

Article

# Sustainability Communication in Rural Tourism: Website Content Analysis, in Viseu Dão Lafões Region (Portugal)

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**Abstract:** In the last few years, the relationship between tourism and sustainability has been consolidated. In the context of rural tourism, this connection is even stronger given the environmental specificities and the natural framework of this type of tourism. To achieve sustainability behaviors, it is crucial that rural tourism lodgings communicate their essence, as well the products and experiences available for tourists. This because it is a common practice for visitors to look for more information on the internet about where they will be staying, before booking their tourist experience. The main objective of this study is the analysis of the information provided by rural tourism lodgings, through their websites, regarding sustainability issues. The territory selected for the development of this study is the Portuguese Viseu Dão Lafões Region, located in the center of Portugal. Based on other studies, the methodology includes a content analysis, conducted on 39 rural tourism lodging websites. The results show that some improvements are needed, to clarify and emphasize the message about sustainable practices, in these rural lodgings. Some practical recommendations are provided, that can be adapted to these rural tourism lodgings, or others.

**Keywords:** sustainability; rural tourism; communication; website analysis; Portugal



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## 1. Introduction

Ventures in rural areas face multiple constraints, in many circumstances worsened by their reduced size and their location in the national territory [1]. Small ventures in this specific context face a reality in which entrepreneurs have to overcome various difficulties in managing and making their business competitive, such as the access to human resources and a diversified labor pool [2,3].

A recent debate on “rural entrepreneurship” suggests that one of the best opportunities to develop rural areas is linked with rural tourism [4,5], since its principles are related to the creation of jobs and income in the rural space and can also help to increase the perception of value of endogenous resources and products [1].

Rural tourism entrepreneurs try to be embedded in the rural space, thereby increasing their chances of success and sustainability of the business [6,7]. At the same time, with this attitude of embeddedness, they can contribute more easily to the sustainability of the region [8–10] and help in shaping and voicing the need and aspirations of the stakeholders of the (rural) destination [11], one of the advocated principles of rural tourism.

However, for the advocated sustainability to be achieved, on the one hand, it is essential that the communication by the rural tourism venture is able to transmit its essence and its respective values, as well as the product and experiences made available to tourists. On the other hand, through efficient communication, these enterprises could attract the tourists that bring more benefits to the region [12–14].

Moreover, if we consider that we live in a world dominated by technology and the internet and that these tools are changing the way the world interacts and communicates [15], it is expected that even in rural tourism there has been an explosion of different digital tools

to communicate the sustainable essence of the venture and the tourism product/experience. This is particularly important for businesses located in regions with symptoms of any kind of economic poverty and in businesses distant from markets, such as the ones located in interior rural areas [3].

Despite the mentioned growing interest in the sustainability of rural tourism and the need for communication in an efficient way, to our knowledge, the research related to these two topics has been largely neglected.

Hence, taking this gap into account, based on a case study in the Viseu Dão Lafões Region (VDLR), the main goal of this study is the analysis of the information provided by rural tourism lodgings, through their websites, regarding sustainability issues. The authors of the study are trying to understand if sustainability is an important value to these rural tourism businesses and if they incorporate this concept in their communication strategies with tourists/guests.

The paper is structured in four parts after the Introduction. Section 2 contains the literature review concerning rural tourism and sustainability and communication in rural tourism. The methodology and the study region are presented in Section 3, while Section 4 presents and discusses the results of the study. In Section 5, the study's main results are summarized, the limitations are pointed out, and eventual paths for future research are suggested.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1. The Emphasis on Rural Tourism

In recent decades, “some rural areas and landscapes became focal points for the productions and consumption of the ‘natural’” [16] (p. 403). In this context, rural tourism has particularly gained attention, principally due to the demand of the tourists which search for new values such as heritage, culture, and gastronomy [1], the problems—environmental and social—caused by “mass tourism” [3], and its potential contribution to tourism sustainability [17–19]. Indeed, it has been observed that it is one of the new alternative tourism choices, challenging the traditional and, in some contexts, fast growing sun, sea, and sun resorts which dominated post-Second World War tourism [20]. The seminal work of Lane [21] states that, in its pure form, rural tourism should be:

- located in rural areas;
- rural in scale—both in terms of buildings and settlements—and, therefore, usually small scale;
- functionally rural, that is, built upon the rural world's special features of small-scale lodging, open space, contact with nature and the natural world, heritage, “traditional” societies, and “traditional” practices;
- traditional in character, growing sustainably and organically, connected with local communities and controlled by them for the long-term good of the area;
- of many different kinds, representing the complex pattern of the rural environment, economy, history, and location.

In this line, a variety of stakeholders involved, particularly tourists, public entities, rural communities, and farmers, agree on the need and urgency for developing this new form of tourism. In fact, firstly, due to standardized, polluted, congested, and artificial modern urban living conditions from which most tourists seek to get away [22], the recent literature emphasizes the new consumption values associated with rural areas in the field of leisure and tourism [3,23], wellness and health [20,24,25], food traditions, local produce, culture, social values [16], and authentic and personal relationships [26], often related to (other) societal trends valuing the nature, small scale, and uniqueness of the rural space.

