
RURAL TOURISM THROUGH THE LENS OF INSTAGRAM USERS

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ABSTRACT

Rural tourism is a form of tourism that takes place in a rural environment and in which the tangible and intangible culture of the destination is experienced. Along with the growing interest of tourists in these elements, the attractiveness of rural tourism and its representation in Instagram posts is also increasing. The purpose of this research is to evaluate trends in rural tourism by analyzing Instagram images as a useful information base. The key methodological tool in research is image content analysis. The results of the research made it possible to draw conclusions about the most represented rural tourism destinations, key attractions and activities, gender specificities of participants in rural tourism, as well as its pronounced seasonality. In particular, the research led to the identification of education as an emerging activity in rural tourism. The research results can be useful for management organizations, rural communities, and tourism marketers. At the same time, the research emphasizes the usability of user-generated images on social media platforms in researching trends in the tourism market.

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Introduction

Rural tourism is a concept that has gained importance in the last few decades. While commercial practices appeared at the beginning of the second half of the twentieth century, greater professional and academic interest in the concept of rural tourism dates back to the eighties of the last century (Karali et al., 2024). Along with the changes in the wishes and demands of tourists, where the stay and experiences in nature are becoming more valued, the opportunities for the development of rural tourism also grew. The evolution towards a new way of life, which includes dynamic, innovative and environmentally responsible activities, gives rural tourism an increasingly important role (López-Sanz et al., 2021). The natural environment, the intangible cultural heritage of rural areas, local products and sustainable agriculture are the core resources on which the development of rural tourism is based (Chen et al., 2023; Marković et al., 2023). The question that has arisen since the earliest period of the development of rural tourism is the balance between the use of available resources in a sustainable way and economic interests (Rosalina et al., 2023). Hence, sustainable development, with its subcomponents of economic well-being, preservation of cultural and historical heritage, and social sustainability and environmental protection, is a very often discussed topic in academic research on rural tourism (Dimitrijević, 2025; Fons et al., 2011; Rosalina et al., 2021). The economic contribution of rural tourism and the development of underdeveloped areas are emphasized as particularly important (Liu et al., 2023). However, the contribution of rural tourism to the socio-cultural, environmental and educational aspects of the development of rural communities is also significant and undoubted. Rural tourism is a community-based form of tourism with the active participation of local community members in its development. Rural tourism is a chance for the local community to interpret and develop its traditional culture, but also to accept the integration of those cultures that differ from the domicile (Lazović et al., 2024; Tang & Xu, 2023). In this context, rural tourism can be seen as an instrument of social inclusion and overcoming socio-economic challenges in society (Kumar & Shekhar, 2020). Rural tourism is a motivating and desirable form of tourism, which can encourage the local population to engage and participate, but which can also meet the demands of modern tourists and enable them to spend their time in a socially acceptable way.

In addition to the resource base, infrastructure, financial and other forms of support from the government, the community and the private sector, the motivation of tourists and their recommendations have been identified as important factors in the development of rural tourism (Kumar et al., 2022). Meaningful experience of tourists and their satisfaction are an inseparable segment of sustainable rural tourism, regardless of whether the core of that experience is in the rural environment or activities (An & Alarcón, 2021). On the other hand, there are numerous advantages that rural tourism provides to tourists. Direct contact with nature and interaction with the local community are perhaps the most frequently highlighted benefits of rural tourism from the perspective of tourists. Also, due to the lower prices, rural tourism represents a form of tourism that enables the involvement of social categories of lower income levels (Kataya, 2021). When

opting for rural tourism, tourists choose those forms and destinations that provide them with the greatest utility in terms of the various attributes they consider (An & Alarcón, 2021). Landscapes, activities, location and hospitality of the local population are highly valued attributes. At the same time, the picturesque rural environment will probably be the first thing that will attract tourists. This raises the question of potential ways, opportunities and channels for its marketing and presentation to potential tourists, where modern technology achievements can play a major role.

