The Eco-Experience as a Complementary Offer to Coastal Product in a Mass Tourism Destination

Júlio Mendes, Manuela Guerreiro and Patricia Oom do Valle

Abstract The new economic era "the experience economy" that we entered in the twenty-first century is challenging the overall tourism industry and destinations to respond to visitor expectations in a radically different way, demanding a new vision on what is truly being delivered to them. Within the current era, tourism businesses and destinations, in order to thrive and compete globally, are bound to recognize that experiences, not goods or services, are what motivate visitors to travel, repeat visits to the destination, and recommend it to friends and relatives. Being so, a research agenda for tourism development and quality should place at its center the nature of tourist experiences and meanings of quality tourist experiences from the stakeholders point of view, so that the industry actors can take joint action supported by in-depth knowledge of meanings attached to experiences. Researchers face many challenges and obstacles in this particular area of investigation due to difficulties inherent complexity of experience-related issues, as an effect of the dynamic, subjective, emotional and in construct definition and consensus, the opportunity for multiple theoretical approaches, as well as the contextual nature of the experience itself. In sum, the construct operationalization both for the purpose of understanding the phenomenon and for practical benefits to the industry is the main challenge. There is however a strong need for these obstacles to be tackled and overcome through this research project designed to contribute to construct definition and clarification, in consistence with an integrated approach conceived to frame the complexity of quality tourist experiences.

Keywords Tourism experiences · Satisfaction · Eco-experience · Inland

J. Mendes (✉) · M. Guerreiro · P.O. do Valle
Center for Spatial and Organizational Dynamics, University of Algarve, Faro, Portugal
e-mail: jmendes@ualg.pt

M. Guerreiro
e-mail: mmguerre@ualg.pt

P.O. do Valle
e-mail: pvalle@ualg.pt

1 Introduction

In a context of globalization and increasing competition between organizations and tourism destinations, it is important to find ways to differentiate specific and composite products in order to be successful. Fostering competitiveness in a destination entails adopting an unequivocal quality approach to meet the balance between tourists' expectations, needs and wants, and the understanding of what they think and how they live experiences.

The search for differentiation and authenticity in the tourist experience, the growing value of natural and cultural resources, the changing attitude of active tourists and the move away from "standardized" practices often contrasts with the visible degradation of many coastal destinations. It may be said that currently the traditional supply of "sun and beach" to new demand needs is a central issue in order to ensure competitiveness of coastal tourist destinations.

The concerns about tourist experiences have led Destinations Management Organizations (DMOs) to face different and more complex challenges. These challenges mean that DMOs need to develop a new vision on how the tourism system should work and to adopt new management segments. Although there has been considerable theoretical thinking on the subject, not much empirical research is available. One reason for this to happen is the multidimensional, complex, and highly diversified nature of the tourist experience. Another reason is related to the fact that supporting constructs, namely satisfaction, quality, and value, continue relatively ambiguous and not always part of an integrated vision and consistent research. And yet understanding of major and relevant dimensions of tourist paradigms should aim at achieving a high level of tourist satisfaction.

Understanding tourists experiences, based on the identification of perceptions and emotions tourists and visitors have during their stay at the destination, is a central issue for DMOs in terms of supply and positioning to potential experiences are of utmost importance to construct operationalization for effective experience management at destination level.

The main objective of this paper is to understand the tourism experience in the Algarve region in order to identify the most relevant issues concerning the increase of destination competitiveness. Moreover, this research aims at profiling the tourists who experience eco-products in the inland of the Algarve region as a complement of a core experience centered in the consumption of sun and beach products.

Focusing on tourist perceptions, this study intends to contribute to a broaden understanding of tangible and intangible activities and attributes that form the underlying basis of the tourist experience which involves the emotions and the memories that make the true story of each personal experience in the Algarve.

2 State-of-the-Art

A tourism destination consists of a coherent set of tourist products, at a specific geographical location, under a specific image and marketed under a distinctive brand name (Silva et al. 2001). They pointed out a destination is usually built around a core product under which it is developed the identity of the place and the image yield by tourists. These are very relevant topics because it looks to design the attractiveness of the tourism destination in an international set. The core products are generally associated with the type of geographical and social structure encountered (urban, rural, and coastal). For the case under study, Algarve is a sun and beach tourist destination given its natural geographical and climatic characteristics.

