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## The Covid 19 pandemic and the attitudes of consumers of agritourism farms towards health and physical activity

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### Abstract

The Covid 19 pandemic had a negative impact on various spheres of human life and the economy. Among them, tourism is mentioned, and mass tourism in particular. However, agritourism activity as a branch of the tourism sector is specific. Therefore, from the scientific and practical point of view, it turned out to be important to examine its impact on the behavior of consumers of agritourism services. From the point of view of tourists, agritourism has become an alternative to large clusters of people in popular, well-known, crowded destinations. Therefore, the following research questions arose: have the preferences of tourists regarding the place of rest changed under the influence of the Covid 19 pandemic and have the behavior of consumers of agritourism services changed in the context of physical activity and approach to health? The main purpose of this study is to investigate the influence of Covid 19 pandemic on consumers of agricultural farms in the context of health and physical activity in the hosts opinion. Research using the diagnostic survey method was carried out among the hosts of 60 agritourism farms in the Greater Poland Voivodeship in 2022. The results showed that although the hosts noticed a greater interest in agritourism and leisure in rural areas, they did not notice an increase in interest in physical activity and care for the health of their guests in connection with the Covid 19 pandemic.

**Key words:** Covid 19, agritourism farms, health, physical activity

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### Introduction

The development of agritourism has been observed in Poland since the early 1990s [1, 2,3]. Areas that are characterized by particular tourist attractiveness, especially recreational, natural and sightseeing values, clearly dominate. The motive for choosing a village by tourists was usually the search for a different environment, an escape

from the hustle and bustle and life in large agglomerations. Tourists feel the need to contact nature, get to know it and admire landscapes different from everyday ones. Meeting nature is an opportunity for contemplation or physical activity [4]. A farm called an agritourism farm is a parallel functioning farm and activity providing tourist services. The farm is also an accommodation base and the main tourist attraction for a potential tourist. Although rest in the countryside "at the host's" most often takes the form of stationary rest, "idyllic holidays", it can also provide guests with many impressions, attractions and forms of recreation. Space is of key importance for agritourism. It provides closeness to nature, freedom of movement, and is also conducive to outdoor sports [5]. M. Drzewiecki [6] calls rural areas, which are conducive to the development of tourism, rural recreational space. M. Drzewiecki states that agritourism is a form of recreation taking place in rural areas of an agricultural nature, based on accommodation and recreational activities related to a farm or equivalent and its surroundings (natural, production and service). It is worth emphasizing the clearly visible emphasis in this definition on the relationship between the agritourist and his recreational activity and the farm [6]. This relationship is an important element that distinguishes agritourism from other forms of rural tourism, which is closely associated with agriculture and an operating farm [7,8]. Crop production and livestock breeding are one of its attractions [9] (Gaworecki 2000: 84–85). Tourists experience the specific home atmosphere, share meals with the hosts, and can also take part in the rural cultural life [10] (Majewski 2000: 8). Agritourism can take various forms: as a permanent holiday stay on the farm; or as a specialized, more active, sports-related form of relaxation combined with: the horseback riding, cycling, nordic walking, angling, hunting, collecting fruits of the forest, bird watching, wildlife watching, etc. [11].

