

HUNTING TOURISM POLICIES AND THE ROLE OF DIGITALIZATION: A COMPARATIVE PERSPECTIVE ON ROMANIA AND HUNGARY

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ABSTRACT

Hunting tourism represents a specialised form of active tourism in which hunting constitutes the primary travel motivation, generating both economic value and symbolic significance for destinations. In Romania, the hunter-tourist experience is shaped by a combination of complementary services, including organisation, guiding, accommodation, logistics, and trophy evaluation. The integration and quality of these components influence not only visitor satisfaction but also destination image and competitive positioning. This study examines the role of tourism policies in the development of hunting tourism and investigates how digitalisation contributes to destination promotion, stakeholder communication, and market visibility within this niche segment. Particular attention is given to pricing as a strategic instrument of market positioning, with emphasis on the concept of total price, which incorporates not only financial costs but also time, effort, and perceived risks associated with the experience. The research adopts a comparative approach between Romania and Hungary, combining an analysis of legislative frameworks, institutional documents, and tourism practices with empirical research conducted among hunting and sport fishing associations in Transylvania. The empirical analysis is based on an adapted SERVQUAL questionnaire administered to 135 respondents from the counties of Mureș, Alba, Bistrița-Năsăud, and Sibiu. The results indicate an overall negative SERVQUAL gap (-0.66), revealing a discrepancy between stakeholder expectations and perceived service performance. The findings suggest that Romania's competitiveness in hunting tourism is constrained not by the availability of natural resources, but by limitations in service quality, perceived value creation, digital communication, and destination branding. Compared with Hungary, Romania continues to rely predominantly on resource-based advantages, while opportunities related to digital transformation and integrated service development remain insufficiently exploited. The study concludes that strengthening the competitiveness of hunting tourism destinations requires coherent tourism policies, improved service delivery, enhanced digital engagement, and strategic approaches to value creation.

Keywords: *hunting tourism, tourism policy, digitalisation, pricing strategies, comparative analysis, Romania and Hungary, perceived value, destination competitiveness*

1. INTRODUCTION

Hunting tourism occupies a distinctive position within the tourism industry because it cannot be easily assigned to a single category. It exists at the intersection of nature con-

servation, the economic utilisation of natural resources, and the ways in which individuals construct meaningful experiences in relation to the environment. Unlike conventional forms of tourism, where consumption is often passive and primarily service-oriented, hunting tourism involves a direct and active dimension centred around the hunting experience itself. Beyond the practical aspects related to organisation, comfort, and logistics, the experience carries a strong symbolic dimension, with the trophy representing not merely an outcome but an important element of the personal narrative created through the journey (Lovelock, 2020; Komppula & Gartner, 2013). In the academic literature, hunting tourism is generally defined as a form of tourism in which visitors, most commonly international hunters, pay to participate in organised hunting activities. However, the value of the experience extends beyond the outcome. The process itself plays a crucial role, including anticipation, uncertainty, patience, and the opportunity to encounter a rare or valuable specimen. These elements differentiate hunting tourism from other forms of nature-based tourism, where the primary focus is typically placed on observation, recreation, or relaxation (Naidoo et al., 2016). From an economic perspective, hunting tourism generates effects that extend beyond direct revenues from services, permits, or taxation. In many rural regions, it contributes to maintaining local economic structures and supporting employment opportunities, although this contribution is not always sufficiently recognised. This perspective is reflected in the frequently discussed principle that natural resources are more likely to be preserved when they generate economic value, often summarised through the logic that resources are protected when they provide benefits to local communities (Lovelock, 2020). Nevertheless, the relationship between economic value and conservation is not automatic. Without appropriate governance mechanisms, hunting tourism may generate challenges such as resource overexploitation or unequal distribution of economic benefits. Furthermore, changing social attitudes towards hunting and increasing international scrutiny continue to influence both regulatory frameworks and the public image of this form of tourism (UNWTO, 2023). In Romania, hunting tourism operates within a relatively established legislative framework, primarily regulated by Law no. 407/2006. At the operational level, the sector involves multiple stakeholders, including Romsilva, private hunting area managers, and AJVPS-type associations, each contributing to wildlife management, financial administration, and the organisation of hunting experiences. At the local level, AJVPS associations represent some of the most important actors in the functioning of the hunting tourism sector. Their role extends beyond wildlife management, as they maintain direct relationships with hunters, organise hunting experiences, and significantly influence perceptions of service quality. Consequently, their perspective provides valuable insight into the practical functioning of the sector. Despite the availability of significant natural resources, including assets with European-level potential, hunting tourism has not yet been fully developed in Romania as a coherent strategic tourism product. Current approaches remain focused primarily on regulation rather than integrated tourism development, while fragmented institutional responsibilities contribute to limited coordination and weaker strategic management (European Commission, 2022).

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature on hunting tourism emphasises the central role of competitiveness, perceived value, pricing strategies, and digitalisation in shaping tourism experiences and influencing destination performance. These concepts provide the theoretical foundation for the present study. A comparison with Hungary reveals important differences in the organisation, positioning, and promotion of hunting tourism. In Hungary, hunting tourism is developed and communicated as a premium tourism product, with stronger integration

into destination marketing strategies and clearer market positioning. The competitive advantage does not necessarily arise from superior natural resources alone, but from the ability to organise, package, and communicate these resources as a coherent and valuable experience. As highlighted by [Crouch \(2011\)](#), destination competitiveness depends not only on resource availability but also on the capacity to transform those resources into differentiated tourism experiences. Similarly, [Ritchie and Crouch \(2003\)](#) conceptualise destination competitiveness as a multidimensional phenomenon involving service quality, infrastructure, destination management, policy support, and broader environmental conditions. [Dwyer and Kim \(2003\)](#) further emphasise that competitiveness emerges from the interaction between inherited resources, created resources, destination management capabilities, and supporting factors. Within this framework, price cannot be interpreted merely as a reflection of production costs. In hunting tourism, pricing incorporates multiple dimensions, including trophy characteristics, organisational quality, destination reputation, service reliability, and exclusivity. Consequently, price functions as an indicator of perceived value, influencing both consumer decision-making and the market positioning of the tourism offer.

