HOTELS INDUSTRY: AN ANALYSIS OF BUSINESS APPROACHES AND STRATEGIES

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Abstract

In an era marked by growing environmental concerns, the hotel industry faces increasing pressure to adopt sustainable practices. This research investigates the approach of Albanian businesses within the hotel sector towards the concept and functionality of ecological hotels. Employing questionnaires distributed from December 2023 to January 2024, this study aims to investigate the hotel industry's engagement with green practices and their commitment to environmental responsibility. Albania, with its rapidly expanding tourism sector, serves as a critical case study for examining how ecological concepts are integrated into hotel operations. The questionnaire focuses on measuring the businesses' awareness, attitudes, and implementation strategies regarding ecological hotels, aiming to explore the link between sustainable practices and environmental management in this industry. The findings offer insightful revelations about the current state of ecological hotel practices in Albania, identifying trends, challenges, and opportunities for advancing sustainability within the hotel sector. This study contributes to the literature by highlighting the specific environmental strategies adopted by Albanian hotels, providing a unique insight into the evolving dynamics of sustainable tourism within an emerging European market. Furthermore, this study seeks to provide a comprehensive analysis of the implications of green practices on business performance and customer satisfaction, thereby contributing valuable recommendations for promoting environmental sustainability in the Albanian hotel industry.

Keywords: Ecological Hotels, Sustainability Practices, Albanian Hotel Industry, Environmental Responsibility, Green Hospitality, Sustainable Tourism

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1. INTRODUCTION

The transition towards sustainable tourism and, by extension, ecological hotels, is not just an environmental need but also a strategic economic decision. The global tourism market is increasingly favoring destinations and accommodations that demonstrate a commitment to environmental sustainability (Chan & Hawkins, 2010). This shift is partly driven by a more environmentally conscious consumer base that prioritizes sustainability in their travel choices (Salman et al., 2020). For Albania, leveraging this shift is essential not only for attracting a niche market of eco-conscious travelers but also for preserving its natural landscapes and cultural heritage.

Despite extensive research on sustainable tourism globally, there exists a notable gap in the literature concerning the specific challenges and opportunities faced by emerging markets, particularly in the Balkans and Albania. Most existing studies focus on developed countries or global chains, leaving a void in understanding how smaller, locally operated hotels in developing countries adapt to and implement sustainable practices (Bohdanowicz & Zientara, 2008; Kasim, 2007). Additionally, while the importance of ecological hotels is recognized, there is insufficient empirical research on how these concepts are applied practically within the unique socio-economic contexts of emerging European markets.

Moreover, the concept of ecological hotels overcomes the simple adoption of green practices. It encompasses a holistic approach to sustainability, incorporating social and economic dimensions alongside environmental considerations (Bohdanowicz & Zientara, 2008; Ihalanayake, 2013). This broader perspective includes community involvement, support for local economies, and the promotion of cultural heritage, aligning with the principles of responsible tourism (Mathew & Sreejesh, 2017; Moise et al., 2018). Such an approach is particularly relevant in the Albanian context, where tourism development is closely linked to rural development and the preservation of traditional lifestyles (Pojani & Grabova, 2022; Seidl, 2014).

Despite the apparent benefits and growing global speed towards sustainable tourism, the adoption of ecological hotel practices in Albania faces several challenges. These include a lack of awareness and understanding of the benefits of sustainability practices among hoteliers, limited financial resources for implementing green technologies, and a developing regulatory framework for environmental sustainability in the tourism sector (Bego & Malltezi, 2011; Dibra, 2023; Pojani & Grabova, 2022). Addressing these challenges requires a coordinated effort from the government, industry stakeholders, and the community to foster a supportive ecosystem for sustainable tourism development.

This study aims to bridge these literature gaps by providing a comprehensive analysis of the current approaches to ecological hotels among Albanian businesses in the hotel industry. It seeks to investigate the existing attitudes, practices, and barriers related to ecological hotels in Albania. The research is guided by questions on how these businesses integrate ecological principles into their operations and the main challenges they face. Using a structured questionnaire, this study utilizes a qualitative methodology to analyze responses, aiming to offer actionable insights for stakeholders to drive the adoption of sustainable practices in the Albanian hotel industry, thus contributing to the broader goals of environmental conservation and sustainable development. It seeks to investigate the existing attitudes, practices, and barriers related to ecological hotels in Albania through the following research questions:

RQ1: How do Albanian hotel businesses perceive the importance of ecological practices within their operations?

RQ2: What are the primary motivators for Albanian hotels to integrate ecological practices into their business models?

RQ3: What barriers do Albanian hotels face in the implementation of sustainable practices?

RQ4: How do these practices impact the overall business performance and customer satisfaction within the Albanian hotel industry?

By addressing these questions, the study utilizes a structured questionnaire and a qualitative methodology to analyze responses, aiming to offer actionable insights for stakeholders to drive the adoption of sustainable practices in the Albanian hotel industry, thus contributing to the broader goals of environmental conservation and sustainable development.

This study is organized as follows. Section 2 presents a literature review on green practices, motivations, and barriers in the hotel industry and, opportunities and challenges in ecological hotels in Albania. Section 3 focuses on the methodology adopted for this study. Section 4 explains the findings. Section 5 offers some discussion and Section 6 summarizes the research.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Adopting green practices, motivations, and barriers in the hotel industry

The decision by hotels to adopt green practices is influenced by a variety of motivations that include economic, environmental, and social dimensions. Economic benefits, including cost savings from energy efficiency and waste reduction, are significant motivators. For instance, studies by Bohdanowicz and Zientara (2008) highlight how energy conservation measures not only reduce hotels' operational costs but also address environmentally conscious consumers, thereby potentially increasing market share. Moreover, regulatory compliance emerges as a key driver, with hotels adopting green practices to align with environmental legislation and avoid penalties (Juneja & Banerjee, 2023; Moise et al., 2018; Tanveer et al., 2024).

