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What makes rural tourism tick in Portugal? Word of mouth, experiential learning, and individual performance examined

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ABSTRACT

Positioning rural tourism as a site of informal, experiential education, this study examines how experiential learning and perceived mental health (PMH) shape rural tourists' post-visit performance in Portugal. The learning construct, with word-of-mouth (WoM), is embedded in an extended Unified Theory of Acceptance and Use of Technology (UTAUT2) framework, tested on 308 tourists. PMH mediated the WoM–performance link, and experiential learning emerged as the strongest driver of post-visit performance, revealing rural tourism as a learning-rich experience rather than mere leisure. The study informs tourism education, showing how rural experiences can shape curriculum design and the training of tourism professionals.

1. Introduction

What can we learn from rural tourism and individual performance? Rural tourism and its associated experiences have seen strong growth in popularity over the past decade (Buckley, 2023; Šajn & Finer, 2023). Following the COVID-19 epidemic there has been a growing trend for rural tourism (Buckley, 2023; World Health Organization, 2022). This is attributed to a shift in people's attitudes toward travel as well as a desire for quiet and authentic experiences that are more focused on nature (Šajn & Finer, 2023). We cannot overlook the immense scope of tourism, which encompasses a wide range of activities and possibilities related to health (Buckley, 2023; Patterson & Balderas-Cejudo, 2023). Rural tourism has emerged as a highly strategic sector for providers to explore (United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO), 2023). As of 2023, 59% of 160 Member States of the UNWTO have publicly recognized the considerable importance of rural tourism in their national agendas. In addition, the overwhelming majority (96%) of these states expect a positive trend for rural tourism soon. The recognition of the potential benefits that tourism brings to rural communities substantiates these assertions (Alim et al., 2021; Kieffer, 2018; Saydam et al., 2024). The primary objectives, as consistently emphasized by Member States, include the establishment of economic opportunities, the improvement of living standards, and addressing the issue of regional population decline. Furthermore, the countries involved have recognized that safeguarding and enhancing cultural heritage, along with protecting the environment, are essential factors that offer substantial advantages in terms of potential gains from rural tourism (UNWTO, 2023).

The principal goal of this study is to improve our understanding of the factors that influence individual performance in rural tourism, with the ultimate goal of benefiting tourists. Our study focuses specifically on individual performance during the postadoption phase of rural tourism rather than the commonly addressed demand-side variables in adoption models. Tang et al. (2022) found in their recent study on rural tourism that factors such as learning and entertainment motivation, natural environment, social

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environment, and tourist satisfaction directly and positively influenced tourists' inclinations to revisit. An important determinant of the increasing appeal of rural tourism is the authenticity and unforgettable experience it offers to individuals and their subsequent ways of living and working (Juliana et al., 2022). Gaining a thorough understanding of authenticity and captivating encounters can provide tourists with more efficient and effective methods of engaging in rural tourism. The research addresses Portugal because the nation has established a robust national strategy to use rural tourism as a tool for sustainable development, cultural preservation, and well-being. The country's dedication to developing tourism beyond coastal and urban areas, together with its abundant rural heritage and varied landscapes, creates an excellent environment in which to study tourism's psychological and educational aspects (UNWTO, 2023). Sink and Tuttle (1989) establish a connection between performance and the amalgamation of effectiveness and efficiency. According to them, effectiveness refers to the ability to complete the right activities, while efficiency refers to the ability to complete jobs correctly. During a rural tourist experience, achieving a high degree of skill or ease in performing life tasks can contribute to overall performance. Inadequate achievement and a complete lack of success in attaining one's objectives can lead to discontentment or even a pervasive sense of shame (Sonntag & Frese, 2002). Gaining insight into postadoption can enhance the ability to retain rural-tourism visitors and mitigate attrition effects.

Grounded in experiential learning theory, this study explores how educational background and WoM recommendations contribute to rural tourism participants' experiential learning and, in turn, affect their PMH, behavioural intentions, and performance outcomes in Portugal. We collected data from adult tourists who visited Portugal for rural tourism and used their responses to understand the relationship between rural tourism experiences and learning outcomes, mental well-being, and behavioural changes. Additionally, we use the extended unified theory of acceptance and use of technology (UTAUT2) model and its extended constructs to advance knowledge about post-visit outcomes in tourism experiences that include learning dimensions. The research explores three constructs that explain rural tourism experiences: WoM, experiential learning, and individual performance.

WoM describes the spontaneous exchange of personal opinions and travel experiences between tourists, which influences how others choose rural vacation spots. Tourism destinations benefit from positive WoM because it functions as an organic marketing tool that builds destination loyalty (Litvin et al., 2008). Experiential learning functions as an experiential element because it enables visitors to gain knowledge and skills and cultural understanding through participating in rural activities, including farming, craft-making, and guided heritage tours (Falk et al., 2012). The concept of individual performance describes how much a rural experience improves a tourist's post-visit personal productivity, effectiveness, and overall well-being. These variables create a comprehensive framework for evaluating rural tourism's dual impact on external influence through WoM and internal transformation through learning and performance. The UTAUT2 model is valuable in explaining technology and tourism usage intentions, but it fails to fully explain the transformative psychological and educational aspects of rural tourism. The current research does not investigate how WoM and experiential learning influence mental well-being and individual performance. This study provides a comprehensive understanding of rural tourism benefits through its analysis of PMH and behaviour intention as a mediator, and education as an experiential construct. Through the mediation analysis we show the importance of studying indirect effects in addition to direct ones.

The study aims to achieve four objectives (i) to evaluate how UTAUT2 factors (e.g., performance expectancy, effort expectancy): affect rural-tourism tourists' behavioural intention; (ii) to investigate how PMH acts as a mediator between WoM and individual performance; (iii) to determine the direct relationships between experiential learning, PMH, and WoM on individual performance in rural tourism experiences; and (iv) to enhance tourism education research by determining how rural experiential learning promotes psychological outcomes and performance after visits.

The research makes four contributions, the first and third of which speak directly to tourism and hospitality education. First, it reconceptualizes rural tourism as an informal experiential learning environment and extends the UTAUT2 model with two constructs grounded in theory, experiential learning and PMH, to capture the developmental, not merely behavioural, outcomes of rural visits. Second, it shows how PMH mediates the relationship between WoM and individual performance, underscoring the value of examining indirect as well as direct effects. Third, and of greatest interest to educators, it establishes experiential learning as the strongest direct driver of post-visit individual performance, thereby validating learning-centred tourism experiences and informing how rural tourism can be designed and taught as a vehicle for competence and personal growth. Fourth, it delivers actionable guidance for tourism educators, curriculum designers, experience designers, and policymakers seeking to connect rural tourism with learning objectives, professional training, and well-being outcomes.

