Highlights of Sustainability

*Article*

# The Value of Sustainable Tourism Destinations in the Eyes of Visitors

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**Abstract** The first objective of this study is to analyze visitors' perceived value of four Italian small areas, that have been granted the European Regional Development Fund's financing for developing sustainable tourism. The second objective of this work is to investigate the influences of socio-demographic and trip-related characteristics on the tourists' assessments of the main aspects of such destinations, for detecting variables useful for market segmentation and for designing better-targeted marketing actions. These areas host protected natural reserves, historical heritage, rural or mountain traditions, and ways of life, the conservation of which is combined with local economic growth through the development of green, cultural, and slow tourism. Thus, insights on how visitors' perceived value is configured there might provide hints useful for upgrading the local tourism supply consistently with the United Nations' Agenda 2030 for sustainable development and the European Green Deal Strategy. Results confirm that the perceived value is a fundamental construct, as it strongly and positively influences satisfaction, intention to recommend, and destination image. The value of sustainable destinations, as perceived by visitors, is mainly based on the affective benefits that sustainable experiences provide, starting from positive social interactions making tourists feel welcomed. The tourist segment valorizing sustainable destinations is mostly composed of old people and low-income travelers, who seek basic services and facilities, as their satisfaction depends mainly on relaxing immersed in pristine nature.

**Keywords** sustainable tourism; perceived value; market segmentation variables; Ordinal Structural Equations Models



**Received:** 2 August 2022
**Accepted:** 7 September 2022
**Published:** 8 September 2022

**Academic Editor**
Deborah Edwards, University of Technology Sydney, Australia



## 1. Introduction

The construct of customer perceived value has been long investigated by scholars and practitioners, as a fundamental factor of firms' competitiveness [1,2]. It has been defined as the consumer's evaluation of the cost-benefit trade-off related to the purchase and consumption of a certain good [3,4]. Such evaluation relies on the consideration of the product/service's monetary price, suitability to fulfill the customer's wishes, value for money, and non-monetary expenses [5]. The assessment of the overall quality of the good is the basis of the functional benefits that the subject retrieves from it [6]. Following the multidimensional model of product quality, the latter depends on how the consumer perceives the service/product's tangible and intangible features [7]. It has been shown that often the emotional and social benefits, experienced during the good's purchase or use, can be even more impactful, on the overall perceived value, than functional advantages [8–10]. Turning to costs, besides monetary price, the energy, time, efforts, uncertainty, possible learning phase, and changes in consumption habits, necessary to enjoy the good, have been considered by the extant literature [11]. Given this dual nature of the construct, providers can increase the perceived value of their offer either by rising the quality of its tangible and intangible attributes, through marketing actions aimed at evoking more desired emotions in customers, or by decreasing the related costs [12].

While studies about perceived value in the manufacturing industry have bloomed profusely since the end of the eighties, only about two decades ago this important construct started to be explored with reference to tourism destinations [13]. Possibly, this is due to the greater complexity of tourism destinations compared to single products [14], that makes it more difficult to identify how visitors' perceived value is formed, which are its main dimensions, determinants, and consequents. In fact, the components of the tourism offer characterizing each destination are, to a great extent, specific to that single area and different from others, so it might be expected that components of perceived values vary between destination types [12,15–17]. However, in general, quality (functional benefits) is considered the most important determinant of perceived benefits, while perceived costs are the basis of perceived sacrifices [12]. The quality of a tourism destination is composed of the quality of its features (such as the cultural heritage, the natural environment, climate, attractions, etc.), its different tourism services (food, shopping, accommodation, etc.), and the perceived behavior of service providers [18]. While the time, cost and effort required to reach the destination, besides the perceived price level, are the main perceived sacrifices [12].

Although challenging, understanding how visitors' perceived value of destinations is configured is fundamental for destination managers, marketers, and policy makers to upgrade the local tourism supply and design effective marketing actions, because this construct has been found to outrank even satisfaction and product quality as the consumer's reference measure to confront and select market alternatives [1]. Nowadays, devising strategies able to attract and satisfy tourists, so that the territory can both enjoy the economic benefits of this business and minimize the negative impacts of tourist activities on the natural and historical heritage, is increasingly urgent. As global market trends spread faster than ever online, the cost of tourist services and transportation becomes more and more affordable, and the population grows expanding the tourist market, tourism appears increasingly unsustainable for the environment [19–23]. Masses of visitors put too much pressure on the structures of historical sites, disturb natural ecosystems, imply polluting travels, and stress the resources of the hosting territories [24,25]. Already in 2002, the World Tourism Organization launched the Sustainable Tourism program, in the context of the Millennium Development Goal of Eliminating Poverty [26], and many initiatives, aimed at making tourism sustainable, were up taken in the last twenty years. However, most part of the tourism system remained far from sustainability [23].

"Sustainability" is an increasingly recurring word, so it might surprise that it has no univocal meaning yet, not even within the sole tourism literature [27]. However, the United Nations World Tourism Organization defined sustainable tourism in terms of the results it offers: intra and intergenerationally fair economic growth, preservation of the natural environment without detriment to the industry, and social and cultural benefits for both the visitors and the resident community [28]. While the industry and policy sectors have debated what sustainability is and how can be implemented in production and consumption practices since the Seventies, the academic literature has started to address this topic systematically since 2000, but then studies on sustainability have rapidly multiplied [29].

Initially, in the tourism field, as well as in other research sectors, the focus of sustainability studies was on the economic aspects [30]. According to the United Nations' World Tourism Organization (UNWTO), economic sustainability refers to the feasibility of economic processes in the long term, in the fair and equal distribution of the produced wealth throughout the society, in the capability to increase both the quantity and the quality of employment, and in the alleviation of poverty thanks to increased opportunities to earn an income for all citizens [28]. Chronologically, the second aspect of sustainability addressed by the tourism literature has been the ecological pillar [30]. As scholars reflected on how the production and consumption of tourist services could be turned into environmentally sustainable processes, the concept of ecotourism, or green tourism, has been elaborated on and tested [31]. Afterward, studies about sustainability have widened their scope, taking into account also the institutional pillar [32]. Institutions are called to promote sustainable orientations, to enforce norms mandating sustainable behaviors, and to set formal systems of legal, social, administrative, and political procedures favoring sustainability, so that this crucial issue is not left to the subjective willingness and personal consciousness only [33]. Given the centrality of the guest-host relationship in tourism and the great impacts of

tourism on the resident communities, more recently the social pillar of sustainability has entered the academic debate [29]. On the one side, tourism contributes to an important extent to the social (not only economic) growth of the host community, especially through the interactions with visitors from different cultures, in the context of which also tourists enhance their education [27]. On the other side, tourists add pressure on public services, and increase pollution, water, energy and gas consumption, and waste production, to the detriment of residents [31].

Currently, a large consensus has converged on identifying the four essential elements of sustainability in the ecological, economic, social (including cultural), and institutional (governance included) pillars, which should be conciliated and balanced [29,32]. However, nowadays the focus of the global community is returning to the environmental sustainability, as the main current threat to both the humanity and the planet is climate change, according to the United Nations' Agenda 2030 for sustainable development and the European Green Deal Strategy. The environmental impact of tourism on the host territory is huge in terms of $CO_2$ and green-house gas emissions [31], which increase the "heat island effect", responsible for the increasingly frequent occurrence of disruptive extreme weather events and droughts [34], thus, tourism activities, starting from travel, contribute to accelerating climate change [35]. As travelers may think of sustainable tourism as choosing ecologically pristine areas as their target destinations, recently, the intensity of recreational and tourist activities in sensitive locations has produced concerning augments in pollution and damage to the natural environment [29,36]. The electronic word-of-mouth on social media [20], the increasing availability of low-cost tourist services offered on sharing-economy platforms [22], and the widening diffusion of "lifestyle mobilities" [19] have promoted unsustainable overtourism and tourist behaviors [21] that contribute to accelerating climate change [31]. Whence the urgent need to reshape the tourism sector consistently with the global call to stop climate change [37], which is pivotal in both the United Nations' Agenda 2030 for sustainable development and the European Green Deal. Thus, it is fundamental to understand how to keep a destination attractive and able to provide valuable experiences to tourists, while avoiding overtourism and, above all, an excessive production and consumption of tourist services that generate excess pollution, $CO_2$, and other green-house gas emissions, drainage of local water resources, unmanageable masses of waste and gas consumption.

