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Olive Oil Tourism as a Tool for Sustainable Development: Evidence From Consumer Motivations and Perceptions

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ABSTRACT

This study examines olive oil tourism as an experiential form of cultural tourism that enhances extra virgin olive oil (EVOO), olive-growing heritage, and rural territories. Adopting a demand-side perspective, it investigates consumers' awareness, motivations, and behavioral intentions related to oleotourism activities. An online survey of 511 respondents was conducted in Italy, collecting information on knowledge of oleotourism, interest in mill visits and tastings, participation in experiential activities, EVOO purchasing habits, and cultural–emotional perceptions. Using principal component analysis and *k*-means clustering, three motivational profiles were identified: culturally engaged, EVOO traditionalists, and experience driven. The results show that motivational and perceptual factors, rather than sociodemographic characteristics, drive differences in interest and behavior toward oleotourism. By focusing on Sicily as a case study, the research provides insights for tourism operators and policymakers to design targeted experiential strategies, supporting sustainable rural development, diversification of tourism offerings, and the reinforcement of territorial identity through olive oil tourism.

1 | Introduction

Extra virgin olive oil (EVOO) is becoming more recognized as a gourmet ingredient and symbol of Mediterranean culture, as well as a crucial component of the modern health diet (Dancausa Millán et al. 2022).

In recent years, experiential tourism has acquired a central role within tourism dynamics, responding to a growing demand for authenticity, well-being and connection with the territory. In that context, food and typical products assume a strategic function in the construction of the tourist experience, becoming elements of narration and enhancement of the material and intangible heritage of places (Dancausa Millán et al. 2022; Rachão et al. 2019).

Oleotourism is part of this trend as a set of tourist activities aimed at discovering EVO oil, its production chain and the cultural and landscape heritage of olive-growing areas. This form of tourism, although sharing traits with agritourism and gastronomic tourism, has its own peculiarities related to the sensorial and emotional dimension of the product, as well as its strong symbolic value. EVO oil is not only a food, but an identity element that encompasses history, knowledge and landscapes, and that can become the focus of immersive tourist experiences with high added value (Dancausa Millán et al. 2022).

In this context, oleotourism emerges as a strategic opportunity to support the competitiveness and resilience of the sector, encouraging the deseasonalization of flows, the diversification of agricultural income and the promotion of sustainable tourism,

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capable of integrating culture, landscape and gastronomy. However, as evidenced by the literature, the phenomenon is still poorly structured and poorly known by consumers, with fragmented supply lacking coordinated governance (Almeida and Silveira 2021; Deramond and Teixeira Pinto Dias 2024; Vaquero Piñeiro et al. 2019).

Most studies focus on the supply side, neglecting in-depth analyses of tourist demand, perceptions, and motivations. Hence the need for research aimed at understanding the motivational drivers and expectations of visitors, in order to outline development strategies consistent with the paradigms of experiential and sustainable tourism.

Existing empirical evidence is largely based on on-site surveys and mainly focuses on tourists already participating in oleotourism activities, particularly in Spain (Pulido-Fernández et al. 2020; Vena-Oya and Parrilla-González 2024). As a result, limited attention has been paid to potential consumers, latent demand, and motivational segmentation in the Italian context, despite the growing interest observed at national level (Garibaldi 2023).

Recent literature confirms the growing relevance of olive oil tourism within gastronomic and rural tourism studies. Bibliometric and conceptual reviews highlight a steady increase in publications over the last decade, reflecting the consolidation of oleotourism as a research field (Pato 2024a). However, this body of literature remains fragmented and largely oriented toward conceptual discussions, destination narratives, or supply-side and stakeholder perspectives (Pato 2024b; Güven et al. 2025; Winter et al. 2025). Empirical studies frequently focus on institutional frameworks, governance models, or the structuring of the tourism offer, while demand-side evidence remains comparatively limited.

More recent contributions increasingly address experience quality and tourist satisfaction, demonstrating the importance of experiential attributes in shaping behavioral intentions (Vena-Oya and Parrilla-González 2024; Murgado Armenteros et al. 2025). Nevertheless, these studies are typically based on samples of tourists already participating in olive oil tourism activities, thus offering limited insights into potential consumers and latent demand. As highlighted by recent bibliometric analyses, motivation-based segmentation and demand-oriented approaches remain underexplored, particularly outside the Iberian context (Pato 2024b).

