



REPUTATION ANALYSIS OF BROTAS (BRAZIL) RAFTING ATTRIBUTES ON TRIPADVISOR

*ANÁLISE DA REPUTAÇÃO DOS ATRIBUTOS DO RAFTING DE BROTAS-SP NO
TRIPADVISOR*

*ANÁLISIS DE LA REPUTACIÓN DE LOS ATRIBUTOS DE RAFTING EN BROTAS
(BRASIL) EN TRIPADVISOR*

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ABSTRACT

Rafting is a characteristic activity of adventure tourism and is one of the main activities in Brotas-SP, one of the main adventure destinations in Brazil. In this context, a survey was conducted to analyze participants' opinions on rafting in Brotas-SP through their opinions registered on TripAdvisor's collaborative travel platform. The 689 reviews on the platform during the research period had their content analyzed. The results showed that approximately 99.42% of TripAdvisor users were satisfied with their experience. In addition, 63.00% of tourists had a positive experience with the guides and other employees of the rafting operators, transmitting feelings of attention, excellence, safety, and professionalism to 23.47% of the participants. The results showed similarity with the opinions of users of other adventure tourism destinations in nature who used the same platform. Finally, the importance of human relations in tourism is highlighted, one of the main aspects most highly evaluated in the opinions registered on TripAdvisor.

Keywords: *Collaborative Travel Platform; Adventure Tourism; Satisfaction.*

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RESUMO

O rafting é uma atividade característica do turismo de aventura, sendo uma das principais atividades de Brotas-SP, um dos principais destinos de aventura do Brasil. Neste contexto, realizou-se uma pesquisa com o objetivo de analisar as opiniões dos participantes do rafting de Brotas-SP por meio de suas opiniões registradas na plataforma colaborativa de viagens TripAdvisor. As análises das 689 avaliações presentes na plataforma no período pesquisado tiveram seu conteúdo analisado. Os resultados demonstraram que cerca de 99,42% dos usuários do TripAdvisor estão satisfeitos com a experiência vivenciada. Além disso, 63,00% dos turistas tem sua experiência marcada positivamente pelos guias e outros colaboradores das operadoras de rafting, transmitindo sensações de atenção, excelência, segurança e profissionalismo a 23,47% dos participantes. Os resultados obtidos apresentaram similaridade com opiniões de usuários de outros destinos de turismo de aventura na natureza que usaram a mesma plataforma. Por fim, destaca-se a importância das relações humanas no turismo, sendo este um dos principais aspectos mais bem avaliados nas opiniões registradas no TripAdvisor.

Palavras-chave: *Plataforma Colaborativa de viagens; Turismo de Aventura; Satisfação.*

RESUMEN

El rafting es una actividad característica del turismo de aventura y una de las principales actividades en Brotas-SP, uno de los principales destinos de aventura en Brasil. En este contexto, se realizó un estudio para analizar las opiniones de los participantes en rafting en Brotas-SP a través de sus comentarios registrados en la plataforma colaborativa de viajes TripAdvisor. Se analizaron los 689 comentarios presentes en la plataforma durante el período de investigación. Los resultados mostraron que aproximadamente el 99,42% de los usuarios de TripAdvisor estaban satisfechos con la experiencia vivida. Además, el 63,00% de los turistas tuvo una experiencia positiva con los guías y otros empleados de las operadoras de rafting, transmitiendo sentimientos de atención, excelencia, seguridad y profesionalismo al 23,47% de los participantes. Los resultados mostraron similitud con las opiniones de usuarios de otros destinos de turismo de aventura en la naturaleza que utilizaron la misma plataforma. Finalmente, se destaca la importancia de las relaciones humanas en el turismo, uno de los principales aspectos más valorados en las opiniones registradas en TripAdvisor.

