

Article

Do Size and Ownership Determine the Willingness for Sustainable Innovations in Spa and Health Tourism? A Case Study on Baile Felix Spa Resort, Romania

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Abstract: There is a considerable debate in the literature regarding the real impact of tourism on the environment and human communities, specifically with respect to tourism's openness to sustainable innovation. The way in which the different forms of tourism and entrepreneurial and managerial initiatives respond to the new economic, technological, social and environmental challenges acquire considerable importance for academics, practitioners, decision makers and consumers. The purpose of this research is to assess the potential for sustainable innovation in spa and health tourism in a relevant area in Romania through a survey-based study of both entrepreneurs who own a tourist accommodation unit, as well as top and middle managers from large tourism enterprises. The results of our research show that the development of spa and health tourism offers multiple examples of good practices, and that stimulating innovative entrepreneurial initiatives can lead to a sustainable reinvention of the tourism and local economy, in line with the international health tourism market. In the case of small businesses, even though sustainable initiatives are present, they are at an earlier stage and are less diversified compared to hotels, the scope of innovation is smaller and their motivation weaker. In other words, a large part of the objectives of modernization and sustainability in spa and health tourism (equipment, services, qualification and hiring of employees, sustainable and environmentally friendly orientation) are the responsibility of large hotel resorts. This research provides valuable insights into the ongoing debate surrounding the impact of tourism on the environment and local communities, with a specific focus on the potential for sustainable innovation in spa and health tourism within a significant region of Romania.

Keywords: sustainable innovation; ownership; business size; spa and health tourism; Baile Felix



Citation: Trip, D.-T.; Simut, R.; Badulescu, D. Do Size and Ownership Determine the Willingness for Sustainable Innovations in Spa and Health Tourism? A Case Study on Baile Felix Spa Resort, Romania. *Sustainability* **2023**, *15*, 14501. <https://doi.org/10.3390/su151914501>

Academic Editor: Harry Coccossis

Received: 12 September 2023

Revised: 27 September 2023

Accepted: 3 October 2023

Published: 5 October 2023



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1. Introduction

Due to globalization, the emergence of a competitive environment has increased the importance of entrepreneurship in various fields [1], having an increasingly important role in analyzing and solving both macro and micro problems [2]. Entrepreneurship is also vital in the tourism sector [3], as tourism survival and development are closely linked to entrepreneurial activities and sustainability [4].

Tourism is influenced by changing consumer preferences and the emergence of new technologies [5]. Consumers are becoming less satisfied with the traditional concept of tourism services consisting of accommodation, catering and transportation, and instead demand more experience-based products [6], that requires an entrepreneurial behavior to innovate and create added value. Therefore, to be able to improve product quality by adding new features and tourist services and to penetrate new market segments, tourism depends on new, innovative companies. Unlike other industries, tourism has the relative advantage of not having to involve production processes and significant investments. For this reason, tourism is also considered an economic development strategy in less developed countries or areas [7].

The evolution of international tourism in recent decades, although impressive, can be characterized by the alternation of sustained growth with the shocks of global crises. Thus, in 2019, experts' forecasts for the coming decades predicted that tourism and travel would be one of the fastest growing sectors in the world in the early 21st century [8], and a continuous growth for the 2020–2030 period [9]. Globally, in the last pre-pandemic year (2019), tourism performed beyond expectations, with a record of nearly 1.5 billion international tourist arrivals. In developed countries, the growth rate exceeded the 2014–2019 world average, accounting for 57% of global arrivals and around 61% of international travel revenues [9]. According to World Tourism Organization [10] and World Trade Organization (WTO) [8] reports, international tourism export revenues reached USD 1700 billion in 2019. In 2019, tourism consolidated its position as the third largest global industry, with exports of around USD 1742 billion, after fuels and chemicals, but ahead of automobiles and food.

Export earnings from international tourism are an important source of foreign currency earnings for many destinations around the world. The contributions of tourism to employment and, subsequently, to solving, or at least alleviating, some social problems are widely recognized. The tourism sector generates millions of direct and indirect jobs and is a favorable field of action for private initiative. The majority of tourism enterprises (about 80%) are small- and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) that employ a large proportion of women and young people. For example, in 2019, women represented 54% of the tourism workforce, compared to around 39% in the global economy [10,11].

Despite this sustained growth, 2020 brought "an unprecedented shock, challenges and an existential threat to the tourism sector" due to the COVID-19 pandemic [12], with travel and tourism being one of the most affected sectors of the global economy. According to UNWTO, international tourism registered a huge decline in 2020: international tourist arrivals (overnight stays) decreased by 74% compared to 2019, and in 2021 by around 72%.

The latest data released by UNWTO in early 2023 indicate that, looking ahead, international tourism is set to recover and improve its situation. Over 72% of UNWTO experts expect better performance in 2023, but almost two thirds of them (65%) believe that international tourism will not return to 2019 levels before 2024, or even later [13].

Critical challenges for the industry include managing changing consumer preferences, ensuring sustainability and adapting to crises. This article aims to assess the potential for sustainable innovation in spa and health tourism in one of the most developed spa regions in Romania, which could serve as a model for the wider tourism industry in Romania, or for other spa businesses internationally. The main goal is to meet these challenges and contribute to scientific knowledge.

Through this article, we aim to assess the sustainable innovation potential in the field of spa and health tourism in a relevant spa tourism area in Romania. The structure of this paper is as follows: after this introduction, we continue with a review of the main contributions on the relationship between tourism, innovation and sustainable development. Next, we will present the context of the research (the health and spa tourism subsector), the research methodology, followed by the main results and discussion. We will end with conclusions and highlight the contribution of this research to scientific knowledge on this topic and the main limitations of the research.