Since the beginning of the twenty-first century, the majority of "first generation" tourism destinations register a number of problems related to the adoption of mass tourism models, seasonality, uncoordinated spatial planning, and environmental disturbances, which represented a serious concern for public and private tourism-related industry authorities (Sedmak and Mihalic 2008).

Once in the destination, the tourist has an array of options of consumable goods that range from gastronomy to shopping, from museums, theme parks, and other events, and planning the time available in tune to needs and expectations. The "new tourist" looks to discover sun and beach destinations with greater preference given to supplementary product offers (Hewison 1987; Hughes 1987; Richards 2002; Chapman and Speake 2010; Valle et al. 2011). It is generally accepted the importance of exploring the unique characteristics of the destination, in terms of cultural and natural heritage, in order to create new products, that will enhance the tourism experiences (Costa 2004; Smith 2004; Agarwal and Brunt 2006).

2.1 The Concept of Tourism Experience

Experience is playing an increasingly important role in the overall economies of most tourism destinations. The process by which tourists perceive, consume, and remember an experience during a visit to a destination is complex and multifaceted because of the large number of actors involved in providing the experience. Consequently, the overall experience at the destination derives from piecemeal experiences, separated by time and space, from the initial departure experience to the experience of returning home. At a conceptual level, tourist experience consists of a continuous flux of related and integrated services which are acquired during a limited period of time, often in different geographic areas.

Li (2000) defines the tourist experience as a "multifunctional leisure activity, involving entertainment and learning dimensions." Some researchers view it as an

encounter with spaces, places, and landscapes (Seamon 1979; Tuan 1989, 1993, 1997). Pine and Gilmore (1999), on the other hand, claim that "entertainment is but one dimension of experience."

The tourist experience has also been studied in relation to destination image and perception, which developed into a research stream that studies issues such as destination attributes (Ross 1991), theme parks attributes (Fenton and Pearce 1988), and museum attributes (Moscado 1991), among others.

The experience is affected by a large set of factors, many of which are not directly related to the acquisition of a specific service. It is the combination of inherent factors and associated satisfaction in terms of acquired and consumed services during the holistic tourism experience which determines the overall satisfaction of tourists.

Tourist experiences have been discussed by (Clawson 1963; Boorstin 1964; Cohen 1972, 1979; MacCannell 1976; Smith 1977; Smith and Brent 2001; Ryan 2002), among others. Clawson (1963) wrote about recreation experiences; Boorstin (1964) discoursed on authenticity in tourist experiences; Cohen (1972, 1979) showed the phenomenological tourist experiences frames; MacCannell (1976) presented contemporaneous writings on tourist experiences and authenticity. Smith (1977, 2001) addressed the interaction of host and guest in travel experiences. Ryan (2002) focused particularly on the "tourist experience."

Tourism and tourist experience past research have also focused on temporality and activity-based relationships (Clawson 1963) and some only on activity (McIntosh 1977; Crompton 1979; Borrie and Roggenbuck 2001a, b, c) presented four ways used to understand tourist and tourism experiences. Those four ways include (1) meanings-based (Botterill and Crompton 1996), (2) benefits, (3) satisfaction (Lounsbury and Polik 1992), and (4) experience-based means (Cohen 1979; Borrie and Roggenbuck 2001a, b, c).

2.1.1 Conceptualizing Tourism Experience

Cohen (1979) changed the way the tourism experience is conceptualized, from the moment he asserted that different individuals may search for different tourism experiences. A research stream developed based on the notion that the tourism experience is plural, and consequently many possible and alternative categorizations are expected to emerge (Krippendorf 1984; Pearce 1982; Plog 1977; Smith 1987). Under the new conceptual framework, by the end of the 1970s, Cohen (1979) proposed one of the most important tourist typologies (Table 1).

