which the hotel has tried to nurture through training in storytelling and guest engagement. This resembles a sensemaking strategy at the individual level — narrating it in a positive way crucial to paradox navigation

In reflecting on all these responses, it appears Hotel-MY largely oscillated between separation (temporal or structural) and minimal integration, with dominance trade-offs in high-pressure moments. This aligns with findings that many organizations initially respond to paradoxes through defensive mechanisms or splitting. "Both-and" strategies were fewer and often driven by unique opportunities (e.g. the fine-dining concept or certification pursuit where business and sustainability interests converged).

In order to visually summarize how the tensions cascade across levels and how the hotel's responses come into play, Figure 2 depicts the multi-level paradox dynamics and indicates the points at which different types of responses were observed. The figure shows the cascade from macro-level pressures to individual experiences and overlays key response strategies:

Figure 2: Multi-level dynamics of paradoxical tensions and responses (Hotel-MY)

Macro-Level
External Institutional Environment
Paradoxes:
  - Profit-led Tourism Growth vs. Eco tourism Stewardship
  - Global Green Standards vs. Local Infrastructure Gaps
  - National Pride vs. Multicultural Market Realities

↓ *Influences (creates context)*

Organizational-Level
Internal Strategic & Cultural Context
Paradoxes:
  - Luxury Brand Promise vs. Eco Efficiency
  - Top-down Chain Control vs. Local Managerial Needs
  - Standardisation vs. Contextual Adaptation

Strategies:
  - Surface level Sustainability Integration
  - Operational Workarounds by Local Teams

↓ *Shapes HRM practices & policies*

HRM-Level
Human Resource Practices
Paradoxes:
  - Short term Cost KPIs vs. Long-term Green Capabilities
  - Control SOPs vs. Empowerment to Act Sustainably
  - Fast Recruitment vs. Green Competency Fit

Strategies:
  - Ad Hoc Training without Systemic Follow through
  - Green HRM Champions with Limited Mandate

↓ *Impacts individual experience*

Individual-Level
Employee Experience & Values
Paradoxes:
  - Performing Sustainability vs. Pleasing Guests
  - Personal Values vs. Role Constraints
  - Learning Desire vs. High Turnover Pressure

Strategies (individual responses):
  - Coping (rule bending, selective engagement)
  - Grassroots Micro-Initiatives (bottom-up learning)
  - Exit from Organisation (resignation)

Legend

Paradoxes: The main tensions identified at each level.

Arrows (▼): Direction of cascading paradoxical influences.

Arrows (◄—): Feedback loops highlighting potential influence upwards.

Strategies: Responses adopted to navigate paradoxes, both organizational and individual.

Following Figure 2, the multi-level dynamic of paradoxical tensions and responses within Hotel-MY becomes evident. Macro-level paradoxes set conditions influencing organizational identity and strategy, which in turn shape HRM practices and policies, finally cascading down to affect individual employee experiences. Although primarily downward cascading, feedback loops exist (left-pointing arrows) where individual and HRM-level experiences can influence organizational strategies (e.g. high resistance prompting management reconsideration).

Figure 2 highlights coping strategies and structural separation as top-down management responses intended to buffer or manage these paradoxes predominantly at the macro and

organizational levels. Conversely, integrative strategies and individual coping responses, such as championing sustainability or, conversely, exiting the organization, are depicted as emerging bottom-up or lateral strategies that have the potential to move back upwards, influencing HRM and organizational strategies over time. This multi-level framework underlines the complex, iterative dynamics of Sustainable HRM paradox management, emphasizing the interplay of structural managerial decisions with emergent individual and collective behaviours.

Hotel-MY's navigation strategies were strongly influenced by an operational mindset among its management and staff. In contrast to the more apparent discussions at University-MY, many responses here were implicit, and determined by on-the-spot problem-solving. Managers and employees certainly noticed the clashes between sustainability goals and service imperatives, but their engagement was to cope quietly or ad-hoc adjustments, rather than openly deliberate the paradox. This indicates a cognitive framing of paradoxes not as enduring dilemmas to be embraced, but as day-to-day obstacles to work around. When a crisis came, Hotel-MY's instinct was often to tip the balance in favour of immediate priorities (e.g. guest satisfaction, revenue), and defuse tension by promising to revisit sustainability later. One manager admitted that during a particularly trying season he put "sustainability on the back burner" and told his team to focus on guests and financial survival first – a clear example of an either/or mindset prevailing under stress. Such instances reveal that the ability to simultaneously hold both goals was constrained by the fast-paced service environment. Employees on the front line also sensed this pattern: as one employee noted, "when guests come, all our green talk goes out the window," — capturing the sentiment that sustainability ideals comes second to service demands in practice. This pragmatic coping kept operations running smoothly and avoided direct conflicts, but it also meant that tensions were typically mitigated through short-term fixes, rather than balancing the sustainability objectives. Nonetheless, the Hotel-MY case did offer glimpses of a more paradox-aware approach in specific instances, suggesting the underlying potential for a paradox mindset even in this high-pressure context.

The prevailing culture at Hotel-MY leaned toward maintaining its pledge of impeccable, luxurious service at all costs, with sustainability treated as a secondary theme to be integrated only when convenient. In effect, the organization's cognitive capacity to handle paradox rested on a few champions, rather than a widespread organizational engagement. Most staff were not empowered to openly debate or reconcile tensions – instead, they followed standard

operating procedures that quietly sidestepped conflicts (e.g. a department might skip an green policy during a busy period). In summary, Hotel-MY's response strategies to Sus-HRM paradoxes can be characterized as:

I.   Predominantly coping and separating strategies (temporal delays, structural differentiation of sustainability tasks).

II.   Use of selective trade-offs where necessary (prioritizing core business needs in crunch times).

III.   Periodic integration moves that create local synergies (green products/services that also benefit the bottom line).

IV.   Heavy reliance on communication and external validation (international certifications, marketing) to manage perceptions of the paradox externally and internally.

These approaches allowed Hotel-MY to navigate daily and seasonal challenges without a breakdown, but they have not eliminated paradoxes – rather, the tensions continue to simmer, needing constant navigation. This finding is consistent with paradox theory: paradoxes are persistent, and responses is about navigating ongoing tensions, not one-time solutions (Smith & Lewis, 2011). Hotel-MY's case shows that navigation involves a dynamic and uneasy balancing act, requiring continual adjustments and education. Finally, it is worth noting that the presence of some "more-than" responses (to use a term from the literature for proactive strategies - indicates potential for the organization to evolve its approach. Under certain conditions (e.g. supportive leadership, clear market incentives, partnership with external experts), Hotel-MY *can* approach a paradox in a way that finds creative both-and solutions. The challenge ahead (to be discussed in Chapter 7) is how to amplify those conditions so that such integrative strategies become the norm rather than isolated exceptions. The next section (6.4) identifies and categorizes the types of paradoxes observed across levels and examines how they relate to each other, with a summary table to concisely present these insights

6.3 Discovery of Underlying Patterns for Sus-HRM Tensions

The case of Hotel-MY reveals a pattern of paradoxical tensions that cut across multiple levels. In this section, the conversation turns to synthesizing those findings to uncover underlying themes; the core types of paradoxes that recur in different guises at the macro, organizational, HRM, and individual levels. By doing so, we can better understand the nested nature of paradoxes in this context, in which a given tension at one level may be emulated or

magnified at another. This pattern analysis also allows us to link back to the theoretical framework on paradoxes (Chapter 2) and to consider parallels with the University-MY case - ensuring consistency, shown below:

Economic vs. Environmental/Social (Performing Paradox): At its heart, many tensions boil down to the classic "people and planet vs. profit" dilemma. This was evident at the macro level (national economic goals vs. sustainability mandates), corporate level (luxury service/revenue vs. green practices costs), functional-HRM level (labour cost efficiency vs. employee well-being investment), and individual level (personal ethics vs. job performance demands). The main driver of this paradox is the pressure to simultaneously achieve financial performance and sustainability outcomes, which often appear uncompromising in the short term. This aligns with what the literature identifies as a fundamental paradox in corporate sustainability.

The consequence of this paradox is manifested as; *profitability and customer satisfaction, taking precedence*, thus creating persistent strain. The hotel tries to avoid framing it as an "either/or" – but often falls back into that when under pressure. Sustainability is often treated as secondary when profit or guest satisfaction is at stake. Besides, short-term financial/security priorities override some green initiatives (e.g. postponing eco-investments, eco-certifications).

Short-Term vs. Long-Term (Temporal Paradox): Another recurrent pattern is the tension between immediate, short-term demands and long-term objectives; mainly due to temporal myopia driven by urgent competitive and operational pressures – a common issue in fast-paced service industries. This temporal paradox is noted in both sustainable HRM and paradox theory as particularly challenging: short-term wins are tangible and rewarded, whereas long-term benefits are uncertain and diffused This paradox was evident at all levels: macro (tourism rebound vs. conservation for future), organizational (instant guest satisfaction vs. long-term brand sustainability), HRM (urgent staffing needs vs. staff development), and individual (daily tasks vs. career or value fulfilment).

The consequence of this paradox in Hotel-MY; the *"now" often edged out the "future"*, indicating a pattern where long-term sustainability goals were continually deferred, thus remaining elusive. Several sustainability initiatives and goals are partially pursued, with execution postponed (e.g. greywater system), while promotion for short-term gains are

prioritized (e.g. flash promotions). Thus, there is a risk of long-term benefits not being recognised, and the paradox amplified – as further postponements can compound issues.

Espoused vs. Enacted Values (Organizing Paradox): Across all levels, there was a theme of espoused ideals not fully aligning with practices. Macro; lofty global standards vs. local enactment. Organizational; green branding vs. actual operational trade-offs. HRM; policy vs. practice gaps (e.g. sustainability KPIs not integrated), and individual; what employees are told vs. what they see happening. The driver of this paradox is an accumulation of symbolic management, external legitimacy pressures, and internal inertia. Hotel-MY, like many international hotel chains, projects an image of embracing dual goals ("green luxury") but struggles to internalize those ideals consistently into routines and systems – a condition often referred to as *organizational decoupling*.

The consequence is confusion and credibility issues, which both University-MY and Hotel-MY experienced in their own ways (albeit with Hotel-MY's version being more operational and customer-facing). This pattern reflects a misalignment or *horizontal inconsistency* (as discussed in Chapter 7) where different parts of the organization do not fully adhere.

Global vs. Local (Contextual Paradox): Hotel-MY had to reconcile global norms (from international headquarters or international hotel certifications), with local context (infrastructure, culture, regulatory environment). While this is a subset of the espoused vs. enacted paradox, it is worth noting separately because its underlying driver is *institutional complexity,* as the hotel is situated in a developing country context but held to developed-economy standards. This paradox led to workarounds and frustration, especially when global expectations proved hard to meet on the ground (e.g. recycling, supply chain issues). It highlights the importance of context in shaping paradox manifestations — a point deliberated in cross-case discussion.

Employee Well-being vs. Service Excellence (Performing Paradox): A more human-centric theme recurring especially at HRM and individual levels was the employee-centred paradox of *caring for employees vs. demanding maximum performance*. This is fundamentally a micro version of economic vs. social goals, but in practice, it emerged differently in Hotel-MY's narrative. The industry's norms of customer-first and the "24/7" obligation of hospitality, alongside the hotel's desire to be a responsible employer - are the main underlying drivers of this paradox. This tension manifested in long hours, stress, and occasional burnout signals among staff even as the hotel tried to implement wellness measures. The pattern is indicative

of what some HRM scholars call the "high-performance work system vs. high-quality work life" paradox. It also connects to broader debates on job quality in hospitality; how to offer *"decent work"* in an industry infamous for demanding working conditions.

The recurring tensions in Hotel-MY exhibit familiar paradox themes, yet they are constituted and experienced in ways distinctive to the hospitality sector. In this fast-paced service-driven context, paradoxes tend to be framed in highly operational terms. Managers and staff frequently interpreted this tension through a pragmatic lens: *Will a given green practice inconvenience guests or raise costs today?* This immediate, utilitarian framing shows that employees perceived the paradox, but often as a practical dilemma requiring a quick decision, rather than an abstract duality to reflect on. Similarly, the Short-Term vs. Long-Term paradox was profoundly felt as a pressure to deliver instant results in customer service and quarterly finances, even if it meant deferring investments in staff development or sustainable technology. The industry's short feedback cycles (e.g. daily guest feedback, monthly targets) cultivated a mindset that tended to privilege the *"now"* – an orientation that prolonged the cycle of postponing long-range sustainability goals. In the interviews, some Hotel-MY staff acknowledged this pattern, recognizing that the urgency of daily operations often prioritized over future-oriented initiatives. This suggests that while the individuals were aware of the temporal paradox (e.g. able to cite examples like delaying a grey-water recycling system due to more pressing needs), their engagement with it remained at the level of reactive priority-setting, rather than proactive balancing.

The underlying paradox patterns in Hotel-MY were felt and implicitly understood, but the predominant mindset treated them as ongoing trade-offs to manage, rather than puzzles to openly navigate. The hospitality sector's orientation toward action and guest satisfaction led to paradoxes being approached with a matter-of-fact pragmatism. This distinctions with the University-MY context, where paradoxes sparked more explicit discussion and identity reflection. Hotel-MY's case underscores that how paradoxes are constituted (e.g. practical conflicts vs. ideological ones) and how they are navigated (adjusted to vs. deliberated upon) can differ significantly by context.

These patterns, while analytically separable; are interrelated. This summary helps to visualize how multi-level paradoxes are nested, systemic and interlinked. For example, the social vs. financial paradox (profit vs. sustainability) is closely tied to the espoused vs. enacted paradox; because financial pressures often lead to sustainability remaining an espoused ideal rather than an enacted one (as noted in Table 5.1 for University-MY, and similarly applicable here). Likewise, the temporal paradox exacerbates the espoused vs. enacted gap – short-term urgencies prevent long-term values from being realized, reinforcing the decoupling. The belonging (identity) paradox of employees aligns with these too: when they see the organization flip-flop between values and profits, it creates identity conflict.

To illustrate these cross-level paradox themes and their drivers in Hotel-MY, Table 4 summarizes the key paradoxes identified, noting *where* they manifested (levels), giving specific examples from the case, and highlighting the observed consequences of each paradox in Hotel-MY's context. This provides a consolidated view of the multi-level tensions and serves as a diagnostic of why these tensions persisted.

Table 4: Summary of Sus-HRM Paradoxical Tensions in Hotel-MY

Paradox Type / Theme	Levels Observed	Tensions Manifestation	Unintended Consequences for Sus-HRM
Financial vs. Environmental & Social Sustainability *(Performing paradox)*	Macro Organizational HRM Individual	**Macro:** National tourism revenue goals vs. eco-conservation mandates. **Organizational:** Luxury service & revenue targets vs. costs of green initiatives. **HRM:** Labor cost savings (lean staffing) vs. employee well-being investments. **Individual:** Personal ethics vs. actions taken to please guests or save money.	Sustainability objectives often treated as secondary when profit or guest satisfaction is at stake. Short-term financial/security priorities override some green initiatives Staff perceive a gap between money vs. mission, leading to frustration when profit unswervingly "wins".

Paradox Type / Theme	Levels Observed	Tensions Manifestation	Unintended Consequences for Sus-HRM
Short-Term vs. Long-Term *(Temporal paradox)*	Macro Organizational HRM Individual	**Macro:** Emphasis on quick tourism recovery (e.g. flash promotions to boost occupancy) vs. slower long-term climate goals. **Organizational:** Meeting monthly KPIs & guest demands vs. investing in long-term green infrastructure or programs. **HRM:** Filling shifts and hitting targets now vs. staff training, career development for future. **Individual:** Daily service pressures vs. personal growth or sustained effort on sustainability.	A pattern of deferral; many sustainability initiatives are partially implemented or on paper only, with execution postponed to "off-peak" times. Long-term goals (carbon reduction, community impact) lag behind targets. Risk of future payoffs not being realized, and paradox intensifying (delays can compound challenges).
Espoused vs. Enacted **(***Credibility, or Say–Do Paradox)*	Macro Organizational HRM Individual	**Macro:** International sustainability pledges vs. local enforcement/infrastructure gaps. **Organizational:** Green branding & awards vs. operational compromises (green promises sometimes unmet). **HRM:** Formal policies (sustainability KPIs, values in hiring) vs. informal norms (rewarding traditional metrics, hiring expediency) **Individual:** "Green hotel" pride vs.	Credibility gap internally – some staff doubt management's commitment ("greenwashing" concerns). Hotel boasts zero-plastic, but still uses some plastic in areas (quietly). Externally, potential risk to reputation if gaps exposed (so far mitigated by strong PR). Employees become disengaged about sustainability, or try to ignore the contradictions.

Paradox Type / Theme	Levels Observed	Tensions Manifestation	Unintended Consequences for Sus-HRM
		witnessing wastefulness or indulgences at work.	
Global vs. Local *(Standardization vs. Localization* Paradox)	Macro Organizational HRM Individual	**Macro:** Corporate global mandates vs. local cultural/regulatory context. **Org:** Brand's standardized luxury protocols vs. need for local adaptation for sustainability. **HRM:** Global HR standards (e.g. strict compliance rules) vs. local labour practices (flexibility) **Individual:** Global training content or values vs. local work realities.	Extra effort needed to "translate" global HQ initiatives to local feasibility. At times, compliance is symbolic rather than substantive, leading to decoupling (e.g. desire to source locally collides with brand specs) Hotel finds itself innovating ad-hoc to bridge gaps, which can be resource-intensive. Staff trained with global materials sometimes find illustrations irrelevant to local guest expectations.
Employee Well-being vs. Service Excellence; Staff Sustainability (fairness, health) vs. Customer Service/Profit *(Belonging & performing paradox)*	Organizational HRM Individual	**Organizational/HRM:** Mission to be employer of choice with happy, healthy staff vs. relentless focus on guest satisfaction and financial performance. **HRM:** Providing work-life balance, fair hours vs. scheduling for optimal coverage and cost (often overtime, odd hours). **Individual:** Personal need for rest,	Staff stress and turnover continue to be challenges (e.g. sick days and attrition tend to spike after high seasons, indicating burnout cycles). Paradoxically, service quality can suffer in the long run due to staff fatigue, undermining the very excellence the hotel pursues (a fact managers recognize). This tension remains largely unresolved, pointing to a need for

Paradox Type / Theme	Levels Observed	Tensions Manifestation	Unintended Consequences for Sus-HRM
		recognition vs. internal drive or pressure to go "above and beyond" for guests constantly.	more innovative HR solutions (as will be discussed). Some employees feel torn between; take care of self/family, or meet the urgent demands of the job

Table 4 highlights that these paradoxes in Hotel-MY are deeply interwoven. For example, the Profit vs. Sustainability theme underpins the Employee well-being vs. Service tension - both are driven by an overriding profit/service philosophy. Besides that, espoused vs. enacted encapsulates many specific instances of other paradoxes (it is often the symptom when one side of a paradox dominates the other in practice). Significantly, many underlying root causes were identified (e.g. market pressures, institutional expectations, cost considerations, and cultural norms) recur across multiple paradoxes. This suggests that a relatively small set of systemic drivers generate a variety of tensions in different guises and at different levels.

The notion of nested paradox is evident: macro-level tensions create contexts in which corporate paradoxes arise, which in turn shape functional-HRM dilemmas and trickle down to individual experiences. The macro policy paradox necessitates the organization to carry both identities, which then leads to internal conflicts, and puts HRM in a bind trying to support both people and performance, ultimately leaving individuals torn between ideals and job demands. This cascading effect will be visualized in a diagram in the next section, illustrating how a tension at one level can influence another. Recognizing this multi-causal scenario helps avoid oversimplifying the paradoxes as mere "lack of effort." Instead, it shows that Hotel-MY's paradoxes are systemic, stemming from various cascading pressures and logics.

With the paradoxes and their drivers mapped out, we can better appreciate that resolving or navigating these tensions is not straightforward. As paradox theory proposes, acknowledging and understanding paradoxes is a critical step to managing them constructively. Earlier finding sets the context for the next section (6.4), which examines how Hotel-MY has responded to these paradoxes. We will see that the responses, too, operate at multiple levels and often mirror the paradoxical nature of the challenges. Figure 6.1 (in the next section) will

visually summarize how the multi-level paradoxes cascade and how various response strategies are employed by Hotel-MY to cope with or attempt to resolve these tensions.

