

Glamping in Romania, a new perspective in camping tourism

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Abstract: Glamping accommodation exploded on the tourism market as a response and resilience of COVID 19 Pandemic. Romania is one of the European countries where this niche tourism has registered an unprecedented development. In this background, the current research analyzes the dimensions of consumers' perceptions via google reviews regarding the quality of glamping in Romania. In order to fulfill this aim, a qualitative-quantitative research known as a mixed method was applied. The results showed that statistics about glamping registered some inconsistencies between the official data and those from the field, and not all sites had a certification by stars. The rating given by tourists was extremely high compared to other tourist structures. Consumers were satisfied to the greatest extent with the views where glamping are framed and the quiet of nature. For the services, tourists appreciated the glamping at whole, as memorable experiences, with exceptional equipment, but also the friendly atmosphere of the hosts. Even if some negative aspects were reported, the study showed that the mountainous and hilly areas remained more suitable for the development of such accommodation units.

Key words: *glamping, Romania, rating, tourist's perceptions, reviews, quality*

1. Introduction

Glamping tourism flourished during the COVID 19 pandemic as a result of social distancing rules, so the specialized literature is relatively limited, including in Romania. Glamping tourism is included in camping tourism, and the latter emerged as an organized activity in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, with the growing interest in nature and leisure among Europe's middle classes and North America. The father of modern organized camping is attributed to Thomas Hiram Holding (1908), who organized tent expeditions and founded the Association of Cycle Campers in 1901. But the origins of camping can be considered to be the mobile dwellings of mobile peoples (Collins et al., 2020) or those from the Romanian and Ottoman military campaigns, the latter being characterized by luxury, somehow precursors of today's glamping (Vrtodušić-Hrgović et al., 2018). Tourist camping has become popular in national parks in the US due to the development of infrastructure and interest in nature conservation (Stephens, Leonard & Smolders, 1989). Increased access to automobiles facilitated transportation to camping sites, leading to the development of RV camping. After World War II, camping tourism expanded rapidly due to economic growth, the development of mass tourism, and the advent of more affordable camping equipment. Gradually, a variety of structures grouped in the traditional model appeared within tourist camping, namely tents located in special locations, caravan camping that offers more comfort, glamping, a form of luxury camping, with more sophisticated facilities (Rogerson & Rogerson, 2020) and backcountry located in isolated areas without facilities for experienced outdoor activities (Leung & Marion, 1999). In Romania, this type of tourism gained momentum especially during the Covid-19 pandemic period, allowing tourists to enjoy nature without violating the restrictions put in place (Craig & Karabas, 2021). it can be considered that this

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phenomenon is still in the beginning stage of development on the territory of Romania. Glamping sites are distinguished from traditional accommodation not only because of the price but also because of their sustainable character (Drăguleasa, Niță & Mazilu, 2023).

Camping represents an activity that is associated with the consumer segment, showing an increased preference in outdoor travel. There is an increase in the interest of tourists who plan to spend this time surrounded by nature to escape from everyday urban life, and want to relax in a comfortable environment that offers recreational facilities. Thus, the trend for glamping accommodation units development in comparison with traditional campsites with modern designs that emphasize refinement and additional spa and sauna services.

The research aims to evaluate the ecological quality of glamping sites in Romania by analyzing the perception of tourists from the contents of google reviews. The objectives of the research are: 1) identification of the glamping base in Romania and 2) analysis of tourists' perception of the quality of this tourist offer on three aspects: rating, environment, and services.

