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Characterization of Olive Oil Tourism as a Type of Special Interest Tourism: An Analysis from the Tourist Experience Perspective

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Abstract: Olive oil tourism is an emerging activity that is sparking a growing interest among tourists seeking to partake in this experience and the self-fulfilment it offers. An ever-greater number of olive oil mills are diversifying their businesses to incorporate this type of tourism. In this article, olive oil tourism is characterized as a type of special interest tourism (SIT), under a demand-side approach. Based on quantitative research carried out with olive oil tourists, which examined the aspects of the destination they value, as well as their preferences and motivations for consumption, this article proposes four dimensions that are considered key for characterizing olive oil tourism as SIT: experience, sustainability awareness, the promotion of local culture, and the image of status and prestige held by the tourist. This proposal to characterize olive oil tourism as a type of SIT can contribute to the development of more effective and successful marketing strategies that orient olive oil tourism towards services that tourists value and demand. In turn, this will have an impact in terms of wealth creation for rural olive oil producing areas.

Keywords: olive oil tourism; oleotourism; special interest tourism; sustainable tourism; olive oil tourist behavior; experiential tourism

1. Introduction

Olive oil tourism is a burgeoning activity, the emergence of which is linked to products developed in rural olive producing areas, offering an opportunity to diversify the olive monoculture. In some of these areas, olive cultivation is the main source of livelihood, and olive oil tourism represents an avenue for diversification for the olive oil companies established there.

Such is the interest in this type of tourism—from a social, economic, and even political viewpoint—that many oil mills and cooperatives are starting to develop this activity. This entails converting the mill to a place that is no longer merely a factory but a unique space where visitors can enjoy a tourist experience. These spaces also serve as informative components, providing insights into the culture of olive oil, its health properties, and the cultural and social heritage of the environment where the activity is carried out. At the same time, they encourage the tourist to become ambassadors for this product, as it satisfies their needs and wants and lives up to their expectations.

Very few analyses in the literature have considered olive oil tourism as special interest tourism (hereinafter SIT). Nevertheless, in recent years, some studies have started to emerge which link this type of tourism with the characteristics of SIT; they do so on the basis of the different activities included in olive oil tourism, which make it a type of complex tourism with connections to different types of

specific tourism [1]. Said studies have attempted to characterize olive oil tourism from a supply-side perspective; that is, by analyzing the activities and services provided. However, there are no studies to date that adopt a demand-side approach in characterizing olive oil tourism as SIT, taking into account the values and motivations of the tourist.

In the present study, we propose a classification of olive oil tourism as a type of SIT, based on the olive oil tourist's opinions on the aspects of the destination he/she particularly appreciates, his/her values, preferences and interests, and motivations for engaging in this tourist activity. This information enables the identification and analysis of four key indicators, on the basis of which olive oil tourism can be characterized as SIT. This characterization can help offer a better understanding of this type of tourism and guide companies' marketing strategies. These indicators are as follows: (1) sustainability, (2) experience, (3) promotion of the local culture, and (4) an image of prestige/status. The more closely olive oil tourism is aligned with these indicators, the more likely it is that this tourism activity will succeed and will be more oriented towards the olive oil tourist—in other words, towards the market.

2. Olive Oil Tourism as Special Interest Tourism

The term olive oil tourism was coined in the 1980s and referred to the transformation of traditional factories towards other business models that were more open and involved more contact with the consumer. It had previously been known as farm tourism [2], but the term was subsequently refined given the need to market the olive producing regions of the European Mediterranean basin, Australia, the United States, and the Southern Cone countries, primarily Argentina and Uruguay [3–5] and to generate olive oil specifiers.

In general terms, olive oil tourism can be defined as a set of tourist activities that revolve around olive oil. These include visits to the olive groves—sometimes coinciding with the olive harvest—and the oil mills, tasting the oils, and trying typical regional dishes in which olive oil is the star ingredient, along with other cultural and nature-related activities that allow visitors to engage with the environment of the region in question [6].

As it is a type of tourism associated with different types of general tourism and even with niche tourism markets, we can consider olive oil tourism as a type of SIT, the production of which is a process guided by consumers' specific interests and motivations [7].

Thus, it is associated with rural or nature-based tourism [3,8]. In addition, it combines with cultural tourism and health tourism and can be framed as thematic tourism, also helping to generate sales of agri-food products linked to this activity [3,9]. Olive oil tourism can even be understood within the context of gastronomic tourism [10].

