Determiners in the Consumer's Purchase Decision Process in Ecotourism Contexts: A Portuguese Case Study

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Abstract: Purpose: This paper entails a reflection on sustainability and specific tourism contexts (i.e., ecotourism). It focusses mainly on local communities' determiners in the consumer's purchase decision process in ecotourism. This research aimed at understanding the determiners in the process of consumer decisions in ecotourism contexts, as well as verifying the growing importance of ecotourism. Methodology: A questionnaire was conducted (with ecotourism specific contexts), in Portugal. Portugal is a tourist destination that has gained notoriety and recognition in recent years. In total, 197 questionnaires were collected, aiming for a deeper understanding of the real social, economic, cultural and environmental impacts resulting from the uncontrolled development of tourism. This study aimed at testing the proposed conceptual model empirically (i.e., the relationship between destination image and post-purchase behaviour). Findings: Sustainability must be looked at as a vital need for society in general, as well as for the tourism sector. Ecotourism is the natural evolution of tourism employing care for the environment, culture and local traditions, while promoting environmental education. Research Limitations: The results obtained are limited, considering the availability of most accommodation units in the ecotourism segment in Portugal (e.g., hotels). As next steps, it is advisable that hotel units come to realise the pertinence of such research as they are the main beneficiaries of these initiatives, being then recommended that they collaborate with the process of completing surveys. Originality/Value: Managers and ecotourists can use the outcomes of this study to gain an in-depth understanding of customer experiences (i.e., sustainability experiences), to develop effective marketing strategies, and to create an operational environment that can maximise customers' perceived experiential values. Destination image plays a fundamental part in terms of experience and the tourist's own satisfaction, with a need to improve the degree of affectivity towards the hotel unit.

Keywords: ecotourism; destination image; loyalty; sustainability; ecotourist profile

1. Introduction

Tourism is increasingly recognised as one of the main impulses of economy, both in the European context and worldwide [1–3]. As a consequence of this expansion comes economic growth, increases in employment levels, social progress and the protection of natural resources when used with moderation. Therefore, it is imperative in sustainable development to promote the satisfaction of the basic needs of the host community, favouring access to all opportunities that promote the well-being of society and facilitate its aspirations to a better life, without compromising coming generations [4]. Thus, sustainability should have a long-term perspective, avoiding the overexploitation of natural resources.

The Johannesburg Declaration on Sustainable Development, reference [5] gives support to the triple support pillar of sustainable development that is the protection of the environment and economic and social development. Furthermore, reference [6] reinforce the importance of natural resources (which are finite) and, as such, it is necessary to protect, care for, enjoy and use in a sustainable way. Ecotourism has been used to finance preservation and scientific investigation; protect the frailty and purity of the ecosystem with benefits for the local population; promote the development of less developed countries, developing ecological and cultural sensitivity, fostering environmental and social awareness in tourism; and please and educate the selective tourist [7]. Regardless of the dimension, all hotel units place their footprint on the environment, provoking its degradation and decreasing the quality of life of the local community. Hence, it is vital to promote environmental preservation measures (long-term perspective). This will result in more loyalty from tourists, a better image toward local communities, motivated employees and good relationship with society [8].

Resulting from the orientation for sustainability, the United Nations Organisation (UN) declared 2017 as International Year of Sustainable Tourism for Development [5] (p. 4). This classification, as referred in [5], serves to promote awareness in stakeholders to serve as catalysts for a positive change, contributing for development, prosperity and well-being for all. The urgency of the measure is emphasised by [5] for the protection of natural and cultural heritage and preservation of ecosystems, strengthening an inclusive and participative tourism to stimulate economic growth, increasing employment offers and business opportunities.

2. Tourism and the Consumer in the Sustainability Perspective

Research on consumer behaviour and the marketing applicability to tourism contexts is based on the analysis of tourist motivations and on the ratio of behavioural intentions (i.e., satisfaction and loyalty), during a period marked by competitivity among tourist destinations [9] (p. 90). In tourism contexts, loyalty is held as the commitment to rebuy or enjoy the product/service again giving consistency to the future of the same brand, regardless of the influences of the moment or marketing strategies [10,11]. In recent years, "the interest in relational studies has been increasing in the management literature" [12] (p. 189). A visitor's loyalty is related to the intention of returning to a tourist destination (revisit) and/or recommending it to relatives, friends and others [9,13]. Reference [14] previously developed research seems to prove a strong relationship between the visitor's satisfaction and loyalty in tourism contexts. The loyalty of the consumer in tourism is no doubt an important factor to assess the success of the development of a tourist destination, being that motivation, image of the tourist destination, quality, perceived value and the degree of satisfaction will develop this loyalty according to [11]. In consonance with [15], there are several factors indicated to measure and understand loyalty, having as example the visitor's positive experience, the intention to return to the tourist destination (revisit) and the effect of positive word-of-mouth to friends and acquaintances. Word-of-mouth recommendations are fundamental to developing loyalty to a place. Along these lines, understanding the factors that influence tourist loyalty may help service providers and local traders improve the perceptions, emotional connection/attachment, involvement, image and satisfaction of tourists [9], as well as location-based marketing, rooted in research developed by some investigators [16–18]. In line with [19], there are two types of connections to the location: cognitive and affective. The first establishes the identity to the location and the second relates to the attachment/affection to the location.

