



## Research Paper

# Segmenting the rural tourist market by sustainable travel behaviour: Insights from village visitors in Portugal

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## ARTICLE INFO

## Keywords:

Sustainable travel behaviour  
Market segmentation  
Rural tourism  
Sustainable development  
Destination marketing  
Place attachment

## ABSTRACT

Rural tourism may contribute to sustainable destination development but the realisation of this potential depends largely on the type and behaviour of the tourists attracted. Therefore, market knowledge, segmentation studies and management of demand, in accordance with sustainability-yielding territorial development goals, are needed. The present study segments the market of visitors of Portuguese villages using scales reporting environmentally, culturally, socially and economically sustainable travel behaviour. Data was collected through a one-year, on-site survey of 786 village visitors. Responses on sustainability-reflecting items were used in a hierarchical cluster analysis resulting in a three-cluster solution with diverse sustainability-impacting behaviours. One segment reveals higher concern with environmental and cultural heritage, another presents the overall most sustainable behaviours, greatly contributing to sociocultural and economic development, while a third group reports globally less sustainable behaviours. The three clusters also differ on socio-demographics, information sources used, travel behaviour, place attachment, satisfaction and destination loyalty. Interestingly, those showing more sustainable behaviour present higher levels of satisfaction and loyalty. This market knowledge permits an evaluation, selection and targeting of tourist segments yielding more sustainable destination development.

## 1. Introduction

Rural tourism can be viewed as any tourism taking place in the countryside, i.e. a territory marked by "rurality" in terms of population density, land use (dominance of agriculture and forestry) and "traditional" social structures, community identity and heritage (OECD, 1994). According to Lane (1994), rural tourism should be functionally rural (based on the rural space's features of open space, natural resources and traditional practices); rural (small) in scale and traditional in character; organically and slowly growing; controlled by local people. This definition implies the ambition of sustainable tourism development, where natural and cultural local resources are preserved and set into value and local communities benefit from tourism. It is partly for these reasons that rural tourism has attracted increasing attention from academics, politicians and investors alike, particularly in Europe, where the EU has allocated important funding to economic activities that present an alternative to declining agriculture (European Commission, 1999; Lane & Kastenholtz, 2015; OECD, 1994).

From the demand-side perspective, there is a growth of urban travellers showing interest in visiting rural areas, for a variety of reasons and purposes, as numerous empirical studies reveal (e.g. Bel, Lacroix,

Lyser, Rambonilaza, & Turpin, 2015; Frochot, 2005; Molera & Albaladejo, 2007; Park, Lee, & Yoon, 2014; Pesonen, 2015; Sidali & Schulz, 2010). Many authors stress the new consumption values associated with rural areas in the field of wellness, health, leisure and tourism, frequently related to other societal trends valuing nature, health, small scale, "authenticity" and uniqueness, while contrasting with standardised, congested, polluted, artificial and stressful modern urban living conditions from which most tourists seek to escape (Kastenholtz, Carneiro, Marques, & Lima, 2012; Lane & Kastenholtz, 2015; Marques, 2006). Examples of initiatives addressing this evolution include initiatives of heritage-conservation-based rural tourism networks, such as the Portuguese networks of "Historical Villages", "Schist Villages" (Lane et al., 2013), the project "Alqueva Dark Sky Reserve" in rural Alentejo, where low levels of light pollution allow visitors to enjoy impressive star-dominated night landscapes (Rodrigues, Rodrigues, & Peroff, 2014). Other initiatives respond to an increasing interest in food traditions and associated local identities, frequently provided in unique, intimate experience settings, with examples abounding in Italy, Germany and Portugal (Sidali, Kastenholtz, & Bianchi, 2015), but also in Spain (Armesto Lopez & Martin, 2006) and France (Frochot, 2003), while the quest for organic food was identified as an important driver

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for German farm tourism (Sidali & Schulz, 2010). Also more active nature-based experiences are sought and provided in the countryside, such as mountain biking in *Seven Stanes/ Scotland* (Lane & Kastenholz, 2015) or equestrian tourism on trails in Virginia (Kline, Cardenas, Viren, & Swanson, 2015).

Many benefits may thus be encountered in the countryside, which is frequently rich in natural and cultural resources, differing from place to place and permitting a variety of experience opportunities that may be enjoyed by distinct tourist groups (Campón-Cerro, Hernández-Mogollón, & Alves, 2017; Kastenholz et al., 2012). Empirical evidence shows that, apart from diverse motivations attracting visitors to the countryside, tourist profiles, behaviours, consumption patterns and experiences are also diverse, suggesting the need to approach tourist segments in a differentiated fashion (Eusébio, Carneiro, Kastenholz, Figueiredo, & Sousa, 2017; Fernández-Hernández, León, Aranã, & Díaz-Pérez, 2016; Frochot, 2005; Kastenholz, Davis, & Paul, 1999; Molera & Albaladejo, 2007; Park et al., 2014; Pesonen, 2015). Additionally, market knowledge may help destinations carefully manage their tourist demand by selecting those target segments that minimize negative while maximising positive impacts at the destination, best match the destination's features and potentialities and thereby optimise sustainable tourism development (Kastenholz, 2004).

