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**Impact of an integrated tourism concept to strengthen the
perceived quality of life in rural destinations**

PhD DISSERTATION

By: Mag. (FH) Daniel Binder

Supervisors:

Dr. habil. Zoltán Szabó PhD MBA

Dr. habil. Árpád Papp-Váry PhD

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Alexandre Lámfalussy Faculty of Economics
István Széchenyi Economics and Management Doctoral School

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Impact of an integrated tourism concept to strengthen the perceived quality of life in rural destinations

Head of the doctoral school:

Prof. Dr. Csilla Obádovics, PhD

Supervisors of the dissertation:

Dr. habil. Zoltán Szabó PhD MBA

Dr. habil. Árpád Papp-Váry PhD

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Signature of the supervisor 1

.....

Signature of the supervisor 2

Abstract

Destinations in rural areas have to be competitive on the market on the one hand and, on the other hand, have to meet the increasing demands of residents, stakeholders, and businesses. Improving the quality of life of the population is becoming a key factor to be attractive as a place to live and work in the future. Threatening migration tendencies force responsible persons of regions and destinations to establish common habitat management. The implementation of sustainability goals to improve the population's quality of life is increasingly perceived as a decisive competitive factor. This thesis examines the relationships between competitive rural destinations, the fulfillment of sustainable development claims, and the influence on residents' perceived quality of life. Incorporating concepts of integrated management, it will be possible to start and enrich a broad scientific discourse. In order to achieve the research objectives, a multi-method approach was adopted. Based on expert interviews, hypotheses were developed. Using quantitative methods, questionnaire results were analyzed in the first stage, and data from a created database were analyzed in a second. The hypotheses were tested using linear regression models. Based on all the research results, an attempt was made to present a holistic model of a region. The results showed that the perception of the impact of tourism within the sample is significantly related to the subjectively perceived quality of life. Economic impacts of tourism are most important. It was also proven that the higher the income from tourism, the higher the satisfaction with tourism is. The study also shows that tourism indicators at the level of service regions have no significant influence on the quality of life of the Austrian population. The developed framework Quality of life-promoting model of integrated rural tourism shows how a destination can be managed competitively and at the same time strengthen the quality of life of the population. Considering a common vision, a destination that sees itself as a living space and is developed as such can positively contribute to increasing the quality of life of the people. However, this can only be achieved if existing political and structural hurdles are overcome, and the principles of integrated and thus sustainable development are implemented without exclusion.

Key Words

Destination management, competitiveness, quality of life, integrated management systems, sustainability, regional development, Austria

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1. INTRODUCTION

Before the Covid-19 pandemic, tourism was a steadily growing economic branch worldwide, and its economic impact was around 10.4% of global gross domestic product (GDP) by 2019. About 334 million people worked directly or indirectly in tourism (WTTC, 2021). The pandemic highlighted that tourism plays a direct or indirect role in many people's lives (Qiu, Park, Li, & Song, 2020). Above all, however, it became clear what far-reaching ramifications changes in the tourism industry can have and how comprehensively tourism policy must be thought through and implemented (Fotiadis, Polyzos, & Huan, 2021).

The fact that tourism impacts the population has already been described in many studies (Uysal, Perdue, & Sirgy, 2012). On the other hand, relatively new is the demand that destinations and living environments for residents must be developed together (Pechlaner, 2019b). This demand is based, among other things, on excesses such as overtourism or climate-damaging influences of travel developments and tourist flows (Mihalic, 2020), where people perceive tourist influences as disturbing, resistance increases, and can also negatively influence the guests' vacation experience (Herntrei, 2019). That notwithstanding, tourism can generate added value in rural regions, which are often infrastructurally and industrially underdeveloped (Bätzing, Perlik, & Dekleva, 1996; Berger, 2013).

