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Sustainable Development of Rural Mountain Tourism: Insights from Consumer Behavior and Profiles

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Abstract: This study aims to investigate the behavior of consumers in rural mountain tourism, with a particular focus on sustainability and durability. Questionnaire surveys were conducted in 2022 in Bucharest during the national tourism fair, collecting responses from 212 visitors based on their availability to participate. Our purpose was to gather their opinions on visiting the rural areas of the Carpathian Mountains in Romania and to reveal distinct patterns in tourist preferences. The responses were analyzed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) 20.0, where descriptive analyses and the Mann–Whitney U test were performed. The study results indicated that perceptions and service satisfaction vary based on demographic and economic characteristics. Women slightly favored higher-quality accommodations and dining services, while lower-income and secondary-educated respondents expressed higher contentment with local hospitality. This research emphasizes the need for a nuanced approach to tourism services that promotes local community engagement and sustainable practices to ensure long-term environmental and economic viability. There is a clear need to develop tourism strategies that align with sustainability principles, ensuring that the Carpathian Mountains region remains attractive and resilient for future generations.

Keywords: consumer behavior; rural mountain tourism; sustainability; durability; sustainable tourism development

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1. Introduction

In recent years, sustainable tourism has become a central priority within the travel industry, driven by the urgent need to balance economic growth with environmental stewardship and cultural preservation. As global destinations strive to manage tourism impacts, the concept of sustainability has gained increasing importance, particularly in response to environmental degradation and socio-economic shifts. Research highlights the evolving landscape of sustainable tourism, emphasizing trends, shifting consumer behavior, and the effectiveness of tourism policies in addressing these challenges [1].

The COVID-19 pandemic profoundly impacted the tourism industry, reshaping consumer preferences in favor of sustainable and meaningful travel experiences. Travelers are now more eco-conscious, selecting destinations that align with their environmental values and offer opportunities to engage responsibly with nature. Research indicates that tourists are moving beyond mere leisure and relaxation, opting for destinations that allow them to minimize their ecological footprint while supporting local communities and economies [2]. Post-pandemic consumers have become more discerning in their travel choices, favoring destinations that actively demonstrate environmental stewardship. Additionally, tourists increasingly seek culturally authentic experiences, preferring destinations where they can engage meaningfully with local traditions and lifestyles. This highlights the growing importance of aligning tourism offerings with consumer values [3].

Parallel to the rise in sustainable tourism is the emergence of creative tourism, a dynamic and innovative approach to enriching travel experiences. Unlike traditional

tourism, which often emphasizes rest and relaxation, creative tourism focuses on providing interactive and memorable experiences. It fosters deeper connections with local cultures through personalized activities, offering a refreshingly unique approach to contemporary tourism [4,5]. At the same time, the impact of sustainable tourism policies on local communities has come under scrutiny. Effective policies are crucial to ensuring that tourism contributes positively to local economies while preserving cultural and natural resources. Evaluations of these policies highlight the importance of addressing local needs and engaging stakeholders effectively [6].

Technology has emerged as a key enabler of sustainable tourism, shaping consumer behavior. Technological innovations are playing a critical role in advancing sustainable tourism practices. Emerging technologies are being leveraged to improve environmental management, enhance visitor experiences, and optimize resource use, supporting broader sustainability objectives [7]. These advancements help develop tourism practices that are both environmentally friendly and economically viable. Travelers now rely on digital platforms to research and book eco-friendly accommodations, activities, and transportation options. Mobile apps and online resources allow tourists to evaluate destinations based on their sustainability credentials, making it easier to align travel choices with personal values [8,9]. Additionally, the use of virtual reality, social media, and mobile apps has enriched the tourist experience by offering real-time information on sustainability practices, local events, and cultural activities. This digital shift empowers tourists to make more informed decisions, contributing to the growing demand for sustainable tourism experiences [10–15].

In this context, we believe that profiling and understanding consumer behaviors are essential for grasping the needs and preferences of rural mountain tourism visitors. To achieve the objectives of this paper, we have organized the document as follows: Following the Introduction section, Section 2 reviews the existing literature in the field; Section 3 outlines the research methodology; and Section 4 presents our findings and analysis. The final section (Section 5) discusses conclusions, implications, and suggestions for future research. This study offers valuable insights that can help inform and refine tourism strategies, ensuring they are effectively aligned with the evolving demands of this market segment.

2. Literature Analysis

In this article, we define sustainable tourism as a form of tourism that meets the needs of current tourists and host regions while protecting and enhancing opportunities for the future. This includes ensuring a positive experience for local communities, tourism companies, and tourists themselves. Sustainable tourism is characterized by an emphasis on environmental conservation, cultural integrity, social equity, and economic viability. This overview is based on several key documents, such as the National Sustainable Development Strategy of Romania 2013–2020–2030, the National Tourism Development Master Plan 2007–2026, and Romania's National Strategy for Ecotourism Development. These documents underline Romania's commitment to sustainable tourism, highlight the importance of preserving natural and cultural heritage, promote eco-friendly tourism practices, and ensure the equitable distribution of tourism benefits. Additionally, they aim to enhance cultural heritage and ensure that tourism contributes positively to local economies and communities.

Our comprehensive analysis of the specialized literature highlights the essential aspects of rural mountain tourism but also pinpoints its strengths and weaknesses, providing a solid foundation for further research and practice in this field [16–24].

Consumer behavior is instrumental in shaping the evolution of sustainable tourism. As global tourism adapts to environmental, social, and economic challenges, understanding the motivations, preferences, and expectations of tourists has become essential for developing effective tourism strategies. Recent trends suggest that post-pandemic travelers increasingly prioritize sustainability, authenticity, and deeper cultural engagement, marking a shift in the traditional tourism paradigm [25].

Recent studies reveal a significant shift in consumer preferences toward sustainable tourism in the post-pandemic era. Today's travelers favor destinations that align with environmental sustainability and offer authentic cultural experiences. This change is largely driven by heightened awareness of ecological impacts and a desire for meaningful engagement with local communities [26,27]. As a result, there is a growing demand for destinations that not only minimize their ecological footprint but also provide socio-economic benefits to local populations [28].

Understanding the key motivations behind consumer behavior in sustainable tourism is crucial for creating experiences that meet evolving demands. Research identifies several primary drivers influencing tourists' choices:

- Environmental Responsibility: Modern travelers are motivated by a desire to reduce their environmental impact. They seek destinations that prioritize conservation, renewable energy, and waste management, alongside eco-friendly accommodations and activities. This motivation is particularly evident in the rise of ecotourism, where travelers immerse themselves in natural environments with minimal disruption [29,30].
- Cultural Engagement: Authentic cultural experiences are a major attraction for tourists. Travelers want to participate in activities that allow them to learn from and contribute to local communities. Whether through workshops, traditional crafts, or festivals, tourists value meaningful exchanges that go beyond passive observation [31,32].
- Desire for Unique Experiences: Tourists increasingly seek unique, personalized experiences in a world dominated by standardized travel packages. Sustainable tourism caters to this demand by offering interactive, original experiences that reflect local creativity and innovation. This trend underscores a shift away from mass tourism toward more intimate, specialized travel that meets individual preferences [33].
- Health and Safety Considerations: The pandemic has heightened travelers' concerns about health and safety, leading to a preference for destinations that offer socially distanced, less crowded environments. Sustainable tourism, particularly in rural or natural settings, is often seen as a safer alternative to traditional mass tourism in urban areas [34–36].

These evolving motivations underline the growing importance of aligning tourism offerings with consumer values, ensuring destinations meet demands for sustainability, authenticity, and safety while delivering meaningful, unique experiences.

Traveler loyalty, which results from experiences meeting expectations, is essential for promoting return trips and enhancing the standing of countries committed to sustainability. The effectiveness of initiatives promoting sustainable tourism is directly correlated with visitor satisfaction. According to research, visitors who express great satisfaction with eco-friendly vacation destinations are more inclined to do so again and to refer others to them, creating a positive feedback loop that supports sustainable practices [37].

Concurrently, a specific kind of tourist is drawn to sustainable tourism, motivated by curiosity, involvement, and creativity. These people are looking for immersive experiences that allow them to engage with the culture more deeply, such as taking part in community-based initiatives or local crafts. In addition to making the experience more memorable and enjoyable, this active participation helps to reinforce relationships between visitors and the communities they are visiting [38,39].

Thus, our paper formulates the following research question: "What is the profile and behavior of rural mountain tourism consumers in Romania, and what are their needs and preferences within this context?"

3. Research Methodology

Romania is a great place to look at how national tourism trends are reflecting global ones because of its varied cultural history, stunning scenery that spans from the Carpathian Mountains to the Black Sea, and growing emphasis on sustainable tourist practices. This includes the increasing demand for one-of-a-kind, sustainable travel experiences that highlight Romania's unique attractions and regional customs, as well as an increasing focus

on sustainability, which combines eco-friendly methods with the preservation of cultural and natural resources [40].

This study specifically aimed to investigate the profile and behavior of consumers interested in rural mountain tourism, focusing on the development and characteristics of this niche in Romania. Additionally, our research examined the preferences, motivations, and attitudes of tourists in Romania to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the evolving behaviors within the tourism industry.

The key steps of the study were to design a questionnaire that captured the consumption patterns of mountain tourism, based on the profiles and behaviors of tourists; to administer the questionnaire, collect responses, and analyze the data; and to formulate recommendations for enhancing rural mountain tourism offerings in alignment with the identified tourist profile.

3.1. Development of the Questionnaires

We developed a questionnaire with 19 questions designed to gain insights into respondents' consumer behavior and profiles. This stage aimed to understand not only the demographics of the respondents but also their preferences, motivations, and attitudes towards tourism experiences. The questions were organized into four main categories:

- Demographic Information: These questions collected data on respondents' age, gender, education level, employment status, and income. This category was intended to create a detailed profile of the typical respondent.
- Travel Preferences and Habits: This section focused on respondents' favorite mountain resorts, accommodation preferences, frequency of visits to rural mountain areas, and general travel behavior. The purpose was to identify trends and preferences in tourism choices.
- Opinions on Tourism Quality Questions: In this category we assessed the importance of various aspects of the tourism experience, including the quality of accommodations, gastronomic services, recreational activities, and overall satisfaction with rural mountain tourism. These questions were designed to evaluate the perceived value and quality of the tourism services offered.
- Accessibility and Attractions: This section aimed to evaluate the accessibility of rural mountain areas, the attractiveness of their natural and cultural features, and the perceived effectiveness of infrastructure. The goal was to understand how transportation availability, infrastructure quality, and local attractions influence tourism experiences.