This gap is especially relevant in Italy, where olive oil tourism is increasingly promoted as a tool for rural diversification, sustainability, and territorial branding (Ferrari and Pulieri 2025), yet empirical evidence on consumer motivations and behavioral patterns is still scarce. Existing studies largely overlook individuals who have not yet engaged in oleotourism but may represent a significant source of future demand.

Against this background, this paper contributes to the literature by adopting a demand-oriented perspective that explicitly includes both participants and nonparticipants in oleotourism activities, with the aim of capturing latent demand and underlying motivational structures beyond on-site experiences. Using

a quantitative approach based on factor analysis and clustering, the study investigates consumer perceptions and motivations toward oleotourism in the Italian context, with a specific focus on Sicily, a region characterized by a rich olive-growing heritage and growing attention to experiential and sustainable tourism.

The specific objectives of this research are: (1) to assess consumers' awareness and interest in oleotourism; (2) to identify motivational and perceptual dimensions through factor analysis; (3) to segment consumers according to their motivational patterns using cluster analysis; and (4) to discuss implications for local stakeholders and policymakers in developing oil-based tourism routes and strengthening rural identity. By narrowing the geographical focus and explicitly addressing latent demand, the study offers an analytical framework that complements existing on-site segmentation studies and extends current knowledge on oleotourism demand.

Based on the identified gaps in the recent literature, this study addresses the following research questions:

RQ1. What motivational and perceptual dimensions shape consumers' interest in olive oil tourism experiences?

RQ2. Can distinct consumer segments be identified based on motivational drivers rather than sociodemographic characteristics?

RQ3. How do these motivational profiles relate to behavioral intentions, particularly EVOO purchasing behavior and willingness to engage in olive oil tourism activities?

2 | Institutional and Sectoral Context of Oleotourism in Italy

The recent development of oleotourism in Italy has been accompanied by the introduction of a dedicated regulatory framework aimed at ensuring quality standards and coherent sectoral growth. The Decree of the Ministry of Agricultural, Food and Forestry Policies of January 26, 2022 formally defines oleotourism as a set of tourism activities carried out in olive-growing and processing sites, including visits to olive groves and oil mills, guided tastings, direct sales, and cultural or educational initiatives linked to EVOO production (Ministero delle Politiche Agricole Alimentari e Forestali 2022). The regulation emphasizes storytelling, trained personnel, and adequate hospitality standards, framing oleotourism as a tool for farm income diversification, deseasonalization of tourism flows, and integrated rural valorization.

Although the regulatory framework is recent, oleotourism is expected to expand rapidly, in line with developments observed in other Mediterranean countries. Several Italian regions, including Tuscany, Umbria, Puglia, and Sicily, have already launched structured initiatives based on mill visits, tastings, and experiential activities, reinforcing the link between product, territory, and cultural heritage.

From a sectoral perspective, Italy plays a key role in the European olive oil market, accounting for around 13% of EU

production and standing out for its exceptional varietal biodiversity. With over 600 registered cultivars and 42 PDOs and seven PGIs, the Italian olive sector is strongly rooted in territorial identity (Verrascina et al. 2022). However, the production system remains highly fragmented, characterized by small farm sizes and limited aggregation capacity, which constrains competitiveness despite high quality standards (ISMEA 2024). Recent production volatility and climate-related pressures further accentuate structural vulnerabilities (International Olive Council 2024).

Within this context, Sicily represents a particularly relevant case study. The region contributes approximately 10%–12% of national production, hosts a rich portfolio of native cultivars, and counts more than 600 active oil mills (Verrascina et al. 2022). While certification schemes and organic practices are increasingly adopted, challenges related to fragmentation, innovation, and climate adaptation persist. These characteristics make Sicily a suitable setting for analyzing olive oil tourism as a potential lever for rural diversification and territorial development.

3 | Literature Review

3.1 | Food, Wine and Olive Oil Tourism as Experiential and Cultural Tourism

In recent years, food and wine tourism has increasingly been interpreted as an experiential form of tourism capable of valorizing territorial identities through cultural, emotional, and symbolic dimensions, rather than through mere product consumption. Within this framework, agri-food products act as narrative devices through which territories communicate authenticity, heritage, and local knowledge, provided that tourism offerings are adequately structured and supported by cooperation among local actors (Rachão et al. 2019).

