

The sensory brand of the destination. Case study: Transylvania

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Abstract. *Destinations can be considered a predominantly experiential tourism product in the context of sensory marketing, which would be the best instrument for creating, communicating and delivering the experiential values of the tourism product, and for developing the sensory brand of a destination. Given that, generally speaking, the geographic area of a destination is difficult to market (because of the multitude of component entities that must have the same vision, although competing at the same time), the unitary character of a destination is reinforced in the identity of the sensory brand, regarded as a collection of sensory experiences, i.e. a collection of contact points between the tourist and the destination. This study identifies the sensory experiences of tourists in the micro-destination Transylvania, thus being a starting point in the development of the sensory brand of the destination.*

Keywords: identity, image, sensory brand of the destination, sensory marketing.

JEL Classification: M31.

REL Classification: 14G.

1. Introduction

Since the tourist experiences a destination through the five sensory channels (visual, auditory, olfactory, gustatory and tactile) during his/her entire experience (pre-consumption, consumption and post-consumption), and the sensations felt during this time further lead to the triggering of emotions and/or issue of value judgments, most often the motivation behind the choice of tourist destination is the emotional factor. Ever since the first stage of his/her experience (pre-consumption), the tourist imagines the destination thinking about the attractions he/she will see, the music and specific rhythms he/she will listen to, the fragrance of nature in those places that will inspire him/her, the taste of traditional food and drinks that he/she will enjoy, as well as the dances, crafts, customs, sports or other activities that he/she will try.

Therefore, sensory marketing should be understood as a “bridge” between the destination’s stimuli and the tourist’s sensations, whose aim is to reduce the gap between projection and perception, or, otherwise, to reduce the differences between the identity of the destination and its image by developing memorable experiences in terms of achieving the target (planned) sensations, emotions and thoughts or memories. While the destination brand is “a name, symbol, logo, word mark or other graphic that both identifies and differentiates the destination; furthermore, it conveys the promise of a memorable travel experience that is uniquely associated with the destination; it also serves to consolidate and reinforce the recollection of pleasurable memories of the destination experience” (Ritchie, Ritchie, 1998: p. 103), the sensory brand of the destination combines the destination’s stimuli (identity: visual, auditory, olfactory, gustatory and tactile), which creates unique and powerful associations in the minds of tourists regarding the destination. Thusly, brand becomes a function that applies identity to the image. Given that identity is designed by marketers (as transmitters), the image is the result of the perception of identity (Kapferer, 1997), being its representation in the mind of the consumer – as receiver.

The evolution of the concept of brand image is continuous, authors encountering difficulties in the conceptualisation of the term because the consumer perceptual process is subjective, so we cannot speak of a single image, but only of a dominant image (Govers, Go, 2009). Moreover, image measurement involves measuring both a rational component and an emotional component. However, brand image is defined as the set of associations the consumer has formed on a brand (Kotler, 1991; Keller, 1993; Aaker, 1996). In terms of destination brand image, it appears in the literature as the “sum of beliefs, ideas and impressions that a person has of a destination” (Crompton, 1979: p. 18) or as the “perceptions about the place as reflected by the associations held in tourist memory” (Cai, 2002: p. 723), from these definitions resulting the important role that it plays in the decision making process of tourists (Mayo, 1975).

From the tourist's perspective, brand capital begins to accumulate once the tourist has formed unique, strong, positive associations regarding the destination's brand (Kamakura, Russell, 1991), so that the points of differentiation anchored in the brand are the elements based on which consumers will form a positive image of the brand, adhering to it (Keller, Strategic brand management: Building, measuring, and managing brand equity, 2008). Therefore, the brands of the future will be developed holistically, thus making the transition from a "unique selling proposal" to a "holistic selling proposal", by integrating the five sensory dimensions in the brand's platform (Lindstrom, 2009), followed by a communication on all five of the consumer's sensory channels, thus creating specific visual, auditory, olfactory, gustatory and tactile identity elements (that constitute the pillars of the sensory brand).

