

# Environmental Sustainability in Albanian Hotels: Drivers and Barriers of Green Innovations

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**Abstract** The hotel industry is recognized for its high resource consumption, particularly in terms of energy, water, and waste generation, which in turn leads to severe environmental impacts. This study analyzes green innovations in the hotel industry in the Albanian context and collects qualitative data from 50 semi-structured interviews with hotel owners and managers from different regions. The study detects the most dominant and widely applied sustainability practices through thematic analysis and examines the various drivers and barriers to the application of green innovations. The results show that Albanian hotels have been adopting, to a significant extent, energy conservation practices, water conservation, and waste minimization, mostly owing to economic and, to some extent, environmental issues. Conversely, some of the most important barriers to hotels moving towards greater or deeper innovation include high investment requirements, a lack of technical expertise, and poor institutional support structures. This paper has established that while Albanian hotels have raised awareness of their sustainability barriers, their responses tend to be unsystematic or reactive. In the context of hospitality research, the study offers an innovative perspective on environmental protection issues in a transition economy. The limitations consist of the self-reported nature of the data and the lack of appropriate quantification of performance. Qualitative nature allows the researcher to gather rich contextual insight. It provides implications for policymakers and hotel managers trying to advance environmentally sustainable practices in the hotel industry.

In practical terms, the study reveals the role of subsidies in accelerating the adoption of green innovations, while on the social side, it highlights how sustainability in the hospitality sector can strengthen Albania's reputation and boost its international image.

**Keywords** Green Innovations, Environmental Sustainability, Hospitality Sector, Qualitative Research, Albania, Environmental Management

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## 1. Introduction

Globally, the hospitality sector is under increasing pressure to lower emissions without sacrificing competitiveness or service quality. The tourism industry significantly contributes to global greenhouse gas emissions, accounting for approximately 8% of the total [1], prompting hotels in Europe to adopt a range of green innovations to enhance their environmental performance. Global tourism emissions rose by an average of 3.5% annually from 2009 to 2019, with transport and accommodation together accounting for about 70% of the sector's carbon footprint increase [2]. It is reported that hotels in Europe have recently adopted technology, management, or behavioral innovations that have enhanced their environmental efficiency [3]. Green innovations have become a practical way to ease environmental pressures while maintaining efficiency [4].

Green innovation in the hotel industry involves an array of technologies and organizational approaches, such as the use of green technology, water conservation, waste reduction, and greener work practices. Based on the existing body of research, green innovation can result in substantial resource use reduction and eco-footprints, alongside cost savings and improved reputation [5, 6].

Tourism contributes greatly to the economic structure of in Albania, increasing the country's revenues and aiding the creation of employment. The dramatic rise in tourism has raised environmental concerns driven by massive energy consumption in hotels and large quantities of waste production. This scenario has emphasized the requirement for sustainable practices that balance economic development with green protection. Although the hospitality sector has become the subject of significant research regarding environmental sustainability, the existing literature shows bias toward developed or transition countries, with most studies employing survey-based quantitative approaches. Qualitative studies on the drivers and barriers of sustainable practices are still scarce in developing and transitional economies [7]. Although research in Western Europe and other advanced regions has identified the facilitators and obstacles of sustainable practices, there is scarce investigation into how hotels in Albania implement and adjust to these innovations [8]. In the Albanian context, existing literature has discussed sustainable business practices, but often at a policy or theoretical level, leaving managerial perspectives underexplored [9]. Its relevance becomes particularly important, especially regarding Albania's dual challenge: rapid growth of tourism and fragile environmental systems.

Tourism has boosted Albania's economy through higher revenues and jobs, making green practices a clear priority for hotels [10]. This paper explores the adoption and use of green innovations by hotels in Albania. The study investigates green innovations adoption in Albanian hotels, relying directly on owners' and managers' experiences. This paper will contribute to the understanding of the motivations for adopting green practices and the problems that restrain their use, underlining managerial perceptions that have been less considered so far. The paper draws upon a thematic analysis of the main drivers and barriers influencing sustainability initiatives in the hospitality industry, based on fifty semi-structured interviews undertaken between April and June 2025. The findings contribute to an advanced understanding of what green innovations are currently being applied, for what reasons hotels decide to move towards environmentally conscious management, what problems they encounter with the application of different sustainability practices, and finally, how managers and owners perceive the environmental and operational impacts of green innovations.

## 2. Literature Review

Green innovation in the hotel industry is perceived as a

set of novel or upgraded products, processes, or organizational methods introduced primarily to reduce environmental impacts and improve efficiency. The session covers the definition and types of green innovation, the factors that promote and hinder it, and the most essential theories used to understand it.

### 2.1. Definition and Types of Green Innovations in the Hotel Sector

Environmental sustainability in the hotel sector involves integrating approaches that minimize environmental harm while ensuring operational resilience over time. Research highlights that sustainability strategies and innovation in tourism are key to hotels' long-term competitiveness [11]. Green innovation can be defined as the incorporation of new or improved products, processes, and organizational systems that reduce negative environmental impacts while strengthening organizational efficiency. In the hotel business environment, such innovations include energy-saving equipment, renewable energy systems, recycling practices, water-conserving devices, and green architectural designs in building construction.

Past research identifies that the basic practices of environmental sustainability in hotels involve energy efficiency, water and waste management, and pollution reduction [12]. Solid waste represents another critical environmental dimension of hotel operations. The circular economic approach in tourism and hospitality offers new perspectives for reducing waste and increasing efficiency [13]. Waste generation occurs across food service, guest services, maintenance, and facilities operations. However, achieving effective waste management is often challenged by infrastructure limitations and by guests' resistance to changes in service routines. The adoption of standardized environmental management practices is affected by affiliation with chain hotels [14].

Green innovations in general can be categorized into technological and non-technological innovations. Technological innovations include renewable energy systems, energy-efficient equipment, and resource management technologies. Non-technological innovations encompass environmental training, certification programs, and sustainability management systems [4].