Oleotourism fits fully within this experiential paradigm, as it integrates gastronomy, olive-growing landscapes, and cultural heritage into immersive tourism experiences (Dancausa Millán et al. 2022; Deramond and Teixeira Pinto Dias 2024). Olive oil is increasingly framed not only as an agri-food commodity but as a carrier of tangible and intangible heritage, capable of conveying values related to tradition, identity, and landscape, and therefore particularly suited to experience-based tourism models (Folgado-Fernández et al. 2019; Hernández-Mogollón et al. 2019).

Recent studies further strengthen this perspective by empirically demonstrating that olive oil tourism experiences positively influence tourists' satisfaction, perceived quality of life, and behavioral intentions. Campón-Cerro et al. (2023), for example, show that participation in olive oil tourism activities enhances destination loyalty, highlighting the strategic role of experiential quality and emotional engagement. Complementary evidence also points to growing synergies between olive oil and wine tourism within integrated food heritage experiences, where storytelling and multisensory engagement reinforce perceived value (Salvado and Monteiro 2024).

At the same time, recent conceptual debates question whether olive oil tourism should be interpreted as an innovative niche

or as an evolution of more traditional rural tourism models (Pato 2024a). This debate reflects the hybrid nature of oleotourism, which combines traditional agricultural practices with contemporary experiential consumption patterns.

3.2 | Oleotourism as Special Interest Tourism (SIT) and Creative Tourism

Within tourism studies, oleotourism has been framed as a form of SIT, distinct from mass tourism and characterized by strong thematic, identity-based, and experiential components (Pulido-Fernández et al. 2019). This perspective highlights how oleotourism emerges from the intersection of rural, cultural, gastronomic, and naturalistic tourism, sharing affinities with other SIT segments such as creative, wellness, and landscape tourism.

In this context, oleotourism has also been interpreted as a form of creative tourism, capable of generating participatory and educational experiences that actively involve visitors (Bezerra and Correia 2019). Early studies already emphasized its potential for rural development and income diversification, while simultaneously pointing to persistent structural challenges such as seasonality, fragmentation, and lower visibility compared to wine tourism (de la Millán Vázquez Torre et al. 2010; Orgaz-Agüera et al. 2018).

More recent contributions reinforce this view by underlining that oleotourism's experiential value depends on the ability to design interactive and meaningful activities that foster emotional connections with the territory. From this perspective, creativity, learning, and authenticity emerge as central elements in differentiating olive oil tourism experiences and enhancing their attractiveness within increasingly competitive rural tourism markets (Pato 2024a).

3.3 | Oleotourism, Sustainability, and Rural Development

Oleotourism is widely discussed as a strategic opportunity to diversify rural economies, strengthen the link between agriculture and tourism, and promote sustainable territorial development (Maamar and Abbadié 2025). The literature commonly attributes a triple value to olive oil tourism: economic, through additional income generation; cultural, as a vehicle for transmitting knowledge and identity; and environmental, through the preservation of olive-growing landscapes and the promotion of sustainable practices (Millán et al. 2018; Deramond and Teixeira Pinto Dias 2024).

This multifunctional role is particularly relevant in Mediterranean regions, where olive cultivation represents a long-standing socioeconomic and cultural system rather than a purely productive activity (Hernández-Mogollón et al. 2021). Recent studies emphasize the contribution of oleotourism to enhancing landscape value and reinforcing rural competitiveness, especially when integrated with certification schemes and sustainability-oriented strategies (Dancausa Millán et al. 2023).

Broader agri-food sustainability debates also intersect with oleotourism, particularly regarding circular economy practices and by-product valorization in olive oil and wine supply chains (Rodríguez-Pérez et al. 2025). These perspectives further support the positioning of oleotourism as part of integrated rural development strategies, although they remain largely supply- and production-oriented.

Despite its potential, the literature consistently highlights constraints related to seasonality, lack of professionalism, and insufficient marketing and infrastructure (López-Guzmán et al. 2017; Ruiz Guerra et al. 2018; Millán et al. 2014). These limitations reinforce the need for coordinated governance and demand-informed strategies to consolidate the sector.

3.4 | Governance, Territorial Coordination, and Structural Constraints

Governance and coordination issues represent recurring barriers to the consolidation of oleotourism across Mediterranean countries (Tregua et al. 2018). The offer is often fragmented, poorly promoted, and characterized by weak integration among stakeholders, limiting its ability to emerge as a structured and recognizable tourism product (Almeida and Silveira 2021; D'Auria et al. 2020; Vaquero Piñeiro et al. 2019).