From an environmental perspective, the intrinsic value of preserving natural resources and reducing carbon footprints motivates hotels towards sustainability (Chan & Hawkins, 2010). Social motivations are also important, with corporate social responsibility (CSR) initiatives driving hotels to adopt green practices as a means of contributing to community well-being and enhancing their reputation among stakeholders (Mensah, 2006). The implementation of sustainable practices in the hotel industry not only aligns with environmental objectives but also significantly contributes to a company's CSR profile. Nimani et al. (2022) highlight the importance of CSR in developing markets, noting that it enhances corporate reputation and stakeholder trust, which are crucial

for long-term business sustainability. This perspective is particularly relevant in regions like Southeast Europe, where the development of ecological hotels can serve as a testament to a company's commitment to CSR, potentially leading to increased support from local communities and international travelers who prioritize ethical and sustainable business practices.

Despite these motivations, the adoption of green practices in the hotel industry faces several barriers. Initial investment costs for green technologies and infrastructure can be prohibitive, particularly for small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) that constitute a large segment of the hotel industry (Fallah & Soori, 2023; Juneja & Banerjee, 2023). The lack of consumer demand for sustainable options, influenced by price sensitivity and a lack of awareness, further discourages investment in green practices (Wang et al., 2023).

Knowledge and expertise in implementing sustainable practices present another significant barrier. Many hotel managers and staff lack the necessary training and awareness to effectively integrate and manage green initiatives (Kasim, 2007). Additionally, the absence of standardized certifications and benchmarks for sustainability in the hospitality industry complicates the measurement and communication of green credentials to consumers and stakeholders (Bohdanowicz & Zientara, 2008).

The tourism industry is a cornerstone of economic development in Southeast Europe, a region known for its diverse cultures, historical landmarks, and natural beauty. As the global travel market increasingly prioritizes sustainability, understanding the scale and economic impact of tourism in this region becomes crucial. Tourism indicators, such as tourist arrivals, expenditure, employment, and revenue, are important in order to provide a comprehensive view of the sector's health and its readiness to integrate ecological practices. These indicators are vital for identifying opportunities for sustainable tourism development, assessing the feasibility of ecological hotels, and aligning them with international environmental standards. The transition to ecological hotels represents not just an environmental or ethical imperative but also a strategic economic opportunity to attract a growing demographic of eco-conscious travelers.

Table 1 presents significant insights into the dynamics of the tourism sector across five countries: Albania, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Greece, and Croatia. Each country exhibits unique characteristics that reflect different stages of tourism development and market maturity, which directly influence their potential for adopting ecological hotel practices.

Table 1. Tourism indicators in Southeast Europe (2022)

Country	Tourist arrivals (thousands)	Expenditure (USD millions)	Employees (thousands)	Tourism revenue (USD billions)
Albania	7544	3255	44	2.8
Montenegro	2036	1110	22	1.047
North Macedonia	537	483	N/A	0.508
Greece	29876	20094	412	23.9
Croatia	50023	13628	91	14.3

Source: UN Tourism (n.d.).

Albania shows a robust number of tourist arrivals and significant tourism revenue relative to its economic size. The integration of ecological hotels could further enhance Albania's appeal by leveraging its natural landscapes and cultural heritage, offering authentic, sustainable travel experiences that are increasingly in demand.

Montenegro, while smaller in scale compared to Greece or Croatia, shows a healthy revenue from a relatively small number of tourists. This indicates a high expenditure per tourist, which could suggest that tourists are willing to pay a premium for unique experiences, potentially including sustainable accommodations.

North Macedonia presents a more modest set of figures with lower tourist arrivals and revenue. The challenge here lies in raising awareness and building infrastructure for ecological practices. However, this also represents a clear canvas for pioneering sustainable tourism models that could differentiate North Macedonia from its neighbors.

Greece and Croatia, as the giants in Table 1, combine high numbers in both arrivals and revenues, supported by well-developed tourism infrastructures. The high employment figures in the tourism sector suggest that both countries have a significant workforce that could be trained to support sustainable practices within hotels. The scale of their tourism sectors offers ample opportunity and financial capability to lead the way in ecological hotel practices, setting benchmarks for the region.

The comparison across these countries highlights varied potentials for ecological hotels. While Greece and Croatia might focus on retrofitting existing infrastructures and enhancing their already popular tourism offerings with green certifications, countries like Albania and Montenegro could develop new eco-friendly tourism products to attract niche markets. North Macedonia might need to focus on building capacity and creating incentives for sustainable practices to make a more substantial entry into the eco-tourism market.

In summary, the robust economic indicators in Greece and Croatia provide a solid foundation for investment in ecological innovations in hospitality. At the same time, emerging markets like Albania and Montenegro offer growth potential that could be expedited by integrating sustainability from the ground up, appealing to environmentally aware tourists. North Macedonia's challenge is also its opportunity: to carve out a new niche in an increasingly crowded tourism market by embracing eco-friendly practices that could attract international attention and investment.

2.2. The international experience in developed countries

The integration of sustainable practices within the hotel industry has been extensively documented in developed countries, where environmental sustainability has become a significant component

of corporate strategy. For instance, in countries like Sweden and Canada, major hotel chains have adopted comprehensive environmental management systems (EMS) that not only reduce their ecological footprint but also enhance their market competitiveness (Bohdanowicz & Zientara, 2008).

