

Sensory experience – between the tourist and the marketer

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Abstract. *In order to influence the decision making process in tourism, and to keep account with the “tough” competition environment in the current economy, destinations find themselves “fighting” more and more for the attainment of an image as favourable as possible in the mind of the tourist. It is for this reason that the marketer projects the image identity and develops contact points, so that, through the application of suitable stimuli, the tourist will have a memorable sensory experience through the stages of pre-consumption, actual consumption and post-consumption of the travel product. The purpose of the present article is to evaluate the sensory experience of the tourist – a possible instrument for reducing the gap between projection and perception, as well as for imagining the travel product.*

Keywords: experience, sensory experience, contact points, sensory dimensions, destination.

JEL Classification: M31.

REL Classification: 14G.

1. Introduction

In the present economy, value progression is acquired by starting from the extraction of raw materials and their processing, and continues with the production of goods and service delivery, to end through the “staging” of experiences, so that the marketer can assure added value and a competitive position for his/hers organization, as it is known that an experience becomes memorable for the consumer as it succeeds in efficiently “seducing” his/hers senses, so that it satisfies its needs in a personalized manner (Pine II and Gilmore, 2010, p. 61). The experiences that the consumers “live” through create “connections at different brain levels”, which can result in waking up positive emotions towards the brand with “each client/company interaction” (Hill, 2010, p. 61). Experiences engage the senses, the emotions and the thoughts of the consumer, drawing him into a social activity or interaction, or just “taking him into another world” (Govers and Go, 2009, p. 17). In this context, the organization that handles the marketing, and the management for a destination respectively, should control sensory experience, as the “supremacy of the emotional factor in relation with the rational in the travel product purchasing decision” (Stăncioiu, 2004, p. 23) is recognized by a huge proportion of specialists.

Trevisani (2007, p. 95) considers that marketing should identify an interface capable of producing emotions, having a role in influencing the consumer’s purchase decision, and sensory experience can represent exactly such a kind of interface between the tourist and the destination. An argument is brought both by the direct relation between the emotion and the senses that have been provoked (according to “emotional reaction = provoked sense x positive reaction x emotion”), and by the increase in the solidarity degree that the consumer exhibits, as well as by the value perceived according to the number of senses involved in the development and the delivery of the product, these being (in ascending order): seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting and touching (Lindstrom, 2009, p. 214).

Throughout the whole experience (pre-consumption, actual consumption and post-consumption), the tourist experiments sensations and emotions that can lead, at the end, to the development of some strong and unique connections with the destination. The reunion of such connections constitutes the image of the destination, the sensory experience being the element that can “bring together” the image perceived by the tourist to the identity projected by the marketer, an experience that is analysed in the present study.

The micro-destination Dobrogea, situated in the South East of Romania, is composed of the Constanța and Tulcea counties. Dobrogea, together with the other micro-destinations (Banat-Crișana, Bucovina, Maramureș, Moldova, Muntenia, Oltenia, and Transylvania) make up macro-destination Romania (1),

with its sensory audit realized in previous articles, the purpose of the present series closing article being to evaluate sensory experience at destination level.

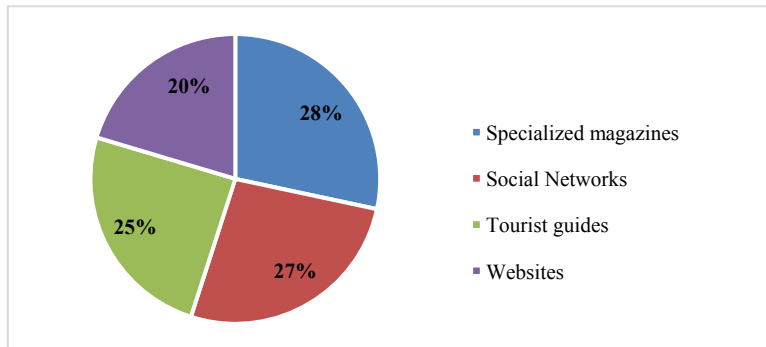
2. Methodological framework

The study was realized between March and August 2013 on a sample of 360 respondents (with 77% women and 23% men), aged between 20-24 years, with higher education or in progress, and coming from all the regions of Romania. The purpose of the research was the evaluation of sensory travel experience at the level of the micro-destination Dobrogea, following on a research realized in October-December 2010 – January 2011, on a sample of 1887 young people with a similar profile with the subjects of the current research, and which had as its purpose the “identification of the measure in which resident perceptions from different regions of Romania on micro-destination Dobrogea help to construct its identity in the development of the destination’s marketing strategy” (Stăncioiu et al., 2011).

