

DEVELOPMENT POSSIBILITIES OF THE HOSPITALITY SECTOR BY CREATING AND PROMOTING AUTHENTIC TOURIST EXPERIENCES

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Abstract

The study on developing the hospitality sector through the creation and promotion of authentic tourism experiences used a mixed approach with quantitative and qualitative methods to gain a complex insight into tourist preferences. Through questionnaires and interviews, the research collected data from tourists staying in the Sf. Nicolae Alunis guesthouse in Prahova County and at the Casa Romaneasca Hotel in Vâlcea County, Romania. The questions addressed tourists' interest in authenticity, personalization and sustainability in their tourism experiences, providing a basis for better understanding how offerings can be tailored to meet their needs. The results highlighted that most tourists value authenticity in tourism experiences, preferring activities that allow them to discover local culture and interact directly with the community. Personalization was also considered important, with tourists showing interest in activity recommendations and itineraries tailored to their interests. However, the level of interest in customization and authenticity varies, which demonstrates the need for flexible options that allow each tourist to customize their experience according to their own preferences. Another key aspect is supporting sustainable practices. Although many tourists are willing to pay extra for environmentally friendly accommodations, price sensitivity remains an important factor. This involves a balance between meeting ecological requirements and maintaining price competitiveness. In conclusion, the study shows that the hospitality sector can benefit significantly from the integration of authenticity, personalization and sustainability in the offer, aspects that contribute to increasing tourist satisfaction and loyalty.

Key words: hospitality, authenticity, experiences, Romania

INTRODUCTION

Hospitality is an economic sector that includes services dedicated to welcoming, hosting and ensuring the comfort of visitors, including hotels, restaurants, catering services and other agreement facilities [9]. This involves a customer-oriented approach focused on creating a positive and memorable experience for tourists and other people served. The hospitality sector is characterized by a direct and constant interaction with customers, and its success depends on the quality of services and the satisfaction offered to them [5, 16]. By attracting tourists and other visitors, hospitality stimulates local consumption, supports small and large businesses, and creates an economic chain with horizontal impact, benefiting sectors such as agriculture, transportation, and the entertainment industry

[3, 6, 22]. Moreover, hospitality contributes to regional development, especially in tourist areas, boosting infrastructure investment and improving the quality of life [20, 21].

In the long term, hospitality can help create a positive image of a country or region, attracting investors and strengthening competitive advantage in the international market [4, 19]. By stimulating innovation and adapting to modern consumer demands, this sector can support sustainable development and economic diversification, contributing crucially to economic growth and the financial stability of a national economy.

Although hospitality can vary between different cultures, in some it involves only a greeting and a smile, in others the guest is treated as a member of the family, integrated into the intimacy of the home [18].

That is why one of the important directions for the development of hospitality is to focus on the creation and promotion of authentic tourist experiences, which reflect the local specificity and meet the expectations of tourists in search of unique experiences [14, 15]. This aspect is linked to global trends in hospitality, where tourists are increasingly looking to participate in activities that give them direct contact with culture, nature and local communities. Therefore, the marketing and development strategies of tourism products must focus on personalizing tourism offers, responding to the various interests and needs of visitors, whether we are talking about cultural tourism, adventure tourism, rural tourism, ecotourism or other forms of tourism. niche [2, 10]. The personalization of experiences can contribute to increasing the satisfaction of tourists and will contribute to their loyalty [17].

In the case of rural tourism, hospitality means more than accommodation, including nature activities, scenic tours and observation of local fauna and flora, etc. all this providing a sense of belonging to the rural environment [13, 22]. Agritourism, a form of rural tourism, allows tourists to experience farm life by participating in agricultural activities and supporting local farms, which enhances the sense of authenticity and learning [8, 12, 23]. The warmth and personalized attention provided by hosts creates a lasting relationship that keeps tourists coming back and recommending the destination. In addition, modern technology makes it easier to connect tourists with rural communities, allowing them to book personalized experiences and interact with hosts before their visit. Thus, rural tourism becomes an attractive alternative for modern tourists, who seek relaxation, authenticity and a deep connection with nature and local traditions [7, 11].

