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Electronic word-of-mouth and tourist satisfaction in rural tourism in schist villages

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ABSTRACT

Consumers' decision-making process and the way they purchase their products and services have been evolving over the years due to the influence of information technologies. Tourists are increasingly making their decisions based on online reviews made by other users, which contain descriptive comments and/or a rating system, leveraging electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM). This study aims to understand the variation of the eWOM in rural tourism as well as unveil the main characteristics that influence the satisfaction and the interest of the consumers. To that end, the content of the comments and quantitative classification of Portuguese Schist Villages' lodgings on the platforms of TripAdvisor and Facebook were studied using both sentiment polarity and frequency analysis. The results show that eWOM has increased in rural tourism, and that the satisfaction of tourists is more influenced by the friendliness of the hosts, the variety and good breakfast or Portuguese cuisine and the service provided.

Keywords: rural tourism, electronic word-of-mouth, online reviews, social media, tourist satisfaction, social networks, schist villages, Portugal

INTRODUCTION

Population in urban areas has been steadily increasing worldwide compared to rural areas, emphasizing socioeconomic differences (Costa & Chalip, 2005). Many national and regional authorities promote rural tourism to counter this trend, bringing hope to rural communities. This type of tourism has been growing over the last 25 years as urban inhabitants seek wellness, quietness, and outdoor activities that are impossible in urban areas due to traffic, pollution, and lack of time (Dashper, 2014). Tourism in rural areas (TRA) in Portugal is considered a driving force for the sustainability and development of local communities. Portugal also holds substantial asymmetry in economic activities, population distribution, and cultural and social issues between urban and rural areas, justifying the investment in rural tourism (Agapito, 2012; Valente & Figueiredo, 2003).

The tourism industry has embraced technology to leverage business (Moro et al., 2017b). The increasing number of Internet users worldwide, empowered by the technological solutions offered by Web 2.0, where users are the major contributors of Internet content, has led to both social networks, from which Facebook is the most prominent example, and to online reviews' platforms, such as TripAdvisor (Moro et al., 2018). The latter is an example of a specialized platform devoted to hospitality and tourism, as it allows users to

write reviews about tourist units such as hotels and restaurants, including quantitative scores on several features (e.g., service and food). The abovementioned platforms belong to social media, a new type of online media where consumers read feedback from others to make judged decisions on their next purchase. These interactions between users online are labeled eWOM, defined by Hennig-Thurau et al. (2004) as “any positive or negative statement made by potential, actual, or former customers about a product or company, which is made available to a multitude of people and institutions via the Internet” (p. 39).

Social media offers a potential source of relevant information about consumers. Therefore, scholars have devoted attention to extracting knowledge from online platforms. Some authors have analyzed the quantitative ranks granted by users (e.g., Jeong & Jeon, 2008; Vermeulen & Seegers, 2009; Moro et al., 2017a), while others analyzed the comments written (Marcheggiani et al., 2014; Calheiros et al., 2017). However, the textual comments published on those platforms hold subjectivity inherent to human language, which can induce bias during its analysis. Opinion mining has been developed to deal with knowledge extraction from written opinions. Sentiment polarity classification is a task within opinion mining devoted to classifying textual contents according to the sentiments expressed by users (Jiménez-Zafra et al., 2016). Although there are many studies on tourists’ online behavior on social media, research focused on rural tourism is still scarce (Melo et al., 2017). Furthermore, the localized nature of rural context justifies specific studies for each case.

This study aims to understand the eWOM phenomenon of the successful case of Schist Villages in Portugal. Notably, the focus is the lodging offer, as online reviews considerably impact accommodation product decisions compared to other tourist products (Gretzel & Yoo, 2008). Accordingly, three main research questions are proposed:

RQ.1: How is eWOM perceived in rural tourism in Portugal?

RQ.2: What features influence most of the review scores in hospitality and consequently contribute most to rural tourists’ satisfaction?

RQ.3: How can this knowledge be worthwhile for rural accommodation managers?

The following section reviews the literature on rural tourism, particularly in Portugal, and social media in hospitality and rural tourism. Section 3 presents the conceptual model and research hypotheses of this study. Section 4 develops the proposed methodology. Section 5 presents and discusses the results, while the final section summarizes the main contributions outlined in this study.

BACKGROUND

Rural Tourism in Portugal

Tourism is a leading industry within the Portuguese economy (Andraz et al., 2015). It directly and indirectly influences several economic activities such as accommodation, transport, the food and beverage industry, construction, and much more (Proença & Souziakis, 2008). The Portuguese tourist office developed an ambitious plan for 2010-2016 to turn Portugal into Europe’s most dynamic and agile tourism destination (Turismo de Portugal, 2015). As a result, the country was given the World’s Leading Destination 2017 award (World Travel Awards, 2017).

Tourism has been, in recent years, the main driver of the Portuguese economy, being a strategic activity for Portugal in terms of attracting investment. Therefore, the growth of activity generated by the tourism industry has grown along with business opportunities and the creation of companies to provide services to the sector, which has awakened the entrepreneurial feeling in Portugal (Duarte et al., 2023).

OECD (1994) characterizes rural areas by three main features: “(1) population density and size of settlements, (2) land use and its dominance by agriculture and forestry, (3) traditional social structures and issues of community identity and heritage” (p. 9). Fleischer and Felsenstein (2000) also indicate that these areas are regularly located in isolated regions. In Portugal, rural areas are more concentrated inland, with most tourism still depending on coastal areas. The rural population in Portugal decreased from 2004 to 2015, representing 36.5% of the Portuguese population in the latter year, a reduction of almost 10% during that period (Trading Economics, 2016).

A universal definition of rural tourism lacks consensus. The definition is influenced by economic conditions and the increasing complexity of defining location (Rosalina et al., 2021). Rural tourism is recognized as a sustainable niche, challenges such as its fragmented nature, inappropriate management, lack of knowledge, and micro interests, hinder its appreciation (Boukas, 2019). Rural areas' observed fragilities include weak infrastructures, an elderly population, and territory desertification. It is possible to prevent this migration as local economies are stimulated, with the active population facing more stability, job creation, income generation, natural landscape, and environmental protection and preservation, thus removing agricultural activity dependency (Drăgulănescu & Druțu, 2012; Heneghan et al., 2016). Thus, local governments should implement tourism-related development projects to enhance rural tourism activities, develop the local economy, and increase employment (Yang et al., 2021).