The questions posed to respondents included statements assessing rural mountain tourism from the perspective of the three components of sustainability (economic, social, and environmental elements). The statements reflecting respondents' opinions encompass specific elements such as perceptions of pollution levels, perceptions of prices and spending levels, the degree of inclusion of local residents in providing products to tourists, and so on.

3.2. Respondents Characteristics

In 2022, we conducted a survey in Bucharest at the National Tourism Fair, engaging a diverse range of respondents from various professional backgrounds (Table 1). A total of 212 individuals completed the questionnaire in person, all of whom are Romanian nationals. The demographic profile of the sample revealed that 50.5% of respondents were between 20 and 39 years old, indicating a predominantly young demographic.

The majority, 65.6%, are female, suggesting a higher interest among women in rural mountain tourism. Additionally, 48.1% hold a university degree, reflecting a well-educated consumer base. A significant 91.5% are employed, indicating economic stability among respondents, and 49.1% have a monthly income exceeding 4000 RON (≈800 Euro), highlighting a relatively high-income segment.

Table 1. Respondent demographic profile.

Category	Subcategory	Frequency	Percent
Age	Under 24 years old	13	6.1
	Between 25–39 years old	107	50.5
	Between 40–59 years old	79	37.3
	Over 60 years old	13	6.1
Gender	Male	139	65.6
	Female	73	34.4
Education Level	Secondary/Post-secondary	63	29.7
	University/Undergraduate	102	48.1
	Postgraduate	47	22.2
Employment Status	Student	3	1.4
	Retiree	13	6.1
	Employee	194	91.5
	Employer	2	0.9
Monthly Income	Under 2000 RON	15	7.1
	Between 2000–3000 RON	51	24.1
	Between 3000–4000 RON	42	19.8
	Over 4000 RON	104	49.1
Total	212	100.00	100.00

Source: Data processed using SPSS Statistics 20.0—own calculation.

3.3. Data Processing and Analysis Methods

Data processing and centralization were conducted using IBM SPSS Statistics 20.0 (trial version) [41]. This involved defining variables and assigning appropriate labels in the software. To analyze the data, we performed both descriptive and non-parametric analyses to evaluate consumer profiles and behaviors. The descriptive analysis provided detailed insights into key variables and trends, while non-parametric tests helped identify significant differences and patterns among different consumer segments.

The methods used included:

- Descriptive Statistics—Frequencies: This method calculated the frequency of specific values and presented results in tabular and graphical formats, summarizing data and revealing general trends among respondents [42].

This stage involved a detailed descriptive analysis of the key characteristics of rural mountain tourism consumers. This analysis aimed to provide a comprehensive understanding of this market segment by examining consumer demographics, travel habits, preferences for destinations and tourism services, and other relevant factors.

- Mann–Whitney Test: This non-parametric technique compared two independent groups to determine if they come from the same population or if there are significant differences between them. It helped understand differences in tourism behavior based on variables such as age, gender, or income [43,44].

We also conducted a non-parametric analysis to further explore these characteristics and behaviors. Non-parametric methods are used when data do not meet the requirements for parametric tests. This analysis focused on evaluating consumer behavior related to rural mountain tourism, aiming to uncover insights into preferences, habits, and motivations influencing their travel decisions.

To apply the Mann–Whitney tests, we organized respondents into specific groups. For age, we divided them into two categories: young people and young adults (under 24 and 25–39 years old) and mature adults and seniors (40–59 and over 60 years old). In terms of education, respondents were categorized as having either secondary education (high school/post-secondary) or higher education (university/postgraduate). Regarding employment status, we separated respondents into employees and other groups (students,

business owners, unemployed, and retirees). Income was grouped into two categories: those earning under 3000 RON and those earning over 3000 RON.

These classifications enabled us to analyze how factors such as age, education, employment status, and income influence travel preferences and behaviors. Through these analyses, we gained a comprehensive understanding of tourism behavior, revealing both detailed and summary information on key variables and identifying significant differences and patterns in consumer preferences and behaviors.

We also categorized respondents' opinions on various aspects of rural mountain tourism to better understand their attitudes and preferences. The aspects evaluated included the significance of tourism services such as accommodations, dining, recreational activities, and infrastructure. Respondents' opinions were classified into three levels of importance based on the percentage of agreement or emphasis placed on these aspects. Low importance was attributed to responses where percentages ranged from 0–9.99%, indicating that these elements were not considered particularly significant in influencing their overall tourism experience. Medium importance was assigned to responses falling between 10–49.99%, representing a moderate emphasis or a balanced view on the feature in question, suggesting that while these factors were somewhat important, they were not central to decision-making or overall satisfaction. High importance, on the other hand, applied to responses where percentages ranged from 50–100%, indicating that these aspects were regarded as critical and highly influential in shaping respondents' satisfaction with rural mountain tourism.

In addition to evaluating the importance of these aspects, we classified respondents' attitudes toward specific statements about their tourism experiences into three categories: negative, neutral, and positive. Negative opinions reflected responses where individuals either disagreed or strongly disagreed with the statements, indicating dissatisfaction or disagreement with certain aspects of tourism services or infrastructure. Neutral opinions occurred when respondents neither agreed nor disagreed, signaling ambivalence or a lack of strong sentiment on the matter. Positive opinions, on the other hand, were associated with responses where respondents agreed or strongly agreed, reflecting satisfaction and approval of the related tourism services or experiences.

These categorizations allowed us to gain a deeper understanding of how different elements of rural mountain tourism were perceived by visitors, offering valuable insights into which areas were most appreciated and which required improvement.

4. Results and Discussions

The following section presents the comprehensive findings from our study on rural mountain tourism in Romania. The results are categorized to provide insights into various aspects of consumer behavior and perceptions. Both descriptive and non-parametric statistical approaches were employed to offer a thorough understanding of the collected data.

4.1. Descriptive Analysis

Our descriptive analysis delves into the profile of rural mountain tourism consumers, examining demographic information, travel habits, preferences for destinations and services, and other relevant characteristics. This detailed examination helps uncover significant trends and patterns within this consumer segment, thereby guiding targeted marketing strategies and enhancing the overall consumer experience [45].

4.1.1. Consumer Profile of Rural Mountain Tourism

This section provides insights into the preferences and behaviors of rural mountain tourism consumers, focusing on their favored destinations, accommodation choices, and travel habits. The detailed analysis uncovers trends and patterns that can guide marketing strategies and enhance the overall tourism experience.

Figure 1 illustrates a significant trend in mountain resort preferences among respondents. A majority (70.28%) of respondents identified three neighboring locations in the

Prahova Valley of the Southern Carpathians as their top choices: Sinaia (18.4%), Predeal (15.57%), and Busteni (15.57%). Poiana Brasov, another well-known destination on the outskirts of Brasov, ranked fourth (8.49%, Southern Carpathians). Respondents (41.98%) also named 35 additional preferred destinations within the Carpathian range, each representing less than 5% in the analysis (including Arieseni, Azuga, Baile Govora, Balea Lac, Barsana, Borsa, Bran, Brasov, Breaza, Calimanesti-Caciulata, Cheia, Colibita, Durau, Fundata, Gura Humorului, Vidraru, Moeciu, Mogosa, Padina, Paltinis, Parang, Piatra Neamt, Ranca, Rasnov, Sambata de Sus, Sighisoara, Slanic Moldova, Sovata, Stana de Vale, Straja, Vatra Dornei, Vidra, Voineasa, and Zarnesti).

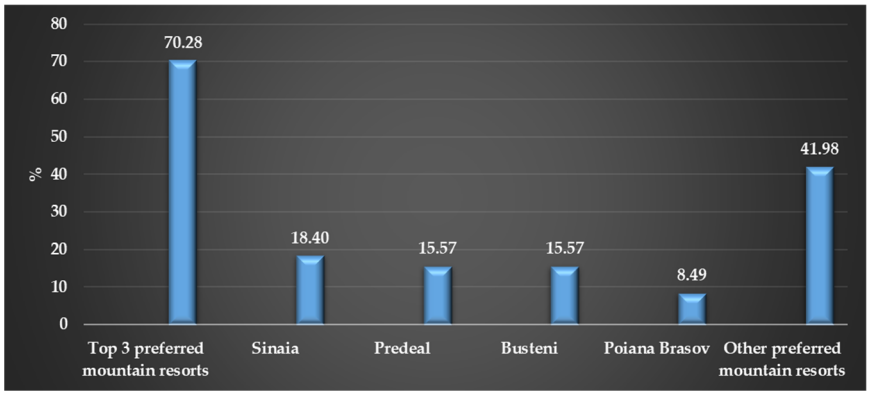


Figure 1. Preferred mountain resorts—data processed using SPSS Statistics 20.0—own calculation.

Accommodation preferences (Figure 2) reveal distinct trends among respondents. Nearly half of the respondents, 49.53%, express a strong preference for hotels or motels. This choice is driven by the comfort and extensive range of services these establishments offer, including amenities such as room service, housekeeping, and often on-site dining options. Hotels and motels provide a level of convenience and luxury that appeals to tourists seeking a high standard of accommodation.