In this context, the paper aimed to collect information on the development of hospitality sector by creating and promoting authentic tourism experiences. In this purpose, there were used various quantitative and qualitative methods, A survey based on a structured questionnaire supplied information on tourists'

preferences. The research place, where the interviewees were questioned, stayed in the Sf. Nicolae Alunis guesthouse in Prahova County and at the Casa Romaneasca Hotel in Vâlcea County, Romania.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The research methodology was a mixed one, which combined qualitative and quantitative methods. The research involved the use of a structured questionnaire including 15 questions which had the role to assess tourists' general satisfaction, service quality, authenticity of the experience and perceived level of hospitality.

The questionnaire included both open and closed questions, questions with answers on the Likert scale (from 1 to 5) which had the role of obtaining clear and comparable quantitative data between two units, one located in Prahova county, and the other in Valcea county.

Pension St. Nicolae is located in the village of Aluniș, Prahova county, approximately 12 km from the Slănic resort. Located in a picturesque area, surrounded by meadows and forests, the guesthouse offers a quiet atmosphere and strong ozone air, ideal for relaxation and escape from the urban bustle. The guesthouse has seven rooms and a restaurant where traditional Romanian dishes are served, prepared from local ecological ingredients. For leisure, guests have various activities at their disposal: games of darts, table tennis and the possibility to rent bicycles to explore the surroundings. The guesthouse also offers a well-equipped playground for children, a garden and a sauna for relaxation.

The Sf. Nicolae guesthouse is recognized for the hospitality of the hosts and the attention given to the needs of the guests. Customer reviews highlight the quality of service, cleanliness and pleasant atmosphere, contributing to an unforgettable experience in the heart of nature.

The Casa Românească Hotel, located in the Călimănești-Căciulata resort, close to the Cozia Monastery, offers accommodation at 4-star standards in double, twin rooms and apartments equipped with air conditioning,

minibar, TV and internet. The complex includes two thermal water pools (indoor and outdoor), two saunas and a 70-seat conference room. The winery-restaurant, rustically decorated with carved wood and stone, offers traditional Romanian dishes. The location of the hotel allows easy access to the natural and historical attractions in the area, offering a complete experience in the heart of the Olt Valley.

The comparative analysis between the two units sought to highlight the strengths and challenges of each of them, and the integration of quantitative and qualitative data allowed us a complete understanding of the tourists' perception. This mixed methodology ensured obtaining relevant conclusions and recommendations with a role in improving the quality of services and increasing the satisfaction of tourists in rural accommodation units.

Right from the beginning, it was desired that the questionnaire be applied to a number of 100 respondents. Out of all of them, 37 were tourists in the St. Nicolae Alunis, and 63 in the Casa Romaneasca accommodation unit.

The purpose of applying and analyzing the answers provided was to identify the authentic preferences and experiences of tourists that were the basis of market segmentation, and especially their use for the purpose of providing personalized packages for different groups of tourists and to improve tourist experiences through based adjustments on feedback. The collected and analyzed data can also be used to adapt promotional messages, emphasizing the authenticity and uniqueness of the experiences offered, but also to identify trends for innovation and long-term strategic development. By capitalizing on the answers, businesses can better meet the expectations of tourists, maintaining relevance and attractiveness in the market.

The questionnaire had 15 questions and was applied between August 15 and October 15, 2024. The questions were divided into 6 sections, as follows: Section 1 - Demographic information; Section 2 – Experiences and preferences of tourists; Section 3 - Interaction with local culture and authenticity; Section 4 - Preferences for sustainable tourism; Section 5

- Digital interaction and personalization of the experience; Section 6 - Feedback and previous experiences. The 15 questions were the following:

- (1) Your age*
- (2) Your Gender*
- (3) What is your annual income?*
- (4) What are the main reasons you travel?*
- (5) On a scale of 1 to 5 how important are they to you? the following aspects on a holiday? (1 = not at all important, 5 = very important*
- (6) How important is the authenticity of the location and tourism experiences to you?*
- (7) Have you participated in authentic tourism activities in the past?*
- (8) If the answer is "Yes," please describe the experience*
- (9) How important it is to you for accommodation units to have sustainable practices?*
- (10) Would you be willing to pay more for environmentally friendly tourism services?*
- (11) To what extent are you interested in personalizing your experience? tourism through applications and digital platforms?*
- (12) What kind of personalization do you think would improve your experience? tourist?*
- (13) To what extent have personalized experiences influenced your satisfaction? tourist?*
- (14) Please provide an example of a personalized experience that impressed you*
- (15) What improvements would you like to see in tourism offers to make them more authentic and personalized?*

