

Article

Determinants of Tourists' Choice of Mountain Tourism Destinations

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Abstract

Mountain tourism plays an important role in sustainable rural development; it is closely linked to agrotourism practices, the use of methodological indicators for sustainability assessment, and the adoption of innovative and strategic management approaches. This study compares the key determinants that shape domestic mountain tourism destination choice among residents of Romania and Georgia. Based on 411 questionnaires in Romania and 440 in Georgia, principal component analysis (PCA) was employed, followed by ANOVA and Tukey post hoc tests. Four factors emerged in Romania, namely basic services, cultural activities, adventure tourism, and natural beauty, while in Georgia, these dimensions consolidated into two broader factors: basic services and natural beauty, and cultural and adventure activities. The results highlight differences in how tourists from the two countries structure and prioritize mountain tourism attributes, reflecting specific local contexts. The study contributes to filling the research gap concerning the influence of local particularities on destination choice in mountain areas and provides comparative evidence that destination choice determinants may be structured differently across mountain destinations.

Keywords: tourists' preferences; decision-making; Georgia; Romania; destination choice; mountain tourism



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1. Introduction

Tourism continues to be one of the fastest-growing sectors of the world economy, representing both a source of income and a key mechanism for regional development and cultural preservation [1]. Within this global context, mountain, rural, and agritourism have gained increasing importance as sustainable forms of tourism that integrate environmental, cultural, and socio-economic dimensions [2,3]. Mountain destinations are especially relevant for countries whose geography combines scenic landscapes, traditional villages, and agricultural livelihoods, such as Romania and Georgia.

In recent years, scholars have emphasized that tourist decision-making in rural and mountain contexts is influenced not only by economic or infrastructural factors but also by local particularities such as cultural authenticity, hospitality, and landscape esthetics [4,5].

Recent research [5,6] further indicates that the perceived image of rural destinations and visit intention are shaped by the interaction between traditional attributes (such as community-based hospitality and environmental quality) and modern influences like digital communication and sustainable marketing strategies. This evolving understanding reflects how destination attractiveness increasingly depends on both tangible and experiential elements of local identity, aligning with the growing demand for authenticity and sustainability in mountain and rural tourism. Romania offers a relevant case, with the Carpathian Mountains representing one of the country's most important tourism assets. The sector includes a mix of traditional rural tourism, agrotourism, and adventure-based experiences [7]. In Georgia, where mountain regions such as the Caucasus play a similar symbolic and economic role, empirical evidence highlights a more compact structure of motivational factors [8].

Mountain tourism in Romania and Georgia presents both shared characteristics and significant differences in terms of natural setting, tourism infrastructure, socio-economic dynamics, and the maturity level of tourism development.

The Carpathian Mountains are characterized by moderate altitudes, an extensive network of mountain trails, and predominantly forested landscapes, which encourage forms of low-impact tourism such as hiking, small- and medium-scale skiing, and agritourism [9,10]. The Carpathian tourism system is mainly oriented toward domestic demand, based on family-owned accommodation structures and a strong tradition of rural tourism. Recent analyses indicate a mature but unevenly distributed tourism infrastructure: a few highly developed centers (e.g., Poiana Braşov, Sinaia) coexist with peripheral mountain localities lacking adequate tourist services [11]. Although Romania benefits from access to European funding instruments, the application of sustainable development principles remains heterogeneous [12]. Mountain tourism represents a significant component of Romania's tourism offer, being a competitive tourism product on both the domestic and international markets. The development of mountain tourism is driven by the multiple possibilities that the mountain has to satisfy a wide range of tourist motivations, particularly the growing demand for practicing winter sports, as well as from the possibilities of developing high daily incomes for locals and achieving high economic and social efficiency [13]. In contrast, the mountainous regions of Georgia, particularly Svaneti, Kazbegi, Gudauri, and Lagodekhi, are defined by higher altitudes, rugged terrain, and spectacular alpine landscapes, favorable for adventure tourism and high-altitude trekking [14]. Tourist destinations with attributes such as attractions, facilities, accessibility, image, price, and human resources are suitable and available for tourists. Different types of tourist destinations, including ethnic, cultural, historical, ecological, and recreational tourist destinations, serve the purpose of satisfying the needs and goals of tourists depending on the geographical location, environment, and natural or anthropogenic structures (urban, coastal, alpine, and rural destinations). Tourists choose a mountain destination in Georgia based on a combination of stunning natural beauty, rich and authentic local culture, a wide range of activities, accessibility, and reasonable costs.

Tourists' choice of mountain destinations appears to be influenced by a complex combination of socio-demographic, motivational, and contextual factors that differ between the Romanian and Georgian tourism markets. Research on mountain tourists' behavior shows that age, income, education, and family status are central determinants of travel decisions [10,12]. In the Romanian Carpathians, the predominant profile consists of young and middle-aged tourists (25–45 years), with higher education and medium incomes, primarily from urban areas [9]. They seek recreational activities, direct contact with nature, authentic cultural experiences, and, increasingly, eco- or wellness tourism services [12]. In Georgia, the profile of mountain tourists includes a larger proportion of international

visitors with adventure, exploration, and cultural motivations [14,15]. Studies show that these tourists mainly come from Western Europe, Asia, and North America, have medium-to-high income levels, and prefer trekking, photography, cultural experiences, and local gastronomy [16].

The prior literature suggests that there is a tension between traditional attributes (e.g., agropastoral traditions) and modern influences (e.g., digital communication and sustainable marketing), which may affect tourists' perceptions of mountain destinations.

Recent trends indicate that there is a growing interest in "authentic" destinations and interaction with traditional mountain communities [17]. In this context, the aim of the current paper is to conduct a comparative analysis between tourists from Romania and Georgia, focusing on the factors that influence the decision-making process when choosing a mountain destination. While existing research identifies general pull factors for mountain tourism, there remains a conceptual gap in understanding how the maturity of a destination's infrastructure and its geographic ruggedness (alpine vs. moderate) reorder the hierarchy of tourist motivations. This study moves beyond geographic description to challenge the assumption of a universal mountain tourist profile, exploring how local identity and socio-economic dynamics fundamentally reshape the decision-making framework in emerging versus mature mountain systems.