In modern conditions, there is an immeasurable role of social media in informing and making decisions of tourists. Content generated by social media users has a huge impact on these processes. This fact is also valid for tourists in rural tourism whose behavior is very often shaped under the influence of social media (Hussain et al., 2024). Empirical research confirms that among the numerous factors influencing the intention to travel to rural destinations, social media has the greatest importance and that, in this sense, information placed on social media must be the focus of organizers of promotional activities in rural tourism. (Azhar et al., 2022). Social media represent a link between tourists and local products and culture of rural areas and, at the same time, enable inclusiveness by involving different social and age groups (Dašić et al., 2024). Social media and content generated by images that tourists post can be seen as a compendium of a tourist destination's image (Pan et al., 2014). The visibility and attractiveness of rural destinations is significantly increased by the distribution of authentic, impactful and high-quality content on social media platforms (Stylianou et al., 2025). The focus of tourists in rural tourism is not only attractive landscapes and tourist attractions, but the sharing of experiences of tourists on social media also plays a significant role in forming the image of the destination and future intentions of the visit.

The role of Instagram in these processes is particularly significant. Posts and images published on this platform are an important source of information for future tourists and also becoming an increasingly used tool in academic research. Siegel et al. (2023) research the behavior of tourists by analyzing the content of images published on Instagram and come to the conclusion that this platform represents an impression management tool. Agustí (2021) analyzing user-generated content on Instagram comes to conclusions about the differences in the behavior of tourists depending on gender and states that the gender of tourists will have an influence on the place they want to visit. Blanco-Moreno et al. (2024), by applying artificial intelligence in the analysis of posts on Instagram, come to the conclusion about interaction with people as a key aspect of a positive tourist experience, but also the feedback effect of a positive experience on the intention to generate content on Instagram during and after the trip. In the context of rural tourism, Sugino et al. (2023) using Instagram data and combined analysis of images, hashtags and descriptions left by tourists, make efforts to see the potential of this platform in the promotion of fishing villages as tourist destinations. They come to the conclusion that the results of such analyzes are highly usable for future tourism development strategies of the analysed rural areas. Galiano-Coronil & Blanco-Moreno (2025) explore the impact that tourists' Instagram images have on the perception and

attractiveness of the most visited rural destinations in Spain and find that images that evoke emotional engagement or those that depict landscape beauty play the most significant role in this process.

While the promotional capacity of social media in practice is indisputable, and a review of academic literature indicates their significant use as a tool for researching the behavior and perception of tourists, their potential in assessing trends in the tourism market remains insufficiently exploited. In this sense, the subject of this research is trends in the rural tourism market evaluated through the lens of Instagram users. The aim of the research is to conclude on the geographical distribution of rural tourism, key attractions and activities, gender characteristics of the involved tourists, as well as to assess the seasonality of rural tourism. In order to identify emerging trends in rural tourism through these four features, a set of research questions was formulated:

- a) What is the geographical distribution of Instagram posts related to rural tourism and which rural destinations appear most frequently?
- b) Which attractions and activities are most commonly depicted in rural tourism posts?
- c) What is the gender distribution and connection with the attractions and activities of Instagram users in rural tourism posts?
- d) Are there seasonal trends in the frequency of rural tourism-related Instagram posts?

Materials and methods

This paper employed a qualitative content analysis of Instagram images to explore how rural tourism is visually represented and spatially distributed through user-generated content in order to make conclusion about certain trends in the rural tourism market. Image content analysis is a widely accepted method in tourism research, particularly when examining user preferences and representations on social media platforms, which serve as powerful tools for travel inspiration, promotion, and decision-making. The primary data source for this study was the social media platform Instagram. Images were retrieved using the hashtag #ruraltourism, selected for its direct relevance to the research focus. Following the methodology adopted in previous similar studies on Instagram (Boepple & Thompson, 2016; Tiggemann & Zaccardo, 2018; Le Busque et al., 2021; Lazarević et al., 2024; Stanišić et al., 2024), the first 600 publicly available images under the “top posts” category were collected and analyzed. The dataset was extracted on September 29th, 2025. “Top posts” were deliberately chosen because they generate the highest user engagement (likes, shares, and/or comments), and therefore will reflect dominant trends, themes, and narratives surrounding rural tourism. All images were coded manually based on visual inspection, and categorized into predefined thematic groups developed through both inductive observation and reference to existing literature. The following categories of rural tourism attractions and activities were

