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Public Perception of Accommodation Structures in the Cultural Landscape: An Exploration of Integration and Significance

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Abstract: Since the end of the communist era in Romania (c. 1989) an economic shift has influenced new construction in the rural parts of the region. New construction faces challenges due to a potential clash between the historic architectural style of the region and the surrounding environment that has been highlighted by the architectural guidebooks from the Romanian Order of Architects. Research surrounding the preference of the region's inhabitants is limited. A survey was conducted to analyze three main questions and their significance for individuals native to the region and for specialists. This survey addresses how the respondents (1) will define the blending (and the differences between blending and integration), (2) how respondents evaluate the blending of construction styles, and (3) if it is important to pay attention to the visual impact of new construction. These architectural considerations were identified after a literature review illuminated concerns regarding landscape blending disparities due to new construction and where the survey was conducted using a diverse sample population of individuals who were engaged in the study via social media. Respondents were shown images of buildings and asked to rate the blending of these structures with the cultural landscape using a scale from one to five. The survey data were collected and analyzed to determine preferences in each key area. The findings indicate that respondents perceive blending as a valuable tool, with a significant visual impact, favoring positive examples irrespective of their professional background. Notably, there is a substantial preference for positive examples over negative ones regarding color. However, respondents without experience in the field tend to choose negative options more often. Researchers anticipate that these findings could inform the planning process and aid in seamlessly integrating new construction with the traditional and natural elements of the region.

Keywords: visual impact assessment; sustainable rural development; quality landscape; multifunctional landscape; rural development

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1. Introduction

Over the past few years, different specialists and the general population have presented their concerns about the inappropriate architecture and landscape modification that has happened in the last three decades in Romania. As a direct result, a few initiatives that have the intention of protecting and preserving the local identity have emerged, such as the following:

- The architectural guidebooks from the Romanian Order of Architects were created to improve the quality of life in rural areas by presenting clear example of easy-to-apply rules, that would facilitate the appropriate choice of building in rural areas. All the elements presented are perceived as a way of preserving the identity and the spirit of Romanian rural areas and highlight the fundamental need for sustainable development [1].

- The substantiation study regarding the cultural heritage (plan for the development of the territory of Cluj county)—this study resulted in a unified and open database, accompanied by a dedicated webpage, which contains the currently available information about the cultural heritage of Cluj County and a preliminary methodology for the identification, classification, and delimitation of the cultural landscapes of Cluj county, at regional, sub-regional, and local scales [2].
- NGO's educational restoration activities for the rural environment: Camp "Satul, demult" (Village, long ago)—a camp where children can learn what the village used to be; 'Casa cu Har' (House with Grace")—Restoration Summer School, 8th Edition; "La origini"—Clay House Summer Workshop—(Re)creating sustainable times with memorable experiences [3–5], along with others.
- Business: Raven's nest [6], "Paraschiva's house" [7], "Albastru și origini" (Blue and origins) [8], and many more.

While participatory methods involving communities of interest are becoming more common [9–11], expert approaches that focus on the contribution of academic disciplines still dominate [12]. Even if there are the above examples, the problem remains, many rural areas facing a chaotic development that has an impact on several levels.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Legislation Limitations

Almost all landscapes are valued in multiple ways by the people who are closely associated with them, and cultural identity is strongly associated with the interaction between humans and their landscape [12].

The European Landscape Convention came into force in Romania through Law 451/8 of 8 July 2002, for the ratification of the European Landscape Convention, adopted in Florence on 20 October 2000, published in the OFFICIAL GAZETTE no. 536 of 23 July 2002 [13], but other specific documents regarding the framing of the Romanian landscape are limited. Law 24/2007 published in the OFFICIAL GAZETTE no. 764 of 10 November 2009, is the basis of the profession of landscape engineer and in principle is the only law that regulates the administration of green spaces in the urban areas and their correlation with determining aspects of an integrative territorial planning [14]. Regarding the landscape assessment/landscape analysis/visual impact of certain developments on the landscape, there are no well-defined or legislated methodologies in Romania. This led to the transformations of Romania's post-December period, in which the country's Constitution, Art. 35, was no longer respected; the article stipulates "the right of any person to a healthy and ecologically balanced environment" [15]. Unfortunately, identifying and delimiting cultural landscapes are, at least for now, extremely different tasks, lacking, in most cases, a systematized methodology. The methodology is based on the European Landscape Convention, promoted by the Congress of Regional and Local Powers of the Council of Europe. Romania was the first signatory to the Convention, later adopting it in the national legislation.

Although Romania has a heritage of over 1300 castles, mansions, and palaces, most of these architectural jewels have fallen prey to carelessness and legislative limitations that do not protect and capitalize on their potential, while the number of houses in the countryside is even higher [16].

On the other hand, there is the example of Charleston, South Carolina, in the United States of America, where even in a rapidly changing environment, the community respect and understand the historical significance of maintaining and restoring the Charleston homes (see Figure 1). There are around 2700 Charleston style homes still standing, as per ref. [17], thanks to the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966. Signed into law on 15 October 1966 and being the most extensive preservation legislation ever enacted in the U.S., it authorizes several tools to carry out preservation activities, including the National Register of Historic Places (NRHP) and a grant program, supported by the Historic Preservation Fund and NRHP which is the federal inventory of districts, sites, buildings,

structures, and objects that are significant on a national, state or local level in terms of American history, architecture, archeology, engineering, and culture. The National Historic Preservation Act (Pub. L. No. 89-665) was established as part of 16–CONSERVATION. It was amended four times: in 1976 (Pub. L. No. 94-422, 90 Stat. 1320), 1980 (Pub. L. No. 96-515, 94 Stat. 2987), 1992 (Pub. L. 102-575, 106 Stat. 4753), and 2016 (Pub. L. No. 96-515) [18].



Figure 1. Charleston style homes, downtown Charleston, SC, USA [17].

On 1 January 1970, President Nixon signed the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) into law. Under the National Environmental Policy Act of 1969 (NEPA), Federal agencies must consider the visual impacts of proposed projects, including potential effects on historic properties, scenic resources, and the scenic experiences of people who view the landscape [19].

There are already countries that have implemented projects and laws to support the protection of local identity and visual impact, which can be adapted for the context of Romania and the rest of the countries facing this situation.

