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The use of stated preference and choice models in the analysis of tourists' preferences: the Minho-Lima sub-region (Portugal) case

Some territories use its natural, historical and ethnographical resources aiming to preserve resources and to increase revenue and employment. In order to efficiently promote the folder of products and services available and attracting tourists, decision makers, private and public, need to know and incorporate in its marketing strategies tourists' preferences.

In this paper we illustrate the use of stated preferences as an instrument to identify national and foreign tourists' preferences in what concerns the products and services the Minho-Lima sub-region (Portugal) touristic destination should offer. As a starting point, we have taken the three general groups of touristic resources mentioned above as attributes.

We believe the previously identified methodology can be a valuable instrument in the identification of strengths and weaknesses of the selected territory and, thus, giving support to the decision making process behind its future tourist development and external promotion.

Keywords: touristic resources, touristic potential, stated preferences, conjoint analysis.

Introduction

Some territories use its natural, historical and ethnographical resources aiming to preserve resources and to increase revenue and employment. However, being financial and human resources scarces, usually, any planning process implies to develop a selection process and the evaluation of available alternatives.

The current touristic resources can provide a starting point for the definition of alternatives and, knowing the tourists' opinion on these, we can get more solid base to select the strategic alternative adjusted to the characteristics of the territory in analysis and to their preferences.

The analysis of tourists' preferences and tastes are facilitated when we face more or less consolidated destinations and actual touristic resources, once these present a demand where tastes and preferences can be investigated. However, when emergent destinations and potential touristic resources are analysed we do not know the demand on which to base these parameters, and this mission becomes more complicated. To surpass that problem, we can apply to the stated preferences analysis, asking respondents about theirs (stated) choices, in the aim of hypothetical consumption situations. "Because it relies on individual's statements about their preferences or choices, this approach has become known as 'stated preference' (or choice) analysis" (Louvière and Timmermans, 1990, p.10).

The starting motivation behind this paper was the conscience of the importance that tourists' opinion has in establishing a new tourism destination, or in the consolidation or improvement of an existent one. Therefore, the main objective of this paper is the evaluation of the value of touristic resources of Minho-Lima, in the tourists' perspective, that is to say, based on the preferences stated by the tourists that visit or intend to visit this Portuguese sub-region.

Section 1 of the paper presents the methodology adopted, the Conjoint Analysis. In section 2, the methodology we apply to this case study (that is, to the analysis of Minho-Lima tourists' preferences) is specified. In section 3 the results obtained are presented and commented. Finally, the main conclusions are drawn.

1. Stated preferences: the conjoint analysis

In the last decades, it has increased the interest in analyzing consumers' preferences, to try to understand and foresee its choices. The analysis can be made using either revealed preferences or stated preferences data (Louvière and Timmermans, 1990; Louvière *et al.*, 2000; Haider, 2002; Merino-Castelló, 2003). In the first case, data are obtained from past of consumers' behaviours, that is to say, through the direct observation of the behaviour of the individuals' consumption. These individuals reveal their preferences through the choices they make (Louvière and Timmermans, 1990). In stated preferences, data are obtained through the choices declared by individuals, over hypothetical situations of consumption, expressed in questionnaires. "Because it relies on individual's statements about their preferences or choices, this approach has become known as 'stated preference' (or choice) analysis" (Louvière and Timmermans, 1990, p.10).

By definition, the analysis of observed behaviour is confined to the study of past behaviour, being necessary to use the analysis of stated preferences if we intend to inquire about future choices or behavioural intentions (Haider, 2002).

Over the last few years, a range of stated preferences techniques have been developed, among which we highlight, given the interest to our research, the Conjoint Analysis's techniques. These techniques are a family of survey-based methodologies for modelling preferences for certain products, where products are described in terms of their attributes or characteristics and the levels that these take (Louvière and Timmermans, 1990; Merino-Castelló, 2003). In Conjoint Analysis, it is considered, therefore, that the choice process is determined by the utilities associated to product representation levels of a set of attributes.

