




DEVELOPMENT PROSPECTS OF RURAL TOURISM ALONG THE DANUBE

Key Factors of Satisfaction and the Role of Sustainability


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Abstract

This study examines the factors influencing visitor satisfaction in rural tourism within the Danube region, a significant area for sustainable tourism in Central and Eastern Europe. The research aims to assess the impact of sustainability practices, corporate social responsibility (CSR) initiatives, service quality, and demographic factors on tourist satisfaction, motivated by the growing emphasis on sustainability aligned with the EU Strategy for the Danube Region (EUSDR). A quantitative approach was employed, using an online survey distributed in Hungarian and Slovak to ensure inclusivity. Snowball sampling resulted in 255 valid responses from tourists familiar with the region. Data analysis included Chi-square tests, Spearman's rank correlation, Wilcoxon signed-rank tests, and multiple linear regression, using Microsoft Excel for data coding and SPSS software for in-depth statistical analysis. The findings suggest that a majority of respondents perceive a need for improvement in sustainability practices, while many consider CSR initiatives to have a significant influence on their overall satisfaction. A positive correlation was found between awareness of sustainability initiatives and service preferences. Disparities emerged between perceived and expected service quality. Regression analysis identified expectation-shaping factors and facility satisfaction as key predictors of overall satisfaction, with no significant impact from price-value perceptions. This study contributes to rural tourism literature by integrating sustainability perceptions, service quality, and demographics into a comprehensive satisfaction model. The findings provide empirical insights for enhancing service quality and adopting sustainable practices, supporting the EUSDR's objectives. Future research could expand the scope by including additional regions or employing a larger sample size to validate the findings further and provide a broader understanding of satisfaction determinants in rural tourism.

Key words

Danube region, rural tourism, sustainability, social responsibility, service quality, satisfaction.



INTRODUCTION

The European Union Strategy for the Danube Region (EUSDR) covers the Danube Basin, stretching from Germany to the Black Sea, involving 14 countries, including 9 EU member states and 5 non-EU countries. The Danube region offers significant potential for the development of rural tourism, which is crucial for achieving the EU's territorial cohesion objectives. In Slovakia, the region possesses outstanding cultural and natural values, whose sustainable tourism utilization can enhance the economic stability of local communities. The region's transboundary nature fosters international cooperation, supporting environmental and social goals through sustainability efforts in tourism development (European Commission, online; Jászberényi, 2019). However, for this development to be sustainable, it is essential to meet visitor needs and ensure their satisfaction. This includes improving the quality of services, preserving cultural and natural attractions, and enhancing infrastructure to ensure that tourists have positive experiences and are encouraged to return to the region.

Recent studies have highlighted the significant role of tourism in regional development. Identifying tourism core areas, for instance, through the Tourism Penetration Index (TPI), can effectively pinpoint locations with considerable tourism potential (Bujdosó et al., 2019). Similar measures in the Slovak part of the Danube region would significantly improve efforts of sustainable tourism, particularly in areas where cultural and natural values meet. According to Mousazadeh (2022), proximity to natural amenities-like the Danube River-significantly contributes to an increase in well-being and satisfaction among residents. Particularly, such findings contribute to the enhancement of rural development in the Slovak Danube region, which possesses huge potential for further advancement of rural tourism. It is mostly represented by the Hungarian minority-inhabited areas, incorporating a rich historical heritage, diverse relief, and, correspondingly, numerous tourist attractions: the Danube River, its tributaries, thermal waters, floodplain woodlands of different ecological types, as well as cultural and historical objects. The region's gastronomic offerings, blending local traditions with international influences, also carry significant tourism potential (Michaeli, 2015; Nagy, 2018; Orságová, 2020; Lacika, 2006; Kerekeš, 2019; Kasagrandá et al., 2016; Bizubová and Kollár, 2000; Gúčík, 2010). The cross-border nature of the region facilitates international cooperation and the implementation of sustainability efforts, ensuring that tourism development supports environmental and social goals in the long term. Despite its strengths, the region faces challenges such as infrastructure limitations and environmental concerns. Local governments and service providers are increasingly focusing on sustainability, striving for environmentally friendly solutions and the preservation of local culture (Hrubalová, 2015; Kádár and Vitková, 2019; Vitková and Štrbíková, 2021). The rapid growth and widespread expansion of modern tourism occurred within a relatively short time frame. While only 25 million



people participated in international travel in the early 1950s, by 2019 this number had surged to 1.4 billion (Gonda, 2022; UNWTO, 2019). Although this growth brings significant economic benefits, such as job creation and the development of local communities, it also poses serious challenges for nation-states and society (Jarábková et al., 2021). The tourism sector is responsible for approximately 8% of global carbon emissions (Ásványi, 2022), making it a substantial contributor to climate change (Streimikiene et al., 2020).

