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The Relationship between Farmers' Values and the Decision to Practise Agrotourism: An Exploratory Study

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The Issue

Agrotourism is a growing economic activity in North America that is increasingly being seen as a new alternative for farmers seeking to augment or diversify their incomes (Lyson, 2003; Bourdeau, Doyon and Donne, 2001). Although the literature recognizes the economic dimension of agrotourism for farmers, many authors imply or argue that choosing agrotourism activities instead of alternatives such as horizontal integration or a new production activity goes well beyond rational economic optimization (Morette, Gramond and Portefait, 1998; Moinet, 1993; Grolleau and Ramus, 1986). This article explores this hypothesis by adapting the experiential approach developed by Holbrook and Hirschman (1982) to an analysis of consumer behaviour by decision makers.

Implications and Conclusions

The Quebec agriculture ministry and various tourism associations have shown an interest in fostering the development of agrotourism in the province. A better understanding of the



decision making behaviour of agrotourism producers would contribute to the design of suitable training and technical support for farmers thinking about integrating this activity; it would also help to guide newcomers to the sector. Four types of agrotourism producers are suggested based on the following six values: *status*, *social aspects*, *independence*, *hedonism*, *utilitarianism* and *self-esteem*. While the typology leads to a better understanding of the intentions and undertakings of agrotourism producers, results also indicate that the choice of agrotourism implies values that are not necessarily taken into account by traditional (rational) utility maximisation behaviour analysis.

Background

Research in consumer psychology has traditionally been based on utility maximisation. This approach considers that individuals are rational and able to evaluate various purchase alternatives (Holbrook and Hirschman, 1982; Babin, Barry and Griffin, 1994). However, Holbrook and Hirschman (1982) take an experiential approach and suggest that, in addition to the rational elements of decision making, feelings about and interactions with the object should also be considered. The experiential approach is not a substitute for the classical approach; rather, it is a complement to it. This approach seems pertinent for family farms, considering that personal, family and entrepreneurial values have an impact on the decision making processes of farmers (Gasson, 1973; Gilmor, 1986).

Methodology

We used the typology of values proposed by Holbrook (1999), as well as the works of Gasson (1973) and Gilmor (1986), to develop eight values (table 1) likely to explain a producer's choice to begin agrotourism activities on his or her farm. We then tested these values in order to identify the most important values in a producer's decision concerning agrotourism.

Given the exploratory nature of the study, we used a qualitative technique. Structured interviews with several open-ended questions and a few closed questions were used in keeping with the methodology described by Patton (1990) and Lindlof (1995). The interviews lasted an average of 45 minutes and were conducted with agrotourism and non-agrotourism producers. Unlike a sample in a quantitative study, our sample does not need to be statistically representative; rather, it focuses on the specific characteristics of a small group of individuals (Creswell, 1994). Since the study did not aim to provide a probabilistic evaluation of the values farmers associate with agrotourism, but rather to identify the values that influenced farmers to choose agrotourism activities, the technique selected was suitable and in keeping with the exploratory nature of the study (Perrien, Chéron and Zins, 1984; Churchill, 1991).

Table 1 Values Tested with Agrotourism Producers**Status**

The producers used agrotourism to transmit a positive image of their profession and agriculture.

This value represents the image that the agrotourism producers wanted to project, such as one of prestige and pride. The producers wanted the importance (economic) and the role (guardian of nature, feeder of the population) of their profession to be recognised by society.

Self-esteem

The producers offered agrotourism products and activities to improve their self-esteem.

This value refers to the perception that the producers had of themselves. It is defined by endeavours to increase people's appreciation of agriculture, technical knowledge, work well done and achievement of goals.

Social Aspects

The agrotourism producers developed relationships with the general public and other producers.

This value refers to the need for human and social contacts that allowed farmers to combat loneliness and open up to the world. This value can also refer to an attachment to the land.

Utilitarianism

The producers turned to agrotourism to use their resources more efficiently (under-use of hired labour, an empty barn).

This value refers to the need to achieve profitability, maximize these profits, prepare for retirement and integrate the next generation, as well as to all other financial reasons.

