



Validation of a market orientation adoption scale in rural tourism enterprises. Relationship between the characteristics of the enterprise and extent of market orientation adoption

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ABSTRACT

Market orientation (MO) is considered as a competitive strategy for the rural tourism sector. A MO adoption scale is proposed and validated for the rural tourism sector. Given the importance of MO, it is important to know the relationship between a firm's characteristics and MO adoption. This study makes a hierarchical segmentation to predict the behaviour of these firms when adopting the MO. Activity and category are the two characteristics that most effectively predict a firm's behaviour. The contribution made by this work is of interest given the new field of application achieved and which have implications for the professional sector.

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1. Introduction

Rural tourism is an increasingly important asset for the European economy (Buhalis and Deimezi, 2004). Its evolution represents a key tool in sustainable economic development and an alternative to the traditional offer of sun, sea and sand, encouraging diversification towards new destinations, and redistributing demand to form sustainable rural tourism destinations (WTO, 2007).

In recent years, interaction with the market has been made easier, to a great extent, by a growth in demand for this kind of tourism, triggered by greater interest in conserving the rural environment and in making direct contact with nature (Albacete-Sáez et al., 2007). However, this positive scenario should be viewed with a degree of moderation, given that currently there is increasing competitiveness in the international tourism market (WTO, 2007) which makes it more difficult to develop and retain market share in the different tourist destinations (Camisón, 2000; WTO, 2007). This situation calls for action, geared towards facilitating the progress of rural tourism enterprises. Achieving competitiveness in the market depends on the proper adjustment of supply to the requirements of demand, the capacity to match or improve on innovations introduced by competitors, and the embedding of innovations arising

from technological development (Camisón, 2000). These actions are systematically undertaken by those businesses that take a MO approach (Deshpandé et al., 1993; Kohli and Jaworski, 1990; Narver and Slater, 1990).

There is universal agreement throughout literature on the importance for organizations of adopting MO (Kirca et al., 2005), this being considered as equivalent to the development of a competitive advantage for the organization (Kohli and Jaworski, 1990; Narver and Slater, 1990). MO has a positive effect on organizational performance (Kohli and Jaworski, 1990; Narver and Slater, 1990), its effects extending to organizational results, employees, innovation and clients (Kirca et al., 2005). Despite the extensive body of literature that deals with MO, there are only a few recent works that apply MO to smaller service enterprises (Kara et al., 2005), micro service enterprises (Blankson and Omar, 2002), and for ethnic tourism enterprises (Altinay, 2010) and none that deals with the topic in relation to rural tourism businesses. However, there is no previous work that is aimed precisely to study the relationships between the characteristics of rural enterprises and MO adoption. The study of the relationships between the characteristics of the rural tourism enterprises and MO adoption is of interest for literature and the rural tourism sector since it helps to develop awareness of the different patterns of corporate behaviour with respect to MO adoption, behavioural patterns with major implications in relation to the company's competitiveness in the market place and highlight the importance and necessity of developing this work. In light of the above, there is a clear need to achieve greater knowledge regarding the adoption of MO within the rural tourism sector and how the characteristics of enterprises in this sector are

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related to the extent of MO adoption. In this aspect, no previous works have been carried out, and its study is of particular relevance for the rural tourism sector, given the repercussions MO is known to have for business performance. The aim of this work is to offer empirical evidence that contributes to reducing this knowledge gap in the relevant areas, based on achieving two secondary objectives:

- (1) To adapt a MO scale for its application to rural tourism enterprises. In order to achieve this objective outlined in this work, an exhaustive review of literature has been undertaken. In addition, two studies have been carried out, one qualitative, the other quantitative. These have made it possible to develop and validate an 'adoption of MO' scale in the rural tourism sector.
- (2) The study of the behaviour of enterprises in rural tourism to MO adoption in relation with the company's characteristics. In developing and analyzing MO adoption in the rural tourism sector and given the implications as a competitive strategy, this paper proposes the development of a hierarchical segment that describes the behaviour of enterprises in rural tourism to MO adoption in relation with the company's characteristics.

Although the effect of MO on business results is extensively explored in literature, its study in the context of the rural tourism sector makes a new contribution. Until now, literature has not responded to the question of whether the adoption of MO constitutes an appropriate strategy for the sector or whether the characteristics of rural tourism businesses have any effect on the behaviour of such businesses in relation to MO adoption. These considerations are of interest to the literature on MO, to specialist rural tourism literature, and to professionals in the tourism sector.

