

TOWARDS A SENSES-BASED MODEL FOR EXPERIENTIAL TOURISM: THE YOUTOOSCAN.Y.COM CASE

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Abstract

An experience can be defined as the “the result of encountering, undergoing, or living through situations” and “triggered stimulations to the senses, the heart, and the mind”. Senses play a central role in our perception of the surrounding world and in the experience process. According to this, the study of sensory dimension of tourist experiences is recently pointed out as pivotal to management in the tourism industry. In particular, recent studies show that there is not a dominant sense but a successful tourism destination should attract tourists by more stimuli and provide for all the senses. That is why in tourism, today, is preferred than the word landscape, the concept of “sensescape”, as multi-sensorial “scape”. In this paper we present an innovative way to see the experience process and a model, based on multisensory criteria, namely taking into account of all the senses. We also show how this model has allowed us to define authentic experiences in project youtooscan.y.com, focused on the territory of Fiesole and Florence (Italy).

Introduction

The conventional tourism is in trouble. The birth and the evolution of new forms of tourism, characterized by tendency to depart from mass tourism, facing new challenges (Stamboulis & Skayannis, 2003)¹. This change in tourism and in consumers' behaviour calls for new approaches that make use of innovative ways for offering tourism. In particular, researchers and economists have drawn attention to experiential nature of goods and services (Pine & Gilmore, 1999; Schmitt, 1999; Holbrook, 2000)^{2,3,4}. Their findings related to hedonic value and emotional responses to consumption are especially relevant for tourism given the inherently experiential nature of tourism products and services (Gretzel & Fesenmaier, 2003)⁵. In last years, the facilitation of extraordinary experiences has become a strategic goal in the tourism industry (Walls et al., 2011)⁶. In this context, the study of the sensory dimension of tourist experiences has recently been pointed out as crucial to supporting decision-makers in enhancing tourist experiences (Gilmore & Pine, 2002;

Gretzel & Fesenmaier, 2010; Pan & Ryan, 2009; Agapito et al., 2013)^{7,8,9,10}. Nevertheless, tourism studies about the role of the five human senses in tourist experiences are still not sufficient to cover this topic and more efforts in conceptualization are needed, playing today an important research opportunity.

The aim of this paper is to offer a contribution in this area, presenting an original senses-based model for designing experiences by stimulating all the human senses, leading to personal engagement. To this end, we investigate how senses play a key role in the experience, both from a multidisciplinary point of view both in the economic and tourism field, with reference to the analysis of the literature. Besides, we let introduce a new way to see the experience like a particular process. This process will be the basis for the definition of senses-based model, in which applying the concept of touchpoint taken by marketing, the influence of all senses will take into account on the basis of criteria. In the last paragraph, we will see the application of this model to the case of the project youtooscan.com.

Senses in experience

The role of the senses in human life, experience and knowledge has been a reason of reflection since the early days of philosophy (Aristotle, 2001; Plato, 2003)^{11,12}. The same division and hierarchy of the senses into sight, followed by hearing, smell, taste and touch are attributed to Aristotle. This philosopher argued a position claiming that knowledge begins with sense perception, through the apprehension of the external world. Then, an abstraction process allows the essence of objects to be captured. Afterwards, in the eighteenth century, philosophers such as Kant defended the idea that knowledge of the world begins with the senses, evolving however through understanding and reasoning (Deleuze, 1994)¹³. Among the contemporary philosophical studies, we can cite those of Merleau-Ponty, who, in *Phenomenology of Perception*, stresses the role of the body in perception, stating that the world is perceived by the individual's body, rejecting the dualism of mind and body. Thus, the body is seen as a form of consciousness, its interactions with the world being what constitutes mental states and activities (Merleau-Ponty, 2002)¹⁴.

In the twentieth century, with the development of new sciences, the study of the importance of senses in the experience in understanding the world spread out to many disciplines, covering a wide range of academic fields.

