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Academic Research Paper

Revitalizing Abandoned Villages through Rural Tourism:

Visitor Motivations and Satisfaction. The Case of Pentidattilo

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Abstract: In recent decades, many rural areas and historic villages in Italy have faced significant challenges, including depopulation and economic decline, particularly in remote regions. This study examines the role of rural tourism as a revitalisation strategy for abandoned villages, analysing how tourism can transform these areas into valuable cultural and economic assets. Specifically, the research aims to explore the relationship between visitor motivations, satisfaction levels, and their intention to return. The borgo of Pentidattilo, located in the Aspromonte National Park, is used as a case study to understand how rural tourism can contribute to the economic, social, and cultural regeneration of marginal areas. The research is based on a survey conducted among visitors to Pentidattilo, using questionnaires and interviews administered both on-site and online. The aim is to gather data on tourists' motivations, satisfaction, and willingness to return. Data analysis was performed using Structural Equation Modelling (SEM), supported by SmartPLS software, to assess the influence of factors such as the destination's beauty, essential conditions, and tourism promotion on visitor behaviour. This research highlights the potential of rural tourism in regenerating abandoned villages by fostering authentic, meaningful experiences that enhance visitor satisfaction and encourage repeat visits. The findings contribute to the growing academic discourse on sustainable tourism and offer insights into the role of visitor motivations in shaping tourism experiences. Future research can build upon these results by exploring alternative tourism models and assessing the long-term impact of tourism on local communities. The study suggests that the success of rural tourism in revitalizing villages like Pentidattilo depends on balancing the preservation of cultural and environmental heritage with tourism growth. Tourism operators are encouraged to focus on delivering emotionally engaging

experiences that resonate with visitors' intrinsic motivations, rather than merely improving infrastructure. These insights provide valuable guidelines for developing sustainable tourism strategies that foster long-term visitor loyalty and support the economic development of marginalized rural areas.

Keywords: *revisit intention; village-based tourism; tourist satisfaction; rural tourism; PLS*

JEL Codes: Z32; O18; D12

1. Introduction

In recent decades, Italy's rural areas and historic villages have undergone a profound crisis, characterized by depopulation and abandonment. This process has particularly affected villages located in remote and marginal areas of the country, where modernization, urbanization, and the decline of traditional agriculture have driven populations to migrate towards urban centers. However, rural tourism has emerged as a promising strategy for the revitalization of these areas, transforming abandoned villages from symbols of decay into valuable cultural and economic assets.

In Italy, rural tourism has gained increasing prominence through both public and private initiatives aimed at promoting the historical, cultural, and landscape heritage of small towns. National programs such as "*I Borghi più belli d'Italia*," along with various regional initiatives, have highlighted the importance of preserving these areas as an integral part of the nation's identity. Villages once on the brink of extinction have been rediscovered through experiential and cultural tourism, offering new opportunities for development in some of the country's most isolated regions. Since 2013, the number of tourists in agritourism businesses has increased by 40%, with 49% of tourists being foreign. However, the potential for the development of rural tourism is much broader, encompassing a variety of opportunities in terms of both scale and financial resources. According to the National Institute of Tourism Research (ISNART), 49.2% of tourists have chosen nature-based destinations, contributing to the revitalisation of the country's internal and marginal areas. In the new strategic plan of the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) 2023-27, tourism is seen as a tool to improve territorial attractiveness and diversification, with €118 million allocated to the sector. Of this, 64% is for agritourism, 21% for investments to increase the attractiveness of rural areas and 18% for supporting cooperation in rural tourism through the Leader programme. The CAP will also invest in safeguarding water and forests for the benefit of rural tourism (Ceci et al. 2023).

Rural tourism in these abandoned villages goes beyond simple sightseeing; it represents a deeper engagement with the discovery of cultural heritage, local architecture, and longstanding traditions. Visitors, often seek meaningful encounters with history, nature, and local communities, in search of experiences removed from the typical mass-tourism circuits. Nonetheless, the depopulation of many of these areas, driven by inhabitants seeking better work and educational opportunities in cities, has created significant challenges. Yet, it also offers a unique opportunity to reposition these villages as alternative tourist destinations, where visitors can experience an authentic and immersive environment.

Rural tourism, therefore, represents not only an economic opportunity but also an instrument for the preservation and enhancement of cultural and natural heritage. Across various regions of Italy, it has contributed to the development of new hospitality structures, cultural itineraries, and local events designed to revitalize traditions and offer authentic experiences to visitors.

The question of how to revitalize these villages through sustainable tourism has become a matter of

great academic and political interest. Many villages have successfully developed rural tourism industries, driven either by the commitment of local communities or by the growing demand from travellers seeking authentic, less-commercialized destinations. A key factor in this process is the ability to retain visitors, as their intention to return is a strong indicator of both satisfaction and long-term engagement. Repeat visits also help to reduce marketing and promotional costs, positioning rural tourism as a competitive strategy for local development.

