

Article

Improving Guest and Owner Satisfaction through a Circular Economy: An Agritourism Case Study

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Abstract: This study examines the role of agritourism in developing strategies to promote a circular economy by applying the 3Rs (reduce, reuse, and recycle) and improving guests' satisfaction. It contributes to filling the gap in the literature regarding the challenges posed, impact evidence, potential trade-offs, and socioeconomic considerations for the application of the 3Rs strategy in small tourism businesses. Interviews with hotel owners/hosts and guests were conducted through mainly qualitative methods, and the content was analyzed. This study reports on a case study conducted with a convenience sample of customers from a rural tourism company in Portugal to assess their position concerning the company's 3Rs strategy. The case study reveals that common categories—hosts, breakfast, decoration, environment, and comfort—appreciated by guests align with the 3Rs practices. It was found that being environmentally responsible, taking part in the circular economy, and interacting with it can improve not only the satisfaction of guests but also hosts, thus creating memorable experiences for both. This study also shows that the position of customers regarding the 3Rs is not monolithic, with reusing and recycling emerging most prominently. This study shows that, in this context, a circular economy is feasible, provides tangible benefits, and successfully combines operational efficiency and guest convenience. This study also shows that it is possible to establish a successful tourism supply strategy based on a circular economy, particularly the 3Rs. Still, this strategy should not look at the 3Rs as if they were a uniform reality.

Keywords: agritourism; circular economy; 3Rs; guest and host satisfaction; organic agriculture



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1. Introduction

Nowadays, the hospitality industry is central to the economy and society. Tourism is a major supplier to the European economy. In 2022, 2.7 billion nights were spent in tourist accommodation across the EU [1]. Because of the growing access to the internet, it has become easier to travel, which prompts the ensuing supply chain in the sector [2,3]. Such a rise in tourism has led to a likewise increase in waste [4,5]. The depletions range from energy consumption to solid waste created by tourists [4]. The sector is aware of the need to implement more environmentally friendly strategies to achieve sustainable tourism throughout the value chain [6].

Concerning sustainable approaches, the hospitality industry has tried to embrace practices of circular economy (CE), green corporate governance, and environmental management systems [7], as accommodation facilities with green practices present high scores in guest satisfaction [8]. Emphasis is placed on mitigating the creation of waste, including pollution, while maximizing environmental efficiency [4]. This approach is equivalent to the 3Rs strategy (reuse, recycle, and reduce) that intends to both extend a product's life cycle and mitigate waste. It involves the implementation of green corporate governance and environmental management systems, leading to superior business performance [7].

Although there has been evidence, for several decades, of the importance of sustainability and its social and environmental impacts, it has not been the priority of most business models [9]. New environmentally friendly behaviors are required. In this vein, given the sparse literature on the topic of CE in the hospitality industry, we suggest an exploratory case study in the Portuguese context.

UN Tourism and the European Committee of the Regions have established a partnership to prepare an exhaustive study on the potential of tourism for promoting socio-economic development in rural areas, as well as the scope of its impact. The report highlights the potential of rural tourism to contribute to the resilience of regional and local communities, helping to address challenges such as depopulation, inequality, and limited access to basic services. Zurab Pololikashvili, UN Secretary-General for Tourism, said, regarding this topic, that “Tourism has the potential to transform societies, stimulate local economic development and empower local communities. This joint study with the European Committee of the Regions highlights the importance of rural tourism in contributing to sustainable development in Europe” [10].

This highlights the resilience of rural tourism, economic diversification, cultural preservation, job creation, and challenges and opportunities for sustainable development.

Infrastructure development, growing environmental conscience, support of local government and community, availability of funds from the government, and participation of the private sector are the primary factors driving rural tourism development. The attitudes of locals to adapt, tourist travel motives, marketing of the destination, destination characteristics, and recommendations by others are major factors influencing international rural tourism [11].

The landscapes preferred by tourists in Extremadura (in Spain-like Portugal) are those forming part of the network of Protected Natural Spaces, those with bathing areas, and those close to mountain areas. However, they have also pointed out the main agricultural landscapes, with special significance in the case of vineyards and olive groves, followed, at some distance, by areas dedicated to the cultivation of cereal crops and fruit trees [12]. For this reason, an agritourism business operating in a protected natural area will be chosen.

Agritourism enterprises are properties located on agricultural holdings that provide accommodation services to tourists and allow guests to monitor and learn about the agricultural activity, or participate in the work carried out there, by the rules established by the person responsible [13].

This research aims to understand to what extent CE practices have an impact on customer expectations and to try to answer whether it is possible to effectively implement a CE, particularly a 3Rs-oriented strategy, in small rural tourism businesses and obtain tangible results in terms of customer satisfaction. To accomplish this, we will carry out a case study in a family-run agritourism business located on the west wine route in Lisbon.

The case study approach allows a holistic understanding of the structural and relational processes of companies embedded in their contexts, thus allowing us to experience and examine the phenomena on-site [14]. In particular, we posit that in the context of a peripheral Portuguese rural area, the circular economy is feasible, provides tangible benefits, and successfully combines efficiency and guest satisfaction in an agritourism unit.

In this case, a family agritourism business located in the west wine route in Lisbon, tucked in the protected landscape of Serra de Montejunto, was established in 1999 to preserve the landscape and its entire surroundings, where the owners (hosts) implemented the 3Rs (reduce, reuse, and recycle) policies since the beginning. It has been practicing organic agriculture, reducing energy and water waste, and reusing and recycling old furniture and dead sticks of trees to decorate the space; serving organic food at breakfast; and sharing experiences and knowledge with the guests. The property is classified as sustainable travel level 3, with three leaves in booking.com. The level 3 “Sustainable Travel” label is reserved for accommodations that have made major investments and efforts to implement sustainable practices but have not yet achieved official third-party certification.