2. Theoretic background

The concept of glamping has come to the attention of researchers in recent years amid the orientation of tourists looking for luxury outdoor experiences (Eremic, 2020). Internationally, 43 publications dealing with this topic were identified in the Web of Science (WoS) database, 91 scientific articles on Science Direct and 3 publications on glamping on Sustainability. At the level of Romania, research on this topic is not developed and is still at an early stage, as the only article published in 2024. Glamping, derived from the association of the terms "glamorous" and "camping" represents a luxury experience in open air that combines comfort in nature with camping (Ting Sun, 2023), being an increasingly popular and accessible modern form of camping (Craig, 2021). Cambridge and Oxford Dictionaries (2023) offer a similar perspective on the term glamping, namely "a type of camping that is more comfortable and luxurious than traditional camping" (Milohnić et al., 2019). Lu, Suhartanto & Chen (2022) focus on the positive aspects of glamping summarized from the significant comfort offered, with numerous amenities (comfortable beds, high-quality linen, functional kitchen and bathroom, and even technological services) delimiting the negative characteristics of traditional camping such as unstable tents, sleeping bags, improvised food. The addition of positioning and direct access to nature gives it characteristics for the segments of tourists looking to distance themselves from urban agglomerations, to visit natural spaces, being focused on recreation and rediscovery (Salmela, Valtonen & Miettinen, 2017). Si Sun & Huang (2022) confirmed that involvement in nature can bring tourists a sense of relaxation and even fun, which shows the success of glamping in the tourism market. These results emphasize the term authenticity, an intrinsic element of success in tourism. The authentic experience offered by these diverse accommodation units (yurts, tents, treehouses) is a fundamental basis for development, stimulating the growth of the glamping sub-sector (Brooker & Joppe 2013). The studies explored the impetuous development trends of camping, after 2019 (Eremić, 2021; Shahane, 2024), based on statistical data, but also from the perspective of managers, producers of tourist goods and tourists in some European countries: Spain, France, Denmark, Pays Bas, Croatia (Milohnić et al., 2019). Studies on tourist satisfaction cover various aspects and are contents more from the field of marketing. Related to glamping, tourist satisfaction depends on the one hand, outdoor tourism must provide high-quality experiences to satisfy tourists (Prayag et al., 2017), and on the other the degree of comfort (Wang et al., 2020) to engage, create loyalty and gives confidence to consumers (Hapsari et al., 2024).

The analysis of reviews is a common approach in tourism research, based on their exploration from booking platforms (Rita et al., 2022) from Google reviews (Brochado & Brochado, 2019), social media have allowed special qualitative analyzes such as those related to feelings, satisfaction, environment, etc. For the topic of glamping, the analysis of reviews (WOM) highlighted the influence of customers' emotional value of the natural environment (including authenticity, scenery, and natural lifestyle) (Lu et al., 2021).

3. Materials and Methods

The research used quantitative-qualitative research methods. Thus, for the evaluation of the accommodation capacity, data from MEET were processed in order to obtain graphics in Microsoft Excel 2021. The same process of building graphs was applied for ratings collected from Online Consumer Reviews (OCRs) on Google. Data from google reviews named OCRs are popular since nearly everyone has a smartphone and access to the internet connection in vacation (Brochado & Brochado, 2019). These reviews were used to identify qualitatively the most common terms associated with the glamping structure on the following themes: environments (views/landscape), services by sentiment terms.

For mapping the QGIS 3.32.2 was chosen as it is a cartographic open source. The base map was vectored after open street input through lines for national boundary and counties units and points in case of the glamping sites.

4. Results and discussions

4.1. Glamping in Romania

The statistical data of the Ministry of Economy, Entrepreneurship and Tourism (MEET, 2023) attest that in 2023 there were 545 campsites, totaling 5,952 places. They were classified from one star to 4 stars. Of these, the same institution, MEET, had registered 22 glamping sites, with a number of 156 places. These were certified in the period 2018-2023. (Figure 1).

