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Agritourism as a preferred travelling trend in boosting rural economies in the post-COVID-19 period: Nexus between agriculture, tourism, art and culture

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Abstract

The COVID-19 global pandemic has caused a massive disruption in the global economy, especially the tourism and hospitality industry. The unpleasant experience of the COVID-19 pandemic and its post effects and the fear of a new wave of infections has thrown the tourism industry of many countries in limbo. Due to the growing interest in agritourism, it has become a preferred travelling trend in boosting the tourism revenues of countries, especially, those in the rural regions where the harsh economic impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic is greatly experienced. This mini-review of existing theoretical and empirical studies on agritourism aimed at discussing how agritourism as a tourism option for countries, could boost rural economies, promote cultural education and local traditional craft enterprises in this post-COVID-19 period. The study concludes that when skilfully managed with strict observation to the COVID-19 safety protocols, agritourism could be a preferred tourism resort for especially domestic visitors to generate tourism revenue for impoverished farmers and rural community members in the present post-COVID-19 era.

Keywords: agritourism, culture, COVID-19 pandemic, rural economy, domestic tourism

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Public Interest Statement

This article reviews the literature on agritourism from theoretical and empirical studies. It intellectually discusses how agritourism unites the fields of agriculture, tourism, art and culture. It tactfully presents workable suggestions to the policy makers in the tourism industry on how to encourage the development of agritourism as a sustainable form of domestic tourism in Ghana.



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Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic and its associated lockdown restrictions on human movement have caused a wreck on the global economy with serious post effects that will take years to repair (Adom, Adu-Mensah & Sekyere, 2020; Gössling, Scott & Hall, 2021). Businesses have suffered massive drawbacks in investments (UNECA, 2020) with disruptions in business operations leading to a total collapse of some resulting in an increase in unemployment rates at an unprecedented level (UNIDO, 2020; OECD, 2020). 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 (Gössling, Scott & Hall, 2021). Similarly, the agricultural sector has witnessed a gigantic decline in demand and supply of agricultural goods in the fall of 2019 when the pandemic started (FAO, 2019). Farmers have been hard hit as a result of the coronavirus pandemic restrictions. Nicola et al. (2020) report a 20% reduction in the prices of agricultural goods due to the closures of hospitality industries such as hotels and restaurants. Moreover, the restrictions on human mobility as a result of the COVID-19 reduced workers on farms and other agricultural enterprises, as such, the post-COVID-19 period has witnessed a high rise in postharvest losses in agricultural goods due to the absence and/or minimum numbers of agricultural workers on farms in harvesting crops (Bhusal, 2020). This situation culminated as a result of many seasonal workers from neighbouring countries and regions who could not cross borders to work on their contracted farms as a result of lockdown restrictions on travels (OECD, 2020).

To assist farmers to cope with the post-COVID-19 economic challenges, Barbieri et al. (2016) have suggested that they must increase their strategies to generate revenue from their agricultural production. Diversification of agricultural lands and farms for agritourism has remained a golden option for farmers to generate additional income aside from their usual farming activities (Privetera, 2010). Granted, there is a general assertion that the global tourism industry would bounce back from the economic downfall as a result of the coronavirus pandemic (CNN, 2020). Agritourism is an innovative form of tourism that creates a nexus between agriculture and the cultural heritage of communities could be a potential preferred travelling trend for most domestic and international tourists. While learning lessons taught the tourism industry by the COVID-19 pandemic, Gössling, Scott, and Hall (2021) advise that there must be long-term transformations to more resilient destinations to achieve sustainable tourism, particular looking for solutions in domestic forms of tourism such as agritourism. Therefore, the main aim of this review paper was to find out the possibilities of agritourism as a preferred tourism model for travellers in this post-COVID-19 period when domestic and international restrictions on movement and travel are gradually being lifted. Moreover, the review paper sought to investigate how 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.

