


THE MODEL OF STRATEGIC MANAGEMENT OF A RELIGIOUS TOURISM  
DESTINATION IN FUNCTION OF SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

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ARTICLE INFO	ABSTRACT
<p><b>Article history:</b>  <b>Received:</b> January, 02<sup>nd</sup> 2024  <b>Accepted:</b> March, 22<sup>nd</sup> 2024</p>	<p><b>Objective:</b> This study aims to explore the significance and potential of religious tourism in Croatia for sustainable development, highlighting the absence of a strategic approach in managing this tourism sector. The primary goal is to assess the current state of religious tourism, identify challenges, and recommend strategic directions for enhancing religious tourism destinations.</p>
<p><b>Keywords:</b>            Sustainable Development;            Religious Tourism;            Religious Tourism Destination;            Strategic Management.</p> 	<p><b>Theoretical Framework:</b> The research is anchored in the theories and models of sustainable development, tourism management, and cultural heritage preservation. These theories provide a comprehensive understanding of how religious tourism can contribute to economic growth, cultural preservation, and community engagement in a sustainable manner.</p> <p><b>Method:</b> Employing survey research and analysis of relevant resources, this study systematically examines the current landscape of religious tourism in Croatia. It focuses on stakeholder coordination, promotion strategies, infrastructure development, and cultural heritage preservation efforts.</p> <p><b>Results and Discussion:</b> The investigation reveals a fragmented approach to managing religious tourism, characterized by poor coordination among stakeholders, inadequate promotion, underdeveloped infrastructure, and challenges in cultural heritage preservation. These findings suggest that a more cohesive and strategic approach could significantly bolster sustainable development, enhance economic opportunities in rural locales, and foster cultural heritage appreciation.</p> <p><b>Research Implications:</b> The study underscores the necessity for stronger collaboration among religious communities, tourism organizations, and governmental authorities. It advocates for enhanced promotional efforts, infrastructure investments, and robust measures for cultural and religious heritage conservation, offering valuable insights for policymakers, tourism developers, and community leaders.</p> <p><b>Originality/Value:</b> This paper contributes original insights into the underexplored domain of religious tourism in Croatia, offering a structured analysis of its current state and potential for sustainable development. Its strategic recommendations provide a foundation for future initiatives to harness religious tourism as a vehicle for economic and cultural sustainability in Croatia.</p> <p>Doi: <a href="https://doi.org/10.26668/businessreview/2024.v9i4.4599">https://doi.org/10.26668/businessreview/2024.v9i4.4599</a></p>

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## O MODELO DE GESTÃO ESTRATÉGICA DE UM DESTINO DE TURISMO RELIGIOSO EM FUNÇÃO DO DESENVOLVIMENTO SUSTENTÁVEL

### RESUMO

**Objetivo:** Este estudo visa a explorar a importância e o potencial do turismo religioso na Croácia para o desenvolvimento sustentável, destacando a ausência de uma abordagem estratégica na gestão desse setor turístico. A meta principal é avaliar o estado atual do turismo religioso, identificar desafios e recomendar orientações estratégicas para melhorar os destinos de turismo religioso.

**Estrutura Teórica:** A pesquisa está ancorada nas teorias e modelos de desenvolvimento sustentável, gestão do turismo e preservação do patrimônio cultural. Essas teorias fornecem uma compreensão abrangente de como o turismo religioso pode contribuir para o crescimento econômico, a preservação cultural e o envolvimento da comunidade de forma sustentável.

**Método:** Empregando pesquisa de levantamento e análise de recursos relevantes, este estudo examina sistematicamente o panorama atual do turismo religioso na Croácia. Ele se concentra na coordenação das partes interessadas, estratégias de promoção, desenvolvimento de infraestrutura e esforços de preservação do patrimônio cultural.

**Resultados e Discussão:** A investigação revela uma abordagem fragmentada para a gestão do turismo religioso, caracterizada pela má coordenação entre as partes interessadas, promoção inadequada, infraestrutura subdesenvolvida e desafios na preservação do patrimônio cultural. Essas descobertas sugerem que uma abordagem mais coesa e estratégica poderia reforçar significativamente o desenvolvimento sustentável, aumentar as oportunidades econômicas em localidades rurais e promover a valorização do patrimônio cultural.

**Implicações da Pesquisa:** O estudo ressalta a necessidade de uma colaboração mais forte entre comunidades religiosas, organizações de turismo e autoridades governamentais. Ele defende esforços promocionais aprimorados, investimentos em infraestrutura e medidas robustas para a conservação do patrimônio cultural e religioso, oferecendo percepções valiosas para formuladores de políticas, desenvolvedores de turismo e líderes comunitários.

**Originalidade/Valor:** Este documento contribui com percepções originais sobre o domínio pouco explorado do turismo religioso na Croácia, oferecendo uma análise estruturada de seu estado atual e potencial para o desenvolvimento sustentável. Suas recomendações estratégicas fornecem uma base para iniciativas futuras para aproveitar o turismo religioso como um veículo para a sustentabilidade econômica e cultural na Croácia.

**Palavras-chave:** Desenvolvimento Sustentável, Turismo Religioso, Destino de Turismo Religioso, Gestão Estratégica.

## EL MODELO DE GESTIÓN ESTRATÉGICA DE UN DESTINO DE TURISMO RELIGIOSO EN FUNCIÓN DEL DESARROLLO SOSTENIBLE

### RESUMEN

**Objetivo:** Este estudio pretende explorar la importancia y el potencial del turismo religioso en Croacia para el desarrollo sostenible, destacando la ausencia de un enfoque estratégico en la gestión de este sector turístico. El objetivo principal es evaluar el estado actual del turismo religioso, identificar retos y recomendar direcciones estratégicas para mejorar los destinos de turismo religioso.

**Marco Teórico:** La investigación se basa en las teorías y modelos del desarrollo sostenible, la gestión del turismo y la conservación del patrimonio cultural. Estas teorías proporcionan una comprensión global de cómo el turismo religioso puede contribuir al crecimiento económico, la preservación cultural y el compromiso de la comunidad de manera sostenible.

**Método:** Este estudio examina sistemáticamente el panorama actual del turismo religioso en Croacia mediante encuestas y el análisis de los recursos pertinentes. Se centra en la coordinación de las partes interesadas, las estrategias de promoción, el desarrollo de infraestructuras y los esfuerzos de preservación del patrimonio cultural.

**Resultados y Debate:** La investigación revela un enfoque fragmentado de la gestión del turismo religioso, caracterizado por la escasa coordinación entre las partes interesadas, la promoción inadecuada, el subdesarrollo de las infraestructuras y los problemas de conservación del patrimonio cultural. Estos resultados sugieren que un enfoque más cohesivo y estratégico podría impulsar significativamente el desarrollo sostenible, mejorar las oportunidades económicas en las zonas rurales y fomentar la apreciación del patrimonio cultural.

**Implicaciones de la Investigación:** El estudio subraya la necesidad de una mayor colaboración entre las comunidades religiosas, las organizaciones turísticas y las autoridades gubernamentales. Aboga por la mejora de los esfuerzos promocionales, las inversiones en infraestructuras y la adopción de medidas contundentes para la conservación del patrimonio cultural y religioso, ofreciendo valiosas ideas a los responsables políticos, los promotores turísticos y los líderes comunitarios.

**Originalidad/Valor:** Este artículo aporta una visión original del poco explorado ámbito del turismo religioso en Croacia, ofreciendo un análisis estructurado de su estado actual y su potencial para el desarrollo sostenible. Sus recomendaciones estratégicas sientan las bases de futuras iniciativas para aprovechar el turismo religioso como vehículo de sostenibilidad económica y cultural en Croacia.

**Palabras clave:** Desarrollo Sostenible, Turismo Religioso, Destino de Turismo Religioso, Gestión Estratégica.

## 1 INTRODUCTION

Tourism represents a key component of the economic development of the Republic of Croatia, constituting a significant share in its Gross Domestic Product (GDP) and creating numerous jobs across the country. However, while tourism brings many economic benefits, it also poses challenges and questions about the sustainability of this development. Sustainable development in tourism has become imperative for the Republic of Croatia to ensure that the benefits brought by tourism do not endanger the natural environment, cultural heritage, and society.

This scientific article is dedicated to the analysis of the concept of sustainable tourism development in the Republic of Croatia, with a special emphasis on religious tourism as one of the key segments of the tourism industry. Religious tourism represents a significant aspect of Croatian tourism, given the country's rich religious heritage that includes numerous churches, monasteries, sanctuaries, and religious customs. At the same time, religious tourism carries with it specific challenges and potentials for sustainable development.

An insight will be provided into the concept of tourism with a particular focus on religious tourism as an area of interest. Also, we will explore the problems in tourism related to sustainable development and analyze the potential of religious tourism destinations in terms of developing sustainable religious tourism. Through considering models of strategic destination management for religious tourism, we aim to identify key strategies and approaches that would enable sustainable development of destinations.

Given all the above, this paper aims to provide a holistic overview of sustainable tourism development in the Republic of Croatia, with a special emphasis on religious tourism. Through the analysis of existing problems, potentials, and strategic approaches, we hope to contribute to a better understanding of how tourism can be an engine of sustainable development in the country, ensuring a balance between economic gain, environmental protection, and the preservation of cultural heritage.

## 1.1 SIGNIFICANT OF THE STUDY

The Republic of Croatia abounds with historically and artistically valuable sacred objects, some of which are included in the UNESCO World Heritage List (such as the Euphrasian Basilica in Poreč, St. James Cathedral in Šibenik, Trogir Cathedral, St. Mark's Church in Zagreb, among others) and already wellvisited sanctuaries, holding great potential for further development of religious tourism. The fact that Pope John Paul II visited Croatia three times, and Pope Benedict XVI once, has significantly contributed to Croatia being recognized as a peaceful and reliable destination for believers worldwide.

However, despite all this, religious tourism cannot be considered a developed form of tourism in the Republic of Croatia. Croatia is still not recognized on the international tourism market as a destination for religious tourism. There still lacks synergy between the public and private sectors, which is reflected in insufficient competitiveness of religious tourism, ineffective marketing, low productivity level, and unsuccessful management for suitable and qualitative development. The synergy between the public and private sectors, or rather cooperation and partnership in tourism, is imperative without which progress cannot be achieved. In this segment, the synergistic role of the state and the Church is crucial, demanding interorganizational relations, cooperation, and hierarchy for the development of effective religious tourism. The state should play more of a role as a stimulator of private sector investment through fiscal and other incentives, as well as the prevention and control of unscrupulous business practices, while the Church should take on a greater role as a moderator in the development of religious offerings. Existing forms of religious tourism in Croatia are mostly in the maturity phase of their life cycle and require structural changes. The development of tourism in general, including religious tourism, is handled by the Ministry of Tourism and mainly by Croatian tourist boards through the promotion and branding of Croatian tourist destinations (geographically defined within the areas of tourist communities). However, it has been shown that Croatian tourist destinations do not have developed systematic models of strategic management in tourist destinations, nor a quality management system, and thus lack standards that would confirm the phrase "Croatian quality", the Croatian tourism brand in general, as recognizability of Croatia in the segment of religious tourism and everything that this concept entails. There is also a visible lack of uniform quality standards and destination management. The process of learning from the best (Benchmarking) is often unknown, and the role of the destination management company generally implicitly belongs to the "strongest"

hotel and catering company or travel agency, which, as a rule, is much more interested in its own profit than in the welfare of the destination as a whole. Based on general knowledge and primary data from research, an optimal descriptive conceptual model of strategic management of destination management in religious tourism based on the principle of sustainability will be presented, which will satisfy the basic direct qualitative and quantitative economic indicators of efficiency. The subject of research in this work, within the stated problem, is to explore theoretical and practical current issues related to religious tourism and systematically formulate an optimal model based on research results on religious tourism in the context of sustainable development concept, and the organization and management of the development of religious tourism in religious tourism destinations, taking into account the historical experience of tourism development, international experience, and selected economic and social criteria. Therefore, the focus of the research is on exploring the stakeholders' attitudes and on the historical and theoretical methodological analysis of sustainable development in the domain of religious tourism, on forming a strategy within the framework of strategic management of the religious tourism destination, on analyzing religious tourism as a special sociocultural phenomenon, and on finding an optimal sustainable development model of strategic management in religious tourism destinations.

