





Article

Tourism Development in Rural Border Territories: A “Phronetic” Approach to Threats and Opportunities

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Abstract: This study emphasises the crucial role of practical wisdom (“*phronesis*”) in the hotel industry, highlighting its impact on ethical behavior, operational reliability, and guest trust. The database was provided by the regional government in Extremadura and the national government in Portugal. Qualitative data from interviews and quantitative data managing from SEM-PLS were provided. In total, 175 rural hotels in Extremadura and Portugal have participated in this study. This study emphasises the significance of integrating ethical leadership with operational excellence to ensure sustainable tourism in rural border territories. It highlights the importance of practical wisdom (“*phronesis*”) in addressing complex ethical dilemmas while balancing cultural preservation and environmental responsibility. Key managerial practices include fostering safe spaces for ethical reflection and integrating technology with cultural sensitivity. These practices help build trust within communities and ensure long-term operational success while respecting local traditions and ecological concerns.



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Keywords: “*phronesis*”; ethical leadership; challenges and opportunities; long-term sustainability; hotel management

1. Introduction

The research posits “*phronesis*”, or practical wisdom, as a crucial tool for understanding how tourist actors can address complex ethical, operational and cultural challenges. This work highlights how the integration of the “*phronesis*” with operational excellence ensures sustainability, community well-being, and environmental stewardship. Additionally, it examines how these principles contribute to building trust, enhancing guest satisfaction, and strengthening tourism businesses in border regions.

“*Phronesis*”, as Aristotle described, is practical wisdom that comes from experience and ethical reflection, enabling individuals to make decisions that promote the common good and provides a vital framework for addressing these multifaceted challenges and opportunities inherent to the practice of rural tourism in border areas [1]. Several authors have addressed this issue. Intezari et al. argue that “practical wisdom in hospitality management enables ethical decision-making that balances business objectives with community

welfare” [2]. Tomassini and Baggio show that “*phronesis*” is rooted in personal experience, moral concern, and a commitment to public well-being, challenging the traditional profit-oriented business models; the aforementioned authors demonstrate that “*phronesis*” equips managers to develop sustainable tourism strategies that honour local customs while fostering economic prosperity and organisational effectiveness [3]. Chimirri and Ren [4] highlighting how tourism actors can use phronetic research to navigate socio-political challenges, resource limitations, and cultural diversity, all factors common to the space shared by the regions that make up the Spanish–Portuguese border. Jamal [5] advocates for a virtue ethics-based approach to sustainable tourism education, where “*phronesis*” guides tourism actions and decisions; this author argues that sustainable tourism pedagogy must incorporate knowledge of ethical principles and practical experiences that cultivate virtues like compassion, fairness, and foresight. Pitman et al. [6] reinforce the approaches of Jamal [5] by demonstrating how educational tourism can serve as a platform for teaching ethics through lifelong learning, grounded in the Aristotelian concept of practical wisdom; their research reveals that ethical learning in tourism is not merely theoretical but deeply embedded in real-world experiences and interactions.

Therefore, in border regions characterised by cultural diversity, resource limitations, and socio-political challenges, the “*phronesis*” empowers tourism actors to align his strategies with community priorities, mitigating risks and capitalising the distinctive potential of borderlands [3], ensuring that local values are respected while fostering growth [7].

Unlike standardised managerial approaches, this wisdom reframes tourism management as a relational practice [5], demanding fairness and sensitivity in navigating the nuanced dynamics of these regions. Tourism managers in rural border areas often face the challenge of reconciling international visitor expectations with local cultural norms. Employing “*phronesis*”, they can thoughtfully evaluate such situations, fostering mutual respect and authenticity while addressing immediate concerns.

The integration of this virtue in resolving ethical dilemmas and maintaining operational excellence enables leaders to balance environmental conservation with economic development, handle crises effectively, and respond to guest complaints with fairness and clarity [8]. Reflective practices, such as narrative-based learning or case studies, equip both staff and management to approach these challenges with confidence [9]. Based on the case study of the regions that make up the Spanish–Portuguese border (Table 1), this is precisely the line on which this contribution is based. These territories are characterised by a peripheral position and poor communications to the main centres of economic activity in their respective countries. The main consequence of both factors has been a lower level of development for these regions. However, this handicap, which reinforces processes of emigration and population ageing, has also meant the preservation of a notable cultural, gastronomic and architectural heritage, as well as important natural spaces with different levels of protection on either side of the border. All these elements constitute first-rate tourist resources but, at the same time, face challenges related to cultural preservation, environmental responsibility, and community trust.

In the rural border territories, creating spaces for dialogue further strengthens trust and transparency, enabling stakeholders to refine decision-making and confront ethical concerns collaboratively [10]. For example, candid communication about pricing policies or the ecological impact of tourism initiatives enhances the credibility of operators while appealing to socially conscious travellers prioritising sustainability. By fostering openness and accountability, these practices transform potential risks into opportunities for stronger community relationships and guest loyalty.

Table 1. Rural hotels distributed in regions.

Portugal	Hotels	Spain	Hotels
Portugal North	285	Galicia	189
<i>Viana do Castelo</i>	90	<i>Pontevedra</i>	91
<i>Bragança</i>	110	<i>Ourense</i>	98
<i>Vila Real</i>	85		
Centro	170	Castilla y León	270
<i>Guarda</i>	95	<i>Salamanca</i>	150
<i>Castelo Branco</i>	75	<i>Zamora</i>	120
Alentejo	350	Extremadura	350
<i>Portalegre</i>	120	<i>Cáceres</i>	200
<i>Évora</i>	140	<i>Badajoz</i>	150
<i>Beja</i>	90		
Algarve	70	Andalucía	80
<i>Zona oriental</i>	70	<i>Huelva</i>	80
Total Portugal	875	Total Spain	889

Ultimately, “*phronesis*” guarantees that decisions are not only practical but deeply rooted in ethical principles, promoting cultural preservation, trust-building, and long-term resilience [11]. Embedding this virtue into their operations, tourism leaders in rural border territories can navigate challenges with foresight and compassion, ensuring sustainable success while leveraging the unique opportunities these distinctive regions provide.

