

RURAL TOURISM – A VIABLE ALTERNATIVE FOR THE CONSUMPTION OF TOURISM SERVICES IN THE CONTEXT OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

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Abstract: *After the beginning of the COVID-19 crisis, the world economy was affected on different levels. Many countries have been confronted with an unprecedented situation being forced to close borders and to apply the state of emergency. Thereby, due to travel restrictions and the specific characteristics of the sector, travel and tourism were among the most affected industries. The consequences of the coronavirus pandemic were largely reflected in the losses that the sector suffered both in terms of value, contribution to global GDP and jobs creation. Following the dynamic of the crisis, tourism companies try to identify solutions capable to picture a possible recovery for this industry. Based on these considerations, our study examines if the rural tourism can be such a solution, also for the Romanian market, measuring the perceptions of a 285 respondents regarding their consumption behavior and decisions during COVID-19 pandemic concerning such a destination. The study results validate the advanced hypotheses, namely the degree of anxiety caused by the COVID-19 pandemic positively influences the preference for rural tourism among respondents. Moreover, as the anxiety about the pandemic manifests itself, the respondents' preference for rural tourism-specific destinations is becoming even stronger.*

Keywords: *rural tourism, the COVID-19 pandemic, changes in tourists' behavior, anxiety*

JEL code: L83, M30, Z32

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic greatly impacted the global economy causing a deep recession in 2020. World GDP at market exchange rates declined by 3.8% in 2020 (WTO, 2021). Due to travel

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restrictions and the specific characteristics of the sector, tourism was among the most affected industries. The negative consequences of coronavirus were largely reflected in the losses that the sector suffered both in terms of value, contribution to global GDP and jobs creation. To this respect, the data provided by the World Travel & Tourism Council are relevant.

Compared to 2019, the Travel & Tourism sector global contribution to GDP declined by almost 50% in 2020. In value terms, the sector losses were of almost USD 4.5 trillion. Besides, in 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic caused the loss of 62 million jobs across the sector globally, representing a drop of 18.5%. International visitor spending decreased by 69.4% and domestic visitor spending, by 45% (World Travel & Tourism Council, 2021). In 2020, total nights spent in tourist accommodations in the European Union (EU) dropped to 50% of the 2019 level (European Commission, 2021).

Fear of contamination with the coronavirus is one of the factors that influences tourist behaviour after the spring 2020 lockdown (Marques Santos, A. et al., 2020). During the pandemic crisis, the behaviour of tourists has changed, requiring safety conditions against the coronavirus. Recent studies (Ivanova, M. et al., 2021; OECD, 2020) highlight that disinfection, hygiene and health are among leading factors in selecting holiday destinations.

Consequently, under the new pandemic environment tourism industry is facing a lot of challenges. In this context, is the rural tourism a viable way to revive the tourism industry and to allow people to enjoy holiday?

Against this background, our study aims to investigate how the pandemic has changed the tourists' behaviour towards rural tourism, with focus on the Romanian market. In order to achieve our goal, we firstly reviewed the evolving literature related to the pandemic and rural tourism. Subsequently, a quantitative research in the form of a field survey based on a questionnaire regarding the impact of the pandemic on tourism rural in Romania was performed. The concluding remarks and the future research directions conclude our paper. The research could provide a clear image for researchers and decision makers in the domestic tourism industry regarding the importance of near future investments into the field of rural tourism in order to develop a relaunch strategy for this sector of the national economy. Along this utility of the research findings, another element that can be seen as a clear attribute for the research work relevance is that referring to one of the most interesting elements that are particular for the new consumer behavior paradigm in times of crisis – the hedonic type consumption that can function like a psychological compensation mechanism used by individuals to deal successfully with the pressure exerted by the pandemic in terms of anxiety and depression.

Literature review

The scholarly literature related to the impact of the pandemic on tourism sector reveals the increasing role of rural tourism in many countries across the globe.

Concerning Czech Republic, Vaishar and Šťastná (2020) underline that, unlike urban destinations, which are focused on foreign tourists, some Czech rural destinations gained domestic tourists in the 2020 summer season. Consequently, the pandemic „created an opportunity for the development of rural tourism“. Visiting rural, coastal and regional areas instead of cities is also indicated by OECD (2020) as being one of the traveler patterns emerging under the pandemic environment at a global level. At the EU level, rural and coastal tourism in 2020 performed better than city tourism as well (European Commission, 2021).

