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Research Paper

Can Location be a Competitive Factor for Hotels in Low-Density Territories? A Study in Alto Alentejo

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ABSTRACT

The tourism sector holds significant importance and impact in Portugal. The fact that Portugal is a country predominantly bordered by the Atlantic Ocean makes “sun and beach” tourism one of its main tourist products. This has led to a strong concentration of tourist demand and, consequently, of tourist supply along the coast. On the other hand, inland regions, classified as low-density areas, face challenges but also present opportunities to develop a distinctive tourism model. To remain competitive in tourism sector, the hotel industry must adopt strategies that enable differentiation from competitors. These strategies can be based on various factors; however, hotel location is undoubtedly one of the most critical and irreversible decisions in terms of positioning and the target audience a hotel aims to reach. The aim of this chapter is to analyze whether location is considered an important competitiveness factor in low-density areas. A quantitative research methodology was used, and a questionnaire was administered to 25 hotel establishments in the Alto Alentejo region, resulting in a sample size of 68%. The results indicate that the territory’s unique natural and cultural resources are essential to hotel development. Respondents expressed confidence in their hotel’s location, recognizing it as a factor that enhances their market competitiveness. Being located in a low-density rural area is perceived as an opportunity for hotels to differentiate themselves. This study provides practical insights to support hotel managers, investors, and destination management organizations in attracting new hotels to the region.

Keywords: Tourism, Low-density areas, Competitiveness, Location, Alto Alentejo

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1. INTRODUCTION

Tourism is widely recognised as one of the largest global economic sectors, playing a strategic role in numerous economies, including Portugal. The exponential growth of this sector over the years, coupled with its resilience to unexpected crises such as the Covid-19 pandemic, underscores its significance as a driver of development on a global scale. However, while tourism offers vast opportunities for economic and social progress, it also presents considerable challenges that demand responsible management and planning approaches.

In an increasingly competitive global environment, tourism destinations and businesses strive to attract high-value tourist flows by offering innovative, unique, and high-quality experiences that set them apart in the market. However, the growing intensity of competition within this sector necessitates elevated levels of competitiveness and the development of both strategic and operational capabilities (Kim & Oh, 2004).

The competitiveness of the tourism sector, particularly that of destinations and businesses, has been extensively discussed in academic literature (e.g., Porter, 1989; Ritchie & Crouch, 2003; Dwyer & Kim, 2003; Enright & Newton, 2004). Nonetheless, research on the key determinants of competitiveness within the hotel industry remains limited. Furthermore, most studies focus on the national level (Rodríguez-Díaz & Pulido-Fernández, 2019; Andrades & Dimanche, 2017; Nazmfar et al., 2019), as well as on provincial and developed urban tourism destinations (Lee et al., 2010; Chen et al., 2011). However, there is still limited literature addressing tourism competitiveness at the rural level (Agustin et al., 2022) and the micro-level assessment of tourism destinations in underdeveloped regions (Cao et al., 2022). Besides that, past studies (Salinas Fernández et al., 2020; Enright & Newton, 2005; Domínguez Vila et al., 2015; Zhao et al., 2024) have found that the relative importance of tourism competitiveness factors varies by location due to different market environments, resource characteristics, socio-natural conditions, destination types, and market segments.

Given these gaps in the literature, further research is essential to understand the factors shaping hotel competitiveness in low-density territories. In contrast to urban destinations and coastal tourism areas, these regions face unique structural challenges and opportunities that require

tailored strategic approaches. Investigating how location influences competitiveness in such contexts can provide valuable insights for both academics and organizations, contributing to more sustainable tourism development in less explored regions. In this context, the aim of this paper is to analyze whether location serves as a significant competitive advantage for hotels in low-density territories.