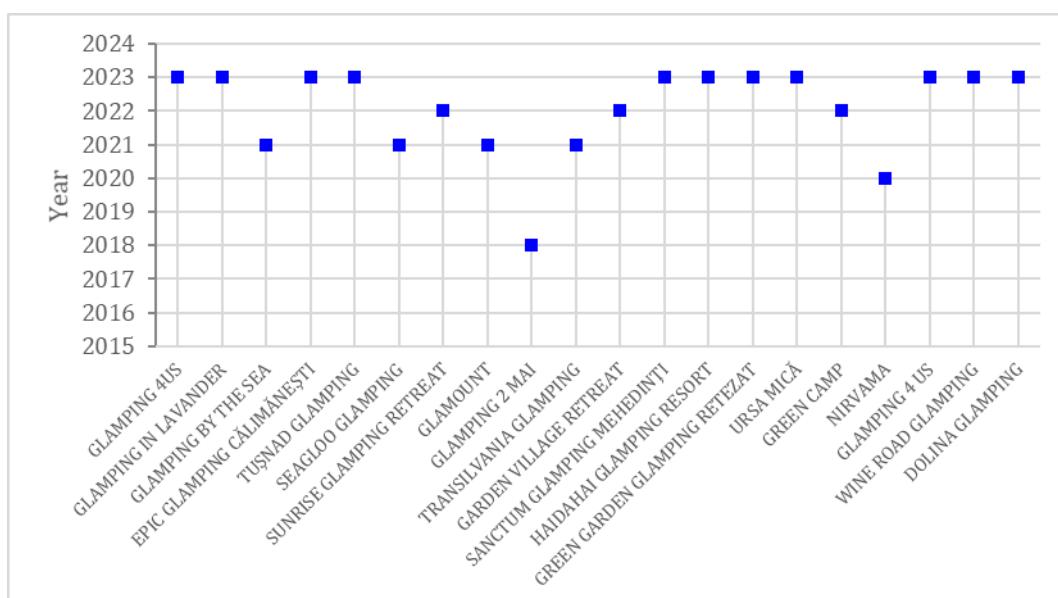


Figure 1. Glamping sites in Romania, certified by MEET (<https://turism.gov.ro/web/autorizare-turism/>)

The accommodation capacity capitalized by glamping sites varies, from a minimum of 1 place (Fărcașa, Neamț) to 24 places (the Black Sea-2 May). The star rating ranged from one star to a maximum of 4 stars (Figure 2).

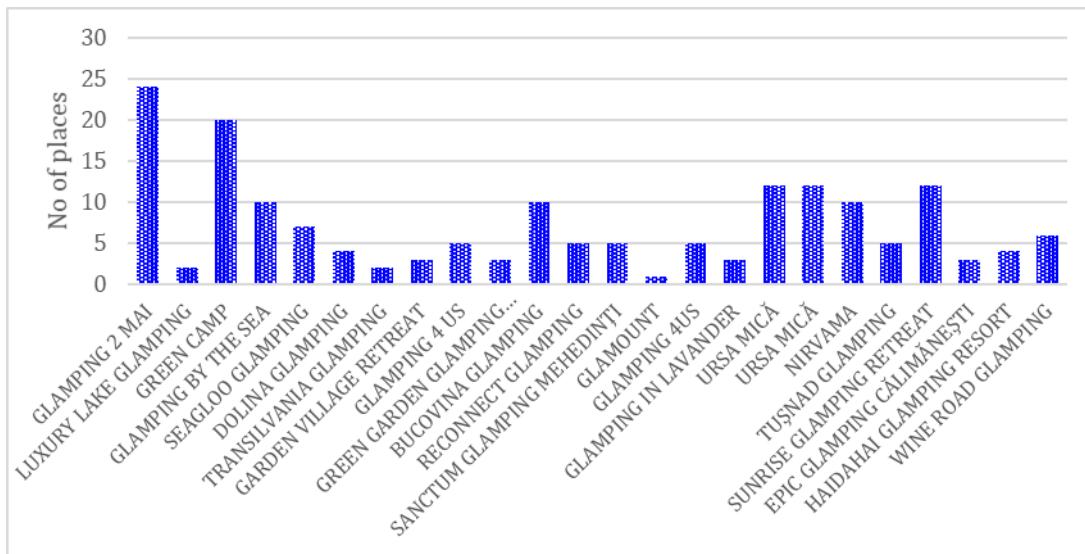


Figure 3. Glamping capacity (places) for certified sites by MEET (<https://turism.gov.ro/web/autorizare-turism/>)

The results of the searches on the tourist platforms, google resulted in a totally different number, of which 12 are not found in the official MEET lists (Figure 3). All these site are considered very popular among tourists and bloggers.

