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## Tourists' memories, sensory impressions and loyalty: *In loco* and post-visit study in Southwest Portugal

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### HIGHLIGHTS

- Conducts a two-step study with a managerial perspective to facilitate positive destination experiences.
- Suggests that diversified sensory impressions as perceived by tourists impact the long-term memory.
- Diversified sensory impressions recalled in the post-visit phase enhance favorable tourist behavior towards destinations.
- Reveals a link between richer sensory tourist experiences and destination loyalty.

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### ABSTRACT

This study aims to offer some insights on the contribution of sensory diversity as perceived by tourists to memorable destination experiences and to explore the connection between long-term memory of sensory impressions and destination loyalty. The vital role of the sensory dimension of tourist experiences is stressed by current tourism research and supported by a multidisciplinary view on the role of the five external senses in human perception, memory, and behavior. While the marketing management approach highlights the importance of considering multisensory information in the process of facilitating positive and memorable destination experiences, there is a lack of empirical research to validate the theoretical literature. A two-step exploratory study was conducted *in loco* and six months after tourists' visits to Southwest Portugal. The findings suggest that perceived richer sensory tourist experiences may have a significant role in the long-term memory of individuals' experiences, encouraging favorable tourist behavior towards destinations.

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### 1. Introduction

Current tourism literature highlights the relevance of the sensory component of tourist experiences while stressing that destinations should attract tourists by more than visual elements alone (e.g. Agapito, Mendes, & Valle, 2013; Agapito, Valle, & Mendes, 2014; Dann & Jacobsen, 2003; Ellis & Rossman, 2008; Everett, 2008; Govers, Go, & Kumar, 2007; Gretzel & Fesenmaier, 2003, 2010; Isacsson, Alakoski, & Bäck, 2009; Kastenholtz, Carneiro, Marques, & Lima, 2012; Kirillova, Fu, Lehto, & Cai, 2014; Middleton, 2011; Mossberg, 2007; Oh, Fiore, & Jeoung, 2007; Pan & Ryan, 2009; Quan & Wang, 2004). From the marketing perspective, this idea puts forward the assumption that efforts to explore sensory aspects associated with destinations contribute to the process of facilitating

positive and memorable tourist experiences and generating positive outcomes such as tourists' loyalty, leading to destinations' competitiveness (Kirillova et al., 2014; Ritchie & Crouch, 2003; Tung & Ritchie, 2011). Furthermore, it is acknowledged that tourist experiences involve complex psychological processes, with a special focus on memory (Larsen, 2007) and that remembered experiences may be better predictors of future behavior than the experiences reported *in loco* (Mitchell, Thompson, Peterson, & Cronk, 1997; Wirtz, Kruger, Scollon, & Diener, 2003). As a result, a connection between recalled experiences and destination loyalty has been revealed in tourism literature (Lehto, O'Leary, & Morrison, 2004).

Furthermore, the idea that senses other than sight can be spatially ordered or place-related is connected with the construct of *sensescapes* (Porteous, 1985), which underpins the appropriateness of the study of *smellscapes*, *soundscapes*, *tastescapes*, and *hapticscapes* with respect to tourist destinations, in addition to *visualscapes* (Dann & Jacobsen, 2003; Rodaway, 1994). Currently, this idea has also been related to the concept of *tourist gaze* as a bodily experience (Urry & Larsen, 2011; Urry, 2002), which considers that

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the interaction between people and places involves multisensory-encounter experiences (Crouch, 2002; Kastenholz et al., 2012; Markwell, 2001). In fact, the so-called five senses are responsible for receiving sensory information from the external environment that is crucial for individual perception, memory, and behavior (Damásio, 2009; Goldstein, 2010; Krishna, 2010, 2012).

However, empirical research on tourist experiences taking into consideration both the so-called five senses and the multiphasic nature of the tourist experience (including the recollection phase) remains scarcely explored (Agapito et al., 2013; Kirillova et al., 2014; Pan & Ryan, 2009). Despite working holistically to contextualize tourist experiences and being interrelated with other components of the experience such as emotions (Mossberg, 2007; Pine & Gilmore, 1998; Schmitt, 1999), senses can be analyzed in a separate manner in order to depict sensory features of destinations, for managerial purposes (Agapito et al., 2014; Gretzel & Fesenmaier, 2003, 2010; Krishna, 2010; Pan & Ryan, 2009; Rodaway, 1994). For example, places have unique sensory qualities that can be used in market segmentation, destination communication, and the process of structuring a coherent destination offer (Agapito et al., 2014; Isacsson et al., 2009), making it important for destination management organizations to know how people perceive the sensory make-up of places (Dann & Jacobsen, 2003; Degen, 2008). In this regard, Heide and Grønhaug (2006, p. 277) argue that “because the atmosphere of a particular environment can be sensed, it can be described in sensory terms.”