This article will involve an introductory theoretical framework on the theme, followed by empirical research focused on a specific case. Hence, firstly, we presented a review of the topic, which embraces diverse definitions of CE about hospitality industry. Furthermore, this piece of literature will present the empirical study that aims to fulfill the research goal. The method used in this research is a case study approach, which was carried out through observation, literature review, and exploratory interviews. A case study research strategy can be highly effective when delving into complex change processes in which boundaries between phenomenon and real-life context are not evident [14]. It is also a useful research strategy when the “how” research questions are paramount and the researcher has hardly any control over events [14]. The case study was performed by interviewing both the hospitality unit owners and their clients. These interviews were intended to ascertain the distinct experiences of diverse hospitality clients concerning CE in each context.

This article is structured into six sections. First, the introduction to the theme. Second, a literature review on the CE and hospitality industry. Third, the adopted methodology. Fourth, the interview results and discussion. Fifth, the conclusions. And sixth, the limitations.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Circular Economy and Hospitality Industry

According to [15], the CE has more than two hundred definitions in academic and non-academic literature, and various schools of thought and scientific concepts, such as cradle-to-cradle, biomimicry, regenerative design, ecological economics, industrial ecology, resilience science, and blue economy, have been associated with the CE in the literature.

In this jungle of definitions, the way the Ellen MacArthur Foundation defines the concept has been repeatedly referred to in the literature (e.g., [16,17]).

The Ellen MacArthur Foundation defines CE as a “system where materials never become waste and nature is regenerated” and a model of production and consumption, which involves sharing, leasing, reusing, repairing, refurbishing, and recycling existing materials and products for as long as possible. It aims to tackle global challenges such as climate change, biodiversity loss, waste, and pollution by emphasizing the design-based implementation of the three base principles of the model. The three principles required for the transformation to a circular economy are designing out waste and pollution, keeping products and materials in use, and regenerating natural systems [18].

This definition is opportune as the planet is being faced with several environmental challenges that range from climate change to pollution. Waste generated by agriculture and industries is negatively impacting the environment, and policies to support companies must be implemented to continue obtaining the benefits they offer to society and promoting sustainability [19].

The overexploitation of natural resources is contributing to the current environmental depletion. As reported in [20] (p. 42), “Human activities, principally through emissions of greenhouse gasses, have unequivocally caused global warming, with global surface temperature reaching 1.1 °C above 1850–1900 in 2011–2020. Global greenhouse gas emissions have continued to increase over 2010–2019, with unequal historical and ongoing contributions arising from unsustainable energy use, land use and land-use change, lifestyles, and patterns of consumption and production across regions, between and within countries, and between individuals [. . .]. Human-caused climate change is already affecting many weather and climate extremes in every region across the globe. This has led to widespread adverse impacts on food and water security, human health, economies, society, and related losses and damages to nature and people” [21].

The world has been faced with not just a huge amount of depletion but also a scarcity of natural resources. Because of this scarcity, the application of the principles of a circular economy appears to be a valuable option to prevent the massive consumption of energy, water, food waste, and CO₂ emissions [4]. This application attempts to use most of its resources and raw materials and constantly reuse them to minimize environmental damage

at the level of food waste, water, and energy consumption, as well as rural and urban development [5].

Therefore, the concept of CE is a principle that enhances sustainable solutions and promotes the increase in green practices that translate into economic, social, and environmental benefits, having a positive influence on hotel selection [22]. Several examples of the 3Rs applicability in the tourism and hospitality industry can be found in the literature: reduce, reuse (energy, water, and waste), and recycle (water and waste) [7]. The CE can help to transform the hospitality industry from its current linear model of production to a circular one [4]. However, the main strategies adopted are reduction, recycling, and reuse, in this order. There is a need to promote the CE in the hospitality industry, especially among independent hotels [23].

According to [24], the CE, through the 3Rs principles, impacts the development of trends in tourism, as there is a connection between tourism and the ideas of CE, while it determines the prospects for digitalization and the use of CE technologies in hospitality institutions. The CE can thus be an emerging economic response to effectively replace growth models centered on a linear view, whereas agritourism may be relevant to a behavioral change based on ethical choices of concrete behaviors by its guests [25]. The CE is a business imperative, and the idea of a CE that meets social and environmental goals, to reduce and eliminate waste, needs development, emphasizing the need to not disrupt existing supply chains, leading to unintended consequences such as loss of livelihoods or cultural erosion [26].

Despite the CE having become one of the priorities of the European Union, the concept of circular tourism has been poorly analyzed until now, namely, for the hospitality industry [27]. In fact, there is a growing awareness of waste management in the hospitality industry in terms of food, water, and energy consumption, ecosystem protection, and rural and urban development, which contributes to translating economic benefits into environmental benefits [5].

The need to address environmental issues in the hospitality industry has become an important point of interest for most researchers, as the issues of food, water, and energy are the most commonly impacting natural resources in tourism [28]. Nevertheless, the concept of CE applied in hotels has yet to be considered, as it is a sector where huge consumption of energy and water, and CO₂ emissions take place [4]. Emissions from accommodation were estimated at 21% of the global amount of tourism [29], even though the literature on this topic is sparse and needs development to demonstrate the tangible benefits of circular economy practices on guest and owner satisfaction. While there is theoretical support for the positive outcomes of sustainability initiatives, it is argued that more robust research and case studies are needed to validate these claims and quantify the impact on key metrics such as profitability, guest satisfaction scores, and environmental performance [4,22]. More examples of the use of CE technologies in hospitality institutions at national and international levels are needed [24].