2. Related Works on Sustainable Innovation in Tourism and Firms' Characteristics

2.1. Tourism, Innovation and Sustainable Development

The last decades have seen increased concerns regarding the impact of tourism on the environment and society and, subsequently, the promotion of innovation and sustainable behaviors in domestic and international tourism.

Many studies have warned that the impact of tourism (direct or indirect) on a destination is often greater than anticipated. The positive aspects—economic development, jobs, income for businesses and the local community, cultural openness and the revival of some local traditions and customs, and the conservation and restoration of natural and heritage sites [14,15]—are counterbalanced by the existence of some negative effects,

such as the leakage of income to developed countries, economic dependence, excessive consumption of resources, corruption and delinquency, environmental pollution, damage to social cohesion in the receiving communities, etc. [14,16,17]. For some researchers and governmental or non-governmental organizations, tourism has an ambivalent relationship with sustainability and sometimes it is seen as an “old-fashioned” practice, which can be indifferent or even aggressive towards the environment [18], being responsible, directly or indirectly, for about 8% of global greenhouse gas emissions, of which about half is due to the contribution of tourist transportation [19].

However, there are also optimistic perspectives: on one hand, technological innovations that offer governments and economic ventures opportunities to incorporate sustainable practices in tourism activities and, on the other hand, the definition and implementation of measures and policies to reduce the carbon footprint of tourism: the general decrease in tourist transportations, the development of local niche markets to distribute the pressure of long-distance transport, education, or public–private partnerships.

The innovation–sustainability–tourism relationship, although intensively invoked in the last decades, is far from being fully clarified and implemented in local, national and global practices and policies. Moreover, according to Hjalager [20], understanding innovation in tourism can be convergent—that is, tourism can learn from the main trajectory of innovation, or divergent—tourism is a separate sector, different from production and even other services, and the investigation of innovation in tourism must take into account other research tools and other perspectives, often multidisciplinary, in which the vision of sustainability (environmental, social) acquires increased importance. The particular characteristics of tourist services (intangibility, simultaneity of production and consumption, the fact that the tourist experience is made up and defined by multiple encounters with providers, the decisive role of information and expectations, the need for intensive labor and the quality of the labor force that influences the tourist experience) also gives a specific character to innovation in this sector [5].

Starting from the fundamental principle of sustainable development—meeting the needs of the present generation without jeopardizing the interests and needs of future generations [21]—tourism develops sustainably as long as it pays attention to local communities and the management of the natural environment [22], reconciling the quality of the tourist experience with the economic, social and cultural life of the residents and the natural environment in which it takes place [23–26]. The technological revolution, communications and the impact of the digital world, economic and social transformations are an undeniable reality of our time and, implicitly, the sustainable development of tourism cannot ignore these realities [27].

Innovation and entrepreneurship stimulate competitiveness of any type of business; therefore, innovative entrepreneurship needs to integrate new business models and innovative applications so as to ensure the long-term sustainable development of tourism [17,28].

According to Teodorescu, Stancioiu, Ravar and Botos [29], the innovation and development of new products or services are very important elements for the differentiation and competitiveness of a tourist destination, and even if many studies suggest a low permeability of the tourism sector to the innovation and dissemination of technological advances [30–32]; there are, however, many voices claiming that innovative practices in tourism exist and that they integrate technical advances, digital approaches and socio-cultural characteristics with sustainable development.

In tourism, sustainably oriented innovations have a considerable human and social component and often require new managerial and organizational structures, broad support from the local community, education and awareness of providers and tourists and internalization of practices oriented towards sustainable development [31].

The literature argues that the lower significance of innovation in tourism is only on the surface, when, in fact, it is less “visible”, being more frequent in process and organizational innovation [33,34] and less in product innovation (which is usually more spectacular and perceptible). Likewise, it follows somewhat different patterns than those

in production [35], and the dominance of mass tourism, which demands less sophisticated and relatively similar products, does not stimulate technological innovation but rather changes in behavior and processes [35]. At the same time, tourism innovations involving a relatively unsophisticated level of technology are relatively easy to imitate [20,35] and are accessible and open to competition [5].

Moreover, the vast majority of tourism ventures are small- and medium-sized companies with low capital that are risk-conscious and without the financial and human resources to support research and innovation [36]. In the case of a tourism company, the trend towards innovation is, therefore, positively linked to the size of the business and limited to incremental innovations and the acquisition of models and equipment necessary to increase efficiency, rather than necessarily promoting innovation [33]. Bramwell and Lane [31] also discuss the quality and qualification of human and managerial resources with lower levels of education and training or with various professional experiences, but insufficiently related to tourism and hospitality and moderate openness to technology. Reduced availability to cooperation, partnerships or alliances also diminishes the appetite for innovation and sustainability in the tourism industry [31,37,38]. This can be a serious disadvantage for the tourism industry that needs to be rapidly mitigated, with studies by Hjalager [20,39] finding that relationships and cooperation between tourism firms are essential for the transfer of knowledge, good practices and collective learning, and which could ultimately facilitate innovative ideas. Hjalager argues that regional sustainable innovation systems are capable of boosting institutional learning, building social capital and preparing companies and communities for global challenges and changes. This implies flexibility, openness to the new, while making the most of local connections and focusing on sustainability [39] for tourism.

