

FROM CHALETS TO COMMERCE: EXPLORING HOW THE STRASBOURG CHRISTMAS MARKET IS AMPLIFYING LOCAL PRODUCERS' PRESENCE IN ALSACE, FRANCE

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Abstract

This study examines the impact of the Strasbourg Christmas Market on local producers in Alsace, France, focusing on its role in rural tourism and consumer preferences for sustainability and bio products. Combining online survey data from Christmas tourists and analysis of existing reports, the research investigates the market's influence on producer visibility and consumer behavior. Findings inform strategies for promoting rural economic development and sustainable practices.

Key words: rural tourism, sustainability, consumer behaviour, branding, culture

INTRODUCTION

Strasbourg, known as the European capital of Christmas, proudly upholds ancient traditions linked to this festive season.

Dating back to the Middle Ages, children eagerly anticipate the arrival of Saint Nicholas on December 6th. Saint Nicholas, the Bishop of Myra in Asia Minor during the 4th century, is revered as the patron saint of children, with his legacy spanning centuries.

In both Catholic and Protestant traditions, Saint Nicholas and the Christkindel, respectively, hold special significance.

The latter tradition, stemming from the Scandinavian Saint Lucy, involves delivering gifts to well-behaved children on December 24th.

The Christkindelsmarik, Strasbourg's renowned Christmas market, bears her name since its establishment in 1570 [7].

Moreover, the Alsace region is making strides in the agrotourism sector, particularly highlighted during the Christmas market. Within the Grand Est region, encompassing Alsace, resides a population of 5,555,186

individuals, representing 8.5% of the metropolitan population.

Encompassing an area of 57,430 km², which accounts for 10.5% of the metropolitan area, it hosts a remarkable 5,132 municipalities).

The economic impact of tourism within the Grand Est region is noteworthy, with annual statistics boasting 21.6 million tourists, 56.6 million visitors, and €4.6 billion in generated revenues [7].

On the other hand, the communication and brand positioning of the region and its Christmas Markets embrace an eco-responsible angle [15].

For the 2023 edition of Strasbourg Capital of Christmas, numerous initiatives related to the event's eco-responsibility are being implemented. Among these initiatives, one can find waste sorting and reduction, eco-friendly lighting, reusable cups, and carbon footprint reduction measures [7].

Considering the presence of local producers offering organic products and the implementation of sustainable initiatives, it can be assumed that these factors play a significant role in influencing buyer intent at the market.

The research methodology encompasses a blend of primary and secondary data collection techniques to effectively address this hypothesis. Primary data acquisition involves the deployment of an online survey targeting individuals actively engaged in Christmas tourism.

Following the dissemination of a 10-question online survey focused on consumer preferences regarding bioproduct purchases, a total of 211 responses were garnered. Subsequent scrutiny identified 195 responses as meeting eligibility criteria and demonstrating comprehensive insights. Additionally, existing reports, studies, and publications concerning the Strasbourg Christmas Market, rural tourism dynamics in Alsace, and consumer behavior within the sustainability and bioproduct domain were leveraged to augment understanding of prevalent rural tourism patterns within the designated geographical location.

It is hypothesized that visitors are attracted not solely by the festive ambiance but also by their inclination to endorse eco-friendly initiatives and procure locally sourced, sustainable products.

The results indicate that despite the inclusion of local producers within the Strasbourg Christmas Market, coupled with the provision of rural tourism attractions, there exists no direct correlation between their presence and heightened purchasing inclination among visitors for rural or traditional commodities. This observation persists notwithstanding the tourists' primary objective of immersing themselves in authentic local customs and their discernible affinity towards locally sourced products.

The Christmas market highlights a series of smaller cities and rural areas grouped together in a circuit for rural tourism, creating incentives for local communities and producers to benefit from the influx of tourists attracted to the area.

For example, activities are linked in smaller local Christmas markets in Orbey, Ungersheim, Grendelbruch, Colmar, etc.