Reference [20] considered place attachment to be a multidimensional construct of place dependence and of the place identity. In addition, reference [18] considered that there are three dimensions: personal (individually and collectively determined meanings), the process (psychological component consisting in affection, cognition and behaviour related to attachment) and the place (characteristics of the attachment place including, in terms of space, specificities and characteristics of the social and physical elements) (Figure 1).
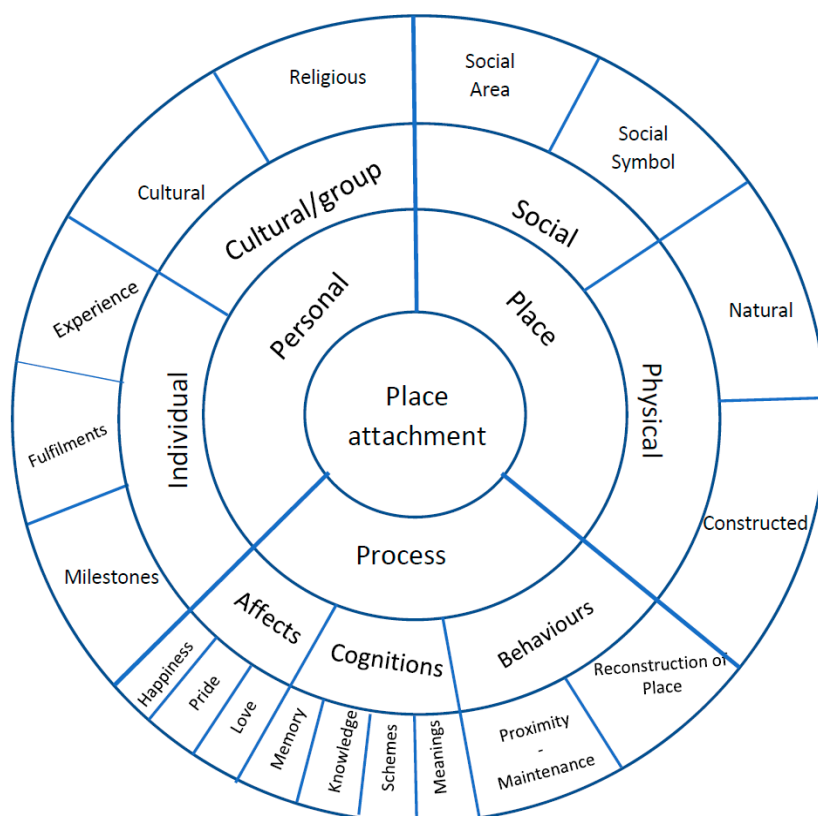
Figure 1. Three-dimensional model of place attachment. Source: [18].

Reference [21] work explores the relationship between sustainability and several types of authenticity in tourism. Following [22], Reference [21] (p. 14) wrote of sustainability as "a dynamic concept: it comes to refer to the existence of some degree of congruence between two sets of changes, in the destination as well as in the motivations of tourists". Later, reference [23] (p. 274) found that the "postmodern tourist attitudes" reflected in the subjective iconic and existential conceptualisation of authenticity might both "facilitate sustainability in tourism" by substituting the contrived for the "genuine, and at the same time inspire a potentially deleterious appetite for follow-up visits to the real thing: objectively authentic sites untouched by repair or rejuvenation" [24] (p. 51). Feelings of "authenticity at a tourist site are thus implicitly linked to sustainable tourism; as we find, the maximisation of existential 'felt' authenticity at sites of limited historical provenance increases the likelihood of return visits" [24] (p. 51).

Natural resources and the history of the location itself develop, according to [25], the feeling of attachment and of belonging and of giving purpose to life. However, globalisation tends to take some of that affective relevance, making sites more fragile. Therefore, it is up to each tourist destination to minimise its negative effect [14,26,27]. To create positive post-purchase behaviours, to develop and attain a sustainable tourist destination, in terms of competitivity, under the orientation of tourist destination managers, they should attend to the maximisation of satisfaction levels [9]. Concerning the destination image, this depends on the tourist's subjective interpretation of reality as it will influence the tourist's behaviour [28–31] and it will influence the levels of satisfaction related to the tourism experience [29,30,32]. These aspects will be responsible for tourist choices [33]. A destination image may influence the positioning of the tourism destination based on its attributes, expected benefits and association to the psychological characteristics assigned by the tourists [31]. Thus, the development of the destination image will be the result of the experiences before, during and post-purchase [34].

According to [35], before a tourist purchases a service, he buys an image that reflects a dream or a wish that, in line with [15], is formed by the consumer's imagination/perception of the quality and the

degree of satisfaction of the experience, the intention to return and to recommend the tourist destination. In the perspective of [36], it is based on comments of friends, photographs and descriptions, which will be objects for the commercialisation and advertising of the tourist product or service, thus creating an expectation that the potential consumer will check later if it corresponds to the experienced reality. According to [11], image is a key determiner of satisfaction, attachment and loyalty and, as such, it should be real so that the tourist can develop affection.

The tourist wants to understand which experiences will be built on the emotions that the place transmits, regarding the memory of an observed flyer, a viewed commercial, the comment of friends and relatives [37]. The decision will be based on the image itself, one he wishes to be real (thus, it is important that the image is in fact real and not fictional). The importance of the image is reinforced by [38], considering that the long tail (long distance) tourist books the flight and the stay with the help of the Internet. This tourist knows the quality of the service he wants, the efficiency and foresees what he looks for, being willing to spend more. Therefore, the tourist may reach niche markets and small businesses that promote quality and not quantity. This tourist focuses on the importance of having a well-thought-out digital marketing (social networks, blogs, etc.), especially for companies which promote small and medium niche markets.