To such an aim, the objectives of this study are two. First, to analyze the configuration of visitors' perceived value of four Italian destinations, that have been granted the European Regional Development Fund's financing for the development of sustainable tourism, by virtue of their sustainability characters. Second, to investigate the influences of socio-demographic and trip-related characteristics on the tourists' assessments of the main aspects of such small areas, for detecting variables useful for segmenting the tourist market and designing better-targeted marketing actions. The four destinations host well-protected natural reserves, carefully sheltered historical heritage, rural or mountain traditions, and ways of life, the conservation of which looks perfectly combined with the local socio-economic growth in the development of green, cultural, and slow tourism. In the considered towns, the risk of overtourism can be excluded, thanks to the residents' deep environmental consciousness and commitment to biodiversity conservation, which strongly support the local policy of preventing the construction of large tourism facilities [38]. Although tourist services and entertainments are scarce, there, visitors' satisfaction and intention to recommend the areas to others reach very high levels, thanks to the local pristine nature and evocative historical heritage, able by themselves to supply valuable tourist experiences. Moreover, the absence of mass tourist facilities and services that imply intensive resources consumption patterns ensures that tourism development generates lower levels of pollution, $CO_2$ and greenhouse gas emissions, water and gas consumption, as well as waste production, compared to the "traditional" service-intensive development. Therefore, by detecting which aspects of our four areas convey the greatest value to tourists and identifying the socio-demographic and trip-related variables that characterize the market segment that receives the greatest value from sustainable destinations, this study provides policy makers and destination managers important hints for designing effective sustainable tourism development strategies consistent with the Agenda 2030 and the European Green Deal. Building on Guizzardi et al. [39], the analysis is conducted by means of an Ordinal Structural

Equations Model (OSEM) and also accounts for the relations of visitors' perceived values with satisfaction, intention to recommend, and destination image. As a result, this work also corroborates previous findings about the direction and strength of the relationship between these constructs fundamental for destination marketing and management.

The paper is organized into four sections. This introduction is followed by the description of the research model, methods and materials employed. The third section is dedicated to the illustration and discussion of results, afterwards concluding remarks are drawn.

## 2. Materials and Methods

### *2.1. Research Model and Methodology*

#### 2.1.1. The Research Model

We stick with the traditional definition of perceived value as a cost-benefit trade-off [3,4] and, in this framework, we build our research model (Figure 1) assuming that the perceived value is a second-order formative latent construct (as in [40–42], composed of functional benefits, socio-emotional benefits and perceived costs (both monetary and non-monetary). Furthermore, the perceived value is surmised to be independent of the visitors' evaluations of destinations' attributes quality, experienced feelings, and incurred costs, given (conditionally to) its three components. Moreover, we hypothesize functional benefits, socio-emotional benefits, and perceived costs to be reflective latent constructs of the first-order (similarly to [41,42]), the levels of which are manifested in the visitors' assessments of the quality of destinations' attributes, of the feelings experienced during the visit, of the monetary and non-monetary expenses incurred, respectively. The choice of indicators was based on the information provided by local policy makers and destination managers, discussed together with tourism scholars and consultants, participating in the Interreg Project.

The first-order latent variables are independent of the socio-demographic characteristics of the visitors, because they are assumed to represent the objective part of the interviewees' perceptions, concerning the capability of the destination to elicit such perceptions. From the distinction of the objective from the subjective side of each perception [43] and the attribution of the former to the attributes of the destination and the latter to the idiosyncratic characteristics of tourists, it follows that the visitors' ratings of destinations' attributes quality, experienced feelings, and incurred costs should be influenced by their socio-demographic characteristics. As formed by the objective components of visitors' perceptions, also the perceived value is assumed to describe the destinations' capability of eliciting the perceptions of value in tourists. But such a capability might manifest differently in different situations (for example a tourist lodging in a hotel may perceive the value of the destination differently from a visitor renting an apartment; a visitor staying for two days only could perceive a value different from that perceived by a tourist staying seven days). Thus, we hypothesize that trip-related factors (including the specific destination visited) affect perceived value, functional benefits, socio-emotional benefits, and perceived costs.

Although the literature brought mixed results about the relations between satisfaction, behavioral intentions and perceived value [44–46], we hypothesize that the perceived value influences tourist satisfaction positively, which, in turn, exerts a positive effect on the perceived value, consistently with the fining of most extant studies. Part of the literature models destination image as a component of the perceived value [12,47]. Other works consider the image as a construct of its own [42,45]. According to Baloglu and McCleary [48], "Research of the past two decades has demonstrated that image is a valuable concept in understanding the destination selection process of tourists" (p. 868). Thus, it may seem controversial to assume that a construct that influences the pre-trip choice of the destination could measure the value of the destination experienced during the visit. So, we consider the image as a holistic [49] and synthetic concept that can be measured unidimensionally with no important loss of information [42,50], that foregoes perceived value, but can change, from the pre-trip to the post-trip [51], influenced also by the latter. By estimating our research model, then, we test whether there is a positive and biunivocal relationship between destination image and perceived value. We also verify if satisfaction, destination image, and intention to recommend are directly influenced by socio-demographic and trip-related variables, or if their influence is mediated by their indicators.

Consistently with most extant literature, we also hypothesize that the intention to recommend the destination to others is positively associated with both destination image and tourist satisfaction, and that the latter two constructs are positively interdependent.

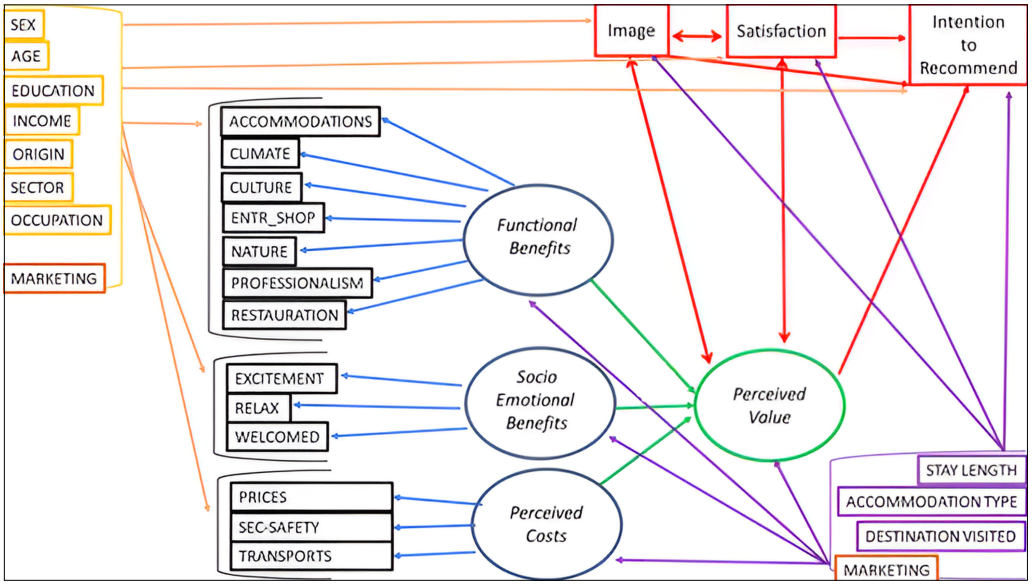


**Figure 1.** Research model (MARKETING is placed next to both socio-demographic and trip-related variables, to avoid too many arrows overlapping).