Secondly, many national governments issued strategies and/or supportive policy documents to foster tourism in rural areas [20]. For instance, in Portugal, the Portuguese government, through various measures to promote rural tourism, seeks to diversify national tourism and to make known other areas, particularly those in the interior with tourist potential, while trying to reduce the seasonality of tourism activity. Many of these

national programs derive from the European programs, as European structural funds greatly contributed to the development of tourism infrastructure in quantity as well as in quality and diversity [27].

Thirdly, in the context of the economic diversification principle underlying most proposals and rural programs, rural tourism has been observed as one pivotal activity, if not the “prescription” with which to achieve the socioeconomic revitalization of the less favored regions, mostly inland and mountainous [28], owing to its potential for employment and income creation and the synergies it is able to generate in other sectors of activity in the rural space [3,29,30]. It is precisely this potential to contribute to the rural economy which makes many farmers and rural tourism suppliers view rural tourism as a complement to their income.

## 2.2. The Sustainability of Rural Tourism

After the publication of the Brundtland Commissions’ report *Our Common Future* in 1987 [31], the idea of sustainability won space in multiple dimensions, such as economic, social, and environmental. More recent approaches suggest another two dimensions: technological and political [32].

For tourism to be sustainable, it needs to protect local culture, improve social and individual wellbeing, and preserve the environment [32,33]. Sustainable tourism “is dynamic in the sense that it is constantly being constructed and reconstructed by different stakeholders” [34] (p. 177). Tölkes [35] (p. 10) claims that “the tourism industry has begun to increase its sustainability engagement, mainly by developing a more sustainable product range”. Consequently, tourism and its integration into the rural product can be very much part of developing employment opportunities, increasing local prosperity, conservation, and maintenance of the environment, celebrating cultural assets and generally ensuring a greater spread in terms of who can benefit (economically, socially, and culturally). Indeed, the seminal work of Lane [19] draws attention to the fact that sustainability in rural tourism cannot be successfully based only on a narrow pro-nature conservation purpose. According to Lane [19], it should sustain landscape and habitats, but also:

- sustain the rural culture and character of local communities;
- sustain the rural economy;
- sustain the local tourism industry which should be viable in the long term—and in turn mean the promotion of successful and satisfying holiday experiences;
- develop sufficient understanding, leadership and vision amongst the decision makers in the rural space in order to work towards a balanced and diversified rural economy.

Although much has been said about this concept of rural tourism sustainability, over the past thirty years, its principles remain. For instance, Martínez, Martín, Fernández and Mogorrón-Guerrero [36] (p. 167), based on a literature review, state that “there are multiple advantages that tourism has as a sustainable development strategy”: it is more respectful to the environment than other alternatives, conservationism is more present in this activity, it is able to improve social structures and facilities, and it diversifies the local economy so that it is viable in the long-term. Additionally, other positive effects associated with development, setting up new businesses, establishment of contact between isolated communities and other people, and resettlement should not be overlooked. However, if this is true, rural tourism may be also associated with potentially negative effects, mostly derived from sociocultural [37–39] and economic effects [37,39]. For instance, Roberts and Hall [39] argue that the development of rural tourism is also associated with the creation of income and employment inequalities among local residents, since one of the major beneficiaries of rural tourism is the owners [28] and not the local population in general. From a social–cultural point of view, the development of rural tourism can lead to the manufacture or distortion of local culture for commodification and staged authenticity [39].

### 2.3. Communication in Rural Tourism—A Path towards Sustainability

Tourism has an important role in the support of rural economies, environments, and societies and rural tourism can be a key tool in creating and maintaining a more sustainable countryside [19].

If we consider that we live in a world dominated by technology and the internet and that these tools are changing the way the world interacts and communicates [15], it is not surprising that there has been an explosion of different ways to communicate the product/experience of tourism. Indeed, it is widely accepted that the internet can serve as an effective marketing tool in tourism [40]. It is a valuable tool for both suppliers and consumers for promotion and communication and online purchasing [41]. Since the 1990s, tourism businesses have undertaken different voluntary activities to show their commitment to sustainable tourism, such as adopting codes of conduct, obtaining eco-labels, or implementing environmental management systems [42].

Some of the main purposes of sustainability communication are to make consumers aware of the availability of sustainable travel products, to inform consumers of how these offerings meet their needs and comply with sustainability criteria, and, ultimately, to stimulate pro-sustainable purchases [35] (p. 10). Besides this perspective focused on products, sustainability communication aims to increase transparency about a company's sustainability engagement, encouraging an interactive dialogue between companies and stakeholders about the company's activities [43].

Due to increased consumer awareness, the sustainability practices of tourism accommodations are developing [44] and, for this reason, an effective website is vital for a lodging unit to strengthen its customer relationships and gain a larger market segment [41,45].