Modern psychology considers that sensation involves mental processes necessary for the basic detection of the surrounding world, by which a stimulated sensor receptor creates a pattern of neural messages that represent the stimulus in the brain, initiating the individual's experience of the stimulus. Thus, psychologists approach the human senses assuming they are important aspects of the individual's experiences and behaviour (Davis & Palladino, 2000; Goldstein, 2010; Zimbardo et al., 2011)^{15,16,17}.

Also in neuroscience, in *Descartes's Error*, Damásio claims that the knowledge comes to mind in the form of images. These images appear in all sensorial varieties, not just visual, but sounds, textures, smells, tastes, pains and pleasures, and refer to any object or action that is being processed in the brain. Therefore, during the perception process of events, individuals form perceptual images through external sensory stimuli captured by the human sensory sensors (Damásio, 2009, 2010)^{18,19}.

Besides, social-anthropological studies on the social and cultural dimensions of the senses stress the fact that perception stems from a learned behaviour, apart from being physically related and hostage to place and time (Howes, 2005)²⁰. The historian Smith claims that "senses are historical, that they are not universal but, rather, a product of place and, especially, time so that how people perceived and understood smell, sound, taste, and sight changed historically" (Smith, 2007)²¹.

In marketing management, the importance of human senses is clear in the individual's experience of different purchase and consumption processes. According to Schmitt, one of the strategic experience module is sensory itself (sense)³. Very recent marketing researches confirm that products of all sorts can evoke strong sensory responses and consumption experiences that appeal directly to consumers (Howes et al., 2013)²². Krishna affirms that "products are sensual in nature... The more a firm can create, accentuate, or highlight the sensuality of their products, the more appealing these products can be for consumers". The same author defines "sensory marketing" as "marketing that engages the consumers' senses and affects their perception, judgment and behaviour" (Krishna, 2010)²³. Creating sensations, or bringing attention to existing sensations, can increase the appeal of products or services to consumers (Malefyt, 2015)²⁴. Business consultants Hultén and colleagues posit that recent sensory awareness has launched "a new epoch in marketing," where "the five senses will be at the centre of a firm's marketing strategy and tactics". Sensory marketing, they hold, supersedes mass and relationship marketing because it involves "heightened consumer involvement with objects on a personal level". The hope for marketers is to unite all the senses in a cascading effect and create a "supreme sensory experience" that wins over the consumer (Hultén et al., 2009)²⁵.

In tourist studies, in particular in the field of experiential tourism, senses have played always a pivotal role. Often, these studies have been systematically centred on the visual component of the tourist experience (Pan & Ryan, 2009)⁹. Some research has paid more attention to specific senses, such as sight (Adler, 1989)²⁶, hearing (Pilcher et al., 2009)²⁷, smell (Dan & Jacobsen, 2003)²⁸, taste (Hjalager & Richards, 2002)²⁹ and touch (Pocock, n.d.)³⁰. Current literature points to the role of all the bodily senses in understanding global tourist experiences, highlighting the need for a holistic approach to *sensescapes*, i.e., adding to *landscapes* other kinds of *scapes*, such as *soundscapes*, *tastescapes*, *haptiscapes* and *smellscapes*, in order to highlight the whole sensory dimension in tourist experience (Agapito et al., 2012, 2013; Urry,

2002; Ellis & Rossman, 2008; Govers et al., 2007; Gretzel & Fesenmaier, 2003; Kastenholzetal et al.)^{31,10,32,33,34,5,35}. In this line, we are presenting this work.

A new way to see the experience process

Every consumption event involves an interaction between a subject and an object (Holbrook, 1999)³⁶, where the subject of interest is a consumer and the object of interest is some good, service, event, person, place or other kind of thing. In their interaction, these two entities make different contributions to the overall consumption experience, but both of them are important for the consumption event. In general, a product embodies certain features or objective characteristics, while the consumer embodies a personality equipped for sensitivity to various sorts of subjective responses. The consumption experience is created through this interaction, involving a strong relationship between the subject and the object (Addis & Holbrook, 2001)³⁷.