This focus situates the study squarely within tourism and hospitality education scholarship. Rather than treating rural tourism as merely a consumption or destination-marketing phenomenon, we approach it as a learning context in which visitors acquire knowledge, skills, and cultural understanding through direct participation. This framing speaks to three concerns central to tourism education: the design of experiential and place-based learning, the cultivation of personal growth and well-being through educational travel, and the implications for curricula and for training of tourism professionals who design and host such experiences. By identifying which features of a rural experience translate into durable learning and performance, the study offers an evidence base for educators and curriculum developers who wish to embed experiential learning principles into tourism programmes and into the professional development of rural tourism providers.

Section 2 introduces the concept of rural tourism, explains the UTAUT2 model, describes the study's literature review, and presents hypotheses. Following that we outline the approach and proceed with the analysis. The final section of the paper addresses the conclusions drawn from the study, the limits encountered, and potential avenues for further research.

2. Literature review and hypotheses

2.1. Rural tourism concept

Rural tourism involves traveling to rural locations where visitors can experience authentic cultural immersion and natural activities. The main characteristics of rural areas include agricultural activities, sparse population, and traditional community structures (Kumar & Shekhar, 2020). The Portuguese government has established rural tourism as a national priority to develop sustainable regions and protect cultural heritage (UNWTO, 2023). The varied natural environments and traditional customs of Portugal create an ideal setting to study how rural tourism promotes visitor psychological and educational development during the post-COVID recovery period, when people seek meaningful travel experiences. Rural tourism involves many different types of tourism that are sustainable, including agritourism, farm tourism, and ecotourism aimed at delivering a genuine experience of the rural area to visitors (Cestari et al., 2017; Walas & Nemethy, 2017). While ecotourism calls for active involvement in natural, cultural, and historical resources that encourage the interaction of tourists with local populations, customs, and landscapes, the notion of ecotourism prioritizes the implementation of sustainable practices that enhance the economic, social, and environmental well-being of rural communities (Kieffer, 2018).

The popularity of rural tourism has grown as travellers are given opportunities to form genuine relationships with nature (Ali et al., 2022; Buckley & Cooper, 2022; Hossain et al., 2021) and rural lifestyles, while a continuation of rural heritage, local cultural advancement, and natural resource exploitation have also boosted the popularity of rural tourism (Amr Saad, 2022). Rural tourism is valuable to the socio-cultural development of the countryside because it pushes for active participation in agricultural activities and stimulates environmentally friendly farming methods (Manta, 2019, pp. 345–359). Moreover, rural tourism implies travel that occurs in rural areas, where visitors have direct contact with the environment and community and where the residents often showcase the typical setting, economy, and history of the region (Saydam et al., 2024). Rural tourism targets small-scale engagement, affording the tourist the opportunities to relax, discover, and participate in outdoor activities. In this way the overall tourism activity contributes to the economic improvement of the rural communities and helps in the preservation of the cultural heritage of those communities (Handiman et al., 2024).

2.2. Individual performance

Individual performance is closely linked to the information systems (IS) success model (DeLone & McLean, 1992). This model explains that the use of IS and user attitudes have a relationship with the impact of IS on individual performance. Au et al. (2008) defined IS performance as the perceived outcome emanating from the use of IS and found that it has a highly significant relationship with user satisfaction and intention to use. Individual performance impact refers to the measurable outcomes an individual achieves in an IS context. Concerning rural tourism, efficiency is the capacity to perform actions with minimal time and effort, which in turn enhances tourist well-being and PMH. Sonnentag and Frese (2002) establish a connection between their study on individual performance and well-being in work settings. The authors discuss the empirical connection between well-being and performance, specifically emphasizing the potential role of self-regulation in explaining this relationship.

Because the IS success model was developed for organizational technology use, we adapt rather than transplant the construct for the tourism context. In rural tourism, individual performance is understood as a post-visit outcome: the extent to which a visitor can apply the knowledge, skills, and renewed capacity gained during the experience to everyday tasks and roles after returning home. This adaptation aligns the construct with tourism scholarship on the transformative and developmental effects of travel, which documents how tourism experiences can enhance competence, self-efficacy, and well-being that carry over into daily life (Buckley, 2023; Falk et al., 2012). It also follows experiential learning theory (Kolb, 1984), in which learning is realized when experience is converted into applicable capability. Defined in this way, individual performance is a measurable expression of what visitors take away from a rural experience, providing a tourism-grounded outcome through which the educational value of the experience can be assessed. We acknowledge, however, that with a cross-sectional self-report design this captures perceived rather than objectively verified performance, and we interpret it accordingly. Anchoring the construct in tourism theory rather than information systems alone, this conceptualization is consistent with research on transformative travel and tourist self-development, which treats the post-visit application of newly acquired knowledge, skills, and renewed capacity as a tangible developmental outcome of the experience (Buckley, 2023; Falk et al., 2012). In operational terms, a rural tourism experience translates into measurable post-visit performance when participation in authentic, hands-on activities, and the reflection that follows, equip visitors with competence and confidence that they subsequently enact in everyday tasks and roles. So defined, individual performance is the behavioural counterpart of the learning that the rural encounter affords, and it is the post-visit construct through which we assess the educational value of rural tourism in the model that follows.

2.3. Extended unified theory of acceptance and use of technology (UTAUT2) and hypotheses

Venkatesh et al. (2003) developed the UTAUT to understand why users intend to use an information system and how they use technology in organizational contexts. The UTAUT is a combination of eight distinct theoretical models from sociological and psychological streams in the literature to explain behaviour (Venkatesh et al., 2003). The UTAUT employs four primary constructs: performance expectancy, effort expectancy, social influence, and facilitating conditions. These predict behavioural intention to use a technology and actual technology use by individuals. These theories specifically address the issue of how the intention to use a

particular technology affects the behaviour of individuals. Technology use behaviour is determined by the interplay of behavioural intention (BI) and facilitating conditions (FC). Moderators of the UTAUT model are gender, age, voluntariness, and experience to clarify the variances across individuals regarding the four component constructs. Venkatesh et al. (2012) conducted a follow-up study that applied and extended the UTAUT2 theory to a consumer setting. The UTAUT model was supplemented with three additional constructs: hedonic motivation, price value, and habit. The results show that extending the UTAUT model leads to a notable improvement in explaining the variance of behavioural intention and use behaviour compared to the original model. Additionally, a lack of saturation and continuous growth trend is indicated by studies adopting the UTAUT model. With this taken into account, we can consider the UTAUT to be one of the major theories in the IS adoption field, while the UTAUT2 succeeds in providing an abundance of understanding from a rural tourism research perspective by incorporating a smooth transition between UTAUT and other constructs, exactly from the early-stage adoption to the intention of continuation.