As no univocal definition of sustainability exists, a precise definition of a sustainable tourism destination is still missing too, therefore measuring and modeling sustainability in tourism is particularly difficult, also considering that a particular meaning of this word could adequately applied in some geographic areas, but not in others, to some communities, but not to others, for certain levels of variables correlated with sustainable tourism, but not to others [27]. Therefore, in this work, we bypassed the need to quantify and model sustainability, by analyzing perceived value in destinations that may be considered paradigms of tourism sustainability, based on the authoritative assessment of the Interreg Italy-Croatia Managing Authority and Joint Monitoring Committee, that selected these small areas (among others) by virtue of their sustainability characters. For this reason, we believe that the results of our analysis can be useful to destination managers and policy-makers in need to devise new strategies for upgrading the local tourism supply consistently with the call for ecological sustainability made by the United Nations' Agenda 2030 for sustainable development and the European Green Deal Strategy.

### 2.1.2. Methodology

Although most of the literature about perceived value estimates Structural Equation Models (SEM) for continuous data, we recur to an Ordinal SEM (OSEM, see [52]) because the distributional characteristics of our data, examined through a battery of tests (Shapiro-Wilk's test for normality [53]; D'Agostino's test of skewness [54]; Geary's measure of kurtosis [55]) recommend not to rely on the linear approximation [56,57]. In general, an OSEM can be described by the following set of equations:

$$Y^* \sim N(0,1) \tag{1}$$

$$Y^* = \Lambda\eta + \varepsilon; \varepsilon \sim N_M(0, \theta_\varepsilon) \tag{2}$$

$$\xi = \Pi\eta + \partial;\ \partial \sim N_M(0, \theta_\partial) \tag{3}$$

$$\Xi = BW + \zeta;\ \zeta \sim N_M(0, \psi) \tag{4}$$

where $Y^*$ is a matrix $N \times M$ (with $N$ the number of observations and $M$ that of indicators) of latent standard normal variables, each one underlying an indicator of the

measurement model (similar to the binary Probit model, but with ordered levels). As we assign a standard normal distribution to these variables, we scaled them by constraining the mean to 0 and variance to 1, so that the cut-off of the normal variables corresponding to the levels of the ordered indicators must be estimated. $\eta$ is the $N \times 3$ matrix of first-order latent components of perceived value. $\Lambda$ is a matrix containing loadings (to be estimated). $\varepsilon$ is the first-order measurement error, with variance $\theta_\varepsilon$ to be estimated. $\xi$ represents the perceived value, $\Pi$ the coefficients vector (to be estimated). $\partial$ is the measurement error of the perceived value, with variance $\theta_\partial$. $\Xi = [\xi\eta]$ is a matrix binding together perceived value, functional benefits, socio-emotional benefits, and perceived costs. $B$ is the matrix of regression coefficients and $W$ is that of explanatory variables (both observable and latent). $\zeta$ is the error of the regression, having variance $\psi$. The latent variables $\eta$ are assumed independent from both measurement and regression errors.

The matrix of correlations between observable variables contains polychoric coefficients for pairs of ordinal variables and tetrachoric correlations for ordinal-binary pairs [58]. Quite numerous missing data prevent the use of a full likelihood estimator. In fact, the full likelihood estimator makes use of complete observations only, discarding all the rows of the dataset containing even a single missing datum. Thus, we prefer to use the pairwise likelihood (PL) estimator [52]. Consistently, we built the likelihood function to be maximized by multiplying the joint probability density of a pair of variables at a time, so that all the pairwise available observations can be employed to obtain estimates more robust. The analysis is brought about with R statistics (lavaan package).

### *2.2. Empirical Setting*

#### 2.2.1. The Areas Under Investigation

The research model outlined in Section 2.1.1 is tested on data collected through a visitor survey in four Italian small areas, selected by the officials of the European Commission for receiving the European Regional Development Fund's financing, with the aim of expanding sustainable tourism, through an Interreg Italy-Croatia project. The four destinations are Alfonsine, Ostellato, the interregional Park of Sasso Simone and Simoncello and Carnia. As the authors were actively involved in the Project, they had the opportunity to collect a lot of information (from residents, main stakeholders, local experts, and authorities), with which they enriched the results of the quantitative analysis.

Alfonsine is a municipality of 106,79 square kilometers, with a population of 11,993 inhabitants in the hinterland of lowland Ravenna province. It hosts a natural reserve, included in the Po Delta Park, constituted by woods, valleys, and marshes. Its cultural heritage is composed mainly of: the Madonna del Bosco Sanctuary of; the Agnese Home, a typical rural house of the late 19th century, where in 1975 Giuliano Montaldo filmed L'Agnese va a morire, after the homonym book by Renata Viganò; the Museum of the Senio battle, documenting the partisan struggle; Monti Home, home of the main Italian poet of Neoclassicism.

Ostellato is a municipality of 173,34 square kilometers, with a population of 6030 inhabitants in the center of Ferrara province. Its natural heritage includes the Valleys, a natural reserve with plants and animals typical of wet freshwater environments, and the Mezzano, a vast reclaimed agricultural area, with large populations of sedentary fauna. It offers suggestive opportunities for phishing, birdwatching, and cycling. It hosts the Civic Museum of the Territory, which shows the geomorphic evolution of the Earth with multimedia devices and a laboratory; the Pieve di San Vito, a rare example of a Romanesque country church; the Church of Saint Peter and Paul and some ancient manors. Pumpkin characterizes Ostellato's gastronomic offer.

Sasso Simone and Simoncello is an interregional park of 49.91 square kilometers in the heart of the historic Montefeltro region, delimited by Marecchia, Conca, and Foglia rivers, characterized by isolated mountains and rocks, and flourishing wildlife. Its cultural heritage is composed of the many churches, museums, monuments, and the fortresses of Carpegna, Frontino, Montecopiolo, Pian di Meleto, Pietrarubbia, and Pennabilli, the municipalities belonging to this territory.

Carnia is composed of three main towns: Ovaro, Paularo, and Prato Carnico. Ovaro is a mountain municipality of 57.85 square kilometers with 1867 inhabitants, in Udine

province. Many of its huts and barns are preserved in their original physiognomy as examples of spontaneous architecture. Picturesque accommodations can be found thanks to the spread of scattered hotels. Ovaro hosts Pieve di Gorto and its museum, with unique ecclesial apparatus, the Museum of Wood and Venetian Sawmill, the "Planelas e Scugjelas" permanent exhibition, and the former Coal Mine Cludinico Museum. Paularo is a mountain town in Udine province, on the Austrian border, at the intersection of different natural reserves. It covers 84.24 square kilometers and has a population of 2541 inhabitants. It offers opportunities for hiking and mountain biking. Its cultural heritage includes the neoclassical church of Saints Vito, Modesto, and Crescente, the church of Santa Maria Maggiore in Dierico, Calice-Screm palace (1591), Mocenigo-Linussio-Fabiani palace (XVIII century), Calice di Villafuori palace (XVII century) and "La Mozartina" museum, an exhibition of pianos, organs and other anti-collectible musical instruments by Giovanni Canciani. Prato Carnico is a mountain area in Udine province, spanning a square of 81.72 kilometers, with a population of 903 individuals only. surrounded by nature, like the former two Carnic localities. It includes Pesariis, the village of a clock tradition dating back to 1725, with streets dotted with sundials and clock mechanisms, as well as a clock museum. Historic houses, like the Bruseschi home, spontaneous architecture, fortifications, and high trenches from World War I represent the cultural heritage of Rive d'Arcano.

