

## Experiential variables as determinants of tourists' quality of life, satisfaction and loyalty in the context of culinary tourism.

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### Goal and objectives of the dissertation

#### Goal

The general goal of this research is the elaboration of a causal model that, within the food tourism context, can assess the predictive power of experiential variables, over experiential (i.e. quality of life) and traditional (i.e. satisfaction and loyalty) marketing outcomes. In addition, six specific objectives (SO) are identified:

*SO<sub>1</sub>: To develop a theoretical framework for the research.*

*SO<sub>2</sub>: To identify the variables most commonly used in the literature for the study of experiential and culinary tourism.*

*SO<sub>3</sub>: To build up an integral structural model capable of explaining the relations between experiential variables, traditional marketing outcomes and new experiential marketing outcomes.*

*SO<sub>4</sub>: To identify the most suitable scales of measurement and items to test the group of variables selected.*

*SO<sub>5</sub>: To empirically test the structural model.*

*SO<sub>6</sub>: To identify the main theoretical and practical implications from the results achieved and to develop meaningful proposals for the sector.*

This dissertation proposes a causal model which relates experiential variables such as *involvement, experience quality, place attachment and memorability*, with traditional and experiential outputs variables such as *quality of life, experiential satisfaction and loyalty*. This last variable has been approached from a triple perspective: towards the destination, the kind of experience itself and the local products tasted during the visit.

### Methodology

The theoretical part of the dissertation is a literature review on experientiality and food tourism which allowed the selection of the most significant variables to be considered and the conceptual definition of the structural model.

The empirical section includes the data collection process by means of an online and a paper-and-pencil questionnaire, the statistical analysis of the data and the model test.

Data have been collected using an originally designed questionnaire, and proposed to tourists who attended 75 previously selected culinary experiences, identified online and held throughout the world (See Table 1).

Multivariate analysis techniques and structural equation modelling have been used. Specifically, Partial Least Square (PLS) technique has been applied (Ringle et al., 2015). The SPSS software has been employed for the management and the preparation of the database, and SmartPLS for the evaluation and the measurement of the proposed model.

**Results**

The results confirm the positive impact that experiential variables have on marketing results, highlighting the need to give greater importance to the emotional elements of the trip to achieve consumers' satisfaction and the competitiveness of the current tourism systems.

Specifically, *involvement* explains a good part of the variance of *experience quality*, and this last resulted to be a valuable antecedent of *memorability*. *Place attachment* is a very weak antecedent of *memorability*. This last resulted to be significantly linked to

*experiential satisfaction* and a significant predictor of this variable. The relationship of causality between *memorability* and *quality of life* also found empirical support, however the causality between *experiential satisfaction* and *quality of life* has not been confirmed in this research.

Loyalty has been modelled with three different variables: the destination, the kind of experience lived and the products tasted during the experience. *Experiential satisfaction* and *quality of life* have been considered as direct antecedents of the three loyalties and this causal relationship have found empirical support within the context of the present research.

In short, the results achieved helped in reaching the objectives proposed and confirmed the logical paths hypothesised in the outlined model.

**Theoretical conclusions**

The main theoretical conclusions of the present research show that experiential trend is impacting the tourism and hospitality industry in the way that both theory and practice face the need of updating their outcomes in order to match this new scenario. Experientiality is a wide concept that requires further research in order to be fully understood and successfully applied in the tourism field.

Culinary tourism and food-based experiences

**Table 1. Technical details of the empirical work**

<i>Population</i>	Tourists who had at least one culinary experience during one of their holidays or trips
<i>Geographical scope</i>	International
<i>Data collection method</i>	Internet-based and paper-based questionnaire
<i>Sampling frames</i>	Not available
<i>Respondents</i>	Tourists who had at least one culinary experience during one of their holidays or trips
<i>Population size</i>	Unknown
<i>Sampling technique</i>	Non-probability convenience sampling
<i>Data collection period</i>	March-September 2016
<i>Responses</i>	563
<i>Valid responses</i>	425

Source: Own Elaboration.

result to be a suitable scenario for deepening into experiential trends in tourism. Food tasting and food related activities in general are assumed to be enhancers of good memories and quality of life which, in turn, can determine positive future behaviours. *Memorability* is assumed to be an essential concept in the new experiential context. The experiential trend determines a structural change in how the tourism phenomenon is interpreted, enjoyed by travellers and offered by practitioners. There exists an emergent class of consumers that see in tourism activities an opportunity for happiness and the enhancement of their quality of life.