The research gap which this contribution is intended to cover is based not only on literature but on the application of “*phronesis*” (practical wisdom) in rural tourism, specifically in border territories as well. While ethical leadership and operational efficiency have been widely studied in urban and corporate settings, there is limited research on their role in rural tourism businesses. Furthermore, the integration of technology in rural hospitality, respecting cultural values, and cross-border tourism initiatives remain underexplored areas.

The questions raised by this study are as follows: How does ethical leadership influence sustainable tourism management in rural border areas? In what ways do “*phronesis*” contribute to operational decision-making in rural tourism businesses? How do hotel managers integrate ethical reflection and decision-making into daily operations? What challenges arise in balancing technological advancements with cultural sensitivity in rural tourism? What are the key factors for successful cross-border tourism initiatives in rural territories?

Basically, the research methods employed are related to a qualitative approach based on a case study analysis. This study relies on interviews with hotel managers and case studies of rural accommodation. It examines tourism operations in the Portuguese–Spanish border, focusing on specific protected areas. The thematic analysis addresses the study categorising key themes such as ethical leadership, practical wisdom, operational efficiency, and sustainable tourism practices.

The contributions to research are both theoretical and practical. In the first one, the study deepens the understanding of ethical leadership and “*phronesis*” in rural tourism management, offering a framework that integrates ethical reflection with operational excellence. The practical contributions provide insights for tourism managers on fostering ethical decision-making, balancing technology with cultural values, and developing sustainable cross-border tourism strategies. Managerial implications are also provided. The research

emphasises creating safe spaces for ethical reflection, ensuring operational reliability, and enhancing community trust.

After this introduction, the next section goes into the theoretical framework of the research and formulates the hypotheses to be tested. The third section deals with methodological issues, defines the scope of the study, the items, and the research model based on the construct design. The fourth section shows the results of the research and, in the fifth section, these results are discussed with those offered by the existing literature. The last section offers the most relevant conclusions of the research, warns of its limitations, and shows future lines of work.

2. Literature Review and Hypotheses Development

2.1. “Phronesis” in the Development of Rural Tourism in Border Territories (PDRT)

Rural border territories, with their unique complexities, demand nuanced approaches to issues such as economic uncertainty, environmental vulnerability, and sociocultural tensions [12]. These distinctive circumstances necessitate management strategies rooted in trust-building and engagement with surrounding communities [13]. Practical wisdom empowers hoteliers to convert apparent risks into valuable opportunities by capitalising on the rich cultural diversity inherent in border regions, which provides fertile ground for authentic tourism experiences [14]. In fact, the cross-border initiatives that celebrate local traditions can create sustainable competitive advantages for rural hotels [15].

Navigating operational complexities in such territories also requires innovative solutions in workforce development. Yoopetch et al. [16] observe that training local staff represents both a challenge and an opportunity for rural hotels, while Livingston [17] emphasises the role of ethical leadership in enhancing employee retention and community advancement. The ever-changing nature of rural border areas calls for exceptional resilience within tourism enterprises, a capacity strengthened through “phronetic” management practices [18]. This sentiment is echoed by those who argue that ethical reflection strengthens a hotel’s capacity to navigate uncertainties while maintaining community trust [19].

By adopting “phronesis” as a guiding principle, hoteliers in cross-border regions can drive sustainable development that not only addresses immediate operational challenges but also supports broader socio-economic growth. Changha et al. [20] argues that hotels guided by practical wisdom become catalysts for positive social change in border regions, a notion further reinforced by Roberts [21], who concludes that ethical management practices in rural hotels contribute to long-term regional development. The integration of “phronesis” into tourism operations embodies a comprehensive approach that aligns commercial success with the welfare of local communities.

Achieving “phronesis” in the development of rural tourism in border territories relies on six interrelated variables that collectively establish a comprehensive framework for sustainable growth. These interconnected variables collectively illustrate how the integration of ethical leadership, operational excellence, and sustainability creates a robust model for rural tourism in border regions, positioning hotels as transformative agents that generate lasting benefits for local communities while addressing the unique challenges posed by these dynamic territories. Those variables were drawn from the literature review as well as a couple of focus groups in which twenty rural hotel managers participated.

Addressing Threats through Ethical Leadership (TEL) underscores the essential role of “phronesis” in shaping hotel management strategies within these regions, where the integration of local knowledge and sustainable practices fosters harmony between business objectives and community welfare. Transforming Challenges into Opportunities (TChO) emerges as a pivotal aspect, as adept managers harness cultural diversity and regional traditions to craft distinctive value propositions, enhancing the appeal of border tourism.

This connects seamlessly with Balancing Operational Excellence with Ethical Standards (OEES), which exemplifies the need for maintaining ethical integrity alongside operational efficiency through refined management approaches tailored to the complexities of rural territories. Furthermore, Building Resilience Through Ethical Reflection (RER) highlights the critical importance of embedding ethical considerations into everyday practices, enabling hotels to adapt effectively to external disruptions such as economic volatility or environmental crises. Within this context, Fostering Long-Term Sustainability (LTS) gains prominence, as enduring success is intrinsically linked to achieving equilibrium between economic viability and social responsibility, ensuring that both community welfare and environmental preservation remain central to operational goals.

2.2. Addressing Threats Through Ethical Leadership (TEL)

The significance of principled governance in addressing challenges within rural frontier territories' hospitality management remains fundamental for sustainable tourism advancement, whereby conscientious leadership provides essential frameworks necessary to navigate multifaceted obstacles inherent throughout cross-boundary destinations whilst maintaining communal trust and environmental integrity [8].

