

SUSTAINABILITY AS A COMPETITIVE ADVANTAGE IN LUXURY GASTRONOMY: EVIDENCE FROM EASTERN EUROPE

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ABSTRACT

Sustainability has gradually become a central concern within the hospitality industry, particularly in the context of luxury gastronomy. While fine dining has traditionally been associated with creativity, exclusivity, and technical excellence, increasing attention is now directed towards responsible sourcing, environmental impacts, and the relationship between restaurants and their local social and ecological environments. In Eastern Europe, this transition has a distinctive character, as many sustainability-related practices are not entirely new but are often embedded within long-established culinary traditions and local production systems. This study examines how consumers perceive sustainability in luxury gastronomy and explores how these perceptions influence authenticity, willingness to pay, behavioural loyalty, and perceived competitive advantage. The empirical analysis is based on a structured online survey comprising 179 valid responses, primarily collected from Eastern European consumers. The research applies descriptive statistics, reliability analysis, correlation analysis, and regression modelling to examine the relationships among the investigated constructs. The findings indicate that sustainability does not directly determine competitive advantage. Instead, its influence appears to operate primarily through perceived authenticity and, to a lesser extent, willingness to pay. Luxury restaurants that integrate sustainability practices in a consistent, credible, and experience-oriented manner are more likely to be perceived as authentic, which subsequently strengthens their competitive positioning. However, the results also demonstrate that sustainability practices are not equally visible to consumers and do not generate the same level of perceived value. Overall, the study suggests that sustainability can represent a strategic resource in luxury gastronomy, but only when it is meaningfully incorporated into the overall dining experience rather than treated as an isolated operational practice.

Keywords: sustainable gastronomy, luxury restaurants, competitive advantage, consumer perception, Eastern Europe, hospitality sustainability

1. INTRODUCTION

In recent years, sustainability has moved increasingly closer to the centre of hospitality research and practice. Although sustainability-related concerns have long existed within the sector, their strategic importance has changed considerably. The current shift reflects

not only a greater frequency of discussion but also a deeper transformation in how restaurants understand their responsibilities, operational choices, and relationship with broader social and environmental systems. This transition is closely connected to growing concerns regarding climate change and resource consumption, which increasingly influence everyday decisions within hospitality organisations (Gössling & Hal.1, 2022; Liu et al., 2023).

These developments are particularly evident in luxury gastronomy, where high-end restaurants often act as early adopters of new approaches in sourcing, culinary techniques, and operational models. Within this context, sustainability is rarely presented as an isolated practice; rather, it becomes integrated into broader narratives of quality, authenticity, and dining experience. However, the presence of sustainability initiatives alone does not guarantee consumer recognition or value creation. In many cases, the impact of such practices depends on how effectively they are communicated and perceived by customers rather than solely on how they are implemented internally (Huang et al., 2023).

Institutional recognition has further contributed to the growing visibility of sustainability within luxury gastronomy. The Michelin Guide, traditionally associated with culinary excellence, has expanded its evaluation framework through initiatives such as the Michelin Green Star, which acknowledges restaurants demonstrating commitment to sustainable practices. Such recognition can enhance restaurant visibility and influence destination perceptions. Nevertheless, the interpretation and communication of sustainability through external certification systems remain complex, as consumers may not always perceive sustainability indicators in a consistent manner (Daries et al., 2018; Huang & Hal.1, 2023; Mrkačić Ateljević, 2025).

At a broader level, gastronomy has become increasingly interconnected with tourism development (Shojaei, et al., 2026). Culinary experiences are no longer considered merely complementary elements of travel but increasingly represent primary motivations for destination choice. Consequently, restaurants contribute not only to individual consumption experiences but also to destination image formation, regional identity, and tourism competitiveness (Cankül, 2019; UNWTO, 2012). Sustainable gastronomy may generate additional economic benefits by strengthening connections with local producers, preserving regional culinary traditions, and enhancing the attractiveness of destinations seeking differentiation through authenticity and quality.

Despite this increasing attention, several research gaps remain, particularly in the Eastern European context. Existing studies frequently approach sustainability as a broad and aggregated concept, providing limited insight into which specific sustainability dimensions are most relevant from a consumer perspective and how they contribute to competitive positioning (Bonfanti et al., 2025; Liu et al., 2023). Furthermore, previous research has often examined sustainability outcomes and consumer attitudes separately, while less attention has been given to the mechanisms through which sustainability-related attributes influence perceptions of competitive advantage in luxury gastronomy. This gap is particularly important in Eastern Europe, where sustainable gastronomy is gaining visibility internationally but remains comparatively underrepresented in empirical hospitality research.

Addressing this gap, the present study adopts a more detailed approach by examining sustainability as a multidimensional construct. Rather than treating sustainability as a single general concept, the research investigates specific attributes including transparency, waste reduction, local sourcing, support for local producers, perceived authenticity, and trust in ecological certifications. The objective is to understand how these dimensions influence consumer evaluations of sustainability-oriented luxury dining experiences and how they contribute to perceived competitive advantage.

The study makes several contributions. First, it extends existing research by conceptualising sustainability as a multidimensional phenomenon rather than a single aggregated construct. Second, it provides empirical evidence from Eastern Europe, a region that remains relatively underexplored in hospitality and gastronomy studies despite its increasing international visibility. Third, it develops and empirically examines a framework connecting sustainability perceptions with authenticity, willingness to pay, behavioural loyalty, and perceived competitive advantage. Beyond the restaurant context, the study contributes to broader discussions on destination competitiveness by highlighting how sustainable luxury gastronomy can support tourism attractiveness, regional identity, and local economic development. More broadly, the research reflects an ongoing transformation in which sustainability increasingly influences how quality, authenticity, and competitiveness are defined within luxury gastronomy.

The remainder of the paper is structured as follows. The next section reviews the relevant literature and develops the conceptual framework and research hypotheses. The methodology section then presents the research design, data collection procedures, and analytical approach. The following section reports the empirical findings, while the discussion interprets the results in relation to existing literature. Finally, the paper concludes by outlining the main contributions, limitations, and directions for future research.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The relationship between sustainability and competitive advantage has attracted increasing attention within hospitality research, particularly in the context of luxury gastronomy. Earlier approaches often framed sustainability primarily as a matter of ethical responsibility, regulatory compliance, or operational efficiency. More recent perspectives, however, suggest that sustainability may also function as a strategic resource, influencing restaurant positioning, consumer perceptions, and long-term competitiveness (Gössling & Hall, 2022; Liu et al., 2023). Nevertheless, the relationship between sustainability and competitive advantage is not automatic. Although sustainability initiatives are generally associated with positive outcomes, their strategic value depends largely on how they are interpreted, communicated, and experienced by consumers.

