




## Article

# Human Sustainability Capital in Agrotourism: An ESG-Integrated and Emotional Labor Approach with Case Studies from Maramureş and Bucovina, Romania

Ramona Vasilica Bacter <sup>1</sup>, Alina Emilia Maria Gherdan <sup>1,\*</sup>, Tiberiu Iancu <sup>2,\*</sup>, Ramona Ciolac <sup>2</sup>,  
Monica Angelica Dodu <sup>1</sup>, Anca Chereji <sup>1</sup>, Anca Monica Brata <sup>3</sup>, Aurelia Anamaria Morna <sup>3</sup>,  
Alexandra Ungureanu <sup>4</sup> and Florin Gheorghe Lup <sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Department of Animal Husbandry and Agritourism, Faculty of Environmental Protection, University of Oradea, 26 Gen. Magheru St., 410087 Oradea, Romania; rbacter@uoradea.ro (R.V.B.); monica.dodu@uoradea.ro (M.A.D.); ancapopa@uoradea.ro (A.C.); florin.lup@uoradea.ro (F.G.L.)

<sup>2</sup> Faculty of Management and Rural Tourism, University of Life Science "King Mihai I" from Timisoara, Calea Aradului No. 119, 300645 Timisoara, Romania; ramonablaga2005@yahoo.com

<sup>3</sup> Department of Engineering of Food Products, Faculty of Environmental Protection, University of Oradea, 26 Gen. Magheru St., 410087 Oradea, Romania; abrata@uoradea.ro (A.M.B.); amorna@uoradea.ro (A.A.M.)

<sup>4</sup> Department of Economics, University Stefan cel Mare of Suceava, University Street 13, 720229 Suceava, Romania; alexandra.ungureanu2016@gmail.com

\* Correspondence: alina.gherdan@uoradea.ro (A.E.M.G.); tiberuiiancu@usvt.ro (T.I.)

## Abstract

Agrotourism is increasingly recognized as a driver of sustainable rural development, yet research has often focused on ecological and economic outcomes while neglecting the human capital that sustains service quality. This study introduces the concept of human sustainability capital and links it with the ESG (Environmental, Social, Governance) framework and emotional labor theory, using case studies from Maramureş and Bucovina, Romania. Data were collected in summer 2025 through two surveys: one of 120 tourists assessing satisfaction, challenges, and improvement needs, and one of 45 agrotourism hosts and employees examining emotional labor, job satisfaction, and ESG-related practices. Tourists reported high satisfaction with hospitality, food, landscapes, and cultural authenticity but noted shortcomings in infrastructure, activity variety, and crowding during peak seasons. Hosts and employees showed strong motivation and cultural pride, with genuine engagement more frequent than surface acting, yet many reported fatigue, low pay, and limited access to training. Social and cultural benefits were evident, environmental practices were modest, and governance emerged as the weakest pillar. Strengthening governance through professional development, fair labor conditions, and infrastructural support is crucial to maintain authenticity, protect cultural heritage, and ensure the long-term resilience of agrotourism.

**Keywords:** rural tourism; human sustainability capital; emotional labor; ESG framework; governance



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## 1. Introduction

Sustainable development has become one of the most influential concepts shaping contemporary approaches to rural policy and tourism planning. Although originally framed in the 1987 Brundtland Report, the idea has evolved through different intellectual traditions and remains an essential lens for understanding how economic growth, environmental care, and social well-being can advance together [1]. Recent work calls for returning to the roots

of classical political economy to better explain the complex, layered nature of sustainability, where history, social structures, and long-term resource use interact [1]. At the same time, modern scholarship has shown how the concept adapts to today's global challenges while keeping its original core principles, equity between generations, responsible resource use, and social development, almost unchanged [2].

Within this broad framework, agritourism is widely recognized as a practical pathway to sustainable development at the regional scale. It helps rural households diversify income while keeping small-scale farming viable, protects cultural traditions, and encourages responsible stewardship of landscapes. By attracting visitors and generating additional economic activity, agritourism can slow rural depopulation, create employment, and stimulate local supply chains, while simultaneously reinforcing community identity and heritage. In regions where agricultural incomes alone are not sufficient, the combination of tourism and farming becomes a mechanism for both economic resilience and cultural continuity. Linking agritourism to sustainable development also emphasizes its role in regional strategies: beyond hospitality, it supports local markets, infrastructure improvements, and the revitalization of small villages.

Building on this foundation, the present study examines agritourism in Romania through the concept of Human Sustainability Capital, the ability to maintain a skilled, motivated, and culturally rooted workforce, while integrating the ESG (Environmental, Social, Governance) framework and the psychosocial perspective of emotional labor. This approach allows a deeper understanding of how tourism contributes not just to economic survival but to long-term sustainable development in rural communities.

### *1.1. Agrotourism and Sustainable Development*

Agritourism, understood as the integration of farming practices with tourism, has become an important part of sustainable tourism. It helps rural households diversify income and, at the same time, protects cultural traditions and natural resources. Visitors may join farm activities or discover local culture, and in doing so, agritourism supports economic growth in small communities, social and cultural exchange, and environmental care. In the last decade, it has been strongly linked with wider goals of sustainable development, helping keep rural livelihoods alive and maintaining landscapes [3,4]. Yet, most early academic and policy debates on sustainable agritourism stayed focused on ecological and financial issues, paying too little attention to the human factor [5,6], even though people are essential for service quality and long-term success.

### *1.2. Human Sustainability Capital in Rural Tourism*

Recent studies point out that the hosts, guides, and supporting staff behind rural tourism represent a form of "human sustainability capital" [7,8]. Their well-being, knowledge and motivation are decisive for authentic, high-quality visitor experiences. Still, human resource management has received far less attention than environmental actions. In hospitality, a labor-intensive sector, the effectiveness of people is a cornerstone of sustainability [9]. Many rural guesthouses depend not only on scenery or comfort but on those who welcome visitors and share traditions. Although this is widely recognized, it is rarely integrated in sustainable tourism strategies [10–13]. Here we use "human sustainability capital" to mean the ability to keep a skilled, motivated and resilient workforce, often family or local community, able to offer real hospitality without burning out or losing cultural authenticity.

### *1.3. Emotional Labor and ESG in Tourism*

A rarely explored but critical element is emotional labor, more precisely, the way service workers regulate feelings and expressions to meet job expectations [14]. In family-

run guesthouses, hosts must appear warm and patient regardless of mood. Simple actions, like a real smile at the farmhouse gate or telling a personal story, shape how visitors remember their stay. But when the emotions shown differ from those felt, stress and burnout can follow [15–18]. Hosts often live where they work, so personal life and professional duty mix [19,20]. Without support, fatigue appears. Although emotional labor is well studied in general hospitality, it is seldom analyzed in agritourism [21,22].

Alongside this psychosocial view, the ESG framework (Environmental, Social, Governance) has become a key sustainability tool [23]. First developed in the corporate sector, it now guides tourism too [24,25]. Large hotel groups report on waste reduction, energy use, fair labor and community impact. Even small rural businesses can use ESG: protecting landscapes and local food (E), preserving traditions and fair employee treatment (S), and transparent, participatory management (G) [26–29]. The social and governance pillars are deeply human: they depend on how owners and staff engage with the community and run the enterprise.

