

THESES OF THE DOCTORAL (PhD) DISSERTATION

ORGANIZATION AND MANAGEMENT OF TOURISM SERVICES IN SZEKLERLAND

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1. BACKGROUND, OBJECTIVES AND RESEARCH HYPOTHESES OF THE STUDY

The choice of the research topic was motivated by the fact that Romania's current tourism sector offers numerous opportunities that are not adequately exploited to ensure the provision of sustainable tourism services. Such challenges include, for example, the incomplete development of numerous hiking trails in mountainous areas, the neglect of elements of the built heritage, the absence of tourism destination management organizations, the low market share of high-quality commercial accommodation establishments and restaurants, and, perhaps most importantly, the shortage of qualified tourism professionals, which represents one of the major obstacles to the development of the tourism sector.

One of the most serious challenges is the underdevelopment of infrastructure, which particularly disadvantages rural and nature-based destinations in terms of accessibility. At the same time, an assessment of the current tourism supply reveals that the limited number of modern, sustainable, and accessible accommodation establishments and catering units constrains the ability to ensure satisfactory service experiences for both domestic and international tourists. In addition to infrastructural shortcomings, another critical issue is the inadequacy of promotional activities and international visibility, which primarily hinders potential tourists from obtaining relevant information and accessing reliable sources of information. In this regard, it can be noted that Romania does not have a unified and well-established tourism image on the international market. Consequently, neither the country's major destinations nor the tourism facilities operating within these destinations are able to achieve high levels of tourist visitation. Alongside the promotional activities of the Romanian tourism sector and the businesses and organizations that contribute to its continuous operation, maintaining a high standard of service provision is essential. However, significant challenges can also be identified in this area, as both the shortage of qualified labour and the outdated condition of tourism services and facilities hinder the sector's ability to keep pace with contemporary tourism trends. In this context, the continuous replenishment, motivation, and recognition of human resources should be regarded as the primary and most important steps in the development of tourism in Romania. These factors are essential for ensuring perceived service quality. At the same time, it is also necessary for both buildings and the equipment and facilities required for service provision to be modern and up to date, thereby conveying a sense of quality and comfort to tourists.

Addressing these challenges is an inherently complex and demanding process that requires close cooperation among governmental institutions, civil society organizations, and tourism enterprises. The first and most important step involves the development and implementation of comprehensive infrastructure improvement plans encompassing transportation networks, public utility systems, tourism accommodation facilities, and hospitality establishments. Within the framework of this dissertation, the activities of tourism destination management organizations (DMO) and commercial accommodation providers operating in various destinations across Transylvania and Szeklerland were examined, alongside an assessment of visitor satisfaction among tourists traveling to the region. The findings of this research may contribute to the development of a long-term tourism development strategy tailored to the different destinations within the study area.

The main objectives

An examination of tourism development in Romania, and particularly in Szeklerland, necessitated the formulation of several research questions and hypotheses. By addressing, validating, or refuting these assumptions, it becomes possible to identify the current state of the tourism market and the opportunities inherent within it. A key focus of the research was the development potential of both tourism destinations and commercial accommodation establishments. Accordingly, the study involved tourism organizations operating in various destinations, commercial accommodation providers, and, simultaneously, the most important stakeholder in the tourism market – the tourist. The research objectives included examining the factors that contribute to the development of tourist satisfaction with commercial accommodation establishments and destinations. At the same time, another objective was to identify the factors that most strongly influence the potential for developing the tourism supply of destinations and commercial accommodation establishments, as well as to determine how these factors contribute to increasing tourist arrivals and the number of overnight stays.

During the research, several objectives were formulated, the achievement of which enabled the tourism sector of the study area to be examined from both theoretical and practical perspectives. From a practical perspective, the tourism market of Szeklerland was analysed from multiple viewpoints, which provided a comprehensive and multifaceted picture of the

current state of the tourism industry. In this context, the following research objectives were formulated:

1. To gain an in-depth understanding of the tourism system and its various aspects, thereby identifying both the opportunities and challenges inherent in tourism, and to examine their practical manifestations within the tourism sector of Transylvania, with particular emphasis on commercial accommodation establishments and their role as an essential tourism service.
2. To examine the legal framework governing tourism activities in Romania, including the legislation regulating commercial accommodation establishments and their classification, as well as the legal provisions establishing the requirements for the creation and operation of tourism destination management organizations in Romania.
3. To assess the current state of the tourism sector in Romania, Transylvania, and, within Transylvania, Szeklerland (Harghita, Covasna, and Mureş counties), with a focus on the activities of commercial accommodation establishments and tourism destination management organizations, while also taking into consideration the satisfaction of tourists staying in Transylvania with the services provided by the commercial accommodation establishments they used during their most recent trips.

During the research, several research questions were formulated focusing on the assessment of organizations responsible for tourism destination management activities in the Szeklerland counties included in the study (Harghita, Covasna, and Mureş counties). The research questions are as follows:

Q1: What types of activities are carried out by the surveyed tourism organizations?

Q2: How do these organizations contribute to the successful implementation of tourism projects?

Q3: What measures do the organizations implement to ensure the sustainability of tourism?

Q4: What forms of financing do the organizations use to ensure their operations?

An integral part of the research involved assessing tourist satisfaction among visitors to the Transylvanian region. This assessment provides insight into how tourists perceive the quality of the region's tourism services, identifies existing shortcomings, and highlights the

factors whose presence can foster guest satisfaction and, in the long term, enhance tourist loyalty. In this context, several research questions were formulated, the answers to which help to identify the aspects of the current tourism market that require development and quality improvements. These research questions were as follows:

Q5: What types of commercial accommodation do the surveyed tourists prefer during their travels?

Q6: How did the surveyed tourists learn about the commercial accommodation establishment they most recently visited?

Q7: What factors influenced the booking decisions of the surveyed tourists?

