

Article

Cultural Tourism in Buzău Carpathians and Sub-Carpathians (Romania): Local Businesses' Perspective

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Abstract: Cultural tourism plays a growing role both in tourists' preferences and in tourism development options in many regions of the world. This paper examines how businesses in the Buzău Carpathians and Sub-Carpathians, a predominantly rural region where tourism relies heavily on the natural landscapes and cultural heritage, perceive cultural tourism. The analysis was performed using a questionnaire survey applied to the local business representatives, focusing on three key areas: (a) their interaction with visitors and contribution to the local economy; (b) their role as drivers of cultural tourism and improving communities' livelihoods; and (c) the current and future challenges they face. This study highlights the way in which local businesses support cultural tourism, empower local communities, and contribute to local and regional development through their connections with cultural and heritage attractions. Despite these businesses facing challenges such as inadequate infrastructure, limited promotion, a narrow cultural tourism offering, and weak institutional collaboration, the research findings emphasize their pivotal role in fostering both local and regional development.

Keywords: cultural tourism; local businesses; Buzău Carpathians and Sub-Carpathians; Romania; SPOTprojectH2020



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1. Introduction

Due to its various positive and negative impacts on destinations, tourism is a multi-faceted activity that connects the economic, social, and environmental components of sustainable development [1]. The trend of the recent decades, where tourist preferences have shifted toward more diversified forms of tourism in general and cultural tourism products in particular, is growing at an increasing pace [2]. Since culture and cultural heritage are closely related to people's identity, self-respect, and dignity, the growing demand for cultural heritage sites helps maintain and pass on the cultural traditions and values of societies [3]. Moreover, with the rising interest of visitors in cultural experiences which brings together tourism and culture, unique opportunities and complex challenges for the tourism sector are emerging [4].

According to the UNWTO General Assembly (2017), cultural tourism is defined as “a type of tourism activity in which the visitor's essential motivation is to learn, discover, experience and consume the tangible and intangible cultural attractions/products in a tourism destination. These attractions/products relate to a set of distinctive material, intellectual, spiritual and emotional features of a society that encompasses arts and architecture, historical and cultural heritage, culinary heritage, literature, music, creative industries and

the living cultures with their lifestyles, value systems, beliefs and traditions" [4]. The global rise in interest for authentic, culturally rich travel experiences has led to the expansion of cultural tourism as a major economic driver for local businesses. These businesses range from small-scale, family-run enterprises such as restaurants, craft shops, and local guides to large-scale cultural institutions like museums, hotels, and performance venues [5].

Cultural tourism is driven by curiosity about culture and broadening our understanding about other places, habits, traditions, and cultural identities, as well as experiencing other civilizations in response to the human need for diversity [2,6]. Local cultural heritage, one of the fundamentals of cultural tourism [7], is viewed as a capital which, in order to be managed in a sustainable way, should take into account the needs of tourists and residents alike [8]. In other words, by relying on the key actors involved in tourism, cultural tourism has the potential to support the conservation of local identities while fostering economic growth [9]. This aligns with the general perception of cultural tourism as 'good' tourism which, while attracting high-spending visitors and stimulating the economy, does little harm to the environment or local heritage [7,10,11]. It involves specific consumption and motivation patterns which generally consider the role of attachment, satisfaction, loyalty, or physical context in cultural tourism behaviour [7,12], as well as engagement, generating cultural contact and memorable tourism experiences for tourists [13].

Increasingly, cultural tourism has been recognized as a self-contained concept, moving beyond the simple combination of the terms 'culture' and 'tourism' [12,14]. The evolution of cultural tourism reveals a number of 'turns' that have shaped its dynamics as a social practice, i.e., cultural, mobilities, performative, creative, and curatorial, thus leading to new approaches [10]. In its dynamism, the cultural tourism market is not homogeneous; according to [15], it could be divided into five segments based on the cultural tourist's decision to travel and their sought experience: the purposeful, the sightseeing, the serendipitous, the casual, and the incidental. Further, the main changes attributed to the transforming nature of cultural tourism, as viewed in the UNWTO Report on Tourism and Culture Synergies (2018) [16], include the shift from tangible to intangible, focus on everyday life, fragmentation of several niches, eventification, rise of intermediaries and curation, transition from elite to mass culture, and conceptual broadening [12].

Following the creative turn mentioned, new identities and roles in experiencing cultural tourism have emerged, such as the perception of 'local' as 'authentic' [12]. This shift has shaped tourists' preferences for new (cultural) experiences, which, in turn, have fostered residents and local communities' participation and empowerment [17–20], contributing to the growth of local economies. The model of cultural tourism explains how the culture–tourism relationship can further support local sustainability and identity formation, based on the processes occurring at the interface between local culture and cultural tourism, while contributing to a local sense of place and pride [21,22].

In Romania, a key document for the development of tourism is the Master Plan for Romania's National Tourism 2007–2026, developed under the guidance of the World Tourism Organization and implemented by the Romanian Government. Its primary goal is to establish a comprehensive framework for the sustainable development and management of the tourism sector, with a focus on preserving and leveraging the country's natural and cultural resources for long-term growth [23,24]. However, despite the plan's ambition to position Romania as a leading tourist destination by highlighting its rich natural and cultural heritage, cultural tourism remains underdeveloped and challenging to quantify. Nevertheless, in recent years, cultural and sustainable tourism have gained greater prominence on the national agenda as key drivers for economic growth, social inclusion, and the preservation of cultural and natural assets [24,25].

Recently, in the framework of the Horizon 2020 SPOT project, several studies have examined the local implications of cultural tourism from various perspectives: tourists and residents in the Slovak–Hungarian cross-border area [26]; residents and business representatives in the Cyclades (Greece) [22,27]; tourists, the local population, and entrepreneurs in Nitra (Slovakia) [28]; visitors/consumers of wine and cultural tourism in

Southern Moravia [29]; and small businesses, tourists, and residents under the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic [30].

This research continues a series of investigations conducted within the Horizon 2020 SPOT project [31] (Work package 1: Data and documentation of cultural tourism, <http://www.spotprojecth2020.eu/reportsandoutcomes>, accessed on 15 June 2022), in which the perception of three main components of the tourism system in the Buzău Carpathians and Sub-Carpathians were analysed in a comparative and distinct manner: tourism businesses, residents [32], and tourists. This article specifically focuses on tourism businesses, which play a crucial role in the development of tourism in a region by connecting local tourism products with their main beneficiaries (tourists) while ensuring the wellbeing of local communities (residents). They are considered responsible for tourism planning, aiming to enhance the wellbeing of residents and reduce the costs of tourism development while meeting the increasing demands of tourists for quality and diversified services. Moreover, this study explores the perception of businesses representatives on cultural tourism, a specific aspect of tourism that has been insufficiently addressed both in global studies and particularly in Romania.

In this study, the authors aim to fill this knowledge gap by conducting a perception analysis with a particular focus on business's perspective of cultural tourism. The authors attempt to address four key research questions which are designed to explore the general understanding of businesses' involvement in cultural tourism in comparison to the perspectives of local communities and tourists.

2. Literature Review: Cultural Tourism from Local Businesses' Perspective

Tourism development is closely linked to the businesses that provide essential services such as accommodation, food and beverage offerings, transportation, and other administrative functions for visitors [33]. In this context, the quality of the business environment, including factors such as service standards, accessibility, and operational efficiency, plays a critical role in shaping the overall visitor experience and, by extension, the success of the tourism sector [34]. Cultural tourism is viewed as a niche form of tourism that not only benefits the visitors but also contributes to the social and economic development of local communities [35].

To better understand local processes related to tourism, local perception is considered by tourism scholars an important research topic, despite the already existing large body of studies [3,36,37]. Generally, the literature has approached the local perception of tourism based on the opinions of tourists and/or residents (host communities) who are considered key actors in the tourism system and main beneficiaries of tourism services and/or revenues. Additionally, a great deal of studies have acknowledged the fundamental role of stakeholder groups in achieving comprehensive planning and management, which leads to sustainable tourism development [38–41]. The understanding of residents' attitudes and perceptions of tourism has received substantial academic attention, e.g., [42–47], considerably more than that of tourists, and even less attention has been given to the businesses involved in the tourism activities. Apart from tourists and residents, stakeholders or tourism businesses are also key players in the tourism system. In rural areas, small tourism businesses and local entrepreneurs have the potential to contribute to rural economies, thus enhancing rural development [48,49]. Recently, small tourism enterprises have been severely affected by the COVID-19 pandemic crisis [50], especially due to the lack of proper government policy responses to increase resilience [51]. However, in some cases, through creativity and innovation, tourism businesses have demonstrated the potential to become more resilient and adaptive to shocks (i.e., the COVID-19 pandemic) [52].

In particular, when referring to the perception of any of the key aforementioned actors in cultural tourism, the academic approaches are even less represented. However, the evaluation of the residents' or local community's perception of cultural or heritage tourism appears to be much better represented in the literature [2,3,53] compared to that of businesses. Nevertheless, a growing body of research has highlighted the critical role that local

businesses play in the development of cultural tourism, particularly in regions with rich cultural and historical assets. Reference [54] examines the critical success factors for businesses in heritage tourism, while [55] emphasizes the importance of understanding local perceptions of tourism development to achieve sustainable cultural tourism and ensure the long-term success of the tourism industry, primarily through a literature review. Studies conducted in the Czech Republic, for example, emphasize how enterprises contribute to the growth and sustainability of cultural tourism by providing services that meet both the needs and interests of tourists while enriching the visitor experience with locally inspired products, cuisine, and authentic cultural interactions [33,34]. In post-COVID Sub-Saharan Africa, [3] discussed ways to rethink heritage-based tourism strategies more sustainably from a local stakeholder perspective.

Like other forms of tourism, cultural tourism has a profound impact on local businesses, offering both opportunities and challenges. The economic benefits are clear, with increased spending by tourists leading to growth in sectors such as hospitality, retail, and transport. Cultural tourists spend more than other tourists due to longer stays and a willingness to pay for authentic experiences [56]. Businesses near cultural attractions, such as restaurants, cafes, and hotels, often benefit from increased expenditure [57,58]. One of the significant benefits of cultural tourism is its potential to empower local communities economically and socially. Local businesses can become crucial players in the local economy by creating jobs, helping to alleviate poverty, and promoting social inclusion [5], particularly in rural areas.