Since rural regions are increasingly affected by outward migration, measures to make locations more attractive are increasingly necessary (Oedl-Wieser, Fischer, & Dax, 2019). It is often young, well-educated people who leave rural regions. However, this group is crucial to the innovative and creative economic output that rural areas so urgently need (Kämpf, 2010). In examining out-migration trends, Fildschuster et al. (2016) argue that in regional development, special attention should be paid to the importance of those factors that influence the quality of life, education, and employment. So it can be concluded that, quality of life is increasingly becoming a decisive factor in making locations attractive for residents, companies, and visitors (Pechlaner, Fischer, & Hammann, 2006).

The importance of quality of life as an essential element of a sustainable destination is undisputed (Woo, Kim, & Uysal, 2015). However, it is also essential to compare the funds used with the outcome and weigh whether an investment contributes to development in a region sufficiently to be worth the investment (Chilla, Kühne, & Neufeld, 2016; Nunkoo, 2016). These are decisions that companies also have to make.

Integrated management systems aim to structure complex processes in companies and thus make them easier to influence and justify decisions (Zeng, 2011). While destinations are not businesses, many of the basic principles of management can also be applied in this sector (Bieger, Derungs, Riklin, & Widmann, 2006).

In summary, the question arises of how the competing demands on a destination in the form of guest expectations can be linked in the best possible way with the requirements for the development of the living environment in order to increase the quality of life of the residents. Moreover, today, more than ever, this question must clearly take into account the basic principles of sustainable development and satisfy the multiple interests of external and internal stakeholders.

2. RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Uysal, Sirgy, Woo & Kim (2016) see a need for further research to identify subjective and objective influences on the quality of life in destinations. Also, current developments (e.g., climate change, overtourism) make increased attention to the tourism development of rural areas even more important (Brandl, Berg, Lachmann-Falkner, Herntrei, & Steckenbauer, 2021). Therefore, this dissertation attempts to bridge the gap between the development of tourism in rural areas and its impact on residents' quality of life. The elementary research question that underpins all the activities of this thesis is, therefore:

How can integrated tourism development contribute to strengthening the perceived quality of life of residents of a rural destination?

To make this research question comprehensible and workable in its entirety, the question has been broken down into parts in the form of sub-questions to be answered individually and then blended into an overall view in answer to the main question.

Sub-question 1: What relationships exist between the tourism development of a region and the perceived quality of life of its residents?

As the literature study shows, it is sufficiently proven that there are significant correlations between the tourism development of a destination and the population's quality of life. Especially when destinations show characteristics of overtourism, the quality of life for parts of the inhabitants is worsened. Proven research tools and measurement scales also show that those segments of the population involved in the economic value chain of tourism in a region report suffering less from the negative impacts of tourism. However, since tourism development in rural regions can only be

successful in the long term if all people involved benefit from it in a sustainable way (economically, socially, ecologically), it is essential to deal with the issues of integrated tourism development. This leads to sub-question 2.

Sub-question 2: How can a model of integrated tourism development in rural regions look like?

Based on both a literature review and results of the previous research approaches, a model is developed that includes the elements of (1) integration management, (2) rural tourism, (3) destination management, (4) sustainability, and (5) quality of life of residents.

3. METHODOLOGY

To comprehensively answer the main research question and the sub-questions, a multi-stage empirical procedure is applied.

Table 1: Research process

Aims (A)	Phase	Process	Results (R)
A1: Status quo of the literature	P1	LITERATURE ANALYSIS	R1: Current status of the literature
A2: Answering Sub-Question 1	P2	QUALITATIVE INTERVIEWS	R2: Categories of tourism impact on quality of life in rural areas
	P3	QUANTITATIVE SURVEY	R3: Subjective impact of tourism on quality of life
	P4	DATA ANALYSES	R4: Objective impact of tourism on quality of life
A3: Answering Sub-Question 2	P5	FRAMEWORK DEVELOPMENT	R5: Quality of life-promoting model of integrated rural tourism
A4: Answering main research question	P6	FINAL CONCLUSIONS	R6: Scientific contribution R7: Professional implications R8: Further research opportunities

Source: Own research, 2021

3.1. QUALITATIVE INTERVIEWS

To make the research field comprehensible in its complexity, qualitative research methods are applied. The following table provides an overview of the experts interviewed.

