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Article

Driving Innovation in Adventure Tourism through Certification Systems: A Diffusion of Innovations Perspective

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Abstract: Innovation is vital for the survival and competitiveness of tourism enterprises, particularly in the dynamic and experience-driven sector of adventure tourism. This article explores how national certification and quality assurance systems act as catalysts for systemic innovation, drawing upon Rogers of Innovations (DOI) theory. Through a qualitative multi-case study of three national certification schemes—VisitScotland Quality Assurance (QA), New Zealand Qualmark (QM), and Iceland's Vakinn—the research examines the impact of innovation attributes such as relative advantage, compatibility, complexity, trialability, and observability on the diffusion process. The findings suggest that relative advantage and compatibility are the most influential drivers for adoption, while complexity and observability play moderate roles, and trialability remains limited. Certifications, although intended to promote standardization and safety, can both facilitate and hinder innovation depending on their design, focus, and adaptability to specific tourism sub-sectors. The study reveals the nuanced dynamics between innovation and standardization, highlighting the importance of aligning certification systems with the unique needs of experience-based tourism. The article concludes with recommendations for developing more flexible and inclusive certification frameworks that promote innovation without compromising authenticity or sustainability. This study contributes to the ongoing discourse on innovation policy, sustainable tourism, and quality assurance in the adventure tourism industry.

Keywords: Adventure Tourism, Innovation Diffusion, Certification Systems, Quality Assurance, Rogers' DOI Theory, Standardization, Tourism Sustainability, Experience-Based Tourism, Innovation Adoption, Tourism Innovation Policy

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1. Introduction

In the contemporary tourism landscape, innovation is increasingly regarded as a fundamental driver of competitiveness, differentiation, and long-term sustainability [1]. Among the various branches of tourism, adventure tourism stands out as one of the most dynamic, experience-intensive, and rapidly growing sectors globally. Characterized by activities that involve physical exertion, interaction with nature, and immersive cultural experiences, adventure tourism demands continuous adaptation and creativity to meet evolving consumer expectations [2]. However, the fragmented nature of this sector—dominated by small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) with limited access to research and development resources—presents considerable challenges to systematic innovation [3].To address these challenges and promote safer, higher-quality, and more sustainable experiences, several countries have introduced certification and quality assurance systems. These systems are designed to establish standards of performance, safety, and

environmental responsibility while also serving as potential instruments for stimulating innovation within tourism enterprises [4]. While standardization and innovation are often viewed as opposing forces, in the context of adventure tourism, certification systems may paradoxically function as both regulators and enablers of innovation [5].This article investigates how certification systems contribute to innovation in the adventure tourism sector by applying the theoretical framework of Everett Rogers' Diffusion of Innovations (DOI) theory [6]. Specifically, it examines five key attributes of innovations—relative advantage, compatibility, complexity, trialability, and observability—and evaluates their role in the adoption and diffusion of national tourism certifications. Drawing on a qualitative multi-case study of three national systems—VisitScotland's Quality Assurance (QA), New Zealand's Qualmark (QM), and Iceland's Vakinn—the study explores how these certification frameworks affect innovation behavior among adventure tourism firms .In doing so, this paper seeks to bridge the gap between policy-driven standardization and grassroots innovation within tourism micro-enterprises. The research contributes to the theoretical understanding of innovation diffusion in tourism and offers practical insights for policymakers, certification bodies, and adventure tourism operators aiming to foster innovation while ensuring safety, sustainability, and authenticity [7], [8].

2. Materials and Methods

This study employs a qualitative research approach utilizing a multi-case study design to explore how national certification systems influence innovation diffusion in the adventure tourism sector. The selection of this approach is based on the exploratory nature of the research question and the need to gain in-depth understanding of the certification processes and their impact on small and medium-sized tourism enterprises.Three countries were purposefully selected for the case studies—Scotland, New Zealand, and Iceland—based on their active implementation of national quality certification programs in tourism. These programs include VisitScotland's Quality Assurance (QA), New Zealand's Qualmark (QM), and Iceland's Vakinn certification system. These cases were chosen due to their differing stages of implementation, levels of government involvement, and targeted tourism sub-sectors, offering a diverse perspective on certification system effectiveness.The primary data was collected through semi-structured interviews with tourism operators who had direct experience with one of the three certification programs. Participants included owners and managers of adventure tourism firms operating in rural or nature-based environments. These stakeholders were selected using purposive sampling to ensure they represented different organizational sizes, service types, and geographic regions within their respective countries.In addition to interviews, the study involved a thorough review of official certification program documents, guidelines, and evaluation criteria. These secondary sources helped to contextualize the responses from interviewees and provided insight into the standards, goals, and administrative processes of each program.Data from interviews were transcribed and subjected to thematic analysis. The analysis was guided by the five core attributes of innovation as proposed in the conceptual framework: relative advantage, compatibility, complexity, trialability, and observability. This allowed for structured coding and cross-case comparison, while still accommodating emergent themes that were unique to each national context.To ensure the credibility and reliability of the findings, triangulation was employed by comparing interview data with documentary evidence. Furthermore, member-checking was conducted with a subset of interviewees to validate the interpretations derived from their input. Ethical considerations were strictly observed, including informed consent, confidentiality of respondents, and secure data storage.This methodological framework enables the identification of patterns, barriers, and enablers in the adoption and diffusion of certification-based innovations in adventure tourism. It provides a grounded and contextually rich understanding of how quality assurance systems shape innovation behavior across different regulatory and cultural settings.