Methods

The steps in the systematic literature review (Boland, Cherry & Dickson, 2017) guided the selection, analyses, discussion, and interpretation of the Sixty-One scholarly articles reviewed which were thematically presented under four thematic areas:

1. The concept of agritourism
2. Benefits of Agritourism for Boosting Rural Economies, Cultural Heritage Education, and Sustainable Agriculture
3. Agritourism as a Preferred Travelling Trend in the Post-COVID-19 Period
4. Challenges Associated with Agritourism Development and Suggested Solutions

The steps in the systematic literature review included in this methodological procedure included identification of the scholarly literature appropriate for the theme under consideration, gathering of relevant strands from the admitted scholarly literature for the study, analyses of the data accrued, reporting and drawing tentative conclusions and inferences from the intellectual discussion of the literature (Okoli, 2015). Keywords and phrases such as ‘agritourism’, ‘COVID-19 and agriculture’, ‘COVID-19 and tourism’, ‘agritourism and COVID-19’, ‘domestic tourism’ in the Web of Science search engine to search for the scholarly literature for the study. The inclusion criteria for the selection of the papers for the review have been detailed in Table 1.

Table 1. Paper inclusion criteria

Parameters	Inclusion criteria
Keywords/Phrases	Includes keywords agritourism, agritourism and COVID-19, agriculture and COVID-19, tourism and COVID-19, domestic tourism
Language	English
Publication year	2000-2021
Types of papers	Papers published in peer-reviewed journals and conference proceedings
Papers’ topics	Papers on agritourism, agriculture, and tourism in COVID-19 pandemic period and after
Written criteria	Written in clarity, with rigorous methodological approaches, sound data collection procedures as well as scholarly discussions and conclusions
Methodologies	Qualitative Method, Quantitative Method, and Mixed Methods

Source: Authors’ Construct

Results and Discussion

The Concept of Agritourism

Ideas of introducing agritourism as a tourism activity on agricultural lands and farms developed roughly two decades ago as a result of the increasing demand for soft tourism that costs less but could give visitors a pleasurable experience with nature (Theodoropoulou, 2004). Since that time, agritourism has become one of the fastest growing tourism models globally (Busby & Rendle, 2000). Though Agritourism was initially seen as a peripheral activity on farms for

agricultural production, it is now reckoned as an important aspect of rural tourism that has the capability of enriching the economies of especially rural agricultural communities (Majewski et al., 2003). Agritourism as a preferred tourism model is not surprising because of its responsiveness to environmental sustainability, sustainable agriculture, as well as social, historical, and cultural ramifications in rural areas (Pavić, Pažek & Pavlovič, 2018; Nickerson, Black & McCool, 2001). The concept of agritourism stems from various activities that are carried out on agricultural farms for pleasure, education, as well as natural and cultural heritage (Tew & Barbieri, 2012). These activities include livestock farming, plant production (Jeczmyk & Uglis, 2014; Majewski, 2000), engaging in the traditional culinary practice, and local cultural crafts produced from agricultural raw materials. Agritourism's primary goal is to conserve the environment, history, and culture of rural areas, where it initially gained popularity while ensuring sustainable agriculture (Privetera, 2010). This attempt was to boost the capitals of rural communities and enrich the revenue of farmers and agricultural entrepreneurs (Flanigan, Blackstock & Hunter, 2014; Eshun & Tettey, 2014; Adom, 2019).

Granted, agritourism is a popular and inexpensive tourism model in agricultural communities stepped in rural regions. This may be because agriculture has been the mainstay occupation in rural regions. However, it will be erroneous to limit the tourism model to rural communities as many urban centres today have started the innovative idea of establishing agritourism facilities on farmlands (Srisomyong, 2010; Sznajder et al., 2009). With this development, it would be unjust to classify agritourism as an aspect of rural tourism as has been theorized in literature.

Though the term 'agritourism' is popular in literature for tourism activities on agricultural farms (Wojcieszak, Jeczmyk, Zawadka & Uglis, 2020; Schilling, Sullivan & Komar, 2012; Phillip, Hunter & Blackstock, 2010), other terms have been equally used to describe this tourism model. These include 'agrotourism' (Kizos & Iosifides, 2007; Eshun & Tettey, 2014), 'agriculture tourism' (Veeck, Che & Veeck, 2006), 'agritainment' (Kime et al., 2011; Wicks & Merrett, 2003). Yet, the activities in this tourism model that demonstrates a symbiotic relationship between agriculture and tourism described by these terms are the same or share very striking similarities.