Respondent opinions on the sensory experiences lived in Dobrogea are relevant, as 91% of them have visited the destination. The main reason for which the respondents have visited micro-destination Dobrogea was represented by the following types of tourism: leisure, recreation and rest tourism (53.4%), visits to relatives and friends (16.5%), balneary tourism (13.9%), cultural tourism (10.1%), business and professional tourism (5%) and other types of tourism (1.1%). On the other hand, the main reasons for which 9% of the subjects did not visit the destination were: lack of material resources (44.1%), lack of interest/motivation (17.6%), insufficient time (14.7%) insufficient information on accommodation facilities (8.9%), do not know (14.7%). However, considering that the 85.9% of respondents that have visited the destination intend to revisit it, we can safely say that they have been satisfied by the overall experience they have had here.

The tourist experience starts from the pre-consumption stage, when his/hers first contact with the destination takes place (at an imaginary level), in the terms of a mental experimentation of the travel product, on the basis of the information received and the storage in time from different sources. This way, in order to document themselves on micro-destination Dobrogea, tourists have consulted, according to the research results, the following sources of information, as presented in Figure 1.

Figure 1. Information sources on micro-destination Dobrogea used in the pre-consumption stage by the tourists



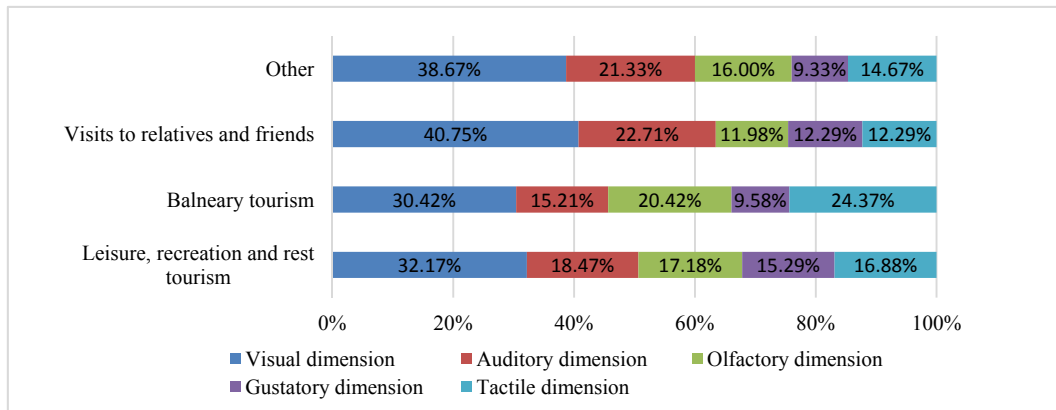
The first aspect that can be observed regards the sources of information is the balanced percentages for each source, according to the degree of trust placed in them by the tourists, when they are searching for information about the destination (Figure 1).

The second important aspect, which can be observed in Figure 1, is represented by the high degree of trust placed by tourists on the information coming from social networks (27%), which is normal considering the respondents' age. In this context, we can deduce that points of view coming from friends, exposed on social networks, become almost as important in delivering destination information as specialist opinions published in travel magazines, highlighting their influence and the high degree of subjectivism in acquiring information regarding a destination.

However, no matter the sources of information used by tourists to document themselves regarding a certain destination, information content remains essential, and it should, preferably, stimulate every consumer's sense, allowing him to mentally experiment the place, so that the gap between the identity projected by the marketer and the image perceived by the tourist is reduced.