2.2. The Relationship between Size, Ownership and Innovation and Sustainable Actions in Tourism

The relationship between the company size and innovation and sustainability is intensely debated in literature, with the vast majority of researchers considering that there is a positive relationship between the size of the company and innovation [40,41], which stems from market power, experience, economies of scale, access and control over financial and technical resources [42]. According to Aguilar-Fernández and Otegi-Olaso [43] (p. 5), “the literature reveals a trend towards the notion of a positive relationship between the size of a company and its innovative activities towards sustainability”. In the tourism industry, large companies, based on their financial strength and expertise and knowledge of legislation and tax facilities, explore, test and implement innovation to a much greater extent than small ones. They are able to manage several innovative projects simultaneously, spread the risk and absorb the considerable associated costs with innovation through higher volumes of sales, employees and stakeholders with varied knowledge, skills and experience [44].

On the other hand, the realities and opportunities of the contemporary economy also support different views, according to which small businesses now seem to be more innovative than large businesses due to flexibility [45,46], reduced bureaucracy [47], using a business-to-business configuration [48], or alliances with other SMEs to complement and improve their capabilities [49,50]. This trend is also identified in the tourism sector [51], highlighting hotels as the most active and innovative sub-segment of this industry [6]. Finally, other studies consider that no obvious long-term relationship can be established between company size and innovation within enterprises in the tourism industry [44].

Many of the identified studies argue that small businesses and family businesses in tourism are more socially and community-responsible [52–54], and that they calculate and project the future of their business by considering the future of the community and the quality of the destination where they operate [55]. Chen [56] and Dwyer [55] argue that place satisfaction increases the proactive participation of residents (people and businesses) in regional tourism development, and small family-owned businesses adjust their voluntary sustainability practices according to legitimacy, competitiveness and environmental

responsibility [57]. This appears to be even more visible in tourism sub-sectors and destinations where ecological and social considerations have a major influence on their sustainable engagement, such as rural tourism [58] or spa and healthcare tourism [59,60]. Qasem, Mohammed, Battisti and Ferraris [61] found a significant positive association between firm sustainable investments and institutional investor ownership in the tourism sector. Companies with foreign shareholders seem to be more interested in sustainable actions than the local ones. Moreover, there is a significant, positive association between managerial ownership and firm sustainable investments, confirming, at least for the contextual case studied, that firm ownership has an influence on firm sustainable involvement in the tourism industry.

2.3. The Role and the Importance of Spa and Health Tourism

Health tourism is a relatively new concept and has been in use for around two decades [62]. However, travelling to another country for health care is not a new phenomenon. People have travelled for treatment and revitalization throughout history—the Romans travelled to thermal baths, pilgrims visited the Dead Sea for the therapeutic benefits of the water, and Asians went to thermal springs for relaxation and socialization [63]. Health tourism is one of the fastest growing segments on the global tourism market [64], with the growing demand for healthcare services creating opportunities for entrepreneurs. According to Global Healthcare Resources, approximately 11 million people travel to different parts of the world for medical care each year [65].

The landscapes, climate and natural resources in Romania have contributed to the wide recognition of spa treatment and health destinations of this country [66]. After being among the favorite destinations of foreign tourists in Romania between 1970 and 1990, spa tourism continues to be a major segment of the health tourism market in Romania [66]. Over the last two decades, several factors (economic, political, changing trends) have led to the decline in spa resorts and to a decrease in the number of foreign tourists. However, tradition, international certifications, employee qualifications, healing natural resources, modernization of infrastructure [67], accommodation and treatment facilities, the implementation of modern spa services and a lower level of tariffs can be a competitive advantage in revitalizing this sector in Romania's economy. There is a growing interest in changing the way people take care of their health, the development of health and wellness tourism in Romania and in Europe in general, driving to the re-evaluation of the positioning and promotion strategies of spa and health resorts, by supplementing the spa offer with innovative [68] and, at the same time, sustainable services [69].

In this context, we would like to investigate the following general questions: on one hand, whether the goals of starting and developing sustainable businesses in spa tourism differs according to the characteristics of the firms; on the other hand, how do managers/owners in this field perceive the factors that support or hinder their attempts to implement sustainable innovations.

Starting from the above questions and taking into account the main contributions from the literature, especially those that substantiate the links between the firm's main characteristics and the sustainable innovations in the tourism sector, we defined four hypotheses:

Hypothesis 1. *The perception of the factors and opportunities underlying a sustainable business in the spa tourism differs according to the size and ownership type of the tourism ventures;*

Hypothesis 2. *The objectives set when launching a tourism business vary according to the size and ownership type of the tourism ventures;*

Hypothesis 3. *The perception of the factors determining the market launch of a new sustainable service/product differs according to the size and ownership type of the tourism ventures;*

Hypothesis 4. *The perception of the factors with a major negative impact in supporting sustainable innovations within the spa tourism businesses differs according to the size and ownership type of the tourism ventures.*

3. Methodology

Our research was carried out among the tourism companies in Baile Felix Spa Resort, the largest Romanian spa resort, located in the northwest of Romania [66,70]. After a period of stagnation, the last decade witnessed a significant increase in the number of entrepreneurial initiatives and jobs in this area through the expansion and modernization of tourist accommodation structures, food, leisure and treatment services, contributing to the prosperity of the local economy and increasing the attractiveness of the area.

