

UNLOCKING SUSTAINABLE TOURISM THROUGH REGIONAL COLLABORATION: OPPORTUNITIES FOR ALBANIA AND THE WESTERN BALKANS

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Abstract: Natural landscapes, cultural heritage, and unique local experiences attract visitors to destinations worldwide – and Albania is no exception. Despite its late emergence as a tourist destination due to historical and political constraints, Albania’s tourism sector has grown rapidly since 1990, becoming one of the country’s most important industries. However, the pace and intensity of this growth have also raised concerns about long-term sustainability, particularly regarding environmental impact and cultural preservation. Today, sustainable growth is a critical priority – not only for Albania but for the entire Western Balkans region. The region shares common challenges and untapped opportunities, and an integrated approach may help unlock greater economic potential while advancing the principles of sustainable development. This study explores whether the development of an integrated Western Balkans tourism destination could support sustainability goals, while proposing a framework that balances economic growth with environmental and cultural preservation. Employing a mixed-methods approach, the research combines qualitative expert interviews with quantitative surveys targeting Albanian citizens and international visitors. The results reveal a significant correlation between investment in green technologies, education, and the belief that regional integration enhances sustainability. Albanian respondents demonstrated strong support for regional cooperation, while international visitors expressed greater satisfaction with the idea of multi-destination travel across the region—suggesting that cross-border tourism experiences are increasingly valued. These findings underscore the value of regional partnerships in fostering stakeholder engagement, promoting sustainable practices, and enhancing Albania’s attractiveness as part of the Western Balkans. The study culminates in the creation of a Balanced Marketing Framework designed to support economic development while safeguarding cultural and environmental assets. This model integrates four core pillars: economic growth, environmental protection, social well-being, and regional collaboration. It offers practical guidance for policymakers and tourism stakeholders, emphasizing the need for dynamic destination management, investment in sustainable infrastructure, and cross-border knowledge exchange. Ultimately, the study illustrates the potential for sustainable tourism growth through regional cooperation and positions Albania’s tourism strategy within a broader, collaborative future.

Keywords: sustainable tourism, regional collaboration, Albania, Western Balkans, marketing model, economic growth, stakeholder engagement, environmental protection

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INTRODUCTION

Tourism is an industry with immense potential for development across various regions of the world. Natural landscapes, cultural heritage, and unique local experiences attract visitors, contributing to economic growth and cultural exchange. This is particularly true for Albania, one of the world’s ancient countries, situated in the Balkan Peninsula in southeast Europe. For much of the 20th century, Albania remained largely unknown to global tourists due to historical and political isolation. Unlike its neighboring countries, Albania’s tourism sector began to develop only after 1990. Following the gradual transition to a market economy in the early 1990s and the rapid improvement of key economic indicators by the late 1990s, the Albanian government focused on maintaining macroeconomic stability, reducing poverty, and achieving sustainable, non-inflationary economic growth (Puci et al., 2023). Only after 1990, tourism has rapidly grown into a significant pillar of economic development. However, despite this growth, new challenges have emerged. Uncontrolled and intensive tourism, not aligned with the country’s resources or long-term needs, risks undermining Albania’s sustainable development goals.

Today, achieving a balance between economic growth, environmental preservation, and social well-being has become a universal objective for tourism development (Dwyer, 2020; Sharpley, 2020). Many countries are increasingly aligning their tourism strategies with the principles of sustainable development (Singh et al., 2024; Wani et al., 2024). This shift focuses on fostering harmony between visitor satisfaction, local community interests, and environmental protection. These goals are reflected in the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly SDG 17, which emphasizes “partnerships for the goals” (Buhalis et al., 2023). Achieving sustainability is a formidable challenge for developing

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countries like Albania, where economic growth often takes precedence. However, collaborative opportunities with neighboring countries may offer a pathway toward sustainable tourism.

This study investigates whether the integration of Albania into a collaborative Western Balkans tourism framework could promote sustainable development. A shared regional vision, harmonized legislation, and joint investment initiatives may enhance the economic and environmental resilience of the region. This aligns with the findings of Knežević et al. (2024), who highlight that Western Balkans economies can achieve greater competitiveness and sustainability in tourism by fostering regional collaboration, particularly in the post-COVID-19 context. Cela et al. (2022) argue that despite the Western Balkans' immense natural beauty and cultural diversity, the region lacks a cohesive regional branding strategy to position itself as a unified tourism destination. Their research highlights the necessity of developing a holistic marketing approach to strengthen regional brand identity and enhance sustainable tourism initiatives.

The present research focuses on exploring how tourism stakeholders in Albania perceive the potential of such collaboration and whether it could lead to balanced, long-term growth. The primary objective of this research is to design a sustainable marketing model that supports Albania's tourism development while fostering collaboration within the Western Balkans. The model aims to balance economic growth with environmental protection and social well-being, contributing to the broader goals of sustainable tourism. By investigating the perspectives of Albanian stakeholders, this study seeks to identify key elements necessary for harmonized regional tourism.

According to the UN World Tourism Organization (UNWTO), tourism is a social, cultural, and economic phenomenon that involves the movement of people to locations outside their usual environment for leisure, business, or professional purposes (UNWTO, 2024). In recent years, sustainability has become an integral part of this definition, emphasizing the importance of protecting the environment and respecting local communities. Sustainable tourism extends beyond visitor satisfaction; it prioritizes the long-term welfare of host communities and ecosystems.

As a developing country, Albania faces obstacles in achieving sustainability independently. The engagement of diverse stakeholders, including business owners, government agencies, residents, and researchers, is essential for overcoming these challenges. At the global level, collaborative opportunities and regional partnerships can accelerate this process. Therefore, this study examines whether an integrated Western Balkans destination can drive sustainable development in Albania and proposes strategic steps to achieve this vision. The methodology employed in this research includes both secondary and primary analysis, utilizing qualitative and quantitative approaches. The findings contribute to the development of a new marketing strategy model for Albania, which integrates four balanced pillars: economic growth, environmental preservation, social well-being, and regional collaboration. This model not only highlights the benefits of partnership but also envisions Albania as a resilient and sustainable tourism destination within the Western Balkans.

