

COTTAGECORE AS AN IDEALISATION OF RURAL LIFE AND A NEW DIMENSION OF TOURIST ACTIVITY FOR GENERATION Z IN RURAL AREAS

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Cottagecore jako idealizacja wiejskiego życia i nowy wymiar aktywności turystycznej Generacji Z na terenach wiejskich

Abstract: The aim of this paper is to present Generation Z as a potential target group for an agritourism product within the relatively new *cottagecore* aesthetic concept. Qualitative research identified the unique characteristics, behaviours and decision-making processes of Generation Z in travel. The second part involved a primary analysis to verify the hypothesis that the *cottagecore* phenomenon may represent a new type of agritourism product for Generation Z. An online survey was conducted with a total of 104 people who were members of *cottagecore* groups on Facebook. The results of the survey showed that there is potential to use the idea of *cottagecore* as an agritourism product, especially among representatives of generation Z. This group shows an interest in the countryside, particularly in experiencing village life, participating in activities typical for the movement, and engaging in farm life, which corresponds well with an agritourism model enriched by the *cottagecore* concept.

Keywords: *cottagecore*, Generation Z, travel, agritourism product

Abstrakt: Celem niniejszej pracy jest przedstawienie pokolenia Z jako potencjalnej grupy docelowej dla produktu agroturystycznego w ramach stosunkowo nowej koncepcji estetycznej *cottagecore*. W badaniach jakościowych zidentyfikowano unikatowe cechy, zachowania i procesy

podejmowania decyzji dotyczące podróży pokolenia Z. Druga część obejmowała analizę pierwotną, mającą na celu zweryfikowanie hipotezy, że zjawisko *cottagecore* może stanowić nowy rodzaj produktu agroturystycznego dla pokolenia Z. Przeprowadzono badania ankietowe online, w których udział wzięły łącznie 104 osoby, będące członkami grup na Facebooku związanych z tematyką *cottagecore*. Wyniki badania wykazały, że istnieje potencjał wykorzystania *cottagecore* jako produktu agroturystycznego, szczególnie wśród przedstawicieli pokolenia Z. Grupa ta wykazuje zainteresowanie obszarami wiejskimi, szczególnie w celu doświadczenia życia na wsi, uczestnictwa w aktywnościach typowych dla tego ruchu oraz zaangażowania w życie gospodarstwa rolnego, co dobrze koresponduje z modelem agroturystycznym wzbożonym o koncepcję *cottagecore*.

Słowa kluczowe: *cottagecore*, pokolenie Z, turystyka, produkt agroturystyczny

Generation Z and travel patterns

Based on classification provided by Cilliers (2017), at least five generations can be identified: a) the Traditionalists (1928–1944); b) the Baby Boomers (1945–1965); c) Generation X (1965–1979); d) Generation Y (1980–1995) and e) Generation Z (1995–2009). Generation Z refers to individuals born after 1995, according to most sources; however, there is no uniform timeframe (Twenge 2023). Given this, the oldest representatives of this group are now 27 years old. Data on this issue in the available literature can vary, as shown by the information collected by Dolot (2018). Despite their relatively young age, with the oldest members in their twenties, they already have a huge impact on various economic sectors. They are forming brand relationships that will shape their future purchase decisions. They are the future of tomorrow's markets. In the U.S. alone, over 70 million of Gen Z members are seriously impacting the market. They have a strong influence on their parents' spending, which is estimated at around \$200 billion annually. They also contribute with their own capital, amounting to \$40 billion per year (Armstrong, Kotler 2017).

Estimating a specific age range for this group is challenging, but it is certain that Gen Z is the youngest group on the labour market. Generation Z is also known by many various terms, such as Net Gen, iGeneration, Digital Natives, Facebook Generation, and C Generation. Each of these terms reflects the profound significance of technology and internet access for Gen Z. The 'C' in C Generation stands for *communicating, connected, and computerized* (Southgate 2017). Notwithstanding the fact that in today's reality, a significant part of society depends on technology, Gen Z grew up during a time when high tech was at its most dynamic, giving them daily contact with the internet, smartphones, readily accessible networking, and social media (Singh and Dangmei 2016, p. 2), making them uniquely attuned to digital connectivity.