Authenticity

The producers practised agrotourism for its way of life, based on family and human concerns.

This value represents the desire of producers to spend more time with their families or to create jobs for family members. This value also reflects the desire to keep the farm to a family size rather than expanding and having a less personalized management.

Independence

The producers chose agrotourism activities in order to become or to remain their own bosses.

This value represents the desire for flexibility and the need to control the activities of the business. On a larger scale, this value represents the producers' desire to participate in regional development.

Aesthetics

The producers turned to agrotourism as a way to enhance and take advantage of a beautiful landscape.

This value represents endeavours such as the installation of an agrotourism site to benefit from a beautiful environment or to improve an agrotourism service.

Ethics

The producers chose agrotourism because it was a socially acceptable activity.

This type of value is associated with notions such as justice, morality and virtues.

Data were collected through interviews with 27 farmers. More specifically, 19 agrotourism producers as well as 8 non-agrotourism producers were interviewed.¹ To be selected, the non-agrotourism producers had to have made significant changes to the structure of their farms, such as adding a new production activity. In other words, these farmers could have invested in agrotourism, but instead decided on more conventional

forms of development. The farmers interviewed were located in two distinct regions. Thirteen were located in the region of Charlevoix and 14 in the Cantons-de-l'Est region. These regions were selected because they both used their biofood potential to attract tourists and were recognized as tourist destinations. However, while the Cantons-de-l'Est region has a dynamic agricultural sector, agriculture in Charlevoix, at least in its traditional form, is declining. The interviews were recorded and analysed with the help of NVivo software using the qualitative technique analysis described by L'Écuyer (1987) and Lindlof (1995).

Analysis

First, we wanted to verify whether the geographic environment had an impact on the choice of a producer toward agrotourism. The analysis of a questionnaire on perceptions of farmers on the state of agriculture and tourism in their respective regions showed no differences between agrotourism producers in the Charlevoix and Cantons-de-l'Est regions. Similarly no differences were noticed between the non-agrotourism producers of the two regions. This was later confirmed with the analysis of values. Although structural variables were most likely to impact agricultural producers, it appeared that the choice of strategies and agricultural practices was more dependent on the individuals than on the geographic environment. These results are in keeping with Long (2002).

Following the interview analysis, six values explaining why producers had chosen agrotourism were identified. These values were *status*, *social aspects*, *independence*, *hedonism*, *utilitarianism* and *self-esteem*. The previously identified values of *ethics*, *aesthetics* and *authenticity* (table 1) did not appear in the agrotourism producers' statements. On the other hand, *hedonism*, which was not part of our initial subset, was added to our value system.

The value *status* refers to the fact that agrotourism generated a positive image of agriculture as well as of its products. Producers stressed the importance of their job and their desire to re-establish their position in society. Most producers deplored the fact that their importance in terms of economic activity and their role in feeding the population were not recognized. The farmers' desire to correct this misjudgement and to reconstruct their professional and social identity characterised this value.

... not only will we be able to tell people where their products are coming from, we'll be able to show them the right way to produce them ...

We told ourselves that our goal would be to help agriculture regain its past importance, because if you don't have agriculture, no one eats. It's that simple

The *self-esteem* value was also a dominant value identified in the interviews. This value refers to the perceptions that individuals have of themselves. For the agrotourism producers, this value took the form of the reward afforded by positive comments from

visitors, the satisfaction in work well done or the feeling that their products or services were appreciated. It also took the form of personal development with indicators such as innovation, challenge and task diversity.

One of our greatest satisfactions is to see a happy and satisfied customer, or to see a client come back with other people; when they tell you that your product is top-notch and they're happy, well, it makes you feel good about your work.

The *social aspect* value was expressed through the hospitality the agrotourism producers showed toward their clients. This value refers to the link the producers had with their environment, and their attachment to their community and region.

This is how I see the idea of welcoming people. When I welcome my family and friends, it's friendly, warm and simple. The clients I welcome are strangers, but I want to recreate the same feeling for them that I do for my family and friends. That's a proper welcome.