LITERATURE REVIEW

This section outlines the theoretical foundation of the study and highlights key knowledge that informs the central research question. The integration of theoretical insights with primary research results plays a crucial role in shaping a new marketing model for Albania. This model incorporates economic, environmental, and social dimensions, alongside the concept of Albania as part of an integrated Western Balkans destination.

International Tourism Development and Sustainability

In 2024, the tourism industry ranked among the world's ten largest sectors (IBISWorld, 2024), contributing significantly to both global economic performance and employment. According to the World Travel & Tourism Council (WTTC, 2025), the sector generated a total of US\$10.9 trillion in global GDP - accounting for approximately 10% of the global economy. It also supported 357 million jobs worldwide, representing roughly 1 in every 10 jobs.

This remarkable growth is part of a long-term upward trend. As noted by the UN World Tourism Organization (UNWTO, 2020), international tourist arrivals surged from just 25 million in 1950 to 1.5 billion in 2019. Although this trajectory was temporarily disrupted by the COVID-19 pandemic beginning in late 2019, the recovery has been swift.

By 2024, international tourism had nearly fully rebounded. According to the UN Tourism World Tourism Barometer (January 2025), global tourist arrivals reached 99% of pre-pandemic levels, with many destinations even surpassing their 2019 performance. Tourism has become a transformative force, influencing economies, societies, and environments. As Williams (2014) notes in "Tourism Geography", tourism touches almost every corner of the globe, shaping both landscapes and communities. In the early stages of the tourism boom, little attention was given to its environmental or socio-cultural impacts. Today, however, the global community faces a "triple planetary crisis" of climate change, biodiversity loss, and pollution, as highlighted in the Global Foresight Report by UNEP and the International Science Council (UN Environment, 2024). Tourism is not a static or isolated phenomenon; it reflects broader patterns of development and change. As Williams (2009) points out, tourism can drive socio-cultural transformation by influencing and being influenced by diverse participants and institutions. The interplay between economic growth, social well-being, and environmental protection aligns with the triple bottom line framework, emphasizing sustainable development as a global priority (Savitz & Weber, 2013b). The interconnected nature of global issues such as deforestation, water scarcity, pandemics, and poverty underscores the urgency for sustainable practices. Awareness is growing, particularly among younger generations, who are increasingly engaged in sustainability efforts. This era of sustainability demands collective action to secure a better future for all (Savitz & Weber, 2013a).

The Triple Bottom Line and Sustainable Development Goals

Interpretations of sustainability range from zero-growth perspectives, which advocate against development, to

approaches that emphasize technology and resource management to achieve sustainability (Wall & Mathieson, 2006). Sharpley (2009) advocates for an integrated approach that considers economic, social, political, cultural, and ecological contexts, prioritizing long-term impacts and ethical considerations. Despite skepticism regarding the true sustainability of tourism (Hall & Page, 2006; Weaver, 2005), there is consensus that growth managed within resource limits offers the best path forward. Murphy (2005) outlines essential principles for sustainable tourism development, including:

- Ensuring renewable resources are not depleted faster than they can be replenished.
- Protecting and maintaining biodiversity.
- Valuing the aesthetic and cultural appeal of environments.
- Respecting local cultures and involving communities in development processes.
- Promoting equity in the distribution of tourism benefits and costs.

These foundational principles continue to shape the modern definition of sustainable tourism, which emphasizes the need to balance economic, social, and environmental dimensions (UNWTO, 2024b).

Tourism in Albania and The Challenge of Sustainable Development

Albania's future lies in sustainable tourism development. While the strategies may differ between developed and developing countries, the importance of sustainable growth remains universal. Albania's diverse landscape - featuring coastlines, lakes, and mountains within 28,000 square kilometers - presents opportunities for year-round tourism. With a growing number of visitors, Albania is expanding its tourism infrastructure while striving to maintain a balance with sustainability (Euronews, 2025). Overdevelopment and economic dependency on tourism pose risks to long-term stability. Similar challenges are faced globally in protected natural areas, where increasing tourist flows threaten the ecological integrity of fragile ecosystems (Artemyev et al., 2025; Malatyinszki et al., 2024). As Remenyik et al. (2025) highlight tourism must go beyond balancing growth with sustainability by actively redefining its relationship with nature and local communities. Integrating ecotourism and circular economy principles - such as green energy, closed-loop systems, and cultural engagement - not only reduces environmental impact but also strengthens long-term competitiveness.

Albania was among the first countries to surpass pre-pandemic tourism levels in 2023, attracting significant investment and global interest. With over 21 tourism projects valued at EUR 3.09 billion, Albania is positioning itself as a premier Mediterranean destination (UN Tourism, 2024a). As Bayona (2024), Executive Director of UN Tourism, states, "Investing in Albania is a guide to action, inviting stakeholders to explore the country's rich potential." Tourism's contribution to Albania's GDP rose from 19.9% in 2013 to 27.8% in 2023, creating jobs and boosting national income (Figure 1).