## 2 LITERATURE REVIEW

### 2.1 THEORETICAL IMPLICATIONS OF SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT OF TOURISM DESTINATION

Changing economic conditions, new aspects of consumer behaviour are likely to cause the emergence of new or growth of existing tourism markets (Andrić et al., 2020).

The tourism industry is one of the world's largest sectors, constituting approximately 10% of global gross domestic product and generating 25% of new job opportunities before the onset of the pandemic. Serving as a vital engine for the global economy, tourism has a rich history of fostering sustainable development on a global scale. (Buhalis et al., 2023). Also, tourism is an activity that has closeness and connection with many sciences and activities, including economics, technology, geography, politics, sociology, etc (Andrić, Šostar, 2021).

Tourism serves as a dynamic catalyst, inspiring travel for the exploration of nature, adventure, marvels, and societies. It facilitates the discovery of diverse cultures, fosters

interpersonal connections, engages with values, and offers opportunities to experience new traditions and events. The development of tourism aims to attract visitors to specific destinations, nurturing and maintaining a robust tourism sector. Additionally, environmental sustainability entails forwardthinking efforts focused on conserving sociocultural heritage and safeguarding natural resources to preserve environmental ecosystems. (Tomaney et al., 2023). This approach supports both the health and economic prosperity of communities. (Baloch et al., 2023). Tourism is one of the most important sectors that drive the national economic growth. There is a lot of research conducted on sustainable tourism. (Maftuhah & Wirjodirdjo, 2018). Tourism emphasizes smart, sustainable, and inclusive growth as a way to overcome the structural weaknesses in Europe's economy, improve its competitiveness and productivity, and underpin a sustainable social market economy. In the context of tourism, this means implementing strategies and policies that promote smart and innovative tourism practices, ensure the sustainable development of tourist destinations, and foster inclusivity by providing opportunities for all segments of society to benefit from tourism-related activities. This approach not only contributes to the economic growth of the tourism sector but also enhances the overall competitiveness and productivity of Europe's tourism industry while ensuring that the benefits of tourism are distributed equitably across communities. (Šostar et al., 2019). Enterprises from all fields of activity, including tourism, utilize systems in their strategic planning. Marketing systems provide valuable spatial data and analysis that enable tourism businesses to make informed decisions regarding site selection, marketing strategies, resource management, and infrastructure development. By leveraging information systems, tourism enterprises can enhance their understanding of destination characteristics, visitor behavior patterns, and market trends, ultimately optimizing their operations and enhancing the overall tourist experience. (Devčić et al., 2019).

According to research of Yu and Gao, 2023, the ideology of sustainable tourism development was formed in the early 1990s. The main frameworks and objectives of sustainable tourism development theory were elaborated by the Globe'90 International Conference held in Canada in 1990 as: (1) Strengthening ecological awareness; (2) Promoting equity development; (3) Improving quality life of local community; (4) Providing highquality experience to the tourists; (5) Protecting the environment which tourism development relies on in the future. The main frameworks and objectives are aimed to coordinate in the interests of environment, tourists and local community. Author Mason et al., 2023 also explain how improving tourism destination quality could contribute to addressing the UN Sustainable

Development Goals (SDGs) at tourism destinations. The World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) in 2005 defined the concept of Sustainable Tourism as “one whose practices and principles can be applicable to all forms of tourism in all types of destinations, including mass tourism and the various niche tourism segments”. Sustainability principles refer to the environmental, economic, and sociocultural aspects of tourism development, and a suitable balance must be established among these three dimensions to guarantee its longterm sustainability (SantosRoldán et al., 2020).

Sustainability has emerged as a pivotal element in the ongoing and future advancement of tourism. The imperative to incorporate environmental, sociocultural, and economic considerations arises from societal evolution, the integration of new information and communication technologies (ICTs), and a redefined approach to comprehending tourism and the global landscape. (SolísRadilla et al., 2019). In study of LópezSanz et.al. 2021, tourism is an activity that contributes directly and indirectly to the development of rural areas. But this development needs to be sustainable. To do this, appropriate policies that positively influence these areas from an economic, social and cultural point of view must be implemented. Furthermore, sustainable tourism represents a type of tourism that advocates for "greener" destinations, interpreting this concept not solely in ecological terms but also as conducive to overall wellbeing. As a result, the prevalent issues encountered by many popular tourist destinations today, such as overcrowding, are anticipated to either abate or necessitate a transition towards sustainable mass tourism. This transition involves amalgamating the rising societal norm of sustainability with the deeply ingrained imperative for economic growth (PalaciosFlorenco et al., 2021).

Prior literature has extensively highlighted the diverse positive impacts of tourism growth, particularly evident in low and middleincome economies. Tourism development plays a crucial role in benefiting local governments by enhancing public spaces, increasing the value of cultural and natural resources, and fostering economic development. In these contexts, tourism intertwines closely with economic growth, resulting in a multitude of advantageous outcomes including demographic stabilization, stimulation of agricultural development, increased profitability of local food products, growth of local handicraft industries, enhancement of socioeconomic wellbeing, establishment of new native enterprises, income growth, job creation, promotion of female employment, enhancement of service standards, improvement of quality of life, and advancement of living standards for residents. Furthermore, tourism acts as a catalyst for preserving traditional, indigenous, and natural heritage, thus enriching the overall tourist

experience. Additionally, it has been demonstrated to elevate the quality of life for inhabitants, mitigate outward migration, and foster sustainable development. Fortunately, the positive impacts of tourism typically outweigh the negative effects, with commercial benefits often outweighing sociocultural and environmental drawbacks. (Iftikhar, 2022).

According to the study of Ikhtiagung and Radyanto 2020., the concept of developing tourism in the region must be based on sustainable development that is supported ecologically, economically, and ethically also socially fair to the community to establish the quality of life by regulating the supply, development, utilization, and maintenance of resources in a sustainable manner. The tourism industry has gained both fame and notoriety, with a blurred distinction between sustainable and unsustainable practices. Nonetheless, it's evident that the industry requires innovative and enhanced mechanisms to prioritize sustainability. Acknowledging this nuanced landscape is crucial, as tourism's economic benefits often come with environmental and sociocultural costs. Unregulated growth and exploitation can lead to issues such as environmental degradation and cultural commodification. Addressing these challenges demands collaboration among stakeholders to adopt sustainable practices. This includes promoting ecofriendly initiatives, supporting local economies, and engaging in responsible tourism development. Embracing technology and data analytics can also aid in monitoring and mitigating negative impacts. Achieving sustainability in tourism necessitates collective efforts from governments, businesses, communities, and travelers. By prioritizing innovation and responsible stewardship, the industry can navigate towards a more sustainable future, preserving natural and cultural heritage for generations to come. (Mohanty, 2020).

Given the global prevalence of tourism and the heightened mobility of populations, the issue of sustainable tourism has garnered significant attention in recent years. Study of Stuchlikova, & Botlikova, 2020, aims to explore various aspects of sustainable tourism and assess their implementation within accommodation and catering facilities, focusing on a regional context. The study seeks to examine the utilization of sustainable practices within these establishments, considering environmental, sociocultural, and economic dimensions. The chosen touristic region presents a unique context, characterized by the presence of large industrial enterprises with potential environmental repercussions. However, it also boasts numerous natural, cultural, and technical attractions, leading to a notable influx of visitors. By examining the extent to which sustainable tourism principles are integrated into the operations of accommodation and catering facilities within this region, this research aims to contribute to



a broader understanding of sustainable tourism practices and their implications for regional development and environmental stewardship.

While the volume of articles on sustainability and innovation in tourism isn't exceptionally high, there is a noticeable upward trend. However, a gap in research has been identified, specifically regarding the intersection of innovation and sustainability in tourism. As previously analyzed and concluded, ensuring sustainable and innovative tourism necessitates continuous adoption of sustainable and innovative practices by industry stakeholders. This is crucial for enhancing service differentiation, fostering greater cooperation, and driving growth and progress in terms of visitor attractiveness and loyalty, particularly in selective forms of tourism. (Santos et al., 2023).

## 2.2 INSIGHTS TO SPECIFIC FORMS OF TOURISM: STATE AND TRENDS

The evolving habits of tourist consumption are leading to the proliferation of particular forms of tourism, which may serve as either the central attraction or a supplementary offering within a destination (SánchezSánchez et al., 2021). In the globalized tourism market, destinations have the opportunity to embrace sustainability as a conceptual and managerial framework to differentiate their brand and establish a distinctive identity proposition. (Glyptou et al. 2022).

In recent years, there has been a noticeable shift in tourists' preferences towards seeking not only the experiences of others but also craving novel and personalized experiences themselves. Consequently, the tourism industry has responded by adapting to these evolving tastes. The integration of new technologies has empowered consumers with access to a wide array of tourism options at their fingertips, along with the insights and ratings provided by previous consumers. (Millán et al., 2021). According to a study by Zhang et al. (2023), the expanding supply and demand within the tourism industry have given rise to various new types of tourism. Recent trends suggest that tourists are increasingly inclined towards seeking novel experiences. As a result, there is a growing preference for higher standards, specialization, and personalization in tourist experiences. Consequently, the tourism market must adapt its offerings to align with this evolving demand. The emergence of new tourism supply and demand dynamics has led to the creation of numerous distinct tourism types, which play a significant role in shaping the segmentation of the tourism market.

In order to position a tourist destination, it is crucial for both emerging and mature destinations to identify competitive advantages that can attract and retain tourists. Understanding visitor loyalty and satisfaction serves as a foundation for anticipating their future behavior and distinguishing themselves within the tourism market (Kozak & Baloglu, 2010). Tourist behavior plays a pivotal role in determining the influx of tourists to destinations.

According to a study by Maria (2016), the main types of tourism include tourism, recreation and leisure, healthcare tourism, curative spa tourism, cultural tourism, educational tourism, social tourism, and shopping tourism. These types of tourism can be classified based on various criteria such as distance, length of stay, geographic origin of tourists, mode of transport used, organization of the stay, activities during the stay, destination characteristics, interaction between travelers and the destination, price paid, age of tourists, and number of tourists. Additionally, tourism can be categorized into international tourism and domestic tourism, with international tourism further classified into inbound tourism and outbound tourism. Understanding these classifications can provide insights into the diverse preferences and behaviors of tourists, aiding destinations in effectively targeting and catering to their needs. Tourism is a multifaceted realm that defies rigid categorization, instead embracing a dynamic interplay of elements and motivations. Across this expansive landscape, a myriad of tourism forms emerge, each offering distinct opportunities for exploration, relaxation, and enrichment. Rooted in mobility, seasonality, means of transport, motivations, and socioeconomic characteristics, tourism embodies humanity's innate desire for discovery, adventure, and connection (Gössling & Lane, 2015). From the serene coastlines of sea tourism to the thrilling heights of air travel, means of transport serve as gateways to diverse landscapes and cultures. Whether embarking on a leisurely hike through nature's beauty or traversing continents via a rail journey, tourists are driven by curiosity and wanderlust.