According to Robinson and Schänzel (2019), the Gen Z's travel motivations can be categorized into intrinsic-extrinsic classification. Intrinsic motivations include the desire to experience something fresh and different, focused more on adventure. Highlights of a given destination, the pleasure that comes from the travel itself and escapism are part of extrinsic classification. Notably, escapism can be classified as both an intrinsic and an extrinsic motivator, although it is predominantly influenced by external factors. The *European Travel Commission's survey (2020)* provided insights into the reasons for travel within and to Europe. The survey's respondents were Gen Zers from China, Germany, the United Kingdom and the United States. The top three reasons included the safety of the holiday destination, which significantly influences their decision-making (42%), low-priced air transportation (45%), and value for money (47%).

One of the most important travel factors for Gen Z is the value for money at the destination (*European Travel Commission 2020*, p. 38). A popular strategy to maximize value is to travel during the off season. This offers the opportunity to find cheaper flights and other services at the tourist destinations.

Source of information and travel decision-making influence

Gen Z, also known as the Digital Natives or iGeneration, primarily relies on digital sources for information and travel decision-making. One of the primary sources of information that has the greatest impact on this generation – 64% – is Facebook, followed by Instagram with 46%, and Twitter with 35% (Expedia Media Solutions, 2017). In the travel decision-making process, 90% of Gen Zers look for deals before making a choice (Expedia Media Solutions, 2017). 86% agree that informative content from destinations and/or travel brands can influence their decision-making process. 82% of them read reviews on platforms like TripAdvisor before finalizing a destination, 76% talk to people who have visited the destination, while 65% agree that ads can influence their decision-making process, and 58% use loyalty programs as part of their decision-making process. Regarding smartphone use, 67% of Gen Zers use it for travel inspiration, 44% for researching destinations, 27% for booking, and 78% use their smartphones during their trip.

As for Gen Z's top travel destinations, France ranks the highest with 38%, followed by Italy with 35%, then Spain with 28%. Greece attracts 24% of this cohort, while Germany appeals to 23%. Austria, Belgium, Croatia, Iceland and United Kingdom also feature on the travel list (*European Travel Commission 2020*).

Cottagecore phenomenon

Cottagecore is an aesthetic movement that emerged in virtual space that romanticises the idea of life in the countryside, surrounded by natural environments and green landscapes (Slone, nytimes 2020). It focuses on living a simple life, connected with nature and the goods sourced from it. The concept behind this movement is a metaphorical return to the so-called roots, even for those who have never lived in the countryside.

Cottagecore consists of the prefix 'cottage' and the suffix '-core'. The 'cottage' refers to a rural or a village house, symbolising an idyllic rural life (Saxon, the vou 2021). The suffix 'core' is commonly used to describe a genre or trend. Originally derived from 'hardcore,' a term for a punk music genre, '-core' now often denotes an extreme or focused aspect of a field, frequently appearing in names of new genres, trends, or styles. The suffix enhances the meaning of the defining prefix.

Embroidery, sewing, knitting, baking, and various handmade crafts form the foundation of *cottagecore* activities (Rao-Kashi, bbc 2020). This trend has created a unique community whose aim is to emphasize simplicity in life through everyday activities, giving them an aesthetic context. This lifestyle aligns with the natural rhythms of the sunlight, the changing seasons, and the principles of self-sufficiency. As the trend has gained popularity, searches for phrases associated with *cottagecore* activities have notably increased.