The hospitality industry has utilized sustainable business models' concepts to satisfy their economic, environmental, and social goals at once. However, its success is not clear [9], and only half of hospitality industry clients are willing to pay extra costs if such sustainability solutions are offered [22]. In the hospitality industry, there is huge consumption [4], and although the CE is paramount [26], green corporate governance and environmental management systems are also found to influence the adoption of a 3Rs environmental strategy [7]. Moreover, it is argued that while the concept of a CE sounds promising in theory, executing it may pose significant challenges, such as a lack of infrastructure, high upfront costs, and technical barriers, particularly for small-scale businesses with limited resources and expertise [7].

In the case of agritourism, most businesses are family-owned and perceive change and uncertainty as constants, relying on extensive networks to access information and make decisions [19] through very professionally managed websites [30]—a key player in a green transition [25]. Furthermore, agritourism advanced the management of its operation and

customer satisfaction through diversification and reorganization strategies [19]. It aims at sustainability through its business models, in which firm and environment interplay, along with sustainable tourism culture, loyalty, and local natural resource setting of a co-evolutionary process [31].

First, agritourism not only brings urban people close to the lives of farmers but also adds economic value. Agritourism has twofold objectives: recreation and education [32]. Also, it is important to apply the concept of the CE to cultural heritage in tourism destinations, with special emphasis on the role of all stakeholders in creating sustainable heritage tourism (local self-government, destination management, local population, and entrepreneurship) [33].

Second, organizational culture and internal communication improve corporate governance and job satisfaction in rural hospitality industry [34], where clients have been found to value a green and clean landscape, the forests, and the possibility of buying agricultural products while participating in agricultural activities. The activities and facilities present in the surrounding areas of the farmhouses are the attributes with the highest visitor satisfaction scores. Customer satisfaction has, therefore, a significant positive effect on customer loyalty. One researcher [35] (p. 410) points out that “the role of customer satisfaction in influencing repeat patronage and positive word of mouth is well-documented”. However, this goes beyond just efficiently satisfying needs. Technical service is moderately significant, but the importance of expressive service in memorable guest experiences has been emphasized [36].

Third, the green image in the accommodation sector influences customer satisfaction, presenting high scores in guest satisfaction businesses [8] and regenerative processes of natural assets such as water, materials such as food, products, services, and tourism space [37], namely, the purchase and tasting of quality and safe food and their participation in its production [38]. On the supply side, economic and environmental sustainability (for instance, in terms of electricity) has been shown to play a crucial role in influencing visitors' frequency [39]. Nevertheless, there is also the risk of greenwashing, where agritourism businesses may engage in superficial sustainability practices to enhance their image without genuinely committing to meaningful change. Transparency in reporting standards is needed for CE initiatives that drive positive environmental and social impact [8].

2.2. R Strategies in the Hospitality Industry and the Customer

As aforementioned, the hospitality industry is an important source of environmental waste. Nevertheless, the application of the CE and green transition leads to a more sustainable tourism industry, namely, at the agritourism level. Research is often fragmented among the issues of water, emissions, and food waste rather than focusing on CE practices.

As mentioned above, there are not many studies on the implementation of 3Rs strategies in the tourism literature. Moreover, the results of the existing studies are contradictory, with no clear trend emerging.

One of the exceptions [40], shows that the principle of reduce, reuse, and recycle was yet to be fully adopted by hotels [41], and even shows that recent social phenomena, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, have reversed trends in the implementation of 3Rs strategies, with negative consequences for tourist areas.

Other studies, however, show that there are significant efforts on the part of the hospitality industry to use 3Rs practices and that proactive strategies centered on the 3Rs are not evident [42].

The perceptions and reactions of customers to the implementation of 3Rs practices in the hospitality industry have not been studied despite the prominence of the circular economy in the sector. This study seeks to fill this gap.

We conceptualized filling this gap through the research question: “Is it possible to effectively implement a CE, particularly a 3Rs-oriented strategy, in small rural tourism businesses, and obtain a tangible result in terms of customer satisfaction?” Figure 1 summarizes the concept model of the research.

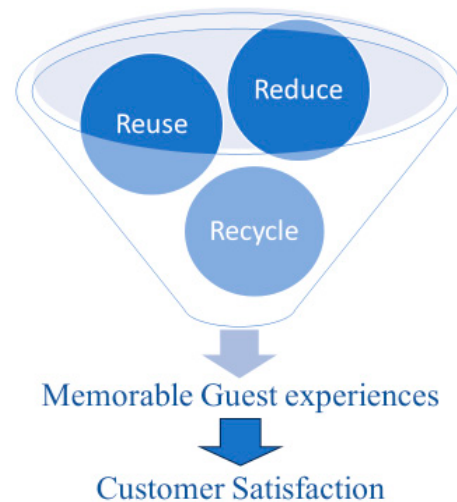


Figure 1. Concept model: impact of the 3Rs on customer satisfaction.

3. Methodology

In this research, due to the specificity of the subject, a case study was chosen.

The focus will be on the analysis of a case study of a hospitality company that is practicing the 3Rs (reuse, recycle, and reduce). The chosen design is ideally suited to an exploration of organizational processes in different contexts whilst still capturing their distinct characteristics and patterns [14]. The author defines case studies as descriptive, exploratory, and explanatory. In this study, an exploratory approach was utilized to provide insights into the CE implementation and ensuing outcome regarding “what” issues arose in terms of client satisfaction. Each case study is unique as data were gathered from different sources as appropriate to the case under investigation [14].