6.4 Summary of Key Findings

The collective impact of Hotel-MY's paradoxical tensions and its navigation strategies has been a mix of modest achievements and ongoing struggles. On the positive side, Hotel-MY has maintained organizational performance, while engaging with sustainability to a degree: remaining financially viable and competitively reputable (high occupancy and guest satisfaction were sustained). Besides that, it succeeded in crafting an external image of a "green hotel" through awards and marketing. The hotel implemented several beneficial sustainability measures (e.g. green initiatives, community projects) that helped its reputation, but also yielded some cost savings and operational improvements. In other words, Hotel-MY *did enough* on both poles of the paradox in order to claim dual success at a surface level; while avoided any situation where pursuing sustainability strictly undermined service quality or profitability, and vice versa.

However, on the negative side, many paradoxes remained unresolved or only informally addressed, leading to persistent internal tensions and missed opportunities for deeper sustainability integration. Employees' feedback and internal metrics reveal that behind the green accolades, the hotel faces continuing issues. Staff burnout and turnover have not noticeably improved (despite wellness initiatives), indicating the well-being vs. service paradox is still active. Moreover, there is a perceptible undercurrent of scepticism among employees about the hotel's commitment to its espoused values — hinting at cultural fragmentation. For instance, an internal survey in 2024 (viewed during research) showed that only ~66% of employees agreed with the statement: "Hotel-MY practices what it advocates in sustainability." Additionally, while the hotel's environmental performance improved in some areas (energy and water usage per guest night improved by ~8% over three years, according to engineering data), other areas stagnated (e.g. total waste, local hiring, equitable wages). These outcomes suggest that the paradoxes were managed in a practical sense, but not "solved" — in turn weakens the overall effectiveness of sustainable HRM efforts.

In sum, the hotel largely followed a "survival and immaculate service first" judgement, integrating sustainability where it conveniently fit or added clear value, but defaulting to traditional priorities when conflicts happened. This approach achieved incremental progress, yet fell short of holistic, ambitious sustainability leadership that truly transcends paradoxes. A

key underlying reason is the implicit hierarchy of priorities that persisted: in day-to-day activities, customer satisfaction and financial imperatives consistently took precedence over sustainability commitments (similar to University-MY's case, financial and competitive concerns often surpassed social mission). In other words, the organization relied on "either-or" decisions in critical moments, reflecting the struggle of pursuing dual objectives in a high-pressure service context.

The hospitality context, with its immediate customer feedback loop and intense operational tempo, led Hotel-MY to handle sustainability tensions in a more ad-hoc, tactical manner. Crucially, the implicit hierarchy of priorities persisted at Hotel-MY, just as a similar hierarchy did at University-MY – in day-to-day decisions, customer satisfaction and financial imperatives consistently trumped sustainability commitments when trade-offs occurred. Despite the challenges, Hotel-MY demonstrated that with proactive leadership and a supportive culture, more integrative paradox navigation is possible. The few "breakthrough" initiatives (e.g. pioneering eco-friendly fine dining and community / environmental programs) were born from leaders and teams actively embracing contradictory goals and seeking innovative ways to fulfil them together. Therefore, a comparative takeaway is that cognitive capacity and mindset acted as enablers or constraints in each case: University-MY had the advantage of a mission-driven discourse that identified issues but sometimes got stuck in talk, whereas Hotel-MY excelled at executing decisions swiftly, but risked overlooking long-term integration.

Overall, Case Two (Hotel-MY) provides a rich, ground-level picture of nested paradox dynamics in the hospitality sector's approach to sustainable HRM. It shows how *sustainability-related tensions cascade from broad institutional forces down to individual service encounters*. Besides, it shows how a hospitality organization's responses can either alleviate or aggravate those tensions. The findings from Hotel-MY underscore several key insights:

I.   Context Matters: The hospitality context - with its immediate customer feedback loop and operational intensity - shapes paradox management differently than the higher education context. Hotel-MY's paradoxes were more operational and day-to-day, and its responses more ad-hoc and market-driven, compared to University-MY's more symbolic and academia-culture-driven tensions. This confirms that industry context

(service vs. education) influences both the *manifestation* of paradoxes and the feasible *management strategies*.

II.   Multi-Level Alignment is Crucial: As in University-MY, misalignment across levels (e.g. vision vs. practice, policy vs. behaviour) can stall sustainability progress. Hotel-MY's experience reinforces that aligning incentives, culture, and structures with top-level sustainability objectives is necessary to avoid constantly "swimming upstream" (bottom-up struggles) with each initiative.

III.   Paradox management requires proactive leadership and culture: A proactive, paradox-embracing leadership stance and a culture that encourages experimentation were at the heart of the few integrative successes in Hotel-MY. Where leaders allowed flexibility (e.g. top management supporting the sustainable dining concept), the paradox was navigated better. This suggests that moving beyond muddling through requires leadership willingness to invest in long-term and trust employees to innovate, as well as storytelling, that celebrates both goals together.

IV.   Continuous Navigation, Not Resolution: Hotel-MY's case echoes the notion that paradoxes in sustainability are ongoing – you don't "solve" them once and for all. Instead, the organization must continuously navigate them, adapting strategies as conditions change (Smith & Lewis, 2011). The case shows the evolution of responses over time. It highlights that; learning and flexibility are crucial – approaches may start as separation but evolve towards more integration as the organization learns what works, or as external pressures mount forcing integration.

These findings from Case Two will be further examined in Chapter 7, where we integrate insights from both cases to answer the research questions and discuss theoretical implications. In the discussion, we will compare how paradoxes manifested and were navigated in the two different sectors, and what that reveals about the role of context (RQ1 and RQ4). Then, delving into the strategies seen across cases (RQ2) and the outcomes/consequences of those strategies (RQ3), drawing on the evidence that both cases, despite contextual differences, underscore the difficulty of embedding sustainability in organizational practice and the importance of a multi-level perspective. Fundamentally, Chapter 6 has documented the multi-level paradoxes and responses in Hotel-MY, revealing a scenario that is both complementary to and contrasting with University-MY's case. Collectively, they set the stage for a richer comparative discussion on managing paradoxes in

pursuit of sustainable HRM in organizations – which the thesis will address in the following chapters.

CHAPTER 7

Discussion: The Dynamics of Sustainable HRM Paradoxes in Two Malaysian Organisations/Sectors

7.0 Overview

Structurally, this chapter first provides alignment with multi-level perspective of paradox, positioning the insights within existing paradox theory and sus-HRM frameworks. Then, it examines horizontal and vertical misalignments within the same level (horizontal), and divergences across hierarchical levels (vertical). The aim is to evaluate how findings align with or diverge from paradox theory, including any sectoral differences. Next, the chapter delves into the responses to paradoxical tensions — illustrating how individuals and organizations navigate competing sustainability demands through various strategies. Finally, the chapter further discusses the multi-level model of paradox and its application in Sus-HRM.

Fundamentally, the discussion stresses that managing sustainability tensions from a single-level perspective is incomplete and can cause sustainability initiatives to stall or fall short of their intended outcomes. This insight is especially relevant given that much of the existing paradox literature tends to concentrate on the organisational level — examining how firms respond to competing demands through strategy, structure, or culture — while paying less attention to how paradoxes emerge and interact across macro (institutional), functional (e.g. HRM), and micro (individual) levels (Smith & Lewis, 2011; Hahn et al., 2014; Schad et al., 2016). By foregrounding a systemic and nested analysis, this study contributes to the growing recognition that sustainability tensions cascade across levels and require multi-level responses (Jarzabkowski et al., 2013; Gehman et al., 2018). As an alternative, a multi-level, nested approach is necessary to complexify existing theory, in line with the complex reality.

By drawing on Jarzabkowski et al. (2013) process model of paradox, this paper situates sustainability tensions within a systemic structure in which tensions are nested across space and time and cascade across levels. Jarzabkowski and colleagues demonstrate events at macro levels can intensify paradoxes at; meso and micro levels, and that archetypal paradoxes of belonging, organizing and performing intersect between individual and aggregate levels. This insight helps explain why sustainability tensions cannot be managed in isolation; our study builds on it by tracing how environmental and social contradictions ripple through supply chains and governance structures, foregrounding the need for multi-level

sense-making and coordination. Gehman and colleagues' work on robust action (Gehman et al., 2018) adds another systemic perspective by arguing that organizations must adopt participatory architectures, multi-voice inscriptions and distributed experimentation to tackle grand challenges. Whereas their approach emphasises pragmatic strategies for engaging diverse stakeholders, this study highlight how managers oscillate between short-term operational fixes and long-term transformational goals — in doing so, extending paradox theory by showing that balancing sustainability demands requires robust stakeholder engagement and continual negotiation across levels and time horizons.

Carmine and DeMarchi (2023) argue that while paradoxes have often been treated as static or conceptual dichotomies, a richer understanding emerges when we examine how they are experienced, negotiated, and enacted by organisational actors embedded within multi-level systems. They emphasise the importance of studying paradoxes not merely as fixed tensions, but as dynamic and situated processes shaped by institutional, organisational, and individual contexts. In line with their call, this study embeds paradox theory into function-specific domains (particularly HRM) and explores how individuals and departments within service-based organisations interpret, respond to, and shape sustainability tensions. In doing so, it contributes to the sustainable HRM literature by providing empirical evidence of how paradoxes are experienced in practice, and how actors navigate them through both strategic and affective responses. This extends empirical insights by illustrating not only the cross-level nature of paradoxes, but also the recursive and nested dynamics involved in their management.

7.1 Strengthening a Systemic View on Sustainability Paradox

Fundamental to systemic tensions; is the notion of nested-ness. Nested paradoxes occur within layered hierarchies, where tensions at one level are influenced and shaped by those at higher and lower levels (Schad et al., 2016; Hahn & Knight, 2021). This study clearly demonstrates the former: that macro-level pressures, such as Malaysia's adherence to the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), generated paradoxical demands within organizations. These high-level sustainability mandates frequently clashed with local economic priorities and short-term business imperatives, creating overarching paradoxes cascading through corporate strategies and into HRM practices. Organizations struggled to effectively translate external sustainability pressures (e.g. international and national) into internal strategic actions, often resulting in symbolic rather than substantive adoption of

sustainable practices. Within HRM contexts, such uncertainty resulted in inconsistent policy implementations around recruitment, training, and performance management, further amplifying individual-level tensions. Employees frequently faced conflicting expectations, resulting in role conflicts and disengagement. Such cross-level dynamics illustrate the necessity of addressing sustainability paradoxes through integrated approaches that consider macro policies, organizational strategies, HRM practices, and individual behaviours - in harmony.

The systemic perspective highlights the interconnected nature of horizontal and vertical misalignments. Horizontal inconsistencies were evident within University-MY's various departments, which differed significantly in their prioritization of sustainability. Similarly, Hotel-MY exhibited internal conflicts between sustainability initiatives and operational objectives. These horizontal misalignments further complicated effective sustainability integration and management by compounding vertical inconsistencies. Vertical misalignments arise from conflicts between strategic sustainability intentions and operational realities, while horizontal inconsistencies reflect discrepancies across departments or sectors within the same organizational level.

In light of Smith and Lewis's (2011) dynamic equilibrium model of paradox emphasises how tensions persist and interact across organisational levels, as well as Hahn et al.'s (2015) framework that conceptualises corporate sustainability tensions as multi-level, nested, and embedded in broader systems — this study extends prior work by offering a more granular typology of organisational misalignments. While one discusses cross-level dynamics in managing paradoxes, while another highlight the interplay of competing economic, environmental, and social logics across levels — this study introduces the language of "horizontal" and "vertical" misalignments to distinguish between lateral tensions within levels and hierarchical tensions across levels. This distinction clarifies the structure of systemic tensions and enables a more diagnostic approach to sustainability paradoxes, as they shape the conditions for the emergence of nested paradoxes materialising within or across different levels of analysis.

Consistent with recent literature advocating for a systems-based approach, the study's findings underscore that sustainability paradoxes cannot be adequately addressed through isolated interventions. Carmine and DeMarchi (2023) emphasized the importance of adopting a dynamic, cyclical approach to managing sustainability paradoxes, proposing that

organizations must continuously balance competing demands across systemic and intra-organisational levels. This aligns well with the empirical evidence from this research, demonstrating the need for holistic strategies that effectively manage the ongoing interplay between top-down sustainability mandates and bottom-up organizational responses.

Figure 3: Nested Illustration of Paradox
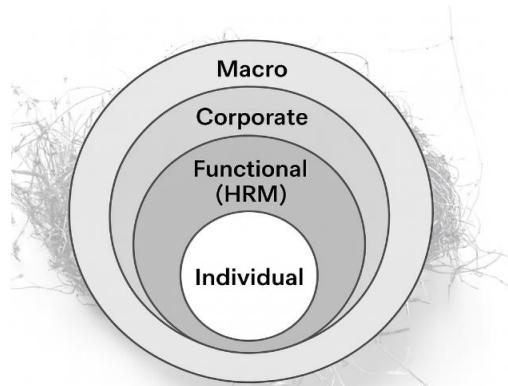
Figure 3 illustrates the nested nature of sustainability paradoxes across four analytical levels—Macro, Corporate, Functional (HRM), and Individual—using the metaphor of a bird's nest. Each concentric layer represents a level of analysis, with the outermost ring denoting systemic (macro-level) influences and the innermost circle capturing individual-level tensions. The intertwined, organic structure of the nest visually reinforces the idea that paradoxes are not isolated but are embedded within and shaped by higher-order contexts. This visual metaphor highlights how tensions and responses at the individual level are both; influenced by, and contribute to paradoxes at broader institutional, organisational, and societal levels. A graphical conceptual model would likely depict these levels and their interconnections: for instance, arrows showing that a macro paradox such as short-term national development vs. long-term environmental conservation corresponds, to an organizational temporal paradox short-term profit vs. long-term sustainability, which corresponds to an HRM paradox short-term labour vs. long-term human capital, down to an individual paradox immediate job tasks vs. career development. Furthermore, horizontal (cross-level) inconsistencies can be highlighted, such as when the organization's adopted values (corporate level) do not align with actual practices across department (functional-HRM level) — creating a misalignment that actors reported.

From the literature, typical responses or management strategies for paradoxes that can be part of the framework: strategies like separation (temporal alternate attention over time; or structural separation assign different goals to different units) and integration (find activities

that serve multiple goals, or develop new inclusive metrics). For multi-level paradoxes, an additional strategy is alignment — ensuring that mechanisms at different levels support each other (e.g. aligning HR incentives with the long-term strategy to avoid gaps). The study also note the concept of transcendence (e.g. rethinking the problem to dissolve the paradox in a systemic order). However, one must be cautious in assuming transcendence is fully achievable; in which often what looks like a synthesis, involving ongoing tensions and might be better seen as an evolving equilibrium rather than a final resolution. Some responses might appear to solve paradoxes, could just be temporal coping, or even "window dressing".

The practical application of organizational flexibility or ambidexterity; through temporally or spatially separating conflicting sustainability goals was evident in the cases studied (Smith & Lewis, 2011; Cunha & Putnam, 2019). However, the findings indicate that, although such strategies offer short-term relief, they do not mitigate underlying paradoxes in the long run. Instead, paradoxical tensions require continuous adaptive management and strategic realignment across macro, corporate, functional (HRM), and individual levels. Organizations frequently faced scenarios where paradoxes re-occurred, or evolved due to shifting internal and external contexts. Hence, sus-HRM requires dynamic capabilities: the capacity to purposefully adapt, reconfigure, and renew HR systems and practices to maintain balance between competing goals (Ehnert et al., 2016; Guerci et al., 2019).

A notable contribution of this study is the identification of how HRM functions were often treated as static responses, rather than dynamic levers for paradox navigation. This static framing stands in contrast to emerging work that positions HRM as a potential dynamic paradox navigator. Guerci et al. (2019) argue that HRM can act as a key agent in sustaining paradoxical tensions by fostering learning, dialogue, and innovation across time. From this view, HRM becomes a dynamic capability; ability to flexibly reconfigure talent systems, reward structures, or organisational routines in response to evolving tensions. This study adds empirical depth by showing that while organisations may conceptually 'accept' sustainability tensions, their HR practices often fail to reflect this complexity. In its place, HR practices default to compartmentalised and static approaches, which offer symbolic reassurance but lack the agility to support transformative change.

The paradoxical tensions around sustainability are not confined to organizations – they are evident at the macro level, where policymakers and international bodies juggle conflicting imperatives. Sustainability research recognises that such tensions manifest at the societal and

institutional spheres, where competing logics create contradictory expectations for organizations (Schad et al., 2016; Hahn and Knight, 2021). In Malaysia's context, the government's commitment to the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) may clash with domestic economic and political priorities. Transnational frameworks such as the SDGs exemplify this macro paradox: they call for all nations to pursue low-carbon, inclusive growth, thereby placing developing economies under pressure to curb emissions (United Nations, 2015), even as they seek to improve livelihoods National agencies and ministries also experience nested paradoxes – for example, the Ministry of Education and Ministry of Tourism and Culture may encourage organizations to embed sustainability, while the Ministry of Finance prioritises fiscal discipline and short-term growth, thus sending mixed signals to institutional actors. Malaysia's participated in global climate accords and developed its own 2030 Agenda blueprints (Economic Planning Unit, 2021), yet these commitments often coexist with pro-growth industrial policies. Such policy-level ambivalence exemplifies macro-level paradox navigation, which cascades downward shaping the unstable context in which organizations attempt to balance global sustainability mandates with on-the-ground practicality.

At the micro level, the findings confirm that individual actors felt pressure to achieve short-term performance goals while upholding long-term sustainability values — reflecting the multi-level mirroring of paradoxes (Guerci et al., 2019). Some individuals responded constructively by adopting a paradox mindset – accepting both poles of tension simultaneously and employing creative sensemaking to reconcile contradictions (Smith and Lewis, 2011; Schad et al., 2016). However, frontline staff and middle managers, lacking systemic support, often reacted with stress, cynicism, or disengagement when sustainability initiatives appeared symbolic or imposed (Wong and Chua, 2021). Others compartmentalised sustainability efforts, engaging selectively when convenient, or resisted directives that conflicted with immediate operational priorities. These varied responses highlight that individuals are not passive recipients of organizational strategies, but active interpreters and navigators of paradoxical demands. Recognising and supporting employees' identity work and coping strategies through; training, participation, and aligned incentives, is indeed critical.

In conclusion, this research robustly aligns with systemic and nested paradox perspectives by empirically validating the complex, multi-level interplay of sustainability tensions within organizations. It provides evidence supporting the proposition that sustainability paradoxes represent enduring systemic challenges necessitating comprehensive, adaptive strategies. Moreover, by exploring sector-specific contexts, this study advances theoretical and practical understandings of how sustainability paradox dynamics uniquely manifest across organizational settings, contributing insights to sus-HRM literature.

7.2 Horizontal and Vertical Misalignments: A Diagnostic View

While paradox theory defines a paradox as "contradictory, yet interrelated elements that exist simultaneously and persist over time", in sustainability and human resource management contexts; such contradictions are not confined to a single arena; they are nested across macro, organisational and individual levels. By analysing through the lens of paradox theory, this section emphasizes the interdependence of different analytical levels and the recursive nature of tensions (Smith & Lewis, 2011; Hahn et al., 2014; Carmine & DeMarchi, 2023).

In the findings, national development policies that encourage both rapid economic growth and environmental stewardship produce tensions that organisations must enact simultaneously. These macro-level tensions fill organisational strategies, creating dilemmas such as mission versus margin in universities and luxury versus eco-efficiency in hotels. These organisational tensions, in turn, cascade down to individual employees who must reconcile personal values with job demands. The cascading effects illustrate the concept of nested or systemic paradoxes (Schad et al., 2016): tensions at higher levels create or amplify paradoxes at lower levels and vice versa.

The data suggest that, alongside these nested paradoxes, misalignment within and across levels of analysis constitutes a distinct analytical lens. Horizontal misalignments describe conflicts between parallel functions or units operating at the same level. These lateral tensions are not paradoxes per se; rather, they arise from inconsistent goals, resources and practices between parallel departments. For instance, identifying them helps explain why sustainability efforts become siloed and why teams or units within an organization may resist sustainability agendas that appear to compromise short-term targets.

Vertical misalignments occur when there is a disconnect between hierarchical levels—between macro policy, organisational strategy and day-to-day practice (Hahn et al., 2015). For example, national policies demanded sustainability but provided inconsistent incentives, leaving organisations to interpret and implement conflicting messages.

