

# A CONCEPTUAL REPRESENTATION OF THE SEMANTIC FIELDS OF RESPONSIBLE TOURISM: IMPLICATIONS FOR MARKETING

## KONCEPTUALNI PRIKAZ SEMANTIČKIH POLJA ODGOVORNOG TURIZMA: IMPLIKACIJE ZA MARKETING

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### Abstract

**Purpose** – Sustainable tourism activities have generated a large amount of research to understand responsible behavior. Scholars have provided multiple definitions, although the meaning of different terms for tourists has rarely been investigated. The objective of this research study is to reveal what the tourist understands by responsible tourism, comparing it with similar concepts and identifying semantic fields that allow a differentiation on the part of the latter.

**Design/Methodology/Approach** – Focus groups consisting of socio-demographically varied individuals have been developed to probe for similarities and differences between the groups. The results show that the associated meanings are not equivalent, and that the meanings can be categorized along an axis represented by the individual versus the institutional dimension, and another with a social dimension versus the destination as “environment”.

**Findings and implications** – The concepts of responsible, sustainable, ecological, and environmental tourism can be defined comparatively. The perceived differences offer clues about the concept and about who should be

### Sažetak

**Svrha** – Aktivnosti održivoga turizma dovele su do velikog broja istraživanja kako bi se razumjelo odgovorno ponašanje. Znanstvenici su dali više definicija iako je značenje različitih pojmova za turiste rijetko istraživano. Cilj istraživanja jest otkriti što turist podrazumijeva pod odgovornim turizmom uspoređujući ga sa sličnim konceptima i identificirajući semantička polja koja dopuštaju njegovo razlikovanje.

**Metodološki pristup** – Kako bi se otkrilo postoje li sličnosti i razlike između skupina korištene su fokus grupe s pojedincima koji pripadaju različitim sociodemografskim skupinama. Rezultati pokazuju da pridružena značenja nisu ekvivalentna i da se mogu kategorizirati duž osi na kojoj se nalaze dimenzija pojedinac nasuprot institucionalna dimenzija, te drugoj s društvenom dimenzijom nasuprot dimenziji destinacija kao “okoliš”.

**Rezultati i implikacije** – Koncepti odgovornog, održivog, ekološkog i okolišnog turizma mogu se usporedno definirati. Percipirane razlike nude naznake o konceptu i o tome tko bi trebao biti odgovoran za razvoj održivih aktivnosti. Konačno, analiza diskursa omogućuje dobivanje smjernica o marketinškim akcijama usmjerenim na

responsible for developing sustainable actions. Finally, the analysis of the discourses allows obtaining guidelines on marketing actions aimed at promoting sustainable behaviors and communicating the value of sustainability by companies and organizations.

**Limitations** – The main limitation of this research study is that the sample that integrates the discussion groups may not be large enough to be representative, with the intervention time of all attendees possibly not being balanced, as well as the bias of the moderator directing the groups.

**Originality** – The study provides information on what tourists understand by responsible tourism and other related meanings, based on a demographically balanced sample of the Spanish population.

**Keywords:** responsible tourism, semantic differentiation, tourist motivations, marketing actions.

promicanje održivog ponašanja i komuniciranje vrijednosti održivosti poduzeća i organizacija.

**Ograničenja** – Glavno je ograničenje da uzorak koji uključuje fokus grupe možda neće biti dovoljno velik da bude reprezentativan, vrijeme sudjelovanja svih sudionika možda nije podjednako i pristranost moderatora grupe.

**Doprinos** – Istraživanje pruža informacije o tome što turisti podrazumijevaju pod odgovornim turizmom i drugim povezanim značenjima pružajući demografski uravnotežen uzorak španjolskog stanovništva.

**Ključne riječi:** održivi turizam, semantička diferencijacija, motivacija turista, marketinške akcije

## 1. DEFINITION AND CHARACTERISTICS OF THE TERM RESPONSIBLE TOURISM

As background information, mention can be made of the Earth Summit held in Rio de Janeiro in 1992, where the term Responsible Tourism was used for the first time with the meaning of protection and development of local communities, conservation of the environment, and the economic future for local inhabitants, based on an alternative, responsible, and sustainable service of natural resources for their application in tourism, implying the recovery of these areas and avoiding their depopulation (Smith & Eadington, 1992). According to Perelli (1997), tourism has the potential to become a way of getting to know places, cultures, and traditions without destroying local resources but rather embracing hospitality and respect for diversity.

This is not only a type of tourism but also part of a social movement whose main values are solidarity and the search for a less invasive and mass tourism. For all these reasons, this type of tourist places great importance on discovering these values in a leisurely manner, without the accelerated pace of mass tourism, and recognizes in this slowness a great value for their experience (Lumsdon & McGrath, 2011; Dickinson & Lumsdon, 2010).

This kind of tourism seeks to embody and apply the concepts of sustainability in tourism experiences. As explained in the General Guidelines of Spain's Sustainable Tourism Strategy 2030, "it is necessary to manage tourism as an engine of economic and social development, and to ensure that the wealth, benefits and also the burdens generated by tourism are distributed more equitably throughout the territory and in all sectors of the population." In addition, these Guidelines indicate that sustainable tourism management of the areas of high natural and cultural value contributes to the diversification of Spain's tourism offer, the enjoyment and profitability of heritage, and the creation of socially

and environmentally sustainable value chains (Spanish Ministry of Industry, Trade and Tourism of Spain, n.d.).

The full use of technological capabilities in favor of more sustainable tourism management in destinations should be encouraged and thus accelerate the digital transformation of the tourism sector.

Another way to understand the concept of responsible tourism is to understand all the activities that are part of it (Del Chiappa & Lorenzo-Romero, 2014):

- purchase of typical and local products;
- buying original products;
- being in contact with the real life of the destination;
- looking for products that represent the authenticity of the place;
- protection of the historical and archaeological sites of the destination;
- being in touch with the traditions and culture of the local community;
- favoring accommodation and restaurants where local people are employed;
- preserving the authenticity of the destination;
- limiting the use of natural resources.