Q8: What factors and shortcomings were identified at the visited commercial accommodations based on the experiences of the surveyed tourists?

The third aspect of the research involved mapping the management activities of commercial accommodation establishments, for which four research questions were formulated. Understanding the management practices of these establishments is crucial not only for achieving long-term market competitiveness but also represents an essential factor in the development of the tourism sector. In assessing the activities of the facilities, the following research questions were formulated:

Q9: What factors constitute the competitive advantages of commercial accommodation establishments, and what means do they use to achieve these advantages?

Q10: What investments and developments have been implemented by commercial accommodation establishments in recent years to increase tourist arrivals?

Q11: What measures do commercial accommodation establishments take to ensure that the services they provide meet higher quality standards?

Q12: What opportunities for future development do commercial accommodation establishments identify in order to increase tourist arrivals, and how do they intend to implement these developments?

By addressing the aforementioned research questions, the hypotheses—representing the fundamental assumptions underpinning the research for this dissertation—can either be

supported or refuted. These hypotheses were primarily aimed at ensuring a comprehensive investigation of tourism in the Transylvanian region from multiple perspectives, taking into account the tourism destination management organizations under study, tourist satisfaction among visitors to the region, and the development opportunities and potential of commercial accommodation establishments operating in the area. The following hypotheses were formulated during the research:

H1: The expansion of services provided by commercial accommodation establishments and the improvement of service quality have a positive effect on the effectiveness of tourism investments and on tourist satisfaction.

H2: The implementation of sustainability measures, such as energy-efficiency improvements and environmentally friendly developments, can provide tourism facilities with a competitive advantage.

H3: The financial stability of tourism enterprises and the use of diversified sources of financing increase the capacity of tourism facilities to undertake development projects and investments.

H4: Tourists' accommodation choices and booking decisions are primarily influenced by service quality, value for money, and online sources of information.

H5: The success of future developments in increasing tourist arrivals depends on the extent to which investments are aligned with tourists' needs and prevailing market trends.

2. MATERIAL AND METHODS

The research conducted for this dissertation aimed to identify and examine the factors influencing the development and development potential of Szeklerland's tourism supply, with particular emphasis on the role of commercial accommodation establishments. Simultaneously, an assessment of visitor satisfaction among tourists staying in Transylvania and an investigation of organizations engaged in tourism destination management activities in Szeklerland were carried out in order to approach the current tourism situation from multiple perspectives. To address the research questions, both quantitative and qualitative methods were employed, combining secondary and primary data sources. This methodological approach ensured the reliability, validity, and objectivity of the research findings. The process of research and data analysis is illustrated in *Figure 1*.

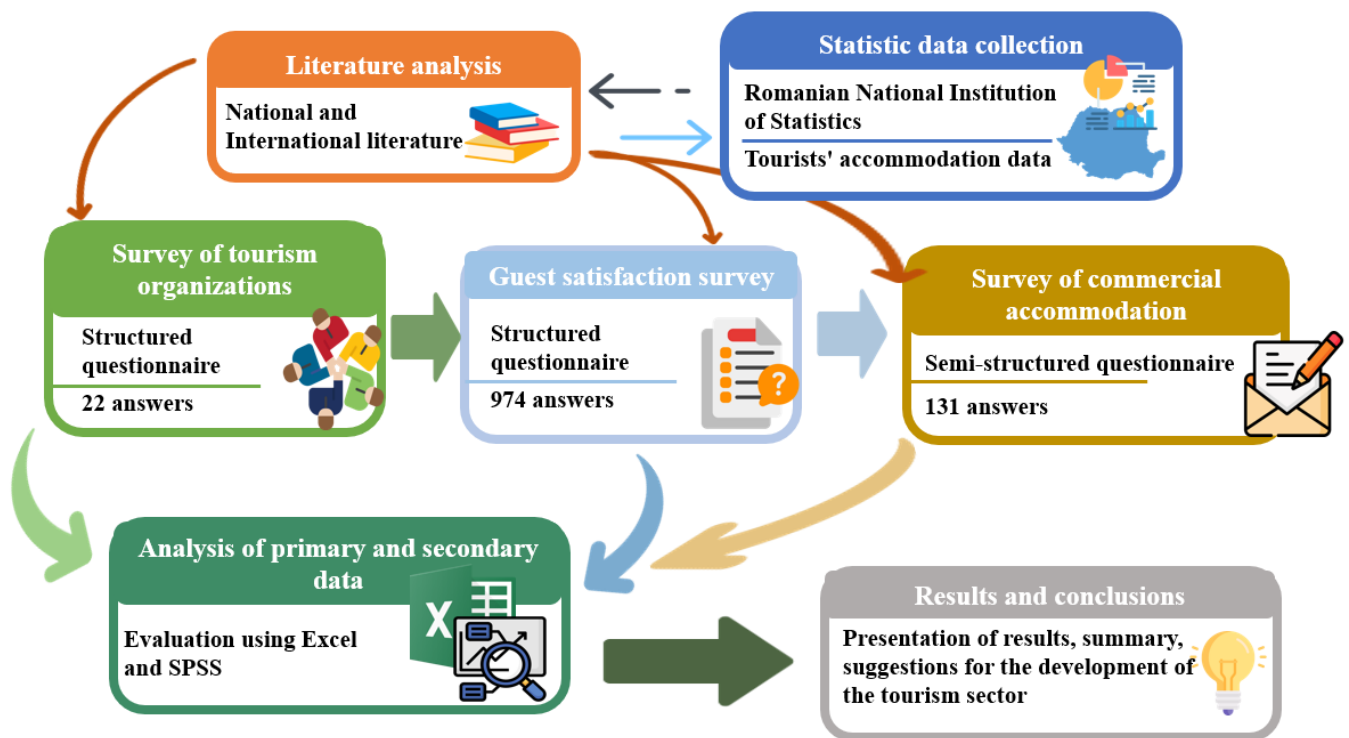


Figure 1.: Flowchart of the research process

Source: Own research (2026)