This research aims to contribute to the academic discussion on rural tourism by exploring the relationship between visitor motivations and their level of satisfaction. Specifically, it examines how different types of motivations—such as the exploration of cultural and natural heritage, interactions with local communities, or the search for relaxation—affect the overall tourist experience, satisfaction, and intention to return. The specific objectives of this study are: (1) to assess visitor satisfaction in relation to their likelihood of returning; (2) to examine the factors that impact visitor satisfaction and their intention to return and (3) to offer strategic recommendations for enhancing visitor satisfaction and fostering loyalty.

The case of Pentidattilo serves as an illustrative example for examining the potential of rural tourism in the regeneration of abandoned villages, providing insights into how an integrated approach can promote the economic, social, and cultural revitalization of Italy's rural areas. Located within the Aspromonte National Park, this historic settlement - depopulated due to emigration and geological instability - has been the subject of several regeneration initiatives focused on leveraging its natural and cultural heritage. With its millennial history, Pentidattilo represents a significant case study for analysing the effectiveness of tourism-led revitalization strategies in abandoned villages. Rural tourism in Pentidattilo has been developed to offer experiential activities that facilitate engagement with local traditions and cultural heritage. The settlement's true character manifests through its preserved landscape, vernacular architecture, and community interactions, providing visitors with immersive experiences that go beyond conventional tourism. This authenticity, grounded in traditional practices and environmental sustainability, represents a distinctive value proposition for experience seeking tourists.

This research contributes to the understanding of tourist motivations in remote rural areas, offering empirical evidence for developing targeted marketing and management strategies. The analysis provides insights into how cultural and natural assets of historic villages can be effectively leveraged to enhance visitor satisfaction while ensuring sustainable development practices. These findings have implications for policy - makers and practitioners involved in rural regeneration initiatives.

2. Literature review and research hypotheses

The decline of rural areas globally is a complex, multifactorial phenomenon, primarily linked to the spread of industrial civilization, which has profoundly altered traditional lifestyles and economic structures in the countryside. However, in recent decades, the postmodern context has redefined these territories, transforming them from mere agricultural reserves into destinations for recreation, tourism, and niche food production. Among these new functions, rural tourism has emerged as a key strategy for the economic development of struggling rural areas.

According to Lane (1994), rural tourism originated in Europe and the United States in the late 19th century, evolving in the 1970s and 1980s into a more complex and modern form. This development was driven by market dynamics and the active engagement of local communities and governments, even in areas without protected status or significant landscape value. Rural tourism has proven to be an effective development tool for disadvantaged areas, providing economic opportunities and countering depopulation

(Augustyn, 1998; Fleischer & Felsenstein, 2000). It is characterized by two fundamental features: active involvement of the local population and the repurposing of existing infrastructures into accommodations and attractions (Lane & Kastenholz, 2015). Despite criticisms raised by Barbieri (2013), who questioned the link between rural tourism and the sustainability of traditional landscapes, the phenomenon continues to expand globally. Thus, it is essential to consider rural tourism not only as a form of tourism but also as a means of regenerating rural communities and preserving cultural traditions (Ciolac et al., 2019).

There is growing attention towards the sustainability of rural tourism and the regeneration of abandoned villages. Many of these villages, once destined for abandonment due to depopulation, are experiencing new life through rural tourism, generating economic opportunities and promoting the conservation of local cultural heritage. Community participation has proven to be a key factor in balanced and sustainable tourism growth (Hwang, Stewart & Ko, 2012), reinforcing solidarity, identity, and empowerment among the communities.

The regeneration of abandoned villages is not merely an economic process but also a cultural and social phenomenon deeply tied to identity, memory, and the symbolic value of places. In this context, Vito Teti's work (*Il senso dei luoghi*, 2004) offers a crucial perspective, framing abandoned villages as "archives of memory" and spaces where the dynamics of loss and revival coexist. Teti emphasizes the importance of viewing abandonment not as a definitive state but as an opportunity for transformation and resilience. His concept of "restanza" (the act of remaining and resisting despite adversity) provides a valuable theoretical lens for understanding the engagement of local communities in rural tourism initiatives. This approach highlights the need to balance economic revitalization with the preservation of cultural heritage and traditional practices, ensuring that tourism development aligns with the values and identities of the local population. An illustrative example of this balance is the concept of "scattered hospitality", developed in Italy during the 1980s to revitalize disused rural buildings (Russo et al., 2013). This innovative approach allows visitors to immerse themselves in the everyday life of local communities, fostering authentic interaction with the social fabric of the area. A notable case is the proposed project for Osini, a Sardinian village completely abandoned for over 60 years, aimed at repurposing unused buildings to promote sustainable tourism experiences (De Montis et al., 2015). Gastronomy plays a central role in many rural areas, often integrating with agriculture and related activities, such as agritourism, where visitors can enjoy local products directly on-site. An innovative example in this field is the village of Nughedu Santa Vittoria, also in Sardinia, where digital technologies have been employed to develop a scattered hospitality model centred on food and wine tourism (Battino & Lampreu, 2019). Activities related to nature and rural life, combined with the promotion of local food, wine, and the territory, and closely integrated with the local community, significantly contribute to diversifying the tourism offering. The relationship between tourists and residents is crucial for the success of rural tourism, influencing both visitor satisfaction and their intention to return (Cánoves et al., 2004; Kastenholz et al., 2013).