The relationship between service quality and tourists' expectations is pivotal in shaping the overall tourism experience. Numerous studies have highlighted significant discrepancies between perceived service quality and tourists' expectations (Lo et al., 2010; Abdou et al., 2022). This issue is particularly relevant in rural tourism, where service providers often face challenges due to limited resources and evolving market demands (Al Matris, 2023; Żemła & Szromek, 2023; Iwara, 2023; Dreshaj et al., 2022). Service quality perception is not fixed; it is dynamic and subjective. Individual perceptions of the quality of service are influenced by cognitive and affective factors, which determine which attributes come into sharp focus and attain importance. The cognitive aspects, such as experiences and learned expectations, interact with the affective elements – emotional reactions to the service encounter – that often play a decisive role regarding overall satisfaction (Wirtz & Lovelock, 2016; Ronnie & Philip, 2021). Identity and image studies explain that while a service provider works toward a specific brand identity, the final image is filtered through individual factors such as socio-economic status, cultural heritage, and personal beliefs. Individual experiences and broader socio-economic contexts, such as income disparity or educational background, result in variations in how service quality is perceived. Various external elements, including cultural norms and local customs, significantly influence how services are perceived (Mousazadeh, 2022; Uslu et al., 2020; Singh et al., 2020). The concept of "polycrisis," which refers to the intersection of multiple simultaneous crises – such as economic, social, and environmental challenges – profoundly impacts tourists' expectations and service requirements. Polycrisis describes how these crises interact, ultimately influencing tourists' perceptions of service quality (Matlovič, 2008; Matlovič & Matlovičová, 2024; Pogátsa, 2023; Tsao & Ni, 2016; Saniuk et al., 2020). The cumulative impact of these challenges has heightened the emphasis on sustainability and ethical practices in service provision, thereby altering what tourists now view as indicators of high-quality service (Chapin et al., 2010). Consequently, rural tourism service providers must not only focus on the products they offer but also on how they communicate value in response to changing consumer priorities. Tourists' previous expectations significantly affect their travel experiences and satisfaction (Rodríguez del Bosque, 2006; Ye et al., 2019; Fu et al., 2020; Mortazavi, 2021; Stylidis et al., 2022; Intani & Rojuaniah, 2024). In the Danube region, addressing the area's varied cultural and natural



features is vital, as they contribute to a broad spectrum of visitor expectations. Recent research underscores the importance of customizing tourism services to cater to the differing experiential desires of various tourist groups. According to Pellešová and Vacha (2023), integrating novel experiences, like emerging trends in gastronomy, has a significant impact on enhancing visitor satisfaction. Similarly, Herman et al. (2020) emphasize that strong collaboration between stakeholders is vital for bolstering tourism infrastructure. Such cooperation can effectively support the region's diverse tourism offerings, fostering sustainable development while helping to smooth out seasonal fluctuations.

OBJECTIVES

The research aimed to achieve several specific objectives. Firstly, it sought to examine the role of sustainability practices and corporate social responsibility (CSR) initiatives in shaping overall tourism satisfaction. Secondly, the study aimed to analyse the discrepancies between customer expectations and the perceived quality of service within rural tourism offerings. Finally, the research aimed to identify the critical factors that influence customer satisfaction specifically in rural tourism within the Danube region. These objectives were designed to provide a comprehensive understanding of the dynamics impacting tourist experiences and satisfaction, with a particular emphasis on sustainability and service quality.

Our research focuses on the Danube region in Slovakia, examining the drivers of tourist experiences to gain a deeper understanding of the dynamics and development opportunities of rural tourism. The findings highlight the connections between service quality and sustainability efforts, which strengthen the economic stability of local communities and provide a model example at an international level for other similar regions. In terms of contributing to solving rural challenges, this research can help identify areas where service quality requires improvement and highlight opportunities for sustainable tourism development. Additionally, the results may contribute to the economic revitalization of rural areas and the enhancement of service quality.

In alignment with our research objectives, we formulated the following hypotheses, which will be subjected to empirical testing:

- H₁: Individuals who positively evaluate the corporate social responsibility (CSR) initiatives of service providers show significantly higher satisfaction with the region's sustainability efforts.
- H₂: There is a significant relationship between the frequency of information acquisition regarding the social and environmental initiatives of service providers and the willingness to utilize services that lack sustainability commitment.



H₃: There are significant differences between the perceived dimensions of service quality and tourists' expectations of the services.

H₄: At least one of the examined independent variables significantly influences the level of satisfaction with the services provided in the Danube region.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Since the 1980s, the concept of sustainable tourism has focused on balancing the economic, social, and environmental dimensions of tourism. The goal is to meet present needs without compromising the ability of future generations to meet theirs (Hall et al., 2015). Sustainable tourism relies on a well-rounded approach that considers economic, social, and environmental factors, often called the Triple Bottom Line (Happ, 2014; Fleischer, 2014; Correia, 2019). These strategies are crucial not only for minimizing environmental damage but also for supporting local communities. Tourism can, for example, improve social well-being by creating jobs and ensuring that the economic benefits are shared fairly among residents (Ryglová et al., 2011; Hvizdová, 2016; Jarábková et al., 2021). In addition, ethical business practices are becoming more important in the tourism sector (Ásványi, 2022). Environmental sustainability means focusing on things like using less water and energy and cutting down on waste. On the social side, it's about respecting local communities by providing fair working conditions and making sure tourism positively impacts the local economy. Businesses need to think beyond just profits and embrace sustainability in their day-to-day operations. Using recycled materials and adopting eco-friendly practices - especially when encouraged by government incentives - can help in this shift (Ásványi, 2022; Bricker et al., 2013; Gonda, 2022; Pogátsa, 2023). Increasingly, travellers expect businesses to demonstrate a commitment to social responsibility and ethics, making sustainability a key part of tourism marketing (Lórinicz & Sulyok, 2017). Corporate social responsibility (CSR) involves a business strategy where companies consider the social and environmental effects of their operations, in addition to their economic performance (Wirba, 2023). Communicating CSR initiatives effectively is crucial, because consumers are highly sensitive to corporate social responsibility efforts, and positive perceptions can significantly influence purchasing decisions (Mahmud, 2024; Kim & Lee, 2019; Al Jarah & Emeagwali, 2017). When consumers have a favourable view of a company's CSR (Corporate Social Responsibility) efforts, they're more likely to stay loyal and have positive perceptions of the company's products (Bello et al., 2020). However, for CSR to truly work, it's essential that stakeholders are well-informed and that the initiatives are executed effectively (Du et al., 2010). In tourism, understanding service quality and meeting customer expectations is critical. Quality isn't just a fixed measure – it's often subjective, shaped by how individual consumers perceive it (Mohammed Alnasser, Mohammed Alkhozaim, 2024). The