Rural tourism, including agritourism, was one of the industries most affected by the effects of the pandemic. Tourism industries have been hit greatly, with their operations thrown in limbo as a result of international, national, regional, and local limitations imposed by governments as a result of the coronavirus pandemic [12]. Agritourism could be a viable means of generating additional revenue for rural farmers, many of whom have been impoverished as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic and recommending agritourism as a viable domestic and sustainable form of tourism in boosting the economies of rural agricultural communities [13]. The state of epidemiological emergency announced in March 2020 resulted in the introduction of numerous restrictions, the consequence of which was the suspension, and in extreme cases, the closure of most tourist activities, including agritourism. The gradual defrosting of the economy by the Ministry of Development and the Chief Sanitary Inspector began on May 4, 2020. This allowed the tourism sector to be restarted, taking into account applicable regulations and restrictions. The pandemic caused by the coronavirus and the related restrictions on the functioning and movement of the population have significantly affected the planned ways of spending leisure time. The ban on international passenger air transport, which was in force until May 31, 2020, was not without significance, without which trips for foreign holidays, which had been extremely popular among Poles, ceased to be perceived as equally attractive. In addition, the announced ways of organizing holidays in hotels in the current sanitary regime, strongly affecting the way of spending the stay so far, e.g. regarding free stay on the beach or serving meals in the changed all inclusive formula, certainly discouraged at least some tourists from choosing this option. Customers' interest inevitably focused (this process could be observed quite quickly by monitoring reports from the domestic tourist market) on spending holidays in Poland, without having to make a still risky trip abroad combined with burdensome and lengthy border procedures and staying in large groups of people in hotels, where in conditions that are usually hot, e.g. wearing masks all the time can be extremely onerous. During the pandemic, tourists were much more looking for places that would provide a respite after weeks of quarantine. Locations with convenient access from large metropolises, with at least a separate sanitary facility and entrance, were preferred in order to minimize contact with other people resting in the same facility. According to research conducted by Wojcieszak-Zbierska and co-authors [14], the vast majority of the respondents who declared that they were willing to take a tourist trip believed that agritourism farms were a good place to spend this year's holidays. Apart from indicating the basic factors (peace, quiet and good price) that encourage people to spend holidays at these facilities, the respondents stated that due to the small scale of their operation, the risk of contracting the coronavirus at these facilities was low. The real boom concerned agritourism lodgings, usually located in secluded areas, surrounded by fields and forests. The downward trend of taking holidays abroad or in domestic hotels or guesthouses, which has been maintained since at least March 2020, was an opportunity for the agritourism industry to "develop" the preferences of tourists by emphasizing the safety of the rest offered and spending it without fear for the health of loved ones.

### **Aim of the Study and Research Tool**

The main purpose of this study is to investigate the influence of Covid 19 pandemic on consumers of agricultural farms in the context of health and physical activity in the hosts opinion. The method of a diagnostic survey was applied, which was the standardized interview technique with the use of the questionnaire tool between

randomly selected hosts of agritourism farms. In order to carry out the research, an authorship questionnaire was prepared for the study. The research sample constituted 10% of the total number of agritourism farms in Wielkopolska. The author's questionnaire contains the necessary specification and four areas compatible with the research questions. These areas concerned: I. consumer preferences regarding the choice of a tourist destination, II. expectations towards the service provider and premises conditions during the Covid 19 pandemic, III. customer preferences regarding the offer corresponding to physical culture, IV. economic situation of agritourism farms in the aspect of Covid 19. The questionnaire had 13 questions. For the purposes of this article, the results from the third part of the questionnaire were used. The obtained data were subjected to statistical analysis using classical methods such as cross tables, ANOVA and other parametric and non-parametric tests. Descriptive statistics (percentages, means and standard deviations) were calculated. The differences between responses were tested among the groups with a Chi-square test for independence. Statistical significance was set at  $p < 0.05$ .

## Results of the Research

The research among 60 owners of agritourism farms was conducted in the Greater Poland Voivodeship from March to November 2022. Among the surveyed farm owners, 55% were men and 45% were women. The youngest of the surveyed hosts was 34 years old, the oldest 77 years old (Table 1). Most of them declared secondary (46.7%) and higher (35%) education (Table 2). The farm that has been run for the longest period of time is 22 years old (table 3).

Table 1. Age of respondents

Mean	Min	Max	Standard deviation	Mean for Women (N=27)	Mean for Men (N=33)
56,88	34	77	11,47	51,48	61,3

Table 3. respondents' level of education

Education level	N = 60	(%)
Primary education	0	0
Vocational education	2	3,3
Secondary education	28	46,7
Incomplete higher education	9	15,0
Higher education	21	35,0

Table 3. Length of running an agritourism farm (in years)

Mean	Min	Max	Standard deviation
12,1	2	22	5,9

The surveyed owners of agritourism farms mostly believe that the Covid 19 pandemic has contributed to the increased interest in agritourism and leisure in the countryside. As many as 68.3% of the respondents declare that the interest in their agritourism offer has increased, and 85% stated that the general interest in leisure in the countryside has increased. In addition, 70% of the surveyed farmers declare that the occupancy on the farm has increased (table 4).

