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SUSTAINABLE RURAL TOURISM AND DESTINATION COMPETITIVENESS: THE CASE OF GORIŠKA BRDA

ODRŽIVI RURALNI TURIZAM I KONKURENTNOST DESTINACIJE: SLUČAJ GORIŠKIH BRDA

Abstract. *This study explores visitor perceptions of Goriška Brda as a sustainable rural tourism destination and examines the extent to which its development model is recognized as structurally coherent and transferable. Using a quantitative, cross-sectional research design, the study analyzes how visitors evaluate key dimensions of the destination, including the integration of agriculture and tourism, authenticity of local gastronomy, environmental responsibility, organizational coordination, community involvement, infrastructure adequacy, and competitiveness potential. The findings indicate a dominant pattern of positive evaluation across all examined dimensions, suggesting that Goriška Brda is widely perceived as an integrated and sustainability-oriented rural tourism model. Comparative analysis reveals no significant gender-based differences in visitor perceptions, pointing to a stable and socially shared understanding of the destination's development logic. Building on these insights, the study discusses implications for tourism development in Fruška Gora. It highlights the strategic importance of integrating local production*

Apstrakt. *Ovaj rad istražuje percepcije posetilaca o Goriškim Brdima kao destinaciji održivog ruralnog turizma i ispituje u kojoj meri se njihov razvojni model prepoznaje kao strukturno koherentan i prenosiv. Primenom kvantitativnog, presečnog istraživačkog dizajna analiziraju se ocene posetilaca u odnosu na ključne dimenzije destinacijskog modela, uključujući integraciju poljoprivrede i turizma, autentičnost lokalne gastronomije, ekološku odgovornost, organizacionu koordinaciju, uključenost lokalne zajednice, adekvatnost infrastrukture i potencijal konkurentnosti. Rezultati ukazuju na dominantno pozitivnu evaluaciju u svim ispitivanim dimenzijama, što potvrđuje da se Goriška Brda široko percipiraju kao integrisani i održivo orijentisani model ruralnog turizma. Komparativna analiza ne pokazuje statistički značajne razlike u percepcijama u odnosu na pol ispitanika, što ukazuje na stabilno razumevanje razvojne logike destinacije. Na osnovu dobijenih nalaza razmatraju se implikacije za razvoj turizma na Fruškoj Gori, uz naglašavanje strateške važnosti integracije lokalnih proizvodnih sistema sa turističkim uslugama, jačanja*

systems with tourism services, strengthening authenticity-based positioning, and ensuring coordinated destination management in order to enhance long-term competitiveness and sustainable growth.

Keywords: *Sustainable rural tourism; destination competitiveness; agriculture–tourism integration; visitor perceptions; model transferability; Goriška Brda; Fruška Gora*

Introduction

A review of the relevant literature reveals numerous definitions of sustainable rural tourism, most of which align with the conceptual perspective adopted in this study (Vujko et al., 2025a; Nugraha et al., 2026). Sustainable rural tourism is commonly associated with the preservation of natural resources, support for local economies, and the maintenance of cultural authenticity within rural environments (Ramaano, 2025; Liu & Wei, 2025). At the same time, beyond formal conceptualizations, rural tourism is often experienced by visitors as an opportunity to reconnect with nature, encounter authentic local lifestyles, and participate in culturally embedded gastronomic traditions (Arsić et al., 2025a; Torkington et al., 2025). These experiential dimensions play an important role in shaping the perceived value and attractiveness of rural destinations (Liu et al., 2025). The sustainability of rural tourism is closely linked to the role of local communities (Lapuz, 2023). In many rural destinations, tourism development is embedded within everyday agricultural practices and community life (Turčinović et al., 2025; Han & Lin, 2025). The integration of agriculture and tourism therefore represents a key mechanism through which rural destinations can strengthen local economic structures while simultaneously preserving cultural and environmental authenticity (Knežević et al., 2025; Sun et al., 2025). Local agricultural production contributes not only to the economic vitality of rural regions but also to the presentation of distinctive destination identities, particularly

pozicioniranja zasnovanog na autentičnosti i uspostavljanja koordinisanog upravljanja destinacijom radi unapređenja dugoročne konkurentnosti i održivog rasta.

Ključne reči: *održivi ruralni turizam; konkurentnost destinacije; integracija poljoprivrede i turizma; percepcije posetilaca; transfer modela; Goriška Brda; Fruška Gora*

through gastronomy, wine production, and traditional food systems (Laterza et al., 2025). Through active participation in tourism activities, local residents become central actors in destination development rather than passive observers, which reinforces social cohesion and supports the long-term sustainability of rural communities (Zhang, 2026).

