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## Perspectives of rural tourism entrepreneurs in Italy, Spain, and Türkiye: A focus group study

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### Abstract

*This qualitative study investigates the essential attributes required for successful rural tourism entrepreneurship. A series of focus group interviews with rural tourism professionals in Italy, Spain, and Türkiye was employed. The data collected identified five central themes: the attractive aspects of rural tourism entrepreneurship, the necessary competencies for a rural tourism entrepreneur, the training/support needed, barriers encountered, and the utilization of rural elements in tourism. The study finds that rural tourism provides numerous benefits, including economic and social growth, cultural exchange, and a close connection with nature. However, to harness these benefits, entrepreneurs need diverse skills, including knowledge of economics, tourism, legislation, and marketing. Additionally, they require specific training and support to navigate potential barriers like administrative procedures and high financial costs. The study's findings provide valuable insights for aspiring entrepreneurs, policymakers, and other stakeholders in the field. Despite its focus on three countries, it allows further research to incorporate a wider range of perspectives and geographical contexts.*

**Keywords:** Rural tourism, Rural tourism entrepreneurship, Sustainable rural development, Barriers in rural tourism

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### 1. Introduction

Rural regions, replete with unparalleled geographical attributes, natural landscapes, historical artifacts, climatic diversity, and rich cultural customs, offer immense potential for tourism development (Saghayy & Javanbakht Ghahfarokhi, 2012). While these areas grapple with challenges originating from their fragile socio-economic fabric, smaller population, and constrained service accessibility (Brown & Schaft, 2018), they concurrently beckon visitors with the allure of vast, untouched spaces that resonate with pastoral charm and nostalgic appeal (Figueiredo & Raschi, 2011).

Rural tourism entrepreneurship has recently been the focus of escalating interest among researchers and practitioners (Naderi et al., 2019; Demir & Aracı, 2022). Rural

tourism encompasses various activities, often in natural environments within rural settings, allowing tourists to immerse themselves in diverse cultures and engage in region-specific pursuits over day trips or extended stays (Zurnacı, 2012). Rural tourism, acting as an unconventional strategy for rural development, has been adopted by numerous rural communities as a mechanism of self-sustainability (Wilson et al., 2001). Moreover, rural tourism is crucial in rejuvenating rural economies and fostering sustainable economic opportunities within these areas (Moqadas, 2018). Therefore, incorporating cultural heritage into rural tourism products is essential for successful development and for fostering economic diversity in rural economies (Kruzmetra et al., 2013). According to Roberts and Hall (2019), rural tourism is slated to become one of the most sought-after forms of tourism in the future.

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The tourism paradigm has undergone a significant transformation, gravitating towards rural tourism, especially post the pandemic and in light of the heightened emphasis on sustainability issues. The adverse impacts of mass tourism on local environments, communities, and cultures, combined with the challenges prompted by the COVID-19 pandemic, underscore the need for alternative, more sustainable forms of tourism that respect and support local communities and economies. Rural tourism, with its integration with nature, respect for local inhabitants, and emphasis on local economies, stands out as a viable substitute for mass tourism (Aydemir et al., 2016; Cengiz & Akkuş, 2012).

Launching entrepreneurial ventures in rural regions is paramount for developing rural tourism (Lordkipanidze, 2002). Tourism entrepreneurship is heralded as an innovative approach to invigorate and diversify rural economies, particularly those boasting unique natural, cultural, and heritage assets (Wozniczka et al., 2010). This is primarily because flourishing rural tourism entrepreneurship aids in elevating local residents' income, generating employment opportunities, and narrowing the economic chasm between urban and rural domains. The viability of a robust rural economy hinges largely on the promotion of tourism entrepreneurs (Roberts & Hall, 2019). Rural entrepreneurship can usher in substantial benefits to rural territories, such as poverty and unemployment alleviation, balanced regional growth, effective utilization of local resources, slum prevention, social tension reduction, capital formation, enhancement in per capita income, economic autonomy, and holistic development (Ghosh, 2011). The onslaught of the COVID-19 pandemic and the emphasis on rural tourism revitalization have shifted the spotlight toward tourism entrepreneurship. The growth of rural tourism destinations is fundamentally dependent on the inception of innovative tourism enterprises capable of fulfilling market demand, designing tourism products, and fostering innovation and industrial transformation.