Benefits of Agritourism for Boosting Rural Economies, Cultural Heritage Education, and Sustainable Agriculture

The development of agritourism in rural agricultural communities is primarily aimed at increasing the economic gains of the farmers. It targets alleviating poverty and boosting rural economies (Wojcieszak et al., 2020; Bhatta & Ohe, 2020). This is because agritourism creates various employment avenues for many people in rural regions, especially, where agritourism is introduced. Privetera (2010), Sadowski and Wojcieszak (2019) as well as Zawadka (2019) argue that both the young and old in the rural farming communities get the chance of creating new businesses using agricultural products and raw materials or by engaging in on-site service jobs in agricultural production. Thus, for the farmers, enterprises in agritourism become a secondary source of income generation that would add up to the income from their primary farming occupation (Srisomyong, 2010). In a study conducted by Hamilpurka (2012) in Karnataka in India, it was observed that the income levels of rural farmers were increased as a result of introducing agritourism as an extended tourism model on agricultural production farms in the region. Likewise, in Ghana, Eshun, and Tettey (2014) noted

that the introduction of agritourism in Adjeikrom Cocoa Tour Facility increased the patronage of cocoa which happens to be the main cash crop in the area, increasing the economic gains of the poor rural farmers in the region. Jobs in traditional food processing methods are created for women such that they can teach visitors how to prepare the traditional culinary or local foods, while some engage in the management of food and drink stalls or managing accommodation centres at the agritourism facility (Srisomyong, 2010). Petromana et al. (2016) note in their study that rural women gained employment by preparing traditional cuisines in bread, pork meat, and sheep cheese. Both men, women, and the youth also get the opportunity to produce and sell tourist souvenir items or crafts that often portray the rich cultural heritage of the people (Kuo & Chiu, 2006). Interestingly, these varied employment avenues made possible as a result of agritourism could assist every member of the rural family in engaging in a profitable good or service to enrich the family revenue and improve their livelihood support systems (Pavić, Pažek & Pavlovič, 2018). Agritourism often promotes the consumption of local products and services and this has been the catalyst for enriching rural economies in agricultural communities (Kline, Barbieri & LaPan, 2016; Di Domenico & Miller, 2012; Rogerson, 2012).

Agritourism is a great educational tool because it helps visitors to learn both the traditional agricultural production and cultural heritage of rural communities through direct experience and direct observation (Petromana et al., 2016). Eshun and Tettey (2014) contend that the educational aspects of agritourism especially for school children who visit agritourism centres hold the great potential of rejuvenating their interests in the field of agriculture, which is drastically waning in Africa. While visitors, especially the youth, engage in hands-on activities in some aspects of traditional agricultural production, their interests in agricultural production methods such as gradually developed. Barbieri (2013) and Koutsouris et al. (2014) mentions that such activities could include self-harvest, planting, and irrigation of some of the agricultural produce on the farm. This agricultural literacy is crucial for the promotion of agriculture among the younger generation (Brune et al., 2018). Others also enjoy the aesthetics of the farmscape, orchard, and wineries on the farm. There is also agritainment that results from engaging in the performance of activities that are traditionally performed on the farms as well as other forms of entertainment such as hiking and hayrides and many others (Wojcieszak, eczmyk, Zawadka & Uglis, 2020). It is important to educate visitors of the cultural sphere of community life (Karabati et al., 2009) including their traditional agricultural production procedures, cultural beliefs, and practices associated with the agricultural production as well as spiritual purification rites that must be performed before tilling the land, planting or harvesting crops. This is what Privetera (2010) refers to as the 'educational-ecological function' of agritourism. Agritourism relies on the refurbishment of old architectural structures and facilities ((Ventura & Milone, 2000; Barbieri, Mahoney & Butler, 2008) which is part of the material culture of a people. Thus, visitors are made to visit and lodge in the indigenous and historical buildings in the communities, and this offers them an opportunity to inquire and get abreast with the place identity history of the rural communities. Local customs and ancestral practices are learned at agritourism sites (Ainley, 2014; Yang, 2012).

Educating visitors about the cultural heritage of the rural communities, particularly concerning their farming culture as well as ways of life helps in preserving the rural lifestyles, culture, and landscapes of the communities, resulting in green tourism (Privetera, 2010). More so,