2.2. Cultural Landscape

According to General DECISION no. 905 of 29 November 2016, published in the OFFICIAL GAZETTE no. 1047 of 27 December 2016, cultural landscapes are made up of different combinations of natural landscapes, natural heritage, immovable cultural heritage (which includes protected architectural and engineering monuments, protected public forum monuments, protected complexes and areas, as well as protected archaeological sites), and intangible cultural heritage (which includes protected customs) [20]. In 2016, through Decision number 905, regulations specific to the cultural landscape and protected areas appeared. The Cultural Heritage Code aims to integrate heritage, sustainable development, and environmental protection policies. It is necessary for the landscape to be recognized, as in all other Western countries, as an integrated tool that has two dimensions: balanced development and heritage protection, thus ensuring the right of citizens to a healthy environment marked by cultural identity and values aesthetics (see Figure 2) [20].

The European Landscape Convention refers to the territory as a landscape, proposing it as a control tool for territorial development, able to integrate all the requirements that intersect in this field. It is addressed to the entire European territory, be it urban or extra-urban, regardless of whether it is a quality one or a degraded one. The objective of the Convention refers to the protection, management, and landscaping of the landscape, thus transforming it into an instrument for controlling territorial development in Europe [21–37]. The Sustainable Management of Cultural Landscapes Consortium defines a cultural landscape "as a geographic area, encompassing its cultural and natural resources and the built and

intangible heritage therein, continuously shaped by historic and present-day evolutionary processes including the adverse or beneficial impacts of human activities, social relations and evolving cultures" [38].



Figure 2. Manarola, Cinque Terre, Italy, on the Ligurian coast [39].

2.3. Identity of the Place or Genius Loci

Genius loci, which belong to the philosophical subfield of phenomenology, have significant implications for place-making in the framework of contemporary architectural theory. Theorist Christian Norberg-Schulz explores this area of architectural discourse most notably in his book *Genius Loci: Towards a Phenomenology of Architecture*. In many cases, built heritage is the foundation for a sense of place (genius loci) that can be identified and appreciated by residents and visitors alike [40]. For some people, identification with a particular place is determined by knowing and understanding it, especially its present and past use or the nature and meaning of the events that took place there. Thus, heritage value becomes the receptacle of a cultural memory, which strengthens the identity of a group or a community [41]. Nowadays, genius loci are part of a design practice that matches the culture, environment, traditions, society, and economics of a place.

Figure 3 shows Roșu's House at the Bucovina Museum and represents a perfect example of genius loci or the identity of a place. The house is built based on organic architecture that blends into the local environment, and the vegetation used matches the surrounding. The veranda with a gazebo covered in three bays, without pediment, supported on isolated foundations of stonework, ornamented by notching, at the pillars, and by tracery, at the balustrades, fit with the house's surroundings. The walls, made of wooden beams, are plastered and painted in pastel colors: light blue in the middle and white in the frames.



Figure 3. Roșu's House—the Bucovina Museum [42].

2.4. Defining the Blending

In the *Explanatory Dictionary of the Romanian Language* and in the *Cambridge Dictionary*, blending is defined as "the meeting of several parts into a single whole"; another definition from the area of biology that can be extrapolated and adapted to the rural environment comes from the *Small Dictionary of Neologisms* which defines it as "ability of the nervous system to achieve the interaction between different parts of the body, as well as between them and the environment" [43–45]. Genius loci were defined above as a design practice that matches the culture, environment, traditions, society, and economics of a place, and this research aimed to present blending as the intersection between all the fields connected to the rural development and as the physical materialization of it. Blending implies research into the construction area and visual analysis to understand the context, the need, and the options. It is important to understand that this is not a limitation and there is still creative space, but there should be a guideline to help the people and specialists understand how to use elements which worked in the past, to use new technologies that are available nowadays, and to try to use the local resources and native flora, while preserving the local identity and traditions, protecting the environment, and ensuring that the project is economically sustainable. Cesar Brandi laid the foundation of the contemporary doctrine in restoration; one of his main ideas is that restoration must be considered as a work of art and must aim for the potential unity of art without committing an artistic or historical falsehood [46].

Concluding this paragraph and idea, blending should be a tool or concept in all the connected fields, as all of the genius loci principles aim to preserve, protect, evolve, and develop the rural area as a work of art. The main difference between blending and integrating is that blending is a more complex concept which combine elements with a focus on a sustainable development, and it is about becoming part of the landscape and a living landmark, while integrating is a less restrictive but at the same time more subjective matching of new buildings with the existing landscape. These new buildings can be part of the landscape without belonging to the place.

Both houses are great examples of structures built using sustainable materials, and they are engineered to achieve the optimal balance between functionality, quality materials, and cost. As such, they can have a positive impact on rural areas. The left picture (contemporary architecture) is an example of integrating into the landscape, while the right one (contemporary architecture preserving authenticity) is an example of blending and has specific characteristic of the area. In addition to being functional and covering the owners'

basic needs, it preserves the identity of the place. An important aspect to understand is that in different context the role can be reverse. The scenarios for this comparation were the rural areas of the hills of Cluj and the plains of Transylvania.

2.5. Blending in the Cultural Landscape

A few main points to take in consideration when blending a new building into a cultural landscape are as follows: (1) respecting the evolution and authenticity of the place by honoring the existing architectural style, materials, proportions, and details that contribute to the character and identity, while avoiding adding conjectural historic features that can create a false sense of history [47,48]. (2) Ensuring compatibility and continuity, rather than mimicry, by building new projects that reflect contemporary design, while still being compatible and respectful of the area. The concept of blending should create a thoughtful balance between aesthetics, functionality, and contextual sensitivity [47–49]. (3) Engaging with the community and understanding the significance of how buildings shape human experiences and influence the character of a place; designs should convey an authentic narrative, and it is necessary to actively listen to the stories and experiences of the people who inhabit those areas to understand their cultural and social context [47,50].