Authors such as Jung et al. [11] underline the complexity of this type of tourism and the existence of different degrees of specialty. However, given its association with different types of general tourism, olive oil tourism can be considered an SIT; indeed, according to Soleimani [12], this form of tourism meets the needs of specific markets by focusing on diverse experiences and activities that fall outside the scope of general interest tourism.

It can thus be seen that SIT has become established as a valuable market niche for multi-product destinations and a central activity for single-product destinations [13,14]; this enables a more thorough characterization of olive oil tourism, a topic that to date has received little attention in the literature.

According to the World Tourism Organization (UNWTO), Special Interest Tourism (SIT) is specialized tourism for groups or individuals seeking to gain knowledge and have experiences by engaging in specific activities. Given the characteristics and knowledge of the target audience for these activities, these tourists can be considered "active" or "experiential" people, who seek specific activities framed within a certain way of being, thinking, or acting. Therefore, this type of leisure experience is related to special, unusual activities, in distinctive settings, and it is particularly linked to a local community and a specific territory [15,16]. The desire to enjoy leisure interests or develop a new interest in a particular destination is central to the definition of SIT [17]. In short, these are tourists

who are interested in spending their leisure time enjoying the diversity and uniqueness of the activities offered by this type of tourism [18–20].

Such activities include visiting an olive orchard and even taking part in harvesting the olives (depending on the time of year); visiting oil mills, interpretation centers or museums; product tasting and food pairings; learning first-hand about the local products and buying them to eat later. All these activities that form part of the SIT create a connection between the tourist and the territory. An identity is forged as a special interest destination, based on its natural, cultural, gastronomic, and ethnographic heritage, thereby offering the visitor a unique experience [21–23].

To summarize, we can characterize SIT as a specific, experience-oriented tourism centered on activities that allow tourists to expand their knowledge, meet their leisure needs, and engage in a certain activity in a particular area and/or at a specific point in time [24].

On the basis of the unique characteristics of SIT and those of olive oil tourism, we have identified four key dimensions that would allow us to characterize olive oil tourism as a type of SIT [25–29]. These dimensions are sustainability and environmental awareness; unique, sensory experience; the promotion of local culture; and an image of status and prestige (Figure 1).

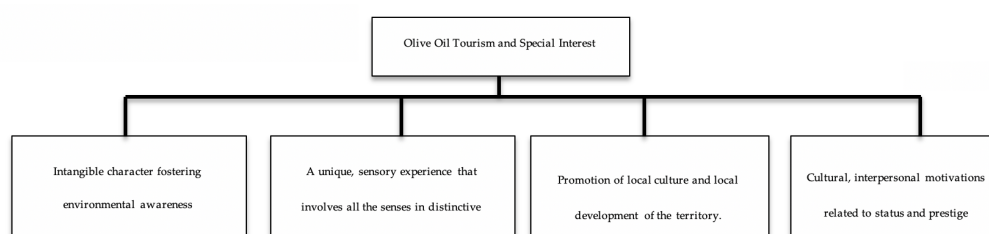


Figure 1. Olive oil tourism characterized as special interest tourism (Source: own elaboration based on [3,25–28]).

Thus, based on the above figure (Figure 1), our research model aims to explain the behavior of the olive oil tourist by incorporating the general values of the destination along with the values of the tourist and his/her motivations. We explore the possible relationship between these elements and the four dimensions of the SIT model (sustainability, experience, promotion of local culture, and image and status).

First of all, it is worth underlining that olive oil tourism is an intangible, sustainable element, insofar as tourism linked to agricultural activities is based on sustainability, respect for the environment, and awareness about a society with certain values linked to the land [25,26].

With olive oil tourism, the connection to the land means that the region’s development is somewhat influenced by the arrival of tourists descending on the local scene; this connection enriches the consumers’ experience and facilitates the development of the local culture as a differentiating element [27–29].

Another fundamental feature that relates olive oil tourism with SIT is its ability to generate a 360-degree experience for the tourist, from the source to the production of the end product, involving all the senses (taste, smell, touch, sight, and sound); this guarantees an all-round, unique experience, within exclusive reach of a particular niche market with certain special interests, meaning that it is oriented towards a particular audience [30–32].

Lastly, in terms of motivations for olive oil tourism, tourists may opt to engage in this activity for cultural and interpersonal reasons, as well as a desire for status and prestige, especially if they want to set themselves apart by undertaking a unique activity. They may also be driven by curiosity and the wish to acquire specific knowledge. At the same time, they are activating the senses linked to olive oil, which is reflected as an added value for the leisure consumer and generates a desire to demonstrate this [3,30,33].

