

## Article

# Exploring the Motivations, Abilities and Opportunities of Young Entrepreneurs to Engage in Sustainable Tourism Business in the Mountain Area

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**Abstract:** An important driver of socio-economic development in mountain areas is sustainable tourism. Young entrepreneurs can represent a solution for the sustainable development of the mountain area. However, little is known if an opportunity or necessity drives them to engage in sustainable tourism business in the mountain area. The present study uses the motivation–ability–opportunity (MAO) framework in an effort to understand young entrepreneurs’ sustainable behavior. Semi-structured interviews with young tourism entrepreneurs in the Romanian Carpathian Mountains (n = 21) showcase why young business owners are motivated to engage in sustainable behaviors, how they make the sustainable outcome happen, and what is entrepreneurs’ perception on the opportunities that allow them to do sustainable business. This paper brings new perspectives presenting the perception of young entrepreneurs regarding the opportunities provided by natural resources in the mountain area for the sustainable development of the tourism business. The results reveal that intrinsic motivation is dominant, sustainable business development being considered an extension of personal lifestyle by most of the study participants. All respondents stated that they have knowledge about alternative energy sources, and they want to use them as much as possible in their business. Most respondents have the managerial capability to integrate the specifics of the area in the offers and to use the natural resources and infrastructure to business advantage. The use of technologies that help save resources is considered an opportunity to build a sustainable business by all study respondents, followed by facilities offered by the local community. The findings may be used by governments and other stakeholders to make key decisions that stimulate sustainable forms of entrepreneurship in the mountain area.

**Keywords:** sustainable entrepreneurship; young entrepreneurs; sustainable mountain tourism; motivation; ability; opportunity



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## 1. Introduction

In 2021, the United Nations General Assembly declared 2022 as the Year of Sustainable Mountain Development. Due to the fragility of the natural environment in the mountain area, conducting business in a greener and more sustainable way become an important goal for all hospitality sector stakeholders. As mentioned by Gast et al. [1] “Truly entrepreneurial enterprises would focus on the discovery of opportunities and proactive strategies guided by the management’s commitment to and orientation towards ecological sustainability and less on reactive measures caused by pressures from external stakeholders” (p. 47). In the authors’ beliefs, seeking the opportunity, not the necessity, should be the reason for acting sustainably.

The interest of the young generation regarding the mountain area was analyzed by Euromontana, the European association of mountain areas, in 2012 and 2022 [2,3]. The surveys cover Italy, France, Norway, Poland, Romania, and Spain. The two studies revealed that young people want to stay in the mountains because they enjoy both the quality of

life and the natural environment. Young generation respondents also mentioned that they want to be entrepreneurs and act against climate change. In Romania, the mountain area is particularly attractive to young people, as mentioned in the Euromontana 2022 survey.

The argument as to why Romania's young people want to live in the mountains is the same as the ones observed at a European scale: for the quality of life and a life close to nature. Most Romanian respondents [2] want to create their own business in the mountains (44.7% of responses). They treasure the natural areas and want them to be better preserved in the future, but they also want to conserve and promote their traditions. The cultural mountain heritage is as important as the natural one for young people in Romania [2]. Young Romanian respondents describe a model of sustainable development of the mountains through rural tourism and agritourism, outdoor activities, local gastronomy, tourism oriented towards nature, and place reliance on small local businesses. In this context, the tourism sector is key for the sustainable development of the mountains because, if well administrated, "the sector can generate quality jobs for durable growth, reduce poverty and offer incentives for environmental conservation" [4] (p. 8). Considering this framework, it is welcome to study and understand young people's sustainable entrepreneurship behavior in the mountain area.

In the last three decades, scholarly interest in young entrepreneurs has been growing [2,5–10]. This phenomenon is attributed to the need for academics, governments, and practitioners to support a business-friendly environment for young people. Many young people consider entrepreneurship a necessity rather than an opportunity [11]. The youth's entrepreneurial abilities are distinct from those of their elders [12], and they need more support. The study of Ceptureanu and Ceptureanu [13] highlights the lack of diversity of practical support relating to creating a sustainable business that can enlarge in the future. Other research also discusses sustainable youth entrepreneurship [14,15]. For example, Soomro et al. [16] propose a model for sustainable entrepreneurship among young aspirants, while the Dzemyda and Raudeliūnienė study [14] notes that the sustainable youth business model includes traditional business model components (resources, structure, capital, technology, information and communication, and manufacturing and other processes) but also specific components like funds, programs, and other sources of aid that provide young people with a broad range of support (training, consulting financial, etc.). The authors point out the importance of developing a culture of entrepreneurship suitable for both young people and society in general. The Bosco et al. study [12] addresses a link between sustainable development and the benefits of youth as they have a role in a country's progress and prosperity.

Despite the welcome growth in academic investigations on young sustainable entrepreneurs, some knowledge gaps remain. Firstly, sectoral coverage of research on young entrepreneurship is restricted. For example, Dzemyda and Raudeliūnienė [14] study the sustainable youth entrepreneurship in conditions of global economy concerning energy security, while Kan et al. [16] evaluate the young farmers project support program in terms of agri-entrepreneurship in Turkey. Secondly, most current studies on young entrepreneurship are focused on developing students' entrepreneurial skills and/or knowledge [17–20]. There is a lack of studies which address the issue of young entrepreneurs active in business. Furthermore, authors like Ratten [21], Israr and Saleem [22], and Barba-Sanchez and Atienza-Sahuquill [23] channeled their research to developed rather than developing countries. Therefore, there is a strong need to understand sustainable entrepreneurship in developing economies [24], especially in remote areas such as the mountains. There is a lack of studies on sustainable tourism entrepreneurship in mountain areas among young people. Narzullayeva & Mukhtarov [25] mention need to support young entrepreneurs' initiatives to develop new types of tourism and encourage local youth who have tourism potentiality but do not exploit it to start tourism activities in remote areas. Moreover, young tourism entrepreneurship studies are lacking an explicit theoretical framework. Finally, an important research gap is the incomplete understanding of young tourism entrepreneurs'

motivations, abilities, and opportunities to act sustainably. This study aims to contribute to the elimination of these identified gaps.

It is well established that the business sector's behavior is particularly important when it comes to making a destination sustainable [26–28]. The connection of entrepreneurship and sustainable development is a matter of great concern presently [29–31]. As Hall et al. [32] mentioned in their research, the dominant question in the field of sustainable development is: Under what conditions do we anticipate seeing entrepreneurs pursue sustainable ventures? Sustainable entrepreneurship is involved with advantage-seeking and opportunity-seeking behaviors resulting in value for individuals, organizations, and/or society [1]. Even though opportunity and necessity entrepreneurship have totally different motivations, Hechavarria and Reynolds [33] considered that both opportunity-motivated and necessity-motivated entrepreneurs were equally likely to attain a good outcome.

Empowering the educated youth to undertake sustainable entrepreneurship business is auspicious [12–14]. Entrepreneurship behavior should boost competitiveness in the industry, thus leading to increased productivity and economic development in the mountain areas, induce positive environmental and social outcomes, and promote the development of local economies. An entrepreneurial philosophy ultimately reduces unemployment rate, particularly among educated youth.

The purpose of this study was to identify the motivations, abilities, and opportunities that encourage the young entrepreneurs in Romania's mountain areas to adopt sustainability practices for the development of their tourism business. This research uses the motivation–ability–opportunity (MAO) framework to reach a better understanding of young entrepreneurs' behavior as they pursue an opportunity or necessity path of doing a sustainable tourism business. This framework contributes to the identification of the main motivations that determine a young tourism entrepreneur to adopt a sustainable business behavior, establish abilities that allow young tourism entrepreneurs to adopt a sustainability friendly behavior, and analyze young tourism entrepreneurs' perception of the opportunities that allow them to do sustainable business.

The structure of the paper is as follows. First, some notions related to sustainable mountain tourism, sustainable entrepreneurship, and of young entrepreneurs' particularities are presented. A subchapter is dedicated to the theoretical underpinning of the MAO framework with details of the three components: motivation, ability, and opportunity. Next, the study methods, including the research design, responses, and data analysis, are explained and the results, including the sample characteristics and motivations–abilities–opportunities of young tourism entrepreneurs in mountain areas to act sustainably, are presented. The paper ends with some conclusions, limitations, and future recommendations.

## 2. Review of the Scientific Literature

### 2.1. Sustainable Mountain Tourism

Sustainable tourism may be an answer to maintaining a balance in the exploitation of the mountain area. Sustainable tourism is an integral part of sustainable development. It must be seen as a reasonable step in preventing the excessive and unrestrained use of tourism attractions and resources.

Mountain zones have long been attractive tourism destinations, their unique ecosystems that fundamentally provide the resources for tourism development. Mountain areas propose an impressive range of possibilities for tourists, offering a place to recharge, renew, and re-awaken with nature potential. As demand grows for less crowded destinations, and the need to reconnect with open spaces and nature increases, due to the recent COVID-19 pandemic, new opportunities for the development of mountain areas are appearing [34]. To guarantee tourism's long-term growth and viability, tourism development must concur with preserving and protecting these resources. Investments in tourism-related facilities can valorize these resources, by creating jobs and additional income for the residents of mountain regions. According to the World Tourism Organization report about Sustain-

able Mountain Tourism—Opportunities for Local Communities [35], tourism is often the only way to create wealth in mountain areas. Still, tourism sustainability depends on the preservation of its environmental resources.