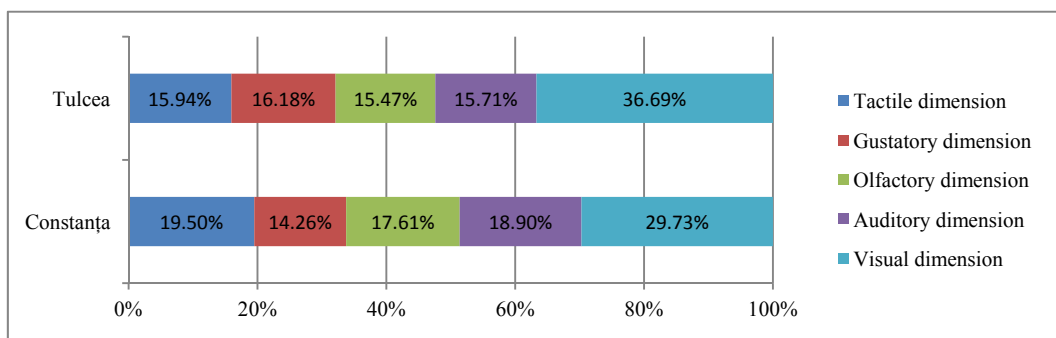
Following on, the marketer should evaluate the types of tourism through a sensorial process (Figure 2), as they can constitute one of the main reasons for choosing a destination in the pre-consumption stage, and also one of convergence elements of all the contact points that "make up" the destination, during the actual consumption stage. This way, efficient natural and anthropic resource management can be achieved, in full correlation with the elements of sensory identity and the "in situ" experience lived by the tourist, ensuring the development of sustainable competitive advantage. Therefore, tourism types could constitute "support columns" in destination selection.

Figure 2. Sensory dimensions that tourists associate with main types of tourism practiced in micro-destination Dobrogea



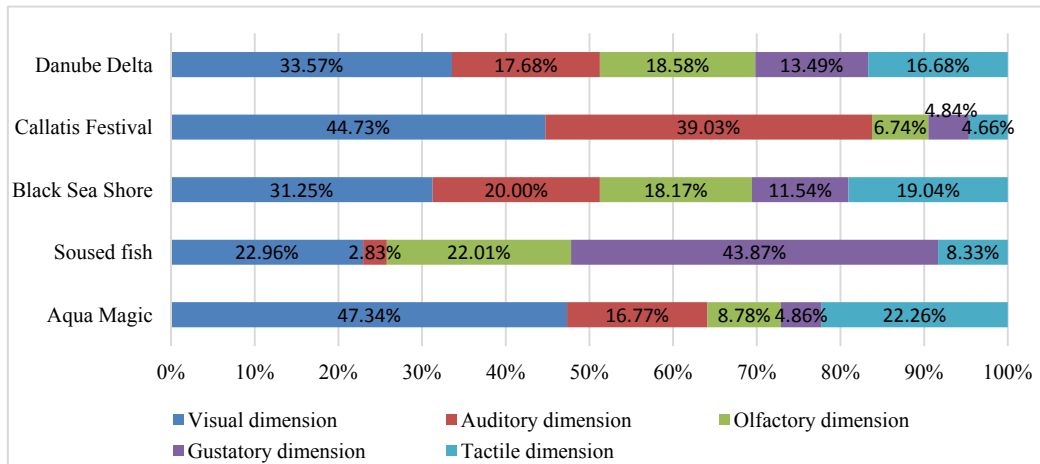
As micro-destination Dobrogea includes Constanța and Tulcea counties, each of them being a destination in its own right, at this level (local) the sensory analysis that the marketer carries out should deliver back relevant information on keeping the perceived quality of the regional travel product (Figure 3). Correlating the sensory analysis of the types of tourism with sensory analysis, at a local level, of destinations that are part of the micro-destination (“vertical” assessment), it can be developed a monitoring instrument for the tourist experience that can be useful in managing total quality for the travel product at region level.

Figure 3. Sensory dimensions associated with the component counties of micro-destination Dobrogea



