

The socio-economic profile of hikers in the mountains of Valencia Region, Spain: a comparative study between the perceptions of hikers' accommodation entrepreneurs and the hikers' profile

El perfil socioeconómico de los senderistas en las montañas de la Comunidad Valenciana, España: un estudio comparativo entre las percepciones de los empresarios de alojamientos senderistas y el perfil de los senderistas

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Abstract. The main objective of this study is to compare the perceptions of the socioeconomic profile that tourism operators have about their hikers/visitors with the socioeconomic profile of hiking users in the mountains of Valencia region (Spain). A mixed methodology has been used. First, 15 semi-structured interviews were conducted with entrepreneurs in the tourism industry. Secondly, 154 surveys were carried out with hikers to characterize their profile. Both samples were cross-checked to see the similarities and differences between the perceptions of both groups. The results indicate that changes in consumer trends, with the emergence of new market niches that are very interesting from a tourism point of view, such as the public new and very interesting market niches from a tourism point of view, such as women and senior female and senior public, as well as the local tourist or one-day hikers. These market segments represent an opportunity to consolidate an increasingly growing market. The results indicate that there are some similarities between some of the demographic and economic variables studied. However, in other variables there is a misperception of practitioners by employers. This information can help to better target potential tourists. This study also provides a very detailed description of specific profiles of hikers. This information can be very useful both for private sports tourism companies to be able to segment their clients and launch very specific promotional strategies.

Keywords: Sports Tourism; Tourism Industry Perceptions; Hikers Profile, Hiking, Spain

Resumen. El objetivo principal de este estudio es comparar las percepciones del perfil socioeconómico que tienen los operadores turísticos sobre sus visitantes con el perfil socioeconómico de los usuarios del senderismo en las montañas de la Comunidad Valenciana (España). Se ha utilizado una metodología mixta. En primer lugar, se realizaron 15 entrevistas semiestructuradas a empresarios del sector turístico. En segundo lugar, se realizaron 154 encuestas a senderistas para caracterizar su perfil. Ambas muestras se cruzaron para ver las similitudes y diferencias entre las percepciones de ambos grupos. Los resultados indican que existen cambios en las tendencias de consumo, surgiendo así nuevos nichos de mercado muy interesantes desde un punto de vista turístico, como son el público femenino y sénior, así como el turista de proximidad o bien los senderistas de un día. Estos segmentos de mercado representan una oportunidad para consolidar un mercado cada vez más creciente. Los resultados indican que existen ciertas similitudes entre algunas de las variables demográficas y económicas estudiadas. Sin embargo, en otras variables existe una percepción errónea de los profesionales por parte de los empresarios. Esta información puede ayudar a orientar mejor a los turistas potenciales.

Este estudio también proporciona una descripción muy detallada de los perfiles específicos de los senderistas. Esta información puede ser muy útil tanto para las empresas privadas de turismo deportivo para poder segmentar a sus clientes como para lanzar estrategias de promoción muy específicas.

Palabras clave: Turismo deportivo; Percepciones de la industria turística; Perfil de los senderistas, Senderismo, España

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Introduction

Currently there is a significant growth in the sports tourism sector that translates into the demand for activities linked to the use and consumption of nature. Hiking, cycling, water activities or climbing, among others, are some of the activities that are being practiced the most. According to various studies, the global economic impact of sports tourism is increasing and sports tourism is expected to represent a very powerful market segment in the medium term (Higham & Vistad, 2011; Wall-Reinius & Bäck, 2011).

Undoubtedly, the activities derived from sports tourism have an impact on the natural environment (Batyrbekov et al., 2024). The activity, the number of practitioners, the existing protection measures, etc. These are factors that can make the activity itself viable or not from an environmental point of view. It is for this reason that the different interest groups, both public and private, must take into account these types of factors with the aim

of proposing quality and responsible tourism that can be developed over time (Margaryan & Fredman, 2017). Interest groups, such as public administrations and private companies dedicated to the sports tourism sector, must establish strategies and make decisions seeking a balance between the socioeconomic benefits and the environmental impact that derives from said activities. There are many tools to have real information about this impact. One of the most relevant is the study of the impact of the activities themselves. According to several studies, one of the most important variables and one that can most affect the natural environment is the tourist himself, that is, the mark he leaves on the environment (Mundet & Coenders, 2010). It is for this reason that the analysis of the socioeconomic profile of the tourist is essential to propose strategies and initiatives to preserve the natural environment. At the same time, there are other parallel strategies that must be taken into account when developing products and services focused on sports tourism (Duglio & Beltramo, 2017). The main objective of this study is to compare the perceptions of the socioeconomic profile that tourism

operators have about their hikers/visitors with the socio-economic profile of hiking users in the mountains of Valencia region (Spain). This information would also allow to understand if the tourist operators have a correct perception of the practitioners and if not, these results would help them to propose better quality services.