#### 2.2.2. The Data Collection

We collected data through questionnaires submitted to visitors since April and until December 2019, through face-to-face interviews, brought about by professional interviewers, appropriately instructed by the authors, for avoiding any external influence on answers. In the Appendix A (Table A1), it is displayed the survey questionnaire employed. Respondents were asked to express their ratings of various aspects of the destinations, on a Likert-type scale ranging from 1 to 7, which is the standard in the literature [12,42,59]. To prevent cognitive confusion, all the destination attributes were rated "in positive". For example, we measure the perceived costs of transportation through the interviewee's level of agreement with the sentence: "It is very easy/comfortable to reach this destination and move around". Then, changing the sign in the Likert scale, we quantify from −7 (very little efforts) to −1 (very great efforts) the economic, physical, and time efforts born to reach the destination and move around. For the perception of prices (variable PRICES): −1 means very expensive and −7 very cheap, while for the perceived personal cost of staying safe and secure at the destination (variable SEC_SAFETY), −1 implies the highest costs, as the destination is very insecure and unsafe, and −7 very little costs, as the destination is secure and safe.

## 3. Results

### *3.1. Data Description*

A total of 527 visitors were interviewed, none refused to answer, but only 49 questionnaires were completed, while the others contain at least one missing answer, raising the issue of non-response bias [60]. So, we check the presence of non-response bias through a chi-square test for differences in proportions, comparing the non-response rates of all the considered variables with the proportion of missing data under the null hypothesis that the non-response rate is the same for each answer (total missing values divided the number of variables, that is 13%). As the test statistics is 0.694, the null hypothesis of the absence of non-response bias must be accepted.

The battery of tests run highlights that data depart greatly from normality:

- the Shapiro-Wilk's test statistics [53], range between 0.71 for the assessment of relax and 0.93 for the entertainment and shopping rating;
- the skew ranges between −1.8382 for the assessment of relax and 0.04 for the entertainment and shopping rating;
- D'Agostino's test [54] confirms that most of the variables are affected by a concerning negative skew;

- whereas Geary's test statistics [55], ranging between 0.72 for the catering services/restaurant services/catering/restaurant rating and 0.86 for the entertainment and shopping rating, reassure against excessive kurtosis.

Thus, the high negative skew causes the data distribution to be markedly non-normal and this is why we used OSEM.

As shown in Table 1, the destination image of Alfonsine is the weakest one, notwithstanding the celebrity of Vincenzo Monti and of the historical events that its cultural heritage evokes. Sasso Simone and Simoncello record the highest satisfaction and also the highest intention to recommend the destination to others, along with Ostellato. Relevantly, both destinations base their tourism offer on the protected natural heritage, that allows tourists to admire unique landscapes and to dive into the pristine nature, where wild animals can be seen in their natural habitat, thanks to the carefully protected oases, and paradises of biodiversity. As it might be expected for its proximity to the border, a fifth of respondents in Carnia are inbound visitors, while overall the great majority of interviewees are Italians. This composition of the tourist market is due to the little promotion and communication brought about for letting the general public get to know about the hidden naturalist treasures of these areas, which lacked any destination management agency until the Interreg Project established one (long after the survey was brought about). Thus, these areas are known and visited mainly by Italian people, especially those dwelling in the surrounding regions, and by a few foreigners passionate about out-of-the-beaten-track destinations.

The sample is quite balanced with reference to sex, with a slight prevalence of males in Alfonsine and females in Sasso Simone and Simoncello. The latter, maybe thanks to the highest capability to satisfy tourists, displays a remarkable average stay length of 22 days, because many visitors own a second home and spend the whole summer there, to enjoy fresh weather and healthy air. Conversely, most of the respondents' trips in Ostellato and Alfonsine last half a day. In fact, these are transit locations, where often tourists coming from greater art or beach destinations stop for relaxing in the pristine nature or for visiting historical attractions, and for eating the traditional "capitone", before continuing their journey.

**Table 1.** Sample composition.

| AREA | N Obs. | Median | | | Proportion | Proportion | Average |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | IMAGE | SATISFACTION | RECOMMEND | INBOUND | FEMALES | STAY LENGTH |
| Carnia | 241 | 6 | 6 | 6 | 25% | 50% | 6 |
| Alfonsine | 75 | 4 | 6 | 5 | 11% | 45% | 2 |
| Ostellato | 94 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 1% | 54% | 1.6 |
| Sasso Simone | 117 | 6 | 7 | 7 | 1.7% | 57% | 22 |

### *3.2. Estimation Results*

#### 3.2.1. Measurement Model

We assessed the scale reliability of the indicators employed for measuring the first-order latent components of perceived value by means of the Cronbach's alpha. The adequacy of our measurement instruments is ensured by values of 0.84, 0.73, and 0.71, for functional benefits, socio-emotional benefits, and perceived costs respectively [61]. As all Variance Inflation Factors are below 2.4, we can exclude multicollinearity.

As displayed in Table 2 below, assuming a significance level of 10%, all the loadings are significant. The first panel of Table 2 reports results for the construct of interest, the perceived value, measured as a second-order formative latent construct, as specified in Equation (4). The loadings' signs are as expected, confirming that perceived value derives from the assessment of the cost-benefit trade-off [3,4]. The estimates of the coefficients $\Pi$ let us conclude that emotional benefits are the most important component of perceived value, although the importance of perceived costs comes immediately after, consistently with some extant studies [8–10,13,41]. While in different destinations functional benefits are the most important dimension [12,17], the areas under investigation lack tourism facilities and infrastructures, thus the dominance of the socio-emotional component was expected, for the relaxed and peaceful atmosphere that the local natural heritage allows to experience.

**Table 2.** Estimates of the measurement model's loadings.

| Latent Variables | Indicators | Estimated Loadings | |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Perceived Value** | Functional Benefits | 0.332 | ** |
| | Emotional Benefits | 0.531 | *** |
| | Perceived Costs | −0.500 | *** |
| **Functional Benefits** | ACCOMMODATIONS | 0.577 | *** |
| | ENTR_SHOP | 0.900 | *** |
| | RESTAURATION | 0.540 | *** |
| | PROFESSIONALS | 0.434 | *** |
| | CLIMATE | 0.409 | *** |
| | CULTURE | 0.474 | *** |
| | NATURE | 0.332 | *** |
| **Emotional Benefits** | WELCOMED | 0.609 | *** |
| | EXCITEMENT | 0.548 | *** |
| | RELAX | 0.517 | *** |
| **Perceived Costs** | PRICES | 0.619 | *** |
| | TRANSPORTS | 0.409 | *** |
| | SEC_SAFETY | 0.581 | *** |

*** = significance level ≤ 0.01; ** = significance level ≤ 0.05.

Based on the estimated values of loadings $\Lambda$ on the three first-order constructs (see Equation (3)), entertainment and shopping are the most important feature in providing functional benefits, confirming some sector-specific studies [62]. On the one side, widening the quantity and variety of shops and entertaining events would attract more visitors to these destinations. However, it is likely that the segment of tourists looking for green experiences in sustainable destinations does not deem these elements very important (in fact they result greatly satisfied in their absence). On the contrary: an increase in the commercial offer could require the construction of new shopping facilities and the organization of events that may threaten the peace and calmness of the areas, also for wildlife. Tourists perceive emotional benefits from a good balance of excitement and relaxation, as might be expected, based on some extant literature [63]. The large loading of the extent to which visitors feel welcome by residents can be read as a confirmation of the centrality of social interactions in the tourist experience co-creation [8]. Moreover, this evidence might hint that the social sustainability of tourism in the area, where the traditional lifestyle is cultivated with pride, adds value to the cultural exchanges between visitors and the local community. The perception of monetary costs is of primary importance for the overall costs perception, as expected [64]. However, also the cost of security is highly impactful, consistently with the findings of some studies, that leisure tourists, in particular, tend to consider their personal safety, along with the monetary price, in the choice of their target destination and also in their assessment of the tourist experience [65].