2.1. The Concept of Ecotourism

Ecotourism as a concept is neither easy to define, nor to implement [39]. Ecotourism is a complex concept as it involves specialised niche markets that can share a lot of characteristics, preferences and motivations or vary for the same reasons [40]. The segment of ecotourism was first approached in 1965 by Hetzer in a perspective of a more ecological tourism (pre-concept of ecotourism), making observations about sustainable and responsible tourism, conferring four key factors to minimise environmental impact (concern with the environment and deterioration due to tourism), the respect for the culture of the host population, maximisation of benefits for the local population and the rise in the tourist's satisfaction degree [41]. Ecotourism was formally defined in 1987 by Hector Ceballos-Lascuráin [42–46] enhanced the value of ecotourism through cultural and environmental involvement together with the benefits for the local population. This type of tourism, considered by [39] as much more than tourism in nature, should be seen as a way of preserving resources and local development through tourism in a synergetic way. These authors added to this idea, considering that the objectives of touristic development should complement those of maintenance of the biodiversity and geodiversity and protection of natural areas. Local populations can become defenders of their resources, but the same will not work if there are costs associated with tourism, as well as restrictions on the protected areas or if the positive connections are not strong or direct [47]. Tourism is one of the biggest industries in the world and with the highest impact on people and on the environment. The unbalanced development of tourism will result in the degradation of habitats and landscapes, use up resources and generate waste and pollution. On the other hand, responsible tourism will help raise awareness and support for preservation and local culture and create economic opportunities for countries and communities, becoming relevant, as stated by [46], to promote the benefits of the ecotourism initiatives in the area of residence. Ecotourism contributes for local development and preservation of natural and cultural heritage. In conclusion, action should be based on the principle of global orientation (of non-exclusion of local population) and of the necessity of action planning [48]. The local population is important, being an active agent and creator of resources, who can make decisions and control the activities that affect their own life, even though it is considered that this participative planning model is more difficult to implement and should always be analysed in the longer run to facilitate the establishment of entrepreneurial mass and the creation/application of environmental legislation. Reference [49] confirmed the importance of tourism enterprises financing the creation of private reserves, communitarian preservation and protection of public areas, growth of local employment as well as the conjugation of two types of marketing: the main marketing which promotes proximity to nature in its wild state, excelling in luxury and comfort and preservation

marketing which promotes the sale of goods to fund preservation. Confirmation of the pertinence of preservation lies on the premise that ecotourism may help preserve or, in case it is not well applied, it may provoke negative impacts in the environment, being hence essential to have efficient planning and management (Figure 2).
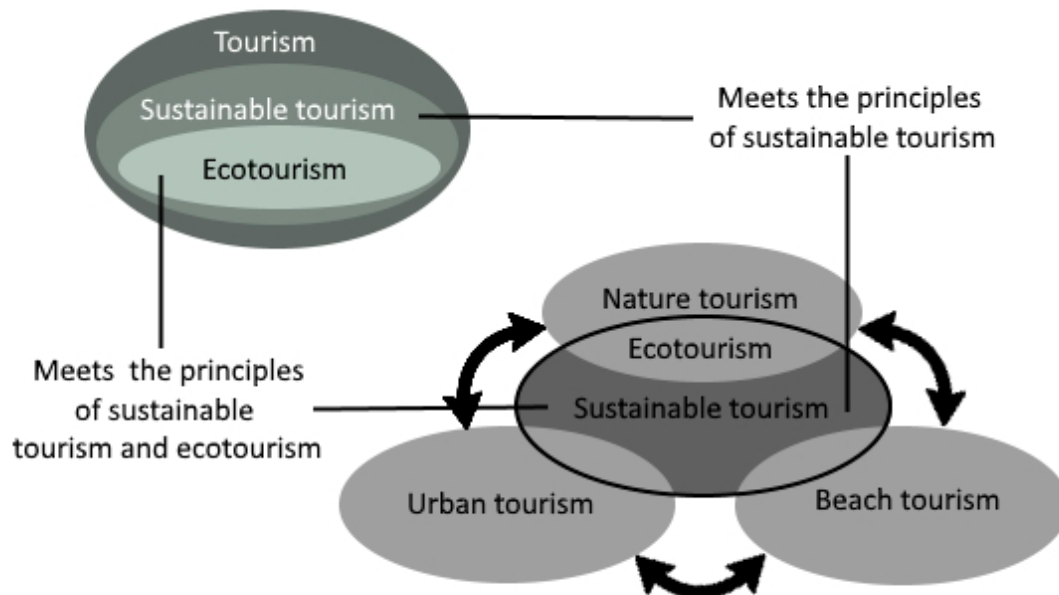
Figure 2. Relationship between ecotourism and sustainable tourism.

Ecotourism is going to continue to expand and grow in importance as it is an essential strategy for the global plan of sustainable development [50]. It is based on the fundamental principles of sustainable tourism, integrating itself in the development of this type of tourism as it is a sustainable development tool that offers long-term social, environmental and economic benefits and given the proper priority in the economic development of the country [51].

Regarding the environment, it promotes incentives for the preservation of nature, education on environmental ethics and the defence for the preservation with development within the environmental perspective. Economically, it results in the main form of obtaining profit from abroad, in the economic development balanced with the adequate distribution of revenues in local communities, in creation of job opportunities for the local population, in the construction of sustainable infrastructures and the incentive to local economy. In sociocultural terms, it results in promotion and preservation of several types of local culture, traditions, arts, music and other historical, cultural and religious heritage, in education by promoting the importance of culture and in the diversification of exchange activities in the cultural area [52].

According to [53], ecotourism should be seen as a tool connected to nature, one that helps solve conflicts of natural, economic and social development. These authors considered this the main difference between this type of tourism and generic tourism, which only promotes the economic cause. It is therefore vital working to satisfy the subsistence needs of local populations, respecting their own dynamics and their culture, so that it is possible to reach nature preservation and local development goals [48]. The development of ecotourism, as with sustainable tourism, is, in the words of [53], one of the biggest challenges of the development of the tourism sector in order to keep competitivity in what international tourism is concerned.