At the same time, digitalisation has become an increasingly important component of tourism competitiveness ([Rustemova et al., 2026](#); [Seisenbekov et al., 2026](#)). Online visibility, accessibility of information, communication speed, and the presentation of tourism products increasingly influence consumer perceptions and purchasing decisions ([Aumeboonsuke & Caplanova, 2026](#)). Therefore, digitalisation should not be viewed solely as a promotional instrument, but rather as an integral element of destination competitiveness ([Hunady et al., 2026](#)). Previous research demonstrates that information and communication technologies enhance destination visibility, customer engagement, and service accessibility, thereby strengthening market positioning ([Law et al., 2014](#)). More recent studies further show that digital platforms facilitate real-time interaction and value co-creation between tourism providers and visitors, contributing to more competitive and adaptive tourism systems ([Buhalis&Sinarta, 2019](#)).

Building on these theoretical considerations, this study examines the functioning and competitiveness of hunting tourism in Romania. The research combines an analysis of the legislative framework and relevant literature with empirical investigation among AJVPS associations, using a questionnaire adapted to the specific characteristics of hunting tourism services. The empirical approach aims to identify differences between stakeholder expectations and perceived service performance. A central analytical concept is the identification of a “perceived value gap”, understood as the difference between the potential offered by available resources and the extent to which these resources are effectively developed, communicated, and recognised by the market. This perspective provides a deeper understanding of sector competitiveness and highlights possible directions for improving positioning and value creation. The analysis further adopts the perspective that price represents more than a monetary exchange value. In hunting tourism, particularly within premium segments, price reflects a broader combination of factors, including time investment, physical effort, comfort level, perceived uncertainty, and opportunity costs. Beyond its economic dimension, price also carries symbolic meaning, being associated with exclusivity, status, and uniqueness, approaching the logic of Veblen-type goods. This interpretation is particularly relevant in hunting tourism because perceived value is not determined solely by the outcome, such as obtaining a trophy, but by the entire experience surrounding it. This includes access to the resource, quality of organisation, professional guidance, accommodation, logistical support, and the symbolic significance attached to the trophy itself. Therefore, price may be conceptualised as a “total price”, incorporating both monetary and non-monetary components of the tourism experience.

Within this perspective, the total price includes factors such as financial expenditure, time commitment, physical effort, comfort conditions, perceived risk, and opportunity cost. In hunting tourism, these elements become especially significant due to the uncertainty inherent in the activity. Variables such as animal behaviour, environmental conditions, seasonality, and the unpredictability of the hunting process directly influence the experience and, consequently, the value perceived by visitors. To better understand this multidimensional structure, the following table summarises the main components of the “total price” concept in hunting tourism, highlighting both its economic dimensions and the related managerial implications.

Table 1. Components of the “total price” in hunting tourism

Component	Example	Managerial involvement
Monetary	Shooting fee, trophy fee, accommodation, meal, guide	Pricing clarity, packages, upsell
Time	duration of travel, duration of stay, seasonal windows	scheduling, reducing “downtime”
Effort / comfort	terrain conditions, hunting pace, accommodation standard	segmentation; service levels
Perceived risk	probability of success, weather conditions, safety	information policies, rules, insurance
Opportunity cost	Holidays, Alternatives (Other Destinations)	Differentiation: trophies, reputation, experience

Source: Own elaboration based on [Lovelock \(2020\)](#); [Komppula& Gartner \(2013\)](#)

Table 1 presents the total price structure and highlights the fact that, in hunting tourism, the value perceived by the customer is determined not only by monetary costs, but also by non-monetary factors, such as effort, time and risk associated with the experience. These elements become essential in the context of the uncertainty specific to hunting activities. In this sense, the price does not only function as a cost recovery mechanism, but also as a signal of quality, exclusivity and market positioning. In the premium segments it acquires a symbolic dimension, being associated with prestige and limited access to resources, approaching the logic of Veblen-type goods, where the high price level can positively influence demand.

Price formation in hunting tourism is the result of the interaction between macroeconomic and microeconomic factors. At the macro level, elements such as the legislative framework, taxation, exchange rate evolution or restrictions imposed by environmental policies, especially in protected areas, intervene. In Romania, changes in VAT rates have, for example, had a direct impact on the price structure, influencing the competitiveness of offers on the international market. At the microeconomic level, the price is influenced by the characteristics of the hunting fund – the density and quality of the game populations – but also by factors such as the reputation of the fund, the level of infrastructure, the qualification of the personnel or the structure of the services offered. These variables do not act independently, but in a relationship of interdependence, which makes the final price the result of a complex architecture, not of a simple cost calculation.

Within this architecture, the cost structure plays a key role. Fixed costs, associated with habitat, staff and infrastructure management, remain relatively constant, while variable costs depend on the intensity of tourism activity and include elements such as field transport, trophy processing or hospitality services. This differentiation directly influences pricing strategies and the need for rigorous bid planning. Another distinctive element is the standardization of trophy valuation through the methodology of the International Council for Hunting and Wildlife Conservation, which allows for international compara-

bility and provides an objective basis for price differentiation. In this context, rates reflect not only physical dimensions, but also a symbolic value associated with rarity and prestige, strengthening the link between price and value perception.

In practice, the hunting tourism market uses several pricing strategies, the most common of which are market-oriented (benchmark-based), value-oriented and package-based pricing models. Among these, the packageization of offers is emerging as a dominant trend, as it allows the integration of various services into a coherent offer, easier to communicate and manage from an economic point of view. Beyond the conceptual structure of the price, the way in which the offer is built in practice becomes essential for understanding the perceived value. In hunting tourism, services are not consumed separately, but integrated into a package, which makes the final experience depend on the coherence and transparency of this structure.

In practice, hunting tourism services are typically bundled into integrated packages combining accommodation, guiding, and hunting activities. The structure of these packages reflects the need to combine traditional tourism services, such as accommodation and food, with elements specific to hunting activities. The clear separation between the included and optional components helps to increase transparency and reduce uncertainty for the customer, especially in the case of international tourists, for whom access to information is a decisive factor.