Literature review

The increase in sports practice

The practice of physical activity worldwide differs greatly according to regions and for this reason the WHO aims to promote physical activity in regions where the rates of this kind of practice are lower (World Health Organization, 2021).

In the European context, sports practice is much better established as a result of greater economic and social development as well as clearly defined public policies that have managed to promote sports practice in the vast majority of countries. There is no doubt that policymakers are aware of the great health benefits of practising physical activity (Eigenschenk et al., 2019).

In the case of Spain, 81% of the population say they get around on foot, which is a positive figure since it is a few percentage points above the European average. There is no doubt that Spain has experienced a significant increase in the number of people doing physical activity, which is closely linked to increased awareness of the importance of keeping active.

The general data is very positive and it is possible that the trend will continue to grow in coming years. That said, it is considered essential to highlight two aspects that are particularly noteworthy: on the one hand, the increase of almost 14 points in the female sex, and on the other hand, how sports practice has also increased in the most advanced age groups.

Hiking, a sport for everyone

Hiking is one of the most significant recreational sports activities that exist today (Fredman & Tyrväinen, 2010; Pomfret, 2006). According to various research projects carried out in Nordic countries, North America and New Zealand, the beauty of the landscape, natural heritage, the experience of nature, as well as tranquillity and solitude have proved to be important reasons for hiking (Kyle et al., 2004; Wall-Reinius & Fredman, 2007).

According to a longitudinal study on the socio-economic profile of hikers, carried out in 1980 and 2003 in the mountains of Sweden, the percentage of hikers under 40 years of age was 65%. For the year 2003, this same group represented 38%, with a clear increase in the older population (Wall-Reinius & Bäck, 2011).

According to some authors, the practice of hiking is a very effective tool for disease prevention and improving physical and psychological health in the older population (Mackenzie & Brymer, 2018; Levinger et al., 2018). Hiking has been proved to have a very positive impact on reducing

levels of stress, anxiety and depression (Mutz & Müller, 2016; Raichlen et al., 2016).

In other research studies focused on the younger population, it was also observed that the practice of hiking provides major physical, psychological and social benefits that have a huge impact throughout a person's life (Gray et al., 2015).

Finally, in more recent studies, it has been possible to demonstrate that the practice of hiking in populations with some type of disability can be a tool for improving health from different points of view (Eigenschenk et al., 2019).

In Spain, hiking is also experiencing very strong growth, going from 2 to 5 percentage points in the 2010/2015 period. It is worth mentioning that the practice of football, in all its aspects, stands at 7 percentage points for the year 2015. If this upward trend continues, there is no doubt that the practice of hiking or mountaineering is set to become one of the most widely practised activities across the whole of Spain.

Given the importance and the growth experienced by the practice of walking and strolling, the survey focuses its interest on this practice (Martin & Mediavilla, 2020). The main data obtained for the year 2019 show that at least 70.6% of the population practices this activity and 68.2% do it at least once a week (Ministerio de Cultura y Deporte, 2020). These results are very interesting since they can be the basis from which to publicise the sports practice of hiking and link it with cultural or heritage factors, as well as for promoting the health of its practitioners.

All of these research studies simply reinforce that the practice of hiking is increasingly widespread in all sectors of the population and that there is a need to invest economic and human resources in improving what is currently on offer in terms of hiking activity (Wu et al., 2017).

Hiking as a tourist product or service

Mountain regions and protected areas generate special interest from the point of view of leisure and tourism (Bedie & Hudson, 2003; Chhetri et al., 2004; Margaryan & Fredman, 2017; Sievänen et al., 2011). During 2019 in Finland, the economic impact of rural tourism in the 40 national parks was 219.3 million euros, while in the 5 hiking areas it was 13.1 million euros (Metsähallitus Organisation, 2019).

Another study on the interest in the use of nature from a tourism point of view carried out in the Jotunheimen National Park in Norway showed that this space was visited by tourists of 47 different nationalities during the year 2010 (Higham & Vistad, 2011).