Authenticity represents another critical element of rural tourism development (Vujko et al., 2025b; Hu & Wang, 2025). Visitors frequently associate rural destinations with experiences that differ from standardized tourism products, particularly through encounters with local traditions, cuisine, and agricultural landscapes (Constantin & Popescu, 2025). Products derived from local agriculture, especially within gastronomy and viticulture, often serve as tangible expressions of the cultural identity of a destination (Arsić et al., 2025b). These elements enable destinations to position themselves more clearly within increasingly competitive tourism markets (Mishra et al., 2025). As rural tourism continues to expand across Europe, destinations are required to identify their distinctive resources and strategically develop tourism offers that preserve authenticity while meeting contemporary visitor expectations (An & Choi, 2025). An additional factor influencing the competitiveness of rural tourism destinations is the level of coordination among destination stakeholders. When different service providers within a destination operate in a mutually connected and coordinated manner, visitors are more likely to experience the destination as coherent and well-organized (Chin, 2022;



Arsić et al., 2024). Such structural coherence refers to the alignment of tourism services, local production systems, infrastructure, and community participation in a way that supports a consistent visitor experience from arrival to departure (Wheeler et al., 2025). Although this concept is often discussed at a theoretical level, its practical manifestation can be best understood through examples of successful rural destinations. Goriška Brda represents a particularly illustrative case of such a development model (Pintar et al., 2010). In this destination, viticulture and agriculture form the foundation of the tourism offer, while authenticity is maintained through the promotion of traditional gastronomy and locally produced goods (Cvijanović et al., 2025). Tourism development in the region has been strategically oriented toward quality and authenticity rather than mass tourism expansion. Within this framework, wine production is presented not only as an economic activity but also as an integral component of local culture and heritage.

Understanding the effectiveness of such development models requires not only economic performance indicators but also insight into visitor perceptions. Feedback from visitors provides valuable information regarding how the destination's development strategy is recognized and experienced in practice (Waller & Waller, 2021). Through visitor perceptions, it becomes possible to identify strengths, detect potential weaknesses, and evaluate whether key elements of the development model—such as authenticity, sustainability, and structural coherence—are successfully communicated and understood. Despite the importance of these perspectives, research examining how visitors perceive integrated rural tourism development models remains relatively limited. In particular, there is a lack of empirical studies exploring whether visitors recognize the integration of agriculture, tradition, and tourism as part of a coherent and sustainable destination strategy. Examining visitor perceptions therefore provides an important perspective on whether such development models are

visible, meaningful, and competitive within the broader tourism market. Within this context, the present study focuses on Goriška Brda as an example of an integrated rural tourism destination (Cvijanović et al., 2025). The findings are further discussed in relation to Fruška Gora, a region with similar natural and cultural characteristics. By analyzing visitor perceptions, the study seeks to identify elements of destination development that could inform future strategic planning in Fruška Gora and contribute to strengthening its competitiveness within the rural tourism market.

The main objective of this study is to examine whether visitors perceive Goriška Brda as a sustainable and competitive rural tourism destination and to determine whether these perceptions vary according to gender. By analyzing visitor evaluations of key destination attributes, the study seeks to contribute to a better understanding of how integrated rural tourism development models are recognized and interpreted by visitors and how such models may serve as reference points for the strategic development of comparable destinations. Despite the growing body of research on rural tourism development, much of the existing literature primarily focuses on economic impacts, destination marketing strategies, or policy frameworks. Comparatively less attention has been devoted to examining how visitors themselves perceive integrated rural tourism development models and whether they recognize the structural coherence that connects agriculture, gastronomy, community participation, and tourism services within a destination (Bjelić et al., 2024). In particular, empirical studies rarely explore whether visitors perceive such destinations as sustainable and competitive systems rather than simply as attractive rural environments.

Understanding visitor perceptions is important because the effectiveness of a development model ultimately depends not only on its strategic design but also on how

clearly its underlying logic is communicated and experienced by visitors (Li & Ding, 2026). When tourists recognize the integration of local production, authenticity, environmental responsibility, and coordinated destination management, this recognition may strengthen the perceived value and competitiveness of the destination (Išpanović et al., 2025; Tiwari et al., 2026). Conversely, if such integration remains invisible to visitors, the strategic advantages of the development model may remain underutilized. Within this context, Goriška Brda represents a particularly relevant case for examining how visitors interpret and evaluate a rural tourism development model built on strong connections between agriculture, wine production, gastronomy, and tourism services. At the same time, destinations with comparable natural and cultural characteristics, such as Fruška Gora, may benefit from understanding which elements of this model are most clearly recognized and valued by visitors (Vujko et al., 2022).

Accordingly, the present study addresses the following research questions: To what extent do visitors perceive Goriška Brda as a sustainable rural tourism destination? To what extent do visitors recognize the structural coherence between agriculture, gastronomy, community involvement, and tourism services within the destination? Do visitor perceptions of the destination's sustainability and competitiveness differ according to gender? By addressing these questions, the study contributes to the understanding of how integrated rural tourism development models are perceived by visitors and how such perceptions may inform strategic planning for comparable rural destinations, including Fruška Gora.

Methodology

Research Design

This study employs a quantitative, cross-sectional research design to examine visitors' perceptions of Goriška Brda as a sustainability-

oriented rural tourism destination. Data were collected through a structured questionnaire administered to visitors present at the destination during the research period. The analysis focuses on key evaluative dimensions of the destination model, including agriculture–tourism integration, gastronomy authenticity, environmental responsibility, organizational coherence, community involvement, infrastructure adequacy, and perceived transferability. A comparative perspective was incorporated to assess whether these perceptions differ according to gender. The methodological framework combines descriptive statistics with inferential testing in order to identify dominant perception patterns and examine potential demographic variation.