2.1. Definition of Data Used in the Secondary Research

Prior to the analysis of the primary research findings and the statistical data obtained through secondary research, an extensive review and evaluation of both national and international tourism literature was conducted. A key objective of the literature review was to explore the relationship between visitor satisfaction and tourist flows from both an international and a

Romanian perspective. Accordingly, relevant academic publications, research studies, tourism reports, and statistical sources were identified and examined, with particular emphasis on the period between 2010 and 2025. In the case of Romania, the research covered regional and county-level tourism development studies, statistical data, and reports prepared by tourism destination management organizations. These sources provided detailed analyses of tourism resources, services, and visitor experiences. Particular attention was devoted to examining the tourism potential of Transylvania and Szeklerland, with special emphasis on cultural, natural, and social factors that significantly influence tourist satisfaction and the average length of stay.

The literature review sought to identify and analyse sources related to five major thematic areas and the interrelationships among them. These included the tourism system and its interconnections, the role of tourists in tourism development, the importance of tourism enterprises and their activities, the social significance of the tourism sector, and the current state of tourism in Romania. During the analysis, the literature sources were content-categorized, with separate categories established for studies addressing commercial accommodation establishments, tourism destination management organizations, tourist satisfaction, existing tourism attractions, as well as accessibility and infrastructure development. This categorization made it possible to obtain a comprehensive overview of the factors influencing tourist satisfaction, their international and Romanian dimensions, and potential intervention areas that may contribute to increasing tourist arrivals and length of stay.

As a second stage of the secondary research, statistical data published within the Romanian tourism sector were analysed. The statistical information was obtained from the official database of the Romanian National Institute of Statistics (Institutul Național de Statistică – INS). Data covering the period between 2010 and 2024 were utilized, with particular attention paid to tourism-related indicators at the national level, in Transylvania, and within the counties of Szeklerland (Harghita, Mureș, and Covasna counties). The analysis incorporated data on the number of commercial accommodation establishments by accommodation type and comfort classification, as well as the number of available bed places according to the same categories. This was followed by the collection of data concerning tourist arrivals and the number of overnight stays recorded in the examined

counties, disaggregated by accommodation type. Based on these data, the average length of stay and its changes over the period 2010–2024 were calculated. The data collection process was carried out in several stages. The first phase took place in February 2024. At that time, the statistical data published by the National Institute of Statistics were available for the period between 2010 and 2022. These data primarily reflected the extent of development and growth experienced by Romanian tourism, as well as by the tourism sectors of the examined counties, during the period from 2010 to 2019, particularly with regard to commercial accommodation establishments as the fundamental service providers of the sector. Furthermore, this initial data collection phase revealed the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the commercial accommodation market and demonstrated the subsequent market recovery that became evident during 2021 and 2022. The second phase of data collection was conducted in June 2025. While the starting year remained 2010, statistical data were by then available up to and including 2024. Consequently, the period from 2010 to 2024 was used as the basis for the final analysis. Data cleaning, transformation, and processing were carried out using Microsoft Excel, which facilitated both the management of numerical data and the creation of charts and graphical representations derived from the analysed datasets.

2.2. Justification for the primary research and description of the methods used

The primary research approached tourism in Transylvania and the counties of Szeklerland (Harghita, Mureş, and Covasna) from multiple perspectives, examining various dimensions of the sector. The exploratory study investigated tourism activity in the region through three distinct approaches.

The first approach focused on the activities and operational practices of tourism destination management organizations operating within the counties of Szeklerland. The second dimension of the research examined visitor satisfaction among tourists traveling to the Transylvanian region. From this perspective, particular emphasis was placed on assessing the availability of authentic and high-quality tourism services. The responses obtained provided valuable insights into the factors that contribute to visitor satisfaction and revealed whether these factors are capable of fostering long-term tourist loyalty. The third component of the primary research focused on the management practices of commercial

accommodation establishments operating within the Transylvanian region. In this context, the study targeted those accommodation providers whose contact information was available in the database published by the Romanian Ministry of Economy, Digitalization, Entrepreneurship and Tourism (Ministerul Economiei, Digitalizării, Antreprenoriatului și Turismului).

All three exploratory studies were conducted using questionnaire-based surveys administered through the Google Forms digital platform. The collected data were subsequently cleaned, processed, and analysed using Microsoft Excel and IBM SPSS Statistics version 27 software.

2.2.1. Assessment of the activities of tourism DMOs in the Counties of Szeklerland

From the perspective of assessing tourism destination management (DMO) activities, data collection was conducted in March 2024. The study focused on organizations engaged in tourism destination management activities within the counties of Szeklerland—namely Harghita, Covasna, and Mureș counties—and examined both their activities and their significance through a questionnaire-based survey.

The sampling procedure was non-random; however, it was purposefully designed to target tourism organizations that play a significant role in the tourism development of the three counties under investigation. Data collection was carried out using the Google Forms platform. The questionnaire consisted of both closed-ended and open-ended questions in order to provide respondents with the opportunity to elaborate on their perspectives regarding the various topics addressed. Among the closed-ended questions, several employed a rating-scale format, allowing respondents to provide their answers using a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 to 5. These questions facilitated the quantification of organizational opinions, as well as the perceived importance of their objectives and initiatives. In addition to the rating-scale items, the questionnaire also included single-choice and multiple-choice closed-ended questions. The open-ended questions enabled respondents to express their personal opinions, share information derived from their professional experience, and provide additional explanations, thereby offering deeper insight into the responses given to the closed-ended questions. The collected data were analysed using Microsoft Excel, through which descriptive statistical analyses were conducted.