Table 4. Increased interest in agritourism during the Covid 19 pandemic

<b>Interest in the offer of an agritourism farm</b>	<b>N = 60</b>	<b>%</b>
Yes	41	68.3
No	9	15
No changes (same as before the outbreak of the pandemic)	9	15
I do not know	1	1.7
<b>Popularization of recreation in the countryside</b>		
Yes	51	85
No	5	8.3
No changes (same as before the outbreak of the pandemic)	4	6.7
I do not know	0	0
<b>Increased occupancy on the farm</b>		
Yes	42	70
No	6	10
No changes (same as before the outbreak of the pandemic)	11	18.3
I do not know	1	1.7

The aim of the study was to check the preferences of tourists regarding the approach to health and physical activity during their stay on an agritourism farm. Therefore, the question was asked in the questionnaire: "Due to the Covid 19 pandemic, have you noticed a greater interest in the physical activity of your guests?" (table 5.).

Table 5. Growth of interest in physical activity influenced by the Covid 19 pandemic

<b>Growth of interest in physical activity</b>	<b>N = 60</b>	<b>%</b>
Yes	20	33.33
No	18	30
No changes (same as before the outbreak of the pandemic)	20	33.33
I do not know	2	3.33

As it turns out, the surveyed hosts of agritourism farms did not notice the increased physical activity of their guests, did not notice the increased needs for sport or recreation.

<b>Likert Scale (1-5)</b>				
Mean	Median	Min	Max	Standard deviation
3.25	3	2	5	0.99

In the next question, the respondents could mark the selected forms of physical activity and it turned out that most of them were walks in the forest - 78.33% (table 6.). Guests also appreciated cycling and fishing (48.3%).

Table 6. Guest preferences regarding physical activity

<b>Guest preferences</b>	<b>N = 60</b>	<b>%</b>
Walks in the woods	47	78.33
Secluded places to relax in the open air	16	26.7
Access to bicycles and cycle paths	29	48.3
Access to fishing	29	48.3
A place to play ball and play	15	25
Bathing area	9	15
Other (What?)	17	28.3

From the forms of physical activity listed as "other", the respondents mentioned: Nordic walking, swimming, horseback riding, horseback riding recreation and canoeing. To the question: "Have you noticed a greater interest in taking care of your health (i.e. healthy eating, sports, being outdoors) under the influence of the Covid 19

pandemic?" this was the answer of only 31.7% of the respondents. It turns out, therefore, that the Covid 19 pandemic did not significantly affect the changes in the attitude of tourists towards health (table 7.).

Table 7. Increased interest in taking care of health

Growth of interest in taking care of health		N = 60	%
Yes		19	31.7
No		17	28.3
No changes (same as before the outbreak of the pandemic)		22	36.7
I do not know		2	3.3

  

Likert scale (1-5)				
Mean	Median	Min	Max	Standard deviation
3,0	3	1	5	0,94

Since the results of the research carried out in the third part of the questionnaire did not show an increased interest of tourists in physical activity, health or broadly understood sport, it was decided to conduct further analysis and conduct in-depth statistical tests.

- Age of the surveyed owners of agritourism farms

In order to verify whether the age, education and length of running a tourist activity in the countryside had a significant impact on his assessment, whether the pandemic resulted in greater interest in physical activity of guests, first two groups of respondents were selected - those who answered "Yes" to the survey question and those who answered "No" or "No change". Due to the fact that the assumption concerning the normality of the age distribution of the hosts in the analyzed groups (tested with the Shapiro-Wilk tests) was not met, a non-parametric equivalent of the t-test for independent samples was used for the purposes of the analysis - the Mann-Whitney U test (table 8).. The analysis was statistically insignificant ( $U=310$ ,  $z=1.15$ ,  $p=0.252$ ). Respondents who stated that they noticed a greater interest in physical activity among guests as a result of the pandemic ( $N=20$ ,  $Mdn=56.5$ ) did not differ significantly in age from respondents who stated that they did not notice such a phenomenon ( $N=38$ ,  $Mdn= 60.5$ ).