2. Literature Review

Mountain tourism has become one of the most significant and rapidly growing segments of global tourism, attracting visitors seeking recreation, adventure, and connection with nature [18]. Understanding the determinants that influence tourists' choice of mountain destinations is crucial for destination managers and policymakers, especially in an increasingly competitive and climate-sensitive environment. Existing studies highlight that tourists' decisions are shaped by a complex interplay of destination attributes, perceived value, motivations, and socio-demographic characteristics [19–25].

2.1. Natural and Ecological Features

Natural and environmental attributes are widely recognized as the primary pull factors of mountain destinations, consistently identified as the core resources shaping tourist appeal [20–22,24]. Key elements include scenic beauty, biodiversity, landscape quality, geomorphological diversity, and the perceived purity of mountain ecosystems, which collectively create a unique and compelling environment for visitors. Features such as clean air, pristine habitats, snow reliability, water bodies, and legally protected areas not only enhance esthetic and recreational value but also underpin wellness-oriented, restorative, and nature-based tourism experiences. The authors in [22,26–28] highlight that the ecological distinctiveness and exceptional biodiversity of mountain regions contribute to destination uniqueness and support the development of specialized tourism niches, emphasizing that strong natural endowments are essential for sustainable tourism growth and the effective utilization of additional investments in infrastructure or marketing [20,22,25].

2.2. Activities, Infrastructure, and Accessibility

The diversity and quality of available tourism activities represent a central factor influencing mountain destination choice, as visitors seek experiences that align with their personal interests, motivations, and skill levels [19,23]. Winter sports such as skiing and snowboarding appeal to different market segments than summer activities like hiking, wildlife watching, or wellness-oriented stays, highlighting the importance of a varied and seasonally adaptable activity supply. The quality of services, including safety standards, guided tours, and equipment rental, further affects visitor satisfaction, repeat visitation,

and destination loyalty [25]. Activity offerings, accessibility, and supporting infrastructure play a decisive role in shaping tourist perceptions and decisions [19,29]. Efficient transport connections, diverse accommodation options, and well-planned spatial organization not only enhance mobility and convenience but also contribute to perceived safety and overall satisfaction. Strategic planning of infrastructure often involves balancing concentrated development, which promotes accessibility and economies of scale, with dispersed, environmentally sensitive layouts that preserve natural assets [21,29,30].

2.3. Perceived Image, Value, and Branding

Tourists' perceptions of a destination, including its image, branding, reputation, and perceived value, play a central role in shaping decision-making and mediating the effects of supply-side attributes on choice [21,24,25]. Destination image encompasses both cognitive assessments and affective responses, influencing expectations, perceived authenticity, and overall satisfaction. Strong branding, whether through local culture, culinary traditions, or unique experiences, can enhance perceived value and compensate for limitations in physical or infrastructural assets, whereas low awareness or weak image may constrain a destination's appeal [31]. Perceived service quality and authenticity further reinforce visitor satisfaction and loyalty, while evaluations of price relative to expected benefits guide tourists' trade-offs among competing mountain destinations, aligning choices with individual preferences and financial considerations.

2.4. Motivational and Psychological Drivers

Intrinsic motivations are central drivers of mountain destination choice, encompassing restorative experiences, escape from routine, adventure, social interaction, cultural enrichment, and connection with nature [23,32,33]. These motivations interact with destination attributes and shape individual evaluations of landscape, activities, infrastructure, and perceived value. Motivation-based segmentation reveals heterogeneity among tourists: adventure seekers prioritize challenging terrain and technical facilities, wellness-oriented visitors seek pristine, tranquil environments, and cultural tourists focus on heritage, local traditions, and immersive experiences. Seasonal variations further influence motivational priorities, with sports and adventure dominating winter travel, while relaxation, nature enjoyment, and wellness pursuits prevail in summer [23]. By filtering which attributes are most relevant to each visitor, intrinsic motivations serve as a proximate determinant of destination preference, linking personal values, socio-demographic profiles, and experiential expectations to actual choice behavior.

2.5. Sustainability and Climate Sensitivity

Sustainability considerations and climate-related factors are increasingly influential in shaping mountain tourism destination choices, as travelers respond to environmental degradation, overcrowding, and variability in snow reliability [3,24,34]. Tourists are progressively drawn to destinations that demonstrate ecological responsibility through conservation initiatives, eco-friendly infrastructure, and effective visitor management, reflecting both ethical concerns and market differentiation. Furthermore, mountain destinations are highly dependent on sport tourism, which extends far beyond traditional skiing. This specialized form of active travel is deeply rooted in the natural appeal of landscapes during both the winter and summer seasons (Steiger et al., 2024 [35]). Nonetheless, snow-dependent activities, such as skiing, remain particularly sensitive to seasonal shifts and projected snow declines, prompting demand for higher-elevation resorts or diversified summer offerings such as mountain biking, trekking, and trail running (Steiger et al., 2020 [36]). While climate change and landscape hazards, such as glacial retreat or permafrost degradation, pose objective environmental risks, empirical evidence suggests that they do not directly

dictate tourists' choices; instead, individual behavior is moderated by experience, activity frequency, and access to risk information, with seasoned visitors exhibiting greater risk tolerance compared to occasional tourists [37]. Long-term competitiveness of mountain destinations, therefore, depends on the integrated management of technological, socio-cultural, natural, and political–legal dimensions, with economic success emerging as a consequence of sustainable performance across these interconnected areas [38].