#### 1.4. Research Objective and Questions

However, few studies combine these strands. In regions like Bucovina and Maramureş, most research still focuses on natural and cultural attractions or visitor numbers [30,31]. As Simeanu et al. note [32], there is no clear model linking tourism growth with sustainability principles or showing how local managers apply them. We argue that sustainability in agritourism must unite three views: tourists' experience, the well-being of hosts and employees, and strategic frameworks like ESG.

This study aims to examine how human sustainability capital influences the long term resilience of agritourism enterprises, by bringing together the Environmental, Social and Governance (ESG) framework with the psychosocial model of emotional labor. The objective of the study is to explore how (a) hosts emotional labor strategies and their well-being shape the Social and Governance sides of sustainability, and (b) how tourists perception of authenticity, care for the environment and service quality reflect these internal human resource dynamics.

Because the present study is exploratory in nature, it is more appropriate to formulate research questions rather than strict formal hypotheses. Accordingly, three guiding questions were established to direct the investigation:

RQ1: *How do the emotional labor strategies of hosts, such as deep acting compared with surface acting, together with their level of job satisfaction, influence the sustainability of human capital within agritourism enterprises?*

RQ2: *How are the ESG pillars, with particular emphasis on the Social and Governance dimensions, perceived and enacted in practice by agritourism hosts and employees?*

RQ3: *How do tourists' evaluations of authenticity, environmental responsibility and service quality correspond to, or diverge from, the internal human resource realities faced by these enterprises?*

This paper proposes a hybrid research design joining tourist feedback with the perspective of tourism workers, especially their emotional labor, and interpreting both through an ESG lens. The study areas, Maramureş and Bucovina, are rich in culture and agritourism potential. By connecting visitor satisfaction with human sustainability capital and ESG performance, we aim to show how rural tourism can stay authentic and resilient while adapting to sustainability demands. This integrated view, although simple in idea, is rarely applied in agritourism studies and can guide better policy and practice.

## 2. Materials and Methods

### 2.1. Study Areas: Maramureş and Bucovina

This study focuses on two well-known rural regions of Romania: Maramureş, in the northwest, and Bucovina, in the northeast within Suceava County. Both are frequently cited in the literature for their strong cultural identity and long-standing rural traditions, which makes them appropriate case studies for understanding how agritourism develops and how sustainability principles can be applied in this context.

Maramureş is often described as a repository of Romania's rural heritage. Villages here retain wooden architecture of high craftsmanship, including the tall-spire wooden churches inscribed on the UNESCO World Heritage list [33]. The area is also recognized for artisanal skills such as weaving, woodworking and folk music, as well as for its small-scale pastoral economy. While such cultural assets have encouraged tourism growth, development is uneven. Some valleys offer well-maintained guesthouses and basic facilities, but remote hamlets still face poor roads and limited services. This unevenness produces sustainability challenges: the most visited landmarks risk overcrowding and strain on heritage resources, while under-visited villages gain few economic benefits. Understanding how tourists perceive both these strengths (authenticity, hospitality) and weaknesses (infrastructure, service gaps) was an important aim of the survey. At the same time, we investigated how hosts adapt to growing demand while trying to preserve cultural authenticity.

Bucovina, historically known as "Țara Fagilor" (the Land of Beech Trees), presents a different profile. It is internationally noted for its painted monasteries, medieval Orthodox edifices with exterior frescoes that have survived for centuries; eight of them, including Voroneţ, Suceviţa and Moldoviţa, are UNESCO World Heritage sites [34,35]. The rural landscape combines hills, forests and the higher Carpathian peaks along the western edge. Farmhouses remain individually decorated and traditional tools are still visible in daily life. Local hospitality includes homemade bread, dairy and smoked meats, yet these features are documented here as socio-cultural practices rather than promoted as attractions. Tourism statistics from Bucovina show steady growth in arrivals and accommodation facilities. In towns such as Gura Humorului, Câmpulung Moldovenesc and Vatra Dornei, the number of registered establishments tripled between 2014 and 2023, accompanied by increases in overnight stays [32]. Still, the average length of stay remains short and in some years has even decreased [36], suggesting that many visitors treat the region as a brief cultural stop rather than a longer agritourism destination. Scholars connect this to limited strategic planning and a tendency of local managers to focus on visitor numbers rather than retention or dispersal [33,37–39].

In both regions, the human resources sustaining agritourism are mostly local. Guest-house owners, small farmers, guides and cultural performers often combine several roles within one enterprise. It is common for one person to prepare meals, clean rooms and guide visitors outdoors in the same day. Such work involves personal and emotional effort, sometimes leading to fatigue. These regions were selected not only for their popularity but because they illustrate the delicate balance between heritage preservation and increasing tourism demand. They also offer a contrast: Maramureş remains less developed and more dispersed, while Bucovina shows a denser network of attractions and a more mature tourism market. This difference allowed us to explore whether human sustainability capital and the adoption of ESG-related practices manifest differently in a still-emerging destination compared with one that is more consolidated.

### 2.2. Research Design and Questionnaire Development

The study followed a mixed-method survey design, combining quantitative measurement with qualitative exploration to investigate human sustainability capital in agritourism.

The conceptual framework relied on two key approaches: the ESG model (Environmental, Social and Governance) and the psychosocial theory of emotional labor, highly relevant in hospitality where personal interaction is central. Bringing these two perspectives together was considered important because ESG is increasingly used to assess sustainability, yet it rarely captures the emotional effort and resilience of those who host visitors in rural areas.

Two complementary questionnaires were created so that the perspectives of tourists and of human resources could be compared and connected. The tourist instrument focused on visitor perceptions, satisfaction and improvement needs, representing the demand-side view. The staff instrument targeted guesthouse owners, family members involved in hosting and employed workers, addressing daily work realities, emotional labor strategies and the way these influence the Social and Governance dimensions of ESG. Combining these tools made it possible to examine how service quality and sustainability are perceived from both outside and inside the tourism experience.

Participation remained fully voluntary and anonymous. Respondents were informed about the study's goals and assured that personal information would not be disclosed. While no formal ethics committee approval was requested, accepted standards of confidentiality and right to skip uncomfortable questions were respected.

### 2.2.1. Tourist Questionnaire

The tourist questionnaire contained 15 questions: twelve closed-ended, mostly five-point Likert scale, and three open-ended. Its structure was adapted from research on rural tourism satisfaction and sustainable destination evaluation [3,5,7], adjusted to capture ESG principles and human aspects of service delivery. Closed questions covered overall satisfaction, accommodation comfort, authenticity of food, hospitality and emotional atmosphere, perceived environmental practices such as waste reduction or local sourcing, safety and value for money. Open questions encouraged visitors to describe the most positive and negative aspects of their stay and to suggest improvements (Table 1).