Palabras clave: *Plataforma Colaborativa de Viajes; Turismo de Aventura; Satisfacción.*

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INTRODUCTION

Adventure tourism is seen as a phenomenon involving tourists who engage in physical activities in unfamiliar and often inhospitable environments (Swarbrooke et al., 2003). The segment has been consolidated based on activities that mediate the offering of a simulation of traditional adventure sports practices, but with moderated characteristics and grounded in the safety provided to participants (Swarbrooke et al., 2003; Ministry of Tourism, 2010; Spink et al., 2005). This moderated transposition of autonomous activities, marked by real risk for adventure practitioners, is permeated by the mental aspect and perspective of adventure tourism participants, who find themselves in a condition very different from their daily practices, allowing for a shift in their mental state to one of adversity, excitement, enthusiasm, and challenge (Janowski; Gardiner; Kwek, 2021).

In Brazil, the historical development of adventure tourism often begins with residents engaging in extreme activities during their leisure time, either out of personal motivation or inspired by early travelers who occasionally visit these places. The initial structuring of the sector as a segment occurred between the 1980s and 2000s, with the emergence of agencies and operators, the specialization of guides, the organization of sectoral fairs, and even the formation of associations among actors who began to consolidate a specific market (Ministry of Tourism, 2009, 2010). The creation of official regulatory frameworks for the segment took place in the early 2000s (Ministry of Tourism, 2003).

One of the activities that stood out in the sector even before the Ministry's structuring of the topic was rafting, particularly in Brotas, in the interior of São Paulo state. In the 1990s, the first companies in the field began to emerge, and by the late 1990s, the municipality had become a symbol of rafting in Brazil (Costa, 2002). Rafting is practiced in watercourses with greater flow movement and turbulence, using inflatable rafts. The activities are coordinated by a guide and carried out in groups ranging from four to eight participants (Dantas and Pires, 2015). Its practice requires high levels of synchronization and collaboration among participants for the proper flow of the raft, especially when navigating obstacles.

Self-proclaimed as the "Capital of Adventure Tourism," with the label reinforced by Municipal Law No. 8,764 of 2017, the municipality is widely cited by the market and media as a reference for safety and quality of service provision, as seen in reports from 2009, 2016, and 2021 by platforms such as "São Paulo para Crianças," "G1," and "São Paulo.gov," with the respective titles: "Want adrenaline? Go to Brotas, the capital of adventure tourism," "Adventure capital, Brotas, SP, has extreme activities for all ages," and "National Capital of Adventure Tourism, Brotas offers outdoor activities, family leisure, and contact with nature during January holidays." In this context, rafting is proclaimed as the city's main tourist activity, according to data from its Tourism Secretariat (Brotas, 2021). Given the relevance of a single activity for an entire destination, the importance of investigating the quality of the practice offered to visitors through the evaluation of the main operators of the activity was assumed.

In this context, the research was developed to analyse the opinions of rafting participants in the city of Brotas-SP through their reviews on the collaborative travel

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platform TripAdvisor. It is understood that in the era of digital marketing and social networks, the reputation of destinations is a primary factor for their survival in a competitive market (Rodrigues and Nunes, 2023), even when they possess intrinsic aspects that strategically differentiate them, such as a river with better conditions for a specific activity. Studies such as Silva and Mendes Filho (2023) have already shown that the perceived quality by visitors often stands out as a deciding factor compared to other attributes, such as the opportunity to engage in a specific activity.

CHARACTERISTICS OF ADVENTURE TOURISM

Adventure tourism has its origins in market segmentation linked to ecotourism, as most of its practices are developed in natural areas. Over time, its unique characteristics have become evident, particularly the recreational experience and the focus on overcoming personal limits, rather than the competitive aspect – a hallmark of traditional adventure sports (Swarbrooke et al., 2003; Spink et al., 2005; Uvinha, 2005; Ministry of Tourism, 2010). Other common characteristics of adventure sports are also often associated with tourism, such as the sensation of risk, the perception of autonomy, the challenge of personal limits, and the delegation of safety to third parties (Spink et al., 2005; Janowski; Gardiner; Kwek, 2021). Swarbrooke et al. (2003) add that adventure has a strong personal component, based on individuals' mental and emotional perceptions, with their physical abilities and environmental adversities serving as accessory factors. In the union of adventure and tourism, Uvinha (2005) argues that purchasing an adventure activity generates the expectation that something rewarding is about to happen, highlighting a significant emotional involvement in the consumer relationship.