definition of quality can vary widely across different studies. Csizmadia (2023) emphasizes that quality involves making sure something is suitable and has as few flaws as possible. On the other hand, Keller and Kotler (2016) argue that quality is mainly about meeting the needs of customers. In the end, how people judge the quality of a service comes down to their own experiences and perceptions, so individual viewpoints play a crucial role in how services are evaluated (Wirtz and Lovelock, 2016). According to the SERVQUAL model, service quality is also a key determinant of tourist satisfaction (Keller & Kotler, 2016). The significance of service quality is also evident in marketing, as dissatisfied customers can lead to significant competitive disadvantages (Kenesei and Cserdi, 2018; Bilan et al., 2023). The SERVQUAL model's five dimensions – reliability, responsiveness, assurance, empathy, and tangibles – provide an opportunity to systematically identify discrepancies between customer expectations and actual service performance (Heidrich, 2017; Park and Jeong, 2019). However, recent critiques suggest that its five dimensions may not fully capture the experiential and emotional aspects that define tourism (Bauer et al., 2016). Customers often assess service quality based on the gap between perceived and expected services, which subsequently influences their satisfaction (Rane et al., 2023).

Service provider communication plays a crucial role in shaping customer expectations. The failure to fulfil promises has a significant impact on satisfaction and negatively affects the perception of service quality (Kenesei and Kolos, 2014; Bauer et al., 2016; Xie et al., 2024). Kenesei and Kolos (2014) highlight that service providers sometimes lack sufficient information regarding customer expectations or fail to establish adequate quality standards. Customer priorities can vary based on demographic characteristics and the chosen destination (Slabbert, 2011; Otoo et al., 2016).

The optimal level of quality is achieved when customer needs are met at a reasonable cost (Blecharz, 2015). Identifying and analysing such discrepancies is fundamental to the competitiveness of tourism service providers in the region, as customer satisfaction largely depends on service provider performance (Keller and Kotler, 2016; Zeithaml et al., 2017). Applying the SERVQUAL model offers a structured way to evaluate service quality and better understand what customers expect. The insights gathered from this approach allow service providers to address customer priorities more effectively, helping to close the gap between the service customers perceive and what they expect (Wirtz and Lovelock, 2016; Osman and Sentosa, 2013).

Service quality plays a critical role in the competitiveness of businesses, particularly in tourism, where consumer expectations extend far beyond average service levels, making quality a strategic priority (Abduazizov et al., 2023; Heidrich, 2017). Consumer expectations are influenced by various factors, such as past experiences, word-of-mouth recommendations, and service provider



communication (Keller and Kotler, 2016; Kajzar and Mura, 2023). Kenesei and Kolos (2014) emphasize that communication – whether explicit or implicit – defines expectations, thereby influencing satisfaction. Meeting or exceeding these expectations is crucial for customer satisfaction, while unmet expectations can lead to disappointment (Kenesei and Kolos, 2014; Rane et al., 2023).

Tourist satisfaction is closely linked to the discrepancy between expectations and actual experiences, and positive feedback contributes to the sustainability and competitiveness of a region (Maghsoodi et al., 2017; Lőrincz and Sulyok, 2017; Khan et al., 2022). Positive disconfirmation, where service exceeds expectations, enhances satisfaction, while negative disconfirmation diminishes it (Xie, 2022; Li et al., 2020; Wang et al., 2020; Wang and Zhou, 2022). According to Wantara and Prasetyo (2023), effective marketing communication increases tourist satisfaction and their willingness to revisit, a finding also supported by Otto et al. (2020). AlSokkar (2024) points out that fostering expectations and trust is crucial for building satisfaction, while Juliana et al. (2024) emphasize that the multidimensional nature of tourism experiences – sensory, emotional, and social factors – plays a significant role in tourists' intention to return.

Nguyen (2024) finds that reliability, responsiveness, content, accessibility, expectations, and satisfaction are essential factors in consumer decision-making, as these directly influence customer purchasing decisions. Moreover, research by Goo et al. (2022) reveals that new experiences, particularly those driven by novelty-seeking motivations, have a substantial impact on tourist satisfaction, and are not necessarily related to the fulfilment of prior expectations. Tourists seeking novelty often value new and unexpected experiences more than the extent to which their previous expectations are met. Furthermore, Jiang et al. (2022) suggest that certain factors, such as prior travel experiences or concerns related to the destination, strongly influence the relationship between expectations and satisfaction. Tourists who frequently visit a particular location are less likely to perceive travel risks, which may reduce the importance of expectations in determining satisfaction.

The issue of sustainability is increasingly coming to the forefront in rural tourism. Gonda and Rátz (2023) suggest that while tourists are becoming more aware of sustainability issues and consider them important, this is not always reflected in their behaviour in practice. Achieving sustainable development is closely linked to people's environmental awareness and education, which influences their actions and behaviours (Šimková et al., 2024; Matijová et al., 2023; Puciato et al., 2023; Pimonenko, et al., 2021). Commitment to environmental protection and sustainability also plays a significant role in shaping satisfaction, as guests often respond positively to responsible and eco-friendly practices (Khan et al., 2022).

Although age may impact satisfaction, McKercher's (2023) findings indicate that this influence is more related to age and cohort effects rather than fundamental value differences between generations. The travel decisions of Baby Boomers are



largely influenced by hedonistic values and attitudes, while Generations X and Y tend to prefer functional values (Gardiner et al., 2014). Hapsari et al. (2017) argue that the customer service provided by a company and the price charged are highly influential factors in determining customer satisfaction.

The immediate experiences during travel are closely connected to the overall evaluation of the trip, which can be measured based on feelings of satisfaction or dissatisfaction (Zátori, 2018). When customers spend less money, time, and effort relative to the quality of the service received, they perceive the service as high-value (Howat and Assaker, 2013; Hapsari et al., 2016; Yu et al., 2014). Mokhlis (2012) supported the hypothesis that an individual's gender influences perceptions of service quality, and the importance attributed to different service quality dimensions. The study further revealed that tangibles, reliability, and responsiveness are key dimensions of service quality that determine the satisfaction of both male and female customers (Godany and Mura, 2021).

