

## Article

# Tourism Monitoring as a Strategic Tool for Tourism Management: The Perceptions of Entrepreneurs from Centro de Portugal

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**Abstract:** Gathering information on the impact of tourism in territories is fundamental for the responsible management of tourism businesses and destinations. Therefore, it is important to monitor tourism performance using indicators that can assess its impacts. Monitoring tourism is a management technique that should adopt a stakeholder network perspective, i.e., all stakeholders should be involved and collaborate with each other by sharing information to increase the competitiveness of the destination. However, it is unclear whether stakeholders are aware of the importance of monitoring and whether monitoring considers their interests, which often leads to a lack of involvement. In this study, we adopt the stakeholder network perspective with tourism entrepreneurs from Centro de Portugal, where we aimed to evaluate the importance assigned to the monitoring of tourism and to the understanding of entrepreneurs' information needs. To do so, the same survey was conducted twice, for the first time in 2018 and later repeated in 2022. The second survey sought to analyze whether tourism entrepreneurs' perceptions changed after the COVID-19 pandemic. We found that tourism entrepreneurs valued the economic area more than the social and environmental ones in both periods. Nevertheless, from 2018 to 2022, entrepreneurs became more committed to monitoring tourism in Centro de Portugal.

**Keywords:** tourism management; tourism monitoring; indicators; sustainable tourism development; stakeholder networks; stakeholder theory; COVID-19



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## 1. Introduction

The accelerated growth of tourism, which generates negative externalities for the environment and local communities, has triggered a debate in academia on the sustainable development of tourism (Butler 1999; Miller and Twining-Ward 2005; Hall 2006). This growth has posed challenges to the competitiveness of destinations and the management of their resources, which has led to the need to discuss approaches that allow tourism to grow while reducing its negative impact (Butler 1999; Sharpley 2000; Miller and Twining-Ward 2005; Vargas-Sánchez 2018; Magliulo 2014; Mercer 2013; Gössling et al. 2019; Blázquez-Salom et al. 2023).

Monitoring tourism activity has been analyzed as one of the destination management approaches that allows a better understanding of the impacts of tourism on the territory, guiding all stakeholders towards more sustainable practices, i.e., that does not affect local communities and the local environment (Font et al. 2021; Dias et al. 2018; Miller and Torres-Delgado 2023; Blázquez-Salom et al. 2023; Foronda-Robles et al. 2023). However, monitoring is a complex approach that requires the participation and cooperation of all stakeholders in the vast tourism cluster (Dias et al. 2018; Miller and Torres-Delgado 2023; Damian et al. 2021; Blázquez-Salom et al. 2023; Ivars-Baidal et al. 2021). Networking

and stakeholder participation in tourism monitoring, which involves sharing information, communicating their interests, and making evidence-based decisions is fundamental to increase the competitiveness of the destination, as advocated by Freeman's stakeholder theory (Laplume et al. 2008; Miller and Torres-Delgado 2023; Damian et al. 2021). However, there is still a lack of involvement of many stakeholders in the monitoring process, especially tourism entrepreneurs, who do not understand the benefits of this network of data gathering for their businesses and destinations (Damian et al. 2021; Blázquez-Salom et al. 2023; Gasparini and Mariotti 2021; Foronda-Robles et al. 2023). Moreover, it is not clear whether monitoring initiatives and indicators selected respond to entrepreneurs' interests, not knowing the kind of information they value the most for the management of their businesses (Font et al. 2021; Miller and Twining-Ward 2005; Butler 1999; Dias et al. 2018; Vargas-Sánchez 2018; Damian et al. 2021).

This study aimed to understand tourism entrepreneurs' perceptions of monitoring tourism activity in their destinations, how important it is for them to consult tourism statistics, how they are engaged in information sharing with other stakeholders, and what type of indicators they value most in the management of their businesses. Its main goal is to understand the importance of monitoring tourism activity, and how to involve tourism entrepreneurs by understanding their monitoring needs.

To do so, this paper presents a survey conducted at two different times (in 2018 and 2022) by the Centro de Portugal Sustainable Tourism Observatory. The 2018 survey was developed to involve tourism entrepreneurs from the Centro Region and to understand their perceptions of the Observatory's indicator system. The survey included an assessment of 29 general indicators (common to all sectors) covering economic, sociocultural, and environmental areas. In addition, it sought to understand the degree of involvement of entrepreneurs in the Centro Region in the use and sharing of information related to the activities of their companies.

Due to the occurrence of the COVID-19 pandemic in the 2020–2021 biennium, it was decided to replicate the same survey in 2022, seeking to ascertain the evolution that has occurred in the meantime in the perceptions of tourism entrepreneurs regarding the same topics. The repetition of the same survey assumed that the COVID-19 pandemic motivated awareness related to the sustainability of tourism in territories (Lapointe 2020; Prideaux et al. 2020). In this sense, we sought to ascertain whether environmental and social indicators assumed greater relevance from the perspective of entrepreneurs in the Centro Region compared to the pre-COVID-19 period.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1. The Sustainable Development of Tourism

The exponential growth of tourism over the past decades has led to a discussion on the negative externalities of tourism in territories and local communities (Butler 1999; Sharpley 2000; Gössling et al. 2019; Gössling and Peeters 2007, 2015; Hall 2006). More recently, several authors have discussed the problems of overtourism, that is, the excessive growth of tourism in destinations that generate social (Milano et al. 2019a, 2019b; Gotham 2010; Clancy 2020; Hughes 2018) and environmental impacts (Burns and Bibbings 2013; Hübner 2014; Holden et al. 2022). These include the touristification of public spaces, overcrowding, and degradation of tourism attractions, and the rising cost of living, which affect residents' quality of life (Gotham 2010; Clancy 2020; Hughes 2018; Milano et al. 2019a, 2019b; Aall and Koens 2019). In terms of environmental concerns, scholars have highlighted the carbon footprint of tourism facilities (transportation, hospitality, etc.) and their pressure on biodiversity and ecosystems, which are vulnerable to climate change (Butler 1999; Sharpley 2000; Gössling et al. 2019; Gössling and Peeters 2007, 2015; Hall 2006; Burns and Bibbings 2013; Hübner 2014; Holden et al. 2022).

