

# IMPACT OF THE ECOTOURISM EXPERIENCE ON CONSUMERS: ONLINE REVIEW ANALYSIS

## IMPACTO DA EXPERIÊNCIA EM ECOTURISMO NOS CONSUMIDORES: ANÁLISE DE REVISÃO ONLINE

*Mafalda Neves Faria<sup>1</sup>; Jorge Julião<sup>2</sup>; Marcelo Gaspar<sup>3</sup>*

### Abstrat

According to the World Travel & Tourism Council (WTTC), Portugal is the European country with the highest growth in the tourism sector. Nonetheless, this recent increase in mass tourism may have a negative impact on the environment and the livelihood of local inhabitants. This leads to the need to develop solutions that allow for the touristic activity to be more sustainable and beneficial for those involved and affected by it. Focusing on ecotourism, the comments available in TripAdvisor about establishments certificated by TÜV as “eco”, were analysed. This study focuses on the consumers’ perceptions about the sustainability claims of local Portuguese hotels with an eco-hotel certification. Moreover, the main related characteristics of ecotourism, such as nature, learning and sustainability were analysed. Based on the results, it is possible to conclude that these parameters related to ecotourism are the less referred by customers on their reviews about their experience on an eco-hotel, and that the fact that they have chosen an eco-hotel did not imply that such choice was based on their concerns about the environment and sustainability.

**KEYWORDS** : Sustainability; Tourism, Environmental Awareness, Sustainable Development, Ecotourism, Consumer Perception.

### Resumo

De acordo com o World Travel & Tourism Council (WTTC), Portugal é o país europeu com maior crescimento no setor do turismo. No entanto, este recente aumento do turismo de massas pode ter um impacto negativo no ambiente e no meio de vida dos habitantes locais. Isto leva à necessidade de desenvolver soluções que permitam que a atividade turística seja mais sustentável e benéfica para os envolvidos e afetados por esta atividade. Focando-se no ecoturismo, neste trabalho foram analisados os comentários disponíveis no TripAdvisor sobre estabelecimentos certificados pela TÜV como “eco”. Este estudo centra-se na perceção dos consumidores sobre as reivindicações de sustentabilidade dos hotéis portugueses locais com certificação de eco-hotel. Além disso, foram analisadas as principais características relacionadas com o ecoturismo, como a natureza, a aprendizagem e a sustentabilidade. Com base nos resultados, é possível concluir que estes parâmetros relacionados com o ecoturismo são os menos referidos pelos os clientes nas avaliações sobre a sua experiência num eco-hotel, e que o facto de terem escolhido um eco-hotel não implicava que tal escolha se tenha baseava nas suas preocupações com o ambiente e a sustentabilidade.

<sup>1</sup> resgroup.cpbs@porto.ucp.pt, Católica Porto Business School, Universidade Católica Portuguesa

<sup>2</sup> jjuliao@porto.ucp.pt, Católica Porto Business School, Universidade Católica Portuguesa

<sup>3</sup> marcelo.gaspar@ipleiria.pt, Escola Superior de Tecnologia e Gestão, Instituto Politécnico de Leiria

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Portugal was recently distinguished as the European country with the highest growth in its tourism sector (WTTC, 2019). Even though such enhanced tourist activity may contribute positively for the country's economy, there is also an increasing controversy regarding the quality of life of the local population, such as residents, workers or other users of the spaces and the environment at the touristic destination places.

In 1997, with the completion of air transport liberalization, the doors of many countries have opened for the establishment and growth of low-cost airlines. These aspects brought a new dynamic to tourism since the mobility of the populations was facilitated and the demand for many tourist destinations has increased. Therefore, the emergence of these airlines, alongside the creation of new routes, also boosted the tourist development of new geographic areas (Almeida and Costa, 2012). As a result, such increase of the touristic activity in many countries has led to the discussions in the scientific community amongst researchers and practitioners about the impacts of this economic activity. Thus, despite the positive economic repercussions, the sector has presented threats to populations and most visited places, contributing to physical and immaterial degradation (Ferreira, 2016).