Table 2: Partners of expert interviews

Expert	Job title	Subject
Mag. (FH) Jörg PFEIFER	CEO Tourism Association Bad Waltersdorf, Styria, Austria	Rural tourism development
Mag. (FH) Mathias SCHATTLLEITNER	CEO Tourism Association Schladming-Dachstein; President Austrian Tourism Associations (BÖTM)	Supraregional tourism development
Mag. Michael FEND	CEO Association to promote the region "Steirisches Vulkanland"; LEADER Management	Regional development (LEADER)
Prof. Dr. Christian BAUMGARTNER	Professor for sustainable tourism, FH Graubünden; CEO response & ability	Sustainable tourism development

Source: Own research, 2020

The number of experts interviewed was decided based on the research questions, with content expertise being responsible for selecting experts. Gender-specific characteristics are random and in no way arbitrary. For data protection reasons, all recordings were deleted from all servers and storage media after transcription.

3.2. QUANTITATIVE SURVEY

A quantitative survey is used to address the research goal A2: *Answering Sub-Question 1*. Since the population for the present survey can be defined as all people living in rural areas in Austria, a representative study was not conducted due to the confusing parameters, and instead, the questionnaire was distributed using the snowball method (Ritschl & Stamm, 2016, p. 63). The resulting ad hoc sample (Berger-Grabner, 2016, p. 165) does not allow any conclusions to be drawn about a specific population and thus does not claim representativeness. For the distribution of the questionnaire, a written online survey was chosen due to the advantages of the medium (Magerhans, 2016).

3.3. DATA ANALYSES

To further address aim A2: *Answering Sub-Question 1*, a stand-alone dataset was generated. Based on the collected data, figures of tourism intensity were calculated (Freyer, 2015, p. 535). All key figures are available at the level of the political districts of Austria for further analysis. Since the goal of the data analysis was a comparison between tourism data and quality of life data, another data set was used in a further step that depicts parameters of the quality of life of the Austrian population. These data are available with the survey of the ATHIS - Austrian Health Interview Survey 2019 (BMSGPK, 2020). The ATHIS dataset represents the Austrian population aged 15 years and older in private households and includes about 15,000 individuals. The dataset includes data on (1) health status, (2) health care, (3) health determinants, (4)

socio-demographic characteristics, and (5) additional questions (e.g., quality of life according to WHOQOL-BREF). Since the ATHIS 2019 data set was created and analyzed based on Austrian service regions and not on the district level, the tourism data set was adapted to the service region level.

3.4. FRAMEWORK DEVELOPMENT

To address the research goal A3: *Answering Sub-Question 2* a framework was developed. This model was based on the one hand on the literature research and on the other hand on the findings of the quantitative studies.

4. RESULTS OF THE EMPIRICAL RESEARCH

4.1. RESULTS OF THE QUALITATIVE SURVEY

The highly condensed results are presented based on the thematic complexes defined in the methods chapter.

Table 3: Expert interviews main results

Tourism & Regional Development	Tourism development, understood as habitat development creates regional added value. Honest communication between tourism developers, the population, and stakeholders creates trust and a basis for a solution-oriented discussion culture. Quality of life, regional and tourism development must be developed in balance. Negative trends, such as the devaluation of land or the excessive increase in the cost of housing and the problem of second homes, must be recognized at an early stage.
Sustainable Rural Tourism	Closely observe and analyze signs of overtourism and migration tendencies of the population and discuss and take countermeasures at an early stage. Under ecological, economic, and socio-cultural aspects, the sustainable creation of offers is seen as a competitive advantage in future-oriented destinations. Mobility requirements on arrival and departure and during the stay are identified as central challenges. Those who manage to create sensible, acceptable, and intelligent solutions have a competitive advantage.
Quality of Life	Well-coordinated structures (region, destination, politics) enable a joint, long-term growth of the region, especially regarding the offer and quality of life. The central issue is the shortage of skilled workers and the provision and acceptance of job opportunities in regional tourism. The motto is: "Leading by example!" An adequate, future-oriented set of indicators is needed to measure successful rural tourism.