For which, in the case of experiential tourism, although the experience is usually treated as product or object, it is crucial to recognize that the experience is a process of consumption where an event, the real object, became an experience. Experience is that only when the objective characteristics of the event interact with subjective responses of the protagonist (consumer) of experience, as we can see in the scheme of Figure 1.

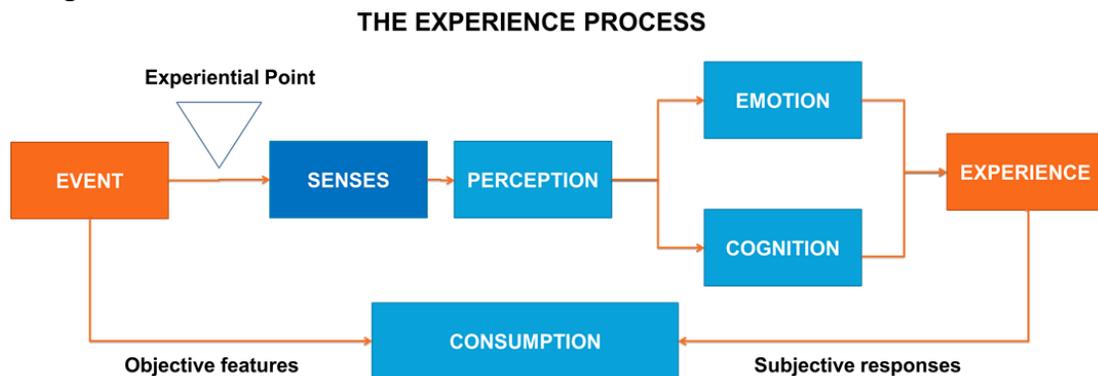


Figure 1: The experience process in tourism.

From a phenomenological and cognitive point of view, this experience process is composed of all the steps of a sequence that contribute to transform the event in the experience itself (Volo, 2009)³⁸. The first stage of the process is represented by senses. In fact, the process starts when the physical stimuli, caused by the event, impinge upon the receptor cells of the sensory organ of the tourist. This phase is biochemical and neurological in nature: an energy form impinge on a receptor physiologically designed to transduce it. Next stage is perception, that is the awareness or understanding of sensory information or, more simply, the

interpretation of the sensation. As a matter of fact, in Latin language, *perceptio* or *percipio* means “apprehension with the mind or senses.” Psychologists tend to understand perception as a mental phase where sensory input is selectively attended to, organized and interpreted. Perception is about making sense of what our senses tell us (Larsen, 2007)³⁹. Lastly, perception affects emotion, the instinctive or intuitive inner state of person related to feeling, and cognition, the mental state of knowing, including aspects such as awareness, reasoning, and judgment (Krishna, 2012)⁴⁰. This last phase is the most subjective and is that in which the tourist makes his own and internalizes the experience. The event has become experience.

By analyzing the process, a clear consequence is the point: senses have a crucial and trigger role, being the first and corporeal gate in the experience process. Therefore, for the tourism industry, to leverage sensory stimuli is essential to create a unique and memorable experience.

A senses-based model

Personal experiences are influenced by factors that are out of the control of management (Walls at al., 2011; Pullman & Gross, 2004)^{41,42}. As seen in the previous paragraph, these factors may include personal human interactions, cultural backgrounds and personality traits, and other personal factors. In other words, who make tourism has no influence on the subjective part of the process of experience.

This raises a question: How an operator can act to draw experiences that are successful and deeply involve tourists?

The secret is to intervene in the right place in the process of experience, or where it triggers the subjective elaboration: the stimulation of the senses.