Portugal is one of the countries in which there has been an exponential growth in tourism and, with it, the related services and economic activities have grown correspondingly. The construction of hotels, restaurants, etc. without any apparent concern for local residents or the preservation of the local environment can have significant impacts. As a consequence, it is important to find solutions for such untamed growth without planning. To such end, new concepts and solutions are required to minimize the unwanted impacts and effects of tourism. Thus, ecotourism can contribute to the solution of the unwanted impacts of the touristic activity, as it aims at offering guiding principles for tourism to take place with minimal impacts on the various dimensions of sustainability.

According to the International Ecotourism Society (TIES), ecotourism involves "responsible travel to natural areas that conserve the environment, sustain the well-being of the local population and involve interpretation and education." It can also be defined as making tourism uniting conservation, communities and sustainability ([www.ecotourism.org](http://www.ecotourism.org), 2020).

The purpose of this paper is to identify the most relevant aspects referred to by consumers on their reviews after having experienced a stay at an eco-hotel in Portugal. To such end, the last ten online customer reviews about the stay in 18 certified Portuguese eco-hotels were analysed and discussed.

## 2. BACKGROUND

### 2.1. Tourism Evolution

According to Akis (2011), it was after the Industrial Revolution that tourism activities began to attract the population. This event changed the daily lives of citizens since there was an increase in the capacity to produce goods, development of new types of energy and extraction, as well as an increase in workers' rights (Hudman & Jackson, 2003). However, it was with the two World Wars that the world of tourism has changed completely. The First World War is still reminded by the change that took place at the automobile level. The development of automobiles provided the

freedom to travel and, consequently, the populations started to have increased mobility that did not exist before (Pires, 2004).

During the Second World War, tourism has stopped abruptly. Nonetheless, as in this period, it was possible to improve the efficiency of air transport, with the end of the conflict in 1945, and the creation of the International Air of Transport Association (IATA), which came to regulate air law, tourism entered in the era of air transport. From that moment, and due to aviation technology, that was developed, it was possible to provide air transport consumers with a faster, more autonomous and comfortable service (Pires, 2004).

According to Campilho (2014), it was from 1970 that the air transport sector registered a constant increase in passengers transported worldwide. The success registered in some developed countries was due to the economic growth in the post-World War II since it came to provide an increase in international trade, so the per capita income followed this increase. The post-war era was a period of affirmation for technological innovations, as they increased security and decreased costs in the air transport sector. Campilho (2014) also mentions that the 70s were marked as the major driver of the aviation sector. The liberalization of the air transport sector registered in the North American market has allowed for prices to be freely set by airlines, increasing price competition.

Thus, the combination of the increase in purchasing power worldwide and the reduction in prices due to the registered technological innovations, as well as the liberalization of the sector allowed the air transport sector to reach its peak, since what was before used for business travel only. From this decade on, it started to be the transportation used by the general population (Campilho, 2014). In Europe, on the other hand, the deregulation of the air transport sector would only appear two decades later. It was concluded in 1997 bringing a new dynamic to the sector: entry of low-cost airlines into the market. These airlines attract new niche markets that are more sensitive to price. Thus, the entry of low-cost companies, in addition to the creation of new routes, allowed the tourist development of new geographic areas (Almeida and Costa, 2012).

## 2.2. Current Tourism Trends

Nowadays, the Travel and Tourism sector contributes with 10.4% of GDP and 10% of employment worldwide (UNWTO, 2019). According to Jurowski *et al.*... (1997), once a city becomes a tourist destination, the lives of residents are affected by tourist activities. Kim *et al.*... (2012) refer that in the last decades the tourism industry has been used as a way of regional economic development, as well as for the improvement of local employment opportunities. However, despite the positive effects that tourism brings to economic levels, social, cultural or environmental well-being, there are also negative effects, such as the quality of life of society (poverty, per capita income, crime rates or pollution).