2.6. Socio-Demographic Characteristics

Socio-demographic characteristics play a fundamental role in shaping tourist preferences, behaviors, and constraints in mountain tourism, influencing activity selection, booking patterns, stay duration, and sensitivity to sustainability considerations [39–41]. Age, gender, education, income, and place of residence determine not only the types of experiences sought, such as adventure and physically demanding activities for younger visitors versus comfort, cultural enrichment, and relaxation for older tourists, but also the willingness to pay for premium services and environmentally responsible options [42]. Cultural background and nationality further affect perceptions of risk, destination image, and expenditure behavior [19]. Research consistently indicates that socio-demographic characteristics shape both travel behavior and destination preferences. Younger tourists tend to exhibit more spontaneous booking patterns and shorter stays, whereas preferences among domestic mountain tourists are more strongly associated with landscape and natural attributes than with economic considerations. Together, these findings suggest that demographic profiles influence not only the types of experiences sought but also the decision-making criteria used when selecting mountain destinations [43,44]. These findings underscore the necessity of tailoring mountain tourism offerings, marketing strategies, and service design to the socio-demographic profiles of target segments to enhance satisfaction, engagement, and destination loyalty.

Based on the reviewed literature, mountain destination choice can be conceptualized as the outcome of interactions among destination attributes, individual characteristics, and contextual factors. Natural and environmental features, tourism activities, infrastructure and accessibility, destination image, and perceived value represent destination-related determinants that directly influence destination attractiveness. Their effects are shaped by tourists' intrinsic motivations and socio-demographic characteristics, which determine the relative importance assigned to specific destination attributes. In addition, sustainability considerations and climate-related factors increasingly influence both destination perceptions and travel decisions. This conceptualization provides the basis for examining the relative importance of these determinants among Romanian and Georgian tourists and for exploring potential differences across socio-demographic groups.

The literature indicates that the selection of mountain destinations is shaped by a complex interplay of interrelated factors. While natural and landscape attributes, such as scenic beauty, biodiversity, and environmental quality, serve as primary attractors, actual visitation and loyalty are mediated by the availability and quality of activities, infrastructure, and accessibility, destination image, and perceived value, as well as tourists' socio-demographic profiles and intrinsic motivations. Socio-demographic variables influence not only activity preferences but also perceptions of satisfaction, value, and sustainability, while motivational and psychographic dimensions determine which destination attributes are most salient to individual visitors. Moreover, emerging considerations, including climate change impacts, environmental degradation, and sustainability practices, increasingly modulate these decision-making processes. A comprehensive understanding that integrates natural, behavioral, demographic, and psychological perspectives is therefore essential for predicting tourist choices and designing resilient, market-aligned strategies.

Although previous studies consistently identify a range of determinants influencing mountain destination choice, there is limited evidence regarding their relative importance across different national and socio-demographic contexts. Furthermore, the interaction between destination attributes, individual characteristics, and sustainability-related considerations remains insufficiently explored in emerging mountain tourism destinations. These gaps create a need for comparative research examining whether established patterns observed in the literature are equally applicable across different tourism settings.

Despite the extensive body of literature examining mountain tourism determinants, little is known regarding whether the relative importance of these determinates differs across emerging mountain destinations with distinct cultural, infrastructural, and environmental profiles. Romania and Georgia represent two such contexts: both possess significant mountain regions and growing agritourism sectors, yet they differ in development trajectories, destination branding, service structures, and socio-cultural characteristics. A comparative analysis of these countries is therefore essential to understand how local particularities shape tourists' preferences and decision-making, and to determine whether established global patterns hold in settings marked by similar natural endowments but divergent tourism systems. Furthermore, the following research questions arises: Which are the factors that influence the Romanian tourists' decision-making process when choosing a mountain destination? Which are influencing the Georgian tourists' decision-making process when choosing a mountain destination? Are there any differences among the factors within different social groups?

3. Materials and Methods

3.1. Questionnaire Design and Characteristics

An online survey was conducted in 2024 in both Romania and Georgia among residents older than 18 years old who have previous experience in mountain areas. The questionnaire was developed based on the existing literature [45,46]. To ensure the relevance of responses, a filter question was applied, requiring participants to have visited a mountain region at least once during the preceding two years. The collected data used for the analysis can be grouped into two main categories, namely (i) socio-demographic characteristics and (ii) items that influence tourists' decision-making process in choosing a mountain destination based on a set of 17 items, evaluated on a Likert-type scale from 1 (not important at all) to 5 (very important). Field experts verified the questionnaire to ensure content validity. The questionnaire was initially developed in English and subsequently translated into Romanian and Georgian by native speakers. A pilot test on 10 specialists was conducted to assure the reliability of the research instrument. Cronbach's alpha test was employed, the result was 0.969 above the recommended value [47].

Table 1 provides a detailed breakdown of the demographic and socio-economic characteristics for the samples collected in Georgia ($n = 440$) and Romania ($n = 411$). Both participating samples exhibited a substantial overrepresentation of female respondents. In Georgia, 71.6% (315 respondents) were female, while in Romania, females comprised 73.7% (303 respondents) of the sample. A high degree of educational attainment characterized both national groups. Over 85% of respondents in both countries reported holding a university degree. The age profile represents the most striking demographic difference between the two samples. The Romanian sample is overwhelmingly young, with 76.6% of respondents (315 individuals) falling into the 18–29 years category. Conversely, the Georgian sample is characterized by an older distribution. The largest single age category in Georgia is ≥ 50 years, accounting for 32.7% (144 respondents). The younger group (18–29 years) accounted for 28.6% (126 respondents).

Table 1. Characteristics of the respondents.

Attributes		Percentage of the Sample (%)	Attributes		Percentage of the Sample (%)
		Georgia (n = 440)			Romania (n = 411)
Gender	Female	315 (71.6)	Female		303 (73.7)
	Male	125 (28.4)	Male		108 (26.3)
Age	18–29 years	126 (28.6)	18–29 years		315 (76.6)
	30–39 years	120 (27.3)	30–39 years		51 (12.4)
	40–49 years	50 (11.4)	40–49 years		33 (8.0)
	≥50 years	144 (32.7)	≥50 years		12 (2.9)
Education level	Primary education	-	Primary education		-
	Secondary education	7 (1.6)	Secondary education		-
	Vocational education	36 (8.2)	Vocational education		6 (1.5)
	High school	9 (2.0)	High school		54 (13.1)
	University degree	388 (88.2)	University degree		351 (85.4)
Monthly net household income	≤850 GEL	72 (16.4)	≤1500 RON		60 (14.6)
	851–1700 GEL	171 (38.9)	1501–3000 RON		75 (18.2)
	1701–2550 GEL	103 (23.4)	3000–4500 RON		102 (24.8)
	2551–3500 GEL	53 (12.0)	4201–6000 RON		105 (25.5)
	>3400 GEL	41 (9.3)	>6000 RON		69 (16.8)

Official annual exchange rate for 2024: 1 EURO = 4.97 RON (Romanian National Bank); 1 EURO = 2.94 GEL (National Bank of Georgia).