Several studies have explored the impact of rural tourism on local communities, focusing on residents' perceptions and attitudes as well as their involvement in decision-making processes (Lindberg & Aylward, 1999; Wang & Pfister, 2008; Williams & Lawson, 2001). Concurrently, attention has shifted to visitor satisfaction and the analysis of their tourism experiences (Devesa et al., 2010; Kastenholz et al., 2012), as well as the management of rural destinations and promotional strategies (Adeyinka-Ojo et al., 2014; Chen et al., 2013; Haven-Tang & Sedgley, 2014; Zhou et al., 2014). Additionally, interest has grown in developing sustainable rural tourism models, particularly regarding the social, economic, and environmental dimensions of sustainability (Blancas et al., 2011). In this context, the institutional dimension emerges as critical for ensuring active participation of local communities in decision-making processes and benefit

distribution (Hwang, Stewart & Ko, 2012). Alongside these aspects, research on sustainable rural tourism has also examined the relationship between visitor satisfaction and variables such as loyalty and travel experiences (Lee & Xue, 2020; Peña et al., 2012). However, a less explored topic is the utilization of tourist satisfaction data to define specific sustainable strategies for rural tourism. While collecting data through surveys and questionnaires remains a standard method, the advent of digital platforms has opened new avenues for real-time feedback collection (Kim & Lehto, 2012; Campòn-Cerro et al 2017). Online reviews, reflecting tourists' opinions and sentiments, are emerging as valuable resources for analysing visitor behaviour and improving services in the tourism and hospitality sector (Chen et al., 2022; Li et al., 2021). Yet, their application in the rural tourism context remains underexplored, possibly due to the complexity of this tourism form, which integrates elements such as accommodation, food, nature, and culture (Gica et al., 2020; Giray et al., 2019).

A crucial aspect of visitor attraction and satisfaction is the operational conditions of the destination, encompassing infrastructure and management factors. Literature recognizes that adequate infrastructure, including transportation, accommodation facilities, sanitation services, and communication technologies, is fundamental to meeting tourists' needs (Vigolo, 2015; Čulić et al, 2021). These factors not only facilitate the enjoyment of the area but also enhance the overall visitor experience, increasing the likelihood of return visits. Equally important is the perception of safety, which significantly influences satisfaction and the intention to return; tourists tend to avoid destinations perceived as risky (Hamouda & Yacoub 2018; Chew & Jahari, 2015). Safety concerns can lead to dissatisfaction, adversely affecting word-of-mouth and customer loyalty. In addition to infrastructure and safety, the natural characteristics of the destination, including landscapes, flora, fauna, and traditional architecture, contribute significantly to visitor satisfaction (Cong Chi & Dam, 2017; Atun et al., 2019). Local gastronomy also plays a vital role; recent research highlights that tourists increasingly seek authentic culinary experiences that they cannot replicate at home. Satisfaction with dining services positively influences the intention to return and fosters positive word-of-mouth among visitors (Cong Chi & Dam, 2017; Mai et al., 2019).

Furthermore, effective promotion is a critical factor for the development and success of a tourist destination. This includes targeted advertising campaigns, strategic use of social media, and management of online reviews. These digital marketing tools can profoundly impact both the initial perception of potential visitors and the overall tourist experience. Well-designed advertising campaigns create a desirable image of the destination, attracting new audience segments (Govers, Go, & Kumar, 2007). Social media also plays a key role in facilitating direct interaction between destinations and travelers, promoting the dissemination of visual and narrative content that enhances the destination's appeal (Leung et al., 2013).

Based on the reviewed literature, the following research hypotheses have been formulated:

- H1: Visitor satisfaction positively impacts the intention to return.
- H2: Essential operational conditions of the destination positively impact satisfaction.
- H3: Essential operational conditions of the destination positively impact the intention to return.
- H4: The beauty of the destination positively impacts satisfaction.
- H5: The beauty of the destination positively impacts the intention to return.
- H6: The attractiveness of the destination positively impacts satisfaction.
- H7: The attractiveness of the destination positively impacts the intention to return.
- H8: Destination promotion positively impacts satisfaction.
- H9: Destination promotion positively impacts the intention to return.

These hypotheses set the stage for the subsequent analysis, which will delve into the intricate relationships between these variables, further contributing to our understanding of rural tourism dynamics.

3. Materials and methods

3.1. Case Study: The borgo of Pentidattilo

The borgo of Pentidattilo, located in the municipality of Melito di Porto Salvo (Calabria, Italy), has its origins in 640 BC as a Chalcidice colony and later emerged as a flourishing economic centre during the Greco-Roman era. Situated 320 meters above sea level and perched on a cliff, its morphology is reminiscent of a hand, from which its name is derived from the ancient Greek “Penta Dactulos”, meaning “five fingers”.

Various legends surround the village, referencing the structural transformation of Mount Calvary into a stone palm and a brutal massacre involving the Alberti marquises, whose nearly entire family was slain due to a rejected love. Inhabited until 1971, the borgo experienced a gradual process of depopulation due to labour migration and numerous hydrogeological disasters that affected the area, rendering an already vulnerable zone uninhabitable due to its urban structure on multiple rocky levels, further exacerbating the abandonment process. Today, only two people reside in the ancient part of the borgo, both of whom moved to Pentidattilo at a later stage and are not originally from the area.