Within this component of the primary research, particular emphasis was placed on examining partnerships among tourism stakeholders and the implementation of sustainable practices. Accordingly, the study focused on the relationships and interactions among the various actors operating within the tourism market. The sampling frame consisted of 23 tourism-related organizations, of which 22 completed the questionnaire. Of the valid responses received, 16 originated from Harghita County, 3 from Covasna County, and 3 from Mureş County.

The survey highlighted the extent to which the collaborative activities of tourism organizations and service providers contribute to enhancing destination competitiveness and supporting the development of the tourism supply side. The primary objective of the research was to gain a comprehensive understanding of tourism activities within the study area, while identifying potential development opportunities at both destination and regional levels. Furthermore, the combined interpretation of the survey findings and the relevant national and international literature on tourism destination management provided valuable insights into the evolution of tourism activities within the examined destinations over the study period.

2.2.2. Survey of tourist satisfaction among visitors to Transylvania

The second aspect of the research, aimed at assessing the nature of tourism in Transylvania, was also conducted as primary research using a questionnaire-based survey. Data collection began on December 10, 2024, and continued until May 10, 2025, in order to capture both the winter peak season and the early spring, lower-season period. The questionnaire was distributed through multiple channels, including electronic delivery to commercial accommodation establishments, travel agencies, and tourist information offices in the region, as well as through Facebook groups where tourists seek accommodation in Transylvania. The survey was administered via the Google Forms platform, which facilitated both the design of the questionnaire and the collection of responses. The sampling method was non-random but intentionally targeted. The goal was to include tourists who stayed at least one night at a commercial accommodation establishment in Transylvania during the data collection period. This approach ensured that the respondents had relevant experiences regarding the region's tourism supply. The final sample consisted of $N = 974$

respondents, providing an adequate basis for quantitative statistical analysis. The sample is not representative, as it is not possible to define the characteristics of all tourists visiting the region. Therefore, efforts were made to increase the sample size to strengthen its validity. Structurally, the questionnaire was divided into three main sections. The first section focused on uncovering travelers' personal preferences, including their preferred types of accommodation, favored travel months, and travel intentions. The second section allowed respondents to express their opinions regarding the most recently visited commercial accommodation, focusing on decision-making factors, expectations related to lodging, dining, and available services, as well as the extent to which these expectations were met. Finally, the third section contained demographic and profiling questions, including respondents' gender identity, age, educational background, travel frequency, budget allocated for trips, and income level. The primary objective of this research was to provide Transylvanian tourism stakeholders with feedback on tourists' current perceptions, particularly regarding the commercial accommodation establishments operating in the region, the quantity and quality of services provided, and any potential deficiencies.

The data obtained from the survey were processed using Microsoft Excel and the SPSS 27.0 statistical analysis software. Following data cleaning and preparation, descriptive statistical analyses, frequency analyses, and cross-tabulations linking demographic data with respondents' opinions were performed. To examine the different attitudes of respondents, dimensional structures representing attitudes were developed using Principal Component Analysis (PCA). Furthermore, independent-sample t-tests and Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) were applied to determine the significance of relationships between travel characteristics and demographic variables (*Table 1.*). The significance level was set at 5% ($\alpha < 0.05$).

Table 1.: Description of the Socio-Demographic Characteristics of Respondents to the Survey

		N	Percentage
Gender	Female	646	66.3%
	Male	328	33.7%
Marital status	Single	235	24.2%
	In relationship	460	47.4%
	Married	263	27.1%
	Divorced	12	1.2%
	Widowed	1	0.1%
Age	25 years or under	349	35.8%
	Between 26 and 50 years old	596	61.2%
	51 years old or above	29	3.0%
Education attainment	Primary education	291	29.9%
	Higher education	683	70.1%
Amount spent on leisure – one year (RON)	≤ 2,000	152	15.6%
	2,001 – 4,000	320	32.9%
	4,001 – 6,000	224	23.0%
	≥ 6,001	278	28.5%
Economy activity	Economically active	807	82.9%
	Economically inactive but employed	50	5.1%
	Unemployed	13	1.3%
	Dependent	104	10.7%
Net monthly income (RON)	≤ 3,000	206	22.0%
	3,001 – 4,000	225	24.1%
	4,001 – 5,000	206	22.0%
	≥ 5,001	298	31.9%

Note: For individual variables, the number of valid observations may differ from the total sample size (N = 974) due to missing responses.

Source: Own research (2025)

2.2.3. Survey of management activities at Transylvanian commercial accommodation establishments

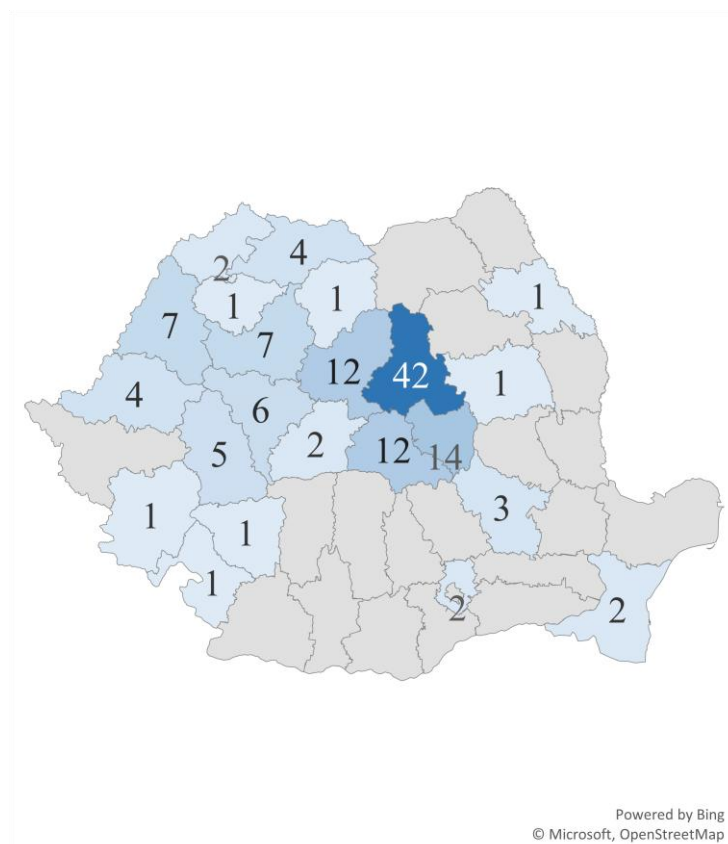
In order to conduct a comprehensive examination of tourism in Transylvania, the third aspect of the research involved a primary survey assessing the activities of commercial

