

PERCEPTIONS AND MOTIVATIONS OF GENERATION Z TOWARD RURAL TOURISM IN ROMANIA

MILITARU FLORIN DANIEL¹, CIOLAC RAMONA¹, MARIN DIANA¹, GAVRILĂ FLAVIUS-IONATAN², POPESCU GABRIELA*¹

¹ *University of Life Sciences “King Mihai I” from Timisoara, Faculty of Management and Rural Tourism, Timisoara, Romania*

² *IOSUD University of Life Sciences “King Mihai I” from Timisoara, Timisoara, Romania*

*Corresponding author's e-mail: gabrielapopescu@usvt.ro

Abstract: *The study aimed to analyze Generation Z's perceptions, attitudes, and behavioral patterns regarding rural tourism in Romania. Using a structured questionnaire and a representative sample of young respondents, the research examined how demographic characteristics, travel frequency, and residential environment influence preferences for rural destinations. The findings revealed that Generation Z values comfort, cultural discovery, and nature-based experiences as core elements of rural tourism. Female respondents showed a stronger orientation toward cultural and experiential aspects, while male respondents were more focused on functional factors such as infrastructure and cost. Urban residents perceived rural destinations as opportunities for reconnection with heritage and nature, whereas rural participants expressed greater awareness of infrastructural deficiencies.*

Key words: *rural tourism, generation, tourist behavior, destination image*

INTRODUCTION

Rural tourism has gone through a rebirth over the past decade and is connected to local economies diversification, natural and cultural heritage valorization, and consumer behavior trends towards sustainability and authenticity [2,11,13]. In Romania, interest in rural destinations was triggered by a diversity of factors, from the quality of services and infrastructure to the availability of outdoor activities and familiarity with local traditions [1,7,10]. Literature shows that changes in climatic conditions and the consequential impacts are likely to redefine the appeal of countryside zones and the demand for managerial flexibility, for which there is a greater need for better knowledge of the aspirations of tourists and wishes in the respective segments [14,15].

There has also been a deepened change in tourist behavior due to digitalization, globalization, and shifts in values among generations. Generation Z, i.e., those born after the year 1996, is a burgeoning consumer market fueled by high-tech consumption, passion for real experiences, and affinity for sustainability [9,13]. It is stated that the younger generation has a preference for experiential tourism with direct involvement, learning through doing, and merging with nature, lesser mass tourism preference and more interest in alternative, ecologic, and customized forms [8,9].

Specifically within Romanian studies, rural tourism research emphasized authenticity and local culture influence to appeal to young tourists. The rural experience rooted in tradition, food, and generosity has been considered something positive, particularly if properly promoted in the virtual world [2,7,12]. Paralleling this, Generation Z's desire for moral tourism and tourist destinations upholding values of sustainability has resulted in the adaptation of rural products to the standards of contemporary comfort, safety, and connectivity [6,11,13].

Among these changes, the study of Generation Z's perception and appreciation of rural tourism is a current research approach. Knowing what this segment expects is valuable information for public policy decision-making, increasing destination competitiveness, and modifying marketing approaches [3,5,13]. The purpose of this paper

is to determine Generation Z's perceptions and expectations of rural tourism in Romania in terms of attractiveness, authenticity, service quality, infrastructure, and sustainability.

According to the given methodology, this research adds to the literature on tourist behaviour among young people in Romania by situating the latest research into the interrelated issues of technology, experience, and identity [9,15]. Moreover, conclusions obtained can assist rural tour operators in creating products responsive to Generation Z's preferences and can inform rural destination marketing and innovation in how they communicate in a competitive digital environment [4,11,13].

MATERIALS AND METHODS

It was quantitative research where a questionnaire was used as the primary means of data collection. The self-administered questionnaire was used, where it was prepared based on the objectives of the study and used via electronic media. The target population included individuals who were part of Generation Z and were living in Romania.

The instrument used included 65 questions where these concerned perceptions, attitudes, and expectations about rural tourism by respondents. The items were built on the basis of professional literature, and in most cases, five-point Likert scales were used to report the extent of agreement with diverse statements. Those items that were intended to gather socio-demographic data like gender, residence, educational level, monthly income, and frequency of travel were also included. The instrument's structure was conceived so that a comparative analysis of perceptions could be performed among categories of respondents, in line with methodological proposals from prior research [7].

The data gathered were processed and analyzed using IBM SPSS Statistics software. At the processing level, the consistency and completeness of the responses were checked, followed by coding variables and assigning them to facilitate interpretation. At the analysis level, descriptive statistics (means, standard deviations, frequencies, percentages) were used in order to determine general patterns in the responses.