In terms of challenges, factors like seasonality and overtourism present significant risks to local businesses. While seasonal fluctuations continue to be one of the main challenges in the tourism industry [59], the seasonal nature of cultural tourism also causes economic instability, as businesses often rely on peak periods such as festivals or museum visits. To sustain year-round operations, small businesses must adopt diversification strategies to ensure profitability [56,57,60]. Cultural tourism also risks overtourism; while it boosts revenues in sectors like accommodation and food, it can pose a significant threat to the conservation of cultural heritage sites and the residents' quality of life [61]. To overcome this, local businesses can play a key role in promoting sustainable practices and collaborate with stakeholders, including local governments, cultural institutions, and tour operators, to adopt sustainable practices and strategies that preserve the cultural integrity of the destination [21,33]. At the same time, they can support community engagement [62,63].

In recent years, digital technologies have had a significant impact on cultural tourism, influencing the way local businesses engage with tourists. Digital technologies have transformed cultural tourism, enabling local businesses to enhance visibility through online platforms and social media [64].

Studies also suggest that cultural tourism can be a tool for promoting cultural exchange and understanding [35,65]. By interacting with visitors, local businesses and residents have the opportunity to share their heritage, traditions, and stories, fostering greater appreciation for diverse cultures.

As the sector evolves, local businesses must adapt to changing technologies, emerging trends, and shifting tourist expectations to remain competitive and sustainable in the long term. Collaboration between businesses, communities, and governments will be essential in ensuring that cultural tourism continues to drive positive economic and social change.

RQ1: *How can tourism businesses act as drivers of cultural tourism development?*

RQ2: *How can tourism businesses contribute to improving the livelihoods of local communities?*

RQ3: *What is the role of local businesses in the development of cultural tourism?*

RQ4: *What are the main challenges faced by cultural tourism?*

To address these research questions, the perception analysis was structured around three key research topics that focus on the most important aspects of the relationships between business and cultural tourism: (a) interaction with the local economy and visitors;

(b) drivers of cultural tourism development and enhancement of communities' livelihoods; and (c) current and future challenges.

3. Study Area

The Buzău Carpathians and Sub-Carpathians are located in the south-eastern part of Romania (Figure 1). This predominantly rural area is characterized by significant natural tourism potential that reflect local cultural identity and heritage. These include scenic landscapes with unique geomorphological features (e.g., the Ulmet “Trovants”, Berca Mud Volcanoes, and Buzău Land Geopark) and one of the main wine-producing regions of the country (e.g., the Dealu Mare—Istrița wine region, which is part of the Romanian Wine Route and included in the European “Iter Vitis Route”). The region also preserves traditions, folklore, and local products, while being known for its spiritual and religious heritage, including ancient (cave) churches and monasteries. Creative tourism is emerging, blending traditional crafts with modern/contemporary art. The study area contributes to inter-cultural understanding through its cultural attractions, highlighting local heritage, identities, traditions, and products (e.g., Pleșcoi sausages, which have become recognised as an EU Protected Geographical Indication).

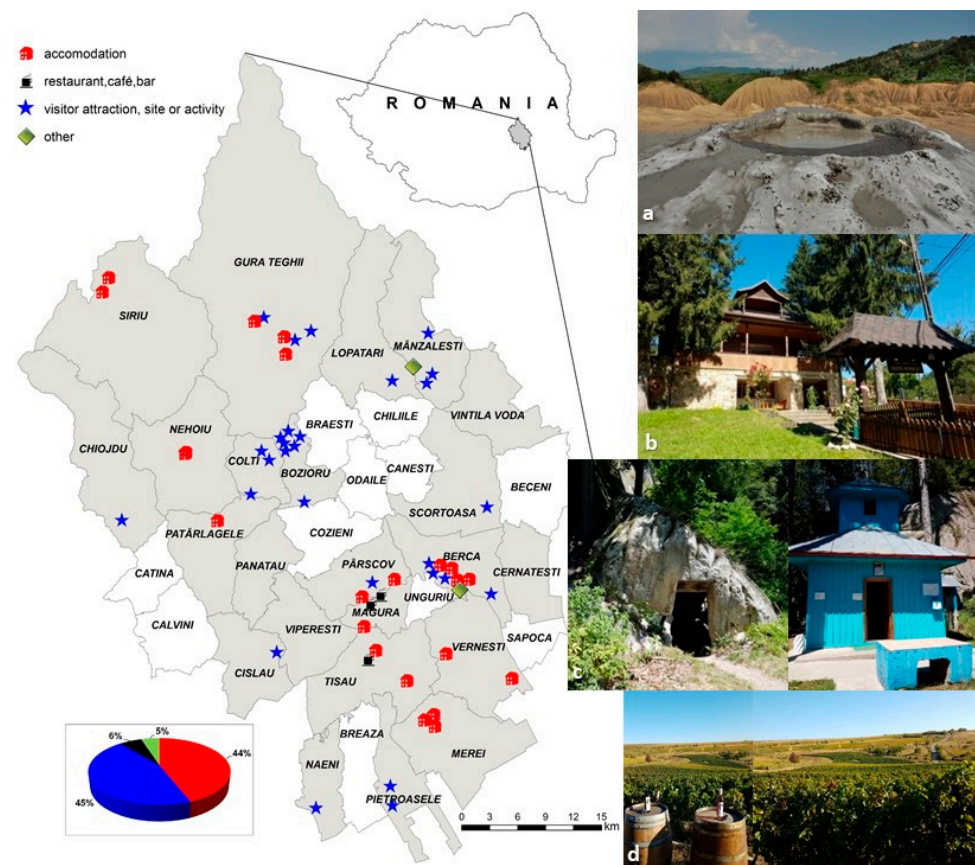


Figure 1. Study area and the type of businesses addressed ((a). Mud Volcanoes, (b). Colți Amber Museum, (c). Alunis Cave Churches Complex, and (d). Lacerta Vineyard).

The dominant rural economy is shaped by socio-economic and environmental factors that create intra- and inter-regional disparities, leading to a lower quality of life of the rural communities. However, the area's rich tourist potential, both natural and man-made, could drive revitalization and socio-economic growth. The growing interest of tourists in seeking authentic local experiences and 'living like a local' [66] has made the study area an appealing region for both local and foreign tourists. With the decline of traditional industries, tourism now plays a vital role in revitalizing the local economy by leveraging the

area's natural and cultural assets for sustainable development [67]. This is also the case for the Buzău Carpathians and Sub-Carpathians, which have seen significant economic shifts, with traditional industries declining and tourism emerging as a sustainable alternative to capitalizing on the existing natural and cultural assets.

Cultural tourism is essential for rural tourism development, fostering a return to nature and traditions [68]. On that account, the study area offers rich natural sights and local traditions which can be transformed into tourist resources, including religious sites, museums, wineries, gastronomy, folklore, the cultural landscape, outdoor activities, and wellness/spa experiences.

The rise of 'creative tourism' emerges as a demand for diversifying the local economy by offering immersive, authentic experiences. This shift reflects a creative turn, likening the 'local' experience with 'authenticity' [10].

4. Methodology

This paper is based on the results of a questionnaire survey conducted with businesses engaged in cultural tourism in the Buzău Carpathians and Sub-Carpathians during fieldwork in the study area in 2020 as part of the HORIZON 2020 SPOT project. By cultural tourism businesses, we refer to all enterprises that operate in the field of cultural tourism, as defined in the Horizon 2020 SPOT project. Thereby, the interviewees included entrepreneurs, owners, or managers of companies (e.g., accommodations and restaurants), sites related to tourism (e.g., museums and vineyards), or cultural events. These businesses are considered the key 'producers' of cultural tourism [12]. To ensure a comprehensive approach to addressing the four proposed Research Questions (RQs), the current investigation was structured into several stages (Figure 2):

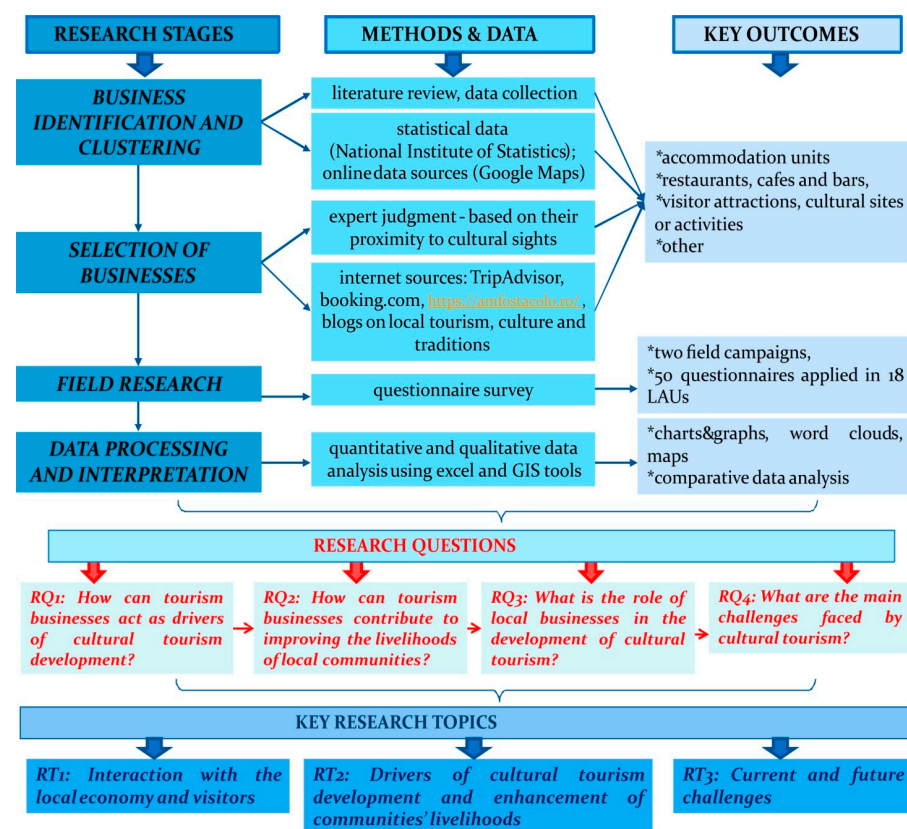


Figure 2. Business perspectives on cultural tourism: methodological flowchart.