Pentidattilo is a fairy tale place, home to two churches: “Santa Maria della Candelora” and the Church of Saints Peter and Paul, the ruins of the Alberti castle, and the fresco of Saint Christopher, located beneath a precarious rocky outcrop for protection. After over twenty years of silence, a group of young individuals, recognising the immense potential of the borgo, initiated a process of revival. Their goal was to preserve Pentidattilo’s historical, cultural, and natural heritage through the restoration of buildings, the promotion of local craftsmanship, and the organisation of cultural events. This commitment led to the establishment of local associations, artisan workshops, and hospitality facilities such as B&Bs and taverns, complemented by charming rural houses that retain the mountain rock upon which Pentidattilo stands, integrating sustainable tourism with the unique identity of the area. Artisans introduced creations reflecting the local identity, highlighting traditional craftsmanship. One of the two inhabitants lives in full symbiosis with the land, cultivating the soil and producing zero-kilometre products, which are then served in his tavern.

Currently, the “pro loco” associations aim to destagionalise tourism by organising cultural events throughout the year. Among the most significant initiatives is the Pentidattilo Film Festival, established nearly two decades ago. Promoted and organised by Ram Film to promote independent cinema, the festival celebrates international short films and attracts filmmakers from all over the world. Its growing visibility has contributed to establishing Pentidattilo as a captivating cinematic location, to the extent that the village recently hosted the filming of a TV series and a cartoon movie. This underscores the importance of tools such as cinema and festivals in promoting tourism and cultural exchange.

Over the centuries, this area has attracted notable travellers. Al-Idrisi wrote a compendium that testifies to the geographical culture of the 12th century, entitled “Il sollazzo per chi si diletta di girare il mondo”, which also mentions the village of Pentidattilo. Maurits Cornelis Escher, the Dutch engraver and graphic artist, travelled to Italy for inspiration for his drawings and arrived in Pentidattilo in 1930. Additionally, the English artist, writer, and illustrator Edward Lear left numerous drawings and paintings in tribute to the places he visited, including one of his major works “Diario di un viaggio a

pedi”, which documents his journey through Calabria. Inspired by these great travellers, local associations have developed several trekking routes in the village and surrounding areas, such as the “Sentiero dell’inglese”, “Anello di Pentidattilo”, “Rocche di Santa Lena”, “Rocche di Prastarà”, and “Cammino Basiliano”. Moreover, the “Ciclovia Parchi per la Calabria” offers an immersive nature tourism experience, connecting the Aspromonte, Sila, Pollino, and Serra parks across a 545 km route.

The borgo of Pentidattilo is distinguished by a strong identity, offering its explorers the opportunity to fully immerse themselves in the local context, living in perfect harmony with it. This site, unique and rare, is characterised by its medieval urban structure "anchored" to the rock, dominating a promontory that extends between the sea, hills, and mountains. However, the village lacks some essential elements to ensure the basic services required to accommodate an increasing flow of tourists.

The village is relatively well connected, with access to the coastal area of the municipality, from which visitors can continue using buses, taxis, or their own vehicles. However, the limited availability of public parking and the absence of a regular shuttle service make a completely comfortable stay difficult, especially for tourists without their own means of transport.

It is necessary to consider some aspects for improvement and implementation:

- The need for a transfer service from the coastal area to the hill, scheduled at various times throughout the day, given that the “public parking” area is limited to a few square meters.
- Establishing a regular road surface to accommodate differently abled tourists.
- Creating a visitor reception centre.
- Building public hygiene services.

There is an urgent need for resolute actions in a place that is increasingly expanding its visibility across various dissemination channels, where public entities must play a key role in territorial support, demonstrating appropriate use of the contributions and funding provided by the European Union.

3.2. Data collection

To fully understand the travel experience, visitor satisfaction, and the willingness to return, an exploratory study was initiated involving a sample of visitors to the borgo of Pentidattilo. The ongoing survey began on August 1, 2023, and is still in progress. The data presented refers to the period from August 1, 2023, to August 31, 2024. This approach allows for the collection of robust and representative data over time, facilitating the identification of emerging trends and the adaptation of strategies based on gathered evidence. Consequently, it enables a more comprehensive view of tourist experiences, and a deeper understanding of visitors’ needs and expectations.

Data collection was conducted through two primary methods¹. Firstly, volunteers and temporary staff from the Municipality of Melito di Porto Salvo carried out direct interviews with visitors using a

¹ Convenience and self-selection sampling were adopted as the data collection methodology, as they represented the only feasible option within the specific context. This was due to the impossibility of obtaining an exhaustive list of visitors, which would have allowed for the application of probabilistic sampling techniques. The absence of a complete register rendered random or systematic selection of participants impracticable, necessitating the adoption of a non-probabilistic approach to ensure the collection of data suitable for analysis.

convenience sampling approach, as the units of analysis corresponded to the visitors present at the destination during the administration of the questionnaire. Concurrently, a self-selection strategy was implemented, enabling participants to access the questionnaire via a dedicated link on the official Pentidattilo website. This approach encouraged voluntary participation and facilitated more flexible data collection, thereby enhancing the sample's representativeness and enriching the diversity of profiles included in the survey.