Motivations lie at the heart of tourism, shaping travelers' experiences and aspirations. While some seek rejuvenation through spa treatments or indulge in retail therapy via shopping tourism, others undertake spiritual pilgrimages or partake in adrenaline-fueled sports adventures. (Collins-Kreiner, 2023). Each motivation acts as a guiding compass, directing tourists on their quest for fulfillment and self-discovery. Socioeconomic characteristics further delineate the nuances of tourism, giving rise to tailored forms that cater to specific demographics and interests. (Nabung et al., 2023). Whether it's the convivial gatherings of social tourism or the bustling corridors of business conferences, these variations reflect the diverse facets of human interaction and endeavor. (Gebesmair & Musik, 2023). Among the diverse expressions of

tourism, youth tourism shines as a beacon of exploration and education, drawing students and young adventurers to broaden their horizons. From educational excursions to international camps, these experiences foster crosscultural exchange and create enduring memories (Zhang et al., 2023). In its essence, tourism embodies the rich tapestry of human experiences, transcending geographical, age, and cultural boundaries. It serves as a testament to our unwavering spirit of exploration and the perpetual quest for discovery that unites us on the journey of life (Petroman, 2015).

Sustainable tourism development in protected areas represents a multifaceted endeavor with diverse objectives that demand attention. Environmental conservation, sociocultural preservation, economic viability, and institutional governance stand out as key priorities in this domain. These objectives are interconnected and necessitate thoughtful management to ensure the overall sustainability of tourism activities within culturally and environmentally sensitive areas (Trišić et al., 2023). Throughout history, practitioners in the tourism industry have faced numerous challenges, yet their enduring practices have paved the way for the concept of sustainable tourism. This approach emphasizes responsible resource utilization, cultural heritage preservation, and the generation of socioeconomic benefits for local communities, both in the present and future (Shmusko, 2023). Delving deeper into the diverse forms of tourism, one aspect of profound cultural significance is religious tourism. Beyond mere sightseeing, religious tourism offers pilgrims and seekers a transformative journey of spiritual enrichment and enlightenment, which will be the focus of the subsequent part of this paper.

### 2.3 RELIGIOUS TOURISM DEVELOPMENT, IMPORTANCE, AND CHALLENGES

In the 21st century, places hold profound significance for people, as meanings become imbued with symbolic importance through tourism heritage. Tourism emerges as a powerful force in shaping our world and enhancing our understanding of diverse cultures, people, and landscapes (Mirfakhraddini, 2023). Managing and promoting cultural heritage presents a complex challenge due to evolving parameters requiring consideration for successful action plans (Fatoufi et al., 2023).

According to Andrić (2007) integration of marketing concepts into tourism policy is not a new axiom, as it has long been recognized that effective marketing strategies are essential for the promotion and development of tourism destinations. When it comes to religious tourism, this principle holds particular significance. Religious tourism relies heavily on effective

marketing to attract pilgrims and visitors to sacred sites and destinations of religious significance. Marketing efforts in religious tourism often involve highlighting the spiritual and cultural experiences offered by these destinations, as well as promoting the historical and religious importance of the sites. By incorporating marketing concepts into tourism policy, authorities can better facilitate the growth and sustainability of religious tourism by effectively promoting these destinations to both domestic and international travelers. Cultural tourism has become a significant revenue source for the industry, with countries investing in and developing their cultural assets such as sites, architecture, art, festivals, and religious practices (Lin et al., 2021). Unlike general tourism resources that may degrade over time, religious beliefs and cultural practices remain resilient and sustainable, contributing to rural development (Lin et al., 2021). Religion encompasses structured systems of beliefs, practices, rituals, and symbols aimed at connecting individuals with the sacred or transcendent. Alternatively, religiousness pertains to engagement or motivation toward a supernatural power, ranging from institutionalized beliefs to personal experiences (Sobihah Abdul Halim et al., 2021). Religion and tourism have long been intertwined, with religious motivations driving travel and emerging as a major tourism segment (Collins-Kreiner, 2020).

Tourists' desires and requirements significantly shape the tourism experience, particularly at religious sites. In the attractiveness of a tourist destination, it is necessary to highlight nonverbal communication, especially that of priests and churches, which attract both believers and tourists. As in any marketing and sales effort, the way of dressing, logos on clothing, eye contact, body language, and gestures are important (Šostar et al.). Engaging with spiritual values, acquiring new religious knowledge, and participating in social interactions influence tourists' motivation (Drăguleasa et al., 2024). Religious tourism, rooted in exclusive or predominant religious motivations, encompasses various forms such as pilgrimages and conferences (Rinschede, 1992). Religion and tourism are intricately intertwined, presenting a complex phenomenon with significant implications for both religious sites and visitors. Pilgrimage, a fundamental aspect of religious practice across cultures, involves journeys to sacred destinations for spiritual enrichment or divine blessings. The tourism industry capitalizes on the allure of these sites, promoting them as tourist attractions and facilitating visits with infrastructure and guided tours. However, this commodification raises ethical questions about the commercialization of sacred spaces. (Collins-Kreiner & Wall, 2005).

In religious tourism communication, the key factors influencing the consumer purchasing behavior are crucial. Personal factors dominate over other factors such as

psychological, social, and cultural ones (Šostar & Ristanović, 2023). Religious tourism has witnessed remarkable growth globally over the past three decades, spurred by various factors such as religious significance, historical importance, economic opportunities, geographic appeal, sociocultural influences, and political considerations. (Tabash et al., 2023). In contemporary times, the term "religious tourism" or "pilgrimage tourism" has gained prominence, encompassing journeys undertaken for religious or religiouscognitive purposes. Modern pilgrims seek not only spiritual encounters but also additional attractions and valueadded experiences during their visits to holy sites, making the pilgrimage itself an integral part of their journey. (Rosak-Szyrocka et al., 2023).

The influx of tourists to religious sites can impact local communities, economies, and environments. While tourism brings economic benefits and cultural exchange opportunities, it also poses challenges such as overcrowding and environmental degradation. Balancing the preservation of religious authenticity with tourism development requires careful planning and stakeholder engagement. (Jude et al., 2018). Scholars explore the dynamics of religious tourism through sociological and anthropological lenses, examining visitor motivations and behaviors. Practitioners focus on realworld challenges, developing strategies for site preservation, visitor management, and destination marketing. By addressing these issues, researchers and practitioners can work towards fostering responsible tourism practices that respect religious traditions and support sustainable development. (Heidari et al., 2018). Religious tourism, dating back to antiquity, has evolved into a substantial sector within the global tourism industry, encompassing various experiences such as pilgrimages and festivals (Iliev, 2020). Religiously motivated tourism, evident across all traditions, serves as a global phenomenon, drawing believers from distant places to religious centers (Kaewumpai, 2018). Religious tourism entails individuals of a specific faith journeying to destinations of religious importance within their belief system. (Olsen et al., 2006). According to Budovich (2023), these destinations hold spiritual significance, drawing pilgrims seeking spiritual enrichment, cultural immersion, or divine blessings. This form of tourism is deeply rooted in religious traditions and rituals, with pilgrims often undertaking journeys as acts of devotion or religious obligation. These sacred sites serve as focal points for religious practice and cultural heritage, attracting visitors from around the world. (Pechlaner et al., 2024).

Travel allows individuals to seek diverse experiences, including leisure, recreation, and religious pursuits, providing opportunities for reflection and personal growth (Almuhrzi, Alsawafi, 2017). Scholars have examined the intricate relationship between religion and

tourism from spatial, historical, and cultural perspectives, viewing pilgrimage and tourism as contemporary practices (Ohlan & Ohlan, 2023). Understanding religious tourism from both religiously motivated and modern spiritual journey perspectives contributes to community development and increases tourist numbers (Abualyazed, 2023). Research findings serve as a foundational framework for managing religious tourism destinations, fostering their longterm sustainability (Pike, 2017). Additionally, understanding commercialization at religious sites from visitors' perspectives has practical implications for site management (Shi & Pande, 2023). The results of fresearch will be used as the basis for the creation of specific tourism products and tourism planning in the future. (Andrić, 2022)

### 3 RESEARCH OBJECTIVES AND HYPOTHESIS

The conceptual part of the research aims to understand tourism as a sociological phenomenon and its associated economic activities, including the characteristics and development of tourism, the exploration of tourism forms, particularly in relation to attractions, and the analysis of the tourist product and its aggregators. It seeks to outline the perspectives of tourism development in the Republic of Croatia, define the concept and elements of a tourist destination, present the history of tourism management, analyze the role of tourist destinations and DMOs in destination management, establish a sustainable development management strategy with a focus on networking for entrepreneurial projects and partnerships, highlight the specifics of religious tourism and its destinations, and, based on empirical research and the study of relevant literature, formulate a strategic management model for religious tourism destinations grounded in the needs of the local and regional community and sustainable development principles.

The empirical part of the research aims to test the parameters of the proposed conceptual model for strategic management of religious tourism destinations using descriptive, bivariate, and multivariate statistical analysis, and to collect, analyze, and synthesize expert opinions through indepth interviews to integrate key insights necessary for accurately defining the descriptive conceptual model. It also seeks to identify statistically significant relationships between selected model variables based on survey responses, confirming the importance of understanding these variables and their interconnections as a foundation for future research on these concepts.

The applied objectives of the research are to propose concrete guidelines for management strategies in religious tourism destinations based on the needs of the local and regional community, with the aim of developing longterm sustainable tourism, and to contribute to the creation of conditions for the practical implementation of religious tourism based on community needs through education and the establishment of adequate organizational structures in religious tourism destinations, utilizing the optimal model of strategic destination management.

The task is to theoretically and practically prove that the model of strategic management for religious tourism destinations is necessary and acceptable to all stakeholders, and that it is the only way to achieve and maintain the competitiveness of religious tourism and meet the trends set by both domestic and global markets, by considering the opinions of economic, sociological, and theological sciences, as well as sustainable development criteria.

The examination of available scientific literature and insights into the field of religious tourism highlights the lack of synergy among stakeholders of this type of tourism, which is reflected in the insufficient attractiveness for this kind of selective tourism (religious tourism), ineffective marketing, low productivity levels, and unsuccessful management for a suitable and qualitative development of religious tourism in Croatia. The synergy of all stakeholders in religious tourism, namely cooperation and partnership in tourism, is imperative without which progress cannot be achieved. In this segment, the key role is played by destination management, which can successfully facilitate cooperation and partnership among all stakeholders of religious tourism and appropriately create an adequate organization of the strategic management model for religious tourism destinations based on the principle of sustainable development.

Based on the articulated problem, the following several hypotheses are implied:

- H1: The haphazard development of religious tourism, often present in religious tourism destinations, negatively affects the balanced economic and sustainable social development of the religious tourism destination, which can lead to significant negative social, and thereby economic trends in the religious tourism destination in the long term.
- H2: The efficiency of strategic management of the religious tourism destination is correlated with the efficiency of synergistic action with the local church community operating in the religious tourism destination, as well as with higher church structures under whose jurisdiction the church community operating in the destination functions.

- H3: Religious tourism has positive effects on the population in religious destinations (including those engaged in hospitality or tourism activities) and the community and contributes to its development in various ways.
- H4: Besides positive effects, religious tourism also has negative aspects, i.e., in certain cases, it negatively affects the community and inhabitants living in religious tourism destinations, including those engaged in hospitality or tourism activities.
- H5: The needs of pilgrims define the tourism product of the religious tourism organization and thus influence the model of strategic management of the religious tourism destination.
- H6: The actions of religious organizations outside the religious tourism organization, especially in the field of promotion and organization of pilgrimages, can statistically significantly affect the volume of visits to the religious tourism destination, and thereby the economic effects of the religious tourism of the destination.
- H7: Networking of all stakeholders in the religious tourism destination and their involvement in decisionmaking about tourism development is functionally related to the success of the development and implementation of a sustainable strategic plan for strategic management of the religious tourism destination.