2.2. The Pillars and the Growth of Ecotourism

As stated by [54–56], environmental education has as a principle to raise people's awareness to their relationship with the environment, allowing its preservation for future generations and to the promotion of tourism in nature. Furthermore [46], in her analysis of the advantages of the influence

of ecotourism in local population, considered that, by having a balanced distribution of the income, there can be an improvement of local infrastructures with gains in quality of life. The acknowledgment of local worth will build up self-esteem, resulting in new opportunities, increasing education/training and job opportunities. This will then produce a rise in cohesion in the local population. The relevance of the representation of the interests and needs of the local population in politics is emphasised by [46]. However, as seen in the recent case studied by [57], measures engaging all of the local population may cause the lack of positive differentiation of minorities due to the implementation of development mechanisms that are less effective (Table 1).

Table 1. The Pillars of Ecotourism.

[43,49] [1]	[39]	[58]	[59]	[53]
Nature	Area protection	Diminish the negative footprint and preserve nature and local culture Tourist zone demarcation	Diminish physical, social, behavioural and psychological repercussions	Minimum impact on environment and nature preservation and culture, history and local traditions
Environmental education	Environmental education	Training in terms of preservation. Environmental and social based studies and monitorisation	Improve environmental, cultural awareness and respect Promote memorable interpretative experiences to the visitors, helping to raise political, environmental and social awareness of the destination	Political, environmental and public events
Sustainable management	Money management Quality tourism Local participation	Responsible business (cooperating with local authorities and people and preservation) Funds for preservation Maximisation of economic benefits for the community, region and country of destination, mainly people who live in the protected area Tourism development that does not exceed determined social and environmental limits	Positive experience for visitors and hosts Promote financial benefits for preservation and for local companies and inhabitants Project, build and manage facilities of low impact Acknowledge the rights and beliefs of indigenous people	Support to local economy through the choice of local products, support to companies and protection of local patrimony Reduction of non-renewable resources

[1] Blamey (2001) based on Ceballos-Lascuráin (1987), The Ecotourism Society (1991), Ecotourism Association of Australia (1992), National Ecotourism Strategy of Australia (1994) and Tickell (1994). Source: Authors.

Ecotourism is a type of tourism with the fastest growth, if not the fastest of the new types of tourism. The search for destinations that include natural elements as national and local parks, forests, watercourses and others is raising ([50,53,60–62]). Markets reflect more sophistication besides a change in lifestyles, attitudes, values and interests. Tourists have well-defined expectations and look for new experiences and purposes to travel based on these diverse interests and preferences [50]. Tourist destinations and operators need to be able to offer a personal experience personalised to interests of this type of tourists. The market of ecotourism is dynamic, in constant change and adaptation to the tourists' preferences and motivations, serving additionally as support for companies that promote

experiences that support the local environmental and social worth. Local and tourism destination operators should try to increase the value of their products by maximising the satisfaction of the tourists' needs.

2.3. The Profile and Specificities of the Ecotourist

The typical ecotourist comes from a developed country, female, with a high education and salary and a bit older than the average tourist [62]. The hard ecotourist has a deep area of interest, is prepared and may wish to live a basic lifestyle, with little comfort and travel in difficult circumstances for long periods in an adverse context in order to truly "experience" nature [63]. Contrarily, the soft ecotourist has a casual interest in natural attraction but wishes to experience that attraction at a more superficial level and less direct. Likewise, the soft ecotourist is less prepared to accept discomfort and physical hardship as a part of the experience and may be contented with spending a considerable amount of his time in an interpretation centre, surrounded by other tourists. Soft ecotourism may lead to mass tourism, more accessible to tourist who are neither rich, nor young or healthy.

Ecotourism has sometimes been used wrongly, camouflaging some activities as ecotourism [50]. Thus, it is difficult to obtain precise data about ecotourism. Ecotourism is often related to adventure tourism and the practice of extreme sports in a natural environment with little care for preservation or sustainable development.

Regarding [61], there is a real danger in seeing ecotourism as a universal salvation. Sometimes, there is a use of ecotourism and cultural tourism as a marketing tool that is ethically inferior [64]. When the orientation of the ecotourism project is merely economic, the goal will probably not be the development of the population [65]. There are some disadvantages that may come up in ecotourism in certain areas [66,67]. Hence, it matters to analyse a three-dimensional perspective of the disadvantages: the environmental, the economic and the sociocultural. Concerning the environment, the following may occure: indirect degradation of the vegetation; the lack of quality of life for the residents; disturbance of wildlife, soil, and air; and noise pollution. In an economic perspective, total loss of income may happen in sight of the impact costs of ecotourism, the growth of unhealthy competition and inequality among local inhabitants. In sociocultural terms, several social problems may arise, such as the less appropriate behaviour of tourists and eventually undesirable commercialisation of cultural and religious products.

Moreover, reference [46], findings, regarding negative aspects that may influence the local populations, indicate that the distribution of profit is frequently destined to a restrict number of beneficiaries, leaving aside the majority of the local population that receives a few benefits (due to the lack of money or knowledge). People who do not receive these earnings feel confused, frustrated and uninterested or disappointed with the initiative. This inequity causes disharmony and social decadence, degrading cultural traditions and the respect for the elderly. On occasion, the local population is seen as a passive agent with regard to the ecotourism project, neither participating actively nor being consulted.

According to an investigation conducted by [68] in Brazil, public organisms and tourism professionals are seen by the majority as having difficulty in the elaboration of action plans. The need of a good planning and debating among the parts involved is reinforced by [69] which, in its absence, may have traffic jams and overcrowding as a consequence, as well as the contamination of soil and water, restricted access to certain attractions for the local population, deterioration of cultural and natural heritage, inequality in the earnings among local residents and the destruction of local community structures leading to the degradation of local culture. In the words of [53], politics and marketing changes influence the development of ecotourism. Another important issue is the need for a considerable financial and political support. This political support, as stated by [70], should be positive through a larger involvement in environmental sustainable tourism, flexible decision-making in tourism areas and the environment, ensuring the continuity of development projects.