In Brazil, various activities are properly classified as part of the scope of adventure tourism, such as canyoning, rafting, zip-lining, long-distance trekking expeditions, caving in non-adapted caves for large-scale visitation, and diving, among many others (Ministry of Tourism, 2010). Some destinations have specialised in offering such activities, notably in the interior of São Paulo, the municipalities of Brotas – addressed in this article –, Socorro, and Iporanga.

The profile of adventure tourism consumers and their purchasing behaviour have been changing increasingly, especially due to social media as an additional source of information and influence for leisure travel (Liu and Chong, 2023). In the digital universe, there are many possibilities for interaction between potential consumers and tourism products. Collaborative travel platforms are among the established forms of this interaction (Abdurakhmanova et al., 2022).

The mechanisms for searching for information about specific destinations or attractions have gained strength and prominence in the context of the collaborative economy in tourism, which can be understood as the process of circulation and consumption of services based on exchanges between current and potential consumers, in a process of trust between the parties (Costa, 2015). Companies in the collaborative economy themselves are understanding and using these information mediators, presenting tools to their customers to enable trust in strangers (Hossain, 2020).

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In addition to issues of trust and access to information and opinions from strangers, a trend aligned with this phenomenon is presented by Hassan (2011), in which the revolution in information technologies is setting a new pace for society, innovating modes of production, communication, and management. For Hassan (2011), the entire process from the initial phase to the shelf of a tourism product is changing, whether in its content or composition, presenting simpler aspects and more targeted to the intended audience.

Characterization of Adventure Tourism in Brotas

Institutionalized adventure tourism in Brotas began in the mid-1990s. Among the milestones of this period, the adherence in 1993 to the State Tourism Regionalization Programme, promoted by the State Secretariat, as well as the presentation of the first Ecotourism Project of Brotas, stand out. In 1994, the first adventure tourism agency in the city was founded, and Municipal Law 1,202/94 was enacted, creating the Municipal Tourism Council (COMTUR). Rafting activities began to be offered to tourists in 1996, with boats for up to seven people and standardized safety equipment and procedures. Continuing with relevant events, in 2003, several municipal laws were created for Adventure and Nature Tourism, specifying operational points of activities and safety measures for agencies and tourists (Brotas, 2022).

In 2004, the Association of Tourism Companies of Brotas and Region (ABROTUR) was created, initially informally, and formalized in 2008. Currently, the association comprises 79 companies (Abrotur, 2022).

The most recent data compiled on the municipality's tourism inventory indicate a total of 27 ecotourism and adventure tourism activities, distributed across 29 attractions. In this scenario and considering the focus of this article, eight rafting operators stand out, all of which use the same natural resource, the Jacaré Pepira River (Fig. 1). The activity is conducted on a route of approximately 8.5 km, with a total of 16 rapids and a maximum drop of 3.0 m in a single stretch (Brotas, 2022).

According to the city's Tourism Secretariat (2021), approximately 190,000 vouchers are issued annually for visitor control, activities conducted, accommodations, and tax collection. In the first half of 2020 alone, the Service Tax (ISS) represented approximately R\$ 490,000.00. For the same period in 2021, the collection was around R\$490,000.00. *For the same period in 2021, the collection was around R\$ 890,000.00* – highlighting the full resumption of activities in the post-peak pandemic context. In numerical terms and according to the same source, from January to March 2020 – considered for the research data – rafting was undertaken by 14,509 visitors.

Fig. 1.

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Above: Representation on a satellite image of the section of the Jacaré Pepira River used for rafting (in red), strategic points, and the urban core of Brotas; Below: A calm section of the route (left) and tourists after navigating rapids (right).



Photos: M. Justi (2023).