Most academic studies show that, despite green attitudes, environmental concerns remain low in tourists' consumption priorities. However, in terms of tourism businesses adopting sustainable tourism principles, there have been improvements (Saarinen, 2014).

One way to classify responsible tourists is by measuring their sense of responsibility. Responsible tourists have a strong sense of responsibility; they are aware that the environment can be damaged by most types of tourism development (including ecotourism) and are against tourism development. In contrast, responsible tourists with a weak sense of responsibility see

humans and nature as equals or humans as being higher in the hierarchy; therefore, they embrace most types of sustainable tourism development (Choi, Doh, Park & Chon, 2017).

Other terms that are part of the concept of Responsible Tourism include Sustainable Tourism, Green Tourism, Environmental Tourism, and Ecotourism.

The concept of Sustainable Tourism, first described in the Brundtland Report (World Commission on Environment and Development, 1987), has gained relevance on the agenda of advanced countries and international organizations. Over the years, it has been adopted by a growing number of businesses, both large and small (Redclift, 2005). However, it has been observed that it is often confused with terms such as ecotourism or green tourism (Pulido, 2011), being mainly associated with environmental issues (Lim & Cooper, 2009). It is important to note that to achieve sustainability in tourism it is necessary to work on economic, social, environmental, and institutional areas (Pulido-Fernández & López-Sánchez, 2011). In this sense, sustainability implies a transformation of the economy, ecology, and ethics, with the aim of changing people's attitudes towards the biosphere, social redistribution, and cultural diversity (Pulido, 2011).

Green Tourism is defined as an alternative form of tourism that promotes respect for the environment, the protection of native flora and fauna, the preservation of the local inhabitants' way of life, and the promotion of their cultural heritage (Torre, Hidalgo & Arjona-Fuentes, 2012). Additionally, it seeks to use non-polluting means of transportation and proposes activities that do not harm the natural environment or its inhabitants, such as hiking, biking routes, and cultural guides (Torre et al., 2012). Deery and Jago (2007) point out that green tourism integrates economic, social, and environmental aspects in its development, with a focus on long-term sustainability, climate change mitigation, biodiversity conservation, and support for local communities. In addition, green tourism

promotes local culture and sustainable development of communities.

Environmental Tourism focuses on the protection of the environment and cooperation with local communities, reconciling tourism development with the conservation of natural and cultural resources, promoting environmental education and community participation (Honey, 2008). It also seeks to promote appreciation for nature and local culture, raise awareness about the importance of preserving the natural environment, thus having a positive impact on the local economy and the well-being of local communities (Prideaux & Pabel, 2018). Environmental tourism involves traveling in a responsible and sustainable way to learn about and enjoy nature, contributing to its conservation and protection in natural spaces, such as national parks and nature reserves, with respect for the environment and local communities (Rivera Mateos & Rodríguez García, 2012). Authors including Mowforth, Charlton, and Munt (2007) emphasize that environmental tourism seeks harmonious interaction between tourism and the environment to minimize negative impacts and maximize benefits for the natural environment and local communities. Within a responsible tourism approach, environmental tourism involves adopting sustainable and environmentally friendly practices, such as the use of renewable energies, proper waste management, biodiversity protection, and the active participation of tourists in the conservation of the natural environments they visit (Honey, 2008).

Ecotourism is a form of tourism that promotes the conservation of the environment and respect for biodiversity, involving visits to protected natural areas, responsible outdoor activities, support for the local economy, and raising awareness about the importance of conservation of the natural environment (Hussain, 2022). Jareño (2020) highlights the importance of ecotourism as a sustainable alternative that contributes to local and regional development, promoting environmental education and community participation. According to authors

Samal and Dash (2023) and Ceballos Lascuráin (1996), ecotourism focuses on the conservation of natural ecosystems and biodiversity, promoting respect for nature and encouraging sustainable practices to preserve the environment. Each form of tourism has its own characteristics and objectives, offering a variety of experiences to travelers.

## 2. MOTIVATIONS TOWARDS RESPONSIBLE TOURISM

From a qualitative analysis perspective, as Hummelbrunner and Miglbauer (1994) outlined as early as in the 1990s, cultural trends are reorienting tourists' choices. These trends include: (a) a growing environmental awareness; (b) individualization and openness to new experiences; (c) an emerging call for highly original and tailor-made travel experiences; and (d) a growing desire to participate in and integrate with a local lifestyle.

A major motive for implementing and spreading such tourism on a larger scale is to fight against inequalities in societies, specifically also those between rich and poor countries, as the latter do not get fair benefits in social and economic terms from today's mass tourism (Rivera Mateos & Rodríguez García, 2012). Tourists seem particularly attracted to differentiation and the search for distinctiveness (Baudrillard, 1974), as embodied in the rural context and search for deep experiential value (Pine & Gilmore, 1999), to authenticity (Lindholm, 2008), contemplative pleasure (Dickinson & Lumsdon, 2010), and responsibility (Goodwin & Francis, 2003).

Tourists' preferences nowadays veer toward an experience that includes not only entertainment, but also culture, and social interaction. They are looking for ways to escape, discover, and connect with local people (De Rojas & Camarero, 2006). This type of tourist enjoys, above all, interacting with local people and developing experiences that do not make them feel like a regular consumer tourist (Cohen, 2005). From a quantitative analysis perspective, early research

studies of residents' attitudes to tourism with a focus on "tourism impact" generally included several questionnaire items related to various types of previously documented impacts (Liu & Var, 1986) or those focused specifically on social or environmental impacts (Jurowski, Uysal & Williams, 1997).

Most studies have shown that residents who depend on the tourism industry or perceive it to bring a higher level of economic gain tend to have a more positive perception of the economic impact of tourism than other residents in terms of employment opportunities, personal income, tax revenues, and standard of living (Deccio & Baloglu, 2002). The shift in focus toward the importance of the subjective in consumption conflicts with the critical realist perspective of object significance that continues to influence many consumer studies (Holt, 1995). But if one accepts the postmodern shift of emphasis from the objective to the subjective, then what counts as reality can never be seen objectively; therefore, it is accepted that the world is socially constructed (Thomas, 1997).