DATA AND METHODS

The study examined the development opportunities for rural tourism in the Danube region, highlighting the critical factors that ensure tourism services meet or exceed visitor expectations. Through a tourism survey and analysis of the perception of sustainability measures and corporate social responsibility (CSR), the research sheds light on the significant impact of these factors on tourist satisfaction.

The research employed a quantitative methodological approach, utilizing questionnaire-based data collection. The online questionnaire was shared via the Google Forms platform to ensure easy accessibility and support sustainability principles by minimizing the use of paper-based materials. The questionnaire was available in both Hungarian and Slovak, thereby allowing for broader access to tourists. During data collection, a snowball sampling technique was used, initially inviting 100 participants to complete the questionnaire, who were then asked to involve three additional acquaintances with relevant experiences in the region. This non-probabilistic sampling approach allowed us to gather a total of 255 valid responses over a month, sufficient for statistical analysis and drawing reliable conclusions. The recruitment process specifically focused on the existing experiences of tourists visiting the Danube region.

The study paid special attention to ensuring diversity among respondents during the sampling process, thus examining a wide spectrum of tourist experiences. Respondents with varying demographic characteristics, such as different age groups and socio-economic backgrounds, were included in the research. Additionally, the previous experiences of respondents were considered to represent the perspectives of both local residents and tourists. Participation was entirely voluntary and



anonymous, in line with the ethical standards applied in social science research, ensuring the authenticity and honesty of the responses received.

In developing the questionnaire, we focused on ensuring both participants' willingness to engage and their capacity to provide meaningful responses. The questionnaire incorporated various question types, including closed-ended, open-ended, and Likert scale questions, allowing for a detailed assessment of opinions on services. For data analysis, a dual approach was applied: Microsoft Excel was used for data organization and graphical representation, while SPSS statistical software was employed for in-depth hypothesis testing and statistical analysis. This complex analytical framework enabled a thorough exploration of relationships between variables and the drawing of well-founded conclusions regarding tourism satisfaction.

The findings of the study allow rural tourism service providers to enhance their competitiveness, promote sustainable practices, and contribute to environmental protection. The research provides valuable guidance for stakeholders to improve service quality and develop evidence-based strategies for sustainable rural tourism.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In recent years, the expectation for sustainability has significantly increased among consumers, particularly in tourism, where tourists consider not only the quality of services provided but also their social and environmental impacts. As sustainable tourism and corporate social responsibility (CSR) play an increasingly central role in tourism competitiveness, it was essential to understand the effects of these two factors on tourist satisfaction. The study initially explored whether the Danube region is perceived as effectively addressing sustainability and if the social and economic initiatives of service providers positively impact consumer satisfaction (H_1). Survey results show that 71.4% of respondents view current sustainability efforts as moderately effective, though they pointed out areas that require improvement. This finding underscores the rising public awareness of environmental issues and the increasing demand for sustainable practices. It also aligns with the sustainable tourism framework, which posits that consumer satisfaction is heavily influenced by their understanding of sustainability efforts (Hall et al., 2015). The respondents' call for enhanced sustainability efforts is consistent with the increasing expectations for environmentally conscious tourism experiences. An even higher proportion, 85.5%, believe that the social and economic initiatives of service providers positively influence their satisfaction. Among those dissatisfied with the social and economic initiatives of service providers – such as charity projects, community support, and environmental measures – 35.1% believe that the region does not place enough emphasis on sustainability, while 45.9% think there is still room for improvement. Conversely,



18.9% are satisfied with the sustainability measures in the region, despite not perceiving the initiatives as significant from a social perspective. Those who positively evaluate the social and economic initiatives also largely believe that the region adequately emphasizes sustainability (77.2%), with 90.7% acknowledging that, although there is room for further improvement, sustainability measures are fundamentally positive. A Chi-Square test was conducted to examine the relationship between the two categorical variables (Table 1). The condition that no more than 20% of the cells should have an expected value of less than 5 (Csallner, 2015) was indeed met, as only 16.7% of the cells had an expected count below 5, fulfilling the requirement ($16.7\% < 20\%$). The Pearson Chi-square test result ($\chi^2 = 18.112$) indicated a significant relationship between the two variables ($p < 0.001$), significantly lower than the conventionally accepted significance level of 1% (0.01). The Cramer's V value (0.267) also confirmed a moderate relationship, thus supporting our hypothesis. The research findings clearly indicate a strong relationship between individuals' views on sustainability and their perception of the social-economic initiatives of service providers. Respondents who positively evaluate CSR are generally more satisfied with the region's sustainability efforts, while less supportive respondents are more likely to demand changes. This trend may result from heightened environmental awareness, evolving social expectations, and a stronger sense of personal responsibility among consumers. Consumers today consider not only the quality of services but also the social and environmental responsibility of companies. Satisfaction largely depends on how authentic visitors perceive CSR efforts, as these reinforce trust in responsible corporate behaviour. When a company genuinely conveys its sustainability initiatives, including environmental efforts and CSR projects, it positively impacts consumer satisfaction by aligning the service provider's actions with the values of its customers. Tourists are placing greater importance on socially and environmentally responsible services, and meeting these expectations leads to increased satisfaction.

Tab. 1 Examining the Relationship Between Satisfaction with Sustainability Measures in the Danube Region and Support for Service Providers' Socio-Economic Initiatives

	Value	df	Asymptotic Significance (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	18,112 ^a	2	<0,001
Likelihood Ratio	15,089	2	<0,001
Linear-by-Linear Association	0,000	1	0,986
Cramer's V	0,267		<0,001

N of Valid Cases 255

a. 0 cells (16,7%) have expected count less than 5.