STAGES AND PROCEDURES OF THE RESEARCH

The research was based on the selection of the collaborative travel platform TripAdvisor as the investigation universe. This platform was chosen for being one of the oldest and most comprehensive in the Brazilian market: created in 2000, it currently has 463 million users worldwide, with a database of 859 million reviews and opinions about 8.6 million businesses, accommodations, agencies, cruises, and more (TripAdvisor, 2023). Since the research objective revolved around the opinions of rafting users in Brotas, the platform allowed for a targeted sample selection, by choosing the desired destination and then the activity and operators working in the destination, using the platform's filters. From the available reviews, three operators with common characteristics were selected, providing a standardized basis for the product offered to tourists and, consequently, for the experiences reported in the reviews used in the research (Tab. 1). The operators were coded to avoid generating negative or positive exposure for the businesses.

Table 1

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General data of the rafting operators selected for the research

Characteristics	Rafting 1	Rafting 2	Rafting 3
Time in the Market	25 years	Over 20 years	Over 20 years
Numbers of Reviews on TripAdvisor	5.166	5.546	1.896
<i>Travellers Choice Award Winners</i> (different years)	Yes	Yes	Yes

Source: Operator websites and Tripadvisor (2023).

Companies with a prominent role in Brotas' rafting scene were selected. However, as the objective was not to expose or favor any of them, their names were omitted. All the companies researched have a Safety Management System (ABNT NBR ISO 21101), ISO Certification, and are part of the platform's Travellers' Choice – the latter being an internal system based on user reputation and recommendations. The evaluation focused on the period immediately before the onset of the SARS-COV-19 pandemic, based on the start of the 2020 season until its closure due to the restrictions imposed at the time. In the 2.5-month sample period (January 1 to March 15), 848 reviews were conducted, of which 689 were used. The remaining 159 were not used as they did not meet the technical criteria established by the research methodology.

The content expressed through user opinions was analyzed using categorization. This analysis allows for the systematic, objective, and quantitative description of communication content (Lakatos and Marconi, 2003). Categorization relates to the concept that encompasses elements or aspects with common characteristics or that are interrelated. Dealing with categories means grouping elements, ideas, or expressions around a concept capable of encompassing all of them (Gomes, 1994).

The anonymity of respondents was ensured, as the data were treated in a way that did not reveal names or other information that could identify platform users. Initially, a comparison was made in total numbers regarding the categories already presented by the platform: "excellent, very good, average, poor, and terrible," with a variable scale between 5 to 1 stars, respectively. Subsequently, it was possible to group them into 4 thematic analysis categories (Commercial, Staff, Operations, and Overall Satisfaction). These categories allude to the sectors of the analyzed operators. Overall satisfaction is related to non-specific aspects of the previous thematic categories, such as reviews that refer only to rafting and not to another specific aspect.

For tabulation in each thematic category, reviews with positive words such as agency, values, communication, company, commercial, structure, infrastructure, and location were assigned to the "Commercial" category. Reviews with words like organization, equipment, safety, and responsibility were assigned to the "Operations" category. Reviews with words like welcome, service, care, education, team, attention, guide, technical and general knowledge, and guidance were assigned to the "Staff" category. Finally, words like activities, adventure, natural beauty, experience, rafting, package,

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tours, service, zip line, potion, moments, and slippers were considered in the "Overall Satisfaction" category.

The same logic was applied to negative reviews, but with words like communication, lack of information, and infrastructure for the "Commercial" category; schedule and bus for the "Operations" category; service and guide for the "Staff" category; and adventure, day use, potion, photos, river, and zip line for "Overall Satisfaction."

The aspects considered in the analysis of reviews included: agency structure, quality of equipment, and quality of transportation, among others; and the human characteristics of the experience: staff education, humor, knowledge, and perceived safety. These aspects were identified and then quantified across the collected reviews.

Once the attributes were defined, keywords, the research's units of record (e.g., polite, good, beautiful, experienced, among others), were analyzed. These were used in conjunction with the attributes, allowing for a list of the most to least used terms and their relation to the activities.

In total, 100 different positive units of record were obtained from the 686 analyzed reviews. The 16 units with more than 10 repetitions were displayed in a graph (percentages refer to the total of 686 positive reviews), and the rest were grouped in a table. The same applies to the graph relating the units of record to the thematic categories used in the research, which was created using the same 16 units with more than 10 repetitions.