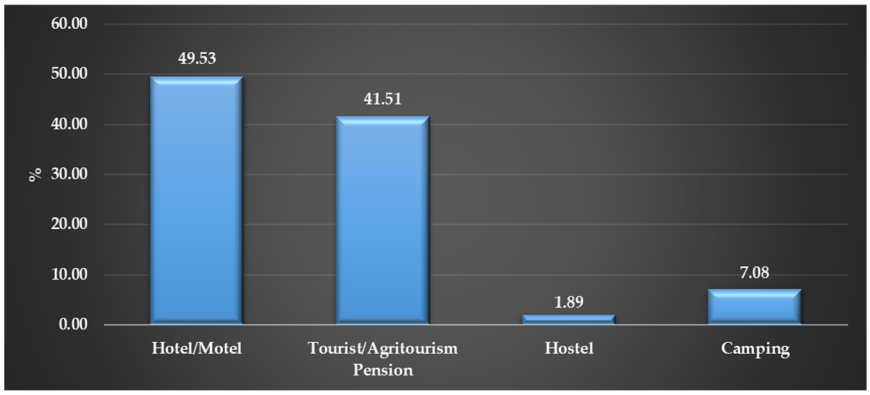


Figure 2. Accommodation preferences—data processed using SPSS Statistics 20.0—own calculation.

In contrast, 41.51% of respondents prefer tourist or agritourism pensions. These types of accommodations are favored for their localized charm and intimate atmosphere, offering a more personalized and authentic experience. Agritourism pensions, in particular, provide visitors with a unique opportunity to engage with rural life, including local farming practices, traditional cuisine, and a closer connection to the surrounding environment.

Camping, chosen by 7.08% of respondents, is appreciated by those who seek a more immersive experience in nature. This preference reflects a desire for proximity to natural settings and a more adventurous, rugged lifestyle. Camping allows tourists to enjoy outdoor activities and the natural landscape directly, albeit with fewer amenities compared to other types of accommodation.

Hostels are the least favored option, with only 1.89% of respondents opting for this type of accommodation. The lower preference for hostels may be attributed to their basic amenities and communal settings, which are often perceived as less comfortable and private compared to hotels or pensions. Hostels typically cater to budget travelers and those seeking a social environment, but they may not align with the preferences of respondents who prioritize comfort and privacy [46].

Travel frequency to Romanian mountain resorts varies among respondents, as illustrated in Figure 3. Around 88% of the respondents visit these mountain resorts at least once a year, highlighting a steady and significant interest in rural mountain tourism. Of these regular visitors, 36.3% take 1–2 trips annually, indicating a moderate level of engagement with the destination. This group may include those who consider these resorts as part of their vacation plans but not their primary holiday destination, likely balancing these trips with other types of vacations or activities.

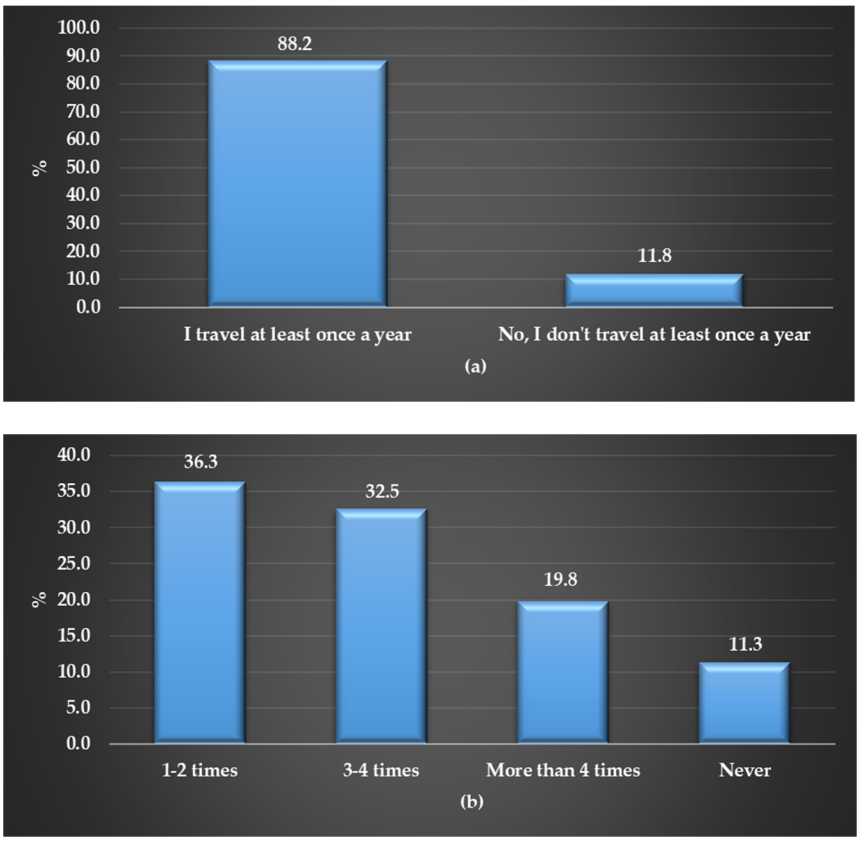


Figure 3. Frequency of trips: (**a**) Frequency of trips per year; (**b**) frequency of travel throughout the year—data processed using SPSS Statistics 20.0—own calculation.

A slightly larger portion, 32.5% of respondents, visit 3–4 times a year, reflecting a stronger connection to the mountain resorts. This suggests that these individuals have a high affinity for the region, preferring to visit multiple times to take advantage of the seasonal or varied attractions available. Their frequent visits could stem from a deep appreciation for the natural beauty and recreational activities that the resorts offer.

This poll indicates that 19.8% of all visitors are frequent visitors, which equates to visiting the resorts at least four times a year. The most devoted travelers fall into this category; they book their trips based on convenience, convenience of access to the resorts, or other considerations. Their high frequency of trip statistics suggests that people do not give up on rural mountain tourism, maybe because of seasons, lifestyle preferences, or the desire to take advantage of all the year-round activities offered by the resorts. However, 11.3% of people do not visit any of these mountain resorts in Romania. This lack of

involvement may also be related to a number of other things, like the person's preference for other recreational pursuits, their financial situation, or even specific leisure pursuits like mountain tourism. When developing marketing strategies or any other tactics that could help in removing these obstacles, it may be helpful to obtain insight into the reasons behind the segment's observed lack of visits.

Ultimately, the disparities in passenger frequencies reflect disparate consumer habits and inclinations, leading to an exaggerated perception of rural mountain tourism's allure. It is evident that a substantial portion of respondents—84.43%—rate the quality of their stay at an extremely high level. This suggests that even if an individual does not enjoy a specific activity, they will still be content as long as the entire experience is positive and enjoyable (Table 2). Similarly, 82.55% of respondents value the caliber of their lodging when they travel, confirming the need for excellent, tidy homes. Additionally, 81.13% of the respondents place a high value on the quality of the food they eat when traveling, indicating that they greatly value both the meal and the overall dining out experience.

Table 2. Tourism consumer opinions on rural mountain tourism in Romania.

Aspect	Low Importance (%)	Medium Importance (%)	High Importance (%)
Quality of a stay in the rural mountain area of Romania	2.36	13.21	84.43
Quality of accommodation structure in the rural mountain area of Romania	2.83	14.62	82.55
Quality of gastronomic services in the rural mountain area of Romania	4.25	14.62	81.13
Quality of recreational services in the rural mountain area of Romania	8.96	28.30	62.74
Level of expenses incurred during your stay in the rural mountain area of Romania	7.08	14.15	78.77
Overall satisfaction with the Romanian rural mountain tourism offers	9.43	25.47	65.09

Source: Data processed using SPSS Statistics 20.0—own calculation.

Despite this strong focus on accommodations and food quality, recreational services receive comparatively less emphasis, with 62.74% of respondents rating them highly. This relatively lower importance may be due to several factors such as insufficient investment in recreational facilities, lack of standardization across different resorts, outdated infrastructure, or the high costs associated with certain activities. The variation in priority could suggest areas where improvements might enhance the overall tourism experience.

Nevertheless, the general satisfaction with the rural mountain tourism offering remains positive, with 65.09% of respondents expressing contentment with their overall experience.

This level of satisfaction indicates that while there are areas needing improvement, particularly in recreational services, the core aspects of the tourism experience are well-regarded. This balance of high satisfaction with room for enhancement provides valuable insights for potential improvements and targeted investments in the rural mountain tourism sector.

The accessibility of rural mountain areas (Table 3) is viewed positively by 79.25% of respondents, thanks to Romania's diverse geography, which allows year-round access to various mountain ranges. The well-developed road network and reliable public transportation contribute to this accessibility. Seasonal events, such as traditional festivals and cultural fairs, further enhance the appeal and ensure a steady influx of visitors.

Table 3. Accessibility of rural mountain tourism in Romania.

Indicator	Negative Opinion (%)	Neutral Opinion (%)	Positive Opinion (%)
Mountain areas in Romania are accessible year-round	11.32	9.43	79.25
Rural mountain tourism locations in Romania are easily accessible	11.32	22.17	66.51
Rural mountain areas in Romania are unpolluted	19.34	25.47	55.19
Rural mountain areas in Romania have unique natural attractions	1.42	9.43	89.15
Rural mountain areas in Romania have unique cultural attractions	1.89	17.92	80.19
Local hospitality in rural mountain areas in Romania is high	4.25	17.92	77.83
Road infrastructure in rural mountain areas in Romania is well-developed	45.28	19.81	34.91
Utility infrastructure in rural mountain areas in Romania is developed (water, sewage)	24.06	30.66	45.25
Tourist services (accommodation/food services) have high quality standards	12.74	36.79	50.47
Purchasing local artisanal products in rural mountain areas in Romania is accessible	14.15	26.89	58.96
Recreational activities in rural mountain areas in Romania are well-developed	17.45	34.43	48.11
Cultural events in rural mountain areas in Romania are well-organized	10.38	29.25	60.38
Mountain roads and trails in rural mountain areas in Romania are well-maintained	29.25	29.25	60.38
Prices for recreational activities in rural mountain areas in Romania are affordable	25.47	25.94	48.58
Prices for tourist services in rural mountain areas in Romania are affordable	24.53	25.00	50.47
Prices for food and artisanal products in rural mountain areas in Romania are affordable	20.28	28.77	50.94

Source: Data processed using SPSS Statistics 20.0—own calculation.