Furthermore, ecological threats demand particular vigilance through value-based administrative approaches, as establishment managers operating near international boundaries must implement sustainable methodologies that safeguard delicate ecosystems whilst ensuring operational viability, noting that such protective oversight proves crucial since frontier regions frequently encounter distinctive natural pressures, necessitating careful equilibrium between visitor accommodation development and preservation initiatives [22,23].

Traditional customs present additional critical dimensions where principled governance demonstrates its worth, given that prosperous establishments along borderlands depend upon administration that honours and maintains indigenous heritage whilst fostering multinational understanding [24]. Moreover, such cultural awareness becomes especially vital as conscientious directors navigate intricate social relationships, nurturing positive engagement with populations on either side of national demarcations, whilst monetary challenges require thorough examination through morally-guided administrative perspectives, wherein directors must harmonise commercial objectives with neighbourhood prosperity, guaranteeing that visitor-related developments benefit local inhabitants [25].

This consideration is especially important for rural frontier accommodations facing unique financial challenges that demand innovative yet ethical solutions. Implementing virtuous management practices not only addresses operational issues but also builds community trust. Leaders who prioritise transparency and ethical decision-making foster resilient organisations capable of overcoming various challenges [26]. This approach is essential for creating long-term solutions that benefit all stakeholders, going beyond immediate obstacles to ensure sustainability. Responsible managers must consider the broader impact of their decisions on both businesses and society, aligning risk mitigation with development goals while respecting local values. Maintaining strong ties with host communities through environmental stewardship, cultural preservation, and economic fairness creates a meaningful, lasting impact [27]. The points outlined below validate the hypothesis under consideration.

H1. *Addressing Threats through Ethical Leadership (TEL) influence "Phronesis" in the development of rural tourism in border territories (PDRT).*

2.3. Transforming Challenges into Opportunities (TChO)

The paramount significance of principled governance in addressing vulnerabilities within rural frontier territories hospitality management remains fundamental for sustainable tourism advancement whereby conscientious leadership provides essential frameworks necessary to navigate obstacles inherent throughout cross-boundary destinations whilst maintaining communal trust and environmental integrity [28].

Ecological challenges demand particular vigilance through value-based administrative approaches, as establishment managers operating near international boundaries must implement sustainable methodologies that safeguard delicate ecosystems whilst ensuring operational viability [29]; such protective stewardship proves crucial since frontier regions frequently encounter distinctive natural pressures, necessitating a careful equilibrium between visitor accommodation development and preservation initiatives [30].

Traditional customs present additional critical dimensions where principled governance demonstrates its worth, given that prosperous establishments along borderlands depend upon administration that honours and maintains indigenous heritage whilst fostering multinational understanding. Cultural awareness becomes especially vital when conscientious directors navigate intricate social relationships, nurturing positive engagement with populations on either side of national demarcations. This cultural sensitivity becomes particularly important as ethical leaders must navigate complex social dynamics while fostering positive relationships with communities on both sides of the border [31,32].

Monetary considerations require thorough examination through morally-guided administrative perspectives, wherein leaders must balance profit objectives with community welfare, ensuring that tourism development benefits local populations. This becomes particularly relevant as rural frontier accommodations confront distinctive fiscal obstacles requiring innovative yet ethically sound resolutions [33].

The transformative power of principled leadership in addressing these challenges extends beyond immediate obstacles towards perpetual sustainability, as conscientious administrators must evaluate broader ramifications of their decisions on both commercial enterprises and society, ensuring risk mitigation strategies align with enduring development aspirations whilst respecting regional values and customs, thereby enabling organisations to build resilience against future challenges whilst maintaining strong connections with their host communities through careful attention to environmental preservation, cultural heritage protection, and economic fairness, ultimately creating meaningful impact beyond immediate operational spheres through comprehensive strategies that effectively convert current challenges into opportunities whilst preparing for future possibilities in these unique geographical contexts. The subsequent reasoning reinforces the assumptions made in the hypotheses.

H2. *Transforming Challenges into Opportunities (TChO) influence Addressing Threats through Ethical Leadership (TEL).*

H3. *Transforming Challenges into Opportunities (TChO) influence “Phronesis” in the development of rural tourism in border territories (PDRT).*

2.4. Balancing Operational Excellence with Ethical Standard (OEES)

The harmonious integration of operational prowess with moral standards (OEES) remains fundamental for successful hospitality management throughout rural frontier territories, whereby this equilibrium demands careful consideration of both business efficiency and principled responsibilities, as implementation creates frameworks ensuring sustainable practices whilst maintaining integrity [34].

Countryside border establishments face unique challenges from geographic and resource limitations [35]. Hotel managers must craft innovative solutions that optimise operations while upholding ethical standards and community interests, especially when managing constrained infrastructure typical of remote boundary regions [36].

The moral dimension encompasses communal relations and environmental stewardship, whereby successful rural border hotels demonstrate that operational efficiency can be achieved while maintaining strong ethical commitments to local communities and ecosystems, requiring thorough evaluation of how administrative decisions impact neighbouring stakeholders and natural surroundings [37,38].

Personnel development represents another critical aspect where OEES demonstrates essential value, as training and development programs must balance operational needs with ethical considerations, particularly in terms of local employment and fair labour practices, proving especially relevant throughout countryside frontier zones where skilled labour might be scarce [39].

Technological advancements and modernisation must align with ethical principles, respecting indigenous values while enhancing service delivery. Schalock et al. [40] and Robina-Ramírez et al. [41] highlight the importance of continuous evaluation to meet operational and ethical goals. This approach fosters sustainability, stakeholder trust, and competitive advantages, blending excellence with moral standards to navigate rural boundary challenges and create meaningful, lasting impact. As outlined below, the hypotheses can be reasonably substantiated.