According to Buhalis (2000), the increased negative impacts of tourism have been due to the mismanagement of tourism performance. He argued that efficient tourism management must consider the interests of all tourism stakeholders and the following

four pillars: 1. Increase the economic prosperity of tourist destinations; 2. Benefit the local community in the long term; 3. Maximize tourist satisfaction; and 4. Find a balance between the economic, environmental, and sociocultural impacts of tourism (Buhalis 2000, based on the table in p. 100). In this regard, the tourism development model adopted to date has essentially valued the economic viability of territories, excluding environmental and social concerns from planning and management (Vargas-Sánchez 2018; Magliulo 2014; Dias et al. 2018; Milano et al. 2019a, 2019b; Gotham 2010; Clancy 2020; Hughes 2018; Fletcher 2011; Font et al. 2021; Aall and Koens 2019). Moreover, the interests of all tourism stakeholders have not been considered, especially those of local communities, which has led to dissatisfaction, tourismphobia, and anti-tourism movements across Europe, accentuating the conflicts between tourists and residents (Milano et al. 2019a, 2019b; Font et al. 2021). These conflicts are detrimental to the tourist experience and, consequently, to the image of the destination and its competitiveness (Buhalis 2000; Miller and Twining-Ward 2005; Butler 1999; Font et al. 2021; Vargas-Sánchez 2018; Magliulo 2014; Aall and Koens 2019).

This model of tourism development has triggered a discussion on the need to promote the sustainable development of tourism in the long term; that is, a tourism activity that considers its current and future economic, social, and environmental impacts, which seeks to meet the needs of visitors, the industry, the environment, and host communities, as defined by the World Tourism Organization (UNWTO 2022; Miller and Twining-Ward 2005; Butler 1999; Font et al. 2021; Vargas-Sánchez 2018; Magliulo 2014; Sharpley 2000).

## 2.2. Monitoring Tourism Activity

### 2.2.1. Monitoring as a Destination Management Tool

Many authors have highlighted the need to measure the performance of tourism on destinations and businesses, that is, to develop monitoring strategies that can improve the management of tourism destinations (Butler 1999; Miller and Twining-Ward 2005; Magliulo 2014; Varra et al. 2012; Antolini and Grassini 2020; Torres-Delgado and Saarinen 2014; Miller and Torres-Delgado 2023; Gasparini and Mariotti 2021). Monitoring tourism activity consists of collecting statistical information about the real impact of tourism on territories, which will contribute to better management of tourism businesses and of tourism destinations (Torres-Delgado and Saarinen 2014; Miller and Torres-Delgado 2023; Torres-Delgado et al. 2023; Bertocchi et al. 2021; Ivars-Baidal et al. 2021; Moniche and Gallego 2022). Since one of the main objectives of destinations today is to promote their sustainability, monitoring the impacts of tourism has become a fundamental factor in destination management (Butler 1999; Miller and Twining-Ward 2005; Magliulo 2014; Varra et al. 2012; Antolini and Grassini 2020; Torres-Delgado and Saarinen 2014; Miller and Torres-Delgado 2023; Gasparini and Mariotti 2021).

The performance of tourism, and its sustainability are measured using indicators. Indicators are "(...) a measure of the existence of some issue or phenomenon of interest, used to describe an aspect of society, macro-societal activity or geographical area, or to point to changes in these factors" (Font et al. 2021, p. 3). Indicators will therefore allow: 1. monitoring tourism sectoral performance; 2. measuring progress and developing strategies/plans based on data specific to the reality of tourism; 3. sharing knowledge of tourism performance among all stakeholders (Font et al. 2021, based on p. 3).

To promote the sustainable development of tourism, indicators should cover the three pillars of sustainability (the environment, the economy, and sociocultural issues), according to the SDG's (Rasoolimanesh et al. 2020), to generate specific and valuable knowledge for local stakeholders and decision makers (about tourism impacts, product quality, etc.) (Font et al. 2021; Dias et al. 2018; Miller and Twining-Ward 2005; Torres-Delgado and Saarinen 2014; Miller and Torres-Delgado 2023; Bertocchi et al. 2021; Gasparini and Mariotti 2021). In addition, local decision makers will be able to adapt their future strategies based on this specific knowledge, allowing them to plan and make evidence-based decisions that promote sustainable tourism development (Miller and Torres-Delgado 2023; Font et al. 2021; Torres-Delgado et al. 2023; Bertocchi et al. 2021; Foronda-Robles et al. 2023). Monitoring tourism

activity will also have a positive impact on destination competitiveness by identifying trends in tourism demand and allowing destinations to position themselves accordingly (Font et al. 2021; Gasparini and Mariotti 2021; Foronda-Robles et al. 2023; Moniche and Gallego 2022). Therefore, monitoring tourism is key to efficiently manage a destination and its image, but most importantly to promote sustainable tourism development (Butler 1999; Miller and Twining-Ward 2005; Torres-Delgado and Saarinen 2014; Miller and Torres-Delgado 2023; Torres-Delgado et al. 2023; Rasoolimanesh et al. 2020; Bertocchi et al. 2021; Gasparini and Mariotti 2021; Moniche and Gallego 2022).

### 2.2.2. Steps in Monitoring Tourism Activity

The first step in monitoring tourism activity is the selection of a system of indicators, which is an integrated set of indicators covering the various areas of interest to be monitored (Magliulo 2014; Miller and Twining-Ward 2005; Font et al. 2021; Miller and Torres-Delgado 2023; Bertocchi et al. 2021). According to Magliulo (2014) “(…) [indicators should] be meaningful, available and comparable” (p. 15). Once the indicators are selected and integrated into a system of indicators, they “(…) will allow monitoring and comparison over time of the sustainable competitiveness of multiform destinations” (Magliulo 2014, p. 13). Furthermore, Font et al. (2021) and Miller and Torres-Delgado (2023) considered that the selection of indicators requires a bottom-up approach with the participation of tourism stakeholders in the process.

Tourism destinations may choose to define their own indicator system, usually based on a benchmarking study of existing systems of indicators (Magliulo 2014; Font et al. 2021; Bertocchi et al. 2021; Moniche and Gallego 2022), or on the other hand, destinations may also follow an existing indicator system, such as the European Tourism Indicator System (ETIS); or the Global Sustainable Tourism Council (GSTC) system (Magliulo 2014; Font et al. 2021; Miller and Torres-Delgado 2023; Bertocchi et al. 2021; Gasparini and Mariotti 2021). The creation of a monitoring system at tourism destinations is often associated with the establishment of a tourism observatory (second step). Observatories function as local, regional, or national repositories/platforms that concentrate the data acquired from regular monitoring (Magliulo 2014; Font et al. 2021; Dias et al. 2018; Miller and Torres-Delgado 2023). The International Network of Sustainable Tourism Observatories (INSTO), launched by the World Tourism Organization (UNWTO), is an international network of tourism observatories that aims to encourage the creation of observatories in tourism destinations to measure their impact (Dias et al. 2018; INSTO 2022).