A central mechanism through which sustainability may contribute to competitive advantage is **perceived authenticity**. In luxury gastronomy, value creation extends beyond technical quality and product excellence; it also depends on the coherence, meaning, and credibility of the overall dining experience. Sustainability practices can strengthen authenticity when they are integrated into the restaurant's identity, philosophy, and operational approach (Cabrita et al., 2026). When consumers perceive these practices as genuine and consistent, they may enhance trust, emotional connection, and loyalty towards the restaurant. Conversely, sustainability initiatives perceived as symbolic, superficial, or disconnected from the restaurant's core identity may have limited influence or even generate scepticism among consumers (Filimonau & Krivcova, 2017; Liu et al., 2023). Therefore, sustainability is unlikely to influence competitive advantage directly, but rather through intermediate perceptual mechanisms such as authenticity.

Closely connected to authenticity is the relationship between sustainability and consumer behavioural responses, particularly willingness to pay and loyalty. Consumers increasingly express favourable attitudes towards environmentally and socially responsible practices; however, the extent to which these attitudes translate into actual purchasing behaviour remains debated. Existing research suggests that sustainability can justify premium pricing when practices are visible, credible, and aligned with consumer expectations. Nevertheless, studies also identify a gap between stated environmental preferences and real consumption decisions, particularly within luxury contexts where consumers evaluate multi-

ple dimensions of value simultaneously (Filimonau et al., 2017; Bonfanti et al., 2025). This distinction highlights the importance of examining not only consumer attitudes but also the mechanisms through which sustainability influences economic outcomes.

Another relevant aspect concerns the visibility and interpretability of sustainability practices. From the consumer perspective, not all sustainability initiatives are equally accessible or meaningful. Operational practices such as energy efficiency, waste reduction, and resource optimisation may generate substantial environmental benefits but often remain invisible during the dining experience. In contrast, practices such as local sourcing, seasonal menus, and producer relationships are more easily communicated and incorporated into restaurant narratives. Research indicates that visible and easily interpretable sustainability attributes tend to have a stronger influence on consumer perceptions, creating a potential gap between actual sustainability performance and perceived sustainability value (Huang et al., 2023; Rosário et al., 2023).

Within this context, locality represents a particularly important dimension of sustainable luxury gastronomy. The use of local and seasonal ingredients is frequently associated with environmental responsibility, but it also carries cultural and symbolic meanings. Restaurants that emphasise local sourcing often position themselves as representatives of regional identity, strengthening connections between gastronomy, place, and community. This relationship can enhance perceived authenticity and contribute to differentiation within competitive markets. However, the strategic value of locality depends on how effectively these connections are communicated and understood by consumers (Huang & Hal.1, 2023; Demir & Bertan, 2025).

Institutional recognition represents another factor shaping sustainability perceptions in luxury gastronomy. The Michelin Guide, as one of the most influential global evaluation systems in the restaurant sector, performs an important signalling function by shaping expectations regarding quality, innovation, and excellence. The introduction of the Michelin Green Star expanded this role by explicitly recognising sustainability-oriented practices. Such certifications may strengthen consumer trust and provide external validation of restaurant sustainability efforts. However, their effectiveness depends on consumer awareness and interpretation, as recognition systems may reinforce existing perceptions among informed consumers while remaining less meaningful to others (Daries et al., 2018; Marquez Garat, 2022).

The relationship between gastronomy and tourism further expands the relevance of sustainability within luxury restaurants. Culinary experiences increasingly influence destination attractiveness, tourist satisfaction, and place identity. As a result, restaurants are evaluated not only as individual businesses but also as contributors to broader destination competitiveness. Sustainable gastronomy therefore operates at multiple levels, influencing firm-level differentiation while simultaneously supporting regional tourism development and destination image formation (Cankül, 2019; UNWTO, 2012; Sang & Anh, 2026).

Despite the growing body of research, several important gaps remain. First, much of the existing literature continues to conceptualise sustainability as a broad and aggregated construct, providing limited understanding of which specific sustainability attributes generate the strongest influence on consumer perceptions and competitive outcomes. Second, empirical evidence from Eastern Europe remains relatively limited, despite the region's growing presence in international gastronomy and tourism markets. This geographical gap restricts understanding of how sustainability is interpreted in contexts where traditional culinary practices, local identity, and emerging luxury markets intersect.

Addressing these limitations, the present study adopts a more differentiated approach by examining sustainability as a multidimensional construct rather than a single concept.

Specifically, it investigates consumer perceptions of transparency, waste reduction, local sourcing, support for local producers, perceived authenticity, and trust in ecological certifications. By analysing how these dimensions influence authenticity, willingness to pay, behavioural loyalty, and perceived competitive advantage, the study aims to provide a more nuanced understanding of the strategic role of sustainability in luxury gastronomy.

3. CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK AND HYPOTHESES

The increasing integration of sustainability into hospitality has generated growing academic interest, particularly within the context of luxury gastronomy. Earlier research primarily focused on the operational implementation of sustainable practices, including resource efficiency, responsible sourcing, and environmental management. More recent studies, however, have increasingly shifted attention toward the consumer perspective and the ways in which sustainability-related actions are interpreted and valued by customers (Liu et al., 2023; Gössling & Hal.1, 2022). This transition reflects a broader understanding that sustainability is not only a matter of organisational practice but also a component of market positioning. The strategic relevance of sustainability depends not only on what restaurants implement, but also on how these actions are perceived, communicated, and incorporated into the overall dining experience.

Within luxury gastronomy, sustainability is rarely perceived by consumers as a clearly defined set of operational measures. Instead, it is often interpreted through visible signals such as local sourcing, responsible procurement, environmental awareness, and connections with regional communities. These elements may communicate values related to quality, care, and responsibility, but their interpretation is not always uniform. When sustainability practices are effectively communicated, they may strengthen the relationship between the restaurant and its local context, reinforcing the sense of place and contributing to a more meaningful dining experience. However, less visible practices may remain unnoticed by consumers, creating a potential gap between actual sustainability performance and perceived sustainability value (Huang & Hal.1, 2023).

