



# The role of the rural tourism experience economy in place attachment and behavioral intentions



Sandra Maria Correia Loureiro\*

Marketing, Operations and General Management, Instituto Universitário de Lisboa (ISCTE-IUL), Business Research Unit (BRU/UNIDE), Av. Forças Armadas, 1649-026 Lisbon, Portugal

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## ABSTRACT

This study aims to empirically explore the effect of the experience economy on place attachment and behavioral intentions through emotions and memory. To do so, the rural tourism context was selected as it not only provides small accommodation units in the countryside, but is also related to a set of possible activities involving both passive and active participation by guests. The survey was conducted using a self-administered questionnaire distributed to individuals experiencing rural holidays in the South of Portugal. A convenience sample of participants, resulting on 222 usable questionnaires, was employed to test the model. The partial least squares (PLS) approach was used to treat the data. The findings demonstrated the role of pleasant arousal and memory as mediators between experience and behavioral intentions. An excited and pleased guest is more likely to memorize the experience. Nevertheless, the effect of pleasant arousal and memory on place attachment was not proven. The findings also lead to managerial implications, limitations and suggestions for future research.

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## 1. Introduction

Experiences have always been at the heart of the entertainment business. Experience is more than the delivery of a service; it is about creating a memorable and unique event, called “staged experience”, where the buyer is the guest and the seller is the provider (Pine and Gilmore, 1998). The consumption experience has received increasing attention from marketing scholars in general product domains, but particularly in the context of services (Vargo and Lusch, 2004) and regarding hedonic products (Hirschman and Holbrook, 1982).

In the tourism context, the experience may be recognized as a key of success, innovation and competitiveness (Ellis and Rossman, 2008; Stamboulis and Skayannis, 2003). Currently, tourists seek appealing, unique and memorable experiences shaped by their motivations, prior travel experiences, individual perceptions, behaviors and ways of coping with the environment, as well as by the specific travel context and circumstantial occurrences (Ellis and Rossman, 2008; Mossberg, 2007; Prebensen and Foss, 2011; Stamboulis and Skayannis, 2003). Therefore, experiences

should be viewed as subjective in light of affective, hedonic and symbolic facets (Otto and Ritchie, 1996).

The tourism experience is also very important for rural areas, which need to develop appealing and distinctive offerings for a demanding and heterogeneous tourism market. Rural tourism, defined as “tourism taking place in the countryside” (OECD, 1994), is associated, at least in Portugal, with a set of diversified tourism products in rural areas aiming to preserve, restore and value the regions’ architectural, historical, natural and landscape heritage (Decree-law n. 54/2002). Rural tourism comprises a set of possible activities besides the accommodation itself, depending on the region, such as appreciating the landscape, visiting heritage sites or regional fairs and participation in rural activities (e.g., making wine, picking fruit or tasting wine, cheese, stuffed pork or even learning how to make handicrafts). Therefore, the rural tourism context becomes an interesting field for further understanding of a gap in the literature: how the experience economy can influence place attachment and behavioral intentions through positive emotions and memory? Several researchers allude to emotions and memories as related to experiences, and place attachment and intention as outcomes, but to the best of our knowledge, this study is the first to empirically test the effect of the experience economy on place attachment and intentions through emotions and memories (e.g., Pine and Gilmore, 1999; Gilmore and Pine, 2002a; Meyer and Schwager, 2007). In this vein, following the introduction, the

\* Tel.: +351 21 790 30 05/96 290 82 08.

E-mail addresses: [sandra.loureiro@iscte.pt](mailto:sandra.loureiro@iscte.pt), [sandramloureiro@netcabo.pt](mailto:sandramloureiro@netcabo.pt)

theoretical background containing the conceptualization of the main construct is presented. Then the methodology and data treatment is reported, and finally the conclusions and implications are discussed.

## 2. Theoretical background

### 2.1. Tourism experience

The last decades of the 20th century are the turning point in considering the customer experience as a single and differentiated construct (e.g., Csikszentmihalyi, 1975; Hirschman and Holbrook, 1982; Schmitt, 1999). Csikszentmihalyi (1975), for instance, proposed the flow experience, a crucial component of enjoyment, a state of complete immersion in an activity, and a merging of acting and awareness. Hirschman and Holbrook (1982, p. 99) referred to customer experience as “those facets of consumer behaviour that relate to the multi-sensory, fantasy, and emotive aspects of product use”. Later, Hirschman (1984) identified three core elements that customers pursue in seeking experience: cognition (stimulating thought processes), sensation (stimulating the senses) and novelty (the desire for new stimuli).