The marketing literature suggests a variety of useful segmentation bases. For effective marketing action, more product-related segmentation bases are frequently preferred, such as benefits sought (Frochot, 2005; Kastenholz et al., 1999) or activities undertaken while on holidays (Eusébio et al., 2017; Pesonen, 2015). However, when giving priority to sustainability goals, a segmentation basis revealing distinct sustainability attitudes or behaviours may be more interesting. Despite the relevance of such an approach specifically for rural tourism, where sustainable development is frequently a major goal of investment and public funding, none was found in the literature review on rural tourism conducted for this study. The present study attempts to fill this gap by segmenting the effective market of visitors of three Portuguese villages, whose development is strategically connected to tourism, based on sustainability reflecting behaviours. More specifically, a cluster analysis was conducted based on visitors' responses to scales reporting environmentally, culturally, socially and economically sustainable travel behaviour, thereby considering the concept's main dimensions. Also other differences will be analysed and discussed for sustainability-enhancing destination marketing purposes.

This market knowledge may be essential for achieving the desired development effect through rural tourism, since it must be recognized that not all investment in this activity, independently of context and type of investment and management, will yield the expected results (Ribeiro & Marques, 2002; Sharpley, 2002). However, in particular well-planned and managed rural locations and regions, where tourism is integrated in a sound development strategy, making the best of endogenous resources and competences, and attending both local residents' interests and the needs and desires of a carefully selected market, tourism may play an important role in sustainable rural development (Clarke, 2005; Kastenholz et al., 2012; Kastenholz, 2004; Saxena, Clark, Oliver, & Ilbery, 2007).

This paper first presents a literature review on the role of market segmentation and management of demand in rural tourism, as well as on sustainable tourist behaviour as a segmentation basis. Next, the methodology of data collection and analysis will be presented, with results focusing, apart from a general descriptive overview of the sample profile, on the outcome of the cluster analysis, with comparative analyses highlighting the differences between the encountered groups. The paper will conclude with a reflection on the implications of results on both theoretical development of research in rural tourism and on the management and marketing of the village destinations under study.

## 2. Literature review

### 2.1. Segmentation and management of demand in rural tourism

Rural areas are increasingly popular tourist destinations, due to both new trends in demand and innovation in rural territories investing in tourism as a new economic opportunity and even development tool (Lane & Kastenholz, 2015; Ribeiro & Marques, 2002). However, particularly territories seeking alternatives to a declining agriculture, in a predominantly fragile socio-cultural and economic context, need very careful tourism management approaches preserving and setting into value unique endogenous resources and benefitting local populations, so as to achieve sustainable tourism and rural development (Saxena et al., 2007).

Rural areas are popular amongst many tourists who seek contrast to urban life and its multiple stress factors (Kastenholz et al., 2012; Marques, 2006). This search is characterised by the desire for closeness to nature (Frochot, 2005; Kastenholz et al., 2012; Kompulla, 2005) and a nostalgic quest of lost identities in a global context, a longing for a "rural idyll" reflected by traditions, intact nature and community life (Figueiredo, 2009; McCarthy, 2008), frequently in contrast to modern urban life, perceived as stressful and unhealthy (Cawley & Gillmore, 2008; Marques, 2006). However, not all rural tourists are the same (Clemenson & Lane, 1997; Frochot, 2005; Kastenholz et al., 1999).

Indeed, there is abundant empirical evidence for heterogeneity in the rural tourist market, although studies are hard to compare using distinct methodologies and even definitions of who should be considered a "rural tourist", while diverse geographical and cultural contexts shape demand patterns (Eusébio et al., 2017; Lane & Kastenholz, 2015). In these studies, market heterogeneity is found in socio-demographic profiles, with some suggesting rural tourism to be a mostly domestic phenomenon (Bel et al., 2015; Campón-Cerro et al., 2017; Devesa, Laguna, & Palacios, 2010; Dong, Wang, Morais, & Brooks, 2013; Opperman, 1996), while others report international market dynamics (Frochot, 2005; Kastenholz, 2004). Kastenholz (2004) found both tourists visiting rural North Portugal for a short break and for a longer holiday stay and tourists coming in diverse seasons of the year, with corresponding implications for a destination's sustainability (e.g. the longer the stay and/or the better the seasonal spread, the more sustainable the market dynamic). Some studies show that there are rural tourists with a relatively high socio-economic and cultural status and corresponding expenditure patterns, sometimes associated to an interest in rural culture and traditions (e.g. Kastenholz, 2004) or special-interest tourism pursuits (e.g. wellness or wine tourism; see Bel et al., 2015 or Sidali et al., 2015), while others report rural tourism as a relatively cheap holiday option for families with children (e.g. Opperman, 1996) or groups of young people who want to spend time with friends in the countryside (e.g. Molera & Albaladejo, 2007).

Diverse motivations, benefits or activities sought were found for the rural tourist market, with studies suggesting segments of tourists mainly interested in peace and quiet in a relaxing, scenically beautiful environment; others looking for active outdoor recreation, or socializing with friends and family in a distinct environment; still others seeking history, culture and traditions or the sometimes called "rural idyll", and some seeking special-interest tourism formats (Fernández-Hernández et al., 2016; Frochot, 2005; Kastenholz, 2004; Kline et al., 2015; Lane & Kastenholz, 2015; Molera & Albaladejo, 2007; Park et al., 2014; Pesonen, 2015; Sidali & Schulz, 2010). Based on results from a survey of rural tourists in South Korea, Park et al. (2014) proposed a continuum of benefits sought, ranging from relaxation-oriented (urban comfort seeking) to learning-oriented (rural experience seeking) segments. In a similar vein, Huang, Beeco, Hallo, and Norman (2016) presented a distinction between a learning-oriented and a recreation-oriented basic motivation amongst tourists visiting small-scale heritage sites in South Carolina. Some studies revealed a particular interest in opportunities for personalised host-guest contacts (Choo & Petrick,

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