H4. *Balancing Operational Excellence with Ethical Standard (OEES) influences Transforming Challenges into Opportunities (TChO).*

H5. *Balancing Operational Excellence with Ethical Standard (OEES) influences Addressing Threats through Ethical Leadership (TEL).*

2.5. Building Resilience Through Ethical Reflection (RER)

The cultivation of organisational fortitude through principled contemplation emerges as a critical component for establishments operating throughout rural frontier territories (particularly given their distinctive vulnerabilities and challenges), whereby this methodology combines systematic evaluation of practices with moral considerations to strengthen administrative adaptability and sustainability. The foundation of such resilience lies in continuous learning and modification, as hotels in rural border regions must develop robust reflection mechanisms that enable them to anticipate and respond to challenges while maintaining ethical integrity, helping organisations build adaptive capacity whilst staying true to their values [42].

Crisis preparedness represents another crucial aspect where moral contemplation proves invaluable, noting that regular ethical reflection sessions enable hotel managers to develop comprehensive crisis response strategies that protect both business interests and stakeholder welfare, becoming particularly relevant in boundary regions where external shocks can significantly impact operations [43].

Community engagement forms an essential dimension of fortitude building, whereby ethical reflection processes must incorporate diverse stakeholder perspectives to ensure resilience strategies that address community needs, strengthening establishments' abilities to navigate complex obstacles whilst maintaining local support [44]. Personnel advancement and empowerment play vital roles in developing organisational strength, as regular ethical reflection sessions contribute to staff development and decision-making capabilities, enhancing overall organisational resilience, which proves essential for long-term sustainability through focused human capital enhancement [45]; additionally, implementation

of contemplative practices must remain systematic and ongoing, since successful hotels integrate ethical reflection into their regular operations, creating a culture of continuous improvement and adaptation [46].

The resilience built through ethical reflection enables hotels to maintain their competitive advantage while upholding their commitment to sustainable practices, thereby creating meaningful impact beyond immediate operational spheres through comprehensive strategies that effectively blend principled contemplation with organisational fortitude, ultimately preparing establishments for future possibilities within these distinctive geographical contexts [47]. The arguments presented below provide support for the hypothesis.

H6. *Building Resilience Through Ethical Reflection (RER) influences Balancing Operational Excellence with Ethical Standard (OEES).*

2.6. Fostering Long-Term Sustainability (LTS)

Fostering long-term sustainability is pivotal in addressing the intricate threats and opportunities present in rural border regions, where distinct cultural, economic, and environmental dynamics intersect. Integrating “*phronesis*” in ethical decision-making, enables hotel managers to navigate these complexities, ensuring tourism development benefits both local populations and natural ecosystems. One significant threat lies in the potential overuse of finite resources. As Aristotle articulated, the virtue of “*phronesis*” is to deliberate well about what is good and expedient for oneself and the community [48].

By adopting resource-conscious strategies, such as reducing water and energy consumption, managers can protect the delicate environments that underpin sustainable tourism. Equally challenging is the risk of cultural erosion, as poorly managed tourism risks marginalising local customs and traditions. Sustainable tourism requires active engagement with local communities to align development with their values and long-term goals [49]. Building genuine partnerships with local stakeholders ensures tourism respects cultural heritage while fostering economic opportunities [50].

Financial instability also looms as a concern, demanding a balanced approach that prioritises both immediate gains and enduring benefits. Tourism in rural regions must focus on resilience by creating diversified income streams that empower local communities [51]. Promoting regional culinary traditions and artisanal crafts not only strengthens local economies but also enhances guest experiences. Furthermore, geopolitical uncertainties, often prevalent in border territories, highlight the importance of inclusive practices. Tourism has the potential to bridge divides by fostering cultural exchange and mutual understanding [52]. Hotels can facilitate dialogue between divided communities, transforming challenges into cooperative opportunities. Resilience becomes indispensable during crises, such as pandemics or environmental catastrophes. The UNWTO [53] underscores that sustainable tourism is not only about preserving resources but also about strengthening the ability of communities to recover from shocks.

Managers exemplifying “*phronesis*” exhibit foresight and adaptability, ensuring continuity in supporting local livelihoods during disruptions. Ultimately, promoting long-term sustainability secures equitable and resilient tourism development in these regions. Aristotle emphasises “*phronesis*” is not just knowing what to do but doing it for the good of others. Through ethical leadership, reflective decision-making, and community-centric collaboration, hotels can address threats while transforming opportunities into enduring advantages. The following evidence serves to justify the proposed hypotheses.

H7. *Balancing Operational Excellence with Ethical Standard (OEES) influences Fostering Long-Term Sustainability (LTS).*

H8. *Transforming Challenges into Opportunities (TChO) influences Fostering Long-Term Sustainability (LTS).*

H9. *Fostering Long-Term Sustainability (LTS) influences “Phronesis” in the development of rural tourism in border territories (PDRT).*

3. Methodology

3.1. Data

The hotel accommodations in Extremadura refer to the range of tourism establishments in this region of Spain, aimed at providing lodging to visitors to the region [54]. These accommodations include a variety of options, ranging from luxury hotels to hostels and rural houses, catering to different types of demand based on tourists’ budgets and preferences. The Junta de Extremadura, through its public platform, manages and publishes a database with detailed information on registered accommodations in the region, facilitating access to up-to-date information on the available offer. This database aims to promote tourism and assist both travellers and sector entrepreneurs in enhancing the visibility of their services. Additionally, the publication is under a free-use license, allowing for its dissemination and reuse under certain conditions.

Table 1 shows the distribution of rural hotels across regions in Spain and Portugal. In Spain, the highest concentration is in Extremadura (350 hotels), followed by Castilla y León (270) and Andalucía (80), totalling 700 hotels. In Portugal, the regions are divided into Norte (285 hotels), Centro (170), Alentejo (350), and Algarve (70), with a total of 875 hotels. Key areas include Cáceres and Badajoz in Spain, and Portalegre and Évora in Portugal, reflecting significant rural tourism development across both countries’ regions.