The development of rural tourism mandates substantial support for entrepreneurship. While existing literature offers insights into the components of rural tourism and ways to mobilize its potential, there is a scarcity of research focusing on the skills requisite for a successful rural tourism entrepreneur. This study seeks to identify the essential attributes for becoming a rural tourism entrepreneur from the vantage point of those already navigating this field. The research questions for this study were structured as follows:

1. What aspects of rural tourism entrepreneurship are perceived as most appealing?
2. What competencies are considered crucial for a rural tourism entrepreneur?
3. What constitutes the most vital training/support needs?
4. What hurdles are commonly encountered?
5. How is the utilization of rural elements in tourism perceived?

## 2. Rural tourism entrepreneurship

Entrepreneurship signifies the process of identifying and exploiting opportunities, mobilizing resources, and establishing a business (Alvarez & Busenitz, 2001; Guo, Zhu & Zhao, 2023). Although the concepts and definitions of entrepreneurship and entrepreneurs vary (Deale, 2016), there is a consensus that entrepreneurs are individuals who amalgamate resources innovatively (Schumpeter, 1934). Rumelt (2005) further qualifies an entrepreneur as an individual who introduces novelty while establishing a business. Hence, the crux of entrepreneurship, independent or corporate, lies in introducing something innovative or achieving autonomy (Sharma & Chrisman, 1999; Hall & Williams, 2019). Personal traits and competencies such as risk-taking, decision-making, market orientation, creativity, innovation, self-efficacy, achievement motivation, preference for innovation, low uncertainty avoidance, high need for control, resilience, and uncertainty management can all be considered 'antifragile' entrepreneurial traits. These traits are instrumental in the entrepreneurial process and link the entrepreneur's societal context with the results of their entrepreneurial endeavors.

The consistent growth of the tourism industry and consequent escalation in tourism revenue has fueled investments in the tourism sector and given rise to a burgeoning group of tourism entrepreneurs (Soylu & Ceylan, 2019). Although tourism entrepreneurship shares its foundation with general entrepreneurial principles, it distinguishes itself through unique aspects (McGehee & Kline, 2008). Rural tourism entrepreneurship has emerged as a significant sub-field among the different categories within the tourism industry. Rural entrepreneurship refers to establishing a new organization that introduces innovative products, services, or technologies in rural regions (Wortman, 1990). Rural tourism entrepreneurs leverage rural areas' historical, natural, cultural, and agricultural resources (Aydemir et al., 2016; Çeken et al., 2007; Zurnacı, 2012). These entrepreneurs and farmers operating in rural areas play a pivotal role in fostering the rural tourism sector and enhancing the economy of rural areas by profitably harnessing the potential of agriculture, handicrafts, nature, culture, tourism, and education.

Various studies have explored the motivations of rural tourism entrepreneurs. For instance, Calza et al., (2018) found national cultural dimensions to influence European rural entrepreneurs' diversification into tourism-based agricultural activities. Similarly, Carmichael & Ainley, (2014) revealed that small businesses could drive innovation in rural tourism, which should be intentional, risk-taking, and profit-driven. Further, while some rural businesses might be driven by 'lifestyle' over pure profit, their activities could still contribute to rural economies' diversity (Ateljevic & Doorne, 2000; Carmichael & Ainley, 2014). Marques & Cunha (2013) highlighted that rural tourism entrepreneurship, influenced significantly by lifestyle aspirations derived from literary heritage, has a significant socio-economic impact on the local population. Other studies have shown that

rural tourism entrepreneurship contributes to social enterprises' performance in the context of rural tourism (Naderi et al., 2019). Utami, Dhewanto & Lestari (2023) examined the success factors, built the framework of rural tourism entrepreneurship for a sustainable tourism village, and revealed ten factors for creating a successful sustainable tourism village through rural tourism entrepreneurship.

Other researchers focused on rural tourism entrepreneurs' human resources. The motivation of human resources is deemed crucial in fostering entrepreneurship in the tourism sector (Setiyo et al., 2022). Women entrepreneurs are particularly active in rural tourism, and relevant promotional programs have been successful in China (Rao et al., 2021). Fidan & Nam (2012) emphasized that supporting women entrepreneurs is essential for developing rural tourism. The entrepreneurial potential of young people has also been highlighted as crucial for the growth of rural green tourism in Ukraine (Martynova & Laromenko, 2020).

