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in the Era of Global Pandemic

Editor

Khalid S. Soliman

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Sensory Marketing at the Destination Level: A Conceptual Approach

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Abstract

Marketing strategies adopted in many destinations do not take into consideration the potential of the senses to generate memorable experiences. By ignoring a driving force of intangibility, such strategies do not value a major source of differentiation. In fact, in a time where the intangible assumes an essential role, the senses emerge as a key for the differentiation of a particular destination when compared to other alternatives. This article puts in evidence the importance of the sensory marketing at the destination level. We develop a conceptual model where sensory contact points emerge as the central element in the 3 different phases of the tourist experience: a priori to capture the attention and provide (or recall) sensations of the destination, in loco for the generation of a multisensory image of the destination, and a posteriori inspiring a new visit to the destination or it's recommendation to others. The model proves to be particularly useful for practitioners, offering relevant insights for managers and policy makers.

Keywords: Sensory Marketing, Senses, Destination, Tourism, Experiences

Introduction

Marketing applied to regions has become a central activity in regional management as it achieves to generate competitive advantages that originate a differentiation of the destination, valuing the intangible and making it unique (Correia & Brito, 2011). Due to the intensification of competition in tourism and a world market that seeks unique and memorable tourist experiences, destinations and tourist companies should look for more innovative marketing strategies in order to attract more tourists. Tourism can thus be perceived as a consumer experience (Pine & Gilmore, 1998), where the tourist is seen as a consumer (Agapito, Mendes, Valle, & Almeida, 2014; Quan & Wang, 2004).

Marketing strategies of companies producing traditional consumer goods, such as cars, cosmetics and food products, have recognized the importance of the senses for the purchase process, however tourism marketing has neglected the significant role of olfactory, tactile, taste and auditory sensations during consumer experiences (Gretzel & Fesenmaier, 2004). Although tourism studies in the past gave greater importance to the visual dimension of the tourist experience (Urry, 1992), recent studies support the importance of the five senses for the marketing of tourist experiences (Agapito, et al., 2014; Dann & Jacobsen, 2003; Gretzel & Fesenmaier, 2004; 2010; Kastenholtz, Carneiro, & Marques, 2012; Pan & Ryan, 2009). However there is not yet a concrete model that allows inserting the five senses roles in the territorial management in a dynamic and interactive way. In this paper, taking advantage of all the existing knowledge about the relevance of the senses to destination touristic

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experience an operational model has been developed that places sensory marketing as a central element in the entire destination management strategy.

The article is structured as follows. Section 2 offers a comprehensive overview of the theoretical background. Firstly, the sensory marketing is contextualized as one of the most relevant elements for consumer experience and offer value. Secondly, it addresses the application of sensory marketing to touristic destinations, highlighting its central role for the touristic experience. Section 3 presents the model developed with the aim of making sensory marketing at the destination level operational. Finally section 4 summarizes the main contributions of the paper and concludes with limitations and suggestions for further research.

Conceptual Background

Sensory Marketing

Human senses have been progressively recognized over time as important factors that influence consumer behaviour, emotions and perceptions (Rupini & Nandagopal, 2015). In the 1950s, major brands began to work on the colours and design (visual marketing) of products and their advertisements, such as the Coca-Cola bottle that reminds consumers the shape of a woman. Then music (audio marketing) started to be introduced in television ads and in sales outlets, and today there is no point of sale without background music. In the 1970s, the first “blind tests” appeared and the brands started to modify the taste of their products in order to adapt them to consumers (taste marketing). In the 90s the scent (olfactory marketing) started to be used to influence the consumer through the creation of artificial scents in the sales points, since 75% of our emotions are generated by the scent. The texture of the products (tactile marketing) also began to be worked on as a way of influencing the consumer, such as the weight of cutlery, the softness of napkins and the comfort of chairs in restaurants. Thus, the role of the senses in the individual perception of the environment attracted the attention of different disciplines, revealing its multidisciplinary nature and importance. Specifically, the evolution in neuroscience, psychology and marketing research has led to interesting results in terms of the role of human senses in consumer behaviour, leading to the emergence of sensory marketing (Krishna, 2011).