3.2. Analysis Methods

Principal component analysis with Varimax rotation was employed to reduce the dimensionality of the 16 items used in the decision-making process of choosing a mountain destination. A distinctive PCA was conducted for each of the analyzed groups. The retention criterion was based on an eigenvalue higher than 1 and factor loading higher than 0.4 [47]. Data suitability for factor analysis was assessed through the Kaiser–Meyer–Olkin (KMO) measure of sampling adequacy and Bartlett’s test of sphericity. The internal consistency of each extracted factor was evaluated using Cronbach’s alpha coefficient. Harman’s single-factor test was employed to confirm the existence of common method bias [48]. The first factor extracted from the unrotated factor matrix explained less than half of the total variance, supporting the assumption that common method bias was not a major issue in the dataset. ANOVA and *t*-test were run to identify if there are any statistically significant differences among different socio-demographic groups from the same country. Tukey’s HSD was employed to pinpoint exactly which pairs of group means are different.

4. Results

4.1. Factors Affecting Decision-Making Process for Visiting a Mountain Tourism Destination in Georgia

A principal components analysis was conducted on 16 items evaluated by respondents to explore the motives driving the choice of a mountain tourism destination in Georgia. The data proved suitable for PCA, as indicated by Bartlett’s test of sphericity ($\chi^2 = 7729.376$, $p < 0.000$) and the Kaiser–Meyer–Olkin (KMO) measure of sampling adequacy (0.969), which exceeds the recommended threshold of 0.6 [47]. The analysis resulted in a two-factor solution, retaining only components with eigenvalues greater than 1 and factor loading of

at least 0.5 (Table 2). Together, the two factors explained 76.58% of the total variance. The internal consistency of the items is confirmed by Cronbach's alpha reliability coefficient of 0.933.

Table 2. Principal component analysis results—Georgia.

Eigenvalue	Variance (%)	Factor	Item	Factor Loading	Mean	SD
10.977	68.609	Basic services and natural beauty (F1) Mean = 3.66 ± 1.048 $\alpha = 0.963$	Local gastronomy	0.894	3.75	1.157
			Diversity of food services	0.852	3.69	1.184
			Diversity of accommodation services	0.842	3.69	1.179
			Hospitality of the local population	0.830	3.74	1.184
			Beauty of the landscape	0.822	3.79	1.146
			Possibility of observing flora and fauna	0.775	3.57	1.209
			Traditions and customs of the area	0.773	3.67	1.157
			Possibility of doing activities together with children	0.750	3.64	1.198
			Proximity to home	0.582	3.23	1.294
1.275	7.971	Cultural and adventure activities (F2) Mean = 3.20 ± 1.091 $\alpha = 0.938$	Possibility of engaging in adventure tourism (rafting, rock climbing)	0.838	3.06	1.325
			Possibility of cycling	0.829	3.11	1.318
			Possibility of practicing winter sports	0.826	3.18	1.295
			Possibility of visiting farms	0.796	3.04	1.260
			Possibility of visiting local artisans	0.646	3.35	1.219
			Possibility of hiking on marked trails	0.634	3.49	1.194
			Possibility of attending fairs and festivals	0.633	3.28	1.268
Total variance %	76.580	$\alpha = 0.969$				

The first component, “basic services and natural beauty” (3.66 ± 1.048), consists of nine items (total variance 68.61%, reliability coefficient $\alpha = 0.963$). This component encompasses aspects related to basic services offered at a mountain tourism destination and the attractiveness of its natural environment. The most important is the beauty of the landscape, followed by the local gastronomy and the hospitality of the local population, all of which play a central role in shaping tourists' preferences. Practical factors, such as the diversity of accommodation and food services, along with the availability of activities for children, also contribute significantly to the destination's attractiveness. Moreover, the opportunity to experience local traditions and customs, and to observe the flora and fauna, further enhances the value of the destination. Proximity to home also plays a relevant role in the choice, though to a lesser extent.

The second component, “cultural and adventure activities” (3.20 ± 1.091), comprises seven items and represents 7.97% of the total variance (reliability coefficient $\alpha = 0.938$).

This component describes the opportunities to experience adventure and cultural activities during a stay in a mountain destination. The most influential element relates to the possibility of hiking on marked trails, which provides accessible ways to engage with nature and facilitates participation in other outdoor activities such as climbing and cycling. Visiting local artisans, attending fairs and festivals, and exploring local farms also contribute to the perceived value of the destination, as respondents appreciate the possibility to experience local cultural activities.

To further explore the determinants of mountain tourism destination choice, we analyzed the relationship between socio-demographic characteristics and the two PCA components (Table 3). No significant differences were found across gender and education categories with respect to the two factors ($p > 0.05$). In contrast, age showed a statistically significant effect in the case of the second factor “cultural and adventure activities” ($p < 0.05$). Younger respondents show higher mean scores (3.43 ± 1.149), while respondents aged 50 and above report the lowest (3.02 ± 1.045), indicating a statistically significant difference between these groups. However, the effect sizes were very small ($\eta^2 = 0.022$ and $\eta^2 = 0.024$), indicating that age explains only a limited proportion of the variance in this dimension and that the observed differences, although statistically significant, have limited practical significance. With respect to income, the “cultural and adventure activities” factor is more important for lower income respondents (3.48 ± 1.041 , $p < 0.05$), indicating that lower-income respondents tend to assign more importance to this factor. Although the difference was statistically significant ($p < 0.05$), the effect size remained small ($\eta^2 = 0.030$), indicating weak explanatory power of income for variations in perceived importance.