Urry (1990, 2002) introduced the notion of "gaze" into considerations of tourist experiences albeit that "his gazes" were challenged by Perkins and Thorns (2001). They defend that both international and domestic tourists in European settler societies, such as New Zealand, participate in active forms of touristic recreation; thus gazing is only one component of the tourist experience. They go further and suggest that a better metaphorical approach to tourism is to talk about the tourism performance, which incorporates ideas of active bodily involvement, physical activity, and gazing.

Table 1 Tourist typologies

Recreational mode	This experience requires activities like cinema, television, sport events. These are marginal activities that break the diary routine. These tourists are looking for relaxing and they appreciate entertainment opportunities
Diversionary mode	Tourists that make part of this segment are looking for lazer activities that can assure them escape opportunities. They want to re-energize themselves
Experiential mode	Tourists who are attracted by this kind of experience are looking for self-enrichment through the contact with other cultures and ways of life. They want authenticity in social, cultural, and natural fields during their trips
Experimental mode	The tourists who make part of this segment are trying to rediscover themselves through tourism experiences. This typology of tourist experience looks for meaning to his life living the authentic life of others. People aim to rediscover himself through tourism
Existential mode	This typology of tourist experience is related with a spiritual existence and may be associated, for instance, with pilgrims

Each individual expects to live a particular experience. Consequently, the very same experience has a different meaning for each one. Research has shown that tourism experiences satisfy a wide range of personal needs, from pleasure to search for meanings (Li 2000).

The tourism experience is a social construct, a socially constructed term (Jennings and Nickerson 2006), concerning a "complex process involving multiple parties in different moments of time (…) and retains value long into the future" (Andereck and Jurowski 2006). It is, in the first place, a visual event, somewhat different from daily routine (Urry 1995). But it can also be positively or negatively evaluated (Lee et al. 1994), dynamic (Hull et al. 1992), transient (Mannell 1980; Tinsley and Tinsley 1986), and context-dependent (Bell 1993; Borrie and Roggenbuck 2001a, b, c).

Recently, a research stream has been developing exploring the relationship between the quality of tourism experience and satisfaction. Experience quality is generally acknowledged as a subjective measure, while service quality, on the contrary, has objective meaning.

Satisfaction is the outcome of process of comparison between expectations and performance. Tourist satisfaction is a relevant measure in the evaluation of the experience and the degree to which satisfies expectations (Pearce 1988). However, this approach does not consider emotional and symbolic values, though they are perceived as highly important in the evaluation of the tourism experience (Colton 1987). And yet, it has been claimed that the greater the impact of emotions on the experience, the more memorable it will be (Pine and Gilmore 1999).

Vitterso et al. (2000) acknowledge that there are conceptual and methodological difficulties related to the evaluation of the tourism experience. In the 1990s, researchers adopted a post-modernist perspective on tourism (Lash and Urry 1994; Munt 1994; Urry 1990), in association with the emergence of alternative practices to mass tourism, linked to nature and cultural heritage (Barrett 1989; Poon 1989; Urry 1990).

3 Setting

Algarve, a region whose principal economic activity is sun and sea tourism (though currently undergoing a process of strategic diversification), is the cradle of Portuguese tourism which first attracted tourists in search of a good climate and the beach in the 1960s. There has since been a steady demand increase for sun and sea, a product which the region specialized in during the 1970s and 1980s.

Although sun and sea represent the main motivating reason for visiting Algarve, studies show that the region offers new market opportunities. Besides entertainment, there is another interesting facet which appeals to tourists, namely nature and rural landscape, historical, cultural, and architectural heritage, and gastronomy. This may represent a potential form of attracting more tourists, and in this way encouraging an increase in the average length of stay and daily expenditure.

Algarve is currently investing in a diversified range of products regarded as strategically important and includes golf (aimed at complementing the sun and sea product and reducing seasonality in the region), sports (through nautical events and new, marinas, port facilities), international conferences and initiatives (to reduce seasonality and enabling accommodation units to maintain a reasonable occupancy rate throughout the year), culture-oriented tourism, health tourism, and nature tourism.

4 Methodology

4.1 Questionnaire and Data

This study uses data from a questionnaire applied to 384 foreign tourists visiting the Algarve region during the 2010 winter months.