People want to be in contact with farmers ... they want to be closer to farmers, to put a name on a face.

I grew up on the farm on the other side of the road. This farm here is the view I saw when I was a kid. I was lucky to be able to buy this farm; it means a lot to me.

The *utilitarian* value was expressed through the agrotourism producers' ability to accomplish tasks and reach goals, such as increasing their income. This functional dimension was observed in the way producers took advantage of contexts and market opportunities. The notion of pragmatism could also be used to describe this value.

I never did this thinking it would be socially motivating for me. I did it thinking that ... this is publicity, the more people who see how this is grown, the more vegetables they'll eat

Our goal in doing agrotourism was purely financial; you want to increase the number of visitors to the farm so you can sell more of your products.

The *independence* value appeared to be quite important and was expressed through the need to be one's own boss, to have some flexibility in everyday tasks and to control the business activities and the product quality.

The reason why I'm an agrotourism producer is to control my work ... so I can produce a stable and good quality product. If you want to do that, being independent and having control is very, very important.

The *hedonism* value was expressed through the pleasure agrotourism producers drew from their interactions with clients or from agrotourism production, all utilitarian concerns aside. This value also describes the passion producers felt for their profession, environment and way of life.

I get a lot of pleasure out of seeing the youngsters, their interest, and the questions that are asked

When I take them for a walk out behind, you know it's magic! Real Christmas trees all around and a real countryside, nothing fake about it. People love it!

I love to see people's reactions. We always give a guided visit that explains how the animals are raised; people discover lots of new things. Kids are always shouting, "There's one here, another one there."

The analysis of the interviews combined with the identification of the six previously described values allowed us to identify three groups, each of which had different motives for undertaking agrotourism activities (table 2).

Table 2 Summary of the Three Processes through Which Agrotourism Businesses Were Initiated

Endogenous (5)*	Identification (7)*	Commercial (7)*
Decision process initiated for personal reasons.	Decision process initiated specifically to improve public opinion.	Decision process initiated for commercial diversification.
For the most part, the producers did not come from the agricultural sector.	For the most part, the producers came from the agricultural sector (family farms).	For the most part, these producers came from the agricultural sector or had been working in it for a certain length of time.
Agrotourism = an aside	Agrotourism = improved relations with urban citizens	Agrotourism = emphasis on direct marketing

* Numbers in parentheses indicate the number of agrotourism respondents that correspond to a given type of initiation.

Individuals in the first group, associated with the endogenous initiation process, did not partake in a traditional farm transfer. For these individuals, the choice of agriculture was based on a way of life. Agrotourism was a means of reaching a goal, of making a lifetime project more viable. The second group, producers associated with the identification process, came mostly from agricultural families. This group's motivation for agrotourism was the promotion of their profession and the education of the urban population about their environmental efforts and importance. The third group we identified was producers associated with the commercial initiation process; they used agrotourism primarily as a way to market their product. Their contact with tourists was reduced to a minimum and was basically a seller-buyer relationship.

Agrotourism versus Non-agrotourism

We enriched our analysis by integrating interviews with non-agrotourism producers. By conducting a parallel analysis of the behaviour of this latter group, we wanted to identify similarities and differences between the agrotourism (*A*) and non-agrotourism (*NA*) producers. Most of the previously identified values were shared by both groups. As mentioned by Ilbery (1978) and later by Perkin and Rehman (1994), it is the relative importance attached to each value that allows the various groups to be characterized.

For example, the *status* value was present in both groups of producers. This being said, the *NA* producers did not try to restore their public image by choosing agrotourism, whereas this was a major motivation for making this choice among numerous *A* producers. In fact, most *NA* producers recognized the positive impact of agrotourism activities on their public image as well as on the image of agriculture. As with the *A* producers, the *self-esteem* and *utilitarian* values also influenced *NA* producers when they had to consider changes such as a diversification of their revenues or increasing the size of their business. Similarly, the *independence* and *hedonism* values were also present for *NA* producers. In fact, a passion for agriculture and its way of life explained at least part of the decision to be a farmer, whether it was along traditional or non-traditional lines. For both types of producers, a major advantage associated with agriculture was the independence it offers. Moreover, *A* producers indicated they chose agrotourism for personal reasons such as the quest for a specific way of life, the desire to return to the countryside or personal growth through new challenges. This is in keeping with Gasson's (1973) observations that the way of life, independence and attainment of goals are more important for agricultural producers than the social and functional aspects of their profession.