used: Adrenaline sports, Agricultural production, Architecture, Food and beverage, Gastronomic events, Nature, Preserved folk customs, Education, Traditional lifestyle, and Hiking. Each image was assigned to a single dominant category based on its primary visual content. For each post, geotag information was extracted when available and used to determine the geographical location where the image was taken, allowing for a spatial analysis of rural tourism representation. In addition to geotag analysis, the date of each post was recorded in order to analyze seasonal variation. Images were grouped by the month in which they were posted, allowing insight into temporal trends of rural tourism-related content. To better understand the social structure of content creators, user profiles were analyzed and classified according to gender. Three categories were established: female, male, and group accounts. The third category included posts of people belonging to associations, organizations, institutions and fan pages dedicated to rural tourism. Profile gender was determined based on the user's name, biography, and visual indicators, where identifiable. This multifaceted methodology provides a comprehensive understanding of how rural tourism is portrayed on Instagram and how different user groups contribute to its representation.

Results and Discussions

The geographical spread of Instagram posts tagged with rural tourism shows a marked concentration in specific countries. India accounts for 32.83% of all posts, followed by Spain, USA, Croatia, Peru, Costa Rica, and South Africa (Table 1). Together, these seven countries represent over 60% of the observed sample, indicating a pronounced unevenness in the global distribution of rural-tourism content on Instagram. The leading position of India suggests that rural areas within the subcontinent are among the most frequently portrayed destinations on Instagram. The high presence of European countries (Spain, Croatia, Portugal, North Macedonia) alongside Latin American and African destinations (Peru, Costa Rica, South Africa, Morocco) illustrates that rural tourism on Instagram is a genuinely global phenomenon, but with strong national hubs of activity.

Table 1. Location of Instagram posts

Percent of posts	Country
32.83%	India
8.17%	Spain
5.67%	USA
4.5%	Croatia
4%	Peru
3.83%	Costa Rica
3.67%	South Africa
3.33%	Lebanon
2.83%	North Macedonia
2.67%*	Korea, Portugal
2.17%*	Iran, Malaysia
1.83%	Canada

Percent of posts	Country
1.17%	Italy
1%*	Hong Kong, Nicaragua, Thailand
0.83%*	China, Philippines, Uganda
0.67%*	Andora, Australia, Montenegro, Morocco, United Kingdom
0.5%*	Buthan, Georgia, Netherlands, Tanzania
**	Finland, Indonesia, Serbia, Malta
***	Albania, Armenia, Bangladesh, Cyprus, France, Germany, Greece, Kuwait, Kyrgyz Republic, Nepal, Pakistan, Panama

Legend: * means percent of posts for each country; ** means two Instagram posts for each country; *** means one Instagram post for each country

Source: Authors' research

When grouped by economic status (The World Bank, 2025), approximately two-thirds of all posts originate from developing or emerging economies, such as India, Peru, Costa Rica, and South Africa. In contrast, developed economies (Spain, USA, Portugal, South Korea) collectively account for a smaller proportion. This finding contrasts with traditional tourism flows, which tend to be dominated by developed countries as both origin and destination markets. On Instagram, however, developing countries are more prominently featured, likely reflecting the visual appeal and authenticity associated with rural settings in these regions. Countries with a larger proportion of rural land and population (e.g., India, Peru, Croatia) appear to dominate on Instagram posts. This pattern suggests a positive relationship between a nation's rurality and its representation in rural tourism posts. Vice versa, countries with smaller rural populations (e.g., USA, South Korea) appear less represented. While this does not establish causality, the observed distribution suggests that nations with a strong rural identity or extensive agrarian landscapes are more likely to be visually portrayed under rural tourism hashtags.