Research on technology acceptance in tourism using the UTAUT2 framework has received considerable attention (Huang et al., 2024; Liang et al., 2024) but there is limited empirical research that integrates psychological well-being and experiential learning into this model, especially in rural tourism contexts. The applications of UTAUT2 primarily focus on pre-travel intentions and technology use but fail to consider post-visit outcomes, which include individual performance, personal development, and PMH. This study addresses this gap by adding two new constructs, PMH and experiential learning, to UTAUT2 to explain how rural tourism experiences lead to individual performance. The study supports current research directions regarding tourism's restorative aspects and learning opportunities (Buckley, 2023; Buhalis et al., 2023) while linking them to visitor behaviour and performance results.

The research depends mainly on UTAUT2 to understand tourist behavioural intentions in rural tourism settings. Unlike traditional tourism frameworks that focus primarily on satisfaction, motivation, or loyalty outcomes, UTAUT2 allows behavioural intention to be explicitly linked to post-adoption outcomes, which is essential for examining post-visit individual performance in rural tourism. The UTAUT2 model serves as a popular tool for digital adoption research because it effectively explains both usage behaviour and intention outcomes. The model provides a systematic set of constructs, including performance expectancy, effort expectancy, social influence, facilitating conditions, hedonic motivation, price value, and habit, which explain tourism behavioural patterns. The UTAUT2 model has strengths and weaknesses, and these are offset and complemented by combining the various dimensions.

Nevertheless, the UTAUT2 model fails to fully explain the experiential educational and psychological aspects that define rural tourism. The model does not consider learning outcomes and psychological effects such as well-being and PMH, which have gained importance in tourism research (Buckley, 2023; Buhalis et al., 2023). We address these lacunae by adding experiential learning and perceived mental health as two new constructs to the model. The experience economy theory from Pine and Gilmore (1998) supports the inclusion of experiential learning as a fundamental aspect of transformative experiences. The concept of PMH stems from the World Health Organization's (2022) psychological well-being definition and matches research on tourism's restorative effects (Patterson & Balderas-Cejudo, 2023; Prince et al., 2007). The added constructs enable us to study individual performance after visiting, which stems from the IS success model (DeLone & McLean, 1992). The model defines post-visit performance as the tourist's capacity to use learned knowledge and skills in their everyday life.

Our model combines UTAUT2 pre-behavioural intention factors with post-experience outcomes, including performance and

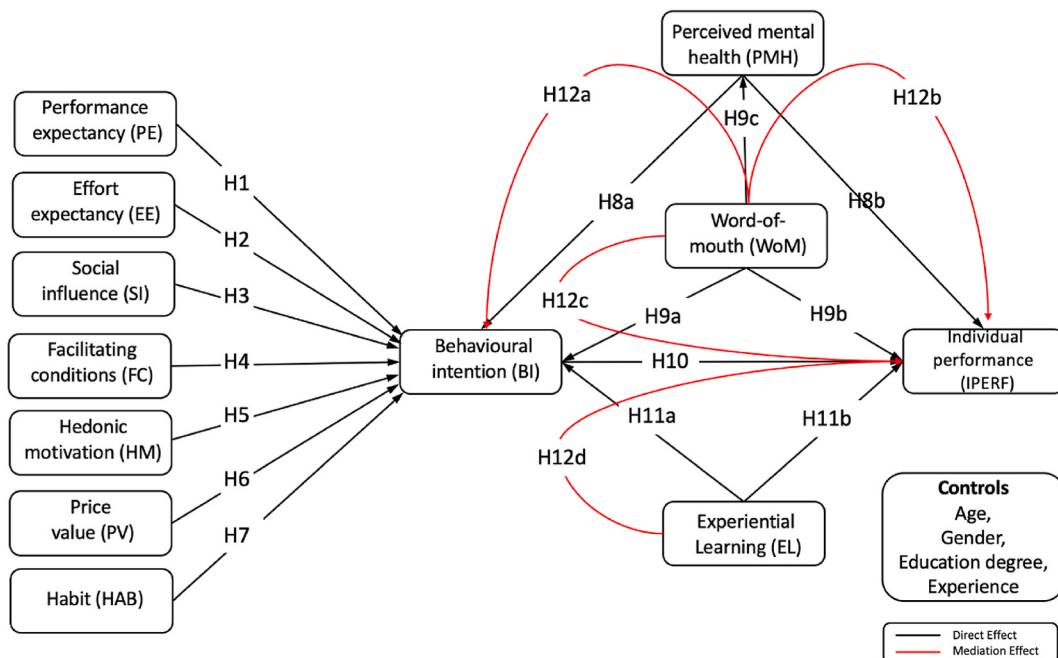


Fig. 1. – Research model.

learning, and well-being, to deliver a comprehensive analysis of rural tourism effects. The research investigates how rural tourism affects individual performance through the integration of PMH and experiential learning within the UTAUT2 framework. Our contribution to theory stems from the original model constructs. We maintain them for robustness because we explain how experiential learning and WoM influence post-visit outcomes through PMH and behavioural intention. The following hypotheses are derived from this extended model (Fig. 1).

Although UTAUT2 was developed to explain technology adoption, its constructs generalize to the adoption and continued uptake of any effortful, benefit-bearing practice, and recent tourism research has applied the constructs to the uptake of tourism services and experiences. We therefore reinterpret each construct for the rural tourism setting rather than for a discrete technology. Framing the constructs in this way allows UTAUT2 to model behavioural intention in rural tourism while leaving room for the experiential-learning and well-being processes that conventional adoption models omit, which motivates the extended model proposed below.

Performance expectation implies the individual's belief that engaging in an activity will enhance the outcomes they value (Chiu & Wang, 2008), corresponding to the notions of perceived usefulness and relative advantage (Alwahaishi & Snásel, 2013). In rural tourism it is reframed as the tourist's belief that the visit will yield valued outcomes, such as relaxation, learning, and authentic experience. Confirmation of prior expectations and perceived usefulness mainly influences satisfaction (Bhattacharjee, 2001), and performance expectancy is consistently among the strongest predictors of behavioural intention (Venkatesh et al., 2003). Accordingly, rural tourists are more likely to intend to revisit when they are confident that the experience will deliver these valued benefits.

H1. Performance expectancy in rural tourism positively affects behavioural intention.