Despite our analysis revealing the absence of a direct correlation between the presence of certain factors and an increased propensity

towards purchasing rural or traditional commodities among visitors, the precise determinants influencing purchase decisions remain elusive.

This ambiguity underscores the necessity for further exploration, establishing a critical starting point for forthcoming analyses.

This study aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of the relationship between the Strasbourg Christmas Market, local producers, rural tourism patterns, and consumer preferences for sustainable products and rural development.

Literature review

Identity preservation in tourism development

The Strasbourg Christmas Market serves as a vibrant showcase of Alsace's cultural heritage and traditions.

Through the prominent display and promotion of locally crafted goods, traditional cuisine, and age-old practices, the market actively contributes to the preservation and continuation of the region's cultural legacy. The (re-)presentation of cultural heritage in these forms creates a unique set of interactions between landscapes, local communities, tourists and heritage organisations [4].

Local producers play a central role in this endeavor, showcasing their expertise and craftsmanship to a diverse audience of visitors.

By providing a platform for these artisans to share their skills and stories, the market fosters a strong sense of community pride and identity among both producers and attendees alike.

Moreover, the market serves as a living museum of Alsace's cultural heritage, where visitors can experience firsthand the customs and rituals that have been passed down through generations.

The benefits of heritage tourism include high tourist arrivals and receipts, the multiplier effects within the industry and creation of employment opportunities for the local community [6], all while providing a sensory experience that immerses visitors in the traditions of the region.

Cultural tourism and rural development

The distinction between culture and tourism has historically been clear-cut, with cultural tourism traditionally defined by visits to renowned cultural sites rather than leisure activities like beach vacations.

However, this demarcation has blurred in recent years as cultural tourism has evolved beyond mere monument visits to encompass immersion in the way of life of different destinations [13].

This shift has given rise to the wine, or Christmas routes in the case of the Alsace region.

On the global tourist market, the interest of tourism consumers in tangible and intangible cultural heritage is growing, as well as the interest in rural tourism in a peaceful rural environment with traditional values [16].

This goes hand in hand with a growing interest in authentic community engagement, slow travel, and high-quality experiences that emphasize local practices, gastronomy, and traditions.

Rural areas, once overlooked, now serve as prime destinations offering picturesque landscapes and nature-based attractions, appealing to tourists seeking to experience destinations like locals [2].

This trend underscores a shift towards meaningful, experiential tourism that highlights the unique cultural and natural elements of a destination, catering to travellers' desire for authenticity and connection.

The success of a sustainable tourist destination in the global tourism market is impossible without a well-designed vision.

The vision of sustainable tourist destinations must start from the primary need to raise the quality of the local population of the tourist destination, preserve the tradition and inherited cultural and historical destination values, and the need to design an integrated tourist product that will provide consumers in tourism with a pleasant and unforgettable experience [16].

While the statement emphasizes the importance of a well-designed vision for sustainable tourist destinations, it presents a somewhat idealized view of the complexities involved.

While raising the quality of life for local populations is indeed a critical aspect of sustainable tourism development, it's important to recognize that this goal can sometimes conflict with other objectives, such as economic growth and environmental conservation.

Cultural landscapes

Landscapes (urban or rural; natural or manmade) serves as tangible expressions of cultural values, practices, and identities.

They are viewed as dynamic entities shaped by human activities and perceptions over time.

While conserving historical evidence, these cultural landscapes should continue as living systems economically and culturally viable within the framework of their authenticity and integrity [11].

This involves engaging with local communities to understand the significance of specific sites, traditions, gatherings, and practices, and integrating this knowledge into tourism planning and management processes. By doing so, destination managers can ensure that tourism initiatives are sensitive to local cultural identities and contribute positively to their preservation and exposure.

Consumer behavior

The paramount importance of brand loyalty for businesses navigating the competitive marketplace, particularly within the context of rural tourism and eco-responsible endeavors, is underscored by the dynamic relationship between brand loyalty and its multifaceted effects on consumer perceptions, behavior, and buyer intent.