In order to investigate the sustainable innovative potential in the field of spa and health tourism in Baile Felix area, we conducted field research between 1–31 October 2022 based on a semi-structured interview and an opinion questionnaire. The questionnaire comprised 12 questions, covering open and multiple-choice questions. A 5-level ordinal scale (Likert scale) was used to construct the closed questions, while Cronbach's Alpha was used to measure the reliability of the items underlying the questionnaire. In the case of the instrument, the Cronbach's Alpha was 0.631, higher than 0.600 [71]. We targeted a representative sample made up of entrepreneurs who own a tourist accommodation unit in Baile Felix area (authorized individuals and SMEs) and, respectively, top and middle managers in large tourism enterprises (over 250 employees). In the reports provided by the Ministry of Entrepreneurship and Tourism (Romania) [70], 203 units were found, which differ based on the type of unit, star rating, number of beds, the type of economic venture, as well as the services and facilities offered.

Of these 203 units, we were able to contact 137, obtaining 91 answers (for a response rate of 66.4%), of which 29 belong to top and middle managers in the hotel sector, representing 15 hotels, and the other 62 people are entrepreneurs and owners of guesthouses, villas and rooms for rent. As the present research focuses on the respondents' attitudes, willingness and experiences related to innovation and sustainability in spa and health tourism, we consider only the responses of entrepreneurs and managers who have introduced new sustainable services/facilities/products in the last 2 years, i.e., 60 respondents out of a total of 91 valid responses.

In Figure 1, we present a research methodology diagram that contains the data source, the procedure, the statistical tests and methods that will be applied to the groups, identifying the inputs and possible outputs.

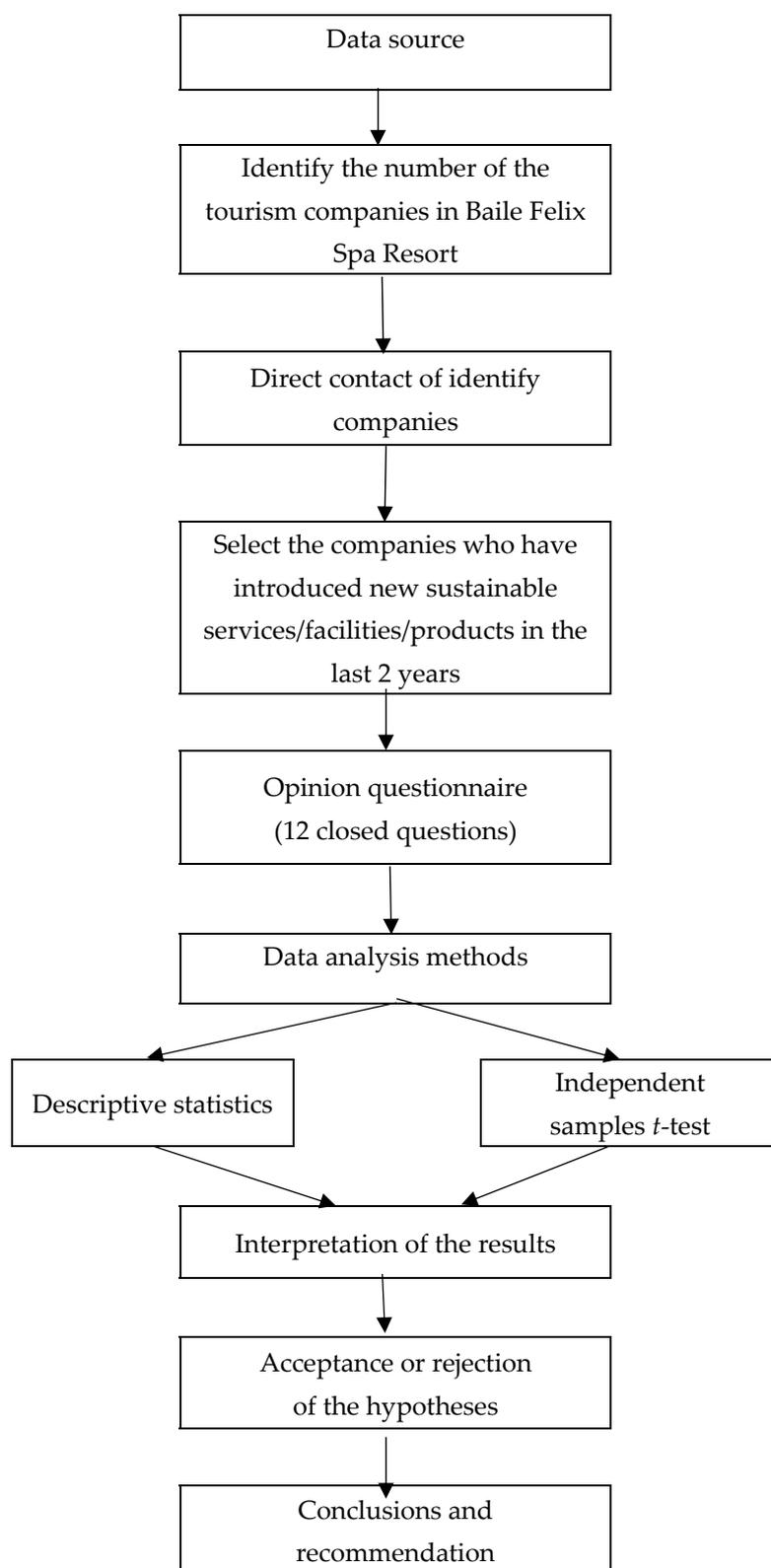


Figure 1. Research Methodology Diagram.