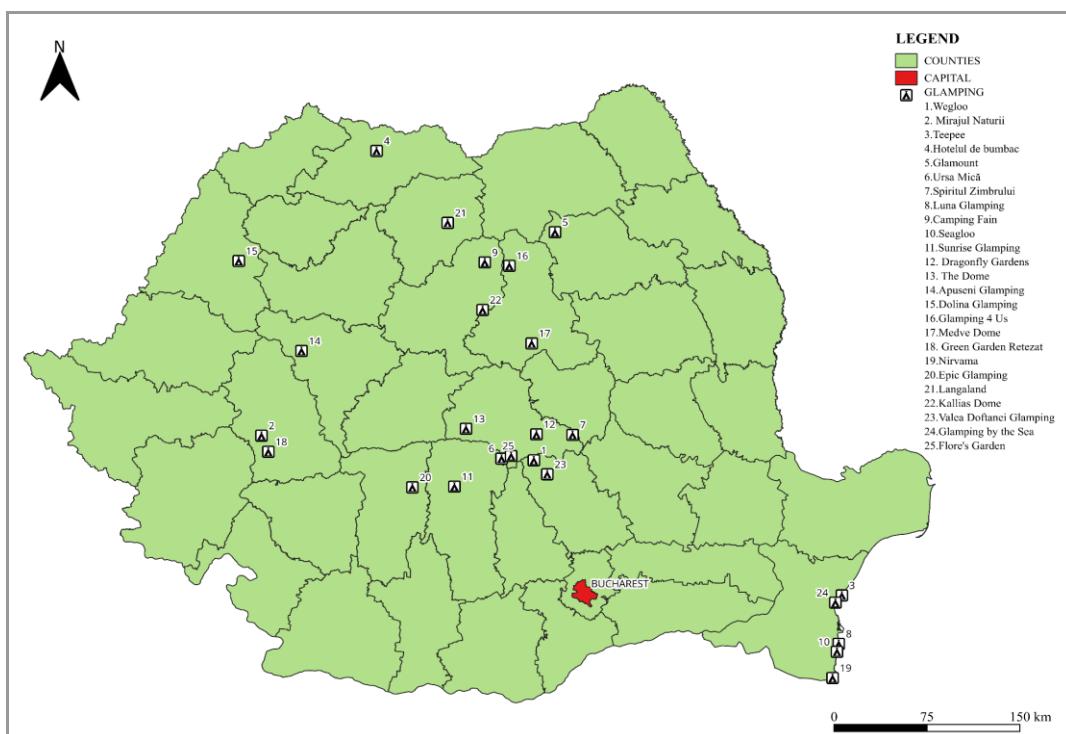


Figure 3. Most popular glamping sites in Romania according to the Google search for "Glamping". Processed by Lungu, A., in QGIS 3.32.2.

According to Romanian legislation, any accommodation structure must be certified (GD No 1267/2010 & subsequent amendments), which in the case of campsites must have more than three places. However, some glamping businesses operate without this license, the business being registered only at the Trade Registry Office in the county where it is opened. Along with these, a series of urban planning, technical, environmental, health and safety approvals are required. These elements explain the statistical differences identified in the study. However, finally, all must be certified and classified by MEET. Glamping has developed mainly after the period of the COVID 19 pandemic, with an impressive power in 2023, when the number of these sites doubled. In addition, Romania, through its diversified tourist potential, offers a variety of natural landscapes, from mountain areas to coastal areas to picturesque rural areas. All this has favored the imminent development of glamping sites, which currently respond to tourists' need for relaxation, offering them the opportunity to combine comfort with nature.

The spatial distribution of the main glamping sites is somehow disproportionate at the national level, having a high density in the central-western region of Romania. This uneven distribution reflects the high interest in mountainous and hilly areas that offer tourists diverse landscapes and also the opportunity to carry out outdoor recreational activities. Sites such as Apuseni Glamping (14), Green Garden Retezat (18), Medve Dome (17) are located near the mountain ranges and offer a perfect combination of comfort and nature. Also, the coastal area offers such modern accommodation units as Seagloo (10), Teepee (3), Nirvama (19) where tourists can enjoy unique experiences near the sea.

