An overview of Green Key certified hotels in Romania towards a sustainable tourism

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Abstract

In recent years, many hotels have adopted green practices to attract environmentally conscious consumers and improve their economic performance. Although the hospitality industry is often considered unsustainable, it has been a pioneer in adopting sustainable practices. The overwhelming amount of literature on green hotels (Appolloni et al., 2022.) and the evaluation of green strategies adopted (Migdadi et al., 2018) seems to leave certain challenges despite the limited market potential, consumer awareness and understanding of green hotels.

This paper aims to shed light not only on the scarce literature in this field, but also on the specificities of Green Key-certified hotels in Romania in their journey towards sustainable tourism, especially at a time when the whole world is facing a multitude of converging crises. In doing so, we explore how deputy general managers, general managers, hotel owners and hospitality professionals in Romania recognize the importance of Green Key certification, how they relate to Green Key, what tools they use and how they approach stakeholders, customers and hospitality staff. Through semi-structured interviews with managers of hotels holding Green Key certification and practitioners in Romania, we aim to provide an overview of the evolution of hotels in Romania towards sustainable tourism.

Keywords

Green Key, hotels, tourism, sustainable, hospitality

Introduction

The Green Key certification program for hotels has gained significant momentum in recent years, reflecting the growing global awareness of sustainable practices. This initiative aims to recognize and reward hotels that demonstrate their commitment to environmental responsibility and sustainability in various aspects of their operations. However, the effectiveness and impact of such certification programs require in-depth discussion.

First of all, it's important to recognize the positive impact of Green Key certification on the environment. Participating hotels typically implement energy-saving measures, reduce water consumption, manage waste responsibly and promote biodiversity conservation. These efforts help to reduce environmental degradation and combat climate change, which is in line with overall sustainability goals (Wei et al., 2020).

In addition, Green Key certification not only benefits the environment, but also enhances the reputation and competitiveness of hotels. Consumers are increasingly attracted to environmentally friendly accommodation, which increases the demand for sustainable tourism offers. Through certification, hotels can attract environmentally conscious guests, differentiate themselves in the market and potentially command a higher price. However, despite its benefits, the Green Key certification program faces some challenges and limitations. One of the biggest concerns is the risk of "greenwashing", which is the misleading portrayal of a company or its products as environmentally friendly. Some hotels seek certification primarily for marketing purposes without making significant changes to their operations. This undermines the credibility and effectiveness of the program as it dilutes the importance of genuine sustainability efforts (Chen et al., 2005).

Additionally, the criteria for Green Key certification can vary from region to region and there is a lack of standardized enforcement mechanisms. Differences in local regulations, resources and priorities can lead to inconsistencies in certification standards and assessments. This raises questions about the reliability and comparability of the program and makes it difficult for consumers to know the actual environmental performance of certified hotels. Furthermore, while Green Key certification focuses on environmental sustainability, it may neglect the social and economic dimensions of sustainability. Hotels certified under this program may prioritize environmental initiatives at the expense of social responsibility or community involvement. To achieve holistic sustainability, environmental, social and economic considerations need to be reconciled, which requires a broader assessment framework (Acampora et al., 2022).

The Green Key program stands as a beacon of excellence in environmental responsibility and sustainable practices in the global hospitality sector. According to greenkey.ro, this program is run by the Foundation for Environmental Education (FEE) and aims to promote environmentally friendly practices in the tourism industry. It focuses on combating climate change by rewarding and supporting environmental protection efforts in the hospitality industry. The program educates stakeholders (businesses, authorities, tourists and communities) about sustainable practices and recognizes establishments that meet international and national environmental criteria. Green Key also promotes economic efficiency through reduced resource consumption, which benefits the awarded hotels and resorts through cost savings, improved brand awareness and marketing benefits. For tourists, choosing a Green Key certified establishment is a guarantee of an environmentally conscious stay and motivates the wider adoption of environmentally friendly practices throughout the tourism industry.