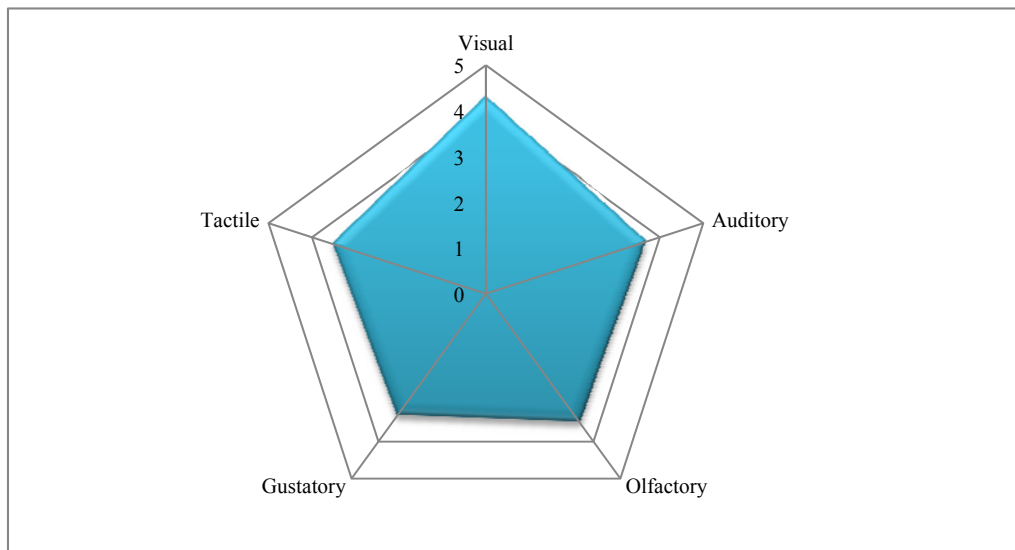
From the tourist perspective, through his/hers experience, the destination can be summed up by a multitude of contact points. For this reason, the sensory evaluation that the marketer realizes must also contain the analysis for these points of contact (Figure 4) for the purpose of ensuring a memorable sensory experience for the tourist.

Figure 4. Sensory dimensions associated with micro-destination Dobrogea at contact point level



From a sensory point of view, micro-destination Dobrogea presents the following profile (Figure 5 – sensogram), well-balanced on all sensory dimensions. This sensory profile is developed better than those that have been analysed in previous articles concerning micro-destination Muntenia (Stăncioiu et al., 2014a), Transylvania (Dițoiu et al., 2014), and Oltenia (Stăncioiu et al., 2014b), and more than that, it can be affirmed that tourists that visit micro-destination Dobrogea take part in a holistic and uniform experience, that “centres” on the consumer and engulfs him/her during product delivery, stimulating his/hers senses.

Figure 5. Sensory profile for micro-destination Dobrogea



During the actual consumption stage (“in situ”), the tourist directly interacts with the destination in certain contact points. For this reason, identifying these points and “preparing” them, so that they meet tourist demand, represents an important stage that the marketer should take account of in developing the travel product. From a practical sense, the management and marketing of a complex product, like a destination, can only be realised in this context, of managing and marketing contact points. The marketer should classify these contact points, so that he can easily operate with them (in the sense of delivering the sensation of a unitary and integrated experience at product level to the tourist). One of the classification possibilities (subjective as it is) would be distributing each contact point in one of the following categories: transport, accommodation, food, attractions, activities, and others, like auxiliaries, according to the main service offered; however, as it can be inferred, there is no clear delimitation of delivered services, not even at destination level, which can lead to a unique classification for specialized literature. A possible solution, proposed by the authors, is to distribute the contact points to the following categories: visual experiences, auditory experiences, olfactory experiences, gustatory experiences and tactile experiences.

Distribution to a certain category is done according to the dominant sensory dimension that is associated by the tourist with a certain contact point. Of course that, in a category, at the level of each contact point, all the sensory dimensions can be analysed, so that point can deliver an optimal experience for the tourist, but at destination level, in order to “close up” as much as possible the projected identity with the perceived image in the collective mind, through sensory experience in situ, the convergence of contact points at dominant sensory dimension level remains essential, “covering up” the gap between the stimuli managed by the marketer (emitter) and the sensory information perceived by the tourist (receiver).

As far as micro-destination Dobrogea is concerned, according to respondent opinion (Table 1), the perceived visual experience is positive, containing elements that lack negative impressions, with which the tourists associate the destination on the visual dimension. Among the contact points identified for micro-destination Dobrogea it can be extracted the Danube Delta, Constanța and Mamaia, which can also represent local level destinations. On the other hand, The Black Sea dominates this dimension, while the only attraction that can become a visual signature for Dobrogea is the Casino in Constanța.