As such, rural tourism must be understood as a niche market aiming to satisfy the demand while seeking sustainability in rural communities (Marzo-Navarro et al., 2015). Rural development through tourism activity is imperative to develop the economy of deprived and neglected rural areas and improve conditions for communities (Duarte, 2010; Drăgulănescu & Druțu, 2012). Nevertheless, for rural tourism to be attractive, it also has to innovate. Innovation in rural tourism and hospitality is a complex process that involves the exchange of knowledge and resources between many actors and the interrelationships between those actors in the business environment (Madanaguli et al., 2022). A study in India revealed that infrastructure development, growing environmental conscience, support of local government and community, availability of funds with the government, and participation of the private sector are the primary factors channeling rural tourism development. Also, locals' attitudes to adapt, tourist travel motives, marketing of the destination, destination characteristics, and recommendation by others are the major dependent factors identified (Kumar et al., 2022).

Internal and external traveling factors, called push and pull factors, can influence tourists' decision-making process. The former concerns internal intentions to satisfy their inherent needs and the latter relates to destiny attributes (Devesa et al., 2010). According to Kastenholz et al. (2012), the experience that rural tourists have is valued and based on a wide range of assets, services, persons, attractions, and surroundings, assuming that particular destination features are the experience constituents.

There are diverse factors why rural areas are increasingly chosen as tourist destinations. Based on studies by Frochot (2005), Kastenholz (2004), Kastenholz et al. (1999), Molera and Albaladejo (2007), and Park and Yoon (2009), those include: to be closer to nature and culture, to have the pleasure to seek and enjoy peace and quiet, beautiful landscapes and relaxation. According to Tung and Ritchie (2011), experience is defined as "an individual's subjective evaluation and undergoing (i.e., affective, cognitive and behavior) of events related to his/her tourist activities that begin before (i.e., planning and preparation), during (i.e., at the destination), and after the trip (i.e., recollection)" (p. 1369). Therefore, the consumer generally needs and expects an irreplaceable and unforgettable experience (Figueiredo et al., 2014) characterized by an authentic and traditional rural lifestyle and activities with services and rural lodgings (Melo et al., 2017).

Customer expectations can have a positive or negative impact on customer satisfaction. While meeting and exceeding expectations is essential, managing expectations has proven to be a more comprehensive approach to delivering a satisfying experience (Costa et al., 2023). This study focuses on the Portuguese Schist Villages. A recent study shows the existence of significant differences in the perceptions of the various stakeholders regarding motivations, adjustment to the impacts of the tourist activities, and satisfaction with the different characterizing elements of the Schist Villages destination, in Portugal, especially regarding cultural items (Moutela et al., 2020). This study confirms a previous study on rural tourism in the USA, in which the results showed that destination image directly affects visitors' perception of value and revisit intentions and indirectly affects satisfaction and recommendation intentions (Phillips et al., 2013).

Social Media and eWOM in rural tourism

Nowadays, people live in the social media age where the Internet has evolved to Web 2.0, which is considered the sharing interface among end users (Thevenot, 2007; Alturas & Oliveira, 2016).

Consequently, many online social networks (OSN) platforms emerged, such as blogs (e.g., Travelblog), forums, social networks (e.g., Facebook), review sites (e.g., TripAdvisor), social bookmarking and wikis (Leung et al., 2013), considering electronic social media as the core asset of this Internet development (Brogan & Smith, 2009). Facebook can be a good platform for advertising, but we still need further empirical and objective observations capable of assessing the effectiveness of advertising relative to users of the online social network sites (Barreto, 2013).

In the tourism industry, denoted as Travel 2.0, this technological progress has been used as a marketing tool to manage products, services, and destinations (Xiang & Gretzel, 2010). It is considered powerful and influential because it contributes to eWOM through commenting, rating, and spreading travel experiences, resulting in collective knowledge and decision-making and purchasing (Law et al., 2015; Chen et al., 2014; Moro & Rita, 2018). Furthermore, understanding user-generated content (UGC) is critical for managing image destinations (Timothy, 2018; Avraham & Ketter, 2017). Regarding the planning process of a trip, most people during the COVID-19 era do more profound research than usual on social media, trying to understand if the destination and tourist services are safe (Madureira & Alturas, 2022).

E-WOM, especially in social media, has become one of the most critical marketing instruments for companies in the current competitive market (Dahka et al., 2020). A feature that distinguishes eWOM from traditional WOM is the speed with which it spreads and the ease of access to it (Huete-Alcocer, 2017). Rural tourism providers ought not to undervalue the power of eWOM since it is significant, critical, and reflects customers' opinions and perceptions (Melo et al., 2017), especially since this type of tourism is a niche within the tourism market, with lower marketing investments.

There is a scarcity of studies focusing on social media in rural tourism, especially compared to other types of tourism. However, the industry has acknowledged the relevance of Internet-based business to rural tourism. Rural tourism accommodations are offered online booking platforms such as Booking.com (Gössling & Lane, 2015). Specialized online tourism platforms first emerged to respond to specific problems such as booking or providing a network for tourists to exchange opinions. However, the most significant platforms have evolved to all-in-one solutions where users can read others' opinions, book their accommodations, and finally write their reviews in an infinite loop of eWOM. Accordingly, tourists are writing and reading opinions on rural tourism, highlighting the need to understand this relatively neglected type of tourism. Furthermore, the geographically localized nature of rural tourism emphasizes the apparent lack of research on this highly relevant field. For example, Ezeuduji (2015) identified that information technologies and social media are not widespread in Sub-Saharan Africa in event-based rural tourism, affecting its competitiveness. The scenario is different in Europe, with widespread social media among tourists. However, some rural tourism unit managers are still holding back due to an apparent lack of relevant experience with social media tools. This happens in distinct countries around Europe, including the UK (Townsend et al., 2016), Austria (Kavoura & Bitsani, 2013), and Norway (Gössling & Lane, 2015). A similar scenario occurs in China (Zhou, 2014). Some rural destinations in the US, such as North Dakota, seem to have moved forward by embracing social media with known success. Independently of the geographic location, social media in rural tourism is a vibrant subject with plenty of research gaps to fill. Remarkably, there is a lack of studies analyzing the impact of social media on rural tourism. The current study aims to fill such a research gap.