Tourists become increasingly aware of the importance of protecting the environment and are seeking destinations and activities that minimize their environmental impact, according to a study by Gomes and Lopes (2023). Additionally, many tourists seek experiences that allow them to learn about and respect local culture, thus avoiding overexploitation and loss of cultural identity in the communities they visit (Rivera-Mateos & Doumet-Chilán, 2021). On the other hand, according to Pérez Vilaplana (2021), tourists seek authentic experiences and contact with nature, preferring destinations and activities that allow them to experience the true essence of the place visited.

Different studies have identified various factors that drive tourists to engage in responsible tourism. Rivera-Mateos and Doumet-Chilán (2021) emphasize environmental awareness, social awareness, perception of personal benefits, and trust in the credibility of responsible tourism organizations as some of the main motivators.

In addition, Lozada-Arías, Sandra-Mariela, Oña-Chiguano, and Anchatuña-Otacoma (2021) highlight the importance of education and information in tourists' choice of this tourism mode.

According to a study by Huertas Cardozo (2016), environmental awareness, the pursuit of authentic experiences, and concern for the well-being of local communities are key factors that drive tourists to opt for responsible tourism. All these authors also emphasize the influence of information, education, socio-economic factors, and demographics on travelers' decisions in this area.

Furthermore, Rivera-Mateos and Doumet-Chilán (2021) outline environmental awareness and social responsibility as determining factors in the choice of destinations and tourism activities by travelers. As tourists seek to minimize their negative impact on the environment and contribute to the sustainable development of the communities they visit, these aspects become increasingly relevant in their decisions (Gomes & Lopes, 2023). Therefore, environmental awareness, the pursuit of authentic experiences, concern for the well-being of local communities, information, and education, as well as social responsibility and sustainable development, are key determinants that influence tourists' choice of responsible tourism (Rivera-Mateos & Doumet-Chilán, 2021).

### 3. RESEARCH OBJECTIVES AND PROPOSALS

As regards the objectives of this research and based on the previous literature consulted, it is concluded that the Responsible Tourism and Sustainability concept has gained major relevance in society, as more and more people are aware of the importance of protecting the environment and local communities when traveling. However, tourists lack knowledge about what it really means to be a responsible and sustainable traveler, especially on account of their age. Therefore, as the first objective, it is essential to delve into the knowledge that tourists

have about this concept, analyzing how it varies depending on their age group and what factors influence their tourist behavior.

As the second objective, it is crucial to identify which elements explain the responsible and sustainable behavior of tourists, as well as the possible disadvantages or advantages of adopting such behavior. What actions make people environmentally responsible during their travels? The third objective of this study is to establish corrective measures based on the results obtained to promote a more responsible and sustainable tourism, increasing individuals' awareness, and promoting tourist practices that contribute to caring for the planet and to the sustainable development of local communities.

To achieve these objectives, a qualitative study was carried out to obtain information on what individuals think about the concepts of responsible tourism and sustainability, as well as on the tourist behavior associated with these terms. Thus, emphasis is placed on the types of behavior that a responsible and sustainable tourist should embrace when traveling. Therefore, to achieve the proposed objectives, the following actions are proposed:

- a) inquiry into what is meant by sustainable tourism in general and responsible tourism in particular;
- b) investigating the factors that explain and influence responsible and sustainable behavior and whether they put it into practice during their tourism trips;
- c) determining the actions that make subjects more or less "environmentally responsible" when they are in their tourist destinations;
- d) analysis of the elements that could be considered as stimuli or brakes towards sustainable and responsible behavior;
- e) establishing guidelines and corrective measures, aimed at making tourist behavior more responsible and sustainable, in order to promote greater awareness of tourist travel activity.

## 4. METHODOLOGY

Based on these research objectives and proposals, qualitative research using focus groups was carried out, according to the criteria shown in Table 1.

TABLE 1: Distribution of the focus groups

Focus Group	Group 1	Group 2	Group 3
Sample	8	8	8
Age	18-40	41-60	older than 60
Duration of the session	2 h 15 min	1 h 55 min	2 h 00 min
Social background	middle class		
Gender	balanced groups (50% male / 50% female)		

Three group meetings were held with different age groups to discuss the theme of rural tourism on a national scale in hotels or rural houses.

First, participants were segmented by age groups, with eight people in each meeting. The first meeting included participants aged 18 to 40, the second those 41 to 60 years of age, and the third those aged 61 to 80. Such segmentation allows for different perspectives and experiences related to the researched topic.

Regarding the social profile of the participants, it was established that they belong to the middle-middle social class, with an equal distribution in terms of gender and having children in the age groups of 41-60 and 61-80 year-olds. All participants were engaged in economic activities, which may influence their experiences and perceptions regarding rural tourism.

In terms of the consumption profile, there is a bias in which all participants are considered to have taken at least two rural tourism trips on a national scale in the last year, staying in hotels or rural houses. This bias allows the discussion to

focus on specific and recent experiences related to rural tourism.

The meetings were moderated with the aim of encouraging and promoting the free spontaneous expression of speech, meaning that participants can freely express their opinions and experiences. If some relevant issues were not addressed spontaneously, actions were taken and questions raised to promote reflection and debate on those issues.

The duration of focus group meetings was approximately two hours, allowing for a deep dive into the researched topic and facilitating active participation from all involved. The meetings were held in the capital Madrid, which could have influenced the perspectives and experiences of the participants regarding rural tourism on a national scale.

Therefore, this qualitative methodology using discussion groups applied in the research through interaction and debate among participants with specific characteristics in terms of age, social profile, and consumption resulted in different points of view and experiences related to rural tourism in Spain. The segmentation by age groups and active moderation of the meetings facilitated the extraction of relevant information and the generation of knowledge on the researched topic.