In the first stage, all businesses in the study area were identified, mapped, and grouped into four major categories: (i) accommodation units (e.g., hotels and boarding houses), (ii) restaurants, cafes, and bars, (iii) visitor attractions and cultural sites or activities (e.g., cul-

tural heritage sites, vineyards, and museums), and (iv) other (e.g., festivals and outdoor activities). The data collection of the businesses was based on systematic documentation using statistical data provided by the National Institute of Statistics, supplemented by internet data sources (Google Maps) to ensure the accurate location of each business. During this stage, a set of questions was developed to gather information from businesses regarding their role in cultural tourism, as well as their interaction with visitors and the local economy. The questionnaire survey was designed with four main sections, each addressing key aspects of cultural tourism (Figure 3). Each section is further detailed in Section 4 of the article, which provides an in-depth analysis of the survey results.

General Questions about the Business

location, type, size, ownership, admission fee, number of visitors, visitors' capacity, total beds, occupancy rate, average stay, business establishing, busiest time, employees

5.1. Businesses' Interaction with Visitors & Local Economy

What is the admission fees per individual adult visitor? What is the estimated revenue per visitor? How many visitors does your business receive? What is the total visitors capacity? What is the average time visitors spend at your facility? What type of visitors are targeted? Where do your visitors come from? What is the share of income from domestic and foreign tourism?

5.2. Businesses as Drivers of Cultural Tourism and Improving Communities' Livelihood

What cultural themes your business offers? What cultural themes would you like to see further developed in your business, or in this area? What type of tourism your business attract? Does your business cooperate with other tourist businesses in the area? What is the cooperation between your business, or tourist businesses in general, and the cultural sector?

5.3. Challenges of Cultural Tourism Business

What aspects do you think could provide most economic improvement in your area? What could be improved in the area – and by whom – to improve the experience both for tourists and for your business? What are the expectations and preferences of the visitors to your business? How do you feel about the number of tourists that visits your business? Which are the visitors to your business? How do you promote your business?

Figure 3. Key questions for assessing cultural tourism businesses.

In the second stage, the selection of businesses was made based on expert judgment regarding their locations in relation to the main objectives of cultural tourism in the area. It was considered that each cultural tourism objective should be spatially and functionally connected to at least one category of business. A significant role in selecting the businesses was also played by internet sources for ranking businesses, such as TripAdvisor, booking.com, [69,70], and various blogs promoting local tourism, culture, and traditions.

The third stage was devoted to field research. Given the size of the study area (comprising a total of 34 Local Administrative Units/LAUs), the limited accessibility, and the relative remoteness of some areas with cultural attractions that hold tourism business, the field research was carried out in two stages: at the beginning of August and at mid-September 2020. The preparation of the two field campaigns was also important, given the restrictions related to the COVID-19 pandemic. In most cases, the selected businesses were initially contacted by phone. Based on their availability, they were then visited in person. A smaller number of questionnaires were sent online via e-mail or WhatsApp to managers or administrators who were unavailable or did not have time to answer the questions during the in-person visits.

The field research was conducted in relation to the spatial distribution of businesses, which were grouped as accessibility hubs of the most important areas with cultural tourist potential. The authors tried to approach as many businesses as possible in 18 of the total of 34 LAUs focusing on units near key tourist attractions. These businesses varied in size, services offered, and economic profile to provide diverse perspectives and perceptions on cultural tourism.

Given that the field research took place after a period of significant restrictions for the tourism sector due to the COVID-19 pandemic, there was a notable willingness among the

interviewees to be involved in the questionnaire survey. They shared their experiences, needs, challenges, and expectations regarding their business and ways to improve it. Considering the geographical characteristics of the study area in terms of limited accessibility, long distances between localities, the geographical isolation of some villages, the lack of tourism businesses in some localities, and the conditions imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic, the number of the completed questionnaires is considered representative.

The fourth stage was focused on the processing and interpretation of the data resulting from the analysis of the questionnaires. The highest number of business surveys were applied in Berca (9 surveys), followed by Gura Teghii with 6 surveys and Tisău and Mânzălești with 4 surveys each. By type of business, out of 50 questionnaires applied across the 18 LAUs (communes and towns), 44% were completed by accommodation units, 6% by cafés, bars, and restaurants, 45% by visitor attractions, sites, or activities, and 5% by other types of businesses (Figure 2).

With these data, we can describe the businesses. Of the 50 total surveyed business, 22 were (i) accommodation units. The most common type of accommodation was guest-houses (50%), reflecting the predominantly rural profile of the area. This was followed by 4* and 5* hotels (18.18%) in the communes of Haleș/Tisău, SărataMonteoru/Merei, and Gura Siriului, as well as other categories: 2* and 3* hotels (13.64%) located in the communes of Măgura and Gura Siriului, a hostel in Vernești, farm accommodation in Gura Teghii, glamping in Gura Teghii, and rooms for rent in Tisău. The accommodation capacity of nearly half of the accommodation units ranged between 21–50 beds, followed by 11–20 beds (27.3%) and those with over 50 beds (13.6%) in the larger units in SărataMonteoru, Măgura, and Tisău (2*, 3*, and 4* hotels). The most prevalent average length of stay was 2–4 nights (81.8%), followed by 1 night (13.6%) for transit tourists. Only 4.5% of guests stayed for longer periods of 5–7 nights.

Among the 18 interviewees in the (ii) visitor attraction, site, or activity category, questionnaires were applied to the curators of natural sights (e.g., Ulmet “Trovants”, BercaMud Volcanoes, Buzău Land Geopark), vineyards (e.g., Pietroasele and Aurelia Vișinescu), museums (e.g., Colți Amber Museum, Vasile Voiculescu Museum, Museum of Shapes, Bozioru, Museum 7 Story Places, and Casa cu Blazoane—Eng. House with coats of arms), cultural heritage sites (e.g., Nucuand Aluniș), theme parks (e.g., Aluniș Art Center), and monasteries (e.g., Răteștiand Berca), farms (e.g., Under Penteleu Farm, Plavăț Donkey Farm, and Cislău Horse Stud). The oldest visitor attractions/sites in the study area date back to the 19th century and include a religious site—Rătești Monastery founded in 1868—and the Pietroasa Research and Development Station for Viticulture and Enology, established in 1893. Other visitor attractions/sites were created in the first half of the 20th century, such as the Cislău Horse Stud, established in 1945 as a centre for the growth and development of the English Thoroughbred (though it existed as a stallion warehouse from 1884 to 1916), and the Colți Amber Museum (opened in 1970).

The category of (iii) restaurant, café, or bar included 3 units primarily offering traditional foods. The fourth category of (iv) other encompassed 7 businesses, namely festivals (e.g., Mânzălești, Sausage Day Festival—Pleşcoi, and Vadoo Chill Fest), events dedicated to wine and gastronomy, outdoor activities (e.g., Green Camp), or stores selling local products (e.g., Rafinețuri in Chiojdu and Băcănialu’ Nea Ticu in Pleșcoi).

Overall, nearly half of the interviewed businesses were established more than 10 years prior to the survey (44%), while 24% were established between 5 and 10 years prior and 18% between 3 and 5 years before. Only 14% of the businesses were established within the last 3 years. The majority of the entrepreneurs interviewed reported that they owned a family-owned business (36%), followed closely by private-owned business (34%) and the public sector, i.e., museums, religious sites, several festivals, and the Cislău Horse Stud (26%), while only 4% were NGOs. For 94%, the peak season was summer, followed by autumn (36%) and school holidays (34%). Spring (14%) and winter (8%) were generally considered off-peak seasons in the study area.

5. Results

The interaction between business and cultural tourism highlights elements that explain the role of businesses as drivers of cultural tourism. Additionally, through the involvement of visitors (tourists) and local communities, businesses contribute to economic growth and local development. The three key research topics of this paper are further explored below through the perspectives of the interviewed businesses.

5.1. Businesses' Interactions with Visitors and the Local Economy

The relationship between businesses, visitors, and the local economy highlights the vital role businesses play in driving cultural tourism and enhancing community livelihoods. This relationship reflects the local impact of tourism businesses, their connection with local (cultural) attractions, their participation in cultural tourism, and their interaction with visitors, showing their ability to attract tourists and revenues for the area. We examined several factors that define the characteristics of these businesses in relation with visitors and the nature of the visit, including admission fees, the number of visitors and the capacity to accommodate them, the time spent at each cultural attraction, the type and origin of visitors, and the income generated from tourism.

The admission fee per individual adult visitor (full-price ticket) reflects both the potential revenues from cultural tourism and the businesses' ability to attract tourists. These fees range from free entry in the case of fourteen businesses to a maximum of EUR 50 for one. Most businesses fall within the under-EUR 25 category, with fourteen offering no fee and eight charging between EUR 1 and EUR 13. This category includes museums, farms/vineyards, theme parks, cultural heritage sites, religious sites, natural site, festivals, horse studs, and stores selling local products (Figure 4). This pricing structure highlights both the low economic level of the region and the modest spending capacity of its visitors. In the EUR 25–50 category, there are two business: one vineyard (EUR 30) and one outdoor activity (EUR 35). The highest admission fee (EUR 50) is attributed to the Vadoo Chill Fest, a festival that blends nature with diverse music genres, such as jazz, funk, alternative, and electronic. Overall, the range of admission fees illustrates the diversity of cultural tourism offerings in the region, from low-cost, community-oriented attractions to exclusive experiences. This diversity underscores the importance of balancing affordability with the need to generate sustainable revenue for local businesses and the broader economy.

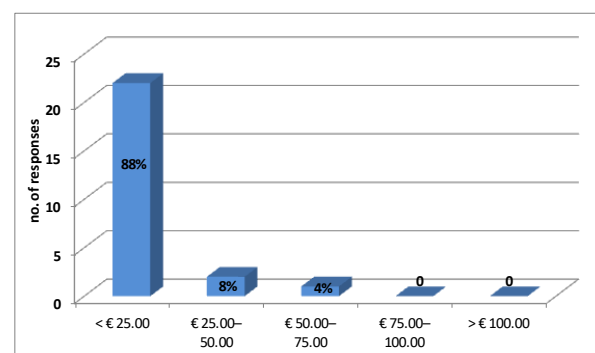


Figure 4. Admission fees per individual adult visitor.