#### 4 METHODOLOGY OF RESEARCH

In the scientific research, formulation, and presentation of results relevant to the exploration of the research topic, a combination of various scientific research methods will be used as outlined below. The historical method will be applied using scientific and professional literature from the field of research. The descriptive method will be used to present previous research and theoretical determinants of religious tourism, as well as in the systematization of religious tourism resources in the Republic of Croatia and the characteristics of the most significant Croatian sanctuaries. Statistical and mathematical methods will be utilized for analyzing numerical data and in the design and interpretation of indicators of growth and development of the selected model. The method of induction will be used for drawing conclusions based on individual facts, i.e., to indicate economic effects in religious tourism. With the deductive method, individual conclusions about economic effects at the local level will be drawn from general views on religious tourism. The analysis method will dissect the economic implications of religious tourism on individual parts and draw conclusions on each



element, thereby observing and studying scientific truths about the economic effects of religious tourism. The systems theory method will view tourism, especially religious tourism, as subsystems or supersystems of some higher or lower system. The synthesis method will connect conclusions drawn from systematic analysis into a complex whole, enabling conclusions on the economic efficiency of religious tourism in Croatia. The abstraction method will separate the irrelevant from the relevant and highlight the essential features of religious tourism. The proof method will verify the set primary and auxiliary hypotheses of the research. The case study method will be used in analyzing individual examples of religious sites where the commercialization of sacred heritage has enabled economic development. The modeling method will be used in developing models of religious tourism development, as well as strategic management of religious tourism destinations. For the conceptual part of the research, benchmarking and case study methods are particularly important as they provide new insights and understandings of the researched concepts. For the empirical part of the research, it is necessary to create and test a scientific model of religious tourism development.

In the conducted literature review (especially of domestic authors), no scientific contributions to the concept of developing religious tourism through a model based on the principles of sustainable development were found. This presents a unique scientific contribution, focusing on variables related to respondents' perceptions of the possibilities for developing religious tourism according to sustainable development principles. For the empirical research, data obtained through survey questionnaires will be used. The survey targets the area of Croatian Marian sanctuaries, which are the most visited by pilgrims. The research is directed at the local population of religious destinations and at pilgrims, religious travelers, and visitors to Croatian sanctuaries, aiming to create a representative sample within a statistical framework. The survey is conducted via a structured questionnaire in Croatian. Data statistical analysis was performed using statistical packages SPSS and Statistica, while graphical representations were created in Microsoft Excel. From a methodological standpoint, the presented model of strategic management for religious tourism destinations based on the principle of sustainable development can be effectively applied to all religious tourism destinations in the Republic of Croatia.

The primary research consisted of conducting two survey questionnaires. The first questionnaire was created for the study of attitudes of individuals from the Republic of Croatia who have gone on a religious journey or pilgrimage at least once, and it was conducted on a sample of 502 respondents. The second questionnaire was designed to research the attitudes and level of

involvement of the local population in management and the application of sustainable development criteria in religious tourism destinations, as well as their satisfaction with the quality of life in the same observed religious destinations. The second questionnaire was conducted through an online survey, created using Google Forms, on a sample of 315 respondents.

## 5 RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Based on theoretical and empirical insights in tourism and the impact of tourism and stakeholders on the sustainability of strategic management of religious destinations, hypotheses were set, tested, and confirmed, which is also elaborated in this chapter. It presents the research methodology that includes defining the research sample, methods, research results, as well as limitations of the research and recommendations for further research. This section of the work displays the research on the attitudes of pilgrims from the Republic of Croatia and the investigation of the attitudes and satisfaction of the local population in religious tourist destinations, concluding with the presentation of research results.

To conduct this research and prove the set hypotheses, methods of scientific research appropriate for the subject matter of the research and the verification of research hypotheses were utilized. The scientific investigation, formulation, and presentation of the research results of this research were carried out applying general methodological principles common to economic research. Data were analyzed using methods of descriptive and inferential statistics. To review the sample of respondents who participated in the surveys, their distributions were determined according to gender, age groups, marital status, household income, employment status, and level of education. For respondents who have gone on a religious journey at least once and filled out the survey, the distribution according to the place of residence was also established. The distributions of respondents according to these characteristics were shown in simple columns. Besides describing the sample, descriptive statistical methods were used to gain insight into research variables. For this purpose, three measures of central tendency (mean, median, and mode) and two measures of dispersion (standard deviation and interquartile range) were calculated for all analyzed variables. The distributions of respondents' answers were also shown in multiple columns.

Based on the collected questionnaires from pilgrims and religious travelers in religious tourism destinations, statistical data processing was conducted, the results of which are presented within the work. Given the objectives and hypotheses of the research, the results of

the analysis are presented in two parts, or subsections. Each section examines the results related to the acceptance of specific hypotheses set forth.

**Table 1**

*Distributions of pilgrims and religious travelers on the impact of the synergistic action of the strategic management of a religious destination with the local church community as well as with higher church structures on the efficiency of strategic management*

Statement	Level of agreement				
	1 (I completely disagree)	2 (I mostly disagree)	3 (I neither agree nor disagree)	4 (I mostly agree)	5 (I completely agree)
In destinations of religious tourism, there should be more religious events offered.	35 (7,0%)	34 (6,8%)	158 (31,5%)	139 (27,7%)	136 (27,1%)
There should be more integration of other forms of tourism offerings with religious tourism.	81 (16,1%)	54 (10,8%)	152 (30,3%)	138 (27,5%)	77 (15,3%)
In destinations of religious tourism, there is weak organization and interaction between the church and other tourism entities.	67 (13,3%)	65 (12,9%)	172 (34,3%)	121 (24,1%)	77 (15,3%)
In destinations of religious tourism, the local population is not motivated to provide services to pilgrims.	77 (15,3%)	77 (15,3%)	157 (31,3%)	123 (24,5%)	68 (13,5%)
Destinations would develop better with more coordination among religious tourism entities.	57 (11,4%)	66 (13,1%)	157 (31,3%)	111 (22,1%)	111 (22,1%)
There is appropriate connectivity and collaboration between religious and social organizations.	58 (11,6%)	81 (16,1%)	166 (33,1%)	116 (23,1%)	81 (16,1%)

Source: Authors research

With the assertion that religious tourism destinations should offer more religious events, nearly 55% of respondents agree entirely or mostly, while about 14% disagree completely or mostly, and a third of respondents neither agree nor disagree. Nearly 28% of respondents mostly agree that there should be more integration of religious tourism with other forms of tourism offerings, with an additional 15% in complete agreement, a third are uncertain, and a quarter disagree completely. Over a third of respondents are unsure about the claim that there is poor organization and interaction between the church and other tourism entities in religious tourism destinations, over 16% disagree entirely or mostly, and more than 40% agree mostly or completely. In relation to the perception that the local population in religious tourism destinations is not motivated to provide services to pilgrims, a third of respondents disagreed, a third are uncertain, and only 38% agree mostly or completely. For the development of

destinations, an equal proportion of 22.1% of respondents strongly agree that there should be more coordination among religious tourism entities, with a third undecided and a quarter disagreeing. Regarding the perception of adequate connectivity and action between religious and social organizations, a quarter of respondents disagree, with a large number undecided and only 39% agreeing mostly or completely. Notably, in all six assertions, a significant number of respondents are undecided, with a third in each case. Considering that a substantial proportion of respondents agree entirely or mostly, from nearly 40% to 55%, it can be concluded that pilgrims and religious travelers view the impact of the synergistic action of strategic management of a religious destination with the local church community and higher church structures on the effectiveness of strategic management as of greater importance compared to those who disagree mostly or completely.

Table 2 contains descriptive statistics related to the assessment of pilgrims and religious travelers on the impact of synergistic actions of strategic management of a religious destination with the local church community as well as higher church structures on the efficiency of strategic management.

**Table 2**

*Descriptive statistics of pilgrims and religious travelers' ratings on the impact of the synergistic action of the strategic management of a religious destination with the local church community as well as with higher church structures on the efficiency of strategic management*

Statement	Arithmetic mean	Median	Mode	Standard deviation	Interquartile range
In destinations of religious tourism, there should be more religious events offered.	3,61	4,00	3,00	1,16	2,00
There should be more integration of other forms of tourism offerings with religious tourism.	3,15	3,00	3,00	1,27	2,00
In destinations of religious tourism, there is weak organization and interaction between the church and other tourism entities.	3,15	3,00	3,00	1,22	2,00
In destinations of religious tourism, the local population is not motivated to provide services to pilgrims.	3,06	3,00	3,00	1,25	2,00
Destinations would develop better with more coordination among religious tourism entities.	3,30	3,00	3,00	1,27	1,00
There is appropriate connectivity and collaboration between religious and social organizations	3,16	3,00	3,00	1,22	2,00

Source: Authors research

Based on the arithmetic mean, which is 3.61, respondents on average most strongly agree with the statement that religious tourism destinations should offer more religious events. For the other statements, the average value is around 3, as well as the median, except for the first statement which has a median of 4, and the mode for all statements is 3, indicating a significant number of respondents are uncertain about these claims. The standard deviation and interquartile range indicate a smaller variability in the opinions of respondents for all six statements. According to the standard deviation, respondents' opinions are most uniform regarding the statement that religious tourism destinations should offer more religious events. The smallest interquartile range was also found for the statement that destinations would develop better if there was more coordination among the entities of religious tourism.

According to the analysis results, HYPOTHESIS 2, stating that the efficiency of strategic management of a religious tourism destination correlates with the efficiency of synergistic actions with the local church community operating within the religious tourism destination, as well as with higher church structures overseeing the work of the church community active in the destination, can be accepted. Indeed, descriptive statistical indicators suggest that the majority of surveyed pilgrims and religious travelers were mildly in agreement that the synergistic actions of the strategic management of a religious destination with the local church community and higher church structures affect the efficiency of strategic management. It's notable that in all six statements, a significant number of pilgrims and religious travelers were undecided, with a third of respondents in each case. Considering that a large number of respondents mostly or completely agree with these statements, from nearly 40% to 55%, it can be concluded that pilgrims and religious travelers view the impact of synergistic actions of strategic management of a religious destination with the local church community and higher church structures on the efficiency of strategic management as of greater importance compared to those who mostly or completely disagree with these statements.