As evidenced by peers, brand loyalty not only cultivates a positive brand image through consistent positive experiences and reliability [12] but also transforms customers into brand advocates, thereby amplifying word-of-mouth marketing [1].

This emotional connection forged through brand loyalty not only bolsters resistance to competitive influences but also instills a willingness among consumers to pay premium prices.

Such emotional attachment extends to various facets of consumer behavior, encompassing purchasing decisions, brand advocacy, and

participation in loyalty programs. Additionally, the role of brand loyalty in reducing perceived risks associated with purchases positively influences buyer intent [10].

Notably, within the realm of rural tourism and eco-responsible initiatives, brand loyalty takes on added significance.

By aligning with sustainable practices and community engagement, brands can deepen their emotional connection with consumers, thereby enhancing loyalty and contributing to the conservation of natural and cultural heritage.

In this context, this study aimed to assess the impact of the Strasbourg Christmas Market on local producers in Alsace, France, focusing on its role in rural tourism and consumer preferences for sustainability and bio products.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The current research employs a blend of mixed research methods to investigate the subject matter comprehensively.

Combining the two approaches can produce more scientifically sound and transferable results by synergistically integrating qualitative stakeholder engagement with quantitative outcomes to inform action/intervention planning, implementation, evaluation, and monitoring [9].

To gain preliminary insights into the specified research objectives, secondary data, such as existing reports, studies, and publications related to the Strasbourg Christmas Market, rural tourism trends in Alsace, and consumer behaviour in the context of sustainability and bio products, were utilized to enhance comprehension of prevailing rural tourism trends within the designated region.

Starting with an overview of employment in the tourism sector in France, we notice that the average employment rate is slightly higher in the Alsace region compared to the national average, suggesting a well-developed range of activities within the sector in Alsace.

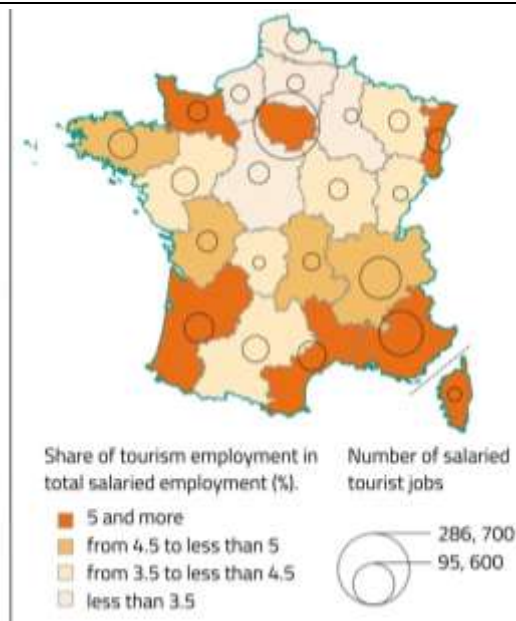


Fig. 1. Tourism employment by region
 Source: INSEE, DADS 2009, estimated of salaried tourism employment [8].

To gain a broader and more comprehensive understanding of job distribution within this sector, we have examined the shares of activity sectors in total tourism employment.