#### 3.2.2. Structural Model

While data confirm the surmised measurement model fully, their empirical correlation structure does not support that implied by the full research model presented in Section 2.1.1. Thus, we drop a non-significant path at a time and re-estimate the model until it is reduced to a form where all the coefficients' P-values are lower than 10%. Then, we re-introduce one path at a time and re-estimate the model, keeping the path if significant at the 10% level and if its inclusion does not increase the other P-values. The final model output is displayed in Tables 2 and 3. Choosing a significance level of 5%, based on a Wald test with robust Huber-White estimates of standard errors, this model is overall significant. As the Partial Likelihood Ratio Test statistics is 658, this model displays a very good fit to the data.

**Table 3.** Estimates of the structural model's coefficients.

| Variables | Estimated Path Coefficients | |
|---|---|---|
| **PERCEIVED VALUE** | | |
| CARNIA | −1.973 | *** |
| SASSO SIMONE | −1.254 | *** |
| DAYS | 1.400 | *** |
| **SATISFACTION** | | |
| PerceivedValue | 0.523 | *** |
| CARNIA | 0.387 | ** |
| DAYS | −0.491 | *** |
| SELF-EMPLOYED | 0.223 | * |
| MARKETING | 0.613 | *** |
| **RECOMMEND** | | |
| PerceivedValue | 0.365 | *** |
| DAYS | −0.365 | *** |
| INBOUND | −0.584 | *** |
| SELF-EMPLOYED | 0.297 | *** |
| MARKETING | 0.575 | *** |
| **IMAGE** | | |
| PerceivedValue | 0.301 | *** |
| AGE | −0.443 | *** |
| INCOME | 0.663 | *** |
| EDUCATION | −0.463 | *** |
| FEMALE | 0.332 | ** |
| MARKETING | 0.915 | *** |
| **ACCOMMODATIONS** | | |
| AGE | 0.161 | *** |
| INCOME | −0.205 | *** |
| SELF-EMPLOYED | 0.409 | *** |
| MARKETING | 0.449 | *** |
| **RESTAURATION** | | |
| AGE | 0.086 | ** |
| MARKETING | 0.453 | *** |
| **PROFESSIONALISM** | | |
| AGE | −0.388 | *** |
| INCOME | 0.865 | *** |
| EDUCATION | −0.52 | *** |
| TOURISM SECTOR | 1.417 | *** |
| SELF-EMPLOYED | −0.561 | *** |
| FEMALE | 0.349 | * |
| MARKETING | 0.795 | *** |
| CLIMATE | | |
| AGE | 0.484 | *** |
| INCOME | −0.724 | *** |
| EDUCATION | 0.518 | *** |
| FEMALE | −0.418 | ** |
| MARKETING | 0.229 | * |
| **CULTURE** | | |
| AGE | 0.266 | *** |
| INCOME | −0.269 | *** |
| INBOUND | 0.38 | ** |
| SELF-EMPLOYED | 0.351 | ** |
| MARKETING | 0.22 | ** |
| **NATURE** | | |
| AGE | 0.468 | *** |
| INCOME | −0.849 | *** |
| EDUCATION | 0.69 | *** |
| INBOUND | −0.647 | *** |
| TOURISM SECTOR | −0.608 | ** |
| SELF-EMPLOYED | 0.361 | * |
| FEMALE | −0.313 | * |
| MARKETING | 0.329 | ** |
| **WELCOMED** | | |
| MARKETING | 0.494 | *** |
| **EXCITEMENT** | | |
| INCOME | −0.141 | * |
| EDUCATION | 0.135 | * |
| INBOUND | −0.522 | *** |
| TOURISM SECT. | −0.526 | ** |
| SELF-EMPLOYED | 0.402 | *** |
| MARKETING | 0.513 | *** |
| **RELAX** | | |
| AGE | 0.299 | *** |
| INCOME | −0.438 | *** |
| EDUCATION | 0.318 | *** |
| INBOUND | −0.543 | *** |
| TOURISM SECT. | −0.432 | * |
| SELF-EMPLOYED | 0.293 | * |
| MARKETING | 0.270 | *** |
| **PRICES** | | |
| SELF-EMPLOYED | −0.440 | *** |
| MARKETING | −0.398 | *** |
| **TRANSPORTS** | | |
| INCOME | −0.179 | ** |
| MARKETING | −0.359 | *** |
| **SEC_SAFETY** | | |
| AGE | −0.095 | ** |
| INBOUND | −0.613 | *** |
| MARKETING | −0.269 | *** |

*** = significance level ≤ 0.01; ** = significance level ≤ 0.05; * = significance level ≤ 0.1.

Our data do not support any significant direct link between satisfaction, image, and intention to recommend, conditionally to the perceived value, which strongly and positively influences all the three constructs. This evidence confirms the importance of our analysis, since the perceived value is validated as the pivotal element of a destination's marketability. In fact, co-variations in satisfaction levels, appreciation of the image of the destination, and intention to recommend it to others are explained by this focal construct. Consistently, the tourism literature has already noticed that, since it leads to consumption choices, the perceived value should be focal for devising tourist-oriented strategies capable of ensuring the sustainable growth of destinations as well as of resident communities [12]. Although many works have reported both a direct and an indirect impact of perceived value on behavioral intentions, where the mediator of the indirect relation is tourist satisfaction [59,66,67], or even just the indirect impact [45,68], we have detected only a positive direct effect of perceived value on behavioral intention, consistently with other studies [46,47,69,70].

Some of the tourism literature, that has abundantly proven that the higher the tourists' perceived value the stronger their satisfaction, has estimated a bidirectional link between these two variables [12,71,72]. Conversely, based on our analysis, satisfaction and perceived value are not bi-directionally linked, but the latter influences positively the former, as shown by more recent studies [6,73,74]. This finding points to a logical antecedence, if not properly to a causal effect, of the value perceived by the visitors over their satisfaction, at least in our sustainable destinations, and makes it the privileged object of investigation to the aim of devising effective sustainable tourism development strategies and related marketing plans. This indication is strengthened by the estimate of the structural coefficient representing a positive unilateral relationship between perceived value and destination image, consistently with some extant literature [75]. Thus, rather than striving to make a destination image more attractive to sustainability-conscious travelers by means of communication tools, efforts should be primarily put on the increase of the value perceived by such a market segment. To such a goal, this paper provides destination managers, marketers, and policy makers with useful suggestions, based on the experience of our sustainable destinations.

Looking at the determinants of visitors' satisfaction, Carnia appears more satisfying, compared to the other areas, which are homogenous in this respect. This homogeneity can be explained by the fact that Sasso Simone, Ostellato, and Alfonsine all belong to the same region (Emilia Romagna), hinting that the key drivers of tourist satisfaction are managed at the regional (NUTS2) level. But, ceteris paribus, there is no significant difference between the four areas with reference to the intention to recommend.

Overall, the results of our estimated models are summarized in Figure 2.