The UN Conference on Environment and Development in Rio has recognized mountains as vulnerable ecosystems of global importance since 1992 [36]. In 2012, the importance of mountains was reaffirmed at the UN Rio+20 conference [37]. The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development is also dedicated to the protection of mountainous regions. Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 15 of the 2030 Agenda presents the need to “protect, restore and promote sustainable use of terrestrial ecosystems, sustainably manage forests, combat desertification, and halt and reverse land degradation and halt biodiversity loss” [38] (p. 27). Target n.1 of SDG 15 clearly acknowledges mountains among the ecosystems to be conserved, rebuilt, and sustainably used aligned with international agreements. Tourism is among the activities that can be carried out sustainably in the mountain area. Tourism is both desired and required by developed and by many developing nations to facilitate development and to achieve sustainable economic growth [39].

As mentioned by Epuran et al. [40], the sustainable character of tourism involves many aspects: taking into account the environmental impact of activities (waste generation, pressure on water, land, and biodiversity, etc.), the responsible use of natural resources, the use of green energy, heritage protection and preservation of the natural and cultural integrity of destinations, quality and sustainability of jobs, the positive impact on the local economy, and the tourist reception quality. All forms of tourism in all types of destinations, including mass tourism and the various niche tourism segments, can apply the sustainable tourism development guidelines and management practices defined by United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) and United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) [41] (p. 11–12).

## 2.2. Sustainable Entrepreneurship

The topic of sustainable development is increasingly on the minds of business leaders around the world. This concept integrates economic success, environmental quality, and social responsibility. However, it has been long pushed low on the priority list for many organizations. At present, embracing sustainability is quickly becoming more than an operational choice. It is a strategic imperative. Organizations must not only meet the needs of society and the environment, but also create a sustainable competitive advantage [42]. Sustainability may offer potential value for an organization’s competitive future when incorporated into strategic planning.

Currently, the face of sustainability is changing. All types of entrepreneurial activities are considered as a cause of environmental degradation. That is why entrepreneurs must play a part in managing sustainability concerns [43–47].

Sustainable entrepreneurship is a new discipline which accumulates the effort of linking entrepreneurship to sustainability management [48,49]. Sustainable entrepreneurship has been widely acknowledged as the answer to the environmental [48,50,51] and social challenges [52] that we as society are facing in this century. “Without sustainable organizations there is no sustainable development, thus, no future.” [53] (p. 289).

Reynolds et al. [54] distinguishes between opportunity and necessity entrepreneurship. Necessity entrepreneurs pursue to make a living by starting their own venture while opportunity entrepreneurs commence a business to follow an entrepreneurial prospect [54]. Discussing ecological sustainable entrepreneurship, Kirkwood and Walton [55] identify a need with opportunity entrepreneurs for a green product and/or service that is currently unsatisfied in the market. Such an endeavor is considered by Schlange [56] an opportunity to “create value in the ecological sphere” (p. 17), and its identification may rely upon the entrepreneur’s knowledge of communal and natural environments [57].

Van den Brink’s [58] thesis presents the individual competencies that the sustainable entrepreneur needs to fully commit to his/her changing role and face the changing challenges that he/she experiences in the various stages of the entrepreneurial process.

Based on an extensive literature review, van den Brink reviewed the implementation of the competence framework for sustainable entrepreneurship over the entrepreneurial process. According to his research, there are six competences a sustainable entrepreneur needs:

- systems-thinking competence (understand the complexity and uncertainty of sustainability challenges),
- diversity competence (close collaboration with stakeholders),
- foresighted thinking competence (they see the future as open and try to build it based on their vision for society),
- normative competence (achieve sustainable development objectives, improving the natural and/or communal environment),
- interpersonal competence (engage others to work on the sustainability goals of the sustainable business; this includes engaging partners and stakeholders along with potential customers),
- strategic action competence (create a business case for sustainability which focus on increasing the value of a business by addressing environmental and social dimensions).

In the context of this research, it is valuable to understand that tourism entrepreneurship is characterized by distinguishing features which stem from the different conditions specific to the tourism entrepreneurial environment [59]. Tourism entrepreneurship is defined by informality, flexibility, and smallness. Thus, small- and medium-size enterprises are the foundation of the tourism industry [60].

The fundamental takeaway is that small firms are not “little big enterprises” that ought to embrace scaled-down variants of the techniques and requirements of bigger enterprises. In fact, it is advisable that they do not engage in sustainability by standard and traditional activities [61,62]. Contrasting with large enterprises, small firms are both motivated and challenged in various ways and engage with sustainability practices differently [62]. Small firms’ owners/managers have good empirical comprehension of sustainability concepts without knowing much theory [63]. Quick reaction to address sustainability issues is their main advantage. The disadvantage is the lack of information on both market requirements and opportunities for change [64].

### 2.3. Young Entrepreneurs

Given the importance of sustainable entrepreneurship, researchers [65,66] have begun to check thoroughly into the phenomenon and revealed an important finding: young adults early in their careers are expected to engage more in sustainable entrepreneurship. Sustainable entrepreneurship is better noted among 18-to-34-year-old individuals, according to the Global Entrepreneurship Monitor (GEM) report [67]. Research also demonstrates that younger adults have probably more sustainable entrepreneurial goals than older adults [66]. Furthermore, sustainable entrepreneurship is preferred by persons with full-secondary and postsecondary education [68,69]. Analyzing data from 29 countries, Vourio [66] concluded that today’s young adults are more entrepreneurial than previous generations and that they also possess more socially and environmentally conscious values.

Even during the best of times, young people (18-to-34 years old) have faced an inconvenient situation on the labor market. Receiving a college degree is no longer a guarantee of future employment [70]. Before the COVID-19 pandemic, young people were around three times more likely to be unemployed than adults (more than 34 years old). Young people are being encouraged to be “job creators” rather than “job seekers”. Because they have narrow possibilities to gain formal sector jobs in the private or public sector, they become self-employed “entrepreneurs” [71]. Entrepreneurship is one of the career alternatives for youths and unemployed graduates [72,73].

Young people at the beginning of their careers are less likely to have entrepreneurial knowledge [74], although they might have a strong entrepreneurial attitude [75]. Entrepreneurial attitude is as entrepreneurial knowledge. In its function of identifying sustainable opportunities, it leads people’s attention to sustainable opportunities [67,76,77].

Younger people are more likely than older people to agree with the consideration “to make a difference in the world” [1]. According to GEM [1], young people have more energy, have less to compromise on established careers and high salaries, and may be closer to new or emerging markets and business-accelerating technologies. They may also be more willing to take risks because they may have less to lose and if the business fails, they may still have a successful and long career ahead of them. Nevertheless, they are likely to have less experience and knowledge and less access to resources, including established networks.

#### 2.4. Motivation–Ability–Opportunity (MAO) Framework in Sustainable Entrepreneurship

The MAO framework is amassed from basic concepts of psychology: Motivation—the impulse towards a behavior; Ability—skills and capabilities required for the performance of a behavior; and Opportunity—situational and contextual coercion significant to the performance of the behavior. Motivation and ability take account of the internal elements that result in the performance of behaviors. Opportunity, however, pertains to external elements. Performance cannot be ensured only by one component [78]. Moreover, the essence of the relationships among the variables counts on the context of the investigation [79].

Empirical studies do not target motivation, ability, and opportunity in isolation, but instead study the influence the three have in combination on potential behavioral outcomes [78–88]. The construction “motivation, ability, and opportunity” has been investigated in a multitude of settings. The MAO framework was adapted for arts audiences by Wiggins [89] and for social marketing by Rothschild [90]. The framework has frequently been used in social research (marketing and consumer behavior) to understand the behavior of adopting innovations and new technologies, information processing and decision-making processes, such as intended use of e-readers [91], intentions to travel [92] purchase intentions [93], likeliness of engagement within local community festivals [94], volunteer participation in social cause communities [95], and adoption of hazard-resistant construction knowledge [96]. However, to the knowledge of the authors, it has not previously been used in the sustainable entrepreneurship context.

##### 2.4.1. Motivation

The ‘M’ component of the MAO framework deals with motivation. Motivation is “an unobservable force that directs, energizes, and sustains behavior” [97] (p. 66). The person’s intention to commit in the behavior seizes the motivational factors and transforms them into a behavioral disposal [98]. Motivation relates to the desire (or degree to which an individual is motivated) to perform [99]. Motivation is also characterized as goal-directed stimulation to engage in desired behaviors [100,101].

Motivation can be intrinsic or extrinsic [86,102–104]. External factors are associated with incentives such as economic rewards, and most of the times lead to focusing on short-term gains, whereas intrinsic factors come forth from an individual’s values and interests. Therefore, in the context of our research theme, it is argued whether the external or intrinsic factors are the most important for young tourism entrepreneurs.

An entrepreneur is self-employed. They are the person who starts, manages, organizes, and assumes responsibility for a business. Many people prefer working for someone else rather than taking on such a challenge. According to Segal et al. [105], entrepreneurs benefit from the potential success of the business, but also consent to the personal financial risks that go with owning a business.