3. Results

The analysis of data gathered from tourism firms certified under VisitScotland QA, New Zealand's Qualmark, and Iceland's Vakinn revealed several patterns regarding how these systems influenced innovation within the adventure tourism sector. The findings are presented based on Rogers' **five attributes** of innovation: relative advantage, compatibility, complexity, trialability, and observability [9].

1. Relative Advantage

Across all three countries, firms emphasized that certification offered tangible marketing benefits, improved customer trust, and signaled professionalism to stakeholders. In Scotland, many operators reported that participating in the QA program increased their visibility in national tourism portals. Similarly, New Zealand firms experienced enhanced partnerships with travel agencies and booking platforms due to their Qualmark status. Icelandic companies, particularly those in the early stages of certification, reported improved internal processes and increased cooperation with similarly certified partners.

2. Compatibility

Compatibility emerged as a critical factor influencing certification adoption. Firms in Iceland and New Zealand found the systems relatively compatible with their operational practices, especially in safety and environmental sustainability. However, some Scottish adventure tourism operators felt that the QA system focused more on accommodation and physical infrastructure rather than on experiential components. This mismatch affected their perception of the system's relevance to adventure-based services.

3. Complexity

The perceived complexity of certification varied depending on prior experience and resources. Firms with existing safety procedures found the transition into certification smoother, particularly in Iceland and New Zealand. New entrants or small operators reported initial difficulties in understanding the documentation and compliance steps. However, the presence of support materials, learning workshops, and network guidance in Vakinn and Qualmark helped reduce these barriers.

4. Trialability

This attribute was the least developed across all three certification systems. None of the programs offered partial or temporary certification, making it difficult for firms to experiment before full implementation. Some operators adopted a phased approach internally by applying the system to one business unit (e.g., accommodation) before extending it to others. While this demonstrated internal trialability, it was not formally supported by the certification bodies.

5. Observability

Observability played a crucial role in influencing new adopters. Firms in each country reported observing the visible success of certified competitors or collaborators as motivation to join. In Iceland, the visibility of Vakinn's standards and their integration into government and industry marketing channels contributed to greater interest among small tourism providers. Similarly, New Zealand's national promotion of Qualmark-certified firms strengthened the public image of certified adventure operators [10].

Table 1 provides a comparative assessment of five key innovation attributes—relative advantage, compatibility, complexity, trialability, and observability—across three national certification systems: VisitScotland QA, New Zealand's Qualmark, and Iceland's Vakinn. Each attribute is rated on a scale from low to high (interpreted here on a 1–5 scale) based on qualitative data obtained from certified adventure tourism firms.

The table illustrates that New Zealand's Qualmark system scores highest overall, especially in relative advantage and compatibility, indicating its strong alignment with the needs of experience-based tourism enterprises. Iceland's Vakinn also performs well,

particularly in compatibility and observability, due to its focus on sustainability and visible government endorsement. In contrast, Scotland's QA program is perceived as moderately supportive of innovation but less tailored to the experiential nature of adventure tourism, particularly in terms of compatibility and trialability. Importantly, trialability is rated low across all three programs, reflecting a gap in allowing businesses to experiment with certification on a provisional or phased basis. This limitation may hinder adoption by smaller or resource-constrained enterprises. The table thus supports the broader finding that certification systems vary in their effectiveness as innovation enablers and must be adapted to better suit the operational context of adventure tourism.

Table 1. Innovation Attribute Assessment by Country

Innovation Attribute	Scotland (QA)	New Zealand (Qualmark)	Iceland (Vakinn)
Relative Advantage	High (marketing benefit)	High (partnerships, trust)	Moderate to high (process improvements)
Compatibility	Moderate (not experience-focused)	High (aligned with values)	High (safety/environmental fit)
Complexity	Moderate to high	Low to moderate	Moderate (tools available)
Trialability	Low	Low	Low
Observability	Moderate	High	High

These results illustrate the varying degrees to which certification programs support innovation diffusion within adventure tourism. While some systems align well with the operational and experiential nature of the sector, others require further adaptation to enhance compatibility and reduce complexity. Overall, firms viewed certification as a strategic tool not only for compliance but also for fostering incremental and, in some cases, radical innovation.