The questionnaire consisted of six sections: section I looked to understand the motivations to visit the Algarve; section II sought information about the environmental awareness of tourists; section III identified the most relevant information sources about the region; section IV enables to profile the activities carried out by tourists during their stay; section V evaluates the Algarve image; and section VI collected information on respondent's demographic profile (gender, age, nationality, marital status, educational qualifications, and employment situation).

The process of calculating the sample size involved the most conservative estimate of the sample proportion ($p = 0.5$), a 95 % level of confidence, and a maximum of sampling error of 5 %. The questionnaire has been applied by two interviewers to tourists leaving the destination at the Faro International Airport, while checking-out. The interviewers were properly identified and the study's objectives have been explained to the respondents. It has been used the systematic sampling method, because the sample is large enough to use the procedure. The sample size and random sampling ensures sample representativeness.

4.2 Data Analysis Methods

The study's variables are either nominal or ordinal, and they have been analyzed using univariate and bivariate techniques. Univariate analysis consisted of graph representations and frequency analysis. Bivariate analysis comprehended graph representations and nonparametric tests (χ^2 independence tests). Nonparametric tests are used to analyze the relation of significant independence (or absence of relation) between two variables. Data analysis used the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) software, version 19.0. The performed statistical tests were based on a 5 % significance level. The graphs have been constructed using Excel.

5 Results

The sample's characteristics are as follows: women make up 54 % of the respondents and men make up 46 %. Age composition shows a distribution varying between 13 and 82 years old, though higher age groups are preponderant. The majority of respondents are in the 45–60 and >61 age groups (61 %). Average age is 48, and the standard deviation is 17. The age median is 50 and the mode is 65. 70 % of the 384 tourists interviewed are from UK and 9 % from Germany, the second most represented nationality.

Concerning the professional status, 49 %) are still in working life, while 21 % are in retirement. In terms of marital status, 254 are married (66 %), 100 are single (26 %), and 26 are divorced (7 %). The majority holds a higher education degree (57 %). Tourists holding a secondary education degree represent 40 % of the sample.

5.1 Motivations

Motivations of tourists visiting the Algarve region as a tourism destination have been assessed through a set of reasons/motives, which served the purpose of measuring their level of importance in the decision-making process. More specifically, eight motivations have been selected and measured using a 5-point Likert scale: 1—Not at all important, 2—Not very important, 3—Indifferent, 4—Important, and 5—Very important.

Data collected show that most important reasons for selecting Algarve as a tourism destination were sun and beach, nature and rural landscape (Table 2). These reasons scored the highest in the categories important and very important (86.8 and 77.7 respectively). Other highly valued motives are visiting towns and monuments (59.4 %) and gastronomy (56.5 %).

Table 2 Motivations to visit the Algarve

Motivations	Important (%)	Very important (%)	Total (%)
Nature and countryside	49.9	27.8	100.0
Sun and beach	47.5	39.3	100.0
Cities, towns and monuments	45.1	14.3	100.0
To visit family and friends	18.3	20.5	100.0
Sport events and sport activities	16.9	10.5	100.0
Gastronomy	41.7	14.8	100.0
Health and beauty	21.5	2.8	100.0
Learn Portuguese	24.8	10.1	100.0
Another	12.9	61.3	100.0

For a deeper understanding of tourists' motivation to travel to Algarve, the team has performed several cross variable analyses. A first conclusion is that "motivation" shows statistically significant evaluation differences according to gender, but only as far as it concerns sun and beach (χ^2 test: $p = 0.037$): 36.5 % of women and 41.7 % of men evaluated it as very important.

Motivations show statistically significant variations in terms of tourists' age, in relation to three specific situations: nature and rural landscape (χ^2 test: $p = 0.013$), sport events (χ^2 test: $p = 0.002$), and gastronomy (χ^2 test: $p = 0.001$). Individuals in age groups 31–45 and 46–60 are more motivated toward nature and rural landscape than other age groups (31 and 37 % respectively believe that this motivation is very important). Higher age groups do not show especially motivated toward sport events (not at all important for 39 % of individuals over 60 years old) and lower age groups, on the contrary, are indifferent to them (26 % <30 years old and 43 % 31–45 years old). Regarding gastronomy, it has been found that it is important to tourists >65 (52 %) and in the age group 46–60. Younger respondents are less motivated by gastronomy.