An important theme in the literature has been the type of entrepreneurial motivation in the tourism business. Numerous studies debate two types of entrepreneurial motivation: business-oriented and lifestyle-oriented [106–108]. Business-oriented motivation is the motivation to achieve formal business success or make a living, while the desire to secure a comfortable lifestyle or to enjoy the beauty of nature can be classified as lifestyle-oriented motivation. The personal achievement with business is important to guaranteeing the continuity of the tourism activity, visible in investments, in the intergenerational plans of

some family firms, and in the incorporation into communities by engaging in activities that are advantageous to the local area [109]. Based on this discussion, the present study aims to find out if young tourism entrepreneurs in mountain areas are motivated by formal business success or by personal achievement.

When it comes to the motivation to act sustainably in small tourism businesses, Font et al. [110] present a series of reasons: a personal lifestyle choice; to improve society; to protect the environment; to meet legal requirements; for cost savings; for marketing and image benefits; because it is easy to implement; in response to customer demand; to gain new information, advice, and networks; to obtain subsidies or grants; to improve business management data; to meet the requirements of a tour operator; to meet the requirements of the chain/group. One's level of affinity to sustainability practices influences the acceptance of responsibility to be more sustainable. Beneficiary focus (personal norms that effort one to act to help others or oneself) and a cultural focus (acting in response to collectivistic or individualistic social norms) influence it as well [111]. Hence, the present study aims to identify which of the reasons listed above apply to young entrepreneurs in the mountainous area.

#### 2.4.2. Ability

The individual's ability to perform gives the 'A' component of the framework. The second component of the model is the actor's ability to accomplish their intentions. If a person commands the required abilities to perform, the motivation leads to performance of the behavior [112].

Ability is defined as the physical and psychological capabilities required to produce a result. [101]. Individual abilities strongly predict individual performance [113]. In theory, the ability component is grounded in the economic human capital and the psychology literature [114]. Ability is conceptualized as personal resources the individual has readily available with no additional costs or effort [96].

To accomplish business growth, an entrepreneur requires some specific managerial skills like learning ability, risk-control ability, creativity, relationship ability and the ability to recognize and tap potential opportunities [115]. In Shane's opinion [116], an entrepreneur is an inventor who utilizes the opportunity to attain the benefits of the environment. Based on this discussion, in the context of our research theme, this study aims to find out what managerial skills are considered important by young tourism entrepreneurs in mountain area.

The Ability component is usually defined by the acronym KSA (knowledge, skills, and attitude) [117]. The Council of Europe [118] defines KSAs as follows:

- Knowledge is the "cognitive" dimension. It covers all the issues and topics that people know or need to know to do their jobs. It is usually associated with "the head";
- Skills are the "practical" or applied dimension. This dimension refers to what individuals can accomplish or what they need to be able to accomplish their work. It is frequently associated with "hands".
- Attitudes are the element which applies to the attitudes and values that individuals must adopt to perform their work effectively. It is commonly associated with the "heart". One of the questions tackled by the present research is: how can entrepreneurs uphold strategic sustainability? The know-what and know-how can be an answer to how their KSA can make the sustainable outcome happen [119]. Sustainable development sustains not only alignment, but also the ambition to learn and share knowledge—knowledge of markets, ways to serve markets, and customer problems [116]. Organizational learning is fundamental to sustaining and developing a competitive advantage in today's complex, rapidly changing, global economy [120].

In conclusion, one of the main issues for investigation emerging from the literature is whether the knowledge, skills, and attitudes allow young tourism entrepreneurs to adopt a sustainability friendly behavior.

### 2.4.3. Opportunity

The 'O' component refers to the opportunity to perform. Opportunity is assigned to the external factors lying outside of the individual. They can inhibit or enable a behavior [101]. Olander and Thøgersen [82] prefer to conceive of opportunities as objective preconditions for the behavior. They acknowledge that individuals see different opportunities because they perceive the same conditions subjectively.

Additionally, opportunity is defined as an array of circumstances that makes it possible to do something. An important aspect of creating a successful business is the decision that it is the "right" time to exploit opportunities [121].

Sustainable entrepreneurship is the finding, creation, and exploitation of opportunities to design services and goods that do not harm the natural environment and provide developmental gain for the community. Profit generation for the entrepreneur is combined with the constant search for sustainable opportunities: innovative ways to protect the environment or methods of profit for the society by providing new goods, services or ones that reduce harmful activities. Entrepreneurship as an attitude or type of behavior fits the practices of sustainable business. Consenting responsibility to become more sustainable suggests that opportunities can arise from creating win–win relationships with stakeholders, deriving benefits from improved legitimacy and reputation or reducing costs and/or risks [122]. Entrepreneurship is highly relevant to organizations and individuals concerned about sustainability. These kinds of organizations are always thinking about doing things in better and new ways. Based on this discussion, this present study aims to find out what are young tourism entrepreneurs' perceptions regarding stakeholders support to act sustainably.

Opportunities for sustainable business development are worth pursuing if new approaches can be designed and delivered to bring value to a significant number of market consumers. According to Gittell et al. [123], a key for successful sustainability-oriented entrepreneurs is to make sure that the new way of doing things that they create provides value to their potential customers. The authors believe that sustainable entrepreneurship has as its foundation the basic principles of entrepreneurship to which the approach of ecological and social concerns is added through the creation of new enterprises and innovation in existing enterprises. All the factors that are important to the entrepreneur in a standard business are crucial to a successful sustainable business. Hence, in the context of our research theme, it is important to find out what is young tourism entrepreneurs' perception of the tourism market opportunities that allow them to do sustainable business.

In their article, Patzelt and Shepherd [58] explore the forms of prior motivation and knowledge that attract individuals' attention on the recognition of sustainable development opportunities. In their opinion, sustainable development opportunities maintain the natural environment as well as providing development gain for others. "Development gain for others" stands for environmental gain (e.g., increased quality of drinking water diminished air pollution), economic gain (e.g., consumption, employment, economic wealth), and social gain (e.g., increased life expectancy, child survival, education, equal opportunity) for society (also referred to as the "triple bottom line"; see [124–126]). Along with the previous knowledge of individuals about the natural environment, their motivation to win for others and their motivation for personal gains, the ability to recognize entrepreneurial opportunities for sustainable development also increases.

Analyzing the studies mentioned above and the fragility of the considered environment, it is important to analyze in this article young tourism entrepreneurs' perception regarding natural resources of the mountain area and on enabling technologies that help save those resources in order to accomplish the "triple bottom line".

### 3. Brief Characterization of the Local Context

Based on their unique cultural and natural heritage preserved and maintained on large integral areas, the Carpathian Mountains are one of the best sustainable tourism destinations in Europe and in the world. The Romanian Carpathians occupy a total

surface of 71,340 km<sup>2</sup>, accounting for 29.93% of the total surface of Romania, and comprise 658 territorial administrative units, in which about 2,400,000 inhabitants live—almost 11% of the total population of Romania [127].

The authenticity of resources serves as the premise for successful tourism development in these areas. The existing natural conditions (varied and picturesque landscape, thermal and mineral waters) favorable to outdoor tourism (mountaineering; hiking; cycling; equestrian tourism; winter sports; adventure tourism; active tourism; hunting and sport fishing; cultural tourism; ecotourism; wildlife, plants, and nature observation; etc.) can represent favorable circumstances to increase the income of mountain residents, but also to increase the economic development of regions dependent on large industries in the past [127].

The National Strategy for Sustainable Development—Objectives 2013–2020–2030 identifies the priorities for the implementation of a sustainable development process for Romania. The mountain area is highlighted in this strategy both in the context of improving the environment and the rural space, as well as in terms of the connection to the European norms and standards regarding the quality of life, which must be accompanied by the revitalization of some traditional ways of life, especially in mountainous and humid areas [128]. Furthermore, according to Romania's Sustainable Development Strategy 2030 [129], Romania "has ratified the Protocol on Sustainable Tourism to the Framework Convention on the Protection and Sustainable Development of the Carpathians" (p. 58).

Chapter V of the Mountain Law [130] is dedicated to economic and social development in the mountain area. Mountain tourism, agritourism, and ecotourism, through specific services, are considered non-agricultural activities specific to the mountain area, supported by this law. In this chapter, it is specified that, to increase the economic potential of the mountain area, the Romanian state ensures the financing of projects in the mountain area, with the following goals: to promote ecotourism and agritourism activities, to expand the global tourist offer, and to favor the creation of jobs in these areas. Likewise, the Romanian state supports young entrepreneurs to encourage the diversification of activities, for their stabilization in the communities they come from, through counseling, professional training, financial support.

Young people in Romania have an entrepreneurial spirit. This is the result of the Euromontana study [2]. More than that, they want to create their own business in the mountains according to the same study. The main four reasons why Romanian young people (18–34 years old) who participated in the GEM study [67] want to be entrepreneurs are: to make a difference in the world (76.6%), to earn a living because jobs are scarce (73.3%), to build great wealth or generate very high income (72.4%), to continue a family legacy (25.1%).