In the case presented by [7], nature tourism projects need special attention as they require an ecological and sustainable focus. They observed that fauna diminished as a result of the construction of a dam and overfishing due to the growth of tourist flow. The same study demonstrates the existence

of a major interaction among tourism, artisanal fishing and gastronomy, favouring the development in a sustainable way as well as finding solutions to repopulate the fauna in the river which will allow its ecological sustainability. Some of the factors indicated by [71], reasons for the failure for Romanian ecotourism, are the little cooperation at local level, modest international and national promotion of the product and poor infrastructures in protected areas. Further, reference [72] emphasised the relevance of an adaptive management with a wide participative approach and a transforming change which integrates the social area, the natural area and sustainable tourism, thus avoiding conflicts.

Along these lines, the present survey aimed to understand the determiners in the consumer's decision process in ecotourism contexts, as well as verify ecotourism's rising importance in tourists' search for desired experiences.

3. Methodology

The present investigation was conducted using quantitative research (i.e., survey by questionnaire, Appendix A) to analyse and understand the profile of ecotourist's behaviour. The current research sought to test the proposed conceptual model empirically, so that it could analyse the relationship between the destination image and post-purchase behaviour. Five variables were used in this research: image, quality, satisfaction, willingness to recommend and willingness to return. In the adaptation of this model, the following variables were used: destination image, purchase, experience, affectivity, satisfaction, recommend and return (Figure 3).
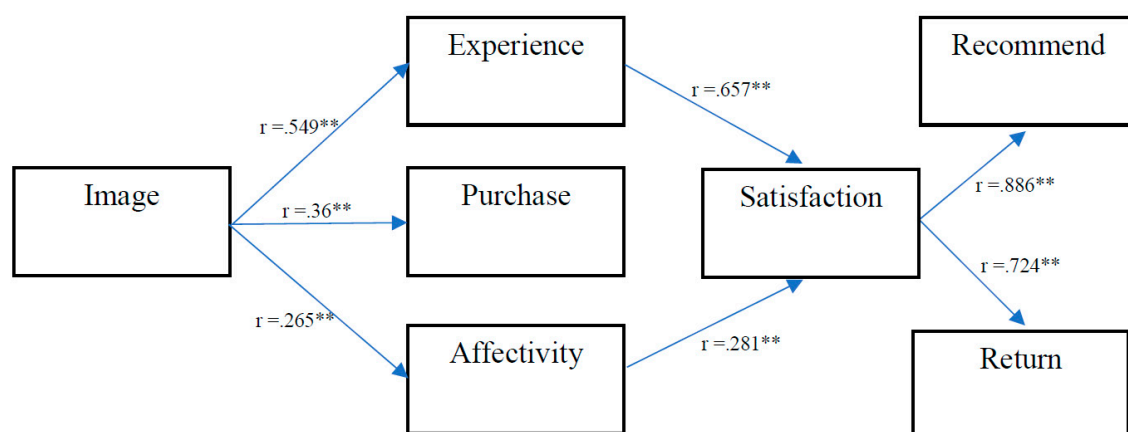
Figure 3. Final conceptual model with the correlations among the variables of the research, based on [15]. Source: Self-elaboration based on data generated by software SPSS.

The collection of surveys was conducted online using social networks (i.e., Facebook), contacting associations and groups related to ecotourism in several countries (Portugal, Brazil and Spain). A difficulty encountered throughout the research was the low willingness of the ecotourism and nature tourism-oriented hotel units to cooperate with the survey, whose conclusions would potentially be beneficial to them. The reason given was the understanding that the ecotourism target guest seeks a refuge from daily life and therefore avoid filling in any kind of surveys, even from the own hotel unit. Nevertheless, it was possible to collect 197 surveys in the period between April and August 2017, in Portugal (Porto, Lisbon, Minho, Algarve and Alentejo). The sample used is not probabilistic by convenience as it depended on the selection of the authors, who selected the population with access to social networks, namely groups interested in nature tourism and ecotourism. Using Pearson's correlation coefficient, it was possible to observe that there is a confirmation of the positive correlation among the variables put to test in the conceptual model. A direct relationship was found, although in different degrees from that hypothesised.

When analysing the variables listed in Figure 3, it was possible to conclude that the hypotheses below are supported:

Hypothesis 1. *There is a direct relationship between destination image and purchase of the offered product.*

Consistent with [73,74], the correlation is positive and weak or low in accordance with the correlation value that is of a r = 0.36; p ≤ 0.01. In other words, it is true that there is a positive variation, confirming the positive influence of the image towards the purchase (even if in a relatively reduced way). The conclusion is that the more positive the image of the hotel unit is, the higher the probability of the tourist purchasing the stay at the ecotourism hotel unit. As such, it was confirmed what [15] defended in considering that the image influences the tourist's behaviour. Through this research, it was confirmed that the ecotourist is a type of tourist who is more independent, who will research and assess, just as verified earlier, the different images of the hotel units which should have special attention in terms of digital marketing as it is the most used mechanism to learn about a hotel unit.

Hypothesis 2. *There is a direct relationship between image and experience.*

There is a positive correlation and moderately stronger than the previous. This allowed the confirmation that the image has more influence in the tourist's experience as the result of the visit/stay in the hotel unit.

A better and more elaborated image of the hotel unit results in a better experience for the tourist, in accordance with [15], who considered that the destination image results in the perception of quality and degree of satisfaction with the experience. In addition, what [11] defended is reinforced, as they considered that the image should stand out as being real and that the tourist on his own will tend to decide based on the own image he intends to be real.