Source: Own research and analysis, 2020

4.2. HYPOTHESES

Derived from the central results of the qualitative survey, the following hypotheses were formulated.

H1₁: Socio-economic variables (i.e., Belonging in the region in years, Socioeconomic Status, and Earnings from tourism) influence the status of perceived satisfaction with tourism.

H1₀: Socio-economic variables (i.e., Belonging in the region in years, Socioeconomic Status, and Earnings from tourism) do not influence the status of perceived satisfaction with tourism.

H2₁: The perceived impact of tourism (i.e., Economic impact, Socio-cultural impact, Ecological impact) influences the perceived quality of life.

H2₀: The perceived impact of tourism (i.e., Economic impact, Socio-cultural impact, Ecological impact) does not influence the perceived quality of life.

H3₁: Variables of tourism intensity (e.g., Arrivals per inhabitant, Density of overnight stays, ...) in a region influence the residents' perceived quality of life.

H3₀: Variables of tourism intensity (e.g., Arrivals per inhabitant, Density of overnight stays, ...) in a region do not influence the residents' perceived quality of life.

4.3. RESULTS OF THE QUANTITATIVE RESEARCH

In order to test hypothesis *H1* and hypothesis *H2*, a quantitative questionnaire was used. Based on the research results to be achieved, a model for hypothesis testing was developed (see Figure 1). This model is based on the findings of the literature review and the results of the qualitative research. All continuous variables were expressed as mean \pm standard deviation and categorical variables as frequency (%; unless otherwise stated). In order to test hypothesis 1 (*H1*), a multiple linear regression was applied. The score *Satisfaction with tourism* was included as a dependent variable in the model. The demographic variables *Belonging to the region in years*, *Socio-economic Status* and *Earnings from tourism* were used as predictor (independent) variables. In order to test hypothesis 2 (*H2*) again, a multiple linear regression was applied. The score *Perceived quality of life* was included as a dependent variable in the model. The demographic variables *Perceived economic impact of tourism*, *Perceived socio-cultural impact of tourism*, and *Perceived ecological impact of tourism* and the *Socio-economic Status* were used as predictor (independent) variables. The tested model *Influence of tourism impact on the perceived quality of life* can be seen in the following figure:

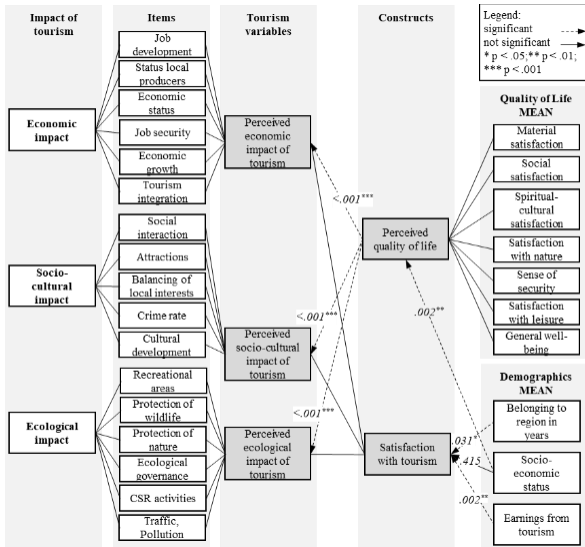


Figure 1: Tested model of the influence of tourism impact on the perceived quality of life

Source: Own research and analysis, 2021

4.4. RESULTS OF DATA ANALYSES

In order to test hypothesis *H3*, a multiple linear regression was applied. For this process, a model for hypothesis testing was developed.