Study Area

The empirical research was conducted in Goriška Brda, a rural wine-growing region in western Slovenia widely recognized for its integrated agriculture–tourism development model. The destination is characterized by vineyard landscapes, family-owned wineries, local gastronomy, and coordinated destination management structures that link agricultural production with tourism services. Goriška Brda was selected as a consolidated example of rural tourism development grounded in local production systems, environmental stewardship, and experiential authenticity. This context provides an appropriate setting for examining whether visitors perceive the destination model as coherent, sustainability-driven, and transferable to comparable rural environments.

Sample and Data Collection

The sample consists of 276 visitors surveyed at wineries, hospitality facilities, and public tourism sites within the destination. Participation was voluntary and anonymous to minimize response bias. The gender structure includes 126 male respondents (45.7%) and 150 female respondents (54.3%). The sample displays variation in age and educational



attainment, with a predominance of respondents belonging to economically active age groups and holding tertiary education degrees. This demographic profile strengthens the analytical reliability of perception-based evaluation.

Survey Instrument

The questionnaire comprised two sections. The first collected demographic information (gender, age group, education level). The second included ten perception-based statements reflecting structural integration, sustainability dimensions, and model transferability. Respondents evaluated statements concerning agriculture–tourism integration, gastronomy authenticity, environmental responsibility, professional organization of wine tourism, local community involvement, infrastructure adequacy, conservation–commercialization balance, willingness to support sustainable local products, applicability of the model to similar rural destinations, and perceived competitiveness potential. All items were measured using a five-point Likert scale ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree.

Data Analysis

The analysis was conducted in two stages. Descriptive statistics (frequencies and percentages) were used to summarize response distributions and identify prevailing evaluative trends. Inferential analysis was performed using Pearson's chi-square test of independence to assess whether response patterns differed significantly between male and female visitors. The chi-square test was selected due to the categorical structure of Likert-scale data and its suitability for group comparison. A significance threshold of $p < 0.05$ was applied. Where p -values exceeded this level, differences were interpreted as statistically non-significant, indicating homogeneity in perception across gender groups.

Methodological Considerations

The adopted framework enables systematic examination of visitor perceptions as indicators of destination model coherence and sustainability recognition. The integration of descriptive and inferential analysis allows both identification of dominant evaluation patterns and assessment of demographic consistency. Although the cross-sectional design limits causal inference, the sample size and demographic diversity enhance the robustness of the findings. The absence of statistically significant gender differences across examined variables suggests that visitor perceptions represent a socially shared evaluative framework rather than a demographic-specific interpretation.

Research Hypotheses

Based on the theoretical framework of sustainable rural tourism development and the empirical focus on visitors' perceptions of Goriška Brda as an integrated agriculture–tourism destination, the study formulates one general hypothesis and a set of supporting sub-hypotheses. These hypotheses are designed to examine whether visitors perceive the destination model as structurally coherent, sustainability-oriented, and transferable, and to assess whether such perceptions differ according to gender.

H: Visitors perceive Goriška Brda as a structurally integrated and sustainability-oriented rural tourism model characterized by strong authenticity, environmental responsibility, and organizational coherence, regardless of gender.

H1: Visitors perceive the integration of local agriculture and tourism as a defining structural feature of the destination model.

H2: Visitors perceive local gastronomy authenticity and wine tourism organization as central experiential components of the destination's competitiveness.

H3: Visitors perceive environmental responsibility, infrastructure adequacy, and

balanced commercialization as indicators of sustainable destination management.

H4: Visitors perceive active local community involvement and willingness to support locally produced and sustainable products as integral elements of the destination's development logic.

H5: Visitors perceive the tourism development model of Goriška Brda as applicable to similar rural destinations and capable of enhancing competitiveness beyond its local context.

These hypotheses are tested using descriptive and comparative statistical analysis of visitor responses, with particular attention to potential differences between male and female respondents through chi-square tests of association.

Results and discussion

The socio-demographic structure of visitors to Goriška Brda reflects a relatively balanced and developmentally favorable tourism segment characterized by moderate gender symmetry, high educational attainment, and a strong concentration in economically active age groups. Women constitute a slight majority of visitors (54.3%), while men account for 45.7%, indicating that the destination appeals broadly across genders without strong structural polarization. This balanced distribution suggests that the tourism offer successfully integrates elements—such as gastronomy, wine culture, landscape aesthetics, and experiential authenticity—that resonate across demographic groups rather than targeting a narrowly defined market niche. Educational attainment represents one of the most distinctive characteristics of the visitor profile. A substantial proportion of respondents possess tertiary education, with 43.8% holding a college or faculty degree and an additional 18.1% holding MSc or PhD qualifications. Combined, more than sixty percent of visitors demonstrate higher education credentials, while only a small minority report elementary education (6.9%). This educational structure

indicates a visitor segment with relatively high levels of cultural capital, informational literacy, and likely heightened sensitivity to issues such as authenticity, environmental responsibility, and quality differentiation. The presence of such a knowledge-oriented audience aligns with the positioning of Goriška Brda as a destination grounded in wine heritage, local production systems, and experiential rural tourism rather than standardized mass tourism consumption.