**Table 1.** Structure of the tourist questionnaire in relation to ESG Framework.

Section	Purpose of the Question	ESG Dimension *	Insight
<i>Overall experience</i>	1. Overall satisfaction	S	Captures general visitor sentiment; benchmark for comparison with other items.
<i>Facilities and services</i>	2. Accommodation & comfort		Evaluates quality and standards of basic services.
	3. Food & cuisine authenticity	E + S	Links to local gastronomy, authenticity, and sustainability of sourcing.
<i>Human interaction and culture</i>	4. Host hospitality	S + G	Explores emotional labor, attentiveness, and service ethics.
	5. Cultural experience		Highlights authenticity, cultural capital, and preservation.
<i>Visitor perceptions (positive/negative)</i>	6. Favorite aspect	S	Identifies main strengths that drive satisfaction.
	7. Least favorite aspect		Detects weak points and visitor pain areas.
<i>Sustainability and environment</i>	8. Suggestions for improvement	G + S	Provides stakeholder-driven feedback for policy/management.
	9. Environmental perception	E	Measures visibility of sustainability actions and their impact on satisfaction.
<i>Well-being and safety</i>	10. Interaction with nature	E + S	Gauges access to natural capital and landscape appreciation.
	11. Safety and comfort	S + G	Explores trust, hygiene, and visitor protection standards.
<i>Economic dimension</i>	12. Value for money	G + S	Captures perception of fairness, pricing, and equity.
	13. Length of stay	S	Provides insights into time allocation, attraction potential, and extension strategies.
<i>Temporal and behavioral aspects</i>	14. Likelihood of return/recommendation	S + G	Identifies loyalty and word-of-mouth potential.
<i>Emotional impact</i>	15. Emotional takeaway	S	Captures the emotional resonance and human sustainability capital outcomes.

\* S—social; E—environmental; G—governance. Source: author's elaboration.

The order of questions moved gradually from straightforward issues like comfort and food to more reflective themes such as authenticity, emotional connection and sustainability awareness. This progression aimed to help respondents feel at ease before considering abstract or evaluative topics. Using both scales and open comments provided measurable data but also explanations behind the scores; for example, a guest might rate overall satisfaction as 4/5 and then explain that poor signage complicated arrival.

### 2.2.2. Human Resources Questionnaire

The staff questionnaire also included 15 items: eleven closed-ended (Likert-type) and four open-ended. Its design relied on Hochschild’s emotional labor model [14–18], which distinguishes between surface acting through displaying emotions not truly felt and deep acting, genuinely aligning feelings with professional role, combined with studies applying the ESG framework to small tourism enterprises [23–29]. Items 3–5 measured surface acting, deep acting and emotional exhaustion; item 6 explored job satisfaction; item 7 training and support; items 8 and 9 staff contributions to community and environment; items 10 and 11 workplace governance and fairness; item 12 cultural sustainability; items 13 and 14 barriers and improvements needed; item 15 emotional rewards and personal meaning [Table 2]. Open questions allowed respondents to add context or describe personal situations, which was important in family-run businesses where governance is informal and multiple roles overlap.

**Table 2.** Structure of the human resources questionnaire in relation to ESG Framework.

Section	Question	ESG Dimension	Insight
<i>Background and motivation</i>	1. Role and background	S	Establishes respondent profile and experience level; contextualizes answers.
	2. Job motivation	S	Identifies intrinsic vs. extrinsic motivations; insight into human sustainability capital.
<i>Emotional labor</i>	3. Emotional display (surface acting)	S	Measures frequency of surface acting; risk indicator for stress.
	4. Emotional alignment (deep acting)	S	Captures deep acting as a more sustainable form of emotional labor.
	5. Emotional exhaustion	S	Gauges burnout risk and long-term resilience of human resources.
<i>Job Experience and support</i>	6. Job satisfaction	S	Reflects overall well-being and retention potential of staff/owners.
	7. Training and support	G + S	Reveals level of investment in human capital and institutional support.
<i>Community and environmental role</i>	8. Community and social impact	S	Highlights local development, jobs, and cultural contributions.
	9. Environmental practices	E + S	Explores human role in implementing sustainable practices.
<i>Workplace relations and governance</i>	10. Workplace relations and governance	G	Examines inclusiveness, transparency, and decision-making processes.
	11. Fairness and welfare	S + G	Evaluates fairness and labor rights; key ESG social criterion.
<i>Cultural sustainability</i>	12. Cultural preservation	S	Investigates cultural capital sustainability and potential pressures.
<i>Challenges and improvements</i>	13. Biggest challenges	G + S	Reveals structural barriers (e.g., seasonality, lack of support, marketing issues).
	14. Needed improvements	G + E + S	Identifies concrete policy or institutional changes needed for ESG alignment.
<i>Positive outcomes</i>	15. Emotional reward	Social	Captures intrinsic satisfaction and resilience; core of human sustainability capital.

\* S—social; E—environmental; G—governance. Source: author’s elaboration.

Questions were intentionally formulated in plain language. Asking small business owners if they “apply ESG practices” often feels abstract; instead, the survey referred to concrete actions such as fairness, decision-making, or environmental habits. Emotional labor concepts were translated into simple prompts about how often hosts show feelings

they do not feel or try to feel what they need to express. This approach aimed to produce honest and usable answers rather than textbook definitions.

### 2.3. Hybrid Methodological Approach

Data collection took place in the summer of 2025, during the busiest rural tourism season. Questionnaires were handed out in person at guesthouses and farm stays in Maramureş and southern Bucovina and were also shared online in Romanian and English through regional tourism networks. Tourists usually filled in the survey close to the end of their stay, when first impressions had settled but experiences were still fresh. Staff and owners were invited either during quieter work moments or later by e-mail, so they could answer thoughtfully.

Altogether, 120 tourists responded, around 60 in each region, and 45 staff members took part, including 25 owners and 20 employees or family members. Although the sample is moderate, it offered a good balance between numerical patterns and detailed personal insight, which fits an exploratory study where depth of context is as important as size.

Analysis followed a concurrent triangulation strategy [40], meaning quantitative and qualitative material were processed at the same time and then compared. Closed-ended items were summarized with means and simple comparisons between the two regions. Correlations were used to explore links, for instance between tourist satisfaction and length of stay. Open responses were grouped into themes such as infrastructure, activity options, training needs or emotional strain.

After coding, the two perspectives were mapped together through the ESG lens. If tourists emphasized authentic and warm interactions and staff reported deep acting with little fatigue, this suggested a strong Social dimension. When staff mentioned exhaustion, low pay or lack of support, it pointed to Governance weaknesses that may erode future service quality. Environmental practices were cross-checked by comparing what tourists noticed with what staff said they implement.

This approach is exploratory rather than hypothesis-driven, but it creates a three-dimensional picture: the experience of guests, the emotional resilience of hosts and the degree to which ESG principles can realistically work in small, family-run businesses. Even with a moderate sample, the method makes visible the links between human sustainability capital, visitor satisfaction and governance, connections rarely addressed together in agritourism research.

## 3. Results

All survey responses were coded and entered into SPSS Statistics 28.0, which was used to generate descriptive statistics such as means, frequencies, and percentages, as well as comparative analyses between the two study regions, Maramureş and Bucovina. Tourist satisfaction was measured on a numerical scale ranging from 1 (very dissatisfied) to 5 (very satisfied), which allowed for the calculation of mean scores and the aggregation of satisfaction levels into percentages.

The open-ended responses were carefully transcribed and analyzed through content analysis, with recurring expressions grouped into thematic categories such as authenticity, hospitality, kindness, and tradition. This mixed approach made it possible to ground the statistical patterns in the more nuanced insights revealed by qualitative feedback. The presentation of findings begins with an overview of tourist satisfaction levels and the main aspects they valued or criticized, followed by staff perspectives on their experiences and ESG-related practices. Finally, the two viewpoints are integrated to highlight emerging patterns that shed light on the dynamics of sustainability in agritourism.