### 2.2. Drivers for Green Innovation in Hotels

Researchers have identified several factors that encourage hotels to adopt green innovation. The adoption of green innovation in hospitality is encouraged by technological, organizational, and environmental forces, as numerous studies empirically support. Environmental drivers, spanning both market and institutional considerations, are especially relevant in the hospitality industry. Consumer pressure for more environmentally responsible services, legislative needs, and industry comparisons make the adoption of green innovations a

desirable and necessary consideration for hotel owners [15, 16]. For instance, in major European cities, hotel owners are often forced by legislative imperatives to pursue certifications under the Green Key and ISO 14001 standards to improve hotel operations and marketing strategies. Empirical evidence indicates that small hotel owners are more prone to external pressures than in-house drives because they must meet environmental standards to establish their validity in a market-oriented towards green consumers [17]. Additionally, industry socialization through prominent examples may accelerate the adoption of green innovations to capitalize on environmental gains and cost savings [18].

Economic incentives remain the most direct and compelling driver of organizational adoption of sustainable practices because economic gains are easily converted into direct financial returns from investments in green innovations [19]. Eco-conscious guests raise occupancy and pay more, while public grants help small businesses adopt faster [19]. A participatory culture motivates employees to adopt green practices, driving stronger innovation results [20].

Moreover, organizational drivers play a very important role. Support from the organizational level, organizational culture, and human resource capability has appeared to have a significant effect on the implementation of green innovations in the hotel industry in several existing studies [17, 21]. Hotels supported by top management, with trained human resources and a culture that is both innovative and sustainable, are more likely to adopt total green practices, such as minimizing waste generation, environmentally friendly room services, and green purchasing practices. Marketing strategies that promote green tourism have been identified as key drivers for sustainable development and for building a national brand rooted in environmental responsibility [22].

Technological forces are, in most instances, considered the core drivers of sustainability initiatives. Accessible energy-saving technologies, renewable energy, smart metering, and sensor technology increase the relative advantage of green technology. According to [18], hotels would be strongly encouraged to adopt energy-saving devices and water management technologies once these services become cost-efficient, as well as to have suppliers capable of providing one-stop solutions.

### 2.3. Barriers for Green Innovation in Hotels

Internal financial capacity and technological expertise represent critical enablers of green innovation. Economic barriers extend beyond initial capital requirements to include uncertain payback periods and financial returns. The long temporal lag between investment and cost recovery creates financial uncertainty that discourages adoption, particularly among risk-averse organizational leadership [23]. The complexity of green innovation implementation poses operational barriers. Some

organizations demonstrate "light green" or superficial sustainability commitments that remain decoupled from substantive operational changes [24].

Conversely, barriers to the adoption of green technologies include initial investment costs, limited access to green finance, and a lack of appropriate technical know-how, especially in developing countries [5]. Additionally, hotels face short-term pressure to remain profitable and competitive. Investors are reluctant to invest in environments with uncertainty around environmental policies and where little is achieved [25]. Green investments are expensive and slow to deliver returns in resource-scarce transitional economies, and Albanian hotels struggle with them due to limited access to materials, technology, and reliable vendors [8].

Moreover, social and attitudinal opposition to it can make its implementation difficult, as employees are resistant and customers find some environmental practices less convenient [26]. Hotels face major hurdles, including high start-up costs, limited green financing, and weak institutional frameworks [27]. Most tourists are reluctant to adopt sustainable practices because they appear expensive and lack credibility [28]. In the Western Balkans, barriers are particularly related to the absence of strong institutional support and the shortage of technical expertise [29].

### 2.4. Theoretical Perspectives

The integration of green innovation in the hospitality industry utilizes several theoretical frameworks. The Technology – Organization – Environment framework, built on [30], posits that businesses adopt innovations when they find technological advantages, possess the requisite organizational capabilities, and respond to environmental influences. Recent studies indicate that hotels are motivated to adopt energy-efficient technologies and waste management systems when these three aspects are met [18, 21].

Internal capabilities are critical factors in the adoption of green innovations, as illustrated by the Resource-Based View Theory. Barney [31] and Wernerfelt [32] suggest that competitive advantages stem from valuable, rare, and non-imitable resources, requiring hotels to possess strong financial, human, managerial, or innovative capabilities to adopt green innovations.

Institutional theory always emphasizes that organizations face pressures from authority, societal expectations, and imitations by successful models [33, 34]. The forces that operate in the hospitality industry can range from environmental legislation and industry practices to certifications such as ISO 14001 or Green Key, as well as imitations by market leaders.

Diffusion of Innovation Theory emphasizes the diffusion or distribution of innovation in any social system. For instance, the visibility of eco-friendly products or services in the hotel industry helps increase adoption rates when hotels see competitors using them effectively.

The Dynamic Capabilities Theory helps identify opportunities and changing resource configuration within a transforming environment [35, 36]. In the context of the hotel industry, the adoption of green innovations can be observed in dynamic capabilities that address climate change and market expectations in this regard. Hotels with dynamic capabilities are more successful in incorporating environmental innovation into their long-run planning activities.

## 2.5. Summary of Literature Gaps

Although green innovation research within the hotel industry on a global scale is well established, a significant qualitative research gap persists in Southeastern Europe, particularly in Albania. Most existing studies originate from a descriptive paradigm, often highlighting policy aspects rather than exploring managerial and employee perspectives. This leaves important dimensions of sustainability implementation underexplored.

The first gap lies in the limited attention to managerial insights relative to technology- or operationally oriented research. This study emphasizes the people's aspect of sustainability implementation, focusing on how managers perceive and drive green innovation.

The second gap concerns the absence of country-specific research for Albania. As a small economy within the global hotel industry ecosystem, Albania is at a pivotal stage of its institutional transformation, making it an important case for analysis.

The third gap identified is in methodological approaches. In the current literature, studies are mostly conducted within a quantitative paradigm. This paper uses a qualitative paradigm. This will enable the examination of specific, often overlooked experiences in green innovation within the hotel industry.

By addressing the three gaps mentioned, the paper aims to make contributions to the literature and to the formulation of policies regarding sustainable development in the Albanian hospitality industry.

