

THE SENSORY DIMENSION OF CONSUMER EXPERIENCES IN RURAL TOURIST DESTINATIONS

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Despite being well documented that the so-called five senses impact consumer behavior, research following a holistic approach to all modalities of sensory experiences in rural tourist destinations is still scarce. Nevertheless, rural areas are characterized by a rich and diverse collection of endogenous resources, ideal for conceptualizing unique multi-sensory tourist experiences involving and benefiting all destination stakeholders.

Hence, this paper proposes a theoretical framework based on the idea that the process of analyzing sensory aspects of consumer experiences as perceived by tourists while experiencing the countryside may contribute to carefully marketing sensory-themed tourist experiences in rural destinations. Accordingly, considering that rural destinations are calling both for cooperative and creative offerings and communication strategies, this paper discusses the potential of using sensory-informed themes in profiling tourists, a process that assists rural

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destinations in the planning of the integral tourist experiences aiming at the optimal use of local resources.

Key Words: sensory tourist experience; rural tourist experience; theme; five senses; destination marketing

INTRODUCTION

Although sensory experiences have been extensively analyzed in consumer behavior research (Krishna, 2010), the sensory dimension of tourist experiences has been overlooked in the tourism literature (Agapito, Mendes, & Valle, 2013; Urry, 2002), especially in the context of rural destinations, where there is a clear lack of research on this specific topic (Agapito, 2013; Agapito, Valle, & Mendes, 2014; Dann & Jacobsen, 2003).

However, the endogenous resources available in rural areas offerspecificand rich sensory stimuli (Kastenholz, Carneiro, Marques,& Lima, 2012) considered to be vital in achieving the desired goal of the tourism industry in facilitating the co-creation of rich, unique, and memorable destination experiences effective in attracting visitors (Larsen, 2007; Mossberg, 2007; Tung & Ritchie, 2011) and competing for attention (Isacsson, Alakoski, &Bäck, 2009; Ooi, 2005). In fact, facing growing competition and a demanding international market increasingly interested in living diversified and unique experiences, rural destinations and individual tourism businesses should find innovative and creative strategies to enhance tourist experiences in a sustainable way (Kastenholz, Carneiro,& Marques, 2012; Lane, 2009).

Currently, some researchers are stressing the need to consider multi-sensory information in understanding and planning tourist experiences (Gretzel&Fesenmaier, 2003, 2010; Pan & Ryan, 2009), an approach embedded in a multidisciplinary view of the senses. In fact, a wide range of academic areas has reflected on the crucial role of the senses in human knowledge and sense making of the world by providing information on the surrounding environment, mediating everyday experiences and influencing individuals' behavior (Damásio, 2009; Howes, 2005; Merleau-Ponty, 2002; Rodaway, 1994). In this context, despite the existence of other human

senses related to internal stimuli, marketing has directed special attention to the so-called five human senses (sight, hearing, smell, taste, and touch), specializing in capturing and conveying external stimuli (optical, acoustic, olfactory, gustatory, and tactile) to the brain (Goldstein, 2010; Zurawicki, 2010). Against this background, sensory stimuli are highlighted as central in the marketing of appealing consumer experiences (Gentile, Spiller, & Noci, 2007; Hultén, Broweus, & van Dijk, 2009; Krishna, 2010, 2012; Lindstrom, 2005; Pine & Gilmore, 1998; Schmitt, 1999; Schmitt & Simonson, 1997).

The diversity of tourists' motivations for choosing a rural destination for vacations results in a multiplicity of desired activities and perceptions (Roberts & Hall, 2001). Therefore, the use of meaningful themes integrating the multiplicity of rural resources and services may be useful in marketing rural tourist experiences in a sustainable manner (Agapito et al., 2014; Kastenholz, Carneiro, & Marques, 2012). Considering the importance of sensory elements in the process of staging the environment for desired individual experiences to emerge (Larsen, 2007; Ooi, 2005), the process of analyzing sensory tourist experiences as perceived by tourists is an appropriate means for understanding and meaningfully theming destination experiences (Ellis & Rossman, 2008; Mossberg, 2007; Pan & Ryan, 2009; Pine & Gilmore, 1998). Despite acknowledging the lack of a specific framework adapted to rural destinations, some researchers have highlighted the potential of using sensory themes in profiling rural tourists (Agapito et al., 2014; Gretzel & Fesenmaier, 2010). Moreover, this process is considered as important in planning and promoting appealing sensory experiences to reference consumers fitting the destination identity by involving the community and tourists in a sustainable way (Kastenholz, Carneiro, & Marques, 2012; Santini, Cavicchi, & Canavari, 2011; Saxena, Clark, Oliver, & Ilbery, 2007).