A significant 89% of respondents highlight the unique natural and cultural attractions of Romania's rural mountain areas. These regions feature stunning landscapes, including majestic mountains, dense forests, rivers, and waterfalls, along with rich biodiversity. The cultural heritage, encompassing local traditions, crafts, music, and cuisine, offers tourists an authentic Romanian experience [47].

In summary, the study highlights that the typical rural mountain tourism consumer is a young, well-educated woman with a high income. Sinaia, Predeal, and Busteni are the most popular resorts due to their natural beauty and good infrastructure, though there is also interest in other destinations.

Tourists prefer hotels and motels for comfort, with agritourism pensions also valued. Most visitors come at least once a year, influenced by personal and financial factors. While quality of stay and food services are highly valued, there is less emphasis on recreational services, suggesting room for improvement. Accessibility is generally seen as good year-round, with an appreciation for natural and cultural attractions. However, concerns

remain about infrastructure and the cost of recreational activities, indicating areas where improvements could enhance the tourism experience.

The consequences touch on important topics of sustainability in rural tourism, going beyond immediate consumer behavior. It is crucial to make sure that growth does not jeopardize the natural and cultural integrity of these areas as tourism grows in importance to local economies. The strong preference among tourists for unpolluted environments indicates that they are attuned to sustainability concerns, reinforcing the need for responsible tourism practices that preserve natural resources and promote environmental stewardship. This can be achieved through initiatives that educate visitors about the importance of conservation and involve them in sustainable practices during their stay, fostering a culture of responsibility and awareness.

4.1.2. Consumer Behavior in Rural Mountain Tourism

Understanding Consumer Behavior in Rural Mountain Tourism involves examining how visitors engage with and experience these destinations. This process includes looking into their habits, preferences, motivations, and decision-making processes related to travel in rural mountain areas. The goal is to uncover patterns in how tourists behave, what they need, and what they expect, to create and deliver tourism services that are better tailored to their desires.

When examining travel timing (Figure 4), our research reveals distinct preferences among tourists visiting rural mountain areas. Specifically, a significant portion of tourists, accounting for 45.3%, prefer to embark on their trips spontaneously. These travelers are motivated by a need to break free from their everyday routines and seek a change of scenery on a whim. This impromptu method highlights how important it is to adjust to last-minute travel and be eager to take advantage of the chance. 37.7% of visitors say they are fond of summertime mountain tourism. The fact that summer vacations are preferred throughout the various travel regions of the nation suggests that a lot of travelers like visiting these locations during this time of year. Summer seems to be the finest season for these kinds of trips, whether it is because of the nice weather, the focus on seasonal activities, or the opportunity to take in the beauty of nature at its peak. All of these observations point to the need for well-planned summer vacations in addition to spontaneous holiday-making while traveling, which is necessary for many travelers.

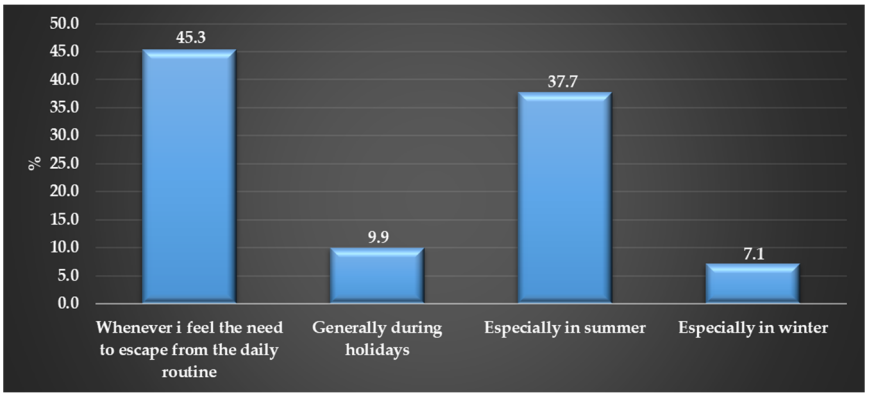


Figure 4. Travel timing—data processed using SPSS Statistics 20.0—own calculation.

The inclination towards these two holiday styles enhances the provision of tourist services by catering to both last-minute travel arrangements and meticulously planned trips. By offering last-minute booking choices and boosting their summer sales, these providers are more likely to meet the diverse needs of their clientele.

Remarkably, as Figure 5 shows, 62.3% of travelers reserve their trip arrangements no sooner than one month in advance. This significant percentage suggests that visitors visiting rural mountain areas have a great propensity to make decisions at the last minute. The large percentage of impulsive reservations indicates that the attraction of unforeseen

travel chances may be a major draw for many travelers. Various things, like abrupt pauses in their regular routines, unplanned vacations, or the urge to swiftly capture special or transient moments, could inspire this spontaneity. One of the most important aspects of these travelers' travel habits is their capacity for impulsive action.

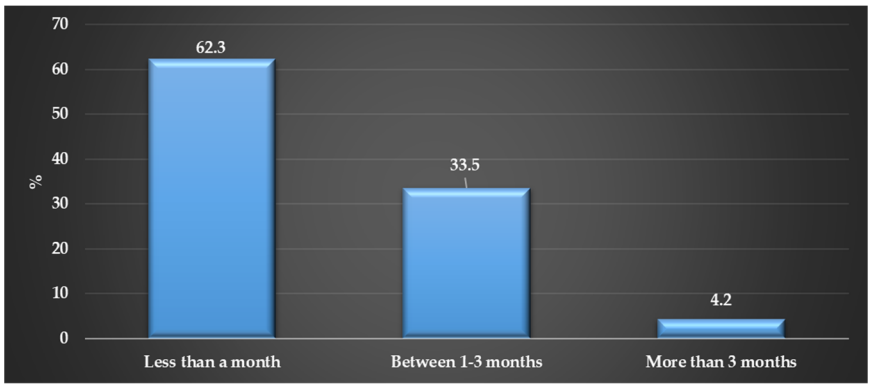


Figure 5. Travel decision time—data processed using SPSS Statistics 20.0—own calculation.

Such impromptu vacationing is most suited to rural mountain regions, which are distinguished by their visual splendor and variety of outdoor activities. The prospect of hiking, camping, or just relaxing in nature, along with the picture-perfect vistas, provides an alluring diversion from the daily stresses of ordinary living. Those looking for an unplanned getaway from their regular surroundings will find this atmosphere to be very favorable to relaxation and emotional rejuvenation [48,49].

The inclination towards last-minute travel arrangements highlights the significance of adaptability and flexibility in tourism offerings. This group of travelers, who appreciate the flexibility to make last-minute decisions and take advantage of the instant advantages of an isolated mountain retreat, is likely to be drawn to providers who can handle last-minute reservations and offer impromptu travel packages or specials.

Figure 6 illustrates how 56.6% of travelers base their decision to travel on advice from friends and family. This emphasizes how important trust is in influencing choices, especially in the context of remote mountain tourism. Because they are founded on sincere, first-hand experiences, personal connections are sometimes seen as more trustworthy than conventional advertising or internet reviews. As a result, word-of-mouth becomes an effective strategy, with happy tourists acting as unofficial ambassadors to persuade others to visit comparable places.

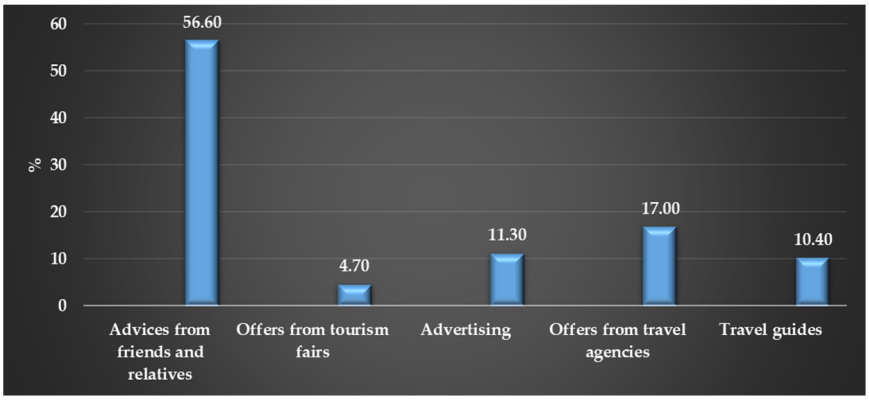


Figure 6. Factors in destination choice—data processed using SPSS Statistics 20.0—own calculation.

Furthermore, 17% of travelers ask for assistance from travel companies. Travel companies continue to be a valuable resource for many, even though personal recommendations continue to have the greatest impact. These organizations simplify the planning process

by offering all-inclusive packages that include lodging and activities. For guests who choose convenience or lack knowledge of rural mountain areas, the direction and expertise provided by agencies simplify the procedure and eliminate uncertainties.

In terms of accommodation booking methods (Figure 7), 39.6% of tourists prefer booking online due to the flexibility and variety offered by digital platforms. These platforms allow travelers to compare prices, read reviews, and choose from numerous lodging options, making it a popular choice for those seeking convenience and spontaneity.

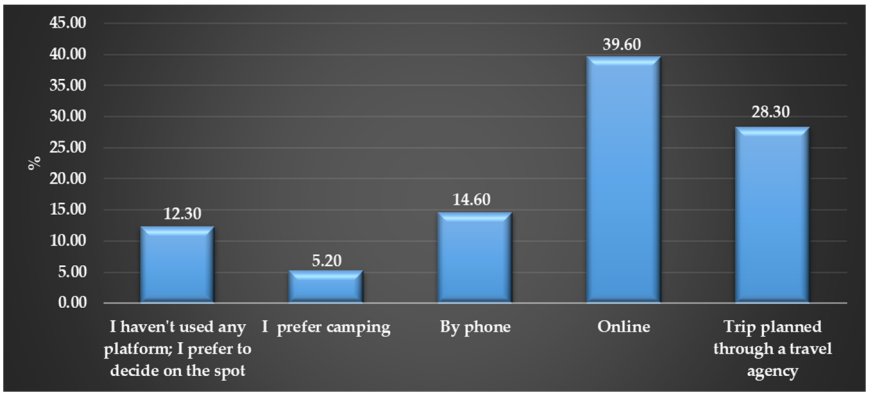


Figure 7. Accommodation booking methods—data processed using SPSS Statistics 20.0—own calculation.