Table 8. The results of the Mann-Whitney U tests for the purpose of verifying the relationship with the age of the respondent

Question	Answer	N	Median	Statistics z	p
Due to the Covid 19 pandemic, have you noticed a greater interest in the physical activity of your guests?	"No" or "no change"	17	58.0	-1.15	0.252
	"Yes"	20	56.5		
	"No" or "no change"	38	60,5		
Have you noticed a greater interest in taking care of your health (i.e. healthy eating, sports, being outdoors) under the influence of the Covid 19 pandemic?	"Yes"	19	56	-1.91	0.057
	"No" or "no change"	37	62		
	"I do not know"	12	60.0		

In order to verify whether the age of the host had a significant impact on his assessment, or whether the pandemic resulted in greater interest in taking care of health, two groups of respondents were first selected - those who answered "Yes" to the eighth question of the survey and those who answered "No" or "No change" (table 9). Due to the fact that the assumption concerning the normality of the age distribution of the hosts in the analyzed groups (tested with the Shapiro-Wilk tests) was not met, a non-parametric equivalent of the t-test for independent samples was used for the purposes of the analysis - the Mann-Whitney U test. The analysis was statistically insignificant ( $U=241.5$ ,  $z=1.91$ ,  $p=0.057$ ). It should be noted, however, that the obtained result is at the level of statistical

tendency. Respondents who said they noticed a greater interest in taking care of their health as a result of the pandemic (N=19, Mdn=56) did not differ significantly in age from respondents who said they had not noticed such a phenomenon (N=37, Mdn=62).

- The level of education of the surveyed owners of agritourism farms

In all the conducted statistical tests related to the level of education, two groups of respondents were selected: people with vocational or secondary education (N=30) and people with higher education or a bachelor's degree (N=30). However, not in all tests the size of these groups was exactly 30, due to the fact that the variants of the answer "I don't know" were not taken into account in most of the analyses. In order to verify whether the host's education had a significant impact on his assessment, or whether the pandemic resulted in greater interest in physical activity of guests, two groups of respondents were first selected - those who had vocational or secondary education and those who had a bachelor's degree or higher education. The chi-square test of independence was used for the analysis, with a statistically insignificant result,  $\chi^2(1)=1.68$ ,  $p=0.195$ . Among respondents with a bachelor's or higher education (N=28), 42.9% of them indicated a greater interest in physical activity among guests as a result of the pandemic. Among people with secondary or vocational education (N=30), this percentage was 26.7%, respectively. The table 9 shows the fractions and numbers of people who answered 'Yes' to a given survey question.

Table 9. Results of chi-square tests or Fisher's exact tests for the purpose of verifying the relationship with the respondent's education

Question	Education level				p	Phi factor
	Higher and Incomplete higher education		Secondary and Vocational education			
	N	%	N	%		
Due to the Covid 19 pandemic, have you noticed a greater interest in the physical activity of your guests?	12	42.9	8	26.7	0.195	-
Have you noticed a greater interest in taking care of your health (i.e. healthy eating, sports, being outdoors) under the influence of the Covid 19 pandemic?	11	42.3	8	26.7	0.218	-

In order to verify whether the host's education had a significant impact on his assessment, or whether the pandemic influenced greater interest in taking care of health, two groups of respondents were first selected - those who had vocational or secondary education and those who had a bachelor's degree or higher education. The chi-square test of independence was used for the analysis, with a statistically insignificant result,  $\chi^2(1)=1.52$ ,  $p=0.218$ . Among the respondents with a bachelor's or higher education (N=26), 42.3% of them said that they noticed a greater interest in taking care of health due to the pandemic. Among people with secondary or vocational education (N=30), this percentage was 26.7%, respectively.

- Length of running agritourism activity by the surveyed owners of agritourism farms

In order to verify whether the length of running an agritourism farm by the respondent had a significant impact on his assessment, whether the pandemic resulted in greater interest in physical activity of guests, two groups of respondents were first selected - those who answered "Yes" to the sixth question of the survey and those who answered "No" or "No change" (table 10.). Due to the failure to meet the assumption concerning the normality of the distribution of the length of running a farm by the respondents in the analyzed groups (tested with the Shapiro-Wilk tests), a non-parametric equivalent of the t-test for independent samples was used for the purposes of the analysis - the Mann-Whitney U test. The analysis was statistically significant ( $U=233.5$ ,  $z=2.40$ ,  $p=0.016$ ). Respondents who stated that they noticed a greater interest in physical activity among guests as a result of the pandemic (N=20, Mdn=8)

had significantly shorter work experience (in relation to running an agritourism farm) than respondents who stated that they had not noticed such a phenomenon ( N=38,Mdn=13.50).