### 3.1. Tourist Experience in Maramureş and Bucovina

Understanding how visitors evaluate their stays provides an essential part of the three-dimensional framework adopted in this study. Tourist perceptions do not only reflect satisfaction with scenery or food; they are also shaped by the emotional labor and commitment of hosts and by the governance context that enables or limits service quality. The following subsections present the main findings from the tourist survey, connecting them to the idea of human sustainability capital and to the ESG pillars.

#### 3.1.1. Overall Satisfaction

Tourists reported a generally high level of satisfaction with their agritourism stays. On the five-point scale, the mean overall score reached 4.5 in Maramureş and 4.3 in Bucovina. Over 80% of respondents in both regions selected either 4 (“satisfied”) or 5 (“very satisfied”), confirming the positive reputation that these destinations hold for rural hospitality and cultural authenticity [Table 3].

**Table 3.** Tourist overall satisfaction in Maramureş and Bucovina.

Region	Mean Score	% “4” (Satisfied)	% “5” (Very Satisfied)	Combined % (4 or 5)	Sample Size (n)
Maramureş	4.5	35%	48%	83%	60
Bucovina	4.3	38%	44%	82%	60
Total	4.4	36.50%	46%	82.50%	120

Source: author’s survey, processed in SPSS 28.0.

Narrative comments added nuance to these numbers. In Maramureş, visitors often linked satisfaction to feelings of authenticity, tranquility and tradition, with some describing the stay as “like visiting family” or remembering the taste of horincă shared by the host. In Bucovina, cultural heritage and personal kindness stood out, for example: “I came for the monasteries, but what I’ll remember most is the kindness of the people.”

Such experiences show how emotional engagement of hosts—part of human sustainability capital—shapes overall satisfaction more strongly than physical infrastructure or length of stay, a finding consistent with earlier tourism studies [3,5,7].

#### 3.1.2. Positive Aspects

When asked to identify the highlights of their stay, tourists most often referred to hospitality, food, scenery, and cultural traditions. Open-ended responses were coded in SPSS; themes were then refined through content analysis to capture subtle meaning beyond frequency counts [Table 4].

**Table 4.** Favorite aspects of agritourism experience.

Favorite Aspect	Maramureş (n = 60)	Bucovina (n = 60)	Total (n = 120)	% of Total Respondents
Hospitality of hosts	36	36	72	60%
Traditional food	28	32	60	50%
Scenery/nature	26	22	48	40%
Cultural authenticity	20	16	36	30%

Source: author’s survey, processed in SPSS 28.0.

Hospitality emerged as the strongest asset, cited by 60% of respondents. Many recalled personal gestures—shared meals, guided walks, or evening conversations by the fire—which indicate the emotional labor and genuine involvement of hosts. Such interactions illustrate the Social pillar of ESG, where human sustainability capital translates directly into visitor satisfaction.

Food followed closely (50%). Bucovina scored slightly higher here, with guests appreciating monastic cuisine and dairy traditions; fresh bread from clay ovens or local cheeses

were often described as symbols of authenticity. Nature and landscapes impressed especially in Maramureş, while cultural authenticity appeared in both regions but with different emphasis: folk crafts in Maramureş, religious art and Easter egg painting in Bucovina. Together, these findings show that people and culture, supported by emotionally engaged hosts, remain the main competitive strength of agritourism.

### 3.1.3. Negative Aspects

Despite the overwhelmingly positive evaluations, visitors also raised practical concerns that affect comfort and sustainability. Analyzing these weaknesses is important because they point to governance gaps that individual hosts cannot solve alone [Table 5].

**Table 5.** Negative aspects of agritourism experience.

Negative Aspect	Maramureş (n = 60)	Bucovina (n = 60)	Total (n = 120)	% Respondents
Infrastructure and accessibility	16	8	24	20%
Shortage of activities/short stay	12	18	30	25%
Overcrowding at key sites	6	6	12	10%
Comfort and amenities issues	8	10	18	15%
Interaction issues (communication/host fatigue)	2	3	5	4%

Source: author's survey, processed in SPSS 28.0.

Infrastructure and access (20%) were mentioned more often in Maramureş, where poor roads, missing signs and weak internet service complicate travel. A shortage of organized activities (25%) was the most frequent issue overall, especially in Bucovina, where many guests stayed only one or two nights because options beyond monastery visits were limited. Overcrowding (10%) at iconic places such as the Voroneţ Monastery or the Mocăniţa train shows that even rural destinations can develop overtourism hotspots. Comfort and amenities problems (15%) cold rooms, creaky beds, unreliable hot water suggest the need for minimum quality standards. A few respondents (4%) also noted host fatigue or language barriers, pointing indirectly to the emotional strain of constant hospitality.

Suggestions for improvement matched these concerns but were often constructive. Many visitors proposed new activities, guided hikes, cooking classes, or the chance to join farm work, and asked for clearer information through maps or itineraries. In Bucovina, several requested better route planning for monastery visits, while in Maramureş, the focus was on road signage and maintenance. Some guests suggested practical eco-friendly upgrades such as solar water heating, combining comfort with environmental care. Others mentioned the difficulty of online booking for small guesthouses and suggested stronger digital presence. Importantly, several noted that they would stay longer and pay more if these improvements were made.

## 3.2. Human Capital Experience in Maramureş and Bucovina

Agritourism in Maramureş and Bucovina runs on people more than on buildings or views. Hosts, family members and employees do not only deliver rooms and meals; they mediate culture, carry the emotional load of hospitality, and keep tiny enterprises together day after day. The evidence below shows both sides of this coin: strong commitment and pride, but also fatigue, uneven support, and governance gaps that make good intentions harder to sustain. Results are organized around emotional labor and ESG-related practices, because together they describe what is treated here as human sustainability capital.

### 3.2.1. Profile of Respondents

The staff survey covered 45 participants, almost evenly split between owners, often with family involvement and employees. Average experience was around seven years,

some far longer, suggesting agritourism has matured into a steady livelihood rather than a passing trend. Motivations were mixed: a sizeable share entered tourism to compensate declining farm income, while others spoke about pride in local culture or the pleasure of meeting guests. Younger respondents sometimes mentioned returning from city jobs to maintain family property and a rural rhythm of life [Table 6]. Taken together, these motives anchor the Social side of ESG: community ties, identity, reciprocity, but also hint at vulnerability when work intensifies or income becomes too seasonal.

**Table 6.** Profile of human resource respondents in Maramureş and Bucovina.

Indicator	Category	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Role in agritourism	Owner/owner-family member	25	55%
	Employee/extended family worker	20	45%
Total		45	100%
Years of experience	Mean = 7 years (range: 1–15+)	–	–
Motivation for agritourism	Economic necessity (farming not enough)	18	40%
	Pride in local culture/traditions	12	27%
	Interest in meeting new people	9	20%
	Return from city jobs/sustain property	6	13%

Source: author's survey, processed in SPSS 28.0.

The respondents included both entrepreneurial owners (55%) and employees (45%), with an average of seven years' experience in agritourism. This shows that the sector is no longer a novelty, as some have hosted visitors since the early 2000s, while younger generations are now returning from urban jobs to take part. Overall, the findings suggest that hosts see themselves as more than service providers. They act as cultural custodians whose work blends financial necessity with identity and belonging. This personal commitment is a source of authenticity but also a potential point of vulnerability when workloads and emotional strain become overwhelming.