## 3. Methodology

This research adopts a qualitative paradigm to explore the perceptions, application, experience, and challenges associated with sustainability practices from the perspective of hotel operators in the Albanian environment. Since the subject of sustainable operations in the hospitality industry in Albania is exploratory in nature, with a lack of empirical research, a qualitative paradigm is considered appropriate [37, 38]. A phenomenological method was used, which sheds light on how individuals, specifically hotel property managers and owners, make sense of their experience about sustainability and green innovation [39]. This also reflects the proposed aim of this study, which is to discover the meanings, drivers, and influencing aspects

that underpin environmentally friendly activities at hotels in Albania.

Purposive sampling was adopted in this study to select participants who held direct responsibility for operations in their hotels. This was in line with Walsh [40], who recommended that this type of sampling helps in identifying "information-rich cases" that can offer novel insights. Although purposive sampling has been widely recognized in qualitative research as one of the best techniques for obtaining in-depth information [41], it has been criticized for being prone to bias and for its inability to generate generalized results [42]. Therefore, findings should be interpreted as context-specific contributions rather than universally representative conclusions.

The sample consisted of fifty hotels across the country, including various geographic areas such as the coastal cities of Saranda, Durrës, the mountain cities of Vermosh, Peshkopi, and cities such as Tirana, Shkodër etc., to encompass different market demands and infrastructure, along with the exposure to international markets. Hotels of various sizes, ranging from family-owned hotels to large resorts, were included. The selection criteria were based on the idea of selecting hotels that, at least to some extent, had been involved with sustainability practices such as energy efficiency, waste management, or the use of local products. However, at the same time, hotels that still have not adopted a systematic approach to sustainability were also included to provide a balanced view of the two different strategies. By targeting the owners/managers directly, the study guaranteed that the perceptions were based on true information, rather than second-hand knowledge.

Data were collected between April and June 2025 through face-to-face interviews lasting 30 – 45 minutes. Field notes were also taken to capture non-verbal communications, tone, and context that add a reflective component to the study [43]. The sessions were audio-recorded with the consent of all participants and later transcribed verbatim. The interview guide contained open questions, for example: "What does sustainability mean for your hotel?" "What motivated you to adopt green innovations and environmentally friendly practices technologies?" and "What barriers have you encountered in implementing green practices?"

The analysis of data followed the six steps of Braun et al.'s [44] thematic analysis. First, the researchers became familiar with the transcripts, and then initial codes were produced. After that, themes were identified, reviewed, defined, and finally reported. Coding was mainly inductive, so themes could appear directly from the data, but concepts from the sustainability literature were also used to guide the interpretation. Hence, the analysis was open to new insights but also connected with existing theory. To increase the credibility of the results, triangulation was applied by comparing interview data with secondary sources, such as government documents and sustainability ratings. Furthermore, member checking was also used among the respondents for the accuracy of interpretations.

Ethical principles guided research throughout its conduct. The consent was given by the participants, and anonymity was maintained throughout the study. Though a qualitative study helps in obtaining in-depth information, it lacks the aspect of generalizability. The data were collected on a self-report basis and may be subject to social desirability bias in that some respondents might overemphasize their degree of engagement with the environment.

## 4. Results

This section offers a comprehensive thematic analysis of qualitative interviews with hotel owners/managers, emphasizing the roles of awareness, action, and institutions in the adoption of green innovations in the Albanian context. The results are organized into five major areas: types of green innovations adopted by hotels, perceived drivers, barriers, impacts and recommendations for advancing green innovations. The main objective is to offer a comprehensive understanding of the drivers of green innovations, as well as the forces that are pulling the sector back, thereby understanding the status quo and the prospects of the industry.

To provide further clarity on the prevalence of green innovations, drivers, and barriers, the study quantified the frequency of each theme. This was done by counting the number of times each theme was specifically mentioned in the 50 semi-structured interviews. This gave the required data for determining the frequency levels of each of the green innovations, drivers, and barriers, which were classified as follows: very frequent (> 30 hotels); frequent (15-30 hotels); moderate (5-15 hotels); occasional (2-5 hotels), and rare (1-2 hotels). This enabled the presentation of qualitative data in a more transparent manner, which may serve as a benchmark in the future to establish the frequency levels of each green innovation.

### 4.1. Green Innovation Types

There was a perceptible sentiment among several hotel owners and managers in Albania regarding increasing concerns about sustainability. *“We do not have any strategy. We simply attempt to consume less plastic, purchase products from local farms, and reduce energy consumption,”* – Hotel owner in Pogradec.

Cost-effective measures such as the use of LED light bulbs, solar water heaters, and plastic reduction measures are most widely adopted. Most hotel managers emphasized that energy efficiency measures were adopted primarily due to cost considerations rather than formal environmental strategies. *“We began using LED lights primarily to lower our electricity expenses”* – Hotel Manager, Saranda.

Yet, solar panels and especially smart energy management systems remain underutilized in hotels largely due to the high upfront expenses. However, variations in

the waste management practiced by the hotels were observed. Some of the hotels were engaged in recycling, while others mentioned a concern about the lack of facilities in the municipality for recycling waste. Segregation initiatives for waste have been attempted several times, but have always failed in recycling, as the concerned municipalities have failed to implement a collection and processing system for receiving this segregation. *“Although waste is segregated within the premises, the municipality later combines it, rendering the entire effort seemingly futile.”* – Hotel owner, Shkodër

Methods used in conserving water include the use of low-flow fixtures, towel reuse, and the monitoring of water use. *“We gather rainwater for the garden and employ low-flow plumbing fixtures to decrease water usage”* – Hotel owner, Peshkopi. The motivation to apply water-saving practices, as indicated by interviewees, was economically oriented.

The hotels were working in conjunction with the local producers. This showed the prominent socio-economic ties that existed between hotels and the community of the region. This not only increases authenticity, but the local supply chain is also strengthened. *“We provide totally local breakfast, like countryside cheese and homemade jams that we get from next-door neighbors”* – Manager, Vermosh guesthouse.