Popularity gain during the COVID-19 pandemic

Although the *cottagecore* aesthetic has existed in the online space since 2014, its popularity surged with the COVID-19 outbreak. As an aesthetic that primarily thrives on-line, the pandemic did not prevent its growth. In fact, users were able to share their cottagecore-related activities freely, further fuelling its development. This is why *cottagecore*'s popularity escalated in 2020. According to Amanda Brennan, a trend expert on Tumblr, 'As the seasons have changed, so has the content: In April, at-home activities like cooking and embroidery were popular; by June and July, it was sunny wildflower fields, twee picnics, and 'lily pads'. (Jennings, Vox 2020).

In March and April 2020, at the beginning of the pandemic, content tagged with the *cottagecore* keyword on Tumblr — where the first mentions of *cottagecore* were noted, increased by 153% and interactions with this content rose by 550%. 'By mid-March, #cottagecore started appearing on our Week in Review ranking more popular than Tumblr faves like Harry Styles, Marvel, and Taylor Swift' (<https://fandom.tumblr.com/>).

On Pinterest, a site that relies on information sharing through images, searches for 'cottagecore fashion' increased by 80% between June 2019 and June 2020.

By August 31, 2020, videos under the hashtag ‘cottagecore’ on the TikTok platform had been viewed 3.7 billion times (Braff, *washingtonpost* 2020). A year later, on June 19, 2021, the number of views had nearly doubled to 6.6 billion (Brand 2021). On an average daily basis, the *cottagecore* subreddit receives 95 new comments and 25 posts per day, with 96,661 followers (<https://subredditstats.com/r/cottagecore>). 3.2 million posts under the ‘cottagecore’ hashtag can be found on Instagram. On average, 191 posts related to this topic are added every hour (<http://best-hashtags.com/hashtag/cottagecore/>).

Generation Z's interest in agritourism and its similarities with *cottagecore*

The scientific literature (Tew, Barbieri 2012) defines the term ‘agritourism’ ambiguously, and it is often used synonymously with terms such as ‘agrotourism’, ‘farm tourism’, ‘farm-based tourism’. Although there are numerous definitions highlighting its various features, agritourism is generally understood as a form of tourism closely related to agriculture and working farms, where crop production and animal husbandry are part of the attractions. These features include 1) farm life (the rhythm of farm life, farm chores, presence of farm animals, fresh food, scents, sounds, etc.); 2) people and family (direct contact with the farmer’s family, opportunities to learn about their customs and hospitality, meeting new people and making new friends, daily activities of villagers); 3) rural life (the culture, customs, folklore, traditions, and history of the village and the region); 4) space (contact with nature, freedom of movement, minimal traffic, peace, quiet, and opportunities for recreation and sports) (Balińska, Zawadka 2013). Agritourism is also understood as the organisation of recreation by a farming family in the countryside on their own working farm. An indispensable element is also the related attractions that a particular region or farm can offer. Agritourism provides a source of income for farm families who attract clientele by providing farm-related attractions and the aesthetic value of rural landscapes (Mackay et al. 2019).

Generation Z and agritourism experience

The available scientific literature has not yet given much attention to the issue of Gen Z and their contribution to agritourism. To better understand the relationship and probable motives of iGen towards agritourism destinations, it is essential to examine the travel motivations of this generation. According to GlobalData (2022), Gen Z’s increased interest in sustainability may be a motivator for such choices. When asked about the importance of environmental issues – 46% of Gen Z respondents indicated that these issues are ‘extremely important’. Despite their young age, this generation is currently the most environmentally aware globally. Agritourism farms

can provide insight into processes and stages of production that cannot be presented anywhere else, providing visitors with unique attractions, such as farm animal care, food production processes, harvesting.

When surveyed about their preferred type of holiday, younger generations show a stronger preference for active sightseeing compared to older generations, who tend to favour sun and sea vacations. In terms of ecotourism, the youngest generations ranked the highest, with Millennials with 23% and Gen Z with 20%, indicating significant opportunities for ecotourism development driven by young tourists (<https://www.hotelmanagement-network.com/>).