Comparative evidence confirms that even regions endowed with strong olive-growing heritage struggle to transform isolated initiatives into coherent tourism systems without strategic planning, branding, and professionalization (Marano-Marcolini et al. 2018; Campón-Cerro et al. 2017). Similar challenges are observed in Portugal, where olive oil tourism remains largely confined to visitable mills and museums, lacking an integrated national vision (Pato 2025; Dias et al. 2023; Almeida and Silveira 2021).

Recent studies further highlight the importance of stakeholder engagement and local governance in shaping oleotourism development. Güven et al. (2025) and Winter et al. (2025) emphasize that stakeholder coordination, profitability concerns, and sustainability objectives play a crucial role in determining the viability of oleotourism initiatives although these analyses remain predominantly supply-side.

3.5 | Demand-Side Evidence, Satisfaction, and Latent Demand

On the demand side, existing evidence confirms growing interest in olive oil tourism activities. In Andalusia, more than 60% of tourists express interest in oleotourism, motivated by the desire to understand production processes and engage in sensory experiences, while product purchase plays a secondary role (López-Guzmán et al. 2017; Ruiz Guerra et al. 2018). Tourist profiles are differentiated according to both sociodemographic and motivational variables, with gastronomic interest and environmental sensitivity playing a significant role (García-Moral et al. 2025; Millán et al. 2018).

In Italy, national reports indicate a similar pattern: high interest in tastings, mill visits, and experiential activities contrasts

with relatively low actual participation rates, suggesting substantial unexpressed potential (Garibaldi 2023). These findings align with experiential tourism theories, according to which the contemporary tourist evolves from a passive consumer to an active subject, in search of participation and authenticity and confirm what is claimed in the literature (Dini and Pencarelli 2022), namely that oleotourism represents a strategic opportunity to enhance rural territories through the synergy between product, local culture and narrative (Giamporcaro et al. 2025). In this regard, recent evidence also supports the potential of olive-related creative experiences to enhance rural heritage and strengthen sustainable tourism strategies (Soares and Dias 2024).

More recent empirical studies increasingly focus on experience quality and satisfaction. Murgado Armenteros et al. (2025) demonstrate that tourist satisfaction in olive oil tourism is primarily driven by experiential and contextual factors rather than visitor characteristics, while Vena-Oya and Parrilla-González (2024) show that satisfaction depends on the alignment between expected and delivered experiences. However, these analyses largely rely on samples of tourists already participating in oleotourism activities.

Bibliometric evidence confirms that demand-side segmentation and motivation-based analyses remain underrepresented within the literature (Pato 2024b). Limited attention has been paid to potential consumers and latent demand, particularly in the Italian context, despite increasing policy and marketing interest in oleotourism as a sustainable development tool (Ferrari and Pulieri 2025; Casado-Montilla et al. 2025).

To the best of our knowledge, few studies adopt a demand-oriented segmentation approach that includes both participants and nonparticipants to capture latent demand. This gap highlights the need for exploratory analyses focused on motivational and perceptual dimensions rather than sociodemographic characteristics. The present study addresses a twofold gap: first, it adopts a demand-oriented perspective that explicitly includes both participants and nonparticipants in olive oil tourism, allowing the identification of latent demand; second, it applies a motivation-based segmentation approach to explore how perceptual and experiential drivers shape behavioral intentions, moving beyond traditional sociodemographic profiling. By focusing on Italy, and Sicily in particular, the study contributes to extending olive oil tourism research beyond its predominant Iberian focus and provides evidence directly relevant for experience design, marketing strategies, and rural development policies.

4 | Methodology

Given the limited evidence on motivational structures and latent demand in oleotourism, the study adopts a descriptive-exploratory approach aimed at identifying and structuring underlying perceptual dimensions rather than testing causal relationships.

Data collection was carried out from June to July 2025, using an online questionnaire created with Google Forms. The

questionnaire was designed based on validated constructs drawn from previous studies on gastronomic and olive oil tourism (Dancausa Millán et al. 2022; López-Guzmán et al. 2017; Millán et al. 2018; Ruiz Guerra et al. 2018). Items were adapted and reworded to fit the Italian cultural context and the exploratory purpose of the research. Before large-scale administration, a pilot test involving 15 respondents was carried out to verify clarity, internal coherence, and response variability. Feedback from the pretest led to minor adjustments in wording and item order. The survey was accessible from any device with an internet connection and distributed via private social networks (WhatsApp, Facebook, and Instagram), enabling broad reach at relatively low cost. A nonprobability convenience sampling method was adopted, which, while limiting representativeness, is often appropriate for exploratory studies where probabilistic approaches are impractical.