**Table 3**

*Distribution of respondents according to the importance ratings of factors that influence the definition of a religious tourism organization's product*

Factor	Level of agreement				
	1 (I completely disagree)	2 (I mostly disagree)	3 (I neither agree nor disagree)	4 (I mostly agree)	5 (I completely agree)
Spiritual significance of the religious destination	36 (7,2%)	27 (5,4%)	101 (20,1%)	115 (22,9%)	223 (44,4%)
Spiritual needs of the pilgrim (e.g., prayer for oneself and others, seeking forgiveness)	18 (3,6%)	21 (4,2%)	76 (15,1%)	91 (18,1%)	296 (59,0%)
Number of attractions (religious landmarks) in the religious tourism destination	71 (14,1%)	62 (12,4%)	161 (32,1%)	120 (23,9%)	88 (17,5%)
Quality of the tourist program for which one travels	55 (11,0%)	37 (7,4%)	127 (25,3%)	143 (28,5%)	140 (27,9%)
Quality of accommodation	55 (11,0%)	37 (7,4%)	145 (28,9%)	144 (28,7%)	121 (24,1%)
Quality of local guide	58 (11,6%)	49 (9,8%)	114 (22,7%)	130 (25,9%)	151 (30,1%)
Quality of meals	74 (14,7%)	53 (10,6%)	158 (31,5%)	110 (21,9%)	107 (21,3%)
Ability to meet specific dietary requirements (e.g., catering for vegetarians, diabetics)	148 (29,5%)	65 (12,9%)	109 (21,7%)	95 (18,9%)	85 (16,9%)
Safety of the religious destination	43 (8,6%)	25 (5,0%)	114 (22,7%)	121 (24,1%)	199 (39,6%)
Social tolerance towards believers in the religious destination	86 (17,1%)	45 (9,0%)	117 (23,3%)	118 (23,5%)	136 (27,1%)
Possibility of traveling with pets	266 (53,0%)	50 (10,0%)	74 (14,7%)	58 (11,6%)	54 (10,8%)
Presence of church officials traveling with pilgrims	96 (19,1%)	52 (10,4%)	90 (17,9%)	110 (21,9%)	154 (30,7%)
Entertainment options outside of scheduled visits	168 (33,5%)	73 (14,5%)	102 (20,3%)	88 (17,5%)	71 (14,1%)
Shopping opportunities	188 (37,5%)	73 (14,5%)	91 (18,1%)	74 (14,7%)	76 (15,1%)

Source: Authors research

The majority of respondents either agree or strongly agree with most (eight out of fourteen) statements regarding the importance of factors that influence the definition of a religious

tourism organization's product. The highest level of agreement, that it is extremely important or mostly important, was expressed for the variables: spiritual significance of the religious destination over 67%; the importance of the pilgrim's own spiritual needs (e.g., prayer for oneself and loved ones, seeking forgiveness) was considered extremely important by 59% of respondents and mostly important by over 18%, with only about 8% considering it unimportant; the quality of the tourist program being over 56%; accommodation quality nearly 53%; 56% of respondents considered the quality of local guides important; nearly 64% for the safety of the religious destination; over 50% believe social tolerance towards believers in the religious destination is important, and over 53% consider the presence of church officials traveling with pilgrims as mostly and extremely important. The possibility of traveling with pets is considered completely unimportant by 53% of respondents and mostly unimportant by 10%. High levels of unimportance were also expressed for shopping opportunities with 52%, for entertainment life outside official tour times 48%, and for the ability to meet specific dietary requirements (e.g., food for vegetarians, diabetics) over 42%. A large number of respondents, about a third, were undecided for three statements: the number of attractions (religious landmarks) in the religious tourism destination, the quality of accommodation, and the quality of food.

Table 4 shows the descriptive statistics of the importance ratings of factors influencing the definition of a religious tourism organization's product.

**Table 4**

*Descriptive statistics of the importance ratings of factors influencing the definition of a religious tourism organization's product*

Factor	Arithmetic mean	Median	Mode	Standard deviation	Interquartile range
Spiritual significance of the religious destination	3,92	4,00	5,00	1,23	2,00
Spiritual needs of the pilgrim (e.g., prayer for oneself and others, seeking forgiveness)	4,25	5,00	5,00	1,08	1,00
Number of attractions (religious landmarks) in the religious tourism destination	3,18	3,00	3,00	1,26	2,00
Quality of the tourist program for which one travels	3,55	4,00	4,00	1,27	2,00
Quality of accommodation	3,48	4,00	3,00	1,24	1,00
Quality of local guide	3,53	4,00	5,00	1,32	2,00
Quality of meals	3,25	3,00	3,00	1,31	2,00
Ability to meet specific dietary requirements (e.g., catering for vegetarians, diabetics)	2,81	3,00	1,00	1,46	3,00

Safety of the religious destination	3,81	4,00	5,00	1,25	2,00
Social tolerance towards believers in the religious destination	3,34	4,00	5,00	1,41	3,00
Possibility of traveling with pets	2,17	1,00	1,00	1,44	2,00
Presence of church officials traveling with pilgrims	3,35	4,00	5,00	1,48	3,00
Entertainment options outside of scheduled visits	2,64	3,00	1,00	1,45	3,00
Shopping opportunities	2,56	2,00	1,00	1,48	3,00

Source: Authors research

According to the mean, which is around 4, respondents generally agree most strongly on the importance of factors influencing the definition of a religious tourism organization's product with variables concerning the spiritual significance of the religious destination, the pilgrim's own spiritual needs (e.g., prayer for oneself and loved ones, seeking forgiveness), and the safety of the religious destination. With an average value of about 3.5, respondents also agreed on the importance of the quality of the travel program, accommodation quality, quality of the local guide, social tolerance towards believers in the religious destination, and the presence of church officials traveling with pilgrims. For these statements, both the median and mode are 4, indicating a high degree of agreement among participants in the research. Respondents agreed least on the importance of factors influencing the definition of a religious tourism organization's product for variables related to the possibility of traveling with pets, shopping opportunities, and entertainment life outside official tour times. The mean for these claims is about 2.5. Additionally, these variables have the lowest values of median and mode, indicating uncertainty among respondents about these claims. The standard deviation and interquartile range indicate the greatest variability in respondents' opinions on five statements about the importance of factors influencing the definition of a religious tourism product: shopping opportunities, entertainment life outside official touring times, the possibility of traveling with pets, the presence of church officials traveling with pilgrims, social tolerance towards believers in the religious destination, and the ability to meet specific dietary needs (e.g., vegetarian, diabetic diets). The smallest interquartile range was found for two claims: the pilgrim's own spiritual needs (e.g., prayer for oneself and loved ones, seeking forgiveness) and the quality of accommodation.

According to the analysis results, we can accept HYPOTHESIS 5 that the needs of pilgrims define the tourism product of a religious tourism organization and thus influence the model of strategic management of the religious tourism destination. Namely, the majority of respondents who participated in the survey agreed with most of the statements on the importance of factors influencing the definition of a religious tourism organization's product,



indicating agreement on its significance, with only one factor being agreed upon as irrelevant to defining the religious tourism organization's product.

**Table 5**

*Distributions of respondents according to their perception of the spontaneous development of tourism and religious tourism and its impact on the development of the religious tourism destination.*

Statement	Level of agreement				
	1 (I completely disagree)	2 (I mostly disagree)	3 (I neither agree nor disagree)	4 (I mostly agree)	5 (I completely agree)
In the destination of religious tourism where I live, religious tourism is developing in a haphazard manner.	6	23	105	108	73
	(1,9%)	(7,3%)	(33,3%)	(34,3%)	(23,2%)
Haphazard development of tourism in the destination of religious tourism negatively impacts its economic development.	7	18	83	109	98
	(2,2%)	(5,7%)	(26,3%)	(34,6%)	(31,1%)
Haphazard tourism development in the destination of religious tourism negatively affects its social development.	11	19	77	117	91
	(3,5%)	(6,0%)	(24,4%)	(37,1%)	(28,9%)
Unbalanced economic and social development of the destination leads to significant negative trends.	15	21	72	114	93
	(4,8%)	(6,7%)	(22,9%)	(36,2%)	(29,5%)

Source: Authors research

Almost 57% of respondents mostly or completely agreed that religious tourism in the religious destination where they live is developing spontaneously. Regarding the perception that spontaneous development of tourism in a religious destination negatively impacts its economic development, and that the spontaneous development of tourism negatively affects its social development, the majority of respondents, over 65%, mostly or completely agree, while a third of respondents are uncertain about this statement. Similarly, they think about the claim that unbalanced economic and social development of the destination leads to significant negative trends, with over 65% of respondents mostly or completely agreeing, nearly 23% are uncertain about this claim, and only about 11% disagree or mostly disagree with it.

Table 6 contains descriptive statistics related to the perception of residents of a religious destination regarding the spontaneous development of tourism and religious tourism and its impact on the development of the religious tourism destination.

**Table 6**

*Descriptive statistics of the perception of spontaneous tourism and religious tourism and its impact on the development of the religious tourism destination*

Statement	Arithmetic mean	Median	Mode	Standard deviation	Interquartile range
In the destination of religious tourism where I live, religious tourism is developing in a haphazard manner.	3,70	4,00	4,00	0,97	1,00
Haphazard development of tourism in the destination of religious tourism negatively impacts its economic development.	3,87	4,00	4,00	0,99	2,00
Haphazard tourism development in the destination of religious tourism negatively affects its social development.	3,82	4,00	4,00	1,03	2,00
Unbalanced economic and social development of the destination leads to significant negative trends.	3,79	4,00	4,00	1,09	2,00

Source: Authors research

According to the arithmetic mean of 3.87, respondents most strongly agree with the statement that the spontaneous development of tourism in the religious tourism destination negatively impacts its economic development. With an average value of 3.80, respondents also agreed with the statements that the spontaneous development of tourism in the religious tourism destination negatively affects its social development and that unbalanced economic and social development of the destination leads to significant negative trends. Meanwhile, for the statement that religious tourism in their living destination develops spontaneously, the arithmetic mean is 3.70. For these statements, the median and mode are 4, indicating a high degree of agreement among the participants in the survey. The standard deviation and interquartile range indicate that the respondents have generally consistent opinions regarding all four statements.

The analysis results support the acceptance of HYPOTHESIS 1, indicating that residents living in religious tourism destinations believe that the spontaneous development of religious tourism, which is often present in these destinations, negatively impacts the balanced economic and sustainable social development of the religious tourism destination. This could lead to significant negative social and, consequently, economic trends in the religious tourism destination over the long term. Indeed, descriptive statistical indicators suggest that residents in the religious destination have pointed out the existence of spontaneous tourism development in their destination and largely agree that this spontaneous development negatively affects

balanced economic and sustainable social development, potentially leading to significant negative economic and social trends in their destination.

**Table 7**

*Distributions of respondents on the impact of the synergistic action of strategic management of the religious destination with the local church and with higher church structures on the efficiency of strategic management*

Statement	Level of agreement				
	1 (I completely disagree)	2 (I mostly disagree)	3 (I neither agree nor disagree)	4 (I mostly agree)	5 (I completely agree)
Religious tourism is more significant than other forms of tourism for the destination where I live.	14 (4,4%)	24 (7,6%)	56 (17,8%)	107 (34,0%)	114 (36,2%)
Hospitality of church officials in the sanctuary.	6 (1,9%)	67 (21,3%)	41 (13,0%)	147 (46,7%)	54 (17,1%)
Yearround religious and tourist offerings in the religious destination.	0 (0,0%)	9 (2,9%)	70 (22,2%)	94 (29,8%)	142 (45,1%)
Local churches and religious organizations are actively involved in the development of religious tourism in the destination.	47 (14,9%)	103 (32,7%)	79 (25,1%)	60 (19,0%)	26 (8,3%)
Multiple church structures recognize and support the development of religious tourism in the destination.	139 (44,1%)	40 (12,7%)	67 (21,3%)	42 (13,3%)	27 (8,6%)
The success of tourism in the destination of religious tourism depends on the quality and interaction of all participants.	2 (0,6%)	4 (1,3%)	33 (10,5%)	71 (22,5%)	205 (65,1%)

Source: Authors research

The majority of respondents, over 70%, mostly or completely agree that religious tourism is more significant than other forms of tourism in the destination where they live. Nearly 64% of respondents mostly or completely agreed that the hospitality of church officials at the sanctuary is important. On the importance of a yearround religious and tourism offer in the religious destination, nearly threequarters of respondents declared it important, with a high 45% completely agreeing and nearly 30% mostly agreeing, while not a single respondent declared complete disagreement, and only 9 expressed mostly disagreement. Over 65% of respondents completely agreed that the success of tourism in the religious tourism destination depends on the quality and interaction of all participants, including the Church, and nearly 23%

mostly agreed, with only two respondents completely disagreeing and four mostly disagreeing, indicating a high degree of agreement, almost 88%, on the importance of the success of religious tourism in the destination depending on the cooperation of all tourism stakeholders, including the Church. With the statement that local churches and religious organizations act in the function of developing religious tourism in the destination, nearly 48% of respondents completely or mostly disagreed, while a quarter of respondents were uncertain. Over 44% of respondents completely disagreed that higher church structures recognize and support the development of religious tourism in the destination, and nearly 13% mostly disagreed, with over 21% uncertain about this claim, indicating that the Church itself has not recognized the value of religious tourism nor does it support the development of religious tourism in the religious destination.