According to Luce and Tukey (1964), it is a methodology used to analyze the action or conjoint effect of two or more independent variables over a dependent variable or, either, to determine the contribution of the independent variables (levels) and their respective values (utilities) for the consumers' preferences of a good or service.

The advantages of these techniques over revealed preferences methods, which matters to our study, are that they offer the possibility to control the attribute levels that configure the alternative choices and the context (questionnaire) through which data are obtained. This allows us to evaluate possible former interventions, that is to say, before

its application (i.e., through hypothetical attributes and levels). As a disadvantage, Rodríguez and González (2002) highlight the effort that each respondent makes as he moves forward in the choice sequence, being probable that he accuses exhaustion and, thus, his answers tend to loose quality.

As pointed out by Green and Srinivasan (1990), Louvière and Timmermans (1990) and Jaeger *et al.* (2001), Conjoint Analysis is supported in a set of assumptions. Those assumptions are:

- respondent evaluates the product or service defined by their attributes or characteristics, that is to say, he takes his decisions not using only the information single factor but of several factors, jointly;

- to each level of each attribute or characteristic is associated an utility that represents the relative interest attributed at that attribute level by respondent;

- product total utility is determined by the sum of the utilities of their attributes; for its turn, the preference for one alternatives can be divided in each one of their multiple partial components;

- choice consumer behaviour is the outcome of a utility maximization process associated to preferences maintained.

The application of this technique crosses several stages or steps. In each step, the researcher can choose among a set of alternatives (Ramírez Hurtado *et al.*, 2004). The necessary steps for its implementation are the following ones (Green and Srinivasan, 1990; Louvière and Timmermans, 1990):

- 1) identification of attributes and specification of attribute levels;
- 2) definition of data collection method;
- 3) construction of choice alternatives/profiles;
- 4) presentation of profiles;
- 5) definition of a measure scale for the dependent variable;
- 6) implementation of the estimation method.

The main objective of the paper is the study, through Conjoint Analysis, of the value of Minho-Lima touristic resources, taking tourists' viewpoint, that is to say, their structure of preferences. For that, we followed each of the steps described previously.

2. Application to Minho-Lima tourists' preferences

Considering the objective defined for the paper, in first place, we had to select the attributes and the attribute levels, recognizing that a realistic choice requires the identification of the attributes and levels that are relevant for the tourist's decision when choosing a touristic destination. According to that, the definition of these attributes and their levels requires the accomplishment of a careful and persistent previous qualitative investigation, with the objective of guaranteeing that individuals consider significant and reasonable the alternatives that are proposed.

In the present study, the preliminary research to be conducted consisted in the review of the literature and in collecting the point a view about the subject from some local tourism experts (employees of RTAM delegations - Alto Minho's Tourist Board, in each municipality; hotels and restaurants owners; public and private tour operators; and tourism academic researchers). From this preliminary work, following the recommendations of Green and Srinivasan (1990), that suggest that full-profile (data collection method followed) should be used in studies with only few (six or fewer) attributes, four attributes were selected,. We also took in consideration Wittink *et al.* (1982, cf. Trinidad and Rotondaro, 2004), that had verified that attributes with larger number of levels have, proportionally, more importance than those with few levels, what suggests that an uniform number of levels should be used for the different attributes. According to this view, three attributes were developed each one in three levels and another was expressed trough a variable of four levels:

- natural resources-water: oceanic beaches, fluvial beaches, and rivers;
- natural resources-land: national parks or protected landscapes, natural recreation and leisure parks, and mountains;
- ethnographical resources: handicraft, popular festivities and gastronomy;
- historical resources: archaeological patrimony, religious patrimony, military patrimony and civil patrimony.

According to Louvière and Timmermans (1990), a profile is the designation given in the literature of Conjoint Analysis to each combination of attribute levels. After having defined attributes and their levels, the next step was to design the profiles or alternative choice to be presented to tourists.

For such, it was necessary to determine the number of profiles that respondents were able to handle with. In fact, it is important to get a certain balance between the maximization of the level of information obtained and the fatigue effect that comes when questionnaires are too long or complex, or the exercises that the respondents should accomplish are repetitive (Swait and Adamowicz, 1997; Brazell *et al.*, 1999).