Qualitative research methods were selected for this study to generate data which are detailed and contextually embedded. Therefore, data collection was categorized to focus on the central issues, avoid coping with an overwhelming amount of data, and ease analysis whilst also including the possibility of revision as new insights emerged. Additionally, the triangulation of different data was applied to validate constructs, as defended by [14], and create a wider and more secure understanding of the research issues.

Accordingly, the interview topic guide was subject to a pilot test to identify inappropriate questions and to mitigate possible biases due to poor question formulation. The interviewer was, therefore, able to probe the “why” of client satisfaction with CE implementation. The resulting verbal data were supplemented with other sources, including documentary evidence [14] where possible. Recorded interviews were, thus, transcribed and treated to be coded using the NVivo13 (qualitative research software). The interviews were conducted in Portuguese for the Portuguese and in English for the other nationalities (everyone speaks and understands English). Open, Axial, and Selective coding were followed to analyze, categorize, and recognize connections within the data content to be analyzed.

This exploratory study carried out, therefore, examines and reflects perceptions of customers in Agritourism. In-depth interviews with 25 guests and 2 owners/hosts were performed in a single enterprise.

Case studies are often used in research in the tourism and hospitality sectors, both in general terms and in research related to sustainability. Of these studies, we would like to highlight the following papers because they provided the methodological inspiration for this work:

- The authors of [43] evaluated sustainable practices and managerial approaches in the hotel industry using the case study technique and, for this purpose, conducted two face-to-face interviews.

- The authors of [44] carried out a case study on entrepreneurship training in tourism and interviewed 8 young entrepreneurs in the catering industry in Indonesia.
- The authors of [45] conducted a case study on stakeholder perspectives concerning smart tourism development, carrying out 19 interviews with a wide range of stakeholders.
- The authors of [46] evaluated the long-term evolution of traditional village tourist destinations from a glocalization perspective. To this end, they interviewed 31 stakeholders, including 14 tourists and 15 residents.
- The authors of [47] carried out a case study on environmental perceptions in rural tourism and their intrinsic link to the transformation and sustainable development of rural tourism destinations, conducting 22 interviews.
- The authors of [48] conducted 8 interviews to gather information in a case study of the nautical tourism sector in the Netherlands.
- The authors of [49] interviewed 10 tourists in a study involving more stakeholders on the revitalization of traditional villages through rural tourism in China.

The papers [46–48] are relevant due to their proximity to the current study.

The interview guide used only two open-ended questions (positive and negative comments concerning the experience on the farm) and a question to sort the 3Rs according to their perceptions during their stay. Participants could respond in their own words rather than being forced to choose from fixed responses, which allows the interviewer to ask why or how. The aim of the research was explained by the author: what is expected from the research participant, including the amount of time likely to be required for participation; expected risks, and benefits, including psychological and social; the fact that participation is voluntary, and that one can withdraw at any time with no negative repercussions; how confidentiality will be protected (the profile of the participants is presented anonymously); and the name and contact information of the local lead investigator to be contacted for questions or problems related to the research [50]. This study was undertaken between 1 July 2020 and 31 March 2023. A three-step procedure consisting of data sampling, data collection, and data analysis was applied.

3.1. Data Sampling

Ideally, the sample represents the whole population on the characteristics of interest [51,52]. Sampling is a major problem for any type of research. We cannot study every case of whatever we are interested in, nor should we want to.

Every scientific enterprise tries to find out something that will apply to everything of a certain kind by studying a few examples, the result of the study being, as we say, “generalizable”. He distinguished it from the population in these words, “The abstract idea of a large group of many cases from which a researcher draws a sample and to which results from a sample are generalized.” [53] (p. 247). Concerning sampling, it is not a matter of small or large but representativeness [53]. We follow the approach of [54] (p. 137), “People to be studied are selected according to their relevance to the research topic; they are not selected for constructing a (statistically) representative sample of a general population”.

In this case, the sample is purposive, and it had been chosen to take into consideration the customers who effectively had the most recent experience on the farm, made an online comment about their stay experience, and were available for an interview. Regarding how many interviews should be enough, the literature posits that anywhere between 5 and 50 participants is adequate [55]. A total of 25 interviews were conducted with the agritourist guests, the most recent ones, all the guests that submitted an online comment or a written comment in the property’s internal book during 2022 and 2021, and 2 interviews with the agritourism owners/hosts of the property in analysis.

Several studies have already been based on text analysis and online reviews, namely, [56–64]. These studies covered satisfaction with hotel products and services and their overall impact on customer satisfaction and concluded that online reviews and their analysis could supply valuable information about customers’/tourists’ perceptions and

emotions with tangible and intangible attributes of hotels. Valuable information is taken out to improve service and facilities.

The digital economy has been recognized as a primary driver of economic growth and development in some countries, and due to the special importance of digital technologies, it is experiencing growth and expansion. The digital economy offers users and businesses the opportunity to easily and quickly access services and products and to generally experience better user experiences [65].

This study used the online hotel reservations platforms booking.com and Airbnb. Analysis of online reviews has become an indispensable marketing tool for managers because their content provides key information to help them allocate resources more appropriately to enhance service and thus increase profits. Customer-generated media can be used in several different ways to suit whatever purpose hoteliers and scholars might have [66]. While positive reviews have been shown to improve hotel revenue [67], negative reviews can lead to a reduction in hotel bookings [68].

So, the most recent guests with reviews online in 2021 had been selected in 2022. The interviews were performed in person with the guests who agreed or had time/availability to participate in it. They also wrote a review online afterward—which is included in our analysis. The interviews had been made in Portuguese for Portuguese guests and in English for the other nationalities (all of them speak and understand English). In the property, only Portuguese and English are spoken.