Blending the accommodation structure or any new construction in the cultural landscape requires a nuanced approach that preserves authenticity, avoids mimicry, and engages with the community to create a harmonious and meaningful expression (architecture, landscape–fauna and flora, community), rather than something kitsch, artificial, or a historical falsehood. Christopher Alexander in his book "The nature of order, volume 1" provides a more detailed and structured framework for understanding the blending into the cultural landscape of architectural elements. This is essential for creating harmonious and functional spaces that resonate with their surroundings and the people who inhabit them. In the book, the author emphasizes the importance of understanding the fundamental principles that govern the creation of living structures [51]. Blending can be used while referring to the concepts of "centers" or "wholeness" from Alexander's book, which in this context, refers to the integration of these centers into a cohesive and harmonious whole, creating a sense of unity. He argues that modern architecture lost the ability to blend and create a sense of wholeness, which leads to sterile and uninviting places, while traditional architecture often blends effortlessly in the cultural and natural context. In his other book "The Timeless Way of Building", Alexander discusses how traditional architecture manages to achieve blending, while highlighting the importance of understanding the cultural and historical context and how the designs of buildings and spaces evolve [52].

It is important to emphasize the importance of architects, landscape architects/engineers, civil engineers, and all the connected fields and how they engage with the creative process and to allow the designs and the structures to emerge organically from interaction between the existing elements, the built environment, and its users. Integration represents one step away from the concept of blending, meaning that it is not only important to match with surroundings, but also mandatory to belong to the local identity.

2.6. Research Questions

This research is essential for specialists because it helps them understand if the population's perception aligns with the architect's recommendations, in this case related to the blending of the buildings.

There is a gap in the Romanian studies and at the European level related to the environmental impact of new construction and how to minimize the visual impact of buildings in the landscape [53–55].

a. What is blending?

   This question will help to define blending and will identify if there is a need to develop further investigations into the subject.

In recent years, the construction of accommodation structures has proliferated in rural areas, and unfortunately in many cases these are incompatible with the cultural landscape [56–61].

Traditional architecture has been characterized, historically, by using local materials which will result in construction perfectly blended into the landscape. Even with significant human intervention, buildings often contribute to a harmonious landscape [62,63].

New construction techniques and materials have led to an imbalance between the buildings and the cultural landscape [54,64]. New technologies and materials are creating more functional construction styles, but they have the potential to affect the environment. There is a need for education for citizens, and those responsible for planning and building new projects in rural areas should include blending and functionality in the design [65–68].

b. How will respondents evaluate the blending of the structures?

   Based on the visual survey, the team identified the differences and how people grade the scenarios, and this will help to understand if people's points of view align with the architect's recommendations.

The recommendations about blending into the cultural landscape were selected from the architectural guidebooks (from the Romanian Order of Architects) which focus mostly on the architectural elements. One of the secondary objectives is to check if people know about blending and if they are interested in the subject.

In general, the survey is used to evaluate how viewers react to visual ideas [63,69–73]. This tool is extensively used and helps to test and evaluate the visual impact of structures in rural landscapes [61,74–78], and this research implemented it as well.

c. Is it necessary to pay attention to the visual impact?

   This question looks at how much attention people pay to certain elements, such as the aesthetics of buildings, the presence of vegetation, the preservation of some architectural elements, blending into the cultural landscape, and if it influences their decision to visit a place.

As a secondary objective, it could determine what materials are preferred and define the blending, which can simplify the specialists' work and finally translate into cost-savings.

There are a lot of important aspects that should be followed when discussing rural environments but one of the main ones should be to maintain a balance between rural development and the economy, adding value to the area.

3. Materials and Methods

3.1. Study Areas

The research is based on the analysis of building characteristics and the relation with culture, environment, traditions, and society in two rural regions in Romania. The rural regions are as follows.

a. The hills of Cluj (Zona Dealurile Clujului)

The villages (see Figure 4) in this area are predominantly rural, because of the geographical environment and occupations closely related to agriculture. The most widespread type of village in this area is made up of a network of streets that cover a larger area of land, with rare houses placed near the road, between which there are patches of agricultural land. But in addition to scattered villages, there are villages with a strong tendency to cluster, with dense houses, set along narrow and winding streets, forming a well-knit hearth. The gathered villages with a compact hearth are very clearly delimited by the agricultural lands, especially in the wide valleys of the rivers. Exceptionally, we find scattered villages of the chamber type, located, as a rule, on the top of a hill or along a valley. Pintic, Leurda, and others have households which include a large part of the agricultural land. The structures do not follow any clear compositional rules, although they are generally subordinated to the relief.



Figure 4. Location of the hills of Cluj, including the following localities in Cluj County: Câțcău, Căşeiu, Vad, Dej, Cuzdrioara, Recea-Cristur, Bobâlna, Jinchișu de Jos, Panticeu, Aluniș, Cornești, Iclod, Aşchileu Mare, Vultureni, Dăbâca, Borșa, Sânpaul, Chinteni, Baciu, Feleacu, Ciurila, Tureni, Petreștii de Jos, and Moldovenești. Regions from **Sălaj County** include the following: Gâlgău, Şimișna, Zalha, Gârbou, Critolț, Rus, Ileanda, Lozna, Surduc, Jibou, Someș-Odorhei, Năpradea, Băbeni, and Letca.

The occupations of the people in the area include agriculture, such as the cultivation of cereals, potatoes, hemp, and vegetables. Animal breeding also predominates here, while fruit growing, which is part of an old tradition in the area, has an important role in providing food and as an additional source of income through the sale of fruit-based drinks. Forestry and logging, beekeeping, processing of agricultural products (cheese, butter, meat products), and fabrics (linen, hemp, wool) are also important industries.

In terms of industry, wood processing and the wood industry, brick production, salt, and other industries are significant.

Peasant crafts include woodworking, carpentry, stone working, weaving and folk garment making, folk art objects, pottery, textiles, leather and fur, musicians, and fiddlers.

The materials used were influenced by the natural conditions but also by the social relations and the material well-being of the inhabitants. Basic materials including wood, unburnt brick, clay, and stone were used, while for roof shingles, straw or cane were common.

Economic development has resulted in the use of burnt bricks and tiles [79].

b. The plain of Transylvania (Zona Câmpia Transilvaniei)

This area (see Figure 5) is characterized by the existence of medium-sized settlements. Even though it is a large geographical area, not all types of villages are found. Most villages are clustered with several streets, and there are rarely linear settlements. The main occupations and peasant crafts are identical to those in the Transylvanian Plains area [80].

3.2. Case Selection

The research was carried out based on the architectural guides (made with the support of the Order of Architects from Romania, OAR), to select pictures of houses from the countryside. The objective was to select buildings from rural areas to which the research methodology could be applied. These were traditional houses that had been restored and conventional/modern architecture with enough surroundings to allow for digital modification of the façade color and different height ratios for the vegetation.