Similarly, top management espoused sustainability rhetoric but failed to provide resources or adapt core HR policies (e.g., promotion criteria), leading employees to perceive hypocrisy. These gaps between "talk" and "action" created cascading tensions: employees experienced value conflicts and disengagement, while middle managers, oscillated between organisational directives and operational constraints. Vertical misalignments, therefore, capture the cascading nature of misfits across hierarchical levels and help diagnose why good intentions fail to translate into coherent action, or in other words, why paradoxes continue to emerge.

Nested paradoxes describe how contradictory demands at one level (e.g., growth versus sustainability at the macro level) become intertwined with and intensify tensions at another level. Misalignment, by contrast, refers to the structural or functional inconsistencies (in goals, incentives or practices) that exacerbate those paradoxes. A vertical misalignment can amplify a nested paradox by leaving front-line staff to reconcile incompatible directives without support, while a horizontal misalignment can generate conflict between departments that should be collaborating toward integrated sustainability objectives. Recognising misalignments thus allowing actors to pinpoint where alignment mechanisms are lacking and to design interventions (e.g., integrated performance metrics, cross-functional teams) that could reduce paradoxical tensions.

By introducing the language of horizontal and vertical misalignment, this study offers a more granular diagnostic vocabulary for understanding how sustainability paradoxes are reproduced across complex organisations. This framing does not replace the concept of nested paradoxes, but complements it: as nested paradoxes explain why tensions persist across levels, while misalignments highlight where structural or behavioural gaps allow those tensions to aggravate. Accordingly, the study contributes to paradox theory and sustainable HRM by illuminating the architecture of organisational tensions and by suggesting that alignment checks across, and within levels could become a practical tool for managing sustainability paradoxes.

7.2.1 Horizontal Misalignments (Intra-level)

Horizontal inconsistencies occur within the same level of analysis, but across different actors, functions, or organizations. In this study, horizontal paradoxical tensions emerged in all four primary domains: misalignments at the regulatory level (macro), the managerial level (corporate), functional (HRM) level, and in professional values and priorities (individual).

The notion of nested paradox (Cunha & Putnam, 2019) is useful in illuminating these findings. Horizontal inconsistencies at one level can exacerbate or trigger tensions at other levels, and vice versa, nesting multiple paradoxes within a broader system. For example, inconsistent macro-level regulations (horizontal misalignment among policy actors) can influence vertical misalignment between government sustainability goals and an organization's sustainability strategy. Thus, making it harder for a university or hotel to respond consistently. Similarly, an internal departmental conflict at the corporate level can cause further vertical contradictions; from top management to front-line staff - as messages get mixed or diluted. In this way, the horizontal tensions are not isolated; they are entwined with vertical inconsistencies, reinforcing a systemic web of paradoxes that spans across and within levels. This insight strengthens the thesis's anchoring in paradox theory by showing that to fully understand sustainability tensions, one must consider how intra-level contradictions (horizontal) occurs within inter-level sphere (vertical) in a dynamic, reinforcing cycle.

Moreover, recognizing these horizontal inconsistencies is crucial for advancing sus-HRM practices. They highlight that achieving sustainability in organizations is also about harmonizing efforts across functions and actors at the same level. For sus-HRM, this implies a need for cross-functional collaboration and coherence. For instance, integrating sustainability criteria into performance appraisals, training, and rewards, so that HRM is not at odds with sustainability goals. Employees, in turn, should be engaged and supported to embrace unified sustainability values in their daily roles (through communication, involvement in decision-making, and empowerment to innovate).

Figure 4: Horizontal Misalignments
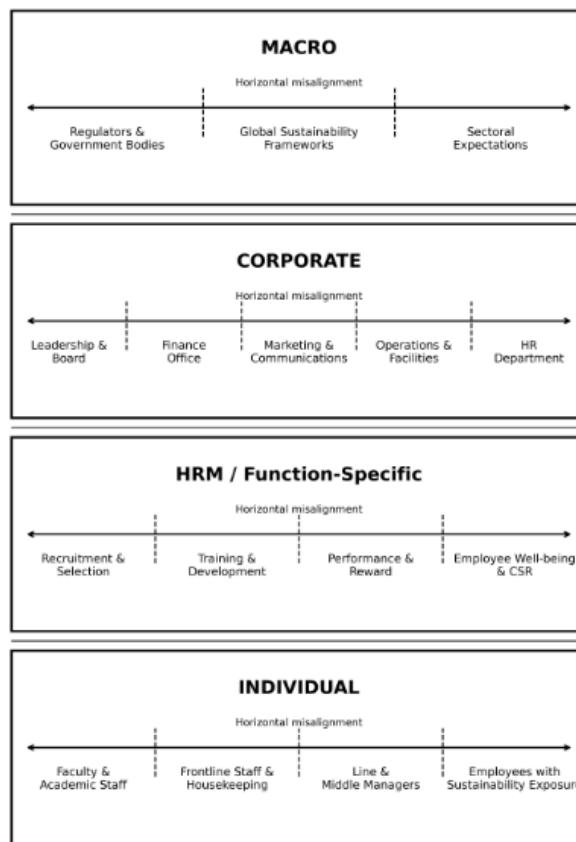
Figure 4 illustrates the horizontal misalignments observed within and between core organisational functions—namely corporate leadership, HRM systems, and operational units; across both University-MY and Hotel-MY. Besides that, macro-level inconsistencies were also found in both sectors. These misalignments and inconsistencies manifested as divergent priorities, communication breakdowns, and contradictory sustainability interpretations across departments.

7.2.1.1 Macro-Level

At the macro level, conflicting sustainability regulations and policies across different authorities and regions created indecision for organizations. In Malaysia's HEI sector, governmental regulations on environmental sustainability were lacking, leading each university to interpret and implement sustainability initiatives differently. In the hospitality sector, local environmental mandates contradicted international standards adopted by multinational hotel chains, resulting in operational confusion in green hotel practices. These horizontal misalignments among regulators and policy frameworks reflect a paradox at the

policy level, where high-level sustainability commitments clash with inconsistent or competing regulatory requirements - undermining coherent action. Actors at this level (e.g. various government agencies and industry regulators) sometimes contradicted each other, illustrating how cross-agency tension can send mixed signals to organizations attempting sustainable practices.

This finding reflects what Hahn et al. (2015) conceptualise as paradoxical tensions at the institutional level, where sustainability commitments made in principle (e.g. SDG adoption, national policy rhetoric) often conflict with the fragmented regulatory infrastructures designed to enforce them. The horizontal misalignments observed (e.g. across government ministries, state agencies, and international regulators) undermine vertical alignment and create implementation gaps for organizations situated at the receiving end of these policies.

At the macro level, these findings highlight that top-level sustainability commitments often operate within a fragmented policy environment. Literature on policy coherence stresses that horizontal incoherence—where ministries or agencies issue conflicting policies at the same level — frequently undermines sustainability goals (Mok., 2019; Baum, 2018). From an institutional perspective, such contradictions are well understood as arising from competing and overlapping institutional logics, where actors must negotiate between divergent expectations and rationalities (Greenwood et al., 2011). These conflicts generate what Smith and Lewis (2011) termed performing paradoxes, in which organizations are compelled to simultaneously fulfil economic, social, and environmental objectives. The evidence from Malaysia's HEI and hospitality sectors demonstrates how these forms of incoherence and paradox interact: universities and hotels encountered contradictory directives from different ministries and regulators. By foregrounding these institutional contradictions, the study extends past accounts of sustainability governance (Hahn et al., 2015) by showing that macro-level sustainability misalignments may stem from weak vertical enforcement, but also from systemic horizontal inconsistencies and conflicting institutional logics across regulators. This underscores the importance of cross-agency coordination mechanisms if sustainability commitments, such as the SDGs, are to be translated into clear organizational action.

7.2.1.2 Corporate-Level

The findings illustrates how conflicting departmental logics and priorities: between leadership, HR, and line units; created fragmented sustainability practices within both cases. At the corporate level, the data uncovers how divergent priorities across departments

produced internal conflicts that impeded coherent sustainability integration. In University-MY, the finance department's reluctance to approve further investments in sustainability (e.g. citing pressing budgetary constraints), clashed with top management's ambition to mainstream sustainability across curricula and operational processes. In Hotel-MY, a similar divide emerged: while operations managers focused on tangible sustainability improvements such as energy efficiency and waste reduction, marketing teams actively promoted a polished green brand narrative that was not always grounded in actual practice. These examples illustrate horizontal misalignment within organizations, where departmental silos foster competing logics (e.g. financial prudence, strategic image management, or sustainability innovation).

This organizational fragmentation aligns with organizing paradoxes: where efforts to pursue innovation and environmental responsibility simultaneously with efficiency and accountability create persistent tensions. The departments in both cases pursued "legitimate but competing" goals (Hahn et al., 2015), leading to internal contradictions that were difficult to reconcile without deliberate coordination mechanisms.

While previous literature often treats the corporate level as a unified actor in sustainability discourse (Bansal & Song, 2017; van Bommel, 2018), the empirical data from University-MY and Hotel-MY suggest that sustainability becomes fragmented among mid- and upper-level managers, as each functional unit champions its own priorities under the banner of sustainability. Thus, this insight extends the multi-level paradox framework by illustrating that corporate-level sustainability challenges are not merely vertical (top-down or bottom up) implementation gaps, but horizontal paradoxes of coordination and meaning-making. The role of key actors is central; without integrative leadership or cross-functional collaboration, well-intended sustainability efforts risk becoming isolated, contradictory, or even symbolic.

7.2.1.3 Functional (HRM) Level

At the functional (HRM) level, the findings reveal how human resource managers were caught in paradoxical tensions between advancing sustainability initiatives and meeting traditional performance and efficiency expectations. In University-MY, the HR manager championed sustainability through green training initiatives and the promotion of environmentally responsible workplace behaviours. However, these initiatives remained decoupled from core HR mechanisms: formal performance evaluations continued to prioritise academic outputs and short-term economic goals. Similarly, in Hotel-MY, recruitment

policies increasingly favoured candidates with sustainability competencies, signalling a strategic shift toward green talent acquisition. Yet, at the same time, HR policies prioritised labour cost containment, especially during high-demand or crisis periods, leading to tensions between long-term workforce development and short-term operational efficiency.

These findings resonate with existing scholarship on Sustainable HRM which highlights inherent contradictions in attempting to integrate sustainability into HR systems traditionally driven by economic rationality (Ehnert, 2009; Renwick et al., 2013). The study extends this body of work by offering empirical evidence of horizontal misalignments within HRM functions themselves; where efforts to promote employee well-being, sustainability training, and value-driven recruitment are undermined by entrenched logics of control, cost-efficiency, and short-termism.

Moreover, the COVID-19 crisis suggestively exposed this paradox. While both organizations had well-being and engagement programmes in place, these were swiftly suspended or deprioritised in favour of austerity measures (e.g. pay cuts, hiring freezes, and increased workload expectations) when financial survival became critical. These data points illustrate what Guerci et al. (2019) term the "double bind" of sustainable HRM: the expectation to simultaneously serve as a change agent and a guardian of efficiency under uncertainty.

drive meaningful environmental and social sustainability will remain unrealized.

The novelty of this study lies in uncovering how these tensions play out not only between HRM and other departments but within HRM itself, where different arms of the same function (e.g. training, performance appraisal, recruitment, and workforce planning) operate under conflicting temporal and strategic logics. This intra-functional fragmentation deepens the understanding of how sus-HRM paradoxes are not only vertical implementation gaps, but lateral tensions between competing HR priorities - requiring HR leaders to navigate a complex terrain of competing institutional logics

7.2.1.4 Individual Level

At the individual level, the study reveals how employees within the same organization held divergent values and interpretations of sustainability, resulting in inconsistent practices and internalised tensions in day-to-day work. In University-MY, some faculty and administrative staff viewed environmental sustainability initiatives as ancillary or performative, particularly when such initiatives appeared driven by branding motives rather than genuine organisational

transformation. For these individuals, sustainability was seen as a distraction from core academic responsibilities such as research productivity, student outcomes, and institutional rankings. Others, however, actively sought to embed sustainability in meaningful ways, integrating it into course curricula, research agendas, or operational behaviours.

This divergence illustrates what Hahn et al. (2015) describe as individual-level cognitive and behavioural tensions: employees are often pulled between personal values and perceived institutional priorities. The resulting horizontal misalignment among peers within the same professional level reveals that sustainability is not only a strategic or structural concern but also a matter of identity and philosophical commitment. The university context particularly amplified this, as academic freedom and disciplinary silos reinforced individual autonomy, making collective alignment around sustainability more difficult to achieve.

In Hotel-MY, similar horizontal paradoxes emerged, though shaped by the nature of service work. Frontline staff (e.g. housekeeping and guest services) often experienced tension between applying eco-friendly practices (e.g. reducing laundry frequency, minimising plastic use) and meeting guest expectations for luxury, immediacy, and comfort. These employees were frequently required to make situational trade-offs, which created a kind of micro-paradox in their roles (Sharma & Bansal, 2017). For example, a housekeeper might enforce sustainability protocols in one instance, yet feel compelled to break them moments later when faced with a demanding guest. These micro-level inconsistencies were not signs of negligence, but rather adaptive responses to competing logics embedded in their roles.

The data contributes empirical insight by highlighting that paradoxes at the individual level are not merely reflections of top-down tensions, but often emerge horizontally among peers or even within the same person over time. This challenges the often-assumed consistency of individual agency in sustainability discourse, showing instead, how role complexity, relational expectations, and situational ambiguity generate deep personal tensions. Employees, particularly in service and academic professions, must continually negotiate between internalised values, external pressures, and institutional signals, often without clear guidance or support structures. This underscores the importance of viewing sustainability not only as a strategic or organisational challenge, but as a psychosocial and identity-based tension at the frontline of practice; where values, norms, and expectations intersect in complex and contradictory ways.

7.2.2 Vertical Misalignments (Inter-Level)

Vertical misalignment in this study refers to paradoxical tensions that arise from inconsistencies between hierarchical levels - macro, corporate, HRM, and individual, in pursuing sustainability. Earlier findings identify vertical misalignments as a core theme, revealing how sustainability objectives and practices at higher levels often clash with or fail to translate into actions at lower levels. This pattern reflects what Hahn & Knight (2021) describe as the competing logics of economic, social, and environmental priorities operating at different levels of decision-making. In other words, sustainability paradoxes are not confined to any single level; they are embedded in broader institutional and organizational contexts (Smith & Lewis, 2011). Temporal tensions further exacerbate these vertical paradoxes: long-term sustainability goals set at the macro and corporate levels frequently conflict with short-term imperatives and expectations at HRM and individual levels (Schad & Bansal, 2018). Hierarchical differences can result in top-down sustainability goals that are misaligned with bottom-up realities (Hahn & Figge, 2011), leading to implementation gaps in practice. The visual representation below depicts the trickle-down nature of paradoxical tensions:

Figure 5: Vertical Misalignment

Figure 5 visualises the cascading dynamics of paradoxes across levels, from macro institutional pressures down to individual experiences, and maps the corresponding organisational responses. The arrows and boxes illustrate how macro-level global sustainability agendas interact with local contextual demands, filtering through corporate policies, HRM systems, and ultimately shaping frontline employee behaviours.While prior studies have treated paradoxes as either strategic or operational, the data here shows that organizing, performing, belonging, and learning tensions co-exist and cascade, demanding multi-level navigation. This insight has implications for how organisations structure accountability, training, and communication across departments and roles, especially in sectors grappling with both sustainability transitions and economic constraints

In the findings, Malaysia's national sustainability policies and international commitments; as the UNSDGs set broad objectives at the macro level, but these often conflicted with localized, short-term economic pressures and regulatory priorities. For instance, in the private HEI sector, global sustainability frameworks were adopted in principle and showcased through symbolic initiatives, yet University-MY did not sufficiently address local challenges - like equitable access to education. In the hospitality sector, macro-level pressures (government regulations and industry certifications) emphasized environmental compliance and eco-certification. However, Hotel-MY remained focused on operational efficiency and green hotel practices, often neglecting deeper social sustainability goals. This misalignment between macro-level aspirations and corporate-level actions represents a vertical paradox: policies promote sustainability broadly, but organizational practices prioritize immediate economic survival, echoing the well-known tension of "doing well" vs "doing good" (Margolis et al., 2009).

At the corporate level, the data suggested that sustainability strategies were inconsistently integrated into HRM practices and day-to-day management. University-MY often championed ambitious environmental and social missions in their official statements, yet lacked formal incentives to engage faculty and staff in achieving these missions. Similarly, in the hospitality case, Hotel-MY's leadership articulated commitment to green initiatives, but its cost-driven management approach limited the ability to invest in long-term sustainability projects. These corporate-level tensions trickled down to function-specific (HRM) level. Sus-HRM practices were not fully embedded at this level, as HR policies did not consistently incorporate sustainability objectives. For example, the university's HR department placed

minimal emphasis on sustainability in recruitment, performance appraisals, or staff development, while the hotel's HR policies were constrained by short-term labour cost considerations. This confirms prior observations that corporate sustainability initiatives often remain dissociated from HRM implementation (Smith & Tracey, 2016), resulting in inconsistent or superficial implementation of sustainable practices at the HRM level.

The outcomes of these misalignments were evident at the individual level, where employees and faculty members faced tensions between the sustainability ideals promoted by top management and the operational realities of their work. Staff often received mixed messages: they were encouraged to support sustainability goals (e.g., by participating in environmental initiatives or community projects), yet they were evaluated primarily on efficiency, productivity, and other traditional performance metrics. This disconnect essentially a clash between *performing* for efficiency and *organizing* for sustainability - leading to frustration and disengagement among employees.

Consistent with Hengst et al. (2020), the case studies showed that; when sustainability goals are imposed without adequate resources, clarity, or alignment; individuals struggle to reconcile competing demands. Limited resources, ambiguous guidelines, unclear performance targets at lower levels exacerbated these tensions and causing many employees to perceive sustainability initiatives as add-on tasks rather than integral to their job role.

The analysis demonstrates that vertical paradoxes are nested and systemic, rather than isolated difficulties. In line with Smith and Lewis (2011), the organizations experience paradoxes as interwoven across levels: a tension at one level can intensify tensions at another. For example, a macro-level policy emphasizing long-term environmental sustainability may create pressure at the corporate level to invest in green infrastructure and technologies. If the corporation responds by introducing new sustainability-structured duties for staff without adjusting workloads or metrics, HRM-level tension emerges, which in turn creates individual-level stress and scepticism.

Such nested tensions create recuring loops of paradox: attempting to resolve a high-level tension (e.g., aligning with international sustainability standards) inadvertently generates new issues at the ground level. This echo the idea of *cascading paradoxes* (Hahn et al, 2015; Schad & Bansal, 2018), wherein institutional pressures and strategic responses generate contradictions downward through the organization's hierarchy. These high-level paradoxes

cascaded downward, creating tension for frontline employees, who experienced them in the form of daily operational trade-offs (Hahn & Figge, 2011). Staff were expected to adopt sustainable practices (organizing) while maintaining high levels of efficiency and output (performing), often without adequate tools, resources, or recognition. Unlike earlier studies that generalise these tensions (e.g. Bansal & Song, 2017), this research reveals the everyday lived experiences of such paradoxes in Malaysia's service sector, contributing granular evidence of how sustainability tensions are internalised by individuals under systemic constraint.

In summary, vertical misalignment in sus-HRM is characterized by the inconsistencies between top-level sustainability aspirations and ground-level implementation, as well as amplified by the nesting of paradoxes across levels. Conceptually, the findings reinforce systemic paradox theory by providing empirical evidence that sustainability tensions are interdependent and layered, rather than one dimensional. Empirically, the findings show how sustainability misalignments plays out in two different service sectors: in private HEI sector, global sustainability ideals often remained symbolic, whereas in the hospitality sector, market imperatives tended to weaken long-term sustainability commitments. These vertical inconsistencies, coupled with aforementioned horizontal inconsistencies within each level (e.g., conflicts among departments or stakeholder groups); compound the difficulty of achieving sustainable HRM.

7.3 Navigating Paradoxical Tensions

The steering of paradoxical tensions in sustainability has gained increasing attention in the literature, particularly from system-oriented perspectives that view paradoxes as persistent features to be engaged with rather than problems to be solved (Hahn & Knight 2021). In this study, navigating paradoxes refers to the strategies and responses through which different actors; policymakers, organizational leaders, HR managers, and employees, attempt to navigate and balance competing sustainability and performance demands. Here, we bridge insights from paradox theory with the findings observed in the two sectors, highlighting both common approaches and sector-specific dynamics in addressing sustainability tensions.