Table 3. Association between the socio-demographic characteristics and PCA components—Georgia.

		F1	F2
Gender	Female	3.67 (1.041)	3.21 (1.106)
	Male	3.60 (1.069)	3.16 (1.055)
	<i>p</i> -value	0.447	0.600
	Cohen’s <i>d</i>	0.07	0.05
Age	18–29 years	3.88 (1.112) ^{abd}	3.43 (1.149) ^{abd}
	30–39 years	3.67 (1.039) ^{abcd}	3.22 (1.105) ^{abcd}
	40–49 years	3.49 (0.893) ^{abcd}	3.09 (0.944) ^{abcd}
	≥50 years	3.50 (1.021) ^{bcd}	3.02 (1.045) ^{bcd}
	<i>p</i> -value	0.02 *	0.016 *
	η^2	0.022	0.024
Education level	Primary education	-	-
	Secondary education	3.07 (1.946)	2.86 (1.823)
	Vocational education	3.69 (1.259)	3.49 (1.248)
	High school	3.63 (1.796)	3.74 (1.604)
	University degree	3.66 (0.986)	3.17 (1.043)
	<i>p</i> -value	0.524	0.117
	η^2	0.005	0.005

Table 3. Cont.

Monthly net household income		F1	F2
	≤850 GEL	3.73 (1.004)	3.48 (1.041) ^{abcd}
	851–1700 GEL	3.69 (1.037)	3.30 (1.075) ^{abcde}
	1701–2550 GEL	3.58 (1.067)	3.06 (1.115) ^{abcde}
	2551–3400 GEL	3.66 (1.075)	2.89 (1.102) ^{bcde}
	>3400 GEL	3.56 (1.115)	3.02 (1.046) ^{abcde}
	<i>p</i> -value	0.843	0.010 ^{**}
	η^2	0.003	0.030

Significance level: * 5%; ** 1%. Scores within the same statement followed by different letters are significantly different (i.e., “a” is different from “b” but not from “ab”).

4.2. Factors Affecting Decision-Making Process for Visiting a Mountain Tourism Destination in Romania

A principal components analysis was conducted on 16 items evaluated by respondents to determine the factors shaping their choice of tourism destination in Romania. The suitability of the data for PCA was confirmed by Bartlett’s test of sphericity ($\chi^2 = 2200.185$, $p < 0.000$) and by the Kaiser–Meyer–Olkin (KMO) measure of sampling adequacy (0.870), which exceeds the recommended minimum of 0.6 [45]. The analysis yielded a four-factor solution, retaining only components with eigenvalues greater than 1 and factor loadings of at least 0.5 (Table 4). Overall, the four factors accounted for 66.60% of the total variance. The internal consistency of the items was supported by Cronbach’s alpha coefficient of 0.870.

The first component, “basic services” (3.59 ± 1.073), comprises six items (total variance 35.48%, reliability coefficient $\alpha = 0.842$). It emphasizes the importance respondents place on the availability and quality of basic services in a mountain tourism destination. The most important factors are the diversity of accommodation and food services, along with the local gastronomy and hospitality. This suggests that respondents prefer service infrastructure that combines lodging, food services, and local hospitality to improve comfort and satisfaction. Attending fairs and festivals and being close to home contribute to respondents’ preferences.

The second component, “cultural activities” (3.39 ± 1.061), has four items (total variance 13.41%, reliability coefficient $\alpha = 0.820$). This element reflects respondents’ enthusiasm for cultural experiences. Traditions and local customs emerge as the most important factor, followed by the possibility of visiting local artisans, indicating that respondents expressed a strong interest in engaging with the cultural identity and heritage of the mountain destination. Moreover, visiting farms and the possibility of involving children in various activities also enhance the perceived value of the destination.

The third component, “adventure tourism” (3.20 ± 1.153), consists of four items (total variance 9.85%, reliability coefficient $\alpha = 0.758$). This factor refers to the variety of outdoor activities, such as hiking, climbing, and cycling, available in the mountain destination. The strongest loadings correspond to the possibility of practicing winter sports and the opportunity to engage in adventure tourism such as rafting or rock climbing. Moreover, the possibility of hiking on marked trails registers the highest mean, emphasizing that accessible and safe hiking routes significantly enhance the destination’s value for visitors.

The fourth component, “natural beauty” (3.68 ± 1.109), includes two items (total variance 7.86%, reliability coefficient $\alpha = 0.504$). Despite having a moderate reliability and fewer items, this factor captures key elements of the natural appeal of the mountain destination. The beauty of the landscape ranks as the most significant across all factors,

showing its central importance in tourist motivation. The possibility of observing flora and fauna further enriches the environmental value of the destination, emphasizing that scenic and ecological attributes remain key determinants of visitor preference.

Table 4. Principal component analysis results—Romania.

Eigenvalue	Variance (%)	Factor	Item	Factor Loading	Mean	SD
5.676	35.477	Basic services (F1) Mean = 3.59 ± 1.073 α = 0.842	Diversity of accommodation services	0.872	4.12	1.020
			Diversity of food services	0.863	4.09	1.026
			Hospitality of the local population	0.719	4.15	1.026
			Local gastronomy	0.695	3.93	1.130
			Possibility of attending fairs and festivals	0.607	3.62	1.252
			Proximity to home	0.526	3.32	1.251
2.146	13.414	Cultural activities (F2) Mean = 3.39 ± 1.061 α = 0.820	Possibility of visiting farms	0.855	3.15	1.172
			Possibility of visiting local artisans	0.818	3.36	1.172
			Possibility of doing activities together with children	0.726	3.15	1.414
			Traditions and customs of the area	0.532	3.89	1.183
1.5762	9.852	Adventure tourism (F3) Mean = 3.20 ± 1.153 α = 0.758	Possibility of practicing winter sports	0.813	3.42	1.152
			Possibility of engaging in adventure tourism (rafting, rock climbing)	0.802	3.18	1.233
			Possibility of cycling	0.668	2.99	1.257
			Possibility of hiking on marked trails	0.616	4.17	0.926
1.257	7.856	Natural beauty (F4) Mean = 3.68 ± 1.109 α = 0.504	Beauty of the landscape	0.706	4.65	0.669
			Possibility of observing flora and fauna	0.686	4.02	0.971
Total variance %		66.599 α = 0.870				