The estimated expenditure per visitor for food, beverages/souvenirs, and other offerings ranges from no fee in the case of 11 business, which include cultural heritage sites, farms/vineyards, and religious sites, to EUR 50 at the Sausage Festival in Pleşcoi Commune (Figure 5). The majority of businesses, 19 in total, fall under the EUR 25 category for additional visitor expenditures. A smaller group, consisting of five businesses (two festivals, two vineyards, and one outdoor activity provider), has estimated revenues between EUR 25 and EUR 50 per visitor. However, for most businesses (76%) that do not exceed EUR 25 in additional revenue per visitor, there is a noticeable limitation in their capacity to generate

further income. This suggests a limited capacity for these businesses to generate extra income from visitors, reflecting either the nature of the services offered or the economic profile of the region's tourists. Many of these businesses likely focus on providing essential or low-cost services, which might not provide enough to invest in additional offerings or upscale amenities. As a result, these businesses may face challenges in expanding their revenue streams beyond the basic ticket fee.

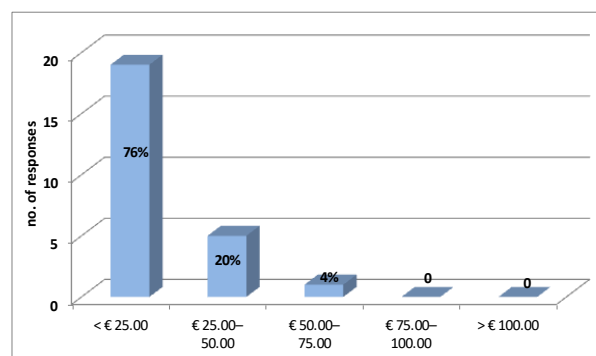


Figure 5. Estimated expenditure per visitor.

The average number of visitors in a year varies from 100 (Plavăț Donkey Farm) to over 100,000 visitors (Băcănialu' Nea Ticu, a store with local products). Businesses with fewer than 1000 visitors annually account for 20% of the total number, comprising five businesses: two farms/vineyards, one museum, one cultural heritage site, and one store with local products (Figure 6). The category of 1000 to 5000 visitors/year includes 14 business, representing 56% of the total. This group consists of one theme park, outdoor activities, a children's workshop, a religious site, two museums and cultural heritage sites, three farms/vineyards, and three festivals. A single farm falls into the 5000 to 10,000 visitors/year category, attracting an average number of 8000 visitors annually. The Colți Amber Museum, Aluniș Archaeological Site (a heritage site), and a Buzău Land Geopark (a natural site) are classified in the 10,000–50,000 visitors/year category. Lastly, the Mud Volcanoes in Berca, a natural site and a key place identity landmark for the study area, attract between 50,000 and 100,000 visitors annually.

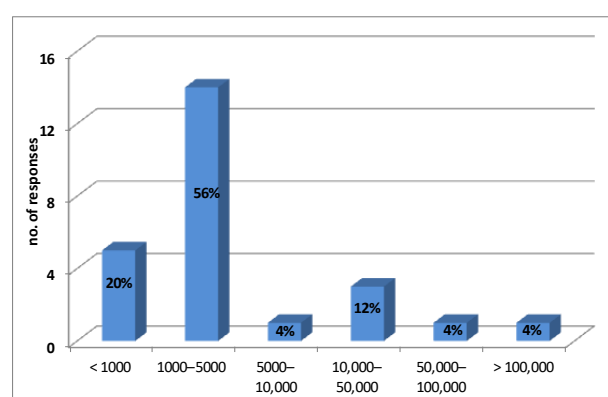


Figure 6. Average number of visitors in a year.

The total visitor capacity ranges from 500 visitors (Plavăț Donkey Farm) to over 100,000 visitors (Băcănialu' Nea Ticu). Approximately 48% of the businesses fall into the 1000–10,000 visitors category, while 28% are in the 10,000–50,000 visitors range (Figure 7). The category with over 100,000 visitors includes three businesses: a children's workshop, a natural site, and a store with local products. The 50,000–100,000 visitors category includes two business: the Vasile Voiculescu Museum and Cislău Horse Stud. This indicator highlights the capacity of these businesses to attract visitors in the future and, consequently,

their potential to generate additional revenue for both the businesses themselves and the local economy. As visitor numbers increase, businesses can reinvest in infrastructure, improve services, and expand their offerings, leading to a positive feedback loop that benefits the entire local economy.

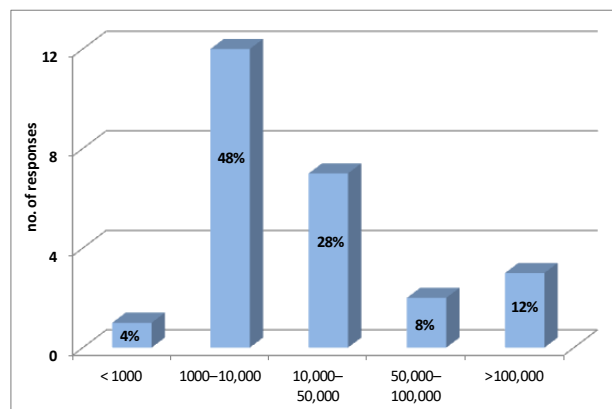


Figure 7. Total visitor capacity.

The average time spent by visitors varies from 0.3 h in the case of a local products store and 12 h in the case of a natural site (Buzău Land Geopark). For 12 businesses (48%), the time spent is less than 2 h (e.g., religious sites, museums, cultural heritage sites, and farms or vineyards) (Figure 8). For seven businesses (28%) including theme parks cultural heritage sites, and natural sites, visitors typically spend between 2 and 4 h. In the case of one vineyard and one festival, the average time spent ranges between 4 and 6 h. The longest durations, typically between 6 and 12 h, are observed at festivals, outdoor activity centres, cultural heritage sites, and natural sites. This indicates a higher level of visitor engagement with attractions that offer outdoor experiences. This trend can be attributed to the region's association with natural attractions, which serve primarily as attractions for tourists. Visitors are often motivated to explore the area's natural beauty, participate in outdoor activities, and engage with cultural sites, making these attractions more appealing for extended stays.

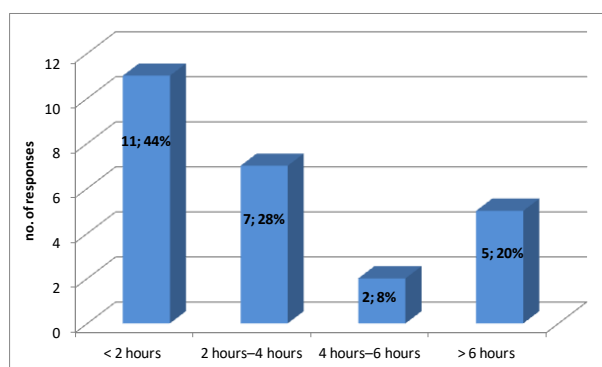


Figure 8. Average time spent by visitors.

For the type of visitors, visitors can be categorized into five main groups: children, families, adults, and others. Each category is evaluated on a scale of importance ranging from 1 (most important) to 4 (least important). Families are the most important visitor type for 77% of businesses (levels 1 and 2). These businesses include festivals, vineyards, outdoor activities, and cultural heritage sites. Additionally, 20% of businesses (level 3), such as museums, cultural heritage sites, natural sites, and children's workshops, also consider families a significant visitor group. Adults represent an important visitor category, with 76% of businesses (levels 1 and 2) emphasizing their importance. This group is particularly

relevant for a diverse range of cultural assets: vineyards, cultural heritage sites, natural sites, religious site, and museums. Nearly 25% of businesses (levels 3 and 4), especially those involving cultural heritage and natural sites, also consider adults an important visitor segment. Children are important for certain businesses that offer attractions specifically designed for them, such as children's workshops, museums, theme parks, cultural heritage sites, and natural sites. For 45% of the businesses (levels 1 and 2), children are a primary focus. However, for 29% (level 3) and 27% (level 4), children are a secondary or tertiary focus, respectively. Businesses that rank children as level 4 in importance typically include festivals, vineyards, and religious sites. The 'other' category, which generally includes group visitors, is considered the least important, with 99% of businesses assigning them to levels 3 and 4 of importance (Figure 9). This suggests that most businesses prioritize individual visitors, such as families and adults, over organized group tours.

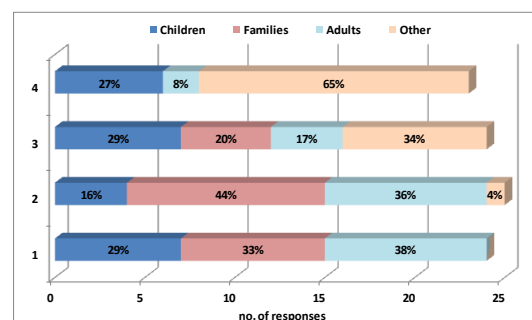


Figure 9. The type of visitors.

Concerning the origin of visitors for most of the questioned businesses, the most important sources of visitors (ranked at levels 1 and 2 in terms of importance) are domestic. Specifically, 96% of businesses prioritize domestic tourists within 150 km (96%) and 100% consider domestic tourists from beyond 150 km (100%) as essential. This highlights the critical role of domestic tourism in driving both the local tourism industry and the broader local economy. In contrast, international tourists from outside the EU are considered least significant, often ranked at level 5 in terms of importance (Figure 10).

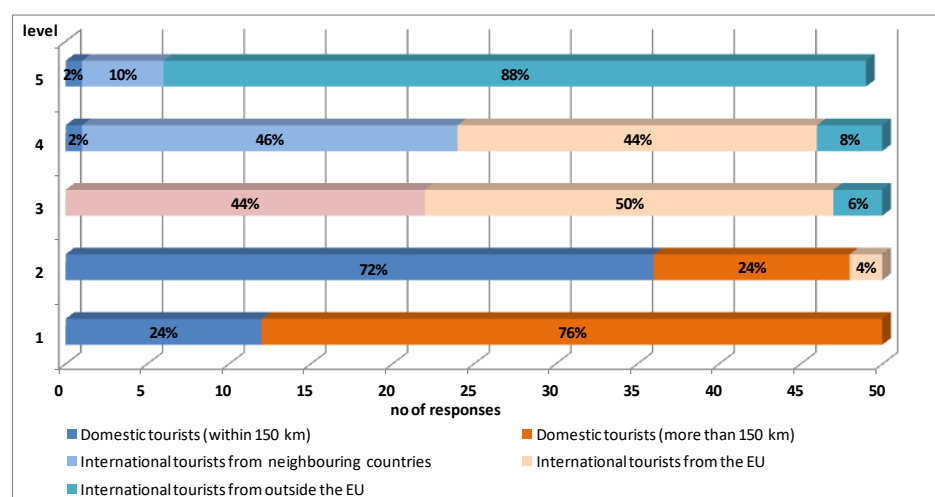


Figure 10. The origin of visitors.