3.2. Data Collection

Two open-ended questions were addressed to the guests, asking them to express their positive and negative experiences and emotions during their stay at the property, as well as how they evaluate the reuse, recycle, and reduce according to their perceptions about priorities in the property. The questions were addressed in person, by Zoom meeting, or by phone, and took an average of 30 min to an hour. Each guest was assured and explained the purpose of the study. The guests' profiles are as follows in Table 1.

Table 1. Profile of the guests interviewed.

Guest	Age	Gender	Nationality	Interview Type	Year
1	25–30	Male	Portuguese	In-person	2022
2	25–30	Female	Australian	In-person	2022
3	25–30	Female	Danish	In-person	2022
4	25–30	Male	Portuguese	In-person	2022
5	35–40	Male	French	In-person	2022
6	35–40	Male	Portuguese	In-person	2022
7	30–35	Female	American	In-person	2022
8	25–30	Female	Portuguese	In-person	2022
9	25–30	Female	Portuguese	In-person	2022
10	25–30	Male	French	Zoom	2021
11	25–30	Male	Portuguese	Phone	2021
12	35–40	Female	Portuguese	Phone	2021
13	35–40	Male	Portuguese	Zoom	2021
14	25–30	Female	Australian	Phone	2021
15	25–30	Female	Portuguese	Phone	2021
16	25–30	Female	Portuguese	Phone	2021
17	25–30	Female	Spanish	Zoom	2021

Table 1. Cont.

Guest	Age	Gender	Nationality	Interview Type	Year
18	35–40	Male	Portuguese	Phone	2021
19	35–40	Male	Portuguese	Phone	2021
20	30–35	Female	Portuguese	Phone	2021
21	25–30	Female	Portuguese	Phone	2021
22	35–40	Male	Portuguese	Phone	2021
23	35–40	Female	Portuguese	Phone	2021
24	30–35	Female	Portuguese	Phone	2021
25	30–35	Female	Portuguese	Phone	2021

The owners/hosts are a couple (57 and 59 years old, female and male). They built an international career as top managers and decided, in 2017, to start their own business based on organic principles and hold an organic agriculture certificate.

3.3. Data Analysis

The aim here is, through in-depth interviews, to create categories from the data collected and then to analyze relationships between categories while attending to how the lived experience of research participants can be understood [55,69].

The data sampling was analyzed using the qualitative data analysis software “NVivo” and manually. Word content analysis included open coding, axial coding, and selective coding.

As the researcher analyzes data collected from various sources, elements (usually tagged with “codes”) are obtained. This procedure continues, and those “codes” are further processed into “concepts” and “categories”, which eventually lead to the construction of new theories. The author of [69] argues that this procedure is especially suited for relatively new research areas where generally agreed theories or definitions are still absent.

The following qualitative research aims to analyze the interview content, as referred to in [70,71].

- (1) Open coding to turn data into small, discrete components of data, selecting the keywords in the interviews. Each discrete piece of data is coded with a descriptive label. Each word related to the same subject is labeled with the same code.
- (2) Axial coding to find connections and relationships between codes. A set of codes is created, and connections are identified between them. Causal conditions, the context behind observations, and the consequences of phenomena are looked for. Codes are aggregated and condensed into broader categories. Broader categories that make connections between codes are determined.
- (3) Selective coding to bring it together with one overarching category. One core category that captures the essence of the research is selected. The connections between this overarching category and the rest of the codes and data are identified.

The keywords (positive and negative) were collected by NVivo, and contextualization was checked manually. The reason for tackling this huge task manually was to obtain a “feel” for the full context around the negative and positive wording. Although it was very time-consuming, what could be extracted in this way was deemed much more relevant.

In sum, a chain of evidence was created, starting with the literature review and proceeding through the problem statement and identification of key concepts to produce a research question that guided data collection and analysis. Finally, a case study protocol was set [14], which included the research procedures to be followed during the investigation.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1. Descriptive Data

Overall, 61% of the reservations were made by females and 39% by males. A total of 29% were reserved as a group. A total of 89% were Portuguese, and concerning foreigners, French and Australians took the lead (including direct reservations). In the sample, 60% were female and 40% were male, 56% booked traveling as a couple and 44% as a family, 16% booked a two-bedroom apartment for four persons, and 84% booked a twin/double room. They gave an average of 9.4 out of 10 to the property, and all of them scored owners/hosts as 10 out of 10.

4.2. Content Analysis

The interviews were transcribed; content analysis [72] was carried out: first, repeated words were collected and classified in the open coding dimensions. Second, the open coding hotel attributes with similar characteristics were gathered (axial coding) into the following dimensions: hosts, breakfast, decoration, comfort, and environment. Third, some connections between these categories that capture the sense of the study were found (selective coding) and classified into the dimensions of reuse, recycle, and reduce. Axial and selective code is enumerated considering the positive most frequent dimension mentioned to the least-mentioned dimension, as summarized in Figure 2.