Font, Elgammal and Lamond [46] state that businesses use their websites, and other forms of communication, to sensitize and persuade their target to change their behavior. This form of communication is particularly important for businesses located in regions with symptoms of any kind of economic poverty and for businesses distant from markets, such as the rural tourism lodgings located in interior rural areas [3]. The wealth and income generated in rural environments can be increased by improving strategically planned activities that enable rural tourism units to communicate them in an appropriate manner. In this context, the web page of the lodging is fundamental, and sometimes is the only way which the rural lodging can undertake strategies to communicate the rural product/experience [14,47].

## 3. Methodology and Case Study

### 3.1. Study Region

This study focuses on the VDLR, a Portuguese region located in the center of Portugal (see Figure 1).

The 3483 km<sup>2</sup> area of the region comprises fourteen municipalities: Aguiar da Beira, Carregal do Sal, Castro Daire, Mangualde, Nelas, Oliveira de Frades, Penalva do Castelo, Santa Comba Dão, São Pedro do Sul, Sátão, Tondela, Vila Nova de Paiva, Viseu, and Vouzela. The VDLR was selected as the study region because it is a predominantly rural and remote region [13] where the power of communication can have a great impact on its development [3].

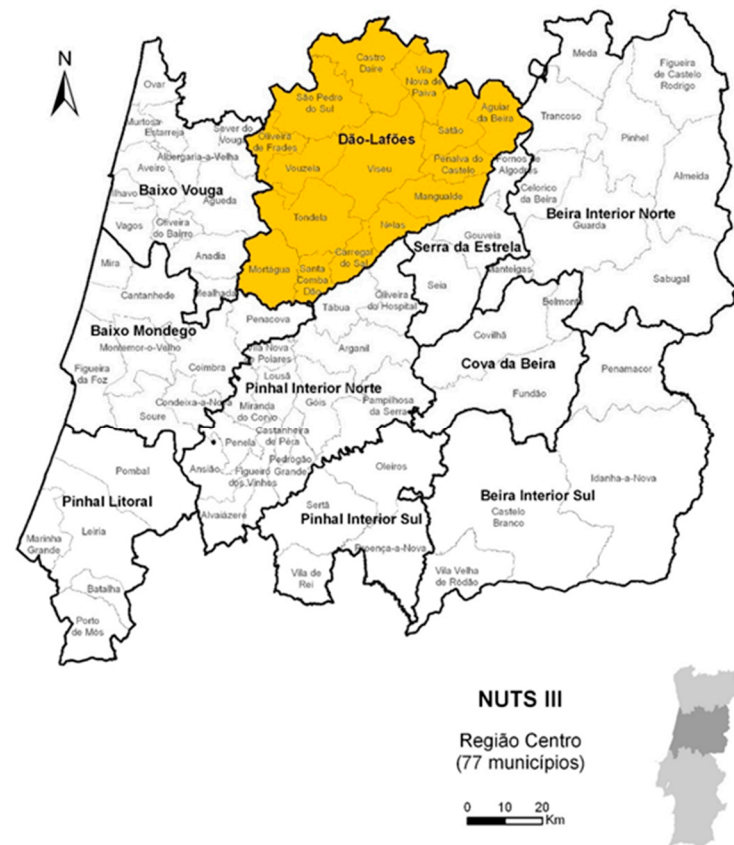


Figure 1. Region map. Source: adapted from CCDRC (2011) [48].

The VDLR has tourism as one of the main economic activities, made possible by the diversity of existing natural and heritage resources [49]. According to the regional tourism entity (Turismo Centro de Portugal), the main tourist products that represent the region's offering are:

- Cultural Tourism: it is possible to visit various monuments, churches, and museums without forgetting the immaterial component of traditions, as well as some historical personalities such as Viriato (a Lusitanian warrior who fought bravely with the Romans) and Grão Vasco (one of the most acclaimed painters of the 15th century in Portugal).
- Health and Wellness Tourism: in this region, it is possible to find most of the spas in operation in Portugal, with waters very rich in minerals and indicated for the prevention and treatment of various diseases.
- Gastronomy and Wines: Dão wine is produced in this region, as well as some very characteristic dishes of national gastronomy, such as veal à Lafões, roasted lamb, carqueja (a wild plant) rice, and rancho à moda de Viseu (a dish made with various meats, chickpeas, and pasta), without forgetting the traditional pastry.
- Nature Tourism: the region allows the performance of various adventure sports, whether in the mountains or on the rivers. For bicycle lovers, the region has the Dão cycle track, which is the largest in Portugal and one of the most beautiful.

Given this scenario, the region still has a considerable number of rural tourism units, as described in the next section.