The categories of international tourists from neighbouring countries and international tourists from the EU are relatively balanced in terms of importance, with 90% and 94% of businesses, respectively, assigning them to levels 3 and 4. Several factors contribute to the limited flux of international tourists, including underdeveloped local infrastructure, poor connectivity with major cities, and insufficient promotion of the region. These challenges

result in a lower number of foreign visitors, which in turn limits their contribution to the local economy. Addressing these issues could help attract more international tourists and enhance the region's economic development.

The share of income from domestic and foreign tourism is closely linked to the origin of visitors and reflects their contribution to the local economy, as well as their role in supporting community livelihoods. The majority of tourism businesses (70%) reported that domestic tourism accounts for the largest shares of their income, with 91% to 100% of their revenue coming from domestic visitors. Additionally, 10% of businesses indicated that domestic tourism contributes between 71% and 90% of their total income. In contrast, foreign tourism makes a minimal contribution to local businesses, with 70% of respondents stating that international tourists account for only 1% to 10% of their revenue (Figure 11). This limited contribution underscores the reliance of the local economy on domestic tourists and highlights the need for strategies to attract more international visitors.

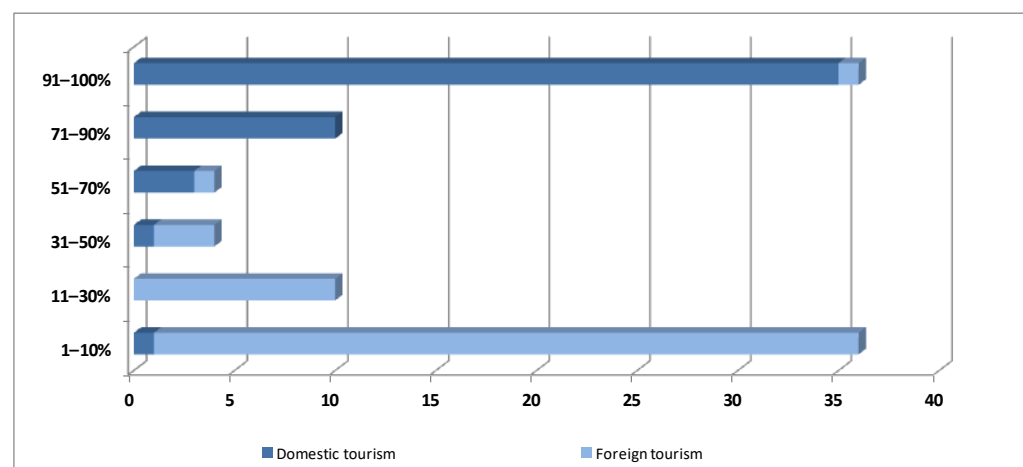


Figure 11. Share of income from domestic and foreign tourism.

5.2. Businesses as Drivers of Cultural Tourism and Improving Communities' Livelihood

While tourism businesses contribute to economic growth by attracting tourists and supporting local industries, they face challenges such as infrastructure limitations, workforce shortages, and seasonal demand. However, these businesses can also play a crucial role in influencing and attracting cultural activities in order to develop and expand cultural tourism. This can be achieved by identifying the existing cultural themes already offered by the businesses, exploring the desire to develop or expand the range of cultural themes within their companies, developing partnerships with similar businesses, or by collaborating with institutions that provide cultural services. Understanding this causal relationship is essential for recognising and outlining the contributions and roles of tourism businesses in the development of cultural tourism.

Overall, the cultural themes offered by the interviewed businesses vary, with gastronomy and wine being the most prevalent (78%), followed by folklore/local traditions (42%) and heritage (36%). Religion, music and history also rank relatively highly, with 28% each. These main themes align well with the region's general profile, which is known for gastronomy and wine, preserving traditions and customs, religious monuments, and pilgrimage sites—an area that has increasingly developed as a tourist destination in recent years. The 'other' category also holds a significant share (40%), with most of the businesses suggesting various themes, many of which are related to outdoor activities (e.g., sports, biking, rafting, cycling, hiking, and hunting) alongside cultural activities (e.g., exhibitions and the use and promotion of local products) (Figure 12). These cultural themes take advantage of the region's rich natural resources, such as its dramatic landscapes, fast-moving waters, and diverse wildlife, as well as tourists' desire to spend more time in nature. It is important to note that tourists seek authenticity, preferring experiences that are as close as

possible to the local culture. This preference partly shapes the tourist offers developed by businesses. Additionally, businesses that focus on visitor attractions, sites, or activities end to be less flexible in providing additional or varied cultural services compared to those in the accommodation and restaurant sectors.

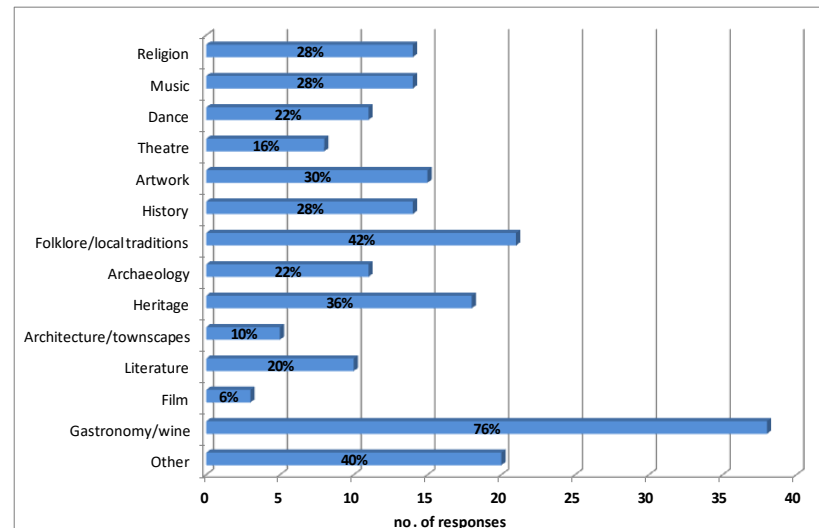


Figure 12. Cultural themes offered.

The desire to develop cultural themes refers to the types of cultural elements the business would like to develop and offer in the future, ranking them by importance. According to the businesses interviewed, the most important cultural themes they aim to develop, both in their own business and in the region, include folklore/local traditions, gastronomy and wine, and, nearly equally, history and heritage. However, there are some differences in how these themes are prioritized within the business compared to the broader region. Within their own business, gastronomy/wine ranks highest (74%), followed by folklore/local traditions (58%) and heritage (42%). These preferences indicate the businesses' desire to offer services that capitalize on both the natural resources and cultural heritage of the area. Despite some businesses having already incorporated these elements (as noted in the previous question), they are committed to continuing the same strategies that have contributed to their success thus far. For the entire area, the interviewees indicated folklore/local traditions (70%), history (56%), and artwork and heritage (52% each) as key themes (Figure 13). These themes are intended to stimulate tourism in the region, creating a favourable environment for the expansion and development of cultural tourism.

The 'other' category has relatively low shares; however, the suggested themes are primarily focused on outdoor activities. Similarly, the categories of film, literature, and architecture/townscape also show low shares, as these themes are generally not aligned with the characteristics of the study area. They are more commonly associated with predominantly urban environments.

Concerning the cultural packages and target groups, most of the interviewed businesses focus on family tourism (74%—levels 4 and 5), followed by outdoor/adventure searching and couples/lonely travellers, each category accounting for 58% at levels 4 and 5. Mass tourism is also a significant target for 50% of the businesses at levels 4 and 5. Additionally, eco-tourism is prominently featured, with 54% of businesses targeting it at levels 4 and 5 (Figure 14).

These main types of tourism are closely related to the region's key characteristics, which include natural landscapes, fresh air, environmentally friendly activities, and options enjoyed by families with children. The field study showed that the tourism offered by business in the area is less addressed to couples and even less to business/work-related groups. These latter categories typically require specific amenities and access to luxury and relax-

ation facilities, which are less prevalent in the area. Only two of the interviewed businesses mentioned offering other types of tourism, such as hunting, fishing, and religious tourism.

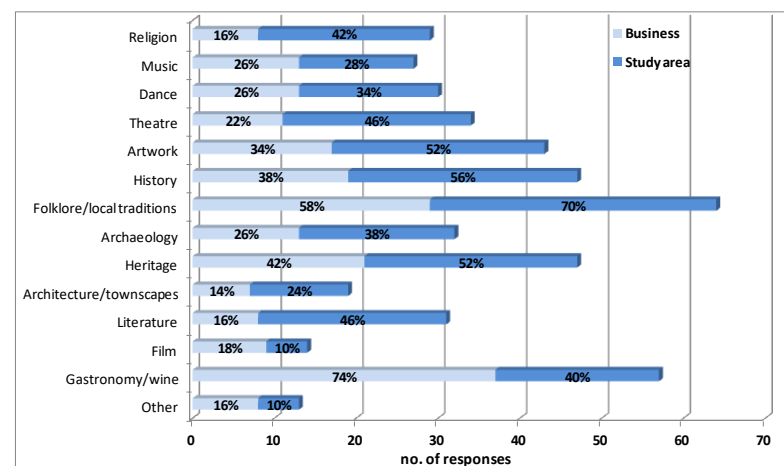


Figure 13. Desire to develop cultural themes in the area.