Against this background, this paper aims to reflect on the role of the sensory dimension of tourist experiences in marketing sensory-themed tourist experiences in rural destinations by bringing a theoretical framework into the discussion. The proposed framework is based on previous research informed by a multidisciplinary view on the so-called five external senses. Relevant journal articles and books with a managerial approach to tourist experiences, focusing on the role of sensory stimuli, were identified by tracking references in online scientific databases. Particularly, empirical studies directing special attention to the five senses in the marketing and planning tourist experiences supported the reflection on the adaptation of

the existing research methodologies to the marketing of sensory-themed rural tourist experiences.

THE ROLE OF THE SENSES IN THEMING RURAL TOURIST EXPERIENCES

A marketing approach to tourist experiences in rural destinations should center on carefully facilitating rich, positive, and diversified experiences by achieving balance in preserving endogenous resources, residents' quality of life, tourism providers' benefits, tourists' quality of visit and, consequently, aiming at local sustainable development (Kastenholz, Carneiro, & Marques, 2012; Lane, 1994; Manente & Minghetti, 2006). Considering the existing opportunities for all stakeholders in actively co-creating tourist experiences in rural areas (Kastenholz, Carneiro, Marques, & Lima, 2012), potentially benefiting all those involved in the process, it is important to note that "the countryside is especially at risk from unmanaged – or ill-managed – tourism" (Lane, 1994, p.19).

In this context, marketing quality tourist experiences is an activity with the potential to benefit the destination in the longterm (Jennings & Nickerson, 2006). Firstly, the quality of local resources constitutes what initially attracts visitors to rural destinations. Thus, an increase in demand may result in more pressure to preserve destination assets (Clark, 1999). Secondly, unique and appealing sensory experiences are considered to have the potential to be priced as *premium* offerings (Pine & Gilmore, 1998), thus benefiting local providers (Kastenholz, Carneiro, Marques, & Lima, 2012). Thirdly, the process of exploring themes is a marketing tool that assists in conceptualizing engaging experiences addressed at specific tourist profiles (Agapito et al., 2014; Kastenholz, Carneiro, & Marques, 2012; Mossberg, 2007). Accordingly, and bearing in mind that rural areas lack the iconic features of urban destinations which result in offering very similar core products (Haven-Tang & Jones, 2010), the marketing of rural destination experiences should focus on unique endogenous resources, as well as on the local identity, in order to provide multi-sensory themed quality consumption experiences.

The identification of themes through sensory information related to destination experiences has also been explored in practice. The Aldeia da Pedralva is a rural tourism village project, situated in Southwest Portugal, which aimed to rebuild a deserted village. The thematic programs available in this lodging unit are based on the idea that staying overnight in this

village and engaging with specific rural and natural multi-sensory resources (e.g. mountain ranges, woods, pinewood, agricultural areas, cliffs and rock caves) stimulates particular sensory-informed experiences. Accordingly, the Aldeia da Pedralva's brand identity consists of a representation of the five human senses. The brand logo is composed by an eye encircled by elements pertaining to the senses of hearing, taste, touch, and smell (<http://www.aldeiadapedralva.com/>). Considering the fact that many resources are endemic to the region, the goal is to create conditions for visitors to live unique sensory-informed place experiences (Agapito, Mendes, & Valle, 2012).

SENSORY STIMULI IN CONSUMPTION EXPERIENCES

The role of sensory stimuli in originating sensations – the activation of the sensory organs (eyes, ears, nose, skin, and taste receptors) and transformation of the outside stimuli in neural signals – acting as the initiator of the human perceptual process, has been shown by psychology. Perception is essential to making sense of the world by giving meaning to sensations and consequently by influencing human action (Zimbardo, Johnson, & Hamilton, 2011). In this regard, perception can be defined as a “conscious sensory experience” (Goldstein, 2010, p.8), deriving from the “sequence of processes that work together to determine our experience of a reaction to stimuli in the environment” (p.5). Accordingly, marketing has been developed through addressing efforts, based on the stimulation of the five human senses, at engaging consumers (physically, intellectually, emotionally, and socially) by providing the appropriate environment for the desired personal consumer experiences to emerge (Carù & Cova, 2003; Gentile et al., 2007; Schmitt, 1999). The rise of the concept of sensory marketing is thus in line with the consolidation of the underlying concept of the *experience economy* (Pine & Gilmore, 1998), according to which what the consumers most value is the hedonic way of consumption (Holbrook & Hirschman, 1982; Hultén et al., 2009). Sensory marketing can thus be defined broadly as the “marketing that engages the consumer’s senses and affects their perception, judgment and behavior” (Krishna, 2012, p.332).