The questionnaire, developed using established measurement tools in academic literature, comprises three main sections. The first section analyses the motivations that led visitors to choose Pentidattilo as a tourist destination. It explores not only motivational factors but also includes items related to travel organization and participants' awareness of promotional policies through media. Understanding these motivations is critical, as they can significantly impact overall visitor satisfaction and future behavioural intentions. In the second section, a five-point Likert scale was employed to collect data on various aspects of the visit experience, including satisfaction with the landscape, the beauty and maintenance of the architectural and environmental surroundings, effectiveness of services, and perceived safety. This section also examines the willingness to return and recommend the borgo, highlighting the importance of positive visitor experiences for word-of-mouth promotion. A high level of recommendation indicates a rewarding visit and suggests that visitors not only intend to return but are also motivated to share their positive experiences with others. This aspect is significant because word of mouth can strongly influence the decisions of other tourists, contributing to a virtuous cycle of attracting new visitors. The third part focuses on demographic information, including gender, age, education level, and geographical origin. These data are essential for analysing sample characteristics and understanding how these variables influence visitor experiences.

3.3. Methodology

To analyse and model the relationships between observed and latent variables and to test complex theoretical hypotheses, Structural Equation Modelling (SEM) approach was employed, implemented through SmartPLS software. This methodology consisted of two primary phases: the Measurement Model Assessment (MMA) and the Structural Model Assessment (SMA) (Hair J.F. et al. 2017).

In the MMA phase, a comprehensive analysis of the convergent and discriminant validity of the latent variables was conducted. Convergent validity was assessed using several indicators, including outer loadings, Cronbach's alpha (a measure of internal consistency reliability), composite reliability (which evaluates the overall reliability of the construct), and Average Variance Extracted (AVE), which indicates the average amount of variance captured by a construct relative to the total variance associated with it. These parameters ensure that the employed measures effectively represent the underlying theoretical constructs, confirming that the selected indicators are consistent and accurately reflect the same theoretical dimension.

To evaluate discriminant validity, the Fornell-Larcker criterion and cross-loading analyses were applied. These methodologies help verify the absence of excessive overlap among the latent variables, ensuring that each construct remains distinct. Such distinction is crucial for maintaining the robustness of the model, as insufficient discriminant validity could compromise the integrity of the analysed relationships.

In the SMA phase, the model's results were evaluated through the analysis of the Q^2 and R^2 indices. The Q^2 index provides insights into the predictive relevance of the model, indicating how well the

model predicts the values of the dependent variables, while the R^2 index measures the proportion of variance in the dependent variables that can be explained by the independent variables. Together, these indices offer valuable information about the model's ability to explain variance in the dependent variables, thereby enhancing the understanding of the proposed relationships and strengthening the conclusions drawn from the study.

4. Results

The final sample consists of 162 participants, considered adequate both for the number of items (25) and for the six variables analysed (Tabacknick, Fidell, 1996), as well as for the Structural Equation Modelling (SEM) methodology (Iacobucci, 2010).

Table 1 below summarizes the demographic characteristics of the respondents.

Table 1. Demographic characteristics of sample

		N	%
Gender	Female	97	59,9%
	Male	61	37,7%
	Unspecified	4	2,5%
Age	17 to 29	14	8,6%
	30 to 39	22	13,6%
	40 to 49	50	30,9%
	50 to 59	41	25,3%
	> 59	35	21,6%
Education	Junior high school	9	5,6%
	Senior high school	31	19,1%
	Bachelor's degree	11	6,8%
	Master's degree	72	44,4%
	Postgraduate	39	24,1%
Place of Origin	Calabria	128	79,0%
	Other Italian regions	31	19,1%
	Foreign country	3	1,9%
Occupation	Worker	28	17,3%
	Employee	68	42,0%
	Manager	9	5,6%
	Freelancer	28	17,3%
	Student	9	5,6%
	Retiree	6	3,7%
	Other	14	8,6%

Source: Authors' elaboration

The majority identified as female (59.9%), with male representation at 37.7%, and a small proportion of unspecified responses (2.5%). Regarding age, the sample exhibited a concentration in the middle age brackets, with 56.2% of participants aged between 40 and 59 years. Specifically, the age group 50-59 recorded the highest participation rate (25.3%), followed by the 40-49 age group

(30.9%). Younger generations (17-29 years) were underrepresented (8.6%), indicating a predominance of middle-aged participants. Participants displayed a notably high level of education: 44.4% reported holding a master's degree, while 24.1% possessed a postgraduate qualification. Only a small percentage (5.6%) completed lower secondary education, underscoring a highly qualified sample. Most participants (79.0%) reside in Calabria, while a minority hail from other Italian regions (19.1%) and foreign countries (1.9%). This strong geographical concentration may limit the generalizability of the results to a broader context. However, the data analysis does not appear to highlight significant differences in motivations and satisfaction levels based on the visitors' origin. Furthermore, an analysis of professions reveals a predominantly active profile: 42.0% of participants are employed, while 17.3% work as freelancers or manual labourers. Retirees (3.7%) and students (5.6%) are less represented, confirming the sample's predominantly active nature.