### 3.2.2. Emotional Labor: Surface and Deep Acting

Hosting requires constant calibration of feeling and display. Respondents distinguished clearly between surface acting—masking irritation or tiredness with a polite smile—and deep acting, which involves genuinely aligning emotions with the role so that warmth is not only shown but also felt. In practice, both strategies appear, though their mix depends on context: hired staff in busier units reported more repetitive encounters and thus more surface acting, while owner hosts leaned toward deep acting grounded in a local ethic of hospitality, difference that matters for sustainability, since authentic engagement tends to buffer stress better than constant emotional dissonance [Table 7].

**Table 7.** Surface vs. deep acting among agritourism workforce.

Indicator	Mean Score	Rarely (1)	Sometimes (2–3)	Often (4)	Very Often (5)	Insights
Surface acting (faking/hiding feelings)	3.2	20%	50%	20%	10%	Higher among employees in larger guesthouses/restaurants
Deep acting (genuine engagement)	3.8	10%	35%	35%	20%	Higher among owners/family hosts; linked to cultural/ethical hospitality values

Source: author's survey, processed in SPSS 28.0.

Deep acting's higher mean (3.8) suggests that many hosts try to "feel the welcome," sometimes by reframing stress as pride in sharing their place. Still, the presence of surface acting (mean 3.2) signals strain points. Human sustainability capital thus looks strong but not invulnerable: it grows from identity and meaning, yet it also tires when days stretch long and encounters become too many and too quick.

### 3.2.3. Emotional Exhaustion and Signs of Burnout

The same authenticity that guests appreciate can become costly in peak months when one person cooks, cleans, guides and entertains. Reports of emotional exhaustion were common, especially among owner-managers juggling many roles at once. Employees relying more often on surface acting also tended to feel depleted, which is consistent with the idea that emotional dissonance wears people down faster than sincere engagement [Table 8].

**Table 8.** Emotional exhaustion among the agritourism workforce.

Indicator	Mean Score	Low (1–2)	Moderate (3)	High (4)	Very High (5)	Insights
Emotional exhaustion (daily fatigue)	3.7	15%	45%	25%	15%	Higher among owners juggling multiple roles; correlated with surface acting

Source: author's survey, processed in SPSS 28.0.

Emotional exhaustion emerged as a clear challenge for agritourism workers. Nearly 40 percent said they often felt drained, with owners most affected due to their many roles. In contrast, about 15 percent, mostly part-time hosts, described low exhaustion, noting that manageable workloads and genuine enjoyment helped them cope. Overall, while deep acting supports authentic guest experiences, the emotional toll is uneven and risks becoming unsustainable without stronger support systems.

Although long hours and emotional demands take their toll, most respondents reported a fairly high level of job satisfaction. Many linked their sense of fulfillment to the pride of passing on cultural traditions and to the personal rewards of offering hospitality. These positive feelings often helped offset the fatigue, even if worries about long-term sustainability and career prospects persisted [Table 9].

**Table 9.** Job satisfaction among agritourism workforce.

Indicator	Mean Score	Low (1–2)	Moderate (3)	High (4)	Very High (5)	Insights
Overall job satisfaction	4	10%	20%	45%	25%	Higher among owners (pride, autonomy); employees slightly lower, citing pay and long-term prospects

Source: author's survey, processed in SPSS 28.0.

From an ESG perspective, these patterns place Governance questions on the table: fair remuneration, clear roles, and progression paths are not extras; they are the scaffolding that keeps human sustainability capital from slowly leaking away.

### 3.2.4. Training and Support (Governance)

One of the clearest findings from the staff survey is the limited availability of formal training opportunities. Although agritourism hosts and employees show strong motivation and pride in their work, most rely on informal learning and self-directed efforts rather than structured professional development [Table 10].

**Table 10.** Training and support gaps.

Indicator	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)	Insights
No formal training in hospitality/emotional management	31	70%	Learned "on the job" or from family tradition
Attended some training (workshops, language class, etc.)	9	20%	Mainly younger owners or those in developed towns (e.g., Gura Humorului)
Specific training on handling emotional stress	0	0%	None reported
Expressed interest in future training	15	33%	Requests for digital marketing, foreign languages, hospitality basics

Source: author's survey, processed in SPSS 28.0.

The results reveals a clear governance gap in training and support for agritourism staff. About 70 percent had never received formal instruction in hospitality, customer care, or stress management, relying instead on family traditions. From an ESG perspective, this absence of formal training is a weakness: sustainable tourism requires not only natural and cultural assets but also investment in human capital. Without institutional support, training remains self-driven, widening gaps between better-connected hosts and those in remote communities. Expanding access to training would both improve guest experiences and help reduce the emotional strain that threatens long-term sustainability.

### 3.2.5. Community and Social Impact (Social ESG)

Most agritourism hosts and employees see their work as extending beyond the boundaries of their own businesses, contributing in meaningful ways to the wider community. Their responses reflect a strong awareness of tourism's role in social sustainability, whether by supporting the local economy, strengthening cultural identity, or helping to improve shared infrastructure [Table 11].

**Table 11.** Perceived community and social impact of agritourism.

Impact Dimension	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)	Insights
Economic benefits	22	49%	"Farmers sell cheese to my guests"; "Tourism keeps the local shop and bakery in business."
Cultural exchange	18	40%	"Each guest that leaves with a piece of our story becomes an ambassador for Bucovina."
Infrastructure & image	10	22%	"The mayor finally fixed the road"; "We have a waste collection point now."
Reservations/concerns	7	15%	"Some locals think we are selling out our culture"; "Tourism benefits us, but others don't see the money."

Source: author's survey, processed in SPSS 28.0.

The findings reveal strong awareness of tourism's social role, with about 80 percent of respondents believing their work benefits the wider community. The main impacts were economic, through income circulation and seasonal jobs; cultural, by sharing traditions and encouraging younger generations to value them; and infrastructural, with tourism prompting improvements such as road repairs or waste collection. Overall, agritourism workers see themselves not only as hosts but also as contributors to local sustainability, though the Social pillar of ESG requires careful attention to fairness and cohesion.

### 3.2.6. Environmental Practices (Environment ESG)

The survey responses show that many agritourism hosts are aware of how closely the appeal of their services depends on preserving the natural environment. While most initiatives are modest and voluntary, they reflect a genuine, grassroots understanding that protecting landscapes and reducing waste is essential for the long-term sustainability of tourism in Maramureş and Bucovina [Table 12].

The survey shows that around 60 percent of agritourism operators practice some form of environmental care, most often recycling, reducing waste, or using local food. These efforts are motivated as much by authenticity and cost savings as by sustainability, yet they still help cut emissions and support local supply chains. A small minority, about 7 percent, reported investing in renewable energy such as solar panels or biomass heating, while others mentioned water-saving measures or protecting land through nature trails. 40% admitted they do little or nothing explicitly green, and none had environmental certifications, reflecting the informal and small-scale character of most businesses. From an ESG standpoint, environmental practices in agritourism remain uneven and largely voluntary, making stronger frameworks of training, incentives, and certification important for long-term credibility.