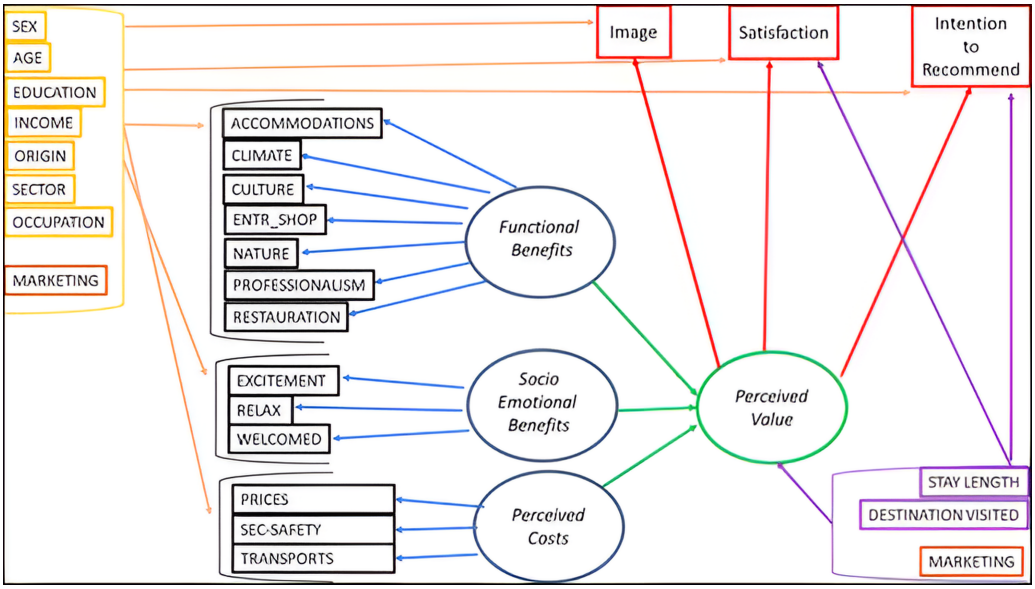


**Figure 2.** Estimated model (MARKETING is placed next to both socio-demographic and trip-related variables, to avoid too many arrows overlapping).

3.2.3. Variables Useful for Market Segmentation

The estimated structural model allows to detect influential variables that appear promising to be employed for a market segmentation that destination marketers should bring about in order to plan actions and initiatives able to attract sustainability-oriented tourists. In fact, the results of our analysis confirm the influence of socio-demographic and trip-related variables on the ratings of the main aspects of the four destinations [76], although not all the indicators depend on the same set of characteristics. Differently than hypothesized in our research model, these variables do not affect the components of perceived value directly, but (some) destination visited and the length of stay exert a direct effect on the perceived value, as found also in some literature [69,77,78]. As opposite to the findings of previous studies [79,80], the destination image is independent of trip-related variable, conditionally to the perceived value. However, the dependence of the image on marketing and socio-demographic variables is confirmed [31,81]. As it might be explained by the scarcity of shopping occasions and entertainment, the image of these destinations is unattractive for young visitors, but very appreciated by elder tourists, who appreciate more the peace and calmness of naturalist experiences and are more environmentally conscious than the youth [82,83]. Given the rich cultural heritage of the four considered areas, the negative value of the coefficient linking education and image is quite surprising. However, it could be explained by the absence of communication and promotion of the hidden historical treasures conserved in these little-known but amazing destinations.

While the stay length has no influence on image, it affects both satisfaction and intention to recommend negatively (as also found in some extant studies, e.g., [84]), likely because the visitors who spend the longest time in these destinations have a second home or friends and relatives there, thus they are so familiar with those places that they do no longer perceive them as tourist destinations, but rather as being at home. In general, self-employed visitors tend to be more satisfied and more willing to recommend the destination than tourists with another occupational status, contrasting previous findings [85].

The professionalism of employees in the local tourism sector looks disappointing to self-employed, "silver" and low-income tourists. While we may imagine that the first category can be more demanding, as it sees it from the employer's side, and that elder visitors might require special attention (especially in case of health issues or hindered mobility), the low appreciation of low-income visitors may be due to the lower service quality of low-cost offerings. The other aspects of our sustainable destinations turn out to be rated higher by old, non-self-employed low-income respondents. This finding might be explained by the fact that the type of tourism experiences offered by these areas, being above all ecologically sustainable instead than based on intensive consumption of tourist services and products, can be enjoyed by spending very little money. Simple traditional accommodations and typical restaurants making use of the products available in great quantity and quality in the territory, ensure not only healthy and sustainable lodging solutions and food, but they also apply low prices.

Interestingly, our estimates show that marketing actions positively affect the ratings of all destination aspects. This evidence corroborates the well-known importance of marketing in shaping tourists' perceptions and inducing favorable behavioral intentions [86,87]. Conversely, no variable explains the respondents' assessments of the effectiveness of the few implemented marketing initiatives. This finding may hint that the latter are not properly designed to target particular market segments, thus the results of this work can be beneficial first of all to the policy makers and destination managers of the considered areas themselves. In fact, by highlighting that the target segment is composed of elder visitors, in search for relax and contemplative experiences immersed in pristine nature, we suggest to emphasize the communication of the environmentally sustainable characteristics of these destinations, their natural unpolluted beauty, and the quiet emotions it evokes, with a communication style attractive to "silver" travelers. The perceived quality of entertainment and shopping also has no significant determinant, likely due to the scarcity of the local offering.

## 4. Discussion

The results of this study, described in Section 3 above, with reference to the configuration of visitors' perceived value in small sustainable destinations, are consistent with the

seminal definition of this construct [3,4] in terms of cost-benefit tradeoff, a definition that continues to be adopted in more recent literature, also in the tourism field [6,10,12,15]. In this regard, there appears to be no difference in the nature of the perceived value of a tourism experience between "traditional" destinations [41,45] and areas deeply vocated to sustainability, as in the present case which turns out to be consistent with the finding of previous research about sustainable destinations [40,47].

However, the most important element of perceived value in our four small areas is represented by the socio-emotional benefits the tourist experiences, while most of the previous studies in destination management and marketing have found that functional benefits prevail [12,17]. Nonetheless, this result of ours is consistent with the findings of previous research about similarly small and mountain or rural destinations [9], but also about larger cities nonetheless of great naturalistic interest, like Rotorua and Wellington [8]. This suggests that beautiful wild landscapes and pristine nature, ensured by sustainability-oriented policies of environmental protection, are able to elicit visitors' emotions so much pleasant that relegate functional benefits to the background. According to previous studies, the affective benefits offered by experiences of immersion in nature overcome the functional benefits retrievable from the "hard" attributes of the destination (accommodation, restaurants, etc.) and also in sun and beach destinations where the sea is magnificently unpolluted [13]. This hints that, for providing tourists with strong emotional benefits, it is not very important which type of natural environment a destination offers (beach, mountain, or countryside), but rather its quality, and state of conservation. Any natural environment might create value in the perception of visitors, as far as it is pristine, pure, and clean.

Our finding that emotional benefits stem from a pleasant equilibrium of excitement and relaxation is consistent with some extant literature about place attachment [63] and may be suggestive of a parallel between the good balance of economic growth, environmental protection, respect of the local society and culture, and institutional support that constitute sustainability and the emotional balance generated by the experience of sustainable places. However, in our empirical application, the most important affective benefit is rather connected to the quality of the human interactions the visitor has with residents. This finding is consistent with the broad literature about the fundamentally relational nature of the tourist experience, which configurates as an interactive co-creation with the locals and the providers of tourist services [8]. As highlighted by almost all the literature in the tourism field, feeling welcomed in a place (more or less) far from home is always determinant for the quality of the visitors' experience [29], but in sustainable destinations, the hospitality of residents might be especially fulfilling and friendly, because the social aspect of sustainability consists in the openness to a process of mutual learning between tourists and locals [27]. In sustainable destinations, the negative impacts of tourism development on the quality of life of residents are minimized, so the local community tends to perceive the inflow of visitors as an opportunity for economic growth and intercultural exchange. This triggers positive attitudes towards tourists, which in turn result in interactions satisfying for both, as shown by the extant literature [71].