The green innovations adopted by hotels demonstrate a real sense of responsibility towards the environment; however, some themes emerge with far greater frequency than others. Energy efficiency and renewable energy represent the dominant area. Solar panels appear in more than thirty cases and are therefore the most pervasive innovation, but there are also regular mentions of LED lighting and energy-efficient appliances. A few properties boast of more specialized approaches, such as using chemical-free thermal water or increasing insulation, but these are less common.

In terms of water conservation, practices are present but less frequent overall. Low-flow sanitary equipment and smart sensor systems are mentioned moderately, while rainwater harvesting and natural pools are rare but notable examples of innovation.

Waste management is another important pillar. Recycling is very common, from separating paper from plastic, metal, and organic waste, which hotels usually do. Plastic reduction is also widely adopted, while composting and more advanced waste separation systems are only mentioned occasionally. The most appropriate characteristic of sustainable hospitality could be considered the use of local and organic products. One of the biggest approaches used is that of local food sourcing, appearing in more than twenty hotels. Eco-tourism projects and awareness events are also mentioned, but to a lesser extent.

On the education and awareness front, staff training on sustainability is moderately frequent, while guest awareness campaigns and certifications such as ETIC

Bronze or “Travel for Good” are rare but important markers of credibility.

Finally, eco-friendly construction and design are highlighted in several cases. Use of local wood and stone, and design that maintains traditional architecture, is listed by hotels, although it seems to be practiced to a lesser extent compared to energy or waste management. In this respect, it can be noted from Table 1 that the hotel industry focuses more on renewable energy, recycling, or the usage of local products, whereas the role of water harvesting, composting, or certification comes later in the process of sustainability.

#### 4.2. Drivers of Green Innovations

For the Albanian hotel industry specifically, the drivers behind the adoption of green innovations can be identified as a mix between short-term drivers and long-term strategy (Table 2). On the short-term side, the main sustainability drivers in the hotel industry will relate to short-term benefits such as reducing electricity and water bills through the reduction of consumption, reducing the use of plastic materials in the hotel industry, as well as adhering to the waste regulations set by the country.

**Table 1.** Green Innovations Adopted by Albanian Hotels

Theme	Subtheme	Mentions (n)	Frequency
<b>Energy Efficiency &amp; Renewable Energy</b>	Solar panels / renewable energy	35	Very frequent
	LED lighting	25	Frequent
	Energy-efficient appliances	10	Moderate
	Thermal water use without chemicals	2	Rare
	Building insulation / efficient design	4	Occasional
<b>Water Conservation</b>	Rainwater harvesting	2	Rare
	Low-flow sanitary equipment	8	Moderate
	Controlled-flow taps / smart sensors	3	Occasional
	Natural pools / thermal water	1	Rare
<b>Waste Management</b>	Recycling (paper, plastic, metal, organic)	32	Very frequent
	Composting organic waste	2	Rare
	Plastic reduction/elimination	20	Frequent
	Waste separation systems	12	Moderate
<b>Local &amp; Organic Products</b>	Local food in restaurants	34	Very frequent
	Support for local artisans/handicrafts	18	Frequent
	Organic / bio products	9	Moderate
	Traditional cuisine promotion	17	Frequent
<b>Cultural &amp; Community Engagement</b>	Promotion of local culture and heritage	16	Frequent
	Collaboration with local guides/producers	15	Frequent
	Eco-tourism and responsible tourism	7	Moderate
	Events and awareness campaigns	3	Occasional
<b>Education &amp; Awareness</b>	Staff training on sustainability	8	Moderate
	Guest awareness campaigns	4	Occasional
	Certifications (ETIC Bronze, Travel for Good)	2	Rare
<b>Eco-Friendly Construction &amp; Design</b>	Use of local wood and stone	3	Occasional
	Eco-materials in furniture and decoration	2	Rare
	Preservation of traditional architecture	7	Moderate

Source: Authors based on interview data

**Table 2.** Drivers of Green Innovations Adopted by Albanian Hotels

Main Theme	Subtheme	Short-Term Drivers (Immediate Benefits)	Long-Term Drivers (Strategic Impacts)
<b>Energy Efficiency &amp; Renewable Energy</b>	Solar panels / renewable energy	Lower electricity bills, visible eco-branding	Energy independence, EU climate policy compliance
	LED lighting	Quick reduction in energy costs	Modern infrastructure, compliance with efficiency standards
	Energy-saving appliances	Direct savings on energy costs	Sustainable operations and reduced carbon footprint
	Thermal water use without chemicals	Unique guest wellness experience	Preservation of natural resources
	Building insulation / efficient design	Lower heating/cooling costs	Long-term resilience and guest comfort
<b>Water Conservation</b>	Rainwater harvesting	Reduced water	Sustainable water management, resilience to shortages
	Low-flow sanitary equipment	Quick savings on water use	Compliance with eco-certifications
	Controlled-flow taps / smart sensors	Prevents waste instantly	Modernized guest facilities, smart hotel branding
	Natural pools / thermal water	Attractive eco-feature for guests	Reduced chemical use, eco-tourism appeal
<b>Waste Management</b>	Recycling	Immediate compliance with local rules	Strong eco-credentials, reduced landfill impact
	Composting organic waste	Local reuse of waste	Circular economy integration
	Plastic reduction/elimination	Quick improvement in guest perception	Long-term eco-branding, reduced pollution
	Waste separation systems	Easier recycling management	Institutional alignment, sustainable operations

Source: Authors based on interview data

The long-term factors are also of equal importance because they tie the practices in the hotel industry with long-term national and European Union (EU) priorities. Engagement in green innovations such as renewable energy sources and eco-friendly construction, is important because of the associated long-term adaptability in the face of rising energy prices and openness in the EU. Engagement with the local communities is vital because of the associated long-term identity of the culture of hospitality in the region, in terms of the sustainability of the business and the contribution of the industry to the lives of the communities in the region.

In combination, these drivers demonstrate that the Albanian hospitality sector is motivated to not only realize short-term cost savings and visibility but also to ensure competitiveness and alignment with EU integration objectives. Green innovation also becomes a viable solution to improve the efficiency of Albanian hospitality.