4. Results and Discussions

We have carried out a statistical analysis of the two independent samples (*group 1—Hotels*, and *group 2—Guesthouses, villas, rooms for rent*), starting from the as-

sumption that the type of organization, the ownership and the size of the company impact the willingness for sustainable innovations in this sector.

In order to test the four hypotheses to determine whether there are significant differences between the entrepreneurial perspectives underlying a particular type of accommodation unit, we applied the independent samples *t*-test.

Hypothesis 1. *The perception of the factors and opportunities underlying a sustainable business in spa tourism differs according to the size and ownership type of the tourism ventures.*

According to the results (Table 1), we can see that entrepreneurs and small business owners are more interested in exploiting current opportunities that are essential for strengthening their market position, and less interested in maintaining continuity with the past features of the sector. The top three options in the case of guesthouses were *financial independence, the desire to succeed, to do things better and the expansion of sustainable business opportunities in the area*, and in the case of large hotels' managers, the options were *the desire to succeed, to do things better, to provide innovative services in a field that was showing signs of aging/capping, and to offer a service already existing on the market, but in a sustainable and innovative way*.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics for the perception of the factors and opportunities underlying a sustainable business in spa tourism, according to the type of venture.

	Type of Unit	N	Mean	Std. Dev.	Std. Error Mean
The desire to succeed, to do things better	Hotel	21	3.857	1.852	0.404
	Guesthouse	39	2.846	2.020	0.323
Expansion of sustainable business opportunities in Baile Felix area	Hotel	21	2.714	2.028	0.443
	Guesthouse	39	3.051	2.025	0.324
Financial independence	Hotel	21	2.143	1.852	0.404
	Guesthouse	39	3.564	1.944	0.311
Flexible schedule	Hotel	21	1.190	0.873	0.190
	Guesthouse	39	2.026	1.769	0.283
The decision to be self-employed	Hotel	21	1.571	1.434	0.313
	Guesthouse	39	2.744	2.009	0.322
Offering a service already existing on the market, but in a sustainable and innovative way	Hotel	21	3.095	2.047	0.447
	Guesthouse	39	2.333	1.910	0.306
Providing innovative services in a field that was showing signs of aging/capping	Hotel	21	3.667	1.932	0.422
	Guesthouse	39	1.718	1.555	0.249
Cost reduction by implementing innovations and sustainable technologies	Hotel	21	1.571	1.434	0.313
	Guesthouse	39	1.718	1.555	0.249

Note: The highest mean for each category was highlighted in bold; Source: authors contribution.

Regarding the less relevant factors and opportunities, we can mention *the decision to be self-employed*, in the case of hotels (explained by the fact that many of these respondents are managers, and not entrepreneurs or hotel owners), while the provision of new services in a decaying domain is not a concern in the case of guesthouses (with no affirmative answers), suggesting that small, privately owned and managed businesses are mainly focused on the fast capitalization of current opportunities. In comparison, this item (*providing new services in a field that was showing signs of aging/capping*) is among the top three answers among hotel managers.

According to the results of the independent samples *t*-test (Table 2), we can state that there are significant differences between *the factors and opportunities underlying a*

sustainable business in spa tourism from the perspective of hotel managers and of small entrepreneurs managing a guesthouse or villa. In the case of the factor *providing new innovative services in a field that was showing signs of aging/capping*, the value of the t-statistic equals 3.980 ($p < 0.01$), a statistically significant result that shows that the two-population means are not equal. Also, considering the positive sign of the t-statistic, we can state that the mean number of subjects in group 1 (hotels) is higher than the mean number of the subjects in group 2 (guesthouses), we can conclude that this is an important factor in developing a *sustainable business in spa tourism* for hotels. Significant differences were also identified in the case of the factors: *the desire to succeed, to do things better* ($t = 1.953$, $p = 0.057$) *financial independence* ($t = -2.786$, $p = 0.008$); *flexible schedule* ($t = -2.446$, $p = 0.018$); and *the decision to be self-employed* ($t = -2.611$, $p = 0.012$). In the case of the last three factors the mean among the guesthouses is higher than the mean among hotels. Therefore, we can state that guesthouse owners place a significantly greater emphasis on *financial independence*, *flexible schedule* and also on *the decision to be self-employed* when running their own business, while concerns related to sustainability fall into the background. The results confirm the first hypothesis of this study.

Table 2. *t*-test results: the perception of the factors and opportunities underlying a sustainable business in spa tourism, according to the type of venture.

		Levene Test		<i>t</i> -Test				
		F	Sig.	t	Df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Diff.	Std. Error Diff.
The desire to succeed, to do things better	Hotel	7.405	0.009	1.902	58	0.062	1.010	0.531
	Guest house			1.953	44.279	0.057	1.010	0.517
Expansion of sustainable business opportunities in Baile Felix area	Hotel	0.693	0.408	−0.614	58	0.541	−0.337	0.548
	Guest house			−0.614	41.019	0.543	−0.337	0.548
Financial independence	Hotel	1.429	0.237	−2.745	58	0.008	−1.421	0.517
	Guest house			−2.786	42.841	0.008	−1.421	0.510
Flexible schedule	Hotel	26.280	0.000	−2.028	58	0.047	−0.835	0.411
	Guest house			−2.446	57.712	0.018	−0.835	0.341
The decision to be self-employed	Hotel	32.836	0.000	−2.364	58	0.021	−1.172	0.495
	Guest house			−2.611	53.288	0.012	−1.172	0.448
Offering a service already existing on the market, but in a sustainable and innovative way	Hotel	2.405	0.126	1.437	58	0.156	0.761	0.530
	Guest house			1.407	38.678	0.167	0.761	0.541
Providing innovative services in a field that was showing signs of aging/capping	Hotel	6.180	0.016	4.249	58	0.000	1.948	0.458
	Guest house			3.980	34.196	0.000	1.948	0.489
Cost reduction by implementing innovations and sustainable technologies	Hotel	0.531	0.469	−0.357	58	0.722	−0.146	0.409
	Guest house			−0.366	44.045	0.716	−0.146	0.399

Note: Statistically significant results were highlighted in bold; Source: authors contribution.