Additionally, literature has examined the conditions fostering the growth of rural tourism entrepreneurs. Factors such as unique tourist attractions, historical heritage, local traditions, local cuisine, unique natural environments, and local entrepreneurs and initiatives are crucial in activating the potential of rural tourism (Zurnaci, 2012). The importance of regional and national policy support for rural tourism entrepreneurs has been underscored (Ndabeni & Rogerson, 2005). The role of the digital economy in promoting innovation in rural tourism entrepreneurship has been identified (Tang et al., 2022), and social entrepreneurship and community mobilization have been proposed as effective strategies to promote rural tourism entrepreneurship and enhance rural residents' quality of life (Zhang et al., 2022).

### 3. Method

This study has been done within the scope "Anti-Fragile Young Entrepreneurs for Sustainable Rural Tourism: YES for Rural Tourism" which is funded by Erasmus+ Programme European Union under the grant no: 2021-1-TR01-KA220-YOU-000028958.

This study adopts a qualitative research approach, specifically using focus group interviews to gather data on rural tourism entrepreneurship. Research questions were developed following a comprehensive literature review on rural tourism, sustainable tourism, and tourism entrepreneurship. The primary aim of conducting focus group interviews was to gain expert insights into the needs of rural tourism entrepreneurs. Focus group interviews allow knowledgeable individuals to discuss the research topic. These interviews offer advantages such as allowing participants to share thoughts and experiences, gain access to a larger sample in a shorter period, encounter various perspectives on the same issue through discussion, and quickly generate a broad range of ideas. The focus group interview process encompassed several stages: review of the research objective, development of focus group interview questions, planning the venue

and technology, piloting the process, participant identification and invitation, conducting the interviews, and data organization and analysis. The recommended participant count for focus group interviews is 6-8 individuals, as handling larger groups can be challenging.

#### 3.1. Sampling and data collection

Given that the research population comprised rural tourism entrepreneurs from Italy, Spain, and Türkiye, focus group interviews were conducted with rural tourism professionals from these nations. The study involved three focus group meetings with 26 participants, all professional rural tourism entrepreneurs with experience in tourism activities. Information on each group is given in Table 1:

Table 1. Information on Professional Rural Tourism Entrepreneurs (Italy, Spain and Türkiye)

Information on focus group interview participants	
Place of residence	Description/specialization
1. Spain	The owner of a tourism company
2. Spain	Operations Manager of a rural tourism company
3. Spain	Legal advisor and Aid Manager
4. Spain	Municipal Technician of Culture and Tourism of Benamejí, Director of the Municipal Museum, Curator and Ethnographer
5. Spain	Project Coordinator
6. Spain	Tourism and Equality Officer
7. Spain	Owner of several tourist hostels
8. Spain	Owner of a rural tourist hostel
9. Italy	Company representative, Hospitality sector
10. Italy	Company representative, Hospitality sector
11. Italy	Company representative, Hospitality sector
12. Italy	Professional Association representative, Agriculture Sector
13. Italy	Municipality Employee
14. Italy	Municipal Representative, Politician
15. Italy	Advisor to the Municipality's Director of Disabled People
16. Italy	Municipal Representative, Politician
17. Italy	Company representative, Wine industry
18. Italy	Company representative, Wine industry
19. Italy	Local NGO representative
20. Italy	Company representative, Wine industry
21. Türkiye	A representative of an agricultural and tourism association
22. Türkiye	Owner of rural tourism facility
23. Türkiye	A representative of an agricultural and tourism association
24. Türkiye	Owner of a rural tourism facility
25. Türkiye	Rural tourism operator
26. Türkiye	Permaculture farm tourism operator

The focus group in Spain included 8 rural tourism professionals and was conducted in September. The participating professionals had an experience range of 25-30 years. The focus group discussion in Italy, held on September 14, 2022, involved 12 participants engaged in rural tourism activities. This two-hour meeting, where participants addressed all questions, was conducted in the Conference Room of the Town Hall of the Municipality of Ponte di Piave. Lastly, the focus group interview in Türkiye included

six rural tourism professionals. These interviews were conducted in September via Zoom under the supervision of two expert moderators. The participating professionals in this group had at least 20 years of experience in the sector.