Table 1. Visual elements “composing” the visual experience for micro-destination Dobrogea

		% of total column	
Visual elements		Total	Of which
<i>Base</i>			Men Women
1	Black Sea	29,7	31,3 29,2
2	Danube Delta	11,7	9,6 12,3
3	Black Sea Coast	6,9	7,2 6,9
4	landscape	3,9	1,2 4,7
5	beautiful	3,1	2,4 3,2
6	beach	2,8	2,4 2,9
7	Danube	2,2	2,4 2,2
8	Casino in Constanța	1,9	0,0 2,5
9	water	1,7	3,6 1,1
10	Constanța	1,7	0,0 2,2
11	Mamaia	1,4	1,2 1,4
12	The sea and Danube Delta	1,4	2,4 1,1
13	blue	1,1	1,2 1,1
14	good	1,1	1,2 1,1
15	pleasant	1,1	1,2 1,1
16	Others	25,6	27,7 24,9
17	Does not exist/Do not know	2,8	4,8 2,2

The auditory experience that the tourists have experimented in micro-destination Dobrogea includes a negative element – the “noise”. With the exception of this element, the auditory experience is a positive one for the tourist. The sound of the waves dominates the auditory dimension (Table 2), but respondents could not identify a single auditory identity element, specific to the destination.

Table 2. Auditory elements “composing” the auditory experience in micro-destination Dobrogea

		% of total column	
Auditory elements		Total	of which
<i>Base</i>			Men Women
1	wave sound	28,1	32,5 26,7
2	Seagulls	8,6	6,0 9,4
3	music	6,7	0,0 8,7
4	sound of the Danube	4,2	2,4 4,7
5	quiet	2,8	0,0 3,6
6	club	1,7	2,4 1,4
7	pleasant	1,7	2,4 1,4
8	noise	1,4	0,0 1,8
9	water	1,1	1,2 1,1
10	concert	1,1	0,0 1,4
11	beautiful	1,1	1,2 1,1
12	sea coast	1,1	0,0 1,4
13	Mamaia	1,1	1,2 1,1
14	birds	1,1	2,4 0,7
15	Others	26,9	30,1 26,0
16	Does not exist/Do not know	11,4	18,1 9,4

Tourists associate micro-destination Dobrogea with the salty smell of the sea, from the olfactory experience perspective. For this reason, olfactory elements they perceive like “sea smell”, “salt”, “sea breeze”, “salty water” together with “fresh”, “clean air” and “aerosols” constitute a positive experience for those who have visited the destination (Table 3), on the other end being the “algae” element, considered to be an exponent of a negative olfactory experience. At the same time, from Table 3, it can be observed that respondents have not perceived a potential olfactory element that can, in time, become an olfactory signature at micro-destination level.

Table 3. *Olfactory elements that “compose” olfactory experience in micro-destination Dobrogea*

		% of total column		
Olfactory elements		Total	Of which	
			Men	Women
	<i>Base</i>	360	83	277
1	sea smell	13,1	10,8	13,7
2	algae	5,6	4,8	5,8
3	fish	5,3	2,4	6,1
4	fresh	4,4	3,6	4,7
5	salty	4,7	6,0	4,3
6	sea breeze	4,2	3,6	4,3
7	Danube Delta	2,2	3,6	1,8
8	pleasant	2,2	2,4	2,2
9	clean air	2,8	2,4	2,9
10	aerosols	1,4	3,6	0,7
11	sea coast	1,4	1,2	1,4
12	wine	1,4	0,0	1,8
13	salt water	1,1	3,6	0,4
14	good	1,1	1,2	1,1
15	Others	33,6	27,7	35,4
16	Do not exist/ Do not know	15,6	22,9	13,4

Gustatory experience is associated with the “fish” element, supported by “fish soup”, “anchovies”, and “fish products” (Table 4). However, the elements that can, in time, become olfactory signatures according to Table 4, are “Dobrogea pies” or “Dobrogea goulash”.

Table 4. Elements that “compose” gustatory experience in micro-destination Dobrogea

		% of total column		
Gustatory elements		Total	Of which	
<i>Base</i>		360	Men	Women
1	fish	19,7	10,8	22,4
2	salty	5,6	6,0	5,4
3	fish soup	3,1	4,8	2,5
4	Anchovies	3,1	8,4	1,4
5	good	2,5	1,2	2,9
6	ice cream	1,9	0,0	2,5
7	food	1,9	0,0	2,5
8	fish products	1,9	1,2	2,2
9	sea fruits	1,7	1,2	1,8
10	Dobrogea pies	1,4	1,2	1,4
11	Dobrogea goulash	1,4	0,0	1,8
12	wine	1,4	3,6	0,7
13	tasty	1,1	1,2	1,1
14	sea	1,1	3,6	0,4
15	salt	1,1	0,0	1,4
16	Others	37,5	32,5	39,0
17	Do not exist/ Do not know	13,6	24,1	10,5