The third step in monitoring tourism activity is the creation of a stakeholder network, that is, a network involving all tourism stakeholders working together and cooperating to provide information to measure tourism performance (Vargas-Sánchez 2018; Dias et al. 2018; Font et al. 2021; Butler 1999; Cottafava and Corazza 2021; Miller and Torres-Delgado 2023; Damian et al. 2021; Blázquez-Salom et al. 2023).

This approach follows Freeman’s (1984) stakeholder theory. Freeman (1984) argued that the development model of an organization should consider the interests of the stakeholders affected by that organization. Furthermore, organizations should encourage cooperation among stakeholders, which, in turn, will enable the co-creation of new products and contribute to their competitiveness (Stieb 2009; Laplume et al. 2008; Prell et al. 2009). Studies on stakeholder theory have subsequently evolved into theories such as stakeholder networks, specifically in tourism, into what Scott et al. (2008) have called destination networks. Stakeholder networks should be created to serve common goals, such as promoting the sustainability and competitiveness of the destination. These networks aim to include all stakeholders affected by an activity, encouraging collaboration between them and their effective participation in planning and decision-making, considering the interests of all (Mondoñedo 2021; Font et al. 2021; Katemliadis and Markatos 2022; Scott et al. 2008; Vogler 2022; Loureiro 2022; Cottafava and Corazza 2021).

Regarding tourism monitoring and management, a strong stakeholder network is essential to developing a monitoring system that answers the needs of all tourism stakehold-

ers (Font et al. 2021; Miller and Torres-Delgado 2023; Damian et al. 2021; Blázquez-Salom et al. 2023). Moreover, stakeholders should actively engage with each other and share knowledge and information that will be valuable to decision-making (Dias et al. 2018; Font et al. 2021; Miller and Twining-Ward 2005; Miller and Torres-Delgado 2023; Damian et al. 2021). However, since the tourism industry is composed of several stakeholders, monitoring tourism activity has proven challenging (Dias et al. 2018; Vargas-Sánchez 2018; Miller and Twining-Ward 2005; Antolini and Grassini 2020; Miller and Torres-Delgado 2023; Damian et al. 2021; Blázquez-Salom et al. 2023). In fact, it is not clear whether tourism stakeholders are aware of the benefits of monitoring their destinations and businesses. Moreover, it is also not clear whether monitoring systems are responding to stakeholders' interests, not knowing for sure what kind of information stakeholders value the most for the management of the destination and local businesses (Miller and Torres-Delgado 2023; Damian et al. 2021). This has resulted in the lack of involvement of many stakeholders in the monitoring process, especially tourism entrepreneurs, who do not understand the benefits of this network for their businesses (Font et al. 2021; Miller and Twining-Ward 2005; Dias et al. 2018; Miller and Torres-Delgado 2023).

Considering the discussion thus far, this paper aims to understand the perceptions of tourism entrepreneurs on monitoring tourism activity in their destinations, how important it is for them to consult tourism statistics, how they are engaged in information sharing with other stakeholders, and what type of information they value the most in the management of their businesses, which the monitoring system can answer. In this sense, the following research question was formulated:

Q1. What importance do tourism entrepreneurs attach to the use and sharing of statistical information, and what type of statistical information do they consider most relevant in the management of their businesses?

### 2.3. Impact of COVID-19

With the arrival of the COVID-19 pandemic, several authors have considered this moment an opportunity to rethink the future of tourism (Gössling et al. 2020; Niewiadomski 2020; Lapointe 2020; Prideaux et al. 2020; Ateljevic 2020; Higgins-Desbiolles 2021; Seabra et al. 2021). According to the UNWTO (2022), COVID-19 has increased the awareness of tourists and decision-makers regarding tourism sustainability. The “under tourism” scenarios in normally overcrowded cities have motivated reflection regarding the social and environmental impacts of tourism in several tourism destinations (Gössling et al. 2020; Niewiadomski 2020; Lapointe 2020; Prideaux et al. 2020; Seabra et al. 2021).

In Portugal, for instance, the “Turismo + Sustentável 20–23 Plan” was launched in 2021 by Turismo de Portugal, focusing on goals to promote the sustainability of tourism in the post-pandemic period. In this plan, COVID-19 is considered to have motivated reflection on the need to rethink the future of tourism development in more sustainable terms (Turismo de Portugal 2021). Among the stipulated goals, the monitoring of tourism activity stands out as a tourism management tool that will contribute to a better understanding of the impacts of tourism in the country and, finally, to sustainable development.

However, it is not clear whether the COVID-19 pandemic has created more awareness among tourism entrepreneurs about the need to monitor tourism activity, to promote sustainable tourism, and, furthermore, whether it has contributed to placing environmental and social issues among entrepreneurs' priorities.

In this regard, this study also aims to understand whether COVID-19 has changed the perceptions of tourism entrepreneurs regarding the use and sharing of tourism statistics for their management, and the type of information they value the most in the monitoring process. The following research question was formulated:

Q2. What changes have the COVID-19 pandemic caused in the way entrepreneurs perceive the usefulness of tourism monitoring and its indicators?

### 3. Results and Discussion

#### 3.1. Most Valuable Indicators for Tourism Entrepreneurs

In this section, we present the assessment made by tourism entrepreneurs on the 29 ETIS indicators. We divided their assessments into economic, environmental, and sociocultural indicators (Table 1).

