
AGRITOURISM MARKETING STRATEGY AND TYPOLOGY INVESTIGATION

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ABSTRACT

During last decades, agritourism started to grow significantly in Mediterranean area mostly due to its favourable climate. Within literature, there are many international studies that discuss the concept of agritourism in various ways. Wide-ranging definitions and labels concerning agritourism still create confusion as there is not a transparent and basic understanding of the characteristics that define it.

This paper provides a comprehensive overview on behaviour patterns of agritourists by combining these patterns with the activity-based taxonomy of all definitions of agritourism into a structured framework. The study offers a comprehensive framework that can be used as a basis for more informed debate and discussion, as well as for further empirical research in future.

Key Words: Agritourism; Typology Information Search Behaviour; Tourism Marketing

1 INTRODUCTION

Agritourism has been recognized world-wide since the early twentieth century (Busby & Rendle, 2000; McKenzie & Wysocki, 2002; Wicks & Merrett, 2003). The development of agritourism was specifically fostered when countries established a set of policies consisting of specific guidelines, obligations, and incentives in order to encourage farm diversification through tourism and hospitality services. (Che, Veeck, & Veeck, 2005; Hegarty & Przeborska, 2005; Kizos & Iosifides, 2007; Sonnino, 2004). One example is the LEADER program that offers grants for the promotion of rural development to farmers of the member-states of European Union (E.U.) (Caballe,1999; Cawley & Gillmor, 2008; European Court of Auditors, 2010, p.100). The attempt to understand any phenomenon requires mostly a basic conceptual understanding of the fundamental characteristics that defines it. A review of existing literature shows that there isn't any specific definition for agritourism. One can discover a wide variety of labels and definitions regarding agritourism, such as agrotourism, farm tourism, farm-based tourism, and rural tourism, (Barbieri & Mshenga, 2008; Roberts & Hall, 2001; Wall, 2000), (Iakovidou, 1997; McGehee & Kim, 2004; Sharpley & Sharpley, 1997). This results in a complex structure that combines the agriculture and tourism principles, especially when there is no distinct elucidation regarding the actual meaning of them.

While the tourism literature evidences that several factors influence travelers' behavior to consume tourism products (Lepp and Gibson, 2008; Hsu,Tsai, and Wu, 2009), to date, investigation into the determinants of agritourism consumption remains inadequate in the literature; for example, the relative importance of the various information sources (ICT sources included) used by travellers is not yet systematically analyzed. Given the increasing importance of this particular market segment for destinations, additional research is needed to understand the behavior of agritourists in an attempt to bring further theoretical and practical contributions to this field of study (Ramkissoon, Uysal and Brown, 2011).

2 LITERATURE REVIEW

Meanings are the representations of a given activity developed by every person according to their background and experiences (Coulson, 2001, p. 320; Sharpley & Stone, 2010, p. 304). Tourism meanings are usually the result of any natural or social contact that takes place during a given experience (Coulson, 2001, p. 320; Greer, Donnelly, & Rickly, 2008) and can vary according to specific contextual factors including time and place (Greer et al.,

2008). According to aforementioned, stakeholders can shape the meanings for agritourism so it is vital to develop successful definitions of tourism-related activities both from the supply and demand sides. (Gilbert, 2003) Apart from that, up to date research has assisted us to understand which bases can be used by tourism destinations to effectively segment tourism markets and these efforts have largely centred upon building tourist profiles for a destination using visitor data (Frochot, 2005).

Trying to analyze the existing theoretical framework for identifying the meanings of agritourism, the sections following deconstruct several definitions of agritourism and present a discussion of the efforts put forth by Phillip et al. (2010) to construct a broad definition of agritourism.

2.1. Deconstructing agritourism definitions

Definitions of agritourism are wide-ranging in the literature. The discrepancies found among the various agritourism definitions relate to three issues: (1) the type of setting (e.g., farm, any agricultural setting); (2) the authenticity of the agricultural facility or the experience; and (3) the types of activities involved (e.g., lodging, education). A fourth ontological issue was proposed to be added, related to the need of "travel", given the use of the word "tourism" (agritourism) in its label (Arroyo, Barbieri, & Rich, 2012).