Effort expectancy refers to the perceived ease of undertaking an activity, and it tends to reinforce performance expectations. In rural tourism, it becomes the perceived ease of planning and undertaking the rural visit, encompassing accessibility, clear information, and manageable logistics. Although a rural visit may be seen as demanding, its benefits commonly outweigh the effort involved, which makes it worthwhile. Just as complexity has been shown to reduce adoption (Venkatesh & Brown, 2001), the anticipation of a smooth and convenient experience encourages continued engagement (Venkatesh et al., 2003). Tourists who expect a rural visit to be convenient and to offer ample choice are therefore more inclined to intend to return.

H2. Effort expectancy in rural tourism positively affects behavioural intention.

Social influence refers to the extent to which one person's behaviour is shaped by others (Chiu & Wang, 2008). In rural tourism it captures the role of family, peers, and online communities in normalizing rural tourism choices. Social influence directly shapes intention, desire, and long-term consumption (Zhou & Li, 2014), and the findings of Zhou and Li (2014) suggest that it positively and significantly affects guests' continued visitation. Social influence thus operates as an often-unseen factor that plays a key role in shaping tourists' attitudes and behaviours.

H3. Social influence in rural tourism positively affects behavioural intention.

Facilitating conditions refer to the degree to which an individual perceives that the resources and support needed to carry out an activity are available (Venkatesh et al., 2003). In rural tourism they denote the supporting infrastructure and resources, including booking platforms, transport, accommodation, and on-site amenities that make participation feasible. When these conditions are present, participation in rural tourism becomes easier and visitor retention increases, since tourists are no longer constrained by practical barriers to taking part.

H4. Facilitating conditions in rural tourism positively affect behavioural intention.

Hedonic motivation, which emphasizes pleasure and enjoyment, plays a central role in shaping how tourists engage with and return to an experience. In rural tourism it corresponds to the pleasure, enjoyment, and sensory and emotional appeal of the rural experience. The enjoyment derived from a visit can influence tourists more strongly than its purely functional benefits, often being the first and most important factor in deciding whether to undertake the experience. Similarly, the pleasure that tourists associate with a rural visit is among the most influential factors in their decision to return.

H5. Hedonic motivation in rural tourism positively affects behavioural intention.

The UTAUT2 model defines price value as the relationship between the benefits of an activity and its monetary costs (Venkatesh et al., 2012). In rural tourism it reflects the perceived benefits of the experience relative to its monetary and non-monetary costs. According to Loureiro (2014), rural tourism visitors tend to value authenticity, emotional connections, and cultural value more than cost considerations. As transparent pricing and fair value have become widely expected, price sensitivity diminishes and visitors increasingly base their decisions on the experiential qualities of the visit.

H6. Price value in rural tourism positively affects behavioural intention.

The UTAUT2 model defines habit as the automatic performance of behaviours that develop through learning and repeated experiences (Venkatesh et al., 2012). In rural tourism habit captures the extent to which prior participation has become routinized, recognizing that, unlike daily technology use, rural visits are typically sporadic and high involvement. Even so, positive past visits create behavioural patterns that shape future participation, particularly when these experiences align with personal values and leisure preferences (Prayag & Ryan, 2012). Habit is therefore included to assess whether previous participation drives future rural tourism intentions.

H7. Habit in rural tourism positively affects behavioural intention.

Many studies utilize UTAUT2 models to investigate the adoption of technology (Li et al., 2024; Shareef et al., 2024), artificial intelligence (Biloš & Budimir, 2024; Huang et al., 2024), healthcare (Huang et al., 2024; Liang et al., 2024), and sustainability (Shetty & Rizwana, 2024), rather than individual performance. In the current study individual performance is defined as the outcomes or effects of engaging in rural tourism.

H10. Behavioural intention in rural tourism positively affects individual performance.

2.4. Perceived mental health

The tourism research field has extensively explored the topic of PMH and its relevance to humanity. The World Health Organization (WHO) describes mental health as “a state of well-being in which every individual realizes his or her potential, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and fruitfully, and can make a contribution to her or his community” (World Health Organization, 2022). Prince et al. (2007) supported the World Health Organization's view that there is a strong link between PMH and overall well-being. Buckley (2023), Buhalis et al. (2023), and Patterson and Balderas-Cejudo (2023) support the importance of tourism in protecting and enhancing people's PMH and well-being, as well as in treating and managing PMH issues. The wider tourism industry is a useful partner in achieving the objectives of the WHO. A recent study calls for a thorough investigation of the PMH issues within the tourism industry and suggests that we need to incorporate tourism more into the core of the Sustainable Development Goals (Buhalis et al., 2023).

H8a. PMH in rural tourism positively affects behavioural intention.

H8b. PMH in rural tourism positively affects individual performance.

2.5. Experiential learning

In this study, experiential learning is defined as the knowledge, skills, and meaning that visitors construct through direct, hands-on participation in rural tourism activities such as farming, craft-making, and guided heritage encounters. This construct is conceptual and behavioural rather than credential-based: it does not refer to a participant's formal education degree, which is reported separately and only as a sample characteristic. Two complementary learning theories ground the construct. First, Kolb's (1984) experiential learning theory frames learning as a cycle in which concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, and active experimentation convert lived rural encounters into transferable competence. Second, Mezirow's (1991) transformative learning theory explains how the disorienting, authentic, and culturally unfamiliar character of rural tourism can prompt visitors to revise their frames of reference, yielding personal growth that endures beyond the visit. Read together, these perspectives position experiential learning as a situated educational process, distinct from satisfaction or enjoyment, that produces post-visit competence and self-development. To our knowledge, no studies have examined the longer-term relationship between rural tourism and personal development from this experiential-learning perspective in conjunction with PMH and WoM (Rosalina et al., 2021). Pine II and Gilmore (1998) identified the educational realm as one of the four dimensions of memorable experiences, a framing that operationalises, within tourism, the broader experiential-learning logic outlined above. Several tourism research studies have tested this concept, from early empirical examinations (Hosany & Witham, 2009; Loureiro, 2014; Mehmetoglu & Engen, 2011) to more recent applications in rural and experiential tourism settings (Chen et al., 2023; Choudhary et al., 2025; Juliana et al., 2022). According to Pine II and Gilmore (1998), the educational dimension is realized through active participation in activities and the reflective processing of that experience, consistent with Kolb's (1984) learning cycle. Examples include immersing oneself in themed fairs, participating in agricultural activities, and learning crafts. Similarly, Kastenholz et al. (1999) examined the consequences of the various elements of rural tourism, finding that the educational factor is one of the components essential for creating interesting rural visits.

H11a. Experiential learning in rural tourism positively affects behavioural intention.

H11b. Experiential learning in rural tourism positively affects individual performance.