Source: based on primary data collection, created using SPSS software



Garay and Font (2012) identified that the most common environmental practices adopted by businesses are waste recycling (88%) and energy and water conservation (77%). In addition, a significant number of companies also implement measures for environmental accountability, use alternative energy sources, offer eco-friendly products, and run environmental promotional campaigns aimed at clients. Consumer assessments of these sustainability measures show mixed results: nearly 70% believe customers occasionally appreciate these initiatives, 22% feel consumers respond positively, and only 8% expect a negative response. This indicates that the majority of businesses receive either positive or moderately positive feedback on their sustainability efforts, which motivates them to continue with environmentally friendly and socially responsible actions.

Wekesa (2024) confirms that consumers are placing greater value on companies that genuinely and transparently communicate their CSR activities, which in turn enhances consumer perception. However, when consumers perceive CSR initiatives as merely marketing tools, skepticism and mistrust can arise (Etikan, 2024; Ko et al., 2023). Although consumer awareness is increasing (Bello et al., 2020), many people remain skeptical of companies' environmental claims unless they are backed by real, tangible actions (Torelli et al., 2020). Sumarmi et al. (2021) point to the effectiveness of community-based ecotourism (CBT) models in fostering sustainable tourism. Strategies such as implementing reservation systems, setting visitor limits, and enforcing strict waste management policies have proven successful in protecting the environment. Additionally, the active participation of local communities, coupled with strategic partnerships, has significantly enhanced conservation efforts and boosted the economic well-being of local populations.

The analysis revealed the relationship between consumers' information-seeking habits and their engagement with services that lacking sustainability commitments. During the analysis, two non-metric variables were examined: the first measured the frequency with which consumers sought information about the social and environmental initiatives of service providers, while the second measured consumers' willingness to support companies that do not prioritize sustainability and environmental protection (H_2). Since these variables are non-metric and could not be measured on a continuous scale, Spearman's rank correlation coefficient was employed to analyse the rankings and trends. This method is appropriate for ordinal variables as it is robust against outliers and does not require normally distributed data (Veres et al., 2017). The coefficient was 0.187 (Table 2), indicating a relatively weak yet positive correlation. The p-value was 0.003, which is significant at the 0.01 level, confirming the hypothesis that there is a statistically significant relationship between the two variables. This suggests that consumers who actively seek information about service providers' social and environmental initiatives, demonstrate a greater likelihood of rejecting services that do not exhibit a clear commitment to sustainability. These findings align



with the research of Lin and Huang (2012), which suggests that environmentally conscious consumers tend to engage in more selective decision-making based on the availability of sustainability-related information. Moreover, Testa et al. (2015) highlight the important role of consumer education and awareness in encouraging sustainable consumption. They stress that service providers must improve transparency in their sustainability communications to attract the growing number of eco-conscious consumers. This phenomenon is driven by the role of information-seeking in increasing consumers' environmental awareness and social responsibility. Consumers who actively seek information about companies' sustainability efforts tend to be more critical of businesses that do not meet their expectations. This behaviour reinforces their value system, where sustainability is prioritized, leading them to favour companies that align with these principles. The findings highlight the crucial role of marketing communication and sustainability initiatives in consumer decision-making. Companies that fail to communicate their sustainability efforts transparently risk losing customers, as ethical and environmental factors increasingly shape consumer preferences. Therefore, information-seeking is a key factor influencing consumer choices, particularly when a company's commitment to sustainability is unclear.

Tab. 2 Correlation Between Frequency of Information-Seeking on Service Providers' Social and Environmental Initiatives and Willingness to Use Services Without Sustainability Commitment

		Frequency of Information-Seeking on Providers' Social and Environmental Initiatives	Willingness to Use Services Without Commitment
Spearman's rho	Frequency of Information-Seeking on Providers' Social and Environmental Initiatives	Correlation Coefficient	1,000
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.
		N	255
	Willingness to Use Services Without Commitment	Correlation Coefficient	0,187**
		Sig. (2-tailed)	0,003
		N	255

** . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Source: based on primary data collection, created using SPSS software

Our findings indicate that consumers actively seek information about companies' social and environmental impacts. The significant correlation coefficient suggests that whilst sustainability considerations are not paramount



for all consumers, they increasingly influence the decision-making processes that determine service utilisation. Testa et al. (2015) posit that a lack of information can hinder environmentally friendly behaviour. Kemp et al. (2012) highlighted that information can elicit strong emotions, which immediately affect consumers. Lin and Huang (2012) established that environmental concerns influence consumption values and choice decisions.

For our next hypothesis (H_3), a comparative analysis was conducted between the dimensions of service quality and the expectations set for services. The results were analysed using the Wilcoxon signed-rank test (Table 3), which allows for the statistical examination of ranked differences between paired samples. The application of the Wilcoxon test was justified given the non-parametric nature of the data, which is typical for responses measured on a Likert scale (Saha – Paul, 2023). The results indicated significant discrepancies between the perceived service quality attributes and their importance ratings. For example, there was a particularly large difference between perception and expectation in the “Safe and Clean Environment” dimension ($Z = -7.935$, $p < 0.001$). Similarly, significant differences were also found in “Responsiveness” and “Reliable and Timely Service Delivery.” In the “Understanding Individual Needs” dimension, significant differences were observed as well, although these were less pronounced compared to other dimensions. The analysis at a 99% significance level ensured a high degree of reliability for the results, minimising the risk of false positive conclusions (Field, 2017). Our findings support the alternative hypothesis that there are substantial differences between the perceived quality of services and their importance expectations. This discrepancy can be attributed to several factors. One primary reason is the differing priorities between service providers and consumers. While providers focus on efficiency and cost optimization, consumers often prioritize experience-driven aspects like safety and cleanliness. Communication challenges also contribute to this gap, as consumer dissatisfaction frequently arises from inadequate information about the efforts of service providers or unclear communication of expectations. The RURALQUAL model, which is employed in studies of rural tourism, highlights the significant correlation between service quality and consumer satisfaction, emphasizing that communication failures can harm trust and loyalty (Marković & Kljaić Šebrek, 2020). Additionally, technological advancements can widen the gap between expectations and services, as consumers quickly adopt new trends that service providers may struggle to meet. The RURALQUAL model also found that safety, customer relations, and integration with the rural environment are key dimensions of service quality (Marković & Kljaić Šebrek, 2020). However, service providers often focus more on technical elements, while neglecting “soft” aspects like communication and responsiveness, which are equally important for enhancing the consumer experience. Service quality in the tourism sector can also be analysed through the Gap Model, which identifies