These studies are in line with a research conducted in Poland by Wojcieszak-Zbierska, Jęczmyk, Zawadka and Uglis (2020). According to their survey, Polish residents show increasing interest towards agritourism both during the pandemic and in the post-pandemic period. The respondents' determinants for choosing this tourism type include: the possibility to spend holiday in

peace and to eat healthy food; the competitive prices of the agritourism farms offer; the low risk of contracting the coronavirus (Campón-Cerro, A. M. et al, 2015).

The recent preference for rural tourism is also pointed out by the empirical results of Zhu and Deng (2020) that approached the Chinese market.

Consistent to these findings, Seraphin and Dosquet (2020) emphasize that the pandemic has had a positive effect on mountain tourism and second home tourism, which are often located in rural areas. Focusing on Romania, Linca and Toma (2021) highlight increasing number of tourists that during the pandemic choose rural mountain tourism, preferring to rent holiday homes or private villas.

In Spain, one of the most developed touristic regions of Europe, rural tourism accounted for 14% of the total in 2020, with 15 Spanish provinces recorded more than 40% of their tourism expenditure in rural municipalities (Aldecoa Fuster, J.I., 2021).

However, contrary to these studies, the paper of Silva (2021), based on empirical material, concludes that the rural tourism in Portugal has been adversely impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic. This situation can be the effect of a local risk factor combined with an improper engaging and promotional activity. Like any other provision of services, rural touristic services have to promote and encourage a sustainable approach (Marin-Pantelescu, A., et al, 2019). Without such an approach, the activity in the field may suffer due to various leaks, as another study with focus on Portugal shows us regarding the sustainable practices (Pato and Duque, 2021). More precisely, the authors analyzed the websites content of 39 rural tourism lodging located in Portuguese Viseu Dão Lafões Region in order to examine the information related to sustainability issues that they provide. According to the study results, these rural lodgings have to improve the message they communicate in terms of their sustainable practices. Therefore, the situation of rural tourism within the pandemic crisis is nuanced, different factors influencing the way in which things are evolving.

In order to highlight the complex picture regarding rural tourism development during the pandemic, a very interesting point of departure consist in the increasingly worrying phenomenon related to the appearance of anxiety and depressive states caused by the pandemic. Anxiety caused by the pandemic is a reality already documented by specialists (Lee, S. A., 2020). This studies have shown the existence of a certain level of dysfunctional anxiety that can have associations with functional impairment, alcohol or drug coping, extreme hopelessness and even changed social attitudes (toward government, political leaders, specific ethnic groups etc). Within this context, consumption of products and services that are capable to offer a kind of emotional and psychological compensation as a possible coping mechanism is favored, touristic services being one of the type that can be considered as a part of this group. Moreover, rural tourism can have the potential to connect with the emotional layer of the tourist due to the characteristics of the rural type destinations. These destinations usually are manifesting a high level of dependence over tourists with a significant attachment based on destination identity and connections with the inner values and expectations of the people (Campón-Cerro, A. M. et al, 2015). Before arriving to a certain destination, tourists can develop an image about the destination and a set of expectations based on previous consumption experiences, information etc. (Gârdan, D. A., et al, 2020). While they are interacting with the variety of persons and elements that are forming the content of their consumption experience within the destination, they will assess this experience and they integrate it in their own form of expression. Consumption behavior for touristic services will have a great impact from the point of view of experience sharing process. Online communication platforms allows today the sharing of consumption experiences as user generated content can function like a determinant factor for impulse buying and future purchase intention, with different layers referring to the emotional and rational type of content (Cheung, M. L., et al, 2021). Thus, consumption

experiences related with touristic services can be easily transferred as individuals need to communicate more than ever during this period of crisis (Marin-Pantelescu, A., 2021).

Rural type touristic destinations have a special position due to their cultural and ethnological features, connections with the national cultural heritage or even gastronomic heritage (Vegheș, C., 2017; Vegheș, C., 2019; Łukiewska, K., and Juchniewicz, M., 2021). Preservation of traditional customs and local specific practices along with natural heritage gives to the rural area important competitive advantages and contribute to the special bond that can be developed between a certain rural touristic destination and consumers (Paștiu, C.A., et al, 2017; Moisă, C. O., and Andronache, B.E., 2020). Elements like professionalism and basic benefits; tangibility and reservation; complementary benefits and environment have been highlighted as being essential from the point of view of the quality assessment of rural touristic destinations using SERVQUAL specific scales (Perić, G., et al, 2020).