Hypothesis 2. *The objectives set when launching a tourism business vary according to related to the size and ownership type of the tourism ventures.*

The results show that, although the order of priorities in the case of guesthouses is different from that of hotels, the outline of options is similar, related to a valid entrepreneurial vision oriented towards performance—motivation, identification of needs and expectations, satisfying these needs under market conditions and profit-making (Table 3).

Table 3. Descriptive statistics for the objectives set when launching a sustainable tourism business, according to the type of venture.

	Type of Unit	N	Mean	Std. Dev.	Std. Error Mean
Personal fulfillment	Hotel	21	2.143	1.852	0.404
	Guesthouse	39	3.872	1.824	0.292
The desire to provide added value through innovative and sustainable elements in spa and health tourism	Hotel	21	4.048	1.746	0.381
	Guesthouse	39	2.744	2.009	0.322
Making profit	Hotel	21	3.857	1.852	0.404
	Guesthouse	39	4.487	1.355	0.217
Restoring the economic dynamism of tourism in the area through innovative and sustainable businesses	Hotel	21	2.905	2.047	0.447
	Guesthouse	39	2.538	1.971	0.316
Identification and correction of sources of dissatisfaction related the services provided	Hotel	21	3.857	1.852	0.404
	Guesthouse	39	2.744	2.009	0.322

Note: The highest mean for each category was highlighted in bold; Source: authors contribution.

The first three options in the case of guesthouses were making a profit (mean = 4.48), personal fulfillment (mean = 3.872) and the desire to provide added value through innovative and sustainable elements in spa tourism and the identification and correction of sources of dissatisfaction related the services provided in spa resorts, both with an equal average of 0.744. In the case of hotels, the order was the desire to provide added value through innovative and sustainable elements in spa tourism (mean = 4.048); making a profit (mean = 3.857); respectively, the identification and correction of sources of dissatisfaction related to the services provided in spa resorts (mean = 3.857). We find that motivations are influenced by the nature of the activity: modernization and performance in the case of hotel managers, and respectively personal fulfillment and performance (profit) for entrepreneurs and small business owners. Moreover, a more general motivation, which goes beyond the career or personal business objectives, namely restoring the economic dynamism of the area (through innovative and sustainable businesses), does not seem to be a priority for either category, which is not surprising as this objective of revival could rather be perceived as an objective of the public regional or national authorities, rather than an objective of the business sector.

The *t*-test results (Table 4) show that there were significant differences between *the objectives underlying the launch of a business* from the point of view of hotel managers, compared to guesthouse owners, in the case of *personal fulfillment* (*t* statistic = -3.484 , $p = 0.001$); specifically, this factor is more important in the case of guesthouse owners. Another significant difference was found in the case of *the desire to provide added value through innovative and sustainable elements in spa tourism*, which is more important for hotel managers (*t*-statistic = 2.615 , $p = 0.012$). The results partially confirm the second hypothesis of this study.

The same order of priorities was found for the factors influencing the market launch of a new service/facility/product: *market needs; attracting new customer segments and new trends in consumption*, as well as relatively similar scores, between guesthouse owners and hotel managers (Table 5). No significant differences were found for the variable with the lowest score (i.e., *how much are potential clients willing to pay for my services*), reflecting that managers and entrepreneurs alike are interested in solvable demand for future (innovative) products they will put on the market. The results are in line with our expectations of a market orientation defined by a certain prudence, which is otherwise justified by recent events (i.e., crises) and the high variability of demand in this field.

Hypothesis 3. *The perception of the factors determining the market launch of a new sustainable service/product differs according to the type of tourism ventures.*

Table 4. *t*-test results: the objectives set when launching a sustainable tourism business according to the type of venture.

		Levene Test		<i>t</i> -Test				
		F	Sig.	T	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Diff.	Std. Error Diff.
Personal fulfillment	Hotel	0.003	0.953	−3.484	58	0.001	−1.729	0.496
	Guest house			−3.468	40.527	0.001	−1.729	0.498
The desire to provide added value through innovative and sustainable elements in spa tourism	Hotel	10.94	0.002	2.506	58	0.015	1.304	0.520
	Guest house			2.615	46.310	0.012	1.304	0.498
Making profit	Hotel	8.440	0.005	−1.507	58	0.137	−0.630	0.418
	Guest house			−1.374	31.801	0.179	−0.630	0.458
Restoring the economic dynamism of tourism businesses in the area through innovative and sustainable businesses	Hotel	1.022	0.316	0.677	58	0.501	0.366	0.541
	Guest house			0.670	39.747	0.507	0.366	0.546
Identification and correction of sources of dissatisfaction related to the services provided	Hotel	5.859	0.019	1.134	58	0.261	0.601	0.530
	Guest house			1.163	44.079	0.251	0.601	0.516

Note: Statistically significant results were highlighted in bold; Source: authors contribution.

Table 5. Descriptive statistics for the perception of the factors determining the launch of a new sustainable service/product according to the type of tourism venture.