Data analysis revealed statistical significance in what concerns the relationship between motivation and education level nature in the case of nature and rural landscape (χ^2 test: $p = 0.038$). This motivation is relevant to individuals holding a secondary (56 %) or higher education degree, but very relevant to those holding lower education qualifications (40 %).

There are statistically significant differences in relation to nature and rural landscape, towns and monuments, gastronomy, and learning Portuguese for tourists that visited inland Algarve and for those who have not (χ^2 test: $p = 0.000$, χ^2 test: $p = 0.044$, χ^2 test: $p = 0.000$, χ^2 test: $p = 0.002$, respectively).

5.2 Characteristics of Tourists' Visit to Algarve

Sample data revealed that 77 % of respondents visited the region previously and only 23 % came to Algarve for a first time visit (Fig. 1).

Fig. 1 First time in the Algarve
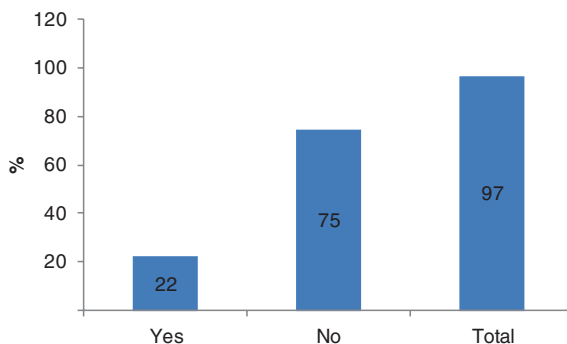
Another issue addressed by this study has been the type of accommodation used by tourists. Data show that "apartment" is the type of accommodation chosen by 38 % of respondents, "hotel" was preferred by 21 %, and "own property" by (19 %). Rural tourism scored last (only 1 % of responses). Accommodation booking methods have been the Internet (41 %) and travel agencies (17 %). Most respondents stayed in the destination for a week (53.6 %), and average stay is 12 days (standard deviation: 8 days). Median and mode are 7 days.

5.2.1 Characteristics of Tourists' Visit to Inland Algarve

Approximately 68 % of respondents visited the inland region of Algarve (Fig. 2).

Most visited places are located in the municipalities of Monchique, Silves, and Loulé, representing 68 % of total visits (Fig. 3).

The activities that mostly involved tourists during their stay in inland Algarve are walking in nature (26 %) and local gastronomy tours (24 %). Although not equally relevant, tourists engaged in safaris (3 %), fishing (2 %), and agriculture (4 %) (Fig. 4).

Most tourists stayed in coastal municipalities (63 %). Albufeira, Loulé, and Portimão hosted 40 % of respondents. However, 33 % of them did not make any reference to the location of their accommodation (Fig. 5).

In terms of means of transportation in the destination, 30.6 % of respondents used a rented car, 20.3 % preferred using the bus, and 19.7 % had their own car. Train was chosen by only 7 % of respondents. For those visiting the region for the first time (38.8 %), only 13.1 % traveled inland. However, taking into account tourists that visited the region the previous year (76.8 %), this means that 86.9 % searched for complementary experiences to the ones associated with the Algarve's sun and beach product. In this last respect, statistical tests and analyses demonstrated a significant relationship between variables (χ^2 test: $p = 0.000$).
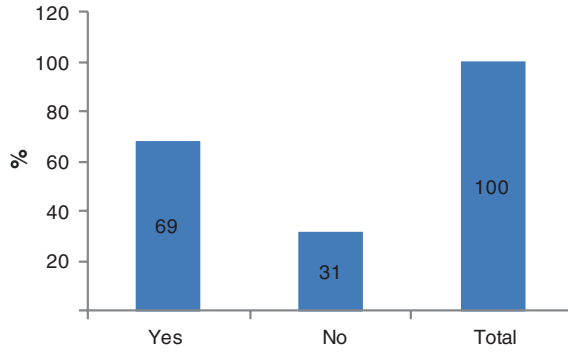
Fig. 2 Visited Algarve before

