



# The sensory dimension of tourist experiences: Capturing meaningful sensory-informed themes in Southwest Portugal



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## HIGHLIGHTS

- Analyzes sensory-informed experiences to facilitate positive tourist experiences.
- Multiple correspondence analysis captures meaningful sensory-informed themes.
- Uses sensory impressions to segment and profile tourists in Southwest Portugal.
- Analyzes the connection between sensory-informed segments and external variables.

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## ABSTRACT

Sensory aspects of destinations have recently been in focus as an important dimension in the process of facilitating positive tourist experiences. The countryside embraces local resources rich in multi-sensory stimuli that could be utilized in the planning and marketing of appealing tourist experiences addressed to segments of tourists, while fitting sustainable local development. This study follows a holistic approach to the five external human senses, aiming to capture meaningful sensory-informed themes adequate for segmenting rural tourists. A self-administered survey in four languages was collected from 181 tourists in Southwest Portugal. A multiple correspondence analysis suggests four sensory-informed themes, tentatively named generic beach-related experience, nature-based experience, balanced experience, and rural experience. The proposed themes correspond to a four-solution cluster of tourists presenting different profiles. The largest segment (73 tourists) corresponds to the rural experience, regarding which tourists mainly refer to the taste of local food and the smell of fresh air.

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## 1. Introduction

The sensory dimension has been posed by recent tourism literature as key to understanding, planning, and marketing tourist experiences (Agapito, Mendes, & Valle, 2013; Crouch, 2002; Dann & Dann, 2011; Dann & Jacobsen, 2002, 2003; Ellis & Rossman, 2008; Everett, 2008; Gretzel & Fesenmaier, 2003, 2010; Heide & Grønhaug, 2006; Jacobsen, 1997; Kastenholz, Carneiro, Marques, & Lima, 2012; Markwell, 2001; Middleton, 2011; Mossberg, 2007; Oh, Fiore, & Jeoung, 2007; Pan & Ryan, 2009; Quan & Wang, 2004; Small, Darcy, & Packer, 2012; Veijola & Jokinen, 1994; Walls, Okumus, Wang, & Kwun, 2011a, 2011b). The idea that the unique character of a destination can be imparted by sensory-informed themed experiences appealing to visitors is couched in recent findings of research on consumption experience framed by

contemporary approaches, such as the *experience economy* (Pine & Gilmore, 1998) and *experiential marketing* (Addis & Holbrook, 2001; Holbrook & Hirschman, 1982; Schmitt, 1999), which are especially relevant to tourism given its inherent experiential nature (Oh et al., 2007; Quan & Wang, 2004; Ryan, 1997; Williams, 2006).

Indeed, a wide range of academic areas has reflected on the contribution of the senses to human knowledge and understanding of the world by providing information on the surrounding environment and mediating everyday experiences (Howes, 2005; Krishna, 2010; Rodaway, 1994). In this context, researchers and practitioners agree that contemporary destinations should attract not only by vision (Dann & Jacobsen, 2003; Daugstad, 2008; Gretzel & Fesenmaier, 2003; Kastenholz, Carneiro, Marques, & Lima, 2012; Pan & Ryan, 2009) but also by devising the right sensory stimuli in the process of creatively facilitating the emergence of appealing tourist experiences, aiming to contribute to the competitiveness and sustainability of destinations (Mossberg, 2007; Tung & Ritchie, 2011). Specifically rural destinations, commonly considered more vulnerable to negative impacts of tourism in view of the related

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environmental, social, and cultural values, as well as economic particularities, have been calling for a sustainable marketing approach (Fuller, 1999; Lane, 1994a). The sustainable approach for tourism aims to optimize the use of the local assets and harmonize the current and future needs of local stakeholders, while simultaneously focusing on the high satisfaction of tourists by ensuring a meaningful experience (Kastenholz, Carneiro, & Marques, 2012; UNEP & UNWTO, 2005). Accordingly, considering that the rural tourism supply is growing rapidly and that tourists seek multiple experiences even on short holidays, rural destinations should articulate their endeavors in facilitating diversified, quality tourist experiences (Feifer, 1985; Lane, 2009). However, a lack of empirical research with a holistic approach to the so-called five external human senses – sight, hearing, smell, taste, and touch – with respect to tourist experiences, particularly focusing on rural areas, is evinced by the literature (Agapito et al., 2013).

By referring to ‘tourist experiences in rural areas’ this research intends to focus on individual and subjective evaluations of events related to tourist activities (Tung & Ritchie, 2011) performed in rural areas. What characterizes *rurality* is not consensual among either authors or countries; however, it generally refers to a non-urban location that can be a stretch of inland or coastal countryside associated with low population density and small settlements, maintaining some agrarian land use and traditional social structures, and/or strongly related to nature environments (Lane, 1994b; Roberts & Hall, 2001). This widespread characterization has influenced the social construction of the countryside and its representation, which has been reinforced in literature, contributing to tourists’ perceptions of the countryside (Butler, Hall, & Jenkins, 1998).