CONCEPTUAL MODEL AND RESEARCH HYPOTHESES

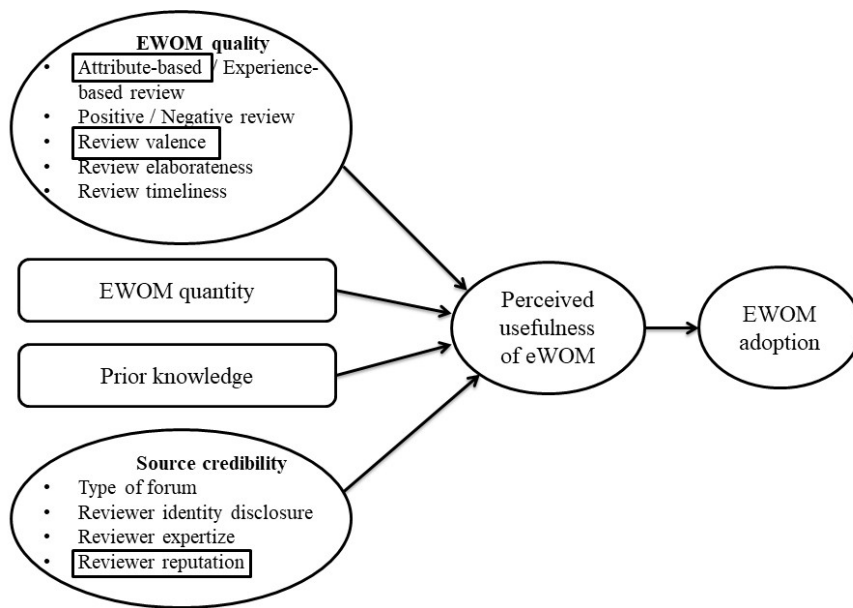
Proposed conceptual model

This section presents the conceptual model developed to identify and analyze the variables in eWOM influencing rural tourism lodgings. The model is based on the previous studies by Melo et al. (2017) and Bandyopadhyay (2016). The model is tested in the Portuguese Schist Villages, a project framed in TRA.

On the one hand, this research applies to part of Melo et al. (2017)'s study to build a branch of the conceptual model. The outcome of analyzing a rural lodging in France was a category system that reflected reviewers' global service quality perception about specific elements (e.g., decoration, environment, and

space). This study uses those elements more broadly, as explained in the next section. Furthermore, this study focuses specifically on the perspective of customer perception and satisfaction. On the other hand, Bandyopadhyay's (2016) theoretical study connects many concepts that are addressed in the study (e.g., valence rating, attributes, and credibility) to explain the usefulness of online reviews and, accordingly, the factors that affect the adoption of eWOM as part of the purchasing behavior. Therefore, Bandyopadhyay (2016)'s framework serves as input in the present research, including constructs such as eWOM quality and credibility, signaling with a circle in Figure 1.

Figure 1. Framework proposed by Bandyopadhyay (2016)



The proposed conceptual model is exhibited in Figure 3, including the highlighted constructs from Figure 1 and additional constructs identified in Table 1 to enrich the final model.

Table 1. Constructs of the conceptual model

Construct	Definition
Service Hosts Leisure activities	These constructs concern the aspects mentioned in reviewers' comments and the rating classification.
Gender	This construct is defined as male and female reviewers in TripAdvisor.
Customer satisfaction	This construct can be defined as how property managers meet, evaluate, and understand consumers' expectations and needs. Thus, the better the quality of service, the greater the satisfaction (Albacete-Sáez et al., 2006).
Reviewer reputation	Reviews' feedback measures this construct and reviews helpfulness by other people. The higher the reputation, the more credible a review is (Bandyopadhyay, 2016).
Management response	Management response is how property owners respond correctly to an online review, being an increased area of study (Levy et al., 2013).
eWOM perceived usefulness	How useful or not is electronic word-of-mouth influenced by eWOM nature (e.g., valence, timeliness, elaborateness), credibility, quantity, and previous knowledge about considered services (Bandyopadhyay, 2016)?

Research Hypotheses

EWOM quality concerns to characteristics of online reviews that impact the apparent usefulness of reviews. According to Bandyopadhyay (2016), review valence and attribute-based are two of five characteristics in his framework. On the one hand, the former is about the positive and negative ratings on the overall review, which is given by the total rank score. On the other hand, attribute-based is related to the sentiments expressed toward the service/product, which can be computed through sentiment polarity score. However, the current study takes advantage of the categories' ranks provided by TripAdvisor's reviews on a 1 to 5 scale (Figure 2).

Figure 2. TripAdvisor



Customers' needs and satisfaction information are two crucial constructs from the previously mentioned information (Melo et al., 2017). Gender is also included. Next, the main topics the model addresses are described, based on which the subsequent hypotheses are drawn.

A choice of a destination in rural areas is influenced by many elements such as infrastructures, natural atmosphere, and service quality (Albacete-Sáez et al., 2007). The first hypothesis drawn attempts to explain if service itself as a specific feature receives higher scores when compared to other features (e.g., Figure 2):

H1: Of all TripAdvisor features, tourists value service the most.

Figueiredo et al. (2014) found that a warm welcome from hosts is important to a memorable tourist's rural experience. Moreover, Kastenholtz et al. (2013), who interviewed hosts and guests from two Portuguese villages, including the Schist Villages' network, mentioned that host hospitality is considered the main traveler attraction to practice this type of tourism. In this context, the second hypothesis arose:

H2: Having friendly hosts is a relevant feature of rural tourism.