2. Literature review and hypotheses

2.1. Rural tourism sector

The study of rural tourism development and their needs require certain issues to be clarified. Firstly, neither "rural area" nor rural tourism is clearly defined. For Lane (1994), the latter occurs in the countryside. However, defining a rural area or zone is complex and subject to different interpretations and criteria (such as population density, nonurban space). Secondly, tourism activity in rural areas is heterogeneous. Different terminology is used according to aim or type of activity (farm, green, adventure, and ecotourism). Farm tourism indicates lodging on a cereal, vegetable, or animal farm. Farmers combine accommodation service with retail of their produce, obtaining greater added value from renting their buildings. Green tourism, the more common term in northern and central Europe, basically refer to farm and rural in their strictest sense. For Cals et al. (1995: 24): "it is the type of tourism that is lodged in the habitat of the farming area or in low impact accommodation within the region (rural dwellings, rural hostels, family-run hotels, etc.)". The aim is to get closer to the values of the rural world, such as its culture and heritage, contemplation of the countryside, tranquillity, physical and spiritual renewal, and the like.

In contrast, ecotourism emphasizes conservation of and respect for the environment. For Ross and Wall (1999), its main objectives are conservation of natural areas and local development. This study adopts the generic concept of rural tourism advanced by Fuentes-García (1995), namely "a tourist activity carried out in a rural environment, made up of an integrated leisure supply, aimed at a

demand whose motivation is its contact with the autochthonous surroundings and which is inter-related with the local society".

Lack of consensus regarding rural tourism and included activities extends to the understanding of its accommodation (Albacete-Sáez et al., 2007). Typology and terminology of such lodging is extremely varied depending on regional idiosyncrasies, both amongst and within countries and geographical areas. Thus, studies of rural accommodation can include houses typical of the region (also those offering bed and breakfast) and communal areas, rural hotels, rented homes, and also campsites (Albacete-Sáez et al., 2007).

The perspectives and premises outlined above enlightened this paper's development. The wealth and income generated in rural environments can be increased by improving competitive strategies actions to enable rural tourism businesses to compete in the international market and that in turn may give rise to the development of such companies, which due to its small size, usually has limited resources.

2.2. MO

The current concept of MO first emerged in the 1990s. It has been shown that the adoption of a MO approach by organizations contributes to the process of capturing, interpreting, disseminating and using market information regarding clients, competitors, distributors and suppliers. The greater the organization's MO, the more systematic and planned this process will be (Martín-Armario et al., 2008). Such activities increase the organization's ability to develop responses to the market that better meet current needs and wants of clients, and to anticipate their future needs and wants (Kohli and Jaworski, 1990; Narver and Slater, 1990). In the main, the concept of MO has been considered from two perspectives:

- (1) A cultural perspective: this conceptualizes MO as part of 'organizational culture' – permanently orientating the company towards the creation and delivery of superior value for its customers (Narver and Slater, 1990), as outlined in the proposed MO model MKTOR (Slater and Narver, 1993). This model identifies three dimensions in the adoption of MO: (a) orientation towards the customer, which enables the business to achieve sufficient knowledge and understanding of the target market so as to be able to continually create superior value for current or potential clients, based on their present and future needs; (b) orientation towards the competition, such that the business achieves insight into the short-term strengths and weaknesses, and the long-term capacity and strategies of its competitors. This insight enables it to evaluate the competitors' capacity to achieve greater client satisfaction; (c) cross-functional coordination, where the company's resources are employed in a coordinated approach and geared towards creating superior value for the client, by means of sharing and disseminating information throughout the business. Furthermore, it is said that any functional area of the business has the ability to create superior value for clients and that this is not limited to the marketing department (Slater and Narver, 1993).
- (2) A behavioural perspective: this conceptualizes MO in terms of specific behaviours of the organization – for example, Kohli and Jaworski (1990), who defined MO as the organization-wide generation of market intelligence pertaining to current and future customer needs, dissemination of the intelligence across departments, and organization-wide responsiveness to it. Based on their MO model MARKOR, Jaworski and Kohli (1993) consider the dimensions of market intelligence-generation, with regard to clients (present and future needs) and other

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