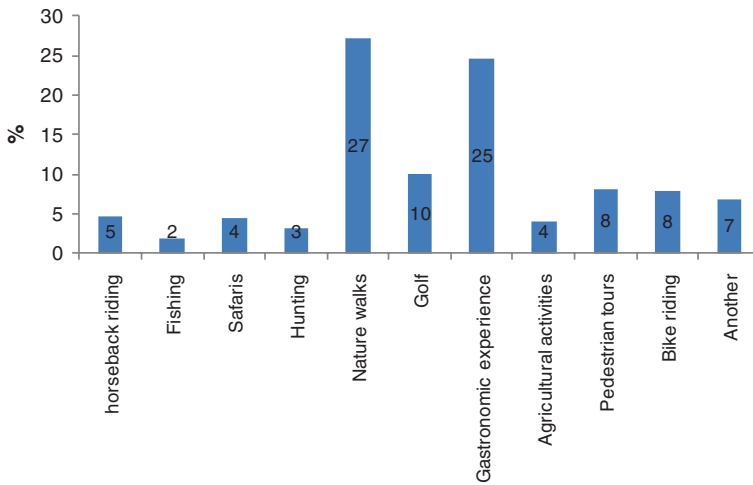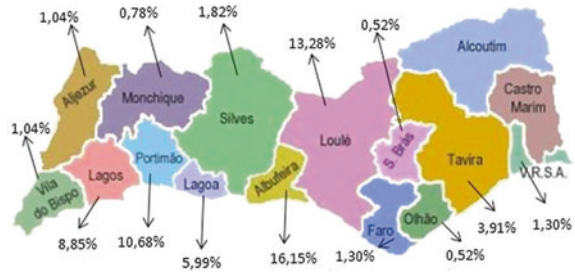**Fig. 3** Areas visited in the inland of the region

Fig. 4 Activities experienced in the inland

Fig. 5 Accommodation

5.3 Level of Satisfaction with the Tourism Experience

In relation to the Algarve experience, a significant percentage of respondents (38 %) found highly satisfied with it and 52 % satisfied. The two groups that scored higher in satisfaction levels represent 90 % of the sample, which is quite positive.

There were no statistically significant relations between overall satisfaction with the tourism experience and visit to specific locations in inland Algarve (χ^2 test: $p > 0.05$).

Such results are in conformity with previous research that have shown the holistic nature of tourism experience overall evaluation, thus not directly influenced by the discrete evaluation of touristic products. Thus being so, it is expected that activities and resources with potential to become tourism products in inland Algarve should be thought complementary traditional tourism products of the destination. In harmony with findings on satisfaction, the majority of respondents (81 %) show a high intention of repeating the visit to Algarve (Fig. 6).

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As to the intention of recommending the destination to friends and relatives, 85 % of respondents said they were favorable to do that (Fig. 8).

