

A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF MANAGERS' PERCEPTIONS OF DOMESTIC AND INTERNATIONAL TOURISTS IN ECO-CERTIFIED ACCOMMODATIONS

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Abstract: *Tourism demand in Romania has shifted dramatically due to the COVID-19 pandemic and the war in Ukraine, with a marked rise in domestic visitors. This study explores differences between domestic and international tourists in eco-certified accommodation units, drawing on insights from 26 managers within the Eco-Romania network. Results reveal that international tourists are motivated mainly by culture and nature, show higher enthusiasm, and display stronger pro-environmental behaviours. Domestic tourists, by contrast, have more diverse motivations centred on relaxation and socialising, coupled with higher expectations and lower conformity to hospitality norms. From a managerial perspective, these findings highlight the need for tailored strategies.*

Key words: *domestic & international tourists, eco-certified accommodation, managers' perception*

1. Introduction

In recent years, the structure of tourism demand in Romania has undergone significant changes. The COVID-19 pandemic that broke-out in 2019, followed by the outbreak of the conflict in Ukraine in 2022, substantially altered tourist flows by reducing the proportion of international visitors and increasing the number of domestic tourists. According to the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) data, in 2021 domestic tourists accounted for 91.2% of total overnight stays in Romanian accommodation establishments (OECD, 2022), highlighting a pronounced reliance on the domestic market. These changes had a significant impact on the ecotourism sector. Reports from the Association of Ecotourism in Romania indicate that, within the network of ecotourism services managed by the association, operators who previously catered primarily to international tourists either ceased operations or reoriented towards the domestic market, which enabled them to observe clear

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differences in profiles, motivations, and behaviours between the two visitor categories (Association of Ecotourism in Romania, 2020).

In this context, a comparative analysis of domestic and international tourists is essential for eco-certified accommodation units, given the fact that understanding these differences helps align services and experiences with the sustainability, community engagement, and nature- and culture-focused values that these establishments promote. In order to adapt their marketing and communication strategies, these tourist accommodations need to identify which types of visitors best match their profile and the extent to which different tourist categories demonstrate interest in ecological and cultural values. Accordingly, it is relevant to examine how domestic and international tourists align with these characteristics, which are specific to eco-certified accommodation units, as well as how managers perceive differences in behaviour and expectations between the two segments. This approach complements the existing literature, which indicates that international tourists are often motivated by the desire to experience authentic activities and to discover cultural and natural heritage, whereas domestic tourists tend to be more sensitive to factors such as proximity, cost, and short-term recreational opportunities (Dolnicar and Grün, 2009; Constantin et al., 2021).

This paper investigates the distinctive behavioural traits of domestic and international tourists. The analysis is based on the perceptions of managers of eco-certified accommodation units within the Eco-Romania system. The study focuses on tourists' attitudes, interests, motivations, and ecological practices. By analysing these dimensions, the study contributes to understanding how eco-certified units can adapt their offerings and marketing strategies to respond more effectively to the needs of different visitor categories. At the same time, this study addresses a notable gap in the existing literature. While a limited number of studies have compared domestic and international tourists within the context of Romanian ecotourism (Constantin *et al.*, 2021; Joshi *et al.*, 2025), the topic of specific behavioural nuances within eco-certified accommodation units remains largely unexplored.

2. Literature Review

While the existing literature is rich in studies on how tourists' behaviours can be influenced to minimise their environmental impact at visited destinations (supply-side approach), authors such as Dolnicar (2002) and Dolnicar et al. (2008) propose an alternative, demand-side perspective. This approach advocates for the implementation of marketing strategies aimed at attracting those segments of tourists who are most likely to demonstrate environmentally friendly behaviours. Within this framework, segmentation analyses become essential for a better understanding of tourist profiles and for the development of management and marketing strategies tailored to the specific characteristics of each segment (Constantin et al., 2021).

Research in the field of tourism has extensively examined both the profile of environmentally conscious tourists, often defined as ecotourists (Dolnicar, Crouch and Long, 2008; Buffa, 2015; Carvache-Franco, Segarra-Oña and Carrascosa-López, 2019; Serio *et al.*, 2025), and the differences between domestic and international tourists from

multiple perspectives (Carr, 2004; Ortega and Rodríguez, 2007; Stone and Nyaupane, 2019; Dean, Novianti and Noor, 2020; Ponsignon, Lunardo and Michrafy, 2021). However, only a limited number of studies have explicitly focused on the differences between domestic and international tourists regarding their environmental sensitivity at visited destinations. Crucially, research specifically dedicated to their behaviours and attitudes within eco-certified accommodation units has not been identified. Constantin et al. (2021) reported a difference between these two segments in terms of visit purpose: 45.2% of domestic tourists visited destinations primarily for natural attractions, compared to only 27.8% of international tourists, who showed a greater interest in cultural attractions (55.7%). Additionally, Cvelbar et al. (2017) indicated that local tourists are more likely to adopt environmentally friendly behaviours.