According to Krishna (2012, p. 332), sensory marketing is defined as “marketing that engages the consumers' senses and affects their perception, judgment and behavior” and can therefore be used to subconsciously trigger the perception of consumers about abstract notions of the product such as its sophistication, quality, elegance, innovation and modernity.

Sensory marketing begins by understanding consumer perceptions, starting with the stimuli that affect the senses, and reaches consumer responses through the interpretation of those stimuli. Thus, sensory marketing argues that the strategies that aim to create multisensory experiences with products, places, events and communications, influence consumer behaviour (Ditoiu et al., 2014).

The five senses give rise to conscious and unconscious sensory experiences, so sensory marketing can also be defined as the use of stimuli and expressed elements, which consumers perceive through the senses, to create certain environments (Suárez & Gumiel, 2012). The use of sensory stimuli in the creation of environments that appeal to the consumer's senses should not be understood as a form of manipulation, but as a process of improving marketing activities aimed at generating a greater value for the consumer.

According to Trierweiler et al. (2011), sensory marketing aims to tie a brand, product or service in the consumer's mind, generating sensations through the senses in order to create an emotional bond, seducing consumers through messages that stimulate the right hemisphere of emotion, as opposed to the messages that stimulate the left hemisphere of the human brain, responsible for reason (Schmitt, 1999). Sensory marketing aims to capture the attention of the five senses of the customer and thereby

create sensory experiences in order to differentiate brands, motivate and create value in the minds of consumers (Schmitt, 1999).

For Guzel and Dortyol (2016), the visual stimulus is the most focused by researchers and is considered the most powerful of the senses, namely associated with colours and light; the auditory stimulus is considered the easiest and strongest to arouse emotions, feelings and memories in the consumer, namely in the case of music; the olfactory stimulus is considered to be one of the most subconscious, namely in the case of pleasant aromas that make the consumer stay in a place longer, in contrast to unpleasant aromas that keep the consumer away; gustatory stimulation is another sense that strengthens the experience, attracting the consumer's attention, namely in the case of the pleasant taste of food and drinks; the tactile stimulus is considered the least important, but should not be ignored.

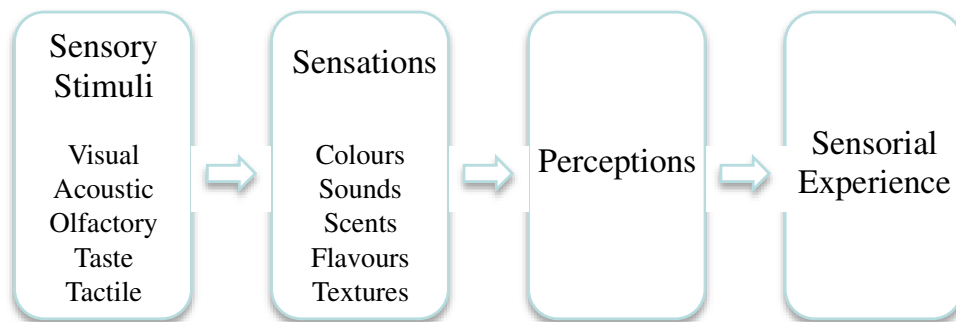


Fig. 1: Sensorial perception process. Source: The authors.

As can be seen in Figure 1, sensory stimuli (visual, acoustic, olfactory, taste and tactile) give rise to sensations (colours, sounds, scent, flavours and textures, respectively), which will be assimilated by the human being through the process of perception (Agapito, et al., 2014). The sensation occurs when the stimulus collides with the cells of a receptor sensory organ, originating the reception of information; perception is awareness or understanding of sensory information / stimulus, transforming it into an experience (Krishna, 2012). Sensory marketing is an application of sensation and perception understanding for the marketing area.