In this light, diverse empirical studies present recent findings from marketing linking sensations with market outcomes, such as consumer’s choice, memory and preference, providing some insights how each of these senses can be engaged by businesses to improve their system of offerings (e.g. Krishna, 2010). This view is consolidated by increasing developments in neuroscience offering important insights into consumer psychology

(Plassmann, Ramsøy, & Milosavljevic, 2012) and encouraging the development of new approaches highlighting the managerial aspects of sensory stimuli, such as neuromarketing (e.g. Zurawicki, 2010), or behavioral neuroendocrinology perspectives (e.g. Derval, 2010). Spence, Puccinelli, Grewal, and Roggeveen (2014) summarize the scientific evidence related to retail store atmospherics and their impact on the consumer experience and behavior. By reviewing the existing multisensory approaches to retail environment and their links to neuroscience principles, the researchers conclude that “various visual, auditory, olfactory, tactile, and gustatory atmospherics independently affect shoppers’ perceptions and behaviors, and their combined influence is likely even greater than the sum of their parts (2014, p.483). Furthermore, while acknowledging the multidimensionality of consumers experiences, so that a good experience should holistically and consistently involve individuals at different levels, empirical marketing studies show the pivotal role of the sensory component compared with other dimensions of consumption experiences. For example, Gentile et al. (2007) reveal that the value associated with the sensorial component is substantially higher when compared to the emotional, cognitive, pragmatic, lifestyle and relational components in co-creating value with the customer, whilst Brakus, Schmitt, and Zarantonello (2009) conclude that the sensory dimension is the most relevant in terms of *brand experience* compared to the cognitive, affective, social and behavioral dimensions.

SENSORY STIMULI IN TOURIST EXPERIENCES

By extending the focus on the relationship between the body and people to places, the geographer Porteous (1985) conceptualized the concept of *sensescapes*, arguing that, similar to the notion of landscape with its primarily visual connotations, other senses can be place-related, resulting in *soundscales*, *smellscales*, *tastescapes* or *hapticscales* (Dann, & Jacobsen, 2003; Urry, 2002). Hence, multiple sensory experiences emerged during geographical encounters (Crouch, 2002; Rodaway, 1994; Tuan, 1977). Whilst previous tourism studies have been centered systematically on the visual component of the tourist experience (Adler, 1989), current research aims to take a holistic approach to the five senses with a view to understanding their role in the global tourist experience (Agapito et al., 2013; Gretzel & Fesenmaier, 2003; Kastenholz, Carneiro, Marques, & Lima, 2012; Pan & Ryan, 2009). However, although the consumption experience

globally entwines all the senses (Spence et al., 2014), the idea of *sensescapes* is referred to as sensory experiences of the surrounding environment, being each sensory modality particularized: *visual landscapes* for sight experience, *hearingscape* for auditory experience, *smellscape* for olfactory experience, *tastescape* for gustatory experience, and *hapticscape* for touch experience (Rodaway 1994; Tuan, 1977; Urry 2002). Accordingly, the frameworks for marketing and managing tourist experiences have raised the importance of stimulating the five external senses – sight, hearing, smell, taste, and touch – in order to reach the hearts and minds of tourists (Agapito et al., 2013; Mossberg, 2007; Schmitt, 1999).