In this context, authenticity represents an important mechanism through which sustainability may influence consumer perceptions. Luxury gastronomy extends beyond the functional consumption of food and incorporates symbolic, emotional, and experiential dimensions. Creativity, prestige, identity, and narrative coherence contribute to how consumers evaluate high-end dining experiences. When sustainability practices are perceived as consistent with the restaurant's identity and values, they may enhance perceptions of authenticity and credibility. Nevertheless, the relationship between sustainability perceptions and consumer behaviour remains complex, as expressed preferences do not always translate directly into actual consumption decisions (Filimonau & Krivcova, 2017).

Willingness to pay represents another relevant dimension in understanding the economic implications of sustainability in luxury gastronomy. Previous research suggests that sustainability-oriented practices may positively influence evaluations of service quality, brand image, and overall experience value. However, these effects depend on the extent to which sustainability is considered meaningful and credible by consumers. In luxury contexts, where prices already contain symbolic and experiential components, sustainability may contribute to the justification of premium prices by reinforcing perceptions of exclusivity, responsibility, and value. Nevertheless, such effects are not automatic and depend on how successfully sustainability is integrated into the broader restaurant experience (Biloslavo & Janković, 2025; Liu et al., 2023).

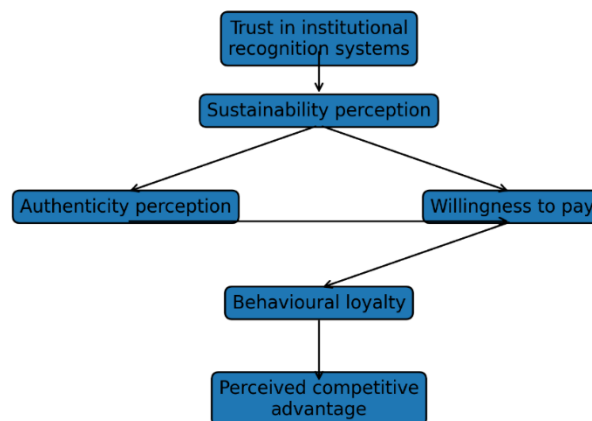
Institutional recognition also contributes to the formation of sustainability perceptions. The Michelin Guide represents one of the most influential quality-assessment systems in global

gastronomy, shaping both consumer expectations and restaurant visibility. Through initiatives such as sustainability-related distinctions, institutional recognition can provide external validation of environmental and social practices. Such recognition may strengthen trust and credibility among consumers; however, its influence depends on how these signals are interpreted by different audiences and whether sustainability certifications are perceived as meaningful indicators of genuine commitment (Daries et al., 2018; UNWTO, 2012).

Taken together, these dimensions suggest that perceived competitive advantage in luxury gastronomy does not emerge from sustainability alone. Rather, it results from the interaction between sustainability perceptions, authenticity, consumer value evaluation, and the broader dining experience. Restaurants that successfully integrate these elements into a coherent identity may develop stronger differentiation, enhanced customer relationships, and greater market distinctiveness. However, the relationship between sustainability and competitiveness is likely to vary depending on contextual factors, consumer expectations, and the credibility of sustainability communication.

Based on these considerations, the present study develops a conceptual framework in which perceived sustainability is expected to influence authenticity, willingness to pay, and behavioural loyalty. These dimensions are subsequently considered as potential mechanisms contributing to perceived competitive advantage. Rather than assuming direct and uniform effects, the framework recognises that sustainability creates strategic value through a series of interconnected consumer perceptions and evaluations.

Figure 1. Conceptual framework of sustainability perception and competitive advantage in luxury gastronomy



Source: Author`s calculation

The figure illustrates the proposed relationships between sustainability perception, authenticity perception, willingness to pay, behavioural loyalty, and perceived competitive advantage in luxury gastronomy.

Sustainability practices are increasingly associated with perceptions of authenticity within hospitality and gastronomy. Consumers often interpret local sourcing, environmental responsibility, and support for local communities as signals of genuineness, transparency, and commitment to place. Previous studies suggest that sustainability-related initiatives can strengthen the perceived credibility of restaurants and enhance the authenticity of the dining experience (Huang & Hal.l, 2023; Liu et al., 2023). When sustainability is embedded within the identity and values of a restaurant rather than communicated merely as a marketing strategy, consumers are more likely to perceive the experience as authentic.

H₁: Perceived sustainability practices positively influence the perceived authenticity of luxury gastronomy experiences.

The relationship between sustainability and willingness to pay has received increasing attention in consumer behaviour research. Sustainable practices may create additional value for consumers by reducing ethical concerns and increasing confidence in the quality, responsibility, and credibility of products and services. Several studies indicate that consumers are willing to accept price premiums when sustainability initiatives are perceived as genuine, transparent, and meaningful (Bonfanti et al., 2025; Filimonau et al., 2017). This relationship is particularly relevant in luxury gastronomy, where consumers often associate higher prices with superior quality, exclusivity, and distinctive experiences.

H₂: Perceived sustainability practices positively influence consumers' willingness to pay for luxury gastronomy experiences.

Authenticity may also represent an important factor influencing consumers' willingness to pay. Experiences perceived as authentic are often evaluated as more valuable because they provide emotional, cultural, and symbolic benefits beyond the functional aspects of consumption. Previous research indicates that authenticity contributes positively to perceived value and may justify higher levels of expenditure among consumers seeking unique and meaningful experiences (Filimonau & Krivcova, 2017; Huang et al., 2023).

H₃: Perceived authenticity positively influences consumers' willingness to pay.

Willingness to pay is frequently associated with behavioural outcomes, including revisit intentions and recommendations. Consumers who perceive strong value in a service and demonstrate acceptance of premium prices are generally more likely to develop favourable behavioural intentions and stronger relationships with the establishment. Previous studies have identified positive relationships between perceived value, customer satisfaction, and behavioural loyalty within hospitality contexts (Bonfanti et al., 2025; Liu et al., 2023).

H₄: Consumers' willingness to pay positively influences behavioural loyalty, including revisit and recommendation intentions.

Competitive advantage in luxury gastronomy is shaped by multiple interconnected factors rather than by a single attribute. Sustainability may contribute to differentiation by strengthening reputation, increasing consumer trust, and supporting unique value propositions. At the same time, behavioural loyalty may reinforce competitive positioning through repeat visits, positive word-of-mouth, and long-term customer relationships. Existing literature suggests that both sustainability perceptions and customer loyalty can contribute to stronger competitive positioning within hospitality markets (Gössling & Hal.1, 2022; Marquez Garat, 2022).