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

The answers obtained on the basis of the questionnaires applied face to face in the 2 accommodation units were centralized and processed with the help of the Excel program. Out of the 15 questions in the questionnaire, the first three were demographic in nature, resulting in 12% of respondents aged between 18-25 years, 14% between 26-35 years, 21% between 36-45 years, 18% between 46 -55 years, 27% between 56-65 years and 8% over

65 years. The structure was also influenced by the tourists' willingness to answer. Of these, 57% were women, and 43% were men. Regarding the annual income, the answers provided show that 11% have an annual income of less than 50,000 lei, and 8% have an income of more than 150,000 lei. The incomes obtained by 57% of the respondents fall between 50,000 - 100,000 lei, and 24% of them have incomes between 100,000 - 150,000 lei (Table 1).

Table 1. The socio-demographic characteristics of the respondents

Age	Frequency	Percentage
18-25 years	12	12%
26-35 years old	14	14%
36-45 years	21	21%
46-55 years	18	18%
56-65 years	27	27%
over 65 years	8	8%
Gender		
Female	57	57%
Male	43	43%
Annual income		
under 50,000 lei	11	11%
50,001-100,000 lei	57	57%
100,001-150,000 lei	24	24%
over 150,000 lei	8	8%

Source: Own calculation.

Section 2 of the questionnaire tracked the measurement of tourists' experiences and preferences. Thus from the answers given to question 4: *What are the main reasons for which you travel?* it turns out that most of the tourists choose to travel for relaxation (27%) or socializing (24%). 12% of them travel for cultural purposes, and 10% of the trips are due

to adventure or culinary experiences. Also, in 8% of cases, the trips have other reasons, among those indicated by the respondent, including: health, hobby (photography), educational, etc (Fig. 1).

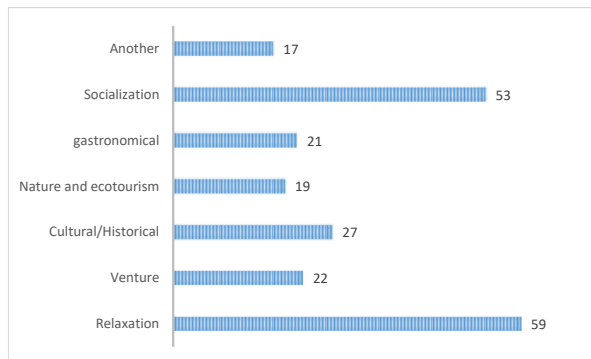


Fig. 1. The main reasons for travel (number)
 Source: own processing.

To question 5: *On a scale from 1 to 5, how important are they to you? the following aspects on a holiday? (1 = not at all important, 5 = very important)*, respondents rated personalization of services as very important to respondents, with the majority choosing 4 and 5. Interaction with locals is also valued, but with a slight variation, suggesting that not all consider it essential. Environmentally friendly accommodation has a moderate appreciation, with a significant number of responses at level 2, showing that the preference for ecological accommodation is not universal authentic are important, but fewer respondents gave the maximum score, finding that these are generally those who come from the Sf. Nicolae guesthouse. Cultural and traditional activities have a large variation, with an average score of 3, indicating interest, but not a priority for all tourists.

Table 2. The structure of the answers to question 5

Likert score value	1	2	3	4	5
	Not at all important	Slightly important	Neutral	Important	Very important
Personalization of services	0	5	27	37	31
Interaction with locals	4	7	24	42	23
Environmentally friendly accommodation	0	19	21	33	27
Authentic experiences	0	6	39	41	14
Cultural and traditional activities	3	4	51	26	16

Source: own processing.

To question 6: *How important is the authenticity of the location and tourism experiences to you?* we found that for the respondents, the authenticity of the location and tourist experiences has a variable importance. Only 17% consider it "very important", and 14% see it as having high "importance". The majority, 38%, perceive it as of medium importance, while 27% consider it "slightly important" and only 4% consider it not important at all. This shows that authenticity is valued but not essential for all tourists, many being neutral about it. However, it is found that those who appreciate authenticity come in the proportion of 61% from those staying in the St. Nicolae, and 39% of those staying in the Casa Romaneasca hotel. Tourists staying in guesthouses prefer authenticity due to the intimate atmosphere and direct interaction with the hosts, which offers a traditional local experience. In the hotel that offers spa services, tourists appreciate authenticity through local elements integrated into the wellness services, seeking comfort and relaxation in an authentic setting (Fig. 2).