Age distribution further reinforces this interpretation. The dominant visitor cohorts fall between 26 and 55 years of age, collectively comprising over 70% of the sample. The largest segments are those aged 26–35 (25.0%) and 36–45 (24.3%), followed by 46–55 (21.4%). Visitors aged 18–25 account for 14.9%, while those above 56 years together represent approximately 14.5%. This concentration in professionally active and financially stable age groups suggests that the destination attracts individuals with established lifestyles, discretionary income, and preferences for value-based experiential consumption. The relatively limited representation of the youngest and oldest cohorts implies that the appeal of Goriška Brda is less oriented toward youth-oriented entertainment or senior leisure tourism and more toward experiential, culturally embedded travel. Overall, the visitor profile reveals a structurally stable, educated, and economically active segment with balanced gender representation and moderate generational diversity. Such a composition indicates a tourism system supported by visitors who are likely capable of appreciating complex destination narratives, integrated agricultural models, and authenticity-driven experiences. The demographic characteristics therefore reflect not only who visits Goriška Brda, but also the type of tourism model the destination sustains—one anchored in knowledge-based appreciation, experiential quality, and cultural–rural value orientation rather than high-volume tourism flows.

As presented in Table 1, visitors predominantly perceive the integration of local agriculture and tourism in Goriška Brda in positive terms.



A combined 70.7% of respondents reported either agreement (37.0%) or strong agreement (33.7%) with the statement that the destination successfully integrates these two sectors. In contrast, only 11.6% expressed disagreement or strong disagreement, while 17.8% remained neutral. This distribution indicates a clear evaluative consensus among visitors that agricultural production and tourism activities are structurally interconnected within the destination. The relatively low proportion of negative responses suggests that the integration model is not perceived as fragmented or superficial, but rather as a coherent and recognizable characteristic of the destination's development logic. When

disaggregated by gender, the response patterns remain remarkably similar. Both male and female respondents demonstrate comparable levels of agreement and disagreement, with only marginal percentage differences across categories. This visual homogeneity in Table 1 is statistically confirmed by the chi-square analysis reported in Table 2. The Pearson chi-square test reveals no statistically significant association between gender and perceived integration of local agriculture and tourism ($\chi^2 = 0.204$, $df = 4$, $p = 0.995$). The extremely high p-value indicates that any minor variations observed between male and female respondents are random rather than systematic.

Table 1. Distribution of visitor responses by gender: Perceived integration of local agriculture and tourism in Goriška Brda

Response category	Male (n = 126)	Female (n = 150)	Total (n = 276)
Strongly disagree	4 (1.4%)	4 (1.4%)	8 (2.9%)
Disagree	11 (4.0%)	13 (4.7%)	24 (8.7%)
Neutral	23 (8.3%)	26 (9.4%)	49 (17.8%)
Agree	45 (16.3%)	57 (20.7%)	102 (37.0%)
Strongly agree	43 (15.6%)	50 (18.1%)	93 (33.7%)
Total	126 (45.7%)	150 (54.3%)	276 (100.0%)

Note: Values represent frequency and percentage of the total sample.

Table 2. Chi-square test of association between gender and perceived integration of local agriculture and tourism

Test	χ^2	df	p-value
Pearson Chi-square	0.204	4	0.995

Note: No statistically significant association was found between gender and perceived integration of local agriculture and tourism ($p > 0.05$).

Taken together, the results presented in Tables 1 and 2 provide clear empirical support for H1, which posits that visitors perceive the integration of local agriculture and tourism as a defining structural feature of the destination model. The absence of statistically significant gender differences further strengthens this conclusion, indicating that this perception represents a stable and broadly shared evaluative framework rather than a demographic-specific attitude. The findings therefore confirm that integrated rural development is not only institutionally embedded within the destination's operational logic but also socially recognized by diverse visitor segments.

The results presented in Table 3 indicate that the authenticity of local gastronomy represents one of the primary motives for visiting Goriška Brda. Positive responses clearly dominate the distribution, with 37.7% of respondents selecting "Agree" and 34.8% selecting "Strongly agree," which together represent 72.5% of the total sample. Negative responses remain relatively limited (9.7%), while 17.8% of respondents expressed a neutral position. Such a structure of responses indicates that visitors strongly associate the destination with authentic gastronomic experiences.

Table 3. *Distribution of visitor responses by gender: Authenticity of local gastronomy as a primary reason for visit*

Response category	Male (n = 126)	Female (n = 150)	Total (n = 276)
Strongly disagree	4 (1.4%)	3 (1.1%)	7 (2.5%)
Disagree	11 (4.0%)	9 (3.3%)	20 (7.2%)
Neutral	22 (8.0%)	27 (9.8%)	49 (17.8%)
Agree	42 (15.2%)	62 (22.5%)	104 (37.7%)
Strongly agree	47 (17.0%)	49 (17.8%)	96 (34.8%)
Total	126 (45.7%)	150 (54.3%)	276 (100.0%)

Note: Values represent frequency and percentage of the total sample.

Table 4. *Chi-square test of association between gender and authenticity of local gastronomy as a primary reason for visit*

Test	χ^2	df	p-value
Pearson Chi-square	2.674	4	0.614

Note: No statistically significant association was found between gender and the perception that local gastronomy authenticity represents a primary motive for visiting ($p > 0.05$).



The chi-square test presented in Table 4 shows that there is no statistically significant association between gender and the perception of gastronomy authenticity as a primary reason for visit ($\chi^2 = 2.674$; $p = 0.614$). This result suggests that male and female respondents evaluate this aspect of the destination in a similar manner.