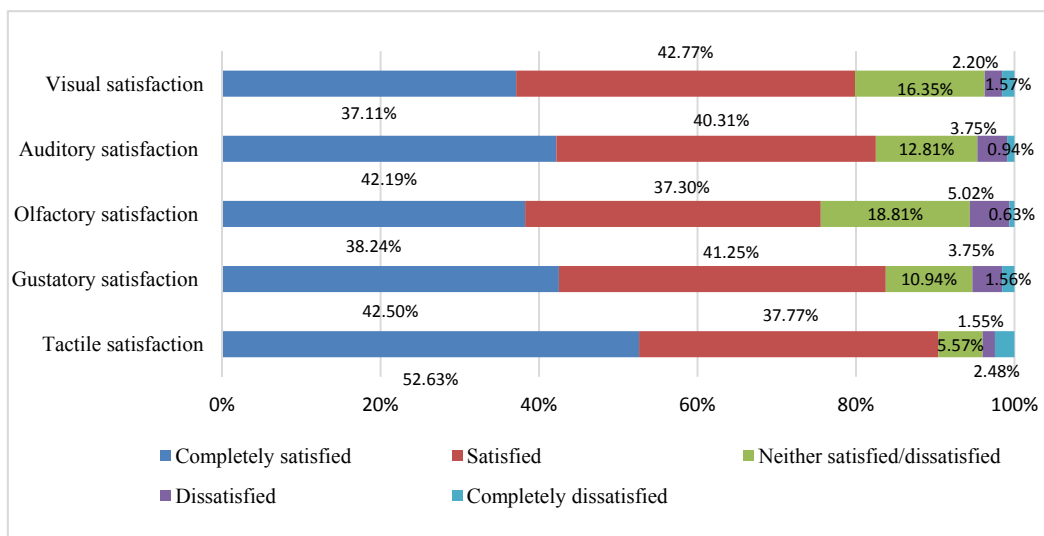
As it was expected, tactile experience (Table 5) is dominated by the “sand” element; however, not even in this it can’t be determined an element that can become a tactile signature for micro-destination Dobrogea.

Table 5. Elements that “compose” tactile experience in micro-destination Dobrogea

		% of total column		
Tactile elements		Total	of which	
<i>Base</i>		360	Men	women
1	sand	19,7	18,1	20,2
2	sea water	10,3	10,8	10,1
3	warm	7,2	3,6	8,3
4	sea breeze	5,3	2,4	6,1
5	temperature	4,4	3,6	4,7
6	humidity	3,1	2,4	3,2
7	sea coast	1,9	1,2	2,2
8	good	1,1	0,0	1,4
9	pleasant	1,1	1,2	1,1
10	coarse	0,8	1,2	0,7
11	Danube Delta	0,8	0,0	1,1
12	soft	0,8	1,2	0,7
13	shells	0,8	0,0	1,1
14	Others	26,7	31,3	25,3
15	Do not exist/ Do not know	15,8	22,9	13,7

After actually experiencing the destination, the tourist enters the post-consumption stage, when he/her evaluates the whole experience, realizing if his/her needs have been fulfilled or even surpassed. Figure 6 depicts tourist satisfaction for each sensory dimension at micro-destination level.

Figure 6. Tourist satisfaction on each sensory dimension concerning experiences in micro-destination Dobrogea



Although, overall tourist experience in micro-destination Dobrogea is positive, as we came up from assessing sensory experience (Figure 6), the lack of some sensory identity elements (for the auditory, olfactory and tactile dimensions), which, in time, could become sensory signatures for the destination, can be interpreted as superficial experimentation/recognition for the destination by the tourist on one side, and as a failure by the marketer to develop the brand destination platform and in-situ contact points to support the brand by delivering an unique, memorable experience on the other.

From the consumer's perspective, the travel experience supposes both an accumulation of information, an "acquaintance" with the travel product through the three stages (pre-consumption, actual consumption and post-consumption), and a testing (experimentation) of the product in the consumption stage, while the sensory experience has at its base the whole perceptive process, starting with the quality and quantity of the received sensory information, which could have an hedonic effect over the short-term on the tourist, by treating ("spoiling") his senses, and by resulting in certain thoughts, emotions and actions that will develop by forming associations, memories regarding the destination.