At the macro level, the focus is create enabling frameworks that encourage alignment between sustainability goals and organizational practice. Regulatory frameworks, industry collaborations, and public sustainability initiatives were deployed in Malaysia to manage

sustainability paradoxes at the national and sectoral level (van der Byl & Slawinski, 2015). For example, government bodies promoted green certifications and sustainability awards in higher education and hospitality, attempting to frame sustainability not as a constraint, but as an opportunity for innovation and competitive advantage (Cunha & Putnam, 2019).

At the organizational level, companies increasingly embed sustainability into their core strategies to promote alignment between financial and sustainability objectives (Hahn et al., 2014). Both University-MY and Hotel-MY motioned commitment by integrating sustainability into their mission and values, and establishing dedicated structures (e.g., sustainability committees and officer roles). In organizational theory, paradox management strategies include structural separation (creating dedicated units or roles to handle sustainability) and temporal separation (pursuing competing goals in different time horizons) as ways to cope with tensions (Smith & Tracey, 2016; Slawinski & Bansal, 2015). The findings observed evidence of these responses: the case organizations created special task and working groups for sustainability initiatives, and they sometimes alternated between periods of focusing on short-term efficiency and periods of investing in longer-term sustainability projects. Such mechanisms reflect ambidexterity in organizational design enabling firms to juggle paradoxical goals by allocating separate structures or time frames to each. Cross-functional collaboration was also used to manage tensions. Overall, these strategies indicate intentional efforts at the corporate level to navigate paradoxes, in line with research suggesting that organizations can be designed to be ambidextrous in the face of competing demands.

HRM practices form a bridge between lofty sustainability goals and day-to-day employee behaviour. The evolution of sus-HRM literature emphasizes HR's role in aligning employee attitudes and skills with sustainability objectives (Ehnert, 2009; Jabbour & Santos, 2008). In theory, practices such as Green HRM (e.g., eco-friendly recruitment and selection, sustainability training, and rewards for green performance) and common-good HRM are meant to embed sustainability into the fabric of workforce management. Findings suggest that both case organizations implemented some sus-HRM initiatives. Recruitment and training were irregularly tailored to emphasize sustainability competencies, and there were instances of incorporating environmental or social criteria into performance evaluations (Renwick et al., 2013). Flexible work arrangements and employee empowerment programs were introduced in a limited capacity to mitigate conflicts between operational efficiency and

sustainability commitments, echoing recommendations in the literature (Ehnert et al., 2014). Moreover, involving employees in sustainability-related decision-making; through suggestion schemes or volunteering in sustainability teams was recognized as a way to ensure top-level commitments translated into action (Greenwood et al., 2011; Buller & McEvoy, 2016).

Despite these efforts, a notable insight from the study is that; meaningful employee involvement in sustainability decision-making was largely confined to higher organizational levels or to specific "champion" roles, while lower-level actors remained on the sideline of formal sustainability planning. In both sectors, HR departments facilitated sustainability training and awareness programs, yet rarely had the authority to change core HR systems or policies to favour sustainability outcomes. This gap suggests a hierarchical orientation in paradox management: senior leaders drive sustainability initiatives, but frontline employees often have to cope with decisions made above them, rather than actively influencing those decisions. Such findings align with Hahn et al. (2015) and Gaim et al. (2022), who argue that creating a culture of reflexivity and empowering individuals are critical for navigating evolving and cascading paradoxes. In the two cases, the lack of empowerment limited the organizations' ability to benefit from the full potential of the workforce - in addressing sustainability tensions. To analyse how individuals actually responded to the tensions, the study applied Putnam et al.'s (2016) framework of coping, more-than, and acceptance responses.

Table 5: Comparative analysis of Responses in Addressing Sustainability Paradoxes

	Response Type	Example from HEI	Example from Hospitality	HRM Role
1.	Coping	One-off sustainability lectures or student events added to existing programs. Symbolic initiatives (e.g., green campus branding, signing ceremonial) without meaningful curriculum or research integration.	Operational tweaks like biodegradable straws or energy-saving lights implemented by mid-level managers.	Supportive through basic training and communication, but not embedded into core HR systems.
2.	Acceptance	Not Evident	Not Evident	Side-lined to administrative and operational roles
3.	More-than	Establishing a net-zero energy building and interdisciplinary sustainability centre led by academic leaders.	Eco-conscious dining experiences and conservation programs; that also serve marketing purposes.	Selective integration of sustainability in recruitment and onboarding (more evident in hospitality).

Table 5 offers a comparative typology of the organisational responses employed in addressing sustainability paradoxes, using categories such as coping, acceptance and 'more-than' responses. These responses were mapped according to their orientation and degree of transformation. The response typology illustrates how both institutions employed coping and symbolic responses, though both organizations adopted 'more-than' strategies in selected domains. Through applying these categories, the study draws on conceptual typologies from past literature (Putnam et al., 2016; Hengst et al, 2020). However, the contribution here is not simply to reproduce these labels, but to empirically extend them by illustrating how these responses play out in nested, multi-level ways. Effectively, showing how sectoral and institutional contexts shape the prevalence, form, and depth of each response; and revealing how HRM functions both reflect and reinforce the limited progression from coping to transformative action.

Acceptance response strategies involve acknowledging the persistent nature of paradoxical tensions and embracing both competing demands as simultaneously valid and interdependent (Smith & Lewis, 2011). Despite widespread acknowledgement of conflicting goals by respondents; the findings reveal that genuine acceptance, as defined by paradox theory, was largely absent. According to Smith and Lewis's (2011) dynamic equilibrium model,

acceptance involves deeply valuing and persistently holding both poles of a paradox. However, in practice, responses in University-MY and Hotel-MY often result to coping or instrumental integration, falling short of this theoretical threshold.

In University-MY, faculty and administrators recognized the tension between academic excellence and environmental responsibility. Yet, when trade-offs intensified; sustainability goals consistently gave way to performance metrics tied to funding and career advancement. For instance, while lecturers might support green initiatives, their day-to-day decisions prioritised teaching KPIs and publication targets. Similarly, in Hotel-MY, managers recognised the paradox between sustainability and profitability, but operational decisions reflected a preference for low-cost, non-disruptive initiatives. These findings align with Hahn et al. (2014), who describe how organisational responses to paradox often remain rhetorical, especially when resource constraints or performance pressures dominate.

Some actors engaged in coping strategies, yet still alleviating "symptoms" of tension rather than undertaking the underlying paradox. Coping often involved implementing incremental changes or compartmentalizing conflicting goals. In University-MY, a common coping approach was to integrate sustainability in small doses: adding a one-off sustainability lectures / projects to a course, organizing sporadic campus greening events - without overhauling the core curriculum or research priorities. These efforts, while positive, remained uneven and were not institutionally enforced and indicated a short-term balancing act that addressed tension without fully integrating sustainability into the overarching mission. In Hotel-MY, coping manifest in: low-cost, operational green hotel practices (e.g., using biodegradable straws, installing energy-efficient lighting, encouraging guests to reuse towels). These measures were usually led by mid-level managers or employees and were constrained; so as not to interfere with guest satisfaction or revenue.

Consistent with previous research (Filho et al., 2025; Goh & Jie, 2019), sustainability initiatives were regularly implemented for branding or cost-saving reasons, rather than as part of a comprehensive sustainability strategy. The findings also found that both organizations sometimes coped by creating ad-hoc teams, or assigning specific "sustainability champs" to handle sustainability projects - effectively isolating the paradox in a silo. While this relieved pressure on other units (allowing frontline staff to focus on their primary duties), it limited the long-term impact of sustainability efforts and prevented widespread organizational learning. Notably, HR departments supported coping efforts through basic training and

communication, but they did not modify performance incentives to make sustainability a sustained organizational priority. This observation aligns with Renwick et al. (2013), who argue that; without deep integration into HR systems, sustainability tends to remain at a superficial level in organizations.

Moreover, the creation of siloed sustainability units in both cases (e.g. outside core operational or academic structures) allowed organisations to "manage the paradox" by isolating it. While these units alleviated frontline pressure, they also limited cross-organisational learning and long-term integration. This practice represents a key empirical contribution in Malaysia, as only a few studies have shown how coping manifests through organisational compartmentalisation in Asia — effectively restricts the pathways for knowledge exchange and world-wide integration.

Beyond coping, the data observed occurrences of proactive responses - efforts that embrace paradoxes as drivers of innovation, and seek integrative solutions going beyond business. These "more-than" responses (Hengst et al., 2020) treat sustainability tensions as opportunities to innovate and change practices, rather than as limitations to be managed. Both sectors exhibited "more-than" responses, but were driven by different motivations and led by different actors.

In University-MY, academic autonomy enabled bold sustainability actions, such as the creation of an interdisciplinary research centre and the construction of a net-zero energy building: a first in the region. These initiatives integrated sustainability into research, infrastructure, and student learning, signalling a paradox-transcending move that advanced institutional prestige, environmental goals, and educational missions simultaneously. Such actions were championed by senior administrators and faculty leaders, demonstrating that autonomy and values alignment can enable transformational responses, even in resource-constrained contexts.

In contrast, Hotel-MY's "more-than" strategies were market-driven. To differentiate in a highly competitive environment, the hotel pursued green certifications, sustainable fine-dining concepts, and curated eco-conscious guest experiences. Sustainability here was positioned not as a cost, but as a source of brand value and customer appeal. These findings contribute empirically by showing that proactive responses may be commercially viable, but

only when external pressures (e.g. competition, consumer demand) and internal capabilities (e.g. leadership, staff buy-in) align.

Besides that, the cross-level analysis found that real transformative responses tended to occur when actors received strong leadership support and organizational flexibility. However, these conditions were more present at the upper levels (macro and corporate), and less so at the operational core (function-specific and individual). For instance, top managers or regulators can offer resources and autonomy in sustainability projects, but lower-level staff typically lack the authority or slack to implement "more-than" actions in their daily routines. In the cases, the most sizable initiatives were driven by senior administrators (e.g., a deputy vice-chancellor) or specialized sustainability roles, rather than by staff or lecturers. This indicates a need to empower lower-level actors if organizations wish to sustain such paradox-transcending approaches more widely.

While prior studies often theorise proactive responses abstractly (Jarzabkowski et al, 2013), this research provides empirical evidence of what enables, or constrains them across different sectors. More importantly, it shows that such responses rarely emerge from frontline units alone. The main reason being the responses depend on the presence of authoritative champions, cross-functional collaboration, and institutional flexibility, conditions more accessible at the macro and corporate levels, than at the operational level.

The data also underscore the limited strategic role of HRM in navigating paradoxes, despite its potential as a lever for integration. While HR supported sustainability through basic onboarding or awareness programmes, it hardly influenced recruitment, incentive design, or overall sustainability strategies. In Hotel-MY: some progress was evident (e.g. hiring for green competencies), but efforts were largely ad-hoc and lacked system-wide adoption. In University-MY: transformative sustainability initiatives were driven by academic departments and student groups, with HR often relegated to an administrative role. Besides that, the findings reinforce Jabbour and Santos's (2008) view that HR's contribution to sustainability is contingent on its empowerment and integration within broader strategy. The empirical contribution here; showing how HRM's side-lining restricts the organisation's ability to move from coping to proactive responses - especially at the lower levels of implementation.

In sum, the navigation responses analysis offers rich, context-sensitive data from underexplored sectors (Malaysian private HEIs and hospitality) where sustainability tensions are shaped by unique regulatory, cultural, and market logics. Understanding how these dynamics unfold in Southeast Asia is critical, given the region's unique blend of hierarchical governance, rapid economic development pressures, and cultural norms that influence how sustainability is framed, communicated, and implemented. It further extends current paradox literature by showing how responses to sustainability tensions are nested across levels, designed by sector, and conditioned by HRM's role. In contrast to prior work that treats paradox responses as either; static or binary, this study reveals dynamic, context-contingent configurations, where coping and "more-than" strategies may co-exist and shift over time, or be led by different actors.

7.4 Making Sense of Nested Sus-HRM Paradoxes: A Multi-Level Model

Sustainable HRM (sus-HRM) entails balancing multiple, often conflicting, priorities across economic, environmental, and social domains. These contradictions manifest at all levels of analysis, from broad institutional forces to day-to-day employee experiences. This created *nested paradoxes* within organizations. A nested paradox refers to tensions that are interdependent and embedded across levels, such that a paradox at one level (e.g. strategic or macro) can trigger or exacerbate paradoxes at other levels (Cunha & Putnam, 2019). In this study, sus-HRM is conceptualized as a nested paradox: macro-level pressures, corporate-level strategies, HRM practices, and individual actions are tightly interwoven, with tensions at each level reinforcing or mitigating tensions at other levels. This section examines how these multi-level paradoxical tensions emerged in the two case organizations and how vertical misalignments (between hierarchical levels) and horizontal inconsistencies (within the same level across actors/functions) interacted systemically to shape sus-HRM.

By mapping such multi-level contributing factors for each identified paradox, the reader could see each paradoxical tension as a symptom of deeper, intertwined influences rather than an isolated dilemma. This multi-causal view of paradoxical tensions reinforced the need for a holistic, multi-level understanding of sustainable HRM. It became evident that effectively managing these paradoxes requires recognizing their cross-level origins. Hence, addressing not only the visible tension (e.g. profit vs. sustainability), but also the underlying misalignments in institutional policies, organizational practices, and individual perceptions that give rise to the tension.

Table 6 presents a structured synthesis of paradoxical tensions identified across the four levels of analysis: macro, corporate, HRM, and individual: within the two case organizations. The table delineates how similar paradox types (e.g. performing, organizing, belonging, learning) manifested differently across sectors, influenced by institutional context and organisational directives.

Table 6: Comparative Analysis of Multi-level Paradoxes in Sustainable HRM

	Level	Key Paradoxical Tension	Private HEI	Hospitality	Implication for SUS-HRM
1	Macro	*Global vs Local*	National policies and international frameworks (e.g., SDGs, green rankings) require sustainability reporting, but autonomy and funding constraints make implementation difficult.	Hotels are pressured to meet international green certification standards, while lacking coherent national support or subsidies to do so effectively.	Organizations need to contextualize global sustainability frameworks to local realities, requiring adaptive strategy alignment.
2	Corporate	*Economic performance pressures vs Commitments to sustainability*	University management promotes sustainability in strategic documents, but budget priorities and KPIs emphasize enrollment growth and academic output.	Marketing pushes green branding for competitive advantage, but operations prioritize guest satisfaction and cost control - limiting resources for long-term sustainability planning.	Strategic sustainability goals must be integrated into resource planning and financial decision-making to avoid superficial commitment.
3	HRM	*Efficiency vs Substantive / Responsible practices in HRM*	HRM is encouraged to support sustainability through training and policy design but faced pressure to minimize costs and align with traditional administrative metrics.	HRM wishes to promote green recruitment and training, but high staff turnover and labor cost constraints prevent deep integration of sustainable practices.	HRM must balance short-term efficiency with long-term investment in sustainability practices through strategic integration.
4	Individual	*Performing core task efficiently vs Engaging in sustainability contributions*	Lecturers are inspired by sustainability ideals but face tension as expectations increase, without corresponding reduction in teaching/research workload or recognition.	Frontline staff must adhere to sustainability protocols while maintaining high service standards, often without adequate time or resources.	Employee engagement and well-being depend on the alignment of sustainability goals with work design and performance support systems.

Table 6 maps the sustainability paradoxes experienced across the macro, corporate, HRM, and individual levels in both case organisations, revealing clear sectoral differences and cross-level cascades. The cases exhibited significant horizontal misalignment - meaning that, at the same level of analysis, different actors or units approached sustainability in conflicting ways. These horizontal tensions add another layer to the nested paradox, as misalignments among peers or departments can intensify the overall difficulty of managing sustainability goals. Below are some of the illustrations of its implications:

At the macro level, horizontal inconsistencies emerged through conflicting regulations and sectoral expectations. In Malaysia's institutional landscape, multiple government bodies promoted sustainability, but often in uncoordinated ways. Private universities received mixed signals: some agencies pushed for global rankings like UI Green Metric, while others prioritised local economic contributions. This reflects macro-level complexity, where organisations face competing logics from different actors (Greenwood et al, 2011), creating ambiguity for sus-HRM implementation.

In the hospitality sector, Hotel-MY faced similar tensions. While adhering to global environmental standards (e.g. ISO 14001), it also had to meet local requirements, which were sometimes inconsistent or weakly enforced. This reflects institutional duality (Hahn et al, 2015) where organisations juggle global frameworks and local norms: often leading to confusion in compliance, especially around waste practices or labour policies.

These undercurrents illustrate macro-level horizontal paradoxes and contradictions among national policies themselves. Such institutional ambiguity complicates sus-HRM efforts and reinforces paradoxes within organisations (Hahn et al., 2018). This study shows how macro-level tensions cascade into HRM functions, limiting their ability to act as strategic sustainability enablers. These findings underscore the need for Sus-HRM systems that can manage shifting external pressures through adaptive approaches (Ehnert et al., 2016).

At the corporate level, divergent departmental priorities created organisational paradoxes. In University-MY, the tension between leadership and the finance office (particularly around investments in green infrastructure) reflected competing evaluative frames (Hahn et al., 2015), where sustainability goals clashed with short-term financial logics. This aligns with temporal tensions identified by Slawinski and Bansal (2015), where long-term aspirations (e.g. reputational or ecological gains) are constrained by short-term performance demands. In

Hotel-MY, the marketing team pursued visible sustainability messaging, while operations managers emphasised cost-saving initiatives, such as energy efficiency.

Although both sought legitimacy, their strategies diverged echoes organisational tensions; where symbolic and substantive sustainability co-exist uneasily (Hahn et al., 2015). These horizontal tensions were not only disagreements, but reflected structural fragmentation; as sustainability was championed rhetorically in one area, but faced practical resistance in others.

HR departments in both cases also experienced friction with line managers. Initiatives around employee well-being or CSR were often undermined by productivity pressures or resource constraints. This mirrors the means-ends paradox in sustainable HRM (Ehnert, 2009; Guerci & Carollo., 2016), where attempts to align people and sustainability objectives encounter operational trade-offs. The issue became pronounced during the COVID-19 period, where well-being programmes were announced, but intensified workloads and cost-cutting measures contradicted them. Paradox theory helps explain why even well-intended interventions may falter when structural and cultural misalignments persist. Indeed, as observed by Hahn et al. (2015), sustainability often triggers conflicting goals not only between stakeholders but within organisations - leading to structural inconsistencies that inhibit coherent implementation.

Hence, the examples demonstrate how intra-organisational paradoxes are not isolated incidents, but persistent tensions between interdependent functions operating under different logics (Smith & Lewis, 2011). Even alongside top-down sustainability commitments, fragmentation across departments and horizontal misalignment limit coherence and reinforce paradoxes - particularly in institutional contexts where sustainability remains aspirational.

Our data reveal that horizontal inconsistencies within the HRM function materialised at the encounter of specific sub-functions—namely recruitment, performance appraisal, reward systems and training. Recruitment ads for "green" or "sustainable" employees sent a signal that sustainability was valued, yet performance appraisals continued to prioritise research outputs and revenue generation. Reward systems offered bonuses for cost savings but rarely recognised sustainability initiatives, and training programmes focused more on compliance with standard operating procedures than on building a sustainability mindset. They also reflect the broader "mission vs. margin" tension evident at the organisational level; HR

managers are caught between supporting long-term employee well-being and meeting short-term performance metrics, thereby embedding paradoxical demands into day-to-day practice.

This echoed the belonging paradox (Smith & Lewis, 2011), where efforts to build a shared sustainability belonging conflicted with professional values such as academic freedom. Symbolic sustainability efforts (e.g. rankings or green branding) often clashed with calls for deeper curriculum or research reform, creating identity dissonance among staff (Ashforth & Reingen, 2014). These findings support Hoffman's (2016) view that decentralised, value-driven institutions like universities often experience fragmented responses to sustainability.

In Hotel-MY, frontline workers such as housekeeping staff experienced sustainability differently from other departments. For example, water-saving rules were seen by some as interfering with service standards, particularly when guests expected daily linen changes. These role-based tensions reflect the performing paradox (Smith & Lewis, 2011): sustainability goals conflict with service expectations. While some staff evaded eco-rules to avoid complaints, others felt conflicted, highlighting the practical impact of horizontal misalignment. Such sustainability-workforce tensions can create unintended burdens when green practices are not aligned with job realities (Ehnert, 2009).

Individual factors (e.g. training, or environmental attitudes) further influenced employee engagement. Staff with prior sustainability exposure were more receptive to sus-HRM initiatives, while others remained sceptical. This aligns with Guerci et al. (2015), who emphasise the role of personal biases in shaping responses to sustainable HRM. Without cohesive narratives and inclusive training, sustainability risks being unevenly interpreted and enacted; even within the same organisational tier. Finally, these findings show that effective Sus-HRM requires not just top-down commitment, but horizontal alignment within roles and peer groups, to avoid uneven implementation and internal paradoxes.