There is thus a need to empirically confirm whether olive oil tourism can be considered a type of SIT with a series of specific features. In this context, first of all, it would have to be the case that all the dimensions of SIT were reflected in the tourists’ opinions or perceptions. Secondly, given its

specific nature, some dimensions in olive oil tourism should carry more weight or importance than others, representing its uniqueness in relation to other types of SIT. These two assumptions can be encapsulated by two research objectives: (1) to analyze the presence of these dimensions in the tourists' motivations; (2) to examine differences in the relative importance of these dimensions, both within olive oil tourism and with respect to other types of tourism.

Finally, the overall perception of the olive oil tourism activity and experience is based on the interrelation between all its component dimensions, such that an improvement in one dimension can positively affect the perception of the rest of the dimensions. Thus, a third objective is to study the potential relationships between dimensions. The findings could be extremely useful for determining which dimension should be addressed to improve the overall experience. This in turn has repercussions in terms of the business management of companies dedicated to olive oil tourism and more generally regarding the management of territories in olive producing areas, thereby contributing to an improvement in rural development.

In summary, this paper analyzes the four abovementioned dimensions of olive oil tourism in order to propose a possible theoretical–conceptual model of the classification of olive oil tourism as SIT, which could be of use to olive oil companies and rural olive oil producing areas.

3. Materials and Methods

In order to carry out this research, a quantitative methodology was designed, based on a personal questionnaire administered to 471 visitors engaging in an olive oil tourism activity, in 10 survey locations chosen from the set of oil mills, museums, and interpretation centers in the province of Jaén (Spain). Jaén is the world's leading olive oil producing region and is known as the world capital of olive oil. This province, home to more than 66 million olive trees, generates between 15% to 20% of the world's production of olive oil [34,35].

The questionnaire was given out when the visitors were engaged in the olive oil tourism activity. The tourists filled out the questionnaire on their own, although the administrators of the questionnaire were on-hand in case the tourists had any doubts.

The fieldwork was carried out between April 2018 and February 2019. The questionnaire was distributed in three languages (English, French, and Spanish) and a pre-test of 25 questionnaires was conducted to detect possible errors or elements that could cause confusion (Table 1).

Table 1. Technical data sheet.

Sample	471 Valid Surveys
Procedure	Convenience sampling
Time period	April 2018 to February 2019
Location	10 survey locations: oil mills, museums, and interpretation centers in Jaén (Spain)
Sampling Error	±4.60%, under SRS (simple random sample) for overall percentages ($p = q = 0.5$); $k = 2$

Source: own elaboration.

In order to explore in more depth the key dimensions of olive oil tourism as a type of SIT, a discussion group was organized, with experts and professionals in the field of tourism. This qualitative research, which was conducted prior to the quantitative study, enabled the configuration of the dimensions by which to characterize olive oil tourism as a type of SIT. To this end, the information used came from a set of variables related to the behavior of the olive oil tourist which capture his/her opinion on the general values of the destination, his/her personal values and preferences, and reasons for engaging in the tourist activity. The selection of items used to measure the four dimensions (sustainability, experience, promotion of local culture, and image of prestige/status) is shown in Table 2. The items selected for each dimension were measured on a scale of 1 to 5 (not very important–very important).

Table 2. Dimensions of olive oil tourism as a type of special interest tourism (SIT): variables and selected items.

Dimensions Based on SIT Model	Olive Oil Tourist Behavior Variables	Selected Items
Sustainability	Destination values	Conservation of the environment Attractiveness of the natural environment Cleanliness Proximity to other areas such as natural parks
	General values of the olive oil tourist	I'm a tourist who looks for destinations without many people. I'm a tourist who looks for activities in nature.
	Motivations of the olive oil tourist	To be in touch with nature and enjoy an olive grove landscape
Experience	Destination values	Hospitality Restaurants and catering Public safety Accommodation Infrastructure and transport communication Accessibility of facilities and areas to visit Value for money
	General values of the olive oil tourist	I'm a tourist who looks for destinations without many people. I'm a tourist who looks for new places to explore. I'm a tourist who likes to do different activities everyday. I'm a tourist who looks for quality over quantity in tourist activities.
	Motivations of the olive oil tourist	To enrich my own life experience To learn about olive oil culture To do a different tourist activity (novelty)
Culture	Destination values	Attractiveness of the cultural and heritage environment
	General values of the olive oil tourist	I'm a tourist who likes to mingle with people (local people, other tourists ...). To find out about the olive oil manufacturing process To learn about olive oil culture To taste the oil where it was made To try the local cuisine
Status	Motivations of the olive oil tourist	To connect with other people interested in finding out about olive oil To find out about the origins and environment of a designation of origin To find out about the cultural and heritage offerings of the producing area
	General values of the olive oil tourist	I'm a tourist who looks for destinations without many people. I'm a tourist who looks for quality over quantity in tourist activities. I'm a tourist who looks for exclusive activities, for fewer days. To enrich my own life experience To gain specific knowledge of olive oil To do a different tourist activity (novelty) To try the local cuisine

Source: own elaboration.