In this context, sensory marketing points to the stimulation of the five senses as essential to encourage consumers' experiences with products and services, influencing their perceptions and, consequently, their preferences and behaviours (Hultén et al., 2009; Krishna, 2011). All the senses play an important role in the consumption experience of individuals (Hultén et al., 2009). According to Hultén (2011), a sensory experience is defined as an individual perception of goods and services or other elements in a service process, as an image that challenges the human mind and senses. And, since the experiences are personal, existing in the mind of the individual who has been involved on an emotional, physical, intellectual or even spiritual level, they can be enacted through the stimulation of human senses, in order to involve consumers emotionally and intellectually in their interaction with products and services (Pine & Gilmore, 1998).

Sensory marketing can be used in a wide range of activities and it has three main characteristics: (1) it focuses on the remarkable and positive experiences that it can offer to the consumer in contrast to the functional attributes and benefits that traditional marketing focuses on; (2) considers consumption to be a holistic experience, where the consumer pays attention to the environment and the experience it provides; (3) takes into account not only the reason but the emotion of the consumer, through which he makes a choice based on feelings and emotions (Schmitt, 1999). In this way, sensory marketing is a complex concept, as it analyses consumers' subconscious, their perceptions, feelings and tastes.

The five senses are, therefore, essential for the consumer to know and understand the environment that surrounds him. In this way, sensory marketing aims to stimulate these senses in order to influence, without the consumer being aware, the consumption experiences and, thus, the consumer's behaviour and decisions.

The Sensory in Tourism

Tourism has evolved more and more in search of sensations and experiences. Tourists seek trips and experiences where all the senses can be involved (Gálvez, Granda, López-Guzmán, & Coronel, 2017). The study of the sensorial dimension of tourist experiences has been recently pointed out, by several authors, as crucial to support marketers to make tourist experiences memorable, since these are considered a source of competitive advantage of destinations and can be stimulated through the five senses (Agapito et al., 2013; Agapito, Pinto, & Mendes, 2017; Agapito, Valle, & Mendes, 2014; Campos, Mendes, do Valle, & Scott, 2016; Gretzel & Fesenmaier, 2004; Gretzel & Fesenmaier, 2010; Pan & Ryan, 2009).

According to Kastenholtz (2002), it is the experiences at the destination that give rise to a greater involvement and familiarity, stimulating the recommendation, the repetition of the visit and the choice of similar destinations. According to the same author, there is a positive relationship between a good experience at the destination and the repetition of the visit, resulting in tourist loyalty to the destination. This positive experience has a strong impact not only on the tourist who has enjoyed it, but also on the opinion that will be transmitted by him to family and friends. In this way, each destination should seek to arouse the interest of potential tourists by transmitting and providing positive experiences of the same.

Pan and Ryan (2009) highlight that multisensory tourism is an enriching element, stating that the more interactive the tourist or traveller is with the surrounding environment, the more their senses are stimulated, and the greater value will be attributed to the experience of traveling. Involving all the senses is therefore important because the more sensory an experience is, the more memorable it will become.

The endogenous resources of certain destinations offer multiple sensory stimuli, creating sensory experiences unique to that destination capable of attracting tourists. Therefore, local resources must be used in order to create sensory experiences that attract the attention of tourists (Agapito, et al., 2014).

Tourism products must contain a significant number of sensory contact points with the consumer, involving all the senses for a complete tourist experience. For example, to create a complete visual experience, marketers must permanently consider and analyse the colours used, the brightness, transparency, volume, area used; as for hearing, the analysis should focus on intensity, pitch, timbre and sound vibration to identify new opportunities in order to improve the experience; the smell, characterized by quality, intensity, emotional valence and duration must also be studied and explored. The scent characterizes the places, making it easier to identify and remember them in the tourist's mind (Dann & Jacobsen, 2003; Stancioiu, Teodorescu, Pargaru, Botos, & Anamaria-Cătălina, 2013); taste is mainly addressed in the context of gastronomic tourism (Everett, 2008), with the consumption of local food being an important part of the tourist experience, or even the main motivation of the tourist on his trip (Gálvez et al., 2017), providing a most memorable travel atmosphere (Quan & Wang, 2004).