Travel agencies are the preferred choice for 28.3% of tourists, who value personalized service and package deals that simplify the travel planning process. These agencies often provide comprehensive packages that include lodging, transportation, and activities, offering a hassle-free experience.

A smaller portion of tourists opt for phone reservations (14.6%) or book accommodations on-site (12.3%), reflecting a preference for direct communication or flexibility. Camping is chosen by just 5.2% of tourists, highlighting its appeal to those seeking a more rustic and nature-oriented experience.

The length of stay in rural mountain destinations (Figure 8) plays a crucial role in shaping tourists' experiences. Our findings reveal that the majority of visitors prefer shorter stays, typically ranging from 1 to 3 nights, as depicted in Figure 8. This trend can be attributed to practical factors such as busy personal schedules and budget constraints. Shorter trips are more manageable for those who have limited time off work or other commitments, allowing them to enjoy a brief but refreshing escape from their daily routines without significant financial or logistical planning.

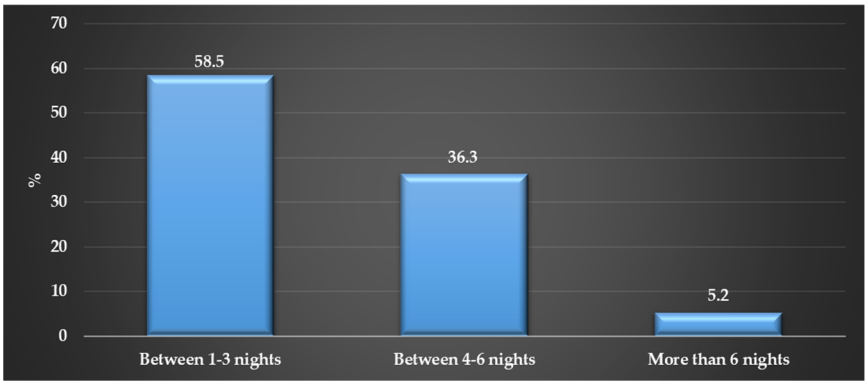


Figure 8. Length of stay—data processed using SPSS Statistics 20.0—own calculation.

On the other hand, a notable proportion of tourists choose to extend their stays to 4–6 nights. This longer duration is often driven by the desire for a more comprehensive

exploration of the destination. A stay of this length offers ample opportunity to engage in a variety of activities, such as hiking, sightseeing, and exploring local culture, which might be rushed in a shorter visit. Additionally, an extended stay allows tourists to fully appreciate the natural beauty of rural mountain areas and take advantage of available amenities and services, contributing to a more immersive and satisfying experience. The extra time also facilitates a slower pace, which can enhance relaxation and overall enjoyment, making the trip feel more like a true getaway.

Figure 9 provides a detailed view of tourists' accommodation preferences. The analysis indicates that 36.8% of tourists prefer accommodations that include breakfast. This option generally offers basic facilities such as a bed and a comfortable resting area, along with breakfast services. Typically, breakfast is incorporated into the room rate and may be served in the accommodation's restaurant or designated dining area. This choice appeals to those who value the convenience of having their first meal of the day readily available without needing to leave the premises.

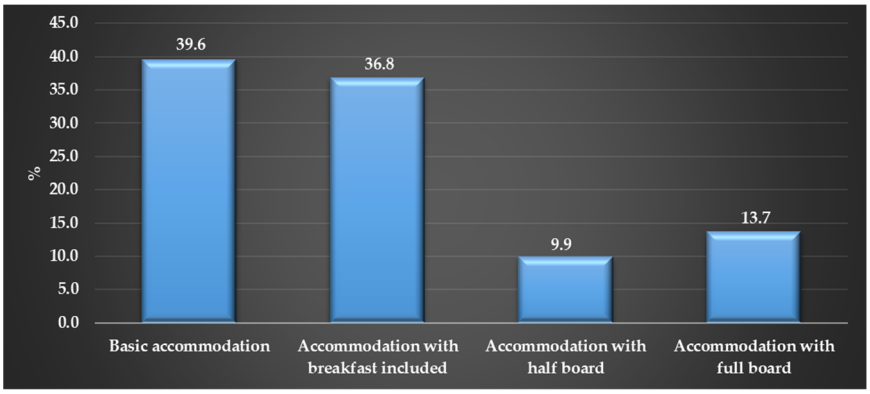


Figure 9. Accommodation type—data processed using SPSS Statistics 20.0—own calculation.

A smaller portion, 13.7%, shows a preference for full-board accommodations. This type includes all three main meals—breakfast, lunch, and dinner—in the room rate. Full-board accommodations are often available in hotels, resorts, or guesthouses that provide extensive meal services to ensure guests have their dining needs fully met throughout their stay. This option is ideal for tourists who prefer a hassle-free experience with all their meals taken care of, allowing them to focus on enjoying their trip without worrying about dining arrangements.

In contrast, only 9.9% of tourists opt for half-board accommodation. This arrangement includes basic facilities similar to those in bed-and-breakfast options but adds dinner to the included services alongside breakfast. Half-board accommodations provide guests with two meals a day—breakfast and dinner—often featuring a range of culinary options available on-site. This option suits travelers who desire some meals included in their stay while having the flexibility to explore local dining options for lunch.

The budget allocated for accommodation is a crucial aspect of travel planning. It represents the amount of money that an individual or group plans and allocates to cover lodging expenses during their trip. This budget includes costs associated with booking and paying for accommodation in a hotel, guesthouse, apartment, or other types of temporary housing. The budget for accommodation can vary based on individual preferences, needs, duration of stay, desired comfort level, and chosen destination. It is important for travelers to establish their accommodation budget in advance, taking into account financial considerations and personal priorities.

In terms of budget (Figure 10), a substantial 56.1% would allocate a maximum budget of 100 to 200 RON per room. 27.8% would allocate more than 200 RON per room, while 16% would allocate less than 100 RON. More affordable and simpler accommodations might be suitable for a tighter budget, while luxury hotels or resorts may require a higher budget.

For longer stays, travelers may opt for more budget-friendly accommodation per night to stay within their overall budget.

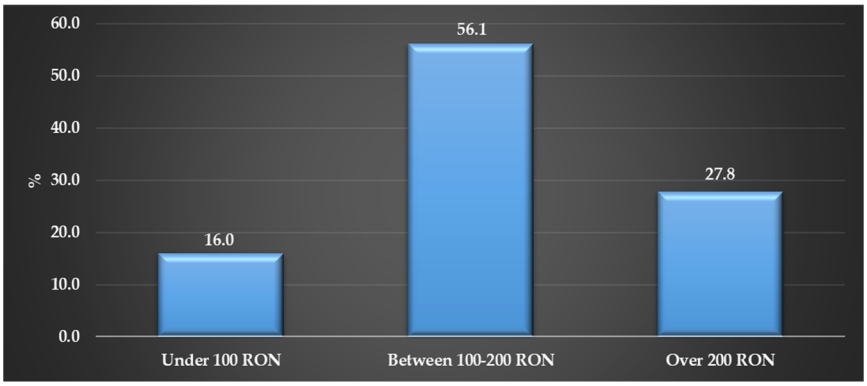


Figure 10. Allocated budget for accommodation—data processed using SPSS Statistics 20.0—own calculation.

Accommodation costs can vary depending on location and travel period. Prices may be higher during peak seasons or in more popular destinations, potentially requiring a larger budget. Overall, people strive to adhere to their allocated travel budgets, regardless of their tourism motivations. Budgeting is an important factor that influences decisions related to transport, accommodation, activities, and dining throughout the trip. Even though travel motivations may differ, managing finances effectively and sticking to the allocated budget is essential for a pleasant and stress-free travel experience. Preferences for accommodations that offer additional services, such as included breakfast or wellness facilities, can also impact budget allocation.

Tourists' motivations for traveling to rural mountain (Figure 11) areas are diverse, reflecting a range of interests and needs. The majority of tourists, 46.7%, seek travel primarily for relaxation. This indicates that they are drawn to destinations where they can unwind and escape from their daily routines. The peaceful environment, scenic beauty, and tranquil settings of rural mountain areas offer an ideal retreat for those looking to reduce stress and rejuvenate [50].

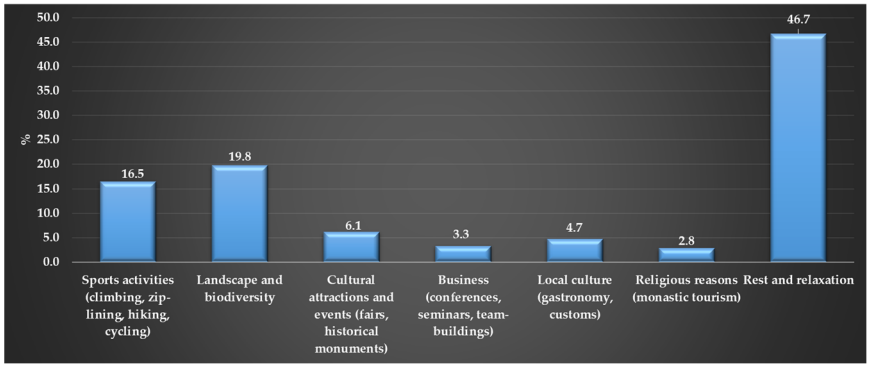


Figure 11. Tourists' motivations—data processed using SPSS Statistics 20.0—own calculation.

Another significant motivation, cited by 19.8% of tourists, is the desire to explore landscapes and biodiversity. These travelers are attracted to the natural beauty and ecological diversity of rural mountain regions, seeking opportunities to experience and appreciate the unique flora, fauna, and geological features of these areas. This interest often influences their choice of destinations and the types of activities they engage in, such as hiking, wildlife observation, and nature photography [51].

A notable portion, 16.5%, travel for sports activities. These tourists are interested in engaging in physical pursuits such as mountain biking, climbing, or skiing, which are

often prominent in rural mountain settings. Their accommodation choices and travel plans are likely influenced by the availability of facilities and services that cater to their sporting interests.