Therefore, it is critical not to conflate the HRM and individual levels. HRM constitutes the system of formal policies and practices designed to steer organisational behaviour. The individual level involves employees' subjective interpretations, and behaviours in response to those practices. While distinct, the two levels are intimately connected: HRM practices shape employees' perceptions and experiences, and those perceptions feed back into HRM implementation. In our cases, misalignment across HRM sub-functions (recruitment,

appraisal, rewards and training) created a fragmented signal for employees, which, when interpreted through personal values and professional identities, triggered tension and paradox. This interplay helps explain why decentralised, value-driven organisations like universities often experience fragmented responses to sustainability.

7.5 Interpretation of Multi-Level Misalignments — Evaluation

Findings reveal clear vertical misalignment — misalignments between macro, corporate, HRM, and individual levels. National policies and global sustainability frameworks encouraged long-term environmental and social goals, while simultaneous economic growth agendas imposed short-term financial expectations (Margolis et al., 2009; Hahn & Figge, 2011). This led to a *global vs. local* paradox: firms were urged to meet international sustainability standards yet adapt to local cultural and market realities (Schad & Bansal, 2018; Jamali & Karam, 2018). Thus, macro-level sustainability mandates "cascaded" down in a fragmented way - they were translated into corporate objectives, but often clashed with immediate local pressures and resource constraints. As a result, sus-HRM practices struggled to contextualize global requirement with local realities.

In turn, managers struggled with classic sustainability dilemmas, such as balancing *economic vs sustainability commitments*. Both case organizations articulated sustainability in their mission. However, corporate strategies were constrained by financial imperatives, creating a *short-term vs. long-term* paradox in strategy execution (Hahn et al., 2015).

This challenge underscores the pivotal yet precarious position of HR in organizational sustainability. Many scholars have stressed that HRM can serve as a linchpin for embedding sustainability (e.g. green recruitment, training, performance management, and reward systems) if it is given a strategic mandate. In forward-thinking firms, HR has even reimagined itself as a proactive sustainability partner by integrating environmental and social criteria throughout the employee lifecycle (Poon & Law, 2022; Bombiak & Marciniuk-Kluska, 2018). However, critical research points out that HR often remains constrained by traditional performance imperatives and short-term metrics (Buller & McEvoy, 2016). This divergence in perspectives reflects differing assumptions in the literature: whereas some "win-win" oriented approaches to sustainable HRM imply that environmental and social goals can be harmoniously aligned with business outcomes through enlightened HR practices (e.g. Green HRM initiatives), paradox theorists argue that deep-rooted contradictions in HR's

role and identity often prevent successful integration. Empirical studies echo this: even when HR managers champion sustainability initiatives, they are often overridden by top-down demands to cut labour costs or boost output, revealing a persistent gap between sustainability rhetoric and HR reality (Ehnert et al., 2016). The findings align with these critical insights — demonstrating that the lack of fundamental shift in institutional logic, HR's sustainability programs remain and often the first to be sidelined during crises. This perspective situates this study work alongside scholars who urge confronting such paradoxes head-on (rather than glossing over them) and underscores a practical imperative: unless HR leaders can navigate and reconcile these internal tensions, its potential to

HR departments in both cases encountered direct paradoxical tensions as they attempted to balance organizational sustainability goals with workforce management realities. A key HRM paradox observed was *efficiency vs. substance* in HR practices (Ehnert, 2009). HR managers were expected to implement sus-HRM initiatives (e.g. green training programs, employee well-being and CSR activities) but also had to uphold productivity and cost control in HR processes. This often resulted in *trade-offs*: many sustainability-related HR programs remained ad-hoc or superficial because deeper integration was seen as potentially undermining immediate efficiency. These trade-offs reflect an HRM-level manifestation of the *short-term vs. long-term paradox*: HRM had difficulty justifying long-term investments in employees' sustainability skills or well-being when short-term metrics (e.g. labour cost ratios or service efficiency) dominated decision-making (Renwick *et al*., 2013). Consequently, HRM departments in both sectors oscillated between promoting sustainability values and enforcing cost or productivity measures, leading to inconsistent treatment of sus-HRM. This inconsistency is "nested" in the sense that it stemmed from higher-level tensions (e.g. corporate resource allocation and macroeconomic pressures) and directly shaped the experience of individuals.

At the individual level, employees and line managers experienced the *downstream effects* of these higher-level paradoxes, in the form of role conflict, uncertainty, and frustration. Frontline staff and middle managers were essentially positioned between sustainability ideals and practical demands, in which created *performing and belonging* tensions (Smith & Lewis, 2011). One prominent tension was the *paradox of performing*; employees were expected to achieve short-term operational targets while also contributing to long-term sustainability goals – an integrally conflicting expectation. Both cases showed that when sustainability

initiatives were not supported by resources or adjustments in workload, individuals felt pressure to "do more with less". Employees in both organizations reported feelings of overload and disillusionment when faced with efficiency-centric management that handled sustainability as secondary. This reflects what Hengst *et al.* (2020) describe as a misalignment between *efficiency vs substance* sustainability commitments - resulting in employee disengagement.

Crucially, the study shows that these vertical tensions are not isolated at each level, but nested within a systemic environment. Paradoxes at higher levels cascaded downward, creating constraints and tensions at lower levels, while paradoxes at lower levels (like employee resistance or burnout) in turn undermined the realization of higher-level sustainability goals, reinforcing the overarching paradox.

This resonates with the arguments of systems-oriented paradox theorists that organizational paradoxes are inherently multi-level phenomena (Schad & Bansal 2018; Schad et al., 2016). In both cases, attempts to address a tension at one level often surfaced new tensions at another. For instance, when Hotel-MY's top management pushed aggressively for green certifications to resolve an external legitimacy paradox, branch level managers and HR faced implementation problems that led to employees' scepticism - effectively creating a new paradox between corporate intentions and individual beliefs. Such findings emphasize that organizations do not experience sustainability paradoxes in isolation at a single level; rather, these paradoxes are nested within a larger system of interdependent tensions. This nested nature means that resolving or mitigating tensions at one level involves acknowledging influences from other levels (Hahn & Knight, 2021).

The sectoral context directed these horizontal and vertical paradoxes and highlighting; nested paradoxes as a systemic, but context-sensitive phenomenon. The private HEI and hospitality sectors in Malaysia showed distinct patterns. In private HEI, sustainability efforts inclined toward the symbolic and reputational to signal commitment, but practical support and involvement were limited. This resulted in many employees perceiving environmental initiatives as a secondary concern to core academic and social missions - thereby deepening belonging tensions. By contrast, in the hospitality case, sustainability actions were more operationally driven due to cost-saving incentives; employees could see some immediate benefits (e.g. reduced utility costs potentially securing jobs), but they also felt intense pressure to not compromise customer satisfaction. Thus, hospitality employees experienced

acute performing tensions in balancing guest expectations with eco-friendly routines; and learning tensions, as frequent staff turnover and on-boarding of new hires made sustained learning on sustainability difficult (Baun 2015; Baun 2018). The cross-case comparison suggests that the university context had stronger *paradox of belonging* (identity/value misalignment) issues, whereas the hotel context had stronger *paradox of learning and performing* issues (continuous improvement vs. turnover and service pressure). These observations align with prior studies: universities often struggle with diverse internal ideologies and relatively high autonomy that can cause identity conflicts (Wright & Nyberg, 2016), while hotels operate in high-pressure, customer-centric environments that make employee learning and well-being paradoxes particularly salient (Goh & Jie, 2019)

Sus-HRM in the cases was characterized by a nested, systemic web of paradoxes. Vertical tensions (macro ↔ corporate ↔ functional (HRM) ↔ individual) and horizontal tensions (among regulators, across departments, among employees) interacted in a loop. A sustainability initiative or pressure at one level often generated a ripple effect of contradictions elsewhere: for example, a well-intentioned national sustainability policy introduced ambiguities that organizations struggled with internally; internal strategic decisions created HRM dilemmas that, if unresolved, translated into employee cynicism or stress, which in turn undermined the original sustainability objectives. This confirms the notion that sustainability tensions are dynamic and cyclical, rather than linear.

Although this study encompasses paradox theory to interpret the findings, it is crucial to temper that enthusiasm by engaging with critical perspectives in the paradox literature. Recent scholarship question some of paradox theory's core assumptions. For instance, Hahn and Knight (2021) propose a *"quantum"* ontological view of paradox; suggesting that contradictions are both inherent and socially constructed, rather than purely objective dilemmas. This dual stance implies that tensions have a latent presence in systems, but become salient only through actors' perceptions and communication. Integrating this quantum perspective guards against treating paradoxes as static factual givens, instead acknowledging that our case participants played an active role in enacting certain tensions while ignoring or downplaying others. It also aligns with our critical realist positioning (Chapter 4) that sustainability paradoxes are *"out there"* in structure, and *"in here"* in minds concurrently. By recognising contradictions as real and constructed, this analysis avoids an

overly naive embrace of paradox — see that what appears as a contradiction might sometimes reflect misalignment in sensemaking, rather than an irreconcilable reality (or vice versa).

Moreover, power dynamics and practical constraints have been highlighted as a *"dark side"* of paradoxical situations that paradox theory must reckon with. Berti and Simpson (2021) argue that paradoxes can have *"disempowering"* effects, especially on actors with constrained authority or resources. According to the authors, when contradictory demands are imposed on those lower in hierarchy (e.g. expecting a middle manager to achieve sustainability and profit without real support), the celebrated both/and solution can devolve into a double bind that paralyses or stresses individuals. Our study's findings echo this concern. For example, several staff described feeling *"stuck"* between meeting immediate targets and honouring sustainability values – a scenario where paradoxical tension was not empowering but frustrating and demotivating. A purely enthusiastic paradox lens might laud these staff for "living with tension", but integrating this critical perspective prompts us to acknowledge the unequal capacity of actors to do so. By recognising this, our discussion avoids a rosy generalisation that *"embracing paradox"* is universally positive. As an alternative, this study highlight how context and power moderated the outcomes: senior leaders (with more power) could espouse both/and approaches more readily, whereas lower-level employees sometimes experienced paradoxes as stressful deadlocks (e.g. being told to improve service quality and cut costs with no viable means).

Another critique addresses the normative bias in paradox theory's typical prescriptions. Berti and Cunha (2023) caution that assuming a *"both/and"* response is always superior may overlook scenarios where clear trade-offs or sequencing are more practical. The scholars argue that insisting managers constantly seek integration can inadvertently constrain creative solutions, and even justify inaction or injustice (if people feel they must passively accept all contradictions). Similarly, Seidemann (2024) problematizes the taken-for-granted universality and positivity of both/and approach, revealing that paradox theory often treats all tensions as paradoxical and assumes balancing them is the ideal, without sufficiently questioning context or outcomes. Engaging with these scholars' insights prompted us to re-examine our cases for instances where an either/or choice or a partial resolution might have been more effective, or even ethical. Indeed, in both organisations there were moments when trying to simultaneously satisfy competing demands proved counterproductive – for example, when Hotel-MY temporarily suspended a green initiative to ensure financial survival during a

downturn. The initial analysis framed this as a short-term coping strategy; the critical literature suggests it might sometimes be a necessary either/or decision made in good faith. Incorporating Berti and Cunha's and Seidemann's critiques, we recognise that not every tension observed required an immediate both/and fix – sometimes managers consciously prioritised one pole (e.g. cost-saving) for a period, and paradox theory should not hastily label this as failure. This resonates with the *"meta-paradox"* idea proposed by Krautzberger and Tuckermann (2024), who develop a meta-level process integrating both/and, and either/or tactics — arguing that effective paradox management may require oscillation — embracing tensions when conditions allow, and temporarily choosing one side when integration becomes unsustainable.

Finally, a broader critical viewpoint from Las Heras et al. (2024) provides a Marxian critique of paradox theory. They argue that organisational paradoxes are not timeless puzzles, but rather the surface symptoms of deeper, historically rooted contradictions (linked to capitalist structures). From this perspective, tensions like *"sustainability vs. profitability"* persist because the underlying economic system prioritises profit accumulation, creating structural antagonisms that cannot be fully reconciled by managerial organizing. This critique warns that a paradox lens, if used too superficially; might reframe fundamental conflicts as mere management challenges, thus obscuring issues of power, exploitation or inequality that require systemic change. In light of this, the researcher interpret the findings with an added layer of socio-political awareness. The paradoxes documented in Malaysia's service sectors — such as the hotel's struggle between labour cost cuts and workforce well-being, or the university's tuition-driven growth vs. social mission — can be seen as manifestations of systemic contradictions (e.g. market logics vs. social good) inherent in the broader context. A Marxian view suggests these tensions are entrenched in the current institutional and economic arrangements; thus, managerial both/and strategies alone may offer only temporary respite. This study, by identifying how these paradoxes cascade and persist, implicitly supports this notion that paradoxes often reflect enduring structural contradictions.

In conclusion, this chapter contributes to a deeper understanding of sus-HRM paradoxes as systemic and nested. Competing demands at different levels reinforce one another in dynamic and context-contingent ways. It suggests that effective sus-HRM requires both structural alignment and cultural readiness to engage with paradoxes holistically. Furthermore, by integrating contemporary critiques has enriched the analysis: by significantly tempered our

analysis — celebrating the insights of paradox theory, but with caution about power imbalances, cultural/contextual contingencies, and the risk of normative bias. The insights set the stage for the next chapter, which turns to — revisiting research questions, overarching contributions of the thesis to theory, practice, and future research directions.

CHAPTER 8

Conclusions

8.1 Re-framing Research Questions

This conclusion chapter summarizes the research findings to provide an in-depth understanding of the multi-level paradoxes influencing Sustainable HRM (sus-HRM) in Malaysia's private higher education and hospitality sectors. The chapter reviews the findings by addressing four research questions explicitly:

> **RQ1**: What are the paradoxes across the macro, corporate, function-specific (HRM), and individual levels that affect Sustainable HRM in organizations?

> **RQ2**: How do leaders and employees navigate these paradoxical tensions?

> **RQ3**: How do these paradoxes influence Sustainable HRM outcomes in organizations?

> **RQ4**: How does sectoral context (private higher education vs. hospitality) shape the nature of Sustainable HRM paradoxes and the ways they are managed?

> **RQ5:** How can paradox theory be extended to explain the nested, multi-level, and sector-contingent nature of sustainability tensions?

The study's contributions focus on four focal areas: (1) the conceptualization and identification of paradoxes across the multiple levels, (2) the processes through which leaders and employees respond to these paradoxical tensions, (3) the dynamic interaction of multi-level paradoxes with sus-HRM, (4) sectoral contexts shaping paradoxical tensions and responses. This study also (5) aims to critically interrogate and extend the theory by assessing whether current paradox frameworks sufficiently capture the complexity of tensions in sustainable HRM.

A key conclusion in this study found that addressing sustainability paradoxes requires more than isolated managerial tools, but it demands a multi-level and systemic understanding of organizing. Within this multi-level view, the research differentiates between the corporate- and HRM-level elements (as components of the organization) and the individual-level elements (micro level), emphasizing that organizations are compounded systems. This compounded nature means that paradoxical tensions at one level can cascade into others,

creating complex effects that cannot be fully understood by examining a single level in isolation.

In line with this systemic view, this study adopt Cunha and Putnam's *(2019)* notion of multiple bundled sets of tensions that nest within, and even unlock other tensions - retaining the systemic and embedded nature. In the two cases, examining one paradox often revealed another paradox nested within it — highlighting the interlocking nature of sustainability challenges.

This core idea of nested paradox is in harmony with emerging perspectives in the literature on management of paradoxes *(Smith & Lewis, 2011)*. Other scholars have described paradox management as: transcending *(Jarzabkowski et al., 2013)*, navigating tensions *(Aust et al. 2015)*, or living with paradox *(Sajjad et al., 2024)*. The analysis builds on these concepts by showing how actors in different sectors and at different levels experience and make sense of nested sus-HRM paradoxes.

8.1.1 Paradoxes across Macro, Corporate, Functional-HRM and Individual Levels (RQ1)

The paradoxes identified in the private higher education and hospitality sectors differed fundamentally, due to underlying sectoral logics. In higher education, paradoxes primarily emerged from symbolic pressures driven by competing values of academic autonomy and institutional sustainability agendas *(Smith & Lewis, 2011)*. Smith and Lewis (2011) conceptualise paradoxes as persistent and interdependent tensions arising from competing demands such as belonging vs. individuality, stability vs. change, or short-term vs. long-term goals — typically within corporate or organisational strategy contexts. While their framework was not developed with the higher education (HE) sector in mind, its relevance becomes evident when examining the symbolic tensions within HE institutions

Hahn et al. (2015) contend that sustainability tensions are shaped by the interplay between organisational goals and the institutional logics that dominate specific sectors. This study provides empirical support for that claim; by revealing how sustainability paradoxes in the hospitality sector were largely operational, stemming from day-to-day service pressures that conflicted with environmental sustainability goals. For example, the imperative to deliver fast, responsive customer service often undermined efforts to implement energy-saving or waste-reduction practices. In contrast to higher education — where paradoxes were more symbolic and value-laden — hospitality tensions emerged from pragmatic concerns around

guest satisfaction, occupancy rates, and branding. These differences reflect the distinct institutional logics at play: academic reputation and scholarly independence in HE versus customer-driven service excellence and commercial performance in hospitality. Thus, this study extends Hahn et al.'s insights by illustrating how sectoral norms shape not only the nature of paradoxes, but also the type of tensions that are foregrounded in sustainability practice.

Across both cases, tensions mapped onto the four classical paradox domains identified by Smith and Lewis: performing (e.g. profitability vs. sustainability goals), organizing (e.g. centralized control vs. decentralized innovation), belonging (e.g. values alignment vs. institutional demands), and learning (e.g. short-term actions vs. long-term development).

Critical reflection reveals that while the paradox typology offers a useful exploratory lens, not all tensions observed in this study can be classified as "true" paradoxes; as per the established definition of "persistent contradictions between interdependent, yet mutually desirable elements" (Smith & Lewis, 2011; Lewis, 2000). In several instances within both cases, the environmental pole was neither perceived, nor treated by actors as equally desirable compared to the economic pole, raising a deeper philosophical question: Does the diminished perception of one pole render the relationship something less than a paradox, or does the paradox ontologically exist irrespective of actors' awareness? At this point, the distinction between epistemological and ontological paradoxes becomes vital. As Putnam et al. (2016) and Schad et al. (2016) argue, paradoxes can exist as structural or systemic conditions (ontological), even when organisational actors fail to recognise/legitimise both poles (epistemological).

This study, therefore, extends beyond a purely perception-based view by recognising that environmental concerns remain fundamentally interdependent with economic goals, even when downplayed by individuals. By making this distinction, the findings challenge a narrow actor-centric interpretation of paradox, and highlight the need to account for the 'grand' nature of environmental sustainability, which demands recognising its intrinsic value, regardless of the immediate priorities or cognitive frames of members.

The original definitions of the four paradox domains were developed primarily for intra-organisational phenomena (Smith & Lewis, 2011; Lewis 2000; Schad et al., 2016). This study, however, applies them at a systemic level (inter-organization): revealing how tensions cascade across macro (policy/institutional), meso (corporate/HRM), and micro (individual)

levels. For instance, performing tensions were not confined to corporate-level profit-sustainability trade-offs, but also extended into national funding structures, or sector-wide metrics that shaped organisational imperatives. Therefore, this study proposes an expanded definition of these paradoxical tensions; beyond the organisational sphere to account for interactions between institutional frameworks, sectoral pressures, and individual agency. This re-scaling contributes to literature by responding to recent calls for multilevel and systemic engagement with paradox theory (Schad & Bansal, 2018; Jarzabkowski et al., 2013).

In University-MY, organizational paradoxes were predominantly symbolic — manifestation created performing and belonging tensions, particularly evident where academic KPIs prioritising research outputs clashed directly with institutional aspirations for tangible environmental and social impacts (van der Byl & Slawinski, 2015). Nevertheless, some participants acknowledged the deeper complexity of these tensions, suggesting they could become genuine paradoxes if sustainability were more deeply internalised and recognised as integral to the university's long-term viability and identity. Furthermore, a critical aspect is whether the observed symbolic integration represents a form of greenwashing. Greenwashing implies deliberately deceptive practices that create a façade of sustainability without meaningful action (Marquis et al., 2016). Although no deliberate deception was explicitly identified, the gap between rhetoric and practice at University-MY indicates some elements of unintentional greenwashing, and potentially undermining genuine sustainability efforts.