In many developed countries, the adoption of green practices in the hotel industry is strongly supported by robust regulatory frameworks. For example, in the United States, environmental regulations such as the Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design (LEED) certification process have propelled hotels to adopt sustainable building designs and operations (Bohdanowicz & Zientara, 2008). These regulatory pressures often act as catalysts for change, pushing hotels to align with national and international environmental standards (Chan & Hawkins, 2010).

Economic incentives play a crucial role in motivating hotels to adopt ecological practices in developed countries. Governments often provide subsidies, tax rebates, and other financial benefits to encourage the hospitality sector to invest in green technologies (Chan & Hawkins, 2010). These incentives not only offset the initial costs associated with implementing sustainable practices but also demonstrate the economic benefits of environmental stewardship.

The availability and advancement of green technologies have significantly facilitated the adoption of sustainable practices in hotels within developed countries. Cutting-edge solutions in energy efficiency, waste management, and water conservation are readily adopted by hoteliers aiming to reduce operational costs and attract eco-conscious consumers (Hsieh, 2012; Jones et al., 2014).

Cultural shifts towards sustainability have also been a driving force in developed countries, with both consumers and businesses becoming more environmentally conscious. Hotels that adopt green practices often see a boost in their public image and customer loyalty, as travelers increasingly prefer accommodations that align with their personal values towards sustainability (Bohdanowicz & Zientara, 2008; Jones et al., 2014; Sharma et al., 2020).

Despite these advancements, hotels in developed countries also face challenges such as high implementation costs and the complexity of integrating new technologies with existing infrastructures. However, these challenges are often addressed through continuous innovation, stakeholder engagement, and strategic partnerships that help to streamline the adoption of green practices (Bohdanowicz & Zientara, 2008).

2.3. Ecological hotels in Albania: Opportunities and challenges

Albania's unique natural landscapes and rising tourism sector present significant opportunities for the development of ecological hotels. The increasing global demand for sustainable travel experiences positions Albania favorably as a destination that could offer authentic and environmentally friendly tourism options (Dibra, 2023; Pojani & Grabova, 2022). Furthermore, Albania's commitment to environmental protection and sustainable development, as evidenced by various national policies and initiatives, provides a supportive framework for the growth of ecological hotels (Council of Ministers, 2022; World Bank, 2021).

Investing in ecological hotels can also contribute to local economies by promoting the use of local materials, produce, and labor, thereby fostering community development and preserving cultural heritage (Icka et al., 2021). Additionally, ecological hotels have the potential to serve as educational platforms, raising awareness among tourists and locals about environmental conservation and sustainable living practices.

The development of ecological hotels in Albania, however, is not without challenges. The lack of a comprehensive regulatory framework specifically targeting the sustainability of the hotel industry hampers the consistent implementation of green practices (Kasim, 2007). Financial constraints, particularly among SMEs, limit the ability of hoteliers to invest in necessary green technologies and infrastructure improvements (Said et al., 2021; Papathimiu et al., 2021).

Moreover, the limited awareness and understanding of the ecological hotel concept among both consumers and industry stakeholders in Albania impede the demand and supply of sustainable accommodations (Pojani & Grabova, 2022). The absence of widespread certification and labeling schemes for green hotels in Albania further complicates the promotion and recognition of sustainable practices within the industry (Bohdanowicz & Zientara, 2008).

While there are clear motivations for adopting green practices within the hotel industry globally, including economic, environmental, and social benefits, barriers such as high costs, lack of expertise, and limited consumer demand present significant challenges. In the Albanian context, the unique opportunities for ecological hotels to contribute to sustainable tourism and local development are met with challenges related to regulatory frameworks, financial constraints, and awareness.

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

3.1. Methodological approach

This study adopts a qualitative research methodology with a structured online questionnaire as the primary instrument for data collection in order to obtain a large audience (Cochran, 1991). Between December 2023 and January 2024, a total of 62 questionnaires were successfully obtained from Albanian businesses operating in the hotel industry. This sample size offers a substantive basis to analyze the approach these businesses have towards the concept and functionality of ecological hotels in Albania. The questionnaire was designed to explore various aspects of hotel operations and their commitment to environmental sustainability, covering hotel characteristics, adoption of green practices, and perceptions of sustainability.

The qualitative approach was chosen due to its effectiveness in exploring complex themes and understanding nuanced perspectives that are often not apparent in quantitative data. This method allows for a deeper exploration of respondents' attitudes and the contextual factors influencing their practices, offering rich, detailed data that can inform more effective interventions and strategies.

The structured questionnaire was designed to encompass various dimensions of ecological practices in hotels, including waste management, energy use, water conservation, and community involvement. The questionnaire included both closed-ended questions for statistical analysis and open-ended questions to capture expansive feedback on practices and perceptions.

To ensure the reliability and validity of the data, the questionnaire was pilot-tested with a small group of hotel managers before full deployment. Adjustments were made based on the feedback received to clarify questions and adjust the structure for better comprehensibility.

Data from the questionnaires were analyzed using descriptive statistics to provide an overview of the current state of ecological practices among hotels. Further thematic analysis was conducted on qualitative responses to identify common themes and significant patterns related to motivations, barriers, and the overall impact of these practices.

This detailed approach to methodology ensures that the study captures a comprehensive snapshot of the current landscape of ecological hotel practices in Albania, providing stakeholders with actionable insights to drive future initiatives.