The IBM (International Business Machine) software SPSS (Statistical Package for Social Sciences) was used for data tabulation and analysis. To analyze the four dimensions, a descriptive analysis of means was carried out and the correlation between them was studied using factor analysis and Bartlett's test of sphericity.

4. Results and Discussions

4.1. Descriptive Model—Simple Means

We begin the analysis by presenting the descriptive statistics of the dimensions of olive oil tourism as SIT in the theoretical–conceptual model proposed in this article.

High values are obtained for the means in all four dimensions (Table 3), which initially indicates, before moving on to a more in-depth analysis, that the theoretical–conceptual model proposed in this study is aligned with the proposals set out in our research objectives. As such, we can state that there is a sound relationship between SIT and olive oil tourism.

Table 3. Descriptive model—simple means.

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Standard Deviation
SUSTAINABILITY	462	1.57	5.00	3.7297	0.60954
EXPERIENCE	455	1.77	5.00	3.8947	0.47619
CULTURE	465	1.11	5.00	2.6514	0.93364
STATUS	469	1.00	5.00	3.1949	0.81454
Valid N (list wise)	447				

Source: own elaboration.

It is crucial to take into account the personal character and active nature of the tourist in olive oil tourism, tied to their involvement in special, unique activities that are linked to social, cultural, and environmental values. The high values obtained for the means reinforce the idea that olive oil tourism can be considered a type of SIT. These results are consistent with those of other studies that—albeit using a different method based on a panel of experts—show that olive oil tourism corresponds to SIT and is derived from three types of general interest tourism: rural, nature, and cultural tourism [1].

Three of the four means are above three, with culture showing a lower weight and therefore less importance than status, sustainability, and experience. The proposed research objectives are thus validated (Table 4).

Table 4. Single sample test with values greater than $\mu > 3$.

	t	df (Degree Free)	Sig. (Level of Significance) (Two-Tailed)	Difference in Means	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
					Lower	Upper
SUSTAINABILITY	25.733	461	0.000	0.72975	0.6740	0.7855
EXPERIENCE	40.077	454	0.000	0.89467	0.8508	0.9385
CULTURE	−8.052	464	0.000	−0.34863	−0.4337	−0.2635
STATUS	5.183	468	0.000	0.19494	0.1210	0.2689

Source: own elaboration.

The correlations between pairs of dimensions were then analyzed (Table 5), and a principal component analysis was carried out to explore whether we can in fact refer to a single dimension that can be encompassed under the term “general experience”.

Table 5. Descriptive model of the means of indicators in a paired samples test.

		Mean	N	Standard Deviation	Standard ERROR of the Mean
Pair 1	SUSTAINAB	3.7358	452	0.60593	0.02850
	EXPERIENCE	3.8955	452	0.47369	0.02228
Pair 2	SUSTAINAB	3.7390	457	0.60229	0.02817
	CULTURE	2.6409	457	0.92708	0.04337
Pair 3	SUSTAINAB	3.7316	461	0.60884	0.02836
	STATUS	3.1878	461	0.81467	0.03794
Pair 4	EXPERIENCE	3.8992	451	0.47450	0.02234
	CULTURE	2.6309	451	0.92052	0.04335
Pair 5	EXPERIENCE	3.8958	454	0.47611	0.02234
	STATUS	3.1863	454	0.80757	0.03790
Pair 6	CULTURE	2.6521	464	0.93453	0.04338
	STATUS	3.2026	464	0.81071	0.03764

Source: own elaboration.

As can be seen, in the proposed model of olive oil tourism as a type of SIT, all the means show a correlation; hence, we can proceed to explore in greater depth the research objectives set out above and present our results.

The macrodimension termed “special interest tourism” is configured as a model of consumer experiences; as can be seen, the constituent dimensions of this type of tourism are related insofar as they are reflective indicators of this experience. This issue is relevant, especially at management level, as it determines whether improvement in one dimension will positively affect the set of SIT dimensions, given the proportional link in the model. Thus, as indicated by Soleimani [12], adapting activities to make them more accessible and to improve the tourist experience in places regarded as destinations for culinary tours or agritourism will create an SIT centered around tourists’ specific needs, with obvious implications for management.