According to Xiong et al. (2015), the vision can be considered the most immediate, essential and reliable sense to know the destination; hearing on the other hand can arouse emotions in the tourist about the destination; smell is considered an important sense in appreciating the destination and in remembering it; the palate represents the culture of the destination and opportunities for tourists to experience the same, with many researchers arguing that each region should promote its local cuisine as an attraction for tourists (Gálvez et al., 2017); touch can provide proximity to the destination, in

addition to serve as a form of communication between the tourist and the locals in case of difficulty of communicating through the language.

The relative place occupied by each sense in the formation of a tourist experience, can provide a structure for the creation of a sensory marketing strategy allowing the creation of touristic products or services based on sensations susceptible to be “absorbed” by consumers (Stancioiu et al., 2013).

Sensory marketing thus offers an important contribution to tourism marketing, since the senses are responsible for processing the sensory stimuli that, in turn, originate the appearance of tourist experiences (Agapito et al., 2013). This recognition of the experiential nature of tourism and new consumer trends requires marketing approaches that use innovative ways to communicate tourism experiences (Schmitt, 1999).

Xiong et al. (2015) and Son & Pearce (2005) use the term “multisensory image”, to describe individual perceptions based on sight, hearing, smell, taste and touch, formed through the interpretation of sensory stimuli of the destination by tourists. These stimuli can be obtained either through the experience of visiting the destination, or by searching for information about it through various means. The touristic experience starts before the destination visit, at the stage of planning the trip and choosing the place to visit, and continues after the tourist returns home, in the form of memories. In this way, marketing can explore the different phases of the tourist experience through sensory appeals to the five senses as a way of capturing the attention of tourists, attracting them to their destination (Agapito, et al., 2014). According to the authors, the multisensory image that tourists have of a destination affects their feelings and emotions, influencing their intentions to visit or revisit the destination. In this way, the multisensory image becomes important in the presentation, strengthening or weakening of a destination (Xiong et al., 2015).

Sensory Marketing Model

So far we have focused on the most strategic elements of sensory marketing. These elements include the stimuli, sensations, perceptions and experiences. All the destinations have resources with the potential to generate sensorial stimuli and memorable experiences. Defining the sensory contact points of the territory that can generate those memorable experiences is a key element in the sensory marketing strategy. However the definition of these elements is only part of a long journey that should include the integration of diverse actions.

The complex features associated with the territories and their resources are very different, so there are no generic recipes of actions to implement in order to develop and enhance their offer. Nevertheless, some essential steps are referred to the operationalization of a sensorial marketing strategy (Figure 2).

The tourist experience goes through three phases: *a priori*, *in loco* and *a posteriori*, during which the perception of the experience can change and influence the future behaviour of the tourist (Agapito et al., 2017). In all of these three phases sensory contact points should be provided to the tourist. These sensory contact points should be consistent, coherent, and aligned with the resources of the destination and the experiences that it wishes to generate.

In the *a priori* stage, websites and tourist pamphlets can capture the attention of the senses through the use of images, videos and sensory maps, as well as interactive contests. Virtual environments, such as Second Life, are also a way for tourists to experience the destination virtually, appealing to their senses in order to attract them (Neuhofer, Buhalis, & Ladkin, 2012). This phase is decisive as tourists explore, seek inspiration and interact with the destination for the first time. Thus, destination marketers must add multisensory information to their promotional communication, through advertisements and pamphlets with multisensory suggestions or the use of multimedia to present their multisensory images, in order to provide or recall sensations of the destination in the tourist's mind. Travel agencies must also develop a multisensory environment around the destination, through images, music, smells, flavours, food, local products in order to promote the destination and influence tourists in choosing it (Xiong et al., 2015).