The associations between socio-demographic characteristics and the two PCA components were then examined to provide further insight into the determinants of mountain tourism destination choice (Table 5). Based on the data presented in Table 5, males and females in Romania exhibit statistically significant differences in their prioritization of “basic services” and natural beauty (F4) ($p < 0.05$). Females assigned more importance to “basic services”, with a mean score of 3.93, compared to 3.88 for males. The difference between the groups was negligible (Cohen’s $d = 0.06$), indicating no meaningful practical difference in the responses. Although male respondents reported slightly higher scores (4.48 ± 0.47) than female respondents (4.29 ± 0.734), the effect size was small (Cohen’s $d = 0.31$), suggesting limited practical significance despite any statistical significance observed. Age showed a statistically significant effect on all four factors ($p < 0.05$). Respondents older than 50 years reported the highest scores in the case of “basic services” (4.85 ± 0.106), “cultural activities” (4.53 ± 0.133), and “natural beauty” (5.00 ± 0.000) factors, whereas in

the case of the “adventure tourism” factor, they reported the lowest score (2.74 ± 1.611). The effect size was small to approaching medium ($\eta^2 = 0.054$ for the basic services, and $\eta^2 = 0.051$ for cultural activities), indicating that the grouping variable explains a modest proportion of variance in the dependent variable. For the last two components, the effect sizes were very small, with age explaining only a limited proportion of the variance, and the observed differences, although statistically significant, have limited practical significance. Regarding education level, significant differences were found in the case of “cultural activities”, with the highest score attributed to respondents with vocational education (4.35 ± 0.170 , $p < 0.05$), and “natural beauty”, with the highest score attributed to respondents with high school education (4.69 ± 0.555 , $p < 0.05$). Monthly net household income has a statistically significant influence across all four of the identified motivational factors ($p < 0.05$). Generally, the data suggest that these factors are most important to tourists in the middle-income brackets, with their perceived importance declining significantly at the highest income levels (over 6000 RON). Although statistically significant, the effect size for “basic services” was moderate-to-large ($\eta^2 = 0.113$), indicating that the grouping variable has a meaningful influence on respondents’ evaluations of this dimension. For “cultural activities”, the effect size was large ($\eta^2 = 0.208$), indicating that the grouping variable explains a substantial proportion of variance in respondents’ evaluations. This suggests that differences between groups are not only statistically significant but also of strong practical relevance. The finding that income dictates the perceived value of every factor implies that pricing and promotional strategies in Romania must be broadly segmented. Because the importance of these attributes (services, culture, adventure, and nature) fluctuates according to economic capability, destination managers must tailor their offerings to match the specific financial constraints and expectations of different social groups to ensure long-term market sustainability.

Table 5. Association between the socio-demographic characteristics and PCA components—Romania.

		F1	F2	F3	F4
Gender	Female	3.93 (0.768)	3.33 (1.015)	3.39 (0.878)	4.29 (0.734)
	Male	3.88 (1.029)	3.37 (1.009)	3.48 (0.922)	4.48 (0.470)
	<i>p</i> -value	0.000 **	0.839	0.454	0.000
	Cohen’s <i>d</i>	0.06	0.04	0.10	0.31
Age	18–29 years	3.93 (0.789) ^{bc}	3.28 (0.986) ^{bcd}	3.47 (0.839) ^{abc}	4.30 (0.674) ^{bcd}
	30–39 years	3.59 (1.091) ^{bd}	3.26 (1.217) ^{bcd}	3.18 (1.073) ^{bcd}	4.29 (0.775) ^{bcd}
	40–49 years	3.98 (0.796) ^{bcd}	3.63 (0.771) ^{bcd}	3.40 (0.495) ^{abcd}	4.55 (0.543) ^{abcd}
	≥50 years	4.85 (0.106) ^a	4.53 (0.133) ^a	2.74 (1.611) ^{cd}	5.00 (0.000) ^{ab}
	<i>p</i> -value	0.000 **	0.000 **	0.007 ***	0.001 *
	η^2	0.054	0.051	0.029	0.039
Education level	Primary education	-	-	-	-
	Secondary education	-	-	-	-
	Vocational education	4.33 (0.733)	4.35 (0.170) ^{ab}	3.61 (0.664)	4.01 (0.000) ^{bc}

Table 5. Cont.

		F1	F2	F3	F4
Education level	High school	3.95 (0.906)	3.44 (1.103) ^{ab}	3.37 (1.145)	4.69 (0.555) ^a
	University degree	3.91 (0.835)	3.31 (0.998) ^c	3.41 (0.850)	4.29 (0.685) ^{bc}
	<i>p</i> -value	0.461	0.033 *	0.826	0.000 ***
	η^2	0.004	0.017	0.002	0.044
Monthly net household income	≤1500 RON	3.89 (1.011) ^{bcde}	3.69 (0.844) ^{abc}	3.45 (1.002) ^{abcd}	3.92 (0.905) ^{cde}
	1501–3000 RON	4.16 (0.624) ^{abc}	3.96 (0.648) ^{ab}	3.79 (0.870) ^{abc}	4.24 (0.524) ^{abde}
	3000–4500 RON	4.27 (0.482) ^{ab}	3.53 (0.799) ^{bc}	3.34 (0.857) ^{bcd}	4.23 (0.377) ^{abde}
	4201–6000 RON	3.68 (0.945) ^{cde}	2.96 (1.049) ^{de}	3.50 (0.835) ^{abcd}	3.70 (0.826) ^{abcde}
	>6000 RON	3.53 (0.883) ^{cde}	2.66 (1.090) ^{de}	2.95 (0.728) ^e	3.63 (0.663) ^{abcde}
	<i>p</i> -value	0.000 ***	0.000 ***	0.000 ***	0.011 **
	η^2	0.113	0.208	0.083	0.032

Significance level: * 5%; ** 1%; *** 0.1%. Scores within the same statement followed by different letters are significantly different (i.e., “a” is different from “b” but not from “ab”).