Currently, and according to Higham *et al.*... (2016) and Wang *et al.*... (2018), tourism stands out as an environmentally harmful industry, due to the discharge of greenhouse gases that are related to tourist mobility, as well as accommodation that depends on high energy consumption. Thus, there is an effective need to make economic interests collide with environmental interests - Ecotourism is considered as one of the solutions. This type of tourism appears as a junction between the cultural area, but also the environmental one since the tourist will visit the place that has been conserved to the maximum in these two aspects (Azam *et al.*..., 2018).

Ecotourism appears as a possible mean of sustainable development since both the supply and the demand for this type of tourism has been growing significantly. It is assumed, therefore, that tourists are increasingly looking for more responsible and environmentally appropriate forms of tourism (Sharpley, 2006). According to this author, Ecotourism is increasing, although it doesn't imply that all ecotourists are following the same path, as it isn't guaranteed that they all have environmental concerns. It is possible that (some) ecotourists may just be looking for a different experience, e.g. something new and different. Beaumont (2011) also goes against the study by

Sharpley (2006), as he considers that the sustainability criterion is not present in the decision making of ecotourism consumers.

### 2.3. Outstanding dimensions in the evaluation of a service

This paper aims to identify which are the dimensions that consumers consider most important during their stay in a hotel. Several authors were analysed (e.g. Akan, 1995; (Wong Ooi Mei *et al.*..., 1999), and it was possible to conclude that many of the variables are coincident, since most of them are based on the SERVQUAL model by Parasuraman (1988). Then, it's possible to highlight some variables such as tangibles, competence, courtesy, customer knowledge/understanding, employees or price.

It is also important to highlight a study carried out by Ruhanen (2019), as the objective of that study was to evaluate the aspects that Ecotourism consumers mentioned giving more importance in their experience. Thus, in the study, seven dimensions were identified, namely staff, facilities, nature, food, activities, experiences and learning.

Analysing the investigation of the above-mentioned researchers, it was also possible to conclude that most of the comments aimed to evaluate the service and not the product as Ecotourism. It is also important to note that many consumers do not align their expectations to the fact that the hotel is an Ecotourism unit. The authors conclude that the demand that exists for Ecotourism establishments is based on interest in the tourist experience itself and not related to their concern for sustainability. Hence, it should be noted that the dimensions studied relate to the service and not to the "eco" experience. Although there are some references to environmental aspects (for example, surrounding areas), it is not possible to understand whether there is a genuine concern of the consumers for the environment sustainability.

## 3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

In recent years, it has been possible to register a considerable increase in the number of platforms that allow companies to advertise their products and/or services (Dias, 2018). Thus, and according to Ruhanen (2019), the number of tourism consumers using online assessment platforms is increasing. It is referred that these platforms can be used to share all kinds of information regarding services, brands, suppliers and destinations.

For this reason, the best method to evaluate the opinions of Ecotourism consumers is to study the comments that they make in online reviews after their stay. In this way, the methodology will focus on a qualitative methodology. This was the method chosen, because it interprets the data that it observes. The qualitative approach uses induction, as there is no pre-established hypothesis; hypotheses are constructed after observation.

It was necessary to find a certification that would guarantee us that Ecotourism standards were fulfilled. Therefore, in this study, special focus was put in finding hotel establishments that are certified as "eco-hotels" by TÜV Rheinland.

Netnography was used as a research method as most of the available hotel reviews are currently online. Moreover, according to comScore (2018), 37% of online platform users consult TripAdvisor before booking their flight or hotel. Since there exists a broad range of information online, it was necessary to establish a limit of reviews to be analysed. Therefore, the ten most recent comments amongst the 18 chosen establishments will be analysed. For the qualitative data analysis, the NVivo software, version 12, was used to a tool for organizing and managing data.