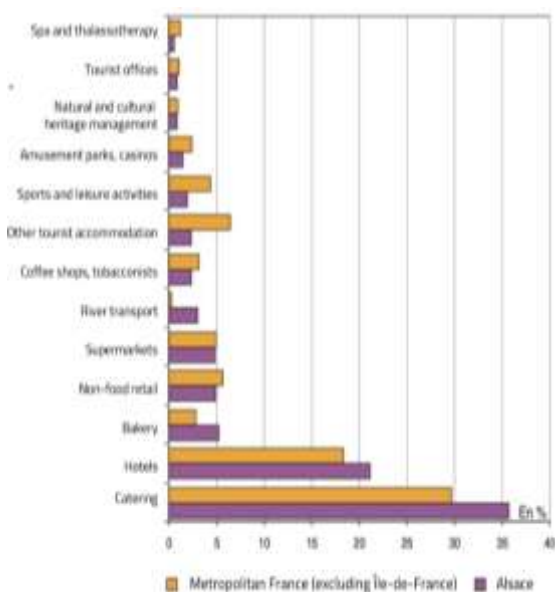
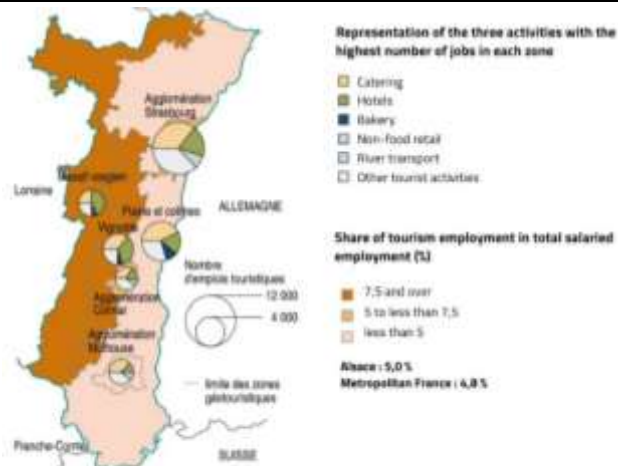


Fig. 2. Share of activity sectors in total tourism employment
 Source: INSEE, DADS 2009, estimated of salaried tourism employment [8].

In relation to the geographical distribution within the Alsace region, we have examined tourism employment according to geotourism zones.



Reading: the top three sectors employing tourism workers in the vineyard geotourism zone are catering, hotels and bakers. Tourism employees in all other activities (including "non-food retailing", "mass distribution", etc.) are grouped together in the grey section of the pie chart.

Fig. 3. The main sectors of activity of tourism employment by geotourism
 Source: INSEE, DADS 2009, estimated of salaried tourism employment [8].

Based on these datasets, it is evident that despite the region's emphasis on rural tourism, the primary sources of revenue and employment stem from a more traditional centred around significant metropolitan area. Concerning the visitor profile of the Grand Est region, including Alsace, the majority consists of couples and families or groups of close acquaintances. The ascendancy of regional products and local markets as preferred attractions within the Alsace region is palpable, albeit still ascending the hierarchy of visitor preferences. These elements consistently garner heightened favorability compared to alternative activities when individuals opt to explore the cultural and gastronomic offerings of the region [5].



Fig. 4. Activities in the Grand Est
 Source: ARTGE, Customer Marketing Survey, 2018-2019 (total sample of 12,249 visitors) [3].

The primary motivations for visiting are historical heritage, museums, and memorial sites (32%), followed by visiting family or friends (24%), and exploring cities, villages, and sites of cultural significance, tradition, and folklore (24%) [3].

The research methodology comprises secondary but also primary data collection methods to address the research objectives effectively.

Primary data will be gathered through an online survey targeting individuals who engage in Christmas tourism.

A total of 211 responses were gathered subsequent to the dissemination of a 10-question online survey pertaining to consumer preferences concerning bioproduct purchases. Among these, 195 responses were deemed eligible and comprehensive.

The role of psychology in consumer buying behavior is essential because it affects the attitude of human through feeling, emotion desire and response, and usually formed through experience [14].

The survey will explore participants' perceptions, behaviours, and preferences regarding their interactions with local producers, engagement in rural tourism activities, and attitudes towards sustainability, bio products, and CSR initiatives.

Firstly, it seeks to elucidate the influence exerted by participation in the Strasbourg Christmas Market on the prominence and market penetration of local producers in the Alsace region, particularly within the context of rural tourism endeavors.

This inquiry delves into the mechanisms through which involvement in the market platform augments the visibility and market presence of local producers, as well as its impact on rural tourism activities.

The study endeavors to examine the perspectives and experiences of local producers concerning the Strasbourg Christmas Market's role in facilitating their involvement in rural tourism initiatives and its efficacy in attracting visitors to their establishments.

