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Research Paper

Exploring the conceptualization of the sensory dimension of tourist experiences

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ABSTRACT

This paper aims to contribute to the conceptualization of the sensory dimension of tourist experiences by discussing its theoretical underpinnings. A multidisciplinary approach to the human senses shows their importance to the individual's experience and perception of the surrounding world, recommending the appropriateness of a holistic analysis of *sensescapes* in tourism. A review of empirical studies conducted under the experiential paradigm of tourism on the five human senses (sight, hearing, smell, taste, and touch) evidences the use of both qualitative and quantitative methodologies, which depends on research purposes, but also the practical implications of findings and data analysis to destination marketing and management. The paper discusses the role of the senses in designing tourist experiences, and identifies important topics regarding the study of the sensory dimension of tourist experiences, considering future research opportunities.

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1. Introduction

Experiences, whether ordinary or extraordinary, transform lives, acting as a means to construct reality (Carù & Cova, 2003). Viewing tourists as peak consumers (Wang, 2002), seeking fantasies, feelings and fun (Holbrook & Hirschman, 1982), the facilitation of extraordinary experiences has become a desired goal in the tourism industry (Walls, Okumus, Wang, & Kwun, 2011a). In this context, the study of the sensory dimension of tourist experiences has recently been pointed out as crucial to supporting decision-makers in enhancing tourist experiences (Gilmore & Pine, 2002; Gretzel & Fesenmaier, 2003, 2010; Pan & Ryan, 2009). This goal is informed by the experiential paradigm which poses memorable experiences as a source of competitive advantage for destinations. Memorable experiences can be designed by stimulating all the human senses, leading to personal engagement (Pine & Gilmore, 1998; Schmitt, 1999).

The contribution of the senses to human knowledge has been a topic of reflection since the early days of philosophy (Aristotle, 2001; Plato, 2003) and more recently new philosophical approaches have assisted in the renewal of debate (Merleau-Ponty, 2002 [1945]). In the 20th century, due to paradigm changes occurred in the

scientific foundations of psychological research, empirical studies conducted on the physiological basis of human perception have demonstrated the importance of the senses to the building of meaning about the world (Gibson, 1966; Goldstein, 2010). Further developments in research have attracted the attention of the subject among many disciplines, covering a wide range of academic fields, namely sociology (Dewey, 1934; Simmel, 1997; Vannini, Waskul, & Gottschalk, 2011; Veijola & Jokinen, 1994); anthropology (Howes, 1991, 2005; Classen, 1997; Erlmann, 2004); history (Corbin, 2005; Jütte, 2005; Smith, 2007); media studies (MacLuhan, 1994 [1964]); literature (Roberts, 2006; Vinge, 1975); geography (Casey, 1996; Crouch, 2002; Rodaway, 1994; Porteous, 1985; Tuan, 1977); urban studies (Degen, 2008); design (Bonapace, 2002); management (Pine & Gilmore, 1998); marketing (Hultén, Broweus, & Dijk, 2009; Krishna, 2010; Lindstrom, 2005; Schmitt, 1999; Schmitt & Simonson, 1997); neuroscience and neurology (Damásio, 2009, 2010 [1995]; Sacks, 2005).

Indeed, places and individuals' surrounding environments have been described as multi-sensory, constituted not only by visual impressions, but also by the associated sounds, smells, tastes and touch (Ackerman, 1991; Bitner, 1992; Casey, 1996; Heide & Grønhaug, 2006; Howes, 2006; Macnaghten & Urry, 1998; Porteous, 1985; Rodaway, 1994; Tuan, 1977; Urry, 2002). While tourism studies have been systematically centred on a Western view of the tourist experience, based on the ocular attributes (Pan & Ryan, 2009), researchers currently stress the importance of addressing and understanding the role of the body in the tourist experience, focusing on a holistic approach to *sensescapes* (Dann & Jacobsen, 2003; Ellis & Rossman, 2008; Gretzel & Fesenmaier,

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2003; Govers, Go, & Kumar, 2007; Kastenholz, Carneiro, Marques, & Lima, 2012; Pan & Ryan, 2009; Urry, 2002; Veijola & Jokinen, 1994). Thus, although the classification of the human senses is not consensual (Rodaway, 1994; Vannini et al., 2011), the traditional division into five senses, attributed to Aristotle (2001), has been useful to operationalizing methodologies aiming to analyze the multi-sensory dimension of tourist experiences and determine managerial implications.

Nevertheless, tourism studies empirically addressing the role of the five human senses in tourist experiences are still scarce. Thus, more research is needed in order to conceptualize the sensory dimension of tourist experiences and to understand its relationship with the other dimensions of tourist experiences suggested in the literature. To this end, this research seeks: (a) to understand the importance of the body to the individual's perception of the surrounding world, in a multidisciplinary approach; (b) to contextualize the role of the bodily senses under the experiential paradigm; (c) to analyse the role of the five human senses in the models used for staging tourist experiences; (d) to identify the methodologies used in empirical research on the role of the five human senses in the overall tourist experience and resulting managerial implications to destinations; and (e) to suggest future research opportunities in this area.