As a final remark, the consumption of tourist services specific to rural destinations has a special situation in the context of the pandemic, on the one hand due to specific features for this type of destination and on the other hand to psychosocial factors affecting consumer behavior during the pandemic crisis.

Methodology of research

In order to achieve the main goal of the research - the degree to which Romanian consumers of tourist services consider the consumption of services specific to rural tourism as a viable alternative for spending holidays in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic - we have designed an online quantitative research in the form of a field survey. There have been taken into consideration respondents from urban area, above 18 years of age. Questionnaires were distributed using an online platform, the total number of valid and correct questionnaires being 285, from which 56.4%, meaning 162 respondents, visited a rural tourism destination in the last 3 months prior to the time of questionnaire completion. The research has the role of an exploratory one due the novelty of the topic and the lack of similar extended literature regarding the specific situation of the Romanian market. As primary hypotheses that have been advanced, we may consider:

H1.The degree of anxiety caused by the COVID-19 pandemic positively influences the preference for rural tourism among respondents;

H.2.The degree of anxiety caused by the COVID-19 pandemic positively influences the consumption decision regarding rural tourism;

H.3.The preference for rural tourism positively influences the consumption decision regarding the tourist services specific to rural tourism;

H.4.The degree of anxiety caused by the COVID-19 pandemic positively influences the intention to buy in the future the tourist services specific to rural tourism;

H.5. Satisfaction with the use of rural tourism-specific services in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic reduces the degree of anxiety caused by the pandemic in the future.

Results and discussion

The analysis performed on the data obtained from completed questionnaires reveals the degree in which the main hypotheses of the research have been validated. The research considered a number of five main constructs/variables every one of them having different items which have been measured at the level of the questionnaire with the help of differential semantic scale with five steps (1 – to a very small extent, 5 – to a very large extent), as it can be seen in appendix 1.

As regarding the sample structure, it can be found within the (table no.1):

Table no. 1 Sample structure

Variable	Items	N	%
Marital status	alone	97	34%
	married (no children)	45	16%
	alone with a child	20	7%
	married with 1 child	77	28%
	alone with 2 or more children	6	2%
	married with 2 or more children	40	14%
Gender	Female	188	66%
	Male	97	34%
Age of respondents	18-25 years of age	60	21%
	26-35 years of age	77	27%
	36-45 years of age	114	40%
	46-55 years of age	34	12%
Level of finalised studies	Secondary school	108	38%
	Post-secondary education	23	8%
	Higher education	131	46%
	Postgraduate	23	8%
Occupation	State system employee	37	13%
	Self employed	14	5%
	Private system employee	194	68%
	Entrepreneur	20	7%
	Student	20	7%
Montly Income of the respondent	under 1500 lei	31	11%
	1501-2500 lei	54	19%
	2501-3500 lei	57	20%
	3501-4500 lei	51	19%
	4501-6000 lei	43	15%
	6001 lei and over	49	17%

Source: own projection

First we may assess the fact that the majority of respondents have preferred rural tourism during the COVID-19 pandemic in comparison with the ante-pandemic situation. Answers have been measured with a five steps semantic differentiation type scale (from very little to very much), the average score of 3.833 showing a well expressed propensity of the respondents towards rural services preference during the pandemic crisis in comparison with the period before the pandemic.

The analysis of the correlation of the variable regarding the degree of anxiety caused by the pandemic with the variable concerning the degree of interest towards rural tourism, shows a strong and positive correlation between these two variables (Pearson's $r = 0.783$, p -value < 0.01). Therefore, we may consider the first hypothesis validated, meaning that the degree of anxiety caused by the COVID-19 pandemic positively influences the preference for rural tourism among respondents, as the anxiety about the pandemic manifests itself, the respondents' preference for rural tourism-specific tourist destinations is also growing stronger.

When it comes to the analysis of the answers regarding the rural tourism services consumption itself, the correlation of the variable referring to the degree of anxiety determined by the pandemic with the variable concerning the decision to consume rural tourism services indicates that of the 56.4% of respondents who made the decision to consume rural tourism services, 72.6% stated that in to a large extent and to a very large extent, they expressed anxiety about the COVID-19 pandemic. The result suggests the validation of hypothesis no. 2, meaning that as the degree of anxiety about the COVID-19 pandemic becomes more intense also the decision to consume services specific to rural tourism was better represented.