In fact, despite there not being many studies on the effective usage of multisensory marketing within the tourism sector, research pinpoints the importance of the sensory dimension of consumer experiences when compared with other dimensions—whether physical, intellectual, emotional, or social—as key in engaging and co-creating value with consumers (Brakus, Schmitt, & Zarantonello, 2009; Gentile, Spiller, & Noci, 2007). While tourism studies remain focused on traditional visual cognitive attributes, recent research holistically approaches the sensory dimension and focuses on the contribution of each sense to the overall destination experience, for managerial purposes (Agapito et al., 2014; Gretzel & Fesenmaier, 2003, 2010; Isacsson et al., 2009).

Against this background, some research topics remain scarcely explored, such as the importance of the five senses for individuals' likelihood of achieving a positive tourist experience, the differences between the reported sensory impressions *in loco* and after the tourists' stay at a destination, the contribution of sensory impressions to the long-term memory of tourist experiences, and the connection between the long-term memory of destination sensory aspects and destination loyalty. By focusing on the Southwest Portugal region as a pragmatic case, this exploratory study addresses these topics, aiming to offer some insights on the contribution of sensory diversity as perceived by tourists to memorable destination experiences and to explore the connection between long-term memory of sensory impressions and destination loyalty, for managerial purposes. With these concerns in mind, the literature review is divided into three sections. In the first part, the role played by the senses in the perception and memory of tourist experiences is discussed by focusing on the literature of psychology and following a managerial approach. The connection between the tourists' memories of their experiences and destination loyalty is explored in the following section. The study objectives and research questions are highlighted in the third section.

## 2. Theoretical background

### 2.1. Sensory stimuli and memorable tourist experiences

The crucial role of the external human senses (*exteroceptive* senses) in human experience and knowledge of the surrounding

world has been a topic of discussion since the early days of philosophy (Synnott, 1991), continuing to more recent developments in the field (Merleau-Ponty, 2002) and contemporarily in a variety of disciplines (for a review, see, e.g., Howes, 2005; Krishna, 2010), particularly in psychology. In this context, the relationship between sensations and perception has been a recurring focus of research. Sensation refers to the process of triggering the sensory organs by sensory stimuli (e.g., light, vibration, pressure, and chemical substances), which are converted into electrical signals and transmitted to the brain, placing sensations at the beginning of the individual's perception of the surroundings (Goldstein, 2010; Zurawicki, 2010). In fact, the perceptual process through which sensory inputs are selected, organized, and interpreted results in a “conscious sensory experience” (e.g., colors, odors, sounds, textures, and tastes; Goldstein, 2010, p. 8). It follows from this that the factual knowledge required for reasoning and decision-making comes to mind in the form of images that are of all sensorial varieties (Damásio, 2009). In fact, whether by using information from current events or by bringing previously learned information to a specific sensory experience, knowledge is present throughout this dynamic process. As a result, it is possible to distinguish the bottom-up process from the top-down process, two processes that often work together to create perception and influence decision-making and behavior. The former is based on incoming sensory data as the starting point of perception. The latter refers to processing based on the recalled knowledge (memory) involved in the perceptual process (Goldstein, 2010). This aspect is vital in tourism studies, given the phasic nature of the tourist experience—anticipation, *in loco*, and recollection—during which the perception of the experience can change and influence future behavior (Cutler & Carmichael, 2010; Larsen, 2007).

Memory is “an alliance of systems that work together, allowing us to learn from the past and predict the future” (Baddeley, 1999, p. 1). Episodic memories, which involve individuals' long-term storing of factual memories concerning personal experiences (Schwartz, 2011), are the type of long-term memory thought to be the most interesting to study in relation to tourist experiences (Larsen, 2007), considering that “lived experiences gather significance as we reflect on and give memory to them” (Curtin, 2005, p. 3). Indeed, tourist experiences involve complex psychological processes, with a special focus on memory (Larsen, 2007). Although several definitions coexist in the literature, tourist experiences can be considered subjective and individual evaluations of events associated with tourist activities resulting in specific outcomes and involving the anticipation and recollection stages in addition to the activity at the destination (Cutler & Carmichael, 2010; Tung & Ritchie, 2011). Larsen (2007, p. 15) verifies tourist experiences to be past, personal, travel-related events “strong enough to have entered long-term memory.” Considering the importance of marketing management in the planning of environments in which positive memorable tourist experiences are more likely to occur, the concept of positive memorable experiences has been enthusiastically discussed and empirically studied (Tung & Ritchie, 2011). Thus, efforts to facilitate the emergence of tourist experiences characterized as being “positively remembered and recalled after the event has occurred” (Kim, Ritchie, & McCormick, 2010, p. 13) are undertaken by destination management organizations in order to be more competitive (Ritchie & Crouch, 2003).

With a managerial approach, Ooi (2005) suggests that tourism mediators are facing the main challenge of competing for tourists' attention, which is a scarce resource (Davenport & Beck, 2001). Hence, in order to help frame tourist experiences, sensory stimuli can be explored by destination management organizations as *sensory markers* (Ooi, 2005). Since a variety of sensory appeals, such as smells or sounds, can assist the activity of recovering memories

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