3.2. Items

Table 2 presents the distribution of rural hotels in Spain and Portugal that contributed to the definition of study items. The study’s items were developed through a combination of a literature review and insights from two focus groups involving 20 rural hotels. The table lists various establishments and specifies their respective countries. In Spain, examples include Finca el Cortiñal Slow Hotel, Castillo de Luna Hotel Restaurante, and Castilla Termal Monasterio de Valbuena. In Portugal, notable hotels include Herdade da Urgeria, Quinta do Barreiro, and Torre de Palma Wine Hotel. These establishments encompass both rural and luxury accommodations, reflecting the diversity of interview sites within these cross-border regions. According to Sánchez-Oro and Robina-Ramírez [55], two focus groups have been delivered: Focus Group 1 explored ethical practices in hotel operations, with an emphasis on decision-making frameworks, team collaboration, and the role of leadership in fostering ethical behaviour. Discussions covered practical wisdom (“*phronesis*”), the creation of safe spaces for ethical reflection, and strategies for addressing ethical dilemmas in rural hospitality. Focus Group 2 concentrated on guest-facing aspects, such as operational reliability, guest trust, and the connection between ethical behaviour and reputation, with specific attention to transparency, sustainability, and crisis management. Three indicators OEE54, PRDT3, and RER 4 were not significant.

Table 3 includes the constructs and highlights key ethical principles and strategies for hotel management that foster a strong reputation and long-term success. “*Phronesis*” in the *Development of Rural Tourism in Border Territories (PDRT)* emphasises the importance of practical wisdom in making ethical decisions in sensitive areas. *Addressing Threats through Ethical Leadership (TEL)* focuses on how ethical leadership can mitigate risks and maintain trust during crises. *Transforming Challenges into Opportunities (TChO)* encourages managers to use obstacles as catalysts for innovation and growth. *Balancing Operational Excellence with*

Ethical Standards (OEES) stresses the need to maintain high operational efficiency while upholding ethical principles. *Building Resilience through Ethical Reflection (RER)* involves fostering resilience by reflecting on ethical practices to navigate difficult situations. Finally, *Fostering Long-Term Sustainability (LTS)* highlights the importance of creating sustainable practices that ensure the hotel's longevity and positive impact on the environment and society. Together, these constructs promote a holistic approach to ethical hotel management. Proposed corrections were adding.

Table 2. Distribution of the interviews.

Hotels	Spain	Portugal
Alojamientos Tajo Internacional	x	
Herdade da Urgeria		x
Dom Dinis Marvao		x
Quinta do Barreiro		x
Finca el Cortiñal Slow Hotel	x	
Hotel Rural Restaurante El Convento	x	
Quinta da Dourada		x
Puerto Roque Turismo Rural	x	
Castillo de Luna Hotel Restaurante	x	
Casa Rural Sierra de San Mamede	x	
Hotel Rural Santo Antonio		x
Herdade do Adaens	x	
Casas da Faia—Nature Guest House		x
Casa da Urra		x
Torre de Palma Wine Hotel, Monforte		x
Conde Rodrigo II	x	
Hotel & Spa Norat Torre do Deza	x	
Castilla Termal Monasterio de Valbuena	x	
Longroiva Hotel Rural		x
Gran Sol de Extremadura	x	

Table 3. Items.

Constructs	Items	References
<i>“Phronesis” in the development of rural tourism in border territories (PDRT)</i>		
PDRT 1	How does practical wisdom guide ethical decision-making in balancing business goals with community welfare?	[1]
PDRT 2	What role does “ <i>phronesis</i> ” play in developing sustainable tourism strategies that honour local customs?	[3]
PDRT 3	How can cross-border initiatives celebrating local traditions create sustainable competitive advantages?	[15]
PDRT 4	In what ways does ethical reflection strengthen a hotel's ability to adapt to uncertainties and maintain trust?	[19]
<i>Balancing Operational Excellence with Ethical Standard (OEES)</i>		
OEES 1	How can rural frontier hospitality establishments balance operational efficiency with ethical responsibilities?	[34]
OEES 2	What innovations can hotel managers develop to address resource limitations without compromising community interests?	[36]
OEES 3	How can personnel development programs in rural hotels align operational needs with fair labor practices?	[39]
OEES 4	How can technological advancements in rural hospitality align with indigenous cultural and ethical values?	[40]

Table 3. Cont.

Constructs	Items	References
<i>Fostering long-term Sustainability (LTS)</i>		
LTS 1	How can “ <i>phronesis</i> ” guide hotel managers in addressing the complex challenges in rural border regions?	[48]
LTS 2	What role does active engagement with local communities play in ensuring cultural preservation and sustainable tourism development?	[49]
LTS 3	How can financial resilience in rural border tourism be achieved, according to Bianchi’s perspective?	[51]
<i>Transforming Challenges into Opportunities TChO</i>		
TChO 1	How does principled governance address vulnerabilities in rural frontier hospitality management?	[28]
TChO 2	What sustainable methodologies can protect ecosystems in cross-boundary destinations?	[29]
TChO 3	How does cultural sensitivity in leadership foster positive relationships with borderland communities?	[31,32]
TChO 4	How can leaders balance profit objectives with community welfare in rural frontier accommodations?	[33]
<i>Addressing Threats through Ethical Leadership (TEL)</i>		
TEL1	How does principled governance contribute to overcoming challenges in rural frontier hospitality management?	[8]
TEL 2	What role does ecological vigilance play in safeguarding ecosystems while maintaining operational viability in border areas?	[22]
TEL 3	How can hospitality management in border regions respect local heritage while fostering multicultural understanding?	[24]
TEL 4	How can directors balance commercial objectives with community welfare in rural frontier hospitality management?	[25]
TEL 5	How can implementing virtuous management practices build resilience and foster long-term sustainability in rural hotels?	[26]
<i>Building Resilience Through Ethical Reflection (RER)</i>		
RER 1	In what ways does crisis preparedness benefit from regular ethical reflection sessions in boundary region hotels?	[43]
RER 2	How can community engagement contribute to building fortitude in rural frontier hospitality management?	[44]
RER 3	What role does personnel advancement play in strengthening organisational resilience in rural hotels?	[45]
RER 4	How does ethical reflection influence long-term sustainability and competitive advantage in rural frontier hotels?	[46,47]

Emails were sent inviting rural hotels mentioned in Table 1, located along the Spanish–Portuguese border, to participate. Initially, 221 hotels responded positively to the invitation. However, the final number of confirmed participants decreased to 175.