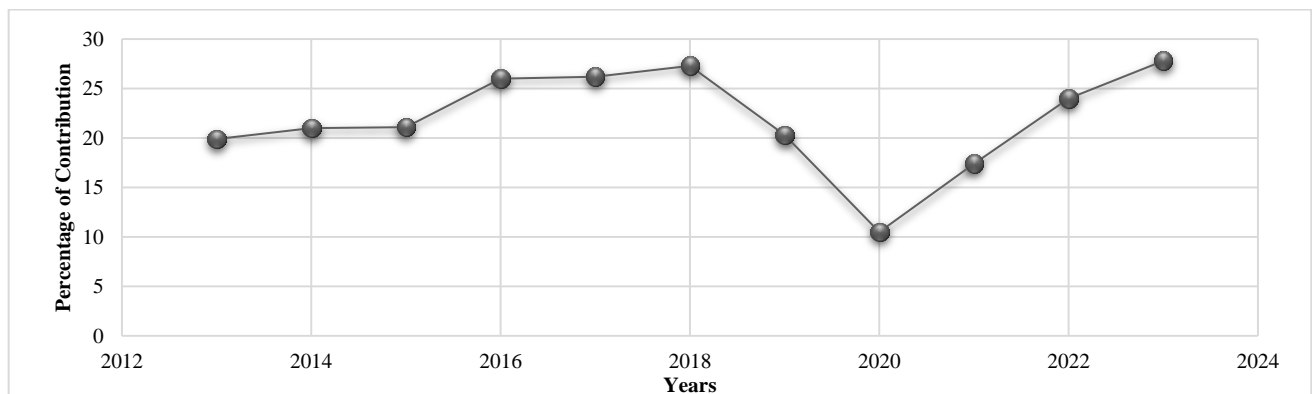


Figure 1. Total contribution of tourism to Albania's GDP
(Source: Albanian Ministry of Tourism (2023), INSTAT (2023), WTO (2024), WTTC (2024))

Table 1 highlights the rising income generated by tourism-related industries between 2020 and 2023. As part of efforts to promote sustainable tourism growth, more than 260 agro-tourism structures have been established across Albania, according to the Deputy Minister of Albania (RTSH, 2025a). However, achieving a balance between economic development, environmental protection, and social equity remains a significant challenge.

Table 1. Incomes generated from travel and tourism (Source: Albanian Ministry of Tourism 2023, INSTAT 2023)

Years	2020	2021	2022	2023
Industries (total) /000 Albanian Leke	42,123	52,654	73,853	87,706.20
Accommodation and Food service industry	34,463	44,104	61,985	72,735.80
Leasing activities	1,971	2,034	2,190	3,255.90
Travel agencies, tour operators, and other reservation activities	5,689	6,516	9,678	11,714.50

Sustainable development, as defined by the Brundtland Report (1987), emphasizes meeting present needs without compromising future generations. Achieving this requires collaboration across sectors and coordinated policy efforts at national and international levels (UNWTO, 2024b). Albania's focus on economic growth often diverts attention from environmental and social concerns, posing risks to long-term sustainability (Table 2).

Table 2. Summary of present economic, environmental, and social challenges in Albania (Source: Source: INSTAT (2021), WB (2022), Halili (2022), The Guardian (2017))

Economic	Environmental	Social & others
Past centralised economy	The absence of regular public transport increases air pollution	Lack of awareness about environmental issues
Long transition phase	Poor air quality in the region of Western Balkans	Increased middle-class emigration
Agriculture dominated economy	Unstudied construction at the expense of green spaces	Limited knowledge about the S.D.G most sectors
High corruption	Extensive use of coal for energy production	Discrepancy between legislation and capacity
High unemployment rate	Underfunded and malfunction of EMS	Absence of studies regarding air pollution and people's health
Extreme poverty rate	Poor waste infrastructure and management	No common framework including principles of a green economy
Poor healthcare system	Reduction in forest volume	Gender inequality
Natural disasters require a large budget	Lack of effective river basin-based water management	Quality of Education
No appointed unit, in the central government structure for environmental taxes	Natural disasters	Risk of commercialization of culture
Acquisition of expensive technologies related to SD	Slow implementation of legal framework for biodiversity	Risk of traditions' loss

The Opportunity of the Western Balkans

Regional collaboration is essential for achieving sustainable development goals, particularly in the tourism sector. The Western Balkans, comprising Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, North Macedonia, Kosovo, Montenegro, and Serbia, represents a region of immense potential. With a combined GDP nearing EUR 100 billion and a population of 20 million, the region's unique cultural and natural assets present significant opportunities for economic integration and sustainable growth (OECD, 2021). Enhanced collaboration across trade, investment, and mobility has already driven economic progress and regional stability. Initiatives led by the European Union have facilitated cooperation, while National Investment Committees across the Balkans track progress on shared projects. Table 3 summarizes the benefits of a collaborative Western Balkans tourism strategy.

Table 3. Benefits from a collaboration of the Western Balkan countries (Source: own research and analysis based on the literature, 2023)

Benefits from a common region
Larger economies are more appropriate for major investments
A diverse destination may be more interesting than one country only
A single investment space with harmonising legislation will ease large investments
Improved reputation of collaborating countries
Trade agreements will facilitate economic transactions
Increased trust among each other, tourists, and outside investors
Improved stability of the region
Higher engagement toward sustainability
Easier approach to global sustainability goals
Employee exchange and skill development
Cultural diversity within a destination

Various types of tourism are currently developing across the Western Balkans region, including coastal ("sea and sand") tourism, cultural tourism, eco-tourism, adventure tourism, and authentic local experiences. However, there is significant potential to further diversify tourism offerings, particularly in areas such as agricultural tourism, MICE tourism (Meetings, Incentives, Conferences, and Events), and wellness and fitness tourism.

These alternative forms remain underdeveloped and warrant greater exploration and investment. A recent example of regional potential is the Trans Dinarica route, promoted by GIZ Albania through social media. This iconic 5,500 km cycling corridor traverses national parks, UNESCO World Heritage sites, and historic villages, showcasing the rich cultural heritage and cuisine of the Balkans. The route connects all Western Balkan countries, representing a unique opportunity for sustainable, cross-border tourism development (RTSH, 2025b).

Health tourism presents another unique opportunity for Balkan countries to enhance their global visibility, as Sziva et al. (2017) argue that countries in the region possess significant potential in this sector. However, as they note, effective brand positioning is necessary to create competitive differentiation, particularly through online communication platforms.