1. Review of the scientific literature

The growing popularity of environmentally sustainable practices in the hotel industry raises the question of their impact on operational efficiency. To investigate how hotels perform under these conditions, researchers employed a double bootstrap method of data envelopment analysis (DEA). Using this technique, they were first able to determine the technical efficiency and its influencing factors in a group of medium to large hotels in Sri Lanka between 2010 and 2014. They then investigated the role of various explanatory factors in shaping hotel efficiency. The results show that the average technical efficiency is 61%, with the highest being 71.5% and the lowest 46.8%. The study shows that the introduction of environmentally friendly practices increases the efficiency of hotels, particularly in terms of energy savings and waste reduction. However, the impact of water consumption on efficiency shows mixed results. In addition, the experts calculated the bootstrapped Malmquist Productivity Index to assess overall productivity in the Sri Lankan hotel industry. This research provides hotel managers and policy makers with valuable insights into achieving competitive advantage through improved technical and environmental practices and helps in strategic planning for the further development of the hotel industry (Kularatne et al., 2019).

The case study on Sri Lanka's tourism industry has led to significant insights. Initiatives such as the "Greening Sri Lankan Hotels" campaign aim to improve environmental sustainability in the hospitality industry, with a focus on energy and water efficiency. This shift towards environmentally friendly practices is driven by customer demand for eco-friendly hotels, with research showing that guests are willing to pay more for such accommodation. In addition, the environmental impact of tourism has prompted government and industry efforts towards sustainability. This summary highlights the importance of understanding the effectiveness of environmentally friendly practices in hotel operations against a backdrop of growing environmental concerns and changing tourist preferences. Research by the International Hotels Environment Initiative (IHEI) shows that 90% of guests prefer eco-friendly hotels, making green investments cost-effective and competitive. Government promotion of environmentally friendly practices can therefore be cost effective, improve business competitiveness and address environmental concerns (Pirani and Arafat, 2014).

In addition, organizations can achieve maximum eco-friendly efficiency by developing synergistic resources. In academic research, an internal focus on green marketing is cited as a key advantage for the eco-balance. This includes fostering a culture that prioritizes environmental principles throughout the organization. In addition, the resource-based view (RBV) emphasizes the synergy between internal and external resources. Therefore, it's reasonable to assume that an internal focus on green marketing (an internal resource) can complement customer engagement in green practices (an external resource), thereby increasing the drive for green information management among hospitality employees (Tuan, 2021).

Up to 2018, in Romania the tourism industry was confronted with a specific reality that has been identified and analyzed in several studies. One study, for example, examines the evolution of tourism in Romania

from 2009 to 2018, analyzing arrivals, overnight stays and other key indicators. The number of tourist arrivals doubled to 12.9 million in 2018, with Romanian visitors accounting for 78% of this figure. 70% of these tourists stayed in hotels and the number of overnight stays increased by 60% to 23.3 million, although the trend in overnight stays is declining. Although Romania has one of the lowest tourism densities in the EU, the number of outbound trips by Romanians increased by 80% to 21 million in 2018. The conclusion highlights Romania's underutilized tourism potential and points to the need for a better balance between supply and demand, improved promotion and service quality in order to increase attractiveness and boost tourism (Popescu et al., 2020).

In summary, the adoption of environmentally friendly practices in the tourism and hospitality sector makes a compelling case for environmental protection, operational efficiency and economic viability. Programs such as the Green Key, as well as research and initiatives in Sri Lanka and Romania, demonstrate the tangible benefits of integrating sustainable practices. Overall, these findings highlight the importance of environmentally friendly practices in promoting a sustainable future for the tourism industry, benefiting businesses, consumers and the environment alike (TM et al., 2021).

2. Research methodology

Hotels that hold Green Key certification face a unique set of challenges and benefits as they strive to balance environmental sustainability with operational efficiency and guest satisfaction (Kim et al., 2017). This paper explores some of the key challenges and benefits associated with maintaining a Green Key certification in the Romanian hospitality industry).