In this context, sensory stimuli integrate the external factors (environment, products, and human interactions) influencing the perceptions of tourist experiences that can be partially staged and coordinated around a theme in order to facilitate the integration of an experiential offering and, subsequently, to achieve positive outcomes (Agapito et al., 2013; Cutler & Carmichael, 2010; Ellis & Rossman, 2008; Mossberg, 2007). Particularly, sensory stimuli are addressed as environmental factors, composing the physical/virtual setting in which the consumption of products (tangibles and intangibles) takes place (Bitner, 1992; Neuhofer, Buhalis, & Ladkin, 2012). Moreover, research suggests that the surrounding environment is a facilitator of social interactions (human factors) (Walls, Okumus, Wang, & Kwun, 2011). From this perspective, research on tourism using the experiential approach stresses the crucial role of sensory stimuli in designing the *experiencescape*, i.e., the destination experience environment, leading to tourists' positive emotions, satisfaction, long-term memory and loyalty (Heide & Grønhaug, 2006; Larsen, 2007; O'Dell & Billing, 2005).

The variety of natural and cultural resources available in rural areas contributes to generating an environment in contrast to urban settings and valued for that reason. Indeed, the countryside is well known as comprising a collection of diverse undeveloped resources such as vegetation, soil, wildlife, water, and natural landscapes, and for being associated with cultural values pertaining to handicrafts, gastronomy and local traditions (Roberts & Hall, 2001). In addition, the countryside relates to economic activities linked to agriculture and fisheries; these attract tourists, whether seeking the rural idyll or wishing to experience the diverse outdoor tourist activities offered in rural settings (Butler, Hall, & Jenkins, 1998; Lane, 1994). As a result, the countryside provides not only rich visual stimuli but also other multi-sensory effects that can be experienced by tourists and consequently be managed by the destination in order to boost tourists'

overall experience (Agapito et al., 2012; Kastenholtz, Carneiro, Marques, & Lima, 2012).

FRAMEWORK FOR MARKETING TOURIST SENSORY-THEMED EXPERIENCES IN RURAL DESTINATIONS

The above multidisciplinary literature review evinces the primary role of the senses in consumption experiences and thus consolidates the idea that sensory elements can be used as a starting point for responsibly marketing sensory-themed tourist experiences in rural destinations. Before presenting the proposed framework (**Figure 1**), it is important to note that there is no consensus on the concept of rural tourism among countries and policy entities (Roberts & Hall, 2001). The concept ranges from comprising all tourism activities performed in a rural area (OECD, 1994), including less specialized forms of rural tourism, to the *purest* form of rural tourism, which is focused on the *rural* character of the destination (Lane, 1994). Since both forms result from different tourist motivations coexisting in rural areas, each destination should analyze their specific characteristics and market tourist experiences according to broader destination planning (Lane, 1994; Roberts & Hall, 2004). Given the complexity intrinsic to marketing rural tourism, Kastenholtz, Carneiro, and Marques (2012) conceptualize the rural tourism experience as a complex reality lived “by tourists and local residents alike, shaped by local resources and infrastructure, as well as by the specific rural tourism supply and eventually coordinated by a destination management/marketing organization, within a larger system of economic, cultural and social forces” (p.248). The phases identified in **figure 1** will be summarized and specific research targeted at investigating the topics in greater depth will be indicated.

