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Theme 3

***HETEROGENEITY OF COUNTRYSIDE VISITORS REGARDING
INFORMATION SEARCH: A SEGMENTATION ANALYSIS***

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Main theoretical framework and contextualization of the research problem

Rural areas have become very popular as tourism destinations worldwide as a result of endogenous and exogenous factors (Anderson, Bakir, & Wickens, 2015). Tourism has assumed a crucial role in many rural areas due to the growing investment in this activity by local agents as a consequence of the decline in traditional economic activities such as agriculture (Sharpley, 2005). Additionally, the emergence of a ‘new tourist’, who is more environmental friendly, looking for authenticity and for a high contact with nature, has also contributed to the growing attractiveness of these destinations (Lane, 2009). However, the

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competitiveness of rural tourism destinations depends, among other factors, both on the type of tourism products offered and on the promotion strategies adopted to attract the target market/s. The definition of the promotional strategies is crucial in the context of tourism since it may influence the image of the destinations, the selection of these destinations and consequent travel behaviour (Carneiro & Crompton, 2010).

There is a wide range of information sources that visitors may use in order to get information from destinations and plan their trips. These information sources encompass traditional sources that are more controlled by marketers (e.g. television advertisement, brochures), and sources that are out of control of marketers and are much more influenced by the visitors' experiences and by their networks (e.g. word of mouth, travel experience) and high technologic sources (e.g. websites, social media) (Gartner, 1996; Gunn, 1988; Luo, Feng, Cai, 2004). The internet has been increasingly used as an information source in tourism and has greatly changed the way, both tourists engage in travel planning and destination choice, and tourism agents communicate with target markets (Luo et al., 2004).

The information sources used by visitors have already been widely studied in the context of tourism (Carneiro et al., 2010). However, besides the relevant role of information search to develop efficient promotional strategies, only a limited number of studies consider information sources used by travellers as a segmentation basis. This research gap is even greater in the market studies regarding rural tourism destinations. The success of destinations that are in early stages of tourism development, of small dimension, with many small businesses, as is the case of rural tourism destinations, is largely dependent on good segmentation strategies that provide relevant inputs to the design of promotional strategies.

Research problem and techniques used to address the research problem

In order to extend the literature in this field this paper aims to analyse the heterogeneity of the rural tourism market regarding information sources used. To accomplish this objective, a hierarchical cluster analysis was carried out, using as input variables the information sources used by Portuguese visitors of rural areas located in Portugal (travel agencies, television, newspapers and magazines, internet, brochures, art works, previous travel experience, friends and relatives). A total of 919 completed questionnaires were obtained from a survey directed at a stratified sample of the Portuguese population who had visited rural areas in the last three years with tourism purposes.

Main findings

Three clusters emerged: Cluster 1 – the *Multisource-based visitors* - , who represent 51% of the sample; Cluster 2 – the *E-based visitors* – representing 28% and Cluster 3 - the *Experience-based visitors* – which included 21% of the visitors. Chi-square tests were used to analyse the differences among these clusters regarding the images cluster members hold of rural areas, their travel behaviour and sociodemographic profile. Cluster 1 – the *Multisource-based visitors* – includes those who use a wider range of information sources, being likely to use, more than the other clusters, a group of commercial and non-commercial sources, such as travel agencies, television, newspapers and magazines, brochures, art works, previous travel experience, friends and relatives and art works. These visitors are most likely to consider rural areas as idyllic and developed spaces, inclined to travel with friends, to undertake tourism activities related to local culture (e.g. visit museums, purchase handicraft, taste local gastronomy) and to live in urban areas. Cluster 2 – the *E-based visitors* – are the most likely to use the internet as an information source, and more than others inclined to see rural areas as disadvantaged places, to use rural-specific accommodation (e.g. rural hotels, rural tourism, rural camping), to carry out nature activities (e.g. visit protected areas, appreciate fauna and flora, view scenery) and recreational and sport activities, to be younger and to have higher education levels. Cluster 3 - the *Experience-based visitors* – are most likely to rely on their travel experience as information source to plan their trip to rural areas, to live or had lived in rural areas, together with Cluster 1 tend to use house of friends and relatives as a tourism accommodation, to travel to other rural areas with relatives or alone, to undertake activities that involve interaction with the local community (e.g. visit relatives, socialise with local population and participate in religious events) and to be older.

The paper ends with some conclusions and implications, including recommendations for improved segment-adapted development of rural areas and for more efficient marketing strategies regarding information sources to promote them to each segment.

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