3.3. Model

Figure 1 below depicts the relationships between the hypotheses and the items posed.

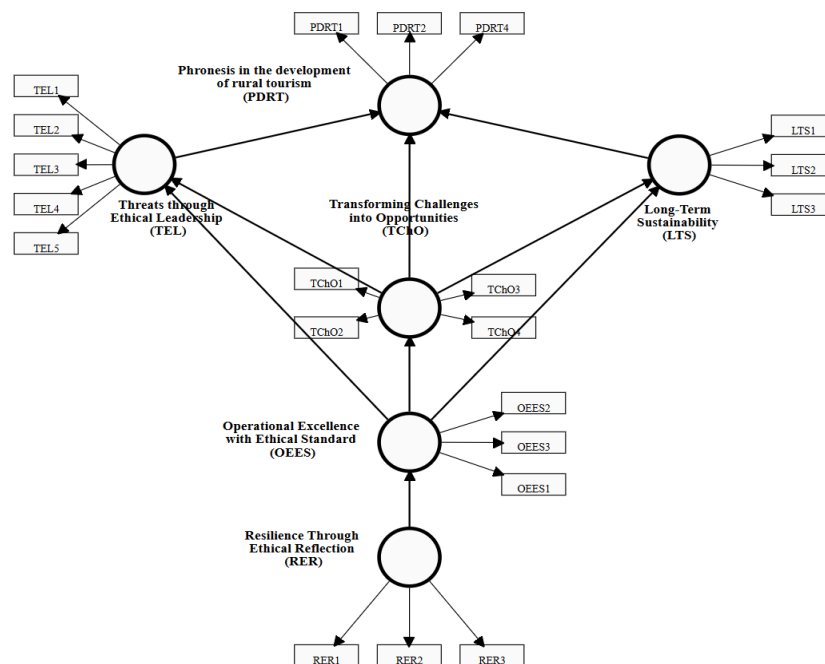


Figure 1. Model.

4. Results

4.1. External Model

The external loadings reflect the relationships between unobserved constructs and measurable indicators. Carmines and Zeller [56] suggest that coefficients above 0.7 are generally deemed satisfactory. However, some researchers caution against strictly adhering to this guideline, as highlighted in Table 4. In the study, three indicators (OEEs4, PRDT3, and RER4) were deleted from the focus groups due to their lack of significance. These indicators were initially considered to measure aspects related to operational excellence, rural tourism development, and resilience through ethical reflection. However, after analysis, it was determined that they did not contribute meaningfully to the understanding of the ethical practices and strategies in rural hotel management. As a result, these indicators were removed to ensure the focus on more relevant and impactful measures in the study.

Table 4. Outer Model Loadings.

	ED	GT	PDRT	RER	RO	OEEs
LTS1	0.890					
LTS2	0.877					
LTS3	0.691					
TEL1		0.782				
TEL2		0.773				
TEL3		0.687				
TEL4		0.684				
TEL5		0.698				
PDRT1			0.801			
PDRT2			0.866			
PDRT4			0.711			
RER1				0.836		
RER2				0.860		
RER3				0.812		
TChO1					0.857	
TChO2					0.855	
TChO3					0.788	

Table 4. *Cont.*

	ED	GT	PDRT	RER	RO	OEES
TChO4					0.816	
OEES1						0.868
OEES2						0.913
OEES3						0.733

Table 5 illustrates the strength of the links between indicators and their underlying constructs, with most values surpassing 0.7, demonstrating robust connections [57]. Reliability was confirmed by Cronbach's alpha exceeding 0.70 [58]. Furthermore, composite reliability and AVE metrics exceeded the required thresholds, ensuring strong internal coherence and model validity.

Table 5. Reliability metrics.

	Cronbach's Alpha	rho_A	Composite Reliability	Average Variance Extracted (AVE)
LTS	0.768	0.842	0.863	0.680
TEL	0.748	0.757	0.833	0.501
PDRT	0.709	0.739	0.837	0.633
RER	0.786	0.792	0.875	0.700
TChO	0.849	0.853	0.898	0.688
OEES	0.791	0.814	0.878	0.708

Fornell and Larcker [58] propose that the square root of the AVE for each latent variable can be used to establish discriminant validity. To confirm this between constructs, the square root of the AVE must be greater than the correlation between the constructs. Table 6 presents the square roots of the AVE along the diagonal, alongside the correlations between the constructs. These values are higher than the other correlations between latent variables, demonstrating the adequate discriminant validity of the measurements.

Discriminant validity was assessed using the heterotrait–multitrait method (HTMT), with a conservative criterion of 0.85, and the recommended threshold of 0.95 for conceptually close constructs (Table 7) [59]. The results, all below the 0.85 threshold, support the discriminant validity of the model, confirming an adequate distinction between the constructs analysed.

Table 6. Discriminant Validity Matrix (Fornell–Larcker Criterion).

	LTS	TEL	PDRT	RER	RO	OEES
LTS	0.825					
TEL	0.378	0.708				
PDRT	0.370	0.555	0.795			
RER	0.411	0.592	0.504	0.837		
TChO	0.275	0.396	0.440	0.320	0.829	
OEES	0.392	0.533	0.401	0.364	0.309	0.841

Table 7. Discriminant Validity Matrix (Heterotrait–Monotrait Ratio Criterion).

	LTS	TEL	PDRT	RER	TChO	OEES
LTS						
TEL	0.490					
PDRT	0.479	0.752				
RER	0.514	0.775	0.650			
TChO	0.323	0.494	0.548	0.384		
OEES	0.455	0.687	0.516	0.460	0.359	

This provides good support for our claims of discriminant validity between our measures of transformational leadership at the group and individual levels [59]. On the other hand, the fit indices are the normalised root mean square residual (SRMR), which is 0.074 (Blue Tourism) and 0.070 (Green Tourism) indicating a better fit of the model in line with what Williams, Vandenberg, and Edwards indicate [60] (p. 585).