At the same time, the offer is not uniform but adapted to different market segments. In this regard, the literature highlights the existence of some types of packages, which vary depending on the level of services and the profile of the customer.

Packages generally vary from standard to premium, depending on the level of service and exclusivity offered. This classification shows that the hunting tourism market is segmented, and premium packages play an essential role in building perceived value. They are associated with personalized services and access to scarce resources, contributing to positioning on the high-end segment. At the same time, the existence of entry-level and standard packages allows attracting a wider audience and maintaining a constant volume of demand.

In practice, these package structures are reflected in different market segments, from standard offers to high-end premium experiences, where value is determined by the overall service integration rather than by the trophy alone.

At the same time, they reflect the fact that value is not only determined by the trophy, but by the entire overall experience offered. To better understand Romania's positioning in a regional context, a comparative analysis of the main game categories and the associated price levels in relation to Hungary is useful.

Table 2. Comparative pricing structure in hunting tourism (Romania vs Hungary)

Species	Romania (€)	Hungary (€)	Observation
deer	2800–3800	4000–6000	HU premium positioning
Wild boar	250–600	400–800	More structured offers in HU
Small game	300–500/day	500–800/day	Standardized packages in HU

Source: Own elaboration based on Romsilva's practices and specialized literature based on the European Commission (2022); comparative data from the regional market

The comparative analysis reveals substantial differences between the two countries. Although Romania benefits from a favourable value-to-price relationship and significant natural resources, Hungary demonstrates a stronger positioning within the premium segment, supported by a more established destination image and a higher degree of service standardisation. These differences cannot be explained solely by variations in resource

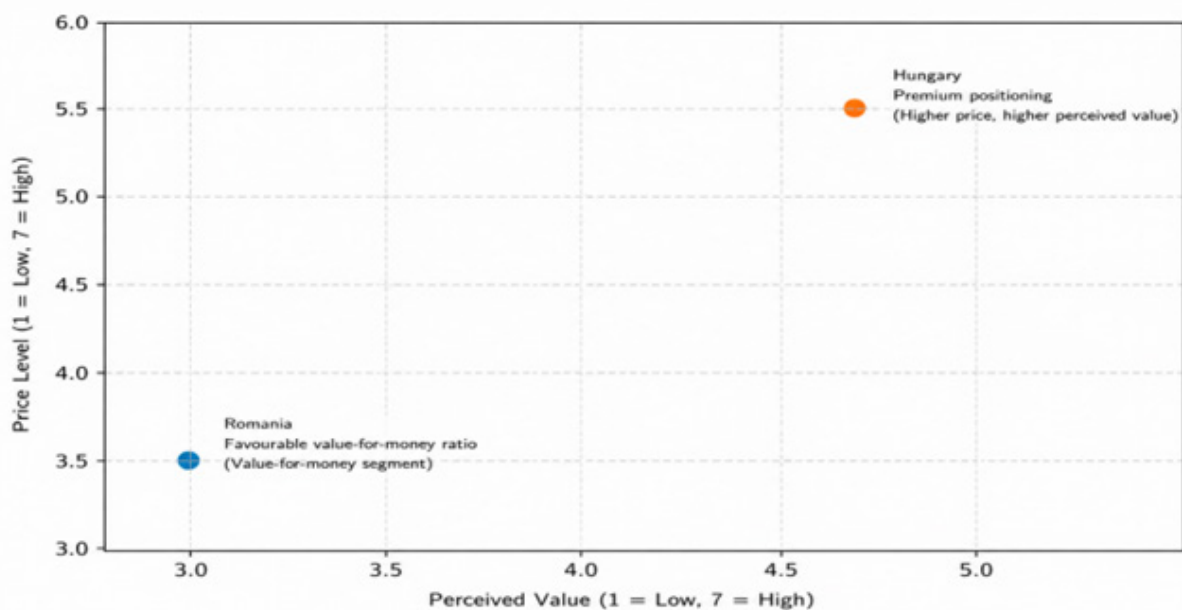
availability; rather, they reflect how effectively these resources are incorporated into public policies, tourism strategies, and market-oriented development approaches.

The professionalisation of tourism offers and the coherence of promotional systems represent key factors in shaping competitiveness. From a managerial perspective, effective product packaging reduces information asymmetry between providers and customers by making the value proposition clearer and facilitating consumer decision-making. At the same time, both pricing structure and price level contribute directly to destination image formation and influence perceptions of service quality.

This relationship can be conceptualised through a value-creation framework in which price influences perceived value, perceived value shapes customer satisfaction, and satisfaction contributes to destination image development and long-term loyalty. In this context, price extends beyond its traditional economic function and becomes a strategic positioning instrument within the hunting tourism market.

To further synthesise the relationship between pricing and perceived value, a conceptual model of comparative positioning can be developed, illustrating how different destinations are interpreted by consumers according to the interaction between resource quality, service organisation, pricing strategy, and perceived experience value.

Figure 1. Conceptual model of comparative positioning of destinations



Source: Authors' own elaboration based on Romsilva public tariff data and Hungarian Tourism Agency (2022)

Figure 1 illustrates the relative positioning of Romania and Hungary within the Central European hunting tourism market based on two synthetic dimensions: price level and perceived experience value.

Within this framework, Hungary occupies a clear premium-market position, characterised by higher prices and higher perceived value, supported by a more coherent development strategy, stronger market communication, and a more established destination image. Romania, by contrast, occupies an intermediate position, offering a favourable value-to-price ratio but not yet fully converting its resource advantages into a premium tourism proposition.

This distinction becomes even more apparent when considering the broader institutional context, including public policies, sector governance, and the organisation of tourism ser-

vices. The competitive difference between the two destinations is therefore not primarily a consequence of resource availability, but rather of how effectively these resources are managed, packaged, promoted, and transformed into a differentiated tourism experience.