## 5. RESULTS

The research results are classified according to the three main objectives proposed.

**With regard to deepening tourists' knowledge of the concept of Responsible Tourism and Sustainability, according to the age group of focus group participants, associated with action a).**

The development of this concept makes it possible to address the hypotheses put forward at the end of chapter 2, on how this type of tourism and its characteristics are valued and considered by tourists when deciding to engage

in this type of tourism. Responsible Tourism is structured around four main aspects: the individual, institutional, social, and tourist destination (physical and cultural environment).

The individual-institutional axis integrates the “behavioral” elements attributed to individuals as tourists, as well as the institutional aspects (the offer). This same axis is used to establish the positioning of the concepts of responsible tourism and sustainable tourism. The tourist environment is related to the institutional dimension in different ways, such as the regulation of access and the conservation of certain spaces (natural parks, etc.). Environmental behavior appears to be associated with the restrictive, for example restricting environmental behavior in the individual sphere, or in a model of responsible tourism (the institutional), which implies limiting access or restricting the physical development of the tourist industry.

**Responsible Tourism:** For most respondents it represents a new concept, which they have never heard of before (41-60 age group). They place their action above all in the individual dimension, and their main value is the protection and care of the environment (18-40 age group). Undoubtedly, one of the most widespread meanings in the groups in relation to the concept of responsible tourism is the idea of not altering the physical-biological environment (41-60 age group) and socio-cultural environment (18-40 age group), highlighting no change (by not disturbing, upsetting, disturbing, or annoying) in the lifestyle of local people.

- *“If you fill a small town like Liebas as full as you fill it at the time you fill it, if you can’t spread the tourism over a whole year, something is obviously not working. If you put half a million people in two days, you spoil it, 300 or 400 thousand people in a town like this is no longer a town. What is the balance between the profit of a few and the benefit of the whole region?” (41-60 age group)*

Therefore, the exploitation of tourism is adapted to the interests of conserving the environment,

as opposed to mass tourism, where exploitation is governed by the economic interests of maximizing profit (61-80 age group).

When it comes to the ideas associated with the Responsible Tourism model, these are related to the idea of a model that sets a ceiling and is self-limiting in its capacity to receive tourists or in the harmful activities of tourists, as a means of conserving the environment.

- *“I think that’s the difference, this is about a much more reduced tourism, much more selective, that is to say that you have to look for it, this would be another different option, without harming.” (41-60 age group)*

**Ecological Tourism:** The idea of this type of tourism is developed from the idea of “ecological product.” They associate it with enjoying farm-type stays, collaborating in the production of these “quality” products because they are artisans (18-40 age group). In this sense, it refers to the concept of health but also to the use given to these products based on the commercial argumentation: it is a consumer market crossed by the action of marketing, being associated with fashionable or emerging trends in consumption.

**Sustainable Tourism:** The concept of sustainable tourism is based on the institutional dimension. A strong relationship of the sustainable concept with the environmental practices of companies, as well as the technical component, in determining the environmental impact of tourism activity mean that this concept has a strong institutional charge. This generates some suspicion among tourists, and in some cases, sustainability recommendations are seen as a ploy for cost savings (profit) used by tourism companies.

- *“People often associate this institutional burden with it, in the sense of trying to regulate the flow of tourists to certain tourist destinations, be they rural (La Pedriza) or cultural (Alhambra in Granada).” (61-80 age group).*
- *“Also, when it comes to applying criteria to reduce abusive consumption of water or*

*electricity, based on warnings that these people observe in hotels or tourist destinations.” (18-40 age group)*

They distinguish Responsible Tourism from Sustainable Tourism, arguing that one has to do with “norms and values” while the other has a more ecological aspect (18-40 age group).

**As for objective number two, analyzing the factors that explain and influence responsible and sustainable behaviors, and which actions make subjects more or less “environmentally responsible”, analyzing the possible disadvantages or advantages of such behaviors, is associated with actions b), c), and d).**

It is vital to know the subjective aspects that determine and condition the actions, behavior, and attitudes of tourists in their destinations. This can help develop corrective measures to change negative behavior from a responsible point of view.

In the focus group there was a disparity of opinions; while some participants advocated respecting the rules, others would not mind skipping them to satisfy some self-interest (18-40 age group). Participation and integration coincide with the tourist motivation of knowledge, which is knowledge through participation and experience, from a role closer to the idea of a “traveler,” thus changing the established idea of the tourist as a mass consumer of resources (41-60 age group).

For the younger participants (18-40 age group), pro-environmental behavior is linked to being interested in the aspects and characteristics of the local community and showing respect for the local people, their traditions, and lifestyles. Therefore, giving the tourist destination a better value, according to the participants, has an impact on increasing the responsible action of the destination. The main idea is based on the position that responsible behavior is more likely to occur in relation to something that is considered valuable.

Numerous ideas emerging in the focus groups suggest adding (or increasing) the value of the destination to encourage responsible behavior. The logic behind this approach is very simple: more respect is given to what has more value (61-80 age group). The value domain has a global character that cuts across the individual, social, and institutional spheres (supply).

Another of the measures proposed is to increase knowledge about the destination (61-80 age group). Information and knowledge of the environment to be visited generate a positive effect; on the one hand, they add value while enabling greater integration with it, thus resulting in greater care for the environment on the other hand.

The availability of more environmentally friendly public transport options can make a difference between being and not being able to behave responsibly. Ultimately, as a means of adding value to a destination or the elements that make up a destination, the possibility of giving it an economic consumer value by charging for access is also considered (61-80 age group).

At the institutional level, it would be up to public bodies to provide and promote responsible tourism options (18-40 age group). Analyzing the meaning of the action needs to become relevant for the understanding of responsible tourism behavior; it is a tool of interest not only for promoting environmentally appropriate behavior but for changing non-respectful behavior as well.

It has been observed that, in certain cases, not knowing how to explain or understand a prescription or normative restriction of behavior implies disobedience. It seems that compliance with a ruling or behavioral suggestion is more likely when one understands the reasons for it or when they have or can derive an explanation that justifies it (41-60 age group).