Cottagecore is a kind of safe place, an oasis for people seeking an escape, where comfort can be found in a cozy armchair with a warm blanket and a book, or in the scent of freshly baked bread wafting through the home. The rapid growth of the *cottagecore* community during the pandemic was caused by a sudden halt in daily routines filled with obligations and external stimuli. The forced shift to a quieter, slower pace of life resulted in the popularity of the trend, which offers a warm, cosy and safe space that promotes peace, enjoyable activities, a slower tempo and a focus on appreciating the present moment and its beautiful aspects. The stress of the global situation, overwork and panic were channelled by people into a self-created world of knitting, tending to homegrown vegetables, and appreciating the beauty of nature. '*Cottagecore*' became and remains a form of escape from the overwhelming realities of life (Tab. 1).

It is based on a nostalgic vision of a simple life, a combination of living in harmony with nature, engaging in cultivation activities, a lifestyle focused on simple daily chores set in rural landscapes. According to many studies, these elements also motivate individuals to travel to or relocate to rural areas, as there has been

Tab.1. Selected features of agritourism and cottagecore

Tab. 1. Wybrane cechy agroturystyki oraz cottagecore

Agritourism	Cottagecore
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – a form of tourism – takes place in rural areas – daily routines centred around rural life tasks – cultivation and production of local food – life revolving around the farm, subsistence farming – growing and raising one's own crops 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – a trend originated in the online space – prioritises contact with nature – romanticises rural life – a shift towards preparing homemade meals and food-stuffs, e.g. baking bread, making preserves – the idea of a simple life, preferably in a nature-centric environment – focuses on gardening and growing one's own vegetables

Source: own elaboration.

Źródło: opracowanie własne.

a growing interest in the rural lifestyle (e.g., Abrams and Bliss 2013; Smith and Phillips 2001; Guimond and Simard 2010). ‘Escapes’ from cities and more urbanised areas are generally also driven largely by the aesthetic appeal of idyllic rural living (Åberg, Tondelli 2021, p.2). Agritourism facilities with accommodation options may appeal to consumers interested in seasonal rural migration, particularly as vacations at agritourist destinations tend to be among the most affordable holiday options (Uglis, Krysińska 2012, p. 161).

To address the research gap regarding the above-mentioned issues, this research was conducted to explore the travel motivations of iGen and *cottagecore* themed agritourism. The main objectives of this study are:

- to determine whether *cottagecore* could motivate Gen Z to visit agritourist destinations,
- and to create a profile of such a potential traveller.

Research methodology

Data collection and sample

The study sample consisted of members of cottagecore-themed Facebook groups (n=104). These groups featured diverse content related to activities, aesthetics, and other elements aligned with the cottagecore theme. Within these groups, users shared posts about their knitting, progress in plant cultivation, decorating a picnic blanket, or quiet moments such as reading a book in an idyllic setting. The survey was conducted from May to July 2022.

Research instrument

The measures for the research constructs were adopted from the reviewed literature. The online questionnaire included a basic demographic section to gather information on the gender, age and place of residence of respondents. The second part of the questionnaire concerned interest in agritourism sites and respondents’ preferences for these types of tourist destinations. Questions explored respondents’ desire to visit the countryside for leisure trips, the type of attractions and facilities they would most like to experience, and whether they would be interested in visiting agritourist destinations inspired by the *cottagecore* theme. The IBM SPSS Statistics programme was used to analyse the statistical data.

This study aimed to not only assess interest in agritourist facilities and visits motivated by the *cottagecore* trend but also to examine the preferred amenities and expectations for such trips. Additionally, the research sought to profile the potential

traveller to agritourism destinations as part of their interest in the *cottagecore* lifestyle and aesthetics.