Hypothesis 3. *There is a direct relationship between image and affectivity by the tourist in destination choice.*

It is possible to observe a reduced or weak positive correlation. In face of this value, the image has a positive influence but at a low level on the tourist's affectivity towards the hotel unit that is related to ecotourism. Along with what is defended by [14,27,75], it is considered that the phenomenon of globalisation weakens place attachment. It is true that the better the image of the hotel unit is, the larger is the feeling of affectivity developed. In a less linear way (in the particular case of ecotourism), it confirmws what [11] defended that image causes the tourist to develop affection.

Hypothesis 4. *There is a direct relationship between experience and the degree of the tourist's satisfaction.*

There is a strong positive linear relationship between the experience variable and the satisfaction variable (r = 0.657; p ≤ 0.01), considering there is a solid correlation in accordance with [73,74]. Observing a relationship between Hypotheses 2 and 4, that is, the indirect relationship between the image variable and the satisfaction variable, not a part of the proposed model, it was possible to see that the value resulting from the correlation (r = 0.59; p ≤ 0.01) is close to the correlation value between the image and experience variables, hence showing that the moderate/strong influence of the image in satisfaction is consistent with [73]. It confirmed that the better the tourist's experience is, the higher the degree of satisfaction is, which gives strength to the research performed by [76], who believed that there should be a special care in terms of promoting an exceptional experience to the tourist and therefore providing a good degree of satisfaction which will represent behavioural reactions of affection, recommendation and return.

As stated above, an indirect relationship was found in this research between image and degree of satisfaction, which strengthens [30] findings, for whom destination image influences the levels of satisfaction related to the touristic experience.

Hypothesis 5. *There is a direct relationship between affectivity towards tourist destination and degree of satisfaction.*

The value of Pearson's correlation coefficient was the second lowest of all correlations (r = 0.281; p ≤ 0.01) along with Hypothesis 3, which refers to the relationship between the image and affectivity variables (r = 0.265; p ≤ 0.01). In fact, according to these values, strong affective bonds on the tourist's part towards the hotel unit are not created, which can be motivated by several factors. The reason may lie on being a new experience and therefore there is not an affective connection or, on the other hand, the hotel units themselves are recent and thus they have an initial difficulty to create affective bonds. Besides, it was possible to attain that most interviewed tourists can be called soft tourists [63]. Although eager to contact nature, these tourists would rather have a less direct contact and thus they easily become tourists of another type. Not forgetting that the ecotourism offer for hard tourism is basically inexistent in the Portuguese context, it is a strong reason for not having found in research any fans of hard or heavy ecotourism.

However, in a less accentuated degree, it is true that the bigger the feeling of affectivity, the bigger the tourist's feeling of satisfaction. Affectivity, although at a less intense rate, was proved to promote the degree of satisfaction, as stated by [77], being that positive emotions promote place attachment and loyalty.

Hypothesis 6 and 7. *There is a direct relationship between degree of satisfaction and being willing to recommend/return to the tourist destination.*

There is a linear relationship between the tourist's degree of satisfaction and the will to recommend the hotel unit, that is, there is a very strong positive correlation between the two variables (r = 0.886; p ≤ 0.01). Verified is the strong correlation between the degree of satisfaction and the will to return to the hotel unit (r = 0.724; p ≤ 0.01).

The larger the degree of satisfaction is, the bigger the loyalty will be, be it to recommend or to return. With such result, the focus is on the importance of the levels of satisfaction to have a solid basis for loyalty, as stated by [14]. After this research, it was possible to test empirically the proposed conceptual model as all of the formulated hypotheses were scientifically corroborated.

4. Analysis and Discussion of Results

Economic aspects have always been the orientation focus for entrepreneurs generally speaking. Only around the 1970s, based on [78], did an ecological awareness come to light since, due to certain excess, certain illnesses appeared. The use of natural resources is so high and growing that the environment does not have the time to renew them and, in accordance with [79], if there is no change, demand will be so high that in 2030 the resources equivalent to two Earths would be necessary.

Sustainability must be looked at as a vital need for society in general, as well as for the tourism sector. In this perspective, the type of tourism that is better oriented for this sustainability is ecotourism. Ecotourism is the natural evolution of tourism with care for the environment, culture and local traditions, while promoting environmental education. This survey reinforces the importance of creating, shaping, caring, modernising and keeping a destination image that is developed, consistent with [34], before, during and after enjoying the touristic experience and it should excel in reality, as stated by [11], to promote satisfaction, attachment and loyalty, so that the tourist can develop affection for that destination. This type of influence promotes action on the tourist's part [80].

Conscious of the growing importance of Ecotourism in world tourism, this research aimed to promote the study of the profile of the tourist who looks for an experience in this type of tourism and his motivations. The results reveal that he is a middle-aged tourist (25–54 years old), who is a graduate or has a master's degree, with a medium/high income and who values being close to nature and leisure. It is usually a tourist who travels with his family, with or without his children and who has never stayed in the hotel unit before. He appears to be autonomous and to value travel advice from friends and relatives. Most book directly or through the Internet, namely through the website Booking.com This tourist usually travels more than twice a year and his stays last for about 3–7 days.

Regarding the relationships between variables, the image fosters a better experience, boosting the tourist's satisfaction. The fact the influence of the image is low though positive may be linked to one of two factors: the concept is recent or the need for the hotel units being more careful when managing their own image and adapting it to the ecotourism target guest. Image nurtures a positive relationship with affectivity but at a relatively low level, in agreement with [25] who considered that the development of the feeling of attachment and affectivity is a consequence of natural resources and the history of the place which develop all of these feelings. This author reinforced again the importance of preservation and promotion of culture and tradition of the local population which is only possible with its involvement. If the image does not stimulate a strong feeling of attachment and belonging, this affectivity may promote satisfaction, but not as it would be when it is well worked. In this analysis, it is made certain the significance of satisfaction in promoting the recommendation and revisit and the development of the feeling of loyalty towards the tourist destination.