This factor represents a fantastic opportunity for companies offering products and/or services related to sports tourism and experiences in nature (Duglio & Beltramo, 2017; Rebolledo, 2020). One of the sports tourism products or services that most attracts tourists is hiking (Raya et al., 2018; Vidal-Matzanke & Vidal-González, 2022). From an international point of view, the data shows that Spain is positioned as one option among many hiking

destinations. It is for this reason that one out of every 4 trips motivated by the desire to do sport was made for the practice of hiking. Evidence shows that the data on international tourist arrivals for hiking are relatively low. However, this factor represents a great opportunity for companies to create products and services related to sports tourism and hiking with the aim of offering higher quality (Cabanilla et al., 2021; Leal et al., 2021; Lee et al., 2015; Weed, 2005; Weed & Bull, 2009).

As indicated by Rokenes et al. (2015), sports tourism products and/or services, including hiking, must be understood as a global experience with high added value (Reimann et al., 2011). The added value of the experience can be understood as the satisfaction and usefulness that customers/tourists obtain when paying for the product and/or service (Nagle & Holden, 2002; Silveira et al., 2024).

In this sense, the role of the guide or companion is highlighted as a very powerful way of providing greater added value to the activity, whether it is a sport, adventure or hiking itinerary (Mykletun, 2018; Rokenes et al., 2015). According to various authors, the guide has a number of roles, including that of planner, storyteller, cultural interpreter, environmental conservator, etc. after all, he or she is an expert who knows all the necessary elements to make the hiker's experience into one with high added value (Curtin, 2009; Lemoine & Pereira, 2019; Mathisen, 2012; Pomfret, 2011).

That said, one of the strategies to promote hiking as a tourist/sports activity that has a socio-economic impact on the destination is to come up with an offer based on quality, in which the client's positive experience is a fundamental aspect (Cánoves et al., 2004; Redondo et al., 2023; Reimann et al., 2011; Stoeckl, 2008).

Some studies segment the tourist/hiker in a very detailed way: according to the motivations for the visit (Beh & Bruyere, 2007), the activity (Mehmetoglu, 2007), the motivations for the trip (Park & Yoon, 2009) or satisfaction (Bigné & Andreu, 2004; Chaves-Castro et al., 2024), among others. However, it is considered necessary to delve further into the knowledge of the socio-demographic profile of the tourist/hiker in Spain in general; and in the mountain areas of the Region of Valencia in particular, so companies carrying out their activity in this area can create tourist/hiking experiences adapted to the characteristics and interests of their clients (Sievänen et al., 2011).

The mountain areas of the Region of Valencia: A brief description

The mountain areas of the Region of Valencia are highly attractive because of their natural heritage. The object of this research focuses on the province of Castellón. This province is the second most mountainous in Spain and one of the most powerful attractions in the entire region (figure 1).



Figure 1: Map of the province of Castellón showing the Penyalgosa and Tinença de Benifassà Natural Parks.

Currently, there is a diversification in economic activity, including honey and cheese production, truffle gathering and the emerging tourism/sports approach for which numerous public and private entities have opted. These organisations have seen the natural and heritage environment and in the roads once used by livestock as an opportunity to promote hiking (Vidal-González & Vidal-Matzanke, 2020).

Materials and methods

The aim of this work is to carry out a comparative study between the perceptions that entrepreneurs have about the socio-demographic profile of their visitors and the profile of hiking users in the inland mountains of Valencia. In order to achieve this objective, a mixed methodology has been used, combining qualitative and quantitative research techniques.

A qualitative methodology has been designed to understand employers' perceptions of the socio-demographic profile of their visitors. As Newland and Aicher (2018) point out, a qualitative approach provides valuable information about the object of study.

The research technique used was the interview, as in Moscoso's words, is very viable "for delving into the specific aspects we required, so we had to select very particular individuals who knew how to provide us with the information we needed" (2008, p.62).

A total of 15 semi-structured interviews were carried out, the duration of which ranged between 40 and 70 minutes. The profiles of the people interviewed included various stakeholders involved in hiking accommodation in both the private and the public spheres. These stakeholders have direct contact with users/hikers through the various services and/or products they offer.

Table 1.