2.6. Word-of-mouth

Many researchers have examined and documented the significance of WoM communication in the service industry (Davis et al., 1979; George & Berry, 1981; Hartline & Jones, 1996; Zeithaml et al., 1993). Similarly, WoM is a very important informational source for consumers and, as a result, it affects their decision to support or not support a firm (Zeithaml et al., 1993). Information transmission through WoM can benefit a company by encouraging consumers to choose it over another brand. According to equity theory, a company can increase the probability of customers' favourable WoM referrals by handling an unfair service failure situation reasonably. Goodwin and Ross empirically tested this in 1992, as did Seiders and Berry in 1998. Several academics have posited that consumers are likely to engage in negative WoM if and when they perceive an unfair response to a service failure (Blodgett et al., 1993; Seiders & Berry, 1998). Some suggest that a strong link exists between service recovery and WoM, as indicated by Blodgett et al. (1993). Put simply, improved service recovery leads to an increase in positive WoM referrals. To summarize, the aforementioned theoretical reasons support a recurring theme: efforts made by a company to recover from a service failure can strongly impact customer satisfaction, intention to repurchase, and positive WoM. The following section outlines the theories associated with these

variables.

H9a. WoM in rural tourism positively affects behavioural intention.

H9b. WoM in rural tourism positively affects individual performance.

H9c. WoM in rural tourism positively affects PMH.

2.7. The mediating role of perceived mental health and behaviour intention

The mediator's effect (also called an indirect effect or mediation effect) occurs when a third-person mediator construct acts as an intervening variable in the relationship between two constructs (Carrión et al., 2017). Hair et al. (2017) confirmed the importance of mediator variables. We therefore employed mediation analysis to evaluate how WoM affects individual performance through PMH while demonstrating the psychological mechanisms that link social influence to personal outcomes in rural tourism. We propose the following hypotheses:

H12a. PMH positively mediates the effects of WoM on behavioural intention.

H12b. PMH positively mediates the effects of WoM on individual performance.

H12c. Behavioural intention positively mediates the effects of WoM on individual performance.

H12d. Behavioural intention positively mediates the effects of experiential learning on individual performance.

2.8. Control variables

The research uses the recommended organizational behaviour research methods, which include age, gender, and tourism experience as key sociodemographic controls (Bernerth & Aguinis, 2016). To avoid any ambiguity between the two senses in which education could be understood, we use consistent terminology throughout the paper. "Experiential learning" denotes the core construct in our model, namely the knowledge, skills, and meaning visitors construct through participation in rural tourism activities. By contrast, "formal education degree" denotes a participant's highest completed academic qualification; this is recorded solely as a demographic sample characteristic and is not a construct in the structural model. The control variables are age, gender, and tourism experience. We categorize these as controls because, although they may shape how tourists perceive their experience and how that perception influences performance, they do not directly form part of the hypothesized relationships. As we were unable to hold these effects constant in our survey, we controlled for them statistically (Spector & Brannick, 2011).

3. Methodology

We collected data through a Qualtrics questionnaire addressed to tourists on a widely used survey website that serves as a popular survey platform because of its strong data protection features and professional design tools, as well as its analytics integration capabilities. The survey reached potential participants in Portugal through social media tourism groups, tourism discussion forums, and academic networks. The survey required that participants had to have taken part in a rural tourism experience in Portugal. The survey did not establish any time limitations for rural tourism experiences, in order to ensure maximum participant diversity. The research employed non-probability convenience sampling and followed PLS-SEM power analysis recommendations to determine our target sample size, which was based on 10 observations per indicator (Hair et al., 2017), resulting in a minimum of 190 responses. We initially prepared the questionnaire in English and assessed its validity. To check translation consistency, we translated the questionnaire into Portuguese and then back into English (Brislin, 1970). The measurement items were adopted from various sources (Butler & Kern, 2016; Chen et al., 2023; Goodhue & Thompson, 1995; Naranjo-Zolotov et al., 2019; Nguyen et al., 2022; Sequeiros et al., 2022; Venkatesh et al., 2012) and adjusted slightly. We measured most items on a Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree).

We conducted a pilot test on 8 April 2024 to verify the validity of the questions and to assess item clarity, translation accuracy, and overall survey flow before data collection. Thirty respondents filled out this pilot questionnaire, and their responses were used to refine item wording and improve questionnaire comprehensibility, but their responses were excluded from the final analyses. The survey required approximately 10 min to complete and included screening questions to verify participant eligibility. We collected the data in Portugal from 10 to 17 April 2024. The survey link received daily distribution through rural tourism-related social media groups, online discussion forums, and academic mailing lists during this period. The posts received updates and re-sharing during the middle of the week in order to keep them visible to participants, while immediate responses to participant questions helped complete the survey. The continuous outreach strategy maintained consistent participant engagement throughout the entire seven-day period. A total of 413 people accessed the survey. Incomplete responses led to the deletion of 105 questionnaires, leaving 308 complete and valid responses for analysis. Of the 308 respondents, most (66%) were females (males, 34%). Regarding age, 101 respondents (33%) were below the age of 25, and 59 (19%) were between 25 and 30. Concerning education degree, 46% possessed a bachelor's degree, 30% a master's degree or higher, and the remainder (24%) had less than a bachelor's degree (Table 1). Because recruitment relied on social media, forums, and academic networks, the sample is not intended to be representative of the Portuguese rural tourist population; for context only, Facebook in Portugal reaches approximately 8.8 million users, of whom 53% are female and 43% are aged 25–44. We report this

descriptive comparison solely to characterize the recruitment channel and make no claim that the sample mirrors the wider population. The questionnaire did not ask participants to specify their nationality. Eligibility was therefore based on having had a rural tourism experience in Portugal rather than on residency, and the sample may include both domestic and international visitors.

We used Harman's one-factor test (Podsakoff et al., 2003) to test for common method bias. Our data analysis results showed that there is no notable presence of common method bias, as we obtained 45%, which is below the limit of 50%. We also used the marker variable technique (Lindell & Whitney, 2001; Malhotra et al., 2006) to test for common method bias (with the marker variable "knowledge level with the topic of this study", which is theoretically unrelated to other variables in our study). Other variables can explain a maximum shared variance of 0.022801 (2.28%). According to the results, the relationship between the marker variable and other variables was weak and not statistically significant at the individual and group levels. Despite a shared method bias influencing all measurements, we found significant differences between the research variables and the marker variable, highlighting the uniqueness of the research variables in this study.

4. Data analysis and results

We performed the data analysis using partial least squares structural equation modelling (PLS-SEM) (Hair et al., 2017), assisted by SmartPLS 4 software (Ringle et al., 2022). Two sections demonstrate the measurement model's efficiency through (i) convergent and (ii) discriminant validity (Hair et al., 2017). Convergent validity contains two parts: the reliability of questions, and the constructs' composite reliability (CR). Constructs extract the average variance (AVE) (Fornell & Larcker, 1981). Discriminant validity consists of three parts. First, diagonal elements should be smaller than off-diagonal elements. Second, we should use higher loadings than cross-loadings (Chin, 1998; Götz et al., 2010; Henseler et al., 2009). Third, the heterotrait-monotrait ratio of correlations should be lower than 0.9 (Henseler et al., 2015).