**Table 1.** Importance of ETIS indicators to tourism entrepreneurs in 2018 and 2022.

ETIS Indicators	2018 Survey		2022 Survey		Significance	
	Mean	Sd	Mean	Sd	t	sig
<i>Economic indicators</i>						
Tourist satisfaction	4.43	0.76	4.30	0.81	1.65	0.100
Seasonality of demand	4.15	0.84	4.01	1.00	1.46	0.146
No. of repeated visits by tourists/visitors	3.99	0.90	3.94	1.01	0.55	0.584
Length of stay (nights)	3.98	0.91	3.82	1.18	1.42	0.156
Contribution of tourism to GDP	3.89	0.92	3.90	1.00	−0.12	0.902
No. of tourist overnight stays per month	3.86	1.01	3.64	1.18	1.94	0.053
Daily expenditure per tourist	3.72	0.99	3.77	0.95	−0.51	0.613
Accommodation occupancy rates	3.68	1.01	3.57	1.14	1.01	0.315
Total monthly business revenue	3.56	1.02	3.61	1.12	−0.51	0.612
Wages and staff costs	3.55	1.03	3.71	1.06	−1.44	0.150
No. of day visitors per month	3.48	1.07	3.44	1.09	0.31	0.760
Daily spending by day visitors	3.47	1.06	3.56	1.07	−0.76	0.446
Average charges per employee	3.44	1.06	3.61	1.10	−1.41	0.158
Non-staff expenditure	3.32	1.03	3.56	1.10	−2.05	0.041
<i>Sociocultural indicators</i>						
Resident satisfaction	3.82	0.90	3.65	1.07	1.72	0.087
% of events focusing on culture and heritage	3.75	0.95	3.71	0.99	0.36	0.722
Tourism jobs (permanent and seasonal)	3.62	0.98	3.56	1.04	0.53	0.599
Inclusion of endogenous products in the tourism value chain	3.60	1.04	3.53	1.14	0.65	0.518
No. of employees in service	3.48	0.98	3.55	1.08	−0.65	0.514
% of men and women employed in tourism	3.13	0.98	3.18	1.16	−0.39	0.698
% of enterprises run by women	2.82	1.07	2.87	1.13	−0.39	0.694
<i>Environmental indicators</i>						
No. of companies supporting biodiversity and landscape protection	3.59	1.01	3.58	1.08	0.07	0.942
No. of companies reducing energy consumption	3.38	0.99	3.58	1.09	−1.83	0.069
No. of companies reducing water consumption	3.36	1.02	3.53	1.11	−1.51	0.133
No. of companies certified (environment, quality, sustainability, or CSR)	3.28	1.02	3.25	1.06	0.26	0.796
Energy consumption per capita in enterprises	3.25	0.95	3.54	1.05	−2.73	0.007
No. of companies separating waste	3.24	1.02	3.47	1.11	−2.07	0.039
No. of companies in climate change mitigation programs	3.14	1.01	3.18	1.09	−0.42	0.676
No. of companies using recycled water	3.05	1.03	3.25	1.09	−1.78	0.075

It can be concluded that the surveyed entrepreneurs considered economic indicators the most important to include in the monitoring system of the Observatory. Among these, the most important economic indicator for the entrepreneurs surveyed in both samples was “tourist satisfaction”. This was followed by “seasonality of demand” and “number of repeat tourists” as other key indicators to be included in the monitoring system. Between 2018 and 2022, the “non-staff related expenditure” was the only economic indicator that had a statistically significant difference. It was considered a more important indicator for respondents in 2022.

Sociocultural indicators were in second place among the most important to include in the Observatory’s monitoring system. Among these, the most valued were the “satisfaction of residents” and the “percentage of events focusing on culture and heritage”. The indicators considered least important were those related to gender equality, the “percentage of businesses run by women”, and the “percentage of men and women employed in tourism”. Between 2018 and 2022, there were no statistically significant differences in respondents’ answers regarding sociocultural indicators.

Environmental indicators were considered by respondents as the least important to be included in the monitoring system of the Observatory. The “number of enterprises supporting biodiversity and landscape protection”, the “number of enterprises reducing energy consumption”, and water consumption were considered the most important indicators to be included in monitoring, among environmental indicators. The indicator “number of companies using recycled water” was considered the least important in both samples. Between 2018 and 2022, there were statistically significant differences in only two environmental indicators: “number of enterprises reducing energy consumption”, and the “number of enterprises separating waste”. It was indeed found that these two indicators became more important for the entrepreneurs surveyed in 2022, after the COVID-19 pandemic.

In summary, we found that the COVID-19 pandemic did not appear to have significantly influenced the perceptions of business respondents in 2022, as environmental and social impact measurement indicators remain less of a priority compared to economic indicators. Only two environmental indicators appeared to have grown among the environmental concerns of business respondents.

### 3.2. Use of Statistical Information in Business Management

Table 2 shows that the number of affirmative and negative answers from respondents in 2018 and 2022 were similar regarding the use of statistical information in the management of their companies. The vast majority claimed to consult and use statistical information for the better management of their company, while a minority claimed not to consult statistical information. Although there was a slight increase in the use of statistical information sources in the management of tourism enterprises between 2018 and 2022, this statistical difference was not significant.

**Table 2.** Use of statistical information by respondents in their business management (%) \*.

Answer	2018 (%)	2022 (%)
Yes	62.8	65.5
No	37.2	34.5
Total	100.0	100.0

\*  $\chi^2 = 0.273$ , sig = 0.601.

Respondents were then asked how often they used statistical information in the management of their businesses. When analyzing Table 3, we find that most entrepreneurs consulted statistical information monthly, quarterly, and weekly. It should be noted that in 2018, 14.3% of respondents stated that they consulted annual information, a trend that did not occur in the same way in 2022. The differences between 2018 and 2022 were statistically significant. These results indicate that the tourism entrepreneurs surveyed are consulting statistical information more regularly, which allows us to conclude that regular monitoring of tourism activity is an important strategy to adopt at the destination.

**Table 3.** Frequency of use of statistical information in business management in 2018 and 2022 (%) \*.

Frequency	2018 (%)	2022 (%)
Daily	1.4	5.4
Weekly	12.2	17.2
Monthly	46.3	52.7
Quarterly	25.9	19.4
Total	100.0	100.0

\*  $\chi^2 = 9.825$ , sig = 0.043.

In the next question, respondents were asked to indicate the professional purposes for which they used tourism statistical information. In Table 4, we can see that, both in 2018 and 2022, respondents recognize the importance of using statistical information to

study the tourism market of the Region, which assists the management of their companies. Within these two broad themes, 10 other themes were identified by respondents.

**Table 4.** Professional purposes for which tourism entrepreneurs use tourism statistical information (%).

Purposes for Using Statistical Information	2018 (%)	2022 (%)
<b>1. Market research</b>	47.9	44.4
Comparison and evolution of tourism markets	20.3	27.2
Obtaining general tourism information	3.5	6.0
Data on tourist occupancy	8.3	3.0
Data on tourist profile	4.7	0.0
Knowing trends in the market and demand	10.7	8.0
<b>2. Business management</b>	50.8	55.5
Assess future investment	4.7	1.0
Assist business management and planning	18.5	21.2
Adapt marketing strategy	4.1	7.0
Improve company positioning	17.2	20.1
Assist in decision-making	5.9	6.0
<b>Total</b>	100.0	100.0

In terms of market research, respondents mentioned that they used statistical information to know about the tourism market of the Centro Region, comparing and analyzing its evolution and other markets, to know the main current trends of the market, and to obtain data on tourist occupancy in their Region. The focus of the respondents seems to be on the topic “Comparison and evolution of tourism markets”. This may be related to the fact that the Centro Region is a growing and emerging tourism destination. In this sense, entrepreneurs sought to carry out market research, comparing their businesses with other competing destinations and companies, analyzing their evolution throughout the years. The results suggest that respondents were aware of the advantages of knowing more about the tourism market of the Centro Region, namely, its advantages for better management of their businesses. When mentioning the management of their businesses, they used information mainly to plan their future progress and investments, as well as to improve their positioning in the market, to assist their decision-making, their communication strategy, and future investments. Since tourism trends are constantly changing and evolving, respondents seem to be aware of the need to consult statistical information to better position their businesses, and to make better decisions and investments.