The type of setting where the activity occurs forms a big difference of agritourism definitions. The majority of studies claim that agritourism must be carried out on a farm (Carpio et al., 2008; Ilbery, Bowler, Clark, Crockett, & Shaw, 1998; McKenzie & Wysocki, 2002). But, there are few studies discussing different type of agricultural settings, such as farms, ranches (e.g., Che et al., 2005; Tew & Barbieri, 2012) or the inclusion of some types of off-farm facilities, such as farmers' markets, where various kinds of farm products are taken away from the agricultural production setting to be sold (Wicks & Merrett, 2003; Wilson, Thilmany, & Sullins, 2006). Furthermore, there are different meanings used to define agricultural establishments, especially those related to "farm". European Union defines a farm as an agricultural holding, meaning "economic unit under a single management engaged in agricultural production activities" and which can also engage in non-agricultural activities (OECD, 2001). Finally, thanks to academic developments over last decades there is a clear separation between terms "agritourism" and "rural tourism" (Colton & Bissix, 2005; Kizos & Iosifides, 2007; McGehee & Kim, 2004).

A second commonly found disagreement surrounds the authenticity paradigm related to the agricultural facility and to the experience offered (Arroyo, Barbieri, & Rich, 2012). McGehee (2007) based her agritourism development framework in the U.S. on Weaver and Fennell (1997)'s definition which explicitly excludes activities and experiences that are developed in non-working farms because they deem necessary the commercial aspect involved in this activity. Furthermore, various North American (Lobo et al., 1999; McGehee & Kim, 2004; Nickerson et al., 2001; Tew & Barbieri, 2012) and European (Hegarty & Przezborska, 2005; Kizos & Iosifides, 2007; Sonnino, 2004) studies claim that having a "working" agricultural setting is linked to recognizing this activity as one form of farm entrepreneurial diversification (Barbieri, Mahoney, & Butler, 2008). Phillip et al. (2010) expanded the authenticity debate in the context of tourist experiences by adopting MacCannell's (1973) "front" and "back" regions of authenticity theory. The particular study refers to the difference between providing the visitors an indirect experience of agricultural activities (e.g., through demonstrations, models) from a direct engagement in an agricultural process (e.g., harvesting).

A third definitional disagreement relates to the activities that agritourism comprises which is not surprising given the extent of inconsistencies related to its meaning. Such inconsistencies may be geo-political as they seem to be associated to government policies (Arroyo, Barbieri, & Rich, 2012).

Finally, Arroyo et al. (2012) suggested the addition of an ontological discussion surrounding the definition of agritourism to the preceding debate in relation to the need of "travel", especially because the term "tourism" is embedded in the label most commonly used in the literature to depict this activity (agritourism). None of the agritourism definitions reviewed refers to the need of travel however, some of them may imply some sort of travel when mainly referring to farm-stays or entailing any type of accommodations.

2.2. A typology-based definition of agritourism

The aforementioned discrepancies motivated Phillip et al. (2010) to propose a definition of agritourism through the development of an activity-based taxonomy. Figure 1 illustrates the proposed typology for defining agritourism.