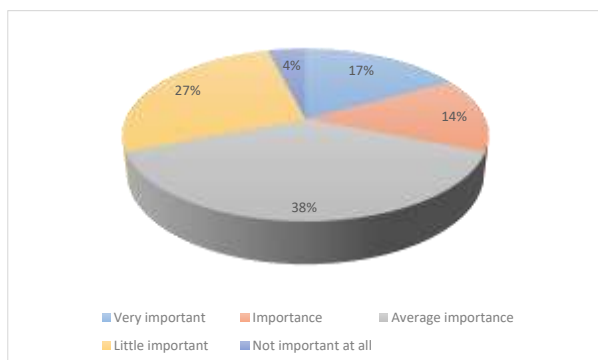


Fig. 2. The weight of the importance of the authenticity of the location and tourist experiences for tourists (%)
 Source: own processing.

To question 7: *Have you participated in authentic tourism activities in the past?* 76% of the respondents indicated that they did not participate in such activities, so we note that this kind of activities are quite little developed within the accommodation units in Romania (Fig. 3).

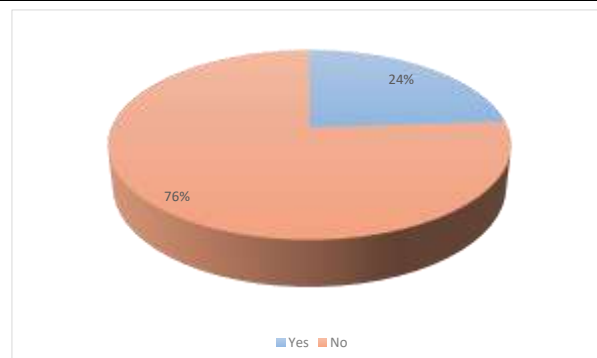


Fig. 3. The share of tourists' participation in authentic tourist activities (%)
 Source: own processing.

The answers given to question 8: *If the answer is "Yes," please describe the experience,* it shows that 24% of tourists participated in activities that reflect local traditions, such as craft workshops (pottery, egg painting), visits to traditional farms and gastronomic tours with local dishes (sarmale, cozonacs, wine tastings). They also experienced the local culture through festivals, guided hikes in natural areas, visits to sheepfolds to understand the life of shepherds and pilgrimages to the monasteries of Bucovina and Maramureş. Tours of the Saxon villages and fortified churches of Transylvania completed the authentic experience, offering tourists a deep connection with Romanian traditions and landscapes.

To question 9: *How important is it to you that accommodation units have sustainable practices?* the answers show that the majority of tourists consider it important for accommodation units to adopt sustainable practices, with 21% choosing "very important" and 31% "importance", while only 5% consider this aspect "not at all important". This is due to increased awareness of environmental issues and global trends towards sustainability. Also, the desire of tourists to contribute to the protection of the environment and the preference for ecological services that reflect personal values. Thus, accommodations are encouraged to adopt green practices, such as recycling, reducing energy consumption and promoting local products, to attract customers who value sustainability, thus strengthening their

reputation and increasing customer loyalty (Fig. 4).

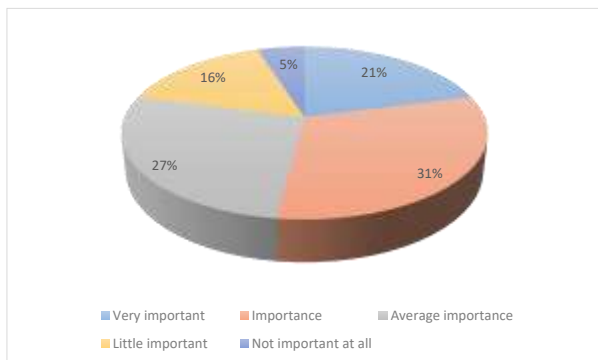


Fig. 4. The importance given by tourists to sustainable practices (%)
 Source: own processing.

Answers given to question 10: *Would you be willing to pay more for tourism services that respect the environment?* it shows that opinions about the costs they would be willing to pay differ. We would thus find that 38% of the respondents would like to pay an additional cost that falls between 5-10%, while 19% of the tourists would be willing to pay cy 11-20% more, which reflected the desire to supporting sustainable tourism and its practices. On the other hand, 39% are not willing to pay more and 4% are not interested in this aspect. These responses show that although a significant portion of tourists appreciate green practices, price remains a deciding factor for many, which can influence the pricing and marketing strategies of green accommodations (Fig. 5).