For data processing, some of the words used by tourists were grouped into a single term. For example, the words "attentive, attentive, attentive" were grouped as "attention"; the words "careful, careful" were grouped as "care"; and terms like "Very Cool, Very Good, Very Fun, Very Nice, Very Crazy, Very Show, and Very Top" were also replaced with the term "Very Good." The goal of this simplification was to reduce categories while maintaining the meaning of each review.

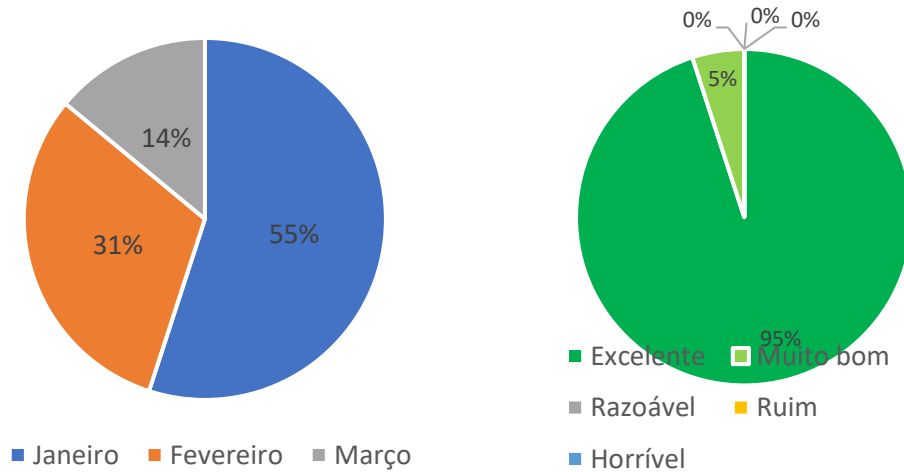
Results and Discussion

Initially, the number of reviews conducted each month within the research timeframe was analyzed (Fig. 2a), as well as the reviews in each category on TripAdvisor (Fig. 2b).

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Fig. 2

a) Participation of each month within the sampling conducted; **b)** Reviews assigned to rafting by platform users.

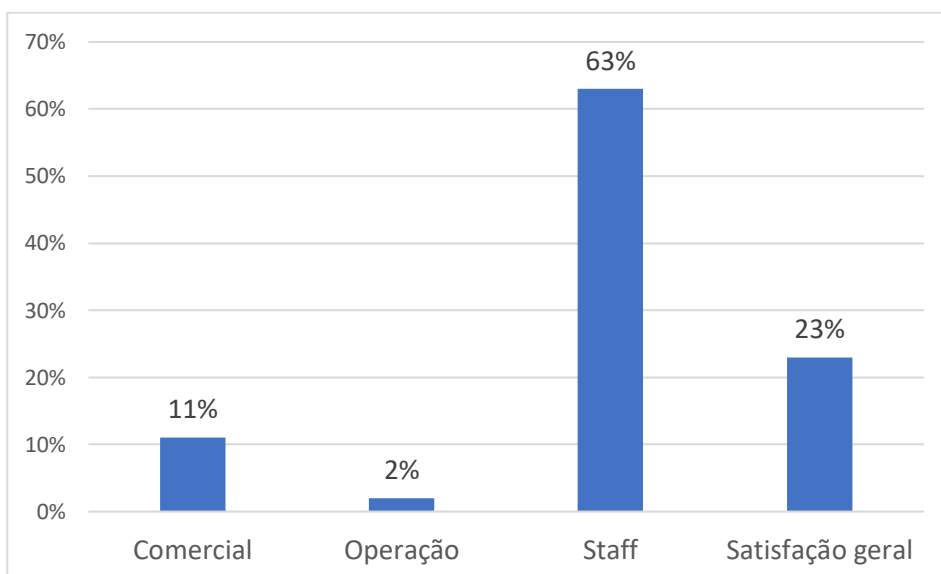


Data: TripAdvisor (2023).