The empirical study was conducted in Alto Alentejo, a region in the interior of Portugal, focusing on hotels located in this area. The research began with a literature review on the role of location in hotel competitiveness, complemented by a theoretical framework addressing low-density territories and their potential in tourism, mainly in Alto Alentejo region. The methodology section details the research approach adopted, including the methods of data collection and analysis used to explore the competitiveness of hotels in low-density territories. The results highlight the key findings of the study and their implications for the tourism sector, particularly in similar low-density contexts. Finally, the study concludes with a discussion of its limitations and provides suggestions for future research.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Location as a Competitive Factor in the Hotel Business

Hotels and the hospitality industry are essential elements in the structure of a tourism destination. Without them, no destination would be able to maintain its competitiveness or attract visitors for extended periods (Barros, 2005; Attila, 2016). Previous studies (e.g., Debski and Niemczak, 2016; Dwyer & Kim, 2003) indicate that the quality of accommodation facilities and the accessibility of a destination are the main factors influencing tourists' intention to visit that destination. Furthermore, the reputation and brand image of accommodations, particularly international hotel chains, can significantly enhance a destination's international appeal and competitiveness (Assaf & Josiassen, 2012; Assaf et al., 2015).

Accommodation is undoubtedly one of the most important components of the tourism offering, playing an essential role in shaping and consolidating a location as a tourism destination. The inherent characteristics of tourism services, particularly the need for consumption to take place at the point of production, combined with the constant evolution of consumer habits and even the motivations driving demand, require the hotel subsector to be highly competitive, constantly striving to adapt to market changes and the increasing competitiveness of destinations. (Alves et

al., 2021). Thus, hotel managers must constantly remain concerned about the future, adopting strategies that enhance the competitiveness of hotel establishments. Júnior et al. (2021), in a study conducted on hotels in Palmas/TO, concluded that hotels must keep their competitive strategies constantly updated and aligned with the realities of the market. To achieve this, they should analyse not only their competitors but also their suppliers, substitutes, and customers (Costa, 2019).

The hotel subsector, like other types of businesses, relies on a set of factors to achieve competitive advantage in the market. These factors can be internal or external to the organisation. Internal factors, such as the quality of the product/service offered, the innovation and technology adopted by the company, the marketing and promotion strategies employed, and human resources, are entirely dependent on the hotel establishment and can be managed to gain a competitive edge. On the other hand, external factors, such as the destination's support infrastructure, the destination's characteristics and management, the attitudes of local communities, and demand conditions, although beyond the control of the hotel industry, can play a decisive role in achieving market competitiveness and influencing the competitiveness of hotel businesses (Ribeiro, 2016).

Location is identified by several authors (Barros, 2005; Ribeiro & Costa, 2017) as both an internal and external factor of success and competitiveness for hotel businesses. Cuervo-Cazurra et al. (2014) define location advantage as the sum of benefits that firms in a particular geographic area can leverage compared to those elsewhere. These benefits stem from privileged access to external resources available in that location, which are otherwise scarce.

According to Porter (1993), the geographic location of an establishment significantly influences the availability of resources that can be leveraged for its benefit. Porter emphasises that the effective utilisation and in-depth analysis of these resources can serve as a turning point for achieving competitive superiority. It becomes clear that merely possessing these resources is not sufficient; they must be effectively utilised and managed. It is essential to adopt measures and strategies that enable a company to stand out from others in the same sector. Yang & Mao (2020) adds that location dictates the competitiveness of lodging units over their rivals.

The suitable location of a small or medium-sized business, such as a hotel, allows, among other benefits, the optimisation of production capacity, generation of additional profits, facilitation of business expansion, enhancement of customer services, and reduction of costs (Mazzarol & Choo, 2003). Furthermore, a hotel's location can significantly influence demand and tourist behaviour.

The location of the hotel plays a crucial role in how and where tourists engage with the destination (Shoval et al., 2011).

Vieira et al. (2020) state that, in the context of accommodation establishments in Brasília, location is highlighted as a distinctive characteristic. Thus, establishments operating in privileged locations tend to achieve performance gains derived from this scarce, valuable, imperfectly imitable, and non-substitutable resource. Location is therefore considered a strategic resource for these hotels, perceived by consumers, and capable of generating a sustainable competitive advantage.

