PROMOTING ENVIRONMENTAL RESPONSIBILITY STRATEGY AND INNOVATION IN THE HOSPITALITY INDUSTRY: A GREEN TOURISM APPROACH

Denada Liça *, Silvana Gashi **, Ermira Qosja **

* Corresponding author, Business Faculty, Aleksandër Moisiu University, Durrës, Albania
Contact details: Business Faculty, Aleksandër Moisiu University, Lagjja 1, Rruga e Currilave, 2001, Durrës, Albania
** Business Faculty, Aleksandër Moisiu University, Durrës, Albania

Abstract

The hospitality industry plays an important role in global sustainability efforts, and Albania, with its rich natural resources, is ready to take advantage of the growing demand for eco-friendly tourism experiences. As global awareness of environmental issues continues to grow, the hospitality industry faces increasing pressure to adopt sustainable practices. This study aims to explore new approaches to tourist behavior and the development of eco-hotels, contributing to the country's potential as a leading destination in green tourism. Moreover, it focuses on the promotion of environmental responsibility and innovation within Albania's hospitality sector, focusing on eco-tourism and the development of the eco-hotel model. Additionally, this study aims to identify opportunities for sustainable growth, positioning Albania as a competitive destination in the emerging green tourism field. The findings show the tourists' perceptions of eco-tourism and eco-hotels. Recommendations for stakeholders, policymakers, and businesses are provided, aiming to influence the country's transformation into a competitive green tourism destination. By combining insights from tourists with global green tourism trends, this study contributes to Albania's effort towards a more sustainable and competitive future in the hospitality sector. This study not only advances academic understanding but also provides practical guidance for the implementation of sustainable practices in hospitality. Additionally, it offers a model for integrating environmental responsibility and innovation in tourism, which can be adapted by other countries seeking sustainable development.

Keywords: Eco-Tourism, Eco-Hotels, Sustainability, Tourist Perceptions, Environmental Responsibility, Hospitality Industry

1. INTRODUCTION

As global awareness of environmental issues continues to grow, the hospitality industry faces increasing pressure to adopt sustainable practices (Chou et al., 2012; Gashi et al., 2023; Juneja & Banerjee, 2023; Luković & Kostić, 2018). As travelers seek experiences that harmonize with nature and as the impacts of climate change become increasingly tangible, the necessity for sustainable practices in the hospitality sector has never been more urgent (Haq et al., 2023). Sustainability in tourism is not only a trend; it is a fundamental shift in the way people interact with the world. It includes principles of environmental protection, cultural preservation, and socio-economic equity, aiming to ensure that the benefits of tourism are shared equitably among present and future generations (Juneja & Banerjee, 2023; Luković & Kostić, 2018). Sustainable tourism seeks to minimize negative impacts on the environment, conserve natural and cultural heritage, and contribute to the well-being of local communities (Bego & Malltezi, 2011; Gorica & Paloka, 2006; Seidl, 2014). It is a holistic approach that recognizes the interdependence of ecological, social, and economic systems, aiming for a balance that promotes long-term viability and resilience (Moise et al., 2018; Salman et al., 2020).

Among this global paradigm shift, Albania stands at a crossroads of opportunity and responsibility. Situated in the heart of the Balkans, Albania possesses unexploited potential to emerge as a place of eco-friendly tourism. This study aims to explore the transformative potential of environmental responsibility and innovation within Albania's dynamic hospitality sector. At the center of this exploration is the field of eco-tourism, which seeks to harmonize travel experiences with the preservation of ecosystems and local cultures.

The motivation for this study is linked with the belief in Albania's potential to not only meet the increasing demand for sustainable travel experiences but also to set a model for other tourism destinations. By examining the perceptions and expectations of both Albanian and foreign tourists, this study aims to analyze the key drivers influencing their decisions and preferences concerning eco-tourism and eco-hotels.

Albania's unique historical context offers the possibility for a growing sustainable tourism practice. However, alongside its natural beauty and cultural heritage, Albania faces many challenges for sustainable tourism development (Bego & Malltezi, 2011; Seidl, 2014). Decades of isolation under communist rule, followed by a period of rapid transition and economic restructuring, have left their mark on the country's infrastructure, institutions, and environmental resources. Environmental degradation, inadequate infrastructure, and limited institutional capacity pose significant barriers to the sustainable management of Albania's tourism assets (Bego & Malltezi, 2011; Kume, 2015; Lushaj et al., 2012).

This study aims to provide insights into the integration of sustainable principles within the Albanian hospitality landscape. Moreover, this study aims to contribute to the literature on green tourism as well as to provide recommendations that push Albania to become a sustainable tourism destination. The objective of this study is two-fold: first, to comprehensively evaluate the perceptions of tourists — both domestic and international — regarding eco-tourism and eco-hotels in Albania, and second, to develop an eco-hotel model uniquely tailored to Albania's resources and aspirations. Through the analysis of tourist behavior, preferences, and suggestions for improvement, this study seeks to offer a contribution to Albania to emerge as a destination of choice.

The research objectives are as follows:
• to comprehensively evaluate the perceptions of tourists — both domestic and international — regarding eco-tourism and eco-hotels in Albania;
• to develop an eco-hotel model uniquely tailored to Albania's resources and aspirations;
• to identify opportunities for sustainable growth within the hospitality sector by analyzing tourist behavior, preferences, and suggestions for improvement;
• to provide recommendations for stakeholders, policymakers, and businesses aiming to transform Albania into a competitive green tourism destination.

This study is articulated as follows. Section 2 offers a literature review on global trends and sustainable practices in green tourism with a specific focus on Albania's context. Section 3 offers the methodology used in this study. Section 4 presents the findings and Section 5 discusses them. Finally, Section 6 ends this study with some conclusions and recommendations.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Global trends and sustainable practices in green tourism

Eco-hotels represent a significant paradigm shift in the hospitality industry, including principles of environmental conservation, social responsibility, and economic viability (Alreahi et al., 2023; Haq et al., 2023; Juneja & Banerjee, 2023; Salman et al., 2020). These establishments go beyond traditional hotels by integrating sustainable practices into their operations, design, and guest experiences (Chou et al., 2012; Donohoe & Needham, 2006; Wadippuli Arachchi et al., 2015). Many studies that have been conducted in this field emphasize the importance of eco-hotels in promoting responsible tourism and mitigating the environmental impacts of travel (Juneja & Banerjee, 2023; Olorunsola et al., 2024).