Some participants believe that common sense should be sufficient guidance for responsible action, although the full extent and accuracy of this is questioned (18-40 age group).

The meaning of an action also becomes relevant as a means of behavioral change; therefore, in some cases the change in favor of pro-environmental behavior has come about through self-reflection on the meaning of the action. The initiation of reflection on the action is understood to be motivated by an external agent (18-40 age group).

In relation to the concept of Responsible Tourism and the actions that constitute it, there is a clear need to work on the meaning of those actions. It is a question of clarifying which actions contribute to Responsible Tourism, as many are not known, and explaining why they are environmentally respectful or beneficial, and/or for whom.

- *"People do it, but the truth is that they don't know why, that it can affect the development." [in reference to the purchase of original products]*
- *"More should be communicated." (41-60 age group)*

From the participants' point of view, communication is considered important. Thus, the promotion of responsible behavior is often linked to the need to develop communication: "more should be communicated." While being necessary, it is also a sensitive issue in terms of how to approach it properly.

- *"The key is how to say it, avoiding negative words, say for example: try to take a bag to throw away the waste and you are helping, and you are doing a wonderful thing for the environment." (18-40 age group)*

Regarding responsible action in the socio-cultural sphere, such as beliefs, values, attitudes, and environmental awareness, the concept of Responsible Tourism refers primarily to the idea of environmental responsibility. However, responsible tourism behavior is part of a broader field of global environmental behavior which, from the point of view of the participants in the meetings, is a necessary precondition. For some, travel implies other behavior that in some

respects appears to be in contradiction with environmental practices (41-60 age group).

On the other hand, it should be noted that awareness of the environmental problems generated by tourism is not widespread (18-40 age group).

In relation to values, for some people environmental issues are ranked lower than others. Action appears to be associated with these values, so people who uphold environmental values are more inclined to make responsible tourism decisions than those for whom the environment does not form part of their scale of values or ranks lower than other values.

Thus, two types of orientations can be discerned: the action orientation motivated by personal values, where the individual benefit is paramount, versus the altruistic value orientation, where the benefit for the environment is paramount. This differentiation seems to be exclusive in the first instance, but altruistic behavior may correspond to a personal interest; for instance, staying in eco-friendly accommodation is associated with a higher quality of the products, which will ultimately benefit the user.

In terms of responsible action, it is therefore interesting to consider the approaches that combine or reconcile altruistic values, as they cover a greater scope of value.

- *"... If there are two rural houses that cost the same and one uses energy from solar panels, I would go to that one, better for my conscience, I mean these gentlemen collaborate all year round and I would give my money to him and not to the other one so that he continues to do well." (18-40 age group)*

Thus, in the case of the 61-80 age group, responsibility is related to civic mindedness, as seen above. Here, one of the fundamental values of civility and responsible behavior is considered to refer to the value of respect for the other (alter). The youth group also agrees that, ultimately, the value underpinning all responsible behavior is respect.

Another determining factor is the role of society in shaping values. It is understood that a socialization in environmental values through education is a major prerequisite for responsible behavior. This role is shared among various actors: educational institutions, families, and the mass media.

- *“Nowadays, television educates more than the school or the parents. A parent comes home from work exhausted, but with video game consoles, mobile phones, television, hardly talks to the child, if parents have little time, and expect the school to educate their children.” (61-80 age group)*

Socialization of young people in pro-environmental values is the best way to ensure respectful behavior in the future. However, behavioral change in adulthood is also possible through tertiary socialization processes.

- *“Until a few years ago, people spat on the Metro and on buses, and you had to put up signs to stop people spitting, just by putting them up and seeing them. You can put up signs, but you must teach civics.” (18-40 age group).*

Although the socializing role falls fundamentally on the family and educational institutions, the potential socializing role of the mass media is noteworthy.

- *The main thing is to comply with these rules, but it is related to people, and to instill these values, mass media have a lot of influence, which can carry out educational advertising campaigns. (61-80 age group)*

Regarding the debate on the factors that influence responsible behavior, some participants allude to the cultural factor, highlighting the differences in behavior observed between different cultural spheres in the international context.

- *So, it is a problem of culture, and responsible tourism is the same. (61-80 age group)*

Another factor linked to respectful behavior is related to social influence, where one is

considered more likely to adopt responsible behavior if they find themselves in the company of people who develop such behavior.

- *“...I wouldn't throw the paper away because you're going to scold me, you're making me responsible.” (61-80 age group)*

It is worth highlighting the mention of reference-belonging groups by participants in one focus group. In this sense, the contribution of going to a sustainable establishment with the idea of finding people of a certain profile, who can represent reference or belonging groups, was mentioned. One should bear in mind that this reference belongs to the sphere of identity.

- *“Do you do it in a sustainable hotel and not in a non-sustainable hotel?”*
- *“...it is assumed that if you go there, there will be people who also like that kind of environment.” (18-40 age group)*

In contrast to some participants, who highlighted the same behavior in different places and situations, another participant suggested that behavior can be influenced by contextual factors, such as the people you travel with or even the type of trip.

- *“Imagine you go to a cup final, you have the same responsibility, do you behave the same as on a cultural trip? Every trip has a different behavior, depending on the type of trip, you will have a laxer behavior.” (61-80 age group)*

In the absence of other factors and values that underpin environmental behavior, sanctions (especially financial) are perceived to be capable of changing that behavior.

- *“When I first came to Madrid 30 years ago, in the Berlin Park there were some people in a grey suit, you couldn't step on the grass, and yet now...”*
- *“... they invade the lawn, have we made progress, is it forbidden?”*
- *“It's not forbidden anymore.”*
- *“... By sanction we come to personal conviction.” (61-80 age group)*

When faced with the same action (use of water resources), behavior may be different depending on the purpose: functional (toilet) or recreational and/or pleasure (bathing).