Respondents were asked to indicate the sources of information they use (Table 5). We can see that the most used sources of information by tourism entrepreneurs in the Centro de Portugal Region are all Portuguese: Turismo de Portugal, Instituto Nacional de Estatística (INE), and Associação da Hotelaria, Restauração e Similares de Portugal (AHRESP). The least used sources of information were the Airports Council International, the National Institute of Civil Aviation. Between 2018 and 2022, there were statistically significant differences in the options European Travel Commission (ETC), Instituto de Planeamento e Desenvolvimento de Turismo (IPDT), and Confederação do Turismo de Portugal (CTP).

Finally, Table 6 shows the monitoring areas that respondents would like to see improved in the tourism statistics data collection process. Most respondents considered it necessary to improve the statistical data collection process in the economic and cultural areas, although the latter saw a decrease in 2022. The environmental area came in third place among respondents’ priorities, followed by the social area, which was considered the monitoring area that least needed improvement in the tourism statistical data collection process. There were no statistically significant differences between 2018 and 2022.

**Table 5.** Sources of information most used by tourism entrepreneurs surveyed.

Sources of Information	2018 (%)	2022 (%)	$\chi^2$	sig
United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO)	11.5	16.2	1.664	0.197
World Tourism and Travel Council (WTTC)	4.3	4.9	0.088	0.767
Airports Council International	0.4	0.0	0.608	0.435
International Air Transport Association (IATA)	4.7	4.2	0.046	0.83
The European Travel Agents' and Tour Operations' Associations (ECTAA)	3.4	1.4	1.380	0.24
EUROSTAT	9.8	10.6	0.052	0.819
Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD)	7.3	9.2	0.430	0.512
European Travel Commission (ETC)	2.6	6.3	3.286	0.07
Instituto de Planeamento e Desenvolvimento de Turismo (IPDT)	4.7	12.0	6.779	0.009
Turismo de Portugal	55.6	58.5	0.302	0.583
Confederação do Turismo de Portugal (CTP)	8.5	14.8	3.544	0.06
Banco de Portugal	9.0	11.3	0.524	0.469
Instituto Nacional de Estatística (INE)	42.3	45.8	0.432	0.511
Portugal's Airports	5.1	2.8	1.159	0.282
Madeira's Airports	0.4	0.7	0.128	0.72
Associação da Hotelaria, Restauração e Similares de Portugal (AHRESP)	18.4	26.8	3.676	0.055
Associação Portuguesa de Agências de Viagens e Turismo (APAVT)	11.1	7.0	1.690	0.194
Instituto Nacional da Aviação Civil (INAC)	1.3	0.7	0.280	0.596
Ass. Portuguesa de Emp. de Congressos, Animação Turística e Eventos (APECATE)	5.6	4.2	0.326	0.568
PORDATA	15.8	14.8	0.071	0.79
None of the above	0.9	0.0	0.275	0.602
Other	7.7	4.2	1.778	0.182

**Table 6.** Monitoring areas to be improved in the tourism statistics data collection process.

Areas	2018 (%)	2022 (%)	$\chi^2$	sig
Social	29.1	26.8	0.231	0.631
Economic	38.5	42.3	0.530	0.467
Environmental	30.8	31.7	0.035	0.852
Cultural	42.3	34.5	2.253	0.133

### 3.3. Sharing Statistical Information

In this section, we aimed to analyze the extent to which respondents were committed to sharing information for the purpose of monitoring tourism activity.

Respondents were first asked to indicate whether they shared statistical information with official entities. In Table 7, we can see significant differences between the 2018 and 2022 samples. In 2018, most respondents stated that they did not share statistical information with official entities, while in 2022, most respondents stated that they provided statistical information to official entities. Thus, it can be concluded that there appears to be a greater commitment from tourism entrepreneurs to provide statistical data to official entities.

**Table 7.** Percentage of respondents providing statistical data to official entities \*.

Answer	2018 (%)	2022 (%)
Yes	43.6	61.3
No	56.4	38.7
Total	100.0	100.0

\*  $\chi^2 = 11.047a$ , sig  $\leq 0.001$ .

Table 8 shows the percentage of respondents providing statistical information who responded "yes" to the previous question by sector of activity in 2018 and 2022. The accommodation sector is the most engaged sector in sharing statistical information, followed by the food and beverage sector. The results regarding the accommodation sector were certainly related to the fact that this sector had the obligation to provide statistical data to the Instituto Nacional de Estatística (INE) on a monthly basis. In the case of the food and beverage sector, its evolution was significant between 2018 and 2022. The sectors that shared less statistical information with official sources were tourist entertainment, travel agencies, and other sectors that had less participation in this survey.

**Table 8.** Respondents providing statistical data to official entities by sector \*.

Sector	2018 (%)	2022 (%)
Accommodation	73.5	79.3
Food and beverage	3.9	11.5
Tourist entertainment	3.9	2.3
Travel agencies	2.9	4.6
Other	15.7	2.2

\*  $\chi^2 = 26.806$ , sig  $\leq 0.001$ .

Finally, respondents were asked to indicate the official sources with whom they shared information (Table 9).

**Table 9.** Official entities receiving statistical data from respondent entrepreneurs sharing information.

Official Entities	2018 (%)	2022 (%)
Instituto Nacional de Estatística (INE)	30.7	32.1
Turismo de Portugal	6.0	7.2
Turismo Centro de Portugal	3.6	1.0
Serviço de Estrangeiros e Fronteiras (SEF)	1.3	0.4
Banco de Portugal	1.8	0.0
Associação de Hotelaria de Portugal (AHP)	4.0	0.4
AHRESP	0.0	1.0
APAVT	0.9	0.0
Other	5.8	3.6

In Table 9, we see that most respondents who answered “yes” to the previous question provided information mainly to the Instituto Nacional de Estatística (INE) both in 2018 and 2022.