Two simulations were prepared for analyzing the façade color preference, and three simulations with the height variation of the vegetation surrounding the building were created by means of computer image treatment with Adobe Photoshop. There were a total of 18 scenarios: 6 for façade color, 9 for height variation of the vegetation, and 3 for the conventional architecture of the buildings.

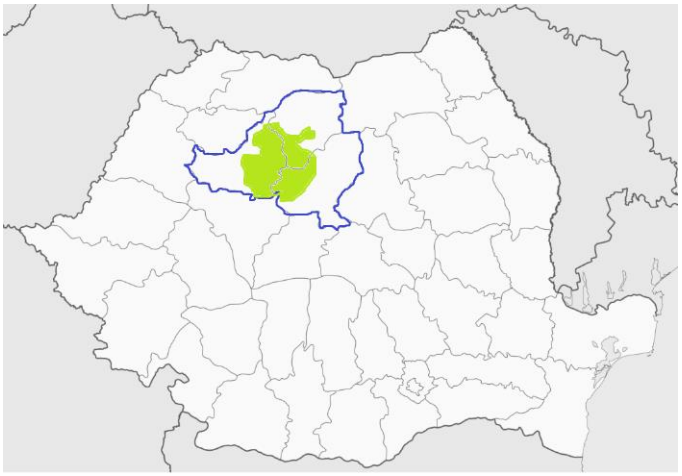


Figure 5. Location of the plain of Transylvania, including Alba County: Lunca and Noșiac; Bistrita-Năsăud County with the following communes: Branișstea, Budești, Chiochiș, Mărișelu, Matei, Micești de Câmpie, Milaș, Nușeni, Reteag, Sânmihaiu de Câmpie, Şieu Magheruș, Rusu de Jos, Țaga, and Teaca. In Cluj County, the communes are as follows: Aiton, Aluniș, Apahida, Bonțida, Buza. Căianu, Călărali. Cămărași, Cătina, Ceanu Mare, Cojocna, Cuzdrioara, Dej, Feleacu, Frata, Fizeșu Gherlii, Geaca, Gherla, Jucu, Luna, Mica, Mociu, Moldovenești, Mihai Viteazu, Pălatca, Ploscoș, Săndulești, Sânmartin, Suatu, Sic, Tiocu de Jos, Tritenii de Jos, Tureni, Unguraș, Viișoara. In Mureș County, there are the following communues: Atintiș. Băla, Band, Batoș, Bogata, Chețani, Cozma, Crăiesti, Cristesti, Cuci, Grebenișu de Câmpie, Iclănzel, Iernut, Luduș, Lunca. Madaraș, Miheșu de Câmpie, Ogra, Pânet, Papiu Ilarian, Pogăceaua, Râciu, Sanger, Sânpaul, Sânpetru de Câmpie, Sărmașu, Şincai, Taureni, Ungheni, Valea Largă, Voivodeni, and Zau de Câmpie.

3.3. Survey

First Survey–Study Design

A survey was used to testi respondents' preferences in relation to the architecture type, façade color, and height ratio of the vegetation. There were two ways to answer the survey, namely online and via a face-to-face interview. The reason behind this was to understand the relevance of the answer in a different context and to have the opportunity to collect extra information during the face-to-face interview. During face-to-face meetings, minimal time was allowed for each scenario to be rated to record the first visual impulse following psychological theories, and this type of survey permits comparison of the results [63,81,82].

Every participant completed a questionnaire, which consisted of two parts. The first part collected demographic and educational data; the second part involved the evaluation of the image sets, posing a question for each scenario, such as "How would you rate the blending of the accommodation structure in the cultural landscape?" using a semantic scale according to the five-point Likert test, from very bad (1) to very good (5). Until now, semantic differential scales have been utilized to quantify visual preferences with success. Although scales with more intervals are possible, there is no evidence that using them will help participants to improve their evaluation.

For the architecture type, two scenarios were chosen: conventional architecture (modern architecture that does not consider the cultural landscape) and traditional architecture (buildings restored or built in accordance with the cultural landscape). The houses were selected based on the recommendations of the architectural guidelines created by the Order of Architects in Romania (OAR).

Two options were chosen for the façade, namely proposal A (façade finished with no color or maximum white) and proposal B (façade finished with a suitable color). An appropriate color scheme created and suggested in previous research was taken in consideration; based on this information, the research team choose the color blue for this study, because the Order of Architects in Romania (OAR) identify this as being specific color of

those two rural areas. The difference between white and blue is relevant for understanding how the cost of the construction will be influenced.

Based on the work of an expert panel, it was found that scenarios can change significantly by about 50%, and the following variations were selected for the study [74]:

- The height of the vegetation did not exceed the accommodation structure.
- The height of the vegetation reached between 0% to 50% of the accommodation structure.
- The height of the vegetation exceeded that of the accommodation structure.

The survey was carried out in Romanian and English, and it was divided in 23 sections: Section I—demographic information:

1. Country of origin;
2. County;
3. Environment of origin;
4. Educational background;
5. Gender;
6. Age;
7. Which destination do you prefer for holidays: mountains; seaside; rural areas; urban areas?
8. Do you prefer to travel in your own country or abroad?
9. Do you prefer to be accommodated in a hotel; traditional house; guesthouse; other;
10. What is the average length of your holiday? (days);
11. What kind of activities do you do during your vacations? Hiking; shopping; nature trails; exploring the local gastronomy; reading; sunbathing; other.

Sections II to VII—Architecture (see Figure 6)—'How would you rate the blending of the accommodation structure in the cultural landscape?' On a scale from 1–5 (disconnected–blended).



Figure 6. QA1—private villa [83]; QA2—traditional house from Rimetea, Alba county [84], QA3—traditional house from the Bucovina museum [42], QA4—Nádas Panzió guesthouse [85], QA5—Casa Truta [86], and QA6—private home [87].

Sections VIII to XI—Façade (see Figure 7): 'How would you rate the blending of the accommodation structure in the cultural landscape?' On a scale from 1–5 (disconnected–blended).

From sections XII to XXIII—Height ratio between vegetation and building (see Figure 8): 'How would you rate the blending of the accommodation structure in the cultural landscape?' On a scale from 1–5 (disconnected–blended).



Figure 7. Façade.



Figure 8. Height ratio between the vegetation and building.