### 3.2. Data Gathering Procedures

To develop this study, a qualitative methodology of content analysis applied to websites was used. The choice of this research method was supported by the increasing importance of electronic media in the access to tourist information [50] and, additionally,

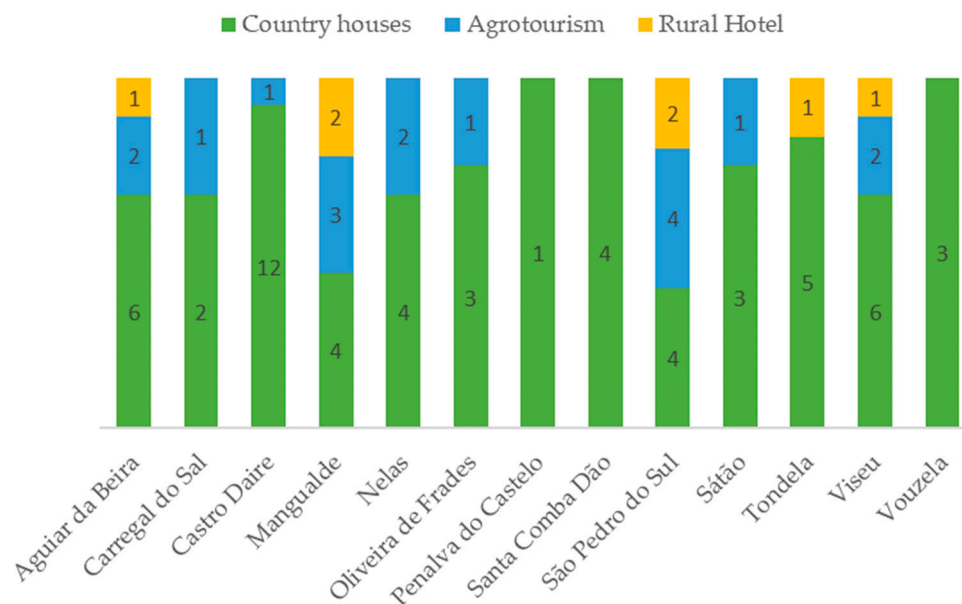
because content analysis is one of the most common approaches [51]. However, research related to website evaluations is lacking and requires further effort [45].

Probably because of this, in recent years, several studies have appeared in the field of tourism, where this methodology has been applied. Below are some examples, although the objectives of the investigations are considerably different from the current investigation.

The purpose of Hsieh's study was to analyze the environmental management policies and practices of the top 50 hotel companies and, in order to achieve that, the study employed content analysis to review websites [52]. Li, Whitlow, Bitsura-Meszaros, Leung, and Barbieri [53] compared tourism websites related to World Heritage Sites in three countries (Australia, China, and Mexico) and developed an instrument to evaluate these websites and the results from its application on government websites. Matoga and Pawlowska [50], in their study about tourists traveling off the beaten track, included a field study (inventorying) supplemented with a content analysis on electronic media. Other authors analyzed the quality indicators that 266 rural Andalusian hotels show on their official websites (quality certifications, logos of excellence, and online reviews) [54]. In Barroco and Amaro's study about the progress of the Dão wine route wineries' websites, the authors used a counting method, in which a prepared checklist (with 12 categories) was used to verify if specific attributes are on the websites [51]. Additionally, another team studied the sustainable digital communication of small and medium accommodation firms, located in the Azores (São Miguel Island) and for that they analyzed data retrieved from the websites of 759 accommodation firms [42].

In order to analyze the websites of the rural tourism lodgings in the VDLR, a search was carried out on Tourism of Portugal, conducted on 28 February 2021. In the first stage, the number of these units in the region was observed. After this, their distribution by typology and municipality was also observed.

The VDLR has 81 units in the modalities of country houses (59), agri-tourism units (15), and rural hotels (7). The majority of them are located in the S. Pedro do Sul, Castro Daire, and Viseu municipalities (see Figure 2). It is also observed that of the 81 rural tourism units, only 39 of them have an operational webpage.



**Figure 2.** Rural tourism lodging typologies in VDLR. Source: own computation based on data gathered from TP (2021) [55].

In the second stage of the process, all the information concerning these 39 rural tourism units was exported to an Excel spreadsheet and (based on the literature review) a new database was created with the following relevant fields: information and process, value

added, relationship, design and usability, trust, and sustainability communication (see Table 1).

**Table 1.** Criteria used in the content analysis of websites.

Information and Process	Source
Sales or reservation: -Search capability; -Online reservation Contact info Sales promotions: -Special promotions, groups; family/kids; honeymooners; Goods and services: -Room classifications; in-room photo About the rural tourism lodgings: -Short description; -Mission/purpose/values; -Organization/people	Hashim, Murphy, and Law (2007)
Value Added	
Travel information: -Transportation -Local sites -News Entertainment: -Leisure activities	Hashim, Murphy, and Law (2007)
Relationships	
Loyalty/CRM: -Guestbook -Newsletter subscription -Cookies Personal interest: -Comments/feedback -Online chat	Hashim, Murphy, and Law (2007)
Design and Usability	
Navigation: multilingual site Success metrics: popularity ranking	Hashim, Murphy, and Law (2007)
Trust	
Copyright and security: privacy statement; copyright Timeliness: date of last update (6 months) current and timely info	Hashim, Murphy, and Law (2007)
Sustainability Communication	
Renewable energies Endogenous/biological products Sustainable agriculture Community involvement: employ local people, projects that help the community, activities and open spaces for the local community Communicate the environmental policy: sustainability report Sustainability awards and certification: eco-labels, etc. Other awards and certifications	Hsieh (2012); Olya, Altinay, Farmaki, Kenebayeva, and Gursoy (2020); Tiago, Gil, Stemberger, and Borges-Tiago (2021)

Source: adapted from literature review.