Turning to functional benefits, the protection of the environment and the quality of life of the local community often prevent the construction of large shopping centers, luxury resorts, and other tourist facilities that bring the main functional benefits to tourists. This might be another reason why, in this work, functional benefits resulted not as important for the visitors' perceived value in sustainable destinations as in mass tourism ones [12,17]. We found that the quality and variety of products in shops generate the greatest functional benefits, consistent with some previous literature [62]. In sustainable destinations, the variety of goods in shops tends to be narrow, because the long-haul transportation needed to import "exotic" products is environmentally and economically unsustainable. Thus, often, in destinations like ours, shops offer mainly locally produced goods, that are not of many different types, but are high in quality. In fact, the pristine environment ensures healthy products from farms and the well-conserved local traditions ensure the prosecution of typical art craft, that offers goods manufactured with a craftsmanship valorizing ancient knowledge with modern technologies. Again, quality looks pivotal in the perception of the tourism experience value by visitors of sustainable destinations: quality of goods in shops, quality of social interactions with residents, and quality of the natural environment.

With reference to perceived costs, our findings are perfectly consistent with the extant literature [64,65], thus, for this aspect of the perceived value, we have not detected specificities or peculiarities of sustainable destinations compared to tourism destinations in general.

An important result of this study is to have identified a direct effect only of perceived value on behavioral intentions in the sustainable destinations considered. This evidence is important because, in this regard, the findings of the previous literature are mixed, so our work may help disentangle this issue. Indeed, the studies that have detected both a direct and an indirect influence of perceived value on behavioral intentions focus on very specific subsectors of tourism, like adventure tourism [59], luxury hotels [66], or wine tourism [66], and the mediating variable is tourist satisfaction. The literature that has found only the satisfaction-mediated indirect impact of perceived value on behavioral intentions considered areas including one main (type of) attraction, like paradisiac beaches [45] or entertainment parks [68]. Whereas studies that have published results in line with our regard broader sets of tourist experiences available in territories like Southern Brazil [46], Taiwan islands [47], or during cruises [70]. This may suggest that behavioral intentions about a specific tourist product depend (on average) entirely on the consumer satisfaction with such product, while everything else remains in the background, even if it contributes to the perceived value (for example, it is likely that a visitor of Walt Disney World Resort would recommend the park to others if he was satisfied with the park, even if restaurants were not too good). Conversely, destinations that host cultural heritage, natural reserves, traditional festivals, and sport activities, more or less sustainably, might be recommended or re-visited for a variety of reasons, also independently of overall satisfaction (for example, a business traveler who has been in Alfonsine for work may have seen the directions for Monti Home, home of the main Italian poet of Neoclassicism, and return with his family to visit it, or recommend the destination to his friends passionate of poetry, even if her/his business trip was not satisfying).

Our finding that perceived value exerts a positive effect on satisfaction is in line with the finding of all the previous literature. However, extant studies focusing on famous destinations very rich in heritage have reported a bidirectional relationship between these two crucial constructs [12,72]. While literature that has found no influence of satisfaction on perceived value, as in our empirical investigation, focuses on "modern" forms of tourism, like creative tourism [73], media-induced tourism [74], and ecotourism. The latter is very similar to the type of tourism experiences offered by our sustainable destinations (although ecotourism valorizes more specifically the environmental pillar of sustainability) and this may explain the common result. More in general, it may be guessed that the bidirectional link is present in the perceptions of visitors of a traditional destination, while tourists that have chosen a more peculiar experience, based also on their values and issues in which they identify, form their satisfaction as a function of the value they have perceived, maybe also from such identification, but not vice versa. Also with reference to the destination image, we have found a unidirectional relationship, pointing to this variable from perceived value. This result is in line with previous literature that has modeled the destination image as a construct on its own (instead of as a component of the perceived value) [75].

Regarding the investigation of the influences of socio-demographic and trip-related variables, we found no direct effect of the formers on the components of perceived value, but a direct relation between (some) destination visited and the length of stay, and the perceived value itself, in line with the extant literature [69,77,78]. Conditional to this focal construct, in our empirical setting, the destination image is independent of the trip-related variables. This result contrasts with findings of previous literature that deals with destinations very different from ours for dimensions, celebrity, and variety of cultural heritage [79,80]. Such destinations offer more diverse types of tourist experiences, compared to the small areas considered in the present work, and thus might host very different trip types (for example, visitors from close origin cities could stay just one day for participating in a festival, tourists coming from foreign countries could spend more than a week for enjoying the cultural heritage and do shopping, etc.) Then, it is likely that tourists form their perception of the destination image based on the elements of their specific trip type (in the example, the formers could base their perception on the organization, quality of entertainment, and security of the festival site, while the second ones may depict the image of the destination

rather based on the kindness of the people working in shops and museums, the security of the city center and so on). While, as noted in the description of the sample, the types of trips made available by the local tourist offer of the four sustainable areas analyzed in this study are quite homogeneous, and possibly the perception of the visitors of the destination image is shaped mainly by the consideration of their sustainability characters, independently on the (fewer) differences in their trips. Conversely, the effectiveness of marketing initiatives and socio-demographic variables have appeared to significantly influence destination image, from our estimated model. This finding was expected, as it is in line with the extant literature [31,81]. In fact, marketing and communication are crucial in conveying a certain image of the destination since the pre-trip phase. Socio-demographic variables are likely to explain the different relevance, attributed by different tourist types, to the various aspects of a destination in the formation of their perception of the destination image. In particular, consistent with previous studies [82,83], we have found that the image of our sustainable destinations is not attractive to young visitors, but very appreciated by elder tourists.

Our finding that the length of stay exerts a negative effect on both satisfaction and intention to recommend, although to a certain extent concerning for the local tourism development (but reassuring on the unlikeliness that these destinations shall suffer from overtourism) is in line with some extant studies [84]. Likely, this result depends on the scarce variety of the tourist experiences made available by destinations strongly focused on a single (or very few) tourism products, so that tourists staying for a long time cannot find enough different activities to live a new experience every single day. In our empirical analysis, self-employed visitors tend to be more satisfied and more willing to recommend the destination to others than tourists with another occupational status. This evidence contrasts the findings of some extant literature, that considers urban destinations [85]. Therefore, this contrast may be explained by hypothesizing that self-employed tourists seek mainly to escape from their very busy working routine, which is likely to articulate in urban environments, and the relaxation that a small sustainable area ensures. Conversely, urban and crowded mass tourism destinations like Barcelona, might not be the perfect place where to find quiet, relax and stop thinking about work issues (that are normally more pressing for the owner of a business, that in case of the problem could lose her/his own money). Finally, our result that the effectiveness of marketing initiatives (aimed at promoting the destination and its attractions) positively influences the ratings of all destination aspects is perfectly consistent with the literature [86,87].

## 5. Conclusions and Implications

This study has investigated the visitors' perceived value in four sustainable destinations, located in Italy, as well as the influences of socio-demographic and trip-related variables on the tourists' assessments of the main aspects of such small areas. The latter might be considered paradigms of sustainable tourism destinations, as they have been selected by the Interreg Italy-Croatia Managing Authority and Joint Monitoring Committee (under the European Commission) to receive a European Regional Development Fund's financing for developing sustainable tourism, by virtue of their sustainability characters. In fact, they host protected natural reserves, historical heritage, rural or mountain traditions, and ways of life, the conservation of which might be combined with local economic growth, by developing green, cultural, and slow tourism further. Thus, we believe that our findings can be extended to other areas, as travelers who seek sustainability-oriented tourism experiences are likely to share the same socio-demographic and trip-related characteristics, as well as to value the same destination aspects similarly in other towns.

Based on our empirical analysis, visitors' perceived value confirms to be a pivotal driver of destinations' competitiveness, thanks to its positive influence on tourist satisfaction, intention to recommend the destination to others, and destination image. The most important element of perceived value, in the sustainable destinations considered, is constituted by socio-emotional benefits, among which the social aspect of feeling welcomed by the local community has turned out to be especially important. Trip-related variables have resulted to be significant for explaining all the main constructs modeled, while the socio-demographic characteristics of tourists tend to exert different effects on the respondents' ratings

of the various aspects of the tourism experience in the destinations (as well as on their images). In particular, the visitors' age, income, occupational status, and education level appear promising variables for market segmentation. Interestingly, effective marketing actions look able to improve the tourists' assessments of all the aspects of the destinations.