The regionalization of these sites indicates that they are not limited only to mountainous areas, but also show a rapid expansion in areas that have varied tourist potential, such as plains and coastal areas, far from the urban agglomeration. The glamping structures are diverse in design, always looking for original elements to attract tourists and at the same time offer special landscapes and eco-friendly accommodations.

4.2. Glamping ratings

In the 34 structures identified by combining MEET data and the most popular sites, the appreciation rate is very high, the average being 4.7 out of a maximum of 5. Without taking into account the number of reviews, above this average, 26.5% have obtained 5, 17.6% 4.9, and 20.6% have a 4.8 rating (Figure 4).



Figure 4. Glamping's rating by consumers. Processed after collecting data from Google reviews.

The high values of the rating are associated with the quality of the tents, such as sky view, sauna services at the camp, playgrounds for children, swimming pool or jacuzzi, restaurant with local specifics. At the same time, the location in wonderful spaces, with possibilities to stay in the middle of nature and less close to populated spaces can be associated with a very high degree of satisfaction. And the services or the way one interacted with the hosts were elements that influenced the rating.

The rate of complaints concerned several sites that refer to glamping sites, either located in the heart of the localities, next to the houses, or on older campsites that have been remodeled into glamping sites (Figure 4).

4.3. Environmental perceptions

The elements of great appreciation are the way the site is framed in the landscape and what kind of view the glamping tourists have (Figure 5).