The analysis of rural tourism posts indicates that the most frequently depicted attractions revolve around nature-based, architectural, and cultural experiences (Table 2). Images categorized under Nature and Architecture dominate the Instagram posts, illustrating that visual representations of rural tourism on Instagram continue to emphasize scenic landscapes, historic buildings, and traditional village aesthetics. This predominance suggests that the visual appeal of rural environments, particularly the combination of natural beauty and cultural heritage, remains the primary driver of engagement and content creation. Activities related to Traditional lifestyle, Food and beverage, and Agricultural production further enrich the spectrum of rural tourism representation. These categories highlight the experiential aspect of rural travel, focusing on interaction with local customs, cuisine, and community life. Users tend to share posts that portray daily activities such as cooking, farming, or participating in traditional everyday life, which collectively promote the image of rural destinations as authentic and welcoming. Lower-frequency categories such as Preserved folk customs, Hiking, and Adrenaline sports demonstrate that while active and ritualistic elements are present, they are less central in shaping the dominant visual narrative of rural tourism.

Table 2. Key rural tourism attractions and activities represented in images

Percentage of posts	Rural tourism attraction
27.67%	Nature
25.17%	Architecture
10.33%*	Education, Traditional Lifestyle
10%	Food and Beverage
8.17%	Agricultural Production
5.17%	Preserved Folk Customs
1.17%	Hiking
1.33%	Adrenaline Sports
0.17%	Gastronomic Event

Legend: * means percent of posts for each country;

Source: Authors' research

A particularly noteworthy finding in this analysis is the appearance of the Education category, which represents a new and emerging dimension of rural tourism. Unlike traditional categories found in previous literature, such as nature, heritage, or agritourism (Rogers, 2002; Fons et al., 2011; Carneiro et al., 2015; Huang et al., 2016; Lupi et al., 2017; Streifeneder et al., 2023; Galiano-Coronil & Blanco-Moreno, 2025), this type of content illustrates how rural destinations are being recognized as spaces for academic events, educational programs, and professional knowledge exchange. Posts within this category often depict university-organized field trips, scientific workshops, rural and sustainability conferences, and student training programs hosted in rural or semi-rural settings. The prominence of this theme on Instagram suggests a broadening conceptualization of rural tourism, where intellectual and educational engagement complements leisure and recreation. This emerging form of rural attraction highlights a transformation of rural spaces from purely consumptive destinations to interactive and developmental environments. The integration of science, education, and tourism aligns with broader global trends toward sustainable and multifunctional rural development – where learning, innovation, and community collaboration coexist alongside traditional tourism activities.

There is a heterogeneous gender composition among Instagram accounts posting about rural tourism. More than half of all posts (54%) originate from group accounts, male users account for 25.83%, while female users make up 20.17% of all posts. This distribution suggests that institutional and collective actors dominate rural-tourism communication on Instagram, reflecting the growing role of destination organizations, rural associations, and hospitality businesses in shaping online visibility. However, the individual-level posts reveal a slightly higher male presence than female among single-user accounts, although the difference is modest. When focusing solely on individual users, a gendered differentiation in portrayed activities becomes evident (Table 3). This is aligned with the research findings of Agustí (2021), which state that the gender of tourists in rural tourism has an impact on the activities and places they visit.