Results

A total of 104 people took part in the survey (respondents were aged 18-26, the target group being Gen Z). Gender data shows that more than half of respondents were female (67.3%) compared to male respondents (26.9%). Europe accounted for the largest share of respondents (60.8%), followed by North America/Central America (22.7%) and South America, Asia, Africa and Australia collectively representing the remaining 16.5%. Most respondents live in urban (37.8%) and suburban (37.8%) areas, with the smallest group residing in rural areas (24.4%). A holiday at a *cottagecore*-themed agritourist facility would be of interest mainly to those suburban residents (37.8%), followed by those in urban areas (36.5%).

When asked about their preferred holiday/leisure destination, nearly two-thirds (62.9%) chose the countryside. In contrast, 37.1% preferred the city. Regarding accommodation preferences among respondents in general, the most popular option was farm stay, indicated by almost one in three respondents (32.0%), followed by renting a cottage (25.8%) and staying in a guesthouse (21.6%). The least popular choice was an RV, which was indicated by only 0.6% of respondents.

As for the main motives for choosing agritourism, the vast majority of respondents indicated experiencing the rural daily life (58.3%), followed by a full experience of *cottagecore* lifestyle (33.3%) and the desire to take a break from urban life (25.0%) (Fig. 1). Respondents were less likely to choose *activities that cannot be done in urban areas* (16.7%) and *relaxation* (13.9%). Only one in nine respondents indicated proximity to nature as a motive (11.1%).

Regarding preferred activities (Fig. 2), the vast majority were most interested in trying or making local food (85.5%), picnicking (83.2%), and baking (82.4%). The least popular activities included visiting a country housewives' association and foraging (61.8%), wine tasting at a vineyard (58.0%), and taking a hayride (48.9%).

Regarding new services (e.g., workshops.) offered by agrotourism farms, the most popular were local cuisine culinary courses (71.2%), baking workshops or baking with others (63.5%), local handicrafts (loom-weaving, quilting, etc.) workshops (59.6%), candle-making workshops (57.1%) and sewing, knitting, and embroidery courses (55.8%) (Fig. 3). The least interesting activities were workshops on making bug hotels or bird feeders (30.8%), crystal healing workshops (37.8%), canning courses (38.5%) and foraging workshops (39.1%).

The study also highlights events or venues related to agritourism facilities that align with potential *Cottagecore* activities (Fig. 4). The activities that were most

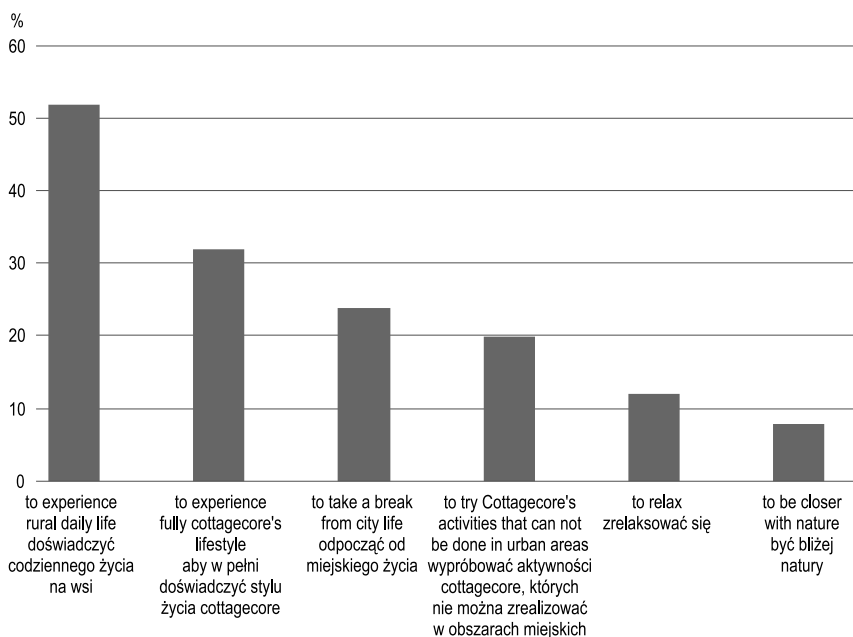


Fig. 1. Motivations to visit/stay at agritourism farm [%]

Ryc. 1. Motywacje do odwiedzenia/pobytu w gospodarstwie agroturystycznym [%]

Source: own elaboration on the basis of research results (percentages do not add up to 100.00% as respondents could select more than one answer).