The main matrix, used in the evaluation of websites, arose from the adaptation of the work of Hashim et al. [45]. The five main categories were maintained—information and process, value added, relationships, design and usability, trust—that unfold into several variables. We used those that are relevant and are directly related to the purpose of the present work. Since the present study focuses on sustainability communication, carried out through the websites of tourism accommodations in rural areas, there was a need to

complement the initial grid with elements directly related to sustainability issues. The works of Hsieh [52], Olya et al. [44] and Tiago et al. [42] were an important contribution.

Following Barroco and Amaro [51] and Tiago et al. [42] in the third stage, all the criteria were measured by a dichotomy process (yes/no).

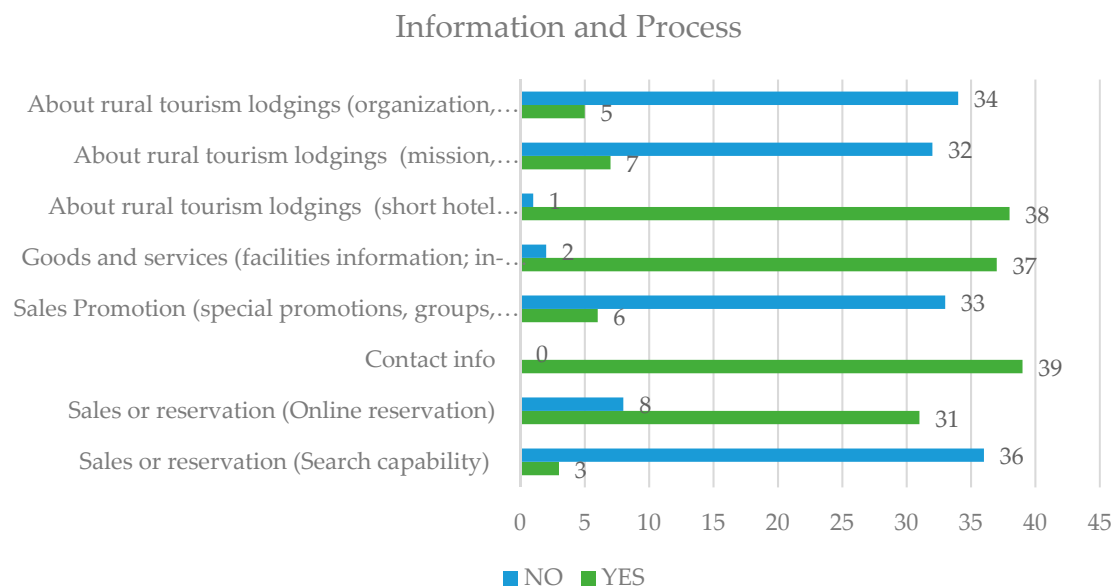
Finally, in the fourth stage, the content analysis of the websites was performed, based on simple, exploratory statics (cf. next section).

## 4. Results and Discussion

### 4.1. Information and Process

As can be observed in Figure 3, all the units under analysis have the contact information of the unit available. This is similar to other studies, like Barroco and Amaro [51] that found that the majority of rural ventures (in this case wineries) use their website to provide some type of information to visitors.

The majority of rural lodgings also have a short description of it and information concerning goods and services available. This information is given by 97% (38) and 95% (37) of them, respectively. Obviously, this is important when a tourist searches for a unit to stay and relax. Additionally, 79% (31) of them allow online reservations.



**Figure 3.** Information and process. Source: own computation based on data gathered from TP (2021) [55].

In relation to other aspects of this dimension, particularly information concerning the mission and values of the unit, and information concerning the organization of their human resources, this information is not available for the majority of them. Indeed, only 18% (7) and 13% (5) of rural tourism lodgings, respectively, have this information available. This result is similar to Hashim et al. [45] who found that added value dimensions and personalization did not garner as much research interest from hotel companies. However, currently, this information is crucial to rural tourism lodgings' success, since the success of rural tourism businesses should be based on the promotion of new value added and genuine products [56] related to culture and social values of rural areas [16]. Therefore, it is suggested that rural tourism lodgings should strengthen and make visible the mission and values of the unit.