Location is also highlighted by hotel managers of luxury hotels in Lisbon as an important source of competitive advantage, with its significance depending on the type of travel motivation (Mendes, 2013). Similarly, Ribeiro & Costa (2017), in their study conducted in the Douro region concluded that location is a competitive factor, both internal and external, with essential relevance for a given establishment.

Given that location is such a crucial factor for the competitiveness of hotels, hoteliers must pay particular attention to it, as this is the type of business that, once established, cannot be relocated. According to Assaf et al. (2015), hotel owners consider several essential factors when choosing a hotel location, including, among others, the size and nature of the city in which the hotel is situated, the political stability of the region, the infrastructure within the area, and the region's perception as an attractive business location. In the empirical study they conducted, they found that, with regard to attracting international hotels to a tourism destination, the most important factors are hospitality, the quality of transport infrastructure, the prevalence of foreign ownership, and the size of the host economy.

2.2 Low-Density Region: the case of Alto Alentejo

Low-density regions are understood as those with a low population and, consequently, economic density. These areas are often characterised by a wide range of disadvantages and structural dilemmas, frequently linked to rurality, and with economic and institutional constraints and vulnerabilities (Moura & Aguiar, 2023).

Demographic size is therefore one of the main factors for assessing a geographic area as low-density, as well as institutional, relational, economic, and productivity infrastructures. Considering these criteria, Alto Alentejo is a region with low population density. According to Fonseca and Ramos (2007), rural areas in the interior of the country are experiencing a population decline and face challenges in developing new businesses due to the lack of support in recent years. In fact,

several constraints have become widespread regarding low-density rural areas, such as low population density, rapid depopulation, poor accessibility, insufficient infrastructure and facilities, and limited cooperation among territorial actor (Correia & Carvalho, 2010; Covas & Covas, 2015; Ferrão, 2018).

However, low-density regions also offer a wide range of opportunities, particularly those linked to leveraging their unique identity and endogenous resources, which distinguish them from coastal areas typically characterized by high population densities (Moura & Aguiar, 2023). In these territories, their scale and location serve as distinctive features, capable of creating a unique image when compared to other tourism destinations (Correia & Carvalho, 2010; Carvalho, 2018).

The Alto Alentejo region is an example of this, endowed with a set of tourism resources that provide great potential for tourism, offering unique business opportunities. Alto Alentejo is rich in tourism resources, particularly in gastronomy, culture, landscapes, and city breaks. In terms of nature, the Parque Natural da Serra de São Mamede stands out, as mentioned by Moraes (2020): The Parque Natural da Serra de S. Mamede is undoubtedly the main reference in terms of natural resources. It is a protected area that covers the Serra that gives it its name, one of the highest mountain ranges in the country, extending into the territories of the municipalities of Arronches, Castelo de Vide, Marvão, and Portalegre. In this area, there is a great diversity of habitats, fauna, and flora. In addition to the natural landscapes of significant tourist interest, this is also a highly inhabited protected area, which gives it unique characteristics. Recently, several hiking trails have been developed in the Alto Alentejo region, with a special focus on the Parque Natural da Serra de S. Mamede.

According to EY-Parthenon (2020), the COVID-19 pandemic, which impacted tourism worldwide and brought nearly all tourism-related businesses to a standstill, proved to be an opportunity for low-density regions such as Alto Alentejo. The presence of rural areas, combined with natural landscapes offering a sense of freedom, has become crucial for certain businesses linked to accommodation in these geographic regions. Previous studies (e.g., Rivera et al., 2008; Reimer & Walter, 2013) have concluded that destination resources are critical attributes for developing destination competitiveness. Similarly, other studies (e.g. Sukserm et al., 2012) have found that the cultural and natural resources available at a tourist destination are key indicators in determining its competitive advantage. These resources, also considered from the communities' perspective,

are fundamental in developing key competitiveness factors for rural tourism destinations (C.-H. Chin et al., 2014), and hold particular significance in rural low-density territories.