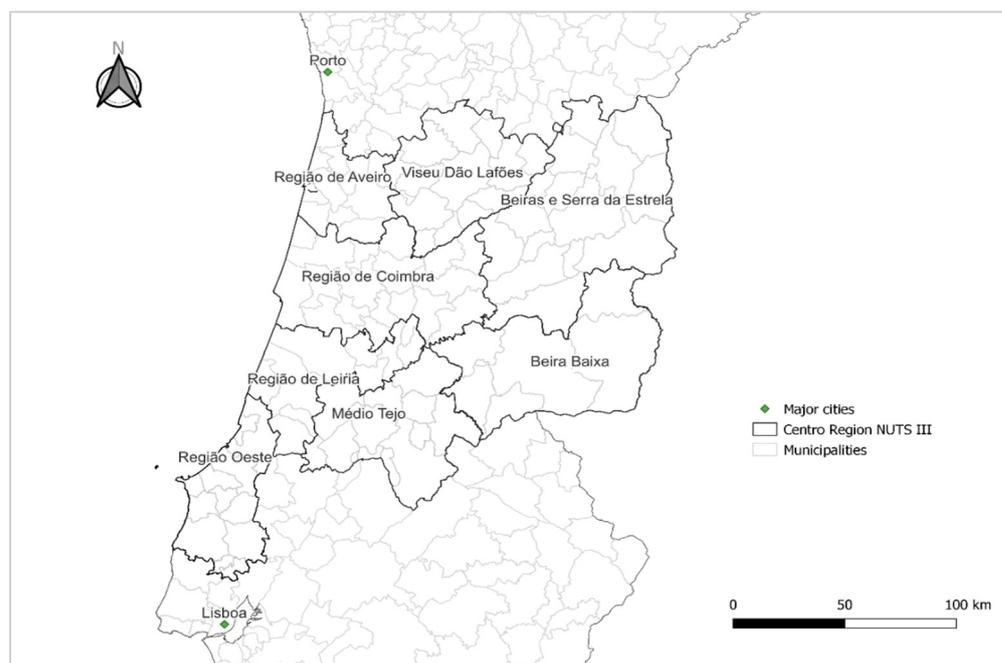
This result was expected, considering that the tourist accommodation sector has the obligation to provide data to INE on a monthly basis. Turismo de Portugal, Turismo Centro de Portugal, and Associação da Hotelaria de Portugal (AHP) also stand out as other entities to which respondents most claim to provide information regarding their activity. Other official sources of information sharing identified were the Serviço de Estrangeiros e Fronteiras (SEF), the Banco de Portugal, AHRESP, and APAVT.

#### 4. Materials and Methods

This study was conducted in the creation phase of the monitoring system of the Centro de Portugal Sustainable Tourism Observatory (OTSCP). The Centro de Portugal Sustainable Tourism Observatory is an autonomous service of the Regional Entity Turismo Centro de Portugal that aims to monitor the tourism activity of the Centro de Portugal Region (Figure 1). The Centro de Portugal Region occupies 28,462 km<sup>2</sup> and has about 2.2 million inhabitants, constituting approximately 30.6% of the total area of Portugal and 22% of the country’s resident population. It is bordered to the north by the North Region, to the east by Spain, to the south by Alentejo, to the southwest by the Lisbon Region, and to the west by the Atlantic Ocean. Its location in central Portugal gives it a strategic position because it is situated between the most important national urban centers: Lisbon and Porto. Its vast territorial coverage makes it the most diverse Region in the country, comprising eight Subregions or NUTS III (see Figure 1).

The Centro Region is very rich in natural and cultural heritage, full of deep contrasts, from the sea on the Atlantic coast to the mountains in the countryside and from the large cities to the traditional villages. The Region includes the mountains of the Montejunto-Estrela System, from which Serra da Estrela stands out, with its beautiful landscapes and glacial lakes and the Lousã, Açor and Caramulo Mountains. Recognized as one of the world’s most esteemed pilgrimage sites, the city of Fátima is one of Portugal’s most popular destinations and is therefore one of the most visited places in Portugal. The Region also has thermal springs and rivers or sea beaches (279 km of Atlantic coast), of which Peniche and Nazaré stand out, sought-after worldwide for surfing, with Nazaré having the world’s

largest surf wave with 24 to 30 m. Moreover, the Region is gifted with 17 parks/reserves and protected landscapes, of which the forest of Buçaco stands out, with exceptional natural areas. It presents a very strong cultural heritage with 189 monuments and 4 UNESCO World Heritage Sites, namely the Monasteries of Alcobaça and Batalha, the Convent of Christ in Tomar and the University of Coimbra, and 5 cities that were included by UNESCO in the Creative Cities Network. The Region is marked by unique places such as the Historical Villages, Schist Villages, medieval castles, and whitewashed houses (Óbidos), and cities, such as Coimbra, known for being the city of students and scholars, Aveiro, between the estuary and the sea, and Viseu, Guarda, and Castelo Branco, where the stone architecture maintains its original features. Finally, the gastronomy and the wines from the demarcated regions are also highly popular.



**Figure 1.** Centro de Portugal Region and its 8 Subregions or NUTS III.

Through monitoring, the Observatory aims to provide useful knowledge to stakeholders and assist in the decision-making of local actors, thereby promoting the competitiveness and sustainability of tourism in the Centro de Portugal Region. The Observatory's monitoring system is composed of economic (supply and demand), environmental, and social indicators based on the ETIS (European Tourism Indicator System).

The ETIS was launched by the European Commission in 2013 and further improved in 2016. This system suggests a total of 43 core indicators to assess four areas: economic value, environmental impact, sociocultural impact, and destination management (Font et al. 2021; Gasparini and Mariotti 2021). This system promotes knowledge creation through data collection and understanding of the various impacts of tourism on destinations. Its aim is to raise awareness and promote cooperation among various stakeholders (Font et al. 2021; Gasparini and Mariotti 2021).

The Observatory is committed to adopting a system of indicators that responds to the needs of all tourism stakeholders and assists the management of companies in the Centro Region. In this sense, when creating its monitoring system, the Observatory developed a survey in 2018 to involve tourism entrepreneurs in the Region and to know their perceptions regarding the Observatory's indicator system. The survey sought to understand the degree of involvement of tourism entrepreneurs in the Centro Region in the use and sharing of information related to the activities of their companies. Moreover, it aimed to assess the perceptions of tourism entrepreneurs on the indicators that the Observatory was looking

forward to including in its monitoring system, covering economic, sociocultural, and environmental areas, as specified in ETIS.