Informant characteristics / Semi-structured individual interviews

Interview	Informant characteristics	Type of accommodation/company	Sport practice	Gender	Municipality
EE1	Owner	Rural House	Yes	Male	Vistabella del Maestrazgo
EE2	Owner	Hostel	Yes	Male	Vilafranca del Cid
EE3	Owner	Rural House	No	Male	Vilafranca del Cid
EE4	Mayor	Hotel	No	Male	Portell
EE5	Owner	Hotel	No	Female	Vilafranca del Cid
EE6	Manager	Campsite	Yes	Male	Vilafranca del Cid
EE7	Administrator	Hotel	No	Male	Ares del Maestrazgo
EE8	Manager	Holiday resort	Yes	Male	Villahermosa del Río
EE9	Owner	Hotel	Yes	Male	Cinctorres
EE10	Employee	Active Tourism Company	Yes	Male	Forcall
EE11	Employee	Hotel	Yes	Male	Forcall
EE12	Employee	Municipal company	Yes	Female	Morella
		Municipal organisation	Yes	Female	Morella
EE13	Administrator	Hostel	Yes	Male	El Boixar
EE14	Employee	Active Tourism Company	No	Female	Pobla de Benifassà
EE15	Administrator	Hostel	Yes	Male	Vallibona
		Guest house	Yes	Male	Vallibona

The interviews were carried out between the months of October 2021 and August 2022. All the interviews were carried out in a quiet space, individually, in order not to have any element that would distort the opinion of each of the participants. To carefully follow the scientific literature regarding work techniques in interviews, on several occasions, it was necessary to explain to the interviewees that the interviews had to be individual.

The profiles selected for the interview meet the double geographical and professional criteria. On the one hand, regarding professional criteria, the various participants profiles that are involved in the field of sports tourism and hiking have been selected. These profiles represent entrepreneurs, employees of tourism promotion associations, politicians, and locals. The reason for this variety is because of the great importance of having a variety of opinions and points of view on similar topics. On the other hand, regarding the geographical criterion, an attempt has been made to represent the greatest number of localities in the area investigated. The geographical heterogeneity of the sample is necessary due to the great variety, specialization, and experience of hiking tourism in the different locations.

The interviewees were aware of the researchers' professional interest in their work and gave their verbal consent to being interviewed. The interviews were transcribed so the information could be sorted, categorised and analysed.

A quantitative approach is used to gain a more analytical understanding of the profile of hiker users. This type of approach makes it possible to obtain information on a larger scale, which can then be standardised. The research technique used was the user survey. For the design of the survey, we have based ourselves on the works on personal tourist profile analysis and visitor satisfaction models (Bernini & Cagnone, 2014; Perić et al., 2019). A total of 154 surveys were carried out. The profiles selected were randomly selected to meet the sample selection criteria. All the profiles belong to the group of hikers. All the surveys were carried out in the natural environments and mountains

close to the points interviewed in the qualitative part. Within the selected geographical environment there are two very important natural parks in the region: the Penyagolosa Natural Park and the Tinença de Benifassà Natural Park. The data collection has been carried out between May and December 2022, thus fulfilling a temporal variety in the sample collected.

To carry out the information analysis procedure, the script was prepared and standardized according to the categories of information that have been cited. This allows researchers to deepen the knowledge they provide informants about the perceptions they have about their visitors.

This research study with qualitative methodology was based on the characterisation of elements put forward by Saldaña (2011) and was adapted according to the elements studied by Vidal-González and Fernández-Piqueras (2021).

Therefore, a very thorough process has been followed for data analysis to provide maximum rigor and reliability to the results (Jennings, 2005). First, the purpose of the interview is explained to the interviewees, and they are asked to give their approval or waiver for the interviewee to be recorded by audio means. All the interviewees are recorded and later transcribed in the Microsoft Office Word 2017 software. Each one of the transcriptions is made as soon as possible, to complement the recorded information with notes observed throughout the interview. As Miles and Huberman (1994) indicate, one of the advantages of qualitative data recording techniques, such as interviews or direct observation, allows for greater contact with specific contexts, which greatly enriches the information obtained.

According to Lincoln and Guba (1985) the triangulation of results in qualitative methodology is fundamental. To triangulate the results and provide greater reliability to the data obtained. In the words of Phillips and Jorgensen (2002), it is about systematizing the analysis of data in search of meanings.

A classification of the qualitative data is carried out to have them divided into different categories. Categorization makes it possible to divide interviewees' topics of interest

and therefore understand the interaction that exists between the various elements that characterize the environment.