The survey was intentionally not administered in a specific physical setting (e.g., olive oil mills), as the study aims to capture both actual participants and potential consumers in order to explore latent demand and motivational patterns beyond on-site experiences.

The study complied with privacy regulations, including Art. 13 of EU Regulation 2016/679; participants were informed of the research objectives and assured anonymity before completing the survey. Before beginning the questionnaire, participants read an introductory statement explaining the voluntary nature of participation, data protection procedures, and the absence of risks. Continuing with the survey was considered as providing informed consent.

The questionnaire included sections on awareness and participation in oleotourism, attitudes, EVOO consumption habits, and sociodemographic characteristics. The instrument was designed to collect information on several dimensions relevant to the study. It explored respondents' awareness and previous participation in oleotourism, assessed attitudes and motivations through Likert-scale items capturing cultural, emotional, and experiential aspects, and included questions on EVOO purchasing behavior and willingness to buy after an on-site experience. Finally, sociodemographic information such as age, gender, education, income, and place of residence was collected. Although the questionnaire was open to all respondents, including those who had not previously taken part in olive oil tourism activities, their inclusion was intentional. Understanding the perceptions and motivations of nonparticipants is essential to estimate latent demand and potential market expansion. Including these individuals allows capturing attitudinal differences between actual visitors and prospective consumers, which is consistent with exploratory segmentation approaches in tourism research (Pulido-Fernández et al. 2019; Dancausa Millán and de la Millán Vázquez Torre 2024).

To explore consumers' perceptions and preferences regarding oleotourism, a principal component analysis (PCA) was conducted on two sets of Likert-type items: four cultural-emotional statements (*impact_1* to *impact_4*) and four experiential-effect items (*effect_1* to *effect_4*). For the first set, two components were extracted (explaining over 90% of variance) and then rotated via

varimax to enhance interpretability. For the second set, a single component accounted for 82% of variance, supporting unidimensionality. The factor scores (*impact_PC1*, *impact_PC2*, and *effect_PC1*) were standardized and used for unsupervised *k*-means clustering ($k = 3$). The resulting clusters were then profiled based on sociodemographic variables and behavioral indicators using cross-tabulations and one-way ANOVA. The goal was to capture underlying motivational differences among consumer types and link them to oleotourism interest and EVOO-related behavior.

The choice of combining PCA and *k*-means clustering is consistent with previous studies in consumer research and tourism, where these methods are frequently applied to segment respondents based on psychological or motivational dimensions (Hui et al. 2025; Wang et al. 2021; Yildirim et al. 2022). PCA is particularly useful in reducing complex sets of Likert-scale items into a smaller number of interpretable components, while *k*-means clustering on the derived factor scores helps to identify homogeneous groups within a heterogeneous population. This clustering approach is well established in exploratory contexts, where the aim is to go beyond descriptive analysis and outline meaningful profiles to support strategic decisions.

Prior to performing ANOVA, normality tests (Kolmogorov-Smirnov and Shapiro-Wilk) were conducted to verify the suitability of parametric analysis. Where normality assumptions were not met, nonparametric Kruskal-Wallis tests were applied, leading to consistent significance patterns. The analyses were performed using Stata 18, ensuring transparency and replicability. Although the PCA-clustering framework is inherently exploratory, this combined approach allows identifying underlying motivational typologies while providing a robust basis for future confirmatory studies.

5 | Data Description and Summary Statistics

The sample comprises 511 valid cases, providing insights into awareness, participation, attitudes toward oleotourism, EVOO consumption habits, and sociodemographic characteristics.

The majority of respondents (47.6%) had heard of oleotourism but lacked a detailed understanding, while only about one-fifth (20.9%) knew exactly what it meant. These figures are summarized in Table 1, along with participation rates and willingness to engage in oleotourism.

EVOO consumption is widespread among respondents, with 97.5% declaring habitual use. However, purchase frequency and channels show considerable heterogeneity. Table 2 illustrates these patterns.

The sample is relatively balanced across gender and generations. Education levels are high: more than 49% of respondents have a university degree. Income levels vary, although nearly half of the respondents report a family income below €30,000. Table 3 provides a breakdown of key demographic variables.

TABLE 1 | Awareness and participation in oleotourism.