Table 2 shows the results of the measurement model. The CR values were greater than 0.8, and thus, the model had satisfactory internal consistency. Factor loadings should be at least 0.6 and ideally more than 0.7 (Chin, 1998). We did not need to discard any items since the cross-loading criterion was satisfied in our PLS model estimation. Table 2 clearly shows that no indicator has loadings lower than its cross-loadings. For the convergent validity assessment, the AVE was above the threshold value of 0.50 (Chin, 1998; Fornell & Larcker, 1981; Götz et al., 2010; Hair et al., 2017; Henseler et al., 2009; Ringle et al., 2022). The square root of AVE (in bold) was greater than the relationship between the constructs. Overall, the measurement model meets all criteria, allowing the constructs to evaluate the conceptual model and related hypotheses.

Fig. 2 presents the results of bootstrapping with 5000 resamples, showing the root coefficients, along with their corresponding R^2 values. We can regard the coefficients from a bootstrap distribution as an approximation of the parameter's sampling distribution and its standard deviation. To draw conclusions about the population, we can use them as a substitute for the parameter's standard error. Therefore, we calculate t-values to explore the significance of each indicator weight (Hair et al., 2017).

The model accounts for 69.3% of the variation in behavioural intention. Performance expectancy ($\hat{\beta} = 0.133$, $p < .001$), effort expectancy ($\hat{\beta} = 0.395$, $p < .001$), and hedonic motivation ($\hat{\beta} = 0.244$, $p < .001$) have significant statistical effects on behavioural intention, thereby supporting H1, H2, and H5. Of the variability in PMH, 39.5% is accounted for in the model, and WoM ($\hat{\beta} = 0.629$, $p < .001$), and WoM ($\hat{\beta} = 0.138$, $p < .001$) have significant statistical effects on individual performance (IPERF), thereby supporting H3, H4, and H6.

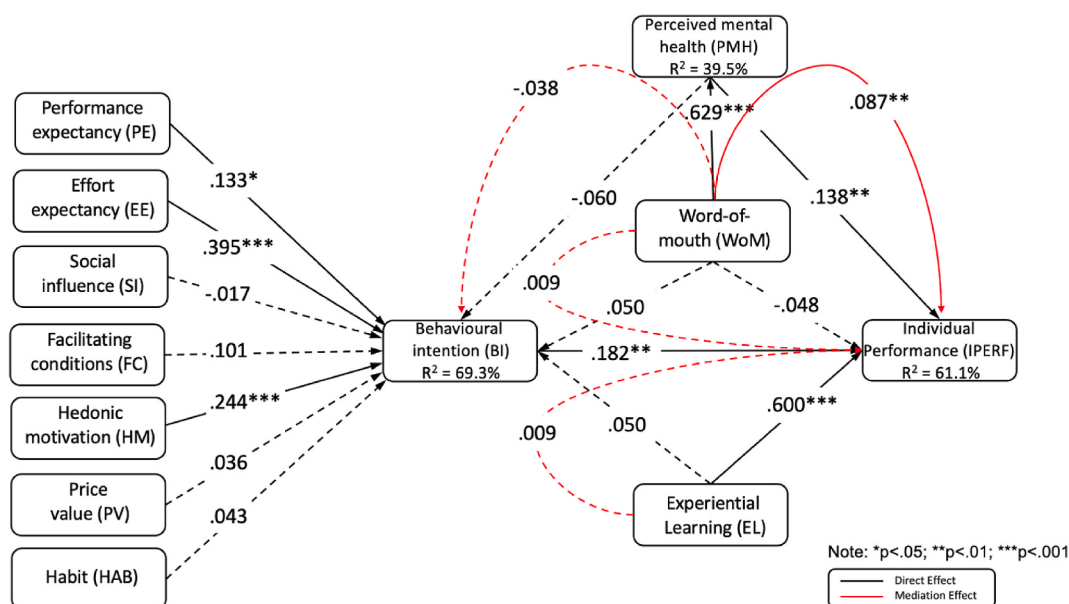


Fig. 2. Structural model results.

$p < .001$) confirms H9c. PMH, behavioural intention, and experiential learning contribute to 61.1% of the variation in individual performance. Specifically, PMH ($\beta = 0.138$, $p < .01$) pertains to H8b, behavioural intention ($\beta = 0.182$, $p < .01$) verifies H10, and experiential learning ($\beta = 0.600$, $p < .001$) addresses H11b.

Our empirical results demonstrate the lack of support for the alternative propositions, some of which have detrimental effects. H9b proposed that WoM positively affects individual performance, but the estimated coefficient was negative and non-significant ($\beta = -0.048$), so the hypothesis was not supported. Likewise, H8a proposed that PMH positively affects behavioural intention but this path was also negative and non-significant ($\beta = -0.060$) and was therefore not supported. Table 3 summarizes the results of the hypothesis testing.

Fig. 2 reports the mediation analysis and the full path estimates are provided in Appendix C. Following Carrión et al. (2017), mediation was assessed by examining the bootstrapped indirect effect (P1×P2) and the direct effect (P3), with significance based on 5000 bootstrap resamples and 95% confidence intervals. For H12a, the indirect effect of WoM on behavioural intention through PMH was not significant ($\beta = -0.038$, $t = 1.225$, $p = n. s.$), and the direct effect was likewise non-significant ($\beta = 0.050$, $t = 0.740$, $p = n. s.$). As neither path was significant, no mediation is present and H12a is not supported. For H12b, the indirect effect of WoM on individual performance through PMH was positive and significant ($\beta = 0.087$, $t = 2.759$, $p < .01$), whereas the direct effect of WoM on individual performance was non-significant ($\beta = -0.048$, $t = 0.882$, $p = n. s.$). Because only the indirect path is significant, PMH fully mediates the WoM–performance relationship, supporting H12b. For H12c, the indirect effect of WoM on individual performance through behavioural intention was not significant ($\beta = 0.009$, $t = 0.689$, $p = n. s.$), and the direct effect was also non-significant ($\beta = -0.048$, $t = 0.882$, $p = n. s.$); H12c is therefore not supported. For H12d, the indirect effect of experiential learning on individual performance through behavioural intention was not significant ($\beta = 0.009$, $t = 0.881$, $p = n. s.$), while the direct effect of experiential learning on individual performance was strong and significant ($\beta = 0.600$, $t = 8.796$, $p < .001$). The effect of experiential learning on performance is thus direct only, with no mediation through behavioural intention, so H12d is not supported. In sum, PMH operates as a full mediator between WoM and individual performance (H12b), whereas behavioural intention does not mediate the WoM or experiential learning > performance relationships (H12c, H12d), and PMH does not mediate the WoM > behavioural intention relationship (H12a).