### 3.2 Analyzing data

The data acquired from the focus group interviews were subjected to descriptive analysis. In this type of analysis, direct quotations are commonly employed to represent the views of the interviewees or observed individuals strikingly. The goal of this analysis is to provide the reader with an organized and interpreted presentation of the findings (Yıldırım & Şimşek, 2013).

Themes and sub-themes were constructed by four researchers in pairs through a detailed data reading. Subsequently, common themes and sub-themes were recognized by all four researchers. The researchers responsible for the analysis are experts in tourism management, gastronomy, and tourism geography.

## 4. Findings

The data analysis from the focus group interview involving rural tourism professionals from Türkiye, Spain, and Italy revealed five key themes. The following sections provide a detailed explanation of these themes.

### 4.1. Attractive aspects of rural tourism entrepreneurship

Upon querying about the attractive facets of rural tourism entrepreneurship, the professionals underscored *economic and social growth, cultural enrichment, modernization, promoting local cuisine, proximity to nature, freedom, engagement in farm activities, and population conservation*.

*"It is an opportunity for the town to grow economically and socially and reach a higher cultural level."* (P5, ES)

*"From a cultural point of view, it is always positive to meet new people from other cultures or environments, which allows us to see society from another perspective. Socially, connections are made with different people and friendships are made that keep these tourists coming back."* (P3, ES)

*"Social entrepreneurs have a very important role to play in protecting and using."* (P1, TR)

*"Rural tourism has always been an opportunity for all sectors, from the region where it occurs to local governments. Since 2020, partly due to the pandemic, the rural environment is being promoted more, as more open spaces are sought after due to confinement."* (P7, ES)

*"It modernizes the village and the arrival of tourists from other regions makes people more open-minded and tolerant."* (P1, ES).

*"Recently, the tourist's quest has changed; they want to know the local area, so it is important for us to give information and directions to make them feel included. We have more and more young tourists and want to create an*

*experience for our customers. After Covid-19, tourists prefer to stay in the most natural places."* (P1, IT)

*We are a wine region, so we want to promote not only famous wines like prosecco but also our local wines.* (P4, IT)

*"It can be interesting to rediscover traditional processes such as rushing, which is rarely done anymore."* (P5, IT)

*"We can also see ourselves as a center in terms of the road, we should not forget that. Also, strengthen the sector by combining the work of culinary, hospitality, not only wine, but also the whole food and wine part, popular culture and television. We have characteristics (culinary, regional and cultural) that need to be valued and known."* (P7, IT)

*"You can do whatever you want. That's the most enjoyable part for me. So, you're free here."* (P2, TR).

*"Being alone with nature is the most important attraction of rural tourism entrepreneurship."* (P3, TR).

*"Therefore, it is very important to introduce both production and places to the public, especially in childhood, and rural tourism is very important for children to have a proper and balanced diet."* (P3, TR).

*"The region values the landscape, the countryside, the activities that occur there... which has led to some of the population returning to the villages. Idle sectors have woken up and rehabilitated the region. We also see that in the villages, thanks to rural tourism, the loneliness and abandonment in forgotten areas has decreased, and depopulation has stopped."* (P6, ES)

*"Rural tourism offers a wide range of activities to prevent depopulation and benefits the entire economy of the region."* (P8, ES)

### 4.2. Competences of a rural tourism entrepreneur

When asked about the essential competencies for a rural tourism entrepreneur, the professionals cited *knowledge in economics, tourism, legislation, and marketing/advertising, understanding of nature and rural environment, risk-taking, knowledge of traditions, awareness of disadvantaged tourists, patience, communication skills, and familiarity with destination programs*.

*"Basically, you should have a good knowledge of economics: you should know how to recognize and balance expenses and income, and you should know state and/or local legislation. Of course, knowledge of tourism..."* (P5, ES)

*"The business part is very important, knowing how to start a company (in my case I already had an experienced expert). On the other hand, the marketing/advertising part, because it is difficult to take a group of people to a small and unknown village. And of course, economics."* (P3, ES)

*"I come from a different region from this region, the Jé solo region, and together with them we have worked with training to improve the quality of the tourist offer, this is also*

through hospitality skills. So, it is important to know the territory and to have hospitality skills." (P4, IT)

"A rural tourism entrepreneur must love the countryside and have the qualifications to adapt to living in the countryside. This is the most important thing. Of course, he must also be hospitable. He must be willing to move away from his comfort zones." (P2, TR).