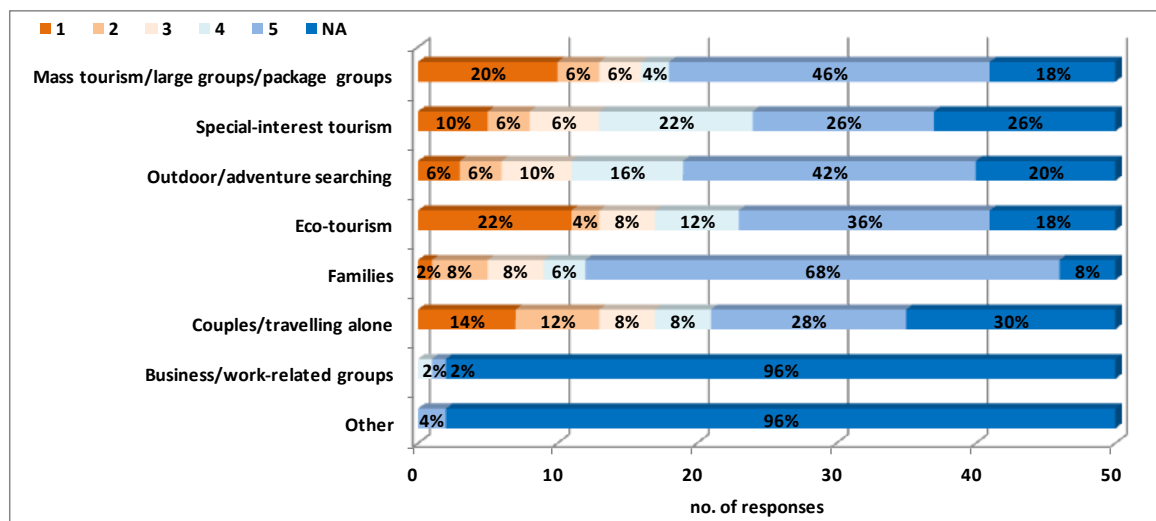


Figure 14. Type of tourism offered.

Regarding cooperation with other (tourist) businesses, most of the interviewed businesses mentioned one of the most frequent forms of collaboration they engage in involves joint activities and cultural itineraries and routes (24% each). These collaborations generally include working with companies that organize trips to various tourist attractions, hosting cultural and gastronomic events, or even collaborating with (other) accommodation units. However, a similar share (20%) indicated that they have no collaboration with other similar businesses. Additionally, 16% specified other types of collaborations, such as with volunteers and NGOs (Figure 15). The remaining interviewees did not consider any type of collaboration relevant or suitable for their business.

This suggests that local businesses have long relied on existing resources, supported by largely empirical promotion, which has not encouraged the enhancement of tourist offerings or external collaboration.

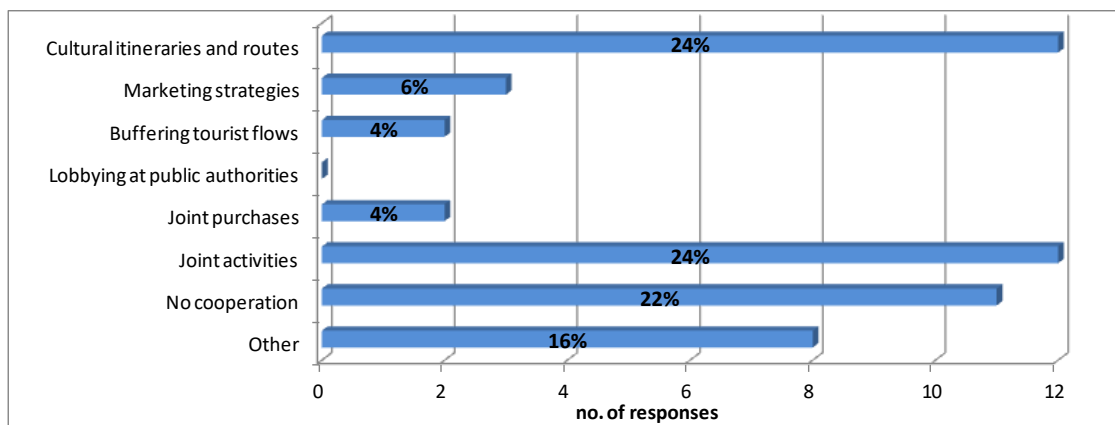


Figure 15. Cooperating with other (tourist) businesses.

Cooperation between business, tourist companies, and the cultural sectors has revealed the potential for collaboration, both at the level of individual businesses or the units they manage and at the regional tourism level (with up to 30% of responses indicating strong agreement, as marked by 4 and 5, each) (Figure 16). However, despite this identified potential, statements regarding actual collaborations between businesses and the cultural sector at both the individual and regional levels did not receive strong endorsements. This explains the lack of substantial interest from many decision-making cultural institutions in establishing partnerships. Additionally, it may suggest tourism businesses are not sufficiently involved in developing these partnerships. Notably, several respondents selected “Not Applicable” (NA) for each of the statements, which could imply that such collaborations do not exist, cannot exist, or are simply not of interest. This lack of established partnerships or concrete collaboration efforts represents a significant barrier to the growth of cultural tourism.

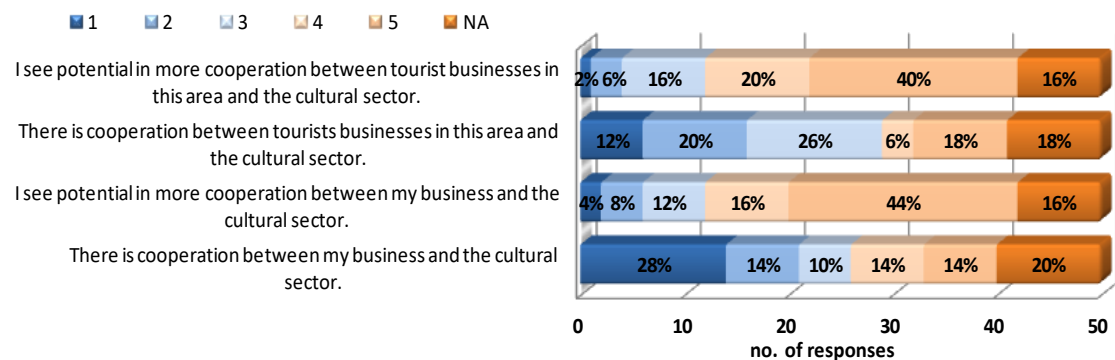


Figure 16. Cooperation between business, tourist companies, and the cultural sectors.

5.3. Challenges of Cultural Tourism Business

A closer examination reveals the challenges businesses face in balancing profit generation with the preservation of cultural heritage and contributing to inclusive community development. The focus is primarily on aspects related to the basic endowments necessary for the development of tourist activities. In addition, considerations are made regarding on how both the business and the services related to cultural tourism are promoted, particularly through the cultural offerings, in order to attract tourists.

The supporting elements for cultural tourism, as revealed by the current study, are twofold. They reflect both the interests of those involved in the tourism business in understanding tourists' needs and expectations, as well as the preferences and habits of tourists, as seen through the eyes of those providing tourist services. Based on the ranking of the most important factors contributing to the economic development of the

area, infrastructure (i.e., improvements in the road network) is by far the most frequently mentioned factor, with 76% of interviewed businesses citing it as the top priority (level 1 of importance). Other factors include the improvement of tourist services through information provision to tourists (14%) and public transport, particularly the bus network (10%). Lower values (less than 10%) focus on enhancing the tourist offer at local level through gastronomy (such as increasing the number or quality of restaurants, which are scarce in some areas), events, and attractions (Figure 17). Therefore, transport infrastructure (roads and public transport) remains a key area in need of significant improvements to support the region's tourist development. The category 'other', while less frequently specified, generally includes suggestions related to infrastructure, tourist promotion, or the revitalization of local attractions (e.g., carriages, carts, Old Diligences Road, restaurants, public awareness campaigns, tourist markings, tourists, and signage).

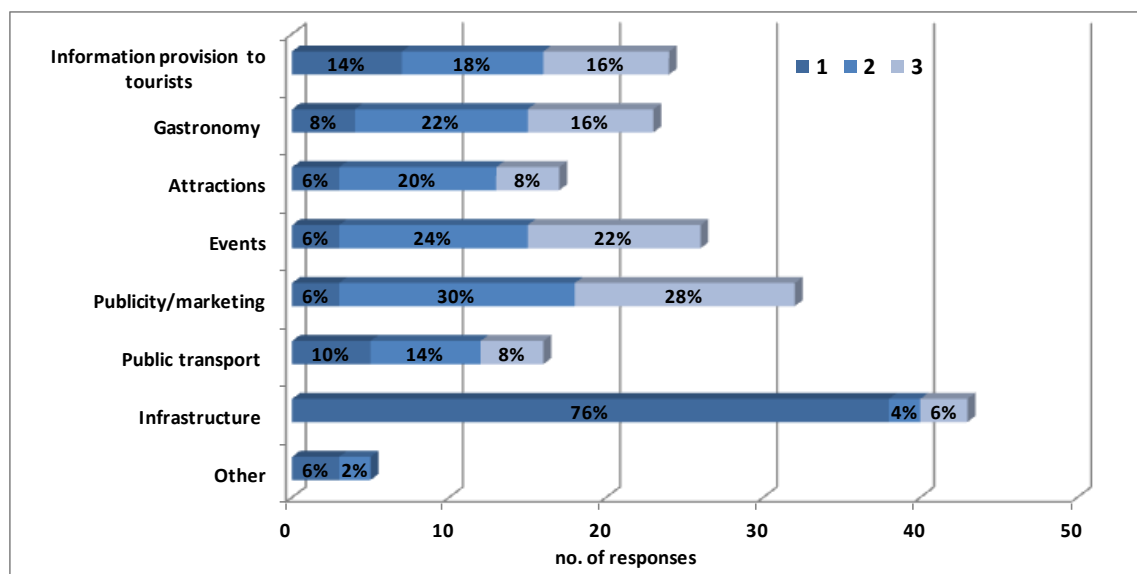


Figure 17. Aspects that support the development of cultural tourism.