These varied motivations are reflected in tourists' choice of destinations and preferred types of accommodation. For instance, those seeking relaxation may prioritize comfort and tranquility in their lodging, while adventure enthusiasts might opt for accommodations that provide easy access to outdoor sports facilities. Understanding these motivations allows for tailored marketing strategies and the development of tourism offers that align with tourists' preferences, ultimately enhancing their overall travel experience.

In summary, the analysis of tourist behavior in rural mountain areas reveals that spontaneity and relaxation are key motivators for travel, with many tourists preferring spontaneous trips or summer vacations. Most travelers make their decisions with less than a month's notice, relying heavily on personal recommendations for destination choices.

Accommodation preferences vary, with a significant interest in options that include breakfast or full-board services. Budget allocation reflects a balance between affordability and comfort, indicating that travelers seek value while considering additional amenities. Motivations such as relaxation, landscape exploration, and sports activities shape destination and accommodation choices.

This analysis offers valuable insights for tailoring marketing strategies and developing tourism services to meet diverse traveler needs, ultimately enhancing the appeal and satisfaction of rural mountain destinations.

4.2. Non-Parametric Exploration of Consumer Perceptions in Mountain Rural Tourism: A Mann–Whitney Test Approach Based on Personal Characteristics in Romania

This section offers a comprehensive analysis of consumer perceptions regarding rural mountain tourism in Romania, highlighting how personal characteristics—such as age, education, employment status, and income—influence travel preferences and behaviors. We also examine perceptions of tourism activities within these rural mountain areas, providing insights into how these factors shape consumer attitudes and experiences. Our analysis addresses both perceptions of rural mountain areas and tourism activities, focusing on statements that show statistically significant differences (p-value < 0.05). To assess responses and identify significant differences among various demographic groups, we employed the Mann–Whitney test.

4.2.1. Age Based Perceptions

We began by analyzing perceptions of rural mountain areas. Our analysis revealed that age significantly influences perceptions of rural mountain tourism (Table 4). Respondents generally view these regions as unpolluted, with mature adults and seniors expressing a more favorable opinion about the environmental quality than young adults. This perception suggests a generational divide, where older individuals may have a deeper appreciation for the natural environment, possibly reflecting their experiences or a cultural inclination toward valuing unspoiled landscapes.

Furthermore, the analysis of road infrastructure indicates that mature adults and seniors perceive it as better developed compared to younger respondents. This finding could be attributed to differing expectations; older individuals might have had more exposure to various infrastructure standards over time, leading them to evaluate these aspects differently.

Additionally, we found that perceptions of tourism services, such as accommodation and dining options, vary across age groups. Mature adults and seniors tend to report higher satisfaction with these services, possibly due to their travel experiences and expectations shaped by prior visits. Their more positive outlook can influence travel choices, leading them to prefer destinations that align with their satisfaction criteria.

Interestingly, while we identified significant differences regarding environmental quality and service satisfaction based on age, many aspects—such as accessibility, cul-

tural uniqueness, and local hospitality—showed no statistically significant variation. This suggests a consensus among respondents across age groups about certain fundamental characteristics of rural tourism, reinforcing the notion that both young adults and mature and senior individuals appreciate the unique offerings of rural mountain areas.

Table 4. Comparative analysis of consumer perceptions of rural mountain tourism by age group.

Statements	Age Group	N	Mean Rank	Mann–Whitney Value	Asymp. Sig. (2-Tailed)
Rural mountain areas in Romania are unpolluted	Young people and young adults	120	96.15	4278.500	0.003
	Mature adults and seniors	92	119.99		
Road infrastructure in rural mountain areas in Romania is well-developed	Young people and young adults	120	97.65	4458.500	0.014
	Mature adults and seniors	92	118.04		
Tourist services (accommodation/food services) have high quality standards	Young people and young adults	120	98.34	4540.500	0.019
	Mature adults and seniors	92	117.15		

Source: Data processed using SPSS Statistics 20.0—own calculation.

Shared experiences may contribute to this alignment; both age groups may have similar encounters with the challenges and rewards of rural tourism. Additionally, the rise of social media and travel blogs may play a role in shaping perceptions, allowing for a broader exchange of experiences and reinforcing common viewpoints.

We will now turn our attention to analyzing perceptions of tourism activities within these rural mountain areas. The analysis reveals that there are observable differences in perceptions of various aspects of rural mountain tourism between young adults and mature adults/seniors (Table 5). For instance, mature adults often express higher satisfaction with accommodation, gastronomic services, and recreational activities. However, these differences do not achieve statistical significance, indicating a general consensus among respondents regarding the quality of tourism services available in rural mountain areas.

Table 5. Comparative analysis of consumer perceptions of tourism activities in rural mountain areas by age group.

Statements	Age Group	N	Mean Rank	Mann–Whitney Value	Asymp. Sig. (2-Tailed)
Quality of a stay in the rural mountain area of Romania	Young people and young adults	120	108.78	5246.000	0.497
	Mature adults and seniors	92	103.52		
Quality of accommodation structure in the rural mountain area of Romania	Young people and young adults	120	105.18	5362.000	0.700
	Mature adults and seniors	92	108.22		
Quality of gastronomic services in the rural mountain area of Romania	Young people and young adults	120	104.06	5227.000	0.626
	Mature adults and seniors	92	109.68		
Quality of recreational services in the rural mountain area of Romania	Young people and young adults	120	104.78	5315.500	0.626
	Mature adults and seniors	92	108.74		
Level of expenses incurred during your stay in the rural mountain area of Romania	Young people and young adults	120	102.90	5088.000	0.296
	Mature adults and seniors	92	111.20		
Overall satisfaction with the Romanian rural mountain tourism offers	Young people and young adults	120	103.49	5158.500	0.392
	Mature adults and seniors	92	110.43		

Source: Data processed using SPSS Statistics 20.0—own calculation.

Older adults reported higher satisfaction with tourism services, indicating that their expectations may be shaped by more extensive travel experiences. This demographic tends

to seek relaxation and a deep connection to nature and local culture, which can be cultivated through targeted marketing and service delivery that promotes sustainable practices, such as eco-friendly accommodations and community involvement.

4.2.2. Gender-Based Perceptions

In analyzing gender-based perceptions of rural mountain areas, our findings indicate no statistically significant differences between male and female respondents. This suggests that both genders share similar experiences and expectations regarding rural mountain tourism in Romania, prioritizing factors such as accessibility, service quality, and environmental conditions when evaluating destinations.

The lack of variation in perceptions may reflect a broader consensus on rural tourism offerings. Since both men and women are exposed to the same marketing messages and tourism services, their experiences tend to converge, resulting in similar evaluations of rural mountain tourism.

Additionally, the trend toward inclusive tourism perceptions of rural mountain areas marketing may reduce gender-based differences. As service providers aim to cater to diverse audiences by emphasizing quality and accessibility, both men and women are likely to encounter comparable experiences, aligning their views on rural tourism.

We then analyzed gender-based perceptions regarding specific tourism activities in rural mountain areas (Table 6). While female respondents generally reported higher satisfaction levels with the overall quality of their stays, this difference was not statistically significant. However, it may suggest that women have different expectations or experiences that contribute to more positive evaluations. These differences, while notable, should be interpreted cautiously given their lack of statistical significance (Table 6).

Table 6. Comparative analysis of consumer perceptions of tourism activities in rural mountain areas by gender.

Statements	Gender	N	Mean Rank	Mann–Whitney Value	Asymp. Sig. (2-Tailed)
Quality of a stay in the rural mountain area of Romania	Female Male	139 73	111.94 96.15	4318.000	0.051
Quality of accommodation structure in the rural mountain area of Romania	Female Male	139 73	112.81 94.49	4197.000	0.026
Quality of gastronomic services in the rural mountain area of Romania	Female Male	139 73	112.97 94.18	4174.500	0.020
Quality of recreational services in the rural mountain area of Romania	Female Male	139 73	111.28 97.40	4409.500	0.102
Level of expenses incurred during your stay in the rural mountain area of Romania	Female Male	139 73	111.51 96.97	4377.500	0.079
Overall satisfaction with the Romanian rural mountain tourism offers	Female Male	139 73	105.76 107.90	4971.000	0.800

Source: Data processed using SPSS Statistics 20.0—own calculation.

When it comes to accommodation quality, female respondents rated their experiences significantly higher than men. This indicates that women may place greater importance on aspects such as comfort, cleanliness, and amenities, which could enhance their satisfaction. Understanding these preferences could help service providers better tailor accommodations to meet the needs of female travelers.

Similarly, in the analysis of gastronomic services, women expressed higher satisfaction than men. This could point to different priorities, with women perhaps valuing quality, variety, and authenticity in dining experiences more highly. Such insights can guide tourism operators to enhance their culinary offerings to appeal to female tourists.

In contrast, perceptions of recreational services did not show significant gender differences, indicating that both men and women share similar views on the availability and quality of recreational activities in rural mountain areas. This consensus suggests that recreational offerings resonate equally with both genders, which can be leveraged in marketing and service strategies.

Regarding spending during their stays, female respondents reported slightly higher satisfaction, although the difference was not substantial. This may indicate that women are willing to invest more in certain experiences, leading to greater overall satisfaction.

Overall, while women tend to express greater satisfaction with specific aspects of rural mountain tourism, the absence of significant differences in other areas points to a shared appreciation for these experiences among both genders. This convergence may result from inclusive marketing strategies that allow both men and women to engage with similar tourism offerings.

Future research could explore the underlying reasons for these observed differences, particularly focusing on the aspects that resonate more with female travelers. By understanding these dynamics, tourism providers could better tailor their services to meet the needs of both men and women, ultimately enhancing the overall visitor experience in rural mountain areas.