The analysis of responses regarding the extent in which rural tourism is a viable alternative for the respondents' holiday time within the context of COVID-19 pandemic shows that the majority of respondents have been positive on this issue. The answers measured with a five steps semantic differential scale showing an average score of 4.296.

The correlation of the variable regarding the preference for rural tourism during the pandemic with the variable concerning the decision to consume rural tourism services highlighted the fact that, out of the 56.4% respondents who made the decision to consume rural tourism services, 85.2 % considers rural tourism to a large and very large extent as a viable alternative to spend holidays in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. Thus, we may consider also the third hypothesis as being validated, meaning that the preference for rural tourism positively influences the consumption decision regarding the tourist services specific to rural tourism. As the preference for rural tourism manifests itself more strongly, there is a similar increase in the number of respondents who decide to consume these services.

Intention to buy in the near future, within the context of persistent COVID-19 pandemic, the touristic services of the rural destination already visited, have been measured with the help of a five steps differential semantic scale, the results highlighting an average score of 4.021. The correlation between variable regarding the intention to buy in the future the touristic services specific for the visited rural destination and the variable that shows the degree of anxiety caused by the pandemic shows a strong and positive correlation between these two variables (Pearson's $r = 0.821$, $p\text{-value} < 0.01$). This means that the fourth hypothesis is also validated as the degree of anxiety manifests itself more strongly, the intention to consume in the future the tourist services specific to the rural destination already visited being also more clearly expressed.

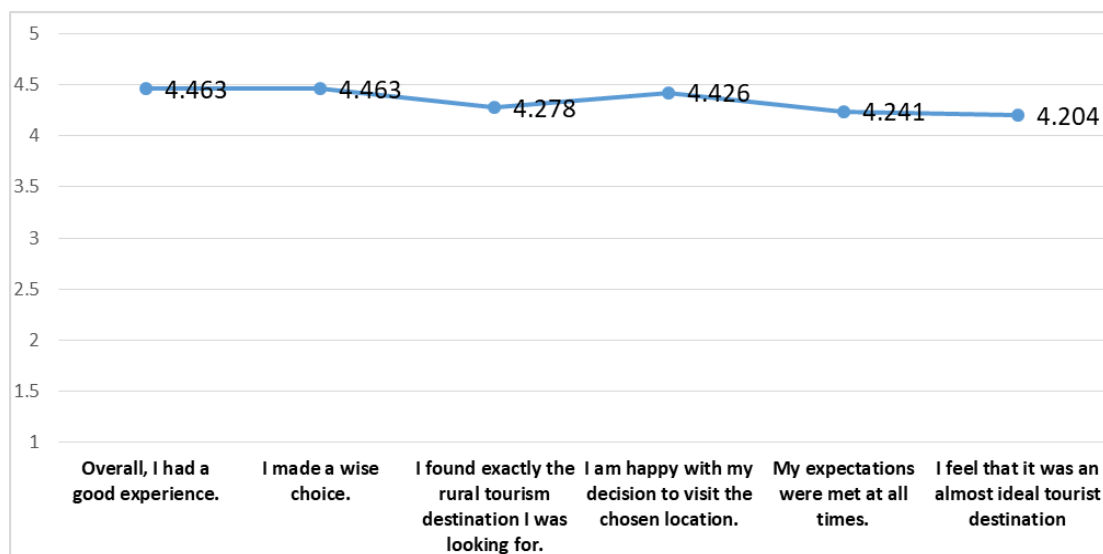


Fig. no. 1 The level of aggregate satisfaction in relation to the tourist services specific for the rural accommodation locations

Source: own projection

Answers to the questionnaires show a pretty high degree of the level of aggregate satisfaction in relation to the tourist services specific for the rural accommodation and a well expressed quality of the consumers experience in these locations.