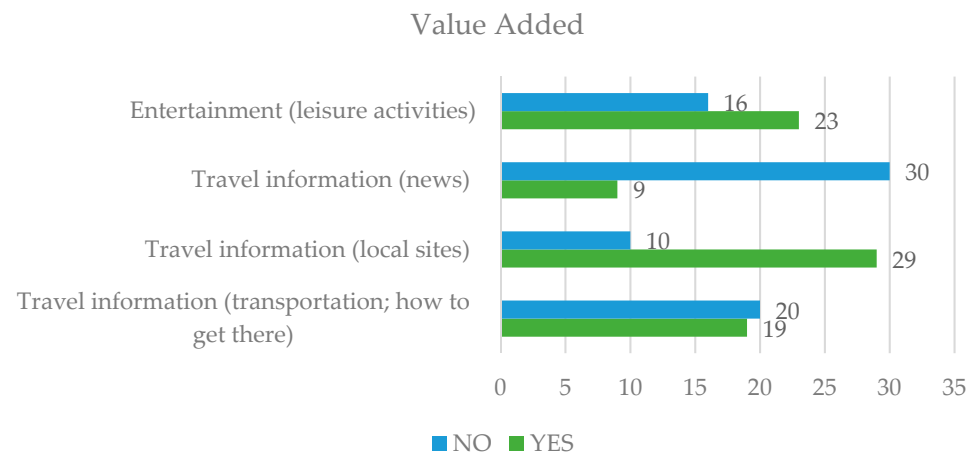
Furthermore, if the personalization of the activity is one of the singularities of rural tourism [3], it is not understood why the information concerning the owners of the unit and their staff is not available, and, here, there should be an effort for its dissemination.

#### 4.2. Value Added

In relation to value added, the majority of the rural tourism lodgings do not seem to invest in the promotion of the unit by news, for instance, through some information/practice of the unit that has the purpose of positively impacting customers. In fact, only a small percentage (23%) has some type of news available about the rural tourism unit on the web page (see Figure 4). Considering, however, that tourists search more and more for different and memorable experiences [57], it is emphasized that there should be an effort in the organization and dissemination of this news.

Concerning the other dimensions of value added, the results obtained are more positive. In relation to the information concerning entertainment and travel information, a considerable percentage of rural tourism lodgings have this information available, respectively, 74% (29) and 60% (23%). This fact is important, as tourists are increasingly looking for co-creative experiences offered not only in the lodging but also in the region where it is located [58].

Intriguingly, however, half (51%) of the rural tourism lodgings do not have available information concerning travel information, particularly how to get there. A major effort should be also made concerning this matter.



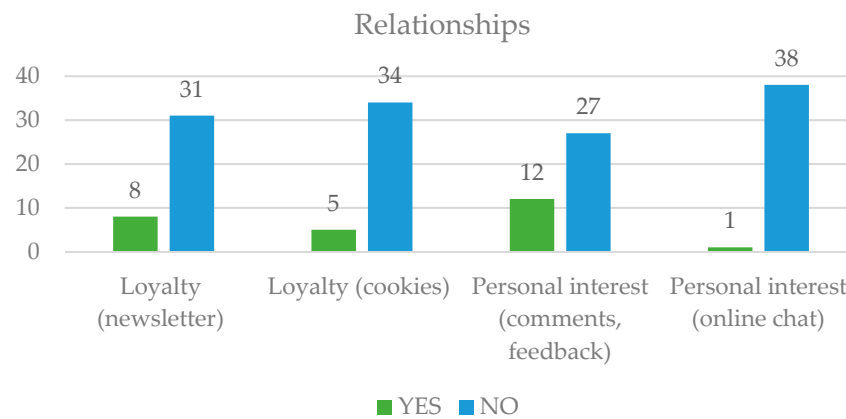
**Figure 4.** Value added. Source: own computation based on data gathered from TP (2021) [55].

#### 4.3. Relationships

The topic of relationships is related to the concept presented by Buhalis, López and Martínez-González [59] (p. 2) about e-loyalty to a hotel, which is “the intention or willingness of a consumer to repeat an online purchase of the same product, service or brand, or to recommend it through the Web, mobile phone or social networks”.

In Figure 5, it is possible to see that the relationship component between the rural lodging websites and their visitors needs to be improved: 79% (31) of the websites analyzed do not have the possibility of subscribing to a newsletter and 87% (38) do not question the website visitors about the cookie policy. Concerning tourists’ comments and feedback, only 31% (12) provide the possibility of sharing their opinions about the place and the overall experience. This is an element that all accommodations should value because electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) is an increasingly important marketing tool [60]. Just one rural tourism unit (3%) has online chat available to help website visitors, if needed.

Summing up, if the internet and technology are changing the way people interact and communicate [15], an effort should be also made on this matter, particularly for the production of newsletters, which are now essential in terms of business communication.



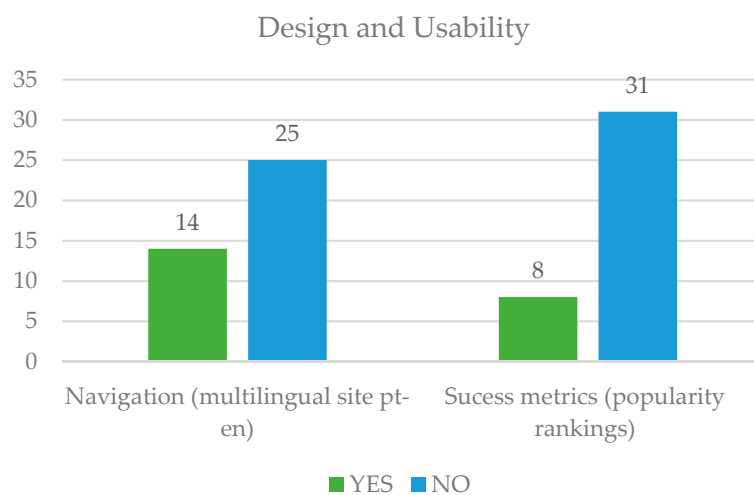
**Figure 5.** Relationships. Source: own computation based on data gathered from TP (2021) [55].