specific discrepancies between expected and actual services (Bauer et al., 2016; Wirtz & Lovelock, 2016). One such gap is the knowledge gap, where providers fail to fully understand consumer needs due to insufficient research or managerial involvement. Another is the standards gap, which occurs when clear service performance benchmarks are not established, and the performance gap, where employees lack adequate training to meet these benchmarks. Additionally, the communication gap arises when marketing promises exceed the service's actual capabilities, and the perception gap reflects the disconnect between the service delivered and how customers perceive it. To bridge these gaps, tourism providers need to gain a better understanding of customer expectations and communicate more effectively about the steps they are taking to improve service quality.

Tab. 3 Examination of the Disparity Between Perceived Service Quality and Its Importance Expectations Using the Wilcoxon Signed-Rank Test

	Perception and Importance Rating of Safe and Clean Environment	Perception and Importance Rating of Responsiveness	Perception and Importance Rating of Courteous and Helpful Staff	Perception and Importance Rating of Service Provider Accessibility and Availability	Perception and Importance Rating of Reliable and Timely Service Delivery	Perception and Importance Rating of Understanding Individual Needs.
Z	-7,935 ^b	-5,371 ^b	-7,607 ^b	-5,970 ^b	-7,309 ^b	-4,301 ^b
Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)	0,001	0,001	0,001	0,001	0,001	0,001

a. Wilcoxon Signed Ranks Test

b. Based on positive ranks

Source: based on primary data collection, created using SPSS software

The findings reveal significant discrepancies between the service quality that suppliers provided by and the level expected by tourists. Service providers may not fully recognise or adequately meet their clients' priorities (Bauer et al., 2016; Keller & Kotter, 2016; Kenesei & Cserdi, 2018; Wirtz & Lovelock, 2016). This disparity poses a considerable challenge for the industry. According to Jocić et al. (2024), tourism functions as an 'experience factory' where each element of the value chain must be of high quality to ensure exceptionally positive tourist experiences. Grazhdani and Merollari (2015) demonstrated that demographic factors influence customer expectations, suggesting that segmentation can effectively enhance satisfaction. Ladhari (2020) concluded that reliability and responsiveness are fundamental factors that significantly impact customer loyalty. Brady and Cronin (2001) found



that while perceptions of service quality may vary across industries, reliability remains consistently important across all sectors. Customers view service quality as a general expectation rather than an added value for which they would pay extra.

Numerous studies indicate that appropriate pricing is crucial for customer satisfaction, as fair pricing contributes to contentment (Cardia et al., 2019; Cai et al., 2021; Zhao et al., 2021; Safitri et al., 2023; Prasilowati et al., 2021). Excessively high prices not aligned with the value provided, or a lack of discounts, may diminish customer satisfaction. However, low prices do not automatically guarantee increased satisfaction if the quality of service is unsatisfactory (Subaebasni et al., 2019).

A comprehensive literature review and the results of preliminary research have demonstrated that consumer satisfaction is a complex, multidimensional phenomenon influenced by numerous factors. The purpose of the present regression analysis (Table 4) was to identify the determinants of customer satisfaction related to services in the Danube region (H_4). The analysis revealed that factors influencing expectations, including the service provider's image, ratings, reviews, recommendations, previous experiences, and advertisements, have a significantly positive effect on customer satisfaction ($B = 0.291$, $p < 0.001$). This result suggests that customer expectations play a crucial role in shaping satisfaction, as they directly influence perceptions of the service. Expectations determine how the quality of services is assessed, and the level of customer satisfaction largely depends on how well the service meets these expectations. General satisfaction with facilities ($B = 0.508$, $p < 0.001$) also showed a significant and positive effect, indicating that the quality of facilities directly contributes to the consumer experience. The tangible experiences provided by the facilities enhance satisfaction, as high-quality infrastructure and environment positively influence perceptions of the service. In contrast, the price-value ratio did not show a significant relationship with customer satisfaction ($B = -0.023$, $p = 0.504$), suggesting that in this region, consumers do not primarily evaluate services based on price. This may be explained by the unique characteristics of the tourism in the Danube region, where experience and service quality are of primary importance to customers, who are less price-sensitive. This is particularly true in areas where cultural and historical attractions enhance the travel experience, and thus satisfaction is more influenced by the quality of the experience than by the price-value ratio. The analysis of gender differences did not reveal a significant impact on customer satisfaction ($B = 0.029$, $p = 0.755$), suggesting that the satisfaction levels of men and women do not statistically differ. This result indicates that service providers are equally capable of meeting the needs of both genders, and therefore, gender is not a determining factor in predicting customer satisfaction. However, significant differences were observed between different age groups, with the satisfaction level of those aged 41-57 being significantly higher compared to the reference



group of 27-40 years ($B = 0.266$, $p = 0.012$). This suggests that this age group, typically with more stable financial circumstances and greater travel experience, has more realistic expectations of services, making them more likely to be satisfied. No significant differences in satisfaction were found for the under-26 and over-58 age groups, suggesting that despite differing needs, the services in the region are able to meet expectations consistently across these age brackets. In summary, the regression analysis identified three key factors that significantly influence customer satisfaction: factors shaping expectations, the quality of facilities, and certain age groups. These results suggest that the formation of customer satisfaction is primarily linked to the quality of service and alignment with expectations, while the price-value ratio and gender do not play a decisive role.