However, alternative methods would be suitable for conducting this research such as: Conducting detailed case studies of specific hotels that have successfully implemented ecological practices could provide in-depth insights into the practical challenges and successes encountered. This method would allow for a more detailed examination of processes and outcomes, providing a narrative understanding of sustainable practices in action. Organizing focus groups with hotel management and staff could be another effective way to gather qualitative data. This method would facilitate a discussion environment where participants can interact and share ideas and experiences, potentially uncovering new insights into the collective challenges and attitudes towards ecological practices; Employing observational techniques to directly assess the operational practices in hotels could complement self-reported data. Observations could include assessments of waste management practices, energy conservation efforts, and the integration of local materials and resources into daily operations; Conducting a longitudinal study to track changes over time could provide valuable data on the progression of sustainable practices and the long-term impact of various interventions. This approach would allow researchers to identify trends and cause-effect relationships more clearly.

3.2. Descriptive statistics

Table 2 represents some descriptive statistics obtained by the questionnaires. It provides a snapshot of the current state of ecological hotel practices among a sample of Albanian hotels.

The descriptive statistics show a diverse landscape with varying degrees of engagement in sustainability initiatives, reflective of hotel size, type, and operational capacity.

The distribution shows a significant inclination towards business and resort hotels, suggesting that these categories might be more engaged or have more resources to implement ecological practices. The equal representation of boutique and heritage hotels indicates a diverse sample that could provide a variety of perspectives on sustainability practices.

A predominance of medium-sized hotels in the sample (68%) suggests that the findings may be particularly reflective of the sustainability practices feasible for this hotel size, potentially indicating flexibility and willingness to adopt ecological practices compared to their larger counterparts.

With the majority of hotels identifying as medium level (60%), the data could imply a focus on sustainable practices within the mid-range market segment, possibly due to consumer demand or operational considerations in this category.

The spread across star ratings, with a notable presence of 4 and 5-star hotels, suggests that higher-rated hotels, which typically have more resources, might be leading the way in adopting green practices.

The prevalence of hotels in tourist areas (40%) and city centers (37%) emphasizes the importance of ecological practices in locations with high tourist traffic, reflecting potential consumer demand for sustainable accommodations in these areas.

The distribution indicates a relatively young sample, with a majority of hotels being less than 10 years old, which may correlate with a more modern approach to hotel management, including the adoption of green practices.

Less than half of the hotels have obtained green certifications, suggesting room for growth in the adoption of recognized environmental standards within the Albanian hotel industry.

The data shows a diversity in hotel sizes, with a significant portion of smaller hotels (up to 20 rooms), which might face different challenges and opportunities in implementing sustainable practices compared to larger establishments.

The dominance of sole proprietorships, particularly those under self-management (61%), highlights the potential for individual owners to directly influence the adoption of ecological practices.

A substantial majority of hotels report having an EMS (73%) and an environmental policy (77%), indicating a formal commitment to sustainability among the sample.

The majority of hotels employ up to 50 staff members (71%), which may influence the scope and scale of sustainable practices that can be implemented.

Table 2. Descriptive statistics

Item		Percentage (%)
Hotel category	Boutique hotel	19
	Resort hotel	29
	Heritage hotel	19
	Business hotel	32
Hotel classification by size	Large	32
	Medium	68
Hotel description	Luxury	34
	Medium level	60
	Other	6
Hotel rating	3 stars	27
	4 stars	39
	5 stars	34
Hotel location	In the city center	37
	In the shopping area	5
	In the suburbs	18
	In the tourist area	40
Years of activity	Up to 5 years	27
	From 6 to 10 years	35
	From 11 to 15 years	21
	Over 15 years	16
Green certificate/ISO environment/HACCP	Yes	44
	No	56
Number of rooms	Up to 20	37
	From 21 to 50	23
	From 51 to 100	21
	From 101 to 300	18
	Over 300	2
Form of ownership	Foreign ownership and management	5
	Hotel chains, managed by them	13
	Part of an international hotel chain or group	5
	Sole proprietor — managed as a franchise	16
	Sole proprietor — self-management	61
EMS	Yes	73
	No	27
Environmental policy	Yes	77
	No	23
Number of staff	Up to 50	71
	From 51 to 100	18
	From 101 to 150	5
	From 151 to 200	6

Note: HACCP — Hazard Analysis and Critical Control Points, ISO — International Organization for Standardization.
Source: Authors' elaboration.

4. RESEARCH RESULTS

Table 3 shows the results of the perceptions and challenges that hotels face in transitioning towards eco/green operations. In particular, the cost of implementation and the high cost of maintenance are closely related and constitute significant financial barriers for many hotels. The concern over costs suggests a perception that transitioning to eco/green practices requires substantial upfront investment and ongoing expenses, which could discourage especially smaller hotels with limited budgets. The mixed responses, however, indicate that while cost is a barrier for some, others might have found ways to mitigate these expenses or view them as justifiable investments towards long-term savings and environmental responsibility.

Lack of knowledge and information highlights a critical gap in awareness and understanding of eco/green practices within the hotel industry. The lack of knowledge not only prevents hotels from implementing such practices but also hampers their ability to perceive the potential benefits, including cost savings, enhanced reputation, and compliance with emerging regulatory standards.

The scarcity of experts is indicative of a nascent field still growing in Albania. The reliance on specialized knowledge to navigate the complexities of eco/green transitions underscores the need for more educational programs and professional training to cultivate expertise in sustainable hotel management.