Table 8 shows the descriptive statistics of the local population's perception of the impact of the synergistic action of strategic management of the religious destination with the local church community operating in the religious tourism destination, as well as with higher church structures, on the efficiency of strategic management.

**Table 8**

*Descriptive statistics of the local population's perception of the impact of the synergistic action of strategic management of the religious destination with the local church community and with higher church structures on the efficiency of strategic management*

Statement	Arithmetic mean	Median	Mode	Standard deviation	Interquartile range
Religious tourism is more significant than other forms of tourism for the destination where I live.	3,90	4,00	5,00	1,11	2,00
Hospitality of church officials in the sanctuary.	3,56	4,00	4,00	1,06	1,00
Yearround religious and tourist offerings in the religious destination.	4,17	4,00	5,00	0,87	2,00
Local churches and religious organizations are actively involved in the development of religious tourism in the destination.	2,73	3,00	2,00	1,17	2,00
Multiple church structures recognize and support the development of religious tourism in the destination.	2,30	2,00	1,00	1,37	2,00
The success of tourism in the destination of religious tourism depends on the quality and interaction of all participants.	4,50	5,00	5,00	0,78	1,00

Source: Authors research

According to the mean of 4.5, respondents on average most strongly agree with the statement that the success of tourism in a religious tourism destination depends on the quality and interaction of all participants. With an average score of around 4, respondents also agreed with the statements about the importance of a yearround religious and tourism offer in the religious destination and how religious tourism is more significant than other forms of tourism for the destination where they live. For these statements, the median and mode are 4 and 5, indicating a high degree of agreement among the survey participants. Respondents agreed least with two statements: that local churches and religious organizations act in the function of developing religious tourism in the destination, and that higher church structures recognize and support the development of religious tourism in the destination. The mean for the first statement is 2.73 and for the second, 2.3. Additionally, these two variables have the lowest values of median and mode, indicating a significant degree of uncertainty among respondents regarding these claims. The standard deviation and interquartile range indicate the greatest variability in respondents' opinions regarding the statement that higher church structures recognize and support the development of religious tourism in the destination. According to the standard deviation, respondents' opinions were most consistent regarding the two statements that the success of tourism in the religious tourism destination depends on the quality and interaction of all participants, and about the yearround religious and tourism offer in the religious destination. Besides these variables, the smallest interquartile range was also determined for the statement about the importance of hospitality of church officials in the sanctuary.

According to the analysis results, HYPOTHESIS 2, which suggests that the efficiency of strategic management of a religious tourism destination is correlated with the efficiency of synergistic action with the local church community operating in the religious tourism destination, as well as with higher church structures in whose jurisdiction the work of the church community operating in the religious tourism destination falls, can be accepted. Indeed, descriptive statistical indicators suggest that residents of the religious destination largely agree in all analyzed statements that the synergistic action of the strategic management of the religious destination with the local church community and with higher church structures influences the efficiency of strategic management.

**Table 9***Distribution of respondents according to their perception of the positive effects of tourism*

Statement	Level of agreement				
	1 (I completely disagree)	2 (I mostly disagree)	3 (I neither agree nor disagree)	4 (I mostly agree)	5 (I completely agree)
Tourism creates new job opportunities for the local population.	2 (0,6%)	8 (2,5%)	26 (8,3%)	186 (59,0%)	93 (29,5%)
Tourism contributes to the employment of young people.	3 (1,0%)	7 (2,2%)	20 (6,3%)	208 (66,0%)	77 (24,4%)
Tourism is a significant source of income for a large number of community members.	3 (1,0%)	26 (8,3%)	104 (33,0%)	132 (41,9%)	50 (15,9%)
Money spent by tourists stays within the local community.	1 (0,3%)	10 (3,2%)	55 (17,5%)	208 (66,0%)	41 (13,0%)
Tourism contributes to the sale of local products.	1 (0,3%)	7 (2,2%)	34 (10,8%)	228 (72,4%)	45 (14,3%)
Tourism enhances the quality of life for the local population through the development of events and infrastructure.	3 (1,0%)	12 (3,8%)	21 (6,7%)	226 (71,7%)	53 (16,8%)
Thanks to tourism, local crafts, skills, and traditions are stimulated.	3 (1,0%)	11 (3,5%)	64 (20,3%)	196 (62,2%)	41 (13,0%)
Tourism strengthens local pride among residents.	5 (1,6%)	53 (16,8%)	86 (27,3%)	115 (36,5%)	56 (17,8%)
Thanks to tourism, I have met people of different nations and their cultures.	5 (1,6%)	9 (2,9%)	88 (27,9%)	174 (55,2%)	39 (12,4%)
Tourism contributes to learning tolerance and breaking down prejudices.	1 (0,3%)	3 (1,0%)	31 (9,8%)	235 (74,6%)	45 (14,3%)
Tourism significantly influences the aesthetic improvement of places.	1 (0,3%)	4 (1,3%)	24 (7,6%)	223 (70,8%)	63 (20,0%)
Thanks to tourism, the level of protection of valuable natural resources has increased.	1 (0,3%)	6 (1,9%)	117 (37,1%)	151 (47,9%)	40 (12,7%)
Tourism initiates the conservation and restoration of cultural and religious heritage.	1 (0,3%)	5 (1,6%)	51 (16,2%)	209 (66,3%)	49 (15,6%)
Due to tourism, there is better management of environmental maintenance and water, forest, and other resources.	2 (0,6%)	8 (2,5%)	158 (50,2%)	104 (33,0%)	43 (13,7%)
Tourism generally raises the level of environmental awareness.	3 (1,0%)	7 (2,2%)	69 (21,9%)	192 (61,0%)	44 (14,0%)

Source: Authors research

Almost 60% of respondents mostly agreed that tourism creates new jobs for the local population, and nearly 30% completely agreed with this statement. Thus, almost 90% of respondents agree that tourism generates new employment opportunities for the local community. Slightly over 8% were uncertain about this statement, while only about 3% disagreed. Regarding the statement that tourism contributes to the employment of young people, over 90% of respondents agreed. Generally, for thirteen out of fifteen statements about the positive effects, respondents mostly or completely agreed from 75 to 90% with the stated positive impacts in tourism, indicating a high level of agreement with the positive effects of tourism among respondents. Only for two statements—that tourism is a significant source of financial income for many community members, and thanks to tourism, there has been an increase in the level of protection of valuable natural resources—slightly more than a third of respondents expressed uncertainty, while for the statement that tourism leads to better management of environmental maintenance and water, forest, and other resources, more than half of the respondents stated they were uncertain about this claim.

The following table 10 shows the descriptive statistics of the perception of respondents from religious destinations on the positive effects of tourism.

**Table 10**

*Descriptive statistics of the perception of respondents from religious destinations on the positive effects of tourism*

Impact	Arithmetic mean	Median	Mode	Standard deviation	Interquartile range
Tourism creates new job opportunities for the local population.	4,14	4,00	4,00	0,72	1,00
Tourism contributes to the employment of young people.	4,11	4,00	4,00	0,69	0,00
Tourism is a significant source of income for a large number of community members.	3,63	4,00	4,00	0,88	1,00
Money spent by tourists stays within the local community.	3,88	4,00	4,00	0,67	0,00
Tourism contributes to the sale of local products.	3,98	4,00	4,00	0,61	0,00
Tourism enhances the quality of life for the local population through the development of events and infrastructure.	4,00	4,00	4,00	0,69	0,00
Thanks to tourism, local crafts, skills, and traditions are stimulated.	3,83	4,00	4,00	0,73	0,00
Tourism strengthens local pride among residents.	3,52	4,00	4,00	1,02	1,00
Thanks to tourism, I have met people of different nations and their cultures.	3,74	4,00	4,00	0,77	1,00
Tourism contributes to learning tolerance and breaking down prejudices.	4,02	4,00	4,00	0,56	0,00
Tourism significantly influences the aesthetic improvement of places.	4,09	4,00	4,00	0,59	0,00

Thanks to tourism, the level of protection of valuable natural resources has increased.	3,71	4,00	4,00	0,72	1,00
Tourism initiates the conservation and restoration of cultural and religious heritage.	3,95	4,00	4,00	0,64	0,00
Due to tourism, there is better management of environmental maintenance and water, forest, and other resources.	3,57	3,00	3,00	0,78	1,00
Tourism generally raises the level of environmental awareness.	3,85	4,00	4,00	0,72	1,00

Source: Authors research

According to the mean of 4.14, respondents generally agree most with the statement that tourism creates new job opportunities for the local population. With an average value greater than 4, respondents also agreed with statements that tourism contributes to the employment of young people, significantly affects the aesthetic arrangement of places, contributes to learning tolerance and breaking down prejudices, and increases the quality of life for the local population through the development of events and infrastructure. For these statements, the median and mode are 4, indicating a high degree of agreement among the participants in the survey. Additionally, respondents believe that other statements also positively impact the life of the local community but are not entirely sure about them. This conclusion is drawn from the mean values below 4 and median values at 4. Respondents agreed least with the statement that tourism leads to better management of environmental maintenance and water, forest, and other resources, with a mean of 3.57. Furthermore, the lowest values of median and mode for this variable indicate uncertainty among respondents regarding this claim. The standard deviation and interquartile range indicate the greatest variability in respondents' opinions regarding the statement that tourism strengthens local pride among residents. According to the standard deviation, respondents' opinions are generally more consistent regarding statements about the positive effects of tourism on the life of the local community.

The analysis results support the acceptance of HYPOTHESIS 3, suggesting that residents living in religious tourism destinations, including those involved in hospitality or tourism activities, believe that such a form of tourism has positive effects on their community. Indeed, descriptive statistical indicators suggest that residents agree to a greater or lesser extent that religious tourism contributes to the development of their community in various ways.



**Table 11**

*Distribution of respondents, who are residents of a religious destination, according to the negative effects of tourism on the sustainable development of the local community*

Impact	Level of agreement				
	1 (I completely disagree)	2 (I mostly disagree)	3 (I neither agree nor disagree)	4 (I mostly agree)	5 (I completely agree)
Tourism affects the increase in prices of goods and services.	1 (0,3%)	15 (4,8%)	86 (27,3%)	167 (53,0%)	46 (14,6%)
The development of tourism negatively affects the development of other economic sectors.	27 (8,6%)	158 (50,2%)	95 (30,2%)	24 (7,6%)	11 (3,5%)
Tourism contributes to the import of cheaper labor.	9 (2,9%)	40 (12,7%)	146 (46,3%)	97 (30,8%)	23 (7,3%)
Due to tourism, the workforce leaves rural areas and other economic sectors.	13 (4,1%)	99 (31,4%)	101 (32,1%)	81 (25,7%)	21 (6,7%)
Tourism causes an increase in the number of seasonal workers and a decrease in the number of permanent employees.	7 (2,2%)	24 (7,6%)	76 (24,1%)	179 (56,8%)	29 (9,2%)
Tourism influences the abundant generation of waste.	12 (3,8%)	29 (9,2%)	56 (17,8%)	135 (42,9%)	83 (26,3%)
Natural and cultural resources are destroyed due to tourism.	4 (1,3%)	80 (25,4%)	175 (55,6%)	41 (13,0%)	15 (4,8%)
Tourism causes overcrowding in tourist destinations.	10 (3,2%)	180 (57,1%)	60 (19,0%)	50 (15,9%)	15 (4,8%)
Tourism increases the risk of fires and other physical damage.	5 (1,6%)	38 (12,1%)	100 (31,7%)	155 (49,2%)	17 (5,4%)
Tourism contributes to the rise in prices in shops and hospitality services.	4 (1,3%)	20 (6,3%)	93 (29,5%)	160 (50,8%)	38 (12,1%)
Tourism contributes to the rise in prices of municipal services.	6 (1,9%)	22 (7,0%)	133 (42,2%)	119 (37,8%)	35 (11,1%)

Source: Authors research

Over 27% are unsure about the claim, and only one respondent completely disagreed with the statement; that tourism leads to an increase in the number of seasonal workers, and a decrease in the number of permanently employed, 66% of respondents agree, and over 24% are unsure about it; that tourism contributes to significant waste generation, nearly 70% agree, and about 18% are unsure; that it increases the level of fire hazards and other physical damages, over 54% agree while a significant number, almost 32%, are unsure; that tourism contributes to the increase in prices of utility services, a large majority of 63% agree, and nearly 30% are

unsure. Regarding the claims that tourism development negatively affects the development of other economic sectors, and that tourism causes overcrowding of the tourist place, a very large number, almost 60%, disagreed, while only about ten or twenty percent agreed. With statements that tourism contributes to the import of cheaper labor, a very large number are undecided, 46.3% and 42%, respectively, while for these two statements, 38% and 48% mostly or completely agree. A large number are also undecided about the two claims that tourism contributes to the import of cheaper labor over 32%, and almost 35% completely disagree or did not agree at all, that tourism destroys natural and cultural resources undecided is over 55% and did not agree or completely disagreed were nearly 27%.