As seen in Fig. 2a, the majority of reviews (55%) were conducted in January, the main month of the school holidays. March may have already been affected by the pandemic, with 14% of the reviews. Regarding the quality attributed by users (Fig. 2b), the vast majority (95%) rated the activity as "excellent," which, combined with the reviews rated as "very good," highlights the service and exceeding of expectations formulated by rafting participants. As for the classification of review content, Fig. 3 presents the positive and neutral reviews by the created analysis category.

Fig. 3.

Summary of the themes evaluated in the positive spectrum of the scale (excellent and very good) and neutral (average).



Data: TripAdvisor (2023).

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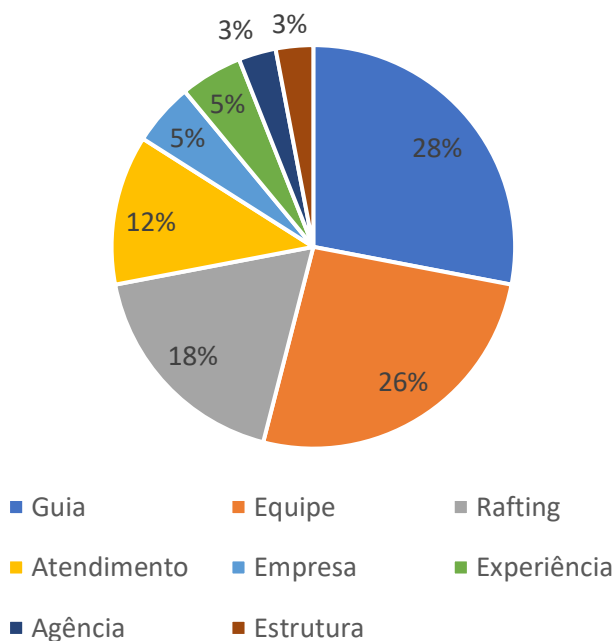
As illustrated in Fig. 3, the Staff category stands out with 63% of the reviews compared to the others, indicating how employees who interact with tourists are essential for a good experience, followed by overall satisfaction with 23%, and commercial and operations with 11% and 2%, respectively. In addition to what is shown in Fig. 3, in the negative spectrum, mentions were insignificant, never exceeding 1%. Furthermore, the thematic category Operations did not appear in the negative reviews, which may be an indicator of operational quality and meeting consumer expectations.

On the other hand, the positive results should be viewed with caution due to the nature of the platform used. It is important to note that, in the current patterns of expressions on collaborative platforms and social networks, they do not necessarily reflect the average or majority opinion of consumers. Recent studies (e.g., Martin et al., 2020; Vila-Lopez and Küster-Boluda, 2024) show that expressions come from the extremes of satisfaction profiles, the "lovers" and "haters," in a process of defending or attacking their preferences or rejections.

Despite the possibility of a concentration of users favourable to both the Brotas destination and the practice of rafting, Figs. 4, 5, and 6 provide detailed insights into the analysed opinions.

Fig. 4.

Percentage distribution of the most cited positive keywords (10 or more mentions) in the analysed sample.



Data: TripAdvisor (2023).

Negative aspects are not presented, as in all cases, the mentions were insignificant. No unit of record or direct mention of the established categories exceeded 0.16%. Illustrative examples include: pollution (of the river) and terrible (quality of the