#### 4. Research Methodology

Even though the concepts of sustainable entrepreneurship have attracted significant research interest, there are limited studies on the young tourism entrepreneurs in mountain areas. The preference for qualitative research methods for primary data collection and analysis is imposed by the exploratory nature of the current study. As mentioned by Matthews and Ross [131], qualitative research is appropriated for under-examined social phenomena in immature study contexts. Font et al. [111] also present the idea that qualitative studies are required to go deeper into the reasons for acting sustainably, while for Anand et al. [132], qualitative studies can aid to contextualize sustainable entrepreneurship as a specific phenomenon in entrepreneurship. This study has drawn upon the MAO framework to investigate what has prompted sustainable tourism entrepreneurship among young people in the Romanian mountain area, and what motivations, abilities, and opportunities have aided them to succeed in doing sustainable business.

The questions that arise from each of the MAO framework components were associated to one of the three operational objectives of the study (Table 1).

**Table 1.** MAO framework questions and Operational objectives.

MAO Framework Component	Question	Operational Objective
M—Motivation	Why are business owners, especially the ones who are at the beginning of their careers, motivated to engage in sustainable behaviors?	Identifying the main motivations that determine a young tourism entrepreneur to adopt a sustainable business behavior
A—Ability	How do the young tourism entrepreneur’s knowledge, skills, and abilities make the sustainable outcome happen?	Identifying the abilities that allow young tourism entrepreneurs to adopt a sustainability friendly behavior
O—Opportunity	What are the circumstances that make sustainable business actions possible?	Identifying young tourism entrepreneurs’ perception on the opportunities that allow them to do sustainable business

The research population of this study consists of young tourism entrepreneurs, 18-to-35 years old, situated in Romania’s mountain areas. Participants were chosen who can best inform the research questions and enhance understanding of the phenomenon under study [133–135]. The sample (21 respondents) included participants who comprise various sectors of the tourism and hospitality industry, including lodging businesses (e.g., hotels, vacations rentals, guesthouses), food and beverage facilities (e.g., restaurants, cafes), ancillary tourism businesses (e.g., gift shops) and travel agencies [136]. The first respondents were selected from among the members of the Association of Ecotourism in Romania (AER) because they have implemented the principles of sustainable development in the businesses they lead. The number of participants was supplemented by recommendations of the respondents for other entrepreneurs in the field of mountain tourism.

Data were collected through in-depth, semi-structured interviews. This method was chosen for its design flexibility, allowing the researchers to modify the interview schedule in a short time, taking into account the needs of the research. [137].

Interview themes were developed based on the literature review. The first part of the interview was designed to ‘warm up’ the participants, with the aim of outlining business and entrepreneurial profiles. The interview schedule consisted of three sections aiming to organize: the (1) motivations of young tourism entrepreneurs to act sustainably; (2) abilities of young tourism entrepreneurs that make the sustainable outcome happen; (3) opportunities that make it possible to act sustainably at a business level. For the motivations section, the seminal work by Filimonau, et al. [104] was used as a basis supplemented with the findings from Marín-García [86,102], Minbaeva [103], and others [106–110]. The interviews continued with discussions about abilities of young tourism entrepreneurs that make the sustainable outcome happen, considering the knowledge, skills, and attitude dimensions presented by Fu, et al. [117]. Main issues discussed by Stevenson [115] and Shane [116] were also considered. As for the opportunities’ component, the respondents were asked to evaluate their perception of the opportunities that allow them to run a sustainable tourism business. The findings of Gittel [123], Carroll and Shabana [122], and Patzelt and Shepherd [57] were also considered.

The interview schedule was created in Romanian, the native language of the respondents. The pilot study involved three young tourism entrepreneurs in the mountain area. Following the pilot feedback, for clarity of expression, some minor changes were adjusted to the wording of the interview questions.

The interviews were conducted by telephone, by members of the research team, in August–September 2022. Before interviewing, prospective study participants were reassured of complete anonymity. No financial incentives were implied for participation. To prevent the lack of awareness compounded by the uncertainty of the term ‘sustainability’, at the beginning of the discussion, the definition of sustainable development was offered. The purpose was to clarify the expression and the expectation of the study to the respondents.

Saturation is the most important factor to think about when deciding sample size in qualitative research [138,139]. The sample size of the study was determined by perceived saturation, which was attended with 21 interviews. Braun and Clarke [140] consider that saturation is no longer important in qualitative research, while Thomson (2010 cited by Marshall et al. [141]) suggests that it is normally reached with 10 to 30 interviews, which this study confirms. On average, the interviews lasted one hour, and were recorded, transcribed, and translated by the research team members. Table 2 presents some demographic data about the study's participants and some data about the businesses they run.

**Table 2.** Study participants—demographic and business-related data (n = 21).

ID	Type of Tourism Business Enterprise They Run	Age	Highest Education Level	Education Related to Sustainable Business Development	Number of Years on the Market	Number of Employees
Y1	Hotel	33	University degree	yes	8	23
Y2	Travel agency	29	University degree	yes	2	2
Y3	Souvenir shop	27	College degree	no	5	0
Y4	Guesthouse	27	University degree	yes	2	5
Y5	Restaurant	34	University degree	no	9	11
Y6	Guesthouse	28	University degree	no	3	7
Y7	Hotel	32	University degree	no	6	19
Y8	Travel agency	30	University degree	yes	3	3
Y9	Travel agency	33	University degree	yes	5	1
Y10	Cafe	22	College degree	no	1	2
Y11	Cafe	34	University degree	yes	5	2
Y12	Guesthouse	32	University degree	no	4	8
Y13	Vacation rental	34	College degree	no	2	1
Y14	Travel agency	23	University degree	no	1	1
Y15	Cafe	27	University degree	yes	2	3
Y16	Guesthouse	28	University degree	no	2	3
Y17	Vacation rental	30	University degree	no	5	0
Y18	Vacation rental	31	College degree	no	3	0
Y19	Souvenir shop	21	College degree	no	2	0
Y20	Hotel	32	University degree	yes	6	34
Y21	Souvenir shop	26	Vocational training	no	6	1

Y number ID is a codification which comes from the initial of the word “Young” and the number of the interview.

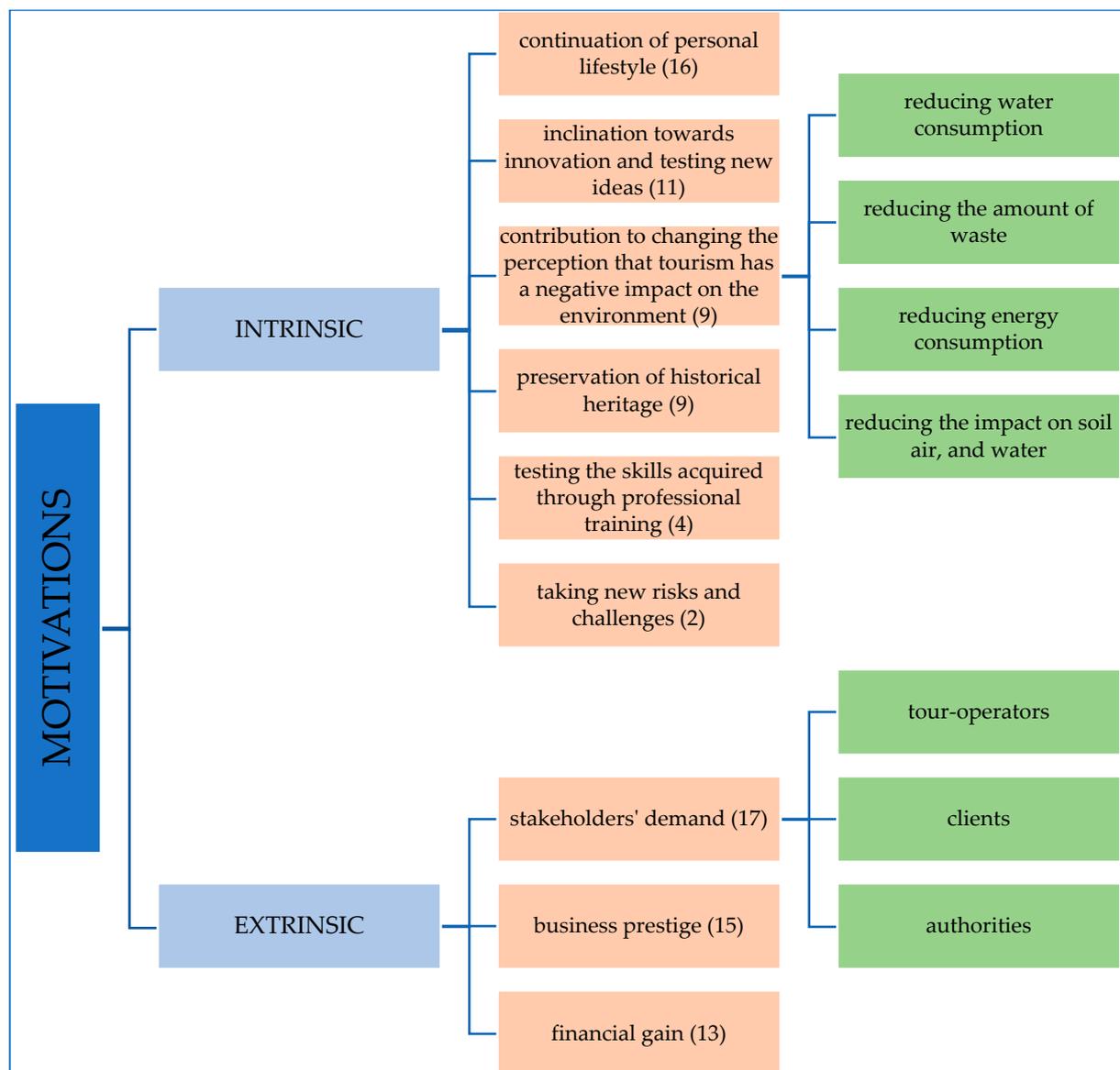
The members of the research team analyzed the interview transcripts thematically. The interviews were recorded and later transcribed verbatim for easier analysis. Interviewees were asked for their consent. To facilitate the transcriptions and coding process, NVivo 12 software was used.