A case study was selected for the investigation of the impact of Green Key certification in Romania and the overview of certified hotels towards sustainable tourism. This decision was based on the following elements: The Green Key certification is a leading standard of excellence in terms of sustainability in the hospitality industry worldwide with more than 5000 certified establishments in more than 60 countries. Through a rigorous set of criteria and specific audits, establishments meet the standards set by the non-profit Foundation for Environmental Education that has a history and reputation of 30 years, it is supported internationally and nationally, and received an international recognition from high-level institutions like World Tourism Organization or UN Enviornment.

In 2023, Romania boasts a total of 1,601 hotels, contributing to an overall tourist accommodation capacity of 202,611 places. However, the net capacity utilization rate in 2021 stood at 48%, indicating underutilization of available resources and pointing to challenges in optimizing occupancy and operational efficiency within the Romanian hotel industry.

This methodology was applied to quantify the value of Green Key certification in the Romanian tourism industry in terms of sustainability best practices and facilitating the building of a good reputation and increasing guest satisfaction through an environmentally friendly approach. The main objective is to gain insights into the perspectives and experiences of general managers of Green Key certified hotels. This study is a qualitative research method that allows for a comprehensive investigation of their perceptions regarding Green Key certification and the potential it has for sustainable tourism.

The subjects of the data collection were 9 hotel general managers on the Romanian market, both male and female, aged between 30 and 55, with higher education and medium to high income, of which 5 are romanian and 4 of them are expats, managing hotels with Green Key certification and interested in sustainability and their investments in procedures and protocols regarding the carbon footprint. As general managers of international brand hotels, the interviewees are considered to have high standards, high efficiency in the areas of diplomacy, emotional intelligence and people management, as well as high competencies in financial performance and multicultural communication. The interview questions were sent by e-mail and responses were received shortly afterwards. The guide contains open-ended questions related to managers' views on Green Key certification and their sustainability efforts in the tourism industry.

3. Results and discussion

The resulting transcripts were examined and re-read to look for relevant themes, patterns and codes for the research. The data collected allowed the identification of important findings on the impact of Green Key certification and the overview of hotels in terms of sustainable tourism. Participants were informed about the scientific purpose of the study as well as their rights to privacy and informed consent. The appendix contains both the guide and the transcripts. The reason for selecting people from different academic backgrounds is that developing expertise in one area can have an impact on how others view the issue at

hand. The research findings are presented thematically according to the order of the research questions and objectives. In addition, "n" is used to indicate the number of respondents who had a similar view/response to the interview questions.

First, this study presents the results related to the first research question, namely the intention of Romanian hotels to be certified according to the Green Key. At the beginning, a series of introductory questions were asked about the interviewees' background and expertise in order to obtain a general background about each interviewee's relationship with the hospitality industry and tourism.

All respondents are aware of the importance of sustainability practices in the hospitality industry (n=9), bearing in mind that sustainability is one of the key drivers of business today and is high on the agenda. Respondents indicated that „all hospitality businesses have a significant environmental footprint" and that „sustainability is critical to meeting consumer demand", not to mention that „sustainable initiatives often lead to long-term cost reductions through energy and water efficiency measures, environmental compliance", but also „reducing costs". Next, the results show that some respondents indicated that aligning to brand direction was the main factor in the decision to consider Green Key certification for the hotel (n=3), only one respondent cited „implementing new projects, spreading awareness" as the main reason, while other respondents (n=5) stated that the main reason was related to „attracting environmentally conscious guests, achieving cost savings, taking advantage of marketing opportunities, meeting additional CSR targets and promoting long-term sustainability in the hospitality industry". When asked about the challenges they encountered in achieving Green Key certification for their hotel, most respondents (n=6) indicated that they had no challenges, while one cited „the soap supplier" as a challenge, another cited „energy conservation and rainwater collection" and only one respondent cited cost and technology, citing "additional costs to upgrade or improve some technologies".