accommodation establishments in the region using a structured questionnaire. The survey was conducted online, with data collection beginning on January 27, 2025, and concluding on July 25, 2025. The first step in data collection involved compiling the contact information of commercial accommodation establishments operating in Transylvania, sourced from the Ministry of Economy, Digitalization, Entrepreneurship, and Tourism (Ministerul Economiei, Digitalizării, Antreprenoriatului și Turismului). In total, 8,173 email addresses were collected, distributed across the counties as follows: 429 from Alba, 229 from Arad, 756 from Bihor, 205 from Bistrița-Năsăud, 1,595 from Brașov, 346 from Caraș-Severin, 961 from Cluj, 116 from Covasna, 596 from Harghita, 493 from Hunedoara, 783 from Maramureș, 306 from Mureș, 91 from Sălaj, 87 from Satu Mare, 782 from Sibiu, and 398 from Timiș. The questionnaire was administered via the Google Forms platform, and invitations were sent to the collected email addresses using the Brevo.com newsletter platform. Both Hungarian and Romanian versions of the questionnaire were provided to ensure that all relevant commercial accommodation establishments were included in the survey. The final sample consisted of $N = 131$ establishments, providing an adequate basis for quantitative analysis (*Table 2.*). The structured questionnaire was divided into nine sections, offering a comprehensive overview of the surveyed businesses' activities and future perspectives. The first section collected basic information about the enterprises, while the second section addressed operational efficiency. The third section focused on financial awareness, and the fourth examined the impact of investments and developments. The fifth section addressed human resource management, and the sixth explored technological innovations and digitalization solutions. The seventh section surveyed guest profiles and target groups, the eighth focused on accommodation development plans, and the ninth assessed the nature of partnerships and collaborations. In total, the questionnaire comprised 54 questions.

The data obtained from the survey were processed using Microsoft Excel and SPSS 27.0 statistical analysis software. Following data cleaning and preparation, descriptive statistical analyses and frequency analyses were conducted. Additionally, various charts were created based on the responses, visually illustrating the diversity of opinions among the participating businesses.

Table 2.: Territorial distribution of surveyed commercial accommodation establishments by county (N=131)

Counties	Number of responses
Harghita county	42
Covasna county	14
Mureş county	12
Braşov county	12
Bihor county	7
Cluj county	7
Alba county	6
Hunedoara county	5
Arad county	4
Maramureş county	4
Satumare county	2
Sibiu county	2
Bistriţa-Năsăud county	1
Caraş-Severin county	1
Sălaj county	1
Timiş county	0
Counties outside Transylvania	11



Source: Own research (2026)

3. MAIN FINDINGS OF THE DISSERTATION

Based on the results derived from the hypotheses formulated in the research and the related research questions, several key conclusions and relationships were identified regarding the significance of tourism destination management activities in the three counties under study (Harghita, Covasna, and Mureș), the importance of tourist satisfaction, as well as the development plans and opportunities of commercial accommodation establishments. Taken together, these factors contribute to the long-term development of tourism.

The first hypothesis (H1: *The expansion of services provide by commercial accommodation establishments and the improvement of service quality have a positive effect on the effectiveness of tourism investments and on tourist satisfaction.*) was fully confirmed. The results obtained from the research questions Q2 (*How do these organizations contribute to the successful implementation of tourism projects?*), Q7 (*What factors influenced the booking decisions of the surveyed tourists?*), Q9 (*What factors constitute the competitive advantage of commercial accommodation establishments and what means do they use to achieve these advantages?*), and Q11 (*What measures do commercial accommodation establishments take to ensure that the services they provide meet higher quality standards?*) indicated that respondents place significant emphasis on strategic planning, consideration of sustainability aspects, and continuous improvement of the guest experience. Service expansion, such as the introduction of new programs, development of high-quality accommodation, and staff training, has a positive impact on visitor satisfaction and the competitiveness of the respective destinations, which are essential for the sustainable operation of accommodation establishments (NICULA et al., 2013; MARTON et al., 2018; LÖKE, 2019; CZUCZOR et al., 2023). This reflects that quality improvement is a key factor not only for guest satisfaction but also for the return on tourism-related investments.

The second hypothesis (H2: *The implementation of sustainability measures, such as energy-efficiency and environmentally friendly developments, can provide tourism facilities with a competitive advantage.*), which posits that introducing sustainability initiatives contributes to the long-term competitiveness of destinations, was partially confirmed. The responses to research questions Q3 (*What measures do the organizations implement to ensure the sustainability of tourism?*), Q9 (*What factors constitute the competitive advantage of*

commercial accommodation establishments and what means do they use to achieve these advantages?), Q10 (What investments and developments have been implemented by commercial accommodation establishments in recent years to increase tourist arrivals?), and Q12 (What opportunities for future development do commercial accommodation establishments identify in order to increase tourist arrivals and how do they intent to implement these developments?) highlighted that protecting cultural heritage, supporting eco-friendly transportation, developing green infrastructure, and involving local communities are all factors that enhance the image of destinations and strengthen their market position. However, it was also found that due to seasonality, labor shortages, and financial constraints, the full implementation of these measures is not feasible in all territorial units. Consequently, the practical impact of sustainability efforts is limited in certain areas.