	Type of Unit	N	Mean	Std. Dev.	Std. Error Mean
Market needs	Hotel	21	4.429	1.434	0.313
	Guesthouse	39	4.897	0.641	0.103
Market areas unexplored by the competitors	Hotel	21	2.333	1.932	0.422
	Guesthouse	39	2.436	1.944	0.311
Attracting new customer segments	Hotel	21	4.238	1.609	0.351
	Guesthouse	39	4.077	1.707	0.273
New trends in consumption	Hotel	21	3.476	1.990	0.434
	Guesthouse	39	3.051	2.025	0.324
How much are potential clients willing to pay for my services	Hotel	21	2.143	1.852	0.404
	Guesthouse	39	2.538	1.971	0.316

Note: The highest mean for each category was highlighted in bold; Source: authors contribution.

The results of the independent samples *t*-test (Table 6) indicate that both groups carefully planned the context and the timing for the launch of new services/facilities/products. This is an interesting and encouraging finding because it shows the clear and realistic positioning of the two categories towards the market and consumers, even when the resources and business models are not similar. This is also a positive signal for new innovative businesses in the tourism sector in Baile Felix area, as it contradicts previous assumptions that the spa tourism sector has a moderate permeability to innovation. However, the willingness to innovate must also be interpreted through the lens of actual resources, i.e., finding a balance between intentions and possibilities. The large budgets required for investments in equipment, in specialized constructions and the training of qualified personnel are not accessible to all tourism ventures, regardless of their desires, plans and objectives. The third hypothesis of the study is not confirmed.

Table 6. *t*-test results: the perception of the factors determining the market launch of a new sustainable service/product according to the type of tourism venture.

		Levene Test		<i>t</i> -Test				
		F	Sig.	T	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Diff.	Std. Error Diff.
Market need	Hotel	13.743	0.000	−1.752	58	0.085	−0.468	0.267
	Guest house			−1.424	24.378	0.167	−0.468	0.329
Market areas unexplored by the competitors	Hotel	0.160	0.691	−0.195	58	0.846	−0.102	0.525
	Guest house			−0.196	41.286	0.846	−0.102	0.524
Attracting new customer segments	Hotel	0.530	0.469	0.356	58	0.723	0.161	0.453
	Guest house			0.362	43.227	0.719	0.161	0.445
New trends in consumption	Hotel	2.164	0.147	0.780	58	0.439	0.424	0.544
	Guest house			0.784	41.698	0.438	0.424	0.542
How much potential clients are willing to pay for my services	Hotel	2.633	0.110	−0.757	58	0.452	−0.395	0.522
	Guest house			−0.772	43.364	0.445	−0.395	0.512

Source: authors contribution.

Hypothesis 4. *The perception of the factors with a major negative impact in supporting sustainable innovations within the spa tourism businesses differs according to the size and ownership type of the tourism ventures.*

According to the results presented in Table 7, we can state that in the case of hotels, the factors with the greatest negative impact in supporting sustainable innovations are: *Insufficient fiscal support for innovative and sustainable initiatives in tourism* (mean = 4.619) and *Lacking or insufficient funds supporting innovation and promoting new sustainable products/services* (mean = 4.429). In the case of guesthouses, we note that the factors with the greatest negative impact are: *Lacking or insufficient qualified personnel in sustainable tourism activities* (mean = 4.795), *Lacking or insufficient funds supporting innovation and promoting sustainable products/services* (mean = 4.692) and, finally, *Insufficient fiscal support for innovative and sustainable initiatives in tourism* (mean = 4.385).

Table 7. Descriptive statistics for the factors with a major negative impact in supporting sustainable innovations within the spa tourism businesses according to the type of venture.

	Type of Unit	N	Mean	Std. Dev.	Std. Error Mean
Lacking or insufficient funds supporting innovation and promoting sustainable products/services	Hotel	21	4.429	1.434	0.313
	Guesthouse	39	4.692	1.080	0.173
Lacking or insufficient qualified personnel in specific sustainable tourism activities	Hotel	21	3.476	1.990	0.434
	Guesthouse	39	4.795	0.894	0.143
Customers wary of new, sustainable products	Hotel	21	2.714	2.028	0.443
	Guesthouse	39	1.615	1.462	0.234
Personnel with no interest in promoting new sustainable products	Hotel	21	1.381	1.203	0.263
	Guesthouse	39	1.308	1.080	0.173
Insufficient fiscal support for innovative and sustainable initiatives in tourism	Hotel	21	4.619	1.203	0.263
	Guesthouse	39	4.385	1.462	0.234

Note: The highest mean for each category was highlighted in bold; Source: authors contribution.

According to the results of the *t*-test (Table 8), we can state that there are significant differences between hotel and guesthouse managers regarding several items pertaining to the factors with a major negative impact on sustainable innovation in spa tourism. In the case of the factor *Lacking or insufficient qualified personnel in sustainable tourism ac-*

tivities, the mean score is lower in the hotel group compared to the guesthouse group (t-statistic = -2.883 , $p = 0.008$); suggesting that this factor is more important in the case of guesthouses seeking sustainable innovations.

Table 8. *t*-test: The factors with major negative impact in supporting sustainable innovation within the spa tourism businesses according to the size and ownership type of venture.