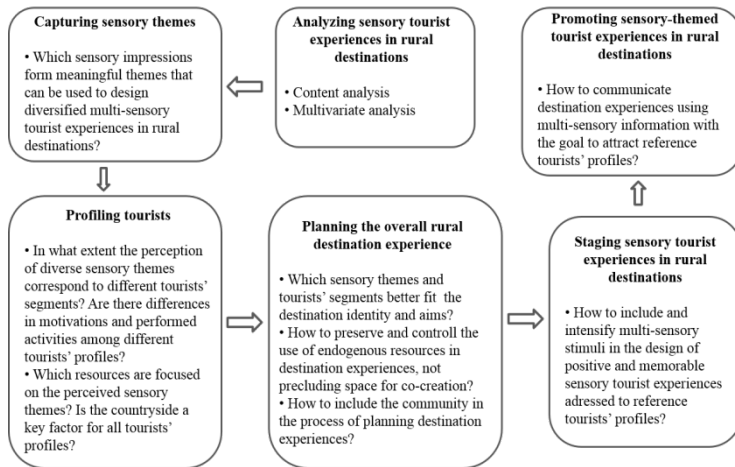


Figure 1 - Framework for marketing sensory-themed rural tourist experience

ANALYZING TOURIST EXPERIENCES AND CAPTURING SENSORY THEMES

The rural tourism literature identifies some themes mainly linked to the images that urban populations (the main visitors to rural destinations) associate with rural areas. A central theme is an idea stemming from a narrative that is being communicated (Moscardo, 2010). From a managerial perspective, it is the underlying concept around which a consumer experience is coherently organized in a particular place, connecting several services and products (Pine & Gilmore, 1998). Common associations with the rural character relate to untouched landscapes, pastoral retreats, the traditional idyll, slower and authentic lifestyles, nostalgic environments, and closeness to nature (Butler et al., 1998). However, rural areas have increasingly become spaces of consumption as opposed to spaces of production, with agriculture losing its dominant position and social structures changing dynamically (Roberts & Hall, 2001), whilst tourists of a different profile are seeking rural areas in which to spend their holidays. This phenomenon has resulted in divergent experiences and perceptions of rural destinations (Kastenholz, Davis, & Paul, 1999), making the study of tourists' perceived themes relevant for marketing purposes.

EMPIRICAL FINDINGS IN RURAL DESTINATIONS

Most of the research taking a managerial perspective to analyze sensory tourist experiences takes into account the phenomenological nature of the tourist experience concept and suggests the use of mixed methods (Agapito et al., 2013). Accordingly, the existing studies in rural areas providesome

empirical that sensory-informed themes can be found in the articulation of different sensory impressions (Agapito et al., 2014; Gretzel&Fesenmaier, 2003, 2010;Pan & Ryan, 2009). These empirical studies suggest, as a first step, to undertakea content analysis of reported sensory experiences (e.g., through open-ended questions, or travelogues), effectively drawing out embedded knowledge. In a second phase, a multivariate analysis (e.g., correspondence analysis orfactor analysis) of the coded sensory categories derived from content analysis permits the intersection of the sensory variables identified to capture sensory themes. Moreover, the procedure ofcrossing sensory impressions and variables related to the visitor (e.g. motivations) allows findingassociations between the sensory themes andthe individuals' profiles (cluster analysis).

In order to assess information that is not easily accessible in the consumer's mind, such as that pertaining to sensory experiences, and to use large samples enabling the extraction of the dominant bundles necessary to develop marketing strategies aimed at specific segments, Gretzel and Fesenmaier (2010) created the *Sensory Experience Elicitation Protocol* (SEEP). This instrument consists of a self-administered questionnaire containingopen-ended questions aiming to eliciting sensory impressions. These researchers concluded that visual impressions were not predominant and that multi-sensory information extracted from perceived tourist experiences was suitable for theming experiences in a rural destination in northern Indiana, in the Midwestern United States. In fact, the research findings suggest that “the sensory experience dimensions capture aspects of experiences that cannot be represented through other variables such as activity patterns or demographic characteristics” (Gretzel&Fesenmaier, 2010, p. 154).

By analyzing tourist travelogues, Pan and Ryan (2009) found shifts in senses in the perception of different destinations in New Zealand mainly induced by spatial changes in the perspective of journalists, showing that it is possible to associate different destinations with specific sensescapes and to manage sensory stimuli conveyed in destination experiences.

Specifically, the authors state that, regarding holidays in rural settings, it is the sound or silence of nature that helps activate aural senses. These findings were confirmed in the study of Agapito et al. (2014) which was conducted in rural lodgings in Southwest Portugal, where the auditory impression “birdsong” stood out. Preliminary results of this research showed consistency between the results of a Likert scale and a content analysis of the open-ended questions used for collect sensory impressions as perceived by tourists. Although, hierarchically, sight as a broad category produces the highest number of sensory impressions, while the touch has the lowest percentage of responses, these differences were not statistically significant (Agapito, Valle, & Mendes, 2012). In fact, this research suggests that all the five senses are important to tourists in order to have an intensive global experience in the rural area under study. After performing a content analysis of sensory tourist experiences as reported by visitors, the researchers conducted a multiple correspondence analysis followed by a cluster analysis using the coded sensory impressions. The results suggest four meaningful sensory-informed themes with respect to the experience lived in the tourist destination under study: generic beach-related experience, nature-based experience, balanced experience, and rural experience. Hence, this study concludes that “meaningful themes can emerge from an analysis of the sensory impressions of global tourists’ experiences in rural areas” (Agapito et al. 2014, p. 233).