Table 3: Public policies in hunting tourism – Hungary–Romania Comparative Table

Analyzed size	Hungary	Romania
Status in tourism policies	Strategic tourism product	Secondary activity, regulated
Institutional coordination	Centralized	Fragmented
International promotion	State-backed	Limited, decentralized
Taxation	Stable, favorable	High
Integration with rural development	High	Partial

Source: Own elaboration based on the legislative framework and institutional documents European Commission, 2022; Romania, 2006, Hungarian Hunting Chamber. (2025), Hungarian Tourism Agency (2022)

Table 3 demonstrates that the observed differences between Romania and Hungary cannot be attributed solely to variations in natural resource availability, but rather to the way these resources are incorporated into broader tourism development strategies. Hungary approaches hunting tourism as a strategic tourism product, supported by stronger institutional coordination, systematic promotion, and clearer market positioning. Romania, in contrast, continues to manage the sector primarily through a regulatory framework, resulting in a more fragmented organisational structure and limited strategic integration within tourism policy.

This difference in approach is also reflected in the economic value generated by the sector. The comparison suggests that Romania's competitive advantage remains largely based on resource availability and cost attractiveness, whereas Hungary has developed a more value-oriented model based on service standardisation, destination image, and the ability to deliver a more differentiated premium experience.

Table 3.1. Economic impact of hunting tourism – comparative implications

Indicator	Hungary	Romania
Revenue predictability	High	Medium–low
Integration into the tourism economy	High	Limited
Local multiplier effect	Clearly outlined	Uneven
Attractiveness for foreign tourists	High	Selective

Source: Own elaboration based on statistical data on tourism and economic impact (Institutul Național de Statistică, 2024; Eurostat, 2023)

Table 3.1 presents a comparative overview of the economic integration of hunting tourism in Romania and Hungary. Hungary demonstrates a higher degree of integration within the tourism economy, generating more predictable economic effects and a stronger contribution to local development. In Romania, although similar economic effects are present, they appear less consistent, suggesting that the existing potential of the sector remains only partially capitalised.

Overall, these differences help explain why Hungary has been more successful in attracting premium market segments and developing a stronger international destination image, while Romania continues to compete primarily through its favourable value-to-price ratio. Consequently, the main challenge for Romanian hunting tourism does not concern the availability of natural resources, but rather the capacity to transform these resources into a coherent, reliable, and internationally competitive tourism experience.

Within this context, the present study examines the factors influencing the competitiveness of hunting tourism in Romania and compares them with the Hungarian experience. Particular attention is given to the role of service quality, perceived value, pricing strategies, and digitalisation as determinants of destination performance. The research combines documentary analysis with empirical investigation among hunting and sport fishing associations in Transylvania to identify the main challenges and opportunities for sector development.

The following sections examine the principal theoretical perspectives related to hunting tourism competitiveness, pricing mechanisms, perceived value creation, and digitalisation, providing the conceptual foundation for the proposed analytical framework.

3. CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK AND RESEARCH PROPOSITIONS

Based on the literature reviewed, the competitiveness of hunting tourism can be understood as the outcome of the interaction between several interconnected dimensions, including service quality, perceived value, pricing structures, and digitalisation. Given the exploratory character of this study, a conceptual framework is developed to illustrate the expected relationships among these factors and to provide guidance for the empirical analysis.

The proposed framework does not aim to statistically test causal relationships. Instead, it serves as an analytical foundation for developing research propositions that are examined through the empirical findings. The framework assumes that the competitiveness of hunting tourism destinations emerges through the cumulative effect of service performance, value perception, strategic positioning, and the capacity to transform available resources into a coherent tourism experience.

The following research propositions are formulated:

P_1 : The perceived quality of hunting tourism services positively influences the perceived value of the overall hunting experience.

P_2 : Negative discrepancies between visitor expectations and perceived service performance (SERVQUAL gaps) negatively influence the perceived competitiveness of hunting tourism services.

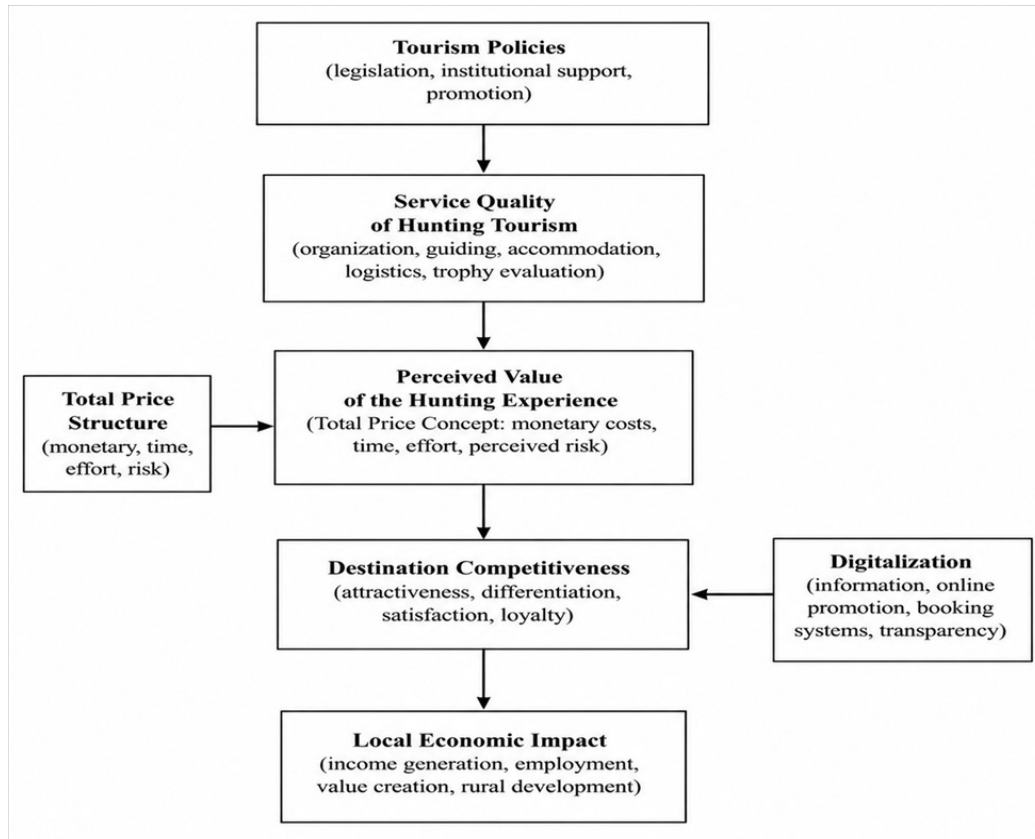
P_3 : The perceived structure of total price influences the perceived value of hunting tourism experiences.