The concept of eco-friendliness extends beyond accommodation to include a wide range of practices within the hospitality sector (Moise et al., 2018; Olorunsola et al., 2024). From energy-efficient building designs and renewable energy installations to waste reduction strategies and water conservation measures, eco-friendly initiatives are becoming increasingly prevalent (Haq et al., 2023; Juneja & Banerjee, 2023; Kostić et al., 2019; Moise et al., 2018). Wang et al. (2023) and Moise et al. (2018) underline the importance of adopting eco-friendly practices not only as a means of reducing environmental footprint but also as a source of competitive advantage and guest satisfaction (Esawe et al., 2024).

Additionally, studies on tourism governance and regulation stress the importance of policy frameworks in promoting sustainable tourism

practices. For example, effective governance in addressing negative externalities through tourism taxation has been shown to enhance long-term welfare (Ihalanayake, 2013). The role of corporate social responsibility (CSR) in emerging markets is particularly notable. Nimani et al. (2022) explore how companies in Kosovo practice CSR and the associated benefits. Their study highlights that CSR practices lead to better long-term financial performance, greater market share, competitive advantage, and improved company reputation. The integration of CSR into business strategies is essential for fostering a sustainable business environment (Nimani et al., 2022). Hasan et al. (2021) delve into the relationship between financial development and carbon emissions, particularly in emerging markets like Bahrain. Their findings reveal a long-term association between financial development and CO_2 emissions, underscoring the importance of adopting environmentally friendly financial policies to mitigate carbon footprints (Hasan et al., 2021).

Eco-tourism represents a holistic approach to travel that aims to minimize negative environmental impacts while maximizing positive socio-cultural and economic outcomes (Alreahi et al., 2023; Donohoe & Needham, 2006; Moise et al., 2018; Wang et al., 2023). It emphasizes responsible travel practices, conservation of natural and cultural heritage, and meaningful engagement with local communities (Bego & Malltezi, 2011; Dibra, 2023; Gorica & Paloka, 2006; Seidl, 2014). A rich body of literature explores the principles, benefits, and challenges of eco-tourism, highlighting its potential to foster environmental protection, promote cross-cultural understanding, and support sustainable livelihoods (Kostić et al., 2019).

Sustainable tourism development requires a comprehensive approach that integrates eco-principles into destination planning, management, and promotion (Milićević et al., 2016; Olorunsola et al., 2024). This needs collaboration among various stakeholders, including government agencies, tourism operators, local communities, and non-governmental organizations. Many scholars emphasize the importance of adopting a destination-wide perspective to ensure that tourism development is aligned with environmental conservation, cultural preservation, and socio-economic equity (Haq et al., 2023).

Consumer preferences play a crucial role in driving the demand for eco-friendly tourism experiences (Alreahi et al., 2023; Wang et al., 2023). A growing number of travelers are seeking destinations and accommodations that align with their values of sustainability and environmental responsibility (Kostić et al., 2019). Recent studies explore the factors influencing consumer decision-making in eco-tourism, including awareness of environmental issues, perceived authenticity of experiences, and willingness to pay a premium for eco-friendly products and services (Dwivedi et al., 2022; Haq et al., 2023; Rafiei Naeini & Farajirad, 2017; Wang et al., 2023).

Certification and standards play a key role in validating eco-friendly practices and providing assurance to consumers (Gashi et al., 2023; Milićević et al., 2016; Moise et al., 2018). Various eco-

certification schemes exist, ranging from global programs such as EarthCheck[1], Green Key[2], Certified Hotels & Locations[3], Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design (LEED)[4], Green Globe Certification[5], etc., to regional initiatives and industry-specific standards. Moreover, recent literature evaluates the effectiveness of certification schemes in promoting sustainable tourism practices, enhancing market credibility, and facilitating continuous improvement in environmental performance (Donohoe & Needham, 2006; Dwivedi et al., 2022; Kostić et al., 2019; Moise et al., 2018).

Despite its potential benefits, eco-tourism faces several challenges, including inadequate infrastructure, limited access to financing, and competing land uses (Ghidouche & Ghidouche, 2019; Salman et al., 2020). Additionally, balancing conservation goals with the needs of local communities and ensuring equitable distribution of benefits remain ongoing challenges. Many studies identify opportunities for overcoming these challenges through innovative financing mechanisms, community-based tourism initiatives, and public-private partnerships (Loginova & Lukina, 2022; Said et al., 2021).

As the tourism industry continues to evolve, the importance of sustainability will only grow in prominence (Haq et al., 2023; Olorunsola et al., 2024). Future research directions include exploring emerging trends such as regenerative tourism, circular economy models, and smart destination management systems. By embracing innovation and collaboration, the hospitality sector can contribute to a more sustainable future, where eco-friendly practices are not just a niche market segment but the standard for responsible travel (Alreahi et al., 2023; Kostić et al., 2019).

2.2. Albania's position in the global context

Albania, with its diverse natural landscapes, rich cultural heritage, and emerging tourism industry, presents a unique context for the study of sustainable tourism. While the country has made significant steps in promoting its tourism potential, there remains a need to ensure that development is managed in a sustainable and responsible manner (Gorica & Paloka, 2006).

The concept of eco-hotels is gaining traction in Albania as tourism stakeholders recognize the importance of environmental conservation and responsible tourism practices. Research by Kume (2015) highlights the emergence of eco-hotels in Albania, emphasizing their role in promoting sustainable tourism development and enhancing the overall visitor experience. Case studies of eco-hotels in Albania demonstrate innovative approaches to energy efficiency, waste management, and community engagement, contributing to both environmental and socio-economic sustainability (Grazhdani, 2010; Kume, 2015).

The hospitality sector in Albania is increasingly embracing eco-friendly practices as a means of reducing environmental impact and meeting

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[1] https://earthcheck.org/what-we-do/certification/earthcheck-certified/
[2] https://www.greenkey.global/application-process
[3] https://www.certified.de/zertifizierung
[4] https://www.usgbc.org/leed
[5] https://greenglobe.com/green-globe-certification/

the demands of eco-conscious travelers. Studies by European Tourism Going Green (ETGG, 2022) and Pojani and Grabova (2022) explore the adoption of eco-friendly initiatives in Albanian hotels and resorts, including measures to conserve water, reduce energy consumption, and promote local sourcing of food and amenities. These initiatives not only contribute to environmental sustainability but also enhance the competitiveness of Albanian tourism products in the global market.