The guidelines presented by Guest et al. [142] were followed when presenting the final data coding structures. Guest et al. [142] suggest concentrating on so-called high-frequency codes in data codification. These are the codes attracting most mentions in interview transcripts. However, the current study includes all codes regardless of their frequency of occurrence. This is to account for any unpopular, but potentially significant, opinions, viewpoints, and perspectives that can be easily overlooked when applying the high-frequency codes suggestions of Guest et al. [142].

## 5. Findings

### 5.1. Motivations Component Findings

The first operational objective was to identify the main motivations that can determine a young tourism entrepreneur to adopt a sustainable business behavior. The motivations discovered can be grouped into two main categories (Figure 1): intrinsic and extrinsic, based on whether they come solely from the personal desires and convictions of the entrepreneurs, or from external influences and incentives.



**Figure 1.** Results of data coding: Motivations of young entrepreneurs in Romania’s mountain areas to adopt sustainability practices for the development of their tourism business. Legend: The blue box presents the theme. The light blue boxes present the sub-themes. The orange boxes present the codes. The green boxes present the sub-codes. The figures in brackets reflect the frequency of occurrence (number of times a specific code was mentioned by the study participants).

The intrinsic motivations that were identified comprise the following: continuation of personal lifestyle, inclination towards innovation and testing new ideas, contribution to changing the perception that tourism has a negative impact on the environment, preservation of historical heritage, testing the skills acquired through professional training, taking new risks and challenges.

Sustainable business development is considered an extension of the personal lifestyle by most of the study participants. This is a consequence of the fact that, most of the time, people who live green/sustainably at home are likely to practice similar habits at work. In the case of the present study, the young entrepreneurs are the ones who build the business and therefore, their personal lifestyle will leave its mark on the business style.

Inclination towards innovation and testing innovative ideas is a reason often mentioned by the respondents. This is partly due to the age of the respondents.

“I read that young people are brave in business. Well, I’m a young entrepreneur and I don’t see why I shouldn’t run my business according to the bravest ideas. The sustainable development of a business is still a delicate subject for many old-school entrepreneurs. We, the young people, should show them that business can be done in a different way.” (Y15)

Some young entrepreneurs admitted that the reason they took steps towards the sustainable development of their business is that they want to contribute to changing the widespread perception that tourism has a negative impact on the environment. “Tourism should bring people into contact with nature, not conflict with nature. We will grow our tourism industry, and ecotourism can help drive this growth” (Y9). One of the respondents mentioned that they carry out campaigns to educate and increase tourists’ level of awareness related to the need to reduce water waste, to decrease energy consumption, and to collect waste selectively during their stay.

“At check-in, our customers receive information about our policy to reduce water waste. For example, they are asked to contact us when they want us to change their towels, otherwise we will change them daily. We also invite them to support us in our attempts to reduce energy consumption and selectively collect waste. Messages reminding them of our concerns can also be found in the hotel room.” (Y6)

The preservation of historical heritage was also brought into discussion. Some respondents attached significant importance to it, and they feel motivated by the need to preserve the historical heritage. One of the participants said, “The restoration works were carried out respecting the old way of construction. We mostly used old construction materials (wooden beams, bricks, tiles), together with stone, all purchased from the local area. For our rooms we used many pieces of Saxon antique furniture that were saved, restored, and now have a new purpose, to be used by our guests” (Y20).

Less than half of the study participants obtained sustainable development-related education. Among them, only four of them considered testing the skills acquired through professional training motivating.

“Yes, I had a course in college about sustainable business development. I liked what I learned, it seemed useful. Ever since I was a student, I decided that one day I would apply what I learned. Now it seems that I can do this in my own business.” (Y20)

One of the participants in the study said:

“I attended a seminar about the development of sustainable tourism and its impact on sustainability and resilience of the region. The information obtained led me to apply the principles of sustainable development in my business.” (Y13)

Only a small number of respondents considered that taking on new risks and challenges is a motivation for acting sustainable. This is also because the sustainable development of a business is considered a normality by study participants. The study participants would often refer to the need to act sustainably “... because I don’t see another option to grow my business in a healthy way” (Y7), or because “it is a risk for the future of the business not to take into account the community in which we live and the environment in which we carry out our activity” (Y16).

The extrinsic motivation was also considered during the discussions. The extrinsic motivations that were identified consist of the following: stakeholders demand, business prestige, and financial gain.

Requirements from the stakeholders are the most important extrinsic motivation for the study participants. These requirements come from:

- tour operators: "One of the travel agencies we work with asked us to be able to provide proof to clients about our concern for sustainable tourism. We want to be included in the offers of this agency and we did everything necessary to obtain the ecotourism certification" (Y12);
- clients: "our clients ask for high-quality experiences that support the conservation of our special natural places and cultural heritage" (Y9);
- authorities: "There is a Mountain Law, a legal framework that we also benefited from. Natural persons and family associations authorized according to the law, which conduct tourism activities in reception structures such as guesthouses and agritourism farms, benefit from the granting by the local councils of some areas from the available land, under the conditions of the law, to build, develop and exploit guesthouses and agritourism households" (Y6).

Some of the respondents feel motivated by the fact that their sustainable activity contributes to the business prestige. "I am delighted that the ecotourism certification obtained from the Association of Ecotourism in Romanian raises the value of our tourism agency at international tourism fairs" (Y8).

Although it is not a main motivation, the financial gain obtained from the development of a sustainable tourist activity was discussed by the interviewed young entrepreneurs. "Our contribution to reducing the water waste and energy consumption also means a reduction in utility bills" (Y13).

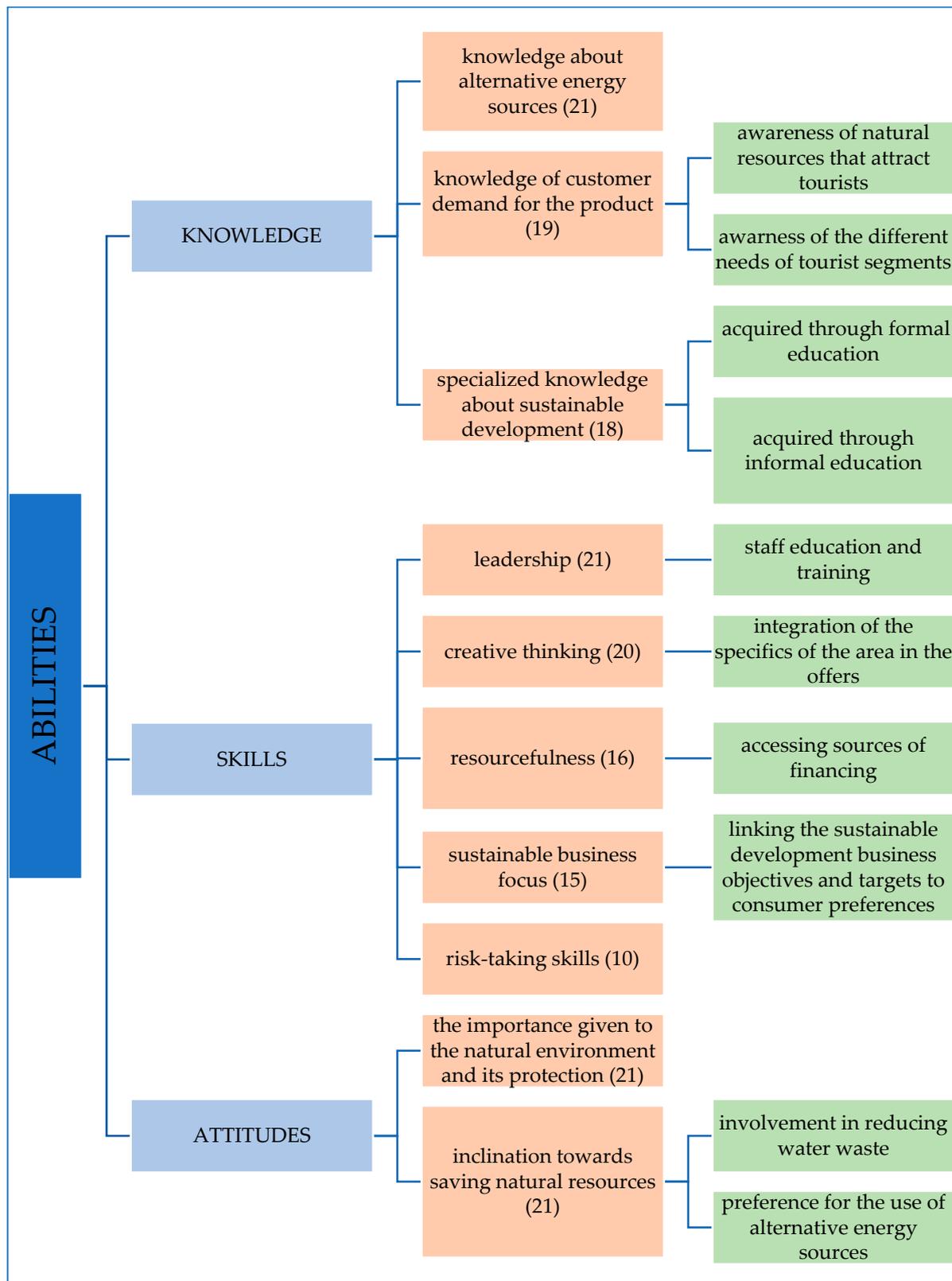
## 5.2. Abilities Component Findings

The second operational objective was to identify the abilities of young tourism entrepreneurs that allow them to adopt a sustainability friendly behavior. Knowledge is the first dimension analyzed in the interviews (Figure 2). Knowledge deals with information acquired by a person through education or experience. It is theoretical, rather than practical.