4.2.3. Education-Based Perceptions

Our findings reveal significant differences in how educational backgrounds influence perceptions of rural mountain areas and tourism (Table 7). Respondents with secondary education rated the accessibility of these areas more positively than those with higher education. This difference may reflect varying expectations, as individuals with secondary education might perceive rural tourism as more welcoming and accessible, potentially due to less familiarity with urban tourism standards. Additionally, secondary-educated respondents viewed rural areas as less polluted, suggesting a more favorable perspective shaped by personal experiences or community narratives emphasizing the beauty and cleanliness of rural environments.

Interestingly, those with secondary education rated the uniqueness of cultural attractions higher than respondents with higher education. This suggests a stronger emotional connection to local customs and traditions, such as festivals and crafts, among the secondary-educated group. Similarly, they gave significantly higher ratings for local hospitality, indicating a perception of warmth and welcome that enhances their overall tourist experience.

Both educational groups acknowledged the development of road infrastructure, but respondents with higher education expressed more concerns about its maintenance and accessibility (Table 8). This may reflect heightened expectations based on urban standards, leading to a more critical assessment of rural infrastructure.

When examining perceptions of tourism activities in rural mountain areas, we found no statistically significant differences between educational groups in categories such as accommodation quality, gastronomic services, recreational offerings, or spending levels. This suggests that individuals from both educational backgrounds share similar views on many aspects of rural mountain tourism.

However, a notable exception is the overall satisfaction with rural mountain tourism. Respondents with secondary education reported significantly higher satisfaction than those with higher education. This finding indicates that education level can influence overall tourism experience, with secondary-educated individuals generally being more content with rural mountain tourism offerings. Understanding these nuances can help providers develop messaging and ser-vices that resonate with diverse educational populations, ensuring that sustainability is communicated successfully to all visitors. Higher educated people might see rural tourism more critically, reflecting urban norms, whereas secondary educated people might more easily recognize the genuineness and allure of rural environments.

Table 7. Comparative analysis of consumer perceptions of rural mountain tourism by educational Level.

Statements	Education Level	N	Mean Rank	Mann–Whitney Value	Asymp. Sig. (2-Tailed)
Rural mountain tourism locations in Romania are easily accessible	Secondary education Higher education	62 150	126.91 98.06	3384.500	0.001
Rural mountain areas in Romania are unpolluted	Secondary education Higher education	62 150	132.59 95.72	3032.500	0.000
Rural mountain areas in Romania have unique cultural attractions	Secondary education Higher education	62 150	123.32 99.55	3607.000	0.005
Local hospitality in rural mountain areas in Romania is high	Secondary education Higher education	62 150	125.98 98.45	3442.000	0.001
Road infrastructure in rural mountain areas in Romania is well-developed	Secondary education Higher education	62 150	148.43 89.17	2050.500	0.000
Utility infrastructure in rural mountain areas in Romania is developed (water, sewage)	Secondary education Higher education	62 150	141.94 91.85	2452.500	0.000
Tourist services (accommodation/food services) have high quality standards	Secondary education Higher education	62 150	144.88 90.64	2270.500	0.000
Purchasing local artisanal products in rural mountain areas in Romania is accessible	Secondary education Higher education	62 150	132.31 95.83	3050.00	0.000
Recreational activities in rural mountain areas in Romania are well-developed	Secondary education Higher education	62 150	142.93 91.44	2391.500	0.000
Cultural events in rural mountain areas in Romania are well-organized	Secondary education Higher education	62 150	136.73 94.00	2775.500	0.000
Mountain roads and trails in rural mountain areas in Romania are well-maintained	Secondary education Higher education	62 150	139.60 92.82	2598.000	0.000
Prices for recreational activities in rural mountain areas in Romania are affordable	Secondary education Higher education	62 150	136.10 94.26	2814.500	0.000
Prices for tourist services in rural mountain areas in Romania are affordable	Secondary education Higher education	62 150	139.77 92.75	587.000	0.000
Prices for food and artisanal products in rural mountain areas in Romania are affordable	Secondary education Higher education	62 150	134.42 94.96	2919.000	0.000

Source: Data processed using SPSS Statistics 20.0—own calculation.

Table 8. Comparative analysis of consumer perceptions of tourism activities in rural mountain areas by educational level.

Statements	Education Level	N	Mean Rank	Mann–Whitney Value	Asymp. Sig. (2-Tailed)
Quality of a stay in the rural mountain area of Romania	Secondary education Higher Education	62 150	100.72 108.89	4291.500	0.333
Quality of accommodation structure in the rural mountain area of Romania	Secondary education Higher education	62 150	103.02 107.94	4434.500	0.566
Quality of gastronomic services in the rural mountain area of Romania	Secondary education Higher education	62 150	103.44 107.76	4460.500	0.608
Quality of recreational services in the rural mountain area of Romania	Secondary education Higher education	62 150	113.27 103.70	4230.000	0.280
Level of expenses incurred during your stay in the rural mountain area of Romania	Secondary education Higher education	62 150	113.33 103.68	4226.500	0.265
Overall satisfaction with the Romanian rural mountain tourism offers	Secondary education Higher education	62 150	125.93 98.7	3445.500	0.002

Source: Data processed using SPSS Statistics 20.0—own calculation.

4.2.4. Professional Status-Based Perceptions

In examining how employment status influences perceptions of rural mountain tourism, significant differences emerge between employed and non-employed individuals (Table 9). Both groups agree on the year-round availability of mountain regions; however, employed respondents generally view these areas as less accessible. This perception may stem from their busy schedules, which lead them to prefer easily reachable destinations, making them less inclined to explore less commercialized locations.

Table 9. Comparative analysis of consumer perceptions of rural mountain tourism by professional status.

Statements	Categories	N	Mean Rank	Valoare Mann–Whitney	Asymp. Sig. (2-Tailed)
Rural mountain tourism locations in Romania are easily accessible	Employees Other groups	196 16	103.62 141.78	1003.500	0.008
Rural mountain areas in Romania are unpolluted	Employees Other groups	196 16	102.92 150.38	866.000	0.002
Road infrastructure in rural mountain areas in Romania is well-developed	Employees Other groups	196 16	102.10 160.44	705.000	0.001
Utility infrastructure in rural mountain areas in Romania is developed (water, sewage)	Employees Other groups	196 16	102.53 155.09	790.500	0.000
Tourist services (accommodation/food services) have high quality standards	Employees Other groups	196 16	101.46 168.25	580.000	0.000
Purchasing local artisanal products in rural mountain areas in Romania is accessible	Employees Other groups	196 16	102.89 150.69	861.000	0.001
Recreational activities in rural mountain areas in Romania are well-developed	Employees Other groups	196 16	101.78 164.38	642.000	0.000
Cultural events in rural mountain areas in Romania are well-organized	Employees Other groups	196 16	102.38 156.97	760.500	0.000
Mountain roads and trails in rural mountain areas in Romania are well-maintained	Employees Other groups	196 16	101.76 164.56	639.000	0.000
Prices for recreational activities in rural mountain areas in Romania are affordable	Employees Other groups	196 16	101.94 162.31	675.000	0.000
Prices for tourist services in rural mountain areas in Romania are affordable	Employees Other groups	196 16	102.23 158.81	731.000	0.000
Prices for food and artisanal products in rural mountain areas in Romania are affordable	Employees Other groups	196 16	102.43 156.41	769.500	0.000

Source: Data processed using SPSS Statistics 20.0—own calculation.

In contrast, non-employed respondents tend to have a more favorable view of accessibility, reflecting a greater willingness to engage with rural tourism and explore less developed areas. Their flexibility allows for easier navigation of these environments.

Environmental quality is another area of divergence, with non-employed individuals more likely to perceive rural mountain regions as unpolluted. This positive outlook may be rooted in their expectations of tranquility and natural beauty, attributes commonly associated with rural settings.

Regarding local hospitality, non-employed individuals reported feeling significantly more welcomed. This could be linked to their desire for authentic interactions with local communities, while employed respondents might prioritize professionalism in service, which could affect their overall satisfaction.

The analysis reveals notable differences in perceptions of tourism activities. Non-employed individuals expressed significantly higher satisfaction with recreational services, suggesting that these offerings may align better with their expectations (Table 10). This

indicates a need for service providers to enhance recreational options to appeal to employed individuals, who may have different priorities and time constraints.

Table 10. Comparative analysis of consumer perceptions of tourism activities in rural mountain areas by professional status.

Statements	Categories	N	Mean Rank	Valoare Mann–Whitney	Asymp. Sig. (2-Tailed)
Quality of recreational services in the rural mountain area of Romania	Employees	196	103.16	914.000	0.004
	Other groups	16	147.38		
Level of expenses incurred during your stay in the rural mountain area of Romania	Employees	196	103.20	921.500	0.003
	Other groups	16	146.91		
Overall satisfaction with the Romanian rural mountain tourism offers	Employees	196	102.89	861.000	0.002
	Other groups	16	150.69		

Source: Data processed using SPSS Statistics 20.0—own calculation.

Furthermore, the substantial difference in overall satisfaction suggests that non-employed individuals have a more positive view of their experiences in rural mountain areas. This may be influenced by a more relaxed approach to travel or differing lifestyle expectations.

Despite these significant differences, the analysis also highlights areas where no statistically significant differences were found. For instance, perceptions of the quality of stays, accommodation, and gastronomic services were comparable across both groups. This suggests a general consensus on these aspects, indicating that both employed and non-employed individuals appreciate the fundamental offerings of rural mountain tourism.

Overall, while employment status shapes certain perceptions and satisfaction levels, many core elements of the rural tourism experience remain uniformly valued. Recognizing both significant and non-significant perceptions allows tourism providers to better tailor their offerings, enhancing the visitor experience for all demographics.

Further exploration of the underlying reasons for these differences could yield valuable insights for marketing and service developments.

4.2.5. Income-Based Perceptions

Both income groups agreed on the year-round availability of mountain regions and recognized the uniqueness of natural attractions, highlighting their broad appeal (Table 11).

Table 11. Comparative analysis of consumer perceptions of rural mountain tourism by income level.