Regarding the profile of environmentally friendly tourists (EFTs), Dolnicar et al. (2008) synthesised previous studies, outlining a set of recurring characteristics: high educational level, middle or older age, higher income, a higher proportion of females, openness to learning and adventurous experiences, and an interest in the environment, culture, and health. This profile is complemented by the findings of Cvelbar et al. (2017), who emphasise that these tourists exhibit heightened awareness and concern for environmental issues and perceive a moral obligation to adopt environmentally friendly behaviours.

When analysing differences between domestic and international tourists, the literature has often approached the comparison through the distance travelled between the place of origin and the destination. Carr (2004) highlights, however, that no general consensus has been reached in this regard. Some studies suggest that tourists travelling longer distances – usually international tourists – exhibit allocentric behaviour, characterised by curiosity and adventurousness. This contrasts with tourists visiting closer destinations, who tend to adopt more passive behaviours during their holidays. Carr (2004) explains these differences through the interaction of two “cultures”: tourist culture (associated with unusual and hedonistic behaviours) and residual culture (linked to norms and values from home). For international tourists, the cultural and social differences from their home environment reduce the influence of residual culture, promoting more hedonistic and passive behaviours. Conversely, other studies indicate that tourists maintain their behavioural patterns regardless of the distance to the visited destination.

Another significant finding regarding differences between domestic and international tourists is that the latter report higher levels of satisfaction with their tourism experience. International tourists derive greater hedonic value from the travel experience, enjoying higher pleasure, entertainment, and engagement. This difference is explained by the enhanced sense of escapism generated by travelling abroad, through which tourists detach from daily routines and their home environment. This phenomenon can be understood through the concept of psychic distance: the greater the difference between the destination and the tourist’s home environment, the stronger the sense of escapism, increasing hedonic value and, consequently, overall satisfaction (Ponsignon, Lunardo and Michrafy, 2021). For tourist destinations, ensuring visitor satisfaction is a key determinant of tourist loyalty, influencing both the intention to recommend the destination and to revisit it (Yoon and Uysal, 2005).

Differences between domestic and international tourists have also been analysed in terms of access to information about points of interest at visited destinations. Both categories value the availability of informational materials, although this aspect is particularly important for international tourists (Ortega and Rodríguez, 2007). A plausible explanation is that domestic tourists are more familiar with the destination and can obtain information easily due to the absence of language barriers. Informational materials are a valuable tool for integrating messages on environmental protection and promoting sustainable behaviours, for both domestic and international tourists.

The review of the above studies thus constitutes an essential starting point for differentiating environmentally conscious tourists according to their origin (domestic vs. international). In the following sections, this theoretical perspective will be complemented by data and observations from the practice of managers of eco-certified accommodation units in Romania.

3. Methodology

In order to characterize the tourist segments differentiated by country of origin for those who choose accommodation in eco-certified guesthouses, a qualitative research study was conducted. The choice of this research direction was motivated by recent shifts in tourist flows, influenced by sanitary and geopolitical crises. The investigation targeted the managers of accommodation units certified under the Eco-Romania system, with the aim of capturing their perceptions regarding the profile of tourists.

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, based on a previously designed interview guide that included themes such as: the main origin of visitors, travel motivations, environmental behaviours, attitudes towards nature, level of satisfaction, lived experiences, and interactions with hosts. In total, 26 managers of eco-certified guesthouses participated in the study.

The sample was characterized by a relatively balanced gender distribution (44.3% male, 55.7% female) and a predominance of respondents aged 40–49 (46.2%). The level of education was high, with over 80% reporting university studies, while geographical origin was almost evenly split between rural (54.8%) and urban (45.2%) environments.

Data collection took place between October 2023 and January 2024, through either face-to-face meetings or online interviews. The interviews varied in length from 30 to 100 minutes, were recorded with the participants' consent, fully transcribed, and anonymized by assigning numeric codes (e.g., R1, R2, etc.). Participation was voluntary, and confidentiality was ensured at all stages.

The analysis of the empirical material was carried out using NVIVO software, following an inductive content analysis approach. The coding process enabled the identification of recurring themes, key terms, and differences in perspective, which formed the basis for the interpretations and conclusions presented in the following chapters.

4. Results and Discussions

This section aims to highlight the differences between domestic and international

tourists visiting eco-certified accommodation units in Romania, as perceived and reported by the interviewed managers. The findings shed light on the evolution of tourist flows, travel motivations, pro-environmental behaviours, levels of satisfaction, engagement with local experiences, as well as attitudes towards personal space and interaction with hosts.

For the majority of accommodation units included in this study, international tourists represented the dominant segment prior to the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic and the onset of the Russo-Ukrainian war. Subsequently, the proportion of domestic tourists has increased significantly. This shift reflects broader patterns observed in other international contexts, where crises have reshaped tourist flows, reinforcing the central role of the domestic market (Dean, Novianti and Noor, 2020). Such changes reconfigure market dynamics, compelling managers to adapt their services and communication strategies accordingly.