Due to the occurrence of the COVID-19 pandemic in the 2020–2021 biennium, it was decided to replicate the same survey in 2022, seeking to ascertain the evolution that has occurred in the meantime in the perceptions of tourism entrepreneurs regarding the same topics. The repetition of the same questionnaire assumed that the COVID-19 pandemic motivated a new awareness related to the sustainability of tourism in the territories (Lapointe 2020; Prideaux et al. 2020; Seabra et al. 2021). In this sense, we sought to ascertain whether environmental and social indicators assumed greater relevance from the perspective of entrepreneurs in the Centro Region compared to the pre-COVID period.

The same data collection method was used for both surveys; that is, both were sent by email to a universe of tourism entrepreneurs from the Centro Region in the various sectors linked to tourism (accommodation, catering, tourist entertainment, travel agencies, transport, and tourist attractions) via the database of the Tourism Investment Department of the Regional Entity Turismo Centro de Portugal. In the two survey waves, it was made available on the Google Forms platform. Once disseminated, it was available for 15 days.

When completing the survey, respondents were asked to rate the degree of importance of 29 ETIS indicators: 14 economic indicators, 8 environmental indicators, and 7 sociocultural indicators. Although the ETIS includes 43 indicators, only 29 rely on primary data provided directly by companies. Therefore, it was decided to consider in the survey only these 29 indicators. To assess the level of importance assigned to these indicators, five-point Likert scales were used, the extremes of which were marked as follows: 1 = “insignificant”; 5 = “fundamental”.

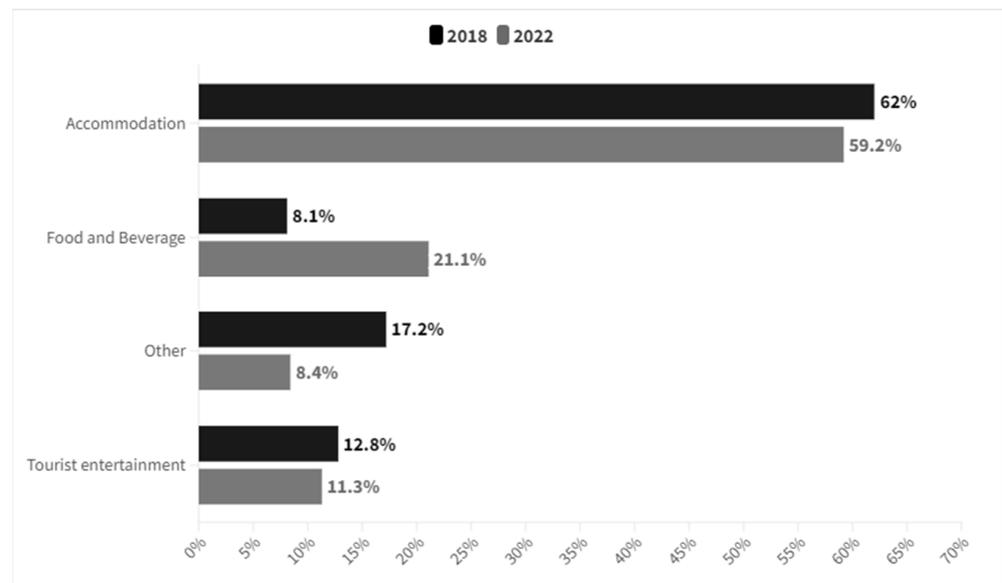
After the evaluation of the ETIS indicators, the second part of the survey aimed to understand the extent to which respondents used tourism statistical information, asking questions such as: “In the management of your company do you use/consult tourism statistical information?” (yes/no); “How often do you use/consult tourism statistical information?” (daily, weekly, monthly, quarterly, yearly); “For what professional purposes do you use tourism statistical information?”; “Which sources of statistical information do you use?” (21 options); and “Which area(s) would you like to see improved in the process of collecting tourism statistical data?” (Four options: economic, environmental, social, and cultural).

In addition, we sought to analyze the degree of respondents’ commitment to sharing information with official entities. To obtain this information, questions such as: “Does your company provide statistical data to any entity?” (yes/no); and “If you answered “yes”, mention which one/those”. (Open questions) were asked. The data were processed using the quantitative and qualitative analysis software SPSS and NVivo 12 (open question).

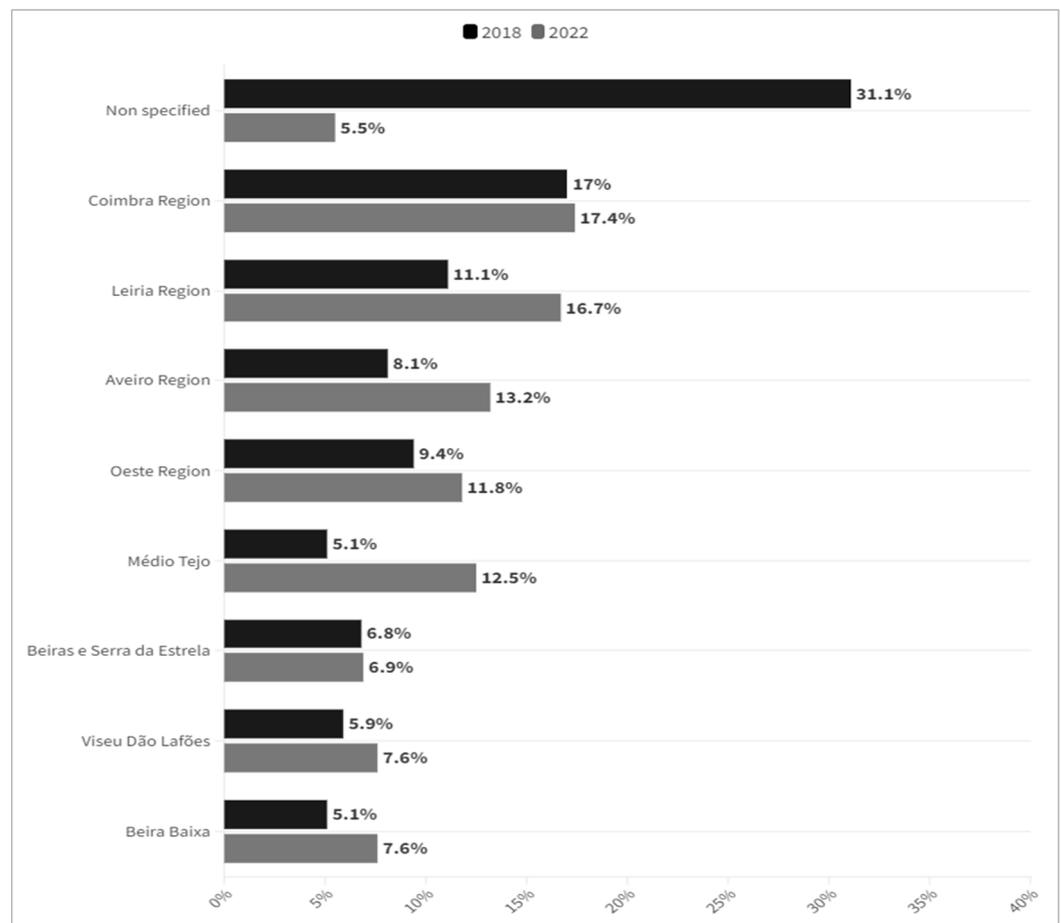
After completing the survey, different samples were obtained. The first survey conducted in 2018 had 234 valid responses, whereas the 2022 survey had 142 valid responses. Although the samples are different, we find that the percentages of responses per sector are similar, allowing us to conclude that the samples are comparable. Figure 2 illustrates the number of responses by activity sector in both waves of the survey.