P_4 : The level of digitalisation positively influences the perceived competitiveness of hunting tourism destinations.

P_5 : Perceived value positively influences the competitiveness of hunting tourism destinations.

P_6 : The perceived competitiveness of hunting tourism contributes positively to local economic impact.

Figure 2. Conceptual framework of hunting tourism competitiveness and economic impact



Source: Own elaboration

The conceptual framework illustrates the relationships identified in the literature between service quality, perceived value, pricing structures, digitalization, and competitiveness in tourism. In the context of hunting tourism, these dimensions are closely interconnected and shape both the tourism experience and the broader economic contribution of the sector. The framework serves as an analytical guide for interpreting the empirical findings and understanding the factors that may influence competitiveness within hunting tourism destinations.

4. METHODS

This research assumes that hunting tourism cannot be fully explained through regulatory frameworks or economic mechanisms alone. Beyond its formal and operational dimensions, hunting tourism includes experiential and perceptual components that significantly influence how this form of tourism functions in practice. Therefore, a mixed methodological approach was adopted, combining theoretical analysis with empirical investigation based on the perspectives of stakeholders directly involved in the sector.

The literature conceptualises trophy hunting as a niche tourism market in which the product is not standardised but rather represents a complex and highly personalised experience. Elements such as rarity, exclusivity, restricted access, and symbolic value make hunting tourism difficult to explain through traditional economic approaches alone. Consequently, a flexible methodological design was considered appropriate, integrating conceptual analysis with empirical research adapted to the specific characteristics of hunting tourism.

The first stage of the research involved a documentary analysis of relevant academic literature, institutional documents, and regulatory frameworks. International studies were examined to understand the economic dimensions of hunting tourism, particularly the

relationship between perceived value, pricing mechanisms, and demand formation. In parallel, Romania's legislative and institutional framework was analysed to clarify how hunting activities are regulated, organised, and managed. Within this perspective, hunting tourism was approached as a specific economic system in which price reflects not only direct costs but also intangible dimensions such as prestige, reputation, exclusivity, and symbolic value. At the same time, the analysis considered that supply is influenced not only by economic factors but also by biological constraints and legislative requirements.

To complement the documentary analysis, empirical research was conducted among hunting and sport fishing associations located in Transylvania, covering the counties of Mureș, Alba, Bistrița-Năsăud, and Sibiu. The selection of these counties aimed to capture diverse local contexts rather than focusing on a single geographical area. The empirical sample consisted of 135 respondents, approximately 25% of whom were active hunters, while the remaining participants were involved in administrative, operational, or managerial activities. This composition enabled the study to incorporate both the practical dimension of hunting tourism and the organisational perspective of those responsible for managing and delivering these services.

A purposive sampling strategy was employed to ensure the inclusion of respondents directly involved in hunting tourism management and organisation. Given the exploratory nature of the research, the objective was not to achieve statistical representativeness at the national level, but rather to identify perceived service quality gaps, sectoral challenges, and development opportunities.

The empirical instrument was based on the SERVQUAL model and adapted to the specific characteristics of hunting tourism. Rather than applying the original model unchanged, the measurement dimensions were adjusted to reflect the particularities of the sector. The central SERVQUAL principle, comparing expectations and perceptions, was maintained, while indicators were reformulated to capture aspects such as service organisation, direct interaction, personalisation, and overall experience management.

In addition to service quality dimensions, the questionnaire included items addressing price perception, tariff transparency, and the competitiveness of Romanian hunting tourism services. A digitalisation component was also incorporated due to the growing importance of online visibility, communication channels, and access to information in attracting potential customers, particularly international visitors.

The questionnaire contained a total of 45 items covering five analytical dimensions: service quality, pricing, digitalisation, competitiveness, and economic impact. The reliability of the SERVQUAL-based measurement scale was assessed using Cronbach's alpha. The obtained value ($\alpha = 0.82$) indicates satisfactory internal consistency, confirming the suitability of the instrument for analysing service quality perceptions in the context of hunting tourism. In social science research, values above 0.70 are generally considered acceptable indicators of measurement reliability.

The empirical analysis was conducted by calculating average scores for each dimension and comparing expectations with perceptions through gap analysis. This approach allowed the identification of areas where delivered services fail to meet stakeholder expectations and provided insights into the main factors affecting sector competitiveness. The interpretation of results was conducted in relation to the conceptual framework, focusing on the relationship between service performance, perceived value, and destination positioning.

The methodology is exploratory and interpretative in nature. The objective is not statistical generalisation but rather the identification of relevant patterns and a deeper understanding of the mechanisms influencing hunting tourism competitiveness. This approach is particularly suitable given the importance of intangible factors such as experience qual-

ity, exclusivity, symbolic meaning, and perceived value within this tourism segment.

The main limitation of the research concerns the sample size and sampling approach. However, the inclusion of respondents from several counties contributes to a broader understanding of the sector and reduces the likelihood that findings reflect only one local context. The results therefore provide relevant insights into the current dynamics of Romanian hunting tourism and establish a foundation for future national-level or comparative research.

The research design was developed to examine the relationships proposed in the conceptual framework, particularly the links between service quality, perceived value, digitalisation, competitiveness, and economic impact. The analysis focuses on identifying expectation–perception gaps and understanding their implications for market positioning and value creation.

It should also be emphasised that the study reflects primarily a supply-side perspective, as respondents were directly involved in the management and operation of hunting activities. Consequently, the findings should not be interpreted as direct measurements of tourist satisfaction. Future research should complement this perspective by incorporating the experiences and evaluations of domestic and international hunting tourists.