In the context of the reference system of the macro-destination Romania, using the segmentation criterion of the geographical and historical region, Transylvania is one of eight micro-destinations of the country (Maramureş, Bukovina, Moldova, Dobrogea, Muntenia, Oltenia, Banat-Crişana, and Transylvania). From this perspective, we tried to identify the sensory experiences that tourists have lived in the region of Transylvania, and the possible sensory identity elements specific to this region, that, based on a destination marketing planning process, which should include additional sensory marketing objectives, strategies and tactics, would contribute to the development of the destination's sensory brand. Located within the Carpathian arc, the micro-destination Transylvania is bordered by Maramureş to the North, Bukovina to the Northeast, Moldova to the East, Muntenia and Oltenia to the South, and Banat-Crişana to the West, and consists of the following counties: Alba, Bistriţa-Năsăud, Braşov, Cluj, Covasna, Harghita, Hunedoara, Mureş, Sălaj and Sibiu.

Considering the high reputation of the micro-destination Transylvania (sometimes even comparable to the notoriety of the macro-destination Romania), the study of this region in order to identify specific sensory experiences and identity elements as the next step in the process of developing the sensory brand of the destination turns out to be a useful undertaking, especially in the context of continuing the sensory audit of the destination – Romania (Stăncioiu et al., 2014).

2. Operational Framework

This study was conducted during March-July 2012, on a sample of 374 respondents (females – 75.1%; males – 24.9%), aged between 20 and 24, with higher education in progress or completed, and coming from all the eight historical regions of Romania. The purpose of the research was the identification

of sensory experiences that tourists associate with the micro-destination Transylvania, and the recognition of the visual, auditory, olfactory, gustatory and tactile identity elements that can support the development of the sensory brand of the destination. The research also tested the characteristic identity elements of the micro-destination Transylvania, resulting from the study conducted in October – December 2010 – January 2011, on a representative sample of 1,887 respondents from all regions of Romania and aged between 20 and 24, with higher education in progress (Stăncioiu et al., 2011).

According to research results, Transylvania was visited by most respondents (87%), the rest (13%) not visiting the destination for the following reasons: not enough time (40.8%), lack of material resources (32.7%), lack of interest (8.2%), insufficient information on accommodation facilities (8.2%), do not know (6%), and unfavourable information about the region (4.1%). An interesting aspect is that, from the actual tourists, 97.8% want to return to Transylvania to practice the following types of tourism: leisure, recreation and rest tourism (39%), cultural tourism (23%), visits to relatives and friends (22%), business and professional tourism (9%), balneary tourism (6%), other type of tourism (1%).

Information sources have the greatest influence on the tourist's experience in the pre-consumption phase. Figure 1 summarises the sources the actual tourists have used in choosing the destination.

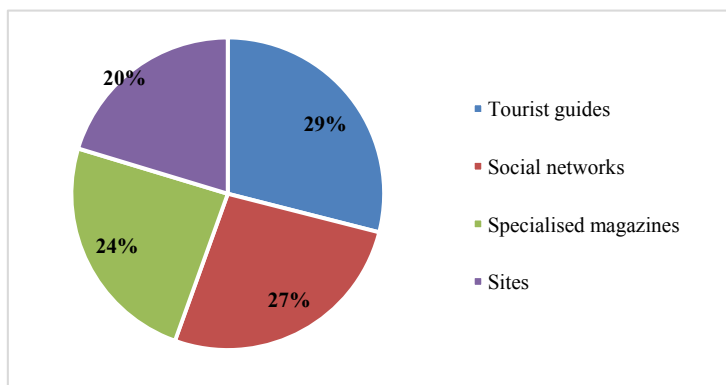


Figure 1. Information sources used by tourists

As can be seen, all sources of information are used in a balanced way by tourists, the percentages being relatively close, so none of the sources dominates consumer preferences over others, but, overall, the balance is tilted in favour of offline sources (tourist guides and specialised magazines). What is surprising is the importance of social networks in choosing a destination. A possible justification could come from the very high reputation of the micro-destination Transylvania,

which manages to turn visitors into image vectors, these disseminating information on social networks, according to the model (Dițoiu, Stăncioiu, 2011).