The overall improvements suggested by the interviewees highlight a series of short-term or long-term needs that must be analysed and considered to support tourism in general and cultural tourism in particular. Among the most frequently mentioned improvements, two major categories can be distinguished: (1) infrastructure-related improvements, typically referring to transport infrastructure (e.g., roads inside the area, but also to connect with the surrounding regions, public transport, cycling routes, and road signs) and municipal services (e.g., sewerage, water supply, and waste collection) and (2) tourism promotion, which encompasses aspects such as tourist signage, promotional materials, restaurants, events, attractions, and publicity. In addition to these, other suggestions include government investments, collaboration with the tourism sector, involvement from local authorities, and improvements to public facilities (Figure 18). These recommendations suggest the need for a top-down approach to financially and institutionally support the development of cultural tourism in the area. It is worth noting that the challenges and needs identified by the interviewees closely align with those identified by tourists and residents as essential to supporting the region's tourism development.



Figure 18. The overall improvement in the area.

To attain insight into the number of tourists visiting every year, this analysis considers the number of tourists visiting annually during the five-year period from 2015 to 2019, excluding the post-2020 pandemic years. The aim is to classify the study region as either overcrowded or undercrowded, based on the perception of local business representatives. Most of businesses (66%), particularly those located in mountain areas such as Gura Teghii, Gura Siriului, and Mânzălești (Figure 19), feel themselves overcrowded with tourists. These areas are popular with visitors seeking natural environments and outdoor activities, and respondents indicated high levels of agreement (levels 4 and 5 on a 5-point scale) regarding overcrowding. In contrast, 34% of respondents, primarily those in less accessible or lesser-known regions, reported low or very low tourist numbers (levels 1 and 2). These businesses highlighted a need for increased tourism promotion and improved infrastructure to attract more visitors and enhance the region's appeal. This question reveals a notable disparity in tourist distribution across the region, emphasizing the dual challenge of managing overcrowding in popular mountain areas, which face infrastructure strain, environmental degradation, and diminished visitor experiences.

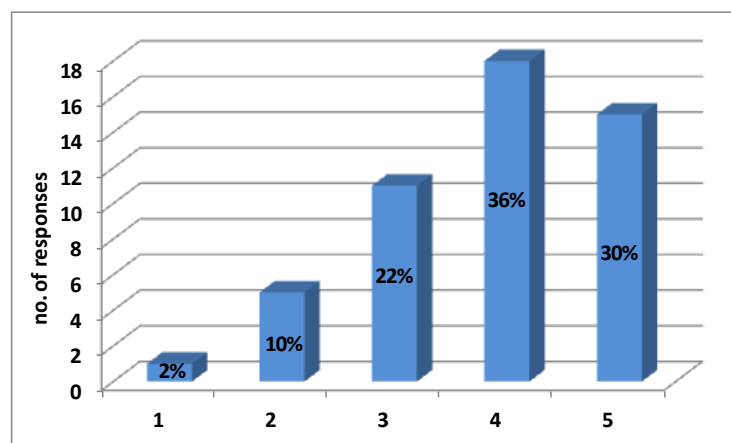


Figure 19. Feelings about number of tourists visiting business every year.

Regarding insights into tourists' expectations and preferences, the survey reveals that tourists highly value experiencing the local culture and traditions of the area, with 94% of respondents indicating strong agreement (levels 4 and 5). This is followed by a desire to learn about the attractions/sites/events with 80% expressing high levels of agreement. Additionally, 74% of respondents showed a willingness to spend a significant portion of their time visiting cultural attractions, sites, and events in the area (Figure 20). These findings underscore the importance of enhancing the overall quality of the visitor experience and ensuring a high level of tourist satisfaction across businesses. Consequently, the overall level of agreement with all surveyed statements is consistently high, reflecting the shared goal of improving visitor engagement and satisfaction in the region.

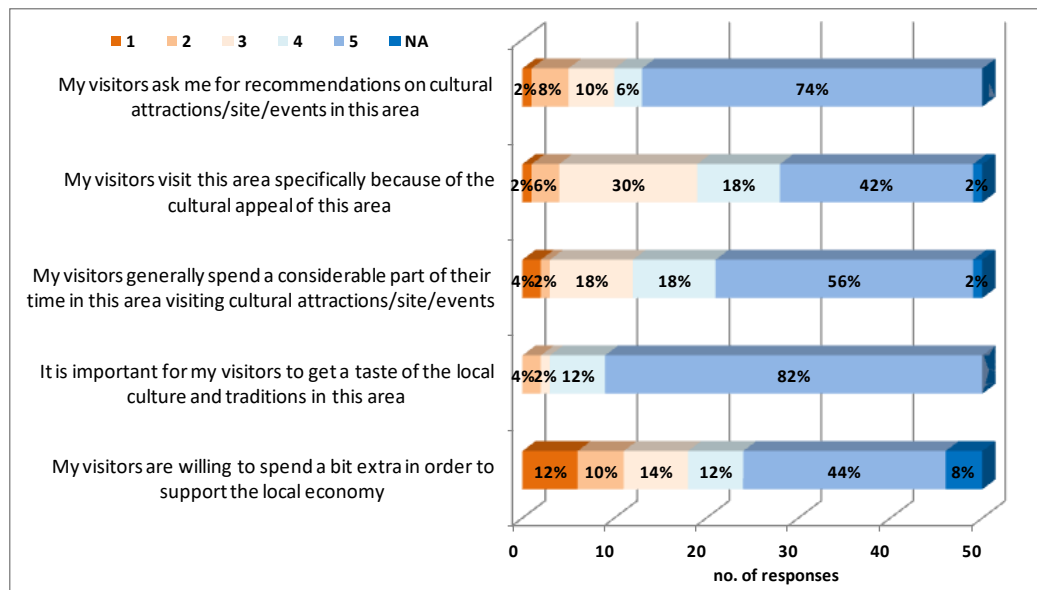


Figure 20. Statements regarding the visitors of the business.

Concerning promotion and advertising, the local entrepreneurs employ a variety of methods to promote their businesses, targeting audiences from local to (inter)national levels through various media sources. The most commonly used promotional tools cited by the interviewed businesses are website (78%), social media (72%), and word of mouth (72%). In the recent years, the use of the internet and social media to promote cultural events at regional and national level has expanded, particularly in wine tourism. This sector increasingly relies on regional branding initiatives (e.g., wine and bike routes and wine tastings), but also on markets, fairs, and festivals showcasing local products (e.g., Pleşcoi sausages). In contrast, only 18% of respondents reported using a travel agent/tourist information centre for promotion. This may be due to the limited number of tourism information centres at the local level and the perception that they are not effective in promoting tourism activities.

In addition, TripAdvisor, printed media, and links from partner websites were also mentioned by a small percentage of surveyed businesses, ranging between 24% and 32% (Figure 21). It can be concluded that local businesses do not frequently rely on platforms like TripAdvisor, possibly because they are satisfied with other promotional methods, such as word of mouth, which appears to be highly valued and effective in attracting customers. Thus, many businesses prefer direct, cost-effective marketing channels, such as social media, which offer greater flexibility, instant interaction with potential customers, and a broader reach compared to traditional tourist information centres.

To summarise the overall perspective of businesses on cultural tourism in the area, we examined the general perception of the interviewed businesses regarding the development potential of cultural tourism, the current development stage, and the external (governmental) support needed for future growth. The largest share of respondents highlighted the role of national or regional authorities (government) in the development of tourism in the area, particularly in terms of assisting businesses and investing in cultural tourism (80% each—maximum level of agreement). Further, significant shares (over 70%—maximum level of agreement) emphasized the increasing number of tourists and the need to regulate tourist flows (Figure 22). These responses suggest that cultural tourism in the area requires substantial investments to attract more tourists. Local businesses alone do not have enough power to grow and sustain themselves, indicating the need for top-down institutional support. At the same time, the interviewees widely agreed (68%—maximum level of agreement) that the cultural tourism potential of the region is very high, indicating optimism for improving tourist offerings through investments and infrastructure development. The

strongest disagreement was related to the current level of cultural tourism development, which aligns with the previously mentioned challenges.

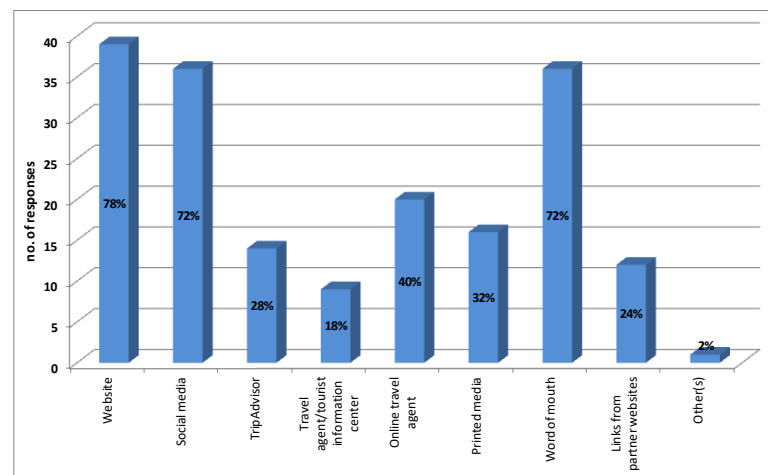


Figure 21. Promotion and advertising.

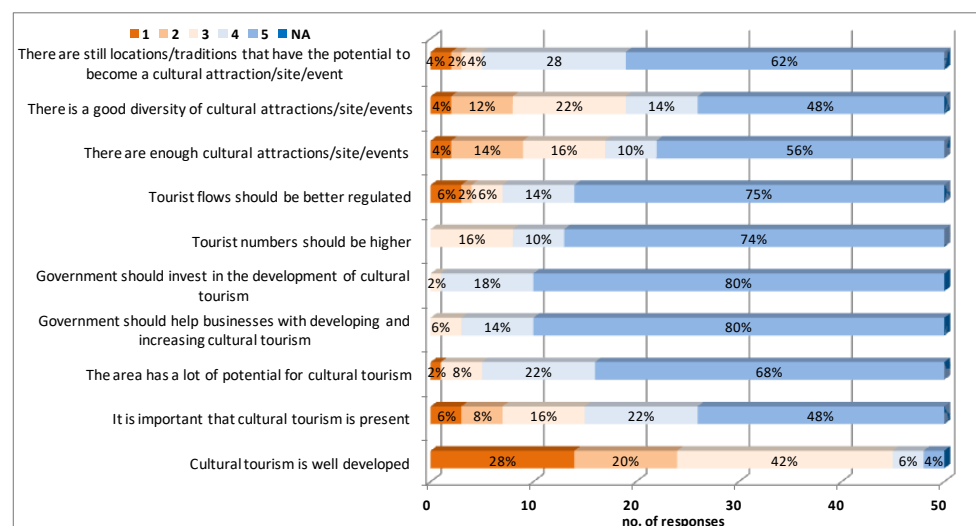


Figure 22. Agreement with statements about (cultural) tourism in area.