Eco-tourism initiatives in Albania often involve close collaboration with local communities, aiming to empower residents and preserve traditional lifestyles while providing authentic and responsible travel experiences to visitors (Grazhdani, 2010, 2014). Research by Gorica and Paloka (2006) examines community-based tourism projects in Albania, highlighting their positive impacts on local livelihoods and cultural preservation. Such initiatives promote sustainable tourism development by ensuring that economic benefits are shared equitably and that natural and cultural resources are conserved for future generations.

Despite the progress made in promoting sustainable tourism, Albania faces several challenges in achieving its sustainability goals (Lushaj et al., 2012). Infrastructure constraints, inadequate waste management systems, and limited awareness of sustainable practices among tourism stakeholders are among the key challenges identified by the literature (Bego & Malltezi, 2011; Dollma, 2019; Gorica & Paloka, 2006; Grazhdani, 2010; Lushaj et al., 2012). Additionally, the need for stronger policy frameworks, increased public-private collaboration, and enhanced capacity-building efforts are highlighted as essential components of Albania's sustainable tourism strategy (Kume, 2015).

Looking ahead, there is a growing recognition of the need for continued investment in sustainable tourism initiatives in Albania. Recent studies underline greater emphasis on destination protection, community participation, and responsible visitor behavior to ensure the long-term viability of Albania's tourism industry (Bego & Malltezi, 2011; Lushaj et al., 2012). By building on existing initiatives and embracing innovation, Albania has the potential to emerge as a leading destination for sustainable tourism in the Balkan region, offering travelers unique experiences that celebrate the country's natural and cultural heritage while safeguarding its environmental integrity (Bego & Malltezi, 2011; Pojani & Grabova, 2022; ETGG, 2022).

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

3.1. Method

The methodology used in this study focuses on a qualitative approach, in particular in a comprehensive questionnaire, designed to analyze the perspectives and evaluations of both Albanian and foreign tourists. The primary objective is to explore the significance of ecological hotels and distinguish the factors influencing and motivating tourists to choose sustainable accommodations in Albania. Moreover, the questionnaire focuses on the exploration of dimensions of tourists' perceptions, preferences, and motivations concerning

ecological hotels. Structured in sections, the questionnaire starts by capturing demographic information to provide a contextual backdrop for subsequent analyses. Questions then continue with a focus on levels of eco-friendly practices, considerations influencing hotel choice, and the perceived importance of sustainability in the hospitality sector. This study uses electronic dissemination since according to the literature it facilitates the participation of a broader audience (Cochran, 1991). The questionnaire was distributed during the period December 2023–January 2024 as Google Forms via various social media tools such as Instagram and Facebook. A total of 352 surveys were collected. After removing eight incomplete or invalid surveys, 344 surveys were retained for statistical analysis, corresponding to a response rate of approximately 98%.

However, there are alternative methods that could be suitable for conducting similar research, enhancing the robustness and versatility of the study's approach. First, conducting a longitudinal study to track changes in tourist perceptions and preferences over time. This method could provide deeper insights into trends and the long-term impact of eco-friendly practices on tourist behavior. Second, implementing experimental designs to test the effectiveness of specific sustainable practices or interventions in eco-hotels. This approach could involve control and experimental groups to measure the impact of different variables.

Third, utilizing focus groups to gather qualitative data from tourists in a more interactive setting. This method allows for deeper discussion and can uncover insights that might not be evident in survey responses. Fourth, applying the Delphi technique to gather expert opinions on sustainable tourism practices and future trends. This method involves multiple rounds of surveys with a panel of experts to reach a consensus on key issues. Finally, analyzing existing data from tourism boards, industry reports, and previous studies complements primary data collection. This approach can provide a broader context and support the findings from primary research.

3.2. Case studies analysis

Some descriptive statistics are represented in Figure 1 providing information on the demographic composition of the tourists who participated in the questionnaire, with a focus on their diverse backgrounds, preferences, and characteristics.

The age distribution of the respondents reflects a predominantly youthful range, with over half (53%) falling within the 18–34 years old age range. This demographic trend suggests a strong request for eco-tourism and eco-hotels among younger generations, who may prioritize sustainability and environmental consciousness in their travel choices. While the percentage decreases with advancing age groups, there is still notable representation across all age brackets, highlighting the cross-generational interest in sustainable tourism practices.

The gender distribution among respondents indicates a slight majority of female tourists (69%) compared to male tourists (31%). This gender imbalance underlines the importance of gender-

sensitive approaches in tourism development and marketing strategies, recognizing the diverse needs and preferences of male and female travelers.

Albanian tourists comprise the majority (93%) of respondents, reflecting a strong domestic interest in eco-tourism and sustainable hospitality within Albania. However, the presence of tourists from various other countries, represented in smaller numbers, underlines the international attraction of Albania as a destination for environmentally conscious travelers. The diversity of nationalities adds richness to the tourism landscape and offers opportunities for cross-cultural exchange and collaboration in promoting sustainable tourism practices.

The questionnaire shows a diverse range of marital statuses and family compositions among respondents. While a significant portion identify as single (47%), indicating a propensity for solo travel or smaller group dynamics, a sizable proportion are married with children (45%), suggesting a preference for family-oriented travel experiences. The presence of divorced, widowed, and unmarried respondents further underlines the heterogeneity of tourist profiles and the need for tailored approaches to focus on diverse traveler segments.

Educational attainment among respondents varies widely, with a notable proportion holding advanced degrees such as Master's or PhDs (60%). This suggests a correlation between higher levels of education and an interest in eco-tourism and sustainable practices, as educated travelers may be more familiar with environmental issues and seek out responsible travel options. However, there is also representation from individuals with Bachelor's degrees (22%) and high school diplomas (3%), indicating a diverse range of educational backgrounds within the tourist range.