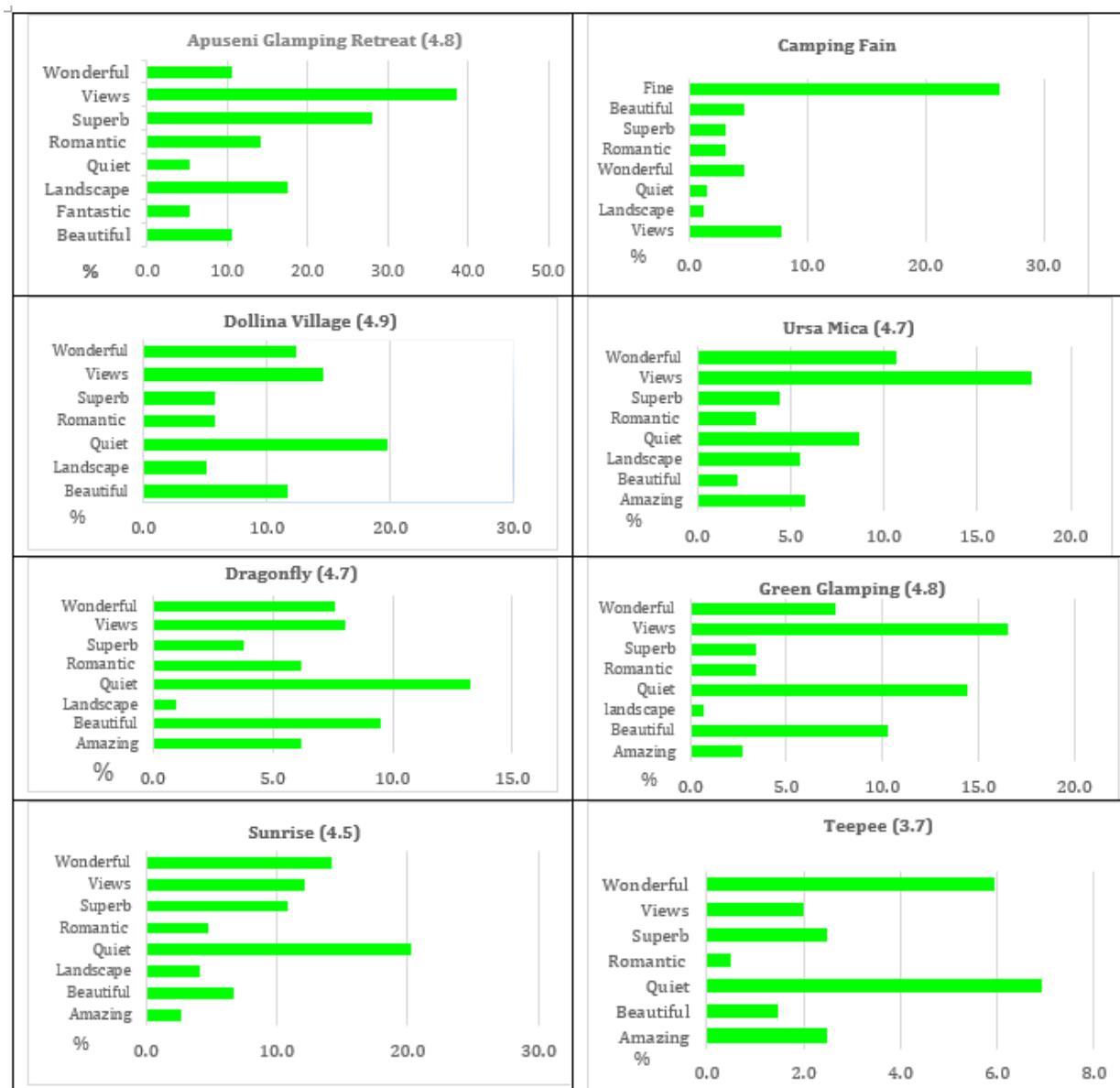


Figure 5. The most frequent assessments for the environmental elements of the top number of google reviews. Processed by the authors

The positive assessments about the environment overlap with glamping in the mountain area, the Subcarpathians or Transylvania. Tourists aim at the variety, beauty and purity of the landscape, accompanied by the lack of noise pollution or its replacement with sounds from the natural environment (birds, the sound of springs). Good remarks in the cases of glamping sites from the Black Sea are associated with those that have a direct view of the sea.

There are also negative remarks regarding crowding, the presence of music in the neighborhood, especially for sites on the coast.

4.4. Quality of services perception

The services in glamping are considered to be very good, so the term "memorable experience" predominates in the reviews (Figure 6). Tourists particularly appreciate the way the owners interact with them, and especially a "friendly attitude", which is combined with a special care for the services offered, creating an environment where they will not miss anything. Often, the phrase expressed by tourists "to feel at home" is associated with the term "friendly".