4. Discussion

The findings of this study offer significant insights into the interplay between national certification systems and innovation adoption in the adventure tourism sector. The analysis, framed around Rogers's five innovation attributes, demonstrates that while certifications serve as mechanisms for standardization, they also influence the pace and quality of innovation diffusion in diverse ways.

The attribute of relative advantage emerged as a strong motivator for certification adoption across all three countries. Firms perceived clear marketing and reputational benefits associated with certification, which aligns with previous research suggesting that visible competitive gains accelerate innovation uptake in tourism. New Zealand's Qualmark program exemplified this, offering certified businesses improved visibility, preferred partnerships, and inclusion in government-supported promotional channels [11]. Compatibility also played a central role. Certification programs that aligned well with adventure tourism operators' core values—such as environmental sustainability, safety, and authenticity—were more readily adopted. Iceland's Vakinn and New Zealand's Qualmark were noted for their relevance to the experiential and environmental goals of tourism firms, making them better integrated into daily operations. In contrast, VisitScotland's QA was perceived as less compatible with non-accommodation-based tourism services, which limited its perceived value among adventure operators.Complexity, though moderate in most cases, was more pronounced among SMEs with limited administrative capacity or prior exposure to regulatory systems. While

programs like Vakinn offered training and support, some firms still found the certification process daunting. This underscores the need for certification bodies to simplify procedures and provide targeted assistance for micro-enterprises, which dominate the adventure tourism landscape.The findings also highlight a critical limitation: trialability was uniformly weak. None of the three systems allowed businesses to engage with the certification on a provisional basis before full implementation. This lack of flexibility may deter potential adopters, particularly those unsure about long-term alignment or resource availability. Incorporating modular or phased certification models could enhance the appeal and feasibility of adoption [12].

Lastly, observability was found to be a powerful indirect driver of diffusion. Firms that witnessed the success of certified competitors or collaborators were more inclined to pursue certification themselves. This "demonstration effect" was most visible in Iceland and New Zealand, where national branding strategies actively highlighted certified businesses. This result supports the notion that innovation visibility plays a vital role in tourism, especially in markets where peer validation and community reputation are key decision factors [13], [14]. These observations suggest that certification systems are not merely administrative tools but can function as platforms for knowledge transfer, collaboration, and experiential learning. When designed with sector-specific realities in mind, such systems can foster innovation that balances authenticity, safety, and sustainability. Moreover, the role of national tourism authorities and public-private partnerships cannot be overstated. The active involvement of governments in promoting, subsidizing, and recognizing certification programs significantly enhances their legitimacy and effectiveness. This is particularly relevant in post-pandemic recovery efforts, where trust, quality assurance, and sustainability are paramount concerns for both tourists and providers [15]. Overall, the study contributes to a deeper understanding of how structured quality frameworks intersect with grassroots innovation. It suggests that future certification systems should not only enforce compliance but also empower enterprises by integrating flexibility, sector relevance, and visible reward mechanisms into their design.

5. Conclusion

This study explored how national certification systems influence innovation adoption within the adventure tourism sector, using Rogers' Diffusion of Innovations theory as an analytical framework. Through a qualitative multi-case analysis of Scotland's QA, New Zealand's Qualmark, and Iceland's Vakinn certification programs, the research revealed how different attributes of innovation affect firms' willingness to engage in structured quality assurance schemes.

The results highlighted that relative advantage and compatibility are the strongest drivers for certification adoption. Certifications that deliver visible business benefits and align with the core values and operations of adventure tourism enterprises are more likely to be embraced. On the other hand, trialability remains underdeveloped across all systems, indicating a need for more flexible, modular certification pathways. Complexity poses a barrier primarily for smaller firms, though targeted support mechanisms can alleviate this. Meanwhile, observability plays a key role in fostering peer influence and confidence in certification uptake. From a policy perspective, the study underscores the potential for certification systems to act not only as quality control tools but also as catalysts for sustainable innovation. National tourism authorities, therefore, have a vital role in designing certification frameworks that are adaptable, experience-focused, and supportive of innovation ecosystems. Ultimately, the research supports the view that well-designed certification systems can reconcile the perceived dichotomy between standardization and innovation. When aligned with the needs and values of the adventure tourism sector, such systems contribute significantly to building resilient, competitive, and sustainable tourism enterprises.

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