

# Shared rural person-to-person accommodations, social interaction and sensorial themes of associated tourist experiences.

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**Objectives** | Rural areas with their particular environment and richness of endogenous resources play a multifaceted role in tourism, with different players acting to co-create tourism experiences (Kastenholz, Carneiro, Peixeira Marques, & Lima, 2012). The increasingly popular sharing economy now opens new opportunities for people to engage in enterprise in tourism (Dredge & Gyimóthy, 2015). Taking into consideration that sharing economy offers low entry barriers for entrepreneurs (Botsman & Rogers, 2010), it is possible to observe a large number of rural accommodations being offered by singular individuals, typically residents of the visited destination, to tourists through online platforms such as Airbnb, Flipkeys, 9Flats.com, etc., thereby providing an apparently more authentic experience to tourists (Molz, 2014; Sigala, 2014; Guttentag, 2013).

The tourist experience is a complex, subjective and holistic phenomenon encompassing social, emotional, cognitive, hedonic and symbolic dimensions and values rather than only functional or utility ones (Kastenholz et al., 2012; Tung & Ritchie, 2011). Rural tourism presents unique and genuine aesthetic features, associated to multisensory aspects within the destination experiences (Agapito, Valle, & Mendes, 2014). Furthermore, rural tourism aggregates different patterns of sociability, in terms of reciprocal exchange processes between (i) tourists and local hosts; (ii) travel companions; (iii) fellow tourists (Kastenholz, Carneiro, & Eusébio, 2015). These social processes resemble the notion of “communitas”, suggested by Arnould & Price (1993). In most cases, these social relations involve generosity and intimacy values, as explained by Heuman (2005) regarding traditional hospitality contexts. Some of these aspects are recollected by the *rural person-to-person accommodation* (RP2PA) guests when they report their experiences by electronic word-of-mouth (e-wom). Therefore, the aim of this study is to identify the most

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relevant themes of social interaction and aesthetic/ sensorial dimensions recalled by the guests in their online reviews published in shared person-to-person accommodation platforms.

**Methodology** | This is a qualitative research which employs netnography and content analysis of online reviews posted on the Airbnb platform. The reviews express guests' experiences in RP2PA. The following three steps of netnography procedures, as detailed by Kozinets (2002), were used in this study: (i) *entrée*, which relates to the adequate selection of the websites; (ii) data collection: the data were gathered during august 2016 and comprise guests' reviews related to specific RP2PAs located in villages associated to the brand "Historical Villages of Portugal". The sample (n=102) was constituted by reviews with more than fifty words, written in English or Portuguese and involving only the cases in which both hosts and guests shared the same property; (iii) data analysis: content analysis was carried out using NVIVO, in order to identify the relevant themes of aesthetic/ sensorial experience and social interaction of RP2PA. To identify the relevant themes, a codification process was conducted by the three authors of this study. After that, the reference frequencies – "*f*" and the "words frequency query results" were calculated by NVIVO in order to rank the analysed themes of social interaction and aesthetic experience dimensions.

**Main Results and Contributions** | Through the analysis of the written reviews it is possible to identify some socio-demographic features of the guests: (i) there is a balanced presence of both males and females in the reviews; (ii) the majority of reviewers are foreigner tourists (81.4%). Only 8% of guests travel alone. Specifically related to the here analysed RP2PA experience, the aesthetic dimension associated to multisensory themes stands out as playing a most relevant role for guests' experiences in RP2PA - frequency value  $f = 173$  (59.7% of the codified narratives), whereas social interaction, comprising communication, *communitas*, generosity and intimacy, resulted in a  $f$  value of 117 (40.3%). Visual experiences present one of the senses most referred to by the guests of RP2PA followed by taste and "touch", with the latter associated with the comfort of the houses, the bed, the blankets and temperature inside the RP2PA. The senses less recollected (i.e. spontaneously recalled) by guests are smell and audition. As far as social interaction is concerned, intimacy is the most mentioned theme more recollected by the guests, followed by generosity. *Communitas* and communication were the less recollected themes. The most frequently used words retrieved are hosts' names (social interaction dimension) and "views/ vista", followed by "breakfast" and "comfortable" (aesthetic/ sensorial dimension). Finally, also guests' loyalty intentions were analysed, with 10.8% of the guests expressing a repurchase intention and 19.6% mentioning intentions to recommend the RP2PA. These values are not particularly high and may be related to eventually brief and not very involving experiences at these RP2Ps.

**Limitations** | The scope of this study is limited to the analysis of reviews written in English and in Portuguese although there were comments written in different languages – and these reviews may give relevant additional insight. The study was conducted only in a specific area of rural tourism in Portugal (the "Historic Villages of Portugal"). Additionally, content analysis of guests' reviews maybe influenced by the author's interpretation. A quantitative approach would help validate the results presented here. Also distinct rural tourism experience settings, eventually in the Schist Villages or the Alentejo Village tourism project, may add new insights.

**Conclusions** | The RP2PA adds value to the tourist experience since it offers a genuine and handmade hospitality to its guests, comprising themes associated to relevant aesthetic/ sensorial experience dimensions as well as positively recalled social interaction opportunities. The latter was expected to be more relevant, though, but may be conditioned by the type of rural tourism experience and traveling context analysed. Historical villages may be destinations visited for rather brief periods of time (as found for Linhares da Beira, for example, see Kastenholz, Carneiro, Marques & Lima, 2012), limiting interaction opportunities, the potential of developing emotional place attachment and corresponding loyalty amongst visitors. Many of these villages have only few and mostly elderly residents who may not easily present a welcoming community atmosphere. One exception is the host (family) of the RP2PA. What seems to impact on RP2PA guests most positively is: (i) the rural style of the houses; (ii) the awesome views of natural and pastoral landscapes around the RP2PA; (iii) the handmade breakfast with local food products; (iii) the scents, fresh air, the comfort and peacefulness of the RP2PA. Indeed, this aesthetic/sensorial dimension also frames the guests' symbolic rural experience by a widespread referral to a peaceful, natural, pastoral "rural way of life", typical of a "tourist gaze" experience (Urry, 2002). The rural way of life is also verified by the warm, welcoming and friendly hospitality, creating an atmosphere of intimacy between host families and guests. The RP2PA hospitality is remarked by plenty of generosity, since hosts offer typical rural food and beverages to their guests, advise about interesting local attractions and activities and also share the village's and region's history and curiosities. Ultimately, results of this research show low levels of loyalty in terms of recommending and revisiting intentions. Therefore, a better comprehension about tourist experiences in RP2PA is necessary to enhance the attachment to this types of accommodation and the places where they are located. Arguably, the *communitas* dimension, particularly in regards to the village community, may be enhanced, which however would require additional in-depth research.

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