We concluded that the sectors that participated the most in this study were tourism accommodation, food and beverage, and tourist entertainment. The number of responses from the other sectors was different and insignificant in both surveys and were therefore grouped in the “other” category (Figure 2).

Figure 3 shows the number of responses by NUTS III in 2018 and 2022. In 2018, we found that a significant part of the respondents chose not to specify their addresses, with 31.1% of the answers classified as “not specified”. Even so, the NUTS III Coimbra Region and Leiria Region registered a higher number of responses. In 2022, the Leiria Region and the Coimbra Region maintained a high concentration of responses, along with the Aveiro Region.



**Figure 2.** Number of tourism entrepreneurs by sector in the samples of 2018 and 2022.



**Figure 3.** Number of tourism entrepreneurs by NUTS III in the samples of 2018 and 2022.

## 5. Conclusions

The aim of this study was to adopt a stakeholder network perspective to assess the importance of monitoring tourism activity in destinations, that is, the importance stakeholders assign to statistical information based on indicators that will assess the impacts of tourism in their territories, and the stakeholders' behavior regarding the use and sharing

of this information. The statistical data collected by monitoring systems will be crucial to local actors and decision makers, who can now make decisions based on representative and regular evidence (Font et al. 2021; Miller and Torres-Delgado 2023). The collection of statistical information about tourism impacts will not only be important to the competitiveness of the destination but also to promote the sustainable development of tourism (Font et al. 2021; Miller and Torres-Delgado 2023; Damian et al. 2021).

Since tourism is a rather complex activity, a stakeholder network perspective in destinations is essential to promote the sustainable development of tourism, where all stakeholders express their interests, participate in local planning, and in decision-making (Damian et al. 2021; Miller and Torres-Delgado 2023). In this study, we involved tourism entrepreneurs from the Centro de Portugal Region in the monitoring process of the Centro de Portugal Sustainable Tourism Observatory to understand how important it was for them to consult tourism statistics, how they were engaged in information sharing with other stakeholders, and what type of information they valued the most in the management of their businesses.

To do so, a survey was conducted at two different times: 2018 and 2022. The entrepreneurs surveyed evaluated a set of 29 ETIS indicators, which covered the various areas of tourism monitoring (economic, social, and environmental) essential to promoting the sustainable development of tourism. The indicators that focused on the economic dimensions were evaluated as the most important and therefore considered a priority in the monitoring system. Social and environmental indicators were not prioritized by tourism entrepreneurs. These results support the perspective outlined in the literature review section that local tourism actors prioritize economic concerns over environmental and social issues (Butler 1999; Sharpley 2000; Font et al. 2021; Miller and Twining-Ward 2005; Miller and Torres-Delgado 2023).

Regarding the second research question, only two environmental indicators grew in importance between 2018 and 2022, namely indicators related to energy consumption and waste separation. Thus, it can be concluded that the COVID-19 pandemic did not substantially change the perceptions of tourism entrepreneurs regarding the intrinsic value of the different types of information that can be collected through the systematic monitoring of tourism activity by the Observatory. These findings contradict the assertions made by several scholars who believed that the pandemic offered an opportunity to highlight the significance of environmental and social issues in the tourism industry (Gössling et al. 2020; Niewiadomski 2020; Lapointe 2020; Prideaux et al. 2020; Ateljevic 2020; Higgins-Desbiolles 2021).

In the second part of the survey, most respondents claimed to have used statistical information on a monthly or quarterly basis. Such information was obtained from two sources: Turismo de Portugal and Instituto Nacional de Estatística. This information was mainly used for market research and day-to-day business management. These results reinforce the ideas explored in the literature review that it is important to ensure regular monitoring of tourism activities to assist entrepreneurs in the management of their business units (Torres-Delgado et al. 2023; Dias et al. 2018; Font et al. 2021). Some entrepreneurs were aware of the advantages that tourism monitoring may provide for their businesses, such as the ability to make evidence-based decisions, identify trends in the destination, and position themselves accordingly, boosting their competitiveness, as previously explored in the literature review (Dias et al. 2018; Miller and Twining-Ward 2005; Font et al. 2021; Miller and Torres-Delgado 2023). In this sense, respondents emphasized the importance of improving the collection of information from economic and cultural areas, which seem to be the most beneficial to their business management.

This study has made important contributions to the scientific literature on tourism management and stakeholder network since it adopts an approach of involvement and participation of tourism entrepreneurs in the establishment of a monitoring system. As Font et al. (2021) and Damian et al. (2021) stated, it is important that the decision-making and definition processes of the monitoring system adopt a bottom-up perspective, that is, the involvement of stakeholders and those affected by the process. The involvement

of tourism entrepreneurs in the process of setting up monitoring systems is essential to raise their awareness of the importance of using and sharing statistical information, and especially to meet their information needs in the management of their businesses, which will contribute to their greater involvement and participation in the system. Future research on this topic should seek to understand the perceptions of other stakeholders involved in the tourism cluster to create monitoring models that involve all stakeholders. With this perspective, we were able to identify strengths and weaknesses in the monitoring system of Centro de Portugal. In terms of fostering sustainable tourism development through tourism monitoring, we believe that additional methods for raising awareness among tourist entrepreneurs about environmental and social concerns must be adopted and reviewed for these issues to be prioritized.

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