All respondents stated that they have knowledge about alternative energy sources, and they want to use them as much as possible in their business. "I am constantly looking for information about solutions to use alternative sources of energy", said Y9, owner of a café.

Discussion about the knowledge of customer demand for the product was mostly related to awareness of natural resources that attract tourists and the different needs of tourist segments. Respondent Y2 considers himself privileged to be able to offer tourists "unforgettable authentic Romanian experiences for those interested in wolf, bear, lynx and bird watching tours", while respondent Y6 considers it "opportune for the sustainable development of the business to locate the guesthouse in the mountain area", attractive for tourists. According to some interviewed young entrepreneurs, it is important to know the different needs of tourist segments: "we promote the ecotourist products to educated target groups", said Y2, while Y14 stated that "people with higher incomes can make the choice to eat organic food, drive more fuel-efficient cars, and travel to ecotourist destinations that may cost more".

Most of the study participants' knowledge comes from non-formal education. Only eight participants benefited from courses dedicated to sustainable development at the formal education institution they attended. Participation in courses and seminars, reading specialty books or gathering information as a member of an organization are more common ways of improving knowledge about sustainable development. One of the participants confessed that "all my knowledge about sustainable development comes from the meetings I have as a member of the Youth Association for Sustainable Development" (Y21).



**Figure 2.** Results of data coding: Abilities of young entrepreneurs in Romania’s mountain areas to adopt sustainability practices for the development of their tourism business. Legend: The blue box presents the theme. Light blue boxes present the sub-themes. Light orange boxes present the codes. Light green boxes present the sub-codes. The figures in brackets reflect the frequency of occurrence (number of times a specific code was mentioned by the study participants).

The second dimension analyzed in the interviews regarding the Abilities component of the MAO framework is Skills. All participants in the study consider themselves as leaders of sustainable development practices in their business. Employee involvement is considered important by most of the interviewed young entrepreneurs. Aspects related to working conditions, training, and the protection of human rights were discussed during the interviews. “Our employees benefit from the safety of both the workplace and the activities they undertake” says respondent Y5, while respondent Y16 says “we provide staff with information, advice and training on how to be more environmentally responsible, how to reduce, reuse and recycle” (Y7). The working conditions are also mentioned by respondent Y10:

“In my café, the working environment is pleasant, with music and air conditioning, with a chair for the employee to be able to sit down whenever there are no customers in the café. We also offer work uniforms, sandwiches, and coffee for employees during working hours. The discussions between us are always decent, we don’t get offended, and we don’t raise our voices at each other.”

In addition, respondents who have employees stated that they invest time in staff education and training. Y20 puts into words a valid belief: “. . . a trained employee is a valuable employee”. All entrepreneurs are concerned about the health and safety of their employees. “In the current context of COVID-19, we have taken all additional measures to protect both staff and tourists from illness”, one of the interviewees told us (Y1).

Another skill identified among most respondents is creative thinking. The young entrepreneurs have the managerial capability to integrate the specifics of the area in the offers and to use the natural resources and infrastructure to business advantage. This is what makes their organizations unique. The respondents to the study exposed diverse ways in which they achieved this:

“In our multi-day trekking tours, we stay in local guesthouses, run by the families in the mountain villages. In that way, the tourists have the chance to taste the home-made food and the local products, to buy handmade souvenirs.” (Y8)

“Our tourists can participate in the current works in the villages (e.g., cutting the grass, milking the cows or sheep). Up in the mountains, we show tourists an authentic sheep farm. There they have a shepherd’s lunch called “bulz” (polenta with cheese). Tourists are interested to find out how the cheese is produced in a traditional way. The tourists could taste a special yogurt called “jintița” (cannot be found in the local markets or big markets).” (Y2)

“We offer tourists the opportunity to enjoy the “peace of nature” of the mountains.” (Y4)

“We brought to the store postcards and objects with images inspired by the landscapes in our area.” (Y19)

Some of the entrepreneurs accessed non-refundable funds for business development. Resourcefulness is an important sustainable managerial capability. “Non-refundable funds were a great help for us at the beginning to of the journey. I think I spent the money right away. I thought of making investments that would last over time” (Y7).

The sustainable business focus of an entrepreneur, seen as a collection of related skills, behaviors, and processes that drive a business forward, is something all sustainable organizations need. Linking the sustainable development business objectives and targets to consumer preferences is a critical task. The study participants reflected on this sub-theme, considering it to be an important ability for the well-being of the business. “Managerial capabilities define what you need in the future as much as right now for our clients”, says respondent Y1.

As with any business, a sustainable developed one implies risks. Almost half of the respondents consider they have risk-taking skills. Risks and challenges are a motivation for acting sustainably, as mentioned above in the Motivation findings section.

Attitudes is the third dimension of the Abilities component of the MAO framework analyzed in the interviews. The attitudes, the values according to which they sustainably run their business, were debated during the interviews. All respondents give importance to the natural environment and its protection. "We are committed to create more opportunities to showcase the natural beauty of Romania while preserving these natural assets for future generations. Conservation and tourism can work hand in hand. We have a vision that brings people into contact with nature, not conflict with nature", claimed respondent Y8. Most participants in the study believe that they have a role in contributing to saving natural resources. They are involved in reducing water waste through "use of containers with controllable water flow in toilets" (Y1), "have walk-in showers in the rooms, not bathtubs" (Y1), "collect rainwater and use it to water the plants" (Y6), "display written messages in every bathroom to encourage the reduction of water waste" (Y12). Respondents also mentioned that they want to use alternative energy sources to contribute to saving natural resources.

### 5.3. Opportunities Component Findings

The third operational objective was to identify the perception regarding the opportunities that allow young tourism entrepreneurs from mountain areas to run a sustainable tourism business. This section's findings relate to four dimensions of the Opportunity component: enabling technologies, stakeholders' support, tourist market opportunities, and natural resources of the mountain area (Figure 3).

Technologies that help save resources were considered an opportunity to build a sustainable business by all study respondents. One of the participants said "... the location in a mountain plateau led us to the use of solar energy. It was only the first step towards the discovery of other green ways of maintaining the business."

The stakeholders' support is seen by young entrepreneurs as an opportunity for the sustainable development of the business. The support offered by the local community is another factor that appeared in the discussions with the respondents. One of the participants in the study said: "the locals are eager to accommodate tourists in their houses" (Y17), while another mentioned: "the locals encourage tourists to participate in traditional festivals to feel the atmosphere in the community" (Y13). Another respondent stated that he hired people from the area who participated in training courses in the field of tourism organized by the municipality. "They familiarized themselves with the notions of sustainable development during these courses" (Y7).