Statements	Categories	N	Mean Rank	Valoare Mann–Whitney	Asymp. Sig. (2-Tailed)
Local hospitality in rural mountain areas in Romania is high	Under 3000 RON	66	119.70	3946.500	0.020
	Over 3000 RON	146	100.53		
Road infrastructure in rural mountain areas in Romania is well-developed	Under 3000 RON	66	119.07	3988.500	0.040
	Over 3000 RON	146	100.82		
Utility infrastructure in rural mountain areas in Romania is developed (water, sewage)	Under 3000 RON	66	119.01	3992.500	0.038
	Over 3000 RON	146	100.85		

Source: Data processed using SPSS Statistics 20.0—own calculation.

However, significant differences appeared in perceptions of local hospitality and infrastructure development. Respondents with incomes below 3000 RON rated local hospitality higher, suggesting that lower-income visitors may have more positive experiences interacting with locals. Their familiarity with rural culture likely fosters a sense of connection, enhancing overall satisfaction.

Fostering authentic connections with local communities can further enhance the durability of rural tourism. The positive perceptions of local hospitality among lower-income respondents highlight the potential for community-based tourism initiatives to engage visitors meaningfully while providing economic benefits to residents. By promoting community engagement and authentic experiences, tourism providers can create a more sustainable and inclusive tourism framework that benefits both tourists and local populations, ensuring that the tourism infrastructure remains viable and culturally relevant.

In terms of infrastructure, lower-income respondents perceived road and utility services as more developed compared to their higher-income counterparts. This difference may stem from varying expectations; lower-income visitors might appreciate available services more positively, while higher-income individuals may hold higher standards and be more critical in their evaluations.

This disparity emphasizes the necessity for a sophisticated comprehension of visitor expectations across the income spectrum. Travelers with lower incomes should appreciate rural tourism's genuineness and emphasis on community involvement more, which would enhance their entire trip. This emphasizes how crucial community involvement is to the growth of the tourist industry because genuine encounters with residents can greatly improve the visitor experience. It is possible to develop a more sustainable economic model that benefits both locals and visitors by encouraging small companies and community-led initiatives.

When it comes to specific tourism activities, the analysis highlights notable distinctions based on spending levels, particularly regarding accommodation and dining experiences (Table 12). Respondents who spent over 3000 lei expressed significantly higher satisfaction with the quality of accommodation compared to those who spent less. This suggests that higher spending correlates with better experiences, possibly due to access to superior facilities, services, or amenities.

Table 12. Comparative analysis of consumer perceptions of tourism activities in rural mountain areas by income level.

Statements	Categories	N	Mean Rank	Valoare Mann–Whitney	Asymp. Sig. (2-Tailed)
Quality of accommodation structure in the rural mountain area of Romania	Under 3000 RON	66	93.27	3945.000	0.022
	Over 3000 RON	146	112.48		
Quality of gastronomic services in the rural mountain area of Romania	Under 3000 RON	66	95.02	4060.500	0.044
	Over 3000 RON	146	111.69		

Source: Data processed using SPSS Statistics 20.0—own calculation.

Similarly, individuals who invested more in gastronomic services reported significantly better dining experiences. This may reflect a greater variety of options or higher food quality, enhancing overall satisfaction.

In contrast, other aspects of the rural tourism experience did not reveal significant differences based on spending. For example, perceptions of recreational services remained consistent regardless of expenditure, indicating that while higher spending can enhance accommodation and dining experiences, the quality of recreational offerings and overall satisfaction with rural tourism is viewed similarly across different spending levels.

Overall, these findings underscore the importance of understanding diverse perceptions among different visitor groups. Tailoring tourism development strategies to meet specific expectations can enhance the appeal of rural mountain tourism in Romania. For instance, initiatives focused on improving infrastructure may resonate well with higher-income visitors, while promoting community engagement and authentic experiences could attract lower-income tourists. This balanced approach fosters a more inclusive tourism experience for all.

5. Conclusions

The research is based on a case study focused on a specific sample of 212 randomly selected respondents from Romanian tourism fairs. The findings reveal distinct patterns in their preferences and behaviors, indicating challenges and opportunities for the future of Romanian rural tourism, with an obvious impact on its sustainability. The results highlight the importance of understanding diverse tourist preferences and adapting service offerings to cater to a broad spectrum of visitors, including spontaneous travelers, seasonal tourists, and demographic segments with differing expectations. These insights are not only significant for improving the current tourism model but also for ensuring the long-term sustainability and durability of rural tourism.

One of the most notable trends identified is the strong preference for spontaneous trips. This suggests that tourism providers need to be flexible and responsive, creating last-minute booking options and promotional strategies to capture this market. By doing so, they can boost visitor satisfaction and increase repeat visits. Furthermore, the evident seasonal nature of rural tourism, particularly during the summer, emphasizes the need for diverse and dynamic offerings during peak travel times. This could include outdoor festivals, guided tours, and nature-focused activities that enrich visitor experiences while promoting a sustainable approach to resource use.

The generational differences in service satisfaction, with older adults expressing greater contentment, suggest that the needs of different age groups must be considered. Older tourists tend to value comfort, relaxation, and cultural authenticity, which can be delivered through eco-friendly and community-based tourism initiatives. By aligning service delivery with these values, providers can appeal to a growing demographic that values both quality and sustainability.

Women expressed slightly higher satisfaction with accommodation and dining services, indicating that they may prioritize comfort and quality. This insight is valuable for tourism operators, suggesting that an emphasis on clean, comfortable, and well-maintained accommodations, as well as diverse and high-quality dining options, can enhance experiences for all visitors. Encouraging eco-friendly dining methods, including farm-to-table programs, can boost the regional economy and improve the overall guest experience. This highlights the importance of community involvement in tourism development, ensuring that authentic local experiences and infrastructure improvements benefit both tourists and residents. Engaging local communities in the tourism value chain not only enhances visitor satisfaction but also fosters a more sustainable tourism model that promotes economic resilience.

Local communities should be actively involved in tourism initiatives, ensuring that economic benefits are distributed fairly and that tourists experience the authentic charm of rural destinations. This not only enhances visitor satisfaction but also ensures the durability of tourism infrastructure by fostering local ownership and participation. Additionally, providers should take an active role in educating tourists about the importance of sustainable practices during their stay. Offering eco-friendly tours, promoting responsible travel behaviors, and encouraging visitors to minimize their ecological footprint can ensure that rural destinations remain pristine for future generations.

Tourism providers should develop systems that accommodate last-minute bookings and spontaneous travelers. Special promotional packages for short-notice vacations can capture this growing market segment, ensuring that rural destinations remain appealing and accessible. Additionally, to capitalize on the seasonal nature of rural tourism, providers should expand and promote activities during peak periods. Festivals, guided hikes, and cultural workshops are just a few examples of offerings that can be developed. These activities should highlight the unique environmental and cultural characteristics of the destination, enhancing both visitor engagement and local sustainability.

Marketing efforts should focus on promoting comfort, relaxation, and cultural immersion, particularly for older travelers. Eco-friendly accommodations, nature-based retreats, and authentic local experiences should be at the forefront of these campaigns. Emphasizing

clean, comfortable, and well-maintained accommodations alongside sustainable dining options, such as locally sourced food, will cater to the higher expectations for hospitality, especially among women and eco-conscious travelers. Promoting sustainability through green certifications and eco-friendly practices can enhance the appeal of accommodations while supporting local economies.

While this study provides critical insights into rural mountain tourism, our research has a series of limitations. The research is based on a case study focused on a specific sample of 212 randomly selected respondents from Romanian tourism fairs. Due to small dimension of the sample and to the fact that we randomly selected the respondents, our research is limited because does not offer a methodological framework for extrapolating results to a national level.

Actually, several limitations came during the research. The collection of data during the tourism fairs might have had weaknesses since only a certain group of tourists could have attended these places. Another shortcoming is the possibility of self-reporting where the respondents may provide a response that they feel will please the interviewer rather than their actual opinion. In order to solve these problems, in our future research we might use a combination of several data collection tools such as in-depth interviews, focus group discussions, and online questionnaires for triangulation of the findings and reduction of bias. Additionally, working together with the local tourism board and community associations may help in obtaining a wider and even more representative sample of the tourists. Future research should aim to address these limitations by utilizing larger, more representative samples that can offer a comprehensive view of rural mountain tourism in Romania. Such studies could employ stratified sampling techniques to ensure diverse and representative participant selection, thereby improving the generalizability of the findings. Additionally, longitudinal studies could provide insights into how tourist preferences and behaviors evolve over time, offering a dynamic perspective on the sustainability of rural tourism.

Also, future research should further explore the long-term impacts of tourism on rural communities, especially in terms of sustainability and economic development:

- monitoring how tourism development affects local cultures, economies, and environments can provide valuable data for refining tourism strategies;
- examining the role of technology and innovation in promoting sustainable practices could offer new opportunities for rural destinations to thrive while minimizing their environmental impact;
- investigating the effectiveness of specific tourism strategies in enhancing visitor experiences while preserving local cultures and environments can provide valuable insights for policymakers and industry stakeholders.
- examining the interplay between demographic variables and travel behaviors in different cultural contexts can yield a more comprehensive understanding of consumer preferences in rural tourism;
- partnering with local tourism authorities and community organizations can enhance data collection efforts and ensure a more representative sample. This collaboration can also aid in the development of targeted and effective tourism strategies;
- conducting longitudinal studies can help track changes in tourist preferences and behaviors over time, providing valuable information for sustainable tourism planning and development.

Even if we have a limited sample size and a non-representative nature which restrict the generalizability of the findings, we consider that the results provide valuable insights.

The findings of the study on consumer behavior in rural mountain tourism reveal distinct patterns in tourist preferences and behaviors, raising critical implications for the future of rural tourism, particularly concerning sustainability and durability.

These findings emphasize critical aspects of consumer behavior in rural mountain tourism, providing a robust foundation for both practical applications and future academic inquiry. By aligning tourism development with sustainability principles and understanding

the diverse needs of travelers, stakeholders can foster a thriving rural tourism industry that benefits all parties involved, ensuring that rural mountain destinations remain vibrant and resilient for generations to come. This knowledge can inform tailored marketing strategies and service designs that cater to diverse groups, ultimately enhancing the appeal of rural mountain destinations.

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