If we make use of all possible profiles (combinations and attribute levels) in a study, we refer to what is called a complete factorial design. However, usually, complete factorial design is rarely used because the number of possible combinations is almost impracticable. For example, the factorial design of an experience with x attributes of a levels and y attributes of b levels would give $a^x b^y$ combinations, which expresses the total number of situations required to identify all the effects and interactions. In our case, that meant $3^3 \times 4 = 108$ possible different combination of levels.

An alternative is to show respondents only a small set of possible combinations, that is, to use fractional factorial designs to construct profiles (Louvière and Timmermans, 1990; Louvière *et al.*, 2000, Haider, 2002).

In our case, following the approach of applying a fractional factorial design, we got 12 combinations/profiles, as follows:

Table 1 – Profiles/Alternative Choices

Card 1	Card 2	Card 3
. Fluvial Beaches . National Parks or Protected Landscapes . Handicraft . Archaeological Patrimony	. Rivers . Recreational and Leisure Natural Parks . Gastronomy . Archaeological Patrimony	. Oceanic Beaches . Mountains or Hills . Popular Festivities . Archaeological Patrimony
Card 4	Card 5	Card 6
. Fluvial Beaches . Mountains or Hills . Gastronomy . Religious Patrimony	. Rivers . Mountains or Hills . Popular Festivities . Religious Patrimony	. Oceanic Beaches . Recreational and Leisure Natural Parks . Handicraft . Religious Patrimony
Card 7	Card 8	Card 9
. Fluvial Beaches . Recreational and Leisure Natural Parks . Popular Festivities . Military Patrimony (vg.: Fortresses)	. Rivers . National Parks or Protected Landscapes . Handicraft . Military Patrimony (vg: Fortresses)	. Oceanic Beaches . National Parks or Protected Landscapes . Gastronomy . Military Patrimony (vg: Fortresses)
Card 10	Card 11	Card 12
. Fluvial Beaches . National Parks or Protected Landscapes . Popular Festivities . Civil Patrimony (vg: Historical Buildings)	. Rivers . Recreational and Leisure Natural Parks . Handicraft . Civil Patrimony (vg: Historical Buildings)	. Oceanic Beaches . Mountains or Hills . Gastronomy . Civil Patrimony (vg: Historical Buildings)

As illustrated in the identified cards above, it was decided to present the combinations of attribute levels (profiles) through a verbal description.

Once defined the profiles/alternatives choices, respondents were requested to classify the cards/profiles according to their preferences. Instead, it could be asked to rank the various alternatives, to rate them or to choose their most preferred.

Experiments in which two or more of these hypothetical profiles are combined in sets of choices and respondents are asked choose their most preferred alternative/profile from each set, are called stated choice tasks or discrete choice experiments. Experiments that involve ranking a set of alternatives or, using a scale, rating a set, are called ranking and rating tasks, respectively (Louvière and Timmermans, 1990; Adamowicz *et al.*, 1998; Louvière *et al.*, 2000).

In our study, we opted to ask respondents to rank a set of alternative options, from the most to the least preferred/favourite, according to their preferences.

In this perspective, respondents were confronted with combinations of attribute levels, each one representing the profile of a touristic destination that respondents could have in mind when establishing their preferences and selecting their touristic destination, following the perception of consumer utility they had.

For data collection, it was designed a questionnaire (available in attachment), to be answered by a sample of visitors that intended to be representative of the Minho-Lima tourists.

The questionnaire was divided in three parts. In the first part we intended to collect the respondent's personal data (sex, age, qualifications, etc.). Collecting the data needed to apply the Conjoint Analysis technique, through the ranking task, was the concern of the second part of the questionnaire. As shown in Table 1, it was presented to each respondent a sequence of 12 profiles of touristic destinations that they should order from 1 (most favourite) to 12 (least favourite). The last section of the questionnaires had a set of specific characteristics of some touristic resources that respondents should order, using a scale from 1 to 5. The data from this last section will not be analysed in this paper.