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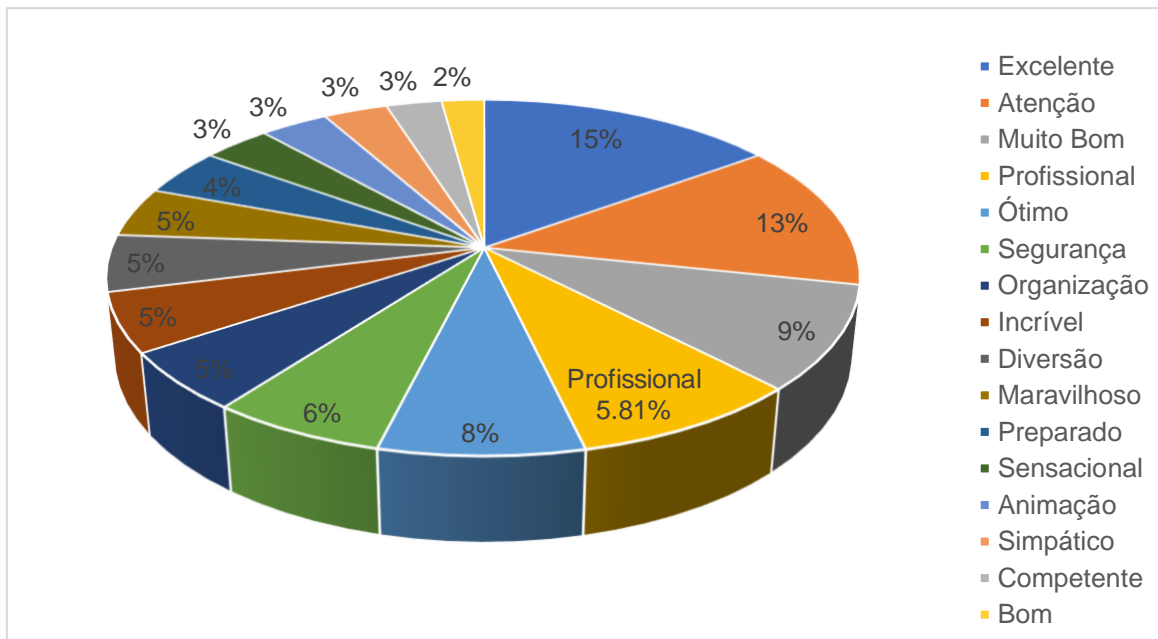
company or experience). Absolute coinciding mentions were always equal to or less than 5 units.

Among the 28 keywords identified in the research – the eight with statistical representativeness were presented in Fig. 4 –, the top five were: Guide, Team, Rafting, Service, and Company, which account for 78% of the reviews.

Studies such as those by Menezes (2009), Pazini et al. (2017), and Cavalcante and Ferreira (2018) emphasize that the positive perception of quality in tourism services is the result of a joint effort, being the responsibility of the entire team and not a single employee. This aspect is highlighted as a fundamental component in adventure tourism activities, as demonstrated by the works of Mackenzie and Kerr (2013), Sigurðardóttir and Helgadóttir (2015), and Jamal et al. (2019).

Fig. 5.

Positive units of record identified in user opinions.