The distribution of monthly income (ALL) among respondents reflects a broad spectrum of economic profiles, with significant variability in income levels. While a notable portion of tourists report incomes exceeding 95,000 ALL (37%), indicating relatively higher purchasing power, there are also respondents with incomes below 30,000 ALL (12%), suggesting more modest financial means. This diversity in income levels underlines the importance of offering a range of sustainable tourism options that pay attention to varying budget constraints and socioeconomic backgrounds.

The survey captures a variety of tourist preferences and motivations, with different types of tourists represented among the respondents. Family tourists (41%) constitute the largest group, indicating a strong interest in eco-friendly travel experiences among families seeking sustainable and enriching vacations. Season tourists (33%) and weekend family tourists (21%) also feature prominently, highlighting the need for eco-tourism as a seasonal or weekend getaway option. Additionally, a smaller percentage of respondents identify as international tour operators (2%) or patrons of local tourist agencies (3%), suggesting the involvement of tourism professionals in promoting eco-friendly initiatives and experiences within Albania.

Overall, the data offers a picture of the diverse demographics, preferences, and characteristics of tourists interested in eco-tourism and sustainable hospitality within Albania. These insights provide a valuable foundation for informing destination management strategies, product development initiatives, and marketing campaigns aimed at fostering responsible and inclusive tourism practices in Albania and beyond.
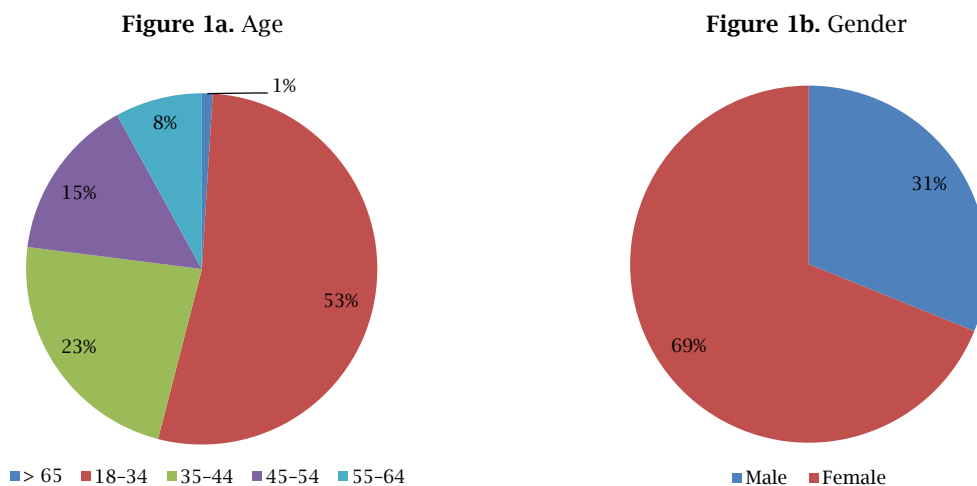
Figure 1. Descriptive analysis by categories

Figure 1a. Age

Figure 1b. Gender

Figure 1c. Nationality

- Albanian
- British
- Canadian
- Colombian
- Dutch
- Greek
- Italian
- Portuguese
- Hungarian

Figure 1d. Status

- Married with children
- Married without children
- Divorced with children
- Divorced without children
- Windowed
- Single
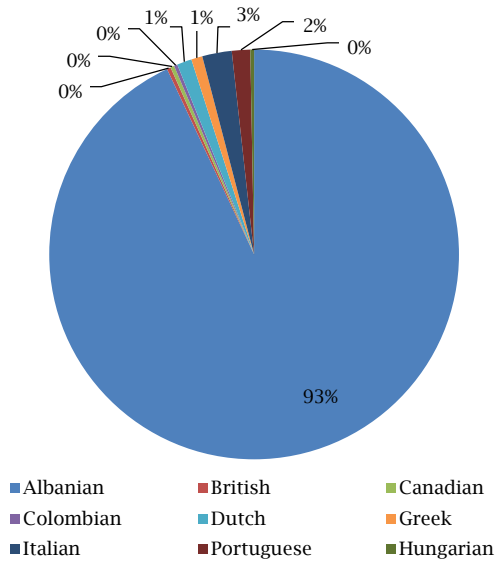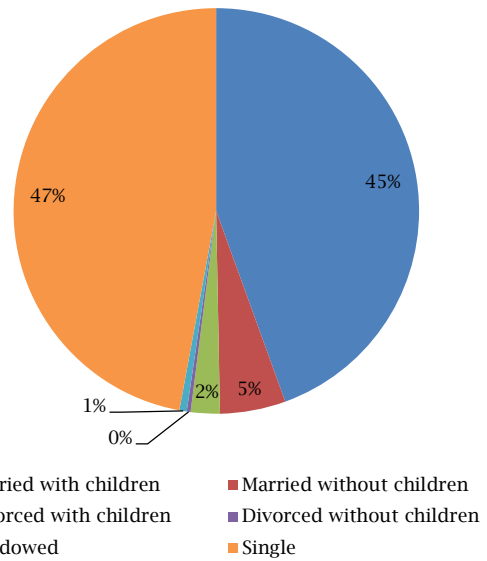
Figure 1e. Level of education

- Bachelor degree
- High school
- Master/PhD
- Middle school
- Student
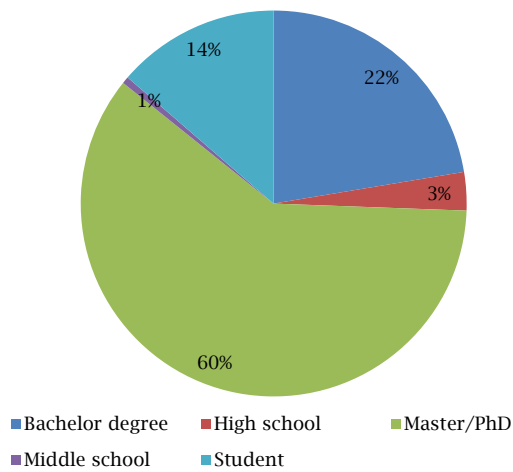
Figure 1f. Month income (ALL)

- < 30,000
- > 95,000
- 35,000–54,000
- 55,000–74,000
- 75,000–94,000

Figure 1g. Tourist type

- Family tourist
- International tour operators
- Local tourist agencies
- Season tourist
- Weekend Family tourist

Source: Authors' elaboration.