4.2. KMO (Kaiser Meyer Oclean) and Bartlett’s Test of Sphericity

Bartlett’s test of sphericity was then performed in order to study another of the proposed research objectives; as can be observed, significant correlations are found. The results of the dependence among variables indicate that the oil mills, defined as the spaces where tourists take part in olive oil tourism, would have to fully manage the most important dimension, whether experience or sustainability, in order to ensure that the olive oil tourist has a better experience (Table 6).

Table 6. KMO Kaiser Meyer Oclean and Bartlett’s test.

Kaiser–Meyer–Olkin Measure of Sampling Adequacy	0.702	
Bartlett’s Test of Sphericity	Approx. chi-square	440,221
	df	6
	Sig.	0.000

Source: own elaboration

To this end, Bartlett’s test of sphericity indicates that, at the management level, it is important to emphasize one dimension, thereby improving the correlation and projection of the other variables. This implies that, at company level, resources could be channeled into one of these dimensions—in this case, the most important ones are experience and sustainability—coherently combining the resources and capabilities for the olive oil tourism products and grouping the four dimensions together into one (Table 7).

Table 7. Total variance explained (Varimax).

Component	Initial Eigenvalues			Extraction Sums of Squared Loadings		
	Total	% Variance	Cumulative %	Total	% Variance	Cumulative %
1	2.246	56.145	56.145			
2	0.774	19.345	75.489			
3	0.654	16.354	91.844	2.246	56.145	56.145
4	0.326	8.156	100.000			

Extraction method: principal component analysis

Source: own elaboration.

In short, the results clearly show the existence of significant correlations, indicating that the four dimensions could be grouped under a factor that accounts for more than half of the variance in the data (Table 8). An interpretation of this finding is that the valuation, perception, and, for practical purposes, the management of the olive oil tourism activity can be dealt with altogether or, in other words, that improvements in one of the four dimensions studied can have repercussions on the rest.

Table 8. Component matrix.

	Component
	1
SUSTAINAB	0.696
EXPERIENCE	0.863
CULTURE	0.590
STATUS	0.817

Extraction method: principal component analysis.

a. 1 component extracted.

Source: own elaboration.

In light of these results, the impact in terms of an improvement in management is substantial as the focus can be centered on one of the four dimensions, especially the ones that carry more weight. As such, by fulfilling the research objectives proposed here, we show that companies who commit to bolstering their strategies aimed at enhancing the tourist experience in the oil mills, or to promoting sustainable values of olive oil tourism products, will enjoy greater success in the implementation of these emerging new activities.

5. Conclusions

This study analyzes olive oil tourism as a type of special interest tourism (SIT). In accordance with the conceptual proposal presented here, it can be concluded that the two key dimensions in the characterization of olive oil tourism as SIT are experience and sustainability. These two indicators have the greatest weight and are where companies should center their attention in terms of their olive oil tourism offer, bearing in mind the importance that the olive oil tourist assigns to these dimensions.

These conclusions have implications from a theoretical and practical perspective.

At a theoretical level, this study represents a step forward in the efforts to characterize olive oil tourism as a type of SIT, with links to different types of tourism. Moreover, it is shown that experience and sustainability should be key variables in the configuration of the olive oil tourism offer. This provides impetus to experiential tourism products and the positioning of this type of activity in more distinctive segments such as “foodie tourism”. At the same time, the findings will encourage companies to commit to preserving the environment, conserving the ethnological heritage and showcasing the local gastronomy, consequently contributing to the development of rural, olive oil producing communities.

At a practical level, this research has implications for both public administration and private or corporate management. With regard to the former, it could contribute to the promotion of rural development plans, based on the olive oil tourism experience as one of the key dimensions. Furthermore, it could lead to olive grove landscapes being nominated for inclusion on UNESCO's list of intangible cultural heritage of humanity. The scope of UNESCO's work in this regard centers on the tourist use, showcasing, and conservation of unique spaces—in this case, olive groves and olive oil heritage—with the aim of bolstering the cultural heritage value and promoting local culture.

From a business perspective, olive oil tourism is a way for olive oil producing companies to diversify their businesses. To this end, they should design experiential tourism products and collaborate with tourist entities in the destination, whether other olive oil mills, restaurants, or accommodation providers, thereby facilitating the complete experience as a destination and special interest tourism. On the other hand, this study can help encourage companies to allocate more resources to implementing environmental conservation measures through integrated production techniques, involvement in sustainable projects, and the production of organic olive oils, all of which are closely aligned with olive oil tourists' awareness and the aim of supporting the "experience" dimension based on sustainable values.

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