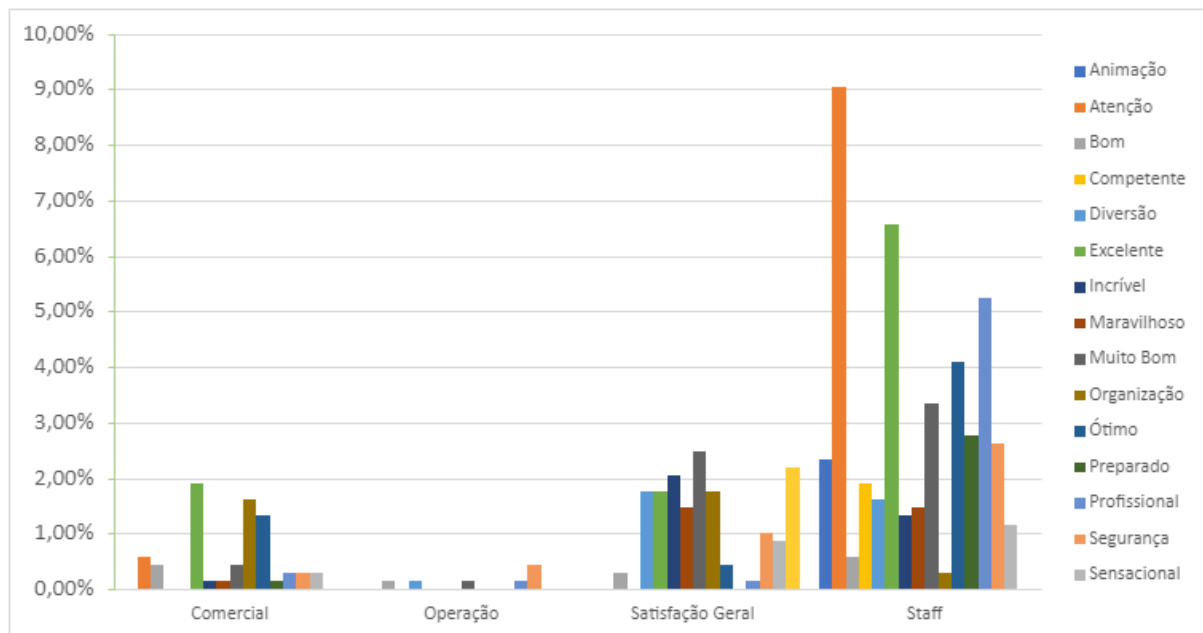


Data: TripAdvisor (2023).

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Fig. 6.

Identifiable relationships between established thematic categories and the main positive units of record.



Data: TripAdvisor (2023).

The terms grouped in Fig. 5, in turn, do not allow a direct relationship between the positive aspects highlighted and the units of record, due to the limitations of the sample itself – no questionnaire was applied, and the responses on the analyzed platform are spontaneous and free-form. Of the total mentions, 32.00% of the units of record may refer to rafting, such as the units "excellent, very good, and great"; and 18.81% use words related to the staff of the agencies, such as "attention" and "professional." When identification was possible, the terms were grouped into the units of record used, as shown in Fig. 6. Most mentions refer to the staff of the agencies, using terms such as "Attention, Excellent, Prepared, Professional, and Safety," among others. Although not always with the same terms and research procedures, the results obtained generally reflect the same pattern identified in other studies on adventure tourism destinations worldwide, such as the works of Güzel and Şahin (2019), Ranga et al. (2022), and Liu and Chong (2023). Thus, even with a shorter temporal sampling, the study reveals relevant aspects for both destination management and discussions on quality and satisfaction in adventure tourism destinations and, more particularly, in rafting activities – for which a scarcity of published results was noted.

CONCLUSIONS

This research aimed to analyze the opinions of rafting participants in the city of Brotas-SP using data from the Tripadvisor platform, to understand the defining attributes of the activity for tourists. The data collection allowed for the grouping of units of record from the content of 689 Tripadvisor reviews regarding rafting. It was possible to conclude from this work that the defining factors of rafting in the city are the people who work in it and the beauty of the river itself, which are traditionally considered success factors for the activity and the destination.

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The obtained sample highlights that the main attribute is the people working in the activity, with 63% of positive reviews. The greatest emphasis was placed on the guides of the operators, who conveyed feelings of attention, excellence, safety, and professionalism to tourists, as reflected in 23% of the reviews. The second most notable attribute was rafting itself, with 23% of the reviews, highlighted by terms such as excellent, very good, and incredible, among others. Negative reviews were quantitatively insignificant in the researched sample, always below 1%. This difference between positive and negative mentions is an indicator of the quality of rafting in Brotas, based on the analyzed operators.

It is worth noting that the results obtained do not reflect the entirety of the rafting audience but rather a portion of it. As discussed throughout the article, the habit of expressing opinions on social networks and collaborative platforms is still quite limited, with evident polarization among participants, which relativizes the results and calls for caution in their interpretation. Additionally, other operators were not considered in the study.

This work can also serve as a basis for future research of a similar nature, both for continuing the analysis of rafting in Brotas and for other activities in this or other destinations, enabling improvements in-demand research and the quality of tourist attractions and destinations. Furthermore, it is useful for obtaining more detailed knowledge about the operators used during the research regarding the feedback from their clients, both quantitatively and qualitatively, and allows public authorities to plan actions in favor of the guides and the municipality, such as conducting specific periodic training or formulating regulatory and disciplinary public policies for the activities offered as attractions.

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