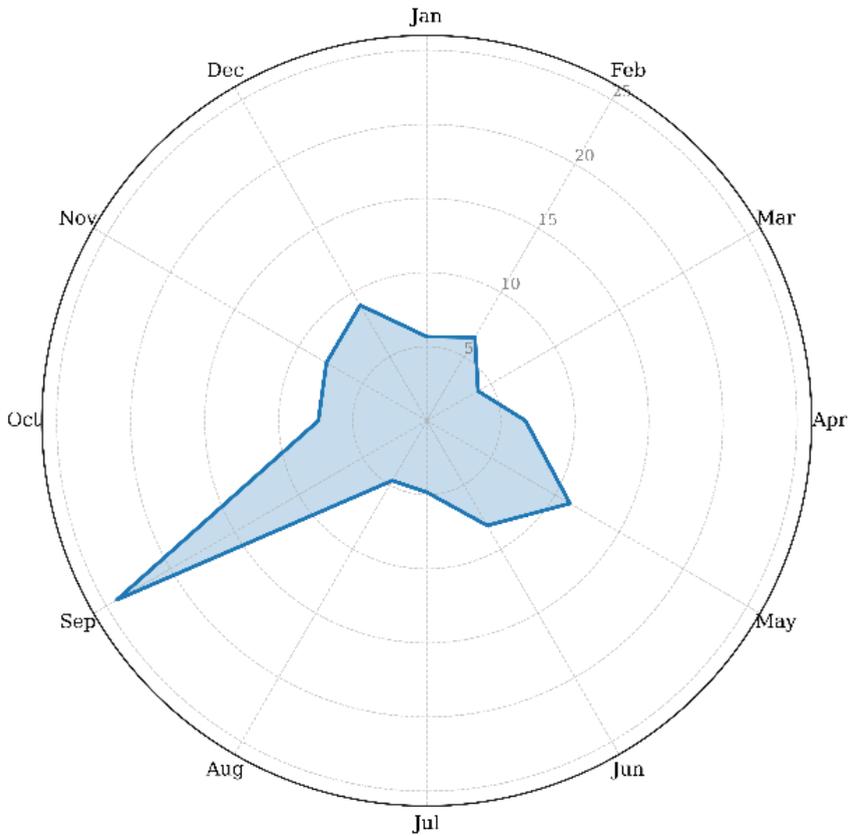
Table 3. Comparative review of the participation of men and women in rural tourism

Category of images	Percentage of posts	
	Male (of 25.83%)	Female (of 20.17%)
Adrenaline sports	1.94%	/
Agricultural production	9.68%	5.79%
Architecture	27.74%	16.53%
Food and beverage	5.16%	15.7%
Gastronomic event	0.65%	/
Nature	23.87%	28.1%
Preserved folk customs	6.45%	12.4%
Education	13.55%	7.44%
Traditional lifestyle	9.03%	14.05%
Hiking	1.94%	/

Source: Authors' research

Male users are more frequently associated with Architecture, Nature, and Education categories. These results indicate that men tend to engage in or highlight content related to exploration, structure, and professional or knowledge-based contexts. Female users, by contrast, are most active in Nature, Food and beverage, Traditional lifestyle, and Preserved folk customs categories. These categories emphasize emotional, aesthetic, and cultural dimensions of rural life. The difference is particularly visible in posts connected to Food and beverage, where female representation is roughly three times higher than male (15.7% vs. 5.16%), highlighting women's dominant role in gastronomic and hospitality-related content. Conversely, male accounts contribute a much higher share of posts in Education (13.55% vs. 7.44%), suggesting that men may be more active in documenting academic, professional, or training events held in rural contexts. Across all categories, both genders show notable engagement with Nature, confirming its universal appeal as the central visual motif of rural tourism. This diversity implies that gender not only shapes who posts about rural tourism but also influences the types of narratives and values being communicated – men focus more on structure and function, while women highlight experience and culture.

The monthly distribution of rural tourism-related Instagram posts demonstrates distinct seasonal fluctuations throughout the year (Figure 1). The data show that posting activity peaks sharply in September, followed by May, while the lowest levels are recorded in March and August. These fluctuations suggest that Instagram content creation related to rural tourism corresponds closely with both tourism seasonality and agricultural or cultural rhythms typical of rural environments.