Źródło: opracowanie własne na podstawie wyników badań (wartości procentowe nie sumują się do %100, ponieważ respondenci mogli wybrać więcej niż jedną odpowiedź).

frequently chosen were farmers' market (76.7%), harvest festivals (76.0%), and rural handicraft workshops (75.3%). Pumpkin patches (54.8%) were the least popular, although this percentage still exceeds half of the votes cast.

The results of the analyses performed for this paper indicate that the potential cottagecore tourist is most often female, comes from cities in European countries. In terms of accommodation choices, the most popular option is renting a cottage, followed by staying on a farm. The main motive for a trip is to experience rural daily life, followed by fully embracing the *cottagecore* style and a desire to take a break from urban life. Tourists are also interested in participating in various events and festivals, with the most attractive being petting farms, bee farms, and rural handicraft workshops.

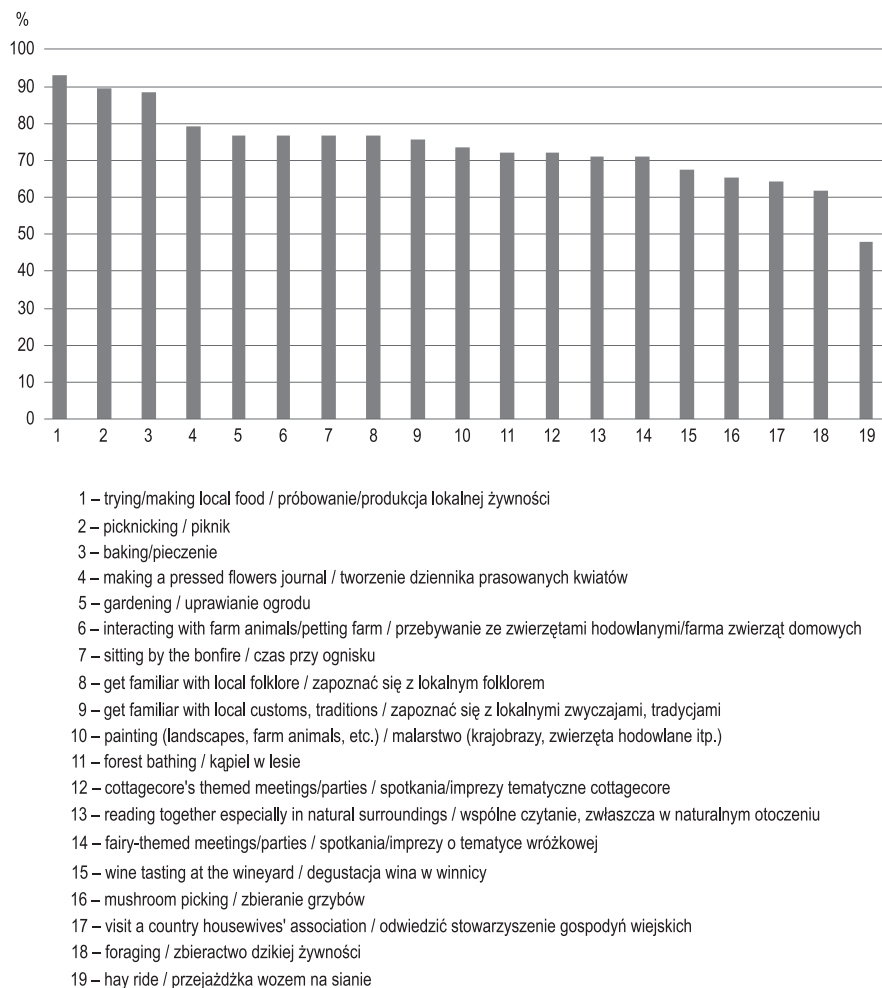


Fig. 2. Preferred activities during an agritourism stay [%]

Ryc. 2. Aktywności podejmowane najchętniej w gospodarstwie agroturystycznym [%]

Source: own elaboration on the basis of research results (percentages do not add up to 100%, as respondents could select more than one answer).