		Levene Test		<i>t</i> -Test				
		F	Sig.	T	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Diff.	Std. Error Diff.
Lacking or insufficient funds supporting innovation and promoting sustainable products/services	Hotel	2.544	0.116	-0.803	58	0.425	-0.263	0.328
	Guest house							
Lacking or insufficient qualified personnel in sustainable tourism activities	Hotel	61.334	0.000	-3.544	58	0.001	-1.318	0.372
	Guest house			-2.883	24.427	0.008	-1.318	0.457
Customers wary of new, sustainable products	Hotel	16.420	0.000	2.418	58	0.019	1.098	0.454
	Guest house			2.195	31.460	0.036	1.098	0.500
Personnel with no interest in promoting new sustainable products	Hotel	0.230	0.634	0.241	58	0.811	0.073	0.304
	Guest house			0.233	37.407	0.817	0.073	0.314
Insufficient fiscal support for innovative and sustainable initiatives in tourism	Hotel	1.695	0.198	0.628	58	0.532	0.234	0.373
	Guest house			0.666	48.358	0.508	0.351	0.355

Note: Statistically significant results were highlighted in bold; Source: authors contribution.

Another significant difference was found for the variable *the customers are wary of new, sustainable products* ($t = 2.195$, $p = 0.036$). In this case, the mean of subjects in group 1 (hotels) is higher, which shows that this factor is more relevant for hotels. Therefore, we can state that the fourth hypothesis of the research is partially confirmed.

5. Conclusions

The results of the study suggest that entrepreneurs and small business owners prioritize exploiting current opportunities to strengthen their market position rather than focusing on the sector's past. In the case of small tourist accommodations such as villas and guesthouses, the top three options regarding the factors and opportunities that motivate owners' aspirations for a sustainable business were financial independence, the desire for success, and the expansion of sustainable business opportunities in the area. For hotels, the options were a desire to succeed, to innovate in an aging or saturated field, and to deliver existing services in a sustainable and innovative manner. Likewise, the goals for a sustainable tourism business tend to differ when comparing hotel managers and guesthouse owners. More specifically, the motivations of hotel managers are primarily modernization and performance, while small business owners and entrepreneurs prioritize personal fulfillment and profit. The goal of restoring economic dynamism to the area through innovative and sustainable businesses does not appear to be a priority for any category, as it is commonly perceived as an objective for regional or national public authorities rather than the business sector. Additionally, we found that both hotel managers and entrepreneurs prioritize market needs, attracting new customer segments and responding to new consumer trends in their decision when to launch new services, facilities or products. In the case of the factors with the greatest negative impact on supporting sustainable innovations, hotel managers complained foremost about the lack of fiscal support for innovative and sustainable initiatives, as well as insufficient funds for supporting innovation and promoting sustainable products and services. These results can be a signal for decision makers at local, regional or national level in designing legislative, fiscal and organizational measures to support innovative efforts in tourism. For guesthouses, the main obstacles are insufficient staff involved in sustainable tourism activities, the insufficient funds to support innovation and promote sustainable products/services and, finally, insufficient fiscal support for innovative and sustainable initiatives in tourism. The only factor that differs significantly between hotel managers and guesthouse owners is the lack of qualified

staff in sustainable tourism activities, with the latter group considering it a more pressing difficulty. This finding highlights the importance of qualified staff in supporting sustainable innovations in spa tourism businesses, especially for guesthouses.

The results of our research largely confirm the finding of several scholars as Sundo et al. [6], Aguilar-Fernández and Otegi-Olaso [43] or Chipunza [44], according to which large companies are more oriented towards the development and implementation of innovations and sustainable practices, in the tourism sector as well as in general. At the same time, our findings partially confirm the contributions that claim that small and family businesses in tourism are more social and community-responsible [52–54], more involved in regional and local tourism development and more environmentally responsible [56,57], quickly adapting sustainable strategies and practices to the specificities of tourism subsectors [58–60].

We believe that this study contributes to existing scientific knowledge by exploring and comparing the motivations of guesthouse owners and hotel managers in the context of spa tourism. It highlights the different priorities between these two groups and how they align with their respective roles. The study also highlights the association between motivations and the nature of the activity, revealing the importance of modernization and performance for hotel managers, as well as personal fulfillment and profit for entrepreneurs and small business owners. This research underscores the importance of addressing market needs, money segments and responding to emerging consumer trends when planning the launch of new offerings. In addition, the study shows the need to find a balance between innovation aspirations and practical considerations such as financial constraints. Considering both market orientation and resource constraints, the studies provide valuable information for entrepreneurs, managers and decision makers in the tourism sector.

Our study has several limitations. The first limitation refers to the sample size. Another limitation would be related to its regional perspective: the study focused on guesthouses and hotels from a single geographical region, the Baile Felix area (Romania). Thus, we can conclude that it does not fully represent the perspectives and priorities of entrepreneurs in other regions or different types of accommodation businesses. Also, given that the study was based on self-reported data from entrepreneurs and small business owners, we could consider that these responses could be subject to subjective interpretations.

Future research could explore a comparative analysis of different regions in Romania that are known for spa and health tourism. As future goals, we propose to expand the analysis to the level of several regions so that we can also determine regional disparities, unique challenges and success factors at the level of each region. This broader perspective would provide a more comprehensive picture of the country's spa tourism landscape.

Author Contributions: Conceptualization, D.-T.T. and D.B.; Formal analysis, D.-T.T. and R.S.; Methodology, D.-T.T., R.S. and D.B.; Supervision, D.B.; Writing—original draft, D.-T.T., R.S. and D.B.; Writing—review and editing, D.-T.T., R.S. and D.B. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Data Availability Statement: Data available by request.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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