The impact of Green Key certification on the guest's decision to purchase hotel services is the research question. In terms of the benefits of Green Key certification on guest reputation and satisfaction, all respondents (n=9) stated that it „enhances the overall guest experience and strengthens our reputation as an environmentally conscious hotel", citing awareness, affiliation, loyalty and recognition as benefits. Some of the hotels surveyed (n=4) noted an increase in guest interest in their hotel's Green Key certification, indicating that „more guests are showing interest in sustainable business practices", while other respondents (n=5) did not see an increase. Regarding feedback from guests who cited Green Key certification as a reason for choosing the hotel, only a few respondents (n=3) said that they had received feedback regarding this certification "in some cases", while others (n=6) had not received any feedback from guests who cited this reason for choosing the hotel.

In terms of Green Key certification setting the hotel apart from the competition in the eyes of potential guests, most respondents (n=6) said that „we certainly have an advantage", while others (n=3) mentioned foreign tourists and CSR measures as criteria that set their hotel apart from the competition. When it comes to ensuring that guests are aware of the sustainable practices associated with Green Key certification during their stay at the hotel, respondents (n=7) cited awards, marketing channels, signage, information on the website and letters prior to arrival „at the front desk at check-in, in the public areas via the digital screens and in the room in the hotel's digital directory", while others (n=2) mentioned purchasing local products, reducing transportation and stimulating the local economy by working with suppliers who have the same respect for the values they promote in terms of sustainability and ethical practices.

Application methods and best practices in Green Key certification represent the third research question. When asked about any type of support or resources that respondents felt would be helpful for hotels pursuing Green Key certification in Romania, specific individuals responsible for certification were mentioned (n=3), only (n=3) of the respondents indicated that they were aware of strategies and action plans to support the „elimination of plastic, food waste and energy conservation", while the other (n=3) of the respondents indicated that they were not aware of any type of support or resources.

When it comes to innovative or unique sustainable initiatives implemented at the hotel as part of the Green Key certification, most responses (n=5) refer to various programs such as waste reduction, filtered water, energy efficient lighting, no single-use plastics, one respondent (n=1) mentioned „installing solar panels on the roof and installing charging stations for electric cars", while others (n=2) spoke of "removing 99% of all information printouts from guest rooms and putting QR codes/information on the TV" or „slippers made from recycled materials"; pens made from recycled materials."One respondent (n=1) mentioned that „ suppliers and shopping establishments are within a reasonable distance from our hotel and provide bike racks to support more sustainable transportation options for our employees." When asked about the tools used to monitor and evaluate the effectiveness of sustainable hotel practices in relation to Green Key certification,

all respondents (n=9) use a specific tool such as GAIA, MESH, carbon footprint calculation, water calculation and waste measurement. Only a few of the respondents (n=3) also mentioned „guest feedback", „monthly internal audits and annual Green Key audits".

Finally, in terms of plans to continuously improve and expand their sustainable initiatives beyond the Green Key certification requirements in the future, most of the respondents (n=5) mentioned seeking and researching all new best practices from around the world, saying: „Set more aggressive goals from year to year to become more sustainable" or "Identify areas of high energy use in the facility through regular measurements, "the other respondents (n=4) mentioned community and the environment by saying, "We plan to become more involved in the community with projects that preserve and protect the natural environment"."

Conclusions

Green Key certification is more than just a label — it represents a commitment to our planet, a promise of quality and a harmonious blend of hospitality and environmental responsibility. As the hospitality industry evolves, Green Key continues to drive responsible tourism, ensuring that future generations can explore the world without compromising its beauty and vitality. To maximize its impact, the Green Key certification program must address these challenges by strengthening transparency, accountability and stakeholder engagement. Clear guidelines, independent audits and stakeholder consultations can increase the credibility and effectiveness of certification assessments. Moreover, broadening the scope of certification criteria to include social and economic dimensions of sustainability can promote more inclusive and balanced approaches to sustainable hospitality (Manganari et al., 2016).

After conducting the qualitative research based on interviews with the general managers of the certified hotels in Romania, it is evident that Green Key certification plays a crucial role in promoting sustainable and environmentally friendly tourism practices within the hospitality industry. Given the growing interest and demand from environmentally conscious travelers, the influence of Green Key certification on guests' decision to use hotel services was consistently noted by interviewees, signaling a shift towards responsible travel choices among guests, businesses and hoteliers.