5. RESULTS

The results of the research reveal a clear gap between the objective potential of hunting tourism in Romania and the way this potential is translated into perceived service quality. Respondents generally evaluate the country's hunting resources positively, highlighting the value of hunting areas, resource diversity, and the overall attractiveness of the destination. However, perceptions become considerably more critical when the assessment shifts from resource availability to the organisation of the tourism experience and the quality of supporting services.

This distinction suggests that Romania's competitive advantage is primarily rooted in its natural resource base, while the transformation of these resources into a complete and internationally competitive tourism product remains insufficiently developed. Although the country possesses significant potential, the available resources are not yet consistently converted into a coherent experience capable of supporting stronger market positioning. The empirical data were collected through a questionnaire distributed both online via digital platforms and directly during local sector-related activities. The sample consisted of 135 respondents from four county hunting and sport fishing associations (AJVPS) located in Transylvania: Mureş, Alba, Bistriţa-Năsăud, and Sibiu. The composition of the sample includes both active hunters and individuals involved in the administrative, organisational, and operational management of hunting activities, providing a broader perspective on how the sector is experienced and managed.

At the organisational level, these associations are responsible for managing hunting areas organised into multiple hunting units with significant territorial coverage. For example, Mureş County manages 11 hunting areas, while Alba County includes more than 20 such areas, illustrating the operational scale and organisational complexity of the sector. Although comprehensive public information is not available for all counties included in the research, the institutional structure of the associations follows a comparable administrative model.

Within this context, hunting tourism should not be understood merely as a recreational activity, but as a specialised economic sector in which the tourism product extends beyond the trophy itself. The overall experience includes multiple interconnected elements, such as organisation, infrastructure, professional guidance, accommodation, auxiliary services, and the symbolic value associated with the activity. To evaluate this multidimensional service experience, the SERVQUAL model was applied, allowing direct comparison between stakeholder expectations and their perceptions of actual service performance.

Table 4. SERVQUAL Assessment of Hunting Tourism in Romania

Size	Expectations (E)	Perceptions (P)	Gap (P–E)
Tangibility	4.2	3.4	-0.8
Reliability	4.3	3.6	-0.7
Responsiveness	4.1	3.6	-0.5
Professionalism	4.2	3.7	-0.5
Empathy	4.3	3.5	-0.8
Average score	4.22	3.56	-0.66

Source: Own elaboration based on empirical research

Table 4 presents the SERVQUAL results and reveals an overall negative average gap of -0.66, indicating that the perceived performance of hunting tourism services remains below stakeholder expectations. The largest discrepancies are observed in the dimensions of tangibility and empathy, suggesting that the main weaknesses are associated with physical infrastructure, accommodation conditions, and the capacity to provide personalised experiences. In other words, the central challenge does not concern the availability of hunting resources, but rather the way these resources are transformed and delivered as a complete tourism experience.

The negative SERVQUAL gap confirms the existence of a perceived value gap between expected and experienced service performance. Despite Romania's significant hunting potential, the inability to consistently meet stakeholder expectations may contribute to a weaker perception of competitiveness at the destination level. This finding supports the argument that natural resources alone are insufficient to ensure market competitiveness unless they are supported by adequate service systems and experience-oriented management.

Beyond the SERVQUAL dimensions, respondents provide a more practical assessment of the main challenges affecting the sector. Infrastructure is identified as the most important weakness, mentioned by approximately 35% of respondents, followed by organisational issues (25%), promotion deficiencies, and the overall level of services provided. Accommodation facilities and complementary services receive generally moderate evaluations, indicating the existence of a functional foundation, but one that remains insufficiently developed to support a premium tourism segment.

Within this context, digitalisation emerges as an increasingly important determinant of competitiveness. Respondents perceive the current level of digital development as fragmented, limiting both market visibility and access to information, particularly for international clients. The absence of well-structured digital platforms, transparent online offers, and coherent communication strategies reduces the ability of Romanian hunting tourism providers to effectively promote existing resources. Therefore, the challenge is not only related to service delivery but also to the way the tourism product is communicated and positioned in the market.

The development of modern digital platforms at the level of AJVPS associations represents an important strategic opportunity. Updated multilingual websites with clearly structured information could improve transparency, accessibility, and consumer confidence. At the same time, social media platforms could contribute to destination promotion through visual storytelling, which plays an increasingly important role in shaping tourism decisions. Furthermore, the integration of online booking systems and direct communication channels could reduce dependence on intermediaries, improve operational efficiency, and simplify access to hunting tourism offers. The collection and analysis of user behaviour data would also enable providers to adapt services more effectively and develop more targeted marketing strategies.

Consequently, digitalisation should not be understood merely as a promotional instrument, but as an integral component of perceived value creation. The way information is presented, accessed, and communicated directly influences how potential customers evaluate the attractiveness and credibility of the destination.

Regarding pricing, respondents generally perceive Romanian hunting tourism offers as competitive. However, the results indicate that price levels are not always aligned with the quality and range of services provided. This imbalance negatively affects perceived value, as customers may perceive a mismatch between the financial cost and the overall experience delivered. In addition, access to hunting areas is considered moderate or difficult by respondents, suggesting the presence of operational barriers that may reduce destination attractiveness.

The findings also reveal strong support for integrated tourism packages. A large proportion of respondents express a preference for complete offers combining hunting activities with accommodation, meals, and complementary services. Such packages are perceived as increasing convenience, reducing uncertainty, and improving overall value, particularly for international visitors. Therefore, the development of structured, transparent, and professionally managed packages represents an important opportunity for strengthening the competitiveness of Romanian hunting tourism.

Overall, the results indicate that Romania's main challenge is not the lack of valuable hunting resources, but the insufficient transformation of these resources into a coherent, accessible, and high-value tourism experience. Improvements in service quality, digital integration, pricing transparency, and package development are essential steps towards stronger international positioning.

Table 5. Perception of competitiveness of Romanian hunting tourism

Reply	Estimated weight
Competitive	15%
Partially competitive	25%
Weaker	60%

Source: Own elaboration based on the questionnaire

The results presented in Table 5 reveal a generally critical assessment of the competitiveness of hunting tourism in Romania. A substantial proportion of respondents perceive the current tourism offer as less competitive compared with international alternatives, particularly due to weaknesses related to infrastructure, limited-service standardization and insufficient promotional activity.