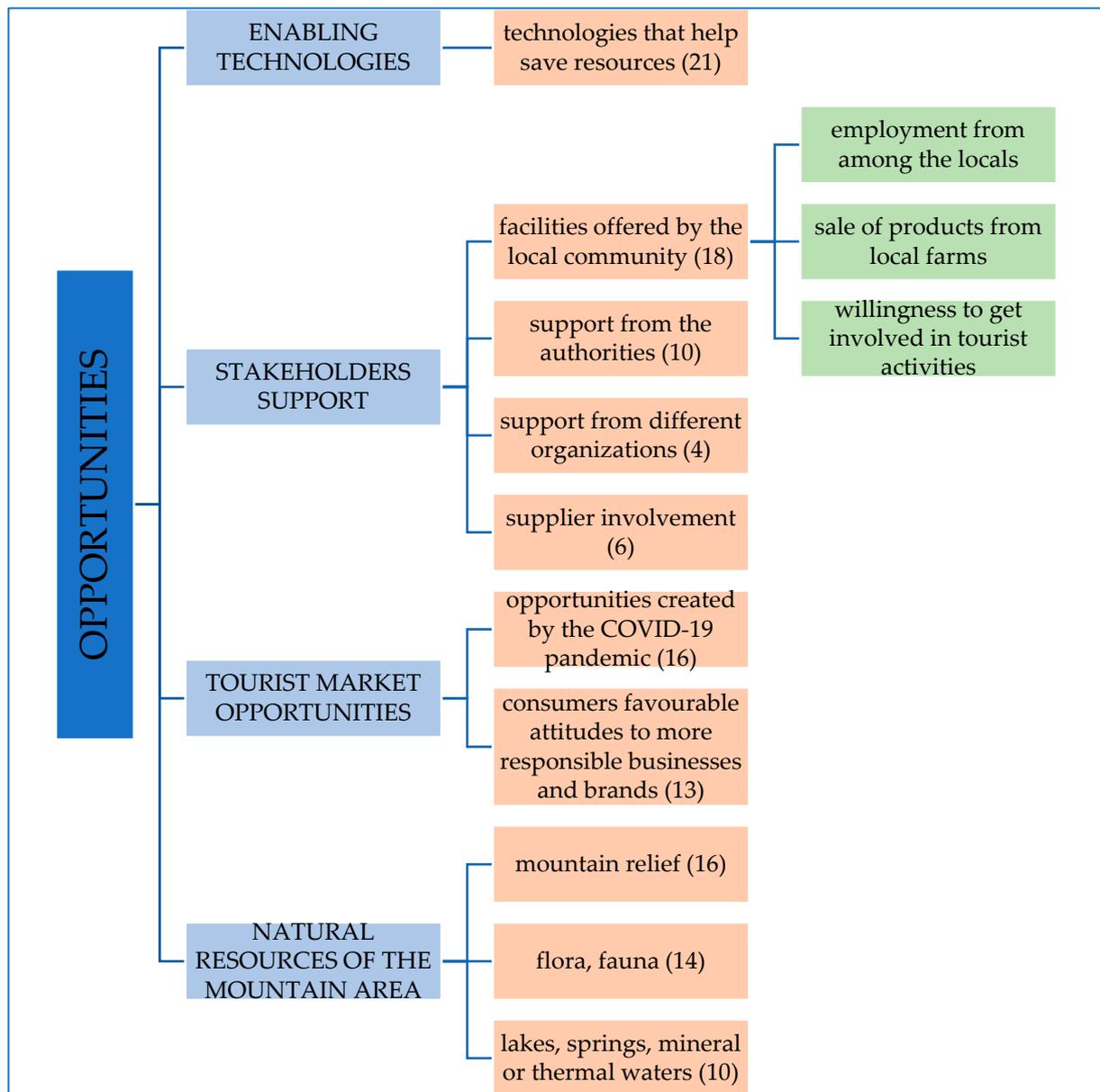
Employment from among the local community was considered by study participants. There are some answers worth mentioning: "we use the services of local guides to present the attractions of the area to the tourists who visit us" (Y8), and "our staff live in the area" (Y16).

Fairs for the sale of local products facilitated contact between producers and tourism companies. The respondents said that "by participating in such fairs, we made friends and now we all function as a whole in the sustainable development not only of our business but also of the entire community" (Y18).

Most of the interviewees consider that the support offered by the state authorities represents an opportunity and could "contribute to increasing the number of sustainably developed businesses in areas with a protected natural environment" (Y7). Among the interviewed entrepreneurs there are people who want "the state to offer tax reductions for those who develop their business sustainably" (Y17) or "to make information guides, good practices available" (Y11).

The support offered by various organizations in the direction of sustainable development was also mentioned. "We are members of the Association of Ecotourism in Romania (AER). This means we contribute to the development of responsible travel and nature conservation in Romania", said respondent Y12. The eco-certification facilitated by such organizations comes with additional opportunities. The respondents mentioned the opportunity that derives from the publicity they receive after they obtain the eco-certification:

“free promotion on the ecotourism promotion platform [www.eco-romania.ro](http://www.eco-romania.ro) (accessed on 14 December 2022) managed by AER” (Y8); “free promotion on the platforms of international partners: [www.destinet.eu](http://www.destinet.eu) (accessed on 14 December 2022) (professional platform for certification systems in sustainable tourism at European level and which includes a map of certified products) and [www.bookdifferent.com](http://www.bookdifferent.com) (accessed on 14 December 2022) (reservation platform for responsible accommodation affiliated with booking.com)” (Y1).



**Figure 3.** Results of data coding: Opportunities identified by young entrepreneurs in Romania’s mountain areas that allow them to adopt sustainability practices for the development of their tourism businesses. Legend: The blue box presents the theme. Light blue boxes present the sub-themes. Light orange boxes present the codes. The figures in brackets reflect the frequency of occurrence (number of times a specific code was mentioned by the study participants).

Upstream from the respondents’ businesses are the suppliers. The way they conduct their activity can be an opportunity for the sustainable development of the business. For some of the respondents, suppliers represent support: “We have managed to find local

collaborators that share our aim of preserving the local values in terms of customs, culture, food, etc.” (Y9).

The young entrepreneurs’ perception of current tourist market opportunities was also discussed. The COVID-19 pandemic has changed people’s perceptions of the role of a healthy environment for a healthy society. The business environment was also influenced. Some participants in the study noticed the inclination of tourists to spend their free time in harmony with nature and used this in the sustainable development of the business:

“The restrictions imposed by COVID have brought tourists and nature together. I thought that now is the right time to let them know that we want to be recognized as an environmentally friendly coffee shop.” (Y10)

Most of the young entrepreneurs in the study noticed consumers’ favorable attitudes to more responsible businesses and brands. They consider this trend an opportunity to continue the sustainable development of their business in the coming years. One of the respondents said:

“There is a rising consumer sentiment around sustainability and local impact. This opens new perspectives for development.” (Y5)

Natural resources (relief, lakes, springs, mineral or thermal waters, flora, fauna) that attract tourists to the area where they operate are considered an opportunity for sustainable business development by the young tourism entrepreneurs participating in the study.

“The development of a sustainable mountain tourism that considers the human—nature communion based on respect and gratitude represents the desired way of valorizing the mountain heritage.” (Y2)

## 6. Discussion

### 6.1. Theoretical Implications

This study answers to Font et al.’s call [110] for more research on the reasons for being in business, generic business skills, and external influences to determine pro-sustainability attitudes and behaviors in small tourism enterprises in European protected areas. Future research proposed by Patzelt and Shepherd [57] consider that motivation and knowledge conjointly rather than independently influence the recognition of sustainable development opportunities. To answer these research calls, opportunity and necessity drivers for developing sustainable business were taken into consideration as they represent a solution for the sustainable development of the mountain area.

First operational objective of the study, identifying the main motivations that determine a young tourism entrepreneur to adopt a sustainable business behavior, is closely linked to the drivers of acting sustainably. Behind the motivation is the necessity or opportunity of sustainable behavior. The study highlighted the intrinsic and extrinsic motivations of a young tourism entrepreneur. Entrepreneur’ motivations to sustainable enterprises are closely linked to their individual values [2]. The results of this study show that intrinsic motivations were predominant confirming the results obtained by Alonso-Almeida [143] and Ngoasong and Kimbu [144]. The findings about lifestyle-oriented entrepreneurial motivation are consistent with those of previous studies [106–108]. Sustainable entrepreneurship is seen as an extension of personal lifestyle, as in the case of the Chawla [145] and Font et al. studies [110,111]. Since intrinsic motivation is the most important, sustainable business behavior is an opportunity driver by the young entrepreneurs.

As mentioned in the GEM report [67], younger people are more likely than older people to agree with the motive “to make a difference in the world”. The consideration about the natural environment and its protection is highlighted by respondents’ answers. The answers obtained after the research confirm that younger people are motivated by their contribution to changing the perception that tourism has a negative impact on the environment. They are involved in reducing water waste, reducing the amount of waste in general, reducing energy consumption, and reducing the impact on soil, air, and water. They also mentioned their interest in the preservation of historical heritage as a motivation

for acting sustainably. The firm's dependence on its social and natural environment is a necessity driver of developing a sustainable tourism business.

Young entrepreneurs are inclined towards innovation and testing innovative ideas like sustainable development. In this way, the results of the study undertaken by Gürol and Atsan [146] are confirmed. Young entrepreneurs are willing to take new risks and challenges and want to contribute to changing the perception that tourism has a negative impact on the environment. This current study, however, also demonstrated that sustainable development is considered a normality for young entrepreneurs because there is no other way to do long-term business. We can say that offering a possibility to manifest these inclinations is an opportunity driver of developing a sustainable tourism business.

From the theoretical perspective, this study presents three sub-dimensions of extrinsic motivation: stakeholders' demand, business prestige, and financial gain. The study demonstrates the relevance of stakeholders' demand in sustainable business development. This finding aligns with Font et al. [110], who highlight reasons to act sustainably such as to meet the requirements of chain/group, in response to customer demand, to meet the requirements of a tour operator, to meet legal requirements. As a novelty, our study places these reasons in the category of extrinsic motivations and divides them according to the type of stakeholder that influences: authorities, tour operators, clients.

The present study corroborates the relationship between business prestige and motivation to act sustainably. The Font et al. [110] study that presents the marketing and image benefits as another reason to act sustainable is reconfirmed.

The study indicated that financial gain motivates young entrepreneurs to act sustainably. This finding aligns with Kurapatskie and Darnall [147], who highlight that firms' various types of sustainability activities are connected to varying degrees of financial gain. On the other hand, this study contradicts the Gast et al. findings [1], who mentioned that sustainable entrepreneurs are thus not necessarily motivated by financial goals.