Table 3. Main challenges (Part 1)

Barrier/Motivation	Summary of challenges
Cost of implementation	Significant financial barrier; deterrence due to upfront investment and ongoing expenses.
High cost of maintenance	Ongoing expenses related to eco/green practices are seen as prohibitive by many.
Lack of knowledge and information	A critical gap in awareness and understanding; hampers the ability to perceive benefits.
Lack of eco/green experts	Scarcity of specialized knowledge; need for more professional training.
Uncertainty of results	Hesitancy due to unpredictability of outcomes; need for empirical evidence of benefits.

Table 3. Main challenges (Part 2)

Barrier/Motivation	*Summary of challenges*
Lack of workforce and equipment	Operational challenges in adopting new practices; highlight the need for resources and training.
Difficulty in managing and training staff	Operational challenges related to staff training and management.
Lack of ownership and management support	Crucial role of leadership; lack of support stifles initiatives.
Lack of laws and regulations	Need for a supportive policy framework and clearer guidelines.
Difficulties in balancing service quality with environmental performance	Concerns over compromising guest experiences; potential as a unique selling point.
Lack of customer support	Need to educate consumers on the value of sustainable tourism.
Lack of a network of eco/green suppliers	Need for building a robust network of green suppliers.

Source: Authors' elaboration.

Uncertainty reflects a broader hesitancy to embrace changes whose outcomes cannot be easily predicted or quantified. This suggests a need for more success stories, case studies, and empirical evidence demonstrating the positive impacts of eco/green practices on hotel operations and profitability to reassure and motivate hoteliers.

Operational barriers, including the lack of qualified staff and necessary equipment, emphasize the operational challenges in adopting new practices. These issues point to a broader need for training programs and possibly government or industry-led initiatives to equip hotels with the skills and resources required for a successful transition.

Lack of ownership and management support highlights the crucial role of leadership in driving change. The decision to adopt eco/green practices often comes from the top; thus, a lack of support from owners and managers can stifle initiatives before they even begin. This underscores the importance of educating and engaging hotel leadership on the benefits and feasibility of eco/green practices.

The call for clearer legislation and regulatory guidance reflects a broader need for a supportive policy framework that encourages and facilitates the adoption of sustainable practices in the hospitality industry. This includes incentives for eco-friendly operations and clearer guidelines for implementing such practices.

The difficulties in balancing service quality with environmental performance suggest concerns about compromising guest experiences in the pursuit of sustainability. Addressing this requires demonstrating that eco/green practices can enhance, rather than detract from, the quality of service- potentially even serving as a unique selling point in a competitive market.

The lack of customer support and a network of eco/green suppliers reflect external challenges in securing demand and supply for eco/green operations. Educating consumers on the value of sustainable tourism and building a robust network of green suppliers are essential steps towards creating a sustainable ecosystem that supports eco-friendly hotels.

Overall, these results indicate a multifaceted set of challenges, from financial and operational hurdles to informational gaps and policy limitations. Overcoming these barriers requires a concerted effort from the industry, government, educational institutions, and the wider community to build a supportive infrastructure that facilitates the transition to eco/green practices. This includes financial incentives, educational programs, regulatory support, and public awareness campaigns that collectively address the identified challenges and unlock the full potential of eco/green practices in the hotel industry.

Figure 1 represents the main motivating factors for the implementation of an EMS in hotels. In particular, pressure from interest groups (3.9) has a relatively high importance, suggesting that external pressure from environmental and other interest groups can play a significant role in motivating hotels to consider implementing EMS. It reflects the impact of societal expectations on hotel operations.

Figure 1. Main motivating factors for the implementation of an EMS in hotels
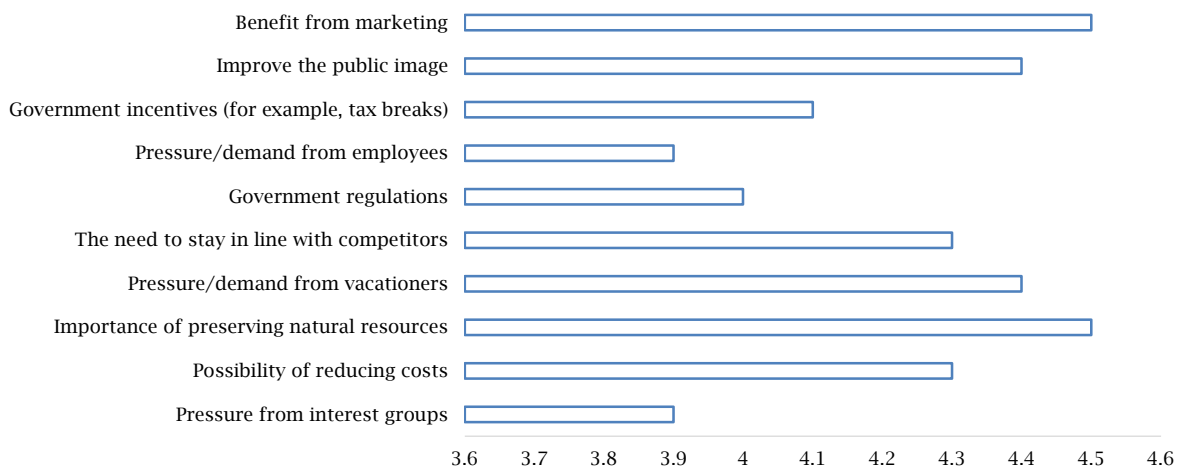
Note: 1 = Not important at all, 5 = Extremely important.
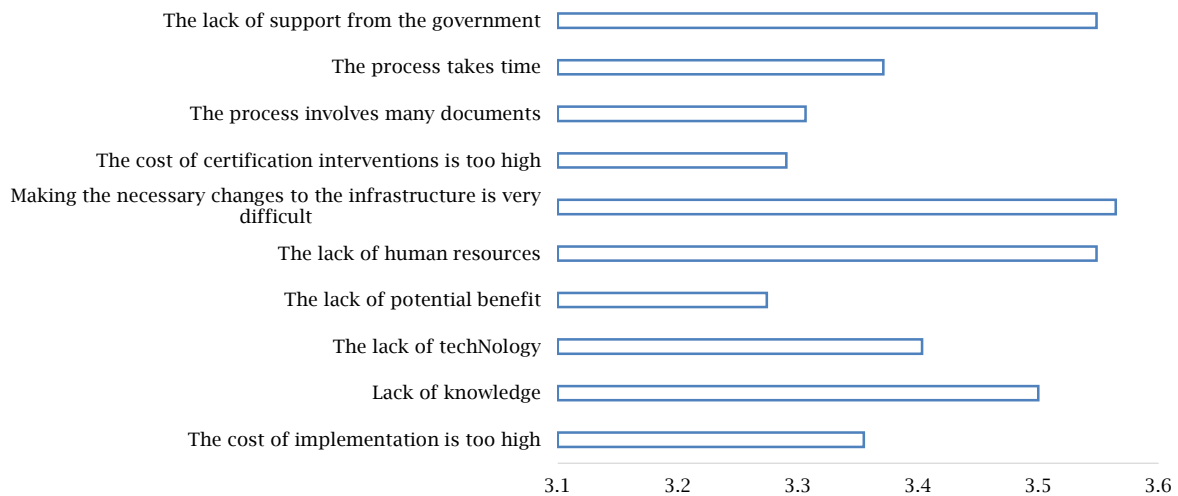*Source: Authors' elaboration.*