The analysis of interviewees' discourse has an important application in the study of qualitative data because it is possible to establish relationships between the ideas. The technique used provides us with the key concepts to see the elements related to the socioeconomic profile of hikers. A descriptive analysis was carried out on the categories of information forming part of the object of study.

Results

Hiking does not distinguish between the gender

If hiking is approached from a gender perspective, the various informants seem to have a fairly common opinion. This was indicated by interviewee 14 when asked about the percentage of women and men who visit their establishment to practice hiking, he answered:

"I think it's quite an even spread, yes, I'd say it's about 50/50, yes. It could be that maybe a little more men, but yes, basically there isn't much differentiation by gender".

A similar distribution between women and men (50/50) is what interviewee 1 shared with us, alleging that his audience is made up mostly of couples, sometimes being same-sex couples. This same topic provided similar data from some of the other interviewees (2, 3, 6, 7, 8, 10 and 15). All these establishments have some factors in common, which could be due to their degree of specialization in sports activities being lower than others who were also interviewed.

In contrast to this, we were able to observe a huge difference in terms of gender in the establishment of interviewee 13 who told us that:

"We started as a company doing quite demanding cycling and hiking activities and then we set up the hostel. I'd say that the percentage men/women is 70/30 and that 30% would account for women who come here to go hiking or trail running".

The gender distribution of the hikers surveyed in the different natural areas shows very similar data. The percentages are very even: 46% of hikers are women, while 54% belong to the male group. These data corroborate the assertion that hiking is an activity that does not distinguish between genders.

Many hikers in the inland mountains of Castellón come from Spain

The results on the place of origin of the hiker draw several very interesting conclusions. On the one hand, the vast majority of establishments made special mention of the year 2020 with a common denominator: "the local tourist". Several factors are behind the current existence of local tourism, but there is no doubt that the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic and the consequent restrictions have made local tourism a key factor for these establishments. Even so, the interviewees were also asked about more

ordinary years, so the results shared here have taken a normal situation into account.

According to the results obtained, it seems that in the vast majority of cases, there is a high predominance of national tourism over international tourism. According to interviewee 5: "100% of my clients are nationals; I'd say that 90% are from the Region of Valencia and the remaining 10% are from Catalonia". Both regions have borders with each other. These results coincide with those shared by interviewee 10, although he clarified that the 10% belonging to Catalonia tend to come from Tarragona (the southern province of Catalonia). Interviewee 11 also told us that 100% of the people who visit the tourist office are nationals, using the previously mentioned concept of "proximity tourism".

In contrast to a large presence of national tourists, there are other establishments with significant percentage points of international travellers. It seems that each one responds to specific marketing strategies. According to interviewee 6 there was:

"A high demand from international visitors. Making a quick comparison, we've had clients from the Netherlands, Germany, Portugal, Switzerland, France, England, etc."

Interviewee 15 also shared with us that a significant part of his audience is international. This can be explained by the strategic decision they made to work together with a trip organiser company:

"Yes, yes. Of course. Yes, yes. Plus, now we work with a company called Olivia Travel, which sends us mainly Dutch people, from Holland, I work specifically with Dutch people. And the vast majority are usually women".

With regard to the distribution of hikers by origin or provenance, the results are very clear, as the surveyed sample is mostly national. The distributions indicate that 97% of the hikers are national, while the remaining 3% come from other countries. Analysing the micro data, it can be seen that of the 97% of hikers from the national level, 139 belong to the Community of Valencia, 8 to Catalonia, 1 to Castilla la Mancha and 1 to the Community of Madrid. The 3% that belong to the international sphere come from Switzerland and Austria.

Hiking, a sport for all ages

From an age point of view, broadly speaking, the results found seem to coincide that the majority age group practising hiking is somewhere between 30 and 60 years old. However, we believe that for practical purposes and for application in the field of sports tourism, we need to take a more in-depth look at the information provided by the informants.

Interviewee 1, manager of a rural house, commented that the age of his clients ranged between 30 and 70 years, although if he had to narrow down that age range, he thought there would be a certain predominance of the 35 to 50 age group. Along the same lines are the results shared by interviewee 5: "My clients have very similar characteristics, the vast majority are between 30 and 60 years old and

usually come in large groups to go hiking." Similar results were shared by interviewee 10, who informed us that the vast majority of their hiking clients belonged to the 35 to 60 age group. Or interviewee 13, who also clarifies that the ages of hikers ranged between 25 and 60 years. These results indicate certain trends regarding hikers' ages, although the age ranges are very wide.