From the point of view of sensory dimensions perceived by tourists in the types of tourism practiced in the micro-destination Transylvania (Figure 2), visual (38.48%) and auditory (23.28%) experiences characterise cultural tourism, olfactory (21.97%) and tactile (26.82%) experiences predominate in balneary tourism, and gustatory experiences (20%) are crucial for visits to relatives and friends. The importance of identifying sensory experiences that characterise each type of tourism is found both in the development of contact points with the destination (transport, accommodation and catering facilities, attractions and leisure centres), which must satisfy tourists, and, symbolically, in design of the sensory brand of the destination, by adapting it to each type of tourism.

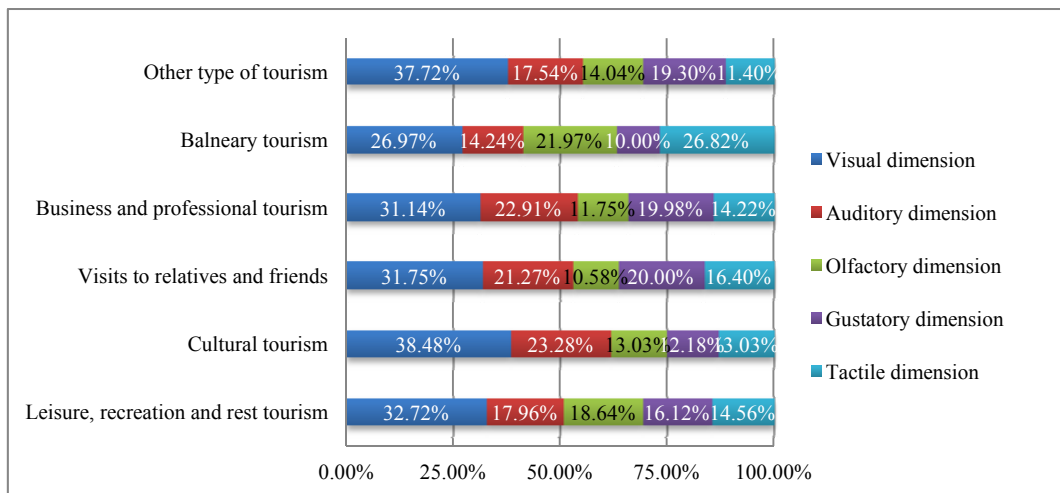


Figure 2. The sensory dimensions associated with types of tourism practiced in the micro-destination Transylvania

Once the sources of information that tourists use in choosing the destination and the reason (types of tourism) for which they travel to that destination are known, the marketer has to prepare the contact points across the destination, so the tourist lives a memorable experience, thus respecting the brand's promise. Therefore, it is essential to follow the development of sensory experiences over time, on types of tourism or at one time, on components of the destination (e.g., counties). Sensory dimensions perceived by tourists for the counties that are part of the micro-destination Transylvania are shown in Figure 3. Note that the sensory experiences, which have most satisfied tourists, have the following distribution: visual experiences (59.64%) – Sălaj, auditory (18.11%) and gustatory (17.23%) experiences – Sibiu, and olfactory (16.13%) and tactile (15.31%) experiences – Brașov.