- *"You can be environmentally responsible, whatever you want to call it. But if it's cold, you put the heating on and if you have to turn it up to the maximum you do it; and if you want to take a bath, you do it because you have also gone looking for comfort." (18-40 age group)*

Another issue addressed by the focus groups is the use of public and private transport. Transport is considered one of the most important impacts. To be able to make visits from the accommodation to the places of greatest interest in the area, according to the participants, it is generally essential to use private transport. In this sense, the factor at play is one's ability to do certain things.

- *"In rural tourism the car is almost essential, when you go for four days you take advantage of the rural house as a starting point to visit a lot of things, it is essential." (18-40 age group)*
- *"The journey conditions, your transport and going to a remote village is not the same as going to a city, you need a car." (61-80 age group).*

**Finally, regarding objective number three, to establish corrective measures based on the results obtained to make tourism behavior more responsible and sustainable by increasing the awareness of individuals, is associated with action e).**

According to the arguments put forward by the focus groups in relation to responsible tourism action, the need to establish control measures for this type of practice stands out, so the experience-sharing factor is fundamental for changing the majority tourism models.

- *"Compliance with the rules is very important. At work you know you must arrive at a certain time and punch a card, and when you go for a walk, there are others to comply with..."*
- *"Of course, civic education." (61-80 age group)*

The fulfilment of internal duty is associated with conscience: taking responsibility for one's actions and their consequences according to one's perception of right and wrong (ethical field). What are the benefits of responsible tourism behavior?

- *"For me, peace of mind..."*
- *...of conscience*
- *...that I am behaving well. (61-80 age group)*

The presence of information, in natural areas, on the rules of behavior prompted a debate within the group of young people: some see these as common-sense rules that do not need to be stated because they are understood or implied, while others believe that their presence is necessary.

- *"It's also good that there are signs, that everything is very ethical, very rational, that you don't need to read them. But we often forget and unconsciously throw a piece of paper on the ground, a cigarette butt, ..."*
- *"... whether in the countryside or in the city, it is not bad to remember it in some way." (18-40 age group)*

It is also possible to consider the elements related to what the person considers interesting. As an example, one participant said that using sustainable accommodation is not a criterion of choice, i.e., environmental is not a value, but he does value positively some actions of Responsible Tourism because they coincide with what he considers personally interesting. The moderator read out responsible tourism actions according to the concept based on Del Chiappa and Lorenzo-Romero (2014):

- *"All the phrases seem responsible to me, it is part of what I like to do..." (18-40 age group)*

Therefore, respectful behavior can be based on non-environmental motivations of tourists that coincide with respectful behavior, such as the protection of the historical and archaeological sites of the destination, which in turn coincides with the motivation of historical-artistic knowledge or being in contact with the traditions and

culture of the local community with the interest of socio-cultural knowledge.

Through innovation (legal, technological, cultural) there is a possibility of establishing different means from those already established to obtain better results in terms of sustainability and responsible behavior, etc. Some actions aimed at improvement are the following: a) Proposing alternatives to environmentally harmful habits, traditions, and practices, such as the use of animals to celebrate festivals, in particular (41-60 age group); b) Alternatives in consumption and alternatives to harmful actions, having sustainable and responsible options (41-60 age group).

## 6. DISCUSSION

Promoting environmentally respectful behavior in tourism is crucial (Deng, Fang, Xu & Li, 2020) and should focus on Responsible Tourism. According to the findings, motivational and activation conditioning are key factors in promoting responsible behavior. Communication plays a key role in activating motivation and overcoming knowledge deficiencies.

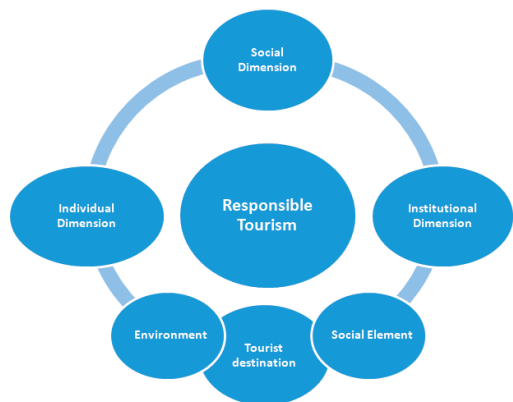
Therefore, emphasizing the sphere of values and raising awareness of the environmental impact of tourism among tourists is important for fostering responsible behavior. Different tourism models should also be considered, as well as institutional innovations, to offer more respectful options for tourists. Social factors, such as family, educational institutions, and mass media, influence the transmission of environmental and civic values (Rivera-Mateos & Doumet-Chilán, 2021). Strengthening communication and education efforts, along with implementing corrective measures and promoting responsible tourism through incentives, is crucial for achieving more sustainable outcomes in tourism practices (Fennell & Cooper, 2020).

The achievement of an environmentally friendly tourism action is a complex phenomenon because of different factors and different relationships involved, as previous research has shown

(Fatema, 2023). The analysis of the discourse of the focus groups found, first of all, that the promotion of environmentally friendly behavior in the field of tourism is of great importance.

Thus, due to their connotations, the use of the concepts of sustainable, ecological, and environmental tourism is discarded. Instead, it is more advisable to resort to the concept of Responsible Tourism, as it covers a broader semantic field (integrating individual, institutional, social, destination value, environmental, and societal dimensions) referring to environmental behavior, and focuses on the individual as the responsible agent of the action rather than being associated with the selfish use of marketing, already discussed previously in the literature (Leslie, 2012). For the majority of respondents, these dimensions are integrated in the term Responsible Tourism, with a special emphasis on not altering the physical-biological and socio-cultural environment, thus meaning that tourism does not imply changing the lifestyle of the local population. These dimensions of Responsible Tourism, represented in Figure 1, show the influence and correlations of different dimensions affecting Responsible Tourism, in addition to such attributes as the destination, the social environment, and the environment.