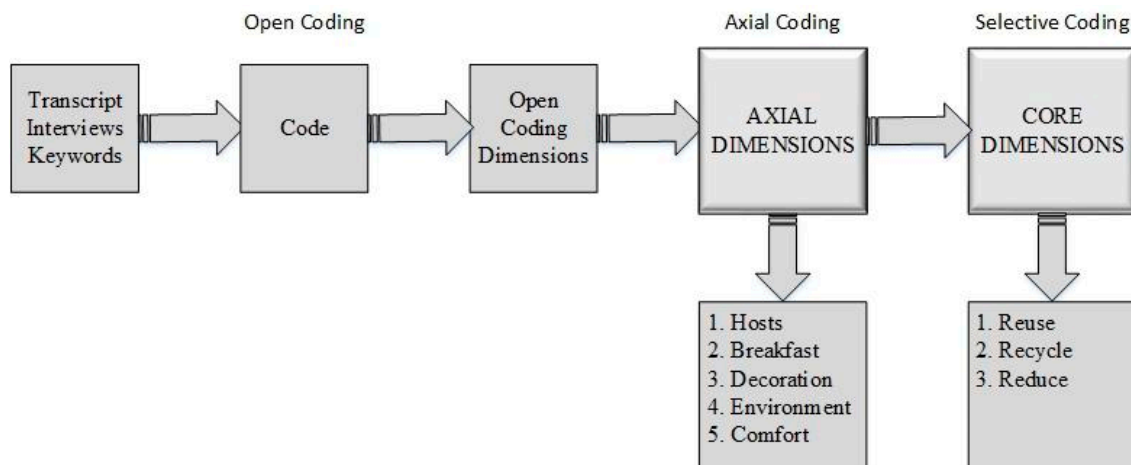


Figure 2. Flow chart of interview and online comments content data analysis (open coding, axial coding, and selective coding).

After the fifteenth interview, the author could see that the experiences and emotions were repeated until the last twenty-fifth interview, and the added value of an additional interview decreased. A saturation point was reached, and additional interviews did not add value with new information, as detailed in Table 2 below.

Table 2. Content analysis summary of customers’ comments.

Coding	Open Coding	Axial Coding	Selective Coding
Kindness Nice couple Availability Care Flexibility Feel right home Welcoming Wonderful Persons	Welcoming	Hosts	Reuse, Recycle, Reduce

Table 2. Cont.

Coding	Open Coding	Axial Coding	Selective Coding
Helpful Warm Generous Very Friendly	Welcoming		
Exchange of Knowledge Sharing of the farm history Sight seeing in the property	Knowledge		
Create good moments in the customers lives Outstanding Service Hospitality at the highest level Privacy	Service	Hosts	
The owners are the cherry in the top of the cake Owners know about the local culture and gastronomy Owners are magnificent Owners are fantastic Owners are incredible	Owners		
Delicious Mouth-watering Tasteful Tasty and Fresh Excellent Flavours Divine Tasteful fruits	Tasteful		
Natural Products Bio Organic, Home made Jams Yogurt cake Tomato Jam Lemonade/Lemon Juice Diverse	Organic	Breakfast	Reuse, Recycle, Reduce
Relaxing Healthy Unforgettable	Sensations		
Love Reused Object Decoration Old windows are the mirrors in the bathrooms Beautiful Cellar Room concept	Reuse	Decoration	
Respect with old stuff The nest bird in the cellar	Respect		
Excellent Decor	Decor		
Location Paradise Perfection Orchard Gardens Exterior very nice	Location and Exterior	Environment	
Smell of the pink pepper tree and curry Colours Smells	Colours and Smell		

Table 2. Cont.

Coding	Open Coding	Axial Coding	Selective Coding
Diverse Species Bees, ladybugs and earthworms Respect with environment	Diversity and Respect		
Moments of happiness Wonderful Idyllic Peaceful Relaxing	Sensations	Environment	
Rooms Good Quality Mattress Well insulated rooms Comfortable Facilities Free bottles of water in the rooms Hygienic Facilities	Room Quality	Comfort	Reuse, Recycle, Reduce
Peaceful Restful sleep	Sensations		

4.3. Hosts

Hosts always had a classification of “10” out “10” on booking.com reviews and are referred to as “magnificent” or “incredible”. Why is that? The researchers tried to understand more about the hosts’ philosophy and concluded that “Respect” is the key to success, as follows:

The main principle of the owners is “Respect”:

- (1) Respect for all kinds of beings (chemicals are not allowed to clean the property, gardens, orchard, and swimming pool). Even a bird nest is kept inside the wine cellar, and the female bird comes four times a year to have babies. “She was there before us”, said the owner. They also have a program “hands-on” (hand on the land) to transfer knowledge about organic agriculture and the importance of the circular economy.
- (2) Respect for the history of place and heritage (there is a wine cellar dating from 1880 that was rebuilt, where breakfast is served), keeping and giving new life to old stuff; for example, the old windows (replaced with more energy efficient ones) were recycled, and they are reused as bathroom mirrors at the suites. Dead sticks from the trees are now toilet paper and towel holders.

The hosts confirmed that the good experiences, emotions, and happiness of their guests have an impact on their satisfaction, and it is a motor of sustainability for the continuity of the business.

“We created this rural business to contribute to the exceptional experiences and emotions of our customers, and also to contribute to a better world. If we can feel that we can contribute to the happiness, good health and sustainability knowledge of our customers, our mission is fulfilled”. (Host n° 1)

Some comments of the guests point out the “respect for others”:

“The way the hosts respect nature is unusual. I loved the story of the bird’s nest in the cellar, which is maintained out of respect and the bird returns every year with its babies”. (Guest n° 11)

“We see that everything is treated with care. This is the true practice of sustainability and not just a ‘pretty’ word”. (Guest n° 18)

“Thank you for taking care of the environment. Your respect for others, which you announce and explain, can be seen and felt”. (Guest n° 20)

Hosts were commented on as wonderful, welcoming, warm, and helpful people who like to share knowledge about the history of the place and about organic and circular economy practices.