	Frequency	%
Item		
Never heard of oleotourism	161	31.5%
Heard, but don't know details	243	47.6%
Know exactly what it is	107	20.9%
Total	511	100%
Participation		
Have never participated	325	63.6%
Have participated	186	36.4%
Willing to participate (nonparticipants only)		
No	33	10.2%
Yes	292	89.8%
Willingness to pay		
No	69	13.5%
Yes	211	41.3%
Depends on price	231	45.2%

TABLE 2 | EVOO consumption behavior.

	Frequency	%
Habit		
Regularly consume EVOO	498	97.5%
Do not consume EVOO	13	2.5%
Frequency of purchase		
Never	99	19.4%
Rarely	83	16.2%
Once a month	171	33.5%
Several times a month	158	30.9%

6 | Results

Three distinct consumer profiles emerged from the PCA and k-means analysis (Figure 1). These clusters differ primarily in how respondents perceive the cultural, emotional, and experiential dimensions of oleotourism.

- *Culturally engaged*: strongly value the symbolic and emotional dimensions of oleotourism.
- *EVOO traditionalists*: have weaker cultural motivations and lower expected effects.
- *Experience driven*: place emphasis on experiential outcomes rather than symbolic aspects.

To formalize this segmentation, the labels and interpretative descriptions are summarized in Table 4.

TABLE 3 | Sociodemographic characteristics.

Variable	Category	Frequency	Percent
Gender	Female	287	56.2%
	Male	220	43.1%
	Prefer not to say	4	0.8%
Generation	Baby boomers (1946–64)	93	18.2%
	Generation X (1965–81)	158	30.9%
	Millennials (1981–96)	121	23.7%
	Generation Z (1997–2010)	139	27.2%
Education	Middle school	41	8.0%
	High school diploma	217	42.5%
	Bachelor's degree	87	17.0%
	Master's or PhD	166	32.5%
	<€10,000	60	11.7%
	€10,000–€19,999	117	22.9%
Household income	€20,000–€29,999	125	24.5%
	€30,000–€39,999	60	11.7%
	€40,000–€49,999	22	4.3%
	€50,000–€74,999	39	7.6%
	Prefer not to answer	88	17.2%

ANOVA tests confirmed significant differences across clusters in the standardized component scores, as reported in Table 5. All differences are highly significant ($p < 0.001$), validating the clustering structure.

The clusters also differed in frequency of EVOO purchases and in their propensity to buy EVOO after visiting a mill. No significant differences emerged in prior awareness or interest in oleotourism. Table 6 reports the behavioral ANOVA results.

Cross-tabulations with gender, generation, education, income, and residence area revealed no statistically significant associations ($p > 0.05$), indicating that motivational segmentation does not align with standard demographics. These findings further support the use of perceptual dimensions for segmentation rather than relying on age or gender.

7 | Discussion

This study was designed to investigate olive oil tourism from a demand-oriented perspective, with the aim of understanding how consumer motivations are structured, whether distinct

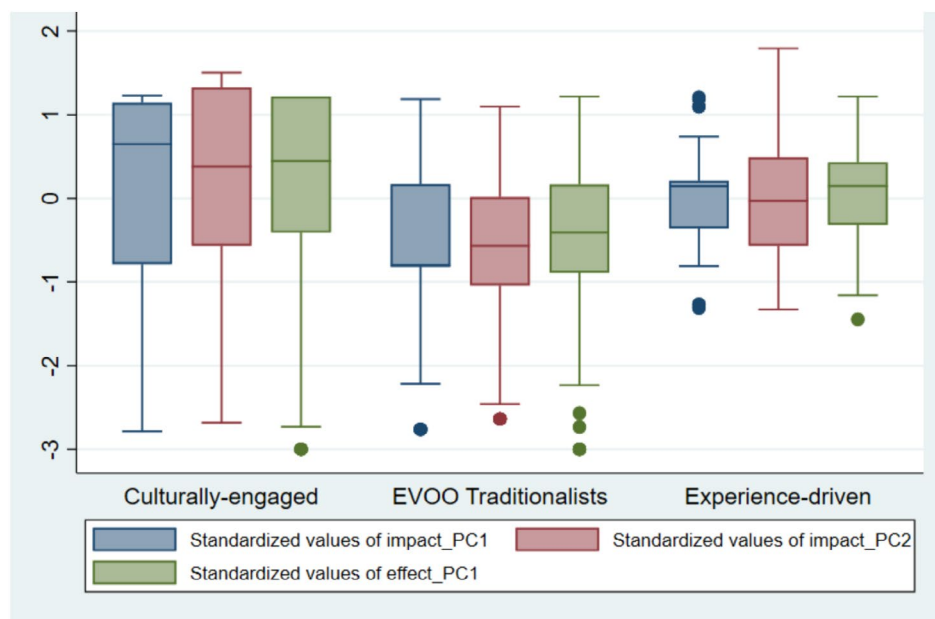


FIGURE 1 | Standardized principal components by cluster.