The perception of environmental responsibility in tourism development was analyzed through the results presented in Table 5. Positive responses dominate the distribution, with 35.5% of respondents selecting “Agree” and 31.9% selecting “Strongly agree,” representing a

total of 67.4% of the sample. Neutral responses account for 20.3%, while negative responses represent only 12.3%. These results suggest that visitors generally perceive the destination as environmentally responsible. The chi-square test presented in Table 6 indicates that there is no statistically significant association between gender and perceptions of environmental responsibility ($\chi^2 = 5.665$; $p = 0.226$).

As shown in Table 7, positive responses account for 64.5% of the sample (40.2% “Agree” and 24.3% “Strongly agree”), while neutral responses represent 19.9% and negative responses 15.6%. These results

Table 5. Distribution of visitor responses by gender: Perceived environmental responsibility of tourism development

Response category	Male (n = 126)	Female (n = 150)	Total (n = 276)
Strongly disagree	3 (1.1%)	0 (0.0%)	3 (1.1%)
Disagree	15 (5.4%)	16 (5.8%)	31 (11.2%)
Neutral	21 (7.6%)	35 (12.7%)	56 (20.3%)
Agree	48 (17.4%)	50 (18.1%)	98 (35.5%)
Strongly agree	39 (14.1%)	49 (17.8%)	88 (31.9%)
Total	126 (45.7%)	150 (54.3%)	276 (100.0%)

Note: Values represent frequency and percentage of the total sample.

Table 6. Chi-square test of association between gender and perceived environmental responsibility of tourism development

Test	χ^2	df	p-value
Pearson Chi-square	5.665	4	0.226

Note: No statistically significant association was found between gender and perceptions of environmental responsibility in tourism development ($p > 0.05$).

indicate that visitors positively evaluate the organization of wine tourism and recognize it as an important component of the overall tourism experience. The chi-square analysis presented in Table 8 confirms that gender does not significantly influence perceptions regarding the organization of the wine tourism offer ($\chi^2 = 1.919$; $p = 0.751$).

Taken together, the results from Tables 3–4 and Tables 7–8 indicate that visitors perceive both the authenticity of local gastronomy and the organization of wine tourism as central experiential elements of the destination. The predominance of positive responses

and the absence of statistically significant gender differences support hypothesis **H2**, which emphasizes gastronomy authenticity and wine tourism organization as important components of destination competitiveness. The results presented in Table 9 indicate that visitors positively evaluate the involvement of the local community in tourism activities in Goriška Brda. Positive responses account for 64.9% of the sample (37.0% “Agree” and 27.9% “Strongly agree”), while neutral responses represent 19.6% and negative responses 15.6%. These findings suggest that visitors recognize the active participation of local households in shaping the tourism offer and preserving the

Table 7. Distribution of visitor responses by gender: Organization and professional management of wine tourism offer

Response category	Male (n = 126)	Female (n = 150)	Total (n = 276)
Strongly disagree	7 (2.5%)	7 (2.5%)	14 (5.1%)
Disagree	12 (4.3%)	17 (6.2%)	29 (10.5%)
Neutral	23 (8.3%)	32 (11.6%)	55 (19.9%)
Agree	49 (17.8%)	62 (22.5%)	111 (40.2%)
Strongly agree	35 (12.7%)	32 (11.6%)	67 (24.3%)
Total	126 (45.7%)	150 (54.3%)	276 (100.0%)

Note: Values represent frequency and percentage of the total sample.

Table 8. Chi-square test of association between gender and perceived organization of the wine tourism offer

Test	χ^2	df	p-value
Pearson Chi-square	1.919	4	0.751

Note: No statistically significant association was found between gender and perceptions of the organization of the wine tourism offer ($p > 0.05$).



cultural identity of the destination. The chi-square test presented in Table 10 indicates that gender differences are not statistically significant ($\chi^2 = 8.802$; $p = 0.066$). Although the value approaches the significance threshold, it remains above the accepted level ($p > 0.05$).

The adequacy of tourism infrastructure was analyzed in Table 11. The results indicate that 70.3% of respondents expressed positive attitudes toward infrastructure quality (38.4% “Agree” and 31.9% “Strongly agree”), while neutral responses represent 19.9% and negative responses only 9.8%. These findings suggest that visitors perceive the road network, signage, and visitor information systems

as functional and well adapted to tourist movement within the destination.

The chi-square test presented in Table 12 confirms that there is no statistically significant difference between male and female respondents in their perception of infrastructure adequacy ($\chi^2 = 1.901$; $p = 0.754$).

Finally, the balance between tourism commercialization and nature conservation was examined in Table 13. The results indicate that 62.7% of respondents positively evaluate the relationship between tourism development and environmental preservation (37.3% “Agree” and 25.4% “Strongly agree”). Neutral responses account for 19.9%, while negative

Table 9. Distribution of visitor responses by gender: Perceived involvement of the local community in tourism activities

Response category	Male (n = 126)	Female (n = 150)	Total (n = 276)
Strongly disagree	6 (2.2%)	5 (1.8%)	11 (4.0%)
Disagree	11 (4.0%)	21 (7.6%)	32 (11.6%)
Neutral	24 (8.7%)	30 (10.9%)	54 (19.6%)
Agree	40 (14.5%)	62 (22.5%)	102 (37.0%)
Strongly agree	45 (16.3%)	32 (11.6%)	77 (27.9%)
Total	126 (45.7%)	150 (54.3%)	276 (100.0%)

Note: Values represent frequency and percentage of the total sample.