The in loco phase is crucial for the delivery of sensory contact points. When well implemented these are going to improve the interactions with the destination, that in turn will foster the stimuli potentiating the arousal of memorable experiences. All the integrated experiences will then generate a multisensory image of the destination (Figure 2). Apart of generating new interactions (and consumption) for the tourist while in the destination, if this multisensory image will be positive exceeding the initial expectation of the tourist it will remain on its memory longer increasing the odds to revisit the destination and recommend it to others.

Marketing can use some techniques to deliver sensory contact points like multisensory routes, sharing experiences in real time through, for example, applications for mobile phones and tablets (Agapito, et al., 2014). Through social networks, such as Facebook, tourists can interact with others in real time, sharing photos and comments about the destination (Neuhofer et al., 2012), while experiencing it sensorially.

In the a posteriori phase, tourists continue to receive sensory stimuli from the destination through stories told to friends and family, sharing experiences on travel blogs or virtual communities (such as TripAdvisor), offering souvenirs, sharing photos with family, friends and on social networks (Agapito, et al., 2014). All these activities remind the tourist of his past tourist experience, thus developing the intention to revisit the destination and his recommendation to friends and family, based on the level of satisfaction of the tourist, which is influenced by the sensory stimuli received in all phases of your tourist experience (Dițoiu, et al., 2014). It can therefore be said that the tourist experiences a destination through the five sensory channels (visual, auditory, olfactory, taste and tactile) during their entire experience (a priori, in loco and a posteriori) (Dițoiu et al., 2014).

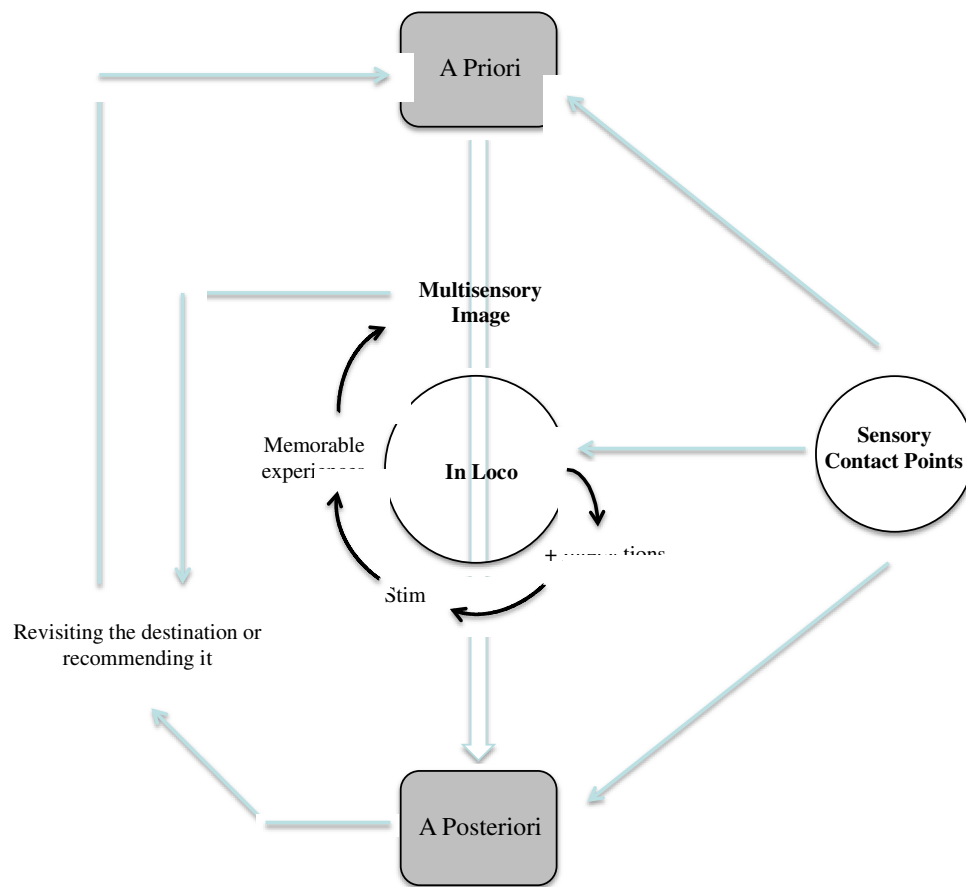


Fig. 2: A Model for the Development of a Sensory Marketing Strategy. Source: The authors.