Though the *social aspect* value was present in both groups, it was nonetheless the value that most differentiated them. For *A* producers, agrotourism was based on tourist hospitality and an interaction with people. For *NA* producers, social aspects were better expressed through regional involvement and their relationship with the environment.

Types of Agrotourism Producers

The interview analysis led us to divide agrotourism producers into four types based on their relation with agrotourism. These types were identified as follows: the entrepreneur, the educator, the all-rounder and the pragmatist.

The pragmatist

The pragmatists' involvement in agrotourism was low. For the pragmatists, agrotourism was an aside or sometimes an obligation given the lack of economically viable alternatives. The farm opened its doors to tourists because of technical obligations (in order to have access to a government road sign) or financial obligations (to increase income or to meet bankers' requirements). The agrotourism services offered were thus minimal and their execution often left to employees. The pragmatists were characterized by the commercial initiation process defined above (table 2).

The entrepreneur

The entrepreneurs had a purely utilitarian approach to agrotourism. Agrotourism allowed the entrepreneurs to start a business that was compatible with a specific environment (countryside) and way of life (independence, challenge, innovation). Passionate businessmen, at the edge of consumption trends, the entrepreneurs were always looking for new opportunities. For the entrepreneurs, the relationship with a visitor (a client) was more a sign of success than a possibility to communicate with a fellow citizen. In other words, the entrepreneurs took pleasure in welcoming clients to their farms and sharing their passion with them, even though the relationship was functional. The entrepreneurs were often characterized by the endogenous initiation process (table 2).

The educator

The educator's goal was to discuss with fellow citizens, particularly with the urban population, to teach them about the realities of agriculture, the constraints producers face and the beauty of their profession. Although the educators hoped to influence the perceptions and eventually the consumption patterns of their visitors, their relationship with agrotourism was primarily affective. The educators reminded visitors of the traditional importance of agriculture and farmers, including their role as food suppliers and as a link with nature. They reminded people of their family values and of such functions as maintaining the land, scenery and regional vitality. In this sense, education-related goals guided their agrotourism product. The educators were characterized by the identification initiation process (table 2).

The all-rounder

The all-rounders were attracted by the diversification potential that agrotourism offered. They felt that agrotourism activities could lead to a change in market reality (concentration of retailers), to opportunities resulting from regional dynamism or simply to the chance to reduce business risk through a greater diversification of revenues. Utilitarianism was therefore an important value for the all-rounder. Their relationship with tourists was less emotional than for the educators. The all-rounders did not make it their mission to improve the image of farmers or to defend their acts, but they still used the agrotourism platform to pass some messages. The agrotourism experience was not solely an opportunity to sell their products, it was also a way of communicating with people and of creating enjoyable life experiences (intangible benefits). The all-rounders drew elements from all the initiation processes – endogenous, commercial and identification – shown in table 2.

Conclusion

The use of the experiential approach in this study does not call into question the economic approach, but rather enriches our understanding of the studied phenomenon. By taking sensibilities into account, in addition to the rational dimension, we were able to identify the agrotourism-related values the producers felt were most important, which in turn allowed us to consider the particularities of these values. Indeed, the experiential approach made it possible to consider the intangible character of the agrotourism product and the interactions that occurred when producers and tourists met. Results show that agrotourism is much more than a simple diversification process of agriculture. They also show that agrotourism producers are not a homogeneous group, but respond to various motivations and incentives, as illustrated by the typology of four broad types of agrotourism producers.

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Endnotes

- ¹ Nine agrotourism and 4 non-agrotourism producers were interviewed in Charlevoix, while 10 agrotourism and 4 non-agrotourism producers were interviewed in Cantons-de-l'Est.