The design of the questionnaire was improved by the accomplishment of a pre-test. This pre-test had two main objectives: help in the selection of relevant attributes and levels for the experiment; and test the understanding and acceptance of the questionnaire. The final questionnaire, after incorporation of the rectifications derived of the pre-test, was applied between May and December of 2006, through personal

interviews to tourists in several municipalities. A total of 350 complete questionnaires were obtained, 74 referring to foreign tourists and 276 to national ones.

For the formulation of the model which allows us to explain the relationship between the evaluations in the form of preference levels (dependent variable) and the different attribute levels chosen to characterize the product we are dealing with (independent variables), it is necessary to have in mind that independent variables are dummy ones (0,1). This way, the presence or absence of a certain level of a specific attribute will be expressed in the model by giving to the correspondent dummy variable the value 1 or 0.

The model to be estimated is as follows:

$$y_t = \alpha + \sum_{i=1}^I \sum_{j=1}^J \beta_{ij} x_{ij} + e_t$$

where:

y_t = evaluation of the preference or ranking that represents the level of preference associated to profile t , expressed by the respondent;

α = constant;

β_{ij} = coefficient or partworth utility corresponding to level j of i attribute;

$x_{ij} = 1$ if level j of i attribute is present in profile t ;

$x_{ij} = 0$ if level j of i attribute is not present in the profile t ;

e_t = estimate residue.

Besides obtaining the partial utility estimative for each attribute level, known as partworth utilities, we will calculate, also, each attribute importance.

The data analysis and the confidence test to coefficients were accomplished through *SPSS Conjoint 15.0* software. The results obtained are showed in the section that follows.

3. Results

The data analysis was carried out not only using the total number of observations (vg: the total respondents) but also by nationality tourists' groups (national and foreigners).

In what concerns the destination characteristics, thought in terms of tourism resources available, the results obtained are the following ones:

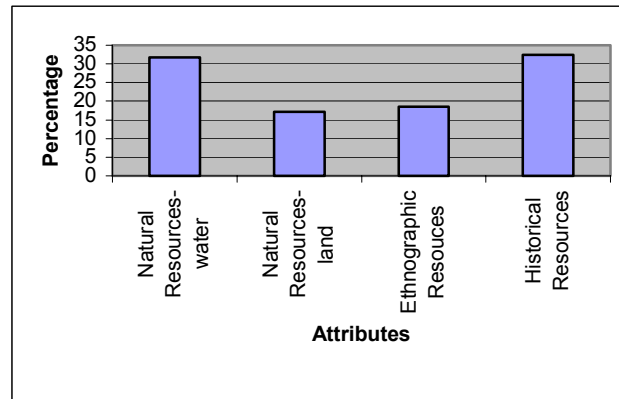
Table 2 –Utilities estimates and importance of attributes (total of respondents)

Attribute	Level	Utility	Relative Importance
Natural Resources-water	Oceanic beaches	1,768	31,790
	Fluvial beaches	-0,407	
	Rivers	-1,361	
Natural Resources-land	Mountains	-0,020	17,205
	National parks or protected landscapes	0,057	
	Natural recreation and leisure parks	-0,037	
Ethnographical Resources	Popular festivities	0,191	18,591
	Handicraft	-0,284	
	Gastronomy	0,093	
Historical Resources	Archaeological patrimony	0,938	32,415
	Religious patrimony	-0,649	
	Military patrimony	-0,399	
	Civil patrimony	0,110	
Constant			6,500
Pearson's R			0,996
Kendall's tau			0,970

The quality of the adjustment was tested through the calculation of the correlation coefficient among the classifications stated by the tourists that compose the sample and those foreseen by the model, applying the Kendall's *tau* and the Pearson correlation coefficient methods. Looking to the values assumed by these indicators (Kendall's *tau*: 0,970; and Pearson's *R*: 0,996), the quality of the adjustment should be considered as high.

From Table 2, we can verify that the touristic resources more valued by tourists are Historical ones, presenting a score of 32,4%, followed by Natural Resources-water, with 31,8% of importance. The least valued attribute was Natural Resources-land, with a score of 17,2%. Anyway, if we take Natural Resources as a whole (water and land), they reach a total score of 49%.