Further insights emerge from respondents' previous international hunting tourism experiences. A significant share of participants reported having engaged in hunting tourism abroad, with Hungary being one of the most frequently mentioned destinations. Most of these respondents evaluated foreign experiences more favourably, emphasising superior organisation, greater transparency of offers, and a higher degree of service integration. These comparative perceptions reinforce the argument that Romania's competitiveness gap is not primarily determined by the availability or quality of natural resources, but by differences in how tourism services are organised, packaged, communicated, and delivered.

The findings therefore suggest that improving the competitiveness of Romanian hunting tourism requires a transition from a resource-based model towards a more experience-oriented approach, where service quality, destination management, and value creation become central elements of market positioning.

Table 5.1. International hunting tourism experience and satisfaction

Indicator	Percentage (%)
Respondents with experience broad	58%
Satisfied with services abroad	72%
Perceive services abroad as better	65%
Would prefer full packages abroad	70%

Source: Own elaboration based on questionnaire data

The findings presented in Table 5.1 indicate, most respondents with international experience perceive services abroad as better organized and more integrated. The preference for full-service packages is also higher in this context, suggesting that structured offers play a key role in shaping perceived value and competitiveness.

At the same time, an interesting aspect emerges although services are valued more reservedly, prices are perceived as relatively attractive. This combination suggests a positioning based mainly on value for money, and less on premium quality or differentiated experience. Overall, the findings suggest that Romania's current competitive position is influenced more strongly by its favourable value-for-money ratio than by a premium service image or a highly differentiated tourism experience.

The data suggest that hunting tourism contributes to increasing employment in accommodation units, stimulating consumption in restaurants and developing related services, such as transport or ancillary activities. In addition, there is also an important social component, linked to the creation of jobs, especially seasonal ones, and the generation of indirect income for local communities.

Interpretation of Research Propositions

P₁: Service Quality → Perceived Value

The SERVQUAL analysis reveals a consistent negative gap between stakeholder expectations and perceived service performance, with an average gap of **-0.66**. This indicates that the quality of services currently provided does not fully correspond to expected standards, particularly in areas related to infrastructure, organisation, and the personalisation of the hunting experience. Since perceived value is strongly influenced by the quality of the overall experience, these service deficiencies directly affect how stakeholders evaluate the attractiveness and value of hunting tourism offers.

Interpretation: The findings support **Proposition 1**, indicating that service quality represents an important determinant of perceived value in the hunting tourism experience.

P₂: SERVQUAL Gap → Competitiveness

The identified service quality gaps appear to negatively influence perceptions of destination competitiveness. This relationship is reflected in respondents' evaluations, with approximately **60%** considering Romanian hunting tourism less competitive compared with alternative destinations. The results suggest that weaknesses in infrastructure, service organisation, and experience management reduce the ability of Romanian destinations to compete effectively, despite the availability of valuable hunting resources.

Interpretation: The findings support **Proposition 2**, suggesting that negative SERVQUAL gaps contribute to lower perceived competitiveness within the hunting tourism sector.

P₃: Total Price → Perceived Value

The analysis confirms that price in hunting tourism is perceived as a multidimensional

concept rather than merely a financial cost. Respondents associate value with a combination of monetary expenditure, time investment, effort, comfort, uncertainty, and perceived risk. Although Romanian hunting tourism is generally considered competitively priced, the results indicate that a mismatch between price levels and service quality may reduce the overall value perceived by customers.

Interpretation: The findings support **Proposition 3**, demonstrating that the perceived structure of total price influences the value attributed to the hunting tourism experience.

P₄: Digitalisation → Competitiveness

The results indicate that digitalisation within Romanian hunting tourism remains relatively limited and fragmented. Respondents identify difficulties related to information accessibility, transparency of offers, and online communication, which may restrict the ability of destinations to attract international customers. In a market where purchasing decisions increasingly depend on digital visibility and access to reliable information, limited digital development represents a competitiveness constraint.

Interpretation: The findings support **Proposition 4**, suggesting that digitalisation is perceived as an important factor influencing the competitiveness of hunting tourism destinations.

P₅: Perceived Value → Competitiveness

The findings highlight the central role of perceived value in determining competitiveness. Although Romania benefits from significant natural resources and relatively attractive pricing, these advantages are not fully converted into competitive strength because service quality, organisation, and experience design remain insufficiently developed. Consequently, the destination struggles to position itself within the premium segment of the international hunting tourism market.

Interpretation: The findings support **Proposition 5**, indicating that perceived value represents a key mechanism through which tourism resources are transformed into destination competitiveness.

P₆: Competitiveness → Economic Impact

The results indicate that hunting tourism contributes to local economic development through employment generation, local consumption, and associated service activities. However, the scale and consistency of these economic effects appear to depend on the level of organisation, market positioning, and overall competitiveness of the destination. More competitive and better-integrated tourism systems are likely to generate stronger and more predictable economic benefits.

Interpretation: The findings support **Proposition 6**, suggesting a positive relationship between hunting tourism competitiveness and local economic impact.

Overall Interpretation

Overall, the findings indicate that the main challenge facing Romanian hunting tourism is not the availability of natural resources, but the limited capacity to transform these resources into a coherent, high-value, and internationally competitive tourism product. The relationships identified between service quality, perceived value, pricing structures, digitalisation, and competitiveness demonstrate the need for a more integrated approach to destination development. Strengthening service delivery, improving digital visibility, increasing transparency, and developing experience-oriented packages represent essential steps towards enhancing Romania's position within the international hunting tourism market.