Table 2 presents the characteristics, organization, motivations, and interests of visitors to the borgo of Pentidattilo, from which it can be inferred that the borgo is particularly appreciated not only for its traditions but also for the deep emotional connection it establishes with visitors.

A noteworthy aspect is the predominance of private transportation, utilized by 96.6% of visitors, suggesting a desire for autonomy and convenience among tourists who wish to explore the borgo in a personal and intimate manner. This dependence on private transport may also reflect the limited public transportation options available in the region, highlighting a possible deficiency in connections between the borgo and larger cities. It is also interesting to note that over half of the visitors (52.5%) visited the borgo more than three times. This data suggests not only a strong emotional bond and loyalty among visitors but also indicates that Pentidattilo is perceived as more than just a tourist destination; it is seen as a place that fosters emotional connections and enduring relationships. The motivations expressed by visitors, while diverse, highlight a recurring theme: an emotional bond with the location (30.2%) and an interest in local traditions (35.2%). An emotional bond refers to a deep and personal connection that visitors develop with Pentidattilo, often tied to emotions, memories, or values evoked by the borgo. This connection may arise from a sense of familiarity, aesthetic appeal, or meaningful experiences shared with family or friends. These factors suggest that Pentidattilo is perceived as an authentic destination, where personal and cultural experiences play a pivotal role. In this context, authenticity refers to the genuine, unaltered characteristics of the borgo that reflect its unique cultural heritage, traditions, and history. This authenticity is often contrasted with the more commercialized aspects of tourism, where places may be altered to meet mass tourism demands. Visitors' interest in local traditions and their emotional bond to the place point to a desire to experience a form of authentic heritage that preserves these values. Additionally, 77.2% of visitors cite personal pleasure as the primary attraction factor. This finding suggests that visitors seek experiences that not only meet their tourism expectations but also enrich their personal lives. Motivations related to discovering local traditions and emotional bonds demonstrate an attraction to an authenticity often lacking in more commercial destinations. The element of shared experience, especially among family and friends, transforms the visit into an opportunity to build connections and share meaningful moments, further enhancing the emotional value associated with the borgo. Finally, it is relevant to note that 46.9% of participants did not seek information prior to their visit, suggesting a degree of spontaneity in the choice to visit the borgo. A significant portion of visitors relied on recommendations from family and friends (25.3%), while only a minority utilized online resources (16.0%). Furthermore, 67.3% of visitors had no information regarding accommodation bookings, indicating a preference for

improvisation or a lack of advance planning. Similarly, concerning activities, 60.5% of visitors did not seek specific information, implying that many prefer to explore the borgo freely upon arrival.

Table 2. Travel characteristics and motivations

		N	%
Transportations	Public transport	5	3,1%
	Private transport	157	96,9%
Company	Friends	59	36,4%
	Family	69	42,6%
	Group tour	17	10,5%
	Alone	17	10,5%
Length of stay	1_day	35	21,6%
	2_day_or more	23	14,2%
	Half day	104	64,2%
Number of times visiting	First time	29	17,9%
	Once	20	12,3%
	2-3 times	28	17,3%
	More than 3 times	85	52,5%
Information search	No information	76	46,9%
	Family/Friends	41	25,3%
	Web	26	16,0%
	Other	19	11,7%
Accommodation booking	No information	109	67,3%
	Family/Friends	24	14,8%
	Web	17	10,5%
	Other	12	7,4%
Activity booking	No information	98	60,5%
	Family/Friends	30	18,5%
	Web	18	11,1%
	Other	16	9,9%
Reason	Attachment	49	30,2%
	Relax	27	16,7%
	Local tradition	57	35,2%
	Tourism	16	9,9%
	Other	13	8,0%
Attraction Factors	Personal pleasure	125	77,2%
	Beauty of <i>Borgo</i>	4	2,5%
	Work	33	20,4%

Source: Authors' elaboration

The results regarding convergent validity are summarized in Table 3. To assess this, three primary indicators were utilized: Cronbach’s Alpha (CA), composite reliability (CR), and average variance extracted (AVE).

Table 3. Convergent validity

	CA	CR	AVE
Attractive Conditions	0,830	0,874	0,740
Essential Conditions	0,886	0,892	0,744
Natural and Architectural Landscape	0,731	0,783	0,784
Revisit Intention	0,889	0,891	0,900
Tourist Promotion	0,877	0,901	0,713
Tourist Satisfaction	0,838	0,838	0,861

Source: Authors’ elaboration

All indicators exceed the established threshold values, set at 0.70 for both Cronbach’s Alpha and composite reliability, and at 0.50 for average variance extracted (AVE), in accordance with the recommendations of Hair et al., 2017.