Graph 1 – Attributes importance



From the previous results (Table 2), we can assume that the destination profile Minho-Lima turistic visitors prefer presents the following characteristics:

Table 3 – Most Preferred Profile/Alternative Choices

Destination	Natural Resources-water	Oceanic beaches
	Natural Resources-land	National parks or protected landscapes
	Ethnographical Resources	Popular festivities
	Historical Resources	Archaeological patrimony

The preference associated to a product or service can be represented by its total utility value. In our case we are concerned with, according to the previous profile drawn, total utility can be obtained adding the parthworth utilities associated to the attribute levels that compose the profile:

Total Utility of the Most Preferred Profile = Constant + Utility (Oceanic beaches) + Utility (National parks or protected landscapes) + Utility (Popular festivities) + Utility (Archaeological patrimony)

Total Utility of the Preferred Profile = 9,45

By contrast, the destination profile with less interest to tourists has the following characteristics:

Table 4 – Least Preferred Profile/Alternative Choices

Destination	Natural Resources-water	Rivers
	Natural Resources-land	Natural recreation and leisure parks
	Ethnographical Resources	Handicraft
	Historical Resources	Religious patrimony

Total Utility of the Least Preferred Profile = Constant + Utility (Rivers) + Utility (Natural recreation and leisure parks) + Utility (Handicraft) + Utility (Religious patrimony)

Total Utility of the Least Preferred Profile =4,17

If we analyze stated preferences with regard to respondents' nationality, we obtain similar results (Table 5):

Table 5 - Utilities estimates and importance of attributes (foreigners)

Attribute	Level	Utility	Relative Importance
Natural Resources- water	Oceanic beaches	1,641	27,908
	Fluvial beaches	-0,316	
	Rivers	-1,325	
Natural Resources- land	Mountains	0,293	16,503
	National parks or protected landscapes	-0,355	
	Natural recreation and leisure parks	0,062	
Ethnographical Resources	Popular festivities	0,702	18,731
	Handicraft	-0,330	
	Gastronomy	-0,372	
Historical Resources	Archaeological patrimony	0,995	36,858
	Religious patrimony	-1,405	
	Military patrimony	-0,243	
	Civil patrimony	0,653	
Constant		6,500	
<i>Pearson's R</i>		0,999	
<i>Kendall's tau</i>		1,000	

Even being quite similar, the results show some differences in terms of preferred destination profiles:

- national tourists prefer National Parks or Protected Landscapes, while foreign tourists give more value to Mountains; additionally,
- in the case of the Ethnographical Resources, national tourists attribute larger importance to Gastronomy, while foreigners value better Popular Festivities.

Both, national and foreigners tourists value a lot Natural Resources-water, namely Oceanic Beaches, and, in what concerns Historical Resources, the preference goes, clearly, to Archaeological Patrimony.

Conclusions

Tourist operators and public decision makers of a certain touristic destination are interested in knowing the contribution of each of the touristist resources (attributes) available and of their levels to the success of the destination. That as to do with preferences kept by present or future (potential) consumers (tourists). Having access to that knowledge they can evaluate the consistency of the strategy they are following in terms of profiting from those resources, as well as to take more informed decisions regarding promotion of the touristic destination, according to the set of products and services available.

Briefly, from the results we got from our empirical approach, we have to conclude that resources tourists value the most are (were) Oceanic Beaches and National Parks or Protected Landscapes. Having this in mind, from a promotional point of view, we think coastal municipalities of our study, which do not belong to the Peneda-Gêres National Park, should include the reference to it in their promotion campaigns, as they are located close to it. The same way, those municipalities which are inserted in this National Park, should refer to the coastline in their tourism folders, as the distance to it is never longer than a few dozens of kilometres.

By contrast, considering the same empirical results, given the minor importance conferred to Religious Patrimony and Handicraft by, both, national and foreign tourists, there is, clearly, the need to review the importance (visibility) given to them in the promotion strategies. Anyway, taking the perspective that it will be better to have a touristic destination able to offer to the market an enlarged folder of products/services than a narrow one, it seems to make sense that these resources are taken as complementary ones. As the current promotion strategy does of the Religious Patrimony and Handicraft the visiting cards of Minho-Lima, the results we got call for a deep move regarding this territory future touristic promotion.