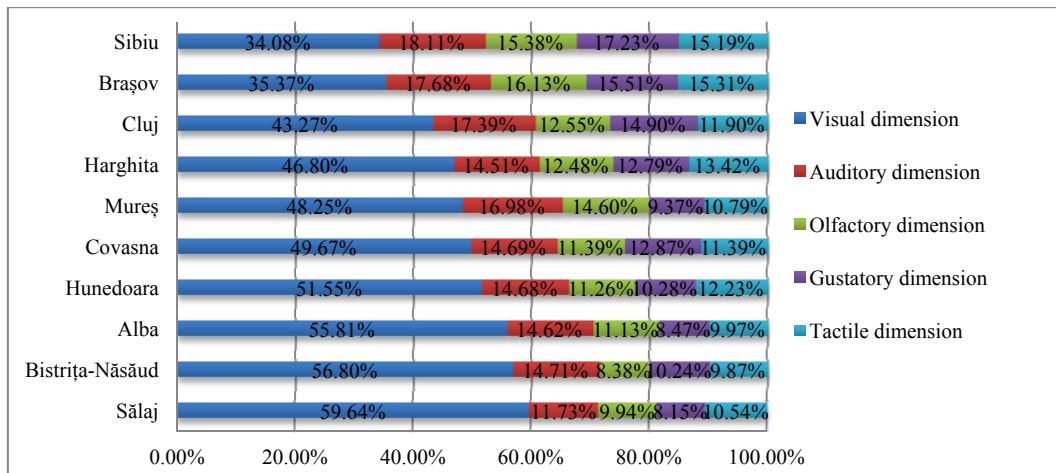


Figure 3. Sensory dimensions associated with the component counties of Transylvania

For example, if the marketer considers cultural tourism as a type of tourism specific to the micro-destination Transylvania, which, according to the previous analysis (Figure 2), is supported by visual and auditory dimensions, then the objective should be improving the visual and auditory experiences, especially in counties that have obtained a lower score on these two dimensions (Figure 3).

The process can also continue for attraction elements identified as points of interest for tourists (Figure 4). This process of improvement or development of sensory experiences in the points of interaction between the tourist and the destination “prepares” the tourism product for the actual consumption stage, so that the expectations the tourist has formed in the pre-consumption phase, through brand communication and product exposure elements, materialise. The tourism product, where it overlaps with the destination itself, can be reduced in this approach to the meeting of points of contact developed as sensory experiences for tourists, being correlated with the sensory brand of the destination by integrating sensory dimensions in a symbolic form. The product supports the brand and vice versa, and the tourist’s experience (consumption manner) is managed under a sensory aspect to ensure product quality.

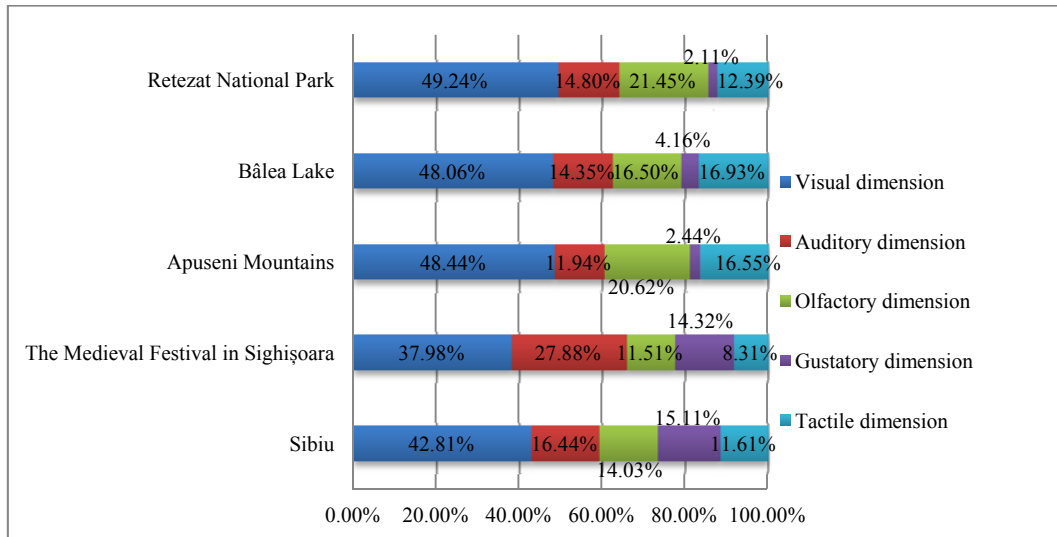


Figure 4. Sensory dimensions associated with Transylvania’s attraction elements

The sensory brand of the destination is built on pillars – elements of visual, auditory, olfactory, gustatory and tactile identity, which, in time, by implementing the destination’s marketing plan and then complementing it with sensory marketing objectives and strategies, leads to obtaining the sensory signatures (Figure 5) of the destination, i.e. iconic elements for each sensory dimension, representing unique, positive and strong tourist associations on that destination.