A unified investment space, harmonized legislation, and barrier-free markets can strengthen capital flows and attract foreign investment. Such initiatives foster regional stability and sustainability, aligning with Confucius' timeless wisdom: "Be in harmony yet be different." There is no one-size model that fits all regarding green development, but collaboration and adaptation are necessary to move forward (Kadiu et al., 2022). As the Western Balkans seeks sustainable growth, preserving cultural diversity while promoting collective progress remains a guiding principle. Achieving harmony across

multiple dimensions is essential for sustainable growth. This includes fostering collaboration among stakeholders – businesses, governments, and local communities – as well as nurturing positive relationships between visitors and hosts to enhance tourist experiences while safeguarding local interests (Carida et al., 2022). Regional harmony is equally important, as it supports cross-border partnerships that generate shared economic and environmental benefits (Paiva et al., 2025; Duda, 2024). By addressing these interconnections, Albania and the Western Balkans can develop a sustainable tourism model that not only enhances economic prosperity but also safeguards cultural heritage and natural resources.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The methodology employed in this study integrates both secondary and primary research approaches to provide a comprehensive understanding of the topic. This dual approach allows for in-depth analysis and robust interpretation of the data, ensuring a well-rounded exploration of sustainable tourism development in Albania. That aligns with Çinaj et al. (2022), who combined stakeholder interviews with official documentation to assess the perception of safety and security within Albania's tourism sector. In the present study a mixed-methods approach was utilized, combining qualitative and quantitative data to enable triangulation and enhance the validity of findings. This methodological framework ensured that insights from existing literature were complemented by empirical data collected from primary research (Neuman, 2013).

Secondary research involved an extensive review of academic journals, books, and credible online sources. This literature review formed the foundation for developing a model that interrelates environmental protection, economic growth, human well-being, and regional collaboration as key pillars for sustainable tourism development in Albania.

For primary research, first of all, ten semi-structured interviews with experts in marketing, tourism, and sustainability were conducted. These experts, drawn from both public and private sectors, possess significant practical and theoretical knowledge in the field. The interviews aimed to explore current trends, challenges, and opportunities in sustainable tourism. According to Mayring (2015b), qualitative content analysis is a suitable method for evaluating expert interviews, as it facilitates the systematic analysis of themes, phenomena, and patterns (Ritschl, 2016).

The interviews were designed based on the study's research questions and initial theoretical insights. Key themes included economic, ecological, and social factors influencing sustainable tourism development. The results were analyzed using Mayring's (2015a) qualitative content analysis methodology.

Following the qualitative phase, two hypotheses were formulated to guide the quantitative analysis:

H1: The belief in investing in green development in Albania is associated with the belief that an integrated Western Balkan enhances engagements toward sustainability.

H2: The perception that a tour combining different destinations in the Western Balkan countries is a desirable choice for the respondents is associated with the belief that their touristic trip to Albania is satisfactory.

To test these hypotheses, two quantitative surveys were distributed and analyzed using statistical methods. This empirical approach enabled the integration of quantitative results into the proposed marketing model for sustainable tourism development in Albania. Quantitative analysis followed a structured process:

- Descriptive Analysis – to summarize and describe the main features of the dataset.
- One-Way Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) – to determine if there were significant differences between groups.
- Correlational Analysis – to assess the strength and direction of relationships between variables.
- Multivariable Linear Regression Analysis – to explore the predictive relationship between independent and dependent variables.

Ethical considerations were integral to the research process. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, and strict measures were implemented to ensure the confidentiality and security of collected data. Participants were informed of their rights, and all data collection procedures adhered to established ethical guidelines.

The key ethical guidelines followed in this process were:

a. Informed consent: Participants were informed about the purpose of the research and assured that their participation was voluntary. Verbal or written consent was obtained.

b. Anonymity and data protection: The identities of participants in the primary quantitative research were protected through data anonymization. Participants retained the right to withdraw their data prior to final analysis. All data were handled using password-protected devices.

c. Minimizing discomfort: Questions that could potentially cause discomfort were avoided, and both professional and personal boundaries were respected throughout the research process.

d. Transparency: The aims of the research and the intended use of the data for publication were clearly communicated to all participants.

e. Reciprocity and respect: In recognition of their time and contributions, participating experts were acknowledged and offered access to the research findings or final publication, where appropriate.

RESULTS

Results of the Qualitative Analysis

The qualitative interviews conducted for this study played a significant role in shaping the hypotheses. These insights were subsequently validated through statistical tests and quantitative survey analysis, reinforcing the alignment between expert opinions and broader respondent data.

The insights from Table 4 summarize the primary results of the expert interviews, highlighting critical areas such as tourism growth, sustainability, and the potential of a unified Western Balkans tourism destination.

Table 4. Key findings from expert interviews (Source: Kadiu (2024) Marketing Strategies promoting Sustainable Tourism Development in the country of Albania, Doctoral Dissertation, University of Sopron, p. 106)

Focus Area	Key Insights
Tourism Development in Albania	- Tourism must be prioritized as a key sector contributing significantly to Albania's economic growth
	- Despite economic challenges, embracing sustainable tourism development is essential
	- Active engagement among stakeholders is crucial to fostering adaptive strategies for sustainable development
	- Development must strike a balance between economic growth, environmental preservation, and societal well-being
	- Negative practices, such as unregulated hydropower projects and overdevelopment in tourist areas, must be carefully managed
Sustainable Development & a Common Western Balkans Destination	- Regional collaboration generates added value and enhances sustainability initiatives
	- Preventing over-tourism requires meticulous planning and capacity assessments
	- Conducting carrying capacity studies is essential to inform sustainable development strategies
	- Stakeholders engaged in green development express strong support for integrating Albania into a unified Western Balkans tourism region
Tourism Marketing Strategy for Albania	- Developing a tourism marketing strategy that integrates sustainability is critical for Albania's long-term success
	Including the concept of a shared Western Balkans destination in the national strategy can provide additional benefits, advancing the path to sustainability

Results of the Quantitative Analysis

The quantitative analysis presents the findings from surveys conducted with Albanian citizens and foreign travelers. This section details the results of the national (domestic) sample survey and highlights key statistical outcomes.