**Table 12.** Environmental practices of agritourism.

Environmental Practice	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)	Insights
Recycling/waste reduction	18	40%	"We instruct guests on separating trash"; "We avoid single-use plastics."
Use of home-grown or local produce	15	33%	"We serve our own vegetables and milk"; "We buy from neighbors."
Renewable energy/energy saving	3	7%	"Solar panels for hot water"; "Biomass heating with wood pellets."
Water conservation & nature protection	6	13%	"We manage spring water"; "We don't allow cars beyond a certain point."
No specific eco-friendly practices	18	40%	"Not much specifically green"; "We don't know what qualifies."
Formal environmental certification	0	0%	None reported.

Source: author's survey, processed in SPSS 28.0.

### 3.2.7. Decision-Making and Inclusion (Governance)

The way decisions are made and how fairness is perceived offer important insights into the governance of agritourism businesses. Although most are small, family-run enterprises, approaches to inclusion and equity differ, highlighting both areas of strength and points of vulnerability within the governance dimension of ESG [Table 13].

**Table 13.** Decision-making and inclusion practices in agritourism.

Governance Aspect	Main Pattern Observed	Insights	Risks
Decision-making structure	Family-based (owners + spouse/children)	"I give suggestions but final call is the boss's."	Limited employee input in most enterprises
Inclusive governance	Found in some larger guesthouses with multiple employees	"We involve staff in planning menus and activities."	Participatory approaches enhance creativity and morale
Communication consistency	Mixed—some cited clear teamwork, others pointed to conflicting instructions	"The owners sometimes give us conflicting tasks."	Need for clearer policies and HR practices
Perception of fairness	Generally positive in family-run businesses; employees feel "like part of the family"	Close-knit teams prevent conflict; no reports of discrimination	Informal fairness strong, but lacks formal HR systems
Pay and benefits	Wages low (often minimum wage or per diem); tips modest; no formal benefits	"I love the job, but might leave for city hotels for better pay."	Sustainability risk: talent retention, youth migration

Source: author's survey, processed in SPSS 28.0.

The results emphasize that trust and closeness help daily work, yet structural governance elements, clear roles, transparent pay, formal complaint channels, are thin. Without them, retention of young talent becomes difficult even when attachment to place is strong. From an ESG perspective, the sector shows a paradox: interpersonal trust is strong, yet structural governance elements like fair pay, benefits, and clear HR policies are weak. Without progress in these areas, retaining younger and skilled workers will be difficult. Still, the respect shown in daily interactions and the gradual move toward participatory decision-making suggest a foundation on which more sustainable governance can be built.

### 3.2.8. Cultural Preservation vs. Strain

Agritourism hosts expressed mixed feelings about tourism's influence on cultural heritage. On one hand, it helps sustain and pass on traditions; on the other, it can create pressures to adapt or simplify them for visitors, raising concerns about authenticity. The responses show that while tourism supports cultural preservation, it also introduces tensions linked to modernization and changing guest expectations [Table 14].

**Table 14.** Perceived cultural impact of agritourism.

Cultural Impact Dimension	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)	Illustrative Comments
Cultural preservation	34	75%	"We revived old recipes and songs because tourists were interested"; "Tourism gave me a reason to wear folk costume."
Craft/heritage continuity	12	27%	"I started making hand-painted eggs again—the craft stays alive."
Cultural strain/adaptation	11	25%	"We adjusted farm routines for guests"; "Tourists want Wi-Fi and quick service."
Risk of commodification	5	11%	"Younger folks dance for tourists but don't live the tradition—it risks becoming a show."

Source: author's survey, processed in SPSS 28.0.

The findings show that most hosts view agritourism as a safeguard for culture, with three-quarters crediting it for sustaining or reviving traditions. Guest interest often encouraged the return of recipes, crafts, songs, and folk costumes, while also passing knowledge to younger generations. Human sustainability capital sits exactly in this balance: enough adaptation to welcome guests comfortably, but not so much that meaning evaporates. Preserving traditions builds resilience and identity, but over-commercialization could weaken authenticity. The challenge lies in maintaining balance, ensuring that tourism integrates with genuine practices rather than replacing them.

### 3.2.9. Challenges to Sustainability

When reflecting on the main difficulties they encounter, agritourism owners and staff pointed to a number of obstacles that put both their businesses and their workforce under pressure. The problems they face are not limited to financial or structural aspects but also extend to personal strains, making it clear that the long-term success of agritourism depends on more than enthusiasm and dedication alone [Table 15].

**Table 15.** Challenges reported by agritourism workforce.

Challenge Dimension	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)	Illustrative Comments
Seasonality and income instability	20	44%	"We only have guests in summer. . . winters are dead."
Marketing and reaching tourists	14	31%	"We're not marketers. . . hard to get noticed."
Infrastructure and policy support	12	27%	"Roads and utilities need improvement, but we get little help."
Labor shortage and rural depopulation	6	13%	"Young people prefer to move to cities; I struggle to hire help."
Personal burnout/overwork	5	11%	"If I continue 16-h days, I don't know how long I can do this."

Source: author's survey, processed in SPSS 28.0.

The results shows that rural tourism's weakness is not visitor demand, which is high, but the ability of hosts and systems to sustain their work over time.

The main challenge is seasonality and unstable income (44%), with businesses dependent on summer peaks and struggling in winter. Marketing and visibility (31%) also remain weak, as most rely on word of mouth or large platforms. Poor infrastructure and limited policy support (27%) further hinder growth. Labor shortages (13%) and personal burnout (11%) highlight the human strain, as low wages and long hours make it difficult to retain workers.

Although guest satisfaction and cultural pride are strong, the future of agritourism depends on better governance, fair pay, infrastructure, and support to ease burnout. Without these, the human foundation that sustains its authenticity may erode.

From the workers' perspective, several improvements could strengthen rural tourism. Many asked for training in languages, marketing, and guest relations, as well as a local

association where hosts could share ideas and even create joint travel packages. Others suggested small grants or tax relief to improve facilities, noting that even modest investments, like adding bathrooms, would raise comfort and capacity. Calls also centered on better promotion through county councils, integrated tourism routes, and inclusion in official tourism platforms. Infrastructure remained a recurring theme, with requests for improved roads, clearer signage, more transport links, and stronger internet coverage to support online bookings. Beyond logistics, some wanted support for cultural events that celebrate traditions for both locals and visitors. A few also raised the need for peer networks to ease stress and share experiences, hinting at the importance of emotional support in sustaining their work.

Despite the challenges, workers spoke with warmth about what makes their efforts worthwhile: guests leaving with smiles, hearing that a stay felt like home, or seeing admiration for local traditions. Many take pride in earning a living without leaving their village and in teaching their children to value their heritage. For some, the friendships formed with travelers are treasures they revisit in guestbooks full of memories. These moments of connection remind us that sustainability is not only about economics or infrastructure but also about the joy and meaning that give this work its soul.

### 3.3. Results Synthesis and ESG-Oriented Interpretation

Bringing together the two surveys allows a clearer view of how tourist experiences and host realities combine to shape human sustainability capital in Maramureş and Bucovina. When seen through the ESG lens, visitor feedback reveals a solid Social and Environmental base but also points to structural weaknesses in Governance, while the voices of hosts show how emotional labor and informal management support (or sometimes threaten) the resilience of this system [Table 16].