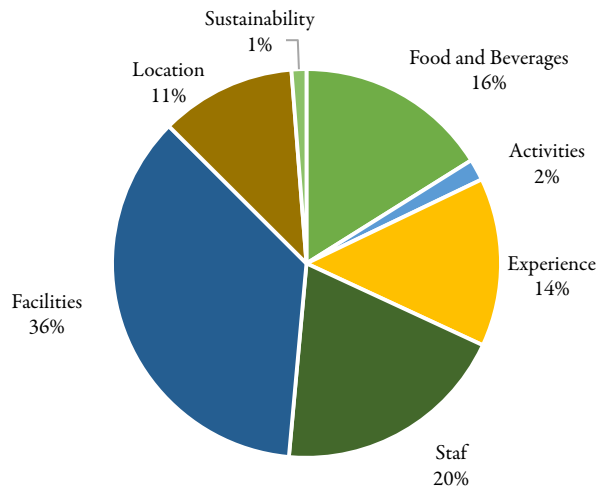
#### 4. MAIN RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This investigation aims to:

- Identify the dimensions most mentioned by consumers in their eco-hotel reviews.
- Assess if the increase in ecotourism consumption implies that consumers are more concerned with the environment.
- Assess the presence of the main characteristics of ecotourism in the reviews, namely nature, learning and sustainability.

Based on the exploratory analysis of the online reviews of eco-hotel consumers it was possible to conclude that the variables identified were in line with the research carried out by Ruhanen (2019). Since current research focuses mainly on a dedicated type of tourism – Ecotourism - it was necessary to analyse two specific sub-dimensions of learning and nature. These sub-dimensions are part of the broader dimensions of activities and location.

The qualitative data analysis was performed using the software NVivo, where data was clustered into 7 nodes: staff, facilities, location, food and beverages, activities, experience and sustainability. This analysis allowed understanding that 20 codes were required to be created based on what was most mentioned by the eco-hotel consumers on their online reviews: These codes were also essential to characterize the main aspects of Ecotourism.



**Figure 1:** Importance of each dimension (in percentage) on the online reviews of eco-hotel consumers.

In this research 1.102 references were identified. As we can be observed in Fig. 1, the dimension of the facilities stands out from the rest of the online reviews of eco-hotel consumers. This fact was already expected as the description of the rooms, cleanliness, facilities such as swimming pool, spa or gym fall into this dimension. The following dimensions are staff, food and beverages, experience and location. The activities and sustainability dimensions, on the other hand, registered values of 2% and 1%, respectively, which allows concluding that learning about nature and sustainability are not the main aspects referred in these reviews.

It is important to highlight the dimensions that are also related to ecotourism. The main purpose of the location dimension is to analyse the rating given by consumers regarding the place's natural beauty, sights or proximity to the beach and countryside. The activities variable appears next online. This latter dimension refers to the activities carried out inside or outside the eco-hotel.

## 5. SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

Current research aimed at answering to three main questions. Starting with the first one, namely “Identify the dimensions most mentioned in the comments”, it was possible to conclude that facilities and employees are the variables that stand out in the consumers’ reviews. These were followed by food and beverages, experience, location, activities and, finally, sustainability.

On what concerns the second objective, “Assessing if the increase in ecotourism consumption implies that consumers are more concerned with the environment”, the variable related to this topic - sustainability - registered only 1% of the total references in the consumers reviews. Although there is some evidence that the culture of the destination is maintained (“magnificent remodelling of an old fishing junction, maintaining the local layout and an exemplary “sample” of artefacts and fishing gear and tuna treatment.”) or the environment is conserved (“Complex perfectly integrated into the environment.”), these topics are not frequently referred to. Therefore, the stay in an Ecotourism establishment does not imply that there is an environmental concern by the consumers.

These conclusions are in line with the studies of Sharpley (2006) and Beaumont (2011), since, as Sharpley (2006) mentioned, although the demand for Ecotourism experiences is increasing, this increase is not guaranteed to be associated with customers’ environmental concerns. Beaumont (2011) also mentions that the sustainability criterion is not present in the decision making of ecotourists or non-ecotourists.

Finally, when considering “Assess the presence of the main characteristics of ecotourism in the comments: nature, learning and sustainability”, these three characteristics are evaluated by the last dimensions of the hierarchy obtained. Given this fact, it is possible to conclude that the three characteristics in question did not have much relevance in the comments analysed.

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