This comparative analysis of mountain tourism in Romania and Georgia ($n = 411$ and $n = 440$, respectively) highlights fundamental differences in how tourists perceive and interact with these destinations (Table 6). While both regions share a primary reliance on the “beauty of the landscape” as their most significant natural attribute, their underlying decision-making structures diverge significantly. The study identifies a four-factor solution for Romania, explaining 66.60% of the variance, which indicates a segmented and differentiated preference pattern among tourists. In contrast, Georgia exhibits a two-factor solution (68.61% variance explained), suggesting a more integrated and holistic destination perception. For Romanian tourists, adventure tourism acts as a distinct and independent decision factor, whereas in Georgia, it is merged with cultural exploration. To ensure the long-term competitiveness of these regions, destination management must be tailored to these distinct profiles. For Romania, the focus should be on diversification and targeted marketing of specific cultural and adventure experiences to satisfy its segmented domestic demand. For Georgia, the strategy must focus on strengthening the overall destination image by seamlessly integrating service quality with its rugged alpine natural attractiveness.

Table 6. Comparative analysis of the main results.

Dimension	Romania	Georgia
Sample size	$n = 411$	$n = 440$
Dominant tourism profile	Primarily domestic tourism demand	Higher share of international visitors
Mountain characteristics	Moderate altitudes, diversified mountain landscapes	Higher altitudes, rugged alpine landscapes
Main tourism activities	Hiking, agritourism, cultural tourism, and adventure tourism	Nature-based tourism, adventure tourism, and cultural exploration
PCA structure	Four-factor solution	Two-factor solution
Identified factors	1. Basic services; 2. cultural activities; 3. adventure tourism; 4. natural beauty	1. Basic services and natural beauty; 2. cultural and adventure activities

Table 6. Cont.

Dimension	Romania	Georgia
Total explained variance	66.60%	68.61%
Tourist decision-making pattern	More segmented and differentiated preferences	More integrated and holistic destination perception
Most important natural attribute	Beauty of the landscape (highest mean score = 4.65)	Beauty of the landscape (factor loading = 0.822)
Importance of service quality	Strong influence through accommodation diversity, hospitality, and gastronomy	Strong influence through accommodation, hospitality, and local services integrated with natural attractiveness
Dominant motivational drivers	Safety, familiarity, loyalty, quality services, and specific activity preferences	Authenticity, exploration, natural scenery, and integrated destination experience
Age profile of respondents	Predominantly young (76.6% aged 18–29 years)	Relatively older respondent structure
Influence of age	Significant effect on all four factors; older tourists value comfort, culture, and natural beauty more strongly	Destination image is perceived more holistically across age groups
Adventure tourism orientation	Distinct and independent decision factor	Included within the broader cultural and adventure factor
Destination management implications	Diversification and targeted marketing of cultural and adventure experiences	Strengthening the overall destination image by combining service quality with natural attractiveness

5. Discussion

The principal component analysis conducted to explore the determinants of mountain tourism destination choice revealed fundamental structural and prioritization differences between respondents from Georgia ($n = 440$) and Romania ($n = 411$). Romania's tourism system is primarily oriented toward domestic demand, characterized by moderate altitudes, low-impact tourism (hiking, agritourism), and a focus on established, familiar destinations where perceived safety and loyalty are decisive factors [9,10]. In this context, the Romanian PCA yielded four distinct factors, reflecting the segmented and dynamic preferences of a market that, according to the sample, is overwhelmingly young (76.6% aged 18–29 years). In contrast, the Georgian context, defined by higher altitudes, rugged alpine landscapes, a greater proportion of international visitors, and motivation driven by exploration and authenticity [14,15], resulted in a compact two-factor solution. In Georgia, the foundational elements were grouped into one dominant factor, “basic services and natural beauty”, which accounted for 68.61% of the variance. The secondary factor was “cultural and adventure activities”. In contrast, the analysis for Romania yielded a more granular four-factor structure, which separately identified “basic services”, “cultural activities”, “adventure tourism”, and “natural beauty”, accounting for 66.60% of the variance collectively. This suggests that while both countries rely on the core attributes of mountain tourism, the perceived image and selection criteria are organized differently by the respective tourist populations.

Despite the differences in factor organization, the findings confirm that natural attributes and service quality are the paramount drivers of mountain destination choice in both countries, aligning with the established literature [7,49]. For Georgia, the emerged factor “basic services and natural beauty” included the item “beauty of the landscape” with

a high factor loading (0.822), indicating its central role. Similarly, in Romania, although natural elements formed a distinct component (“natural beauty”), the item “beauty of the landscape” registered the highest mean score (4.65) across all items, confirming its essential motivational power. Additionally, components related to hospitality, local gastronomy, and diversity of accommodation loaded highly within the respective service factors in both samples, highlighting the necessity of adequate infrastructure to complement natural appeal.

The influence of age was even more pronounced in Romania, where it had a statistically significant effect on all four factors. In the Romanian context, respondents aged 50 and above reported the highest scores for “basic services” (4.85), “cultural activities” (4.53), and “natural beauty” (5.00), suggesting that for this older demographic segment, comfort, passive engagement, and cultural enrichment are key drivers [42]. In Romania, tourists specifically requested more guided hikes and nature trails to explore the Carpathian landscapes [50]. Gastronomy is a major pull factor, involving traditional food consumption, shared meals with hosts, and monastic cuisine [50]. The modern adventure tourist in Romania is typically a millennial (18–34 years old) who is socially connected, highly reliant on technology, and motivated by the desire to share experiences and seek unique sensations. For these travelers, holidays are not merely a break from everyday life but an opportunity to push beyond their personal boundaries and continue exploring new challenges and experiences [51].