This tourist is a soft ecotourist, wishing to have a superficial contact with nature, cherishing the proximity to nature, a good price/quality relationship and the search for leisure and relaxation. Through a quantitative approach, the developed empirical research permitted the verification of the authenticity of the formulated hypotheses in the proposed conceptual model. The concept of ecotourism is so broad that other types of tourism may turn into ecotourism hotel units, so long as they respect its principles. Future trends will converge different types of tourism in sustainable tourism, involved with local population and environmental care. Nonetheless, this type of tourism is different from nature tourism. Ecotourism pays extra attention to increasingly more fundamental aspects such as nature, environmental education and sustainable management with preservation and promotion of the local culture and traditions, with the precious involvement of the local population.

Companies and hotels should be careful to avoid the tendency of the economic perspective overlapping sustainability and nature preservation. On the other hand, it is perfectly understandable that Portugal's natural wealth reveals potential that can and should be used for tourism, but that is often undermined and put in lower level because of economic reasons, thus endangering fauna and flora in the region. A current example is the hydroelectric construction at the mouth of River Tua or the replacement of the autochthonous forest by eucalyptus that make it easy for fire to spread, destroying the local fauna and flora and endangering native species. Therefore, the Portuguese State will have a fundamental role in regulation to avoid the abusive use of the name ecotourism in naming touristic holdings that are located near nature but without any ecotourism attributes, as well as the protection of the biggest wealth Portugal holds though it is tendentially put in second place (to the advantage of "over tourism" of cities with a larger population density or natural places are wearing out due to seasonal excessive population as it is the case of Portugal's coast). [81] emphasised the importance of regulation to mediate the development of tourism and maintenance and preservation of protected natural areas.

This strategy would be fundamental for the enforcement of regulations to be defined in terms of ecotourism and additionally it would a form of thriving new projects in the Portuguese territory and to attract tourists to visit the country in this segment of tourism. Sustainability is as relevant for society nowadays as it is for tourism, becoming ecotourism an important stepping stone for the change of perspective for the development of tourism and of the areas that otherwise would continue to suffer from the phenomenon of desertification. As a complement, the Portuguese State can and should support and monitor projects that follow all ecotourism proceedings and, in this manner, accomplish a larger and better nature preservation (2017 was an example of the opposite in Portugal) and solve a problem with deep roots in Portugal that is the desertification of the interior of Portugal. Stakeholders should accompany the evolution of the market itself, not only in the tendency of a more sustainable tourism, but also the tendency of the tourist becoming more independent, not needing a third party to know hotel units and to make his own reservation. Named by [38], this tourist is typically a long tail tourist seeking quality and not quantity. There is also the evolution of marketing to a marketing that is oriented to new technologies, the digital marketing, bringing hotel units closer to tourists, making it

possible to establish affective ties that are more continuous and lasting but that makes demand a closer follow up.

5. Conclusions, Limitations and Next Steps for Research

The evolution of tourism includes sustainable tourism and ecotourism, the same way that evolution in marketing includes digital marketing. It is a marketing positioned to inbound marketing, drawing attention through appealing digital content for the tourist and promoting engagement, generating a larger bond between hotel units and the tourists, fostering and enhancing a closer proximity between guests and the company. There is also a focus on the rising importance of a cared for destination image, vital for the success of every hotel unit in the different types of tourism, special relevance given to ecotourism. Even though ecotourism is a 30-year-old topic, in Portugal, it is a theme that coincides with the awareness of sustainability as an outcome of these factors, given that many projects are still in a stage of exploration of the touristic product, as referred to by [82]. Concerning the research, there is still a pertinent fact that can be a synonym for the lack of affectivity in the relationship between the hotel unit and ecotourists that are the relatively short periods of stay (from two or three to seven days, corresponding to 79.19% of the enquired). In their turn, hotel units should improve the creation of an affective tie with the tourists, as it involves a multidimensional construct according to [20] and establishes an affective bond between people and places [83], adding a new dimension that is a process (a psychological component made of affections, cognition and behaviour related to attachment) [14]. To develop a feeling of attachment and a feeling of belonging and purpose of life, as [25] stated, it is necessary to have a base for natural resources and also the history of the location itself. It means that there should be a special care in place history and not only implementing a unit that respects the pillars of ecotourism. Under a different perspective, [80] supported the importance of interacting with the local population as a motivation factor, as observed in the results of the experience variable. Consistently, [40] referred to the need to customise the experience, adapted to the interests of this type of tourist. Seeing the importance of the natural resources in Portugal, the mistakes made in 2017 should be analysed, as it was the worst year ever regarding the burnt area, as stated by [84], considering the European Forest Fire Information System (EFFIS) in the period of reference from 1 January 2017 to 17 October. In addition, it represents 60% of the burnt area in all of Europe. It is urgent for serious measures to be taken into action to rectify this calamity that struck one of Portugal's biggest riches and the foundation of nature tourism and ecotourism. The present research recognised the difficulty in finding cooperation with the hotel units in terms of the collection of quantitative data, leading to the use of other forms of obtaining the results. As next steps, it is advisable that hotel units come to realise the pertinence of such research, as they are the main beneficiaries of these initiatives, being then recommended that they collaborate with the possibility of completing surveys. In the future, it is proposed that an accurate survey of the main ecotourism hotel units and the hardship toward the establishment of affectivity be conducted and, by doing so, try to identify the most exact changes to improve the performance of satisfaction through affectivity.