Table 12 shows the descriptive statistics of the perception of negative effects of tourism on the sustainable development of the local community.

**Table 12**

*Descriptive statistics of the perception of negative effects of tourism on the sustainable development of the local community*

Impact	Arithmetic mean	Median	Mode	Standard deviation	Interquartile range
Tourism affects the increase in prices of goods and services.	3,77	4,00	4,00	0,77	1,00
The development of tourism negatively affects the development of other economic sectors.	2,47	2,00	2,00	0,89	1,00
Tourism contributes to the import of cheaper labor.	3,27	3,00	3,00	0,88	1,00
Due to tourism, the workforce leaves rural areas and other economic sectors.	2,99	3,00	3,00	1,00	2,00
Tourism causes an increase in the number of seasonal workers and a decrease in the number of permanent employees.	3,63	4,00	4,00	0,84	1,00
Tourism influences the abundant generation of waste.	2,76	3,00	3,00	0,81	1,00
Natural and cultural resources are destroyed due to tourism.	3,79	4,00	4,00	1,05	2,00
Tourism causes overcrowding in tourist destinations.	2,95	3,00	3,00	0,79	1,00
Tourism increases the risk of fires and other physical damage.	3,45	4,00	4,00	0,83	1,00
Tourism contributes to the rise in prices in shops and hospitality services.	3,66	4,00	4,00	0,82	1,00
Tourism contributes to the rise in prices of municipal services.	3,49	3,00	3,00	0,85	1,00

Source: Authors research

According to the mean of 3.79, respondents generally agree most with the statement that tourism leads to excessive waste generation. With an average value greater than 3.5, respondents also agreed with statements that tourism affects the increase in prices of goods and services, causes an increase in the number of seasonal workers and a decrease in the number of

permanently employed, and contributes to the rise in prices in stores and catering services. For these statements, the median and mode are 4, indicating a high degree of agreement among the participants in the survey. Additionally, respondents generally believe that other statements negatively impact the life of the local community but are not entirely sure about them. This conclusion is drawn from the mean values below 4, as well as medians, which are 4. Respondents agreed least with the statement that tourism development negatively impacts the development of other economic sectors, with a mean of 2.47. Furthermore, the lowest values of median and mode for this variable indicate uncertainty among respondents regarding this claim. The standard deviation and interquartile range indicate the greatest variability in respondents' opinions regarding two statements: that tourism leads to excessive waste generation and that tourism causes the workforce to leave rural areas and other economic sectors. According to the standard deviation, respondents' opinions are generally more consistent regarding statements about the negative effects of tourism on the life of the local community.

According to the analysis results, HYPOTHESIS 4, which suggests that besides positive effects, religious tourism also has negative aspects, namely that in certain cases it negatively affects the community and residents living in religious tourism destinations, including those involved in hospitality or tourism activities, can be somewhat accepted. Indeed, with most statements about the negative effects of tourism, residents did not agree, or they were only mildly in agreement in certain cases that religious tourism negatively impacts their community.

**Table 13**

*Distribution of respondents, who are residents of a religious destination, according to their ratings on the impact of the parish community on the volume of visitation to the religious tourism destination*

Statement	Level of agreement				
	1 (I completely disagree)	2 (I mostly disagree)	3 (I neither agree nor disagree)	4 (I mostly agree)	5 (I completely agree)
The proactivity of the parish priest and their motivation of parishioners significantly influences the number of pilgrimages and pilgrims.	54	34	83	101	230
	(10,8%)	(6,8%)	(16,5%)	(20,1%)	(45,8%)
My participation in a pilgrimage largely depends on who organizes the pilgrimage.	105	61	103	106	127
	(20,9%)	(12,2%)	(20,5%)	(21,1%)	(25,3%)

The spiritual significance of the pilgrimage destination greatly influences my decision to participate in the pilgrimage.	52	51	115	128	156
	(10,4%)	(10,2%)	(22,9%)	(25,5%)	(31,1%)
The distance of the pilgrimage destination greatly influences my decision to participate in the pilgrimage.	96	51	135	103	117
	(19,1%)	(10,2%)	(26,9%)	(20,5%)	(23,3%)
My satisfaction with previous religious journeys greatly influences my decision to participate in the pilgrimage.	70	52	148	110	122
	(13,9%)	(10,4%)	(29,5%)	(21,9%)	(24,3%)

Source: Authors research

With the statement that the proactivity of the parish priest and his motivation of parishioners significantly affect the number of pilgrimages and pilgrims, nearly 46% of respondents completely agree, and over 20% mostly agree. Thus, almost 66% of respondents believe that the proactivity of the parish priest and his motivation of parishioners significantly influence the number of pilgrimages and pilgrims, while over 16% of respondents are not sure about this statement, and similarly, about 17% of respondents mostly or strongly disagree with it. A quarter of respondents completely agree, and over 21% mostly agree that their participation in a pilgrimage greatly depends on who organizes it. Over 20% of respondents are unsure about this statement, while a third of respondents mostly or strongly disagree. Only about a third of pilgrims mostly agree, but taking into account those who mostly agree as well, it can be concluded that over 56% of respondents believe the spiritual significance of the pilgrimage destination is crucial for their decision to participate. Over 20% of surveyed individuals mostly or strongly disagreed. While a third of respondents mostly or strongly disagree that the distance of the pilgrimage destination greatly influences the decision to participate, a quarter are undecided, and almost 44% mostly or completely agree with this statement. On the claim that the decision to participate in a pilgrimage is greatly influenced by satisfaction with previous religious travels, a quarter of respondents disagree, a third are undecided, and over 46% of respondents mostly or completely agree.

Table 14 contains descriptive statistics related to the assessment of the impact of the parish community on the volume of visitation to the religious tourism destination.

**Table 14**

*Descriptive statistics related to the assessment of the impact of the parish community on the volume of visitation to the religious tourism destination*

Statement	Arithmetic mean	Median	Mode	Standard deviation	Interquartile range
The proactivity of the parish priest and their motivation of parishioners significantly influences the number of pilgrimages and pilgrims.	3,83	4,00	5,00	1,36	2,00
My participation in a pilgrimage largely depends on who organizes the pilgrimage.	3,18	3,00	5,00	1,47	3,00
The spiritual significance of the pilgrimage destination greatly influences my decision to participate in the pilgrimage.	3,57	4,00	5,00	1,30	2,00
The distance of the pilgrimage destination greatly influences my decision to participate in the pilgrimage.	3,19	3,00	3,00	1,40	2,00
My satisfaction with previous religious journeys greatly influences my decision to participate in the pilgrimage.	3,32	3,00	3,00	1,32	1,00

Source: Authors research

According to the mean, with an average score greater than 3.5, respondents agreed with two statements: that the proactivity of the parish priest and his motivation of parishioners significantly influence the number of pilgrimages and the number of pilgrims, and that the decision to participate in a pilgrimage is greatly influenced by the spiritual significance of the pilgrimage destination. For these statements, the median is 4, and the mode is 5, indicating a very high degree of agreement among the survey participants. For the other three statements—that the decision to participate in a pilgrimage is greatly influenced by satisfaction with previous religious travels, that the decision to participate in a pilgrimage is greatly influenced by the distance of the pilgrimage destination, and that participation in a pilgrimage greatly depends on who organizes it—respondents generally agree but are not entirely sure about these claims. This conclusion is drawn from the mean values, which are slightly over 3, and medians, which are 3. The standard deviation and interquartile range indicate the greatest variability in respondents' opinions regarding two statements: that participation in a pilgrimage greatly depends on who organizes it and that the decision to participate in a pilgrimage is greatly influenced by the distance of the pilgrimage destination. The smallest interquartile range was determined for the statement that the decision to participate in a pilgrimage is greatly influenced by satisfaction with previous religious travels.

According to the analysis results, HYPOTHESIS 6, suggesting that the activities of religious organizations outside of the religious tourism organization, especially in the realm of

promotion and organization of pilgrimages, can statistically significantly affect the volume of visitation to the religious tourism destination, thereby influencing the economic effects of religious tourism of the religious tourism destination, can be somewhat accepted. Indeed, with most statements regarding the impact of the parish community on the volume of visitation to the religious tourism destination, pilgrims and religious travelers were mildly in agreement, while they more strongly agreed with the statement that the proactivity of the parish priest and his motivation of parishioners significantly influence the number of pilgrimages and the number of pilgrims.

**Table 15**

*Distributions of respondents according to their ratings of the impact of stakeholders in religious tourism on the development of sustainable tourism in the religious destination*

Statement	Level of agreement				
	1 (I completely disagree)	2 (I mostly disagree)	3 (I neither agree nor disagree)	4 (I mostly agree)	5 (I completely agree)
Decisionmaking regarding the development of religious tourism in my area involves members of all interest groups.	78 (24,8%)	79 (25,1%)	86 (27,3%)	53 (16,8%)	19 (6,0%)
The tourism industry accepts different viewpoints from members of interest groups in the community regarding tourism development.	62 (19,7%)	81 (25,7%)	112 (35,6%)	45 (14,3%)	15 (4,8%)
The tourism industry engages in longterm planning in collaboration with the local community and the Church.	81 (25,7%)	78 (24,8%)	94 (29,8%)	47 (14,9%)	15 (4,8%)
Successful tourism management requires strategic planning involving the broader local community.	2 (0,6%)	10 (3,2%)	43 (13,7%)	73 (23,2%)	187 (59,4%)
The local community maintains a longterm perspective on tourism development planning.	62 (19,7%)	89 (28,3%)	99 (31,4%)	48 (15,2%)	17 (5,4%)
The tourism industry, in collaboration with the local community and the Church, ensures quality tourism experiences for future visitors.	120 (38,1%)	35 (11,1%)	77 (24,4%)	56 (17,8%)	27 (8,6%)

Source: Authors research

In the statement that members of all interest groups participate in making decisions about the development of religious tourism in their place, most respondents, nearly 50%, disagreed or strongly disagreed with this statement, while over 27% were unsure, indicating

a high degree of disagreement about the participation of interest groups in decisionmaking regarding tourism development in their place. Similarly, there was a high degree of disagreement with the following statements: that the tourism industry accepts different viewpoints of community interest group members on tourism development, that the tourism industry plans longterm in collaboration with the local community and the Church, that the local community has a longterm perspective regarding the planning of tourism development of the place, and that the tourism industry, in collaboration with the local community and the Church, ensures quality tourist experiences for future visitors. For the statement that successful tourism management requires strategic planning with the broader local community, respondents expressed agreement with nearly 60% completely agreeing and over 23% agreeing, while only two respondents disagreed entirely. The responses indicate that, according to the perception of the local community members, there is no cooperation among interest groups on the development of tourism in their religious destination, and they are aware that successful tourism management in their religious destination requires strategic planning with the broader local community.