These comparative results underscore that while scenic quality is an universal resource, effective destination management strategies must be tailored to the target segment’s age profile and associated priorities [20–22,24]. The integrated factor in Georgia suggests that for a typically older population, the destination’s quality image is perceived holistically, encompassing both core ecological appeal and essential service provision. Conversely, the segmentation found in the young Romanian sample highlights a dynamic and differentiated market that expects high-quality foundational services (“basic services”) while also distinctly separating specific experiential categories like “cultural activities” and “adventure tourism”. Therefore, strategies must focus on enhancing the overall quality image for the older segment (Georgia) and optimizing the diversity and distinct marketing of activity-based offerings for the younger, more segmented market (Romania).

While the current literature extensively explores natural landscapes and service quality as primary drivers for mountain tourism, there remains a significant gap in explicitly linking these determinants to the agricultural and social economics of mountain regions in Romania and Georgia. The comparative analysis (Tables 2 and 4) reveals that while mountain tourism determinants are well-defined in Georgia and Romania, their explicit integration into the broader frameworks of agricultural and social economics remains an area for further synthesis. The data provides a quantitative basis for understanding how tourist preferences intersect with the rural economic landscape and the social fabric of mountain communities. In Romania, the “possibility of visiting farms” shows a significant factor loading (0.855) within the “cultural activities” component. Similarly, in Georgia, this item was identified as a critical element of “cultural and adventure activities” (loading 0.796). From an agricultural economic perspective, these findings suggest that traditional working farms have transitioned into multifunctional assets that generate non-farm revenue, supporting the resilience of the primary sector in high-altitude areas. “Local gastronomy” is a high-priority item for both Georgian (mean = 3.75) and Romanian (mean = 3.93) respondents. This preference underscores the potential for mountain tourism to create direct markets for traditional agricultural products, such as monastic cuisine and artisanal food, thereby shortening supply chains and increasing the economic efficiency of local producers. In the Georgian context, while variables such as age and income demonstrated a statistically

significant influence on “cultural and adventure activities” ($p < 0.05$), the corresponding effect sizes were notably small (η^2 values of 0.024 and 0.030, respectively), indicating that these factors explain a minimal proportion of variance and thus possess limited practical significance for destination branding. A similar pattern emerged in Romania regarding gender, where high levels of statistical significance ($p = 0.000$) for preferences in “basic services” and “natural beauty” were offset by negligible to small effect sizes (Cohen’s d of 0.06 and 0.31), suggesting that these demographic variations do not warrant highly specialized marketing interventions. In contrast, the Romanian market exhibited a convergence of statistical and practical significance regarding household income, which showed a large effect size ($\eta^2 = 0.208$) for “cultural activities”, confirming its status as a robust predictor of tourist behavior that necessitates broadly segmented pricing and promotional strategies.

These findings suggest that stakeholders should prioritize high-impact variables like income in segmented markets while relying on universal pull factors when demographic differences yield statistically significant but practically minor variations.

Furthermore, the social economics of these destinations are deeply influenced by socio-demographic factors, where monthly household income and age significantly dictate the demand for authentic community-based hospitality and high-quality services. Bridging these aspects is crucial, as the long-term competitiveness and socio-economic efficiency of these mountain areas depend on an integrated management approach that aligns traditional agricultural practices with the evolving social profiles and economic capabilities of domestic and international tourists.

6. Conclusions

This study provides a comparative analysis of mountain tourism decision-making in Georgia and Romania, offering significant conclusions regarding the structuring and prioritization of motivational factors based on local socio-demographic profiles. These findings carry important practical implications for destination management. For destinations targeting the older segment prevalent in the Georgian sample, strategies should focus on enhancing the overall quality image, ensuring seamless integration between natural assets and foundational service provision (“basic services and natural beauty”). For destinations in Romania, characterized by a young and highly segmented market, successful strategies must emphasize the distinctive development and targeted marketing of specialized experiences, such as separating dedicated adventure routes from cultural immersion opportunities. The statistically significant influence of income on all four factors in Romania further suggests that promotional and pricing strategies must be broadly segmented based on economic capability within that market.

From a management perspective, these findings necessitate tailored strategies. For the Georgian market, stakeholders should focus on enhancing the overall quality image to meet the expectations of an older, stability-oriented segment. Conversely, for the Romanian market, managers must prioritize the distinct marketing of specialized experiences, such as separating high-intensity adventure routes from immersive cultural opportunities. The statistically significant influence of household income on all decision factors in Romania highlights a critical social economic constraint; therefore, pricing and promotional strategies must be carefully segmented to ensure economic accessibility across different social groups. The long-term competitiveness of mountain destinations in the Caucasus and Carpathians depends on an integrated management approach. This approach must align the preservation of traditional agricultural livelihoods and social community structures with the evolving experiential and economic requirements of modern domestic tourists.

Policy implications derived from this study suggest that the sustainable development of mountain tourism in Romania and Georgia should prioritize both infrastructure im-

provement and product diversification. First, strengthening basic tourism infrastructure, such as accessibility, accommodation quality, and essential services, is essential to support core visitor satisfaction in both contexts. Tourism strategies should actively diversify offerings beyond traditional activities by promoting year-round experiences, including hiking, cultural tourism, and adventure-based activities such as mountain biking and trail running. Third, integrating local socio-economic resources, particularly gastronomy and rural–agricultural products, can enhance destination competitiveness and strengthen local value chains. Last but not least, destination management should be adapted to market structure differences, with Romania benefiting from more segmented, activity-specific development strategies, while Georgia requires a more integrated approach that combines natural attractiveness with service quality into a unified destination image. Together, these measures contribute to improving the sustainability, resilience, and competitiveness of mountain tourism destinations.

This study has several limitations. The samples were not nationally representative and differed in their demographic composition, particularly regarding age distribution. The current research also noted overrepresentation of female and highly educated respondents, which may skew the results toward a specific social stratum. The findings reflect local particularities such as the moderate altitudes of the Carpathians versus the rugged alpine landscapes of the Caucasus. Consequently, the “two-factor” versus “four-factor” solutions may be unique to these specific destinations and may not be directly applicable to other mountain systems with different developmental trajectories. Future studies should employ more balanced and nationally representative samples. Efforts should aim for a more equal distribution across genders, educational levels, and particularly age groups, as the Romanian sample was overwhelmingly dominated by younger respondents.

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