Table 10. Chi-square test of association between gender and perceived local community involvement

Test	χ^2	df	p-value
Pearson Chi-square	8.802	4	0.066

Note: No statistically significant association was found between gender and perceptions of local community involvement in tourism activities ($p > 0.05$).

responses represent 17.4%. The chi-square test presented in Table 14 again confirms the absence of statistically significant gender differences ($\chi^2 = 6.192$; $p = 0.185$).

Overall, the results from Tables 5–6, 11–12, and 13–14 indicate that visitors perceive environmental responsibility, infrastructure adequacy, and the balance between tourism development and nature conservation as key elements of sustainable destination management. The dominance of positive responses and the absence of statistically significant gender differences support hypothesis **H3**. Visitors' willingness to pay a higher price for locally produced and

sustainable products was examined in Table 15. The results indicate that 62% of respondents expressed positive attitudes toward this statement (34.1% "Agree" and 27.9% "Strongly agree"), while neutral responses represent 22.1% and negative responses 15.9%. This distribution suggests that visitors recognize the value of local and sustainable products and are willing to support them economically. The chi-square test presented in Table 16 confirms that gender does not significantly influence this perception ($\chi^2 = 4.727$; $p = 0.316$).

Taken together, the results from Tables 9–10 and Tables 15–16 indicate that visitors perceive community involvement and support for locally produced and sustainable

Table 11. Distribution of visitor responses by gender: Adequacy of tourism infrastructure (roads, signage, visitor information)

Response category	Male (n = 126)	Female (n = 150)	Total (n = 276)
Strongly disagree	6 (2.2%)	4 (1.4%)	10 (3.6%)
Disagree	8 (2.9%)	9 (3.3%)	17 (6.2%)
Neutral	25 (9.1%)	30 (10.9%)	55 (19.9%)
Agree	51 (18.5%)	55 (19.9%)	106 (38.4%)
Strongly agree	36 (13.0%)	52 (18.8%)	88 (31.9%)
Total	126 (45.7%)	150 (54.3%)	276 (100.0%)

Note: Values represent frequency and percentage of the total sample.

Table 12. Chi-square test of association between gender and perceived adequacy of tourism infrastructure

Test	χ^2	df	p-value
Pearson Chi-square	1.901	4	0.754

Note: No statistically significant association was found between gender and perceptions of infrastructure adequacy ($p > 0.05$).

products as integral elements of the destination's development model. Therefore, hypothesis H4 is supported. The perception of the transferability of the Goriška Brda development model to other rural destinations was examined in Table 17. The results indicate that positive responses account for 62.7% of the sample (34.1% "Agree" and 28.6% "Strongly agree"), while neutral responses represent 21.4% and negative responses 15.9%. These findings suggest that visitors perceive the development model not as an isolated example but as a potentially applicable approach to rural tourism development. The chi-square test presented in Table 18 confirms that gender

does not significantly influence this perception ($\chi^2 = 0.611$; $p = 0.962$).

Furthermore, Table 19 analyzes whether respondents believe that adopting a similar development model could enhance destination competitiveness. Positive responses account for 63% of the sample (33.3% "Agree" and 29.7% "Strongly agree"), while neutral responses represent 21.4% and negative responses 15.5%. The chi-square analysis presented in Table 20 again confirms the absence of statistically significant gender differences ($\chi^2 = 3.772$; $p = 0.438$).

Table 13. *Distribution of visitor responses by gender: Balance between nature conservation and tourism commercialization*

Response category	Male (n = 126)	Female (n = 150)	Total (n = 276)
Strongly disagree	4 (1.4%)	6 (2.2%)	10 (3.6%)
Disagree	21 (7.6%)	17 (6.2%)	38 (13.8%)
Neutral	20 (7.2%)	35 (12.7%)	55 (19.9%)
Agree	43 (15.6%)	60 (21.7%)	103 (37.3%)
Strongly agree	38 (13.8%)	32 (11.6%)	70 (25.4%)
Total	126 (45.7%)	150 (54.3%)	276 (100.0%)

Note: Values represent frequency and percentage of the total sample.

Table 14. *Chi-square test of association between gender and perceived balance between conservation and commercialization*

Test	χ^2	df	p-value
Pearson Chi-square	6.192	4	0.185

Note: No statistically significant association was found between gender and perceptions of the balance between nature conservation and tourism commercialization ($p > 0.05$).

Taken together, the results presented in Tables 17–20 indicate that visitors perceive the tourism development model of Goriška Brda as transferable and capable of strengthening competitiveness in other rural destinations. These findings therefore support hypothesis H5.