H₅: Perceived sustainability practices and behavioural loyalty positively influence the perceived competitive advantage of luxury gastronomy establishments.

These hypotheses provide the foundation for the empirical model examined in this study. The conceptual framework assumes that sustainability practices influence competitive advantage both directly and indirectly through mediating mechanisms such as perceived authenticity and willingness to pay. By analysing these relationships, the study aims to provide a deeper understanding of how sustainability is transformed into competitive positioning within the luxury gastronomy sector.

The next section presents the research design and methodology used to test the proposed hypotheses.

4. METHODOLOGY

4.1. RESEARCH DESIGN

This study adopts a quantitative research design to examine how consumers perceive sustainability practices in luxury gastronomy and how these perceptions relate to authenticity, willingness to pay, behavioural loyalty, and perceived competitive advantage. Quantitative methods are particularly suitable for analysing relationships between variables and evaluating perception-based constructs in a structured and comparable manner (Hair et al., 2019; Liu et al., 2023). The approach is especially appropriate in a cross-country setting, where consistent measurement is required across different national contexts. The study focuses on consumers from Eastern Europe, a region that is becoming increasingly visible in the international gastronomic landscape but remains relatively underexplored in empirical hospitality research.

4.2. SAMPLE AND DATA COLLECTION

Data were collected through a structured online questionnaire distributed primarily via digital platforms and social media channels. This method enabled access to respondents from multiple countries within a relatively short period while maintaining consistency in data collection procedures (Bryman, 2016).

A total of 179 valid responses were retained for analysis. Participants originated from several Eastern European countries, with the largest proportions coming from Romania, Slovenia, Bulgaria, and Hungary. Although the sample is not perfectly balanced across countries, it reflects the regional focus of the study and provides a suitable basis for exploring consumer perceptions in emerging gastronomic markets.

The sample size was considered adequate for the statistical techniques employed in the study. According to Hair et al. (2019), multiple regression analysis can be reliably conducted with substantially smaller samples than the one obtained in the present research. Therefore, the final sample of 179 respondents provides sufficient statistical power for the proposed analyses and hypothesis testing.

4.3. QUESTIONNAIRE DEVELOPMENT

The questionnaire was designed to capture the main constructs included in the conceptual framework: sustainability perception, authenticity perception, willingness to pay, behavioural loyalty, and perceived competitive advantage. Measurement items were adapted from established studies in hospitality, sustainability, and consumer behaviour research.

Items related to sustainability perception were derived from previous studies examining environmental responsibility, local sourcing, and ethical food production. Measures of authenticity and willingness to pay were adapted from research focusing on consumer evaluations of luxury gastronomy experiences. To ensure contextual relevance, all items were slightly modified to reflect the characteristics of fine-dining restaurants in Eastern Europe while preserving conceptual consistency with previous studies.

The questionnaire consisted of several sections corresponding to the major constructs investigated. Respondents first evaluated sustainability-related practices, followed by items measuring authenticity perception, willingness to pay, behavioural loyalty, and perceived competitive advantage.

4.4. MEASUREMENT OF VARIABLES

All constructs were measured using multiple-item scales. Sustainability perception included statements related to environmental responsibility, local sourcing, and sustainable operational practices. Authenticity perception captured the extent to which respondents

associated sustainability with genuine culinary traditions and local identity. Willingness to pay reflected respondents' acceptance of potential price premiums for sustainability-oriented dining experiences. Behavioural loyalty was measured through revisit and recommendation intentions, while perceived competitive advantage referred to the extent to which sustainability contributes to differentiation and long-term positioning.

All items were evaluated using a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 ("strongly disagree") to 5 ("strongly agree"). Likert scales are widely used in perception-based research because they allow attitudes and evaluations to be measured in a structured and comparable manner across respondents (Hair et al., 2019).

4.5. DATA ANALYSIS TECHNIQUES

The empirical analysis was conducted in several stages. First, descriptive statistics were calculated to provide an overview of the sample and identify general response patterns. Measures of central tendency and dispersion were reported for all constructs.

Second, reliability analysis was performed using Cronbach's alpha coefficients to evaluate the internal consistency of the measurement scales. Values above the commonly accepted threshold of 0.70 were considered satisfactory (Hair et al., 2019).

Third, Pearson correlation analysis was conducted to examine the relationships among the principal constructs included in the conceptual framework. Correlation coefficients provided an initial assessment of the strength and direction of the associations between variables.

Finally, multiple regression analysis was employed to test the proposed relationships and evaluate the extent to which sustainability-related perceptions influence consumer behaviour and perceived competitive advantage. Regression analysis allows the identification of statistically significant effects while accounting for the simultaneous influence of multiple variables.

Several diagnostic procedures were conducted to assess model robustness. Multicollinearity was examined using Variance Inflation Factor (VIF) values, all of which remained below the commonly accepted threshold of 5, indicating no significant multicollinearity concerns. In addition, the assumptions of linear regression were evaluated. Residuals were approximately normally distributed, and no substantial violations of homoscedasticity were detected.

To reduce the potential influence of common method bias, respondents were assured of anonymity and confidentiality throughout the data collection process. Furthermore, Harman's single-factor test was performed. The results indicated that no single factor accounted for most of the variance, suggesting that common method bias is unlikely to significantly affect the findings.

Taken together, these procedures provide a coherent analytical framework for examining the relationships proposed in the conceptual model and offer a robust basis for evaluating the role of sustainability as a source of competitive advantage in luxury gastronomy.

5. RESULTS

5.1. SAMPLE CHARACTERISTICS

This section presents the empirical findings of the quantitative analysis. The analysis is conducted in several stages. First, the characteristics of the sample are described. Second, descriptive statistics for the main constructs are presented. Third, reliability analysis is performed to evaluate the internal consistency of the measurement scales. Fourth, correlation analysis is conducted to examine the relationships among the main variables.

Finally, regression analysis is applied to test the hypotheses developed within the conceptual framework.

The empirical analysis is based on 179 valid responses collected through an online questionnaire. The respondents originate primarily from Central and Eastern European countries. The largest groups of participants come from Romania, Slovenia, Bulgaria, and Hungary, while additional responses were obtained from other European countries. This geographical distribution reflects the regional focus of the study and provides insights into consumer perceptions of sustainability within emerging gastronomic markets.