3.4. Second Survey

The survey consisted of three sections: 1. demographic data, 2. defining the perception and knowledge about the subject, 3. visual assessment of houses according to the recommendations of the Order of Romanian Architects, and 4. testing potential models.

Section I: Demographic data:

1. Country of origin;
2. County–dropdown (41 counties + 1 municipality Bucharest and 'Outside of Romania';
3. Have you ever visited the rural areas of Alba, Bistrița-Năsăud, Cluj, Sălaj, Mureș counties: da/yes or nu/no;
4. Environment: urban or rural;
5. Educational background: middle school; high school; bachelor; master; Ph.D., post-doc;
6. Do you have knowledge in one or more of the following fields: architecture, landscaping, construction, and design. Da/yes or nu/no;
7. Gender: masculine; feminine; non-binary; other;
8. Age: 18–25; 26–35; 36–45; 46–55; 56+;
9. Do you prefer to travel in your own country or abroad?
10. Which destination do you prefer for holidays: mountains, the seaside, rural areas, or urban areas?
11. Do you prefer to be accommodated in a hotel, agri-pension, guesthouse, hostel, tourist villa, or another type of accommodation?

Section II: Defining the individual's perception and knowledge about the subject.

Responses to each question in the stress scale questions were scored between 1 (low importance) and 5 (very important) on a Likert scale.

1. Do you think that preserving the identity (architecture, native vegetation, harmony between buildings) of a place is important?
2. Bearing in mind that it is not ethical to reproduce 1:1 traditional houses, do you think that keeping certain elements of traditional architecture in new structures manages to preserve and pass on the identity of the place?
3. If you were to vacation in the countryside, how important would the aesthetics of the building be?
4. How important is the vegetation used in the landscaping when we talk about the integration of buildings into the landscape/community?
5. How important is it that the accommodation structure is built in harmony with the other structures?
6. Do you think that a guide should be followed or implemented with the recommendations of specialists in rural construction?
7. Have you heard of the architectural guides produced by the Romanian Order of Architects? Yes; no.

Section III: Visual assessment of houses according to the recommendations of the Order of Romanian Architects.

1. Same questions for each pictures (see Figure 9): How would you rate the following statements referring to the height and street alignment of buildings?

Responses to each question in the stress scale questions were scored between 1 (strongly disagree) and 5 (strongly agree) on a Likert scale, with 2 (disagree), 3 (neutral), and 4 (agree).

a. The height and alignment of buildings to the street influence the landscape in a positive way.
b. The buildings are integrated into the landscape.
c. Vegetation impacted how I rated blending.



Figure 9. Examples for height and street alignment (H.S.A.). Source: Google Maps.

2. Same questions for each pictures (see Figure 10): How would you rate the following statements referring to the color of buildings?

Responses to each question in the stress scale questions were scored between 1 (strongly disagree) and 5 (strongly agree) on a Likert scale, with 2 (disagree), 3 (neutral), and 4 (agree).

a. The color of buildings influences the landscape in a positive way.
b. The buildings are integrated into the landscape.
c. Vegetation impacted how I rated blending.



Figure 10. Examples for color. Source: Google Maps.

3. How would you rate the following statements that refer to the hierarchy of structures (see Figure 11)?

Responses to each question in the stress scale questions were scored between 1 (strongly disagree) and 5 (strongly agree) on a Likert scale, with 2 (disagree), 3 (neutral), and 4 (agree).

a. The hierarchy of buildings on the street influences the landscape in a positive way.
b. The buildings are integrated into the landscape.
c. Vegetation impacted how I rated blending.



Figure 11. Examples for hierarchy. Source: Google Maps.

Each respondent had the opportunity to withdraw from completing the survey at any time. Participation in the study was voluntary, and the completion of the questionnaire represented their consent. Confidentiality was maintained as no personal data were collected and participant responses were anonymous. The surveys were created in Google Forms, shared on social platforms, and open for the duration of two (weeks), first in the spring of 2023 (8 March 2023–15 March 2023) and then in 2024 (2 March 2024–16 March 2024). The pictures in the first survey were digitally modified with Adobe Photoshop, and the pictures from the second one were collected from Google Maps Street View.

3.5. Statistical Methods

IBM SPSS Statistics 28.0.1 (demo version) was used for statistical analysis. Absolute and relative frequencies were used to illustrate the qualitative data. The significant threshold was set to 0.05 (95% confidence level). The median and the 25th to 75th percentiles were used to describe continuous data that proved deviation from the theoretical normal distribution. Determination of quantitative data normality distribution was performed using the Kolmogorov–Smirnov test. The Chi-squared test was used to confirm associations between categorical variables, and for the theoretical frequencies that were less than 5, the Fisher's exact and Mann–Whitney tests were used. To test the internal consistency of the items in the questionnaire, the Cronbach alpha coefficient was used. The confidence interval for the Cronbach alpha was also presented [88,89].

4. Results

Questionnaire items showed good consistency, with a Cronbach alpha equal to 0.877 and a confidence interval of [0.842, 0.906].

4.1. First Survey—Results

The determination of quantitative data normality distribution was performed using the Kolmogorov–Smirnov test.

One hundred and twenty-one (121) individuals participated in the survey. A total of 100 were from Romania, while the others were from Algeria (1), Austria (1), France (2), Germany (1), Greece (1), India (1), Iran (1), Italy (3), Jamaica (1), Mexico (1), Morocco (1), Poland (1), Republic of Moldova (1), Spain (1), Taiwan (1), Turkey (2), and Vietnam (1).

The counties of Romania involved in the questionnaire were as follows: Alba (2), Arges (1), Bacau (1), Bihor (2), Bistrita-Nasaud (7), Botosani (1), Brasov (3), Cluj (50), Constanta (1), Covasna (1), Hunedoara (5), Ilfov (2), Maramures (1), Mehedinti (2), Prahova (1), Salaj (5), Sibiu (7), Suceava (7), Targu Mures (1), and Timis (4).

The destinations preferred by respondents were as follows: the seaside (60), mountains (45), urban areas (9), and rural areas (7).

In general, 62 women and 15 men answered that preferred to travel abroad, and 27 women and 17 men said that they preferred to travel in their own countries.

The educational backgrounds of the respondents were as follows: bachelor (71), master (26), high school (14), Ph.D. (6), postdoctoral (2), vocational school (1), and primary school (1).