Another sector of interviewees were much more specific when it came to establishing the age ranges of hikers. Interviewee 2 set the age ranges at a generic level, between 25 and 75 years old, however, he clarified in a very specific way that: "in hikers I think so. In hiking 40 and upwards, 40/50 and 50/60, in those 20 years". Similar results were shared by interviewee 6, who stated that the vast majority of people interested in hiking were between 50 and 60 years old.

The results on the distribution of hikers by age groups show that hiking is an activity for most of the public. Specifically, ramblers between the ages of 22 and 72 were surveyed. The distribution by age group was even. The 19-29 age group is represented by a total of 27 hikers, while the 30-39 age group is made up of 34 hikers. The largest group, with 40 hikers, is the 40-49 age group, while the 50-59 age group is down to 30 hikers. Finally, it is positively surprising that hikers over 60 years of age make up a total of 23 hikers.

Hiking is a social activity that is practised in groups

From the point of view of groups for hiking, all the interviewees stated that there were different groups: large groups of hikers, small groups, families, couples and individuals. Each interviewee referred to different percentages depending on the different characteristics that surround their environment.

Some establishments claimed to have a fairly diversified demand and an annual presence of various types of groups. As interviewee 15 stated:

"If we analysed over the course of a year, 40% of our visitors who do hiking would be couples, another 40% would be made up of families, another 10% would be small groups of friends and the last 10% would belong to large groups of hikers or individuals. People who practice hiking individually would be a residual percentage, but would still exist".

Similar distributions were shared by interviewee 14. For him, the percentages would be: 30% couples, 35% families, 15% small groups and another 15% large groups. Or interviewee 1, who told us that the vast majority of hikers were grouped in pairs (45%) or families (45%), while small groups (5%) or individuals (5%) were very much a minority.

Similar results were obtained from information shared by interviewee 10. According to him, 90% of hikers were grouped in pairs, while the remaining 10% were families. Interviewee 12 also gave prominence to couples with 80%, while another 10% accounted for families and the remaining 10% were large groups.

The results obtained from the ramblers' surveys indicate a variability in the way in which ramblers practise this activity. Half of the hikers go hiking with friends. While 23% hiked with a partner, 22% hiked with their family and the remaining 6% hiked alone.

Spring and autumn, the preferred hiking seasons

In our research, we have been able to establish a rough estimate of the most predominant seasons for hiking. Knowing this information can help establishments improve on their strengths and counteract their weaknesses. The vast majority of establishments seem to agree on a general idea, which is that extreme temperatures in winter and summer are not a factor that attracts hikers. Instead, spring and autumn temperatures are much better hiking. Along with this variable, clients' holiday periods also need to be taken into account, as they will vary depending on origin.

According to those interviewed, the aforementioned time ranges contain specific periods with high demand, such as holidays and many weekends. As interviewee 1 told us:

"There is a high demand during the weekend. As I told you, our clients are people who mostly work during the week and can get away during the weekend, in the holidays or for long weekends".

Similar assessments were made by other interviewees such as 3, 6 and 7. Like interviewee 15, who told us that the best seasons of all for hiking activity were spring and autumn. According to him: "some hikers come in summer but the weather is more adverse, because of the heat."

The results obtained from the surveys of hikers indicate that the predominant seasons for hiking are spring and autumn, both with 142 responses. As for summer and winter, the results are very positive, with 104 and 102 hikers, respectively, saying that they go hiking during these seasons.

Hiking has a positive socio-economic impact on mountain regions.

Hiking is an activity that can be practised by the vast majority of the public. The sports tourism sector is aware of the great potential that exists in hiking as a product and/or service that enhances the tourist experience. For this reason, hiking represents one of the fastest growing tourist activities. There are various characteristics that facilitate or hinder the practice of hiking, including orography or weather conditions, among others.

All this set of variables is necessary for a fundamental objective: the socio-economic impact of hiking in rural areas. According to different interviewees, there is a real socio-economic impact that helps local towns and villages. According to interviewee 2, there is a significant economic impact, as:

"This flow of people brings money into the town. They go shopping at the bakery, they buy vegetables, they spend money and thanks to that the economy is moving".