Guests mentioned the breakfast as delicious and healthy, the decoration as stylish (even with the reuse of old furniture), the environment as peaceful, the wonderful smell and colors, and the comfort of everything highlighted, as follows:

“Hospitality at the highest level. The owners’ concern for the environment is to be commended. Portugal needs more people like this”. (Guest n° 16)

“Very friendly couple, knowledgeable about local culture and cuisine. Breakfast products from their organic garden with a divine flavor, definitely worth repeating”. (Guest n° 17)

The energy of the farm is achieved using sustainable sources such as solar panels and heat pumps—but not so visible and with no direct experience impact on the customers. Hosts confirmed that they implemented the 3Rs in the same order that guests perceived them, almost with the same priority levels of recycle, reduce, and reuse (everything left behind on the farm, such as furniture, dead trees, and historical items, were reused and recycled). Reduce was in last place—not because it was less important—but because it was not only dependent on the hosts for implementation but also dependent on public entities’ approval and public teams’ availability (such as solar panels installation, for example), so it took more time to be implemented and was less visible to the guests. A summary of guests’ comments about the hosts and from the hosts about the guests is provided in Table 3.

Table 3. Summary of positive wording of guests and hosts on the dimensions of owners, breakfast, decoration, environment, and comfort.

Guests’ Comments about the Hosts	Hosts’ Comments about the Guests
Welcoming	Through the sharing of knowledge, owners/hosts feel richer and happier
Explain and share the history of the place	The feeling of contributing to a better place and the happiness of the guests
Explain and share organic agriculture knowledge (reuse, recycle, and reduce)	
Guide tour through the gardens and orchard	
Guests’ Comments about the Breakfast	Hosts’ Comments about the Breakfast
Organic local production	Enjoy and share the customer emotions provided by the unique flavors and
Tasteful and healthy	smell of organic products
Touch, smell, flavors	
Historical and design of the cellar dated to 1880, where the breakfast is served	
Guests’ Comments about the Decoration	Hosts’ Comments about the Decoration
Appreciated the:	Keep the history of the place and family furniture
Old furniture transformed into modern with a historical style	Unique decoration, reusing and recycling old stuff
Old windows (replaced with more efficient ones) from the main house	
Nowadays, there are mirrors in bathrooms	Hosts learned how to reuse and recycle old furniture (another opportunity for learning)
Dead tree sticks are now toilet paper and towel holders	
Old bowls to feed animals turned into washbasins	

Table 3. Cont.

Guests' Comments about the Environment	Hosts' Comments about the Environment
Smell, colors, flowers	0% chemicals
Organic orchard	Circular economy
Peace, relaxation, calm	Attract bees, ladybugs, and other important insects to support the environmental balance and circular economy
Paradise	
Guests' Comments about the Comfort	Hosts' Comments about the Comfort
Clean	The replacement of normal energy supplies with solar panels and heat pumps did
Sound-proof	not negatively affect comfort, and it has an impact on savings
Large rooms	The reuse and recycle of old items improved the decoration, and the accommodation decoration had a good impact on comfort

Source: own elaboration.

4.4. Hosts' Attitude toward the 3Rs

Quantitative methods were also applied, based on counts and the application of scoring, without the use of statistical tests. Guests were asked to rank in order of importance the practices relating to the 3Rs: reuse, recycle, and reduce.

Depending on where the guests ranked each of the practices, they were given 1 if they considered it to be the most important, 2 if they considered it to be in second place, or 3 if they considered it to be in last place. The results obtained for the sample of 25 guests are shown in Table 4.

Table 4. Importance of each practice (inverted scale).

	Reuse	Recycle	Reduce
Points obtained	39	32	73

Source: own elaboration.

As can be seen, the guests surveyed did not value the three practices associated with the circular economy in the same way, prioritizing reuse and recycle (most valued) and then reduce (least valued).

We can therefore revise our initial model, introducing elements of a personal nature, which are largely the result of the guest–host interaction and which are decisive for the guests' appreciation of the experience. Guests do not uniformly value each of the 3Rs. We can therefore affirm that, according to the results of the study, it is possible to establish a tourism offer based on the circular economy and that there is a segment of potential customers who are willing to consume tourism products that seduce them based on the 3Rs.

The interaction between guests and hosts has a positive effect on guests and hosts as memorable experiences, as summarized in Figure 3.

As known, tourism is an activity based on experiences [73,74]. In the case of rural tourism, the interaction between the tourist and the host is fundamental. This study highlights this importance, showing which core dimensions of the 3Rs are relevant.

Respect and sensations are mentioned several times by the guests and by the owners/hosts, confirming some previous studies that reached the conclusion that hotel guests consider not only the economic value of staying in a particular hotel (price and quality) but also seek other values of a more emotional nature, such as self-gratification, aesthetic pleasure, prestige, transaction, and hedonism. Customer satisfaction has a significant direct positive effect on customer loyalty [75]. Service quality, however, goes beyond just efficiently satisfying needs. Technical service is moderately significant, and the importance of expressive service in memorable guest experiences is highlighted [36]. However, managers need to not only understand the importance of customer satisfaction but also the need to

take pleasure in directly driving customer loyalty. Managers need to understand customers' emotions [76]. In the context of the different modalities of rural tourism, agritourism presents itself to contribute favorably to local development dynamics and may play an active role in the green economic transition process. It is in this context that farmers are facing a change in role—from food producers to landscape conservationists, as well as being considered drivers of the new dynamics of local entrepreneurship and innovation [77]. The agritourist experience consists of five dimensions: uniqueness, learning, staff, escape, and peace of mind [78]. These dimensions were referred to in this case study as contributing to their customers' emotions/sensations.