5. Discussion

This study set out to understand how rural tourists respond to and benefit from their experiences, extending UTAUT2 with experiential learning and PMH to capture post-visit developmental outcomes alongside behavioural intention. The research findings validate some of the findings reported in the literature while providing new insights for theory on how intentions develop, and how individuals perform in these circumstances. The results of our research confirm that performance expectancy functions as a primary driver of behavioural intention, as claimed by Chiu and Wang (2008) and Venkatesh et al. (2012). Rural tourism participants believe such experiences will produce positive results, which confirms the findings of Tang et al. (2022) that functional benefits drive repeat visitation. Effort expectancy supports Buhalis et al. (2023) and Venkatesh et al. (2003), which demonstrates that convenience, accessible information, and user-friendly features remain important even in settings that emphasize authenticity and a rustic character. Efficient booking systems and well-organized itineraries reduce visitor concerns and increase the likelihood of return.

Social influence showed no significant link with behavioural intention. This diverges from Litvin et al. (2008) and Zhou and Li (2014), as peer recommendations and social norms exerted no detectable influence. Rural tourism decisions appear to follow individual preferences since people base their choices on personal values and lifestyle needs rather than social pressures. Facilitating conditions were not significant predictors, contrary to Sequeiros et al. (2022) and Venkatesh et al. (2012). The visitor experience benefits from technological and organizational supports that operate in the background and remain largely unnoticed by visitors. In our results hedonic motivation maintains its predictive power for supporting previous tourism research (Hosany & Witham, 2009; Mehmetoglu & Engen, 2011) that pleasure, enjoyment, and sensory satisfaction remain essential motivators even when educational and psychological outcomes are foremost. Price value carried no significant weight here, unlike findings from price-sensitive segments (Sequeiros et al., 2022). Rural tourism visitors tend to set internal expectations for fair pricing, valuing authenticity and emotional connections and experiential depth above costs.

Habit had no significant effect, contrasting with Venkatesh et al. (2012), who found that repeated use typically reinforced behavioural patterns. Because rural tourism events occur infrequently, visitors do not experience the necessary repetition for automatic behaviours to develop. Visitors make purposeful decisions for each rural tourism experience because the visits remain distinct from habitual patterns. PMH showed a notable pattern: it strongly shaped personal outcomes yet did not influence future behavioural intentions. The findings of Buckley (2023) and Patterson and Balderas-Cejudo (2023) regarding tourism well-being benefits align with this study but their research shows that psychological improvements do not directly impact revisit intentions. Visitors often seek new destinations even when previous trips enhanced their PMH. WoM had a strong effect on PMH, but did not impact behavioural intention or individual performance directly, which contradicts some findings in Litvin et al. (2008), who demonstrated that WoM directly influenced destination selection. The indirect function of WoM appears to shape visitor emotional anticipation, which leads to better post-visit outcomes.

Our research found that behavioural intention served as a key determinant for individual performance results, in accordance with Goodhue and Thompson (1995) and the task–technology fit model. The model shows that sustained user participation leads to improved skill utilization and higher productivity, along with better effectiveness perception. The results confirm that rural tourism serves as a learning-based educational experience that provides practical advantages after the visit. The mediation analysis provided

additional understanding of the results. WoM influences individual performance because PMH fully mediates the relationship and thus acts as the crucial link between WoM and post-visit individual performances. Individual performance results directly from educational influences: learning benefits translate into action without requiring behavioural intention as an intermediary.

Overall, the model retains its core predictive constructs, performance expectancy, hedonic motivation, and effort expectancy, while social influence, facilitating conditions, price value, and habit were not significant. The addition of PMH and experiential learning improved the model's explanatory power, reframing rural tourism as both a recreational activity and a means of psychological restoration and individual growth.

Read as a whole, these findings speak most directly to tourism and hospitality education. The result that experiential learning, rather than the adoption-oriented UTAUT2 constructs, most strongly explains post-visit performance reframes rural tourism as an educational setting whose value depends on how the experience is designed, facilitated, and reflected upon. This resonates with the belief that learning in tourism should be treated as an embedded pedagogical condition rather than an incidental by-product of travel, and that experiential and project-based formats should be central concerns among students and practitioners engaging in the professional practice. Two features of our results are especially salient for educators. First, experiential learning influenced performance directly, without passing through behavioural intention, suggesting that well-designed rural encounters can produce durable competence and growth independently of whether visitors plan to return, a useful property for educational programmes that cannot rely on repeat exposure. Second, the coupling of WoM and PMH indicates that the social and affective conditions of a rural experience shape what is learned, underscoring that the design of supportive, well-being-oriented learning environments is itself a pedagogical task. Together, these patterns position rural tourism not only as content within tourism curricula but as a vehicle for experiential and transformative learning that educators can deliberately design, assess, and improve.

5.1. Theoretical implications

Theoretically, the study contributes to tourism and hospitality education by bringing experiential learning theory (Kolb, 1984) and transformative learning theory (Mezirow, 1991) into dialogue with a behavioural-adoption model. Rather than treating learning as one of several experience dimensions, the study specifies it as a measurable educational construct that drives post-visit competence, giving educators a theory-based account of why and how rural tourism functions as a learning environment. In doing so, it also extends UTAUT2 beyond its adoption focus toward post-adoption, developmental outcomes, demonstrating that the constructs that explain *intention* are not the same as those that explain what visitors *take away* from an experience.

A second contribution concerns the distinct pathways through which a rural experience produces value. Experiential learning exerted a direct effect on individual performance without operating through behavioural intention, while PMH fully mediated the influence of WoM on individual performance. Theoretically, this separates an affective-social pathway, through which an experience is anticipated and emotionally felt ($WoM > PMH$), from an educational pathway, through which it yields lasting capability (experiential learning $>$ individual performance). The directness of the educational pathway is consistent with transformative learning theory (Mezirow, 1991): when an authentic encounter prompts learners to revise their frames of reference, the resulting growth is internalized as competence rather than mediated by an intention to return. This implies that the developmental worth of a rural experience does not depend on whether learners intend to repeat it, an important property for educational settings, such as field placements or study visits, that cannot rely on repeated exposure.