6. CONCLUSIONS

This study examined the competitiveness of hunting tourism in Romania by analysing the relationships between service quality, perceived value, pricing structures, digitalisation, and destination positioning. The findings demonstrate that Romania's main competitive challenge is not the availability of hunting resources, but rather the limited capacity to transform these resources into a coherent, high-value tourism experience. Although the country benefits from significant natural potential, weaknesses related to service integration, infrastructure, standardisation, digital communication, and experience management reduce the perceived value of the offer. The comparative analysis with Hungary highlights that competitiveness in hunting tourism depends less on resource endowment and more on the ability to organise, package, and communicate those resources effectively. Hungary's stronger market position is associated with a more integrated approach, where tourism policies, service delivery, promotion, and destination image are aligned. Romania, by contrast, continues to rely primarily on resource advantages and favourable pricing, without fully developing a premium positioning strategy. The empirical results confirm the importance of service quality as a determinant of perceived value. The negative SERVQUAL gap (-0.66) indicates that current service performance does not fully meet stakeholder expectations, particularly in areas related to infrastructure, accommodation, and personalisation of the experience. At the same time, the findings show that pricing should be understood beyond its monetary dimension. In hunting tourism, perceived value is influenced by the relationship between price, service quality, comfort, effort, uncertainty, and the overall experience delivered. Digitalisation represents another important factor affecting competitiveness. Limited online visibility, insufficient transparency of offers, and weak digital communication reduce the ability of Romanian hunting tourism providers to reach international markets. Strengthening digital platforms, improving access to information, and developing integrated booking and communication systems represent important steps towards increasing market accessibility and customer confidence. The study also highlights the broader economic relevance of hunting tourism, particularly in rural areas. Beyond direct revenues, the sector generates indirect effects through accommodation, gastronomy, transport, and other complementary services. However, these benefits depend on the level of organisation and integration of hunting tourism within the wider local economy. The main contribution of this research lies in identifying the gap between the objective potential of Romanian hunting tourism resources and the value perceived through the delivered experience. By combining the analysis of service quality with economic and strategic dimensions, the study demonstrates that competitiveness is created not only through resource availability, but through the effective management and communication of value. Several limitations should be acknowledged. The empirical analysis is based on a sample of 135 respondents from selected regions of Transylvania and reflects primarily the supply-side perspective of hunting associations and sector stakeholders. Therefore, the findings should not be interpreted as a direct measure of tourist satisfaction. Future research should extend the analysis through larger samples, international tourist perspectives, cross-country comparisons, and advanced quantitative approaches such as regression analysis or structural equation modelling.

Overall, the findings suggest that the future competitiveness of Romanian hunting tourism depends on a transition from a resource-based model towards an experience-oriented and value-driven approach. Improved service integration, stronger digitalisation, clearer market positioning, and closer cooperation between hunting organisations and tourism stakeholders represent essential conditions for transforming Romania's hunting tourism potential into a sustainable and internationally competitive tourism product.

7. APPENDIX A. QUESTIONNAIRE USED IN THE EMPIRICAL RESEARCH ON HUNTING TOURISM SERVICES

Introduction:

This questionnaire aims to assess perceptions regarding the quality, pricing, and competitiveness of hunting tourism services in Romania. The responses are anonymous and will be used exclusively for academic research purposes.

Section 1. General Information

1. What is your role?
☐ Active hunter ☐ Staff ☐ Manager ☐ Other: ____
2. Years of experience
☐ <5 ☐ 5–10 ☐ >10
3. Age group
☐ <30 ☐ 30–50 ☐ >50
4. Have you participated in hunting tourism abroad?
☐ Yes ☐ No
5. If yes, where?
☐ Hungary ☐ Austria ☐ Germany ☐ Other: ____
6. Were you satisfied with the services abroad?
☐ Very satisfied ☐ Satisfied ☐ Neutral ☐ Unsatisfied

Section 2. Service Quality

Please rate the following statements on a scale from 1 (very low) to 5 (very high).

EXPECTATIONS

7. The infrastructure should be modern and well maintained.
1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ 5 ☐
8. Services should be reliable and well organized.
1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ 5 ☐
9. Staff should respond promptly to requests.
1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ 5 ☐
10. Personnel should demonstrate professionalism.
1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ 5 ☐
11. Services should be personalized according to client needs.
1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ 5 ☐
12. Accommodation quality should be high
1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ 5 ☐
13. Food services should meet expectations
1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ 5 ☐
14. Organization should be efficient
1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ 5 ☐

PERCEPTIONS

15. The infrastructure is modern and well maintained.
1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ 5 ☐
16. Services are reliable and well organized.
1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ 5 ☐
17. Staff responds promptly to requests.
1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ 5 ☐

18. Personnel demonstrates professionalism.

1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ 5 ☐

19. Services are personalized according to client needs.

1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ 5 ☐

20. Accommodation quality is satisfactory

1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ 5 ☐

21. Food services are satisfactory

1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ 5 ☐

22. Organization is efficient

1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ 5 ☐

Section 3. Pricing and Perceived Value

23. Price reflect the quality of services offered.

1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ 5 ☐

24. Prices include time/effort/risk

1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ 5 ☐

25. Hunting tourism offers good value for money

1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ 5 ☐

26. Pricing is transparent

1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ 5 ☐

27. Trophy value influences price perception

1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ 5 ☐

Section 4. Digitalization

28. Information is easy to access online

1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ 5 ☐

29. Websites are well structured

1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ 5 ☐

30. Online communication is effective

1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ 5 ☐

31. Social media improves visibility

1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ 5 ☐

32. Digital booking would be useful

1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ 5 ☐

Section 5. Competitiveness

33. Romania is competitive internationally

1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ 5 ☐

34. Romania is competitive vs Hungary

1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ 5 ☐

35. Services meet international standards

1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ 5 ☐

36. Romania can attract premium tourists

1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ 5 ☐

Section 6. Economic Impact

37. Hunting tourism creates jobs

☐ Yes ☐ No

38. It supports local businesses

☐ Yes ☐ No

39. It contributes to local development

☐ Yes ☐ No

Section 7. Hunting Experience & Packages

40. Would you choose a full package (accommodation + meals + hunting)?

☐ Yes ☐ No

41. Do full packages increase perceived value?

☐ Yes ☐ No

42. Do packages simplify decision-making?

☐ Yes ☐ No

43. What type of package do you prefer?

☐ Standard ☐ Premium ☐ Customized

Section 8. General Evaluation

44. Main weaknesses of hunting tourism in Romania

☐ Infrastructure ☐ Organization ☐ Promotion ☐ Services

45. Overall evaluation

☐ Competitive ☐ Partially competitive ☐ Weak

Thank you for your participation!

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