Table 1. Sample distribution by country

Country	Number of respondents	Percentage
Romania	59	32.96%
Slovenia	32	17.88%
Bulgaria	29	16.20%
Hungary	25	13.97%
Other countries	34	18.99%
Total	179	100%

Source: Author`s calculation

Table 1 presents the geographical distribution of respondents participating in the survey. The largest share of respondents originates from Romania (32.96%), followed by Slovenia (17.88%), Bulgaria (16.20%), and Hungary (13.97%). The remaining respondents (18.99%) represent other European countries.

To provide a more comprehensive description of the sample, additional demographic characteristics are presented in Table 2. Respondents represent diverse age groups and educational backgrounds, allowing the analysis to capture a broad range of consumer perspectives regarding sustainability and luxury gastronomy.

Table 2. Demographic characteristics of respondents

Variable	Category	N	%
Age	Under 25	80	44.69
	25-34	24	13.41
	35-44	26	14.53
	45-54	34	18.99
	55+	15	8.38
Education	Secondary	68	37.99
	Bachelor	46	25.70
	Master	39	21.79
	Doctoral	26	14.53

Source: Author`s calculation

The sample is relatively young, with respondents under the age of 25 representing the largest group (44.69%). In terms of education, secondary education represents the largest category (37.99%), followed by bachelor (25.70%), master (21.79%), and doctoral degree holders (14.53%). This distribution suggests a diverse sample with varying educational backgrounds and consumption perspectives.

Table 3. Mean values of the main constructs by country

Construct	Romania	Slovenia	Bulgaria	Hungary
Sustainability perception	3.59	3.86	3.47	3.57
Authenticity perception	3.78	3.91	3.93	3.61
Willingness to pay	3.45	3.67	3.69	3.56
Behavioural loyalty	3.77	3.86	4.13	3.63
Perceived competitive advantage	3.67	3.86	4.05	3.83

Source: Author's calculation

Table 3 presents the mean values of the main constructs across the four countries with the highest representation in the sample. The results indicate some variation between countries. Respondents from Slovenia report the highest level of sustainability perception ($M = 3.86$), while Bulgarian respondents demonstrate the highest levels of behavioural loyalty ($M = 4.13$) and perceived competitive advantage ($M = 4.05$). Authenticity perception is also particularly pronounced among respondents from Bulgaria ($M = 3.93$) and Slovenia ($M = 3.91$). Although the observed differences are relatively moderate, the findings suggest that sustainability-related perceptions represent an important dimension across all examined national contexts. This supports the broader relevance of sustainability-oriented strategies within the luxury gastronomy sector in Eastern Europe.

Descriptive statistics were calculated to examine the central tendencies and variability of the main variables included in the conceptual model. These variables correspond to the core constructs analysed in the study: sustainability perception, authenticity perception, willingness to pay, behavioural loyalty, and perceived competitive advantage.

The descriptive results indicate generally positive consumer evaluations of sustainability practices in luxury gastronomy. Respondents tend to associate sustainable restaurant practices with higher levels of authenticity, responsible management, and overall quality of the dining experience. Furthermore, willingness to pay for sustainable gastronomy experiences demonstrates moderate to relatively high mean values, suggesting that consumers show a certain degree of openness toward paying premium prices for restaurants perceived as environmentally and socially responsible.

Table 4 presents the descriptive statistics of the main constructs included in the analysis.

Table 4. Descriptive statistics of main variables

Variable	Mean	Standard deviation
Sustainability perception	3.62	0.96
Authenticity perception	3.81	0.89
Willingness to pay	3.55	0.92
Behavioural loyalty	3.81	0.93
Perceived competitive advantage	3.79	0.85

Source: Author's calculation

Authenticity perception ($M = 3.81$) and behavioural loyalty ($M = 3.81$) display the highest mean values among the constructs, suggesting that respondents particularly associate sustainability-oriented practices with credibility and consistent behavioural intentions.

5.2. RELIABILITY ANALYSIS

Reliability analysis was conducted to evaluate the internal consistency of the measurement scales used in the questionnaire. Cronbach's alpha coefficients were calculated for

each multi-item construct included in the study. Cronbach's alpha values above the commonly accepted threshold of 0.70 indicate satisfactory internal consistency of the measurement scales.

The results point to good to very good internal consistency across all constructs, suggesting that the questionnaire items consistently capture the underlying concepts they were designed to measure.

Table 5 presents the Cronbach's alpha coefficients for the main constructs.

Table 5. Reliability analysis

Construct	Number of items	Cronbach alpha
Sustainability perception	4	0.85
Authenticity perception	4	0.83
Willingness to pay	4	0.82
Behavioural loyalty	3	0.80
Competitive advantage perception	4	0.80

Source: Author's calculation

All constructs show good internal consistency, with Cronbach's alpha values ranging between 0.80 and 0.85, indicating strong reliability of the measurement scales.

5.4. Correlation Analysis

Pearson correlation analysis was conducted to examine the relationships between the main constructs included in the conceptual model. The results indicate several positive and statistically significant correlations between the variables. Sustainability perception is positively associated with both authenticity perception and willingness to pay. In addition, behavioural loyalty shows positive correlations with authenticity perception and willingness to pay. These findings are consistent with theoretical expectations suggesting that sustainability-related perceptions are closely linked to authenticity and value-related evaluations in luxury gastronomy.

Table 6 presents the correlation matrix for the main variables.

Table 6. Correlation matrix

Variable	1	2	3	4	5
1 Sustainability perception	1				
2 Authenticity perception	0.65	1			
3 Willingness to pay	0.68	0.74	1		
4 Behavioural loyalty	0.58	0.68	0.64	1	
5 Competitive advantage perception	0.56	0.75	0.71	0.71	1

Source: Author's calculation

Sustainability perception shows strong positive correlations with authenticity perception ($r = 0.65$) and willingness to pay ($r = 0.68$). Authenticity perception also demonstrates a strong relationship with perceived competitive advantage ($r = 0.75$), indicating that authenticity plays a central role in shaping how consumers evaluate the positioning of luxury gastronomy establishments. No excessively high correlations were observed ($r < 0.80$), suggesting that multicollinearity is unlikely to be a concern.

5.3. REGRESSION ANALYSIS

Regression analysis was conducted to test the hypotheses proposed in the conceptual framework. The model examines the extent to which sustainability perception, authen-

ticity perception, willingness to pay, and behavioural loyalty influence the perceived competitive advantage of luxury gastronomy establishments. These findings suggest that sustainability-related perceptions contribute to competitive positioning in luxury gastronomy primarily through indirect mechanisms operating via consumer attitudes and behavioural intentions.