the education of the rich cultural heritage of the youth who visit agritourism sites helps them to appreciate the science of their forebears, the indigenous knowledge systems of their ancestors, and the importance of their cultural norms and values. Traditional culinary classes and cultural classes are organized on some agritourism farms for visitors (Barbieri, 2013). These classes moderated by local elders in the community traditional cabinet, elderly women, and other community members who are well versed in the traditional culinary practices and cultural heritage of the people assist visitors to appreciate the wisdom of the rural forebears, which to the one who is not enlightened, rests in the past or backward in development. Enterprises in local traditional artefacts are also boosted in agritourism sites (Kuo & Chiu, 2006). Visitors often patronise the local traditional artefacts that epitomize the rural lifestyle, culture, beliefs, and traditions of the rural communities. Thus, agritourism creates a marketing outlet for these traditional craft enterprises in sculpting, leatherwork, painting, beadwork, macrame art, etc. Many of these enterprises are skills-oriented and become an avenue for the youth to get trained in professions in traditional crafts to sustain the agritourism centres set up in rural communities. Commendably, some agritourism centres deliberately create a farm shop where the local crafts or artefacts could be displayed for sales (Srisomyong, 2010). This makes it easier for the visitor to purchase and patronise these products that result in income generation for the rural artists, ensure cultural education, and preservation of cultural heritage.

Agritourism as a Preferred Tourism Model in the Post-COVID-19 Period

The Global Web Index on Coronavirus Research (2020) reports that despite the global crisis in the tourism industry, over 40% of the global population are optimistic that they will travel in the next six months in the post-COVID-19 period. Despite the keen desire of visitors to patronize tourism services, they are much concerned about tourism models that prioritize their safety and protection, especially in terms of health (Williams & Baláz, 2013). Visitors who would want to travel now in the post-COVID-19 period are very cautious of their health and that of their families. Thus, they would patronize a tourism model that reduces the tendency of contracting the coronavirus. Statistica (2020) reports that many visitors are now more interested in domestic travels as a means of reducing infection and spread of the coronavirus. This is because of the assertion among the general populace that international travels have been the leading factor in the contraction of the coronavirus. Interest in domestic products and services has soared up among the populace, including those who desire to travel for holidays, entertainment, and education (Wojcieszak et al., 2020). Many persons who have expressed interest to travel in the post-COVID-19 period have endorsed agritourism as a domestic tourism model that reduces the risk of coronavirus infection (Gössling et al., 2021).

Agritourism often requires a minimal number of visitors in a given time horizon. As such, the risk of coronavirus infection that oftentimes is exacerbated in large gatherings is avoided. Also, agritourism relies solely on local production of farm produce which visitors would be more inclined to patronize unlike imported goods labelled as coronavirus infected. These local farm products are offered in the organic farms that offer agritourism services (Bhusal, 2020; Srisomyong, 2010). Patronage of fresh agricultural produce that is inexpensive compared to purchasing these same products in supermarkets is preferred now by travellers as Rusciano,

Civero, and Scarpato (2020) noted in their study in Italy. Due to its minimal operations and domestication characteristics, agritourism is preferred as a safe tourism model with minimal risk of contracting coronavirus (Wojcieszak et al., 2020). As a domestic travel option, agritourism relies more on domestic travellers who may not necessarily be prevented from travelling as the local easing of restrictions are high globally. Skift (2020) contends that domestic travellers' fear of coronavirus infection is drastically reduced or completely allayed because they can reach the agritourism facilities more quickly, sometimes, at their backyards. Therefore, visitors would not necessarily have to travel long distances and avoid interactions with large populations. Moreover, travel to agritourism sites can be a day's trip without thinking of accommodation arrangements, limiting the stay period (Gil Arroyo, Barbieri & Rich 2013), a strategy believed to reduce the risk of coronavirus infection. The localization of agritourism is also a sustainable way of encouraging local agricultural production and services that would lead to massive income generation (Gatto, 2020) and an economic recovery strategy for the deteriorated economies of rural communities. Due to the low health risks, domestic visitors in Poland (Wielkie et al., 2020; Wojcieszak et al., 2020; Uglis et al., 2018) and Finland (Gössling et al., 2021) are more willing to engage in short trips to agritourism facilities. This growing interest in agritourism in the post-COVID-19 period presents the way forward to tourism provisions in countries.

Challenges Associated with Agritourism Development in the Post-COVID-19 Period and Suggested Solutions

The fear of contracting infectious diseases still lingers on the minds of both domestic and international tourists (Williams & Baláz, 2013). Despite the high interest in agritourism in the post-COVID-19 period, there are still concerns been raised on health safety on agricultural farms where agritourism initiatives have been established. Activities in agritourism often increase contact between wildlife, livestock, and humans which could lead to the spread of the coronavirus disease (Wu et al., 2017). All kinds of tourism activities in this period require great vigilance as tourism holds the great tendency of disease spread (Nicolaidis et al., 2019; Hon, 2013). Agricultural food production in history has been a major cause of the spread of SARS, MERS, and the current COVID-19 (Labonte et al., 2011).