From the marketer perspective, tourist experience during all the stages represents an indicator for identifying the way the tourist interacts with the destination, so that it can take the most efficient measures in order to strengthen the product during each stage and to ensure the quality promise previously made. On the other hand, sensory experience gives the marketer a measure of the quality perceived by the tourist for the destination, which can be managed at marketer monitored stimuli (sensors) level, and a management solution for contact points, namely for the destination in a restrained sense, in full correlation with the projected identity and the image perceived by the consumer.

3. Conclusions

Sensory experience – a destination positioning tool – represents the interface between destination identity and image, between the “putting the product on the stage” and its consumption. This way, even from pre-consumption stage, the tourist realises his/hers first interaction with the destination, imagining how the holiday will be. In this moment, the image “takes” a first form in the mind of the tourist, and if it is taken into account the fact that it represents a reunion of associations concerning the product then, through the communication of identification elements for each sensory dimension, the image of the destination can become clearer (mode specific), stronger (more intense), differentiating from the competition and, at the same time, supporting the tourist in forming some “closer” to “staged” product reality expectations. Therefore, communicating sensory identity elements helps the marketer “fix” the first destination contact points in the mind of the tourist, presenting the experience that is waiting for him. In other words, the tourist finds out in this way about the attractions that he will be able to see, about the music and local dances, and also about the existence (or not) of a language barrier, about the natural or artificial perfumes he will sense, but also about the foods and drinks that he will savour or the people he will meet and the activities he will experiment. Starting with this moment, the tourist is “prepared” to live a unique and memorable experience, while the marketer is ensuring a first measure of control for the perceived quality of the destination.

During the actual consumption stage, the tourist experiences the destination, in the sense of interacting with each programmed point of contact. Any take-off from the pre-established contact point model can lead to a negative experience for the tourist and implicitly to the deterioration of the destination image. This way the destination image formed in the pre-consumption stage will suffer certain modifications, in accordance with the positive, neutral and negative experiences of the tourist. This is why treating the senses of the tourist, “spoiling” them with the purpose of inducing the appearance of pleasant sensations and strong emotions

has as its result the development of beautiful memories and by so, taking a distinct place in the consumer's mind. For the tourist, no matter the motivation, everything is sensorial matters. It can be taken into account:

- a) The visual dimension (what the tourist sees in the transportation vehicles, in the hotel room, the natural and anthropic attractions, destination landscaping, etc.);
- b) Auditory dimension (what the tourist hears starting from the language spoken at the destination, music and specific dances, the information received from the travel guide and to the quiet and noise levels in the destinations);
- c) Olfactory dimension (what the tourist smells, from certain plants, specific foods, artificial perfumes and destination air quality);
- d) Gustatory dimension (what the tourist tastes from the local gastronomy in direct association with restaurant/destination atmosphere);
- e) Tactile dimension (what the tourist feels, from the comfort offered by the hotel matrices to the texture (destination landscaping) that he/her "can" touch, activities and events in which he/her is involved, the local clothes he buys, the souvenirs, etc.).

During the post-consumption stage, the destination image formed in the mind of the customer stabilises, in the sense of taking a final form. However, the term "final" should not be interpreted in a definitive manner, as it is possible that throughout the life of the tourist the image will suffer further modifications, due to certain powerful experiences that concern the destination. On the other hand, if the marketer has succeeded in providing the tourist that unique experience that was promised in the pre-consumption stage, through the "staged" product, then he/she has ensured destination positioning, developing a number of links in the long-term memory of the consumer. Occupying a bigger space in the memory of the consumer with associations with the destination represents both a guarantee of maintaining positioning, as well as a trigger, once with the repetition of stimuli application and even with just its remembrance, of the pleasant moments lived at the destination, which can be followed by the appearance of the desire to revisit the destination, of the desire to purchase destination specific products or to recommend the destination.

In conclusion, the sensory experience offers benefits to the tourist, through the sensations and emotions that are felt and the memories that are created, as well as a perception of quality "closer" to the marketer projection regarding contact points and the product characteristics. On the other hand, it ensures a destination marketing and product quality monitoring tool for the marketer.

The current research presents certain limits due to the individual sensory evaluation of the senses, which does not happen in reality, as the sensations that

are felt cannot be completely isolated, so that the final result represents a combination of these sensations.

Future directions aim at testing a sensory model at local destination level, through implementing a sensory marketing plan, in order to determine the real impact that sensory experience can have over tourists or over the developed product.

Note

- ⁽¹⁾ The present article represents the last “episode” of a series regarding the sensory audit of macro-destination Romania.

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