Nationals Sample Survey

Survey responses were collected through the "Question Pro Survey" platform and analyzed using SPSS Statistics software. The questionnaire was structured around five primary pillars: Albania's natural resources, economic challenges, the Balkans region, integrated Western Balkans destinations, and sustainability.

Descriptive Statistics and Analysis

A total of 685 responses were completed out of 936 submissions, yielding a completion rate of 63.36%. The demographic breakdown, presented in Table 5, highlights key characteristics of the national sample.

The domestic survey sample was characterized by a notable gender imbalance, with women comprising 72% of the respondents. Age distribution was skewed toward younger participants, with nearly half (47.7%) aged 25 or younger, followed by 27.2% aged 26–41, and 23.1% aged 42–57. In terms of educational attainment, the majority held higher education degrees. Employment sector data show a balanced split, with 42.2% working in the private sector and 38.7% in the public sector. This demographic and socio-economic profile provides important context for interpreting attitudes toward sustainability, tourism development, and regional cooperation.

Table 5. Questionnaire Data – Domestic (Albanian) Sample (Source: authors' research and analysis, 2023)

The questionnaire was viewed	1361
Total responses	936
Responses completed	685
Completion rate	63.36%

One-Way Analysis of Variance (ANOVA)

The ANOVA analysis assessed the relationship between the belief that an integrated Western Balkans enhances sustainability engagement (dependent variable) and the perception of investing in green technologies and education (independent variable). The results, summarized in Table 6, show a statistically significant association at the 0.05 level, indicating that investments in green development correlate with enhanced sustainability engagement.

Table 6. Anova analysis: domestic sample (Source: authors' research and analysis, 2023)

Anova ^{a b}					
Model	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Regression	21.115	4	5.279	4.515	.001 ^b
Residual	795.075	680		1.169	
Total	816.190			684	

a. Dependent Variable: ID b. Predictors: (Constant), What is your highest completed education grade, SC, Gender, Age group

Pearson Chi-Square Test

The Pearson Chi-Square analysis further confirmed a significant relationship between the belief in green investments and the perception of enhanced sustainability through regional collaboration. Table 7 presents the Chi-Square test results, highlighting a highly significant association ($p < .001$). This analysis assesses hypothesis 1, which refers to the association between respondents' perception of investing in innovative technologies and education related to green development with the belief that an integrated Western Balkans enhances engagement toward sustainability.

Table 7. Chi-Square Tests: domestic sample (Source: authors' research and analysis, 2023)

Chi-Square Tests			
Value		df	Asymptotic Significance (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	53.493 ^a	20	<.001
Likelihood Ratio	50.930	20	<.001
Linear-by-Linear Association	15.388	1	<.001
N of Valid Cases	685		

Multivariable Linear Regression

Regression analysis demonstrated a positive and statistically significant relationship between investments in green development and the belief that an integrated Western Balkans enhances sustainability engagement ($B = 0.156$, $p < .001$). This association remains robust even when controlling for demographic factors such as gender, age, and education level.

These findings provide substantial evidence to reject the null hypothesis, reinforcing the connection between green investment initiatives and regional collaboration for sustainable tourism development in Albania.

Table 8. Multivariable linear regression analysis: domestic sample (Source: authors' research and analysis)

Variables	B	β	SE B	t	95.0% Confidence Interval for B Lower Bound	95.0% Confidence Interval for B Upper Bound
Constant	3.938***		0.261	15.087	3.425	4.45
Investing in green development	0.156***	0.149***	0.04	3.914	0.078	0.234
Gender	0.138**	0.057**	0.093	1.477	-0.045	0.322
Age group	0.005	0.004	0.055	0.093	-0.103	0.113
Education	-0.016	-0.012	0.06	-0.273	-0.133	0.101
R square			0.026			
Adjusted R square			0.02			

Internationals sample survey

The responses for the international survey were collected using the "Question Pro Survey" platform and analyzed with SPSS Statistics software. The survey targeted visitors to Albania and potential travelers interested in visiting the country. A total of 249 respondents participated in the international survey. The primary data are presented in Table 9.

Table 9. Questionnaire Data –International (non-Albanian) Sample (Source: authors' research and analysis)

The questionnaire was viewed	387
Total responses	249
Responses closed	249
Completion rate	87.55%

The income distribution of international respondents reveals a relatively affluent participant base. A substantial portion (40.6%) reported an annual income above €20,000, while 28.9% fell within the €12,000–€20,000 range. Only a small share of participants reported lower income levels, with 9.6% earning between €5,000 and €12,000, and just 6.4% earning less than €5,000 annually. This distribution suggests that the majority of surveyed international visitors represent middle- to upper-income groups, which is relevant when assessing their tourism preferences and spending behaviors.

The key variables of interest concerning the potential for sustainable tourism development through an integrated Western Balkans destination are the perception of a satisfactory trip to Albania and the perception that a tour combining different destinations of the Western Balkans is a good option for travelers.

One-Way Analysis of Variance (ANOVA)

The analysis assesses hypothesis 2, aiming to find whether there is a significant association between the dependent variable—satisfaction with trips to Albania—and the independent variable—the belief that a tour combining destinations across the Western Balkans would be a desirable option for travelers. The results of the ANOVA for the international sample are presented in Table 10.

Table 10. Anova analysis: international sample (Source: authors' research and analysis)

Anova ^{a b}						
Model	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.	
1 Regression	3.548	3	1.183	13.759	<.001 ^b	
Residual	17.709	206	.086			
Total	21.257	209				

a. Dependent Variable b. Predictors: (Constant), Age, Independent Variable

If the relationship were not statistically significant, there would be no evidence to confirm hypothesis 2. However, the results indicate a statistically significant association between the two primary variables. The perception of a satisfying trip to Albania increases the likelihood that respondents would prefer a combined tour of Western Balkans destinations. The mean difference is significant at the 0.05 level.