The third hypothesis (H3: *The financial stability of tourism enterprises and the use of diversified sources of financing increase the capacity of tourism facilities to undertake development projects and investments.*), which posits that the presence of varied financing sources enhances the development capabilities of tourism organizations, was partially confirmed. The results derived from research questions Q4 (*What forms of financing do the organizations use to ensure their operations?*), Q10 (*What investments and developments have been implemented by commercial accommodation establishments in recent years to increase tourist arrivals?*), and Q12 (*What opportunities for future development do commercial accommodation establishments identify in order to increase tourist arrivals and how do they intent to implement these developments?*) indicated that government support, membership fees in the case of DMOs, and grant funding play an important role in maintaining operations and implementing developments. Regarding the activities of DMOs and destinations, the absence of a tourism tax in several localities represents a significant barrier to achieving long-term financial stability. In cases where financing is diversified, larger-scale investments and more effective developments have been realized, whereas organizations relying solely on grants or state funding are in a more vulnerable position (SHANG et al., 2023; PAVONE et al., 2021; ALEKSANDROVA & NENAKHOVA, 2019; SESOTYANINGTYAS & MANAF, 2015; JANG et al., 2008).

The fourth hypothesis (H4: *Tourists' accommodation choices and booking decisions are primarily influenced by service quality, value for money, and online sources of information.*), which examines tourists' accommodation selection, was fully confirmed. The results from research questions Q5 (*What types of commercial accommodation do the surveyed tourists prefer during their travels?*), Q6 (*How did the surveyed tourists learn about the commercial accommodation establishment they most recently visited?*), and Q7 (*What factors influenced the booking decisions of the surveyed tourists?*) indicate that tourists' choices are strongly determined by media content available on online booking platforms, reviews, opinions expressed on social media, and personal recommendations. High-quality services and favorable price–value ratios not only influence the initial choice but also play a decisive role in the behavior of returning guests.

The fifth hypothesis (H5: *The success of future developments in increasing tourist arrivals depends on the extent to which investments are aligned with tourists' needs and prevailing market trends.*) was partially confirmed. Responses to research questions Q8 (*What factors and shortcomings were identified at the visited commercial accommodations based on the experiences of the surveyed tourists?*), Q10 (*What investments and developments have been implemented by commercial accommodation establishments in recent years to increase tourist arrivals?*), Q11 (*What measures do commercial accommodation establishments take to ensure that the services they provide meet higher quality standards?*), and Q12 (*What opportunities for future development do commercial accommodation establishments identify in order to increase tourist arrivals and how do they intent to implement these developments?*) clearly indicate that investments that directly respond to tourists' expectations have led to measurable changes in visitor traffic. Following sustainability and digitalization trends is highlighted as a potential direction, though implementation may face challenges due to resource limitations (CAJIAO et al., 2022; HORVÁTH & JOÓR, 2022; FILLIPLAK et al., 2023; LIM et al., 2023).

Based on the primary research, it can be concluded that the stakeholders of the Transylvanian tourism sector—both destination management organizations and commercial accommodation providers—strive for long-term development. They place particular emphasis on providing high-quality services, which aim not only to increase visitor numbers but also to extend the average length of stay. In addition to examining the supply side, the

demand side, the experiences and preferences of tourists, is crucial. The analysis highlighted that tourists' decisions are significantly influenced by the availability of reliable and authentic tourism services, while the survey also revealed shortcomings experienced by visitors at commercial accommodations in Transylvania. These results collectively provide a strategic guideline for tourism stakeholders: development initiatives must be innovative, enhance service quality, and contribute to strengthening the recognition of destinations in both the international market and public awareness. The primary research thus confirms that coordinated, quality- and experience-focused developments play a key role in the long-term competitiveness of Transylvanian tourism.

Analyzing the economic impact of tourism, the focus was primarily on factors related to the multiplier effect. In recent years, the number of accommodation establishments in Transylvania has grown dynamically, which in itself has generated economic growth. Statistical data revealed that between 2010 and 2024, the number of commercial accommodations multiplied, reflecting not only an expansion of the tourism sector's supply but also promoting the diversification of the local economy. For instance, examining tourism in Harghita County shows that the number of accommodations increased by 86%, which stimulated local entrepreneurial activity and expanded tourism-related services. This development supports the multiplier effect described in the literature, according to which both direct and indirect impacts of tourism investments significantly influence the economic performance of a region. Several transformations can be observed in the tourism market. While traditional hotels and their services used to dominate, today apartments and rental rooms play an increasingly important role. This trend aligns with international developments, as short-term rental platforms such as Airbnb are experiencing growing global demand and have acquired a specific significance within Transylvanian tourism. At the same time, it is important to note the persistent problem of the imbalance between supply and demand. Although the number of accommodations has increased substantially, the average capacity utilization rate remained around 40–45%, which is below the international standard. This indicates that the expansion of supply was not accompanied by a sufficiently diversified service structure, and the development of tourism products did not fully follow the changing demand patterns. Empirical results suggest that many commercial accommodations remain at the level of traditional hospitality, without integrating various

experience-based services, thematic programs, or comprehensive package offers, which form the foundation of modern tourism.

The results of the research on the management of commercial accommodations highlight the financial vulnerability and structural weaknesses of these businesses. Two-thirds of the accommodations do not maintain an up-to-date budget plan, and only a few enterprises utilize modern financial software. This represents a significant lag in digital transformation, which, according to international literature, is a prerequisite for competitiveness. Financial instability not only complicates day-to-day operations but also hinders long-term development planning, as investment decisions require accurate cost and revenue forecasting. The empirical data support the literature's assertion that financial management is crucial, while simultaneously revealing that in Transylvania, there are substantial deficiencies in this area.