Figure 1. Monthly distribution of Instagram posts

Source: Authors' research

The general pattern indicates three main temporal phases: spring growth phase (April-June) – steady increase in posting frequency, reflecting the beginning of the tourism season, pleasant weather conditions, and the reactivation of rural destinations after winter; autumn peak (September) – the most prominent period of online activity, associated with harvest festivals, agritourism events, and the visual appeal of autumn landscapes; winter recovery phase (November-December) – moderate but notable posting activity, often tied to winter rural retreats and local holiday traditions. The pronounced September peak stands out as the dominant posting period, surpassing all other months by a significant margin. This surge likely corresponds to the culmination of agricultural and harvest-related activities, which are visually appealing and culturally meaningful; increased tourist visitation to rural areas during early autumn, when weather remains favorable but destinations are less crowded than in summer; enhanced event-driven content, such as educational workshops organized in rural settings and scientific conferences; but it may also be due to the date of analysis. The secondary peak in May reflects the spring awakening of rural destinations and the symbolic start of the tourism season. This period

also coincides with national holidays and long weekends in many countries, providing additional motivation for rural travel and social media sharing. In contrast, summer months (July-August) show surprisingly lower posting rates, which may be attributed to a potential shift of users toward coastal or urban tourism during mid-summer, and the relative scarcity of organized rural events compared to spring and autumn.

Conclusions

The paper explored how rural tourism is represented on Instagram through a multidimensional analysis of image content, geotag data, user characteristics, and temporal patterns. The findings demonstrate that Instagram serves as a valuable mirror of contemporary rural tourism trends, revealing not only spatial concentrations of content but also evolving narratives surrounding rural experiences. The results indicate a geographically uneven distribution of rural-tourism posts, with India, Spain, and the United States as leading destinations. Developing countries dominate rural tourism imagery, reflecting the visual and experiential appeal of their authentic landscapes and traditional lifestyles. Content analysis revealed that nature, architecture, and cultural heritage remain the most visually dominant themes. The emergence of education posts marks a novel and important expansion of rural tourism representation, indicating that rural areas are increasingly perceived as spaces for learning, professional exchange, and innovation. Gender-based analysis showed a heterogeneous structure of content creators, with group accounts collectively contribute to the majority of posts. Among individuals, men more frequently post about architecture and professional events, while women emphasize gastronomy, lifestyle, and cultural expression, suggesting gendered storytelling patterns in digital portrayals of rural experiences. The temporal analysis identified a strong seasonal pattern with a major posting peak in September and a smaller one in May, corresponding to harvest periods and pleasant weather. These results highlight the synchronization between Instagram activity and the cyclical nature of rural life and tourism.

Scientifically, the study contributes to the increasing volume of literature on digital representations of rural tourism by integrating visual, spatial, temporal, and demographic dimensions. It expands methodological approaches to social media research through a combined use of content, geotag, and user-profile analysis, demonstrating how user-generated images can serve as a valid proxy for understanding tourism dynamics. The discovery of the Education category represents an original contribution, providing evidence of how rural tourism narratives are evolving beyond traditional leisure and nature-oriented frameworks. Practically, the findings can inform destination management organizations, rural communities, and tourism marketers. Understanding when, where, and how rural tourism is represented online can help stakeholders plan targeted promotional campaigns and develop content strategies aligned with seasonal peaks and audience interests. Moreover, recognizing gender-specific preferences in visual storytelling enables more inclusive and effective marketing approaches, while the rise of educational and scientific events suggests opportunities for diversifying rural tourism products.

Despite its comprehensiveness, the study has several limitations. First, the sample was limited to 600 top posts under the #ruraltourism hashtag, which may overrepresent highly visible or algorithmically favored content while excluding less-engaged users. Second, the temporal analysis is based on posting dates rather than the actual time of travel, which may cause slight discrepancies between digital activity and real-world tourism flows. Future studies should expand the dataset to include a larger and more diverse range of hashtags. Comparative research across social media platforms (e.g., TikTok or YouTube) could reveal differences in visual communication styles. Finally, incorporating user engagement metrics (likes, comments, shares) and sentiment analysis would deepen understanding of how audiences perceive and interact with rural tourism content.

Overall, the study demonstrates that Instagram is not only a platform for sharing aesthetic images but also a dynamic space of cultural production that shapes the perception of rural destinations. By capturing the intersection of nature, tradition, education, and community, these visual narratives contribute to redefining rural tourism as a multifunctional and sustainable experience, bridging leisure, learning, and identity.

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Conflict of interests

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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