Cost reduction (4.3) is a highly motivating factor for hotels to implement EMS. This high rating indicates that financial benefits, particularly savings in operational costs, are a significant incentive for hotels to adopt sustainable practices. The preservation of natural resources (4.5) is rated as very important, highlighting environmental conservation as a key motivator for hotels. This suggests a strong recognition within the industry of the need to operate sustainably to protect the environment. Pressure/demand from vacationers (4.4) also receives a high importance rating, indicating that consumer demand for sustainable and environmentally friendly accommodations is a strong driver for hotels to implement EMS. It underscores the influence of guest preferences on hotel policies. Competitive pressure (4.3) is another significant motivating factor. This rating reflects the need for hotels to adopt EMS as a means to maintain competitiveness in the industry, where eco-friendly practices are increasingly becoming a benchmark. Governmental policies and regulations (4.0) are important motivators, suggesting that compliance with legal requirements is a key consideration for hotels in their decision to adopt EMS. It highlights the role of policy in shaping sustainable practices in the hospitality sector. Employee advocacy (3.9) for EMS is seen as relatively important, indicating that internal stakeholders, including staff, have a role in pushing for the adoption of sustainable practices within hotels. Financial incentives from the government (4.1) are rated as an important factor, implying that subsidies, tax breaks, or other economic benefits can motivate hotels to implement EMS, highlighting the effectiveness of policy tools in promoting environmental sustainability. Improving the public image (4.4) through EMS implementation is highly valued, indicating that reputation management is a critical motivator for hotels. This reflects the importance of brand perception in the hospitality industry. Marketing advantages (4.5) tied to EMS implementation are rated as very important, underscoring the strategic value of promoting eco-friendly initiatives for attracting guests. This indicates that hotels recognize the marketing potential of being seen as environmentally responsible.

Overall, these results show that both internal and external factors, ranging from cost savings and competitive advantage to consumer demand and regulatory compliance, significantly motivate hotels to adopt EMS. These findings suggest a broad recognition of the multifaceted benefits of EMS, encompassing financial, operational, reputational, and compliance-related aspects.

The main barriers to the implementation of an EMS in hotels are presented in Figure 2 providing insights into the perceived challenges within the industry.

Figure 2. Main barriers to the implementation of an EMS in hotels

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

The cost of implementing an EMS (3.4) is seen as a significant barrier, though not the highest among the factors listed. This suggests that while financial concerns are important, they are not perceived as the most prohibitive barrier to EMS adoption. The lack of knowledge about how to implement an EMS (3.5) effectively is slightly more concerning than the implementation cost. This indicates a need for greater awareness and education among hotel operators about the benefits and processes of EMS. Similar to the cost barrier, the lack of technology (3.4) is seen as a challenge but not the primary concern. This points to issues related to access or familiarity with the technological tools required for effective EMS management. The lack of perceived benefit (3.3), while recognized, is rated slightly lower than others, suggesting that while there is some skepticism about the tangible benefits of EMS, it is not the main deterrent for hotels considering its implementation. The lack of human resources to implement and manage an EMS effectively (3.5) is tied to the lack of knowledge as a relatively high concern. This underscores the importance of having skilled personnel dedicated to environmental management. Difficulty in making infrastructure changes (3.6) is identified as the most significant barrier, indicating that the physical modifications required to support EMS are viewed as challenging. It suggests that logistical and structural changes pose the greatest obstacle to EMS adoption. Similar to the initial implementation cost, the cost of certification (3.3) is seen as a barrier but not the highest concern. This implies that while the expenses associated with EMS certification are noteworthy, they do not outweigh other challenges. The bureaucratic challenge of managing numerous

documents for EMS (3.3) is acknowledged as a barrier but is not among the highest concerns. This suggests a need for streamlining the certification process. The time required to implement an EMS (3.4) is seen as a moderate barrier. It reflects concerns over the time investment needed, though it is not perceived as the most significant obstacle. The lack of governmental support (3.5) is tied to the lack of knowledge and human resources as a significant barrier. This highlights the role that policy and governmental incentives could play in facilitating EMS adoption.