Second, cross-tabulations were conducted to identify the associations among categorical variables like gender, residence, level of education, and rural tourism attitudes. The technique enabled the observation of relationships and comparison of proportions among groups and is widely used in marketing and tourism studies to investigate the associations between demographic attributes and attitude [2]. At this point, these connections were clarified with respect to the literature in order to identify Generation Z's rural tourism perception's key explanatory avenues.

Internal set consistence was verified through determining Cronbach's α coefficient, a standard method of determining consistence in psychometric tools and most commonly used in rural tourism studies [7]. All statistical computations were made in line with the canons of scientific rigor, ensuring objectivity in interpretation and transparency of the analysis procedure.

The study adhered to scientific ethical standards. The subjects were informed of the scholarly objective of the study and voluntary participation. The responses were handled confidentially and tabulated on aggregate with no personally identifiable data gathered.

Through its research approach of construction and its analysis methods, the research gave a strict empirical foundation for comprehending the view that Generation Z has about rural tourism in Romania. The findings achieved assisted in identifying drivers affecting the attractiveness of rural destinations and in creating strategic directions for sustainable development and to provide adjustment to this generation's preferences.

Besides, survey results can assist rural tourism enterprises in creating products catering to the needs of Generation Z and guide innovation in communication and marketing of rural destinations by an aggressive digital environment.

RESEARCH RESULTS

The analysis was conducted on a sample of 144 respondents representing Generation Z in Romania. It was observed that the socio-demographic structure revealed a predominance of male participants (66.7%), while females accounted for 33.3% of the sample. In terms of age, most respondents were under 25 years old (77.8%), followed by those aged between 25 and 30 years (22.2%). Regarding education, 55.6% had completed high school, 33.3% held a bachelor's degree, and 11.1% had a master's degree. Monthly income was mainly below 3,000 lei (77.8%), while 22.2% reported incomes above 9,000 lei. The majority of participants resided in urban areas (77.8%), with 22.2% living in rural environments. Travel frequency was also examined, revealing that 55.6% travel twice a year, 22.2% travel three to five times per year, and 22.2% more than five times per year. These results confirmed that the sample represents a young, digitally active population with moderate income levels and high travel mobility [2,7].

Table 1.

Demographic profile of respondents

| Category | Level | n | % |
|------------------|-------------------|-----|------|
| Gender | Male | 96 | 66.7 |
| | Female | 48 | 33.3 |
| Age | Under 25 | 112 | 77.8 |
| | 25–30 years | 32 | 22.2 |
| Education | High school | 80 | 55.6 |
| | Bachelor's degree | 48 | 33.3 |
| | Master's degree | 16 | 11.1 |
| Monthly income | < 3000 lei | 112 | 77.8 |
| | > 9000 lei | 32 | 22.2 |
| Residence | Urban | 112 | 77.8 |
| | Rural | 32 | 22.2 |
| Travel frequency | 2 times/year | 80 | 55.6 |
| | 3–5 times/year | 32 | 22.2 |
| | > 5 times/year | 32 | 22.2 |

The analysis revealed that among the main tourism forms, mountain tourism was rated the highest ($M = 4.45$), followed by rural tourism ($M = 4.00$). Urban tourism ($M = 3.78$) and seaside tourism ($M = 3.60$) scored slightly lower but still positive. This indicates a preference among young tourists for nature-oriented and authentic experiences, which aligns with recent studies emphasizing sustainability and rural tourism trends [8].

Table 2.

Importance of tourism forms

| Tourism form | Mean |
|------------------|------|
| Mountain tourism | 4.45 |
| Rural tourism | 4.0 |
| Urban tourism | 3.78 |
| Seaside tourism | 3.6 |

From the Likert-scale assessment, it was identified that respondents rated highest the items related to comfort, cleanliness, and cultural authenticity. The most appreciated were 'Clean and comfortable accommodation' (M = 4.78), 'Friendly and responsive staff' (M = 4.56), 'Local culinary experiences' (M = 4.56), followed by 'Authentic experiences' and 'Discovering local traditions' (both M = 4.44). This demonstrates that Generation Z perceives rural tourism as an intersection of comfort, cultural value, and authenticity [2,7].

Table 3.

Items with the highest mean scores

| Item | Mean |
|-------------------------------------|------|
| Clean and comfortable accommodation | 4.78 |
| Friendly and responsive staff | 4.56 |
| Local culinary experiences | 4.56 |
| Authentic experiences | 4.44 |
| Discovering local traditions | 4.44 |

Composite indices were calculated to verify internal consistency. Cronbach's alpha coefficients ranged between 0.76 and 0.91, indicating high reliability. Table 4 presents the aggregated means and alpha values for each thematic dimension [2].

Table 4.