Pearson Chi-Square Test

The Chi-square test evaluated the association between overall satisfaction with a trip to Albania and the belief that a tour combining various Western Balkans destinations would be a desirable option for travelers.

Table 11 presents the results of the Chi-square test. The results confirm a statistically significant association between overall satisfaction with a trip to Albania and the belief in the value of a Western Balkans combined destination tour. Both perceptions align positively, reinforcing hypothesis 2.

Table 11. Chi-Square tests: international sample (Source: authors' research and analysis, 2023)

Chi-Square Tests			
	Value	df	Asymptotic Significance (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	37.050 ^a	4	.000
Likelihood Ratio	27.899	4	.000
Linear-by-Linear Association	29.052	1	.000
N of Valid Cases	215		

Multivariable Linear Regression Analysis

Multivariable linear regression analysis was conducted to further assess the association between perceptions of an integrated Western Balkans destination and satisfaction with Albania's tourism. Table 12 presents the results.

Hypothesis 2 proposed that individuals who view a combined Western Balkans tour favorably are more likely to express satisfaction with their trip to Albania. The analysis revealed that a one-unit increase in the belief that such a tour is desirable corresponds to a 0.135 increase in satisfaction with trips to Albania. These findings indicate that perceptions of an integrated Western Balkans region contribute to higher levels of satisfaction with tourism experiences in Albania. The null hypothesis—suggesting no association between these variables—was rejected at the 0.001 significance level, while controlling for demographic factors to ensure precision. This highlights the potential for Albania's tourism sector to benefit from collaborative regional strategies, fostering greater development, growth, and sustainability.

Table 12. Multivariable linear regression of association between perception of WB combined destination tour as a good option and satisfaction with touristic trip to Albania (Source: authors' research and analysis)

Variables	B	β	SE B	t
Constant	0.331**	0.127**		2.6
WB combined destination tour	0.135***	0.024***	0.36	5.64
Income	0.054*	0.024*	0.155	2.211
Age	-0.005*	0.002*	-0.157	-2.245
R square			0.167	
Adjusted R square			0.155	

Key Findings and Strategic Implications

Findings from both samples revealed consistent views regarding the benefits of an integrated Western Balkans destination and its potential contribution to sustainable tourism and economic growth in Albania. The statistically significant results from both national and international respondents highlight critical insights that could inform strategies for sustainable tourism development. Albanian respondents expressed that the concept of an integrated Western Balkans destination fosters greater engagement with sustainability initiatives. This perspective aligns with their belief in investing in innovative technologies and education related to green development. A stronger belief in green development correlates with the perception that regional collaboration enhances sustainability efforts. The regression analysis indicates a positive slope of 0.156, confirming the statistical significance of this relationship.

Similarly, international respondents who viewed a multi-destination tour across the Western Balkans as desirable also reported higher satisfaction with their trips to Albania. The analysis shows that a one-unit increase in the belief that such a tour is a good option corresponds to a 0.135 increase in satisfaction with tourism experiences in Albania.

Figure 2 illustrates the association between these key variables, derived from empirical research. These findings reinforce the notion that fostering regional partnerships and integrated tourism offerings supports sustainable tourism growth and economic development in Albania. This conclusion aligns with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goal 17 (UN, 2023), which emphasizes the importance of strengthening global partnerships to achieve sustainable development. By investing in green technologies and educational initiatives, Albania and the Western Balkans can collectively advance their sustainability objectives, contributing to long-term economic resilience.

The Balanced Marketing Model for Sustainable Tourism Development in Albania

The foundation of Albania's new tourism marketing strategy lies in showcasing the country's rich offerings, encouraging tourists to slow down, reconnect, and explore unique places while engaging with extraordinary local communities.

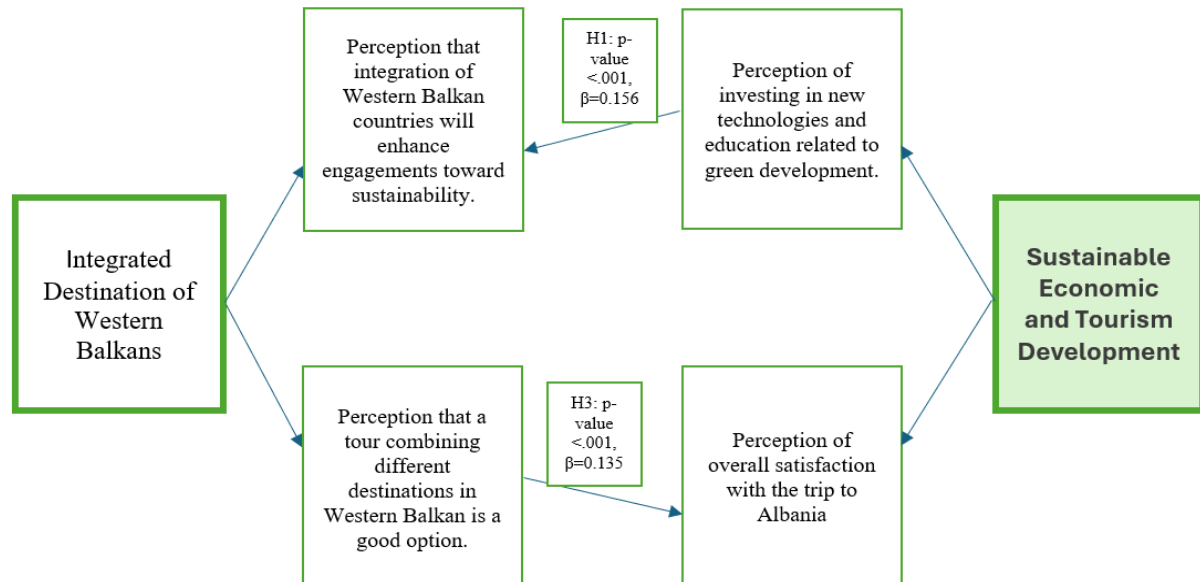


Figure 2. Association Between Key Variables Analyzed Through Empirical Research (Source: Kadiu (2024) Marketing Strategies promoting Sustainable Tourism Development in the country of Albania, Doctoral Dissertation, University of Sopron)

However, the key challenge is fostering tourism growth that respects and preserves the environment and the cultural heritage of local populations. The integration of the Western Balkans presents a significant opportunity, offering Albania and its neighboring countries a pathway to collective advantages in sustainable tourism and broader economic development. The Balanced Marketing Model, illustrated in Figure 3, was developed through insights gained from the literature review and empirical survey results. This model addresses the central research question: What framework can guide the marketing strategy for sustainable tourism development in Albania?