### 4.3. Benefits of Green Innovations and Environmentally Friendly Practices

When Albanian hotels implement green innovation, they receive many different benefits. One of the most visible benefits of applying green innovation in Albanian hotels is the improved image of the hotels. Since Albanian hotels are viewed as eco-friendly hotels, this makes them stand out

among others. Another benefit is the influx of visitors because of sustainability as shown in Table 3. Of equal significance are the improvements that have arisen through increased efficiency. Spending on methods that can save energy, water-saving technologies, and strategies to reduce waste means a substantial decrease in the costs of operation. Hotels operating in Albania would greatly benefit from such improvements since energy and water costs are high.

The financial aspect is complemented by institutional support. Grants, subsidies, and financial incentives for green investments enable hotels to get additional funding for developing their infrastructure and incorporating more advanced technologies in their setup. Not only does institutional support reduce the effects of the investment burden, but it also sparks innovation in the long run.

Green practices also have significant effects on human capital. Employee commitment rises when involved in sustainable practices, cultivating pride in the workplace, and enhancing overall team effectiveness. These practices also affect the guests meaningfully. Contrarily, from the perspective of the customer, sustainability encourages loyalty and trust. Those customers who experience a green service and a genuine local offering are induced to return and refer the hotel to others. However, at the same time, the attention to the sustainability goal improves the level of service quality.

**Table 3.** Perceived Benefits of Green Innovations Adopted by Albanian Hotels

Major Theme	Subtheme	Benefit
<b>Reputation &amp; Market Position</b>	Hotel image improvement	Enhancement of reputation and brand identity
	Tourist attraction	Increase in the number of visitors
<b>Operational Efficiency</b>	Energy savings	Reduction of electricity costs
	Water savings	Reduction of water consumption costs
	Overall cost reduction	Lower operational expenses through efficiency
<b>Financial Gains</b>	Institutional support	Access to grants and subsidies
	Revenue growth	Financial benefits from sustainable positioning
<b>Human Capital &amp; Staff</b>	Staff engagement	Improved motivation and involvement
	Training impact	Better skills in sustainable practices
<b>Customer Relations</b>	Client loyalty	Stronger customer retention
	Service quality	Improved hospitality and guest experience

Source: Authors based on interview data

Finally, for Albanian hotels, green innovation does not only relate to environmental conservation – green innovation acts as an investment or a tool for improving reputation, efficiency, growth, motivating hotel workers, and gaining customer loyalty. All these factors form a model that is sustainable for long-term success in the hotel industry.

**4.4. Barriers to Green Innovation**

This section analyzes the critical factors that limit the application of green innovations in hotel settings within the Albanian hotel industry.

Based on the analysis of data shown in Table 4, this study found that financial, technological, and institutional factors act as prominent barriers to the application of green innovations in Albanian hotels. Most accommodations are small, family-owned establishments with restricted access to crucial financial and technical resources required for advanced sustainability practices. It is evident that the existence of cost, financial, and technical barriers makes it essential for the adoption of policy instruments such as micro-grants, green loans, capacity-building, and simplified regulations to facilitate the adoption of green innovations in the sector.

Such findings imply that green innovations are mostly rational, incremental, and economic in nature in the Albanian hospitality industry, being driven by economic, managerial, and international market forces rather than government policies. Smaller changes, which involve low financial investment, such as in labor, with quicker returns, have been employed. Hotels, particularly smaller ones, encounter significant obstacles such as high initial investment costs, lack of government incentives, and insufficient training or certification options for sustainability.

Another challenge comes from customer awareness of green practices, since many customers remain unaware of

the measures being implemented to adopt green innovations. However, a major challenge that is affecting the adoption of green innovations by hotels in Albania is the limitations in the supply chain. The hotel managers are not satisfied with the supply chain of organic and certified products, which is limited due to high costs involved in the certification and infrastructure of the suppliers in Albania, as well as the unstable demand from the consumers.

**4.5. Recommendations for Advancing Green Innovations**

Hotels always stress that the key to sustainability lies in financial incentives. This is shown in Table 5. Grants, subsidies, or funding for green technology prove to be the most frequently repeated recommendation, as investing in renewable energy, water, or waste management is quite expensive. Any kind of tax relief or access to credit can prove to be a crucial factor.

Another critical aspect would be training and capacity-building. The hotels emphasize the importance of training and capacity-building for their staff on the concepts of sustainability, workshops, and exposure to model hotels that have already embarked on eco-tourism. The concern for human capital demonstrates the importance of sustainability, which goes beyond technology to knowledge and behavior. Another theme is promotion. The belief is that hotels will only have success in their efforts to go green if they can somehow have enough exposure to tourists. Promotion of hotels through online means as well as promotion of hotels that go green in partnership with cities, has emerged as crucial to attract tourists. The aspect of collaboration and partnerships also features prominently. Hotels require increased collaboration with various institutions, municipalities, and international bodies. These networks and involvement of hotels in the community with businesses, NGOs, and residents are seen as strategies for integrating sustainability into the broader tourism system.

**Table 4.** Barriers to Green Innovation Adoption in Albanian Hotels

Main Theme	Subtheme	Mentions (n)	Frequency
<b>Financial</b>	- High initial cost for ecological investments - High taxes - Lack of subsidies/grants	45	Very frequent
<b>Institutional Support</b>	- Lack of government support - Lack of local authorities - Difficulties in applying for EU projects	40	Very frequent
<b>Training and Human Capacities</b>	- Lack of specialized training - Lack of local expertise - Need for continuous education	30	Frequent
<b>Infrastructure</b>	- Lack of public recycling systems - Poor sewage and water supply - Inadequate waste management infrastructure	25	Frequent
<b>Client Awareness</b>	- Lack of appreciation from clients - Lack of information from authorities	20	Frequent
<b>Local Supplies</b>	- Difficulty in finding organic products - Lack of standards for sustainable suppliers	14	Moderate