4.2. Structural Model Analysis

Structural model evaluation explores the interactions among constructs within a conceptual framework, frequently employing methods like Structural Equation Modelling (SEM). This approach evaluates hypothesised relationships, determines direct and indirect effects, and verifies the validity of theoretical structures. Chin [61] categorises R^2 values as follows: above 0.67 for strong explanatory capacity, between 0.33 and 0.67 for moderate, and between 0.19 and 0.33 for weak. In this analysis, the coefficient of determination ($R^2 = 0.385$) indicates a moderately good alignment with the data.

Using the PLS algorithm, T-statistics are calculated via bootstrapping, generating 10,000 resamples to estimate standard errors and T-values for path significance. R^2 values, which range from 0 to 1, reflect predictive ability, with values above 0.10 and T-statistics exceeding 1.64 confirming minimum explanatory adequacy [62].

Table 8 reveals that the relationships between H5: OEES → TEL (Balancing Operational Excellence with Ethical Standards leading to Addressing Threats through Ethical Leadership) (T-statistics: 8,139) and H1: TEL → PDRT (Addressing Threats through Ethical Leadership leading to “Phronesis” in the Development of Rural Tourism in Border Territories) are critical for ensuring sustainable tourism growth and stability in rural frontier regions for two main reasons.

Operational excellence (OEES) often requires sound decision-making processes based on ethical principles, which directly influence the way threats are addressed in hospitality settings (TEL). When managers prioritise ethical standards in their operations, they create a robust framework for addressing various challenges, including crises and ethical dilemmas, which are prevalent in border territories. This leadership approach fosters resilience by ensuring that hospitality businesses can swiftly adapt to challenges while maintaining their ethical integrity. By promoting ethical decision-making, leaders can navigate crises with foresight, ensuring that both community welfare and business interests are preserved. This, in turn, supports the building of long-term resilience in hospitality management (PDRT), as organisations guided by ethical leadership are better equipped to respond to emerging risks and uncertainties.

Table 8. Path coefficients.

	Original Sample (O)	2.5%	97.5%	T Statistics (O/STDEV)	p Values
H1: TEL → PDRT	0.403	0.295	0.508	7.498	0.000 ***
H2: TChO → TEL	0.256	0.143	0.371	4.427	0.000 ***
H3: TChO → PDRT	0.239	0.127	0.359	4.018	0.000 ***
H4: OEES → TChO	0.309	0.313	0.065	4.774	0.000 ***
H5: OEES → TEL	0.454	0.341	0.558	8.139	0.000 ***
H6: RER → OEES	0.364	0.242	0.484	5.902	0.000 ***
H7: OEES → LTS	0.339	0.221	0.457	5.669	0.000 ***
H8: TChO → LTS	0.170	0.045	0.296	2.642	0.008 **
H9: LTS → PDRT	0.152	0.040	0.264	2.642	0.008 ***

Results of testing the model significance ** $p < 0.01$. *** $p < 0.001$.

Transforming challenges into opportunities for rural development: The ability of ethical leadership (TEL) to address and navigate challenges effectively enables the transfor-

mation of these challenges into opportunities for the development of rural tourism (PDRT). By adopting a balanced approach to operational efficiency and ethical standards (OEES), tourism managers can recognise potential risks and seize opportunities for growth that benefit both the environment and local populations. This approach promotes a holistic view of tourism development, integrating economic, cultural, and ecological aspects in decision-making. Ethical leadership provides the vision needed to turn complex, cross-boundary challenges into positive outcomes, contributing to the sustainable development of tourism in rural border territories. Thus, the relationship between OEES, TEL, and RER is vital for the establishment of responsible, sustainable, and ethically-guided tourism practices that support both short-term resilience and long-term growth.

5. Discussion

In line with Enz [36], when he considers ethical leadership as an indispensable component of long-term success in hotel management, the results of the research support that the ideas of Operational Excellence and Ethical Standards (OEES) and Transformational Ethical Leadership (TEL), proposed in the theoretical framework, are fundamental to face the challenges inherent to the management of rural tourism in territories where it is crucial to maintain a balance between commercial objectives and ethical standards.

Ethical leadership, grounded in OEES, is not only about maintaining ethical standards but also about aligning operational strategies with broader social and environmental goals. This would be consistent with the conclusions of authors such as Koščak and O'Rourke [34], who highlight, sustainable practices in rural territories require that businesses not only focus on profitability but also consider the well-being of local communities and ecosystems. Attfeld [37] suggests that operational efficiency should never come at the cost of ethical commitments, such as environmental stewardship and fostering positive community relations. This view is echoed by Schwartz and Sharpe [1], who argue that ethical leadership is critical in rural territories for navigating the complexities posed by environmental challenges, cultural diversity, and socio-economic tensions, thus ensuring that tourism practices respect local customs and traditions. Ethical leaders, as Guerra-Lombardi et al. [22] explain, must balance the need for sustainable tourism practices with business viability. Their role becomes even more significant in rural tourism, where the integration of local traditions and ecological preservation is vital for the continuity of both business and community welfare. By incorporating ethical leadership, managers can build long-term trust within communities, fostering resilience and contributing to the sustainability of the tourism industry.

A crucial aspect of ethical leadership is practical wisdom which enables managers to address ethical dilemmas while maintaining operational excellence. The results of the research show that the role of "*phronesis*" extends beyond internal hotel operations and into the broader context of rural tourism management. This is particularly relevant in border regions, where the integration of "*phronesis*" allows hotel managers to make decisions that consider the broader social and environmental implications of their actions. In line with these conclusions are the contributions of authors such as Intezari et al. [2] who argue that such wisdom equips leaders to develop strategies that protect both local communities and ecosystems, creating mutually beneficial outcomes for businesses and the areas they operate in. The importance of these principles is further supported by Tambovceva et al. [15] and Yoopetch et al. [16], who emphasise the need for ethical leadership to promote cultural and economic development in rural territories. Ethical leadership, combined with practical wisdom, becomes a tool for ensuring the sustainability of tourism practices, making it a critical component of successful rural tourism management in border regions.