For discriminant validity, the Fornell-Larcker criterion was employed (see Table 4). In all instances, the square roots of the AVE values (in bold) exceeded the correlations among the constructs in the model. Furthermore, the HTMT (Heterotrait-Monotrait Ratio) values for each construct were below the threshold of 0.85, as suggested by Henseler et al. (2016). These results provide clear empirical support for both the convergent and discriminant validity of the model.

Subsequently, to assess the adequacy of the proposed model, several indicators were considered, including the structural variance inflation factor (VIF), predictive relevance (Q²), and explanatory power measured through the coefficients of determination (R²).

Table 4. Fornell-Larcker criterion

	Attr_Cond	Ess_Cond	Nat_Arch	Rev_Int	Tour.Prom	Tour.Sat
Attr_Cond	0,860					
Ess_Cond	0,846	0,862				
Nat_Arch	0,809	0,805	0,886			
Rev_Int	0,744	0,785	0,804	0,949		
Tour.Prom	0,583	0,496	0,584	-0,568	0,844	
Tour.Sat	0,821	0,785	0,841	0,846	0,121	0,928

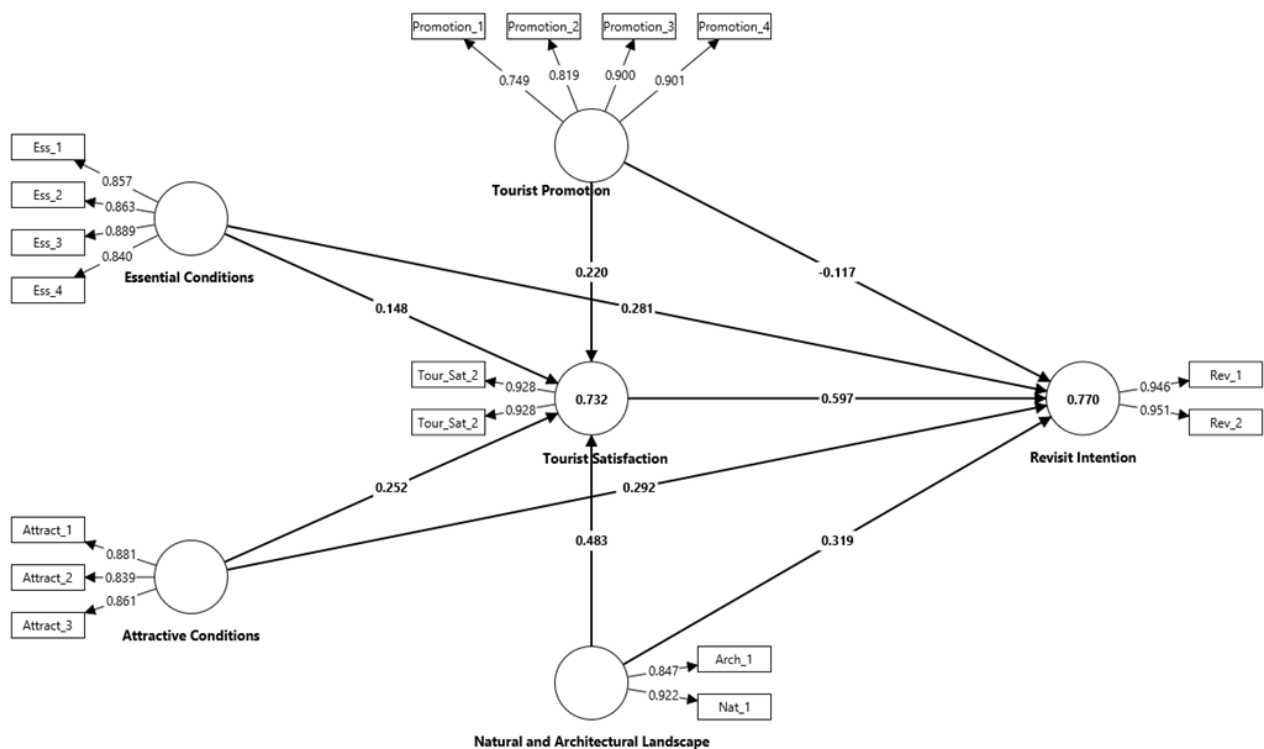
Source: Authors’ elaboration

The observed VIF values ranged from 1.489 to 2.791, all below the threshold of 3.3 (Hair et al., 2017), indicating the absence of collinearity issues. The Q² values varied between 0.218 and 0.521, all exceeding the benchmark value of zero, thereby confirming the predictive relevance of the model (Henseler et al., 2009). Additionally, the R² values (0.732 and 0.770) indicate a model with good explanatory capacity (Hair et al., 2017). Overall, these indicators suggest a good fit of the model within the research framework.