The commitment of international brand hotels from chains such as Marriott, Accor, Radisson, Hilton and Intercontinental to Green Key certification underlines a significant step towards sustainability in the hospitality industry. These leading brands are recognized worldwide for their presence and culture of excellence, laying the foundation for the promotion of sustainable tourism in the region and in Romania in particular. By proactively participating in the certification process, these hotels not only demonstrate their commitment to reducing carbon emissions and environmental impact through sustainable operations, but also inspire other hotels to follow their lead and contribute to a more responsible tourism sector in Romania. Their collective commitment to the Green Key certification criteria underscores a shared vision for a more sustainable future, sets a positive example for the entire industry and educates younger generations on best practices and environmentally conscious travel (Font and Tribe, 2001).

First, expanding Green Key certification in Romania beyond international hotel chains requires a multi-faceted approach that includes educational initiatives, awareness raising and demonstrating tangible benefits. By demonstrating best practices in practice, the educational component, which plays an important role for both hotels and the general population, can be activated through workshops, seminars and excursions in certified hotels, as well as through a wide invitation to eco-clubs that promote environmental awareness or eco-friendly initiatives.

Secondly, social media platforms can be used through online campaigns and interactive content to educate and engage on the importance of sustainability, and recognition and awards for conscious travel initiatives provide public acknowledgement and honor efforts to inspire others to adopt sustainable practices.

On the other hand, Green Key certification represents a competitive advantage in a dynamic hospitality market that recognizes environmental responsibility as a mega-trend in tourism, a trend that will continue for many years to come and will influence the way we travel and perceive the world, our immediate surroundings and our homes.

Overall, while Green Key certification is a step in the right direction, continuous improvement and collaboration are essential to realize its full potential and drive positive environmental and social change in the hospitality industry.

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Annex 1.

Preamble

Hello! My name is Cristina Malaia and I am a first year PhD student at the Academy of Economic Studies in Bucharest, specializing in Business Administration. I am conducting a research paper on "The impact of Green Key Certification in Romania. An overview of certified hotels towards a sustainable tourism"and I would like to ask you a series of questions. The interview will last around 45 minutes and I want to assure you that this is for academic purposes only and your confidentiality will be maintained. Also, I would appreciate your consent for participating in this interview.

Thank you for accepting to participate in this study.

At first, please start by telling me a few things about yourself.

(Control Questions)

What is your name?

What is your age?

What is your occupation/role?

What is the last level of education you completed?

Where did you hear about Green Key certification?

For how long you have been General Manager/CEO/Owner?

(Interview Research Questions)

1) Taking into account that your hotel is Green Key certified, how do you perceive the importance of sustainability practices in the hospitality industry?

2) Which were the main factors that influenced your decision to consider Green Key certification for your hotel?

3) Were there any challenges that you encountered in the process of obtaining Green Key certification for your hotel?

4) Do you think that Green Key certification can benefit your hotel in terms of reputation and guest satisfaction?

5) Have you noticed an increase in guest interest or inquiries about your hotel's Green Key certification?

6) Have you received feedback from guests specifically mentioning the Green Key certification as a reason for choosing your hotel?

7) Do you think Green Key certification sets your hotel apart from competitors in the eyes of potential guests and how exactly?

8) How do you ensure that guests are aware of the sustainable practices associated with Green Key certification during their stay at your hotel?

9) Is there any kind of support or resources that you think would be helpful for hotels aiming to achieve Green Key certification in Romania?

10) Can you provide any kind of examples of innovative or unique sustainable initiatives implemented at your hotel as part of the Green Key certification process?

11) By using what tools do you monitor and evaluate the effectiveness of your sustainable practices in relation to Green Key certification?

12) In what ways do you plan to continuously improve and expand your sustainable initiatives beyond Green Key certification requirements in the future?

13) Did you like the interview?

14) Do you have anything else to add on this topic?

Thank you for accepting to participate in this study.