Overall, these results reveal that while financial concerns are notable, the primary barriers to EMS adoption relate to operational challenges such as making necessary infrastructure changes, along with the need for more knowledge, human resources, and government support. Addressing these barriers through educational initiatives, policy interventions, and support programs could significantly lower the hurdles to implementing EMS in the hotel industry.

5. DISCUSSION

The findings of this study underscore the multifaceted nature of challenges and motivators influencing the adoption of EMS in the Albanian hotel industry. The analysis highlights financial, technological, informational, and regulatory barriers, alongside significant motivators such as cost savings, market competition, and environmental stewardship. These insights contribute to a nuanced understanding of the sustainability landscape within the hospitality sector, aligning with global trends that underscore the importance of integrating environmental management into business operations (Bohdanowicz & Zientara, 2008; Mensah, 2006).

This study contributes to the existing literature by providing empirical evidence on the barriers and motivators for EMS adoption in a specific national context, enriching the understanding of sustainability in the hospitality industry. It also extends the discourse on the role of external pressures, including customer demand and competitive dynamics, in driving environmental initiatives (Chan & Hawkins, 2010).

The implications of this study on the approach of Albanian businesses in the hotel industry towards ecological hotels and the adoption of EMS are multifaceted, touching on various stakeholders including hotel operators, industry associations, policymakers, and environmental advocacy groups.

For hotel operators understanding that cost reduction is a significant motivator for EMS adoption, hotel operators can leverage sustainable practices to enhance operational efficiency and reduce expenses in the long term. This study highlights the competitive pressure as a motivator for EMS adoption. Hotels that successfully implement EMS can differentiate themselves in the market, appealing to the growing segment of eco-conscious travelers. Given the importance of human resources as both a barrier and a motivator, investing in staff training and engagement around sustainability can improve the implementation of EMS and foster a culture of environmental stewardship within hotels.

For industry associations, the need for knowledge and expertise in EMS implementation suggests a role for industry associations in providing training programs, workshops, and resources to build capacity among their members. Associations can play a key role in advocating for favorable policies and incentives for sustainable

practices and providing support to members navigating the complexities of EMS certification and maintenance. Moreover, embracing CSR in hotel management can lead to greater community support and enhanced market positioning, as suggested by the findings of Nimani et al. (2022).

For policymakers, this study underlines the need for clearer legislation and regulations to support EMS adoption. Policymakers can work to develop and implement policies that encourage sustainable practices, including incentives such as tax breaks or grants. The difficulty in making infrastructure changes identified as a barrier suggests the need for government-led initiatives to facilitate the physical modifications required for EMS implementation in hotels.

For environmental advocacy groups, the lack of knowledge and perceived benefits of EMS point to an opportunity for advocacy groups to increase awareness about the environmental, economic, and social benefits of sustainable hotel operations. These groups can collaborate with the hotel industry and government agencies to promote best practices, share success stories, and develop joint initiatives to advance sustainability in the hospitality sector. Moreover, increased financial investments in tourism infrastructure can lead to both positive and negative environmental impacts. This will highlight the need for strategic planning to ensure that financial growth supports sustainability goals (Hasan et al., 2021).

The findings of this study contribute to the broader goal of sustainable tourism development, highlighting the importance of integrated efforts among all stakeholders to mitigate environmental impacts. There is a need for ongoing research to inform policy development, ensuring that legislative and incentive frameworks are based on empirical evidence and aligned with the operational realities of the hotel industry.

6. CONCLUSION

This study highlights the complex factors affecting the adoption of EMS in the hotel industry, underscoring the need for a collaborative approach to surmount barriers and harness motivators effectively. The engagement of all stakeholders — hotel operators, industry leaders, and policymakers — is crucial in fostering sustainable practices that benefit the environmental, economic, and social facets of sustainability.

The practical implications of this research are substantial, offering actionable insights for developing strategies that accelerate EMS integration. Tailored policy measures and targeted strategies can address specific challenges identified, such as financial constraints and knowledge gaps, enhancing the sustainability profile of the hotel industry on a broader scale.

This research paper is significant for future research as it lays foundational insights into the adoption and implementation of EMS within the Albanian hotel industry, a relatively underexplored area in sustainable tourism studies. By examining the specific motivators and barriers experienced by hotel operators in Albania, the study provides a valuable framework that can be applied to similar emerging markets, enhancing the global understanding of sustainable practices in hospitality.

The study offers a model for investigating EMS in countries with developing tourism sectors,

suggesting avenues for comparative studies that could validate or refine the proposed framework. Insights from this research could guide policymakers and industry leaders in crafting targeted interventions that promote sustainability, serving as a blueprint for other regions with similar economic and cultural contexts. Future research could build on this work by incorporating more diverse sustainability metrics, enhancing the comprehensiveness of environmental strategies in the hospitality industry.

However, the study's focus on the Albanian hotel industry may limit the applicability of findings to other contexts. The reliance on self-reported data also introduces potential biases, underscoring the need for more objective, quantitative methods in future research. Focusing primarily on Albania might limit the generalizability of the findings. Different economic, cultural, or regulatory contexts in other regions may lead to different challenges and opportunities. The reliance on self-reported data may introduce biases that could affect the accuracy of the findings. Future studies could benefit from incorporating more objective data sources, such as observational data or verified environmental impact assessments. The study's snapshot approach does not account for long-term trends or the evolving nature of environmental policies and market dynamics. Longitudinal studies could provide deeper insights into the sustainability trajectories over time.