Since open-air activities encompass river beaches, sports, and outdoor animal activities, outdoor activities influence rural tourism, including family togetherness and well-being (Coyle-Shepherd & Hanlon, 2013). As a result, the following hypothesis was inferred:

H3: Most tourists who wrote about outdoor activities traveled with family.

According to Meyers-Levy and Sternthal (1991), men and women evaluate products differently with their knowledge and opinions due to the significance that both give to each product's distinct characteristics. Bandyopadhyay (2016) corroborates that gender discrepancy can affect customer satisfaction.

H4: There is a difference between genders in the score granted.

Levy et al. (2013) analyzed negative reviews (ranked only with one star) to understand how managers are coping with these reviews in the lodging market in Washington. They concluded that better-classified hotels correspond to those managed by owners who respond more frequently to negative reviews. Therefore, it is vital to understand how business owners manage their online pages (Leung et al., 2013; Litvin et al., 2008).

H5: Hosts of rural tourism units are replying to negative comments.

Based on Bandyopadhyay (2016)'s research, there are four dimensions related to source credibility: type of online platform, reviewer identity exposed, expertise, and reputation. The type of online platform dimension will not be used to formulate the subsequent two hypotheses. Nevertheless, it is perceived as more trustworthy since TripAdvisor is an independent review website, not a vendor-owned one (Bandyopadhyay 2016). Additionally, reputation is included through the number of helpful votes from other tourists. This reduces hesitations about the quality and performance of tourist products because it helps travelers decide whom to rely on and trust (Helm & Mark, 2007; Resnick et al., 2000). Furthermore, people

who search for online reviews information tend to perceive lower-rated reviews as more useful (Lee et al., 2011). Therefore, reputation is more related to negative WOM rather than positive, which will be assessed by H6b.

H6 a: The TripAdvisor member's duration positively correlates with the number of helpful votes.

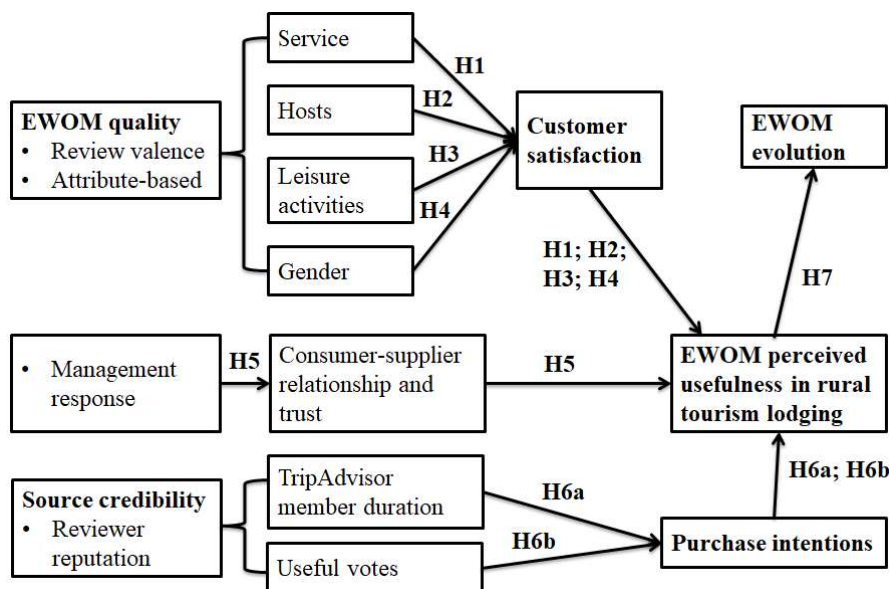
H6 b: Tourists who have a higher number of votes given, on average more negative reviews.

Online reviews in the tourism industry are receiving huge attention from researchers to understand consumer behavior, motivations, complaints, preferences, and profiles because eWOM issue and adoption have been increasing (Moro & Rita, 2018; Bandyopadhyay, 2016; Munar & Jacobsen, 2014; Albacete-Sáez et al., 2007; Sparks & Browning, 2010). However, this interest and evolution are not extensively reflected in other types of tourism, such as TRA. Therefore, the last research hypothesis addresses this issue:

H7: The eWOM has been increasing in rural tourism.

Once the theories and models that comprise the theoretical-conceptual framework have been identified, it was possible to define the hypotheses previously identified in Figure 3.

Figure 3. Proposed conceptual model



Hypotheses H1, H2, and H6 are linked to Research Question 2; hypotheses H3, H4, and H5 are linked to Research Question 3, and finally, hypothesis H7 is linked to Research Question 1.

METHODOLOGY

Case study

Portuguese Schist Villages comprise 27 villages in 16 counties in the Central Region of Portugal, between Castelo Branco and Coimbra, covering about 5,000 km². Schist stone is seen as a unifying element of a rich material and immaterial patrimony, resulting from the combined work between nature and man, shaping these villages and their surroundings (Aldeias do Xisto, 2023).

This is a regional sustainable development project led by ADXTUR, an Agency devoted explicitly to the tourism development of the Schist Villages, with many partnerships (public and private) operating in the territory. The brand Schist Villages represents the offer of tourist services of its associates (hotels, accommodation in rural areas, catering, tourist animation, and traditional commerce) articulated with the

Calendar of Animation of the Schist Villages (Aldeias do Xisto, 2015). Table 2 highlights how tourist products and services increased from 2009 to 2014, with significant percentages.

Table 2. Evolution of the tourist resources in units (Source: Aldeias do Xisto, 2015)

Schist Villages' evolution of the touristic resources	2009	2014	%
Schist Villages	24	27	13%
Schist Villages stores	10	18	80%
Housing units	26	70	169%
Hotels	1	7	600%
Restaurants	7	13	86%
Tourist Animation Businesses	6	12	100%
Fluvial beaches	21	50	138%
Walking routes (small route)	14	45	221%
Big routes	0	1	NA
Total of the pedestrian traces (Km)	140	700	400%
BTT Centers	2	6	200%
Total cycling trails (Km)	260	900	246%
Associates (Privates)	70	179	156%
Rooms	52	492	846%
Beds	114	920	707%

In order to increase brand attractiveness by pursuing a communication and marketing plan, ADXTUR has implemented a consistent strategy of disclosure of Schist Villages and the promotion of its resources, equipment, animation, and services, which resulted in a constant and growing presence in the media, including online social networks. According to data from the 2015 report, the written press and online media stand out clearly, with 96.5% of published news between July 2012 and June 2015.