The statement that cultural tourism is well developed in the area received the lowest levels of agreement (1 and 2) from 50% of the interviewed businesses, which aligns with the identified needs for supported elements of cultural tourism (see previous questions).

The relationship between tourism and cultural objectives/sights is shaped by how these two components support each other in defining cultural tourism. It was particularly interesting to observe how businesses promote their cultural tourism offerings, develop cultural themes, and, where these cultural elements do not exist as an intrinsic value, how they establish relationships with cultural and heritage attractions.

6. Discussions

Despite the goals set by the Master Plan for the Development of National Tourism in Romania (2007–2026) to transform Romania into a leading tourist destination by emphasizing its natural and cultural heritage, cultural tourism remains underdeveloped and difficult to quantify [24,25]. Recently, cultural and sustainable tourism have increasingly been recognized as key drivers for economic growth, social inclusion, and the preservation of cultural and natural resources on the national agenda [25].

At the local and regional levels, cultural tourism can play a critical role in revitalizing rural communities by promoting intercultural connections, such as the promotion of the European cultural routes like the Cultural Routes of the Council of Europe. The lower population densities and the relative lack of economic alternatives have made rural cultural tourism a successful option for the development of rural areas [66]. In the study area—the Buzău Carpathians and Sub-Carpathians—cultural tourism, coupled with support from tourism businesses, has the potential to drive sustainable and inclusive economic growth. An example is the integration the local Wine Route into the European Iter Vitis Route, offering new opportunities for regional branding and development.

In line with the above, this article highlights the significant role of businesses in driving cultural tourism development, particularly in rural areas with under-promoted cultural assets. To achieve this, we aimed to address several key questions about the role of specific types of businesses in the development of cultural tourism and how this, in turn, can support local development and improve the livelihoods of local communities. The answers to the questions raised at the beginning of the paper help us understand the potential of cultural tourism as a major driver of tourism development in a predominantly rural area. This region is primarily known for its natural attractions with cultural assets that remain under-promoted. Despite these challenges, including remote areas and infrastructure shortcomings, cultural tourism holds significant potential for growth.

How can tourism businesses act as drivers of cultural tourism development? Businesses are at the heart of cultural tourism, acting as key drivers of local and regional development. This study has highlighted several ways in which they can contribute to the growth of cultural tourism in the area by stimulating and enhancing the cultural offerings and shaping tourist preferences for cultural experiences. Accommodation units, in particular, while not primarily focused on cultural tourism, can expand their cultural offerings, develop new activities, and attract additional businesses related to cultural tourism. Through these efforts, cultural tourism can attract a new category of businesses, targeting various components of the cultural tourism experience. When it comes to contributing to the local economy, domestic tourists appear to be the primary visitors, especially those from within a 150 km radius. Challenges related to transport infrastructure, coupled with the area's limited connections to major cities in Romania and international airports, restrict access for foreign tourists, particularly those from neighbouring countries who rely on personal vehicles for travel.

How can tourism businesses contribute to improving the livelihoods of local communities? The potential of cultural tourism, which remains largely underexplored, is a valuable resource that businesses can capitalize on to develop cultural tourism offerings while simultaneously creating jobs for local communities. Thus, local communities play a crucial role as a human resource, benefiting from the revenues generated by the extended tourist offer. This includes involving smaller (family-run) businesses and encouraging investments in infrastructure, leisure activities, and other related sectors.

What is the role of local businesses in the development of cultural tourism? The role of businesses in the development of cultural tourism is fundamental and complex. In addition to being key drivers in attracting and developing cultural tourist offerings, they also engage the local community, involving it in the process of building and enriching the cultural aspects of tourism at the local level. These efforts contribute to diversifying the tourism experience and improving the livelihoods and well-being of the community. However, we have observed a tendency among tourism business to isolate themselves from others in the industry. For a long time, businesses have relied solely on their intrinsic capabilities to attract tourists, using non-professional forms of promotion. This approach has limited investments in expanding and diversifying the tourism offer to include cultural elements. Moreover, businesses often avoid collaborating with others, driven by a fear of competition, and fail to see collaboration as a way to grow and attract more tourists.

What are the main challenges faced by cultural tourism? The main challenges faced by cultural tourism are largely similar to those encountered in, and can be summarized as

(though not limited to), infrastructure issues, such as roads, and challenges related to promotion and advertising. These difficulties are further exacerbated by the region's predominantly rural characteristics and its relative remoteness from major cities, which makes access more difficult, particularly for attractions located in remote villages or mountainous areas. In terms of advertising, there has been some improvement through social media platforms like Facebook, Instagram, and blogs, especially for specific events such as gastronomic or outdoor activities (e.g., wine and bike routes, and wine tasting in the Dealu Mare area). However, these remain relatively isolated cases. Understanding tourists' expectations by business representatives is essential, as it involves not only addressing the current challenges but also anticipating and avoiding them in the future.

While this study addressed critical questions regarding the relationship between tourism businesses and cultural tourism, it also raised new questions for future research. Two of these questions stood out due to their profound impact on local development, communities, and the preservation of cultural heritage: *How can tourism businesses further contribute to the empowerment of local communities?* And *How can cultural tourism contribute to heritage conservation while developing cultural experience for tourists?*

These questions will be explored in future studies as cultural tourism gains a more distinct place within Romania's tourism landscape and as both tourists and residents begin to recognize its value as a unique and differentiated form of tourism.

7. Conclusions

This study sheds light on the role of tourism businesses in the development of cultural tourism in the Buzău Carpathians and Sub-Carpathians, a rural area known for its natural attractions but with under-promoted cultural assets. It emphasizes how tourism businesses, particularly accommodations, can drive cultural tourism by expanding their offerings and attracting related businesses, thus benefiting the local economy. This study also highlights the significant potential for cultural tourism to improve local livelihoods by creating jobs and involving the local community in tourism development. However, cultural tourism in the region faces significant challenges, particularly ones related to inadequate infrastructure, a lack of promotion, and limited collaboration. Despite this, local tourism businesses bring economic prosperity by providing services that attract both domestic and international visitors, though most tourists come from within a 150 km radius. Poor transport infrastructure and limited connections to major cities and international airports further restrict access for foreign tourists, especially those who rely on personal vehicles. The key findings of this study can be summarized as follows:

- *Businesses as drivers of cultural tourism:* Tourism businesses are central to cultural tourism, stimulating local development by enhancing cultural offerings and attracting new businesses related to cultural tourism. Accommodation units, although not primarily focused on cultural tourism, can diversify their services and attract more visitors.
- *Impact on local communities:* Cultural tourism has the potential to improve local livelihoods by creating jobs and supporting smaller, family-run businesses. Local communities benefit from the revenues generated through expanded tourism offerings.
- *Challenges in collaboration:* Despite their importance, local businesses often operate in isolation from other cultural institutions and businesses, avoiding partnerships due to competition concerns. This limits their ability to diversify offerings and expand the reach of cultural tourism.
- *Challenges faced by cultural tourism:* Key obstacles include infrastructure issues (such as poor roads), limited access for foreign tourists due to remote locations, and insufficient promotion. While social media has helped in some cases, broader efforts to attract tourists remain insufficient.
- *Limited capacity of local businesses:* Small businesses and cultural event organizers often struggle to fully benefit from the cultural tourism sector. Challenges such as limited

access to international markets, securing investments, and inadequate infrastructure and services hinder their ability to meet the expectations of foreign visitors.

- *Improvement potential:* Addressing these challenges, fostering collaboration among stakeholders, and better understanding tourist expectations are crucial for realizing the full potential of cultural tourism as a driver of local development. In conclusion, while local businesses are vital to the success of cultural tourism, they often face significant barriers without adequate support. Strengthening the role of national or regional authorities in supporting the development of cultural tourism is crucial. By providing institutional backing, fostering partnerships, and facilitating investments, authorities can enable local businesses to tap into the full potential of cultural tourism, benefiting both the local economy and the broader cultural system. Through targeted policies and strategic interventions, cultural tourism can become a sustainable driver of growth for local businesses, but also for the development of local communities, particularly in rural areas.

In addition to the limitations identified by [31,33,70] in similar studies within the SPOT project, such as participant reluctance due to COVID-19, accessibility issues, gender imbalance, non-representative sampling, and emotional influence, the current study presents additional limitations that may affect its applicability to other destinations: (i) sample bias: since this study relies on responses from local business owners or representatives, they may present their businesses more positively, either to emphasize their role in cultural tourism or minimize challenges, leading to an overestimation of benefits or underreporting of issues; (ii) local business perspective: this study relies solely on local businesses, offering a narrow view of cultural tourism without considering other key stakeholders like tourists and residents, whose perspectives, addressed in separate studies (e.g., [30,32]), could provide a more comprehensive understanding of tourism impacts; (iii) regional specificity: this study focuses on the Buzău Carpathians and Sub-Carpathians, which have unique cultural, economic, and tourism characteristics, meaning the findings may not be applicable to regions with different tourism contexts, infrastructure, or economies; and (iv) questionnaire design and communication: the questionnaire may not fully capture the complexity of key issues and the wording may not be clear or easily understood by interviewees.

To overcome these limitations in future studies, it would be beneficial to include a more diverse and representative sample of stakeholders, such as tourists, local residents, government officials, and other key players in the tourism sector, to provide a more comprehensive view of cultural tourism's impact. For now, our scope was to understand just the perspective of the local businesses on cultural tourism development. Additionally, incorporating both qualitative and quantitative methods, such as interviews or focus groups alongside surveys, could offer richer, more nuanced data. Refining the questionnaire design to ensure it addresses specific challenges and opportunities in greater depth, while also considering regional and temporal variations, would help capture other perspectives. Furthermore, integrating longitudinal data would allow researchers to track changes over time and identify evolving trends, leading to a more accurate understanding of the long-term effects of cultural tourism. Lastly, considering external factors, such as national policies or global tourism trends, would provide a broader context for the findings, helping to assess how these elements influence local tourism dynamics.

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