"First of all, the entrepreneur who wants to do this business should love to host guests and his/her family should volunteer for this business as he/she can do it with his/her family workforce." (P3, TR).

"Recognizing the natural and orographic aspects of the region, knowing how to develop businesses within the framework of sustainability." (P2, IT)

"It is very important for entrepreneurs to be aware of the environment they live in. What I want to say is that they should be aware of their environment and nature and at least have an idea of what they are going to do." (P1, TR)

"That is the difficult part of the job, but first I believe that the person who will be an entrepreneur should know the rural area they want to work in very well." (P1, TR)

"Unfortunately, rural tourism cannot be practiced without knowing the nature." (P1, TR)

"The entrepreneur must be a native of the region with an inherent desire to exist." (P1, IT)

"They should know the history, traditions and sagas of the region in depth." (P10, IT)

"We need people who can connect the dots between what the region has to offer and know how to read tourist needs, understand the entrepreneurial possibilities and take some risks." (P11, IT)

"He has to accept everything. He has to be a problem solver. He shouldn't sulk." (P1, TR).

"To be competent about the need for a person with a disability or who is particularly able to meet those who are different." (P7, IT)

"Patience and perseverance, there are many people who will tell you that what you are doing is wrong or will never work. You have to endure." (P3, IT)

"Knowing how to communicate with their territories." (P5, IT)

"So, they need to be good communicators. So being a good communicator should be just one of the basic skills to be a harmonious nexus between urban and rural." (P2, TR).

"Cold-bloodedness" (P2, IT)

"And we need to develop and promote various destination programs. Whether in NGOs, professional chambers, schools or different industrial zones, people want to visit such places." (P3, TR).

#### 4.3. Training/support needed

Upon discussing the training and support required for a rural tourism entrepreneur, professionals highlighted foreign language proficiency, technology, geography, archaeology, food culture, customer service, sustainability management, marketing and advertising, business management, entrepreneurship, social media management, and local knowledge.

"As we have a lot of foreign visitors, it is very important that they know the language, but above all it is important that they know about the region itself." (P2, ES)

"People who are in charge of a museum, a hotel, a business needs cultural and language training because tourists from the countryside are educated people looking for quality tourism, looking for handicrafts and things of value, and these people need to be provided with information about the region. We need to provide them with information about the region. Events to make them more dynamic, local concerts... more than a brochure. We have to offer not only a good product, but we have to make sure that everything is clean so that the image of rural tourism is a good image." (P4, ES)

"Networking, communication between local companies, alone you go faster, together you go further!" (P8, IT)

"The people who are going to do this work should do it with love. And they may have farmer friends or other entrepreneurs who can cooperate with them. What we call the network, that is, those ties should be able to determine the issues that can cooperate and accelerate this work as a catalyst with them." (P3, TR)

"For me it is knowledge about the management of a business, the business plan, the risk assessment, the planning of the use of resources over time. Knowing how to make a business plan is very important to be able to open a company." (P4, IT)

"Supporting a network of tourism projects in the area where the entrepreneur can work." (P3, IT)

"First of all, he needs nature-education. He needs to study ecology. He needs to know about protected flora. He needs to know about archaeology. About history." (P1, TR)

"Therefore, you need to know the geography, which is also your branch. When you come without knowing these things, the entrepreneur himself becomes a tourist." (P1, TR).

"First of all, the culture of the region, whether it is food culture, historical culture, and when you make a business plan, the issue of budgeting is important because where and how much money you will spend and how you will recover it later, you should put it on a piece of paper and plan it before you start this business on paper." (P2, TR).