TABLE 4 | Cluster labels and interpretations.

Cluster name	Description
Culturally engaged	High scores on cultural and emotional motivation and effects of oleotourism
EVOO traditionalists	Moderate to low scores on cultural dimensions; less emotionally involved
Experience driven	More influenced by potential outcomes and experience-based engagement

TABLE 5 | ANOVA on principal components by cluster.

Component	F-statistic	p
Impact_PC1 (z-score)	37.34	0.000
Impact_PC2 (z-score)	35.94	0.000
Effect_PC1 (z-score)	32.67	0.000

TABLE 6 | ANOVA on behavioral variables by cluster.

Outcome variable	F	p
Interest in oleotourism	1.64	0.195
Frequency of EVOO purchase	3.38	0.035
Prior knowledge of oleotourism	1.43	0.239
Willingness to buy after mill visit	16.98	0.002

motivational segments can be identified beyond sociodemographic characteristics, and how such profiles relate to behavioral intentions. The results provide a coherent and empirically grounded answer to these research questions, while

also allowing a critical positioning within the most recent literature.

With respect to the first research question, concerning the motivational and perceptual dimensions shaping consumers' interest in olive oil tourism, the principal component analysis reveals that interest is structured around two complementary but distinct domains: a cultural–emotional dimension and an experiential–outcome dimension. This finding is consistent with recent empirical evidence highlighting the centrality of experiential quality, symbolic meanings, and emotional engagement in olive oil tourism experiences (Vena-Oya and Parrilla-González 2024; Lin et al. 2025; Murgado Armenteros et al. 2025). However, unlike satisfaction-based studies that rely on postvisit evaluations, the present analysis captures these dimensions at a preparticipation stage, thus extending existing knowledge to the formation of interest and expectations among both actual visitors and potential consumers.

The second research question asked whether consumers can be meaningfully segmented on the basis of motivational drivers rather than sociodemographic characteristics. The clustering results clearly support this proposition. Three distinct motivational profiles emerge, culturally engaged, EVOO traditionalists, and experience driven, each characterized by a different configuration of cultural, emotional, and experiential orientations. Importantly, no significant differences are observed across clusters with respect to age, gender, education, or income. This result confirms and strengthens recent indications that traditional sociodemographic variables have limited explanatory power in olive oil tourism contexts (Murgado Armenteros et al. 2025), while also extending earlier segmentation studies conducted on-site by showing that motivation-based profiles are equally relevant among nonparticipants. In doing so, the study directly responds to recent bibliometric calls for demand-side and segmentation-oriented research in olive oil tourism (Pato 2024a).

The third research question focused on the relationship between motivational profiles and behavioral intentions. The results show that while the identified segments do not differ in terms of general interest in oleotourism or prior awareness, they display significant differences in EVOO purchasing frequency and, most notably, in their willingness to buy after a mill visit. This finding provides an important qualification to recent satisfaction-focused studies, which implicitly assume that increasing awareness or participation opportunities will automatically translate into economic outcomes. Instead, the evidence suggests that behavioral conversion depends on the alignment between experiential offerings and underlying motivational drivers. In this respect, the results complement recent work on experience performance and expectation–delivery alignment (Vena-Oya and Parrilla-González 2024), but shift the analytical focus upstream, from postexperience satisfaction to pre-experience motivational structures.

While recent contributions increasingly focus on experience quality, satisfaction, and sustainability strategies, they largely overlook the role of latent demand and the motivations of potential consumers, particularly in the Italian context. By adopting a motivation-based segmentation approach that includes both participants and nonparticipants, this study provides empirical evidence on how interest in olive oil tourism is structured, differentiated, and translated into behavior. In doing so, it contributes to reframing olive oil tourism not merely as a niche activity for already-engaged visitors, but as a multifaceted experiential product whose development depends on understanding heterogeneous motivational profiles.

8 | Conclusions

This study shows that engagement with olive oil tourism is shaped primarily by how people relate to olive oil at a symbolic, cultural, and experiential level, rather than by who they are in sociodemographic terms. The identification of three distinct motivational profiles highlights this heterogeneity clearly. Culturally engaged consumers approach oleotourism as a way to connect with heritage and identity, experience driven individuals are attracted by immersion and tangible outcomes, while EVOO traditionalists relate to olive oil in a more functional and everyday-oriented manner. These profiles coexist within the same population and cut across age, gender, education, and income.