Source: Authors based on interview data

**Table 5.** Recommendations for Advancing Green Innovations

Theme	Subtheme	Mentions (n)	Frequency
<b>Financial Support &amp; Incentives</b>	Grants/subsidies for green technologies	35	Very frequent
	Tax reductions / fiscal incentives	20	Frequent
	Access to loans or favorable credit	10	Moderate
	General financial support/funds	32	Very frequent
<b>Training &amp; Capacity Building</b>	Staff training in sustainability practices	34	Very frequent
	Specialized workshops/seminars	18	Frequent
	Learning from pioneer hotels / best practices	5	Occasional
<b>Promotion &amp; Marketing</b>	Promotion of sustainable hotels on platforms	22	Frequent
	Joint promotional campaigns with municipalities/organizations	12	Moderate
	Green branding / digital marketing support	4	Occasional
<b>Collaboration &amp; Partnerships</b>	Partnerships with international organizations	19	Frequent
	Closer cooperation with local institutions/municipalities	17	Frequent
	Networking platforms among hotels	5	Occasional
	Community engagement (local businesses, NGOs, residents)	9	Moderate
<b>Infrastructure &amp; Technology</b>	Investment in green technologies (solar, efficient systems)	36	Very frequent
	Improved waste management infrastructure	11	Moderate
	Transport solutions (bicycles, electric vehicles, public transport)	4	Occasional
	Upgraded water/energy management systems	15	Frequent
<b>Policy &amp; Institutional Support</b>	Clearer state policies / legal frameworks	20	Frequent
	National certifications for sustainable hotels	9	Moderate
	Government support/involvement	33	Very frequent
<b>Awareness &amp; Education</b>	Guest awareness campaigns	12	Moderate
	Public sensitization campaigns	4	Occasional
	Information resources on sustainability practices	3	Occasional

Source: Authors based on interview data

On the infrastructure and technology component, hotels consider particularly important investments in renewable energy sources, water and waste management, and sustainable transport methods, for example, bicycles and electric cars. These are viewed as immediate facilitators of a reduction in negative impacts on the environment.

Finally, support through policies and institutions keeps coming up. Specifically, the hotels would like to see more detailed policies on the part of the government, national certification of sustainable hotels, and greater interaction with the central and local institutions to award relevance to the green innovations they engage in. While this is the case, the role of staff and guest education in the concept of going green should not be overruled.

In terms of conclusions, there is a unanimous agreement on the necessity of a holistic outlook in the recommendations. Financial motivation, training, and technological investment are the pillars of sustainability, and promotion, collaboration, and policy help to create an environment that is incredibly conducive to promoting green innovations and sustainable practices to ensure that sustainability is a collective social responsibility and not just the concern of a hotel.

## 5. Discussions and Limitations

### 5.1. Key Findings

Green innovation has been identified as one of the essential factors for sustainability in the tourism sector internationally. Green innovation involves innovative products, processes, and management methodologies that can result in either new products and services or improve existing ones by reducing environmental effects without compromising business performance [45]. In the hotel industry, green innovation involves innovative solutions in lighting and heating systems, waste reduction, the use of green materials, and intelligent energy resource management systems [46]. In contrast, hospitality innovation is not merely technical in nature, as in manufacturing, but a combination of technical and social aspects, where social behavior interacts and merges with technical progress in organizations, particularly in service [47].

On one side, adopting sustainable practices can help increase competence through ecological respect, thereby gaining respect from environmentally conscious tourists, while on the other side, there are disadvantages such as resource scarcity, constrained institutional capacity, or inadequate technical expertise [48].

### 5.2. Contextual Insights (Albanian Case)

The results of this study verified that Albanian hotels apply different types of green innovation, where energy efficiency and local product sourcing are the most

dominant. This is consistent with previous research conducted in other European countries, where cost reduction measures such as LED lights and solar panels are the starting point for sustainability strategies [3, 18]. Nevertheless, unlike hotels in Western European countries, where customer demand and certification schemes such as ISO 14001, Green Key are the major drivers for sustainability, Albanian hotels seem to be mainly influenced by economic benefits, rather than long-term strategies.

Barriers such as high investment costs, the absence of technical expertise, as well as poor institutional support are in line with the findings of other studies in other transitional economies [27, 29]. Nevertheless, the Albanian case shows the specific importance of municipal infrastructure support, as in the case of waste management, where the effectiveness of recycling is hindered by the poor support of the public infrastructure. This is different from the findings of studies in developed countries, where the institutional environment is more supportive of the use of external certification schemes for the evaluation of the sustainability efforts of hotels [14, 22].

Another aspect is the high importance given to the sourcing of local products. Although similar practices have been noted in the literature regarding eco-tourism [13, 20], in the Albanian context, this appears to be a sustainability practice but at the same time a socio-economic imperative, which may add strength to the relationship between hotels and local suppliers. This may also suggest that sustainability does not only mean environmental issues but also community development, which could add to the authenticity of the product.

A comparison of the findings in relation to the wider literature can be made. With respect to similarities, Albanian hotels share similarities with respect to the usage of energy-saving technologies and waste reduction mechanisms. With respect to contrasts, the findings indicate contrasts with respect to the usage of certification schemes and the application of advanced water management systems. These differences may be structural in nature, as they do not constitute a part of the developed world.

The findings contribute to the literature as they demonstrate the importance of the socio-economic environment regarding sustainability practice development within a transitional economy.

In a transitional economy, such as in the Albanian case, the adoption of green innovations ensures the presence of potential and challenges simultaneously. Foreign tourists demand environmentally responsible services, but Albanian companies lack finances and qualified staff to address sustainability. Covering such a gap between what exists and what requirements demand plays an essential role in ensuring sustainable tourism. Despite the strategic commitment to a sustainable development of tourism within Albanian legislation in line with the European standard, the implementation of a green approach in

Albanian companies has not been systematic.