Author Contributions: Investigation, P.R.; Supervision, B.B.S.; Writing—review & editing, L.R. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Appendix A

I –Context of Visit
1. The stay/visit to this hotel unit **is due to motives** such a**s**:
(Please, put x in the **option (or options)** that best describes your situation)

   2.　**Did you make this visit**: Alone □　　Couple □　　Couple + children □　　Other □ (**me + ____(nº) people**)

   3.　**Have you already visited hotel unit?** Yes □　　No □

   3.1.　**How did you first hear of this hotel unit?**

Agent/Tourist Operator □　　Friends/Relatives □　　Television □　　Internet □ Magazines/Newspapers □

Brochures and travel guides □　　Tourism fairs □　　Twitter □　　Other □　　Which? _____

   3.2.　**How did you reserve your stay?**

Agent/Tourist Operator □　　Booking □　　TripAdvisor □　　Directly □　　Other □　　Which? _____

   3.3.　Consider your **choice**. Put in the option that best describes your opinion (**for each one**), in a scale of 5 points. The values vary from **"1 = I fully disagree"** to **"5 = I fully agree"**

You seek refuge from the stress of daily life	1	2	3	4	5
The choice of location is due to the proximity to nature	1	2	3	4	5
You seek physical activities in nature	1	2	3	4	5
You are concerned with environmental issues	1	2	3	4	5

   4.　**How often do you travel?**

Twice/year □　　Once/year □　　More than twice/year □　　Less than once/year □

   5.　**How long is your stay?**

1 day □　　2 days □　　From 3 days to 7 days □　　From 1 to 2 weeks □　　Over 2 weeks □

   6.　Please, classify according to the degree **of importance** the following **topics**, considering the influence they had in your decision to visit/stay. Put in the option that best describes your opinion (**for each one**), in a scale of 5 points. The values vary from **"1 = Not Important"** to **"5 = Extremely Important"**, where:

1 = Not Important 2 = Not Very Important 3 = Important 4 = Very Important 5 = Extremely Important

Contact with Nature	1	2	3	4	5
Interest in culture and local traditions	1	2	3	4	5
Gastronomy	1	2	3	4	5
Security and hospitality	1	2	3	4	5
Environmental education	1	2	3	4	5
Sustainable Tourism (preserving nature and promoting social and economic benefits for the local population)	1	2	3	4	5
Challenge/physical exercise	1	2	3	4	5
Affordable Price	1	2	3	4	5
Quality of service in the hotel unit	1	2	3	4	5
Location	1	2	3	4	5

   7.　Please, show **how much you agree** with the following statements, assessing the **image** you have in relation to the hotel unit. Put in the option that best describes your opinion (**for each one**), in a scale of 5 points. The values vary from **"1 = I fully disagree"** to **"5 = I fully agree"**, where:

The decision of purchase was due to the perceived image	1	2	3	4	5
The real image reflects the expectations you had about the hotel unit	1	2	3	4	5
The image is equal or superior to other ecotourism hotel units	1	2	3	4	5
This unit has a distinct image	1	2	3	4	5
The information you received at the time of purchase corresponds to the experience you had.	1	2	3	4	5

   8.　Consider the present experience. Put in the option that best describes your opinion (**for each one**), in a scale of 5 points. The values vary from **"1 = I fully disagree"** to **"5 = I fully agree"**

You feel there is care in the preservation and maintenance of nature	1	2	3	4	5
You recognize there is care with culture and local traditions	1	2	3	4	5
In this place, environmental education is transmitted along with environmental, political and social awareness	1	2	3	4	5
You check the promotion of local products	1	2	3	4	5
You noticed involvement in the performed leisure and recreation activities.	1	2	3	4	5

9. Consider **your satisfaction**. Put in the option that best describes your opinion (**for each one**), in a scale of 5 points. The values vary from **"1 = I fully disagree"** to **"5 = I fully agree"**

You consider this was a positive and satisfactory experience.

You consider this was a positive and satisfactory experience.	1	2	3	4	5
You recommend this unit to friends, relatives and acquaintances.	1	2	3	4	5
You will keep a positive opinion about this unit.	1	2	3	4	5
You think you will return to this unit.	1	2	3	4	5

10. Please, show **how much you agree** with the following statements, according to your feelings concerning ecotourism. Put in the option that best describes your opinion (**for each one**), in a scale of 5 points. The values vary from **"1 = I fully disagree"** to **"5 = I fully agree"**, where:

The offer in contexts of ecotourism means a lot to you	1	2	3	4	5
You are very connected to ecotourism and its touristic offer	1	2	3	4	5
You strongly relate to ecotourism	1	2	3	4	5
Ecotourism characteristic lifestyle is what attracted you here	1	2	3	4	5

11. Select **the factor,** with a in the options you consider more relevant in the **choice of a hotel unit:**

Landscape/Natural attraction	☐	Resting/relaxing	☐
Cost/price range	☐	Familiar environment/exotic	☐
Climate	☐	Opportunity for ad	☐
Touristic locations/	☐	Increase in knowledge	☐
Night life and entertainment	☐	Oriented for the far	☐
Infrastructures/spo	☐	Quality of service	☐
National parks/Activities in nature	☐	Fame/reputation	☐

12. Demographic Data:

(a) Gender: Male ☐　　　Female ☐

(b) Nationality: _____

(c) Age: 18–24 years ☐　　25–34 years ☐　　35–44 years ☐　　45–54 years ☐　　55–64 years ☐ 65 years or over ☐

(d) Country of residence: _____

(e) City of residence: _____

(f) Education:

Primary Education ☐　　Secondary Education ☐　　University Degree ☐　　Masters ☐　　PhD ☐ Postdoctoral ☐

(g) Occupation: Employed ☐　　Student ☐　　Retired ☐　　Unemployed ☐

End of Questionnaire.

I am grateful for your concern for the environment and for your precious participation for the development of this study.

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