On the other hand, Hotel-MY presented primarily operational paradoxes — significantly influenced by immediate service delivery pressures. Performing tensions were particularly evident in the conflict between delivering high-quality guest experiences and adhering to strict environmental standards imposed by external certification entities. Such tensions strongly resonate with Baum's (2018) exploration of hospitality paradoxes, clearly indicating a genuine paradox scenario due to the mutual necessity and coexistence of luxury and sustainability objectives. Learning tensions at Hotel-MY further highlighted the complexities inherent in building long-term sustainability capabilities amid challenges of high employee turnover and frequent onboarding. This dynamic aligns well with existing learning paradox literature: emphasising how organisations struggle with balancing immediate operational demands against long-term capability development (Smith & Lewis, 2011; Lewis & Smith, 2022).

Furthermore, both cases revealed a macro-level global–local paradox, whereby organisations grappled with reconciling adherence to global sustainability frameworks (such as SDGs and ISO standards) against the backdrop of domestic challenges like funding limitations, client preferences, and institutional inertia. Indeed, the friction between global sustainability discourse and local practical realities has long been acknowledged within the literature (Rowley, and Abdul-Rahman, 2007). However, reframing this tension explicitly as a paradox provides a significant theoretical advancement by spotlighting the persistent, interdependent, and mutually reinforcing nature of these conflicting demands (Smith & Lewis, 2011; Schad & Bansal, 2018).Through the conceptualising the global-local conflict as a paradox, rather than just a tension elevates the dialogue by stressing the necessity for integrative thinking and dynamic management strategies instead of simple resolutions or trade-offs. It encourages stakeholders at all levels to recognise that neither global frameworks nor local realities can be sustainably ignored or deprioritised without incurring significant consequences. Thus, employing paradox theory here stimulates stakeholders to adopt more sophisticated approaches (e.g. iterative balancing, strategic flexibility, and dialogical processes) that accommodate and leverage both poles concurrently.

In sum, this study contributes conceptually by proposing an extension of paradox theory to better capture the nested and systemic nature of sustainability challenges, particularly within under-studied institutional contexts such as Malaysia. Rather than undermining the utility of paradox theory, the findings advocate for a broader and more dynamic application of its core tenets. Specifically, the study reinterprets the four classical paradox domains as categories of paradoxical tensions: highlighting their interdependence across macro, organisational, HRM, and individual levels.

8.1.2 Navigation/Response to Paradoxical Tensions (RQ3)

The university relied significantly on symbolic declarations, such as environmental pledges and active participation in global sustainability rankings, which can reflect defence mechanisms, or superficial compliance rather than genuine integration (Hahn & Knight, 2021). These visible commitments often lacked substantive follow-through, with limited evidence of deep integration into core curriculum or strategic HR systems. In contrast, real acceptance involves acknowledging the legitimacy of competing sustainability goals and actively engaging in practices that embrace and integrate both poles over time, rather than favouring performative or reputational strategies (Smith & Lewis, 2011; Schad et al., 2016).

Coping strategies primarily consisted of fragmented, one-off sustainability events or isolated green audits, frequently driven by individual motivation rather than robust institutional structures. This fragmentation suggests a defensive or superficial stance rather than authentic integration of sustainability imperatives (Sajjad et al., 2024). However, it is important to acknowledge that symbolic actions, even when lacking substantial underlying mechanisms, may not always be mere empty gestures; they can signify early-stage engagement or institutional responsiveness to external pressures (Marquis et al, 2016). In addition, when senior leaders with strong sustainability values and decision-making autonomy existed, - the university demonstrated "more-than" responses. An example of this is the establishment of the net-zero campus building and far-reaching community programmes. However, such cases were exceptional, rather than reflective of a systemic and institution-wide acceptance or strategic integration. Overall, University-MY's stance largely reflects a cautious engagement; by balancing symbolic responses with occasional pledges when conditions allowed, but limited deeper practical commitments. Similarly, this might represent an example of early-stage engagement or institutional responsiveness to external pressures (Marquis et al, 2016)

The hotel predominantly utilised coping strategies, characterised in literature as pragmatic, short-term responses that manage paradoxical tensions without fully resolving them. This approach involved operational initiatives such as green procurement, energy efficiency measures, and eco-labelling campaigns, motivated largely by immediate cost-saving benefits. Such coping strategies align closely with previous findings in paradox literature — highlighting resource efficiency as a prevalent, and manageable organisational response (Hahn et al., 2015).

However, comparing Hotel-MY's practices with the higher education (HE) context reveals critical implications for paradox theory and practice. In the HE case, coping primarily entailed superficial symbolic actions and strategic prioritisation that often-distanced sustainability from core institutional functions. By contrast, Hotel-MY's coping strategies, though similarly pragmatic, were directly embedded into core operational activities, thus offering tangible pathways towards incremental sustainability improvements. This comparison highlights the significance of context: operational imperatives in the hospitality industry (e.g. resource efficiency vs immediate service quality) making coping strategies more integrative and immediately seen. Moreover, Hotel-MY's adoption of "more-than" strategies, such as incorporating sustainability into marketing and guest experiences, extends beyond mere coping. These strategies illustrate a proactive, strategic response to paradox,

shifting sustainability from being solely compliance-driven towards becoming integral to competitive differentiation and long-term brand positioning (Jarzabkowski et al., 2013). The proactive integration seen at Hotel-MY is distinctively absent in the HE context, suggesting that market-driven environments may facilitate deeper engagement with paradox management through direct alignment of sustainability with core business strategies.

In summary, theoretical implications include the insight that industry-specific contextual factors significantly influence paradox management approaches. Hospitality's direct market pressures and direct customer engagement facilitate both; immediate coping and strategic integration — providing valuable lessons for other sectors. By recognising this context-driven difference enables tailored strategies: the hospitality model demonstrates that leveraging market incentives and operational imperatives can significantly enhance organisational commitment and effectiveness in addressing sustainability paradoxes. Besides that, the study can offer transferable insights for sectors struggling with symbolic or superficial sustainability engagements.

8.1.3 Consequences of Paradox on Sus-HRM (RQ3)

HR's role in navigating paradoxical tensions was generally constrained in both cases, reflecting broader patterns highlighted in the Sustainable HRM literature. In line with Buller and McEvoy's (2016) study, sustainability-oriented HRM in organizations functioned predominantly in a supportive or administrative capacity, rather than as a strategically central force. This highlights a persistent gap between espoused strategic intent and the realities of operational practice; a problem widely noted in the literature (Ehnert et al., 2014).

Explicitly, sustainability considerations were only partially embedded within core HR functions such as recruitment, training, and performance management. While there were instances of green training and symbolic references to sustainability in job roles or appraisals, these were typically reactive, sporadic, and driven by individual champions, not integrated into a coherent HR strategy. This mirrors findings by Ehnert et al. (2016), who argue that HRM often remains on the periphery of sustainability transformations. The reactive theme of green-HRM observed in both cases aligns with earlier Renwick et al.'s (2013) framework, which characterizes much of green practices as fragmented and isolated, rather than embedded across HR systems or linked to broader organizational strategy. This limited and inconsistent integration suggests that HRM was more engaged in symbolic compliance or operational adjustments than in actively managing paradoxical tensions.

University-MY faced a key paradox between its traditional academic identity and external demands for sustainability performance. Faculty were expected to maintain research output while supporting institutional greening, creating belonging tensions. HR's role in recruitment and appraisal was cited as a lever to align sustainability with academic values. Revising KPIs to reflect environmental contributions could improve coherence. Literature supports this: performance systems that include sustainability enhance alignment (Guerci & & Carollo., 2016; Jackson et al., 2014). This suggests HR could bridge identity-performance gaps if strategically empowered.

Hotel-MY faced a persistent tension between service quality and sustainability protocols. Frontline staff struggled to balance guest satisfaction with environmental procedures, often without adequate training. Sustainability messaging was top-down and rarely linked to daily tasks. Here, HR training has strategic potential. Targeted green training can equip staff with the skills to reconcile service expectations and environmental compliance (Renwick et al., 2013; Tang et al., 2018). A participatory approach would help embed dual imperatives into practice, aligning operations with sustainability goals.

The paradoxical tensions significantly impeded sus-HRM effectiveness, a finding that resonates with broader concerns in sustainability and HRM literature. For instance, at University-MY, faculty members experienced disengagement due to conflicting sustainability communications, resulting in diminished motivation and commitment to sustainability initiatives. This aligns with findings by Guerci et al. (2015), who argue that inconsistent sustainability messaging wear down employees' trust, weakens their identification with organizational values. At Hotel-MY, employees frequently compromised sustainability protocols to maintain service standards, mirroring the findings by Baum (2018) and De Grosbois (2016), who observed that hospitality workers deprioritize environmental goals in the face of customer satisfaction imperatives, thus undermining the authenticity and operationalisation of sus-HRM.

Sustainable HRM (Sus-HRM) outcomes, as the literature suggests: improve significantly when sustainability goals are embedded explicitly in HR structures and processes. Renwick et al. (2013), as well as Santana and Lopez (2016), emphasise the importance of sustainability-linked performance metrics, continuous training, and strategic HRM alignment to ensure that sustainability becomes a substantial organisational practice, rather than a symbolic gesture. In

both cases studied, the absence of such systemic alignment meant that sustainability efforts were perceived as secondary.

This discussion of RQ3 necessarily includes the individual level because HRM, by its very nature, operates at the intersection of individual and organisational levels. HR practices mediate how sustainability objectives are communicated, enacted, and experienced by employees — shaping both personal engagement and organisational outcomes. Furthermore, HR's influence can be extended to the societal level through community outreach initiatives, suggesting that sustainable HRM can bridge multiple layers of analysis.

At the individual level, unresolved paradoxes manifested as confusion, stress, and disengagement. Faculty members at University-MY reported scepticism due to perceived lack of institutional support, while hotel staff described having to "bend" sustainability rules to appease guests. These experiences reinforce the findings of Gaim et al. (2022), who argue that unresolved paradoxes at the micro level create role conflict and emotional strain, especially when employees are caught between espoused values and contradictory performance expectations. The perception that sustainability was an "addition", rather than a core responsibility is similarly noted in the work of Ehnert et al. (2016), warning that without genuine integration, sustainability initiatives can cause backlash and value conflict among staff.

At the organisational level, inconsistent navigation strategies weakened Sus-HRM's capacity to support sustainability. The literature supports this: Buller and McEvoy (2016) and Jackson et al. (2011) emphasise that fragmented or weakly coordinated HR practices fail to create the strategic consistency needed to navigate complex tensions. In both University-MY and Hotel-MY, the lack of sustainability-linked incentives, institutionalised training, and cross-functional collaboration reflect what Ehnert (2009) describes as a "decoupling"; between sustainability ambitions and operational HRM design.

Where "more-than" responses were observed (e.g. green campus infrastructure and sustainable food sourcing), it led to deeper alignment between sustainability and organizational identity or service delivery. However, these responses were typically driven by individual leaders, or isolated units with discretionary authority and resources. This finding echoes the work of Smith and Lewis (2011), who note that paradox resolution often depends on the presence of enabling conditions, such as: leadership vision, organisational flexibility, and cultural support, that are not distributed evenly. The lack of diffusion in such proactive

strategies suggests that without systemic embedding and cross-level consistency, paradox navigation in sus-HRM risks becoming both fragmented and unsustainable (Hahn et al, 2015).

The empirical findings contribute to literature by reinforcing the notion that while HRM is often cited as a potential driver of sustainability, its practical role remains underleveraged. The constrained positioning of HR in both University-MY and Hotel-MY suggests a missed opportunity for HR to act as a mediator of paradoxical tensions (e.g. as short-term performance demands versus long-term capability building) that are central to sustainable transformation. This gap underscores the need to reconceptualize HR's role not just as admin/operations roles, but as a strategic partner in navigating and reconciling the paradoxes inherent in sustainability transitions. Besides, the study's findings substantiate existing arguments within the sus-HRM literature, demonstrating the widespread challenge organizations face in achieving strategic integration of sustainability into HR functions (Jabbour & Santos, 2008; Ehnert, 2009), and underline the need for a systemic approach to embedding sustainability at the strategic core of HRM practices.

8.1.4 Sectoral Influence on Sus-HRM Paradox (RQ4)

Sectoral differences greatly shaped how sustainability paradoxes manifested, driven by distinct regulatory landscapes, institutional norms, and market dynamics. In the private higher education sector, tensions around professional priorities and sustainable imperatives were especially salient. These tensions emerged from the longstanding academic tradition of autonomy, and intellectual freedom conflicting with externally imposed sustainability mandates. While previously discussed in the literature as a form of "belonging paradox" (Smith & Lewis, 2011), empirical data from University-MY reveal a more nuanced configuration, where tensions extend beyond simple value alignment, involving deeper conflicts around professional imperatives (e.g. research productivity, academic reputation, and institutional survival)

This framing enriches our understanding of belonging and performing paradoxes by highlighting how sectoral pressures impact professional responsibilities. This dynamic aligns closely with findings by Wright and Nyberg (2016) and Hoffman (2016), who noted that sustainability initiatives in universities frequently trigger symbolic paradoxes because of conflicts between academic values and administrative directives. The present study extends this discourse by emphasising how sustainability becomes problematic when perceived as a

reputational lever, rather than a deeply embedded professional imperative. Such framing generates dissonance among faculty, who may regard sustainability efforts as contradictory to the fundamental academic priorities of higher education. By focusing explicitly on professional priorities and imperatives, this analysis offers a clearer lens to examine how organisational practices mediate the navigation of paradoxical tensions in sustainability transitions, particularly within professionalised and value-driven institutions like universities.

On the other hand, the hospitality organization faced more customer-facing operational paradoxes. These paradoxes are primarily driven by the need to balance luxury service standards with eco-efficiency protocols. The tensions found mirror Baum's (2018) and De Grosbois' (2016) observations that customer-centric service industries experience acute "performing tensions," as staff are simultaneously tasked with delivering high-quality guest experiences while adhering to resource-conserving policies. Paradoxes are amplified by short-term market pressures and fluctuating tourist demand, which in turn, focusing on customer satisfaction and revenue performance over long-term sustainability investments.

According to Smith and Lewis (2011), learning paradox arises when organisations simultaneously require both the exploitation of current capabilities (e.g. efficient service delivery), and the exploration of new competencies (e.g. sustainability knowledge and practices). Frontline employees were often caught in a persistent dilemma: expected to fulfil strict environmental standards (e.g. reducing waste or conserving water), while simultaneously maintaining premium service experiences that often contradict these goals. The hospitality sector's reliance on visible sustainability gestures — such as sustainable dining concepts and towel reuse programmes — reflecting a commercial logic wherein sustainability is framed as a brand asset. However, these sustainability efforts were frequently unsupported by deep structural or developmental investments, particularly in HR functions, resulting in the emergence of learning paradoxes (Goh & Jie, 2019).

In the context of Hotel-MY, this was evident in the recurring challenge of training and retaining staff in sustainability practices. High staff turnover, and reliance on short-term contract workers created a volatile learning environment; in which sustainability training was either absent, minimal, or rapidly lost due to workforce mix. Consequently, while the hotel championed long-term sustainability goals, its investment in developing the workforce to meet those goals remained uneven. Goh & Jie (2019) similarly identify this dynamic in their study of Malaysian green hotels: as they observe that hotels often promote sustainability

through external messaging, but internally fail to institutionalise sustainability learning due to inadequate staff development frameworks and high labour precarity. This creates a learning paradox due to the desire for long-term environmental sustainability is undermined by short-term cost-saving practices that inhibit employee learning and capacity building. The present study corroborates this view, but adds further nuance by highlighting how this tension is not just a structural issue, but also a temporal one — employees are expected to perform sustainably without the time, resources, or incentives to develop those capabilities meaningfully.

These learning paradoxes in Hotel-MY were compounded by temporal tensions; organisations striving for immediate financial returns (e.g. high occupancy, guest satisfaction scores), often deprioritised longer-term developmental investments such as sustainability training. As Schad and Bansal (2018) note, learning and temporal paradoxes are deeply intertwined where the pressures of daily operations tend to crowd out future-focused thinking. Hotel-MY's case exemplifies this: despite a stated commitment to sustainability, the failure to embed learning structures, and HR support mechanisms undermined the hotel's ability to move beyond sporadic engagement. Thus, the learning paradox in this context is not simply a matter of lacking training; as it reflects a deeper contradiction between organisational ambitions and the structural, temporal, and cognitive resources allocated to realising them. Addressing this paradox requires more than isolated green workshops; it demands a systemic, long-term strategy that integrates sustainability learning into the core HRM architecture and acknowledges the unique challenges of sustaining knowledge in a high-turnover, performance-driven sector.

In summary, although both sectors encountered multi-level sustainability paradoxes, the nature of these tensions were deeply dependent on sectoral logics and institutional conditions. These sector-specific patterns confirm the importance of contextualised and systemic paradox analysis, and emphasize the need for adapted sus-HRM responses that reflect the institutional realities of each context.

8.2 Empirical Contributions

A key empirical contribution of this research is the detailed mapping of sustainability paradoxes across four levels of analysis in two cases. The study provide concrete evidence of how; macro-level, corporate-level, HRM-level, and individual-level tensions co-exist and

interrelate in organizations striving for sustainability. While multi-level models of paradox had been proposed conceptually, the study is among the first to illustrate them empirically in a developing country context. The research identified specific paradoxical tensions at each level. More importantly, the findings showed how these tensions are nested: macro pressures (like national economic goals or international sustainability standards) translated into internal policies that created corporate tensions, which in turn influenced HR practices and ultimately employees' experiences

This empirical evidence aligns with theory; that the idea that sustainability challenges are systemic. In doing so, the study provides a rich narrative and data-backed model of what nested sustainable HRM paradoxes look like in practice. For scholars, this offers a reference point and dataset for further analysis. For practitioners, it paints a holistic picture of the challenges faced by organizations, by filling a gap between theory and on-the-ground reality.

Through the comparative case design, the thesis empirically demonstrates how paradoxical tensions in sustainable HRM manifest differently across sectors - revealing sector specific paradox dynamics. This is a contribution to the literature which often treats sustainability tensions in a generalized way. The study found that the private higher education (HEI) sector and the hospitality sector, even in the same country and recognized as sustainability leaders, experienced and managed paradoxes in distinctive ways. In the private HEI (University-MY), social mission vs. financial viability emerged as a prevalent tension; illustrated by the university's struggle to reconcile its educational and social equity values with, tuition-driven economic needs. On the other hand, the hospitality case (Hotel-MY) faced more intense performance vs. sustainability tensions in day-to-day activities. By documenting these sectoral differences, the study contributes empirically by showing that context matters. Sustainable HRM strategies effective in one sector may not directly translate to another. The data suggest: universities might need to focus on aligning values and reducing symbolism (to address belonging paradoxes), whereas hotels might prioritize employee engagement and innovative service design (to address performing and learning paradoxes). Thus, the insights broaden the empirical knowledge base by indicating that future research and practice should account for industry-specific factors when addressing sustainability paradoxes.

Another empirical contribution is the knowledge of the consequences of unresolved paradoxes on both organizations and individuals — highlighting unintended consequences and cross-level outcomes. The findings show that when paradoxical tensions were poorly

managed, they usually produce negative outcomes and reinforcing the initial tensions shown below:

At the individual level, employee outcomes (e.g. frustration, disengagement, and increased turnover intentions) in response to perceived falseness, or overload related to sustainability programs are observed. University-MY's staff expressed disappointment when sustainability was championed publicly, but not supported by workload adjustments or incentives – resulting in some respondents withdrawing effort from sustainability committees, or resisting new initiatives. In Hotel-MY, employees who felt overburdened by extra "sustainability tasks" without recognition eventually exhibited lower morale or left for other employers – illuminating the hospitality sector's turnover problem. These outcomes empirically demonstrate why responding to paradoxes is critical; as unresolved tensions hamper sustainability goals, and tensions can also harm employee well-being and organizational performance. Meanwhile, at the organizational level: the study documented unintended consequences like internal conflicts between departments, weakening of sustainability programs, and implementation gaps. In both cases, several sustainability initiatives lost momentum over time because managers and employees start seeing them as simply fulfilling a requirement — a direct result of paradoxical messaging and inconsistent commitment. By capturing these dynamics, the thesis asserted that failing to acknowledge, or navigate paradox can lead to *symbolic compliance* and undermine genuine progress (Hahn *et al*., 2018).