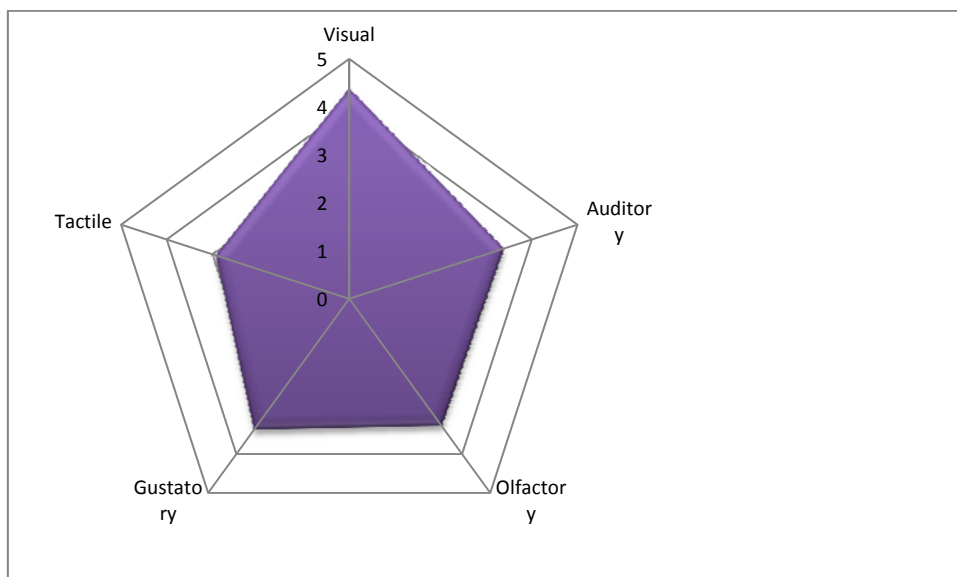


Figure 5. Sensory profile of the micro-destination Transylvania

The sensory profile (Figure 5) shows the sensory dimensions integrated in the sensory brand of Transylvania, being developed similar to the brand sensogram model (Lindstrom, 2009). However, the sensogram allows the monitoring of the evolution of sensory dimensions until the achievement of the sensory signature threshold of a visual, auditory, olfactory, gustatory or tactile identity element. In Transylvania's case, the visual size is almost close to reaching the visual signature of the destination threshold, while the tactile dimension (tactile experience) is the least developed.

Improving the sensory experience of the tourist in order to obtain the sensory signature of the destination involves identifying the sensory identity element specific to that destination and integrating it into the brand platform, as well as supporting it "in situ" by the management of contact points that provide those experiences converging to the identity element chosen. Therefore, the micro-destination Transylvania, as shown in Figure 5 and Table 1, is visually represented by Bran Castle. This element of attraction can become a visual signature for the micro-destination Transylvania, thus being the first pillar of the sensory brand.

Table 1. Visual elements "composing" the experience for the micro-destination Transylvania

		– % of total column–		
		of which		
	Visual elements	Total	Male	Female
	<i>Base</i>	374	93	281
1	Bran Castle	12.0	7.5	13.5
2	Sibiu	10.2	9.7	10.3
3	landscape	5.6	2.2	6.8
4	mountain	3.7	3.2	3.9
5	Sighișoara	3.5	5.4	2.8
6	Bran	3.2	5.4	2.5
7	castle	3.2	0.0	4.3
8	beautiful	2.9	3.2	2.8
9	Dracula	2.7	1.1	3.2
10	Brașov	2.4	3.2	2.1
11	Cluj-Napoca	2.1	1.1	2.5
12	architecture	1.9	5.4	0.7
13	Black Church	1.9	2.2	1.8
14	Hunyadi Castle	1.9	1.1	2.1
15	Peleş Castle	1.9	2.2	1.8
16	Others	40.6	46.2	38.8
17	Does not exist/Do not know	0.3	1.1	0.0

From Table 1 we can "extract" a common experience that dominates the micro-destination, namely the experience of medieval Transylvania, supported by castles ("Bran Castle", "Hunyadi Castle", "castle"), architecture, churches ("Black Church"), and cities (Sighișoara, Sibiu). In addition, all the elements associated by

tourists with the visual dimension of the micro-destination Transylvania have positive connotations, except for the character “Dracula”, whose legend is inspired by the Vlad the Impaler, considered a just ruler by Romanians.