Schist Villages is an unavoidable mark in the Portuguese tourist panorama and inspiration for developing low economic and demographic density places. It is an excellent example of national capacities and competence when led by a dream and managed with a missionary spirit. It won many awards (e.g., Prémio 85 Anos do Diário de Coimbra; Prémio Internacionalização do Património 2014) and participated in several international fairs (e.g., International Fair for Applied Arts and Design), which was suitable for both national and international acknowledgment.

Data collection

Several types of social media are available, from which social networks and online review platforms are among the most popular. The two most renowned are Facebook and TripAdvisor (Moro et al., 2018). Table 3 summarizes the main steps to reach the data used to analyze the hypotheses. From the first phase, a total number of 29 different accommodations were retrieved.

Table 3. Summary of the data collection process

1st phase	Went to the Schist Village website to find out how many properties were available, excluding rural hotels and camping areas.
2nd phase	Saw if those properties had a page on Facebook and TripAdvisor.
3rd phase	Collected the total number of online reviews from both online platforms.
4th phase	Discarded reviews with only a general rating classification (without descriptive content).
5th phase	Read the comments to compute the most meaningful features, according to Melo et al. (2016).
6th phase	Analyzed those features' sentiment polarity as additional features to those categories already provided by TripAdvisor.
7th phase	Assessed the validity of the hypotheses proposed.

Data was gathered since 2006, when the first customer impression on social media was published, up to May 22, 2017. Seven hundred sixty-four evaluations were registered: some with only quantitative data (e.g., score from 1 to 5) and others with quantitative and qualitative data (e.g., descriptive reviews). However, to thoroughly analyze the assumptions of this study without compromising the sample quality, only 430 online reviews were considered from 2008 (Table 4). Of those discarded, 315 were blank reviews, while 19 had no specific quantitative features to be analyzed, as those consisted of short descriptions not identifying the service/product evaluated.

Table 4. Number of evaluations per online platform (units and %)

Source	Number of evaluations	%
Facebook	146	34%
TripAdvisor	278	65%
Both	6	1%
Total	430	100%

The lodging attributes most discussed were identified from the ones most frequently mentioned within the reviews. After analyzing them, some were excluded because the sample size was insignificant (e.g., Wi-Fi and noises), while others were incorporated in more general attributes (e.g., bed quality and room security), as shown in Table 5. Moreover, these occurrence terms followed the study by Melo et al. (2017), where they analyzed rural lodgings in France and used the same categories and similar descriptions, except for the food category, which was not mentioned in their research.

Table 5. Features extracted from TripAdvisor and Facebook reviews

Features based on comments	Typology of the features
Food/ Breakfast	Typical and general food; Variety
Decoration	Styles (e.g., rustic); Pillows and other adornments;
Peacefulness	Relaxing, quiet and calm; Nature
Exterior Place	Pool; Gardens; Animals; Landscape
Hosts	How hosts are (e.g., friendly)
Leisure Activities	Sports; Hiking; River Beach
Cleanliness*	Rooms and general spaces' cleanliness
Service*	Check-in; 24h service; Hospitality; Attention to customers' requests and needs
Location*	Cars, persons, and place accessibility and visibility; Road infrastructures;
Rooms*	Air conditioner; Cozy; Shower; Fridge; Bed quality; Rooms security; Comfort;

* These features are the same in TripAdvisor, where users can classify them from 1 to 5, but it is relevant to add them again since many consumers wrote about them.

Their sentiment polarity was computed to understand the sentiments drawn from qualitative features. Therefore, besides TripAdvisor standard categories' ranks, the sentiments from both Facebook's comments and TripAdvisor's reviews were extracted using Excel and quantified into positive (100%) or negative (0%), according to Jiménez-Zafra et al. (2016). All numerical features were included in SPSS for the t-student and Pearson correlation tests to assure statistical validity. All the information retrieved and feature extraction was made manually, according to the recommendations by Marcheggiani et al. (2014).

As the reviews' accommodations were pre-selected based on Schist Villages lodging and, consequently, not every person had his profile complete, there were missing values to deal with. From the 430 reviews, 284 were extracted from TripAdvisor, while the remaining comments were obtained from Facebook. Since Facebook's profiles are undisclosed, this study only analyzed gender based on TripAdvisor's profiles,

which account for more than half of the reviews. However, more than half of the reviewers do not post in their TripAdvisor profile their gender (n= 187) or their age (n=195), respectively. Nevertheless, from the ones who disclose both features, men, and people whose ages range from 35-49 (13%) and 50-64 (9%) are more likely to generate online content. Also, most reviewers travel as a couple (38%), followed by 29% as a family.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Next, the hypotheses drawn are evaluated based on the collected data.

H1: Of all TripAdvisor features, tourists value service the most.

Table 6 shows the average ranks obtained for each of the TripAdvisor features. Although all ranks shown are above 4.50, cleanliness is the feature that users overall granted the highest score. The next most valued features are “service” and “rooms”. However, these last two are the only features that had negative scores within the sample (1 and 2 values), as shown in the following example for “service”: “a tremendous lack of respect. I made the appointment via telephone where I received the confirmation by email, and when I arrived there, I had no reservation”; and the following example for “rooms”: “there was no air conditioning as had been mentioned (...)”. Both reviews were about the same accommodation unit, probably indicating the need to restructure such a unit to meet customers’ expectations. Thus, overall, the hypothesis is not validated.

Table 6. TripAdvisor features mean

Ranking	TripAdvisor Features	Mean
1	Cleanliness	4.78
2	Service	4.73
3	Rooms	4.69
4	Sleep Quality	4.64
5	Value	4.58
6	Location	4.51

H2: Having friendly hosts is a relevant feature of rural tourism.