Źródło: opracowanie własne na podstawie wyników badań (wartości procentowe nie sumują się do 100, ponieważ respondenci mogli wybrać więcej niż jedną odpowiedź).

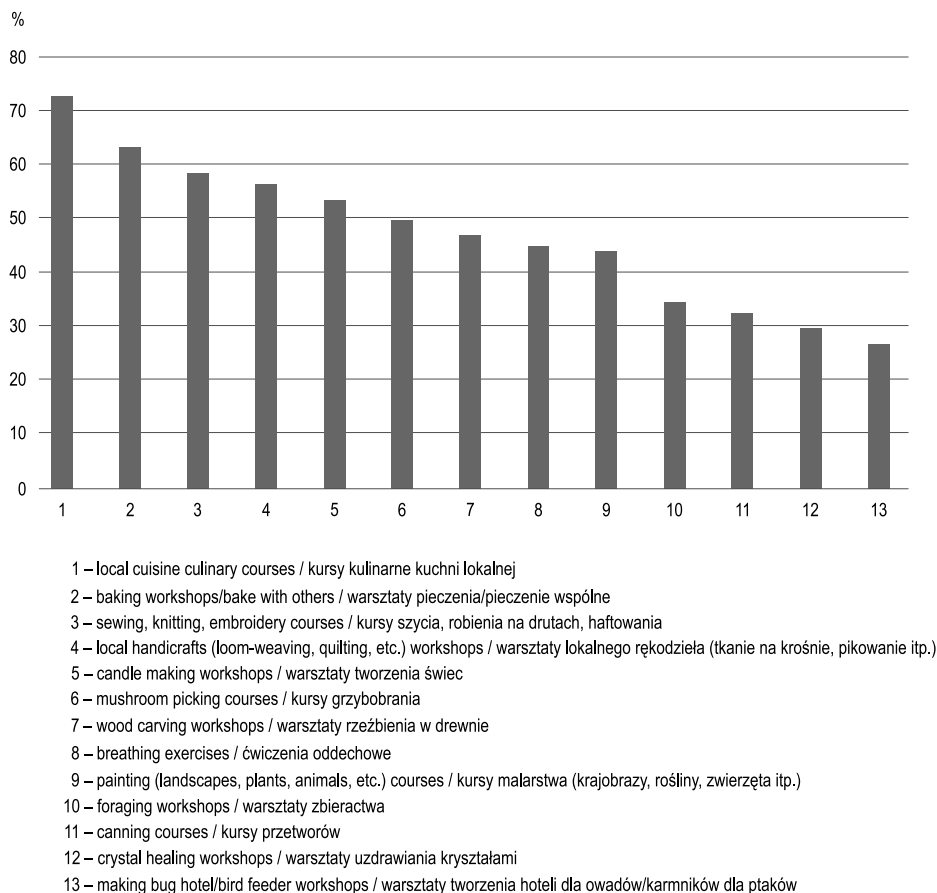


Fig. 3. Interest in courses and workshops during the rural leisure stay [%]

Ryc. 3. Zainteresowanie kursami i warsztatami podczas wypoczynku na wsi [%]

Source: own elaboration (percentages do not add up to 100%, as respondents could select more than one answer).

Źródło: opracowanie własne na podstawie wyników badań (wartości procentowe nie sumują się do %100, ponieważ respondenci mogli wybrać więcej niż jedną odpowiedź).