Discussion

The results of this study provide empirical support for the interpretation of Goriška Brda as a functionally integrated rural tourism destination in which agriculture, gastronomy, wine culture, environmental responsibility, and

community participation operate as mutually reinforcing elements of a coherent development model. Visitors consistently recognized the integration of local agriculture and tourism as one of the defining structural characteristics of the destination. The high level of agreement regarding this dimension suggests that the agricultural foundation of the tourism offer is not perceived merely as a background context but as a visible and meaningful component of the visitor experience. In this sense, the findings confirm that the connection between local production systems and tourism services represents a central mechanism through which rural destinations can create distinctive

Table 15. Distribution of visitor responses by gender: Willingness to pay a higher price for locally produced and sustainable products and services

Response category	Male (n = 126)	Female (n = 150)	Total (n = 276)
Strongly disagree	6 (2.2%)	7 (2.5%)	13 (4.7%)
Disagree	12 (4.3%)	19 (6.9%)	31 (11.2%)
Neutral	25 (9.1%)	36 (13.0%)	61 (22.1%)
Agree	40 (14.5%)	54 (19.6%)	94 (34.1%)
Strongly agree	43 (15.6%)	34 (12.3%)	77 (27.9%)
Total	126 (45.7%)	150 (54.3%)	276 (100.0%)

Note: Values represent frequency and percentage of the total sample.

Table 16. Chi-square test of association between gender and willingness to pay a higher price for sustainable products

Test	χ^2	df	p-value
Pearson Chi-square	4.727	4	0.316

Note: No statistically significant association was found between gender and willingness to pay a higher price for locally produced and sustainable products and services ($p > 0.05$).

and recognizable tourism identities.

The results further indicate that gastronomy authenticity and the organization of wine tourism represent particularly strong experiential components of the destination's competitiveness. Visitors clearly associate the destination with authentic culinary experiences rooted in local agricultural production and traditional food culture. The strong positive evaluation of wine tourism organization also suggests that visitors perceive wineries not only as production facilities but as integral elements of the tourism system that contribute to the overall destination narrative. Together, these findings

reinforce the interpretation that gastronomic and wine-based experiences function as key mediators between agricultural heritage and contemporary tourism consumption. In this respect, Goriška Brda illustrates how rural destinations can successfully translate local production systems into experiential tourism products that strengthen both authenticity and market positioning.

Environmental responsibility and sustainable destination management also emerged as strongly recognized components of the destination model. Visitors expressed predominantly positive evaluations regarding environmental responsibility, infrastructure

Table 17. *Distribution of visitor responses by gender: Applicability of the Goriška Brda tourism development model to similar rural destinations*

Response category	Male (n = 126)	Female (n = 150)	Total (n = 276)
Strongly disagree	8 (2.9%)	8 (2.9%)	16 (5.8%)
Disagree	13 (4.7%)	15 (5.4%)	28 (10.1%)
Neutral	25 (9.1%)	34 (12.3%)	59 (21.4%)
Agree	42 (15.2%)	52 (18.8%)	94 (34.1%)
Strongly agree	38 (13.8%)	41 (14.9%)	79 (28.6%)
Total	126 (45.7%)	150 (54.3%)	276 (100.0%)

Note: Values represent frequency and percentage of the total sample.

Table 18. *Chi-square test of association between gender and perceived applicability of the tourism development model*

Test	χ^2	df	p-value
Pearson Chi-square	0.611	4	0.962

Note: No statistically significant association was found between gender and perceptions of the balance between nature conservation and tourism commercialization ($p > 0.05$).

adequacy, and the balance between tourism development and nature conservation. These perceptions indicate that sustainability practices are not only implemented at the destination level but are also visible to visitors. The recognition of such practices is particularly important in rural tourism contexts where the preservation of landscapes, ecosystems, and cultural heritage represents a fundamental component of destination attractiveness. The findings therefore suggest that sustainability-oriented development strategies can be effectively communicated through the visitor experience when environmental stewardship is integrated with tourism infrastructure and

destination management practices.

Another important dimension highlighted by the results concerns the role of the local community in shaping the tourism offer. Visitors largely recognized the active involvement of local residents in tourism activities and expressed a willingness to support locally produced and sustainable products. This pattern of responses suggests that community participation is perceived as an authentic element of the destination experience rather than as a purely institutional or managerial component. The willingness of visitors to pay a higher price for local and sustainable products further indicates that

Table 19. *Distribution of visitor responses by gender: Perceived potential to enhance competitiveness through adoption of a similar development model*

Response category	Male (n = 126)	Female (n = 150)	Total (n = 276)
Strongly disagree	2 (0.7%)	5 (1.8%)	7 (2.5%)
Disagree	13 (4.7%)	23 (8.3%)	36 (13.0%)
Neutral	31 (11.2%)	28 (10.1%)	59 (21.4%)
Agree	40 (14.5%)	52 (18.8%)	92 (33.3%)
Strongly agree	40 (14.5%)	42 (15.2%)	82 (29.7%)
Total	126 (45.7%)	150 (54.3%)	276 (100.0%)

Note: Values represent frequency and percentage of the total sample.

Table 20. *Chi-square test of association between gender and perceived potential for competitiveness enhancement*

Test	χ^2	df	p-value
Pearson Chi-square	3.772	4	0.438

Note: No statistically significant association was found between gender and perceptions regarding the potential to enhance competitiveness through adoption of a similar development model ($p > 0.05$).



tourists attribute value to locally embedded production systems and perceive them as an essential part of the tourism experience. These findings support the interpretation that community-based tourism development can strengthen both authenticity and economic sustainability when local production systems are successfully integrated into the tourism offer.

The analysis also demonstrates that visitors perceive the development model of Goriška Brda as transferable to other rural destinations with similar resource bases. Respondents largely agreed that the integrated model combining agriculture, gastronomy, wine tourism, environmental responsibility, and coordinated management could enhance the competitiveness of comparable destinations. This perception suggests that visitors recognize the destination not only as a successful local example but also as a potential reference model for broader rural tourism development. The transferability of such models is particularly relevant for destinations seeking to diversify their tourism offer while preserving local identity and environmental integrity.