From the aspects extracted from the description of consumers’ experience, it is interesting to note the frequency and diversity of opinions. The “hosts” feature only accounted for one negative review compared to the 289 positive ones (140 records were missing values for this feature). Consequently, it results in 67.2% positive reviews, the highest percentage among all features (Table 7). Therefore, the hypothesis is validated.

In textual reviews for rural tourism, people also quoted as positive the fact of being surrounded by nature where they can relax and stay out from the busy life in urban areas. Moreover, Portuguese gastronomy and a good and varied breakfast are other things tourists write favorably about. However, in the same reasoning, it can be noticed that the food topic is the most cited when people talk negatively about anything. The t-student test was computed to evaluate mean differences in total scores between the individuals that scored negatively and positively on the different variables. “Food/breakfast” and “rooms” are the only ones that have statistical evidence to state that the mean of those features is different from both groups (negative and positive) analyzed, according to p-value ≤ 0.05 .

Table 7. Opinion about the additional features extracted.

	Positive (%)	Negative (%)	Missing Value (%)
Food/Breakfast	39.3%	3.5%	57.2%
Decoration	25.8%	0.2%	74.0%
Peacefulness	46.0%	-	54.0%
Exterior Place	32.1%	0.7%	67.2%
Hosts	67.2%	0.2%	32.6%
Leisure Activities	21.2%	-	78.8%

Service	20.0%	0.2%	79.8%
Cleanliness	9.6%	0.2%	90.2%
Locations	13.0%	1.6%	85.4%
Rooms	14.9%	2.1%	83.0%

H3: People who wrote about leisure activities traveled with family.

Outdoor activities are one of the things that distinguish rural tourism from urban tourism. Thus, it is essential to study this issue. As a result, the feature mainly related to it is the one that describes who people travel with (e.g., family, couple, alone, business, and friends).

Because everyone who talked about these activities in their reviews only mentioned it positively, this hypothesis has the perspective of more who talk about leisure activities in rural areas. This way, crosstabs were made in the SPSS to understand if people who wrote about leisure activities traveled with family, friends, alone, in business, or as a couple. Of the 69 people who responded, 28 traveled by family, accounting for 40.6%. This result was followed by people who traveled as a couple (39.1%) and with friends (13.0%). Thus, H3 is supported.

H4: There is a difference between genders in the score granted.

There is no statistically significant difference between males and females and the total score since the $p\text{-value} > 0.05$. Therefore, the hypothesis is rejected. One of the reasons for this is that not only there exists few negative scores, but also the difference between the number of males and females is small within the sample. Nevertheless, H4 rejection implies that men and women have the same perception and satisfaction of the lodgings despite their personal tastes. For example, literature acknowledged that male tourists are more attracted to adventure and sports in their travel experience, while female tourists prefer to explore the place's culture and opportunities for family closeness (Meng & Uysal, 2008).

H5: Hosts of rural tourism units are replying to negative comments.

Statistically, there is no significant difference between "No response" and "Response" in total score since the $p\text{-value} > 0.05$. Thus, the hypothesis is not valid. The reason is that the sample is small, limiting hypothesis validation. However, if the set is divided into two groups, e.g., one containing all reviews with scores above 3, and another with reviews rated equal or below 3, then it is possible to verify that both ratios are less than 50%, implying that hosts do not reply independently of the total score. Further data is in demand for a more robust answer to such a question.

H6 a: The TripAdvisor member's duration positively correlates with the number of useful votes.

Pearson's r statistic for the correlation between the TripAdvisor member years and the number of useful votes is 0.305. Therefore, we can conclude that there is a weak positive correlation between member years and useful votes, meaning that this variable does not influence the credibility and trustworthiness of a review, as it might be seen.

H6 b: Tourists with more votes have, on average, more negative reviews.

In this hypothesis, the total score was transformed in the same two groups as in H5: $\text{score} \leq 3$ and $\text{score} > 3$. Although statically, the difference of means in both groups is not significant ($p\text{-value} > 0.05$), the average of useful votes is higher in negative reviews than in positive reviews if it is considered that only 12 negative reviews are present, which is a limitation of this study. Nevertheless, results point out that when people plan their trip, they are more careful, interested, and trusting in reading negative reviews to make more judged decisions.

H7: The eWOM has been increasing in rural tourism.

The eWOM in Schist Villages accommodation has increased during the years, validating H7. This steady growth started after 2012, which agrees with the study made by Mauri et al. (2017), where they found a growth in online reviews after the date mentioned. The most significant difference in online reviews written by travelers is between 2014 and 2015, with more than 93 reviews. Since 2017 has data from less than half of the year, it is impossible to conclude this year. Most of these comments were retrieved from TripAdvisor, not Facebook, as the former platform is friendlier to use and evaluate and is associated with online booking platforms.

The average total score in the 430 online reviews analyzed is 4.77 in 5, which means that Schist Villages' accommodations are evaluated, on average, as excellent units, meeting customers' expectations with high satisfaction. Thus, the mode was 5, and the minimum and maximum score attributed was 1 and 5, respectively.

On the one hand, we can see that there are no negative reviews on the Facebook platform and just one with a mid-level classification, meaning that most people using Facebook to spread the word think positively about Schist Villages' lodging. On the other hand, TripAdvisor has many positive reviews and 12 reviews with negative and average scores. The reasons that may explain this difference between TripAdvisor and Facebook are: (1) TripAdvisor is a specifically designed hospitality reviews website, while Facebook is a generic online social network platform; (2) TripAdvisor has six features to classify from 1 to 5, making reviewers more aware about the criteria for evaluating accommodation units.

CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

Portugal and, particularly, the Schist Villages have not been a matter of study in terms of eWOM or rural tourist preferences prior to this research; thus, this study is the first aiming at better understanding it. Despite the limited sample, it can be concluded that eWOM has been increasing in rural tourism, a niche market, over the years, following a general tourism trend.

