

Measuring tourist experience at a destination

Medir a **experiência turística** ao nível do **destino**

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Objectives | The paper presents a review of tourism experience literature, with an emphasis on the experiential marketing paradigm and its application to tourism studies. A framework that supports a current investigation aiming to enhance existing tourism experience scales and its testing in a rural destination setting is also explained.

Methodology | The investigation is based on a combination of qualitative and quantitative methods. Through an extensive literature review covering the fields of consumer experiences, tourism experience, destination marketing and rural tourism, an initial set of dimensions of the tourism experience construct is identified. For each dimension, a group of items is generated from the literature, and will be complemented with the results of a content analysis of tourist reviews in social networks as well as destination sites focusing on experiential aspects of the destination. Following the scale development methodology proposed by Churchill (1979), the initial set of items will be tested on a convenience sample for refinement, and on a second stage it will be tested in a rural tourism setting. The relationship between tourism experience, satisfaction and loyalty will be examined at the same time, in order to assess the tourist experience construct validity.

Main Results and Contributions | The research project currently in progress relies on the management investigation stream on tourism experiences. It is positioned in the intersection between research on the experiential paradigm of consumption and research in destination marketing and management. The aim is to investigate tourism experiences at the destination, and specifically develop an instrument that can measure those experiences, for a particular destination context.

The existence of experiential aspects in consumption and their importance to consumers has been proposed and investigated by several authors. One of the main proposals is that consumption is not only a rational process, but is also influenced by other factors such as emotions, personal characteristics or sensations, which are especially relevant in the consumption of hedonic products (Holbrook & Hirschman,

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1982; Addis & Holbrook, 2001). One may consider the experience paradigm as an extension of Vargo and Lusch's (2004, 2008) service dominant logic in the general consumer behaviour context, where the central notion of "value in use" recognizes the active co-creation of value by the consumer.

This stream of research has developed throughout the years and several characteristics of the consumption experience have been identified by several researchers. Experiences are personal, result from the interaction between the consumer and the product or service, requiring an involvement of the consumer (Addis & Holbrook, 2001; Holbrook & Hirschman, 1982; Pine & Gilmore, 1998; Schmitt, 1999; Vargo & Lusch, 2004). These features of the experience construct are quite adjusted to the tourist product. Therefore, the experiential paradigm has been gradually applied in tourism research, using both qualitative and quantitative methods.

Being a complex construct, several dimensions have been proposed in the literature, some of which particularized for the (rural) tourism context. Figure 1 presents some of these dimensions which have been partly aggregated regarding their conceptual meaning.

emotional / affective / hedonic / feelings Pine and Gilmore, 1998; Schmitt, 1999; Addis and Holbrook, 2001; Gentile et al., 2007; Kim et al., 2012; Kastenholz et al., 2012	cognitive / knowledge / intellectual Pine and Gilmore, 1998; Schmitt, 1999; Gentile et al., 2007; Kastenholz et al., 2012
sensorial / physical Pine and Gilmore, 1998; Schmitt, 1999; Gentile et al., 2007; Kim et al., 2012	relational / social Schmitt, 1999; Gentile et al., 2007; Kastenholz et al., 2012
behavioural / action / reaction Pine and Gilmore, 1998; Schmitt, 1999; Gentile et al., 2007; Knutson and Beck, 2004	nature / esthetics Pine and Gilmore, 1998; Kastenholz et al., 2012
novelty / surprise Hosany and Gilbert, 2010; Kim et al., 2012	local culture / authenticity Kim et al., 2012; Kastenholz et al., 2012

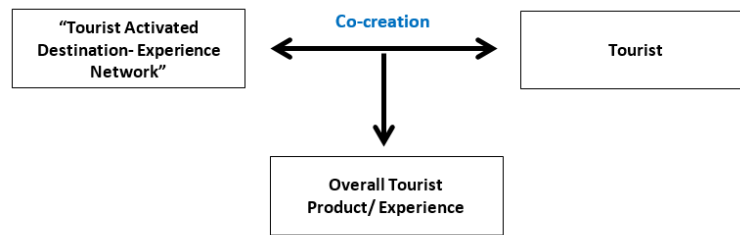
Source: Own elaboration

Figure 1 | Dimensions of the tourist experience construct in the literature

One of the challenges in tourism experience research is to develop instruments that can measure the tourism experience, taking into consideration all dimensions. A few studies have been conducted in specific tourism settings, such as for lodging (Oh, Fiore & Jeoung, 2007) and cruisers (Hosany & Witham, 2010), or at the destination level (Barnes, Mattsson & Sorensen, 2014). Besides these efforts, there is still no general acceptance of a scale and an apparent need for further improvements on the measuring instruments remains.

The tourist experience results from multiple interactions between the tourist, the destination actors, and other tourists (Andersson, 2007; Mossberg, 2007), in a context of a particular destination setting (Kastenholz, Carneiro, & Marques, 2012). Actually, tourists co-create their own experience putting together the resources (services, attractions, landscape or people) that are available (Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2004; Kastenholz et al., 2012, Mossberg, 2007), and "activating" their own "destination-experience network" (adapted from Gnoth, 2003). This is represented in figure 2.

The evaluation of the experience at the destination is then a result of all the interactions occurring, and

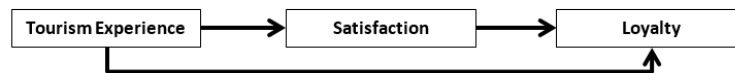


Source: Own elaboration

Figure 2 | Tourism experiences – a personal co-creation between tourist and the destination network

affecting different dimensions of the experience. The present research attempts to develop a tool that measures these dimensions that together form the overall tourist experience.

For assessing the tourist experience construct validity, the research will assess the predictability of the experience scale on other measures that relate to it and to identify if they behave as expected (Churchill, 1979). For the present study, we plan to include tourist satisfaction and loyalty as outcomes of the tourism experience. Several studies have confirmed the relation between experience, satisfaction (Oh et al., 2007; Barnes et al., 2014; Hosany & Gilbert, 2010) and loyalty (Brakus, Schmitt & Zarantonello, 2009; Hosany & Gilbert, 2010; Barnes et al. 2014). Therefore, it is expectable that a positive experience will increase the satisfaction level of the tourist and his/ her loyalty behaviour. This hypothesis is represented in figure 3.



Source: Own elaboration

Figure 3 | Relation between experience, satisfaction and loyalty

Limitations | The potential dimensions presented in the paper are solely based on a literature review and hence the present research needs to better define the experience construct dimensions with a qualitative study that may capture which of the dimensions in the literature may be supported and to identify potential new dimensions to include. Additionally, it is also necessary to specify the items to include in each scale and refine them through a pre-test on a convenience sample, with scales incorporating both already suggested items found in other studies, adapted scales and eventually new ones from the qualitative study. This is work in progress with additional scale validation requiring a large-scale survey and additional model testing.

Conclusions | The experiential view of consumption is quite suitable for research in the tourism field. Tourism experiences result from the interaction between the tourist and a network of other actors at the destination, including local resources such as service providers, local communities, built or natural attractions, as well as other tourists. The identified potential dimensions of the tourism experience, as well as the proposed model for the way the tourist co-creates his personal experience, are a step in the way to develop a scale to measure tourist experiences. Having such instrument will contribute to a better understanding of the experience concept and consequently to a better development of destination policies.

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