Hence, the cross-level perspective showed how a macro-level push for sustainability reporting led to a burst of activity that dissolved internally, and how HRM's attempt to accommodate both cost cuts and well-being imperatives. However, the findings showed that these instances resulted in neither goal/pole being accomplished. These complex and nuanced findings strengthen empirical understanding of the effects within nested paradoxes.

Additionally, the research also provides empirical support for several theoretical constructs in the sustainability and paradox literature, reinforcing validity. The study found proof of the classic *"triple bottom line"* trade-offs (economic vs environmental vs social goals) manifesting in both cases - supporting the idea that pursuing corporate sustainability will involve such trade-offs (Schad *et al*., 2016; Elkington, 1997). For example, the economic vs environmental paradox was evident when both organizations hesitated to invest in green technologies due to financial strain. The study also observed the *paradoxes of organizing, performing, and belonging* as defined by Smith and Lewis (2011), which appeared at various

levels: organizing/performing tensions in how work was structured, and belonging tensions in how employees identified with sustainability values. This cross-validation in a new Malaysian context; is an empirical contribution that broadens the evidence base for universality.

Besides that, this study extends existing frameworks by uncovering new linkages and context-specific nuances. For instance, the researcher documented a connection between macro-level voids and paradox intensity; in areas where clear sustainability guidelines or support were missing at the national level, organizations felt greater strain and paradox (e.g. lack of government incentives made the economic vs environmental paradox more prominent). The author identified difficulties with compliance in the university case; as the university's need to comply with both academic accreditation standards and sustainability standards sometimes forced prioritization of one over the other. Such findings can encourage refinements of existing models to consider these real-world specifics. Through our focus on Malaysia's service sectors, the thesis addresses specific gaps in the sustainable HRM literature by providing empirical insights where previously there was limited data (e.g. limited empirical research on how HRM mediates between organizational sustainability strategies and individual behaviours in emerging economics). The study fill this gap by showing instances of HRM practices influencing employees' engagement with sustainability, thus empirically illustrating HRM's mediating role.

Additionally, the research tackles the noted scarcity of studies on nested paradoxes over time by capturing some temporal aspects (although the study was not longitudinal, participants reflected on changes over time in their organizations as early adopters). Therefore, responding to authors like Carmine & DeMarchi (2023) and Smith & Tracey (2016) who called for empirical examination of multi-level paradox dynamics: as this comparative case evidence show macro-to-micro cascades, and differences between contexts. Sustainable HRM scholars have pointed out the need for more research to see if the same HRM sustainability issues occur in developing economies (Stankevičiūtė and Savanevičienė, 2018). By offering rich qualitative detail, thereby extending empirical generalizability of Sustainable HRM concepts to the Malaysian context. Through explaining how institutional context intertwines with HRM, the study gives empirical establishing to the idea — HRM in sustainability cannot be studied separately from its broader environment.

This provides a blueprint for examining complex, systemic phenomena like multi-level and nested paradoxes. This approach aligns with recent calls in the literature for rich, context-specific studies of paradox (Smith & Lewis, 2011; Hahn et al., 2018) and Putnam et al. (2016)'s inspiration to incorporate multiple levels and actors when investigating tension management. The cross-case element (by comparing HEI and hospitality) further adds a methodological contribution; in which allowed the researcher to identify which findings were robust across contexts vs. which were context-dependent. This comparative strategy is a useful template for future researchers to study paradoxes across different settings and isolating the influence of sector.By adopting a multi-level analytic strategy in the qualitative data analysis, it allowed the researcher to link each paradox to a combination of factors (e.g. external regulatory change, internal policy trade-off or cultural norm, and a set of individual attitudes; might all converge to produce a particular sustainability dilemma), rather than attributing tensions to any single source. A multi-causal lens in coding is relatively new in paradox research, and it demonstrated how qualitative analysts can go beyond surface theme identification to explain the emergence of paradoxes. Conducting research across multiple levels require contextual and cross-level data collection techniques. The study engaged with organizational respondents, and also external stakeholders to properly understand the macro-level context. Through the inclusion of such perspectives is a methodological contribution, as it expands the boundary of case study data to the institutional level.

In conclusion, the empirical contributions of this thesis consist of a comprehensive depiction of nested paradoxes in sustainable HRM within two important service sectors. Therefore, showing sectoral and cultural features in these paradoxes. Besides that, the documentation of real effects and responses associated with these tensions — these contributions not only enrich academic understanding but also ensure that theoretical insights are based on the studied reality.

8.3 Theoretical Contributions: Towards Paradox-Informed Examination of Sus-HRM (RQ5)

This doctoral research makes several important contributions by deepening the understanding of multi-level paradoxes in sustainable HRM. This section first distinguish theoretical contributions. The theoretical contributions of this thesis lie in constructing a more comprehensive framework of sustainable HRM paradoxes, ranging multiple levels, integrates HRM and human factors, and acknowledges context and time, thereby advancing the

understanding of sustainability's inherent complexities, in support of the identification of more productive responses to ever evolving paradoxes. Each is discussed below, incorporating both conceptual significance and insights drawn from our comparative case findings. In sum, this section addresses the final RQ5: How can paradox theory be extended to explain the nested, multi-level, and sector-contingent nature of sustainability tensions?

8.3.1 Progressing the Multi-Level Paradox Theory in Sustainability

This thesis extends paradox theory by demonstrating how sustainability tensions are *systemic, nested, and multi-level* in nature. Thus, advancing multi-level Paradox Theory in sustainability research. While early paradox research often examined contradictions at a single level (e.g. organizational or leadership level), this study shows how paradoxes manifest and interact across macro, corporate, HRM, and individual levels simultaneously. By applying a systemic paradox perspective (Hahn *et al*., 2014; Schad *et al*., 2016), it provide empirical evidence that sustainability paradoxes are not isolated incidents, but part of an interdependent network of tensions that permeate an entire organizational system. This reinforces the view of paradoxes as persistent and embedded phenomena (Smith & Lewis, 2011; Hahn & Knight, 2021) — answering calls in the literature for multi-level analyses of paradox.

The nested paradox framework used in data analysis refines theoretical understanding by illustrating specific mechanisms of cross-level influence. For example, how a macro-level *"short-term vs long-term" paradox* cascades into corporate level paradox. In turn, this cascade into an HRM-level *"present vs future tension"*, which then produces an individual-level *"performing paradox"*. Such findings add nuance to paradox theory; by showing that what might appear as an isolated contradiction (e.g. sustainability vs profitability) actually unfolds through misalignments at various levels. By empirically validating the *nested* nature of paradoxes, the study moves the theory beyond static, single-level models to a more dynamic, networked model of paradox, consistent with recent conceptual arguments (Putnam *et al*., 2016; Smith & Besharov, 2019).

8.3.2 Substantiating the Role of Sustainable HRM into Corporate Sustainability Paradox Framework

A significant contribution to a more holistic treatment of broader corporate sustainability paradox literature lies in increasing awareness of the role of sustainable HRM — essentially,

integrating sustainable HRM into Corporate Sustainability Paradox Frameworks. Paradox theory has been extensively applied to corporate sustainability challenges (e.g. strategic tensions between economic and environmental goals), but has rarely been applied at the HRM-functional level, apart from notable exceptions (Guerci & Carollo 2016; Poon & Law 2020). This research positions HRM as a crucial mediating level in the nested paradox structure, highlighting that HRM-level paradoxes (e.g. *HR efficiency vs employee well-being*, *or short-term performance vs long-term capability building*) are significant to how organizations navigate sustainability tensions. By embedding HRM considerations into the paradox framework, this thesis addresses a gap where traditional sustainability models overlooked the role of HR practices in managing paradoxes

This study shows that HRM systems (hiring, training, performance management) can either alleviate, or exacerbate sustainability paradoxes. For instance, proactive HR initiatives (e.g. sustainability training programs or green skill development) can develop a workforce capable of embracing paradoxes, whereas neglecting HRM in sustainability plans leads to implementation limitations. This integration of HRM and paradox theory broadens the applicability of paradox theory, suggesting that any comprehensive sustainability strategy must account for human resource dynamics. It also contributes to sustainable HRM theory by using paradox as a lens to understand HR's dual responsibility: ensuring organizational efficiency and adaptability, while fostering social and environmental values (Ehnert *et al.*, 2016; Jabbour & Santos, 2008). The findings support arguments in sustainable HRM literature that HRM must balance short-term productivity with long-term workforce development and well-being, and add a paradox perspective to explain why this balance is so challenging in practice.

In terms of sustainable HRM theory, the study suggests that managing people for sustainability is inherently paradoxical and multi-layered. Instead of treating HR initiatives as simple extensions of strategy, the findings reveal that HR policies are embedded in broader sustainability tensions and can both; mitigate and exacerbate those dilemmas. This implies that Sus-HRM must be expanded to acknowledge persistent contradictions — for example, HRM must constantly balance short-term efficiency vs. long-term capability building, and employee well-being vs. performance goals, often without full resolution of the trade-offs. In practice, HR systems (e.g. hiring, training, appraisal) emerged as a crucial mediating level: proactive "green" HR initiatives helped employees embrace sustainability goals, whereas

misaligned HR metrics tended to intensify the very tensions they were meant to resolve. By highlighting HR's dual role and the multi-stakeholder demands it faces, the thesis enriches Sus-HRM theory with a systemic, context-sensitive perspective – moving beyond normative models to show why well-intentioned sustainability policies often get "stuck" in organizations, when underlying paradoxes are ignored.

At the same time, the research advances paradox theory itself. It provides a detailed empirical example of nested, multi-level sustainability paradoxes: tensions at the national and institutional level were found to cascade through organizational strategy and HRM practices down to individual work routines. Therefore, the study validates and extends calls for dynamic, networked models of paradox (e.g. Putnam et al., 2016) by moving further than static one-level accounts. The analysis also combines temporal and contextual dimensions (e.g. upstream short-term economic mandates translated into short-termism in HR decision-making and daily work), linking temporal paradoxes across the hierarchy. Finally, by foregrounding individuals' sensemaking and agency, the study suggests that paradox theory should encompass micro-level psychological, and cultural processes as part of its accounts. In sum, the thesis extends both fields by showing that sustainable HRM challenges can only be fully theorised by embracing their inherently paradoxical, multi-stakeholder, and multi-level nature.

8.3.3 Contextualizing Paradox Theory in an Emerging Economy and Service Sectors

The study makes an important theoretical contribution by expanding the geographical and sectoral scope of paradox research - in an emerging economy and service sectors. Much of the existing literature on sustainability paradoxes is rooted in Western or developed-economy contexts, as well as in manufacturing or corporate settings (Lewis, 2000; Hahn *et al.*, 2018). By examining cases in Malaysia's private HEI and hospitality sectors, the study introduce contextual complexity into paradox theory. The findings highlight how local cultural, institutional, and economic factors shape paradoxical tensions in unique ways. For example, in Malaysia, pressing socio-economic issues (e.g. job creation, cost of education) and institutional conditions (e.g. government emphasis on economic growth) made "*economic vs environmental*" paradoxes especially acute. Thus, sustainability initiatives were often perceived as costly add-ons in a resource-constrained environment. This study also observed that "*global vs local*" tensions were intensified by the drive to meet international standards (e.g. global university rankings or tourism certifications) amidst local resource limitations.

By bridging these context-specific insights, the thesis extends paradox theory to non-Western settings, demonstrating its relevance but also revealing the need for more variation. The researcher corroborate and build on studies like; Jamali and Karam (2018) who suggested that emerging markets experience corporate sustainability paradoxes differently due to institutional constraints or competing development priorities. The sectoral comparison also contributes conceptually: it shows that sector logics (e.g. academic vs. hospitality service rationality) influence which paradoxes emerges, and how they are managed. Thus, the research enriches paradox theory with contextual distinction, emphasizing that while the core idea of paradox is universal, its manifestation and intensity are context-dependent (Van Bommel, 2018; Jarzabkowski et al, 2013). This insight encourages scholars to incorporate institutional and cultural dimensions into paradox models, rather than assuming one-size-fits-all, or simplistic patterns of tension.

8.3.4 Deepening Understanding of Nested and Temporal Dimensions of Paradox

The thesis also contributes to the theoretical development, as well as deepening the understanding of nested and temporal paradox concepts. First, by adopting a nesting perspective (Hahn *et al*., 2018; Smith & Tracey, 2016), the findings shed light on how paradoxes at different levels embed within each other through cascading effects and feedback loops. Early conceptual work discussed that macro-level sustainability challenges (e.g. climate change pressures) could shape organizational strategy and individual behaviour (Slawinski & Bansal, 2015), but empirical evidence across systemic levels was rather limited. This study addresses this gap; by mapping those linkages in real organizations. For instance, how a change in government policy (macro) influenced company strategy (corporate), which then required HR adjustments and finally impacted employees' daily routines — each step carrying a paradox. This empirical elaboration of nested paradoxes contributes a more detailed theoretical model of cross-level interactions, plus the notion of recursive loops (e.g. employee reactions feeding back into organizational outcomes).

Second, our research highlights the temporal aspect of paradox across levels. Through identification of several temporal tensions *(short-term vs. long-term orientation, present vs. future priorities)* that were interconnected across macro, corporate, HRM, and individual levels. While temporal paradoxes in sustainability are known (Schad & Bansal, 2018), limited studies have shown how they concurrently play out at multiple levels. This study found that short-term pressures upstream (national economic targets, quarterly performance

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metrics) trickled down to create short-termism in HRM decisions and even in how employees approached their jobs. Thus, linking temporal paradoxes across the hierarchy. This addresses recent calls for more research on the temporal dynamics of paradox in organizations, demonstrating that temporal and structural paradoxes are intertwined. Any attempt to resolve a temporal tension must consider structural alignment (ensuring support at all levels), otherwise the paradox may persist.

In summary, by investigating nested and temporal dimensions together, the thesis provides a more integrative theoretical framing of sustainability paradoxes as multi-level, context-influenced, and evolving over time.

8.3.5 Revealing Underlying Drivers of Sustainability Paradoxes

Beyond mapping where paradoxes occur, this research makes a novel theoretical contribution by explaining how and why they form; thus, revealing underlying drivers of sustainability paradoxes. By incorporating multiple reasons/roots of paradox framework (Chen & Eweje, 2022) into the analysis, the findings systematically traced the mechanisms behind each paradoxical tension in sustainable HRM. This approach revealed that sustainability paradoxes are powered by multiple, overlapping causes across different levels of the system: ranging from, macro-level institutional pressures and cultural expectations, to organizational policies and operational constraints, down to individual beliefs and behaviours. Demonstrating these causes/reasons adds an explanatory layer to paradox theory: rather than treating paradoxes as static dualities, this study asked why those dual demands persist? and how they are co-produced by cross-level dynamics? By doing so, the researcher extends paradox theory by highlighting the origin of paradoxical tensions, an aspect often under-developed in the literature — as this study further developed the vertical and horizontal misalignment. This insight also contributes to sustainable HRM literature by pinpointing specific drivers of tension in that realm. For instance, the findings show how misaligned incentives or conflicting cultural norms can generate HRM-level paradoxes, thus providing a clearer understanding of the challenges practitioners face.

This richer theoretical explanation of paradox formation broadens the discussion in paradox theory and sustainable HRM, moving away from simply acknowledging that "tensions exist", toward understanding why those tensions arise and endure in organizational practice.

8.3.6 Highlighting the Role of Individuals and Sensemaking in Paradox Management

Conclusively, this work extends the emerging literature on the *paradox mindset* and micro-level responses to paradox (Carmine & DeMarchi, 2022; Ivory & Brooks, 2018). Therefore, highlighting the role of individuals and sensemaking in paradox management. The study brings in the human element by illustrating how individuals (sustainability champions, managers, front-line employees) interpret and navigate paradoxical circumstances. The findings feature that individual agency, perceptions, and coping strategies; are central in either mitigating or exacerbating organizational paradoxes.

The findings record that employee adopted various responses such as "*acceptance of tensions*", "*creative problem-solving (both-and thinking)*", or on the other hand "*avoidance and resistance,*" depending on the support they received from the organization. These observations support and extend Hengst *et al*. (2020), by showing that paradox management is not only about top management strategies, but also about how individuals on the ground respond in their daily activities. The cases showed instances of proactive *"more-than"* responses (Smith *et al*., 2017; Putnam et al., 2016), as a handful of employees reframed tensions as new opportunities (e.g. by integrating sustainability into teaching methods, or by discovering cost-saving in green initiatives that also improved service). Nonetheless, some employees resorted to trade-offs, or cynicism when tensions felt unmanageable. By analysing such micro-level behaviours in conjunction with system-level tensions, the data provide a more holistic theoretical insight. Besides, effective paradox navigation requires both; structural approaches (policies, roles, resource allocation), and cultivating a culture or mindset at the individual level that embraces paradox. This dual-level insight pushes paradox theory to incorporate constructs stemming from organizational behaviour (e.g. reflexivity, empowerment, sensemaking). In theoretical terms, this research suggests that the paradox mindset can serve as a bridge between systemic paradox conditions and practical outcomes — a suggestion that future paradox theory scholars can explore.

8.4 Contributions for Practice

Beyond academic insights, this research offers several practical contributions for organizations, managers, and policymakers seeking to foster sustainable HRM while navigating inherent paradoxes. By understanding the nested and systemic nature of sustainability tensions, stakeholders can implement more effective strategies and involvements.

One practical lesson is that organizations should strive for better vertical alignment of sustainability objectives from the strategic level down to daily operations. Effectively, striving for holistic alignment of sustainability goals across levels. Misalignment leads to confusion and cynicism; while senior leaders must ensure that corporate sustainability goals are integrated into HR policies and management processes, not just stated in mission statements. For example, if a company sets a target to reduce carbon footprint or improve community impact, the HR department should translate this into real actions (e.g. including sustainability targets in performance appraisals, adjusting recruitment profiles to value sustainability competencies, and providing training for employees on relevant practices). By embedding sustainability into job descriptions, evaluation metrics, and reward systems; organizations send a consistent message that both economic and sustainability outcomes count (Schad *et al*., 2016). The findings suggest that when such integration was lacking (e.g. sustainability goals were decoupled from HR and operational metrics), employees perceived sustainability initiatives as non-essential or symbolic. Therefore, a key practical contribution is highlighting the need for coherence: sustainable HRM works best when there is a clear line of sight from macro ambition to individual action. Managers can conduct internal audits or workshops to map out how each sustainability objective is supported, or not, at various levels. Then, addressing any gaps. This systemic alignment can lessen vertical paradoxes; by ensuring that employees are not required to meet sustainability targets without the necessary time, tools, or incentives.

Given the persistence of tensions between competing goals, another practical implication is the importance of developing a paradox mindset among leaders and employees – the ability to accept and work through competing demands, rather than asserting on trade-offs. Corporate leaders in both case studies who acknowledged the contradictions (instead of downplaying them) were better able to create creative solutions, such as temporal separation of goals or finding synergistic initiatives. The author recommend that organizations train and encourage leaders to be ambidextrous and flexible, in order to simultaneously consider sustainability and performance imperatives without overlooking either. This could be development programs, such as involving scenario exercises on managing dual objectives, or mentorship from experienced managers who successfully implemented both initiatives. Through consistent conversation about tensions, employees down the line feel more comfortable voicing difficulties and proposing solutions. Flexible leadership structures can also help in; forming cross-functional teams tasked with balancing different outcomes, or

rotating managers through sustainability and operational roles to build understanding. As the literature recommends, paradoxical leadership that *"differentiates and integrates"* competing demands is essential to sustainable outcomes (Smith & Lewis, 2011; Zhang *et al*., 2019).

Moreover, the horizontal inconsistencies found in both cases point to a practical need for better communication and collaboration across departments and stakeholder groups. Organizations can establish mechanisms to break down silos when it comes to sustainability. For instance, creating a sustainability committee or taskforce with representatives from finance, HR, operations, and marketing can ensure that initiatives are jointly planned, as well as potential conflicts are addressed directly. In the private HEI sector, a more inclusive planning approach might have pre-empted the resistance to sustainability costs by aligning them with academic goals. In the hospitality sector, involving frontline employees in designing green initiatives could have led to solutions that did not impede customer service. Therefore, internal forums or workshops on sustainability progress can help maintain alignment (e.g. quarterly meetings where different departments report on how they have advanced the sustainability agenda). This promotes a shared understanding and can reveal horizontal paradoxes early on, allowing the organization to address them before they grow. Transparency is also crucial: if trade-offs are made (e.g. cutting a well-being program due to the pandemic), explaining the reasons and discussing how to ease negative impacts can maintain trust. Overall, the practical takeaway is that sustainable HRM should not be left to a single function; it requires a coordinated effort. Tools like cross-functional KPIs and internal communications efforts can align various actors toward common sustainability objectives — reducing internal contradictions.