Therefore, successful planning of agritourism in this post-COVID-19 period is crucial for its continual patronage and success even though there are positive empirical indicators of preference on the part of tourists. First, agricultural farmers and agricultural entrepreneurs who manage agritourism centres must ensure that safety health protocols are meticulously observed. For instance, it is a fact that the spread of any infectious disease is intensified whenever large crowds gather at a spot. Likewise, a large number of visitors often leads to poor service delivery at most agritourism facilities (Srisomyong, 2010). To remedy this situation, daily cut off points for visitors must be provided and adhered to strictly. Bookings for visits at the agritourism sites must be made before so that adequate preparations could be made to provide quality services to visitors. Eshun and Tetley (2014) advise that adequate training must be given to farmers and operators of agritourism on how to effectively address safety and health issues to put the mind of visitors at ease without any fear of contracting any infectious disease. Thermometer guns must be readily available together with hand-sanitizing liquors and equipment at the entrances to the agritourism

facility. The entire agritourism centre must be disinfected every day with hand sanitizers and hand-washing arrangements put at vantage points in the centre within short intervals. Also, appropriate social distancing protocols must be observed at all times to reduce any likelihood of coronavirus outbreak and/or spread.

Well cooked meals that have been prepared under very tidy and hygienic conditions must be served at the agritourism sites. It is recommended that locally grown farm products are used in the preparation of all the traditional culinary practices with face masks worn at all times by visitors and service providers. Procuring a sanitary and epidemiological safety certificate (Wojcieszak et al., 2020) from appropriate agencies such as the Food and Drugs Authority under the Ministry of Health and showing it to visitors would convince visitors and put their minds at rest that the agritourism facility has passed all the rigorous health and sanitation assessments.

Conclusion

The purpose of the study was to systematically review existing empirical and theoretical literature on agritourism to find out the possibility of recommending it as a safe, domestic tourism model that can boost the economies of rural communities in the post-COVID-19 period when human mobility restrictions in countries are been eased gradually. The findings of the study have confirmed that agritourism is a preferred tourism model in this coronavirus pandemic period due to its domestic characteristics, adherence to locally grown products, and minimal intake of visitors. The study has shown the tremendous benefits of agritourism in enriching rural economies, promoting local craft industries, preserving the esteemed cultural heritage of rural communities, and promoting interests in agricultural production among the youth. However, for agritourism to flourish and continue to remain an innovative income generation venture for rural communities, strict adherence to all COVID-19 safety protocols must be maintained at all times. The Ministry of Food and Agriculture in countries must assist farmers and offer them the required training for them to acquire the skills in operating agritourism facilities. Though agritourism facilities do not require high operating costs in their establishment, yet, the majority of farmers in rural communities who own these farms are impoverished and would require financial stimulus packages to start operation. Governments must offer such assistance to rural farmers through their entrepreneurship assistance programs and schemes. The Ministry of foods and agriculture must immediately set up community engagement committees for agritourism development to offer farmers who would want to transform their agricultural farms into agritourism facilities the required technical assistance, training, and coaching to be able to apply and/or qualify for the entrepreneurship assistance programs. These efforts would help rural farmers to grasp the innovative and sustainable means of establishing agritourism centres on their farmlands to repair their deteriorated financial conditions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Authors Bionote

Dickson Adom holds a Doctor of Philosophy in African Art and Culture from the Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology, Ghana. He is a lecturer in the Department of Educational Innovations in Science and Technology, K.N.U.S.T. He also holds an extraordinary researcher in the School of Economic and Management Sciences, Northwest University, South Africa. His research

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Disclaimer Statement

The authors declare that there are no conflict of interest(s) for this study.

Authorship and Level of Contribution

Dickson Adom conceptualized the research idea, wrote the problem statement and developed the research questions that undergird the study. Atabek Alimov designed the methodological framework for the study as well as the analytical procedure to be followed. Gouthami V. searched for relevant theoretical and empirical studies on agritourism based on a keyword search strategy she developed. Though Dickson Adom led the writing and editing of the final draft of the manuscript, both Atabek Alimov and Gouthami V. contributed significantly to the final approved manuscript.

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