In defining customer experience, Pine and Gilmore (1998, p. 98) stated that an experience occurs “when a company intentionally uses services as the stage, and goods as props, to engage individual customers in a way that creates a memorable event”. Schmitt (1999), in turn, argued that experiences are individual and occur in response to stimulation, and often result from direct observation and/or participation in events. Such events could be real, virtual, or appear in dreams. Experiential states are usually categorized into cognitive (rational activities), affective (emotional responses) and conative (behavioral intentions) (e.g., Padgett and Allen, 1997). Close to this approach is brand experience, which is created in response to stimuli related to the brand during the encounter (e.g., Davis et al., 2000; Padgett and Allen, 1997). In this connection, Schmitt (1999) conceptualized experience as individual and shared experiences. Individual experiences comprise sensing (aesthetics and sensory qualities), feeling (including moods and emotions) and thinking (convergent/analytical and divergent/imaginative thinking). By contrast, acting (motor actions and behavioral experiences) and relating (social experiences, such as relating to a reference group) are considered as shared experiences.

Concerning the tourism context, the pioneers Boorstin (1964), MacCannell (1973) and Cohen (1988) emerged with experience authenticity. Experience authenticity is founded on the idea that the contemporary tourist is searching for authenticity, genuineness and verisimilitude.

Otto and Ritchie (1996) defined tourism experience as the subjective mental state felt by tourists during a service encounter, and developed a scale to measure the quality of the tourism service experience based on consumer behavior, services marketing, leisure and tourist activities. Otto and Ritchie (1996) proposed four dimensions of experience: hedonics, peace of mind, involvement and recognition.

Pine and Gilmore (1998) presented for the first time the four realms of the tourism experience: entertainment, education, esthetics, and escapism. They are also responsible for the paradigm change from service delivery to experience creation pointing out the experience-design principles: theme the experience, harmonize impressions with positive cues, eliminate negative cues, mix in memorabilia, and engage all five senses. Later, Vittersø et al. (2000) measured the holistic tourist experience comparing the perceived situation and the tourist's cognitive schemas. The holistic tourist experience is modeled in a flow-simplex, ranging from boring to frustrating experiences, with positive experiences in the middle

of the simplex, corresponding to moderate levels of assimilation resistance.

Gentile et al. (2007, p. 397) highlighted that experiences originate “from a set of interactions between a customer and a product, a company, or part of its organization, which provoke a reaction. This experience is strictly personal and implies the customer's involvement at different levels (rational, emotional, sensorial, physical, and spiritual)”. In accordance, Meyer and Schwager (2007, p. 118) alluded to an internal and subjective response that an individual has when contacting directly or indirectly with an organization (brand or place), so “direct contact generally occurs in the course of purchase, use, and service and is usually initiated by the customer. Indirect contact most often involves unplanned encounters with representatives of a company's products, service or brands and takes the form of word-of-mouth recommendations or criticisms, advertising, news reports, reviews and so forth”.

Oh et al. (2007) developed a scale for the tourism context to analyze bed and breakfast (B&B) accommodation experiences inspired by Pine and Gilmore's (1998) framework for the consumption experience. The Oh et al. (2007) scale comprises four dimensions depending on the customer or tourist involvement in business offerings: entertainment (passive absorption), aesthetics (passive immersion), escapism (active immersion), and education (active absorption). The customer or tourist who passively participates in an experience does not directly influence the experience, what is being presented or performed, whereas one who actively participates will affect the activity or event and tends to become immersed in esthetic and escapist experiences. Pine and Gilmore (1999, p. 31) defined absorption of an experience as “occupying a person's attention by bringing the experience into the mind” and immersion as “becoming physically (or virtually) a part of the experience itself.”

Recently, a new approach has emerged from the work of Pizam (2010), the creation of memorable experiences. Pizam (2010) highlighted that it is the quality of the experience and not the quality of goods or services that makes the experience memorable. The quality of the experience is the intervening variable between “the independent variables of quantity and quality of tangible and intangible products and services, and the dependent variables of customer satisfaction and willingness to pay high prices” (Pizam, 2010, p.343) and thus a memorable experience can emerge from an opulent and sophisticated environment (for instance, provided by a spa hotel) or from a simple event (for example, a Bedouin tent located in the desert or a rural lodging).

In this connection, in order to capture the essence of memorable tourism experiences, Tung and Ritchie (2011) conducted in-depth interviews and found four dimensions representing aspects of experiences that enables them to be particularly memorable: affect (positive emotions and feelings associated with the experiences such as happiness and excitement), expectations (fulfillment of intentions and/or descriptions of surprises encountered during the experience), consequentiality (a sort of personally perceived importance from the outcome of the experience; this dimension comprises four sub-dimensions, enhancing social relationships, intellectual development, self-discovery and overcoming physical challenges), and recollection (the efforts made and actions taken by tourists to remember the tourism experience and/or reflect back on it such as photographs and souvenirs).

Kim et al., 2012 followed Churchill's paradigm and determined seven factors that characterize memorable tourism experiences: Hedonism (pleasurable feelings that excite oneself, fun, exciting, pleasant, and interesting sensations), Involvement (to visit a desired place, to enjoy the activities), Local culture (good impressions, friendly people and closely experience the ways of the local people), Refreshment (liberating feeling, sense of freedom, refreshing, revitalized), Meaningfulness (to do something meaningful and important, to learn about him/herself), Knowledge (information,

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