The model emphasizes the critical role of tourism stakeholders, urging them to collaborate actively in the development process. As Aman et al. (2024) highlight, destinations must adopt innovative and sustainable branding strategies to address environmental concerns, meet changing visitor expectations, and remain competitive in the global tourism market. These insights further support the rationale behind Albania's Balanced Marketing Model.

The model also highlights the importance of the market offering—comprising essential elements aimed at enhancing performance and delivering value not only to tourists but also to industry players and local collaborators.

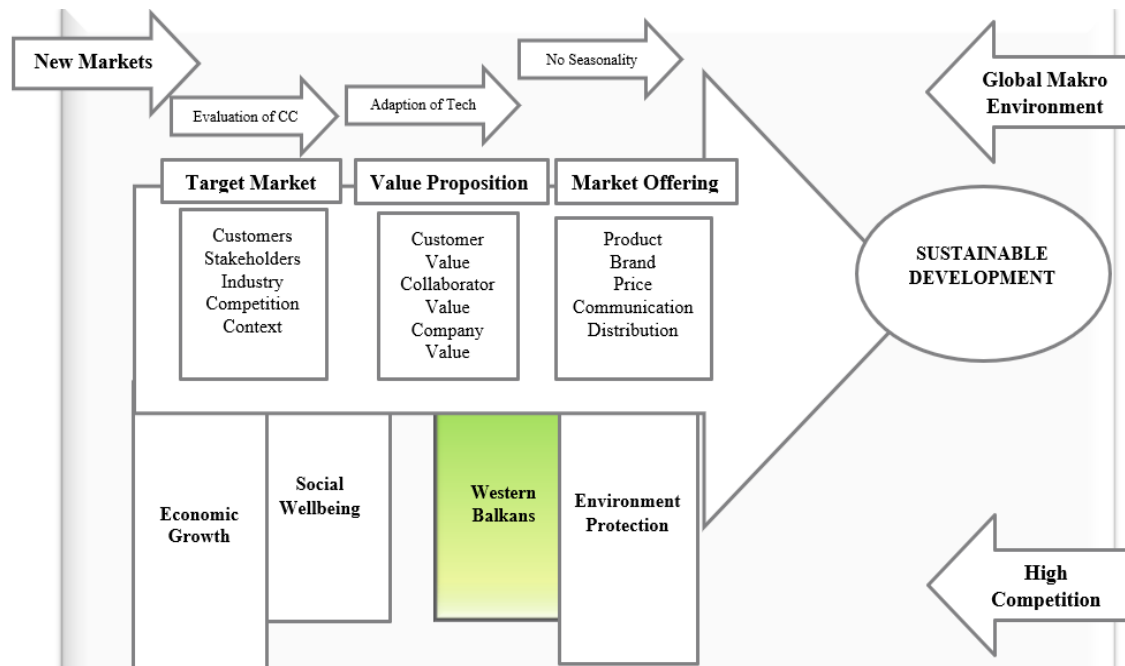


Figure 3. The Balanced Marketing Model for Sustainable Tourism Development in Albania (Source: Kadiu (2024) Marketing Strategies promoting Sustainable Tourism Development in the country of Albania, Doctoral Dissertation, University of Sopron)

Based on: Chernev (2019), Kotler et al. (2022), Chernev & Kotler (2018), UNWTO (2022), UNWTO (2019), World Trade Organization (2017), Williams & Lew (2014), WTTC, Albania (2022)

At the core of the model are four equally weighted pillars. While three align with globally recognized pillars—economic growth, environmental preservation, and social well-being—a fourth pillar specific to Albania emphasizes regional collaboration among the six Western Balkan countries, including Albania.

These four pillars are of equal significance and must remain in balance throughout the development process to ensure sustainable tourism growth. This holistic approach not only aligns with global sustainability practices but also leverages regional partnerships, fostering shared progress and long-term resilience.

DISCUSSION

The Western Balkans, positioned at the crossroads between Eastern and Western Europe, remains a region marked by economic, environmental, and social vulnerabilities. Despite notable progress, countries within this region continue to grapple with persistent challenges. A comprehensive understanding of each country and the broader region is essential for fostering collaboration and sustainable growth. International researchers often view the Western Balkans as a fragmented region for study, facing challenges such as limited infrastructure and the politicization of certain topics (Dzankic, 2023). However, as Petrov & Dimitrov (2022) note, while infrastructural deficits remain, investments in sustainable tourism corridors between Albania, Montenegro, and North Macedonia have begun to address these challenges by facilitating eco-tourism routes. Also, as noted by Williams (2014), tourism can drive socio-cultural and economic transformation in regions that actively engage in sustainable practices and collaboration. This reflects the potential for tourism to serve as a unifying force, fostering development even in resource-constrained areas.

This study aimed to establish a link between regional collaboration within the Western Balkans and sustainable tourism development. Findings align with prior research emphasizing the value of cooperation in sectors like tourism, energy, and finance. Regional integration and collective promotion of tourism, as highlighted by The Balkan Forum (2024), could significantly enhance economic stability and generate long-term growth for each nation.