The sample, consisting of responses from 344 tourists, provides a diverse perspective on eco-tourism preferences. This diversity ensures that the findings are comprehensive and representative of various demographic segments, which is critical for developing a robust eco-hotel model and identifying sustainable growth opportunities. The analysis of the sample data reveals key insights into tourist behavior, preferences, and perceptions. These insights are foundational for making informed recommendations and for designing targeted marketing and development strategies that cater to different tourist demographics.
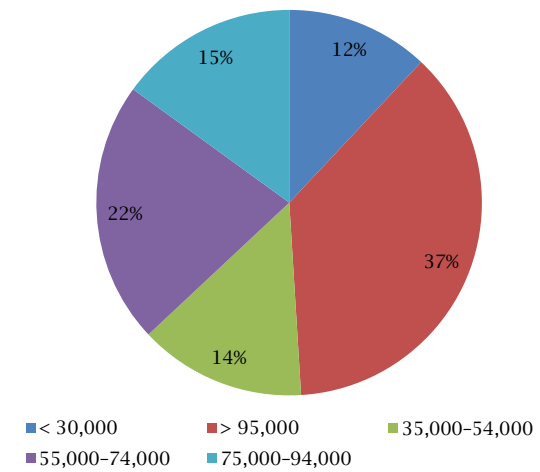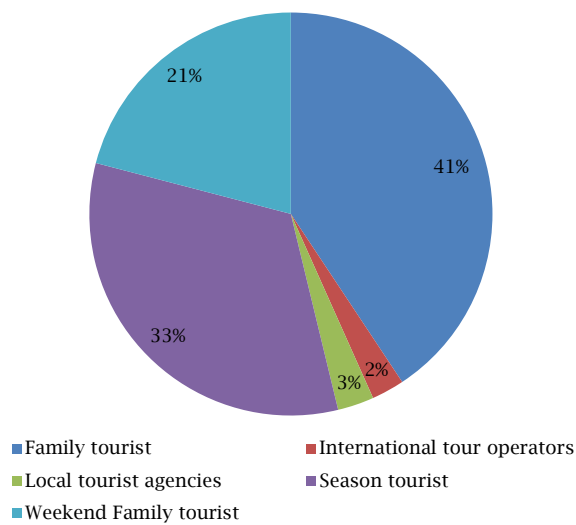
4. RESEARCH RESULTS

The findings show that the majority of tourists rated their experiences as good (43%) followed by very good (33%) and excellent (13%), with fewer ratings for fair (11%) and poor (1%) (see Figure 2). Also, the results show a generally positive experience among Albanian nationals. The data includes a variety of nationalities with generally positive experiences, though the sample size for each is relatively small. Marital status variations (married with children, single, etc.) show diverse experiences, but the trend suggests that married tourists, especially those with children, and single tourists, tend to rate their experiences from good to very good. Tourists with higher educational levels rate their experiences mostly as very good and good, indicating a strong appreciation for the offerings in Albania while tourists with bachelor and below, show a positive trend but with fewer responses in the excellent category. Moreover, family tourists have a significant presence, with most rating their experience as good to very good, indicating that family-oriented tourism is well-received. These

findings suggest that demographic factors such as gender, nationality, marital status, education level, and tourist type all play roles in shaping the overall experience of tourists in Albania. The generally positive experiences across diverse demographic groups highlight the importance of Albania as a tourist destination. However, the data also suggests areas for targeted improvement and customization of tourist experiences, especially considering the diverse needs and expectations of different tourist segments. Implementing strategies to further enhance positive experiences could help concretize Albania's position as a competitive destination in the global tourism market, especially within the eco-tourism sector.
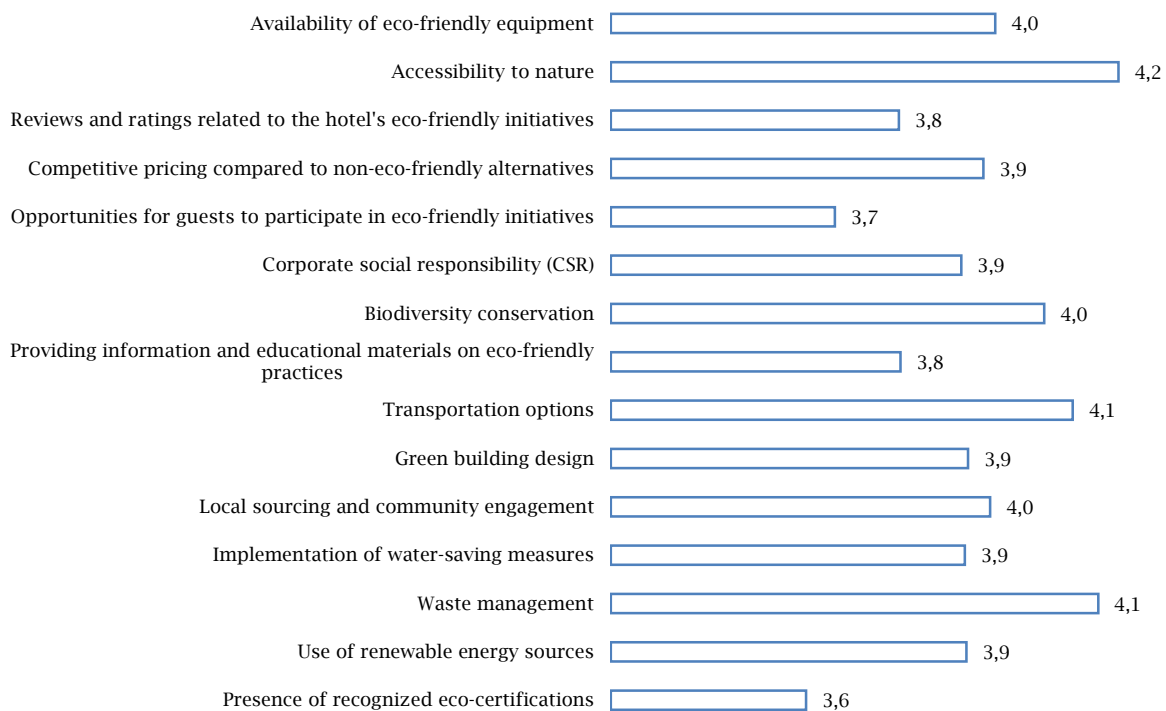
Figure 2. The overall experience in Albania

Poor	1%
Very good	33%
Good	43%
Fair	11%
Excellent	13%
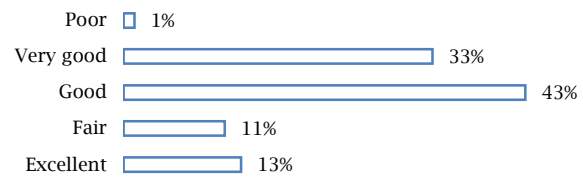
Source: Authors' elaboration.