When sensory information is communicated, it is usually presented in isolation, that is, or smell, taste, touch or sound, and is often simply translated into visual signals (Gretzel & Fesenmaier, 2004). Destinations shouldn't attract only by sight (Dann & Jacobsen, 2003; Pan & Ryan, 2009), but through an integrated perspective of all the senses. The current literature on tourism studies claims a holistic approach to the five senses as a way of understanding their role in global tourist experiences, since previous studies have privileged only the sense of vision (Agapito et al., 2012; Agapito, Valle, et al., 2014; Dann & Jacobsen, 2003; Gretzel & Fesenmaier, 2004; 2010; Kastenholtz, Carneiro, & Marques, 2012; Pan & Ryan, 2009). This approach emphasizes the importance of understanding the sensory relationship between tourists and destinations, suggesting that sensory marketing can be used to create, communicate and boost tourist experiences, increasing tourists' satisfaction and, consequently, increasing long-term recall and recommendation through word of mouth. In fact, when sensory marketing strategies are aimed at providing the most positive tourist experiences possible, the tourist ends up revisiting the destination or recommending it. Taking into account the fact that if more than one sensory stimulus affects the consumer at the same time, he will remember the destination more quickly (Dițoiu & Căruntu, 2014). Thus, the more senses are called in an integrated way, the stronger the message will be transmitted.

According to Guzel and Dortyol (2016), tourism specialists should pay special attention to generate memorable tourism experiences for tourists in order to create and maintain a sustainable competitive advantage in the destination. They must discover ways to appeal to the senses of tourists in an

emotional and rational way, creating a relationship between tourism and the multisensory experience. These memorable experiences are built by tourists through individual and subjective evaluation of experiences, such as the collection of pleasant memories during their vacation at the destination (Agapito et al., 2017).

Conclusion

All the destinations are different, as different are their associated resources and the senses they can trigger on the tourists. The destinations should evaluate themselves through the tourist eyes of and define the multisensory image (or images) that they want to deliver. For that they should identify and deliver sensory contact points in the 3 phases of the tourist experience in a consistent and integrated manner.

In conclusion, the tourist creates his own image of the destination according to his own perception that is, through the experimentation of the destination, combining the five sensory dimensions. Thus, it is necessary to create a unique atmosphere at the destination level to generate / stimulate positive associations with the place and, at the same time, eliminate negative ones, providing sensory experiences that can seduce the senses of tourists and offer some memories that can leave a visible mark of the destination, together with the overall memorable experience (Dițoiu & Căruntu, 2014). In this way, determining and promoting the multisensory experiences that tourists find most rewarding and unique in the destination has become an essential marketing strategy to attract a greater number of tourists (Guzel & Dortyol, 2016). On the other hand, less pleasant or negative multisensory experiences in the destination must also be considered in the marketing strategy as aspects to be targeted for improvement (Xiong et al., 2015).

This research should be viewed as an exploratory exercise, translated into a model of analysis of a reality that involving multiple actors reveals itself to be very complex. The model now proposed therefore lacks an empirical validation that at first should occur through a qualitative methodology. Another line of future research will be to measure and relate the relation between experiences and the multisensory image of the destination comparing tourists that have been exposed to more sensory contact points to other less exposed. It will also be interesting to be able to quantify and relate the relative importance of each of the senses for the multisensory image as well as the relation between them.

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