This aligns with recent findings by Knežević et al. (2024), who emphasize that cross-border tourism initiatives in the Western Balkans not only enhance economic performance but also encourage sustainable environmental practices by pooling resources across borders. Economic growth in the Western Balkans has accelerated in recent years, outpacing Western Europe and the EU average (Uvalić, 2023). This economic upswing can be attributed to the EU's unilateral trade liberalization in 2001, which bolstered exports and deepened economic integration. Nonetheless, Kennell et al. (2021) stress that such growth must align with sustainable tourism policies, ensuring that the rapid expansion of the sector does not undermine environmental and social well-being. Kontic & Maksimovic (2023) further emphasize that tourism plays a crucial role in driving economic growth in the Western Balkans.

Their research demonstrates a direct relationship between tourism, renewable energy consumption, and economic expansion, reinforcing the importance of sustainable practices for long-term development.

Despite notable gains, individual Western Balkans countries remain vulnerable to sustainability challenges. As Porfido (2020) notes, tourism plays a central role in economic development across the region, but a collective approach is necessary to stabilize growth and mitigate risks associated with fragmented efforts. A shared regional tourism framework could support more sustainable progress, ensuring that no single country bears the burden alone.

Visegrad Insight (2022) outlines five potential scenarios for the Western Balkans by 2030, all emphasizing the necessity of cooperation to secure a prosperous future. Even in less optimistic scenarios, regional collaboration is seen as a critical mechanism for stability and resilience. The "banding together" scenario, if embraced by all six countries, could catalyze regional development, reinforcing sustainable tourism initiatives.

Global challenges, including climate change and economic instability, are reshaping the tourism landscape. Caporale et al. (2023) found that the COVID-19 pandemic significantly altered tourism patterns in Southeastern Europe, including Albania, by increasing persistence and diminishing seasonal trends. This disruption highlights the need for adaptive strategies in the region's tourism planning to counterbalance long-term structural changes in tourist arrivals and overnight stays. This mirrors Williams & Lew's (2014) assertion that tourism is both a driver and a consequence of socio-economic change, reinforcing the importance of regional partnerships in addressing future crises.

The perspectives of Albanian stakeholders gathered in this study reflect a shared belief that regional collaboration is essential for advancing sustainable tourism and economic growth. Respondents indicated a strong willingness to invest in green technologies, education, and sustainable practices if Albania becomes part of a broader Western Balkans framework. This aligns with Savitz (2013b), who notes that sustainable development flourishes through integrated, long-term strategies involving multiple stakeholders. If these strategies are embraced by the entire Balkan region, they would provide a significant advantage. An integrated destination is perceived as more compact and secure, fostering trust among travelers. The future should not be seen as a dilemma between economic growth and environmental protection but rather as a commitment to both simultaneously (Kadiu, 2021).

Albanian tourism industry stakeholders recognize the country's potential but also acknowledge gaps in public awareness regarding sustainability. Bridging this knowledge gap requires collaboration between local and international researchers, policymakers, and private sector leaders. As UNWTO (2024) emphasizes, sustainable tourism development must address economic, environmental, and socio-cultural aspects to ensure long-term viability.

Ultimately, the development of an integrated Western Balkans tourism destination is inextricably linked to sustainability and stakeholder collaboration. If embraced by governments, businesses, and local communities, this approach could foster inclusive growth and long-term prosperity.

CONCLUSION

This study highlights the significance of regional collaboration in fostering sustainable tourism development in Albania and across the Western Balkans. By integrating quantitative and qualitative findings, the research underscores that cooperation among countries in the region can drive economic growth, environmental sustainability, and long-term resilience. The quantitative analysis revealed a strong link between Albanian respondents' belief in investing in green technologies and education and their perception that an integrated Western Balkans enhances sustainability efforts. A positive correlation indicates that greater investment in sustainable practices aligns with broader regional collaboration goals. Similarly, international respondents who favored multi-destination tours within the Western Balkans expressed higher satisfaction with their travel experiences in Albania.

A central contribution of this study is the Balanced Marketing Framework, designed to guide Albania's sustainable tourism strategy. This framework introduces a fourth pillar—regional collaboration—alongside the established pillars of economic growth, environmental protection, and social well-being. By emphasizing cooperation among the six Western Balkans countries, the model aims to leverage shared resources, promote cross-border tourism, and drive long-term development. The findings align with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goal 17 (UN SDG 17), which highlights the importance of partnerships to achieve sustainable development. This study affirms that Albania's path toward sustainable tourism depends on fostering closer ties with neighboring countries, investing in green technologies, and advancing educational initiatives focused on sustainability. Based on the findings, the following recommendations are proposed to support sustainable tourism in Albania and the Western Balkans:

- **Dynamic Destination Management:** Implement adaptive frameworks to monitor visitor capacity, preserve resources, and prevent overcrowding.
- **Impact Monitoring:** Continuously assess tourism's environmental and social impacts to inform policy decisions and ensure long-term sustainability.
- **Waste Management and Renewable Energy:** Invest in waste management infrastructure and renewable energy initiatives to minimize tourism's environmental footprint.
- **Cultural and Local Engagement:** Promote local products, cultural heritage, and community-based tourism to enhance visitor experiences and stimulate local economies.
- **Knowledge Sharing and Education:** Foster cross-border collaboration among researchers, policymakers, and industry leaders to advance sustainability awareness and best practices.
- **Sustainable Infrastructure:** Regulate tourism infrastructure development to align with sustainability goals, preventing overdevelopment and preserving cultural heritage.

This study concludes that Albania's path to sustainable tourism lies in strengthening regional partnerships within the Western Balkans. By embracing collaboration, investing in green technologies, and promoting sustainability-focused education, Albania can enhance its tourism sector, attract greater investment, and contribute to regional stability. The Balanced Marketing Framework developed through this research offers a strategic roadmap for achieving these objectives,

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