### **Practical application of the dissertation**

The results of this dissertation outline some important paths to follow for tourism marketers and managers. The research gave answer to the original research question of the dissertation focusing on whether experiences could be considered as new tools capable of enhancing traditional marketing outputs (satisfaction and loyalty) or if they were rather introducing the tourism industry into a new era in which new variables, such as *memorability* and *quality of life*, should be given major attention by academics and practitioners in the context of food tourism. Tourism practitioners should recognise the role of typical food and food-based activities as *memory* and *quality of life* enhancers and try to get advantage of it by drawing new offerings capable of impacting the consumers' memory over the long-term. Memorable value can be provided by delivering an once-in-a-lifetime experience, improving the emotional implication of tourists during the visit and defining memories' recollection strategies, in order to make travellers revive the emotions and the happy moments associated with certain flavours, culinary practices or products tasted on holidays.

Food-based offerings, with an high experiential content, can drive positive future behaviours benefitting the destination (Kim et al., 2015), inducing the desire of buying similar experiences in different destinations (McKercher et al., 2012), and initiating tourists

to the consumption of typical products on a regular basis (Espejel & Fandos, 2009; Grunert et al., 2011).

### **Content of the dissertation**

The dissertation is organised in 7 chapters.

#### *Abstract Chapter 1*

It is a general introduction to the research. It aims to give the reader an initial idea of the contents and structure of the work and to ease its comprehension. The research question and the objectives of the dissertation are detailed in this chapter.

#### *Abstract Chapter 2*

It is dedicated to conceptually contextualise the present research. Experiential marketing and culinary tourism have been considered the proper support to the theoretical and empirical approach of this thesis. It shows how experiential marketing is making a new trend in tourism theory and practice and defining innovative markets and marketing strategies, new consumers' segments, and new paths to follow in order to gain tourists' satisfaction and loyalty. Food and local cuisine is presented as a germane component of the tourist experience and a suitable practice for providing tourists with an once-in-a-lifetime experience.

#### *Abstract Chapter 3*

It presents the literature review and explains the process followed to identify the main experiential variables to consider in the research. Starting from the explanation of the experience concept, the literature analysis showed a bunch of concepts responsible for providing the holiday with experiential value. Their selection and inclusion in the conceptual model of the present work is fully justified on the basis of previous contributions published in high-quality scientific journals.

#### *Abstract Chapter 4*

It is mostly dedicated to define the structural model, to define the causal paths that give birth to the research hypotheses to be tested and the scales of measurement selected to assess each variable.

#### *Abstract Chapter 5*

This chapter describes all the steps of the research process and explains how every decision has been taken in relation to data sources, data collection tools, sampling, design of the questionnaire and methods adopted for data analysis. This research has chosen an exploratory approach and a survey-based method to collect quantitative data. Structural equation models are applied to test the theoretical model proposed and to reach useful results for both academics and practitioners.

#### *Abstract Chapter 6*

This chapter is addressed to give empirical evidence to the relations and hypotheses set out. Data collected in the fieldwork phase undergo a statistical analysis by means of the PLS-SEM technique. The majority of the hypotheses proposed are supported. A descriptive analysis of data is presented and the structural relationships proposed assessed following the two-steps approach method. Results described in this chapter give cause for relevant considerations that will lead to important conclusions at both a theoretical and practical level.

#### *Abstract Chapter 7*

This chapter presents the conclusions of the research and provide a proper interpretation to numbers and figures, extracting from them a useful meaning for both theory and practice.

Final considerations are presented with regards to the theoretical conclusions achieved and the practical implications that will possibly be of help to academics and practitioners in the future. The correspondence with the objectives of the research is showed, as well as, its limitations and future research lines.

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