

Exploring Tourists' Behavior Regarding Sustainable Destinations: The Case of Portugal

Sara Sousa

Polytechnic University of Coimbra, Rua da Misericórdia, Lagar dos Cortiços, S. Martinho do Bispo, 3045-093, Coimbra, Portugal
Research Center for Natural Resources, Environment and Society (CERNAS), Polytechnic University of Coimbra, Bencanta, 3045-601 Coimbra, Portugal

Abstract

In recent decades, Portugal—a southwestern European country with both a mainland territory and two archipelagos—has established itself as one of the most competitive tourist destinations in Europe and worldwide. Tourism plays a vital strategic role in Portugal's socioeconomic development, generating significant revenue, creating jobs, fostering business opportunities, and driving growth across both inland and coastal regions. Beyond being one of the country's primary economic activities, tourism also holds substantial growth potential. Amid pressing global sustainability challenges—such as population growth, resource scarcity, food insecurity, climate change, biodiversity loss, and pollution—there is a growing awareness of the urgent need to protect the environment and empower local communities. This awareness has led to a stronger push for the development of sustainable tourism. The COVID-19 pandemic, which caused severe socioeconomic disruptions worldwide, further accelerated this shift, compelling the tourism sector to reinvent itself with a greater emphasis on sustainability. During and after the pandemic—characterized by periods of social distancing and an increased appreciation for nature—tourists became more aware of the economic, social, and environmental impacts of tourism on both present and future generations. As a result, demand for sustainable hotels has risen, and an increasing number of tourists are willing to pay more for eco-friendly transportation options. This study aims to analyze and understand tourists' behavior toward sustainable destinations in Portugal by applying the Theory of Planned Behavior and examining data collected through an online survey. The findings reveal that tourists exhibit a strong intention to visit Portugal's most sustainable destinations, influenced by several factors, including their attitudes, subjective norms, perceived behavioral control, and sustainability awareness. Additionally, the results indicate that tourists' actual consumption behavior in sustainable destinations is driven by their intention, despite the presence of an intention-behavior gap. The study also concludes that tourists are willing to pay a higher premium for sustainable tourism experiences compared to less sustainable alternatives.

Keywords

Tourism, Sustainability, Theory of Planned Behavior, Portugal.