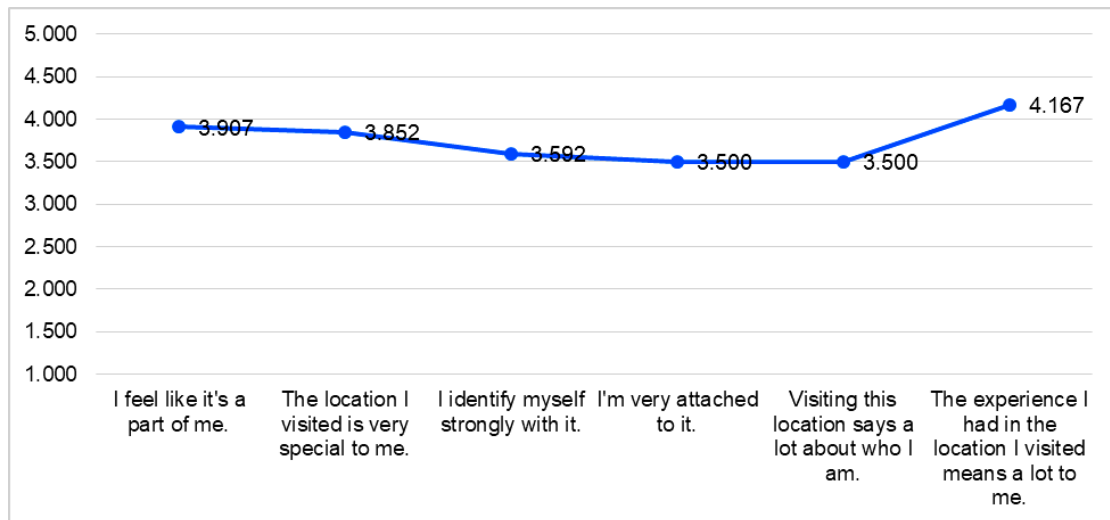


Fig. no. 2 The quality of the consumer experience in the tourist location specific to the rural environment

Source: own projection

The answers also indicate a nuanced degree of attachment from a part of consumers with a specific emotional involvement, which can be also related with the pressure caused by the pandemic anxiety. Tourists pay attention to the need of identification between the destination and their personality as a clue for their need of self-confirmation for the choices that they made.

Analyzing the correlation between the variable expressing the level of satisfaction with the use of rural tourism-specific tourism services in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic and the variable referring to the future degree of anxiety caused by the pandemic we may highlight a strong and positive correlation between these two variables (Pearson's $r = 0.756$, $p\text{-value} < 0.01$). These results validate the fifth hypothesis, meaning that as the satisfaction of the tourist services specific to the rural destination visited became more pronounced, the degree of intensity of the future anxiety caused by the pandemic felt by the respondents decreased.

Conclusions

The COVID-19 pandemic greatly impacted economic and social life worldwide, the tourism sector being among the most affected industry. In the pandemic context, tourists look for safety conditions and, consequently, their behaviour is changing. The evolving literature related to the pandemic influences reveals that the appeal of rural tourism increases in the new environment. In the same line, the results of our research confirm the main advanced hypotheses, highlighting a special relationship between the variables that are depicting rural tourism services propensity of the Romanian consumers and the anxiety caused by the pandemic crisis and their emotional involvement.

The different aspects revealed by the research underline the possibility for rural tourism to become a truly viable alternative for the relaunch of the tourism industry in Romania. A special mention must be made in connection with the nuance of the constructs that describe both the satisfaction of consumers and their experience of consumption in the chosen rural tourist destination. The scale with which the satisfaction was measured reveals the consumers' perceptions in relation to the aspects that certify the fairness of the choices made and the appreciation of their own ability to decide under conditions of pressure. Also, the measurement of the different aspects related to the quality of the consumer experience had in the specific location of the chosen rural

destination revealed the special emotional involvement of the attachment built on the level of satisfaction had. Respondents highlighted a strong resonance with their own personality and individuality, which indicates the deep dimension of hedonic consumption. These results confirm the advanced ideas of other studies (Naeem, M., 2020; Öztürk, R., 2020; Gârdan, D.A. et al., 2021) that consider hedonic consumption during times of crisis as a part of a mechanism to compensate individuals in the face of anxiety and depression caused by the pandemic crisis.

