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AUTHENTIC EXPERIENCES: NON-FORMAL EDUCATION AS THE "ENGINE" OF RURAL TOURISM

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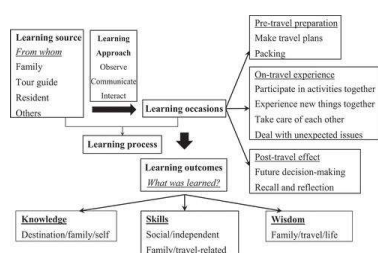
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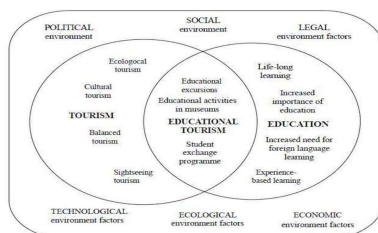
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Abstract: The paper aims to investigate, from a theoretical-applicative perspective, the role of non-formal education in the dynamics of rural tourism in Romania, highlighting its contribution to the configuration of a tourism paradigm centered on experience, authenticity and participation. In the context of the reconfiguration of tourist consumption behavior, characterized by an increased orientation towards personalized experiences and meaningful interactions, the rural environment acquires complex functional valences, becoming a space of convergence between cultural heritage and non-formal educational processes. Non-formal education constitutes a strategic vector in diversifying the rural tourism offer and in consolidating a sustainable development model, based on the valorization of cultural capital and community participation, asserting itself as an essential conceptual and operational tool in redefining rural tourism, supporting the transition towards an experiential, participatory and sustainable model.

• Introduction



Source: own creation
The link between tourism and non-formal education

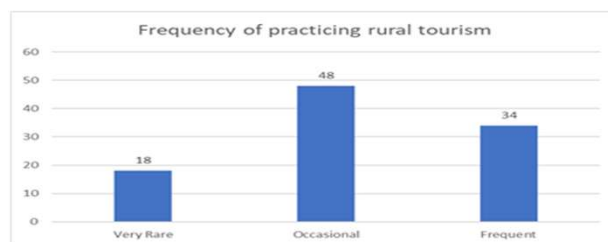


Source: own creation
Structure of educational tourism concept

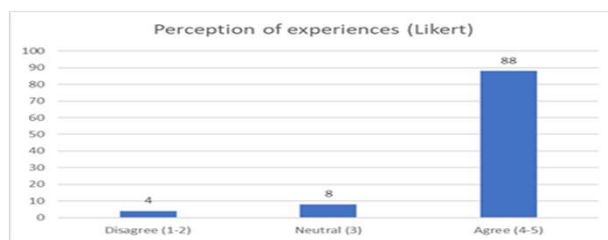
• Material and method

This research is based on a mixed methodological approach, predominantly quantitative, and the aim is to investigate the role of non-formal education in transforming the tourist from a simple visitor into an active participant, assessing the impact of this transformation on the revitalization of the rural environment. The study is of a descriptive-explanatory type, as it aims both to describe the perceptions and behaviors of tourists, and to identify the relationships between participation in educational activities and the tourist experience, using a sociological survey through a structured questionnaire. The research sample consisted of 100 respondents, facilitating the expression of results in relevant percentages.

• Results and discussions



Source: results obtained after processing survey data
Frequency of practicing rural tourism



Source: results obtained after processing survey data
Perception of experiences (Likert)

• Conclusions

This research has highlighted the significant role of non-formal education in the transformation of rural tourism in Romania, underlining the transition from a traditional model, focused on passive consumption, to a participatory one, based on active involvement and authentic experiences. In this context, non-formal education emerges as a strategic tool in redefining the relationship between the tourist and the destination, contributing to the creation of experiences with educational, cultural and identity value. The results of the empirical research confirm the general hypothesis, demonstrating that the participation of tourists in activities specific to the rural environment facilitates their transformation into active participants. The high level of agreement expressed by respondents in relation to the importance of direct involvement, the authenticity of experiences and proximity to the local community highlights a paradigm shift in tourist behavior.