Secondly, the research aims to evaluate the interplay between the presence of local producers at the Strasbourg Christmas

Market, patterns observed in rural tourism, and consumer attitudes towards sustainability and bio products.

It involves investigating the extent to which consumers prioritize the procurement of bio products and locally sourced items while visiting the Strasbourg Christmas Market, and the correlation of such preferences with their interest in rural tourism experiences.

Moreover, the study seeks to uncover the motivations and decision-making criteria that underpin consumers' choices for sustainable and bio products at the market, elucidating how these preferences intersect with their support for local producers and advocacy for rural tourism promotion in the Alsace region. Through these research inquiries, the study endeavors to offer comprehensive insights into the intricate nexus between the Strasbourg Christmas Market, local producer engagement, rural tourism trends, and consumer attitudes towards sustainability and bio products within the context of Alsace's regional dynamics.

The collected data from the form will be analyzed quantitatively for the survey responses to derive insights, patterns, and correlations relevant to the research objectives and the tendencies that were previously identified.

Limitations such as sample bias and data availability constraints will be acknowledged to interpret findings accurately.

The research findings present a preliminary examination aimed at elucidating consumer trends, serving as a foundational study to guide future investigations.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

The following chapter presents the findings of a study investigating the impact of the Strasbourg Christmas Market on local producers and rural economic development in the Alsace region of France.

Building upon the research objectives and methodology outlined in the preceding sections, this chapter offers insights gleaned from both primary data collected through an online survey targeting Christmas tourists.

The analysis delves into the market's influence on producer visibility, consumer preferences for sustainability and bio products, and the broader dynamics of rural and rural tourism in the region.

The findings suggest that the presence of local producers at the Strasbourg Christmas Market, along with rural tourism offerings, does not necessarily translate into increased purchasing intent among visitors for rural or traditional goods and services.

Specifically, 45.5% of respondents indicated that the presence of local products from local producers does not influence their spending budgets when planning their trip.

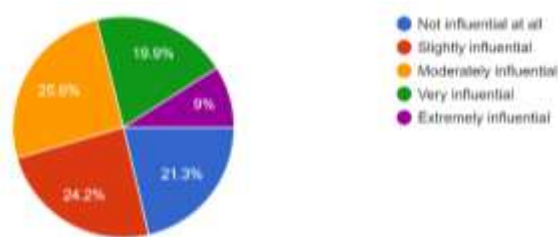


Fig. 5. Influence of bio/local labels on products at the Christmas Market in regards to your buying intent.
Source: Made by the author in Google form.

Additionally, 24.2% expressed active interest in seeking out these types of products and experiences, a figure closely aligned with the reported activities preferred by visiting tourists in the region.

When subjected to a sequence of open-ended inquiries concerning the exhibitors at the Christmas Market, participants exhibited limited substantive understanding of the merchandise on display.

This suggests that the local and organic aspects of the event may serve primarily to establish a sense of trust rather than significantly influencing consumer choices. Notably, the prevailing factors influencing decisions appear to be the aesthetic appeal of decorations and the ambiance of the town, particularly during the festive season.

Despite the overarching objective of events geared towards promoting local producers and heritage foods and crafts, empirical evidence suggests that taste emerges as a paramount determinant in consumer preferences.

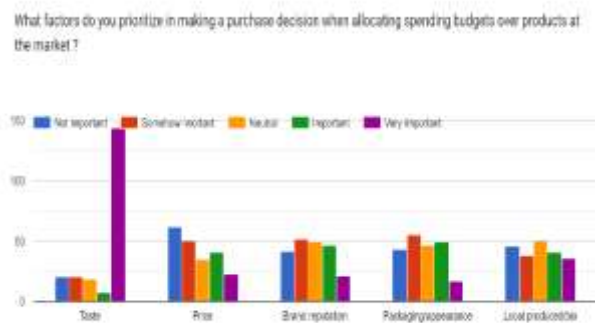


Fig. 6. Purchase decision factors
 Source: Made by the author in Google form.