Additionally, the results offer insights related to the importance of eco-friendly tourism. In particular, there is a broad interest in eco-friendly tourism practices among various demographic segments, with slight variations that could inform targeted marketing and service development strategies. The hospitality industry in Albania, particularly those involved in eco-tourism, can leverage these insights to tailor their offerings to meet the expectations of different tourist demographics, enhancing Albania's effort as a sustainable tourism destination.

Figure 3. The main factors that would influence tourists' decision to stay in an eco-friendly hotel

| Factor	Rating
Availability of eco-friendly equipment	4,0
Accessibility to nature	4,2
Reviews and ratings related to the hotel's eco-friendly initiatives	3,8
Competitive pricing compared to non-eco-friendly alternatives	3,9
Opportunities for guests to participate in eco-friendly initiatives	3,7
Corporate social responsibility (CSR)	3,9
Biodiversity conservation	4,0
Providing information and educational materials on eco-friendly practices	3,8
Transportation options	4,1
Green building design	3,9
Local sourcing and community engagement	4,0
Implementation of water-saving measures	3,9
Waste management	4,1
Use of renewable energy sources	3,9
Presence of recognized eco-certifications	3,6

Note: 1 = Not important at all, 5 = Extremely important.
Source: Authors' elaboration.

Figure 3 shows the main factors that would influence tourists' decision to stay in an eco-friendly hotel. Accessibility to nature (4.2) received the highest average importance rating, followed by transportation options (4.1), waste management (4.1), availability of eco-friendly equipment (4.0), biodiversity conservation (4.0), and local sourcing and community engagement (4.0). Sustainable transportation, building infrastructure, supporting local economies, conserving water, and proper waste management are crucial elements of eco-friendly practices in the hospitality industry. Overall, the findings indicate a strong preference for eco-friendly initiatives that are directly related to the guest experience and tangible conservation efforts. Price and formal recognition through certifications are considered, but they are not as critical as practical, everyday eco-friendly practices and policies. While still above average, it suggests that formal eco-certifications are less of a priority for the respondents compared to practical, on-site sustainability measures.

The main factors that tourists suggest for enhancing eco-friendly practices in the hospitality sector in Albania are presented in Figure 4.

Promoting local products and culture (4.3) receives the highest score, suggesting that there is a strong emphasis on supporting local businesses and cultural practices as a part of eco-friendly initiatives. Moreover, the results indicate that there is a high demand for eco-friendly transportation solutions (4.2); a significant need to improve how waste is handled (4.2); a high level of concern for protecting and conserving biological diversity (4.2); increasing awareness and knowledge about environmental issues is seen as very important (4.2); importance placed on adopting new technologies to enhance eco-friendliness (4.1); partnership between the hospitality sector and government for effective sustainability initiatives (4.1); a strong push for reducing energy consumption (4.1); and, importance of preserving water resources (4.1). Overall, the results indicate a balanced view of the importance of various factors, with the promotion of local products and culture being rated as the most influential. It suggests that stakeholders in the Albanian hospitality sector view a comprehensive approach to sustainability as crucial, integrating education, resource management, local engagement, and innovation.

Figure 4. The main factors to suggest for enhancing eco-friendly practices in the hospitality sector in Albania
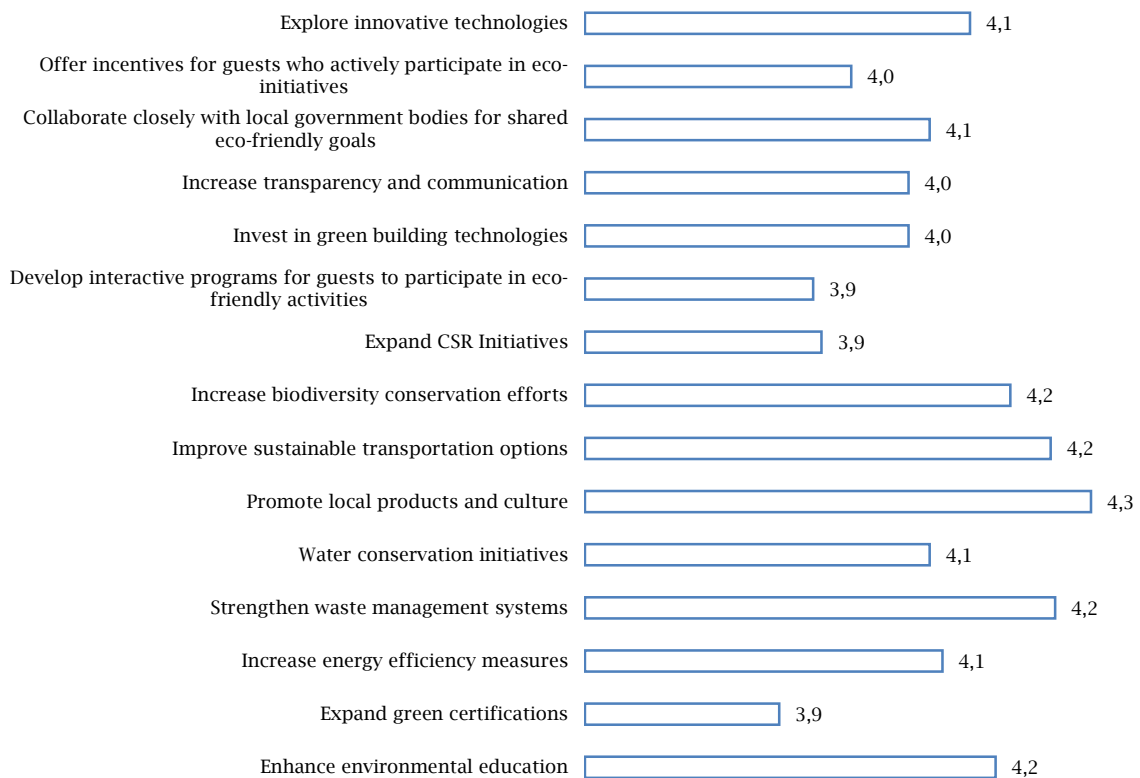
Note: 1 = Not important at all, 5 = Extremely important.
Source: Authors' elaboration.