For policymakers and industry bodies, this study highlights the importance of providing clear and context-appropriate guidance to organizations. The *global vs. local paradox* observed suggests that while international sustainability frameworks are constructive benchmarks, but they need to be translated into actionable local guidelines to avoid superficial compliance. Regulators in Malaysia and similar contexts could use these findings to refine sustainability regulations. — i.e. by issuing sector-specific sustainability roadmaps that merge global commitments with local conditions. In practice, this mean setting gradual targets that consider an industry's maturity – such as incremental environmental standards for hotels with incentives for each level achieved, or sustainability accreditation for universities that aligns with national education goals. So, external pressures become more achievable for

organizations and reducing the paradoxical pressure of achieve world-standard sustainability immediately, versus losing competitiveness. For organizations, the implication is to proactively localize and prioritize sustainability initiatives. Instead of adopting every aspect of a global framework, managers could conduct a materiality assessment to determine which sustainability issues are most pressing locally and focus efforts there (e.g. a university might prioritize equitable access, and energy efficiency that align with local needs). By engaging local stakeholders in this prioritization ensures the sustainability strategy is relevant and gains support — turning paradox into an opportunity for local innovation.

Another practical contribution of the thesis is highlighting that HR departments should be empowered to champion sustainability within organizations. Traditionally, sustainability is seen as the domain of a CSR office or top management, but this research shows HR is the essential in translating grand goals into everyday practice. Thus, corporations should involve HR early in sustainability planning. Practical steps for HRM include revising HR processes to support sustainable outcomes; (1) integrating environmental and social criteria into recruitment, (2) integrating sustainability goals into training programmes (e.g. sustainability-oriented training for new hires and ongoing development), and (3) improving performance management to acknowledge contributions to sustainability (e.g. team-based bonuses for achieving waste reduction or community project milestones). Additionally, (4) HR can promote employee voice and engagement in sustainability by setting up suggestion systems where employees can propose improvements — these addresses individual-level tensions by giving employees agency in resolving paradoxes (Ivory & Brooks, 2018; Hahn et al., 2014).

Another HR-related implication is balancing workloads. The distribution of workload is to allow time for sustainability activities, as managers might allocate a percentage of work hours for staff to participate in green teams or training, to show that these efforts are valued equally with regular duties. The benefit of such HRM actions is improved employee morale and innovation. For instance, flexible work arrangements or job rotations can help employees manage work-life sustainability conflicts (Ehnert *et al*., 2016). On the other hand, this study's university case implies that; if teaching loads had been adjusted to free time for sustainability research, academic staff would have engaged more actively. In summary, a practical takeaway is that HRM should be a strategic partner in sustainability, to develop the mechanisms needed to cope with paradoxes. Additionally, organizations may possibly invest

in training HR professionals themselves on sustainability issues, to align HR strategies with corporate objectives more effectively.

Lastly, at the cultural level, organizations should foster an environment that supports employees and managers as they navigate paradoxes. This includes top management demonstrating commitment to *both* sides of the paradox - so employees don't assume that profit always trumps sustainability. It also involves celebrating successes in sustainability even if small, to reinforce that those efforts are appreciated. This research showed that when sustainability achievements went unrecognized, individuals lost motivation. Simple measures such as awards for sustainability champions, sharing stories of teams that developed innovative solutions to tensions, or including sustainability metrics in internal practices can reinforce a culture of learning and experimentation. Encouraging reflexivity is another cultural practice – meaning encouraging teams to regularly reflect on "what tensions are we experiencing and how can we handle them better?" - in which could be built into strategy development. Thus, companies should train their focus on paradox management capabilities as part of their sustainability path, which incorporates cultural adaptability, open communication, and continuous learning.

In conclusion, the thesis advances theoretical and empirical knowledge of sustainable HRM paradoxes, as well as provides a roadmap of actionable insights. By recognizing nested paradoxes and its effects, and by implementing strategies that promote alignment through paradox mindset (e.g. cross-functional collaboration, local adaptation, strategic HRM involvement, and supportive culture), organizations in similar contexts can better navigate the complexities of sustainable HRM. These contributions bridge the gap between understanding and doing — by presenting guidance to practitioners on responding paradoxical tensions that go together with the pursuit of sustainability in HRM.

8.5 Limitations of the Research

While this research extends a rich and multi-level understanding of nested paradoxes in Sustainable HRM (Sus-HRM) within Malaysia's private higher education and hospitality sectors, various limitations must be acknowledged. These relate to methodological scope, contextual generalizability, temporal constraints, and conceptual framing.

The study adopted a qualitative, comparative case study design across two organizational contexts in a private university (University-MY) and a hotel (Hotel-MY), to explore the

systemic and nested nature of sustainability paradoxes. While this approach provided rich, context-sensitive insights, the case study method inherently limits generalizability beyond the specific organizations being studied (Yin, 2014). The findings are intended to be analytically generalizable, rather than statistically representative. In other words, they offer conceptual insight into how nested paradoxes operate in similar institutional or sectoral contexts, but may not capture all possible configurations of paradox in other organizations, industries, or national systems.

Furthermore, the number of cases (two) and the sampling of interviewees; while sufficient for the depth of analysis undertaken, it could constrain the diversity of paradox manifestations. While theoretical saturation was approached within each case, more extensive comparative insights could have emerged from a broader range of organizations (e.g. across public, hybrid, or multinational firms within the same sectors). While the cases were well-selected and reflective of institutional sustainability leaders, the inclusion of less mature or contrasting organizations might have revealed additional paradox configurations, particularly those involving resistance or institutional voids.

Contextually, this study was situated in Malaysia, an emerging economy characterized by: high power distance, institutional pluralism, and developing sustainability governance (Haque & Nor, 2020). These contextual features strongly influenced how paradoxes were experienced and navigated across macro, corporate, HRM, and individual levels. As discussed in the nested paradox section, high power distance shaped the vertical distribution of paradox responses: 'more-than' innovations or integrative strategies at senior levels. While this cultural embeddedness is a strength in capturing contextual richness, it also represents a limitation in terms of cross-cultural transferability. In low power distance or more decentralized settings, the manifestation and management of Sus-HRM paradoxes may differ significantly. Furthermore, the macro-level conditions that influence Sus-HRM (e.g. policy frameworks, regulatory enforcement, or labour dynamics) can vary significantly across national contexts. For example, the lack of sustainability mandates or incentives in Malaysia led to localized adaptation and symbolic implementation — dynamics that might not resonate in countries with stronger institutionalized sustainability regimes. Thus, thoughtfulness must be exercised in extending these findings, beyond the Malaysian context without appropriate cultural and institutional conversion.

A further limitation concerns the temporal scope of the research. While interviews, observations, and document analysis captured current practices and reflections, the study was not longitudinal in design. This, the evolving nature of paradox over time (a key theme in sustainability and paradox literature), could only be inferred through participant narratives, rather than observed. The study does reflect on temporal paradoxes (e.g., short-term vs. long-term trade-offs), but it cannot fully track how responses or tensions evolved or were managed over sustained periods. Given the recursive and dynamic nature of paradoxes (Smith & Lewis, 2011; Hahn & Knight, 2021), future research would benefit from a longitudinal approach that can monitor how organizations oscillate, adapt, or institutionalize responses to sustainability tensions over time. This would be particularly valuable for examining whether 'coping' strategies evolve into 'more-than' approaches, or vice versa.

This thesis adopted Putnam et al.'s (2016) typology of paradox responses (acceptance, coping, and more-than) to categorize how organizations and actors responded to sustainability tensions. While this framework provided useful analytical clarity, there were challenges in classifying responses, especially in distinguishing between sophisticated both/and strategies and genuine more-than responses. The boundaries between these categories are porous in practice, and some so-called "more-than" examples may reflect evolved coping or symbolic balancing, rather than systemic integration. Additionally, the conceptual term of the 'more-than' response warrants further interrogation. While this study argued that more-than strategies should transcend binaries and reframe tensions constructively, the researcher also acknowledged that many so-called transformative initiatives may be strategically framed without enacting deep change. This resulted in a broader theoretical limitation, without clearer operational definitions or longitudinal observation, it remains difficult to empirically prove whether more-than responses truly transform systems or only represent enhanced coping. Future research should continue to refine these categories, possibly integrating paradox mindset and institutional change theories to assess responses and outcomes.

The selection of two specific sectors; private higher education and hospitality sector - was grounded in their prominence in Malaysia's service economy and their differing sectoral judgments. This comparative design helped illustrate how nested paradoxes manifest differently in reputation-driven (HEI) vs. customer-driven (hospitality) organizations. However, other sectors (e.g. public administration, manufacturing, or technology) may

exhibit different paradoxical configurations, particularly where regulatory enforcement, union dynamics, or innovative capabilities differ. Additionally, the case organizations were both positioned as sustainability leaders in their respective sectors, in which means that their paradoxes may differ in salience or management compared to organizations with less mature sustainability commitments. This design choice helped highlight tensions between adopted values and embedded practices, but may minimize the intensity of paradoxes in settings with disputed or evolving sustainability agendas.

Considering the novel application of paradox theory in Malaysia, this study's limitations and challenges offer valuable lessons for future researchers operating in similar high power-distance, as well as institutionally constrained environments. Scholars should anticipate and bridge conceptual gaps, because many participants lacked familiarity with paradox theory, and did not possess an established vocabulary to describe competing sustainability and HRM tensions. While paradox theory provides academics a common language for articulating contradictory yet interdependent demands, practitioners in emerging contexts may not share the same vocabulary. Future researchers should therefore translate theoretical constructs into accessible, context-relevant terms. For example, rather than invoking the term *"paradox"* outright, researchers might discuss *"balancing challenges",* or use relatable scenarios to elicit insights on conflicting goals. By encouraging participants to express tensions in their own words is crucial; the responsibility falls on the researcher to interpret these narratives through a paradox lens. In practice, investing time in explaining key concepts (or drawing analogies to local cultural ideas) can foster deeper engagement. Future scholars — more so for those from outside the community — should consider collaborating with local partners or using bilingual research instruments to ensure that subtle paradoxical insights are not lost in translation. Through co-creation of shared understanding regarding paradoxical tensions with interviewees, researchers can obtain richer and more authentic data when the academic terminology is new to the field.

Another challenge concerns navigating hierarchical and institutional barriers to research. High power-distance contexts (e.g. Malaysia) pose unique challenges in access and openness: deference to authority and concerns about face can inhibit open discussions. Thus, gaining top management endorsement or a respected gatekeeper's introduction can legitimize the study in the eyes of potential participants, easing access to both internal and external stakeholders. Moreover, assurance of confidentiality must be emphatically communicated to

respond to participants' hesitance in voicing criticisms, or paradoxical struggles that implicate superiors. Malaysia's exceptionally high-power distance index (PDI 104, the highest globally) stresses that subordinates may be reluctant to contradict official narratives. To gather real insights, researchers should create a safe interview atmosphere — for instance, conducting interviews one-to-one in neutral settings, and using open-ended, non-confrontational questions. In addition, accessing actors external to the organization (e.g. regulators, suppliers, or community representatives) can be frustrating. Future researchers might leverage professional networks, industry associations, or snowball sampling initiated by internal participants to involve these external voices. In institutionally constrained environments, flexibility and cultural savvy are key: researchers should be prepared for protracted approval processes, last-minute cancellations, or reticence, and adapt accordingly. Importantly, maintaining a reflexive stance throughout fieldwork is advised — being familiar to what is not being said, and why. By understanding and respecting the local power dynamics and institutional norms, scholars can devise more effective field strategies that uphold research ethics while yielding authentic, insightful data.

Overall, while the research was carefully designed to capture the systemic and nested nature of sustainability paradoxes in Malaysian service organizations, it is subject to several limitations. These include the restricted generalizability of qualitative case study methods, the bounded cultural and sectoral context, the absence of longitudinal data, and the challenges of categorizing paradox responses. Thus, future researchers could adopt; a longitudinal comparative approach, expand the sectoral range, or apply quantitative or mixed methods to triangulate and extend the findings presented in this study. Furthermore, these pragmatic yet conceptually informed challenges will enable future research on sustainable HRM paradoxes in Malaysia, and similar contexts to be both feasible and richly illuminating — advancing the scholarly conversation in culturally suitable ways.

8.6 Final Reflections: Embracing Paradox

This study began with an ambition to examine the multi-level paradoxes embedded within corporate sustainability practices in Malaysia's private service sector. What emerged, however, was not a linear account of problem-solving, but rather a nuanced and contradictory landscape of tensions that defy resolution. These paradoxes are not irregularities to be corrected, but persistent, systemic features of complex organisations navigating sustainability

in real-world contexts. This final reflection bids a moment of pause; to critically engage with the intellectual and practical implications of embracing such enduring tensions.

Sustainability practices are inherently political and value-laden, particularly within institutional contexts marked by regulatory fragmentation, hierarchical traditions, and evolving market demands. The application of paradox theory has enabled a deeper understanding of how contradictory demands coexist, and how they are interpreted, navigated, and amplified within and across levels of analysis. Still, this study does not offer formulaic solutions. However, it presents evidence that navigation efforts are often fragmented, symbolic, or constrained by sectoral logics and organisational capacity. In this regard, the theoretical contribution lies not in the resolution of paradoxes, but in illuminating how they manifest and interact, especially in under-researched settings.

Methodologically, the study underscores the value of a multi-level, contextually embedded approach. The Malaysian context: with its pluralistic institutions, cultural complexity, and developmental sustainability agenda, provided a platform for a richer, more situated understanding of paradox. This challenges universalist models of Sus-HRM and sustainability, and calls for frameworks that are sensitive to place-based dynamics, temporal complexity, and embedded institutional contradictions.

From a reflexive standpoint, conducting this research has involved navigating paradoxes of a different kind. The tension between theoretical abstraction and empirical specificity; between representing participant voices and crafting conceptual coherence; as well as between critique and constructive contribution mirrors the lived challenges faced by sustainability actors themselves. This experience reinforces the argument that navigating paradox is not merely a cognitive exercise, but a fundamentally ethical and situated endeavour.

To sum, this thesis extends the view that paradoxes are not obstacles to be eliminated, but conditions to be engaged with thoughtfully and systemically. In facing with ambiguity and contradiction, scholars and practitioners must cultivate 'paradox literacy': *an adaptive capacity to hold competing truths, to think dialectically, and to act with integrity within complex organisational environments*. This, possibly, is the most lasting insight of the study

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APPENDIX

Policy & Organizational Documents

Document Title	Year	Issuing Institution / Organization	Type
Eleventh Malaysia Plan 2016–2020	2015	Economic Planning Unit, Prime Minister's Department	National Development Plan
Green Technology Master Plan 2017–2030	2017	Prime Minister's Department, Malaysia	National Policy Document
Malaysia Education Blueprint (Higher Education) 2015–2025	2015	Ministry of Higher Education, Malaysia	National Education Policy
Malaysia Green Hotel Certification Guidelines	2024	Ministry of Tourism, Arts and Culture, Malaysia	National Certification Guideline
Malaysia Tourism Transformation Plan 2020	2012	Ministry of Tourism, Malaysia	National Tourism Strategy
National Policy on Climate Change	2009	Ministry of Natural Resources and Environment, Malaysia	National Policy
National Sustainable Development Framework for Higher Education	2022	Ministry of Higher Education, Malaysia	National Policy Document
National Tourism Policy 2020–2030	2020	Ministry of Tourism, Arts and Culture, Malaysia	National Policy Document
SDG Roadmap for Malaysia: Phase II (2021–2025)	2021	Economic Planning Unit, Prime Minister's Department	National Policy Document
Shared Prosperity Vision 2030	2019	Economic Planning Unit, Prime Minister's Department	National Policy Document
Strategic Plan 2021–2025	2021	University-MY	Internal Strategic Plan
Sustainability Report 2023	2023	Hotel-MY	Internal Sustainability Report
Sustainability Policy	2022	University-MY	Internal Policy Document
Sustainability Policy Document	2022	Hotel-MY	Internal Policy Document
Corporate Sustainability Report	2022	Hotel-MY	Internal Report
University Annual Report 2022	2022	University-MY	Internal Annual Report
University Sustainability Strategy 2030	2023	University-MY	Internal Strategic Document
Workforce Development Plan	2021	Hotel-MY	Internal HR Planning Document
Human Resources Manual	2021	Hotel-MY	Internal HR Document
Human Resources Manual	2021	University-MY	Internal HR Document
Employee Training & Development Handbook	2022	University-MY	Internal HR Document
Employee Well-Being Report	2022	Hotel-MY	Internal HR/Sustainability Document

Interview Guideline

Opening and informed consent procedures:

i. Welcome the participant, thank them for their time, and introduce the purpose of the study (to explore paradoxical tensions in sustainable HRM and how organisations and individuals navigate them).

ii. Emphasise that there are no right or wrong answers; the research seeks to understand lived experiences and perspectives.

iii. Explain that participation is voluntary, the interviewee may withdraw at any time, and all responses will be treated confidentially and anonymised.

iv. Request informed consent to participate, and (where applicable) to audio-record the interview.

v. Confirm the interview duration (approximately 25–60 minutes) and check if the participant is comfortable to proceed.

The following interview guideline was used to conduct semi-structured interviews for this study. It is organised around four levels of analysis – macro (institutional/national), corporate (organisational/strategic), functional (HRM practices), and individual (employees/managers). The guide was designed to elicit participants' experiences and perspectives on paradoxical tensions in Sustainable HRM, and to explore how such tensions are navigated in practice. Core questions were posed to each participant, with suggested probes used flexibly to encourage elaboration and context-specific detail:

Section / Level	Core Question	Probes
Opening & Consent	Begin by thanking participant, introducing study purpose (exploring paradoxes in Sustainable HRM), and explaining confidentiality & voluntary participation.	– Confirm informed consent (and permission to audio-record). – Clarify interview length (45–60 minutes). – Check comfort before starting.
Macro-Level (Institutional / National)	How do national or institutional factors (laws, policies, culture, industry norms) influence your organisation's approach to sustainability in HRM?	– Can you recall an example where government policy supported or constrained HR sustainability? – Do you encounter contradictions (e.g. economic growth vs. environmental or social goals)? – How has your organisation responded to these tensions?
	What paradoxical pressures at the wider institutional/sector level most affect your work?	– Have you seen situations where external demands pulled in opposite directions? – How did these tensions cascade into HR practices?
Corporate-Level (Organisational / Strategic)	How are sustainability goals balanced with your organisation's broader business objectives?	– Describe a situation where financial/operational targets conflicted with sustainability. – How did leadership address it (prioritisation, sequencing, integration)? – Does the organisation present sustainability and profitability as complementary or conflicting?

Section / Level	Core Question	Probes
	How do stakeholder demands create pressures on HR strategy?	– Which stakeholders (investors, employees, customers, regulators) pull in opposite directions? – How are conflicting expectations negotiated? – What formal structures (committees, reporting, forums) exist to manage tensions?
HRM-Functional Level (People Management Practices)	In your HR practices, what tensions or contradictions have you observed between sustainability objectives and other priorities (efficiency, cost, performance)?	– Examples: recruitment speed vs. fairness/diversity; training cost vs. long-term development; performance metrics vs. well-being. – Can you describe a specific policy where such tensions appeared? – How are these resolved: favouring one, balancing, or integrating?
	Do HR policies themselves embody paradoxes?	– Examples: short-term productivity vs. long-term well-being. – How are tensions acknowledged/managed (reviews, incentives, committees)?
Individual Level (Employee / Manager Experience)	How have you personally experienced contradictions between sustainability goals and work demands?	– What opposing pressures were involved? – What actions did you take, and how did you interpret the situation? – What emotions or dilemmas arose?

Section / Level	Core Question	Probes
	What strategies do you or colleagues use to navigate such tensions?	– Do you pursue "both/and" solutions, prioritise one, or integrate creatively? – Has the organisation provided training or guidance?
	How do people in your organisation talk about these tensions?	– Are paradoxes discussed openly (e.g. "trade-offs," "balance")? – Do employees feel safe raising contradictions? – What narratives circulate about handling these tensions?
Closing	Invite final reflections: *"Is there anything else you would like to add about managing tensions in sustainable HRM?"*	– Reiterate confidentiality. – Thank participant. – Explain how data will be anonymised and used for research purposes only.