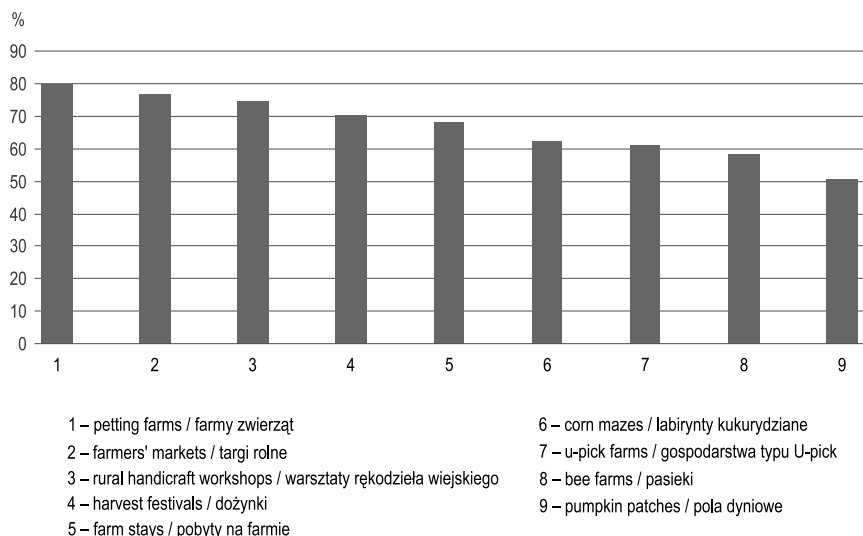


Fig. 4. Interest in venues related to agritourism facilities [%]

Ryc. 4. Zainteresowanie wydarzeniami w gospodarstwach agroturystycznych [%]

Source: own elaboration (percentages do not add up to 100%, as respondents could select more than one answer)

Źródło: opracowanie własne na podstawie wyników badań (wartości procentowe nie sumują się do %100, ponieważ respondenci mogli wybrać więcej niż jedną odpowiedź).

Conclusion

The findings of this study reveal that *cottagecore* may be a new phenomenon in the rural tourism space. *Cottagecore* and the characteristics associated with this concept are strongly linked to the activities, values and overall concept of agritourism. Introducing the concept of *cottagecore* into the tourism programs could attract many young people to the countryside and surrounding areas. There is potential to develop an agritourism product that could serve as a motivator to for future visits to these destinations. Agritourism farms, campsites and cottages for rent may be key accommodation options, as they were the most popular among respondents and their further development could contribute to the growth of *cottagecore*-related travel.

Cottagecore tourists are interested in actively participating in farm life, so it is important for these farms to offer such „experiences”. It is also important to develop

attractions related to local cuisine, provide access to knowledge about it, and involve tourists in the preparation of local delicacies. This is strongly linked to the folklore and customs of the area, which are unique assets of rural communities.

Thanks to the simplicity of life represented by this trend, agritourism facilities can easily attract potential visitors by offering, above all, idyllic landscapes. The growing trend of seeking simple pleasures and a return to nature are favourable to the development of rural tourism, and *cottagecore* can be an additional component to improve the agritourism offer. The research may be of interest to policymakers and marketers seeking to better understand the emerging segment of new-generation tourists. Additional, future in-depth research could help create even more customized agritourist offers that align with more sophisticated needs.

Due to the small sample size collected in this study, the results cannot be generalised to the entire phenomenon under study. However, this study proposes new approaches for further studies to analyse the application potential of the *cottagecore* concept in agritourism destinations and their co-creation to add more value to these destinations.

Badania zostały przeprowadzone w ramach pracy licencjackiej pt. „Generation Z travel patterns. Is Cottagecore new phenomenon for the future? [Wzorce podróżowania pokolenia Z. Czy Cottagecore to nowe zjawisko przyszłości?]”, Sierpień Kamila, promotor A. Tucki, Lublin : Uniwersytet Marii Skłodowskiej Curie w Lublinie, 2022.

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