And indeed, as interviewee 8 shared with us, hiking can be a fundamental activity that helps improve the local economy, because in his view:

"Yes. I think so too. There are more and more people

who are doing hiking and those people really do come to the mountains, they stay to eat in a bar up here and spend the day. That logically generates work and work generates jobs and obviously it's going to make a difference. You can really see that, you can see it happening”.

There is a very positive economic impact in natural and mountain areas. 66% of the respondents say that their expenditure per person per day is less than €50, while another 29% say they spend between €50 and €100 per person per day. The remaining 5% say they spend between €100 and €200 per person per day.

Discussion

The practice of physical activity is becoming more widespread and consolidated worldwide. In the European context, data on sports practice, in any of its modalities, are very relevant (Sievänen, Neuvonen & Pouta, 2011; Margaryan & Fredman, 2016). Some of the reasons for the exponential increase in sports practice are the greater awareness of health factors (Eigenschenk et al., 2019), better training and knowledge about the benefits of the activity or the new, more sustainable forms of travel (Eurostat, 2014), to mention just a few.

In this context, the activity of walking, in its most basic form, and hiking, in its more technical-sports aspect, are positioned as one of the activities within reach of the vast majority of the general public (Pomfret, 2006; Fredman & Tyrväinen, 2010; Wall-Reinius & Bäck, 2011). Sports tourism has also found in hiking an opportunity to improve the tourist experience on offer (Beedie & Hudson, 2003; Chhetri, Arrowsmith & Jackson, 2004; Sievänen, Neuvonen & Pouta, 2011; Margaryan & Fredman, 2016).

In light of the data obtained both quantitatively and qualitatively, the distribution of hikers by gender is equitable, with a 50/50 % representation. These results seem to have a strong relationship with studies run by the Spanish Ministry of Culture and Sport (2020) that point to the strong increase in female practice in recent years, to the point of parity. As indicated by Wall-Reinius and Bäck (2011), in the European population, the percentages by sex have been equal for some decades now.

The vast majority of hikers in the territory studied come from the nearest towns (97%), while the presence of foreign tourists is very limited. In terms of the characteristics of the hiker within the sports tourism framework, there is still a split between national and international tourism. It seems that the COVID-19 pandemic has triggered national tourism due to the large number of restrictions that governments have been forced to take. The first is that the data were obtained during the pandemic, when mobility was reduced and international travel was limited. In this sense, a significant increase in intra-provincial or intra-regional mobility was observed, which may explain these numbers. This has given rise to a concept that will be very interesting for scientific studies in coming years within the framework of research on

economy, development and tourism, that of proximity tourism. Despite all this, establishments should not lose sight of international tourists, since, as has been shown, they represent an important source of income, especially in countries that receive tourists from other countries with higher incomes (Higham & Vistad, 2011; Duglio & Beltramo, 2018).

In the case of age groups, it has been shown that in global terms the practice of hiking extends to almost the entire range of practitioners. Although the informants focus on the age range between 30 and 60, they also mentioned that a large part of the demand consists of families, which is why it would be necessary to widen these age ranges. According to the results, each of the informants specified more precise age ranges, but this is partly due to highly specialised sports practice products and services. It is for this reason that the age ranges must be viewed from a holistic perspective of the destination as a whole. These results are very similar to the longitudinal study undertaken in the Nordic countries by Wall-Reinius and Bäck (2011), where they were able to observe how the average ages of hikers varied in the years 1980-2003, with a clear increase in the adult population. As for the age groups, it seems that young people between 20 and 30 years old are the ones who practise hiking the least, so there is a need to study that age group. According to Garms, Fredman & Mose (2016) in their study on the motivations of German tourists to travel to the mountains of Scandinavia, specifically the Fulufjället National Park, family trips represent one of the most important segments within the sports tourism framework. Special attention should be paid to the 60 and older age group.

In the case of the types of groupings, the results differ slightly between the two methodologies. While in the qualitative one there is a predominance of families and couples, in the quantitative one almost 50% corresponds to friends. This can be explained by the fact that hikers who do not spend the night away from home travel more with friends than with families or couples. This factor may represent an opportunity for the lodgings that every weekend have a very interesting floating population in the natural areas. From a tourism point of view, we would recommend on-site promotion of the establishments in order to promote the complementary offer.