PROFILING TOURISTS

The benefits derived from tourism market segmentation, a process that consists of finding homogeneous groups of tourists sharing similar needs and wants and requiring specific tourist product offerings and marketing mixes (Middleton & Hawkins, 1998), have been discussed extensively in the tourism literature and particularly in rural tourism studies (Park & Yoon, 2009). Given the diversity of tourists seeking rural destinations, niche markets might possibly emerge aimed at gaining competitive advantage and efficiently allocating marketing efforts towards profiles that afford greater attraction to the destination (Kastenholz, et al., 1999; Lane, 2009). Despite the benefits of finding niche markets, this should be a process undertaken with care since individuals are increasingly interested in participating in a wide range of activities in rural destinations, resulting in some difficulty in the identification of a product's core value (Roberts & Hall, 2004).

Some scholars note that commonly used demographic variables relating to market division, although useful in travel research, do not explain underlying motivations for travel since they look only at the characteristics of individuals (Plog, 1994). Other bases for profiling rural tourists for marketing management purposes have proved useful, such as the benefits sought, motivations or activities (Kastenholz et al., 1999; Park & Yoon, 2009). According to the literature, perceived appeals to the senses seem to be appropriate for the activity of profiling rural tourists, since a) perceptions of destination experiences implicitly incorporate personal interests and other psychographic characteristics, and b) sensations are at the core of perceptual processes (Goldstein, 2010; Larsen, 2007). In line with this idea, Gretzel and Fesenmaier (2010) show that although demographic variables do not significantly differentiate sensory-based clusters, activities performed in the destination influence overall destination sensory experience. In a similar vein, Agapito and colleagues' study (2014) conclude that the four sensory-informed themes suggested by a multiple correspondence analysis match to a four-solution cluster of tourists. With the exception of "country of origin", demographic variables do not significantly differentiate the perceived sensory-informed themes; however the tourists' profiles seem to differ according to the tourists' motivations for travel and the activities performed in the destination.

PLANNING AND PROMOTING SENSORY-THEMED RURAL TOURIST EXPERIENCES

With a view to providing long-term benefits to destination stakeholders, tourist profiles should be sustainably matched to the potential of destinations' resources, this being a process expected to increase the levels of satisfaction of both visitors and the destination community, mitigating the gap between expectations and experiences (Dolnicar, 2004). Against the tendency to evaluate resources in an individualistic manner, a holistic approach to the overall tourist experience in the countryside follows from the idea that it is important to generate synergies with different resources within the rural destinations (Cawley & Gillmor, 2008). As part of the character of rural destinations, communities should also be involved in the process of creating quality rural tourism offerings (Saxena et al., 2007), which contributes to increase tourists' confidence in taking longer rural holidays (Lane, 2009). Hence, rural destinations can effectively use their multi-sensory resources (e.g., fauna, flora, landscapes, material and non-material cultural heritage, and gastronomy) to conceptualize quality themed experiences that immerse visitors into perceived authentic local atmospheres, which are aimed at generating sustainable competitive advantage (Haven-Tang & Jones, 2010). Furthermore, bearing in mind that outdoor recreation in natural areas has aesthetic implications affecting the quality of the visitor experience (Pilcher, Newman, & Manning, 2009), targeting specific profiles of tourists facilitates easy management of outdoor activities.

Moreover, since small destination tourist organizations have insufficient budgets to develop marketing strategies with significant impact, the private and public sectors should collaborate. Neighboring regions associated with specific *senses* may conceptualize offerings to different profiles of tourists together, in particular exploring niche markets (Morgan, 2010; Pan & Ryan, 2009; Roberts & Hall, 2004). Furthermore, sensory themes and information and communication technologies (ICT) should be considered together in order to boost destination experiences before, during and after travel (Gretzel & Fesenmaier, 2003, 2010; Neuhofer et al., 2012; Stamboulis & Skayannis, 2003). Furthermore, co-creative management in a network based on specific themes calls for creative industries (e.g., films, architecture, and music) to assemble unparalleled experiences in rural destinations (Kastenholz, Carneiro, & Marques, 2012; Mossberg, 2007). In addition, the institution of a destination management organization is crucial for encouraging cooperation between private and public sectors and

assuring that a destination has a coherent system of offerings (Manente&Minghetti, 2006).