Although quality hotels in urban regions have adopted green technologies such as solar water heaters and LEDs, SMEs in this industry have maintained conventional forms of operation. A strategy concerning resource management, the involvement of the community, waste reduction, and the conservation of cultural heritage is necessary for sustainability in the hotel industry. The rising environmental concern among tourists is currently triggering the need for sustainability in the hotel industry. Research shows that there is a positive willingness among people to pay more for such services. Furthermore, the need for the hospitality industry to comply with global sustainability standards to attract external investments is another point to be considered. In general, Albanian hotels tend to follow the global trend of adopting basic green innovations but differ from it regarding the limited use of certification schemes and advanced sustainability strategies. This is due to the transitional nature of the Albanian hospitality industry, where sustainability is considered reactive and is influenced by structural constraints. Overall, the above differences highlighted in the study contribute to the literature by showing the impact of the socio-economic realities of a transitional economy on the development of green innovations.

### 5.3. Barriers and Challenges

Among the barriers identified in the Albanian scenario is the fact that considerable initial investment is required for technology such as solar and water conservation technology. This has emerged as a factor in most parts of the world, with considerable capital outlays being an obstacle to most hotels adopting environmental conservation measures effectively [49].

The absence of support by institutional players such as subsidies, tax breaks, and the availability of recycling stations does not help the matter significantly, with patterns observed in many developing countries, where fragile policy frameworks hinder progress [50]. These results are in line with established research confirming that hotel sustainability commonly manifests in an incremental and pragmatic manner that is driven by economic imperatives and international market pressures rather than direct state regulation [50-52].

A second barrier relates to technical knowledge and staff training. Hotel managers very often pointed to difficulties in gaining access to specialized training programs, which hinder the development of a sustainability culture. This finding is supported by literature that identifies the need for regular training and enhancement of skills to ensure that green innovations are embedded deeply rather than superficially [49].

The issue of client awareness was revealed to occur in a complex manner. It was common for international visitors who acknowledged and appreciated the sustainable efforts

of the hotel, as compared to local visitors who tend to be less responsive. In the long run, the barriers within the supply chain, particularly the limited availability of certified organic materials, are structural barriers. This has been supported by studies that assert that inefficiencies discourage the practice of sustainable foods [53]. In addition, inefficiencies and gaps hinder investment in environmentally friendly procurement strategies [54]. Supply chain inefficiencies and organizational culture influence the adoption of green innovations [55]. In fact, studies that undertake a systematic review of the challenges to the adoption of green innovations in hotels note inefficiencies among vendors and a lack of institutional support as major challenges to the adoption of green innovations [56]. It is important to note that the success of green innovations depends on the hotel as well as the ecosystem of suppliers. In the Western Balkans, the lack of institutional support and vendor training is another factor hindering sustainability in Albania's hospitality industry, as hotels are often forced to use imported products rather than encourage local sustainable production. Supply chain inefficiency is an important factor in improving sustainability in Albania's hospitality industry.

### 5.4. Contributions and Transferability of Findings

#### 5.4.1. Contributions to Literature and Policy

This paper offers qualitative insights into the green innovations of hotels in Albania. From the results, the drivers and barriers faced in adopting green innovations are identified. It helps the body with knowledge of environmental sustainability by offering environment-specific information.

By offering context-specific qualitative evidence, this research contributes to the stream of literature on sustainable hospitality management in developing and transition economies. On a larger scale, this research has major policy-related implications, in which it has been revealed that a combination of financial and development initiatives, along with regulatory support, might be extremely effective in promoting green innovation and improving the environmental practices of the Albanian hotel industry.

Alternatively, this study makes a crucial contribution to the limited existing literature. It presents unique insights into the adoption of green innovations by Albanian hotels. Conducting in-depth interviews with owners and managers of hotels sheds light on the main drivers and underlying motives of the green innovations by Albanian hotels, such as cost reduction, guest demand, and regulatory pressure. By explaining the barriers that include a lack of green skills, cost barriers, and a lack of infrastructure, this research gives a detailed insight into the issue. Moreover, this research includes both international literature and Albanian experiences and thus introduces domestic phenomena in terms of international debates about sustainability.

#### 5.4.2. Transferability of Findings to Other Transition Economies and Sectors

The research results from Albanian hotels regarding the adoption of green innovations are applicable to other transition economies and industries such as agro-tourism and green restaurants. Empirical research results have supported the fact that subsidies, policies, and capacity-building are essential factors for the promotion of sustainability in these industries. Similarly, as hotel industries face high initial investment costs and limited subsidies, agro-tourism farms and green restaurants face issues of accessing cheap credit and fiscal subsidies [57]. Financial tools and subsidies are essential for green innovation in rural tourism and agro-food industries. In the hospitality industry, a lack of institutional support and ambiguous policies are barriers to the adoption and implementation of green innovations. This is also the case in agro-tourism and restaurants. National certification schemes, more defined legal frameworks, and better government support are consistently highlighted as areas that can help push the sustainability agenda forward [57]. A lack of specialized training in hotels is also a problem, which is also the case in agro-tourism and restaurants due to a lack of specialized skills in areas such as eco-certification schemes, waste management, and energy efficiency. Research confirms the effectiveness of workshops and learning from pioneer companies in promoting the adoption of sustainability [58]. The unawareness of clients regarding the need for sustainability in hotels is similar to that in restaurants and agro-tourism, where clients do not understand the need for local organic food and sustainability. Research has revealed that awareness is very important for the adoption of sustainability services. In the case of transition economies, the adoption of sustainability practices by firms can be explained by the Institutional Theory and the Resource-Based View. Institutional theory has shown that firms react to external pressures such as government regulations, certification schemes, and consumer pressure; therefore, the absence of such pressure leads to the delay in the adoption of sustainability [33]. This is particularly true for industries such as hospitality, agro-tourism, and sustainable restaurants, which face unclear legal frameworks and certification schemes. On the other hand, the Resource-Based View emphasizes the role of firms with higher levels of finance, knowledge, and relational resources to successfully implement sustainability innovations [31]. Empirical research on agro-tourism and rural tourism has proven the positive role of subsidies and collaboration with local institutions to improve the capacity of firms to implement sustainable innovations [57-58]. Thus, the above approaches suggest that the institutional and resource bases are crucial factors to determine the path of

sustainability transitions in various industries of emerging countries.