The role of destination management in the development of Transylvanian tourism is particularly relevant, as the success of tourism products depends not only on the performance of individual service providers but also on the coordinated management of the region as a whole. The literature clearly emphasizes (HORVÁTH, 2013; FIROIU et al., 2019; AGRÁDI & BAYRAMOV, 2022; KASZÁS & KELLER, 2022) that destination management is a complex process requiring strategic planning, marketing activities, partnership collaboration, and financial stability. In the case of Transylvania, surveys indicate that destination management organizations operate under numerous constraints. Most organizations employ only a few staff members, and there is often a lack of the necessary expertise required for effective strategic planning. Empirical data show that although nearly 70% of the organizations recognize the importance of long-term strategic thinking, in practice, few documents or action plans exist that actually provide guidance for tourism development.

In terms of marketing activities, a clear dominance of online platforms and digital communication can be observed. More than two-thirds of the organizations actively use social media, websites, or online campaigns to promote the region. This aligns with international literature (ÖZCAN et al., 2021; ONCIOIU et al., 2022; PACHUCKI et al., 2022; TAM et al., 2024), which emphasizes that a digital presence in tourism is now indispensable. At the same time, it has become evident that marketing activities are often ad

hoc and do not integrate into a comprehensive branding strategy. While Transylvania's diverse tourism offerings represent a significant attraction, there is a lack of a unified identity and long-term positioning. Literature examples (ZULVIANTI et al., 2023; HASAN et al., 2020; HERNÁNDEZ-ROJAS & HUETE ALCOCER, 2021; LE & LE, 2020; SU et al., 2020; XU et al., 2021) show that in other regions, a well-developed destination image has successfully contributed to increasing competitiveness. In Transylvania, however, no integrated campaign has yet been implemented that could position the region as a cohesive and recognizable brand on the international tourism market.

From the perspective of tourism product development, the data on guest satisfaction convey a dual message. On one hand, they confirm that Transylvania is capable of providing a high level of satisfaction for tourists; on the other hand, they highlight that tourists' expectations remain relatively modest compared to international trends. This implies that the positive feedback is partly due to guests anticipating less complex service packages, making it easier to meet their expectations. However, in the long term, this is insufficient, as competition in tourism increasingly revolves around experience-rich, high-quality, and innovative products. If Transylvania fails to keep pace with international trends, there is a risk that guest satisfaction may stagnate or decline, particularly when the region is compared with other, more developed tourism destinations.

From the perspective of future tourism development, a key issue is how to bridge the gap between the expectations identified in the literature and the reality on the ground. Accelerating digital transformation is of fundamental importance. The integration of automated customer relationship management systems, online booking platforms, smart rooms, and digital payment options can all contribute to maintaining the region's competitiveness. Strengthening sustainability practices is also essential. Implementing green procurement systems, increasing energy efficiency, and obtaining sustainability certifications can provide not only environmental but also economic benefits. Human resource development is equally critical, whether through regional training programs, collaboration with universities, or professional internships. These initiatives can make the tourism sector more attractive to young people while ensuring a long-term supply of skilled labor. Tourism product development in Transylvania can achieve sustainable success only if it is able to simultaneously respond to global trends and leverage the region's unique

assets. The acceleration of digitalization must be a central element of future strategies. Research clearly shows that most accommodation providers lag behind in technological innovation, despite the fact that the international tourism market is increasingly defined by digital, experience-based services. Online check-in, smart rooms, AI-supported customer relationship systems, and real-time data collection are no longer merely convenience factors—they are prerequisites for competitiveness. For Transylvanian accommodation providers, investment in digitalization is not just a cost but a long-term, profitable investment that simultaneously increases guest satisfaction and reduces operational costs. Failure to adopt digital transformation could result in the region falling behind, particularly if international tourists arrive with expectations that exceed the current capabilities of local service providers.

The research ultimately highlighted that tourism development in Transylvania presents both significant opportunities and considerable challenges. Among the opportunities are the region's rich cultural and natural heritage, the growing international interest, and the fact that visitors currently report relatively high levels of satisfaction. The challenges, however, lie in the low diversification of the tourism supply, the lack of sustainability measures, the lag in digitalization, and shortages in human resources. The success of future developments will depend on the ability to address these challenges in an integrated manner and to develop strategies that simultaneously support economic growth, social well-being, and environmental sustainability.

4. NEW AND NOVEL RESULTS OF THE DISSERTATION

The aim of the dissertation was to provide a comprehensive analysis of the factors influencing the development and organization of tourism products and services in Transylvania, with particular emphasis on Szeklerland, focusing specifically on the activities of destination management organizations, the service development practices of commercial accommodation establishments, and the satisfaction of tourists visiting the region.

The empirical investigations conducted as part of the research clearly demonstrated that the performance and development potential of tourism in Transylvania cannot be understood as the outcome of the isolated operations of individual service providers. The effectiveness of the tourism system is fundamentally determined by the quality of institutionalized cooperation, particularly by the coordinating role of destination management organizations. The integrated interpretation of the findings obtained from the different data collection processes suggests that more structured cooperation may contribute to the development of a more favorable service environment.

The novel contribution of the research lies in the fact that tourism product development is not examined from the perspective of a single stakeholder group; rather, the structural relationships between the supply and demand sides are analysed simultaneously. The integrated interpretation of data obtained from destination management organizations, commercial accommodation establishments, and tourists revealed that persistent discrepancies can often be observed between development decisions and consumer expectations. This discrepancy is not merely incidental but can be attributed to shortcomings in tourism governance and market feedback mechanisms, thereby offering a new interpretative framework for the strategic planning of destinations.

The quantitative methodology applied in the research enabled the identification of latent dimensions underlying the tourism experience. The results of the principal component analysis demonstrated that tourist satisfaction is not a one-dimensional construct but rather a combination of interrelated quality factors. According to the statistical analyses, variables related to service quality, including the professional competence of staff, operational reliability, and value for money, have greater explanatory power with regard to tourist

satisfaction than natural and cultural attributes considered independently. This finding provides an empirical refinement of classical approaches to tourism motivations.