Table 7. Regression analysis results (Dependent variable: Perceived competitive advantage)

Independent variable	Coefficient	Standard error	p-value
Sustainability perception	-0.05	0.056	0.376
Authenticity perception	0.34	0.069	<0.001
Willingness to pay	0.26	0.067	<0.001
Behavioural loyalty	0.30	0.057	<0.001
Constant	0.62	0.178	0.001

Source: Author's calculation

The regression results demonstrate that authenticity perception, willingness to pay, and behavioural loyalty represent significant positive determinants of perceived competitive advantage. Among all analysed variables, authenticity perception has the largest effect ($\beta = 0.34$, $p < 0.001$), emphasising the importance of genuine and credible experiences in influencing consumer evaluations within luxury gastronomy. Conversely, sustainability perception does not achieve statistical significance as a direct predictor of competitive advantage ($p = 0.376$). This indicates that sustainability may contribute to competitiveness mainly through other consumer-based mechanisms, particularly by strengthening authenticity perceptions and increasing willingness to pay.

The estimated model accounts for a considerable share of the variation in perceived competitive advantage ($R^2 = 0.668$; Adjusted $R^2 = 0.660$), demonstrating a high level of explanatory capacity. The overall regression equation is statistically significant ($F = 87.46$, $p < 0.001$), confirming that the included predictors collectively provide a meaningful explanation of how consumers evaluate competitive positioning in luxury gastronomy.

The strong explanatory performance of the model may also be related to the theoretical closeness among the examined constructs. Since authenticity, willingness to pay, behavioural loyalty, and competitive advantage represent interconnected aspects of consumer experience and perceived value, their relationships may contribute to the relatively high level of explained variance.

The diagnostic procedures described in the methodology section confirm the reliability of the regression specification. The obtained VIF values remained within acceptable limits, indicating that the model does not suffer from problematic multicollinearity among the independent variables.

Overall, the findings suggest that sustainability does not generate competitive advantage primarily through a direct relationship. Instead, its strategic relevance appears to emerge through indirect effects, as sustainable practices enhance perceptions of authenticity, support consumers' willingness to pay, and contribute to stronger behavioural loyalty, which ultimately reinforces the competitive position of luxury gastronomy establishments.

5.4. HYPOTHESIS TESTING

Table 8. Hypothesis testing results

Hypothesis	Relationship	Result
H ₁	Sustainability perception → Authenticity perception	Supported
H ₂	Sustainability perception → Willingness to pay	Supported
H ₃	Authenticity perception → Willingness to pay	Supported
H ₄	Willingness to pay → Behavioural loyalty	Supported
H ₅	Sustainability perception and behavioural loyalty → Competitive advantage	Partially supported

Source: Author`s calculation

The hypothesis testing results provide overall support for the proposed conceptual framework. The correlation analysis identifies positive and statistically significant associations among the key constructs, offering empirical support for hypotheses H₁-H₄. However, these relationships should be interpreted carefully, as the cross-sectional design of the study limits the ability to establish definitive causal effects.

The findings indicate that sustainability perception is positively associated with both authenticity perception and willingness to pay, supporting H₁ and H₂. This suggests that consumers are more likely to perceive luxury gastronomy establishments as authentic when sustainability practices are present and meaningfully communicated. Furthermore, sustainability-oriented practices appear to enhance consumers' acceptance of premium prices by increasing the perceived value of the overall dining experience. These results reinforce the view that sustainability contributes to value creation not only through environmental responsibility but also through consumer interpretation and emotional evaluation.

The results also confirm H₃, demonstrating a significant positive relationship between authenticity perception and willingness to pay. Consumers who perceive sustainable gastronomy experiences as genuine and credible show a greater tendency to accept higher prices. This finding highlights authenticity as an important pathway through which sustainability-related attributes can generate additional value within luxury gastronomy.

Similarly, the evidence supports H₄, as willingness to pay is positively related to behavioural loyalty. Respondents who demonstrate a stronger readiness to pay for sustainability-oriented gastronomic experiences are also more likely to express intentions to revisit and recommend such establishments. This indicates that perceived value may contribute to the development of stronger and more lasting customer relationships.

The findings provide partial support for H₅. Although behavioural loyalty has a significant positive effect on perceived competitive advantage, sustainability perception does not demonstrate a statistically significant direct impact within the regression model. This suggests that sustainability enhances competitive positioning primarily through indirect pathways, particularly by strengthening authenticity, increasing willingness to pay, and encouraging behavioural loyalty. Therefore, sustainability appears to create strategic value when it is successfully transformed into a meaningful consumer experience rather than being presented as an independent attribute.

5.5. ROBUSTNESS CHECKS

To further assess the stability and reliability of the results, several robustness checks were performed. Multicollinearity was examined using Variance Inflation Factor (VIF) values. All VIF values remained below the commonly accepted threshold of 5, indicating that multicollinearity was not a concern in the regression models. Residual diagnostics were also conducted to verify the assumptions of linear regression. The residuals were approx-

imately normally distributed, and no substantial deviations from homoscedasticity were observed. In addition, Harman's single-factor test was performed to assess the potential influence of common method bias. The results indicated that no single factor accounted for the majority of the explained variance, suggesting that common method bias is unlikely to significantly affect the findings. Taken together, these diagnostic procedures support the robustness and stability of the empirical results.

5.6. CROSS-COUNTRY COMPARISON OF KEY CONSTRUCTS

Table 9. Mean values of the principal constructs by country

Country	Sustainability	Authenticity	WTP	Loyalty	Competitive Advantage
Romania	3.59	3.78	3.45	3.77	3.67
Slovenia	3.86	3.91	3.67	3.86	3.86
Bulgaria	3.47	3.93	3.69	4.13	4.05
Hungary	3.57	3.61	3.56	3.63	3.83
Other countries	3.61	3.83	3.48	3.69	3.60

Source: Author's calculation

To address potential cross-country differences, the principal constructs were also examined by country. The results indicate moderate variation across national groups. Respondents from Slovenia reported the highest sustainability perception ($M = 3.86$), while Bulgarian respondents recorded the highest levels of perceived competitive advantage ($M = 4.05$) and behavioural loyalty ($M = 4.13$). Romanian respondents showed relatively balanced evaluations across all constructs, whereas Hungarian respondents reported slightly lower authenticity perceptions ($M = 3.61$). Overall, the observed differences suggest that sustainability-related perceptions are broadly consistent across Eastern European markets, although certain variations exist regarding loyalty and competitive advantage.