The second operational objective of the study, identifying the abilities that allow young tourism entrepreneurs to adopt a sustainability friendly behavior, offers new dimension of the relationship between motivations and perception on the sustainable business opportunities. The attitude of young entrepreneurs in relation to the conservation of natural areas and the promotion of traditions, as mentioned in the Euromontana studies [2], was highlighted by the results of our study. In addition, young entrepreneurs are inclined towards saving natural resources by getting involved in reducing water waste and showing their preference for the use of alternative energy sources. [74,75].

The Skills dimension of the Abilities component of the MAO framework was widely debated in the present study. This approach introduces as an element of novelty five sustainable entrepreneurial skills: leadership, creative thinking, resourcefulness, sustainable business focus, risk-taking skills. All skills emerging from the study could be addressed in future quantitative research. It is also worth mentioning that leadership, including staff education and training, is an important entrepreneurial skill. Our study reconfirms the results obtained by Shane [116], who considers that desire to share is an important entrepreneurial ability.

The aim of the third operational objective of the study was to identify young tourism entrepreneurs' perception of the opportunities that allow them to do sustainable business.

This research's findings reaffirm the results of the study of Carroll and Shabana [122]. According to them, profit generation for the entrepreneur is combined with the constant search for innovative ways to protect the environment. The use of new technologies that help save resources was considered important by the study respondents; Choi and Shepherd [148] also found that entrepreneurs were more likely to take advantage of opportunities when they perceived more fully developed enabling technologies.

The young entrepreneurs in our study highlighted aspects of stakeholders' support. This current study portrays the opportunities that come from the local community, support from the authorities, support from different organizations, and supplier involvement. Choi and Shepherd [148] also suggest that entrepreneurs who consider that they have strong

stakeholder support for full-scale operations are more likely to proceed with exploitation. More research is justified on this topic, especially in contexts with a strong need to involve local communities in tourism activities and help uplift their economy.

Putting the focus on current tourist market opportunities, the study participants consider that consumers now are looking for available sustainable travel options. Tourists are much more responsible and aware of the reality they live in, as mentioned in the UNWTO report about Tourism Trends 2022 [149]. As previous studies discussed [150,151], sustainable entrepreneurs recognize a market gap as an opportunity. This study reconfirms Zhongming, et al.'s findings [152], who consider that small and medium enterprises (SMEs) are more likely to quickly respond to opportunities to meet the specific needs of travelers.

This study analyzes the opportunities driven from the connections between sustainable tourism and mountain natural resources. Although these aspects were debated in other research [153,154], this paper brings new perspectives presenting the perception of young entrepreneurs regarding the opportunities provided by natural resources in the mountain area for the sustainable development of the tourism business. Future research is warranted specifically into the mechanisms of maintaining and developing mountain natural resources (relief, flora, fauna, lakes, springs, mineral or thermal waters) by tourism entrepreneurs.

### *6.2. Policy and Management Implications*

Worldwide sustainable development cannot be obtained without changes in business attitudes and entrepreneurship behavior. The fact that young people are the ones who are expected to change the world for the better is a generally accepted idea. Starting from this statement, the state institutions should be involved in attracting them to the field of entrepreneurship and supporting them during the development of the business. The businesses of young tourism entrepreneurs are based on the authenticity and uniqueness of the natural resources in the mountain area where they operate. As a result, they must be motivated by government intervention to develop sustainable businesses. Governments should consider establishing measures targeted at supporting new sustainable tourism enterprises led by young people in mountain territories that capitalize on the mountain environment, local products, traditional activities, and the unique heritage and culture of a mountainous area. The consideration of the MAO framework, presented in this study, may be a starting point for establishing a plan of measures dedicated to young tourism entrepreneurs in the mountain area.

Dedicated policies are required to facilitate motivation among young tourism entrepreneurs. These policies should stimulate young people to think about the wider environmental and societal implications of their business. Policymakers can design dedicated laws to support and promote innovation in mountain tourism in the field of resource efficiency: energy efficiency, water efficiency, and waste management. For instance, interest-free loans can be offered to young tourism entrepreneurs whose goal is to employ, (re-)train, or upskill residents. In addition, subsidies should be proposed to business enterprises to help the environment: for example, installing solar panels for energy generation or any other alternative energy source in the Carpathian region can be financed.

Policies can also take the form of government-sponsored upskilling courses and seminars provided to prospective and existing young tourism entrepreneurs to increase their sustainable knowledge and skills as education can have a role in promoting sustainable development and sustainable entrepreneurship. Governments should provide specific measures, by existing operational programs or new initiatives, to assist the development of training in sustainable tourism and include, in training and business support, models of young entrepreneurship that boost opportunities in mountain communities. These measures should stimulate the transfer of existing and traditional skills as well as the development of new skill sets. In turn, young entrepreneurs, in the role of business managers, should transfer the received information to their employees. In increasing the level of knowledge about sustainable development in tourism, some organizations could be involved. These, by organizing meetings with young entrepreneurs, can significantly

influence the attitude of young people towards the development of a business not only for profit but also considering nature and society.

Dedicated policies are also needed to encourage young entrepreneurs to develop sustainable business in mountain areas. Maintenance and study grants proposed by national governments to young entrepreneurs who have chosen to pursue a tourism career in the mountain protected areas could be considered an opportunity by them.

## 7. Conclusions

Drawing from the motivation, ability, and opportunity (MAO) framework, this examination investigates factors impacting the implementation of sustainable principles in a tourism business in the mountain area run by a young entrepreneur. We found out why a young entrepreneur is motivated to act sustainably in a tourism business, how their knowledge, skills, and attitudes make the sustainable outcome happen, and what are the circumstances that make it possible to act sustainably at a business level. Opportunity and necessity drive young tourism entrepreneurs to engage in sustainable business in the mountain area, confirming the influence of economic, social, and political environments that frame individual behaviors [155].

The novelty of this study represents the sub-themes considered for the three main components of the working framework. Thus, under the Motivation theme, the answers received were divided into intrinsic motivation and extrinsic motivation. The Abilities component was approached from three perspectives: knowledge, skills, and attitudes. The third component, Opportunities, was divided into enabling technologies, stakeholders' support, tourist market opportunities, and natural resources of the mountain area. These sub-themes appear separately mentioned in different studies as is specified in the literature analysis part, but they do not appear in the link to the MAO framework.

Intrinsic motivation is the most important for the young tourism entrepreneurs. Sustainable business development is considered an extension of personal lifestyle by most of the study participants. The respondents also feel motivated by their contribution to changing the perception that tourism has a negative impact on the environment.

Regarding the intrinsic motivation, the study demonstrates the relevance of stakeholders' demand in sustainable business development. In addition, this study indicated that financial gain motivates young entrepreneurs to act sustainably.

The Abilities component of the MAO framework brought new information regarding young tourism sustainable business behavior. All respondents stated that they have knowledge about alternative energy sources, and they want to use them as much as possible in their business. Five sustainable entrepreneurial skills were explored in this study: leadership, creative thinking, resourcefulness, sustainable business focus, risk-taking skills. Leadership and creative thinking are mentioned as the most important skills that allow young tourism entrepreneurs to adopt a sustainability friendly behavior. The study also reconfirmed the important role of attitudes, a sub-theme of the Abilities component of the MAO framework.

Concluding about the Opportunity component of the MAO framework, it can be said that sustainable entrepreneurship is more an opportunity than a necessity for doing business in the mountain area. Most respondents have the managerial capability to integrate the specifics of the area in the offers and to use the natural resources and infrastructure to a business advantage. The use of technologies that help save resources is considered an opportunity to build a sustainable business by all study respondents, followed by facilities offered by the local community.

This study outlined the need to encourage and support young tourism entrepreneurs from the perspective of social policy design. Policymakers should showcase life-long opportunities to residents, thus preventing migration to more prosperous regions. Policymakers should look at young entrepreneurs in the Carpathian Mountains as key agents of change, as young people have ideas "to build the mountain of tomorrow, they want to participate in local life and bring their voice to the table. Their ideal vision of the mountain for 2040 is a

territory resolutely sustainable socially, economically, and environmentally”, as mentioned in the Euromontana study [2].

## 8. Limitation and Future Research Needs

In this study, we add to the field of sustainable entrepreneurship by developing a theoretical model to explain why young people early in their careers are willing to become involved in sustainable entrepreneurship, how their abilities make the sustainable outcome happen, and when they access business opportunities for sustainable development.

This study had limitations, as with any research. The main limitation regards the exploratory, qualitative nature of this project. Generalizing the findings to young tourism entrepreneurs in other countries should be approached with attention. The findings from this study should be refined and re-validated using innovative research designs and quantitative or mixed methods.

Another limitation was the purposive sampling. The application of random sampling could have offered further novel insights into this study’s findings. Furthermore, participants recruited in the current investigation had businesses in different sub-sectors within the tourism and hospitality industry (e.g., restaurants, hotels, gift shops). Homogeneity among these sub-sectors may be misleading.

Lastly, the region of the Romanian Carpathian Mountains is unique. Replication of the study’s findings in other destinations should be done with caution due to the possibility of influence of the local context as established earlier in the text.

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