Tab. 4 Impact of Individual Predictors in the Linear Regression Model on Satisfaction with Service Quality

Model	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.	Collinearity Statistics	
	B	Std. Error	Beta			Tolerance	VIF
Factors influencing expectations	0,291	0,055	0,282	5,314	0,001	0,908	1,102
General satisfaction with service provider Facilities	0,508	0,060	0,447	8,421	0,001	0,904	1,106
Perception of price-value ratio	-0,023	0,035	-0,035	-0,670	0,504	0,946	1,058
Male	0,029	0,094	0,016	0,313	0,755	0,926	1,080
Under 26 years old	0,191	0,107	0,109	1,793	0,074	0,688	1,453
Aged 41 – 57	0,266	0,105	0,153	2,527	0,012	0,694	1,440
Over 58 years old	0,242	0,134	0,101	1,805	0,072	0,813	1,230

a. Dependent Variable: Level of satisfaction with the quality of service provided in the region

Source: based on primary data collection, created using SPSS software

In the final section of our survey, we asked respondents if they had experienced any unique services or activities in the region that made their stay memorable. Our analysis focused on two main factors: the residency status of respondents (locals vs. visitors) and whether they encountered any exceptional experiences. Interestingly, a much higher percentage of non-locals (86.49%) felt that the region lacked unique experiences compared to locals (76.24%). On the other hand, more locals (23.76%)



reported finding distinctive aspects of the region, while only 13.51% of visitors had the same experience. This difference could be explained by the fact that locals are more exposed to special events and opportunities, whereas visitors, due to their shorter stays, may miss out on these experiences. Alternatively, it's possible that locals, having grown accustomed to the region, may find its unique aspects less remarkable.

The findings indicate that the region may require considerable enhancements to increase its distinctiveness. Among the memorable experiences mentioned, hospitality stood out. Respondents highlighted the high-quality dining options, praising not only the food but also the attention to food allergies and the personalized service provided. Many valued the extra effort establishments put into catering to dietary restrictions with professionalism and care. Culturally, a range of artistic and historical activities—such as festivals, concerts, and guided tours—were also well-received. Additionally, small gestures, like unexpected gifts or personalized amenities at hotels, made stays even more memorable. Families especially appreciated the availability of child-friendly environments. When asked about areas for improvement, 39.22% of respondents placed the highest priority on creating new and attractive tourism events. Service quality was another significant concern, emphasized by 29.80% of participants. Other suggestions included enhancing and streamlining the region's information system (12.16%), promoting environmental sustainability initiatives (8.63%), and increasing staff training to elevate service standards (7.45%).

Open-ended feedback provided additional insights. Respondents expressed a desire for better recreational facilities, like more refreshment spots along bike paths, including cafés, ice cream stands, and food stalls. Many criticized the lack of customer-focused services, citing issues such as unhelpful staff and impersonal communication, especially in restaurants. There were also concerns about professionalism, with participants calling for clearer and more courteous communication from service providers. Environmental education was another priority, with respondents stressing the importance of teaching ecological awareness to children to help foster a stronger connection with the region and encourage them to stay. Lastly, improving economic conditions and raising wages were highlighted as ways to reduce emigration, which could, in turn, boost school enrollments and support regional sustainability.

Like many research endeavours, this study on rural tourism in the Danube region, whilst providing valuable insights, is subject to certain limitations. These constraints, however, offer opportunities for future research and refinement of methodologies. The non-probabilistic snowball sampling technique, although yielding 255 valid responses, may limit generalisability of the findings. Additionally, the study's focus on a single region and the questionnaire's availability only in Hungarian and Slovak potentially restrict its applicability and demographic reach.



The use of online questionnaires via Google Forms, chosen for sustainability reasons, might have inadvertently excluded certain groups, such as those with limited internet access. To address these limitations, future studies could enhance the robustness of conclusions by incorporating probabilistic sampling methods and expanding the geographical scope to facilitate comparative analyses across regions. Including additional languages and integrating qualitative methods, such as interviews or focus groups, would provide deeper, more nuanced insights by capturing the perspectives of diverse stakeholders. Additionally, future research should conduct subgroup analyses and examine interaction effects to deeply understand how variables such as demographics, cultural background, and travel motivations influence consumer satisfaction in rural tourism. Furthermore, a deeper exploration of the link between CSR and service quality is needed to provide a more thorough understanding of their combined impact on consumer perceptions.

CONCLUSIONS

The research highlights the significant impact of social and environmental responsibility initiatives on tourists' perceptions, validating theoretical models of corporate social responsibility (CSR) and sustainable tourism (Ásványi, 2022; Hall et al., 2015; Mahmud, 2024; Bello et al., 2020). Our findings contribute to the growing literature by demonstrating that businesses adopting sustainability principles not only meet consumer expectations but also enhance overall satisfaction. The strategic importance of CSR and sustainability is evident, as tourists' express satisfaction while consistently seeking improvements in these areas. However, the literature reveals that the relationship between CSR initiatives and customer satisfaction is not always positive. Several studies have found that the influence of CSR on customer perceptions is contingent on factors such as consumer awareness, the perceived authenticity of CSR efforts, and the alignment between CSR activities and the core business operations of the company (Kim & Lee, 2019; Ko et al., 2023). For instance, Kim and Lee (2019) found that when a company's CSR initiatives closely align with its main business activities – a concept known as high CSR fit – consumers perceive these efforts as more authentic, which positively influences their attitude toward the brand. However, they also discovered that consumers who are highly engaged in CSR are less influenced by CSR fit when assessing authenticity. For these consumers, the genuineness of CSR efforts does not heavily depend on how closely the CSR activities are related to the company's core business. CSR initiatives can influence customer satisfaction in both positive and negative ways, depending on the type of activities and how they are communicated (Du et al., 2010; Rivera et al. 2016; Kim & Lee, 2019; Garay & Font, 2012; Hapsari et al., 2017). Therefore, developing a unified sustainability criterion and certification system for tourism service providers is warranted. Such a system