**Table 16.** Tourist survey results and ESG relevance.

Key Findings (Tourists)	ESG Dimension	Relevance
High overall satisfaction (4.5 Maramureş; 4.3 Bucovina)	Social	Strong human interaction and hospitality generate social capital and community pride.
Favorite aspects: hospitality (60%), food (50%), nature (40%), culture (30%)	Social and environment	Hospitality (social bonds); food/nature (environmental appreciation); culture (heritage sustainability).
Least liked: infrastructure gaps (20%)	Governance	Lack of public support for roads, signage, and utilities highlights governance gaps.
Least liked: shortage of activities (25%)	Governance and social	Indicates limited product diversification; risk of short stays; governance needed for development support.
Overcrowding at key sites (10%)	Environment and governance	Reflects micro-overtourism; requires visitor flow management and planning.
Comfort & amenities issues (15%)	Governance	Need for baseline service quality standards; local policies can support.
Interaction issues (<5%)	Social	Rare emotional dissonance; reflects human sustainability limits.
Emotional/experiential takeaways: peace, authenticity, cultural identity	Social and environment	Tourists value authenticity and rural landscapes; highlights agritourism's triple-bottom-line benefits.

*Source: authors' elaboration based on the results of the questionnaire.*

Tourists describe agritourism in Maramureş and Bucovina as offering rich social and environmental value, shaped by genuine human connections, cultural traditions, and the beauty of the natural landscape. Their comments, however, also make clear that long-term success depends on stronger governance. Better infrastructure, more varied activities, and effective visitor management are seen as essential to maintain high levels of satisfaction. In this sense, while the Social and Environmental pillars appear strong, the Governance dimension remains the area where most progress is needed to secure the future of rural tourism.

Visitors therefore describe agritourism as socially and environmentally rewarding; they treasure authentic contact with hosts, home-cooked food, quiet landscapes and living traditions. Yet the same feedback shows that Governance remains fragile. Poor roads, weak digital presence, few structured activities and some crowding at famous sites hint that individual hosts cannot alone guarantee service quality or sustainability. Long-term satisfaction will depend on stronger local planning, shared marketing and infrastructure investment [Table 17].

**Table 17.** Human resource (staff) results and ESG relevance.

Key Findings (Staff)	ESG Dimension	Relevance
Profile: 55% owners, 45% employees; avg. 7 years' experience	Social	Embeds local livelihoods and intergenerational transmission of skills.
Emotional labor: deep acting dominant (mean 3.8 vs. 3.2 surface)	Social	Shows authenticity and cultural pride as human capital strengths.
Exhaustion high (mean 3.7); burnout risk for 40%	Social	Human sustainability threatened if exhaustion persists; requires social protections.
Job satisfaction high (mean 4.0), but pay/career prospects limited	Governance & Social	Satisfaction rooted in pride; retention risk without fair pay or pathways for growth.
Training gaps (70% no formal training)	Governance	Lack of institutional investment in skills; highlights governance weakness.
Community/social impact: 80% positive (economic, cultural, infrastructure)	Social	Agritourism generates shared local benefits, builds cultural resilience.
Environmental practices: 60% eco-actions (waste reduction, local food, some renewables)	Environment	Grassroots eco-practices show awareness but lack certification/support.
Decision-making: family-based, little employee input; fair treatment but low wages	Governance	Informal fairness strong, but structural governance (pay, HR policies) weak.
Cultural preservation (75% positive, 25% strain/commodification)	Social	Agritourism sustains traditions, but risks over-commercialization if not managed.
Biggest challenges: seasonality (44%), marketing (31%), infrastructure (27%), burnout (11%)	Governance & Social	Sustainability risks require coordinated governance and social support.

Source: authors' elaboration based on the results of the questionnaire.

These results show a workforce rich in human sustainability capital: hosts feel proud, transmit culture to younger generations and genuinely engage with visitors. At the same time, their ability to keep doing so is limited by systemic governance gaps. Training is mostly self-taught; pay is low; policy support for small rural tourism units is minimal. Emotional labor, while authentic, can become draining when seasons are long and help is scarce. Many respondents linked their satisfaction to meaning and identity but admitted that without better organization and fairer compensation, younger people may leave and family businesses could fade.

Looking at both groups together clarifies the sustainability picture. Social value is clearly strong: tourists cherish the warmth and authenticity hosts provide, and hosts themselves feel culturally anchored and proud. Environmental value exists but is modest and mostly grassroots, relying on voluntary waste reduction or local sourcing rather than formal schemes. Governance emerges as the weakest pillar, affecting both sides: visitors notice infrastructure gaps and lack of organized activities, while workers struggle with limited training, low wages, informal HR systems and little institutional backing.

For agritourism in Maramureş and Bucovina to stay vibrant, the human sustainability capital already present must be protected and developed. This means investing in people through training, fair pay and shared marketing, creating cooperative structures or local networks, and planning infrastructure and visitor flows more strategically. Without such governance improvements, the emotional and cultural strength that currently delights tourists could slowly erode, risking both service quality and community resilience.

3.4. Integration of the ESG Dimensions into the SWOT Analysis of Agritourism in Maramureş and Bucovina

To grasp the sustainability dynamics of agritourism in Maramureş and Bucovina, we decided to mirror the findings through an ESG-based SWOT framework. This method makes it possible to see not only the internal strengths and weaknesses shaping rural tourism, but also the external opportunities and threats that influence its future. Placing the ESG perspective at the core of the SWOT analysis helped in revealing how environmental, social, and governance factors interact, exposing both the sector’s resilience and its vulnerabilities. It also captures the views of both tourists and hosts, showing where their expectations and experiences align or diverge. The overall picture points to strong social assets, emerging but still limited environmental practices, and persistent governance gaps that continue to limit long-term development [Table 18].

**Table 18.** ESG-Integrated SWOT analysis of agritourism in Maramureş and Bucovina.

Strengths (Internal ESG Assets)	Weaknesses (Internal ESG Deficits)
Social (S): Genuine hospitality and emotional connection; deep acting and cultural pride reinforce service quality. Social (S): Strong alignment on cultural preservation; tourists value authenticity, hosts revive traditions. Environmental (E): Recognition of eco-friendly practices (clean surroundings, solar panels, local sourcing). Social (S): Shared acknowledgment of community benefits, aligning with regenerative tourism. Governance/Social (G/S): Intrinsic motivation of hosts ensures authenticity and resilience.	Governance (G): Limited product diversification, short stays due to lack of coordinated planning. Governance (G): Poor infrastructure and accessibility (roads, signage). Social (S): Host well-being under strain, risk of burnout due to rising guest expectations. Governance/Economic (G): Low profitability and wages; weak economic sustainability for younger generations. Governance (G): Insufficient training and professional development (languages, service quality, innovation).
Opportunities (External ESG potentials)	Threats (External ESG risks)
Governance (G): Destination-level initiatives: collective marketing platforms, grants, improved signage. Environmental (E): Expansion of eco-tourism practices and communication of sustainability efforts. Social (S): Diversification through experiential activities (workshops, storytelling, festivals) to extend stays. Governance/Social (G/S): Training programs (languages, digital marketing, culinary skills) to professionalize services. Governance/Economic (G): Adoption of fair pricing models; differentiated strategies for domestic vs. international tourists. Social (S): Host support mechanisms (community duty rotations, seasonal staff, internships).	Governance (G): Persistent infrastructural neglect could deter tourism and hinder operations. Social (S): Rising tourist expectations (Wi-Fi, instant service) may clash with rural authenticity. Economic/Social (G/S): Seasonal dependency and income instability threaten viability. Social (S): Youth migration and disengagement if incomes remain low. Social (S): Risk of cultural commodification if authenticity is reduced to staged performances. Governance (G): Lack of institutional support prolongs structural weaknesses.