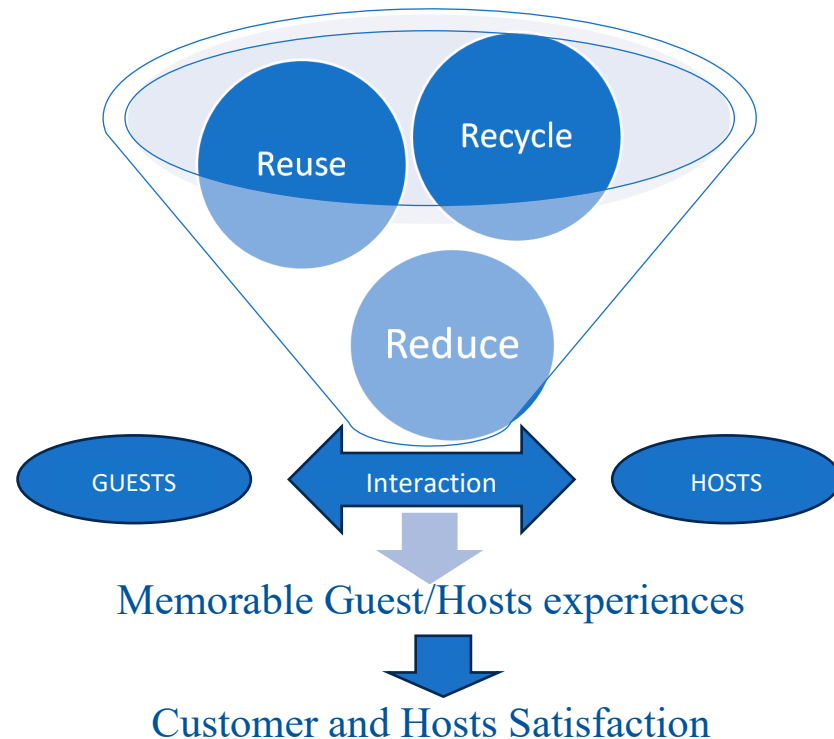


Figure 3. Memorable guests' and owners' experiences via interaction regarding the 3Rs.

The importance is put on mitigating waste creation, also in terms of pollution, while maximizing environmental efficiency [4]. In the case study, it is reflected as waste transformation, adding value to what could be waste, giving new life to mitigating "waste" in terms of pollution, and taking care of the environment in an efficient way.

5. Conclusions

Through agritourism, it is possible to contribute to a better world by applying the circular economy and the 3Rs, attracting and delighting customers, improving word-of-mouth (WOM) and online customer reviews, and creating memorable experiences, not only for guests but also for owners/hosts. Memorable experiences are passed on to guests by sharing knowledge with hosts. The natural environment creates a sense of calmness, health, well-being, and comfort for guests, enhancing their senses of smell and taste and creating sensations that customers will take with them as wonderful experiences.

Given the scarcity of studies on the circular economy in small rural tourism businesses, this study sought to understand the extent to which CE practices in these businesses have an impact on customer expectations and to try to answer whether it is possible to effectively implement a CE, particularly a 3Rs-oriented strategy.

In this case study, the guests highlighted five dimensions that will encourage them to repeat the experience: hosts, breakfast, decoration, environment, and comfort. The application of the 3Rs (reuse, recycle, and reduce) is pointed out as an added value compared to

other properties available in the same region. This study also reveals that guests do not evaluate the various dimensions of the 3Rs in a uniform way, placing special emphasis on reuse and recycling, with reduction only in a subordinate position.

We can therefore conclude that the circular economy can help transform the hotel industry from its current linear production model to a circular model through reduction, recycling, and reuse.

In short, the results showed that it is possible to implement circular economy practices in agritourism contexts, with clear evidence of guest and owner satisfaction achieved through guest satisfaction scores and environmental performance. In addition, the trade-off in terms of operational efficiency and convenience for guests can be achieved through overall satisfaction while local livelihoods are preserved.

However, this study also shows that guests are particularly attracted to certain aspects of a CE. Thus, the design of CE-based strategies for agrotourism and their implementation in terms of concrete practices has factors identified in this study that are most critical to the successful implementation of these practices and strategies.

SMEs are decisive in tourism and are many of the companies in rural tourism and agro-tourism. They will be very important in the transition to a world based on a circular economy. What this study shows is that it is possible to design strategies for SMEs based on the circularity of the economy and thus establish specific competitive factors for these SMEs.

For these strategies, reuse and recycling are practices particularly valued by guests. By basing strategies for creating unique experiences for tourists on these practices, rural tourism businesses can develop their own identity, giving them competitive advantages and making them active participants in the transition to the circular economy.

6. Limitations

There are several limitations that can hinder the leveraging of agritourism for the development of the circular economy. Further research should thus emphasize the issue of infrastructure and accessibility, as many agricultural areas lack the necessary infrastructure to support agritourism activities, such as parking facilities and poor road networks.

7. Future Research

Future research avenues might comprehend issues such as regional regulatory constraints that vary significantly with context; environmental impact in terms, for instance, of pollution; and the interplay of agritourism with other tourism experiences to remain competitive. Addressing these topics requires further research in light of the circular economy. Subsequently, collaborative efforts involving academia and remaining stakeholders, such as policymakers, community, and tourism professionals, are essential to unlock the full potential of agritourism as a driver of sustainable rural development.

This study should be performed in other similar agritourism to confirm if the results are similar or not, and if not, to understand why.

Specifically, because of this study, it is suggested that the relationships established in Figure 2 be studied further, namely, how interaction influences guests' perceptions of the 3Rs and how the 3Rs influence the relationship between customers and hosts.

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