#### 5.5. Limitations and Future Research Directions

Despite its contributions, the study has several limitations that must be recognized and addressed in further research. The study was focused on a very short list of the target sample population, which included only the owners and managers of Albanian hotels. This would create a problem in generalizing the findings of the study. The research used qualitative research. Thus, the findings would depend upon perceptions rather than objective facts. The research was conducted in Albania. Hence, the findings may not apply to other geographical locations. The constraints in terms of time and resource limitations may have limited the scope of data generation, which would be important in the adoption and implementation of sustainable practices in hospitality. While it is possible to gain a good understanding of the relative frequency of green innovations through thematic analysis, further research could be carried out to determine the relative frequency of theme usage, such as how many hotels utilize a certain theme. It can be said that this study is limited in scope in terms of its perspectives, as it only interviews the owners and managers of hotels. Next studies can be further carried out by including the employees of hotels, the guests of hotels, and the local government officials, so that a more holistic view of the role of society can be presented regarding the implementation of green innovations in hotels in Albania.

A major barrier to sustainability in hotels is the limitations faced by the supply chain, such as sourcing organic and certified products. Local vendors often struggle to provide organic products due to high certification costs, limited infrastructure, supply chain inefficiencies, and consumer demand fluctuations. These challenges make organic sourcing less reliable compared to conventional products. Future research might conduct a study on the "green supply chain" by interviewing local suppliers and vendors to gain a better understanding of the difficulties that they face in meeting hotel sustainability requirements.

Lastly, the study is cross-sectional in nature, with the study having taken place in the year 2025. In addition, the use of a longitudinal design, for example, a follow-up study in the next few years, could prove instrumental in determining whether changes in long-term drivers, such as EU legislation pressures or climate policy pressures, have impacted changes in operations or whether the changes have merely been superficial in nature. By overcoming these limitations, the research can build on the existing knowledge of sustainability in the Albanian hospitality industry and provide more useful insights.

## 6. Conclusions

Green innovation refers to the use or development of various products, processes, and management practices with the aim of reducing harmful environmental impacts and, at the same time, ensuring business success. In the hotel industry, green innovations relate to the use of renewable sources of energy, recycling, conservation of energy, and green architectural designs.

Talking broadly about the global tourism sector, the hotel sector has been facing increasing challenges to reduce its negative impacts on the environment without affecting the level of service as well as customer satisfaction. The situation is not different in the Albanian hospitality sector, either. The implementation of green innovation is expected to have both pros and cons.

The study offers new insights into the practice of green innovations in Albanian hotels, with a focus on the drivers and barriers of sustainability. The results show that the most employed green innovation practices are energy efficiency, waste minimization, and local procurement, which are primarily motivated by immediate financial gains. The study identifies the barriers to green innovation, which include the high costs of investment, the lack of technical and institutional support, and the absence of technical knowledge.

This study also emphasizes the importance of the culture of the organization, management's perspective, and connectivity with the community in obtaining results concerning sustainability. Adopting green innovation is a more complex activity and is affected by internal and external mechanisms, along with fluctuating trends in the marketplace. Barriers to green innovation adoption in Albanian hotels are still important issues to be addressed.

Finally, it may be concluded that the research helps to fill a significant gap that has been created within the body of knowledge, as it offers country-specific qualitative research within a transition economy setting.

Aside from the direct results, the research offers opportunities for new exploration. Further quantification of sustainability practices could add more depth to the research and practice. Extension of the perspectives of the stakeholders, including the employees, the guests, and the local government officials, could also add more depth to the research. The problems of the supply chain, including the accessibility of organic and certified products, are also significant for further research on sustainability in the hospitality industry. Longitudinal research is also needed to examine whether the drivers such as EU compliance and climate change are more than just surface-level changes.

## Data Availability Statement

The data supporting the findings of this study are available upon reasonable request from the corresponding author.

## Author Contributions

E.J. conceptualized the study, designed the research framework, revised the text critically for intellectual content, and coordinated the overall project; G.P. conducted interviews, managed fieldwork, and organized the collection of primary data; A.B. performed qualitative and thematic analysis, synthesized findings, and drafted the results section; D.D. prepared the manuscript, integrated literature review and policy framing, and managed the submission process. All authors contributed to the discussion of results, reviewed the manuscript, and approved the final version.

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## Conflict of Interest Statement

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

## Annex: Interview Guide

The semi-structured interviews were guided by the following open-ended questions:

### 1. Perceptions of Sustainability

- What does sustainability mean for your hotel?
- How do you define environmentally friendly practices in your daily operations?

### 2. Motivations and Drivers

- What motivated you to adopt green innovations and environmentally friendly practices?
- Which factors (economic, environmental, institutional, or customer-related) influenced your decisions?

### 3. Implementation of Practices

- What specific sustainability measures have you implemented (e.g., energy, water, waste, local products)?
- How do you monitor or evaluate the effectiveness of these practices?

### 4. Barriers and Challenges

- What barriers have you encountered in implementing green practices?
- How do financial, technical, or institutional constraints affect your sustainability efforts?

## 5. Impacts and Outcomes

- What benefits have you observed from adopting green innovations (economic, environmental, reputational)?

## 6. Future Perspectives

- What plans do you have for expanding or improving sustainability in your hotel?
- What kind of support (policy, financial, technical) would help you adopt more advanced green innovations?

## 7. Institutional and Policy Context

- How do you evaluate the support provided by public institutions for green practices?
- Have you benefited from any subsidies or grants for investments in green innovations?

## 8. Supply Chain and Vendors

- What are the main difficulties in sourcing organic or certified products?
- How do you collaborate with local suppliers to ensure sustainable products?

## 9. Employee Involvement

- How is your staff trained in sustainable practices?
- Have you experienced resistance from employees regarding the implementation of green measures?

## 10. Guest Perceptions

- How do guests react to the sustainable measures you have implemented?
- Do you think green practices influence your hotel's reputation and competitiveness?

## 11. Outlook

- What are your plans for future investments in green technologies?
- What type of support would be most useful for you in the future (financial, technical, institutional)?

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