Future studies should consider comparative analyses across different national and cultural contexts to highlight both universal and unique challenges in EMS adoption. Longitudinal studies could examine the long-term impacts of specific interventions, offering insights into the dynamics of policy and practice changes over time. Additionally, qualitative methods could delve deeper into the micro-level dynamics of EMS implementation, providing a granular view of the barriers and motivators at play.

By building on the findings of this research, future efforts can continue to refine and expand the integration of EMS, paving the way for a more sustainable and resilient hotel industry globally. This holistic approach will not only enhance environmental stewardship but also boost economic performance and social well-being, creating a more sustainable future for all stakeholders involved.

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APPENDIX. QUESTIONNAIRE

1. Hotel category:

a) Boutique hotel   c) Heritage hotel
b) Resort hotel   d) Business hotel

2. Hotel classification by size:

a) Large   b) Medium

3. Hotel description:

a) Luxury   b) Medium level   c) Other

4. Hotel rating:

a) 3 stars   b) 4 stars   c) 5 stars

5. Hotel location:

a) In the city center   c) In the suburbs
b) In the shopping area   d) In the tourist area

6. Years of activity:

a) Up to 5 years   c) From 11 to 15 years
b) From 6 to 10 years   d) Over 15 years

7. Green certificate/ISO environment/HACCP:

a) Yes   b) No

8. Number of rooms:

a) From 101 to 300   d) Up to 20
b) From 21 to 50   e) Over 300
c) From 51 to 100

9. Form of ownership:

a) Foreign ownership and management   d) Sole proprietor — managed as a franchise
b) Hotel chains, managed by them   e) Sole proprietor — self-management
c) Part of an international hotel chain or group

10. EMS:

a) Yes   b) No

11. Environmental policy:

a) Yes   b) No

12. Number of staff:

a) Up to 50   c) From 101 to 150
b) From 51 to 100   d) From 151 to 200

13. Is the cost of implementation an obstacle for the hotel to become an eco/green operator?

a) Yes   b) No

14. What is the reason?

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15. Is the lack of knowledge and information an obstacle for the hotel to become an eco/green operator?

a) Yes   b) No

16. What is the reason?

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17. Is the lack of eco/green experts an obstacle for the hotel to become an eco/green operator?

    a) Yes   b) No

18. What is the reason?

_____

19. Is the uncertainty of the result an obstacle for the hotel to become an eco/green operator?

    a) Yes   b) No

20. What is the reason?

_____

21. Is the lack of workforce and equipment an obstacle for the hotel to become an eco/green operator?

    a) Yes   b) No

22. What is the reason?

_____

23. Is the lack of ownership and management support a barrier to the hotel becoming an eco/green operator?

    a) Yes   b) No

24. What is the reason?

_____

25. Is the lack of laws and regulations an obstacle for the hotel to become an eco/green operator?

    a) Yes   b) No

26. What is the reason?

_____

27. Is the high cost of maintenance an obstacle for the hotel to become an eco/green operator?

    a) Yes   b) No

28. What is the reason?

_____

29. Are difficulties in balancing service quality with environmental performance an obstacle for the hotel to become an eco/green operator?

    a) Yes   b) No

30. What is the reason?

_____

31. Is the lack of customer support an obstacle for the hotel to become an eco/green operator?

    a) Yes   b) No

32. What is the reason?

_____

33. Is the lack of a network of eco/green suppliers an obstacle for the hotel to become an eco/green operator?

    a) Yes   b) No

34. What is the reason?

_____

35. Is the difficulty in managing and training staff an obstacle for the hotel to become an eco/green operator?

    a) Yes   b) No

36. What is the reason?

_____

37. Evaluate the motivating factors for the EMS (1 = Not important at all, 5 = Very important):

a) Our hotel is encouraged to implement the EMS due to pressure from interest groups.
b) Our hotel is encouraged to implement the EMS because of the possibility of reducing costs.
c) Our hotel is encouraged to implement the EMS because of the importance of preserving natural resources.
d) Our hotel is encouraged to implement the EMS due to pressure/demand from vacationers.
e) Our hotel is encouraged to implement the EMS due to the need to stay in line with competitors.
f) Our hotel is encouraged to implement the EMS due to government regulations.
g) Our hotel is encouraged to implement the EMS due to pressure/demand from employees.
h) Our hotel is encouraged to implement the EMS due to government incentives (for example, tax breaks).
i) Our hotel is encouraged to implement the EMS to improve the public image.
j) Our hotel is encouraged to implement the EMS to benefit from marketing.

38. Evaluate the barriers for the EMS (1 = Not important at all, 5 = Very important):

a) There are limitations to the implementation of the EMS because the cost of implementation is too high.
b) There are limitations to the implementation of the EMS due to a lack of knowledge.
c) There are limitations to the implementation of the EMS due to the lack of technology.
d) There are limitations to the implementation of the EMS due to the lack of potential benefits.
e) There are limitations to the implementation of the EMS due to the lack of human resources.
f) There are limitations to the implementation of the EMS because making the necessary changes to the infrastructure is very difficult.
g) There are limitations to the implementation of the EMS because the cost of certification interventions is too high.
h) There are limitations to the implementation of the EMS because the process involves many documents.
i) There are limitations to the implementation of the EMS because the process takes time.
j) There are limitations to the implementation of the EMS due to the lack of support from the government.