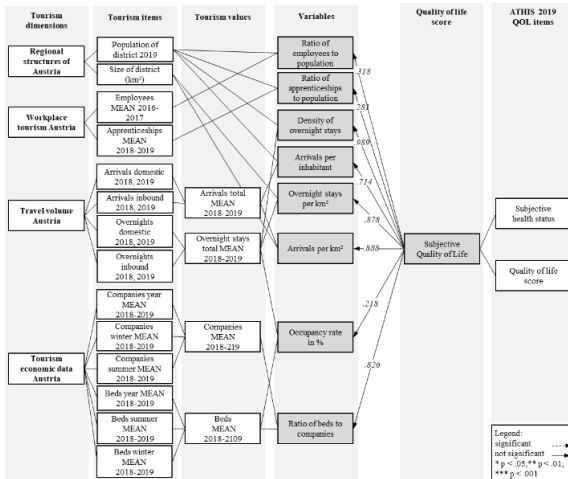


Figure 2: Tested model Influence of tourism intensity on subjective quality of life

Source: Own research and analysis, 2021

The score *Subjective quality of life* was included as a dependent variable in the model. The tourism-related variables *Ratio of employees to population (per 1,000 inhabitants)*, *Ratio of apprenticeships to population (per 1,000 inhabitants)*, *Arrivals per inhabitant*, *Density of overnight stays*, *Overnight stays per km²*, *Arrivals per km²*, *Occupancy rate %*, *Ratio of beds to companies* were used as predictor (independent) variables.

5. FRAMEWORK: QUALITY OF LIFE-PROMOTING MODEL OF INTEGRATED RURAL TOURISM

The framework (R5) is understood as an amalgam of different concepts and theories dealing with the issues of competitive destination management in rural areas, regional development issues, and the emergence and influence of the population's quality of life.

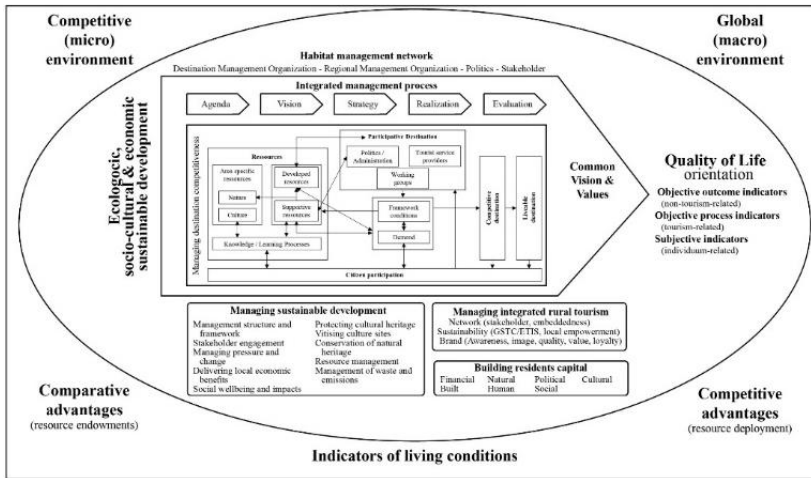


Figure 3: Quality of life-promoting model of integrated rural tourism

Sources: Own analyses and editing, 2021 based on Bieger, T., Derungs, C., Riklin, T., & Widmann, F. (2006). Das Konzept des integrierten Standortmanagements - Eine Einführung. In H. Pechlaner, E. Fischer, & E.-M. Hammann (Eds.), *Standortwettbewerb und Tourismus: Regionale Erfolgsstrategien* (pp. 11–26). Berlin: Schmidt; Crouch, G. I., & Ritchie, B. J. (2012). Destination competitiveness and its implications for host-community QOL. In M. Uysal, R. R. Perdue, & M. J. Sirgy (Eds.), *International handbooks of quality-of-life. Handbook of tourism and quality-of-life research: Enhancing the lives of tourists and residents of host communities* (pp. 491–513). Dordrecht Heidelberg London New York: Springer.; Dvorak, D., Saari, S., & Tuominen, T. (2014). *Developing a Competitive Health and Well-being Destination*. Turku. Retrieved from <http://julkaisut.turkuamk.fi/isbn9789522165404.pdf>; Einig, K., & Jonas, A. (2011). Ungleichwertige