These ideas are especially relevant in a territory that, like the Portuguese–Spanish border, possesses important natural resources such as the Gerês–Xurés Biosphere Reserve, Sierra de Malcata Nature Reserve, or the Natural Parks of Montesinho, Duero Internacional, Arribes del Duero, Tajo Internacional or Valle del Guadiana. The tourism potential of these resources is analysed by Robina-Ramírez et al. [63], who highlight the relevance that factors such as health, well-being, and happiness can have in the practice of tourism in this type of space [64]. Phronetic becomes a crucial factor in guaranteeing the viability of tourism investments in rural areas, thus overcoming the warnings made in this regard by Castellano-Álvarez and Robina-Ramírez [65] or Castellano-Álvarez et al. [66–68].

In line with the findings of Leal-Solís et al. [69], the results of the research show that the Practical Decision-making and Reflective Thinking (PDRT) approach further strengthens the connection between ethical leadership and operational success. On the other hand, the research also shows that Balancing Operational Excellence with Ethical Standard (OEES) demands that the implementation of technological advances in rural tourism be carried out with careful consideration of local cultural values. Castellano-Álvarez et al. [70] or Castellano-Álvarez and Robina-Ramírez [71] warn us about the relevance that these values and local singularities have for the development of the territory, and the truth is that sometimes technological growth can conflict with the cultural norms of local communities. Along these lines would be the conclusions reached by Koščak and O'Rourke [34] who point out that technological advancements in rural hospitality must be approached with ethical responsibility to avoid disrupting local values. This is particularly important in cross-border initiatives that celebrate local traditions while seeking to create sustainable competitive advantages. However, as Sofield [13] and Tambovceva et al. [15] argue, socio-cultural and economic tensions often hinder the success of these initiatives, especially when local staff lack the training to navigate complex cultural dynamics.

This study faced several limitations. First, the geographical focus on rural border areas, while intentional, presented challenges in accessing comprehensive data due to the remoteness of these regions. The limited availability of secondary data sources and the logistical difficulties in conducting primary research constrained the scope of the study. Another limitation was the sample size. Many hotels in these rural border territories are small and independently operated, making it difficult to gather a broad range of perspectives. Additionally, cultural and language barriers in some regions added complexity to the data collection process, potentially impacting the depth and breadth of the insights obtained. Methodologically, the study relied on qualitative approaches, which, while rich in detail, can be subjective and harder to generalise. The reliance on interviews and case studies means that the findings are context-specific and may not be universally applicable to all rural border hotels.

Future research should expand the geographical scope to include a more diverse range of rural border territories. Comparative studies between regions could provide deeper insights into how “*phronesis*” manifests in different cultural and economic contexts. Additionally, incorporating quantitative methods alongside qualitative ones could enhance the robustness of the findings. Future studies should also explore the role of technology in supporting “*phronetic*” management in rural hotels. Another important consideration for future research is the impact of training on fostering “*phronesis*” among hotel managers and staff. In summary, while this study highlights the importance of “*phronesis*” in managing rural border hotels, addressing its limitations through broader, more diverse research approaches and exploring technological and educational interventions will be crucial for future advancements in this field.

6. Conclusions

The results of this research emphasise the critical role of ethical leadership and operational excellence in fostering sustainable tourism practices.

The first key theoretical conclusion is the integration of ethical leadership with operational excellence. This synergy ensures that tourism businesses not only focus on maximising profits but also prioritise the welfare of the local community and environmental stewardship. This enhances the long-term sustainability of tourism in rural border areas and protects the social fabric and natural resources of the region.

Another theoretical conclusion revolves around practical wisdom and ethical reflection. “*Phronesis*”, or practical wisdom, allows tourism stakeholders to navigate challenges that involve cultural preservation and environmental responsibility, while ensuring the operational efficiency of the business. By leveraging practical wisdom, leaders can make decisions that respect local traditions and ecological concerns, thus building trust with both staff and guests.

The third theoretical conclusion stresses the importance of ethical decision-making and community trust. Ethical leadership and “*phronesis*” contribute to transparent, consistent decision-making that builds a culture of trust within tourism businesses. This practice strengthens both internal team dynamics and external relationships with the local community. By fostering trust, businesses improve their reputation, ensuring that guests perceive the establishment as ethically responsible and trustworthy.

On the practical side, the study outlines three significant conclusions for tourism managers. First, creating safe spaces for ethical reflection is crucial. By encouraging staff to engage in open discussions about ethical dilemmas, managers can improve decision-making capabilities, which leads to smoother operations, especially in difficult or crisis situations. When employees feel that their concerns are heard and addressed, they become more engaged, leading to higher operational reliability.

Secondly, as technological advancements play an increasingly significant role in rural hospitality, it is essential that managers introduce new technologies in ways that respect local cultural values. Overzealous technological adoption can lead to alienation of the local community, which may perceive these changes as a threat to their traditions. Balancing technological innovation with cultural preservation fosters a more inclusive approach that minimises negative reactions from local communities while improving service quality. This balance also contributes to a more sustainable model of tourism, where modernisation does not overshadow the region’s cultural heritage.

A third practical conclusion addresses the importance of cross-border initiatives for sustainable tourism. Cross-border collaborations can offer significant benefits, such as resource sharing and expanded marketing efforts. However, these initiatives face challenges related to socio-cultural differences, logistical issues, and local capacity constraints. For rural tourism managers, it is essential to understand these barriers and work towards overcoming them by investing in workforce development and building local capacity. When effectively implemented, cross-border tourism initiatives can contribute to the long-term development of both the community and the tourism industry.

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