

SUSTAINABLE PRACTICES AND QUALITY STRATEGIES IMPLEMENTED IN RURAL TOURISM IN ROMANIA

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Abstract: *For both Romanians and foreigners, rural tourism in Romania is attractive. Although the literature provides information on strategies and measures that have been taken in the tourism industry to improve the quality of products and processes, the authors did not find studies on quality strategies and sustainability measures implemented in the rural tourism sector in Romania in the last period, which was severely affected by the pandemic. In order to highlight these strategies and the way in which their implementation is perceived by consumers, the authors conducted an exploratory research and a quantitative research. The results of the research showed that Romanians do not know the significance of quality strategies and sustainability practices, but appreciate the effects of their implementation by tourism units' administrators.*

Key words: *rural tourism, quality strategies, sustainable development.*

1. Introduction

In recent years, the policy of the European Union, but also the national policies of the member states, have encouraged the orientation of tourists to less crowded areas, such as rural ones. The studies carried out by the World Tourism Organization have revealed that tourists who prefer rural destinations develop at a faster pace than other categories of tourists.

Rural tourism is one of the tourist sectors with which Romania can successfully compete with many other European countries, such as Greece, Italy, Spain, France etc. The increasing number of agritourism guesthouses, the special natural setting, the well-preserved traditions and customs are assets that attract an increasing number of tourists, Romanian and foreign, every year.

Before the pandemic, there was an increase in Romanian rural tourism, both quantitatively and qualitatively. The holiday vouchers offered by the state to state budget holders have contributed to the increase in the number of Romanian tourists in

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rural areas, willing to know new areas of the country. Tourist guesthouses, due to the fact that they are accommodation units with a smaller capacity, some even in secluded areas, with more affordable rates, are an attraction for nature lovers, both for longer stays and for weekend gateways, for relaxation but also to work at the same time.

Rural Romania is an attractive destination, both for Romanians and foreigners (Vlad & Stoian, 2014, p. 401), with unique areas and products, where nature, architecture, traditions, gastronomy and culture blend perfectly. Before the pandemic, rural tourism in Romania had begun to be attractive to those who wanted a less popular destination, and had much to offer (Marcuta et.al, 2021, p. 496).

The paper aims to discover the opinions, attitudes and behaviours of tourists regarding rural tourism in Romania, the factors underlying the choice of this form of tourism and to identify the main sustainability practices applied in the rural tourism sector in Romania. To this end, the authors combined an exploratory analysis with a quantitative market research. The electronic survey method was used to collect the data. The survey was conducted based on a questionnaire designed on the Google Forms platform. The data collected from respondents were processed with the SPSS statistical processing software.

2. Literature Review

Each responsible country evaluates the economic field of tourism in terms of its ability to attract tourists and as an opportunity for economic growth and sustainable development in the medium and long term (Filip and Iamadi, 2012).

Although the tourism sector has been severely affected by the pandemic, the rural tourism sector has been less affected (Incoming Romania, 2022). During the pandemic, the demand was higher for boarding houses in remote rural areas, where tourists, with family or in small groups of friends, could relax safely (Volkman et al., 2021, p. 202).

The field of rural tourism, the implementation of appropriate quality strategies is an important competitive advantage. Through quality strategies, the company's management aims at: satisfying the requirements of the beneficiaries and the staff regarding the total quality assurance and establishing the quality level according to the conditions imposed by the market and competitiveness requirements (Madar and Neacşu, 2020, p. 771). Quality-focused strategies are therefore considered competitive strategies, as the mission of quality is to compete.

The tourism industry has had a rapid evolution in the last decades. In addition to the positive effects of generating growth in the destination areas, there are also negative effects with an impact on areas such as the environment, culture, politics, society and economy. Sustainable development requires changes including in terms of improving the relevance of accounting information, with the aim of increasing the satisfaction of its users with regard to the capitalization of specific environmental decisions, in order to achieve the established objectives.

The implementation of sustainability measures is a result of the large amount of knowledge and concern regarding the impact on tourism (Brătucu et al., 2017, p. 2051) and environmental issues in general (Demirovic et al., 2019, p.35). The development of

unsustainable tourism can lead to serious damage to society, but also to the environment and the entire tourism industry (Dutescu et al., 2014, p. 838).

3. Material and Methods

The methodology used combined an exploratory analysis with a quantitative market research.

The exploratory analysis aimed to identify the evolution of rural tourism in Romania in the last two years that were marked by the coronavirus pandemic. For this purpose, the internal publications of the companies operating in the field of tourism, their websites, annual reports, industry analyses and reference materials for the businesses on this market were studied.

The market situation is derived from the views expressed by respondents in the quantitative research. Its purpose is to highlight the opinions, attitudes and behaviours of tourists regarding rural tourism in Romania in recent times.

The objectives of the research are:

O1 - Identify respondents' opinions regarding the rural tourism in Romania and the factors underlying the choice of this type of tourism.

O2 - Identifying respondents' opinions and attitudes towards the safety and security measures practiced during the pandemic by the Romanian rural tourism units.

O3 - Determining the quality strategies and sustainable development practices implemented by the unit administrators in the Romanian rural tourism.

To collect the data, the survey method carried out in the electronic environment was used. Considering the exploratory nature of the research, the aim was to obtain as many completed questionnaires as possible.