5. DISCUSSION

This study explores the perceptions, preferences, and expectations of tourists towards eco-tourism and eco-friendly hotels in Albania, highlighting the significant role of sustainability in the hospitality industry. Through the analysis of comprehensive questionnaire data, key insights are presented regarding tourist demographics, the importance of eco-friendliness, factors influencing accommodation choices, and suggestions for the hospitality sector.

This study shows diverse tourist demographics with a predominantly positive overall experience in Albania. The findings indicate the importance of eco-tourism across a broad range of ages, nationalities, and educational backgrounds, suggesting a universal interest in sustainable travel experiences. Importantly, the analysis links tourist experiences with demographic data, exploring variables such as the higher valuation of eco-friendliness among younger tourists and those with higher education levels.

Tourists' growing awareness and concern for environmental issues are evident in the moderate to high importance ratings of eco-friendliness in their accommodation choices. This trend is consistent across different demographic groups, with slight variations that offer important insights for targeted marketing and service development.

The presence of recognized eco-certifications emerges as a key factor, especially among female tourists, underlining the need for hotels to adopt and communicate their sustainability certifications effectively. Other factors such as the impact on local communities and sustainable practices also influence accommodation choices, emphasizing the holistic approach tourists are seeking in eco-friendly tourism.

The strong support for developing interactive programs for guests and investing in green technologies suggests a desire for active participation in sustainability efforts during their stay. These suggestions, highly rated across genders, underline the potential for the hospitality sector to innovate in environmental responsibility and guest engagement (Donohoe & Needham, 2006; Erdem & Tetik, 2013).

This study highlights the significant opportunity for Albania's hospitality sector to focus on the growing demand for eco-friendly tourism experiences. By aligning with global sustainability trends and tourists' expectations, Albania can enhance its need as a sustainable tourism destination. The findings suggest several strategies for stakeholders. First, hotels should pursue recognized eco-certifications and communicate their sustainability efforts effectively to attract eco-conscious tourists (Donohoe & Needham, 2006; Gashi et al., 2023; Milićević et al., 2016; Moise et al., 2018). Second, developing targeted marketing strategies that pay attention to the specific preferences of different demographic segments can enhance the tourist experience and satisfaction (Esawe et al., 2024; Loginova & Lukina, 2022). Third, implementing interactive programs and investing in green technologies not only aligns with tourists' desires but also positions Albania as a leader in innovative eco-tourism practices. Fourth, stakeholders across the hospitality sector should collaborate to promote sustainability, leveraging insights from tourists to guide improvements and innovations in eco-friendly tourism (Erdem & Tetik, 2013).

6. CONCLUSION

This study explores the potential for Albania to become a leading destination in eco-tourism by developing eco-hotels and promoting sustainable practices within the hospitality sector. Moreover, it highlights tourists' perceptions and preferences for eco-friendly accommodations, emphasizing the importance of environmental conservation, local community engagement, and the adoption of green technologies. The findings suggest a positive reception among tourists towards eco-friendly initiatives, with recommendations for stakeholders to enhance sustainability efforts through eco-certifications, innovative guest programs, and targeted marketing strategies. This approach aims to position Albania as a competitive green tourism destination while ensuring long-term environmental and socio-economic benefits.

This research contributes important insights into the evolving field of eco-tourism and the hospitality sector's role in fostering sustainable travel experiences. By embracing the recommendations derived from this study, Albania can experience its transformation into a competitive green tourism destination, ensuring a sustainable and prosperous future for its hospitality industry.

The findings from this study offer several implications for managers and policymakers in the hospitality and tourism sectors, in particular within the context of Albania's efforts to position itself as a leading destination for green tourism. These implications can guide strategic decisions, policy formulation, and operational practices aimed at enhancing the sustainability and competitiveness of Albania's tourism offerings.

For managers in the hospitality sector, the implications are as follows. First, given the importance tourists place on eco-certifications, hotel managers should seek to obtain these certifications and actively promote them in their marketing materials. Highlighting eco-friendly practices can differentiate their offerings and attract eco-conscious travelers (Donohoe & Needham, 2006; Gashi et al., 2023; Moise et al., 2018). Second, the strong interest in interactive programs that allow guests to engage in sustainable practices suggests a need for innovative guest experiences. Managers should consider developing eco-tours, sustainability workshops, and other engaging activities that highlight the local environment and culture (Donohoe & Needham, 2006; Rafiei Naeini & Farajirad, 2017). Third, with a clear demand for sustainable practices, investing in green technologies such as renewable energy, water conservation systems, and waste reduction initiatives can not only reduce operational costs but also enhance the hotel's appeal to environmentally conscious tourists (Erdem & Tetik, 2013). Fourth, the demographic characteristics explored in the study indicate the importance of tailored marketing strategies. Managers should use these insights to target specific demographic groups with personalized messages that highlight the aspects of eco-tourism most relevant to each group (Erdem & Tetik, 2013; Papathimiu et al., 2021).

For policymakers, the implications are as follows. First, policymakers can facilitate the transition towards sustainability by providing support, incentives, or effective processes for hospitality businesses seeking eco-certifications (Donohoe & Needham, 2006; Gashi et al., 2023; Milićević et al., 2016). This might include financial subsidies, technical assistance, or recognition programs. Second, developing infrastructure that supports sustainable tourism, such as eco-friendly public transportation, green spaces, and recycling facilities (Ghidouche & Ghidouche, 2019; Dollma, 2019), can enhance the overall attractiveness of Albania as an eco-tourism destination. Third, establishing strong environmental regulations for the tourism sector and ensuring their enforcement can maintain high standards of sustainability (Donohoe & Needham, 2006). This might include guidelines for waste management, energy use, and conservation practices (Chou et al., 2012; Rafiei Naeini & Farajirad, 2017). Fourth, encouraging hotels and tourism operators to source locally and sustainably can stimulate the local

economy and reduce the environmental impact of tourism. Policies could support local agriculture, crafts, and other sustainable products that can be integrated into the tourism experience (Ghidouche & Ghidouche, 2019; Rafiei Naeini & Farajirad, 2017). Fifth, policymakers should consider initiatives to educate and engage local communities in sustainable tourism practices (Dibra, 2023). Community involvement can enhance the authenticity of the tourism experience and ensure that tourism development benefits local populations (Ghidouche & Ghidouche, 2019; Donohoe & Needham, 2006; Gorica & Paloka, 2006; Wadippuli Arachchi et al., 2015).