2. Senses: A multidisciplinary state of the art

There is a complementary and dynamic interaction between the *bottom-up pathway* – the external reality that reaches individuals through the senses – and the *top-down pathway* – the internal realm that influences individuals' perception of the surrounding world, comprising learning, memory, emotions and desires (Martínez, 2012; Zimbardo, Johnson, & Hamilton, 2011). The dynamics of external and internal processes lead to selective attention, a phenomenon which can be exemplified in the saying of the Chinese writer Lin Yutang: "Half of the beauty of a landscape depends on the region and the other half on the man looking at it" (cited in Martínez, 2012, p. 28). Thus, when an individual is in contact with a specific environment, "interactions occur that entail exchanges of energy" (Martínez, 2012, p. 168), and inferences from the stimuli begin to emerge.

Carù and Cova (2003) and Walls et al. (2011a) identify diverse definitions of the concept of experience, resulting from multiple disciplinary approaches. Since the senses are seen as crucial to both having and staging the experience, a multidisciplinary approach also seems pertinent in order to gain a better understanding of the complexity of the relationship between human senses and the individual's experiences and perception of the surrounding world. In fact, despite the traditional classification into five senses, there is no consensus on the number of existing human senses, which is explained partially by multidisciplinary research and the complexity of the subject itself (Vannini et al., 2011).

2.1. The senses in philosophy

Divergent philosophical approaches originate from different historic periods regarding the relationship of the senses and the mind. Plato's idealism posits that the mind is a synonym of thinking and reasoning. In the *allegory of the cave*, which can be found in *The Republic*, the Athenian philosopher (2003) suggests that true reality lies in the unchanging world of ideas, arguing for the existence of universal concepts. The surrounding physical world reaching individuals through the senses is seen as inaccurate, hence deceptive. Following the opposite line of thought, the 18th century empiricist David Hume claims that knowledge is ultimately derived from sensory impressions. In this context, he

states that individuals only know things that they experience directly, rejecting the existence of innate ideas (Morris, 2011).

Aristotle (2001) adopts a balanced position, claiming that knowledge begins with sense perception, through the apprehension of the external world. Then, an abstraction process allows the essence of objects to be captured. The classical division and hierarchy of the senses into sight, followed by hearing, smell, taste and touch are attributed to the philosopher. In a 16th century work, Spinoza develops his theory based on Aristotle's line of thought, stating that the mind is linked to the human body and cannot be detached from it, highlighting the role of affect in consciousness (Damásio, 2003a). Under the Enlightenment paradigm, philosophers such as Kant also defended the idea that knowledge of the world begins with the senses, evolving however through understanding and reasoning. A basic assumption of Kant's transcendental approach is the notion that the external reality inside the mind (*phenomenon*) differs from reality in itself, the "thing in itself" (*noumenon*). Scholars view Kant's theory as a compromise between rationalism (*a priori* knowledge of the world, based on reason) and empiricism (*a posteriori* knowledge of the world, based on experience), arguing the existence of *a priori synthetic judgments*, judgments determined by space and time, the *pure forms of sensible intuition* under which individuals perceive the world, but meeting the requirements of universality and necessity (Deleuze, 1994; Vancourt, 1982). Husserl's work, dating from the second half of the 1800s, focuses the attention on the role of the phenomenon created by the interactions between individuals and the world, founding the philosophical school of Phenomenology (Welton, 1999). In *Phenomenology of Perception*, Merleau-Ponty (2002) [1945] stresses the role of the body in perception, stating that the world is perceived by the individual's body, rejecting the Cartesian dualism of mind and body. Thus, the body is seen as a form of consciousness, its interactions with the world being what constitutes mental states and activities.

2.2. The senses in neuroscience

The paradigm of embodiment, which supports the integration of the body and mind, is in line with the latest findings in neuroscience. In *Descartes's Error*, Damásio (2009) [1995] claims that the factual knowledge that is needed for reasoning and decision-making comes to mind in the form of images. These images appear in all sensorial varieties, not just visual, but sounds, textures, smells, tastes, pains and pleasures, and refer to any object (e.g., person, place, machine) or action that is being processed in the brain, either actually present or to be remembered or imagined. Therefore, during the perception process of events, individuals form *perceptual images* through external sensory stimuli captured by the human sensory sensors. Recalling involves not only assessing these perceptual images, but a reinterpretation and reconstruction of the lived events (Damásio, 2010). The perception, whatever the sensory modality, is the result of the mapping skills of the brain, which produce a mind. Damásio (2010) also claims that subjectivity, as defined by sentiments, creates the self, which is crucial for having a conscious mind.

Apart from the five human senses (sight, hearing, smell, taste and touch), which provide information on the external environment (*exteroceptive* senses), neuroscience proposes that the sensory signals received by the brain can also derive from the internal body, pertaining to body awareness (*interoceptive* senses). The interoceptive system includes the *proprioceptive* sense (deriving *kinesthesia*, the sense of movement, via the musculoskeletal system), the vestibular sense (balance), the visceral sense, and the sense of the *internal milieu* (pain, temperature) (Craig, 2003; Damásio, 2003b).

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