6. DISCUSSION

The objective of this study was to examine how sustainability perceptions relate to authenticity, willingness to pay, and perceived competitive advantage within the context of luxury gastronomy in Eastern Europe. The findings reveal a relationship structure that is complex rather than strictly linear, which reflects the multidimensional nature of sustainability as a concept interpreted by consumers. Sustainability is not evaluated identically by all individuals; for some consumers, it represents an additional attribute, while for others it forms an integral part of the overall dining experience. Nevertheless, the results indicate that sustainability has become an increasingly relevant element in the evaluation of luxury gastronomy experiences.

One of the most significant findings relates to the connection between sustainability perception and authenticity. When restaurants are perceived as environmentally responsible or strongly connected with local producers and communities, consumers tend not to interpret these practices merely as operational choices. Instead, such initiatives are associated with credibility, commitment, and a stronger sense of place. This finding corresponds with [Huang et al. \(2025\)](#), who highlight the relationship between sustainability practices, local sourcing, and authenticity communication among Michelin Green Star restaurants. Similar conclusions have been reported in research examining sustainable practices in fine-dining contexts, where sustainability-related attributes contribute to the broader meaning and perceived value of the gastronomic experience ([Liu et al., 2023](#)). The present study extends these observations by demonstrating that similar patterns are evident among luxury gastronomy consumers in Eastern Europe. However, the strength

of this relationship differs among individuals, suggesting that authenticity remains influenced by personal interpretation and previous experiences.

A similar pattern can be observed regarding willingness to pay. Consumers who associate restaurants with sustainable practices appear more prepared to accept premium pricing; however, this relationship is not automatic. Sustainability contributes to price acceptance mainly when it is perceived as an authentic and meaningful component of the overall experience. Practices such as local and seasonal sourcing, responsible procurement, and support for regional producers may increase perceived value, but their influence depends largely on the extent to which they are effectively communicated and recognised by consumers. These findings are consistent with previous studies indicating that value perceptions in fine-dining environments influence consumers' willingness to pay higher prices (Liu et al., 2023). Therefore, sustainability appears capable of supporting premium positioning when consumers perceive it as a genuine source of value rather than simply a promotional element.

Authenticity appears to represent a key mechanism within this relationship. The findings indicate that sustainability becomes more influential when it strengthens perceptions of authenticity rather than being evaluated as an independent characteristic. When sustainability initiatives are considered credible and integrated into the restaurant's identity, consumers are more likely to engage emotionally with the experience and assign greater value to it. This supports the argument that authenticity functions as an important pathway through which sustainability affects consumer evaluations. At the same time, the conceptual closeness between sustainability and authenticity may explain why these constructs are challenging to fully distinguish empirically. Consumers often recognise sustainability through visible expressions of authenticity, including relationships with local producers, preservation of culinary traditions, and transparency in sourcing practices. The relationship between sustainability and competitive advantage appears to be more nuanced. Although sustainability perception demonstrates positive associations with authenticity and willingness to pay, the regression results indicate that it does not have a statistically significant direct effect on perceived competitive advantage. This finding suggests that sustainability alone may not automatically create competitive benefits. Instead, its contribution appears to emerge through consumer-recognised mechanisms, particularly authenticity, perceived value, and behavioural loyalty. This interpretation aligns with previous research indicating that sustainability generates competitive outcomes primarily through enhanced customer experiences and stronger stakeholder relationships rather than through immediate market effects (Bonfanti et al., 2025; Marquez Garat, 2022). In this sense, sustainability represents an enabling factor for competitiveness, but its strategic value depends on whether consumers perceive and appreciate the benefits it creates.

These findings are particularly relevant for the Central and Eastern European context. The region possesses several characteristics that naturally correspond with sustainability-oriented gastronomy, including strong culinary heritage, extensive use of regional ingredients, and established relationships between restaurants and local suppliers. In many cases, sustainability does not represent a completely new practice, but rather a process of recognising, structuring, and communicating existing traditions and approaches. This interpretation is consistent with research on Michelin Green Star restaurants, which identifies local sourcing, regional food systems, and community engagement as important components of sustainable gastronomy (Huang et al., 2025). The results suggest that restaurants can strengthen their competitive positioning not only by adopting sustainable practices but also by making these practices visible, understandable, and relevant to consumers.

From a tourism perspective, the implications extend beyond individual restaurants. Gastronomy increasingly contributes to destination attractiveness and influences how places are experienced, differentiated, and remembered by visitors. The findings suggest that sustainability contributes to destination competitiveness indirectly through authenticity, perceived value, and behavioural loyalty. Sustainability-oriented luxury restaurants may therefore enhance not only their own market position but also the attractiveness of destinations by strengthening local identity, supporting regional food systems, and contributing to broader tourism development. This interpretation corresponds with previous research emphasising the growing role of gastronomy in destination competitiveness and tourism development (Cankül, 2019; UNWTO, 2012). Consequently, sustainable luxury gastronomy may represent not only a strategy for restaurant differentiation but also a broader instrument for regional branding, local economic development, and strengthening tourism ecosystems.

6.1. IMPLICATIONS FOR TOURISM DEVELOPMENT

The implications of these findings extend beyond the individual restaurant level. Luxury gastronomy is becoming an increasingly important element of destination attractiveness and tourism competitiveness, especially for regions aiming to differentiate themselves through authenticity, quality, and unique experiences. Sustainable gastronomy can contribute to local economic development by strengthening connections with regional suppliers, supporting small-scale producers, and encouraging higher-value tourism demand. Therefore, sustainability has the potential to enhance not only the competitive position of individual restaurants but also the broader economic performance of tourism destinations. This aspect is particularly relevant for Eastern European regions, where traditional culinary practices and local production systems remain important components of cultural identity. In such contexts, sustainable gastronomy can serve as a mechanism for generating economic value while simultaneously preserving regional heritage.

Overall, the findings indicate that sustainability in luxury gastronomy should not be viewed solely as an environmental responsibility, but rather as a strategic dimension of competitiveness. Its influence emerges through its ability to shape consumer perceptions, reinforce authenticity, and support long-term market positioning. However, the strategic value of sustainability depends on the way it is incorporated into the overall dining experience and communicated to consumers. When sustainability practices are coherent, credible, and visible, they can enhance both perceived value and competitive advantage. Conversely, when these elements are insufficiently integrated or poorly communicated, the contribution of sustainability to competitiveness becomes considerably weaker.

7. LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

Although the study provides valuable insights into consumer perceptions of sustainability within luxury gastronomy, several limitations need to be considered. Some limitations are inherent to perception-based empirical research, while others arise from the specific scope and design of the present study.

First, the research is based on self-reported survey responses. Consequently, the findings reflect consumers' declared attitudes and perceptions rather than their actual purchasing behaviour. Previous studies have demonstrated that positive sustainability attitudes do not always translate into corresponding consumption choices, highlighting the persistence of the attitude, behaviour gap in sustainability research. Future investigations could address this limitation by combining survey data with behavioural evidence, such as reservation patterns, online review analysis, purchasing records, or observations of

consumer decisions in real restaurant environments, providing a more complete picture of sustainability-related behaviour (Daries et al., 2018).

Second, the empirical analysis is geographically concentrated mainly on Central and Eastern Europe. This focus reflects the purpose of the study, as the region remains relatively underexplored in luxury gastronomy research despite its growing relevance. However, perceptions of sustainability may differ depending on cultural values, economic conditions, and institutional contexts. Future research including Western European and international samples would enable cross-regional comparisons and help establish whether the observed relationships are specific to the Eastern European context or applicable more broadly (Gössling & Hal.1, 2022; Liu et al., 2023).

A further limitation relates to the consumer-oriented perspective adopted in the study. The analysis examines how sustainability is perceived by customers, rather than how sustainability practices are implemented within restaurants. Sustainable gastronomy involves complex operational decisions related to costs, supplier networks, resource management, and organisational strategies, many of which remain invisible to consumers. Future studies could therefore incorporate qualitative approaches, including interviews with restaurant owners, chefs, managers, suppliers, and other relevant stakeholders, to provide deeper insight into the practical challenges and strategic opportunities associated with sustainable luxury gastronomy (Liu et al., 2023).

The cross-sectional design of the research also represents an important limitation. Consumer expectations, sustainability awareness, and perceptions of value are continuously evolving, particularly within a rapidly changing hospitality environment. Since the current study captures consumer perceptions at a single point in time, it cannot fully explain how these relationships develop or change over longer periods. Longitudinal research would therefore provide valuable evidence regarding the evolution of sustainability perceptions and their influence on consumer behaviour and competitive positioning.

The findings also suggest several directions for future research. One important area concerns the relationship between sustainability practices and institutional recognition systems within gastronomy. The growing relevance of the Michelin Green Star provides an opportunity to examine how sustainability certifications influence consumer trust, restaurant reputation, destination image, and long-term competitiveness. Comparative research between Michelin Green Star establishments and non-certified restaurants could further clarify the strategic value of sustainability recognition.

Another promising research direction relates to the interaction between local sourcing, regional identity, and destination development. In many Eastern European contexts, traditional ingredients, local producers, and small-scale food systems represent important elements of gastronomic identity. Future studies could examine how these resources contribute to sustainable innovation, destination branding, and regional competitiveness, particularly in emerging gastronomic destinations seeking stronger international recognition (Gössling & Hal.1, 2022; Liu et al., 2023).

Future research could also explore the economic consequences of sustainability-oriented strategies in greater detail. While this study focuses primarily on consumer perceptions, additional research could investigate financial outcomes associated with sustainability practices, including profitability, operational efficiency, organisational resilience, and return on sustainability investments. Such approaches would contribute to a broader understanding of sustainability as a strategic capability within luxury gastronomy.

Despite these limitations, the study provides empirical evidence that sustainability can represent an important strategic resource in luxury gastronomy. The findings indicate that its contribution to competitiveness emerges primarily through authenticity, willing-

ness to pay, and behavioural loyalty rather than through a direct relationship alone. By integrating these dimensions into a single analytical framework, the study contributes to the broader discussion on sustainability, consumer value creation, and destination competitiveness in luxury gastronomy, while also identifying important directions for future academic and managerial research.

8. CONCLUSIONS

This study investigated the relationships among sustainability perception, authenticity, willingness to pay, behavioural loyalty, and perceived competitive advantage within the context of luxury gastronomy in Eastern Europe. The results demonstrate that sustainability represents an important factor in shaping consumer evaluations, although its contribution does not appear to be primarily direct. Rather than functioning as an independent source of competitive advantage, sustainability influences outcomes through interconnected processes involving authenticity, perceived value creation, and consumer attachment. A key finding of the research is the strong relationship between sustainability perception and authenticity. Consumers who perceive restaurants as environmentally responsible and engaged with local producers are more likely to evaluate these establishments as genuine, trustworthy, and closely connected to their context. Furthermore, sustainability perception demonstrates positive relationships with willingness to pay and behavioural loyalty, indicating that sustainable practices can strengthen consumer involvement and long-term engagement. However, the regression results reveal that sustainability does not have a statistically significant direct effect on perceived competitive advantage. Instead, its strategic contribution appears to emerge indirectly through authenticity, willingness to pay, and loyalty-related mechanisms. From a theoretical standpoint, the study contributes to hospitality and gastronomy research by approaching sustainability as a multidimensional phenomenon rather than a single, unified construct. The findings show that sustainability-related attributes influence consumer perceptions through a combination of interconnected pathways and emphasise the central role of authenticity as a mechanism connecting sustainability practices with competitive outcomes. From an empirical perspective, the study expands existing evidence by analysing responses from 179 consumers across several Eastern European countries, a region that remains relatively limited in international research on luxury gastronomy and sustainable hospitality. The findings provide additional insight into how consumers in emerging gastronomic markets understand sustainability and how these perceptions translate into behavioural intentions and evaluations of competitive positioning. From a managerial perspective, the results indicate that the implementation of sustainability practices alone may not be sufficient; their effective communication and integration into the overall dining experience are equally important. Sustainability generates value when consumers perceive clear connections between responsible practices, authenticity, local identity, and gastronomic quality. Therefore, restaurant managers should consider sustainability not merely as an operational requirement but as an element of strategic experience design. The findings also have implications for tourism stakeholders, as sustainable gastronomy can contribute to destination attractiveness, regional identity formation, stronger local production networks, and wider economic benefits within tourism ecosystems. Overall, the study demonstrates that sustainability can represent a strategic resource for luxury gastronomy, but its effectiveness depends on the extent to which it is meaningfully incorporated, communicated, and recognised by consumers. By linking sustainability perception with authenticity, willingness to pay, behavioural loyalty, and perceived competitive advantage, this research contributes to a deeper understanding of how sustainability can support both restaurant competitiveness and broader tourism development.

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