The tourism resources of a destination enable the creation of a diverse range of activities, allowing visitors to enjoy different experiences in a rural tourism destination, which is fundamental for establishing the uniqueness of the destination (Lo et al., 2019). Furthermore, studies have highlighted that accommodation quality plays a significant role in influencing domestic demand for rural tourism (Bel et al., 2015). Accommodation quality is also recognized as one of the fundamental factors that significantly contribute to the competitiveness of rural tourism destinations (Dębski & Niemczak, 2016; Pavlovic & Cavlin, 2014; Ritchie & Crouch, 2010; Lo et al., 2019).

Sustainable tourism development in low-density rural areas presents an opportunity to enhance the economy and improve the livelihood of rural communities, while also positively impacting rural revitalization and helping to reduce the gap between urban and rural areas (Jia et al., 2022). This development relies on the ability to create and integrate value-added products that preserve local resources and maintain a competitive market position (Hassan, 2000). The creation of such value-added products is only achievable through the implementation of a collective awareness, where each stakeholder plays an integral role in a model that demands responsibility and active engagement, ensuring unique tourist experiences with tangible, positive outcomes from both the supply and demand perspectives (Moura & Aguiar, 2023).

3. METHODOLOGY

The primary objective of this study is to analyse whether location constitutes a significant competitive factor for hotels situated in low-density territories.

The population under study comprises hotel establishments located in the Alto Alentejo region. We chose this subregion because it is part of Alentejo, one of the regions in Portugal where tourism performance has been growing and standing out in recent years. However, this region presents distinct tourism characteristics and resources, as well as regional disparities in sector development. Alto Alentejo is the third subregion of Alentejo in terms of tourism demand and accommodation capacity. This subregion encompasses 15 municipalities and, as shown in the literature review, falls under the category of low-density territories.

Hotels were the most represented type of tourism accommodation in Portugal, accounting, in 2020, for approximately 88% of establishments. However, the Alentejo region had the lowest number of hotel establishments (7.5%) and, along with the Centre, showed the lowest prevalence of affiliated hotel establishments (Alves et al., 2021). In Alentejo, smaller-scale tourist establishments dominate (EY-Parthenon, 2020), with rural tourism standing out. In Alto Alentejo, out of a total of 150 tourism accommodations, 25 are hotels (Pordata, 2022), with approximately 50% located in the municipalities of Elvas, Portalegre, and Marvão.

To achieve the aim of this study, a quantitative methodology was employed, using a questionnaire survey as the data collection technique. A questionnaire is a research instrument consisting of a series of typically closed-ended questions designed to collect numerical data from a sample of participants (Bryman, 2012). The questionnaire was designed based on the literature review and was structured into 3 sections. The first section aims to characterize the surveyed hotel, followed by the identification of the most relevant tourism products and resources for the businesses. The third section focuses on analyzing the competitive strategies adopted by the hotel, with particular emphasis on the choice of the Alto Alentejo region as the location for the hotel operation. The questionnaire consists of 23 questions, 8 of which are open-ended, and the remaining ones are closed-ended with a Likert scale (1 to 5). To ensure reliability, a pre-test was conducted with a few hotel managers who were randomly selected. For the construction of the questionnaire, the Google Forms tool was used. It was sent directly via email to the directors of the hotel. Questionnaires were sent to the whole study population (25 hotels), but only the questionnaires from 16 hotels were considered valid. The data were analyzed using SPSS version 27.

4. RESULTS

The results indicate that the hotel units are distributed across 10 municipalities in Alto Alentejo, specifically in Elvas (23.5%), Portalegre (17.6%), Alter do Chão (11.8%), Ponte de Sor (11.8%), Avis (5.9%), Castelo de Vide (5.9%), Crato (5.9%), Marvão (5.9%), Monforte (5.9%), and Nisa (5.9%). The majority of the surveyed hotels are classified as 4-star and 5-star establishments, accounting for 88.2%, while only 11.8% are 3-star hotels. Additionally, most of the hotels were established before 2017, representing 75% of the sample.

Regarding the type of management, it was found that 58.8% of the hotels operate independently. Hotels integrated into hotel chains (7) with central reservation systems are affiliated with the

Pestana Pousadas Group (2), Vila Galé Hotels (2), Ridan Hotels (1), Nau Hotels (1), and the Fundação Inatel (1). The majority of the hotels are small-scale establishments, with 76.5% employing between 11 and 30 staff members in 2021, and each hotel having an average of 30 rooms.