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6. NEW SCIENTIFIC RESULTS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

Finally, this dissertation demonstrates the following scientific (R6) and practical contributions outlined (R7) and provides the basis for further research (R8).

6.1. SCIENTIFIC CONTRIBUTION

This dissertation has revealed multiple potentials and challenges that need to be considered in researching whether destinations contribute to strengthening the quality of life of the population.

Scientific outcome 1: Within the scientific discourse on **the development of regions**, the present work contributes to deepening a general understanding of destination development. For **tourism researchers**, this research provides an insight into the diverse factors influencing the quality of life in general and in destinations in particular. Furthermore, concepts of integrated destination development in rural areas are summarized and discussed. For those interested in researching the **quality of life**, the results may provide insight into how regions and destinations interact as a system and can be developed with integrated management concepts to enhance the subjective quality of life.

Scientific outcome 2: By implementing the test model **Influence of tourism impact on the perceived quality of life** (see p.9), the quantitative survey showed that

within the sample, the perception of the **impact of tourism** is significantly related to the subjectively **perceived quality of life**. Economic impacts of tourism have the most significant influence, followed by ecological and socio-cultural ones. Based on the sample, a correlation could be shown between an individual's **income generated from tourism** and **satisfaction with tourism**. The higher the income from tourism, the higher the satisfaction. Furthermore, it was found that the Socio-economic Status of the sample does not influence tourism satisfaction.

Scientific outcome 3: The test model *Influence of tourism intensity on subjective quality of life* (see p. 9) showed that the comparison of tourism indicators with data from quality-of-life research based on Austria's service regions does not reveal any significant correlations. Nevertheless, the model can serve as a basis for further discussion in the scientific discourse. The analyses of the developed dataset have confirmed the east-west divide in Austrian tourism. This means that the western part of Austria, with the provinces of Salzburg and Tyrol, accounts for a large part of Austrian tourism, measured in terms of arrivals, overnight stays, and businesses and labor force. **Tourism intensity**, measured in terms of establishments and guests relative to population size, is also many times higher in western Austria than in the country.

Scientific outcome 4: The framework *Quality of life-promoting model of integrated rural tourism* (see Figure 3, p. 10) represents a model of a rural tourism region that has set strengthening the populations' quality of life as a future-oriented guideline for action.

The model attempts to present a holistic approach to destination development along the **dimensions of sustainable regional development**. It indicates how future habitats can be developed utilizing **integrated management** approaches. Moreover, the framework represents a contribution to the scientific discussion of established theories of **destination competitiveness** and **social development** to strengthen the quality of life and **relations between visitors and residents** of a region.

Scientific outcome 5: Based on the qualitative results, it can be stated that to sustainably design living spaces for people in an intact environment, **well-coordinated structures** and organizational units committed to shared goals are needed. The quality of life of people can only be secured in the long term if the **principles of sustainable development** are followed. Rural regions, in particular, offer great potential to contribute positively to the regeneration of systems and people.

Moreover, they positively affect the quality of life of the population, the people working in tourism, and the guests.

6.2. PROFESSIONAL IMPLICATIONS

In the course of the research process, the qualitative interviews, in particular, it became clear that the previous indicators used to measure successful tourism will no longer be sufficient in the future. Table 4 presents an attempt at enumerating possible metrics that can be used to assess future tourism.