"When it comes to women, one of the main fears is not being able to manage businesses. The next problem is economic; they need immediate, not long-term and conditional,

help to start a business. In parallel, basic training in entrepreneurship, language, social media management and online marketing.” (P8, ES)

“Knowledge and training are the foundations of successful management: the trend, the technology used, the rural market... All these are indispensable for an entrepreneur who will use innovation and creativity to surprise tourists and make them feel special. On the other hand, the development of new technologies has transformed the visitor from a mere spectator into a protagonist. The main training needs are customer service, sustainability management, diversity or languages.” (P6, ES)

“We try to hire local people, but sometimes it is difficult due to lack of education or qualifications, so we also hire people from the capital. Traditionally young people work in the countryside or go to study abroad, so there is no investment in the area or emphasis on supporting the rural environment. As I mentioned before, some advertising support or marketing courses to promote the business would be very interesting.” (P3, ES)

“Lack of awareness on marketing to make rural areas attractive to urban people.” (K7, İS)

“I would say how to welcome people, guest management, building quality services, managing all cases that fall into the categories of diversity and vulnerability.” (P12, IT)

“It provides a kind of training certificate that allows us to improve quality. This means training people in different areas (history of the territory, how to deal with people with vulnerabilities, craftsmanship, bureaucracy, etc.). It is also essential to train stakeholders in welcoming people with disabilities and vulnerable people.” (P4, IT)

#### 4.4. Barriers encountered

When asked about the key difficulties and barriers faced as a rural tourism entrepreneur, participants emphasized administrative procedures, managerial barriers, a lack of qualifications or motivation among local people, significant financial expenditure, and bureaucratic obstacles.

“We have very demanding administrative procedures. When it comes to women, the importance of their entrepreneurship is not valued.” (P2, ES)

“In many cases, there is a lack of qualification or motivation of the local population, but above all, there are excessive and complex administrative procedures that make it very difficult to market products and services properly in terms of access to resources (personnel, financial, technological) and lack of advice and information on business opportunities in this area.” (P6, ES)

“There is a lot of paperwork, a significant financial outlay, supplies, insurance .... And being accepted by the community, accepting the traditions and cultural richness; we had problems in some areas, because the local people think that if outsiders come in, their environment will be polluted

or they will lose their intimacy, they see it as a threat. Finding professionals is also a problem.” (P3, ES)

“There is a situation where the use of rural material is not promoted in the right way. We have historical events in the whole region (civil war, holy wars, caliphate, ...): our history was almost entirely rural and that is where we are today. ... The main problems for an entrepreneur are the bureaucratic obstacles to register as a company or partnership.” (P7, ES)

“Every entrepreneur faces the great wall of bureaucracy in our country, the lack of support in the municipal councils and delegations that should accompany people in the process of reinvesting in rural tourism, the procedures to be carried out, and how to manage public aid.” (P4, ES)

“Often the presence of tourists, the demand for tourist services in the region is not always constant, there must be a real return on investments.” (P10, IT)

“The challenge is that this area cannot be considered as a tourism destination in its own right. The biggest challenge we need to find solutions to is how do we create demand?” (P9, IT)

“First of all, what we call materiality.” (P1, TR).

“But is there a fund? There is if you have a certain number of resources. So, the European Union grant does not come and give money to those who do not have money in their pockets. If you have half in your pocket, I will give you half. Apart from that, taxation is very important.” (P2, TR)

“I think the most difficult issue is the tax issue, it has to be exempt. It should be exempt from tax.” (P2, TR).

“In our country, the entrepreneur is alone in this regard. I mean, this is one of the difficulties, they are alone. In other words, while providing this training or preparing more resources, it should be emphasized that people should organize and struggle together.” (P2, TR).

#### 4.5. Utilization of rural elements in tourism

In response to how rural elements are incorporated in their tourism practices, professionals listed outdoor activities, gastronomy and culture.

“In my case, I work in an environment that makes outdoor activities very easy: hiking, trekking, motorcycling, ATV (All-terrain vehicle) ... there are a lot of mountains and countryside.” (P5, ES)

“We offered camps and activities for children (6-8), for young adults (+18), with companies (coaching, emotional intelligence in nature), introduction to adventure sports, activities in a rural house, .... We even organized a few days of 'autumn knowledge' with a group of Erasmus students from the university, picking chestnuts and mushrooms in the area.” (P3, ES)

“The region we are in is a dam area and there is a canyon. We also produce olives. There is an olive oil factory.” (P2, TR).