Most people that answered the survey chose to stay in a hotel (42) or guesthouse (42), while some preferred traditional houses (27), house sharing (5), apartments (2), cottages (1), campers (1), or a tent (1).

Based on the survey, the answer to the question "How would you rate the blending of the accommodation structure in the cultural landscape?" was as follows:

(a) If the discussion is about the architecture types, the most blended to the least blended structures were rated as follows: QA2(43), QA4(40), QA3(18), QA6(9), QA5(8), and QA1(3) (Figure 12). Traditional architecture took the first three positions in terms of participants' preferences.



Figure 12. Six structures with different types of architectural classification, arranged based on preferences.

(b) The most appreciated construction that blended into the landscape was the structure with a white façade and traditional architecture (the height ratios between the vegetation and accommodation structure were 50%, 100%, and 150%) (Figure 13), followed by a white façade and modern architecture, blue façade with traditional architecture and, lastly, a blue façade and modern architecture. (Table 1).

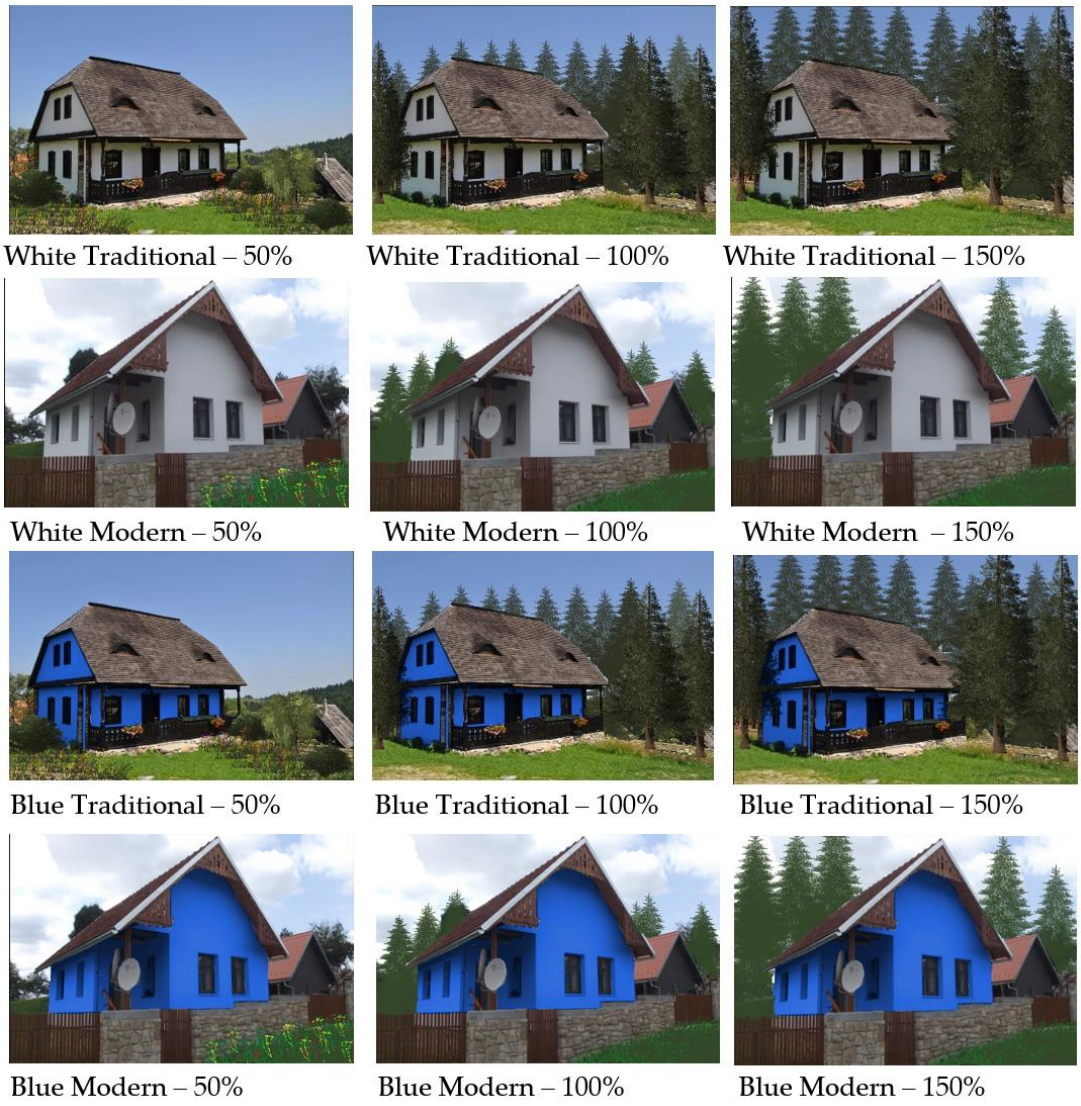


Figure 13. The most appreciated structures blended into the landscape based on the survey analysis.

Table 1. Results were obtained based on statistical tests and the validated hypotheses.

Hypotheses	Statistical Tests	*p*-Value	Hypotheses Validated
Ho: There is no association between architecture type and environment. Ha: There is an association between architecture type and environment.	Chi-squared test -Hi^2	0.0479	There is an association between architecture type and environment.
Ho: There is no association between architecture type and educational background. Ha: There is an association between architecture type and educational background.	Fisher's exact	0.0738	There is no association between architecture type and educational background.
Ho: There is no association between gender and architecture style. Ha: There is no association between gender and architecture style.	Chi-squared test -Hi^2	0.4725	There is no association between gender and architecture style.
Ho: There is no difference in the average number of vacation days depending on the location. Ha: There is a difference in the average number of vacation days depending on the location.	Kruskal–Wallis	0.0635	There is no difference in the average number of vacation days depending on the location.
Ho: There is no difference in the average number of vacation days depending on the age group. Ha: There is a difference in the average number of vacation days depending on the age group.	Kruskal–Wallis	0.6001	Ho: There is no difference in the average number of vacation days depending on the age group.

Note: null hypothesis (Ho), and the alternative hypothesis (Ha).

4.2. Second Survey—Results

Determination of the quantitative data normality distribution was performed using the Kolmogorov–Smirnov test.

Two hundred and ten individuals participated in the survey. A total of 206spondents were from Romania, while the others were from Bulgaria (1), Germany (1), Liban (1), and Spain (1).