FIGURE 1: Factors of Responsible Tourism



Many respondents differentiated Responsible Tourism from Sustainable, Environmental and

Ecological Tourism, when all of these are integrated in Responsible Tourism. Responsible Tourism is a holistic approach that seeks to minimize any negative impacts and maximize the benefits for local communities and the natural environment. It focuses on social, economic, and environmental aspects, promoting sustainable and respectful practices and thus brings together the approaches of Sustainable, Environmental, and Ecological Tourism. Figure 2 shows the dimensions that affect responsible, ecological, sustainable, and environmental tourism at a semantic level.

**FIGURE 2: Semantic dimensions encompassing Responsible, Ecological, Sustainable and Environmental Tourism.**



The analysis of responsible action has resulted in the study of two specific aspects of behavior:

- motivational conditioning, necessary for the activation of action, composed of should-do and want-to-do factors;
- activational conditioning, necessary to enable environmental action, composed of know-do and can-do factors.

The communication aspect acquires a relevant role within responsible tourism action (already outlined by Shen, Qian, and Chen, 2020), because the most deficient dimensions of action belong to the communication sphere, as is the case with know-how, but it can also play an important role in the activation of the motivational dimension.

This is evident in the young segment's rejection of formulas based on prohibition, making it necessary to resort to other formulas for communicating information. The importance of communication codes – as a formula for capturing the attention and interest of the receiver -- and the continuous renewal of messages should also be emphasized. Aspects that the individual considers valuable (social values – value of a destination) enhance responsibility. Thus, there is a greater responsibility for something that is considered valuable, which is in line with previous research findings (Fatema, 2023). Therefore, fostering the value sphere is a way to enhance responsible behavior. This can be done by drawing on the values of the individual or by increasing the value of the destination (focused on the institutional: the offer) through increased knowledge of the destination's meritorious qualities or through a more valuable destination experience.

It is important to note that in some cases there is a lack of awareness of the environmental impact of tourism activities, with tourists unaware of the need to take respectful actions, as already found in previous research (Gupta, Mondal, Janardhan, Kumawat & Shekhar, 2024). If this proves to be a widespread belief, that lack of awareness should be one of the first levels of communication action.

Innovation must also be considered from an institutional point of view so that more respectful options of action can be proposed, allowing the individual to have a choice (Gupta et al., 2024). As can be seen from the responses of focus group participants, innovation is fundamental for ensuring the sustainability and preservation of destinations, while also offering unique and enriching experiences to visitors, and is therefore indispensable in the development of Responsible Tourism.

Given the strong influence of social factors such as the family, educational institutions, and the media in the transmission of environmental and civic values (Gupta et al., 2024), this path seems most likely to yield positive results. Although

the explanatory aspects of tourist behavior are mostly socio-cultural, other influential factors such as the cost of the action or possible contradictions among some of the purposes of the trip on the one hand and the environmental purposes on the other are also considered.

In terms of corrective measures necessary to achieve more sustainable results in tourism practices, it is concluded that communication and educational work should be strengthened by focusing on the practices and actions to be carried out in the tourist environment, and those that should be avoided, as outlined in previous research (Shen et al., 2020; Fatema, 2023). This is so because even if tourists, according to the statements of the focus group, have assimilated good practices, behavior that is considered inappropriate from a sustainable point of view can still occur in the tourist environment and in the resort.

Booking companies should strive to promote communication and educational actions targeting tourists. These should be supported by threat of sanctions for non-compliance with existing nature protection laws, local civic ordinances, or resort rules, as previously analyzed by Shen et al. (2020). And due to the sensitivity of monetary issues, the development of responsible tourism actions can be promoted by financially rewarding tourists with discounts or bonuses for sustainable tourism behavior.

## 7. CONCLUSIONS

The Responsible Tourism concept is gaining increasing relevance in the tourism industry, as it seeks to minimize the negative impact that tourism can have on the environment, local culture, and the economy of a destination. However, despite efforts to promote sustainable practices, there are still many challenges and controversies surrounding this issue. In this respect, it is essential to critically analyze the policies and actions being implemented in the name of Responsible Tourism, as well as reflect on the responsibility of both tourists and tourism companies for the protection of the visited

destinations, while also continuing to expand research on this topic (different destinations, countries, types of tourism, etc.).

Most existing studies of this concept have focused mainly on the differences between mass and responsible tourism without delving into how different socio-demographic groups understand this term and what they associate with it. In this research study, very diverse opinions and perspectives have been obtained thanks to the focus group format, bringing together people with different experiences and points of view; thus, new ideas and suggestions that had not been considered previously have been reached, while also identifying different problems and possible solutions (recommendations, good practices to be adopted by the tourist and those to be developed by the tourist complex, etc.). Discussing these with participants with different socio-demographic profiles can create and increase awareness of the importance of adopting sustainable and ethical practices in the tourism industry.

Based on those premises, the present focus group study (with three different socio-demographic groups) addressed the following three ideas:

1. to deepen tourists' knowledge of the concept of Responsible Tourism and Sustainability, according to their age group;
2. to analyze the factors that explain and affect responsible and sustainable behaviors, and what actions make individuals more or less "environmentally responsible," analyzing the possible disadvantages or advantages of such behaviors; and
3. to establish corrective measures, based on focus group results, to make tourism behavior more responsible and sustainable by raising the awareness of individuals.

The research explored the concept of Responsible Tourism using the focus group approach with participants of different profiles and experiences in the tourism sector. Throughout the

sessions, it was possible to identify a series of key aspects that participants consider fundamental to the understanding and promotion of responsible tourism. These include the importance of environmental conservation, respect for local communities, promotion of local culture and economy, among others. These findings have allowed us to obtain an approximation of what these different age groups understand as responsible tourism, and how they ascribe it to a holistic approach that seeks to maximize the social, economic, and environmental benefits of the tourism activity while minimizing its negative impacts.

Nevertheless, for many this represents a new concept, so there is work to be done by economic and institutional actors to promote it and raise awareness of it. For the respondents, the Responsible Tourism model means an idea of a limited economic model, both in terms of the capacity to receive tourists and the harmful activities of tourists, with the aim of sustainability and environmental conservation.