The bootstrapping analysis, conducted on 10,000 samples, revealed that eight out of the nine coefficients related to direct effects were statistically significant in the hypothesized direction (Figure 1). This supports all hypotheses except H2, indicating that the essential conditions of the destination do not significantly influence tourist satisfaction ($\beta=0.148$, $p=0.133$). However, these conditions were found to influence revisit intention ($\beta = 0.281$, $p = 0.007$). The effect of attractive conditions emerged as significant for both the intention to revisit ($\beta=0.292$, $p = 0.011$) and overall satisfaction ($\beta=0.252$, $p = 0.035$). These findings suggest that improvements in attractive conditions are positively correlated with increases in visitor satisfaction and their likelihood of return. Similarly, the natural and architectural landscape had a significant and positive impact on both satisfaction ($\beta = 0.483$, $p < 0.001$) and revisit intention ($\beta = 0.319$, $p = 0.021$), highlighting its central role in delivering a fulfilling tourism experience. Conversely, the construct represented by the tourist promotion showed a moderate positive effect on satisfaction ($\beta = 0.220$, $p = 0.031$) but no significant influence on revisit intention ($\beta=-0.117$, $p = 0.232$). This suggests that while promotional efforts can enhance tourists’ immediate perception of their experience, they do not necessarily increase their intention to return. Finally, the relationship between tourist satisfaction and revisit intention ($\beta = 0.597$, $p < 0.001$) emerged as the strongest in the model, confirming its critical role as a mediator. Satisfaction not only reflects the quality of the tourism experience but also acts as a key determinant of visitors’ likelihood to return, consistent with existing literature on rural tourism.

In summary, the findings emphasize the importance of investing in attractive conditions and natural and architectural landscapes to improve satisfaction and encourage repeat visits. While essential conditions remain important for operational purposes, they appear to have a limited role in influencing satisfaction or motivating visitors to return. Promotional efforts should focus on enhancing satisfaction through these key dimensions, as satisfaction ultimately drives revisit intention.

Figure 1. Estimate model



Source: Authors’ elaboration

5. Discussion, conclusions, and future implications

This study analyzed the potential of rural tourism in abandoned historic *borghi* as a tool for economic, cultural, and social regeneration, with a specific focus on the case of Pentidattilo. This small village, located on the slopes of Mount Aspromonte and now uninhabited, offers a unique tourism experience that intertwines authentic cultural heritage with a captivating natural environment, exceeding visitors' expectations. This combination fosters a deep emotional connection with the local community, encouraging not only repeat visits but also positive word of mouth. The data suggest that visitors perceive these places not merely as tourist destinations, but as spaces that evoke a sense of belonging and emotional attachment. Borrowing a phrase from Vito Teti (2017), one could say that Pentidattilo is one of those “places that do not die. Not even when people have left. Places continue to live if there are people connected to them, people who come from them, until someone, perhaps a descendant of those born in these places, remembers them”. This finding supports the idea that intrinsic motivations, such as cultural curiosity and the pursuit of authenticity, are strongly correlated with higher levels of satisfaction.

From a methodological perspective, the use of Structural Equation Modelling (SEM) and rigorous validity assessments strengthens the reliability of these findings, providing a robust framework for analyzing visitor behaviors and preferences. The results highlight the strategic role of tourism in the sustainable development of marginalized areas, confirming, as established in existing literature, that visitor satisfaction is a critical factor in fostering loyalty and supporting the central thesis of the research. An interesting aspect that emerged is that visitor satisfaction is strongly influenced by the overall experience of authenticity and cultural immersion, rather than by infrastructure and services, which represent essential operational conditions. This suggests that, although service quality is relevant, it is not sufficient to make the visit experience satisfactory; the determining factor lies rather in the ability to offer meaningful and authentic experiences. Similarly, tourism promotion through cultural events and targeted communications increases the visibility of the destination and attracts new visitors but it has a limited impact on visitor loyalty. On the other hand, lived experiences play a decisive role in shaping the desire to return, underscoring the need to focus on the quality of the experiences offered, rather than relying solely on marketing. These insights suggest practical strategies for local tourism operators and policymakers, emphasizing the importance of integrating community participation and leveraging cultural heritage to create distinctive and memorable tourism offerings.

From a development perspective, the importance of preserving and enhancing the architectural and natural heritage of the borgo emerges as crucial to maintaining high levels of satisfaction and encouraging repeat visits. Cultural activities and the active participation of local communities are indispensable for offering authentic experiences, fostering social interaction, and creating a sustainable tourism model capable of counteracting depopulation and generating economic benefits.

In conclusion, this research demonstrates the transformative role of rural tourism for abandoned villages, such as Pentidattilo, and underscores the need for a balanced approach that integrates tourism development with the preservation of cultural and environmental authenticity, suggesting that an integrated strategy (valuing local resources, engaging communities, and promoting authentic experiences) is key to the sustainable development of the most disadvantaged areas. However, the true challenge will be to balance tourism growth with the preservation of the cultural and environmental authenticity of these places. While the results of this study provide significant insights into visitor motivations, satisfaction levels, and intention to return, it is important to acknowledge the

methodological limitations related to the representativeness of the sample. Future research, overcoming the aforementioned limitations, should explore the long-term impacts of rural tourism on local communities, analyze the evolution of visitor satisfaction over time, and identify the factors influencing loyalty to the destination. Moreover, comparative studies involving other similar destinations could provide a broader perspective on replicable models for rural tourism. Finally, the role of digital technologies, such as real-time visitor satisfaction tracking and personalized tourism promotions, warrants further investigation to enhance visitor engagement and improve management practices.

Conflict of interest

All authors declare no conflicts of interest in this paper.

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