This study provides also social implications. First, promoting eco-tourism practices enhances public awareness and education about environmental issues and sustainability. Second, sustainable tourism practices often involve local communities, fostering socio-economic development and preserving cultural heritage. Third, eco-friendly hotel practices, such as improved waste management and reduced pollution, contribute to the overall health and well-being of both tourists and local residents. Fourth, the study supports broader goals of sustainable development by integrating environmental, social, and economic considerations in tourism practices. Fifth, by highlighting the growing demand for sustainable options, the research can influence consumer behavior towards more responsible travel choices.

In conclusion, the implications of this study highlight the interconnected roles of managers and policymakers in fostering a sustainable tourism sector. By adopting a collaborative and strategic approach to sustainability, Albania can enhance its competitiveness as an eco-tourism destination, benefiting both the environment and the economy.

This study, while providing valuable insights into the preferences and perceptions of tourists towards eco-tourism in Albania, offers some limitations that should be acknowledged. First, this study focuses on tourists within Albania, with a significant portion of respondents being Albanian nationals. The diversity and size of the sample may limit the generalizability of the findings to other tourist demographics and regions. Second, the reliance on self-reported data through questionnaires can introduce biases, as respondents may provide socially desirable answers or may not accurately recall their behaviors and preferences. Third, the data represents a picture in time, which may not capture seasonal variations in tourist behaviors and preferences or changes in the global tourism field. Fourth, this study focuses on a selected set of factors influencing accommodation choices and suggestions for the hospitality sector. There might be other significant factors and innovative suggestions not covered in this study. Fifth, the quantitative nature of the study might overlook the characteristics and depth of tourists' attitudes and motivations that qualitative methods could reveal.

To build on the findings of this study and address its limitations, future research could explore several directions. First, future studies could include a more extensive and diverse range of tourists, including those from different countries and with varied travel experiences, to enhance the generalizability of the findings. Second, conducting longitudinal research could offer insights into how tourist preferences and behaviors towards eco-tourism evolve over time, considering changing environmental concerns and tourism trends. Third, qualitative research, such as interviews and focus groups, could provide deeper insights into the motivations behind tourists' preferences and experiences, enriching the understanding of eco-tourism dynamics. Fourth, investigating a broader range of factors influencing tourists' accommodation choices and further innovative suggestions for the hospitality sector could explore new opportunities for enhancing eco-tourism experiences. Fifth, evaluating the actual environmental, economic, and social impacts of implementing the suggested strategies for eco-tourism development could provide empirical evidence of their effectiveness and guide policy and managerial decisions. Sixth, comparative studies across different cultural and regional contexts could offer important insights into global trends in eco-tourism and identify best practices that could be adapted across various settings. By addressing these limitations and exploring the suggested future research directions, scholars and practitioners can further contribute to the sustainable development of the tourism sector, ensuring it aligns with global sustainability goals and enhances the competitiveness of destinations like Albania in the eco-tourism market.

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APPENDIX. QUESTIONNAIRE

A. Demographic information

1. Age:
   o 18–34 years old
   o 35–44 years old
   o 45–54 years old
   o 55–64 years old
   o > 65 years old

2. Gender:
   o Female
   o Male
   o Other

3. Nationality: _____

4. Status:
   o Single
   o Married with children
   o Married without children
   o Divorced with children
   o Divorced without children
   o Windowed

5. Level of education:
   o Middle school
   o High school
   o Student
   o Bachelor degree
   o Master/PhD

6. Months income (ALL):
   o < 30,000
   o 35,000–54,000
   o 55,000–74,000
   o 75,000–94,000
   o > 95,000

B. Tourist type

7. Tourist type:
   o Weekend family tourist
   o Season tourist
   o Family tourist
   o Local tourist agencies
   o International tour operators

C. General experience

8. How would you rate your overall experience in Albania?
   o Excellent
   o Very good
   o Good
   o Fair
   o Poor

D. Perception of eco-tourism

9. On a scale of 1 to 5, how important is eco-friendly tourism for you?
   o 1 (Not important at all)
   o 2
   o 3
   o 4
   o 5 (Extremely important)

E. Factors influencing hotel choice

10. Evaluate the factors that would influence your decision to stay in an eco-friendly hotel (1 = Not important at all, 5 = Extremely important):

- o Presence of recognized eco-certifications
- o Use of renewable energy sources
- o Waste management
- o Implementation of water-saving measures
- o Local sourcing and community engagement
- o Green building design
- o Transportation options
- o Providing information and educational materials on eco-friendly practices
- o Biodiversity conservation
- o Corporate social responsibility (CSR)
- o Opportunities for guests to participate in eco-friendly initiatives
- o Competitive pricing compared to non-eco-friendly alternatives
- o Reviews and ratings related to the hotel's eco-friendly initiatives
- o Accessibility to nature
- o Availability of eco-friendly equipment

F. Suggestions for improvement

11. Evaluate the factors that you would suggest for enhancing eco-friendly practices in the hospitality sector in Albania (1 = Not important at all, 5 = Extremely important):

- o Enhance environmental education
- o Expand green certifications
- o Increase energy efficiency measures
- o Strengthen waste management systems
- o Water conservation initiatives
- o Promote local products and culture
- o Improve sustainable transportation options
- o Increase biodiversity conservation efforts
- o Expand CSR initiatives
- o Develop interactive programs for guests to participate in eco-friendly activities
- o Invest in green building technologies
- o Increase transparency and communication
- o Collaborate closely with local government bodies for shared eco-friendly goals
- o Offer incentives for guests who actively participate in eco-initiatives
- o Explore innovative technologies