Crucially, these differences are not confined to attitudes. They translate into observable behavioral patterns. Motivational profiles are associated with differences in EVOO purchasing frequency and, even more clearly, in the willingness to buy olive oil after a mill visit. At the same time, the absence of significant differences in prior awareness or declared interest helps clarify a key issue emerging from the Italian context: widespread interest in oleotourism does not automatically lead to participation or economic engagement. The results suggest that this gap is less a matter of information and more a matter of motivational alignment between potential visitors and the experiences offered.

From a research standpoint, this study contributes to the current debate by shifting attention away from visitor-only analyses and destination-specific profiling. Including both

participants and nonparticipants allows latent demand to be observed directly and shows that motivational structures exist well before any on-site experience takes place. This perspective refines the conceptualization of olive oil tourism as an experiential domain driven by psychological and perceptual dimensions rather than a narrow niche defined by participation status or demographic traits.

The findings also point to concrete implications for operators and local stakeholders. Different experiential formats appear suitable for different motivational orientations. Cultural storytelling and heritage interpretation resonate more strongly with those who seek symbolic meaning, while participatory activities and sensory engagement are more likely to activate experience-oriented consumers. For EVOO mills, this implies that experiential design is not merely an add-on, but a strategic lever that can influence both visitor engagement and product-related outcomes, including direct sales and longer-term loyalty.

By focusing on Italy, and Sicily in particular, this study adds context-specific evidence to a literature still dominated by Iberian case studies. It shows that motivational segmentation can provide useful guidance for rural diversification strategies in fragmented production systems, where converting interest into value creation is a key challenge. More broadly, the results suggest that oleotourism can play a meaningful role in strengthening the relationship between consumers, products, and territories, provided that experiences are designed with a clear understanding of the motivations that underpin demand.

9 | Limitations and Future Directions

Naturally, this study presents several limitations that should be acknowledged.

First, the use of a convenience sample collected via social media implies a strong self-selection bias and limits the representativeness of the results. Respondents are predominantly highly educated, which may influence their awareness and attitudes toward olive oil culture. Moreover, the sample mainly includes residents and not actual tourists, meaning that findings refer to potential demand rather than to effective participation in oleotourism.

Second, the cross-sectional nature of the survey and the reliance on self-reported data introduce possible social desirability bias, especially concerning proenvironmental or cultural attitudes.

Third, the PCA-clustering approach, although appropriate for exploratory purposes, does not allow causal inference nor the assessment of segment stability over time.

Future research could address these issues by employing probabilistic or mixed-method sampling, integrating behavioral data from real visitors, and validating motivational constructs through confirmatory factor analysis or latent class models. Comparative analyses across Mediterranean regions would also enhance understanding of cross-country differences and shared cultural drivers.

Despite these limitations, this study provides a valuable exploratory framework for analyzing consumer motivations toward olive oil tourism and offers a foundation for further quantitative and qualitative research in this emerging field.

Author Contributions

Caterina Sciortino: conceptualization, methodology, software, formal analysis, writing – original draft, validation, visualization, supervision. **Filippo Sgroi:** conceptualization, writing – original draft, validation, visualization, supervision. **Vito Domenico Sciancalepore:** visualization, validation, writing – original draft. **Giusi Giamporcaro:** investigation, data curation, writing – original draft, writing – review and editing, visualization, validation. **Carmelo Maria Moscato:** investigation, data curation, writing – original draft. **Vincenzo Ferrantelli:** validation, visualization, writing – original draft. **Federico Modica:** methodology, formal analysis, writing – original draft, validation, visualization. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

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Ethics Statement

This study did not require approval from an Institutional Review Board (IRB) or Ethics Committee because it involved a fully anonymous online survey that did not collect any personal, sensitive, or health-related data, in accordance with the European Union General Data Protection Regulation (EU Regulation 2016/679—GDPR) and the Italian Legislative Decree June 30, 2003, No. 196, as amended by Legislative Decree August 10, 2018, No. 101. Participation was completely voluntary, and respondents could withdraw at any time before submitting their answers.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

Data Availability Statement

All data used in this study are fully available upon request. The lead author confirms full access to the data reported in the manuscript and takes responsibility for its accuracy and integrity.

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