A recurring theme highlighted by managers concerns the differences in motivation between the two segments. International tourists who choose Romania are generally preselected through their travel motivations, visiting primarily to discover the country's culture and nature, particularly in ecotourism destinations (Constantin *et al.*, 2021). By contrast, Romanian tourists display a broader range of motivations, such as relaxation, spending time with family and friends, or disconnecting from everyday routines. According to R1, international tourists tend to have a higher educational background and more clearly defined objectives, whereas domestic tourists belong to more heterogeneous categories. Nevertheless, R16 observes that domestic tourists travelling greater distances demonstrate motivations similar to those of international visitors, an observation that aligns with other scholars' findings on the role of psychic distance in shaping tourism experiences (Ponsignon, Lunardo and Michrafy, 2021).

With regard to environmental behaviour within accommodation units, some managers (R1, R4, R22) reported no substantial differences between the two segments. However, international tourists were frequently described as more environmentally educated (R11, R13, R23), more disciplined in adhering to house rules (R4, R16, R18), and even proactive, asking for information about waste separation (R6, R13, R16) or collecting litter from the destination (R11). Respondents such as R13, R25, and R26 agreed that both groups know how to separate waste, but major differences were noted in energy, water, and heating consumption. These discrepancies were attributed to cultural legacies, particularly the scarcity of such utilities during the communist period, which shaped domestic tourists' behaviours. Nevertheless, respondents R25 and R26 observed a gradual improvement in environmental attitudes among Romanian tourists.

International tourists were also perceived as more enthusiastic and impressed by ecotourism experiences, which they often regarded as novel (R4, R5, R9, R10, R20). Conversely, Romanian tourists, more familiar with rural life and local traditions, tended to have higher expectations and were considered harder to please (R4, R20, R25), with a stronger focus on the quality of accommodation and food services (R6). Illustratively, R5 noted that the presence of animals in household courtyards was a source of delight for international tourists but a source of discomfort for domestic ones. International tourists also showed fascination with aspects of recent history (R5) and traditional

agricultural activities (R6).

Perceptions regarding tourists' relationship with nature varied. R1 argued that Romanian tourists have a stronger connection with the natural environment, whereas R11 and R17 observed that international visitors demonstrate a deeper passion for wildlife observation and outdoor activities such as hiking, cycling, or horse riding.

Significant differences were also identified in relation to personal space and interaction with hosts. International tourists were generally described as more discreet and respectful (R7, R13), while domestic tourists were perceived as more inclined to cross implicit boundaries (R13).

At the same time, international tourists expressed a greater willingness to engage with their hosts, although linguistic barriers sometimes hindered communication (R10).

Overall, the findings highlight clear distinctions between domestic and international tourists, particularly regarding travel motivations, attitudes towards nature, pro-environmental behaviours, satisfaction levels, and interaction with hosts. While international tourists are characterised by culture- and nature-oriented motivations, higher levels of enthusiasm, and greater environmental awareness, domestic tourists display more diverse motivations, higher expectations, and a lower degree of conformity with implicit hospitality norms. Nonetheless, signs of convergence between the two groups were identified, especially among domestic tourists who travel longer distances or who gradually become more environmentally conscious. These insights provide a robust empirical basis for designing differentiated management and marketing strategies in Romania's eco-certified tourism sector.

5. Conclusions and Managerial Implications

Given the necessity of identifying and attracting suitable tourists for eco-certified accommodation units—according to a profile centred on sustainable development, community integration, and appreciation of local natural and cultural heritage—and considering the changes generated by epidemiological and socio-political crises that have affected Romania, this research aimed to conduct a comparative analysis between domestic and international tourists. The perspective adopted was that of managers of eco-certified accommodation units, who interact directly with tourists and are therefore able to observe behavioural patterns.

Several differences emerged between international and domestic tourists. In terms of travel motivations, international visitors choose Romania for its culture and nature, whereas Romanian tourists display more diverse motivations, often focused on relaxation and spending time with family or friends. However, the analysis revealed a convergence between the two segments: as the distance travelled by domestic tourists to reach the destination increases, their motivations become more similar to those of international visitors. From a managerial standpoint, these findings highlight the need to adapt the offer: for tourists oriented towards culture and nature, outdoor activities and cultural experiences are recommended, while for the domestic segment focused on recreation, greater emphasis can be placed on hospitality services and relaxation facilities.

International tourists also stand out through a higher level of enthusiasm and more environmentally conscious behaviour, while domestic tourists tend to express higher expectations and lower conformity to the implicit norms of hospitality. Consequently, in addressing international tourists, managers of eco-certified accommodation units could intensify the promotion of responsible tourism practices, given this segment's receptiveness to pro-environmental behaviours, and explicitly communicate the sustainability values of the accommodation unit in order to strengthen loyalty and sense of belonging. For domestic tourists, it is advisable to set clear expectations through transparent communication before and during the stay (e.g., information about facilities, rules, and limits) and to introduce subtle mechanisms for guiding behaviour (e.g., verbal or non-verbal interpretation) to increase compliance with hospitality and sustainability norms.

The results obtained can be used by managers of eco-certified accommodation units to adapt their marketing strategies in order to attract those categories of tourists most aligned with the values promoted through ecotourism. Customizing management and marketing strategies according to these differences can contribute to enhancing visitor satisfaction and fostering long-term loyalty.

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