Some researchers recommend that traditional forms of communicating the benefits of destinations should be revised and ICT could assist in promoting destination experiences based not only on visual but also on non-visual stimuli (Gretzel&Fesenmaier, 2003; Gretzel, Fesenmaier, Lee, & Tussyadiah, 2011; Hyun Lee, & Hu, 2009; Isacsson et al., 2009). Indeed, stimulating the senses is a tool with the potential to trigger intense emotions and thus sensory-themed communication based on consumer sensory experiences is important with respect to boosting brand attachment (Gretzel&Fesenmaier, 2010). Collaborative marketing strategies may result in sensory-based creative communication events, such as the development of multi-sensory routes addressed at diverse tourist profiles (Pan & Ryan, 2009) or the use of local gastronomy to promote interactive tourist sensory experiences (Daugstad, 2008; Quan& Wang, 2004; Sidali, Kastenholz, & Bianchi, 2013; Silkes, Cai, & Lehto, 2013).

CONCLUSION

Despite the importance of the senses in consumer experiences being clearly identified in literature, this paper acknowledges the lack of research on the sensory dimension of rural tourist experiences. Hence, this paper proposes and discusses a framework which is based on previous research and focused on carefully marketing sensory-themed tourist experiences in rural destinations. The analysis of perceived sensory tourist experiences in the countryside is considered an appropriate starting point for this process since according to diverse academic fields, sensations are a precondition to human perception of the surroundings and thus sensory stimuli are considered to underpin the provision of satisfying environments, whether physical or virtual, for the consumption of tourism products and services, while boosting human interactions (Agapito et al., 2013; Howes, 2005; Krishna, 2012; Tung & Ritchie, 2011).

The proposed framework is based on the experience economy paradigm, posing that sensory appeals are suitable for theming tourist experiences, resulting that the process of analyzing sensory themes perceived as meaningful allows to understanding which endogenous resources are highlighted by specific groups of tourist. The segmentation of tourists based on sensory-themes followed by the procedure of profiling tourists according to motivations and the activities performed in the destination can help

policy makers and tourism providers to address destination offerings and communication strategies to specific groups of tourists which are more likely to have responsible behavior while at the destination (Kastenholz et al., 1999). As a result, sensory themes may be used to conceptualize and promote creatively rural tourist experiences to reference tourist profiles, exploring both the idea of the multi-phase nature of tourist experiences and the potential of ICT (Agapito et al., 2014). For example, the process of integrating geographic information systems and GPS technologies with the internet could enable sensory-informed routes to be mapped interactively facilitating ease of access to up-to-date and reliable information, adapted to the different phases of the trip and to diverse visitors' needs and motivations (Briedenmann & Wickens, 2004; Pan & Ryan, 2009). Specific routes designed for visually impaired tourists, for journalists, or young visitors, for example, could be developed based on meaningful sensory-themed information.

Hence, the efforts to facilitate the emergence of memorable tourist experiences in rural areas may focus on bundles of textures, colors, shapes, sounds, tastes, and smells related to nature (e.g. local fauna and flora, and geography) and unique characteristics of place identity (e.g. local products, gastronomy, handicrafts, farm activities, local architecture), enabling an appealing aesthetic experience. Furthermore, the process of matching sensory-informed tourists' profiles to destinations encourages the integration of the local community and the optimal use of resources in the planning of the overall rural destination experience, benefiting all the stakeholders. This idea is in harmony with the win-win strategies related to community-based tourism that, if properly managed, can stimulate the conservation of endogenous resources and increase local benefits through participation in tourism activities while enhancing the global rural tourism experience (Saxena et al., 2007; Sebele, 2010). Against this background, empirical research using case studies is required in order to validate the complete framework and its effective impact in the sustainable development of rural destinations.

Since the intend of this paper was to present a framework to marketing integrated rural tourist experiences by using sensory-informed themes, rather than particular consumption interactions, the use of mixed methods proposed by previous research on rural tourist experiences seems to be adequate to this goal. Nevertheless, other tools used in consumer behavior research could be considered in a complementary fashion. In order to conduct tourism firm-specific market research to understand consumers' responses to particular sensory stimuli, neurophysiological tools, such as

eye tracking, skin conductance, electroencephalography (EEG), and functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI) can be implemented in a neuromarketingperspective(Plassmann et al., 2012).Also, experimental studies can contribute to reveal the influence of sensory stimuli (e.g. physical product, gastronomic experience, brand, or promotion) in tourist consumer behavior in particular conditions and to understand how tourists' individual specificities influence their responses (Krishna, 2010). These analyses could result in more effective sensory marketing strategies in rural destinations.

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