The counties of Romania involved in the questionnaire were Alba (6), Arad (1), Bacău (1), Bihor (6), Bistrita-Nasaud (7), Botosani (2), Brasov (1), București (8) Cluj (133), Harghita (1), Hunedoara (3), Iași (4), Ilfov (1), Maramures (5), Mehedinti (1), Neamț (1), Olt (2), Outside of Romania (2), Satu Mare (2), Salaj (7), Sibiu (9), Suceava (1), Timis (3), Vaslui (2), and Vâlcea (1).

Here, 96.2% of the respondents visited/lived in the rural area of Alba, Bistrița-Năsăud, Cluj, or Sălaj și Mureș.

In general, 174 women, 35 men, and 1 non-binary person answered that they preferred to travel abroad, while 42.9% of respondents said that they preferred to travel in their countries. The destinations preferred by respondents were as follows: seaside (77), mountains (70), urban areas (40), and rural areas (23). Most people that answered the survey chose to stay at hotels (76), guesthouses (53), other types of accommodation (32), traditional houses (24), tourist villas (22), or hostels (3).

The educational backgrounds of the respondents were as follows: master (80), bachelor (74), Ph.D. (35), high school (14), postdoctoral (4), and middle school (3). Seventy-six people had knowledge of architecture, landscaping, construction, or design.

A total of 29.5% of the respondents had heard about the architectural guides for rural areas created by the Romanian Order of Architects. Of those who answered the survey, 85.7% said that structures should be created that followed and/or implemented a guide with specialists' recommendations for rural construction, while 9.5% were neutral and 4.8% disagreed (see Figures 14 and 15).



Figure 14. Positive examples (+) based on the architects' recommendations.



Figure 15. Negative examples (−) based on the architects' recommendations.

Based on the survey, the answers to the questions are presented in the article:

a. What is blending?

The answers from the following questions:

"Do you think that preserving the identity (architecture, native vegetation, harmony between buildings) of a place is important?"
"Bearing in mind that it is not ethical to reproduce a 1:1 traditional house, do you think that keeping certain elements of traditional architecture in new structures manages to preserve and pass on the identity of the place?"
"If you were to vacation in the countryside, how important would the aesthetics of the building be?"
"How important is the vegetation used in the landscaping when we talk about the integration of buildings into the landscape/community?"
"How important is it that the accommodation structure is built in harmony with the other structures?"

And the averages of pictures scores showed that respondents consider that it is important to pay attention to these items, and this can be seen in the way that they evaluate the pictures (see Figure 16).

b. How will respondents evaluate the blending of the structures?

Regarding how they would evaluate the blending of the structures, there is no significant difference between the choices of those with knowledge in the field and those without (Table 2). They all leaned towards the positive options.

c. Is it necessary to pay attention to the visual impact?

Most of the respondents consider that the visual impact is important (see Figure 17).

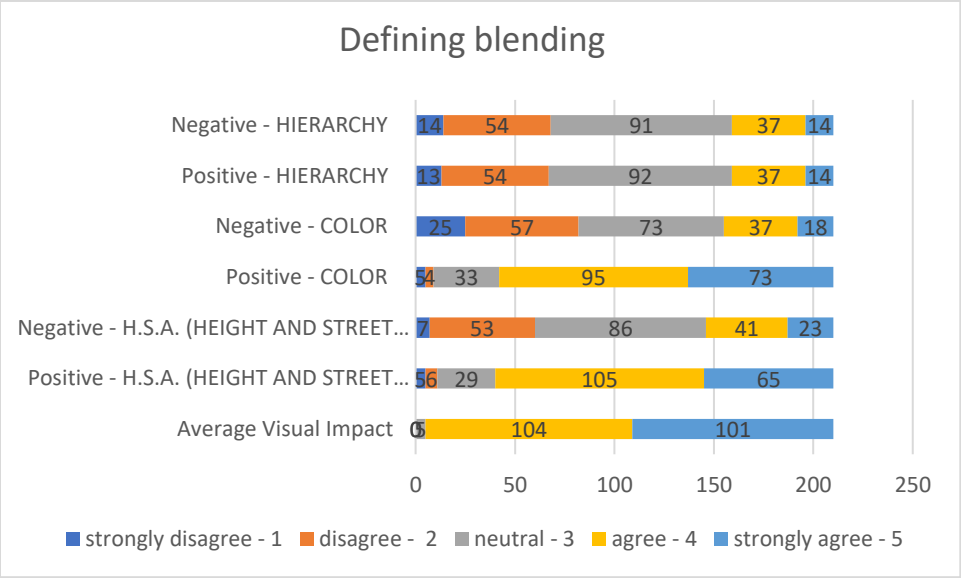


Figure 16. Defining blending based on the questions and visual assessment.

Table 2. Mann–Whitney U test analyzing variables (H.S.A., color, hierarchy) with if the respondents had knowledge in the field.

Variables	Knowledge in the Field		*p*-Value
	Yes	No	
H.S.A. +	4.00 (3.67;4.50)	4.00 (3.50;4.50)	1.000
H.S.A −	2.83 (2.33;3.67)	3.00 (2.33;3.67)	0.716
Color +	4.17 (3.67;4.67)	4.00 (3.50;4.67)	0.464
Color −	2.33 (1.71;3.33)	2.83 (2.17;3.50)	**0.015**
Hierarchy +	3.33 (2.88;4.00)	3.5 (2.96;4.00)	0.792
Hierarchy −	2.67 (1.88;3.33)	2.92 (2.33;3,38)	0.134
+ positive example		x.xx (a.aa;b.bb)	
− negative example		x.xx-median	
H.S.A—Height And Street Alignment		(a.aa;b.bb)—IQR—The interquartile range	