This phenomenon underscores the inherent complexity of consumer choice mechanisms, wherein sensory gratification often takes precedence over symbolic attributions such as locality or organic certification.

From an economic perspective, this divergence between promotional objectives and consumer behavior underscores the necessity for a nuanced understanding of market dynamics and the multifaceted nature of consumer preferences.

It prompts a re-evaluation of marketing strategies employed within such contexts, advocating for approaches that accentuate sensory appeal alongside broader narratives of locality and heritage to effectively resonate with consumer sentiments and foster a symbiotic relationship between promotional objectives and consumer choices.

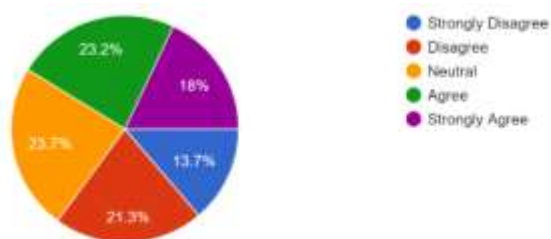


Fig. 7. Buying these products/goods again in the future outside of the Christmas Market
 Source: Made by the author in Google form.

The analysis of consumer behavior at the Christmas Market unveils intriguing insights into purchasing patterns and subsequent buyer intent. Our study reveals that a substantial portion, constituting 35% of respondents, express reluctance towards repurchasing these

goods beyond the festive market ambiance. Conversely, 41% exhibit an inclination towards future purchases, while 23.7% remain neutral, suggesting an absence of conscious deliberation in their decision-making process. Upon aggregating the disinterested cohort (35%) with the neutrally inclined (23.7%), a significant 58.7% emerges, reflecting a considerable proportion of visitors who potentially lack a deliberate intent towards future purchases outside the festive context. This observation underscores a critical challenge for producers, as it signifies diminished prospects for client retention and loyalty.

The data imply a predominant occurrence of singular transactions, indicative of a transient engagement rather than enduring patronage. Such findings underscore the need for strategic interventions aimed at enhancing consumer engagement and fostering brand loyalty amidst transient market dynamics. Several factors contribute to the limited efficacy of visibility in driving long-term buyer intent.

The transient nature of consumer attention during Christmas markets, the abundance of options, and the lack of post-market engagement strategies all hinder the conversion of initial interest into lasting loyalty.

Strategic marketing interventions, including targeted engagement efforts and community-building initiatives, are essential to augment the impact of visibility.

Future research could explore the effectiveness of various post-market interventions in fostering enduring consumer relationships.

CONCLUSIONS

The Strasbourg Christmas market serves as a significant platform for enhancing the visibility of local rural producers, albeit not being the primary motivation for tourist visitation during this period.

Analyzing datasets sheds light on the tourism dynamics in the Grand Est region, revealing a paradox between the region's focus on rural tourism and the predominance of conventional

urban attractions in revenue generation and employment.

Effective collaboration among rural communities, local authorities, and tourism stakeholders emerges as pivotal for harnessing the full potential of rural tourism.

Through concerted efforts to identify and capitalize on the region's inherent strengths such as scenic landscapes, quaint villages, and rich agricultural heritage, a more equitable tourism ecosystem can be cultivated, benefiting both urban and rural locales.

Strategic intervention presents an opportunity to leverage the region's rural assets more effectively.

By showcasing local traditions, folklore, and artisanal craftsmanship, rural areas can distinguish themselves from urban attractions, offering visitors a more profound and immersive experience.

While the presence of local producers and products at such events is desirable, there appears to be insufficient correlation between their participation and revenue generation, as the majority of tourists prioritize factors such as price and taste over a bio label.

However, respondents acknowledge the potential for switching to new products and services based on these considerations, suggesting that the Christmas Market serves as a valuable platform for visibility at the very least.

The question of whether the visibility gained during Christmas markets translates into sustained economic growth for these producers in the medium and long term remains an avenue for further exploration and deeper analysis.

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