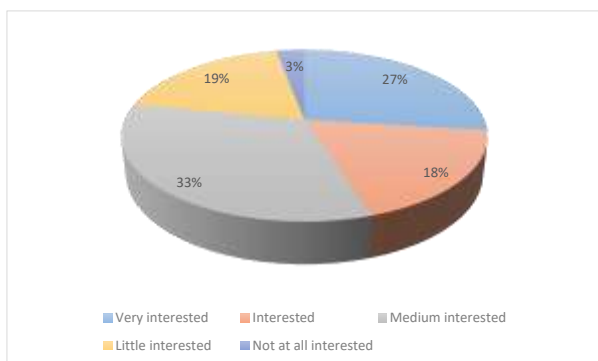


Fig. 5. The availability of tourists regarding the costs of tourist services that respect the environment (%)
 Source: own processing.

To question 11: *To what extent are you interested in personalizing your experience?* tourism through applications and digital

platforms? the respondents considered that the interest in personalizing the tourist experience through applications and digital platforms is varied; 27% of respondents are very interested and 18% are interested, indicating significant openness to digital personalization; 33% have an average interest, while 19% are slightly interested, and 3% are not at all interested. These data show that, although a considerable part of tourists appreciate digital personalization, there is a significant segment that does not prioritize this aspect, which implies the need for a specific approach in the integration of digital solutions, adapted to different preferences. This is also due to the age groups of the respondents (Fig. 6).

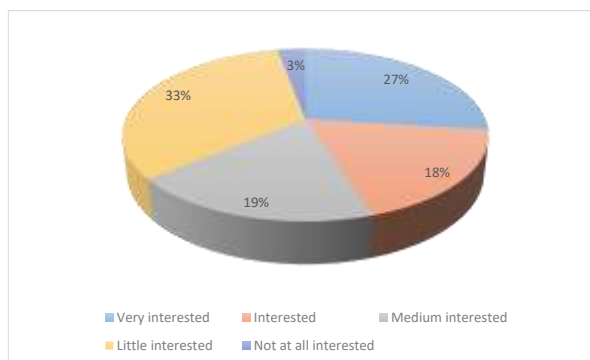


Fig. 6. The availability of tourists regarding the costs of tourist services that respect the environment (%)
 Source: own processing.

To question 12: *What kind of personalization do you think would improve your tourist experience?* Respondents felt that restaurant and local attraction suggestions (27%) and personalized interest-based activity recommendations (20%) would most enhance their tourism experience. Personalized itineraries are also valued (19%), while transport options adapted to preferences are less requested (11%). Other activities represented 23% and according to the indications of tourists, these can be: notifications about local events, guided tours according to cultural preferences, special offers for unique experiences, or personalized accommodation options according to lifestyle or ecological preferences (Fig. 7).



Fig. 7. Respondents' preference regarding the personalization of the tourist experience (number)
 Source: own processing.

Responses to question 13: *To what extent did personalized experiences influence your satisfaction?* tourist shows that most respondents believe that personalized experiences have had a moderate influence on their tourism satisfaction, with 39% indicating a medium influence; 21% said these experiences greatly influenced satisfaction, and 17% said they greatly influenced them. However, 14% said personalized experiences had little influence, and 9% said they had no impact on their satisfaction. These responses show that although personalization contributes to satisfaction, its effect varies, implying the need to adapt personalized offers to maximize the impact on each type of tourist (Fig. 8).

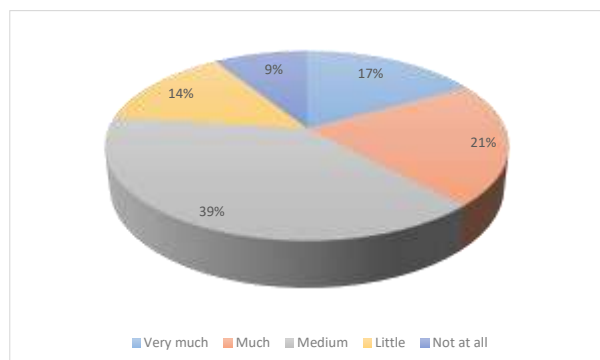


Fig. 8. The extent to which personalized experiences influence tourist satisfaction (%)
 Source: own processing.