### *5.1. Theoretical Implications*

The main theoretical implications of this study regard the relationships between destination image, visitors' satisfaction, intention to recommend the destination to others, and perceived value. In particular, this work has contributed to clarifying and disentangling the mixed results present in the extant literature. With reference to the link between perceived value and behavioral intentions, the comparison of our findings with those of the literature has suggested that behavioral intentions about a specific tourist product may depend (on average) entirely on the consumer satisfaction with such product, while everything else remains in the background, even if it contributes to the perceived value. Conversely, destinations that host cultural heritage, natural reserves, traditional festivals, and sports activities, more or less sustainably, might be recommended or re-visited for a variety of reasons, also independent of overall satisfaction.

By comparing our result that perceived value has a positive effect on satisfaction, but not vice versa, we have hypothesized that a bidirectional link between these two fundamental constructs can be present in the perceptions of visitors of a traditional (and so more 'generalist') destination, while tourists that have chosen a more peculiar experience, based also on their values and issues in which they identify, form their satisfaction as a function of the value they have perceived. With reference to the destination image, we have proposed that it is likely that tourists form their perception of the image of destinations offering many diverse types of tourist experiences (and thus might host very different trip types) based on the elements of their specific trip type. While the types of trips available in the four sustainable areas analyzed in this study are quite homogeneous and possibly the perception of the visitors of the destination image is shaped mainly by the consideration of their sustainability characteristics, independent of the (fewer) differences in their trips.

### *5.2. Practical Implications*

Destination managers, marketers, and policy makers, who aim at reshaping the local tourism supply in the direction of sustainability, should have found useful hints and insights in this paper. In fact, we have suggested which market segmentation variables should be effectively adopted. Thus, by following our suggestions, destination marketers might be able to increase tourist inflows and promote positive word of mouth, by targeting the market segment of travelers, who attribute high value to sustainability and are satisfied by sustainable tourist experiences in sustainable destinations, the image of which is attractive to their eyes. Meanwhile, destination managers and policy makers can be guided by the knowledge of the most relevant destination aspects in the improvement of the local tourism supply, so that it can create more value for tourists, but also for the local community and businesses, without giving up the environment protection, but, on the opposite, finding support from environmentally-conscious visitors. In fact, combining economic and sociocultural growth with the conservation (or restoration) of the quality of the natural environment through appropriate policies and governance processes is the essence of sustainability. Nowadays, the green transition from unsustainable to sustainable tourism is urgently needed for contributing to stopping climate change, consistently with the United Nations' Agenda 2030 for sustainable development and the European Green Deal Strategy, given the heavy impact of tourism on the host territory, in terms of pollution, $CO_2$ and greenhouse gas emissions, drainage of local water resources, waste production and gas consumption. Whence the importance and relevance of this paper.

We found that the success of sustainable destinations relies on the affective benefits provided by a welcoming community and a carefully conserved natural heritage, where the preservation of the biodiversity becomes an exciting attraction by itself, thanks to the possibility to see wild animals in their natural habitat. The peace and relaxation, that the pristine nature and wild landscapes ensure, are able to generate high value for the visitors, who do not need organized entertainments, shopping occasions, tourist services or facilities to

be satisfied. As a consequence, this type of tourism implies less pollution, gas emissions, and resources consumption, compared to the 'traditional' one, based on intensive consumption patterns, many tourist services, and facilities. Based on our results, the target segment of sustainable destinations does not spend a lot for enjoying the visit, first because the on-payment functional benefits are the least relevant to the formation of perceived value, and second because this segment tends to be composed of low-income people. Thus, the economic benefit for the local businesses might be low. The tourists who choose sustainable experiences are rather in search of positive emotions, deriving above all from social interactions with the locals that make them feel welcomed. Whence the importance, for destination managers and policy-makers, to build residents' support for sustainable tourism development.

From our analysis, the visitors' age has turned out to be a very important market segmentation variable. Elder people tend to appreciate sustainable destinations the most. The natural heritage looks especially attractive to males, though females find the image of sustainable destinations more appealing. Therefore, promotion and marketing initiatives should be tailored to the "silver" segment, in terms of communication style and reference imagery, highlight the local natural beauties thinking of addressing primarily a male audience, and convey a destination image pivoted on sustainability and able to touch the female sensitivity to this issue. Effective marketing actions are vital for any organization, but, according to our findings, they are absolutely crucial for the success of sustainable tourism destinations. In fact, we have found that the visitors' rating of the effectiveness of marketing and communication concerning the destination greatly influences the perception of all the aspects of sustainable destinations, as well as tourist satisfaction, intention to recommend, and of course, destination image.

This paper contributes to the ongoing debate on sustainability in tourism and calls for further study for expanding and deepening the obtained results, as well as for overcoming its limitations. The main limitations of this study are the low number of questionnaire items regarding the local environmental quality and the lack of questions about the sustainability policies enforced in the considered territories, which would have allowed us to draw a more detailed picture of the phenomenon investigated. Moreover, our sample is composed mainly of domestic visitors, thus a comparative analysis of the differences in the value perceived by inbound and domestic tourists was not possible, although it could have added interesting insights. Further limitations are represented by the small scope of the analysis, as only four destinations are considered, and by its geographic concentration, as all four are placed in Italy. Nonetheless, we are confident that destination marketers and managers, as well as policy makers might find useful suggestions in these pages.

Future research could employ questionnaires with more numerous questions concerning the environmental quality and sustainability policies enforced in the destinations. Answers given by inbound and domestic tourists could be analyzed separately and results compared. Qualitative methods could be combined with quantitative analysis for retrieving further insights.

**Funding**

This work was supported by the European Regional Development Fund under Grant Rep.10 Prot.n.52.

**Data Availability**

Data are available upon request to the corresponding author.

**Acknowledgments**

We thank EXCOVER Project Partners, destination managers, and policy makers for the collaboration.

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## Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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# Appendix A

**Table A1.** Variables' names and corresponding survey question.

| Variable Name | QUESTION |
|---|---|
| ACCOMMODATIONS | Rate the accommodations of this destination (1–7) |
| CLIMATE | Rate the climate in this destination (1–7) |
| CULTURE | Rate the cultural heritage of this destination (1–7) |
| ENTR_SHOP | Rate the entertainments and shopping offered by this destination (1–7) |
| EXCITEMENT | To be in this destination makes me feel excited (1 = it makes me feel very bored, 7 = it makes me feel very excited) |
| IMAGE | The image of this destination is very attractive (1 = completely disagree, 7 = completely agree) |
| MARKETING | The marketing and communication initiatives regarding this destination are very effective (1 = completely disagree, 7 = completely agree) |
| NATURE | Rate the natural environment of this destination (1–7) |
| PRICES | Rate the prices in this destination (1 = very high prices, 7 = very low prices) |
| PROFESSIONALISM | The people employed in tourism-related businesses are very professional in this destination (1 = completely disagree, 7 = completely agree) |
| RECOMMEND | I would recommend to visit this destination (1 = completely disagree, 7 = completely agree) |
| RELAX | To be in this destination makes me feel relaxed (1 = it makes me feel very distressed, 7 = it makes me feel very relaxed) |
| RESTAURATION | Rate the restauration services of this destination (1–7) |
| SATISFACTION | Rate your overall satisfaction with this destination (1–7) |
| SEC_SAFETY | Rate the safety and security level of this destination (1–7) |
| TRANSPORTS | It is very easy/comfortable to reach this destination and move around (1 = completely disagree, 7 = completely agree) |
| WELCOMED | The residents' attitude towards tourists makes me feel very welcomed in this destination (1 = completely disagree, 7 = completely agree) |