The data obtained indicate that spring and autumn are the favorite seasons for hiking in this territory, which coincides with the characteristics of the Mediterranean climate, with hot summers and winters with episodes of intense cold. However, it is interesting to note that the number of hikers in winter and summer is also quite high. In the case of summer, we believe that the explanation has to do with the high occupancy of rural lodgings coinciding with the traditional August vacations, a time when hiking activity also takes place, but at a lower intensity and concentrated in the first or last hours of the day. These results are associated with reasonably mild winters, in which hiking activity can be carried out without problems. Only one or two moments of heavy snowfall or extreme

cold during the winter should be discarded, when it is not advisable to do this activity. In any case, the data show that hiking can be practiced throughout the year, breaking with the problem of seasonality of the activity that affects other tourism sectors, such as the beach.

There is no doubt that all the interviewees valued the economic impact that these activities have on the environment, thus corroborating the statements made in other impact studies (Beedie & Hudson, 2003; Chhetri,

Arrowsmith & Jackson, 2004; Sievänen, Neuvonen & Pouta, 2011; Margaryan & Fredman, 2016). The socio-economic impact generated in these spaces is a source of new products and services that have an impact on the different companies directly related to the tourism-sports sector, as well as on other types of local businesses. All this represents a great opportunity for rural areas (Batyrbekov et al., 2024; Silveira et al., 2024).

Table 2.
Summary of the main contributions and their recommendations

Main Conclusions	Explanation	Recommendations
Hiking does not distinguish between the gender.	Interviews and survey shown that is a 50/50 activity.	Importance of the growing female audience.
Many hikers in the inland mountains of Castellón come from Spain.	97% of travellers are from Spain, mostly from the same studied region.	Strengthening the offer of local tourism.
Hiking, a sport for all ages.	We found hikers of all age groups, with those between 40 and 49 years of age standing out.	Boosting the offer of senior tourism.
Hiking is a social activity that is practised in groups.	Only 6% of hikers do it alone.	Create offers for the 1-day tourist.
Spring and autumn, the preferred hiking seasons.	All seasons are favourable for the practice of hiking, but there is a high number that avoids summer because of high temperatures.	Creating products and services adapted to the low seasons.
Hiking has a positive socio-economic impact on mountain regions.	66% of hikers spend less than 50 euros per day.	Generate new products and services associated with hiking that increase the expenditure/person/day ratio.

Conclusions

In recent decades, the practice of physical activity has undergone an exponential increase worldwide. A large proportion of the population in developed countries practises physical activity on a daily basis, while in developing countries it is also gradually on the rise. Access to information technologies, public health and well-being plans linked to the activity itself are factors that allow this development (Sievänen, Neuvonen & Pouta, 2011; Margaryan & Fredman, 2016; Eigenschenk et al., 2019). Hiking is becoming one of the most widely practised activities due to its characteristics, as it is an activity suitable for the vast majority of audiences (Pomfret, 2006; Fredman & Tyrväinen, 2010; Wall-Reinius & Bäck, 2011). In this sense, hiking has found a very good fit within the framework of sports tourism, being a sports product that suits the vast majority of audiences very well (Beedie & Hudson, 2003; Chhetri, Arrowsmith & Jackson, 2004; Sievänen, Neuvonen & Pouta, 2011; Margaryan & Fredman, 2016). Both the entrepreneurs of the hiking lodges and the hikers themselves indicate that there is a positive economic impact in the region. According to the data analysis of the tourism sector in the area, we believe that there are some strategies that can be improved in order to provide better and more services to visitors. An increase in digitalization or a broader proposal of complementary services are two good examples of these improvement initiatives, which will have a positive economic and social impact on the sector.

This study also provides a very detailed description of specific profiles of hikers. This information can be very useful both for private sports tourism companies to be able to segment their clients and launch very specific promotional strategies, as well as for public administrations

to propose and improve current legislation on the use of natural parks, health promotion strategies, local area conservation through training, etc.

Finally, a number of recommendations emerge from this study that may be of great interest to the tourism sector. First, there is a large increase in female participation in hiking activities, which represents a very interesting market segment. Secondly, the senior public is increasingly interested in the hiking offer together with other complementary activities that can generate higher income. Thirdly, the local tourist represents another segment to be taken into account, as well as the 1-day hikers. Although each of these has its own particularities, both can cover the tourist offer in low seasons. Fourthly, the adaptation of the hiking offer to the different periods of the year must be assessed. Fifth, the proposal of these different products and/or services should be made from a global vision of the tourism industry with the aim of providing a tourist experience that has a return in the territory.

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