When it comes to the group of young people (18-40 years old), they believe that common sense is sufficient as a guide for responsible action in tourism. However, the effectiveness and accuracy of this approach is questioned. It has been mentioned that the meaning of an action is also important as a means of prompting a change in behavior and that, in some cases, reflection on the meaning of an action has led to a change towards more pro-environmental behavior. Young people can therefore be influenced by external agents to reflect on their actions in relation to responsible tourism and change their behavior in favor of more sustainable practices. This suggests that awareness and motivation to adopt responsible behavior can be fostered through education and awareness-raising. In conclusion, young people have the capacity to adopt responsible behavior in tourism but they need to be encouraged to reflect on their actions and provided with information and support to make conscious and sustainable choices. In addition, it is important

to recognize the role of external actors in motivating this type of behavioral change.

For the adult age group (41-60 years old), it is important for public bodies to promote responsible tourism options to encourage environmentally friendly behavior. For this group, it is essential to understand the reasons behind the rules of conduct for complying with them effectively. Their perception of the concept of Responsible Tourism is focused mostly on environmental responsibility, but they also ascribe it to broader global environmental behavior. While believing that some travel practices may seem contradictory to environmental practices, they consider it possible to adopt a responsible approach in all facets of tourism. Adults therefore have a crucial role to play in promoting and adopting responsible behavior in tourism. Environmental awareness and understanding of the reasons behind regulations to ensure sustainable and environmentally friendly tourism needs to be promoted to improve compliance and uptake.

The elderly age group (61-80 years old) proposes to add value to a destination in a simple way by increasing knowledge about it. For them, socialization in environmental values through education is fundamental, with this role needing to be shared between educational institutions, families, and the media. They highlight the influence of television on children's education, especially when parents have little time to interact with them. Therefore, education and the provision of information about the environment to be visited are key to promoting responsible tourism among the elderly group. Socialization in environmental values through different actors, including educational institutions, families, and the media, is essential to promoting responsible behavior in tourism. It is vital to raise awareness and educate society, especially the elderly, about the importance of respecting the environment and valuing tourist destinations. Promoting responsible tourism among this age group (and others) will contribute to the conservation of natural resources and the sustainable development of tourist destinations.

In relation to the concept of Responsible Tourism and the actions that comprise it, there is a clear need to work on the meaning of such actions. It is a question of clarifying which actions contribute to Responsible Tourism, as many are not well known, explaining why they are respectful of or beneficial to the environment, as well as by whom or for whom. The results show that organizations should elucidate the characteristics associated by tourists with Responsible Tourism and align them with the services offered. In addition, they can collaborate with local communities to ensure that they benefit fairly and equitably from tourism, with their natural and cultural resources being protected.

By aligning the requirements of tourists on responsible tourism actions in tourism companies, several positive effects can be achieved, such as an improvement in reputation and thus attracting a greater number of customers who are aware of and committed to responsible tourism, building the loyalty of customers who value responsible tourism and share its values and commitments, and generating long-term relationships. This would also contribute to compliance with regulations and standards that more and more countries and regions are establishing in this regard (sustainability, ecology, etc.), avoiding administrative sanctions, and encouraging responsible behavior on the part of tourists, as they could also be subject to sanctions. Finally, long-term economic benefits would be generated, contributing to the sustainable development of local communities, promoting environmental conservation, and generating employment opportunities in the area.

Some practical implications to be highlighted include the personalization of the travel experience, adapting services and activities in a sustainable and responsible way, while meeting the needs and preferences of each age group. Also, not to be neglected is promoting education and awareness of Responsible Tourism (in collaboration with educational and environmental institutions, public administration, media, etc.), incentivizing responsible behavior (e.g. through

discounts for participating in sustainable activities or prizes for following environmental standards), and collaborating with external agents, cooperating with governmental organizations, NGOs, and other relevant actors to promote responsible tourism and ensure compliance with environmental standards. This may include the implementation of internal sustainability policies and participation in corporate social responsibility initiatives.

Therefore, aligning tourist requirements (according to age groups) with responsible tourism actions by tourism companies and offering services based on these requirements can have positive effects on reputation, customer loyalty, compliance with regulations and standards, as well as reaping long-term economic benefits. Education, awareness raising, and collaboration with external agents are key to promoting sustainable and environmentally friendly behavior in the tourism sector.

## 8. FUTURE LINES OF RESEARCH AND LIMITATIONS OF THIS STUDY

It is considered relevant to evaluate specific behaviors, according to the different impacts associated with the activity, and investigate possible different patterns that explain each one of them as a new objective of research. Likewise, this qualitative study allows us to establish general guidelines that make it possible to draw up a structured questionnaire aimed at different responsible tourists in a statistically significant quantitative analysis that can be extrapolated to the population under study.

Other future lines of research could include a longitudinal study, analyzing and comparing different behavior of responsible tourists over time, to identify possible changes or trends in their behavior. The influence of socioeconomic, cultural, and educational factors on the behaviors of responsible tourists could also be

investigated to get a better understanding of which variables may have an influence on their decisions. Additionally, the impact of environmental education and awareness on responsible tourism behavior could be examined to determine if these strategies are effective in promoting sustainable practices.

However, despite a thorough segmentation of discussion groups and bias in the participants' consumption profiles, it is important to mention some limitations of this study. Firstly, focusing on a specific age group in each meeting may lead to missing important perspectives from other age groups that could provide different viewpoints on rural tourism. Additionally, selecting participants from middle-middle social

class may limit the diversity of opinions and experiences related to responsible tourism in rural areas. Furthermore, the fact that all participants have taken at least two rural tourism trips in the last year may bias the discussion towards positive experiences and overlook those who have not had the opportunity to participate in this type of tourism. Finally, the influence of participants' economic activities on their perceptions and experiences may be a limitation, as it could bias their opinions towards certain tourism practices based on their occupation. Overall, these limitations should be considered when interpreting the results of this study and may be subject to future research to address the concept of responsible tourism in rural areas more comprehensively.

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