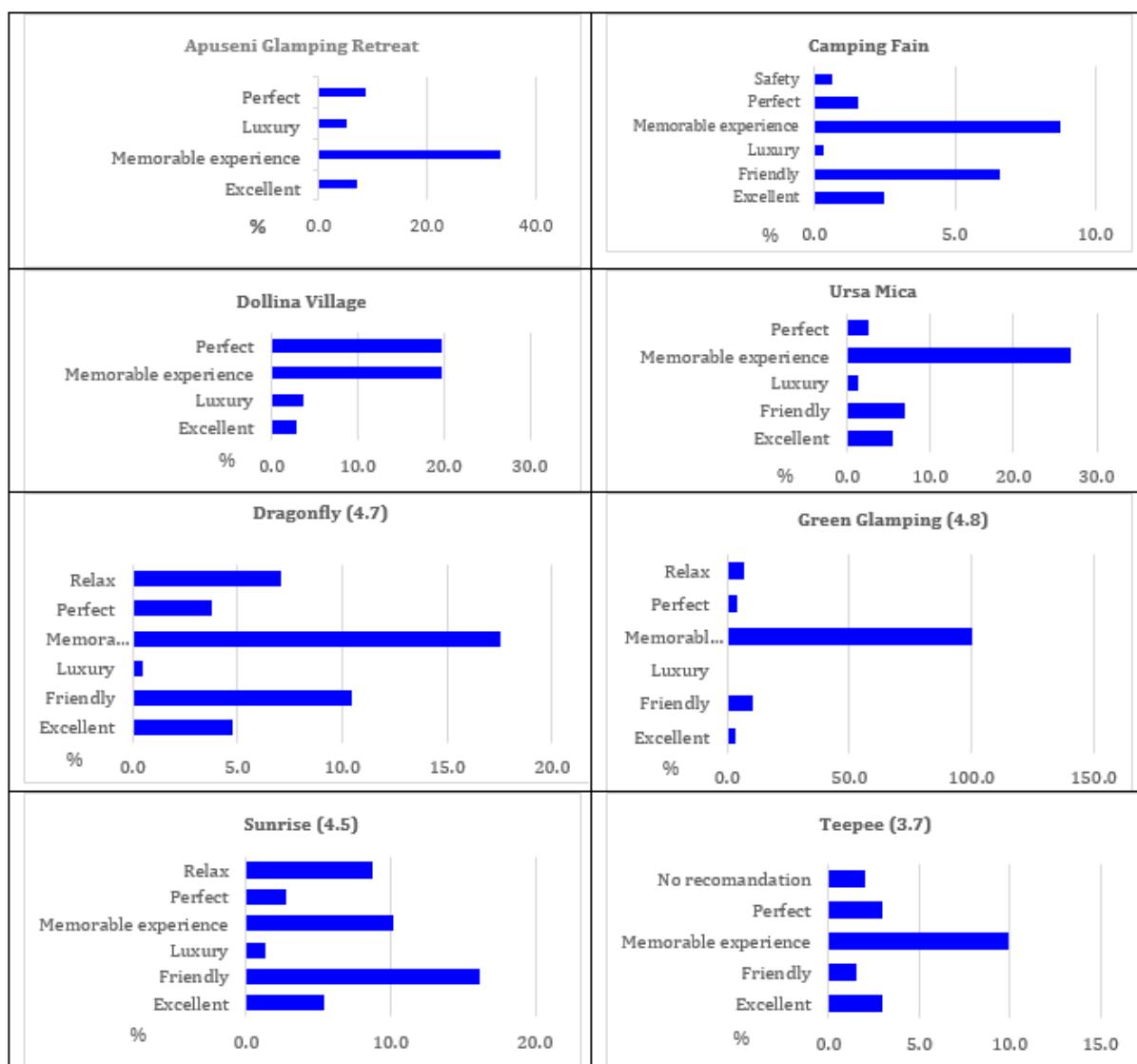


Figure 6. The most frequent assessments for services quality of the top number of google reviews. Processed by the authors.

The rating through the word "excellent" depends on the quality of all the services offered, for rest, meals, relaxation, etc.

There are negative aspects associated with lower ratings, which refer to "inhospitable attitude" ("arrogance", lack of concern in providing hot water, linen, etc.), elements that are not compatible with hospitality and which should be made aware by reading and the hosts' responses to the reviews and remedied by management.

5. Conclusions

Glamping is a subtype of accommodation that subscribes to camping that has developed in recent years as a response and adaptation of tourist businesses to the experiences during the COVID 19 pandemic, focused on social entertainment. Romania, like other European countries, has this rapidly developing sector, doubling the number of sites in 2023 compared to previous periods. However, there is a need for regulations in the legislation in the field in order to supply the market with validated products that do not allow underground economies (Gri). This aspect is in agreement with elements of business and tourist safety, considering that many glamping sites are in more isolated areas.

The high level of appreciation of tourists for glamping offers credit for their further and subsequent development. From the content of the reviews regarding the tourist services in glamping, the need to perfect the staff and business owners can be outlined, for the benefits of tourists, the environment, and businesses.

Limits of the study

The inconsistency between the data from MEET, those from the INS and those from the field, required a sustained research, but which can leave room for interpretations on the legality of some structures. The review analysis could not be carried out for all glamping sites, as many of them had an extremely low number of reviews.

Acknowledgments

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Further research

The current work has an exploratory character, which for the authors is a starting point for the research of camping truism in Romania in the paradigm of sustainable development.

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