Source: authors’ elaboration based on the results of the questionnaire.

The SWOT–ESG analysis shows that agritourism in Maramureş and Bucovina rests mainly on social capital, reflected in genuine hospitality, the preservation of traditions, and the close bonds formed between hosts and guests. These qualities provide a strong base for sustainable growth, especially as global tourism places greater value on authenticity and meaningful human connections. At the same time, the sector faces serious governance challenges. Poor infrastructure, limited training opportunities, and the absence of coordinated marketing or institutional backing continue to restrict its development. Environmental practices are present but remain modest, leaving room for improvement and for creating a stronger competitive edge. Strengthening governance while building on social and environmental achievements would help ensure that the emotional effort of hosts is matched by real structural support. This balance is key to securing both economic stability and cultural vitality, allowing agritourism to grow into a model that truly reflects the full ESG vision.

**4. Discussion**

The findings of this study give clear answers to the three research questions and help understand better how human sustainability capital shapes the resilience of agritourism.

For RQ1, which looked at the link between hosts' emotional labor strategies and human sustainability capital, the results show that deep acting, when hosts try to truly feel and express positive emotions, is very common and strongly tied to cultural pride [41]. Many hosts said that welcoming tourists and reviving local traditions makes their work feel meaningful and helps keep identity alive, creating a reinforcing loop where guest appreciation feeds back as pride and motivation [42]. Still, this strength often becomes fragile when fatigue, long working hours and almost no real institutional support appear, leaving hosts exposed to stress and burnout over time [43]. These findings go in line with emotional labor theory [13,14], but they also add something new: in rural agritourism, deep acting alone is not enough when there is no good governance system to protect and support workers [44].

For RQ2, about how the ESG pillars are seen and applied by hosts and employees, the study shows a clear imbalance between Social and Governance. The Social side looks quite strong, thanks to authentic host–guest interactions, the revival of local culture, and the informal but meaningful exchange of values [41]. Yet the Governance side stays weak, held back by informal management, low pay, poor access to training and very few career options [43]. These results support earlier warnings from SHRM studies [11,12] about the fragility of human resources in tourism, while also adding new evidence from rural settings, where the lack of structured governance means that small agritourism businesses rely mostly on personal effort and family labor [45]. Informal but human-centered governance, when present (for example, in family-run guesthouses where responsibilities are shared), appeared to reduce burnout and improve satisfaction [43].

Finally, RQ3 connects tourists' opinions with what really happens inside the workforce of agritourism. Here the match is only partial. Tourists value authenticity and cultural identity, which aligns with the deep acting and cultural pride of hosts [41,42]. However, there is a clear gap when it comes to infrastructure, comfort and organized activities. Many visitors wish for more diverse experiences and better amenities, while hosts say they cannot provide these because of time pressure, doing everything alone during peak season, and weak professional networks [43]. This mismatch highlights a critical tension: the emotional labor of hosts keeps authenticity alive, but without stronger governance and external support networks, it is difficult for these businesses to grow, meet tourist expectations and safeguard the emotional sustainability of those working in agritourism [44,45].

The case studies from Maramureş and Bucovina show how rural tourism depends not only on nature and heritage but also on the people who keep it alive. The findings demonstrate that when human sustainability capital is cared for agritourism can grow in a balanced way. Emotional labor, ESG dimensions and visitor satisfaction are closely linked; together they shape the long-term resilience of rural destinations. Looking at them as one system helps to explain patterns that purely economic or ecological studies often miss.

Placed in the ESG framework, emotional labor bridges the Social (well-being, authentic ties, cultural continuity) and Governance (training, fair pay, support systems) pillars [46,47]. Even small steps like community training, peer-support groups, partial subsidies for development—could strengthen service quality and workforce stability. Similarly to findings in other rural sectors [48], our study shows that informal fairness is common but lacks structured HR policies, which threatens long-term sustainability. These human investments also support the Environmental pillar indirectly, as motivated hosts care more for landscapes and local resources.

Overall, the discussion shows that the resilience of agritourism in Maramureş and Bucovina depends less on new buildings and more on investing in people. Without emotional health, fair conditions and cultural pride, ESG goals stay abstract. With them, sustainability becomes real, keeping rural tourism authentic and competitive for the future.

## 5. Conclusions

This study examined human sustainability capital in agritourism by linking the ESG framework with the psychosocial dynamics of emotional labor. Focusing on Maramureş and Bucovina, it explored how tourist satisfaction, host well-being, and governance practices interact to shape the long-term success of rural tourism.

The findings confirm that people are the true foundation of agritourism. High tourist satisfaction was not driven mainly by infrastructure or facilities but by the warmth, cultural pride, and personal engagement of hosts. This supports the idea that sustaining tourism quality depends on maintaining a motivated, skilled, and emotionally resilient workforce. Emotional labor emerged as a double-edged factor: deep acting based on pride and authenticity enriches guest experience, yet surface acting and long hours lead to fatigue and burnout. These results underline the need to treat emotional sustainability as a key part of sustainable tourism.

The ESG pillars proved deeply interconnected. Social aspects—hospitality, cultural renewal, community pride—are the sector's main strength. Environmental practices exist but are small and mostly voluntary, while governance remains the weakest link, marked by low pay, limited training, and fragmented coordination. Strengthening governance could multiply benefits by improving host well-being, supporting eco-initiatives, and helping destinations plan and market themselves more effectively.

A major novelty of this work lies in its integrated, two-sided approach. Bringing together the voices of both tourists and hosts, and interpreting them through ESG and emotional labor theory, revealed alignments and gaps often missed in single-perspective studies. For example, tourists expressed interest in longer stays if more activities existed, while hosts admitted struggling to diversify offers; both groups pointed to infrastructure weaknesses. Seeing these patterns together provides a clearer, more actionable picture for sustainable destination management.

There are, however, limitations. The sample size, especially on the staff side, was modest and limited to two Romanian regions, so the findings cannot be fully generalized to all rural destinations. The study was also cross-sectional, capturing only one tourist season. Longer-term research could follow hosts and visitors across several years to observe how human sustainability capital evolves.

Future research should test this model in other countries and compare regions with different governance traditions. It should also estimate the economic cost of burnout and turnover in agritourism, which could help policymakers justify investments in training and support. Another promising direction is to adapt ESG reporting tools for small-scale tourism, creating simple scorecards with indicators such as local employment, cultural activities, and staff well-being.

In practical terms, the results send a clear message: invest in people. Training, peer networks, fair pay, and emotional support can be as important as infrastructure upgrades. For policymakers, developing local associations, supporting cooperative marketing, and funding skill development would help keep rural tourism both authentic and resilient. For researchers, the study offers a framework that combines human capital, emotional labor, and ESG principles, showing that sustainability in agritourism is not just about nature or profit—it is about caring for the humans who make it possible.

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