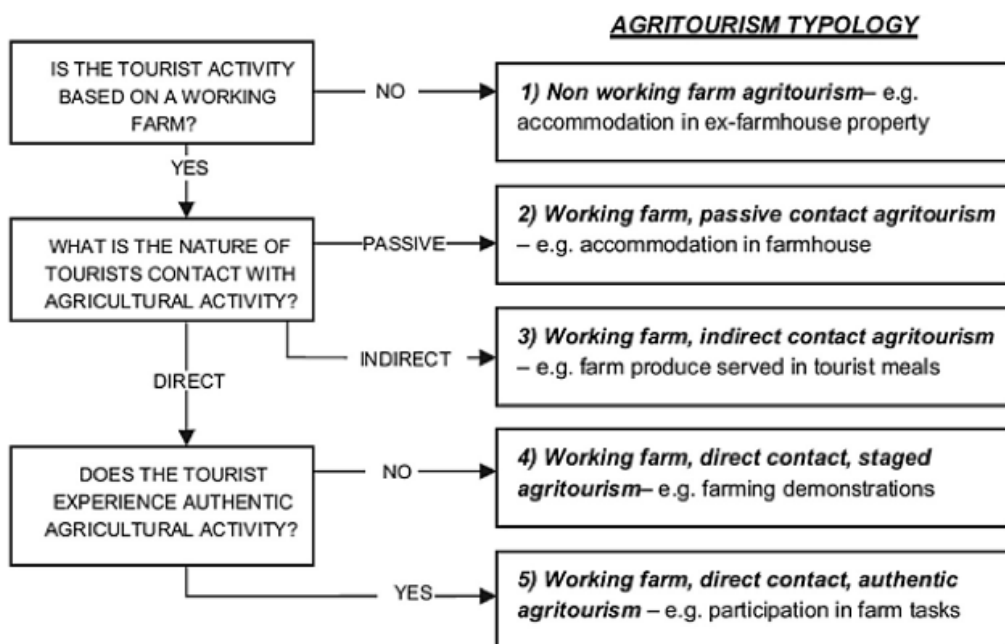


Figure 1 A typology for defining agritourism (Phillip et al., 2010)

The **non Non-Working Farm agritourism (NWF)** typology refers to activities where the non-working farm only serves for scenery purposes (e.g., bird-watching on an old mill). Although the majority of the literature excludes from definition of agritourism the tourism not based on a working farm, there are cases that tourists participate in agritourism though other different ways. Examples of NWF agritourism includes farm heritage attractions, tourism activities based on converted farms (e.g. horse riding) or agricultural practices that form part of the tourist product.

The **WORKING FARM, PASSIVE CONTACT AGRITOURISM (WFPC)** typology refers to activities that allows farmers to continue their agricultural activities without having interferences by the visitors(e.g., attending a wedding in a vineyard).

The **WORKING FARM, INDIRECT CONTACT AGRITOURISM (WFIC)** typology refers to activities that are more directly related to farm procedures, although the nature of the visitor's contact focuses more on the agricultural products rather than the practice of

farming itself (e.g., enjoying fresh produce or meals on site). A number of authors focus mostly on hospitality and accommodation components. Examples of WFIC agritourism is the consumption of agricultural products served in accommodation or café's or through sale to tourists at farm shops.

The **WORKING FARM, DIRECT CONTACT, STAGED AGRITOURISM (WFDCS)** typology refers to activities through which visitors experience agricultural functions but through staged scenarios and predetermined tours (e.g. touring an operating cider mill). Other examples of WFDCS agritourism include farming demonstrations (e.g. milking cows) and direct physical contact with farm animals (e.g. feeding or petting animals).

Last but not least, the **WORKING FARM, DIRECT CONTACT, AUTHENTIC AGRITOURISM (WFDCA)** typology refers to activities where tourists fully participate in farm tasks. Visitors work and contribute to the farm economy in return for accommodation and food. There are limited opportunities one to experience WFDCA agritourism so there are not many examples discussed in the literature.

3 RESEARCH OBJECTIVES AND CONCLUSIONS

All the previously mentioned approaches demonstrate the complexity of the agritourism phenomenon, illustrate a range of approaches in its typology, and emphasize a concern with determinants, information sources, decision making, and segmentation. The results of this study have important implications from managerial perspectives at the tourism destinations. The present study can help managers carry out this task in a more informed and strategic manner by examining agritourist consumption and consider the effects that information has for the agritourists at destinations. This information increases the economic impacts from travel and tourism in the destinations, adopting the necessary measures to reinforce the forms of information analyzed in this study in order to attract the suitable target market. This article supports the view that developing alliances with well-positioned, knowledgeable distribution channels is especially important for the assessment of tourism policies and coordination in the communication process with more traditional media in order to have a unified message from all media that reaches the public should also be part of the marketing strategy, be part of the advertising campaign or the promotion of the destination (Kavoura and Katsoni, 2013). The research implies that a segmentation based on the information search behavior is an appropriate way to develop marketing strategies and target marketing communications.

Fundamental technological shifts have a profound impact on the perception, consumption and construction of tourism spaces, and their local development outcomes, and 'traditional' regional communities have new tools through which to disseminate their concerns, and may, via global networks, gain new 'community members' that can represent their interests around the world (Katsoni and Venetsanopoulou, 2013). It seems evident that tourism boards can have a significant impact on these processes, and the present findings will possibly help in outlining a cursory examination of these issues.

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