


Chapter 9

Mediterranean Diet and Tourism Innovation, Experiences, and Sustainability: The HoST Lab Case Study

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ABSTRACT

HoST Lab is an integrative approach that aims to innovate based on Mediterranean diet (MD) creating new products, services, and experiences, involving producers and distributors. The lab research also aims to know the emotions and sensations associated with eno-gastronomic experiences of the Mediterranean diet and their welcome among visitors-tourists, using a triangulation of traditional methods (interviews, focus groups, workshops), but also developing a digital solution for sharing results (webpage, digital survey, sentiment analysis). A set of reference indicators and a nutrition economic label will be developed and used to evaluate and monitor research results, both in a laboratory and in a real environment. The HoST Lab pretends to be a sharing and learning research space between the academy, the tourism, and the hospitality sector, in which proposals are tested, results transferred to the community, and well-being promoted among the local population and visitors, aspiring for a growing sustainable destination.

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1. INTRODUCTION

The Algarve is located in the southernmost part of Portugal's mainland. The city of Faro, home to the University of Algarve public institution (location of HoSTLab - Hospitality, Sustainability and Tourism Experiences Innovation Laboratory) and the international airport serving the region, serves as the administrative hub for Algarve. Two zones—one to the west (Barlavento) and another to the east—are separated by the area, which is located in Faro District (Sotavento). The foundation of the Algarve's economy is tourism along with other significant activities such as fisheries industries (Ortega et al., 2013).

In 2017, the Regional Commission for the Mediterranean Diet of the Algarve highlighted in the *Plan of Activities to Safeguard the Mediterranean Diet* in the Algarve (2018-2021) the enhancement of local products, as a strategic differentiator of the Portuguese regions and other countries practising Mediterranean Diet (Freitas et al., 2022). The concept of gastronomy tourism has evolved to encompass the ethical and sustainable values of the territory, the landscape, the sea, local history and cultural heritage (Kiráľová & Malec, 2021).

The topic of “innovation” linked to the Mediterranean Diet is emerging in the research area. This study aims to contribute to filling the scarcity of scientific literature and to contribute in practice, through the explanation of how to build a research laboratory to explore the Mediterranean Diet's area and how it aggregates value to the development of new ingredients, as well as, services that contribute to improving quality, sustainability and local heritage.

The aim of the HoSTLab Project¹ is to understand and study the feelings associated with the enogastronomic experiences that are based on the elements of the Mediterranean Diet, and the characteristics of flavour and the surrounding atmosphere, which can condition the sensory result of the experiences (in a real context, testing along the restaurants or hotels; and, in a laboratory context, in a simulated environment).

Innovating through traditional products and resources correspond to the proposal of HoSTLab, directing to be a reference for research and development applied to culinary tourism and enogastronomic experiences associated with the Mediterranean Diet (MD), which will study the determinants of experience and the atmosphere of places, promoting sensory evaluation with tourists and stakeholders, of new products and services (based on local resources and products, such as cereals, olive trees, vines, and other foods), enhancing the qualification and diversification of the Algarve as a sustainable tourist destination.

This chapter reports the literature framework and findings related to the first phase of the exploratory research developed by the University of the Algarve team that aimed at better understanding present local food systems and their relation to tourism in the regional community and the Mediterranean Diet recognition throughout the province of Algarve.

For the purposes of this initiative, it was necessary to develop a diagnosis of the existing research and define the case study theoretical framework. One of the main results of the ongoing empirical and still exploratory analysis is the enormous lack of studies and research about innovation and knowledge transfer in the food and tourism industry related to the Mediterranean Diet in the Algarve.

The chapter follows a structure of five sections, without considering the present introduction. The first section contextualizes the research problem, the relevance and expected contribution of the study and the research objectives. The second section is dedicated to the literature review about the surrounding topics involving Mediterranean Diet and innovation. The third section describes the methodology

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