Composite indices and internal consistency

| Index | k | Mean | Cronbach α |
|------------------------------|----|------|-------------------|
| Tourism forms importance | 4 | 4.0 | 0.76 |
| Nature & authenticity | 9 | 3.95 | 0.88 |
| Cultural & heritage interest | 10 | 3.93 | 0.91 |
| Services & infrastructure | 3 | 3.56 | 0.84 |

In terms of gender, it was observed that female respondents attributed higher importance to rural tourism (M = 5.00) compared to males (M = 3.17), a difference that was statistically significant ($p < 0.001$). Similarly, females scored higher in 'Nature and authenticity' (M = 4.37 vs. 3.74; $p < 0.001$) and 'Cultural and heritage interest' (M = 4.27 vs. 3.77; $p < 0.001$). However, both genders evaluated services and infrastructure similarly ($p = 0.29$). These findings suggest that while women focus more on the emotional and cultural dimensions of travel, men tend to value functional and practical aspects [7][8].

Table 5.

Differences between genders (t-test)

| Variable | Mean Male | Mean Female | t | df | p |
|------------------------------|-----------|-------------|--------|----|--------|
| Rural tourism importance | 3.17 | 5.0 | -47.95 | 95 | <0.001 |
| Nature & authenticity | 3.74 | 4.37 | -6.27 | 76 | <0.001 |
| Cultural & heritage interest | 3.77 | 4.27 | -4.14 | 99 | <0.001 |
| Services & infrastructure | 3.5 | 3.67 | -1.06 | 76 | 0.29 |

When analyzing travel frequency and gender together, the ANOVA results revealed significant differences in the perception of authenticity, cultural interest, and service quality. The analysis indicates a differentiated profile: female respondents exhibited a stronger interest in authentic, cultural, and gastronomic experiences, whereas male

respondents tended to focus more on the utilitarian aspects of travel, such as infrastructure and cost. Moreover, urban participants rated the cultural and authenticity dimensions more favorably ($M_{\text{urban}} = 3.94$; $M_{\text{rural}} = 3.90$; $p < 0.001$), suggesting a desire for escape and reconnection with traditional values. In contrast, rural respondents expressed a slightly more critical attitude toward tourism infrastructure ($M_{\text{rural}} = 2.67$; $M_{\text{urban}} = 3.81$; $p < 0.001$), reflecting a greater awareness of local limitations.

Overall, those who travel three to five times per year recorded the highest mean values across these dimensions, regardless of gender. Both male and female respondents who travel frequently reported higher satisfaction with services and authenticity, confirming behavioral complementarity in travel motivations and reinforcing the connection between travel frequency, gender, and perceived experience quality [14].

Table 6.

ANOVA results by travel frequency and gender

| Variable | F | p | Mean Male | Mean Female | Mean (2/year) | Mean (3–5/year) | Mean (>5/year) |
|------------------------------|--------|--------|-----------|-------------|---------------|-----------------|----------------|
| Rural tourism importance | 2.47 | 0.088 | 3.17 | 5.0 | 3.8 | 4.0 | 3.5 |
| Nature & authenticity | 45.03 | <0.001 | 3.74 | 4.37 | 3.64 | 4.56 | 4.11 |
| Cultural & heritage interest | 93.34 | <0.001 | 3.77 | 4.27 | 3.58 | 4.95 | 3.81 |
| Services & infrastructure | 186.73 | <0.001 | 3.5 | 3.67 | 2.93 | 4.33 | 4.33 |

Overall, it was identified that Generation Z’s perception of rural tourism is shaped around authenticity, comfort, and cultural immersion. Urban residents perceive rural tourism as an opportunity to reconnect with traditions and nature, while rural participants express awareness of infrastructural limitations. The observed patterns confirm that emotional and cultural components play a defining role in young tourists’ motivations [14].

CONCLUSIONS

The research highlighted that Generation Z represents a dynamic and demanding segment of the tourism market, whose decisions are influenced by both emotional and practical considerations. Rural tourism is perceived as a blend of comfort, cultural enrichment, and nature-based recreation. The study identified gender-specific and environmental differences: women and urban residents exhibit higher appreciation for cultural immersion and authenticity, while men and rural respondents are more pragmatic and sensitive to infrastructural quality.

Frequent travelers demonstrated a more positive perception of services and authenticity, suggesting that accumulated experience increases expectations but also enhances engagement with rural destinations. These findings emphasize that the attractiveness of rural tourism depends on the balance between modern comfort and the preservation of traditional elements.

From a managerial perspective, rural tourism providers should prioritize improving infrastructure and service quality while promoting cultural heritage, local gastronomy, and community involvement. Strengthening destination image through digital communication tailored to Generation Z’s preferences will enhance competitiveness and contribute to the sustainable revitalization of Romania’s rural areas.

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