Concerning the services offered to clients, most hotels provide standard services such as dining, bar, housekeeping and laundry, Wi-Fi, room service, and private parking. However, distinctive or premium services, such as a spa, gym, heated swimming pool, wine tastings, and chef's cuisine, are offered by fewer than half of the respondents.

In terms of marketing, all respondents use the internet as a means of communicating their products/services, with 88.2% doing so through the hotel's official website. In addition to this, the respondents highlighted print media (58.8%), brochures, and merchandising (both at 47.1%) as key communication channels. Approximately 82.4% of hotels offer price discounts on packages, while 52.9% participate in tourism fairs and workshops/conferences as a means of promoting and publicising their hotel units. Personal relationships are indicated by 94.1% of respondents as the preferred method of communication with their international target audience.

Regarding the tourist products and resources mentioned by the respondents, cultural and landscape tourism, as well as nature tourism, were highlighted as very important for their activities, supported by the presence of natural and cultural resources in the region.

When asked about the competitive strategies implemented by the hotel, the focus on service quality control and customer satisfaction stood out, with a median valor of 5 (very relevant). Following that, the introduction of new products and services to customers, understanding market trends, offering differentiated products and/or services compared to competitors, and the promotion and adoption of environmental practices within the hotel were also highlighted, all with a median value of 4.

Location was one of the elements of the hotel considered by the respondents as advantageous compared to the competition. In response to the question about the hotel's position relative to its competitors in various aspects (e.g., price, location, quality, services), 52.9% rated the location as 4 (favorable), and 17.6% rated it as 5 (very favorable).

When asked about their perception of the following parameters regarding the location of their hotel establishments, on a Likert scale of 1 (not important) to 5 (very important), the respondents unanimously agree that the region has tourist potential, with a variety of historical and landscape

resources. They believe that the Alto Alentejo is the right choice for the location of their establishments, that the region is competitive in terms of hotel business, and that they benefit from being located in rural areas. The respondents also consider that the success of the establishment is due to its location and that it would not be desirable for it to be situated elsewhere (Table 1).

Table 1. Location Parameters Statistics

Location Parameters	Likert Scale					Mean	Standard deviation
	1	2	3	4	5		
The region has tourist potential				41,2	52,9	4,4706	0,62426
I would prefer my establishment to be located elsewhere.	35,3	47,1				1,9412	1,02899
I feel confident with the choice of Alto Alentejo as the location for my establishment.				52,9	29,4	4,1176	0,69663
Do you consider that Alto Alentejo is competitive in relation to the market it is part of.			29,4	41,2	29,4	4,0000	0,79057
Do you think that the difficulty in managing a hotel unit in this region is higher compared to other regions with greater attractiveness			41,2	35,3		3,4706	0,87447
If your hotel establishment were located in a different region, do you believe it would have greater success.			58,8			2,8824	0,99262
Characteristics of more relief locations			23,5	41,2		3,5294	1,12459
Being located in rural areas				52,9		3,4118	1,22774
Location in cities/towns with lower population density			41,2	41,2		3,5294	0,94324
Do you consider the region to have a great diversity of historical and landscap resources				47,1	47,1	4,2941	0,98518

Source: Own elaboration based on SPSS 27.0

To understand the importance of location as a factor of competitiveness, contingency tables were created, relating the parameters concerning location (Table 1) with the characteristics of the hotels, namely their category and management type.

Regarding the hotel category, no significant discrepancies were observed between this variable and the importance attributed to location. However, it is worth noting that the sample includes only three hotels in the 3-star category, while the remaining ones are 4- and 5-star hotels.

Concerning the type of management, most of the surveyed hotels are independent (10), while 7 are part of hotel chains. The analysis revealed a slight tendency for independent hotels to have a stronger connection to the region and greater awareness of its tourism potential and its importance for the hotel's competitiveness, particularly the diversity of its natural and cultural heritage, as well as the characteristics of the rural environment in which they are located.