Despite Portugal frequently being associated with seaside tourism, especially the South, where the Algarve region accounts for the largest amount of tourists’ overnight and lodging accommodation (Statistics Portugal, 2012a), the country is a destination of contrasts. These contrasts are characterized by a diversity of culture, physical geography, and biology that can be managed in order to invigorate the tourism offerings, prolong the main product life cycle, and address efforts toward different segments of tourists (Kastenholz, Davis, & Paul, 1999). Specifically, Southwest Portugal (SP) is an eclectic area, where the west coast and the inland of the Algarve and Alentejo regions meet, offering diverse, rural endogenous resources (e.g. gastronomy, handicraft, fauna, and flora) with the potential to generate multi-sensory effects attracting tourists with diverse motivations. The natural values stand out; these are the reason underlying the creation of the Southwest Alentejo and Vicentina Coast Natural Park, extending approximately 100 km along the coast of four municipalities (Vila do Bispo, Aljezur, Odemira, and Sines). A multiplicity of natural resources with over 700 species of plants, many of which are native to Portugal, can be found in the surrounding area, which is also an important stopover for migrating birds. Moreover, dozens of species of mammals and aquatic fauna, some of which are protected species, coexist in the area. Geologically, a variety of landscapes can be found, converging in coastal and inland scenarios (Instituto de Conservação da Natureza, 2005), appealing to rural tourists.

By focusing on SP as a pragmatic case, the purpose of this study is to approach the five human senses holistically, with respect to tourist experiences, and specifically to understand how tourist sensory experiences in the countryside are portrayed by visitors.

## 2. Conceptual framework

### 2.1. Destination sensory experiences

The tourism experience can be seen as a global consumption experience of a destination (Andersson, 2007; Crouch, Perdue,

Timmermans, & Uysal, 2004; Lewis & Chambers, 2000; Morgan, Elbe, & de Esteban Curiel, 2009; Mossberg, 2007; Neuhofer, Buhalis, & Ladkin, 2012; Oh et al., 2007; Quan & Wang, 2004; Ritchie & Hudson, 2009). In this sense, destinations – the core of the tourism system (Fyall & Leask, 2007) – are a composite product, i.e. an amalgam of tourism products and services, comprising lodging, food, transportation, souvenirs, and leisure activities (Buhalis, 2000; Otto & Ritchie, 1996). Bearing this in mind, destinations are perceived as a whole by tourists; the perception of a destination is a combination of factors, comprising a “collection of experiences gained by the traveler” (Gunn, 1997, p. 32). While tourist encounters are personal to each visitor, tourism planners can facilitate the development of the right environment, enhancing the likelihood that positive and memorable tourist experiences will emerge (Tung & Ritchie, 2011), benefiting and involving tourists, the tourism industry, and the local community (Manente & Minghetti, 2006). This idea assumes that, in order for destination marketing and management strategies be fully successful, creative opportunities should be sought to encourage the co-creation of positive, unique, and quality tourist experiences that can attract visitors efficiently (Binkhorst & Dekker, 2009; Jennings & Nickerson, 2006; Mossberg, 2007; Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2004) and contribute to the competitiveness and sustainability of destinations (Ritchie & Crouch, 2000).

Against this background, the relevance of the experiential paradigm for conceptualizing, planning, and marketing the tourist experience is evinced by the current literature (Cutler & Carmichael, 2010; Ellis & Rossman, 2008; Gilmore & Pine, 2002; Mossberg, 2007; Oh et al., 2007; Ritchie & Hudson, 2009; Tung & Ritchie, 2011; Volo, 2009; Walls et al., 2011a; Williams, 2006). Experiential approaches outline the importance of hedonic consumption for individuals and, accordingly, stress that attention should be paid to the activity of devising the right multi-sensory environment, contributing to the value creation for both customers and companies (Addis & Holbrook, 2001; Gentile, Spiller, & Noci, 2007; Holbrook & Hirschman, 1982; Pine & Gilmore, 1998). As a result, sensory stimuli (visual, aural, olfactory, gustatory, and tactile) have been highlighted as a crucial tool for marketing unique and appealing holistic consumer experiences (Krishna, 2012; Schmitt, 1999; Schmitt & Simonson, 1997). In fact, sensations (the activation of sensory organs – eyes, ears, nose, skin, and taste receptors) act as the initiator of the individual’s perception of the surrounding world, a process through which sensory inputs are selected, organized, and interpreted, resulting in a “conscious sensory experience” (Goldstein, 2010, p. 8). Furthermore, empirical studies consolidate the importance of the sensory dimension of consumer experiences when compared with other components (e.g. physical, intellectual, emotional, and social) stressed as key in engaging and co-creating value with consumers (Brakus, Schmitt, & Zarantonello, 2009; Gentile et al., 2007).

Within this vein, frameworks aiming to create the desired tourist experiences focus on the external factors influencing tourists’ perception, which can be partially staged by the destination, from a marketing management perspective. These instruments stress the importance of stimulating tourists’ five human senses in order to achieve positive individual responses (Agapito et al., 2013; Ellis & Rossman, 2008; Mossberg, 2007; Oh et al., 2007; Walls et al., 2011a). On one hand, sensory stimuli integrate the environmental factors composing the setting in which the consumption of products (tangibles and intangibles) takes place (Bitner, 1992; Heide & Grønhaug, 2006). On the other hand, the resulting surrounding environment is a facilitator of human interactions between tourists and employees, other tourists, and the community (Bitner, 1992; Mossberg, 2007; Walls et al., 2011a, 2011b). Considering the multi-phase nature of the tourist experience (before, during, and

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