For tourism and hospitality education, this finding repositions rural tourism from a topic studied in the curriculum to a pedagogical resource: an authentic, experiential setting in which competence is built through doing and reflecting. It implies that curricula and professional-training programmes can deliberately design rural encounters as experiential learning, and that the educators and hosts who facilitate them are, in effect, designers of learning environments.

Finally, the pattern of non-significant relationships carries its own theoretical implication for how adoption models should be used in educational tourism research. Social influence, facilitating conditions, price value, and habit, all influential in the original UTAUT2, did not predict behavioural intention in this mature rural tourism setting, where infrastructure and pricing are largely standardized and choices are driven by intrinsic, experiential motives. This suggests a boundary condition: in learning-rich, intrinsically motivated tourism contexts, the explanatory weight shifts away from the model's extrinsic, convenience-oriented constructs and toward experiential and well-being processes. For tourism and hospitality education, the theoretical contribution is therefore not simply that UTAUT2 can be extended, but that learning and well-being constructs may be central rather than supplementary when the object of study is what visitors learn and carry forward, rather than whether they adopt a service.

5.2. Practical implications

For tourism and hospitality educators and curriculum designers, the finding that experiential learning is the strongest direct driver of post-visit individual performance carries a clear curricular message: rural tourism is most valuable educationally when it is designed as a learning experience, not merely consumed as leisure. Programmes can operationalize this by embedding Kolb's (1984) learning cycle into rural field-based modules, pairing concrete activities such as farming, craft-making, and heritage interpretation with structured reflection, conceptualization, and opportunities to apply what has been learned. Curriculum developers can treat rural placements, study visits, and live projects as assessable experiential learning, with intended learning outcomes framed around competence, cultural understanding, and personal development rather than satisfaction alone. Because confidence in our study became meaningful when tied to learners' ability to make sense of and justify their experience, assessment design should foreground reflective and evaluative tasks (learning journals, debriefs, portfolios) that make the educational value of the rural encounter explicit.

In this way, the study offers tourism educators an evidence base for shifting rural tourism from a topic taught about to a pedagogy enacted through.

A second set of implications concerns the training of tourism professionals, the operators, hosts, and frontline staff who design and deliver rural experiences, and who function, in effect, as host-educators. Professional-development and vocational programmes for rural tourism providers should equip them to support visitor learning: to sequence activities so that doing is followed by sense-making, to surface the cultural and heritage knowledge embedded in everyday rural practice, and to be attentive to the well-being and restorative dimensions that our results link to WoM and PMH. Because experiential learning translated into performance without depending on behavioural intention, providers can be trained to design encounters that deliver durable competence and personal growth even for one-off, novelty-seeking visitors. For destination management organizations, municipal boards, and rural tourism associations, the practical priority is therefore to invest in the educational capacity of providers and to promote rural products on their learning and well-being value, supported by visitor storytelling and reviews given the central role of WoM. Finally, the alignment between educational travel and community well-being points to cross-sectoral collaboration with public-health and regional-development agencies, and to a research-informed view of rural tourism sites as informal educational platforms, an agenda squarely within the remit of tourism and hospitality education.

5.3. Limitations and future research

The research adds value to existing studies about rural tourism, experiential learning, and visitor well-being, but researchers need to consider certain limitations. The generalizability of our findings faces a limitation because the study used a non-probability convenience sample. The research used PLS-SEM analysis with a sufficient sample size, but future studies should adopt probability-based or stratified sampling methods to enhance the representation of different tourist groups. A further sampling limitation is that nationality was not collected; the sample may therefore include both domestic and international visitors, and the study does not distinguish between these groups. Future research could record nationality and compare the experiences, learning, and well-being outcomes of domestic and international rural tourists. The self-administered online survey data collection method makes the results vulnerable to self-report bias and social desirability effects. Future research should implement qualitative methods, including interviews and reflective diaries to gain better insights into visitor learning processes and psychological results. The research examined rural tourists in Portugal, but its findings lack direct applicability to rural tourism operations in different cultural or geographic locations. Research that compares different countries would help explain how cultural elements and institutional frameworks, together with infrastructure conditions, affect the educational and well-being aspects of rural tourism. The study design, as a cross-sectional approach, prevents researchers from determining cause-and-effect relationships between perceived performance and mental health benefits and their duration. Research following tourists throughout different time periods would generate more robust evidence about how rural tourism affects individual outcomes. Future research should investigate how rural tourism creates mutual learning and well-being for visitors and communities through the inclusion of perspectives from local host educators and tourism workers.

Several of these directions are specifically educational and align with the agenda of tourism and hospitality education research. First, because we measured experiential learning at a single point, longitudinal designs are needed to trace how learning, competence, and personal growth consolidate or decay after the visit, mirroring calls in tourism education for studies that follow learners over time. Second, intervention or quasi-experimental studies could compare differently designed rural experiences; for example, reflection-rich versus activity-only formats to test which pedagogical features convert participation into durable learning, providing direct guidance for curriculum and experience design. Third, future work could examine the curricular integration of rural tourism within degree and vocational programmes, including how field placements, live projects, and assessment are structured to develop evaluative judgement and professional competence. Fourth, research that incorporates the perspectives of host-educators and frontline tourism workers would illuminate the teaching practices through which rural encounters become learning encounters, and how such educators might themselves be trained and supported. Finally, qualitative and mixed-method studies using interviews, observation, and reflective diaries would complement the present model by capturing the situated, transformative learning processes (Mezirow, 1991) that survey measures only approximate.

6. Conclusion

The research contributes to rural tourism knowledge by studying the effects of WoM, experiential learning, and PMH on behavioural intentions and post-visit performance outcomes. The study tested 19 hypotheses through a model combining UTAUT2 with psychological and experiential constructs, of which 8 were supported. The fact that fewer than half of the hypothesized paths were supported should temper any strong reading of the model. Several non-significant relationships are themselves informative: social influence, facilitating conditions, price value, and habit appear to matter less in a mature rural tourism market in which infrastructure and pricing are largely standardized, and decisions are driven by intrinsic, experiential motives. We therefore present the extended model as a partial and context-bound account rather than as a confirmed general framework. The study extends UTAUT2 beyond adoption to post-visit developmental outcomes.

By uniting tourism, experiential learning, and PMH within a single framework, the study moves beyond traditional satisfaction and loyalty models, repositioning rural tourism as a vehicle for personal development and well-being. These findings hold value for tourism educators, experience designers, and policymakers who seek to align rural tourism growth with learning and well-being objectives.

CRediT authorship contribution statement

Mafalda Pereira: Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Validation, Conceptualization. **Carlos Tam:** Writing – review & editing, Validation, Supervision.

Compliance with ethical standards

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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Appendix A. Supplementary data

Supplementary data to this article can be found online at <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jhlste.2026.100628>.

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