The results obtained in this study are consistent with past studies conducted in other countries as well as in other inland regions of Portugal (e.g., Ribeiro & Costa, 2017). Location is mentioned as a key competitiveness factor for these hotels and a competitive advantage over their rivals. Being situated in a territory characterized by rural landscapes and authentic natural and cultural resources enables these hotels to adopt differentiation strategies, offering visitors unique experiences (e.g., wine tasting). The small size of these establishments further allows for a greater focus on service personalization. Similar to Vrkljan's (2013) conclusions, hotel differentiation is primarily achieved through specialization, but also through the quality and consistency of hotel services. This was also identified as the most relevant competitive strategies among the surveyed hotels.

Moreover, these hotels consider nature-based resources, such as the Serra de São Mamede, a fundamental and distinctive asset that enables them to specialize in specific market niches.

Being located in a low-density territory presents opportunities for the surveyed hotels. However, as highlighted in the literature review, these areas also pose constraints that impact hotel management and competitiveness, which were also, to some extent, pointed out by the respondents.

When asked about specific measures or territorial resources that could be strategic for their hotel, respondents indicated that government support and nearby infrastructure are not highly important to their business. However, these factors often contribute to lower investment from companies, difficulties in retaining human resources in the region, and a slower increase in tourist demand.

5. CONCLUSION

The constant changes occurring in society have significant impacts on the tourism sector, increasing competition among companies and tourist destinations and presenting challenges for various stakeholders. Hotel business is undoubtedly one of the key assets of the tourism sector, essential for the establishment and development of any tourist destination.

Portugal's interior regions, classified as low-density areas, face several challenges, primarily due to population decline, economic disinvestment, and a limited capacity for innovation and diversification of economic activities. However, these characteristics also make these regions unique and distinctive, offering a sense of rurality and authenticity that is increasingly valued by tourism consumers. In the Alto Alentejo region, small-scale tourist accommodations dominate, particularly rural tourism establishments. However, there is a visible growth in small-scale hotel units with unique characteristics, though still concentrated in certain areas.

Given the increasing competition among hotels, there is a continuous need for them to adopt strategies based on various factors to maintain or expand their market share. Hotel location has been consistently highlighted in the literature as a critical factor for competitiveness. Therefore, the aim of this study was to analyze whether location is equally significant in low-density areas with lower tourist influx.

The results of this study indicate that hotels in the Alto Alentejo region are small-scale, predominantly independently managed, though 40% are part of hotel chains. Most are four-star establishments offering the common and necessary services to achieve this classification. In terms of competitiveness strategies, hoteliers emphasize ensuring high-quality service as well as the need to innovate and offer differentiated products and services. This trend is already visible in the additional services provided by some establishments (e.g., heated pools, wine tastings, and signature cuisine).

Regarding the region and hotel location, respondents recognize that the area is endowed with cultural and landscape resources, offering a rural and tranquil environment. These characteristics make the region unique and suitable for the implementation and development of their activities. The study highlights the importance of location and the characteristics of low-density regions for the competitiveness of these hotels.

The findings of this study have practical implications not only for academics but also for tourism managers, particularly hoteliers, as well as for destination management organizations. They provide valuable insights into the role of location in rural and low-density areas as a factor of competitiveness, as well as the communication and competitive strategies adopted by these hotels. The study's conclusions are particularly relevant for supporting regional development organizations' decisions related to the type of tourism investment attraction that should be

encouraged in the region, and for future hotel investors who may emerge in the Alto Alentejo, assisting them in defining competitiveness strategies and target audiences.

A limitation of this study is that not all hotels in the region were surveyed. Additionally, the data collection method, based mainly on closed-ended questions, may not capture or reflect the respondents' perception of potential factors that could influence tourism competitiveness in such territories and that were not extensively explored (e.g., human resources).

Future research could explore and compare competitiveness strategies, specifically the factor of "location," among different types of accommodation in the Alto Alentejo, and between low-density and high-density areas. Longitudinal studies could also track the impact of location on hotel performance over time.

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