Recommendation to visit Algarve and repeating it show a statistically significant relation with visiting the inland region (χ^2 test: $p = 0.003$ and χ^2 test: $p = 0.000$, respectively). The highest levels of recommendation intention were found among tourists that visited inland Algarve (88.8 %). The percentage is slightly lower for tourists that remained in coastal areas (76.7 %). 86.4 % of respondents that are favorable to the idea of repeating the visit have been inland. This intention is not equally relevant for those who stayed in coastal areas (70 %).
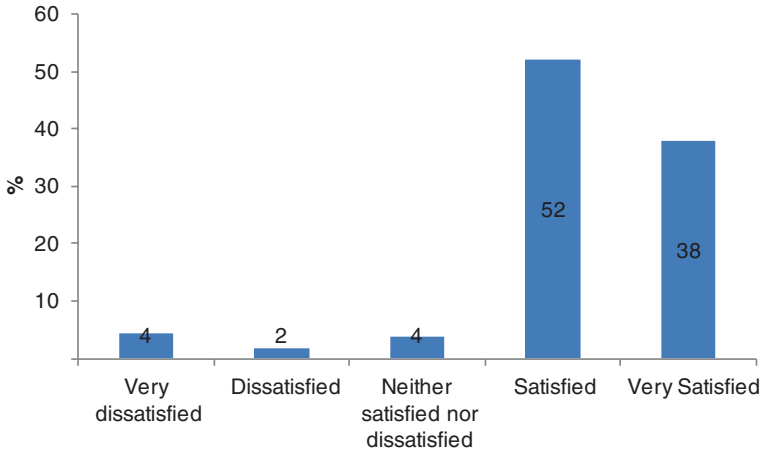
Fig. 6 Satisfaction with the tourism experience
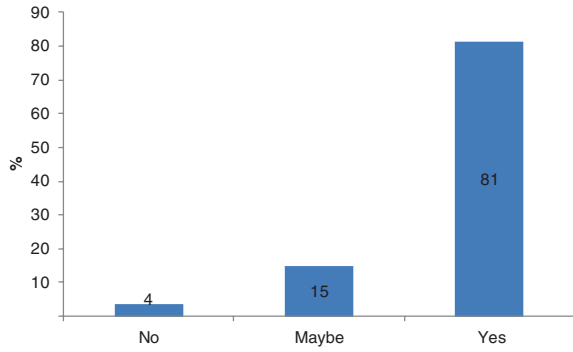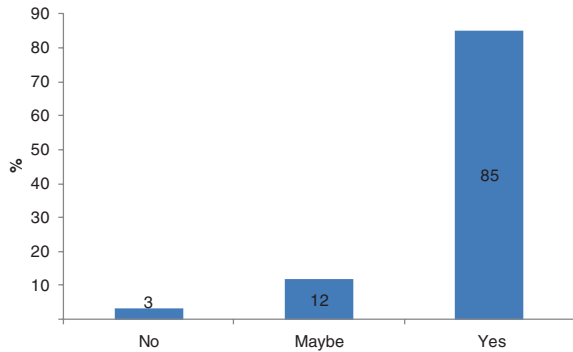
Fig. 7 Intention of return to the Algarve

Fig. 8 Intention to recommend Algarve

6 Conclusions

In contrast to what is usually believed in relation to Algarve, main motivations for the choice of the destination have been the sun and beach product, but also nature and rural landscape, gastronomy, towns, and monuments (86, 78, 59, and 57 % respectively).

There is a whole new reality that needs to be acknowledged in order to meet the needs of new market segments that have not, so far, been considered in the DMO's communication strategies. The study identified two target markets for the region: individuals in the age groups 31–45 and 46–60, which have shown more motivated toward nature and rural landscape.

On the other hand, this motivation is associated with education qualification levels. In fact, it has shown important to individuals holding secondary (56 %) and higher (47 %) education qualification, but also very important to individuals holding lower levels of education qualifications (40 %). It is worth noting that the three levels, in average, showed a 70 % level of importance in relation to this specific motivation.

Another conclusion of the study relates to tourist accommodation in the region. Although the location of the accommodation has not prevented contact with inland scapes, the majority of tourists took accommodation in the coastline, either in apartments (38 %) or in hotels (21 %). Data suggest that there should be an integrated approach to sun and beach and nature and rural landscape products.

For tourists visiting inland Algarve, favorite activities are nature-based tours and gastronomy-related experiences. 38 % of the respondents found the tourism experience highly satisfactory, 52 % found it satisfactory, amounting to 90 % overall satisfaction with the destination.

The intention of repeating the visit is very high among these tourists (81 %), which is associated with the level of satisfaction with the visit. In addition, the intention of recommending the destination is also high, which is quite in harmony with levels of satisfaction found and the intention of repeating the visit.

A concluding remark concerns the destination promotion. The study's findings suggest that it is no longer sustainable to focus the destination's promotion exclusively on the sun and beach product. In this sense, the researchers recommend that it is necessary to design a repositioning strategy for the Algarve destination, attempting a differentiation from competition based on an integrated offer of sun and beach, nature, culture, and gastronomy.

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