Table 4: Indicators (examples) of successful future tourism

Dimension	Examples of indicators
Tourist value-added	Transparency of equity ratio Visibility of additional value-added by guests (direct/indirect) Diversity of accommodation types (e.g., apartments, hotels)
Daily spending by guests	On average; per room, per bed; per m ² of built tourism area/attraction area; per inhabitant, per km ²
Sustainability indicators	CO2 - footprint per guest (arrival - stay - departure) Increase in value of land concerning the income of the population Inflow/outflow tendencies concerning tourism key figures Public good balances in companies and destinations
Quality of Life	Ongoing quality of life measurement in destinations Evaluation of satisfaction with tourism
Working in tourism	Job satisfaction indicators Jobs created - retained through tourism Staffing by non-local employees / residents

Source: Own research and analysis, 2021

6.3. CONCLUSION, PROSPECTS AND FURTHER RESEARCH

Based on the available research findings, other research topics are developed, and thus the result R8: *Further research opportunities* is achieved.

It was shown that the test model *Influence of tourism intensity on subjective quality of life* (see p. 9) could not provide any significant findings in the selected sample (based on the service regions of Austria). Perhaps the model does not allow any significant conclusions in general. A recommendation for further research, therefore, is to collect both strands of data, tourism intensity and quality of life within a specific destination. This could provide information on possible correlations. If this survey is carried out in different destinations, they could be compared with each other, and then conclusions could be drawn about specific tourism activities and their effects.

In general, it is recommended to use existing scales to measure the quality of life in destinations and apply them to specific regions on an ongoing basis. It could be

conceivable that developments that one would like to avoid (e.g., unbalanced tourism) can be recognized early through a monitoring system. What such an evaluation and monitoring tool should look like can be the subject of further research.

The development of a reliable and valid set of indicators to measure tourism satisfaction and quality of life in tourist destinations certainly represents one of the most significant future scientific discussions. Since the field of activity ranges from questions of ethics and sustainability, guest satisfaction, work-life balance of employees, perception of involved and non-involved parts of the population to questions of mobility and the economic efficiency of operations, this opens up a variety of possibilities for further research of this complex of topics (Brandl et al., 2021; Koscak & O'Rourke, 2020; Pechlaner, 2019a; Uysal, Sirgy, & Kruger, 2018). How can the signs of overtourism and unbalanced tourism be recognized, and their effects be mitigated (Pechlaner, Innerhofer, & Erschbamer, 2020)? What can well-being tourism contribute to an increase in the population's quality of life, and how are these two factors related to each other (Dvorak et al., 2014; Konu & Pesonen, 2018)? How can a destination develop further in increasing competitive pressure and the demands of digitalization, experience design, and sustainability?

If a serious rural exodus is to be prevented, intensive research is needed on how regions must develop and position themselves in the future so that they remain or become attractive again as places to live. The present work has shown possibilities for cooperation. How these can be implemented and in which contexts and resources, and stakeholders are required for this can be the subject of future research projects.

A further recommendation is to test the results of this dissertation in rural regions that are committed to integrating and thus sustainable development. Thus, reference values could be obtained and transferred to other regions. This could be done within the framework of further research projects, for example, financed by the LEADER program. A concrete proposal for implementation would be to look at the destination *Thermen- und Vulkanland Steiermark*¹ as a test region. The region is characterized by its geographical location in rolling hills of southeastern Styria and the mild climate there, but above all, the consistent valorization of existing resources for “human,

¹ The destination “Thermen- und Vulkanland Steiermark” represents a tourism marketing unit consisting of parts of the regional development organization “Steirisches Vulkanland” and the Thermenland Süd- & Oststeiermark Marketing GmbH. The destination extends over the districts of Hartberg-Fürstenfeld and Südoststeiermark. (Sources: www.thermen-vulkanland.at; www.vulkanland.at)

ecological and economic sustainability”. The model developed in this work (see p. 10) can serve as a basis for the touristic use of the already established structures and thus form the basis for integrated tourism development to strengthen the quality of life of its residents.

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