The auditory dimension of the micro-destination Transylvania is moderately developed (Figure 5), and, as can be interpreted from Table 2, the identity element that could become the destination’s auditory signature is the “Festival in Sighișoara”, it still requiring more concentration, as well as the development of more experiences convergent towards the event. However, the “Festival in Sighișoara” could become the “voice” of the sensory brand of the micro-destination Transylvania, which would accompany the aforementioned medieval experience.

Table 2. Auditory elements “composing” the experience for the micro-destination Transylvania

		– % of total column–		
		of which		
	Auditory elements	Total	Male	Female
	<i>Base</i>	374	93	281
1	quietness	7.5	3.2	8.9
2	music	3.7	1.1	4.6
3	festival	3.5	4.3	3.2
4	Festival in Sighișoara	2.1	1.1	2.5
5	medieval music	1.9	3.2	1.4
6	noise	1.9	2.2	1.8
7	Dracula	1.6	1.1	1.8
8	exists	1.6	2.2	1.4
9	Mureș	1.6	1.1	1.8
10	birds	1.6	2.2	1.4
11	accent	1.3	3.2	0.7
12	Golden Stag	1.3	1.1	1.4
13	Others	61.2	60.2	61.6
14	Does not exist/Do not know	9.1	14.0	7.5

The experience “Dracula”, as noted in the analysis of the visual dimension, is negative at least for some of the tourists, the identity problem being added to this, according to which Romanian residents do not recognise the existence of this character. On the other hand, the reputation of “Dracula” among foreign tourists is high, the experience being mysterious and also an element of attraction for a particular type of audience. In conclusion, Dracula’s legend can be used for the benefit of the micro-destination Transylvania, provided the creation of a route that “follows” the legend, with the introduction of the true values over time.

The olfactory experience for the micro-destination Transylvania is dominated by the term “fresh”, which defines the products, air, nature (Table 3) in this region. The first olfactory identity element mentioned, specific for Transylvania, is, however, Retezat National Park, which, taking into account the moderate development of the olfactory dimension (Figure 5), has the ability to reach the

olfactory signature of the sensory brand of the micro-destination Transylvania, if measures similar to the auditory signature are taken. Another aspect to be noticed following Table 3 is that all olfactory experiences presented are positive, which helps the marketer to focus activities only on the ongoing development of existing elements, without exhausting resources on the neutralisation or even conversion of negative experiences that lead to a negative image of the micro-destination.

Table 3. *Olfactory elements “composing” the experience for the micro-destination Transylvania*

		– % of total column–		
		of which		
	Olfactory elements	Total	Male	Female
	<i>Base</i>	374	93	281
1	fresh	11.2	7.5	12.5
2	clean air	7.5	6.5	7.8
3	fresh air	3.7	1.1	4.6
4	fir	2.4	2.2	2.5
5	Retezat National Park	1.9	2.2	1.8
6	pleasant	1.9	0.0	2.5
7	clean	1.6	1.1	1.8
8	flower	1.6	2.2	1.4
9	nature	1.3	1.1	1.4
10	clean mountain air	1.3	1.1	1.4
11	Black Church	1.1	1.1	1.1
12	Cluj-Napoca	1.1	1.1	1.1
13	Others	48.4	53.8	46.6
14	Does not exist/Do not know	15.0	19.4	13.5

The gustatory dimension (Figure 5) associated with the micro-destination Transylvania (like the auditory and olfactory dimensions) is moderately developed. Gustatory experiences specific to the region (Table 4) are closely related to Romanian and Hungarian traditional food. Most likely to become a gustatory signature for Transylvania are “goulash” or “kurtos kalacs” and “Sibiu salami”. Further analysing the case of the gustatory identity element “Sibiu salami”, there is a discrepancy between the food brand and the place of origin brand, as the product is manufactured in another micro-destination, namely in Bacău, Moldova, or in Sinaia, in the micro-destination Muntenia, where the story of this product began. Ideally, the food brand should support the location brand, and, in turn, the location brand should add value to the food brand. For this, however, the product should be manufactured only in the destination included in its name. The association of “Sibiu salami” with the micro-destination Transylvania is closely related to the inclusion in the product’s name of the destination of Sibiu, an aspect justified by the product’s history, i.e., the facilitation of exports via Sibiu Customs.