As TripAdvisor Insights (2015) suggested, properties can become more popular compared to others based on reviews' quality, quantity, and recency. It is like a vicious cycle because all these three aspects reflect on each other to continually attract more visitors and, consequently, more reviews on this website. Another way to increase the rating is to improve the lodger experience by using their feedback to respond to their needs. Thus, this study helped to collect reviewers' feedback that spent time in Schist Villages accommodation, motivating owners to improve and get to know their guests better and, consequently, convert the analyzed data into opportunities. Nevertheless, findings show that Schist Villages hold an excellent rating (4.77 from the reviews taken) and with few negative or average reviews.

The benefits of responding to online reviews were outlined in the positive and negative literature review. In terms of positive reviews, a response demonstrates that the reviewer's feedback is appreciated and attention is paid to it. In general, the consequences of replying are related to giving a competitive advantage to businesses by listening to customers and understanding their perceptions (TripAdvisor Insights, 2013). Schist Villages have to consider this and start responding to online reviews on TripAdvisor and Facebook pages in a timely and personalized manner to perform higher than their competitors and to increase their visibility and revenue while improving their reputation with a proper management response. For this purpose, suppliers could apply two solutions: hiring someone to do all this control or creating a system that could monitor and respond to comments.

Based on the collected dataset, we can split it into two types of consumer perceptions in this study: one related to the accommodation itself and the other connected to the surroundings. The results addressed a research gap, finding that content categories in comments differ at some point from those categorized in a rank.

From the results' insights, it was observed that rural reviewers evaluated positively the services provided by Schist Villages accommodation studied in the sample because more than half of the online reviews were favorable, judging the place with good and very good connotations. Therefore, it can be inferred that there is a high level of professionalism in providing rural experiences to customers. Despite the majority of positive posted comments and their featured evaluations provided by rural lodgings, it is necessary that managers of these tourism companies think about the reviews with low levels of satisfaction along with which features and why that happened. The most regular complaints were about rooms, service features, and food/breakfast.

In addition to these meaningful inferences from the study findings, some limitations must be considered. First, only user-generated content on Facebook and TripAdvisor was used. Although both platforms are well-known among potential rural tourists, others could be a matter of study, such as Booking.com or Toprural website. Second, the sample size was not extensive, considering that rural tourism is a niche in

the market. Finally, it must be considered how difficult it is to deal with and identify motivational or emotional elements within text. For example, it was impossible to identify reactions to any feature within 19 comments.

It is recommended to expand the analysis to other types of establishments within TRA consideration, like rural hotels and in other rural regions of Portugal and other countries. In the same reasoning, it could be helpful to extend to other social media platforms to see if there are differences in how consumers perceive rural tourism. Last but not least, comparing different types of tourism with the same factors analyzed could reveal hints for suppliers.

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ADDITIONAL READING

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KEY TERMS AND DEFINITIONS

Cultural tourism: Cultural tourism refers to the practice of traveling to destinations, events or attractions that have cultural and historical significance, in order to learn about and experience the unique cultural heritage of a particular place or community. This can include visiting museums, historical sites, festivals, and cultural events, as well as participating in activities that showcase local traditions, art, music, and cuisine.

Electronic word-of-mouth: Electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) refers to the process of sharing opinions, recommendations, and other forms of information about products, services, or brands through electronic media, such as social media, online forums, and review websites. It involves the use of digital communication channels to spread information and influence the attitudes and behaviors of others, including potential customers, about a particular product or service.

Rural tourism: Rural tourism refers to the practice of traveling to rural areas and engaging in activities that are related to the local culture, heritage, and environment. This can include visiting rural communities, participating in outdoor activities, exploring natural landscapes, and learning about the local agricultural practices and traditional ways of life. Rural tourism is often seen as a way to promote sustainable development and preserve local culture and natural resources, while also providing economic benefits to rural communities.

Social media: Social media refers to digital platforms and tools that allow users to create, share, and exchange content, opinions, and information with others. Social media platforms enable users to connect with each other and engage in online communication, which can include text, images, videos, and other types of multimedia.

APPENDIX 1

Evaluation #1

<p>The background information could be slightly implemented to give an even better reference picture of the tourism context to which the work refers. I would perhaps add a very brief mention of how covid has impacted this type of tourism. The literature review adequately frames the phenomenon, although this part may contain more recent references: "The Portuguese tourist office developed an ambitious plan for 2010-2016, aiming to turn Portugal in the most dynamic and agile tourism destination in Europe (Turismo de Portugal, 2015). As a result, the country was recently given the World's Leading Destination 2017 award (World Travel Awards, 2017)."</p>	<p>We are very grateful for the reviewer's suggestions, which we took into consideration.</p> <p>The literature review has been updated.</p>
<p>The request questions were set out very clearly and the choice was very pertinent. In the description of the model, the references in the text (e.g., H1, H2) generated a minimum of frustration in reading what it referred to. Although it is not methodologically incorrect, given that there are not 2-3 references and that they are made often, I recommend that you consider the idea of fully naming the elements to which it refers, or trying to put figure 2 later in a way to give a more comfortable reference to reading.</p>	<p>Once again, we appreciate the comments of the reviewer.</p> <p>The Figure was placed after the hypotheses.</p>