Table 10. The results of the Mann-Whitney U tests for the purpose of verifying the relationship with the length of running an agritourism farm

Question	Answer	N	Median	Statistics z	p
	"No" or "no change"	31	12.0		
Due to the Covid 19 pandemic, have you noticed a greater interest in the physical activity of your guests?	„Yes”	20	8.0	-2.40	<b>0.016</b>
	"No" or "no change"	38	13.5		
Have you noticed a greater interest in taking care of your health (i.e. healthy eating, sports, being outdoors) under the influence of the Covid 19 pandemic?	„Yes”	19	10.0	-1.79	0.074
	"No" or "no change"	37	13.0		

In order to verify whether the length of running an argotourism farm by the respondent had a significant impact on his assessment, whether the pandemic resulted in greater interest in taking care of health, two groups of respondents were first selected - those who answered "Yes" to the eighth question of the survey and those who who answered "No" or "No change". Due to the failure to meet the assumption concerning the normality of the distribution of the length of running a farm by the respondents in the analyzed groups (tested with the Shapiro-Wilk tests), a non-parametric equivalent of the t-test for independent samples was used for the purposes of the analysis - the Mann-Whitney U test. The analysis gave a statistically insignificant result, but at the level of statistical tendency (U=248.5 z=1.79, p=0.074). The respondents who stated that they noticed a greater interest in taking care of their health as a result of the pandemic (N=19, Mdn=10) did not differ significantly in terms of the length of the internship (in relation to running an agritourism farm) from the respondents who stated that such a phenomenon was not noticed (N=37,Mdn=13).

## Discussion and Final Conclusions

The motive for choosing rural areas by tourists is not only the search for an environment different from everyday life. They are interested in the natural and cultural heritage of the region, they show concern for the natural environment; but also about your health and well-being [17, 18, 19, 20, 21]. Nature and the lack of crowds are a very important factor that largely determines the choice of agritourism as a form of spending free time.

The conducted research shows that the hosts of agritourism farms believe that the Covid 19 pandemic had a positive impact on agritourism in Poland. It caused the occupancy on farms to be greater, as well as the general interest in recreation in the countryside. Although the increase in social awareness about the importance of physical activity for human health and development is increasing, the research shows that the hosts have not noticed an increase in interest in physical activity among their guests due to the Covid 19 pandemic. Residents of rural areas who undertake non-agricultural tourism activities should use the existing recreational and tourist infrastructure and prepare it themselves. Especially that they often organize events and attractions, such as: horseback riding, bicycle trips, guided tours of parks or reserves, mushroom picking trips, canoeing trips and others. Therefore, agritourism (in this edition), similarly to qualified tourism, may be one of the most important and most accessible forms of active recreation [11, 22,23].

The use of the rural natural environment is an important and easily accessible factor supporting the renewal of strength of people who lead an urban, sedentary lifestyle, making it easier for them to undertake various forms of recreation related to physical recreational and tourist activity. If there are spatial, natural environment and socio-economic conditions, then with appropriate, well-thought-out use, focused on promoting health and physical activity, they can become a niche product of qualified agritourism in Poland. For several years, in Poland, a clear increase in the importance of sport has been observed, which in developed societies has become a common good, available in various forms, according to the capabilities and interests of citizens. Trips motivated by sport and physical recreational activity have become popular. The offer of domestic rural tourism and agritourism, following the example of foreign countries, should also include elements of tourism focused on sport and any physical activity.

Rural space obviously creates conditions for the development of a specialized, higher form of rural tourism - qualified agritourism. The analysis of the literature on the subject and contemporary trends in spending free time and using rural areas, especially those located in close proximity to large agglomerations, indicates the need to specialize tourist services in rural areas in the direction of agritourism farms offering physical activity, specialized, using the farm location rent, ensuring use of specialized equipment. In addition to the sightseeing and natural conditions in the countryside and properly prepared conditions for its cultivation, the level and health value of physical recreation undertaken on agritourism farms also depends on the owners of these farms, who should become specialists in the field of physical culture and try to act as instructors and animators of free time, as specialized farms with an offer dedicated to a specific segment of qualified, active tourists will have an increasing share in the agritourism market, and typical farms providing basic tourist services in the countryside will have a smaller share [24]. The author sees the need for specialization in the offer of agritourism farms in Poland, in which emphasis will be placed on the physical activity of tourists.

Unfortunately, the results of the research conducted are worrying. They should be a guide to supplementing the offer of agro-tourism farms with physical activity. Hosts should encourage their guests to exercise and stay active outdoors.

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