The implications of the research can be taken into consideration from the perspective of the individual consumers, touristic organizations and policy makers within the field of tourism alike. As a consumption trend, preference for rural tourism may overcome difficulties that individuals have in order to obtain a certain degree of satisfaction and the feeling of "back to normal" behavior when they deal with their holidays. From the point of view of touristic managers, investments made in rural destinations may represent a solution to rebuild the competitiveness into the field and the local economy of the rural areas involved. For policy makers, supporting the sector corresponding to rural tourism may represent also a viable solution for relaunching the hospitality industry and the subsequent fields depending on it. At a national level, developing rural tourism circuits may be an important priority for the national touristic development strategy as well as for other players within the industry (travel agencies, transport companies etc.).

As regarding the limits of the research, we may consider that the research has had a quite small volume of the sample used, which did not ensure an adequate statistical representation for the level of our country. Still, the research was made having in mind just an exploratory demarche that will be developed subsequently in a form of a new effort to employ a complex model that will test the relationship between variables depicting degree of anxiety, preference for rural tourism, consumer decision, hedonic consumption, satisfaction, buying future intention of rural tourist services, rural tourism consumption loyalty. We consider that such future possible directions of research are eloquent taking account of the possible evolution that will characterize rural tourism consumption in near future.

The future developments of the pandemic holds a huge challenge for everybody, regardless of the field of activity or the resources involved. However, the return of the tourism industry to the core values of cultural and ethnic heritage promoted by rural tourism may represent the future for many countries that have a rich tradition of exploring and sharing.

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Appendix 1. Variables used within the research questionnaire

Construct /Item from questionnaire	Adapted from:
Consumer decision on rural tourism	
The food available in rural touristic accomodations is tastefull	Measuring perception of service quality of Serbian rural tourism using RURALQUAL scale, Goran Perić, Sandra Dramićanin, p. 11-12
Employees offer attention and care for each customer	
The architecture of the rural accomodation induces a pleasant feeling of authenticity	
The rural accomodation is located in a quiet area	
Rural accomodation employees have a neat and tidy look	
The reservations of rooms are easily accomplished.	
Rural accomodation location has invested in booking systems with automatic confirmation	
The accomodation places have a proper appearance	
The rooms furniture have a proper comfort	
The rural accomodation location has a high level of cleanliness	
The rural accomodation location is isolated and closer to nature	
The customers can experience the original local rural way of life.	
Other cultural or recreational activities are well organized and safe from the point of view of the spread of virus infection	
The rural accomodation has implemented strictly measures against COVID-19 pandemic spread	
The rural accomodation employees are vaccinated and/or tested against COVID-19 virus	
The rural accomodation facilities have a professional healthcare support at their disposal (doctor, medical office, etc)	
Rural tourism preference	
Rural tourism is a viable alternative for spending the holiday within the context of COVID-19 pandemic.	Authors own construct.
The preference on rural tourism during the pandemic in comparison with the pre-pandemic period.	
Degree of anxiety caused by the COVID-19 pandemic	
I felt dizzy, or fainted when I read or listened to Coronavirus news	(Coronavirus Anxiety Scale), Lee, S. A.

I had trouble falling asleep or staying asleep because I was thinking about Coronavirus.	(2020). Coronavirus Anxiety Scale: A brief mental health screener for COVID-19 related anxiety. <i>Death studies</i> , 44(7), 393-401.
I felt paralyzed or frozen when I thought or was exposed to information about Coronavirus.	
I lost interest in food when I thought or was exposed to information about Coronavirus.	
I felt nauseous or had stomach problems when I thought about it or was exposed to information about Coronavirus.	
Overall satisfaction	
Overall, we had a good experience.	Campón-Cerro, A. M., Alves, H. M. B., & Hernández-Mogollón, J. M. (2015). Attachment as a factor in generating satisfaction with, and loyalty to, rural tourism destinations. <i>Tourism & Management Studies</i> , 11(1), 70-76.
I made a wise choice.	
I found exactly the rural tourism destination I was looking for.	
I'm happy with my decision to visit my chosen location.	
My expectations were met at all times.	
I feel that it was an almost ideal tourist destination.	
Quality of the Consumption experience	
I feel like it's part of me.	Campón-Cerro, A. M., Alves, H. M. B., & Hernández-Mogollón, J. M. (2015). Attachment as a factor in generating satisfaction with, and loyalty to, rural tourism destinations. <i>Tourism & Management Studies</i> , 11(1), 70-76.
The location I visited is very special to me.	
I identify strongly with it.	
I'm very attached to it.	
Visiting this location says a lot about who I am.	
The experience I had in the location I visited means a lot to me.	