The answers given to question 14: *Please provide an example of a personalized experience that impressed you*, showed that tourists appreciated the tours through the forests around the St. Nicolae Alunis with local stories, a sarmale and cozonac cooking workshop, tastings of local cheeses and bee

products, a visit to a barn to observe the preparation of cheese, wine tasting tours. In the case of the Casa Romaneasca Hotel, the following were indicated: private sessions in the thermal pool, personalized massage sessions with essential oils and evenings with popular music and dances. These activities gave tourists an authentic connection with local culture and traditions, contributing to a memorable experience.

To question 15: *What improvements would you like to see in tourism offers to make them more authentic and personalized?* tourists considered unique local activities (festivals, artisan workshops), personalized guides with detailed information, authentic culinary experiences with locals, interactions with locals, seasonal nature activities, eco-tours, cultural learning sessions (dancing, history) and access to authentic rural experiences (farm visits, agricultural activities) could give them a deep connection with local traditions and culture.

CONCLUSIONS

Agritourism and rural tourism offer authentic hospitality, offering tourists the opportunity to spend time with the hosts and being in daily activities, in a relaxing atmosphere. This hospitality, adjusted to modern needs, includes traditional elements or modern amenities and adapts to the hosts' desire to preserve privacy. From the business point of view, hospitality is essential for satisfying tourists' demand, but also for the image of agritourism, having an important role in creating the image of the tourist destination. Moreover, hospitality is not limited to a cultural trait or a regional characteristic, but involves a personalized and trusting relationship between host and guest.

In the rural context, hospitality is personalized and intimate, being an alternative to the fast and materialistic life of the city. These unique experiences attract tourists seeking authenticity and relaxation, and rural hospitality is becoming an essential component in the success of agritourism businesses.

The current study allowed us to identify different aspects related to the development of the hospitality sector through the creation and promotion of authentic tourist experiences. Thus, the preference for authenticity differs significantly between tourists from the Sf. Nicolae Alunis guesthouse and those from the Casa Romaneasca Hotel, which reflects opportunities to customize tourist offers to better meet these needs. Tourists staying in guesthouses are drawn to traditional experiences and direct local interactions, while tourists in spa hotels appreciate authenticity when it is subtly integrated into wellness and relaxation services.

In general, tourist guesthouses must adopt marketing strategies that highlight traditional experiences and local cultural elements, promoting authenticity through storytelling and evocative images. Hotels can attract tourists interested in authenticity through campaigns that emphasize local ingredients and wellness rituals inspired by local traditions.

To increase the attractiveness, the pensions could introduce interactive activities in the tourist program, such as craft workshops, guided tours in the community or traditional meals. Hotels can integrate local products and rituals into their wellness packages.

By implementing marketing policies and strategies, both B&BS and hotels can attract and retain authenticity-oriented segments of tourists by tailoring their offerings to meet their varied preferences.

According to the analyzed data, tourists showed a high interest in sustainability in tourism, but this interest is influenced by price and personal perception of the importance of ecology. The majority consider the ecological practices of accommodation units important, but only those who perceive a clear benefit and accept a moderate increase in costs (5-10% more) are willing to pay extra. However, a significant segment is not willing to pay extra, which shows that marketing strategies should emphasize the added value of sustainability without significantly increasing prices. Accommodations could adopt green practices and highlight these efforts to attract green customers, but they must maintain

competitive prices to remain attractive to the most cost-sensitive as well.

Also, the analyzed data shows a moderate interest in personalizing tourist experiences through digital applications, and restaurant suggestions, local attractions and personalized activities are the most appreciated forms of personalization. However, the influence of these experiences on tourist satisfaction varies – most tourists believe that personalization contributes only moderately to their overall satisfaction. These results demonstrate that personalization should be carefully tailored to the individual preferences and needs of tourists in order to enhance the positive impact on satisfaction and maximize the perceived value of these experiences.

Research shows that authentic experiences increase tourist satisfaction, and the inclusion of local traditions and culture in the offer contributes to their loyalty and the growth of the hospitality sector. Tourists prefer personalized experiences, which emphasizes the need to tailor services to individual interests to add value. Sustainable practices are valued, being associated with authenticity and environmental protection, attracting tourists concerned with sustainability and supporting the sustainable development of the sector.

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