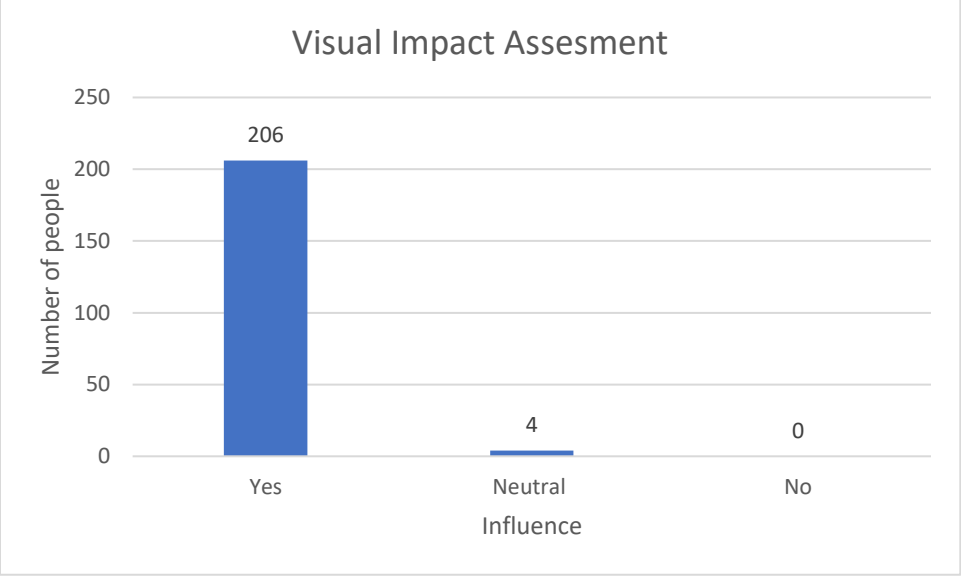


Figure 17. Visual impact assessment graphic.

5. Discussion

In the years following communism in Romania, and other countries with a similar situation, there was a boom in the construction of private and/or touristic accommodations, which, unfortunately, have not been in harmony with the local landscape of rural areas [90,91]. There are a lot of resources, from natural ones to the heritage of the rural areas and humans, that need to be protected and preserved with the intention of maintaining the specificity of the areas. Therefore, at least for Eastern Europe, this research is a starting point for improving the approach to developing rural strategies of development.

Although the evaluation excluded the sounds and smells and could not perceive the shades of color, this technique is effective and can be suitable and valid. The photographic method for landscape assessment research was used with success by other authors as well [58,74,92–96].

The present investigation contributes to improving the understanding of the way that respondents define and perceive the blending in the landscape and how to improve the use of height and street alignment, the colors for façades, hierarchy, and ways of using vegetation, as well as if this is important and if this has any visual impact or even more serious consequences. The article provides answers to these questions and can help to create a more accurate approach to planning and construction.

The second survey uncovered the following:

a. What is blending?

To conserve, protect, develop, and promote rural areas, blending should be the instrument or concept used in all the related fields. Blending should be defined as a design practice that matches the culture, environment, traditions, society, and economics of a place, and should apply elements which worked in the past, use new technologies that are available nowadays, and try to use the local resources, native flora, while preserving the local identity and traditions, protecting the environment, and being economically sustainable.

Blending is an important feature; most respondents rated the photos according to what they answered to the questions that aimed to define the concept. Whether it was a conscious or unconscious decision, people's brains look for harmony and clear messages in what surrounds us.

b. How will respondents evaluate the blending of the structures?

There is no difference between those who have knowledge in the field and those who do not, but it is obvious that they all chose the positive examples, as there is an intrinsic need to seek a balance. If we were to analyze within each item, many respondents opted for the positive option, but at the same time it can be observed that those without knowledge in the field were more inclined to choose the negative options.

The most significant difference was regarding the image that analyzes the negative color. On this scale, the specialists are situated in disagreement area (2), while the respondents chose the neutral area (3).

c. Is it necessary to pay attention to the visual impact?

There was not a single person who did not agree that visual impact is important. Although, at first, this can be dismissed as a superficial approach, it is possible to go deeper and develop how each element is analyzed and how other aspects that have bit been covered in this article are related to the functional part and have a negative impact on the environment, the community, the economy, well-being, and many other aspects. The current literature cannot 100% support the importance of this type of analysis, but the sample size and the diversity of the group used in this study were proven suitable in prior studies [97–99]. Anyway, this paper is statistically based, and soon, once the research teams are transdisciplinary, the data will be reliable enough to be useful and to support solutions for rural development problems.

Future research is needed to confirm this point and to identify other methods of blending the structure into the landscape and to assist in the development of sustainable agribusinesses in harmony with nature.

This article can be a useful tool for the authorities to create specific building regulations, as well as for the actors, such as engineers and architect, who are responsible for the integration of the building into the rural landscape without increasing costs. At this moment, there are architecture guides for each rural area of Romania, although this is the first research approaching the perception of the integration, and it intends to create a methodology and solution to support authorities, entrepreneurs, actors, and villagers.

Study Limitations

The first survey showed the preferences of respondents for the specific pictures but did not answer the article's questions. Another challenge identified was that people did not notice the changes in the pictures at the first look, and they realized only later in the process.

The second survey managed to reach more people, but it was not limited to a single answer. Because the respondents come from different backgrounds, there would have been the risk of them giving up or becoming blocked if they had been asked to respond to further questions.

Future researchers will be able to replicate this study with more systematic methods, creative ideas, or other points of view. More transdisciplinary studies on this aspect are suggested in the future to define and create a realistic solution for rural areas through the lenses of construction, the environment, and community.

6. Conclusions

The study intended to better understand the perception of the population in relation to the recommendations of specialists, and if the concept of blending it is important. Even if the concept of blending and integration are used as synonyms, a closer look and analysis of the etymology can set those words apart and make it clearer when each should be used. Based on the answers and the literature review, this article defined blending and set it apart from integration, providing the opportunity for a deeper approach to rural areas through a wider lens, i.e., a more inclusive and transdisciplinary one.

The concept of blending is part of the visual impact, and future research can analyze the relationship between them and how affects more than the aesthetics of the places in more depth.

It was interesting to observe that there are not big differences between the perceptions of specialists and the public, and it is important to start educating the public to make a conscious decision. Chaotic developments create a discomfort state for the public, who do not understand why they feel the way they feel. The most significant difference is the negative example for color, which can be understood as being one of the first thing that people observe; while the specialist did not agree with the colors, the public respondents were not sure if they liked it or not, being right in the middle. Again, this can be related to their well-being and realizing that it can make them uncomfortable without knowing. The lack of vegetation is one of the main problems, and this significantly affected the way that the public perceived the blending of the accommodation structure in the cultural landscape. The height and street alignment and hierarchy have some significance, but the procedure may need to be improved to be more efficient. Preferences are the positive examples in all cases.

New investigations may go deeper into the subject or identify additional elements to improve the prior research.

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