#### 4.4. Design and Usability

In terms of design and usability, two topics were analyzed: navigation (related to multilingual sites (PT-EN)) and success metrics (related to popularity rankings) (see Figure 6).

Regarding the sites being available in Portuguese and English, 36% (14) of the sites analyzed have this functionality, compared to 64% (25) that do not.

When it comes to success metrics, which show if popularity rankings are available on the site, 79% (31) do not have this indication. Some studies, like the one developed by Mou and Shin [61], state that when consumers shop online, they focus on information about the evaluation of the product, its popularity, and information concerning the product's characteristics. Therefore, with the same perspective, it is argued that a great effort should be made in this matter.



**Figure 6.** Design and usability. Source: own computation based on data gathered from TP (2021) [55].

#### 4.5. Trust

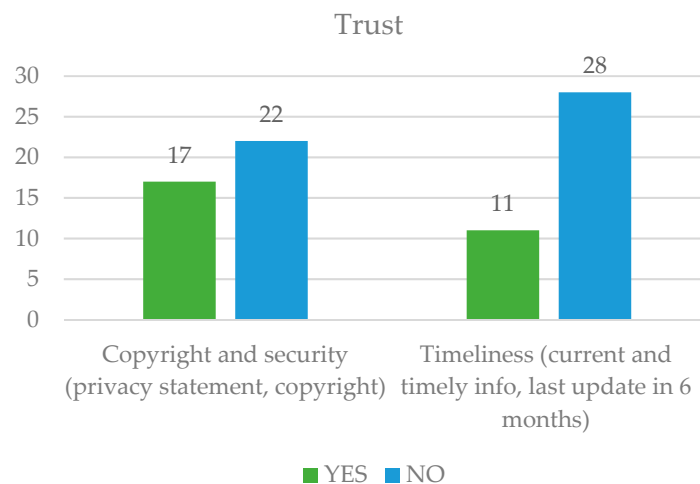
The two items analyzed in the category of trust were related to copyright and security and timeliness, as shown in Figure 7.

Currently, the questions related to personal data protection are very important in European Union countries, and Portugal is no exception. Many websites provide a privacy statement option to ensure that (online) visitors know what they are doing. Of the 39 sites analyzed, only 44% (17) have this option available.

Timeliness is related to the fact that the information available on the site is up to date, with data referring to the last 6 months (at the time the analysis was carried out). More than half of businesses (72%) do not have up to date websites. During the research, the

authors noted that some websites are still announcing and carrying out promotions related to past events, for example Easter of 2019.

If the information provided on the official website is outdated, the visitors may think there is a lack of interest or enthusiasm by the managers of the rural tourism unit, and this is bad for the business's image, and, for that reason, an effort should be made on the updating of information.



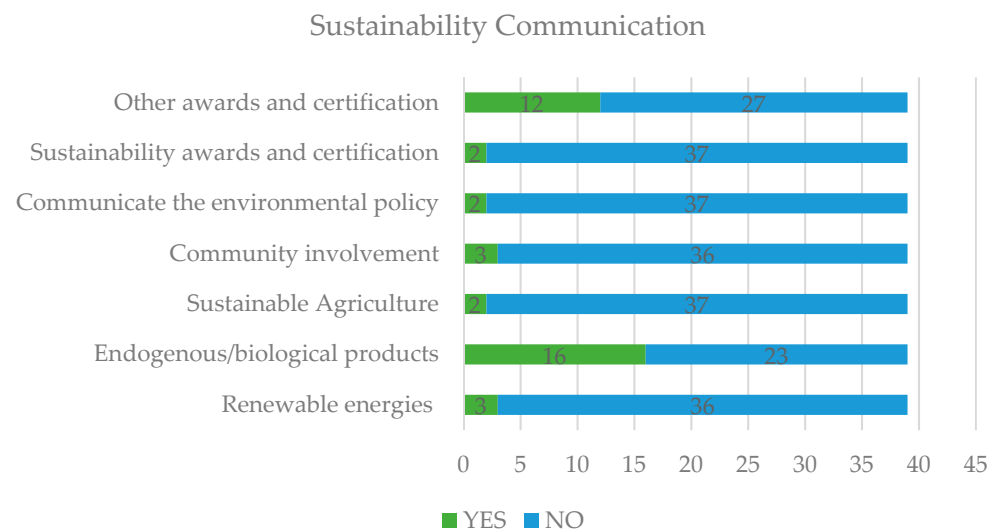
**Figure 7.** Trust. Source: own computation based on data gathered from TP (2021) [55].