*"Even cycling can be an opportunity to raise awareness about the region and its rural characteristics." (P5, IT)*

*"We show our gastronomy, our landscape, how we live every day... and people learn more about our culture. Now that it is the season of mushrooms or chestnuts, we have bonfires at night to collect them and people are very involved. I would never let animal husbandry disappear, or the typical cheese maker who makes the cheeses very rich and with love, the typical lady who embroiders by hand and has been doing it all her life and sells you that souvenir... everything that has nothing to do with industrial products, that is made by hand, with care and with love." (P1, ES)*

*"Rural tourism homes should reflect the culture of the region, reflect its heritage and identity, be full of the aromas, colors, textures and flavors of the region; good rural tourism comes to find something authentic. Festivals, scenery, traditions, fairs, festivals." (P4, ES)*

Lastly, the experts provided several suggestions for promoting rural tourism entrepreneurship and facilitating the training of rural tourism entrepreneurs. They highlighted the pivotal role of local administrations in establishing a range of services, local communities in welcoming and accommodating visitors, and tourists in maintaining the peaceful everyday lives of the locals. The importance of sustained interaction among all stakeholders was underlined. The use of local guides was suggested as a means to stimulate economic and social development in the region. The significance of investing in the area's cultural heritage, monitoring homestay facilities, and promoting local food culture was also stressed. Professionals advocated for diversification of training programs and providing on-the-job training, particularly for young individuals. Lastly, they emphasized the power of dreams, as dreams can inspire tangible opportunities.

## 5. Conclusion

The study aimed to recognize the critical attributes necessary for rural tourism entrepreneurship. By examining the perspectives of rural tourism professionals in Italy, Spain, and Türkiye, five essential themes emerged, including the attractive aspects of rural tourism entrepreneurship, competencies of a rural tourism entrepreneur, required training/support, barriers faced, and the utilization of rural elements in tourism. These findings not only align with previous studies (Kruzmetra et al., 2013; Wilson et al., 2001; Zurnacı, 2012; Ateljevic & Doorne, 2000; Calza et al., 2018; Carmichael & Ainley, 2014; Marques & Cunha, 2013; Jaafar et al., 2021; Zhang et al., 2022; Aydemir et al., 2016; Çeken et al., 2007; Zurnacı, 2012) but also provide novel insights with implications for theory, practice, and policy.

### 5.1. Controversial implications

The results may ignite debate around the role of rural tourism in preserving traditional lifestyles, reducing rural-urban migration, and promoting social and economic

growth. Critics may question whether rural tourism exploits local cultures and the environment or if it genuinely provides long-term benefits to the communities involved. These discussions can lead to new research perspectives on the balance between tourism development and sustainability.

### 5.2. Theoretical implications

The findings affirm and build upon extant literature by revealing the importance of various competencies and the necessity for specific training in rural tourism entrepreneurship. Future research may wish to explore these themes in depth, providing a more detailed understanding of the unique skillsets and knowledge areas needed in this specific form of tourism entrepreneurship.

### 5.3 Managerial implications

From a practical perspective, identifying common barriers provides valuable insights for potential rural tourism entrepreneurs, suggesting the need for strategic planning and problem-solving skills. The emphasis on nature-based and cultural activities presents a potential blueprint for developing unique, authentic rural tourism experiences that can attract tourists while preserving local heritage. The noted necessity for long-term interaction among stakeholders indicates that success in this sector may require robust community engagement strategies and partnership models.

Moreover, the findings underline the significance of training in foreign languages, technology, sustainability management, and local knowledge. This insight can guide educational institutions and policy-makers in designing relevant and impactful curricula and training programs to equip future rural tourism entrepreneurs with the necessary competencies.

Nevertheless, the study is not without its limitations. Its focus is confined to only three countries, which may not provide a comprehensive overview of rural tourism entrepreneurship in different global contexts. Furthermore, it exclusively represents the perspectives of professionals. Future research could thus aim for a broader representation, incorporating local governments, tourists, prospective entrepreneurs, and academic experts to achieve a more holistic understanding of rural tourism entrepreneurship.

### Author contributions

The authors declare that they equally contributed to the design and implementation of the research, the analysis of the results, and the writing of the article.

### Disclosure statement

The authors reported no potential competing interest.

### Ethics committee approval

All responsibility belongs to the researchers. This study has been done within the scope "Anti-Fragile Young Entrepreneurs for Sustainable Rural Tourism: YES for Rural



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