An important methodological observation emerging from the results is the absence of statistically significant gender differences across all examined variables. This consistency indicates that the perception of the destination's development model is not shaped by gender-specific preferences or expectations but rather reflects a broadly shared evaluative framework among visitors. The homogeneity of perceptions across demographic groups suggests that the key structural elements of the destination—agriculture–tourism integration, gastronomic authenticity, sustainability practices, and community involvement—are clearly communicated and widely understood. Consequently, the destination model appears to operate as a socially recognizable system rather than a set of isolated tourism products. Taken together, the findings indicate that the success of Goriška Brda as a rural tourism destination lies not in the presence of individual attractions but in the coherence of its development model. The integration of

local agriculture, gastronomy, wine tourism, environmental stewardship, and community participation forms a unified experiential framework that visitors are able to recognize and evaluate positively. This structural coherence appears to play a crucial role in shaping the destination's competitiveness, as it allows visitors to interpret the tourism offer as a consistent and authentic representation of the local environment and cultural landscape.

Conclusion

The findings confirm the general hypothesis that visitors perceive Goriška Brda as a structurally integrated and sustainability-oriented rural tourism model characterized by authenticity, environmental responsibility, organizational coherence, and community embeddedness. Across all examined dimensions, respondents expressed predominantly positive evaluations, while comparative analysis revealed no statistically significant gender differences. This consistency suggests that the perception of the destination's development model represents a stable and socially shared evaluative framework rather than a demographic-specific attitude. The results indicate that the integration of agriculture and tourism, the authenticity of gastronomy, environmental responsibility, infrastructural adequacy, balanced commercialization, and the perceived transferability of the model collectively form a coherent sustainability narrative recognized by diverse visitor segments. The absence of gender-based differentiation further strengthens the interpretation that this model operates as a broadly acknowledged structural configuration rather than a perception mediated by individual demographic characteristics.

At the level of specific hypotheses, the results demonstrate that visitors clearly recognize the integration of local agriculture and tourism as a defining structural characteristic of the destination (H1). Gastronomy authenticity and the professional organization of wine tourism are perceived as central experiential components contributing to destination

competitiveness (H2). Environmental responsibility, infrastructure adequacy, and the balance between tourism development and nature conservation are recognized as key indicators of sustainable destination management (H3). Furthermore, visitors acknowledge the active involvement of the local community and express willingness to support locally produced and sustainable products, confirming the importance of community-based development logic (H4). Finally, respondents perceive the development model of Goriška Brda as transferable and capable of strengthening the competitiveness of similar rural destinations (H5). Taken together, these findings indicate that the destination operates as a functionally integrated system in which agricultural production, tourism services, environmental stewardship, and cultural authenticity form mutually reinforcing elements of a sustainable rural tourism model.

Theoretical and Practical Contributions

From a theoretical perspective, this study contributes to the literature on sustainable rural tourism and destination competitiveness by empirically examining how visitors perceive integrated agriculture–tourism development models. While previous research frequently focuses on economic indicators, policy frameworks, or destination management strategies, this study highlights the importance of visitor perception as an indicator of whether such development models are socially visible and experientially meaningful. The findings demonstrate that structural coherence between local production systems, tourism services, environmental responsibility, and community participation can be recognized by visitors as a unified destination logic. This contributes to a better understanding of how sustainability-oriented tourism models are interpreted and validated through visitor experience.

From a practical perspective, the results provide insights for destination managers and regional development planners seeking to strengthen the competitiveness of rural tourism destinations. The case of Goriška

Brda illustrates that the integration of local agricultural production, gastronomy, wine tourism, and community participation can create a recognizable and attractive tourism system. For destinations with similar resource bases, such as Fruška Gora, the findings highlight the strategic importance of preserving authenticity, strengthening cooperation between local producers and tourism providers, investing in infrastructure and information systems, and maintaining a balanced relationship between tourism development and environmental protection. These elements collectively contribute to the creation of a coherent destination identity capable of attracting visitors seeking authentic and sustainability-oriented experiences.

Limitations and Future Research

Despite the insights provided by this study, several limitations should be acknowledged. First, the research is based on a cross-sectional survey conducted within a single destination, which limits the ability to generalize the findings to other rural tourism contexts. Second, the analysis focuses primarily on visitor perceptions and does not incorporate perspectives from other stakeholder groups such as local residents, tourism entrepreneurs, or destination management organizations. Third, although gender differences were examined, other demographic or behavioral variables—such as travel motivation, length of stay, or visitor origin—were not included in the comparative analysis. Future research could expand this analytical framework by applying similar perception-based approaches to other rural tourism destinations in order to examine whether comparable development models generate similar evaluative patterns among visitors. Comparative studies across different regions would provide deeper insight into the transferability of integrated agriculture–tourism models. In addition, future studies could incorporate mixed-method approaches combining quantitative surveys with qualitative interviews in order to explore how visitors interpret authenticity, sustainability,

and community involvement within rural tourism experiences. Such approaches would further contribute to understanding how sustainable rural tourism models are constructed, communicated, and recognized within contemporary tourism systems.

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