should evaluate not only the quality of services but also their environmental and social impacts, enabling consumers to make more informed decisions and fostering greater trust in businesses demonstrating a clear commitment. However, the findings in the literature regarding the impact of CSR on customer satisfaction indicate that merely implementing CSR initiatives is not sufficient. The study indicates that sustainability and social responsibility require a comprehensive approach, as consumers perceive these concepts as closely interconnected.

The results support the alternative hypothesis that a significant positive relationship exists between the frequency of consumers' information-seeking and their willingness to reject services lacking a commitment to sustainability. This finding suggests that informed consumers are more inclined to choose service providers who adhere to sustainable practices, indirectly encouraging companies to adopt and develop these initiatives. This is particularly important given the significant discrepancies identified by the Wilcoxon signed-rank test between the perception of service quality attributes and their importance ratings. Such discrepancies indicate that service providers may not always fully meet customer expectations, underscoring the need to explore development opportunities and establish customer-centric solutions. To bridge the gaps between service quality and customer expectations, it is advisable to implement comprehensive quality improvement programs that incorporate sustainability and CSR at their core. These programs should include efficient consumer feedback mechanisms, enabling providers to respond promptly to customer input and adapt swiftly to evolving needs. Integrating complaint-handling processes into broader service development strategies can provide significant benefits, particularly in managing expectations and continuously enhancing service quality. By aligning sustainable efforts with service quality strategies, providers can better meet consumer expectations, which increasingly emphasize high-quality experiences underpinned by ethical and sustainable practices.

Our findings challenge conventional assumptions about the importance of price in customer satisfaction. In the Danube region, for instance, service quality and experiential value are consistently prioritized over price. However, findings from other regions indicate that price sensitivity can vary depending on demographic and cultural factors (Fu et al., 2020; Subaebasni et al., 2019; Ronnie & Philip, 2021; Matlovič & Matlovičová, 2024). Additionally, the lack of significant differences in satisfaction levels between genders implies that service providers are effectively meeting the needs of both male and female tourists equally. Based on the research, it is recommended to develop age-specific marketing and service strategies. Addressing the differing preferences of younger generations is also essential to cater to a broader customer base. Studies have shown that generational differences can significantly impact travel behaviour and expectations, necessitating tailored approaches (Gardiner et al., 2014; McKercher, 2023).



This study highlights a critical need for the region to develop its unique offerings to better attract tourists, as 86.49% of non-residents did not perceive any distinctive experiences during their stay. This lack of engagement with the region's unique characteristics emphasizes the importance of targeted strategies to enhance its identity and promote its distinctive features. Respondents identified memorable experiences, particularly in the areas of gastronomy and personalised service. Exceptional culinary offerings, along with attentive service that accommodates dietary preferences, were highly valued. Establishments providing professional, personalised services significantly enhanced visitor satisfaction. Creating family-friendly environments has also been a key factor in increasing visitor satisfaction, particularly for those with children. The study suggests that the region should focus on developing new and engaging tourism events, such as cultural festivals, food fairs, and historical re-enactments, which highlight local traditions and appeal to both residents and visitors. Collaborating with local artists and institutions to expand cultural programming can attract a broader audience and deepen cultural engagement. Additionally, cultural programmes like festivals, theatre performances, concerts, and guided historical tours fostered a deeper connection with the region's heritage.

Adding value to accommodation services, through personalised amenities like welcome, also leaves a lasting positive impression. A focus on family-friendly services further enhances guest satisfaction. Improving service quality is another priority, and this can be achieved through comprehensive staff training. Focusing on customer service, communication, and cultural sensitivity will enable staff to meet visitor expectations more effectively. Optimising information systems is crucial for enhancing accessibility. Developing a centralised website and mobile application with updated event and service information, alongside leveraging social media for outreach, can significantly increase visitor engagement.

Achieving these objectives will require collaboration among local authorities, businesses, and the community. By focusing on personalised hospitality, rich cultural experiences, and sustainability, the region can meet current tourism demands while securing long-term success and enhancing its reputation as a desirable destination.

Table 5 presents the results of the hypothesis testing, confirming the acceptance of all alternative hypotheses.



Tab 5. Summary of hypothesis testing results

		Test applied	Outcome	Decision
H ₁	Positive evaluations of CSR initiatives correlate with higher satisfaction with the region's sustainability efforts.	Pearson Chi-square test	$p < 0.001$	The alternative hypothesis is accepted at the 1% significance level.
H ₂	Information-seeking about social and environmental initiatives is significantly related to the willingness to use unsustainable services.	Spearman's rank correlation	$p < 0.003$	The alternative hypothesis is accepted at the 1% significance level.
H ₃	Significant differences exist between perceived service quality and tourists' expectations.	Wilcoxon signed-rank test	$p < 0.001$	The alternative hypothesis is accepted at the 1% significance level.
H ₄	At least one independent variable significantly impacts satisfaction with services in the Danube region.	Linear Regression Model	The significance of individual variables is presented in Table 4.	Due to the identification of multiple variables, the alternative hypothesis has been accepted

Source: based on primary data collection

While this study offers valuable insights, it is important to acknowledge its limitations. The use of a non-probabilistic sampling method and the focus on a single region may affect the generalisability of the findings. Future research should address these limitations to enhance the robustness of the conclusions and provide a more comprehensive understanding of consumer satisfaction in rural tourism.

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