Table 16 presents the descriptive statistics of the ratings of the impact of stakeholders in religious tourism on the development of sustainable tourism in the religious destination.

**Table 16**

*Descriptive statistics of the ratings of the impact of stakeholders in religious tourism on the development of sustainable tourism in the religious destination*

Statement	Arithmetic mean	Median	Mode	Standard deviation	Interquartile range
Decisionmaking regarding the development of religious tourism in my area involves members of all interest groups.	2,54	3,00	3,00	1,20	1,00
The tourism industry accepts different viewpoints from members of interest groups in the community regarding tourism development.	2,59	3,00	3,00	1,10	1,00
The tourism industry engages in longterm planning in collaboration with the local community and the Church	2,48	2,00	3,00	1,16	2,00
Successful tourism management requires strategic planning involving the broader local community.	4,37	5,00	5,00	0,88	1,00

The local community maintains a longterm perspective on tourism development planning.	2,58	3,00	3,00	1,13	1,00
The tourism industry, in collaboration with the local community and the Church, ensures quality tourism experiences for future visitors.	2,48	3,00	1,00	1,37	3,00

Source: Authors research

According to the arithmetic mean, which is 4.37, respondents generally agree the most with the statement that successful tourism management requires strategic planning involving the broader local community. The median and mode for this statement are both 5, indicating a high level of agreement among participants. Conversely, with an average value of 2.5, respondents generally disagree the most with the remaining five statements. For these variables, the lowest values of median and mode were calculated, indicating uncertainty among respondents regarding these statements. The standard deviation and interquartile range indicate the greatest variability in respondents' opinions regarding the statement that the tourism industry, in collaboration with the local community and the Church, ensures quality tourism experiences for future visitors, while for other variables, respondents' opinions are more uniform regarding these statements.

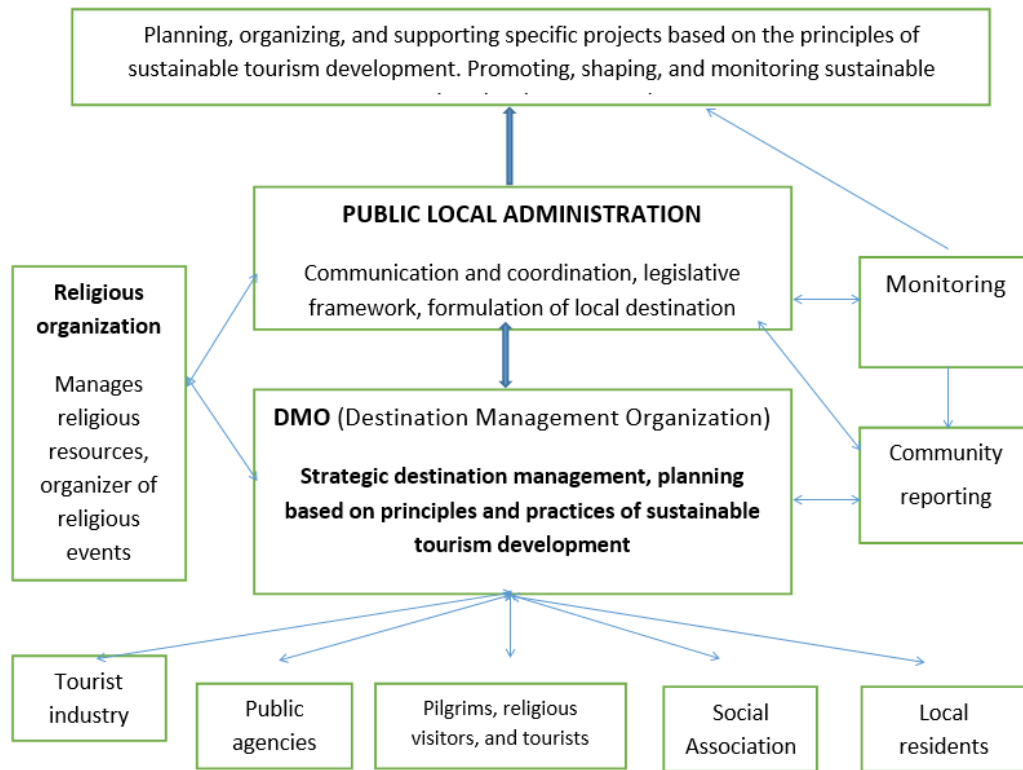
The results of the analysis support the acceptance of HYPOTHESIS 7, indicating that residents living in religious tourism destinations believe that networking of all stakeholders in the destination and their involvement in decisionmaking about tourism development are functionally related to the success of developing and implementing a sustainable strategic management plan for the religious tourism destination. Descriptive statistical indicators suggest that residents in the religious destination have indicated a lack of synergy among all stakeholders in religious tourism in decisionmaking about tourism development. They also generally agree that successful tourism management in their destination requires the involvement of all stakeholders in religious tourism in decisionmaking, which is functionally linked to the success of making and implementing a sustainable strategic development plan for their destination.

In conclusion, analyzing the above data, we can confirm that **hypotheses H1, H2, H3, H5, and H7 are confirmed, while hypotheses H4 and H6 are partially confirmed.**



**Figure 1**

*The conceptual model of strategic management of religious tourism destination (Source: Authors model)*



Every religious tourism destination is specific in terms of its geographical and religious characteristics, and it is necessary to recognize and consider these specificities when creating a sustainable model for strategic management of tourism development in the religious destination. From this model, three key critical points for establishing sustainable strategic management of the religious tourism destination can be identified: 1. establishing planning processes based on principles of sustainable tourism development; 2. establishing an organization for strategic management of sustainable tourism development in the religious destination; 3. defining and monitoring projects based on principles and principles of sustainable tourism development at the level of the religious destination.

Given the highlighted challenges, one response is to establish, by the public local administration, an organization for destination management, known as the Destination Management Organization (DMO), which would aim to connect different stakeholders with the goal of joint action, including promoting sustainable tourism development in the religious destination. One of the primary tasks of the DMO should be to achieve formal and informal connections among the public, religious, private sectors, as well as pilgrims, religious visitors,

tourists, and residents. By establishing the DMO, the public local administration should address the problem of strategic management of the religious destination due to the lack of hierarchy and authority, or the absence of leaders in sustainable tourism development of the religious destination. Similarly, by establishing the DMO, the problem of having many different interest groups with conflicting goals among them should be successfully neutralized. The purpose of the DMO's existence should be to develop techniques for strategic management of the religious destination and to connect different interest groups, shaping a common vision and goals for sustainable tourism development with one single aim: to enhance the religious and other resource base for present and future generations, considering both economic and physical aspects of tourism. From the perspective of strategic management with sustainable tourism development of the religious destination, one of the key roles of the Destination Management Organization is to lead and coordinate various stakeholders in the process of planning, managing, and supervising specific projects towards achieving sustainable tourism development goals.

The role and responsibility of the Destination Management Organization (DMO) in the context of a religious tourism destination should be significant in promoting and achieving sustainable tourism development goals. The DMO should encourage, facilitate, and support projects based on principles of sustainable tourism development and have clear objectives and policy for sustainable tourism development. It is responsible for aligning, promoting, and shaping sustainable tourism goals within the destination, coordinating efforts with various stakeholders, from the religious community to residents, and guiding active planning processes in complex situations. Given the challenges, establishing a DMO, supported by the public sector, religious organizations, and the private sector, is essential to foster collaboration, develop a broad stakeholder base, and steer the destination towards desired changes promptly. Sustainable strategic management of religious tourism destinations is achievable through the adoption of a local strategy for sustainable tourism management. Sustainability should be the primary goal of destination management. As it is often challenging to ensure unbiased influence from any governing body, including the DMO, strategic management in religious tourism destinations should leverage religious resources for sustainable development, implementing projects based on sustainable tourism principles. These efforts should drive positive synergies in tourism offerings, leading to economic efficiency improvements and contributing to local and regional development. Furthermore, monitoring the impact of tourism on the environment is essential. Using indicators of sustainable tourism development can facilitate decisionmaking

and enhance understanding among stakeholders, even when there are perceived economic constraints. The DMO should utilize these indicators to provide actionable information for all stakeholders involved in spiritual and tourism offerings, supporting sustainable tourism development comprehensively.

Overall, religious tourism destinations must adhere to sustainable tourism principles through strategic management, as there are no viable alternatives for development. The DMO plays a pivotal role in this process, ensuring collaboration, fostering understanding, and guiding efforts towards sustainable tourism development.

## 6 DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

The development of religious tourism is inherently tied to specific locations with religious events and resources that attract pilgrims, religious visitors, and tourists. Despite its perceived acceptability compared to other activities, tourism leaves negative impacts on the environment, local communities, and space. Religious tourism destinations, especially those centred around sacred heritage and events, face challenges due to the industry's concentration of visitors during certain times, leading to rapid and intense tourism activity.

Effective management of religious tourism development is crucial due to these challenges. However, many destinations lack coordinated planning and management, resulting in unplanned and unsustainable tourism growth. Establishing a robust strategic management model is essential to address these issues and foster sustainable tourism development. This model should involve collaboration among various stakeholders, including the public sector, religious institutions, private sector, local communities, and tourists, to formulate and implement a cohesive strategy for sustainable development.

Through the implementation of strategic management, destinations can improve the quality of their offerings, garner stronger support from religious institutions and local communities, mitigate negative impacts of tourism, and raise awareness about the value of religious, cultural, and natural heritage. Successful examples worldwide highlight the importance of strategic management in balancing economic development with environmental and social sustainability.

In conclusion, the establishment of a strategic management organization is vital for steering religious tourism destinations towards sustainable development. This organization should facilitate collaboration among stakeholders, formulate a cohesive development strategy,

and implement effective management practices based on sustainable principles. By doing so, destinations can achieve balanced and sustainable tourism growth while preserving their cultural, natural, and spiritual assets.

It should be emphasized that the focus of this research is on endogenous variables, while exogenous variables are disregarded at this conceptual level. External variables such as the influence of global economic trends, wars, diseases, epidemics, pandemics, natural disasters, although we are aware that the COVID19 pandemic has significantly impacted consumer behavior trends (Šostar and Ristanović, 2023).

The research contributes to science and society by addressing the underexplored topic of religious tourism development through a sustainable development model in the Republic of Croatia. By employing a combination of scientific research methods, including historical, descriptive, statistical, mathematical, inductive, deductive, analytical, systems theory, synthesis, abstraction, proof, case study, and modeling methods, the study offers valuable insights into the current state, challenges, and potential of religious tourism in Croatia. Through a comprehensive literature review and empirical research involving survey questionnaires targeting both pilgrims and the local population of religious destinations, the study provides a scientific model for strategic management of religious tourism destinations based on principles of sustainable development. By filling this research gap, the study contributes to the advancement of knowledge in the field of tourism studies, particularly in the context of religious tourism and its role in sustainable development.

Despite its contributions, the research also faces certain limitations and challenges. One limitation lies in the scarcity of scientific contributions from domestic authors regarding the development of religious tourism through a sustainable development model, highlighting the need for further research in this area. Additionally, while efforts were made to create a representative sample for the empirical research, the sample size may not fully capture the diversity of perspectives within the population. Furthermore, the reliance on survey questionnaires, while common in social science research, may introduce biases or limitations inherent in self-reported data. Finally, the effectiveness and applicability of the proposed model for strategic management of religious tourism destinations based on sustainable development principles may vary depending on contextual factors and implementation challenges encountered in practice. Despite these limitations, the research provides a valuable foundation for future studies and practical initiatives aimed at enhancing religious tourism development in Croatia and beyond.

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