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Annex 1

University of Minho

PhD in Economics Science

Tourism and Regional Development in the Minho-Lima

I will be very thankful if you answer this small inquiry. The answers are confidential, being a fundamental contribution for my PhD project.

1. Personal data

Nationality _____

Sex: Feminine Masculine

Age _____

Civil State _____

Level of Education:

Basic education	
Medium education	
Higher education	
PhD	

2. Please rank the destination in which you would like to go on vacations, in case of choosing the Minho-Lima (according to the supplied cards - p. 3).

1° _____

7° _____

2° _____

8° _____

3° _____

9° _____

4° _____

10° _____

5° _____

11° _____

6° _____

12° _____

3. Please order from 1 (more important) to 5 (less important) the characteristics that you would like that the resources had.

Beaches	. with quality symbol (ex. blue flag)	
	. taken care surrounding area	
	. with nautical sports	
	. with animation activities	
	. without special characteristics	

Rivers	. with official classification / protection (ex. Net Natura 2000)	
	. taken care surrounding area	
	. with nautical sports	
	. with fishing practice	
	. without special characteristics	

Natural Areas	. with official classification / protection (ex. protected area)	
	. conservation state	
	. with interpretation centers	
	. with hunt zones	
	. without special characteristics	

Historical Heritage	. with official classification / protection (ex. National Monument)	
	. conservation state	
	. period that belongs	
	. visit easiness	
	. without special characteristics	

Handicraft	. with craft exhibition and sale	
	. with certification	
	. with routes	
	. with the possibility to see artisans working	
	. without special characteristics	

Festivities	. traditional festivities / pilgrimages	
	. contemporary festivities (ex. music festivals; biennial of art)	
	. historical representations	
	. with the possibility of participation of the public	
	. indifferent	

Gastronomy	. typical/ regional cuisine	
	. typical desserts	
	. regional wines	
	. with ethnographic groups playing at the same time	
	. indifferent, since of good quality	

Thank you!

Tourist Destinations in the Minho-Lima

(Arcos de Valdevez, Caminha, Melgaço, Monção, Paredes de Coura, Ponte da Barca, Ponte de Lima, Valença, Viana do Castelo e V. N. de Cerveira)

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> . Fluvial Beaches . National Parks or Protected Landscape . Handicraft . Archaeological Patrimony <p style="text-align: right;">1</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> . Fluvial Beaches . Recreational and Leisure Natural Parks . Festivities . Military Patrimony (vg: Fortress) <p style="text-align: right;">7</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> . Rivers . Recreational and Leisure Natural Parks . Gastronomy . Archaeological Patrimony <p style="text-align: right;">2</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> . Rivers . National Parks or Protected Landscapes . Handicraft . Military Patrimony (vg: Fortress) <p style="text-align: right;">8</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> . Oceanic Beaches . Mountains or Hills . Festivities . Archaeological Patrimony <p style="text-align: right;">3</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> . Oceanic Beaches . National Parks or Protected Landscape . Gastronomy . Military Patrimony (vg: Fortress) <p style="text-align: right;">9</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> . Fluvial Beaches . Mountains or Hills . Gastronomy . Religious Patrimony <p style="text-align: right;">4</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> . Fluvial Beaches . National Parks or Protected Landscape . Festivities . Civil Patrimony (vg: Historical Buildings) <p style="text-align: right;">10</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> . Rivers . Mountains or Hills . Festivities . Religious Patrimony <p style="text-align: right;">5</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> . Rivers . Recreational and Leisure Natural Parks . Handicraft . Civil Patrimony (vg: Historical Buildings) <p style="text-align: right;">11</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> . Oceanic Beaches . Recreational and Leisure Natural Parks . Handicraft . Religious Patrimony <p style="text-align: right;">6</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> . Oceanic Beaches . Mountains or Hills . Gastronomy . Civil Patrimony (vg: Historical Buildings) <p style="text-align: right;">12</p>