Table 4. *Gustatory elements “composing” the experience for the micro-destination Transylvania*

		– % of total column–		
		of which		
	Gustatory elements	Total	Male	Female
	<i>Base</i>	374	93	281
1	food	5.9	2.2	7.1
2	Goulash	5.6	6.5	5.3
3	traditional food	4.8	4.3	5.0
4	Kurtos Kalacs	2.9	1.1	3.6
5	Sibiu salami	2.9	2.2	3.2
6	bulz	2.4	3.2	2.1
7	sarmale	2.4	5.4	1.4
8	sweet	2.1	1.1	2.5
9	bellows cheese	1.3	1.1	1.4
10	good	1.6	1.1	1.8
11	tasty	1.3	1.1	1.4
12	Varză (cabbage) à la Cluj	1.3	1.1	1.4
13	Others	52.9	50.5	53.7
14	Does not exist/Do not know	12.3	19.4	10.0

The tactile experience of tourists in the micro-destination Transylvania is “marked” by “coolness” (Table 5). Reality confirms that certain areas of Transylvania are the “cold pole” in Romania, since here low temperatures are recorded frequently. However, cold air is perceived as clean by tourists.

Table 5. *Tactile elements “composing” the experience for the micro-destination Transylvania*

		– % of total column–		
		of which		
	Tactile elements	Total	Male	Female
	<i>Base</i>	374	93	281
1	coolness	5.3	5.4	5.3
2	temperature	5.1	4.3	5.3
3	cold	3.5	4.3	3.2
4	warm	2.7	2.2	2.8
5	pleasant	2.4	1.1	2.8
6	grass	1.3	1.1	1.4
7	mountain	1.3	2.2	1.1
8	chilly	1.3	2.2	1.1
9	pleasant temperature	1.3	1.1	1.4
10	clean air	1.3	1.1	1.4
11	brick	1.1	1.1	1.1
12	Bran Castle	1.1	3.2	0.4
13	Poiana Braşov	1.1	1.1	1.1
14	pressure	1.1	1.1	1.1
15	Others	51.9	44.1	54.4
16	Do not exist/Do not know	18.2	24.7	16.0

The tactile dimension (Figure 5) is weak, requiring increased attention from marketers that need to develop memorable tactile experiences for tourists in contact points. “Bran Castle” can become a tactile signature (Table 5) for the sensory brand of the micro-destination Transylvania, in addition to its role as a visual signature. The following tactile identity element, “Poiana Brașov”, also enables the development of tactile experiences throughout the year through sports activities that can be performed here.

The sensory brand of the micro-destination Transylvania, according to this analysis, includes the following sensory identity elements: “Bran Castle”, “Festival in Sighișoara”, “Retezat National Park”, “Goulash”, (“Poiana Brașov”). Thus, each dimension of the sensory brand is represented by an identity element, and, for the tactile dimension, which shares the same element with the visual size, the next item in that category was chosen. It can be seen that identity elements corresponding to the sensory brand of the destination are consistent with the types of tourism for which tourists visit Transylvania, namely leisure, recreation and rest, and cultural tourism.

In the last experience stage (post-consumption), the tourist remembers the pleasant moments experienced in the destination, while making an assessment of the tourism product. If the tourist is satisfied with the whole experience, then he/she will recommend the destination to relatives or even return to the destination. Therefore, in the last stage, the marketer must measure tourist satisfaction (Figure 6). As expected, tourists who visited Transylvania were satisfied with visual experiences, and less satisfied with tactile experiences.