Descriptive statistics

Table 1

Percent (%)		Percent (%)	
Sex		Age	
Male	46%	25 or below	12%
Female	54%	26-35	24%
Education		36 – 45	27%
		46 – 55	23%
High school or below	22%	56 or above	14%
Bachelor's	42%	Place of Residence	
Master's	28%	Rural	32%
Doctorate/ Postdoctoral	8%	Urban	68%

Source: Authors' own research

The study was carried out on a sample of 550 people, structured as follows (Table 1): 54% women (297 people, respectively) and 46% men (253 people, respectively), of which 68% are from the urban environment and 32% from the rural environment. It is observed that the majority of those questioned (67.03%) are aged between 26 and 55 years.

The large geographic dispersion of the researched population led to the application of the questionnaire through the Computer Assisted Web Interviewing (CAWI) technique. The questionnaire was completed using the Google Forms application. The data collection period was January 2022. The questionnaire included 22 questions, of which 17 aimed at collecting information related to the analysed subject, namely the opinions and attitudes of the surveyed population regarding rural tourism, and the final 5 questions aimed at characterizing the respondents. The data were analysed using the IBM Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) program.

4. Results and Discussion

The findings are structured on each of the aforementioned objectives and combine the results of exploratory analysis with the results of quantitative research.

O1 - Identify the respondents' opinions regarding the rural tourism in Romania and the factors underlying the choice of this type of tourism.

If in the past years, most tourists opted for rural tourism, weekend stays (2-3 days), in 2020 and 2021 most tourists opted for longer stays, the most preferred being those of 5-7 nights. The reasons are both the high quality of services (28.35%), slightly lower rates (22.36%), high security (15.65%) and the natural environment (33.64%).

Tourists have replaced stays at large hotels, from the mountains, the sea or spa resorts with stays at guesthouses in the countryside.

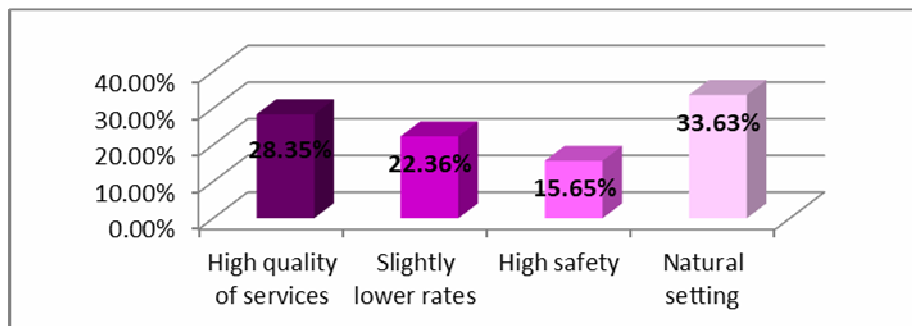


Fig. 1. *Reasons why subjects choose rural tourism*

Source: Own research of the authors

O2 - Identifying respondent' opinions and attitudes towards the safety and security measures practiced during the pandemic by the Romanian rural tourism units.

The measures implemented by agritourism accommodation units were appreciated by tourists (Porutiu et al., 2021, p.92), who felt comfortable and safe.

Guesthouses located in rural areas have quickly adapted to the measures imposed by the authorities in the context of the pandemic, especially those with generous outdoor spaces. In addition to the mandatory measures, the administrator of this unit has also implemented its own, optional measures, such as room service (no additional costs), digital menu, etc.

O3 - Determining the quality strategies and sustainable development practices implemented by the guesthouse administrators in Romanian rural tourism.

The most widely applied quality strategies in the Romanian rural tourism are: the strategy of dominance through quality, the strategy of certification, the strategy of concentrating on a level of quality and the strategy of differentiation through quality.

The strategy of differentiation through quality - this strategy is based on competitiveness and knowledge of the forms of manifestation of quality characteristics related to reliability, maintainability, availability, accessibility for products of the same type and realized by different manufacturers.

The strategy of dominance by quality - involves keeping a market or market segment and involves a high volume of production and sales.

The strategy of focusing on a level of quality – used to maintain a known and accepted level of quality offered to a well-defined group of beneficiaries.

Certification strategy - which is based on the certification by an authorized body of its management systems. This aims to confirm, through authorized bodies, the quality of the services provided, the care for the environment and for the safety and health at work of the employees and collaborators of an organization.

The research revealed that many Romanians have heard of the concept of "sustainability", but do not know very well what it refers to. The most appreciated tourist accommodation units by the respondents were those that integrate in nature and community, which offer dishes from the local gastronomy with natural and organic ingredients, which keep the spirit of the local community.

5. Conclusions

In the rural tourism of Romania, the implementation of sustainable development measures has become a trend among accommodation units. Unit management has tried to come up with new ideas that will enhance the customer experience, involve the local community and affect the environment as little as possible.

In conclusion, it was noted that the implementation of quality strategies is an important factor for success. It has also been observed that units that focus on quality and sustainability tend to perform much better than competing units that do not take these issues into account. At the same time, quality standards give customers the certainty that the services offered are safe and verified by specialized units in the field. The same can be said for quality and classification certificates.

Based on the results of the paper, the authors recommend that authorities, but also organizations and companies operating in the rural tourism industry should get more involved in educating the population on the concept of sustainable development and sustainable development practices. The authors consider that the topic is of particular interest at present and that, based on the results of this research, the accommodation units in the analysed sector can improve their quality strategies and the sustainability measures applied to improve their services and increase tourists' satisfaction.

The main limitation of the research is that it was not possible to perform a random sampling, so that the statistical validation of the sample is impossible, which means that

its results cannot be extrapolated to the entire research population. However, the authors consider that the paper has academic contributions in the field of the analysed issue and this should be the starting point for future research.

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