In marketing, the term “touchpoint” is used to refer to point or moment of contact between a product, service or brand with customers/users or other stakeholders. The touchpoint, also called “moment of truth”, is essentially the contact point between the object and the subject (Jenkinson, 2006, 2007)^{43,44}. Based on this concept, we define as “experiential point” each point, moment, of contact or interaction between the consumer (tourist) and the event (a tourist destination or attraction), which can contribute to the overall tourism experience (Rossi & Goetz, 2011)⁴⁵. In the scheme of Figure 1, the experiential point is placed at the beginning of the process as an element related to the event and of input to the senses. In this sense, we can affirm that each experiential point is sensual in nature and has a specific sensory dimension.

This assumption makes it possible to converge towards a crucial consequence: To design an experience means to foresee, plan, create experiential points. So a question arises later: how can an operator build experiential points?

In a previous paragraph, we have remarked that researchers currently stress the importance of addressing the role of body in tourist experience, focusing on a holistic approach to all senses (*sensescapes*). It is increasingly no doubt that, not only all

senses are equally important (Pan & Ryan, 2009)⁴⁶, but also that there is a powerful phenomenon of interaction of the senses (Krishna, 2012)⁴⁰. The total resulting of mono-sensory elements associated with different senses is greater than the sum of the values of the individual elements, in terms of impact and involvement of the person. Some recent studies within consumer behavior have looked at cross-modal interactions, including the effects of smell and sound (Mattila & Wirtz, 2001)⁴⁷, sound and vision (Russell, 2002)⁴⁸, sound and smell (Spangenberg et al., 2005)⁴⁹, sound and perceived taste (Yorkston & Menon, 2004)⁵⁰, touch and taste (Krishna & Morrin, 2008)⁵¹, vision and taste (Hoegg & Alba, 2007)⁵², and smell and haptics (Krishna et al., 2010)⁵³. So, the touristic experience is multisensory and a successful tourism destination should attract tourists by more than visual stimuli and provide for all the senses (Dann & Jacobsen, 2002; Franklin & Crang, 2001)^{54,55}.

Thereby, for the reason that not a single sensorial stimulus but the interaction between all the senses makes the experience process, we can deduce that to design the product experience means to plan experiential points with a comprehensive and holistic multi-sensorial approach.

The senses-based model here presented brings together the strategic elements just discussed and identifies the method for the design of a tourist experience of success, in the following five actions:

1. Identify and create multiple experiential points and varied;
2. Assign to each experiential point its sensory nature, that is the main sense associated;
3. Give a score to every sense involved. Every sense is a dimension of valuation of the overall experience;
4. Evaluate the effectiveness of the experience on the five-dimensional plane of the senses;
5. If some sensory dimensions are characterized by low involvement, create new experiential points.

This method, based on the model, therefore allows not only to evaluate the impact of experience in tourist, but allows, in the construction phase of the experience, to guide the operator and helps to define, adjust and add contact points in order to guarantee an experience of full involvement.

In the next section, let us see the application of this model to the youtooscany.com case by providing an example.

The youtooscany.com case

The project “Youtooscany”, which focuses on rural tourism in the hills of Florence, was born for competitive development of hospitality that aims to move from the concept of common tourist product to that of authentic tourist experience. The project has involved research centers such as the Centro Interuniversitario di Ricerca sul Turismo (CIRT) and the University of Florence, SMEs such as the Farmhouse of

Maiano and Local Public Administrations including the City of Fiesole. The goal of the project is to create a well-structured tourist offer of tourism products such as to be perceived as unique and engaging. The home page of official web site youtooscany.com is shown in Figure 2.