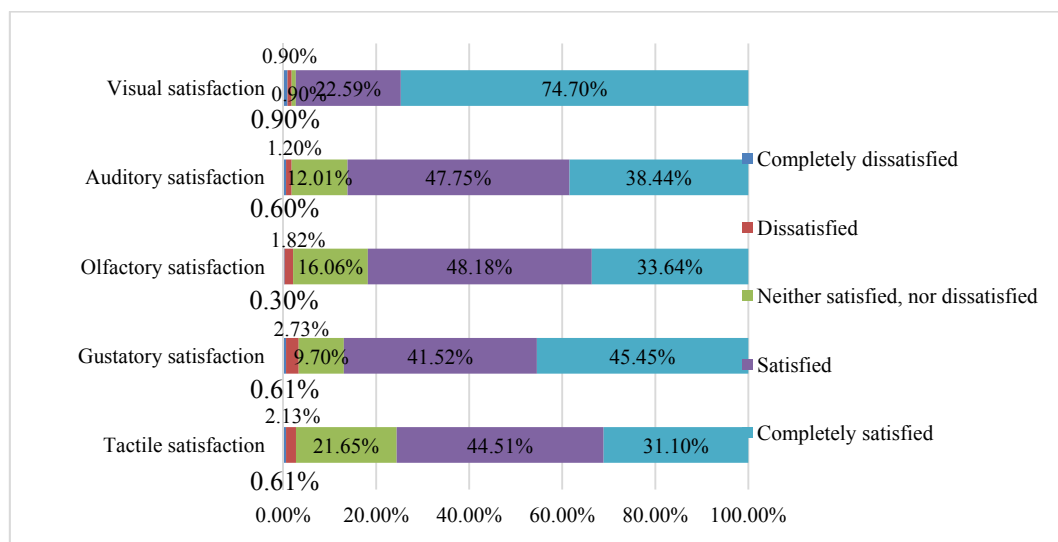


Figure 6. The satisfaction degree felt by tourists on each sensory dimension

Overall, the sensory experiences, which can be lived in the micro-destination Transylvania, are positive, and, even if the sensory profile of the destination has no sensory signature yet, there is still a balance between generic and specific sensory elements.

Since the tourism product is experiential, sensory marketing can be the tool to apply the sensory brand to the destination. It is obvious that the pillars of marketing (product, price, placement and promotion) still form the skeleton of the destination brand, but, given the fact that tourists experience a place through the five sensory channels and that external information is received through these channels, the “4 Ps” of marketing are encoded by the marketer in the form of sensory signals.

The sensory brand of a destination helps organisations involved in the marketing and management, respectively, of a destination remain focused on the contact points, which combined form the brand’s identity, and ensure the quality of the tourism product by continuing to reduce the projection-perception gaps.

3. Conclusions

The sensory signatures of a destination which originate in the visual, auditory, olfactory, gustatory and tactile identity elements (components of the sensory brand) may be considered at one time, in a particular context, in the development of a destination’s brand and of sensory marketing strategies, subordinated to clearly defined product/products objectives, and, of course, very well targeted markets/market segments. Therefore, the importance of a sensory destination brand must be understood in order to obtain a sustainable competitive advantage (Mowle, Merrilees, 2005), which targets certain tourist sensations to trigger an emotional response, thus leading to pleasant memories.

Creating the sensory brand is a process that involves six steps: sensory audit, “staging”, “dramatization”, “signature”, implementation and evaluation (Lindstrom, 2009).

Once the sensory destination brand is developed, it “helps” the tourist imagine the entire destination in the pre-consumption stage, thus influencing the decision making process relating to a tourism product, and forming “expectations” close to the “staged reality”; “guiding” the tourist through the points of contact that support the sensory identity elements communicated so as to provide the “right” stimuli for “dealing with” the senses; reminding the tourists of the memorable experience “lived” in the destination, eventually leading to the formation of a positive image, which consequently leads to the tourist returning to the destination or recommending it.

Research limitations are based on the absence of similar researches on the sensory approach to a complex product such as the destination, locally, regionally and nationally, also being cognitive (lack of linguistic measuring scales for the intensity of sensations generated by a complex tourism product on each sensory dimension).

As a result, the authors will continue in future studies to simplify the design process for the sensory brand of the destination by developing a function intended to apply the identity of the destination (the set of contact points) in the destination image (the set of associations created in the minds of tourists), in this way ensuring the development of effective marketing strategies.

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