#### 4.6. Sustainability Communication

In an era of growing attention to sustainability, particularly in tourism [13,42,62,63], the attention dedicated to the sustainability dimensions and the communication of good practices that the accommodations have implemented is inadequate. Indeed, as Figure 8 shows, 92% (36) of rural tourism units do not use renewable energy and 95% (37) of the rural tourism units do not implement sustainable agriculture or communicate any kind of environmental policy.

When observing other aspects of environmental sustainability, particularly references to endogenous and organic products, although the results are better, they show that less than half of units (41%) are reporting them. In the cases under analysis, they refer to for breakfast or gastronomic experiences associated with the region. However, knowing that tourists are increasingly looking for traditional agri-food products [64], it is intriguing why the rural tourism lodgings do not emphasize this dimension of sustainability more.

In relation to other dimensions of sustainability, particularly social and economic, only 8% (3) of the rural tourism lodgings refer to some type of community involvement, through different economic activities the tourist can enjoy and participate in. Again, as rural tourism is one of the best activities linked to the rural space and the rural economies [3] and knowing that tourists are looking for more and more rural tourism activities related to the culture and social values of rural areas [65], a great effort should be made on this matter, trying to diminish the gap between rhetoric and practice [28]. Taking into account these results, it is not surprising that only two (5%) rural tourism units are certified. One of these units is certified by two certification schemes—Green Key certification (related to environmental sustainability) and Biosphere certification (related to environmental, social, and economic dimensions of sustainability). The other unit has Biosphere certification. This general scenario of units' certification in the region is poor and a great effort should be made trying to understand the reasons for this situation. Is also important to think about solutions to implement its adoption.



**Figure 8.** Sustainability communication. Source: own computation based on data gathered from TP (2021) [55].

Last, but not the least, in relation to other awards and certifications, particularly in the notification of measures to be adopted to contain the COVID-19 pandemic, only 31% (12) of units have the Clean & Safe certification. The Clean & Safe label was created by Turismo de Portugal in 2020 with the aim of supporting companies in identifying the measures to be adopted to contain the COVID-19 pandemic and strengthen confidence in Portugal as a tourist destination, whether by tourists—national and foreign and employees of companies—or the population in general. If this result reflects the difficulties and the adverse impact on rural tourism units and in the region caused by COVID-19 in Portugal [66], particularly on demand, it is important to promote its adoption by the rural tourism units.

## 5. Conclusions

Rural tourism is on the agenda more than ever, particularly due to the specificities of rural areas that have scarce resources [3] and the contribution to their sustainability [8]. Therefore, rural tourism entrepreneurs have a challenge in the design, management, and development of rural landscapes, evidencing cultural values and landscape heritages [67], combined with other tangible and intangible tourist resources of the rural area.

If the adoption of a culture of sustainability and its communication is a challenge [35] it is, at the same time, essential. Thus, maintaining an appealing website has thus become vital for a business to communicate its essence and sustainability [68], strengthen its customer relationships, and gain a larger market segment [41].

Drawing on a qualitative analysis of the websites of the VDRL in Portugal, this paper makes an important contribution to knowledge in the field of the sustainability of rural tourism, highlighting the modest use of websites to communicate the principles of sustainability that businesses follow.

The findings show that in relation to the topic “communication sustainability”, few rural tourism units communicate dimensions related to sustainability. On the one hand, the communication they provide is weak and unappealing, not valuing the sustainability component on their websites. On the other hand, there are many lodgings that have not yet properly invested in the implementation of sustainable measures and perhaps that is why they do not communicate them either. These results are similar to the ones reported by Villarino and Font [69] and Tiago et al. [42] who noted that ventures could make substantial improvements in their digital communication related to sustainability and commitments.

In accordance with Tiago et al. [42], the results gathered here also suggest that the few rural tourism lodgings with a more sophisticated online presence tend to better communi-

cate their sustainability and practices. However, contrary to Villarino and Font [69], the references found on the websites do not evidence a greater concern about the environmental dimension in relation to the social and economic dimensions. The fact that two units are certified with the Biosphere certification, that focuses on the environmental, social, and economic dimensions of sustainability, is evidence of this. Dunk et al. [63] stated that the adherence to certification schemes necessitates an understanding of motivations for joining, especially given that this participation is often voluntary.

These results provide some important insights in terms of managerial implications as well for policy makers. Indeed, from a practice point of view, local rural tourism entrepreneurs must be more sensitive in relation to the power of more efficient communication through the websites of rural tourism units. From a political point of view, public authorities should be more sensitive to the questions related to sustainability, promoting a sustainability policy in the region. The new Municipal Platform for Sustainable Development Goals implemented in Portugal is a good example of what the diverse municipalities in the region can do, even in rural tourism, but other good examples are welcome.

This study has some limitations, mainly related to time constraints. This limited the contact with rural tourism entrepreneurs in order to understand why they invest more or less in sustainability and communication. Therefore, a path for future research involves a qualitative analysis based on interviews with the managers of rural tourism units.

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