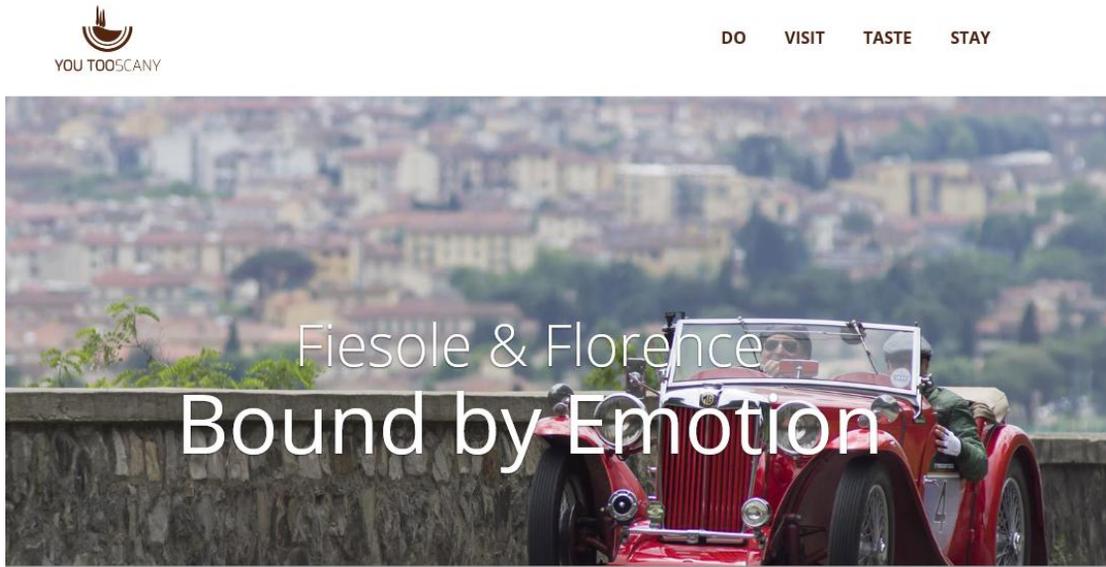


Figure 2: The youtooscany.com home page.

Let us consider the experience “Learn how to cook Tuscan with us”, created within the project and available online. The purpose of this paragraph is to provide an example of application of the sense-based model and to show how this one can guarantee the evaluation of an experience.



Figure 3: The application of senses-based model to the youtooscany.com experience “Learn how to cook Tuscan with us”.

In the experience we are considering, we can identify different experiential points. Some of these, as shown in Figure, are:

- To knead the dough with own hands
- To smell the sauce in cooking
- To listen to the stories of the cook
- Working in an authentic old kitchen
- To taste “tagliatelle” just made

Experiential Points listed above are just some of those that this experience provides. However, for illustrative purposes, we can consider them sufficient to illustrate the application. In fact, each of these points has a sensitive nature which can be identified and associated, as reported in Figure 3. As it is evident, in this case, all the senses are involved. Every sense is a dimension in the evaluation of the experience, as shown by the radar chart of Figure 3. Giving a score to each experiential point, on the basis of the level of involvement of tourists in relation to respective sense, the operator who evaluate and design the experience is able to understand the effectiveness of the experience. In this case, reporting the score values listed in Figure 3 on their sensory dimensions of the graph, the operator can have a more comprehensive overview and then an overall evaluation of the experience, considering the area of the resulting pentagon.

More experiential points an operator can create and more the sensory dimensions are involved, then more the experience will be meaningful, engaging, high-impact and successful in terms of consumer satisfaction and in term of business.

Conclusions

This work was born by the interest to contribute to improve the tourist offer experiential. The research is in line with studies on the role of the senses and the value of their interaction in the consumer experience. The main results presented here are:

1. on the theoretical level, a new definition of experience process definition that highlights the crucial role of the senses;
2. on the operational level, the elaboration of a senses-based model for the evaluation and design of the experience.

Among the key concepts we expressed in this work, we point out:

- Consumption is an interaction between a subject and an object;
- The experience is a process of consumption where an event became an experience;
- Senses are the first and corporeal gate in the experience process;
- The experiential points are points of contact or touchpoints between the consumer (tourist) and the event (tourist attraction);
- Each experiential point is sensual in nature and has a specific sensory dimension;

- Not a single sensorial stimulus but the interaction between all the senses makes the experience process;
- To design the product experience means to plan experiential points with a comprehensive and holistic multi-sensorial approach.

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