The analysis of commercial accommodation establishments confirmed that development activity and improvements in service quality are closely related to the financial stability of tourism enterprises. The adoption of sustainability considerations cannot be regarded as an independent strategic choice; rather, it primarily reflects a rational response associated with ensuring long-term operational viability.

The analysis of destination management organizations demonstrated that the presence and activity of the organizations included in the study constitute significant factors in determining the organization and market visibility of the tourism supply. In areas where TDM organizations perform strategic planning and coordination functions, cooperation among service providers is more stable, marketing communication is more consistent, and development decisions are more closely aligned with long-term strategic objectives. This finding reinforces international theoretical approaches emphasizing the central role of destination management.

The methodological novelty of the research lies in the fact that the factor structure, supported by reliability analyses, can contribute to refining and standardizing the measurement of tourist satisfaction. The developed model not only enabled the specific characteristics of the study area to be identified but also provides an analytical framework that can be applied to regions with similar characteristics.

Based on the results of the secondary and primary research conducted, the following significant and novel scientific findings can be formulated:

1. The integrated examination of destination management, accommodation supply, and guest satisfaction as a novel approach.

One of the fundamental novelties of the analysis is that the study of tourism in Transylvania was conducted using an integrated approach, which simultaneously examined:

- the operations of tourism destination management organizations,
- the management and development practices of commercial accommodations,
- and tourists' satisfaction and decision-making mechanisms.

In the literature, these areas typically appear as separate research units, whereas the empirical results of this dissertation highlighted that the quality and competitiveness of a tourism product can only be understood through the coordinated and joint functioning of all three actors. This approach is particularly relevant in the case of Transylvania, where the organization and institutionalization of the tourism supply vary significantly across different areas.

2. Empirical Exploration of the Role of Destination Management Organizations in Transylvania

A novel contribution of the research lies in empirically mapping and systematizing the actual activities of tourism destination management organizations operating in the examined Transylvanian counties. Based on the results, it can be concluded that:

- the organizations primarily carry out promotional and project coordination tasks,
- strategic planning and strengthening cooperation among service providers are not yet fully institutionalized in all cases,
- the inclusion of sustainability considerations is more declarative than operational.

The dissertation's innovative contribution is that it examined not only the existence of these organizations but also their operational intensity and mechanisms of impact, thereby providing a nuanced understanding of the practical role of destination management in Transylvanian tourism.

3. Factor-Based Mapping of Tourist Satisfaction in Transylvania

Based on the results of the primary research, a novel finding is that tourist satisfaction in the Transylvanian region is determined not solely by attractions themselves, but primarily by the quality of services, price–value ratio, and the accessibility of information. The analyses highlighted that:

- tourists' accommodation choices are predominantly influenced by online information sources and reviews,
- supplementary services and flexible service delivery are essential for a positive guest experience,
- dissonance between infrastructure and service quality reduces the overall experience, even when natural endowments are favorable.

The dissertation's innovative contribution lies in interpreting tourist satisfaction not as an isolated phenomenon, but as a reflection of the overall operational quality of the destination.

4. Relationships Between the Development Practices and Competitiveness of Commercial Accommodation

One significant finding of the research empirically confirmed that the competitiveness of commercial accommodations is closely linked to the continuous development of services, the quality of human resources, and the practical application of sustainability considerations. The study highlighted that:

- developments are predominantly infrastructural, while service innovation remains secondary,
- sustainability measures are primarily implemented for cost-reduction purposes,
- the lack of a long-term strategic approach limits the effectiveness of development initiatives.

The dissertation's novel contribution lies in connecting accommodation development decisions with tourist expectations, emphasizing that market success depends not only on the volume of investment but also on adaptability.

5. Practical Limitations of Sustainability in Transylvanian Tourism

While the literature emphasizes the importance of sustainability in tourism, the empirical findings of the dissertation indicate that in Transylvania, its practical implementation is fragmented and inconsistent. Novel contributions of the research include:

- environmental sustainability measures are more frequently applied than social sustainability aspects,
- involvement of local communities and strengthening of partnerships are not yet common practice,
- sustainability is recognized as a competitive advantage only to a limited extent.

Through these insights, the dissertation contributes to the practical interpretation of sustainable tourism theory using the example of a region in a transitional development phase.

5. PRACTICAL APPLICABILITY OF THE RESULTS

The research results highlight that tourism development in Transylvania is a complex, multi-stakeholder process, requiring the alignment of destination management organizations, commercial accommodations, and tourist needs. The study revealed that expanding and improving service quality has a direct impact on guest satisfaction and the competitiveness of destinations. From a practical perspective, this indicates that accommodations and tourism service providers should focus on quality enhancement, staff training, and the introduction of new services.

Sustainability measures, such as energy efficiency, environmentally friendly developments, and the involvement of local communities, can provide a competitive advantage. However, their practical implementation may be limited due to seasonality, labor shortages, and financial constraints. Consequently, for the long-term development of destinations, it is important to establish multi-channel, stable funding sources, including government support, grant opportunities, and the sustainable use of local revenues.

Tourists' decisions are primarily influenced by the quality of services, the price–value ratio, and the reliability of online information. The practical implication of this is that tourism operators must strengthen their digital presence, manage online booking systems and guest reviews effectively, and continuously adapt to market trends.

The research also highlighted that the success of investments and developments is closely linked to taking tourists' needs into account. Future developments should focus on integrating guest-centered services, sustainable solutions, and digital tools, as these combined measures increase visitor numbers and contribute to the sustainable enhancement of the region's tourism competitiveness.

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7. LIST OF PUBLICATIONS RELATED TO THE DISSERTATION



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List of publications related to the dissertation

Articles, studies (7)

1. **Gergely, N.:** Élményből lojalitás, avagy mitől válik elégedetté a turista?
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