Evaluation #2

<p>The literature review is not quite sufficient and up-to-date. It is suggested to add some literature about the research of eWOM as it is one of the major concepts of this research/chapter. Besides, adding some updated articles about this research would be better.</p>	<p>We are very grateful for the reviewer's suggestions, which we took into consideration.</p> <p>The literature review has been updated.</p>
<p>There is no explicit linkage between RQ1,2 and 3 with H1 – H7. In the Discussion section, the author(s) did not explicitly respond to the research questions at the end of the section after discussing all hypotheses.</p>	<p>It was clarified in section 3.2</p>
<p>I think the chapter is relative to the book as it hits the concepts of rural tourism and electronic word-of-mouth targeted by the book.</p>	<p>Thank you very much.</p>
<p>The author(s) mentioned that their proposed model is based on Melo et al. (2017) and Bandyopadhyay (2016). However, I could not see how the model by Melo et al. (2017) was explicitly incorporated into their proposed model. Besides, not all readers will understand the components of the conceptual model by Bandyopadhyay (2016) and the proposed model of this research. Therefore, the author(s) would be better to briefly explain each construct and how it is measured in Section 3. In addition, it is advised to justify why the author(s) revised the model of Bandyopadhyay (2016) by only taking some of the constructs but not all. It is recommended to obtain a more recent report about the case in Section 4.1 if possible, as it could be relatively out-of-date (e.g., 2015). A sign of % could be missed in Table 2 (next to 2014). A typo of "no. of evaluations" seems to be in Table 4. It is recommended to define and explain the analysis methods, e.g., sentiment polarity,</p>	<p>The conceptual model considers indeed the contributions of these two journal articles. From Bandyopadhyay (2016), it includes constructs such as "eWOM Quality", "Source Credibility", and "Perceived Usefulness of eWOM". From Melo et al. (2017), a pivotal construct is considered, i.e., "Customer Satisfaction". Please also refer to Table 1 ("Constructs of the conceptual model") in section 3.</p> <p>The first paragraph of section 4.1. updated the citation to Aldeias do Xisto (2023). Thank you for your other remarks, namely regarding tables 2 and 4. Just a quick note to state that the big push in Aldeias do Xisto took place between 2009 and 2014 in terms of the Evolution of the tourist</p>

frequency analysis, t-student tests and correlation analysis, as it is pretty difficult to judge the reliability and validity of the findings if readers do not have some knowledge of this analysis method (s) in Section 4.2.	resources in units (see impressive changes (%) in the last column to the right). We respectfully disagree with your last comment since this is a research report (scientific paper), not a pedagogical text.
There is no explicit linkage between RQ1,2 and 3 with H1 – H7. In the Discussion section, the author(s) did not explicitly respond to the research questions at the end of the section after discussing all hypotheses.	It was clarified in section 3.2
Please carefully revise the grammar of the chapter, as some grammatical mistakes are relatively obvious.	Done.
It could contribute to studying and analyzing the impact of social media in rural tourism with a newly proposed conceptual framework by revising previous models.	Thank you very much
I think the chapter is relative to the book as it hits the concepts of rural tourism and electronic word-of-mouth targeted by the book. Yet, it would be better to explain how the model was used to analyze the case in Section 4.	Thank you very much
The organization of the chapter is quite effective. However, using different font styles or other formats to show the hypotheses explicitly would be better. Otherwise, it is relatively difficult for readers to spot the hypotheses.	Hypotheses were highlighted in bold.
According to the reference list, it is observed that the references are not much up-to-date. It is advised to find some related literature in recent five years.	References have been updated.

Evaluation #3

Eventually the author could have introduced a section on marketing applied to rural tourism and only then the section "2.2 Social media in rural tourism", i.e. a more global view of marketing and then a more particular view.	We are very grateful for the reviewer's suggestions, which we took into consideration.
Nothing to remark.	Thank you very much
Nothing to remark.	Thank you very much
Nothing to remark.	Thank you very much
The constructs presented are important and the analysis of their applicability to the market to be studied makes sense.	Thank you very much
The empirical study part is confused: The model presents some duplicate hypotheses. Some hypotheses formulated are not in accordance with the constructs present in the model. For example, "H5: Hosts of rural tourism units are replying to negative comments". There is no clear definition if we are facing a qualitative or quantitative study. A case study is mentioned, but then hypotheses are mentioned, which in practice are propositions that have no representation in the conceptual model.	This quantitative study uses secondary data (online reviews), which work as a proxy of customer experience and do not have the recognized limitations associated with self-reporting when using survey-based questionnaires. Although the collected data has both qualitative and quantitative features, computations and statistical analyses were performed to arrive at quantified results, as explained in the Methodology section.
The analysis of social networks, in a framework of certain constructs important for business success.	Thank you very much
A business area with certain specificities leveraged by digital marketing, with direct inputs from consumers obtained through social networks. Completely adjusted to the book and its recipients.	Thank you very much

<p>The conceptual model should be seen as a graphic representation of the hypotheses formulated. Thus, it is suggested that it appears after the formulation of the hypotheses.</p>	<p>The Figure was placed after the hypotheses.</p>
<p>One reference from 2022, one from 2020 and the rest are of date 2018 or below. It is suggested to incorporate some more recent references. For example: Madanaguli, A., Kaur, P., Mazzoleni, A., & Dhir, A. (2022). The innovation ecosystem in rural tourism and hospitality—a systematic review of innovation in rural tourism. <i>Journal of Knowledge Management</i>, 26(7), 1732-1762. Rosalina, P. D., Dupre, K., & Wang, Y. (2021). Rural tourism: A systematic literature review on definitions and challenges. <i>Journal of Hospitality and Tourism Management</i>, 47, 134-149. Kumar, S., & Valeri, M. (2022). Understanding the relationship among factors influencing rural tourism: A hierarchical approach. <i>Journal of Organizational Change Management</i>, 35(2), 385-407. Yang, J., Yang, R., Chen, M. H., Su, C. H. J., Zhi, Y., & Xi, J. (2021). Effects of rural revitalization on rural tourism. <i>Journal of Hospitality and Tourism Management</i>, 47, 35-45.</p>	<p>Added reference</p> <p>Added reference</p> <p>Added reference</p> <p>Added reference</p>
<p>I suggest that the empirical study be presented as a qualitative one, more specifically a case study supported on a series of propositions that we intend to confirm, using the observation technique that allowed us to collect a set of elements, namely of a numerical nature. Thus, a profound rethinking of the empirical study is suggested, in the description of the methodology and in the framework of the presentation of the results framed by the same methodology.</p>	<p>This quantitative study uses secondary data (online reviews), which work as a proxy of customer experience and do not have the recognized limitations associated with self-reporting when using survey-based questionnaires. Although the collected data has both qualitative and quantitative features, computations and statistical analyses were performed to arrive at quantified results, as explained in the Methodology section.</p>