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Bender, Ana; Guerreiro, Manuela; Sequeira, Bernardete; and Mendes, Júlio, "Sensorial Experiences at Heritage Contexts: A Qualitative Approach to A Visitor Attraction in Algarve, Portugal" (2021). *Travel and Tourism Research Association: Advancing Tourism Research Globally*. 13.
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SENSORIAL EXPERIENCES AT HERITAGE CONTEXTS: A QUALITATIVE APPROACH TO A VISITOR ATTRACTION IN ALGARVE, PORTUGAL

Abstract

This study aims to explore the sensory experience at heritage sites from the visitor's perspective. A qualitative and exploratory approach was applied, using two data collection methods: semi-structured interviews and in situ focus groups. The findings suggest that these historical spaces' managers should explore and understand tangible and intangible, or immaterial, elements that influence visitors' experience, attitudes, and behaviours towards the physical landscape. In this sense, they must converge their efforts to highlight the sensory cues intrinsic to each site, providing a connection between the monument and its visitors. Future investigation should employ longitudinal research, including a broader scope of heritage attractions and perspectives from the diverse stakeholders involved in the management and consumption of these historical places.

Keywords: heritage attractions, the sensory dimension of tourist experiences, consumer experience, visitor perspective

1. Introduction

The tourist experience is a complex combination of factors that results in a holistic and personal perception (Volo, 2009; Ritchie & Hudson, 2009; Tung & Ritchie, 2011). The literature describes heritage sites' experience as a process determined by the cognitive and emotional connections between the individual and the place visited, where the meaning of a monument or historical site is very personal. It is directly related to the visitor's perceptions and motivations as an individual and his expectations regarding the to-be-provided experience (Bender, 2020). Schorch (2014, p.22) explains that *"heritage (...) is not an inherited essence but an experienced process; a process in which our emotions and feelings are enmeshed with our thoughts"*.

Sensory perceptions are the main signals that can capture from a place based on which the human being experiences, understands the environment, creates lasting memories, and models future behavioural intentions (Campelo, 2017). When an individual explores a place, he does it through the senses, continually influenced by his thoughts, by the surrounding environment, by his previously lived experiences.

Current research in tourism studies, specifically those focused on the on-site experience, claim a holistic approach to the five senses which stresses the importance of understanding the sensory relationship between tourists and destinations, visitors and attractions. It suggests that sensory marketing can be used to design, communicate, and intensify "meaningful touristic experiences" (Kim & Fesenmaier, 2015, p.1). It also creates conditions for arousing emotions that can engage visitors' feelings (Jelinčić & Senkić, 2017), thus increasing satisfaction and long-term memories (Agapito et al., 2012). The expansion of opportunities to understand the past through a broader sensorium is a positive step towards providing a more in-depth and more engaging visit experience, capable of awakening a sense of belonging in each individual (Miles, 2017).

The sensory dimension of tourist experiences has attracted increasing attention in recent years (Agapito, 2020). There is a consensus in the literature that the experience is grounded in its embodied dimensions (Miles, 2017) and that the tourist experience *"is corporeal and multisensory"* (Pan & Ryan, 2009, p.625). It is only recently that a gradual number of researchers have begun to draw attention to the different senses' role in the tourist experience (Cohen & Cohen, 2017). Studies in multisensory experiences are still scarce, postulating further investigation and opening opportunities to explore it in different contexts, such as heritage attractions (Marto et al., 2019).

Researchers conducted qualitative and exploratory research in a castle, the second most visited tourist attraction in Algarve, Portugal. Semi-structured interviews and focus groups were used to retrieve information from the visitors of the monument. The categorial content analysis method was used to analyse data using the software QSR NVivo 12.

2. Literature Review

2.1 The Sensorial Dimension and the Consumer Experience

Human sensations result from the stimulation of the five senses. It plays a fundamental role in the construction of experience, acting as triggers for the formation of perceptions (Agapito et al., 2013, Larsen, 2007), establishing an interface between the environment and the brain, and communicating with the outside world, where the interaction of the senses can significantly affect our understanding of a given domain (Krishna, 2012; Chalmers, 2017). The role of sensations in experiences has come to attract attention in academia, as it can provide objective and context-specific information (Krishna, 2012; Kim & Fesenmaier, 2015).

The role of the senses and sensory stimulation within the experience paradigm emerges in Marketing's literature (Holbrook & Hirschman, 1982; Pine & Gilmore, 1998; Schmitt, 1999; Gentile et al., 2007). An increasing marketing focus on how it plays in consumer behaviour emphasises multisensory stimuli' contribution in enhancing the consumption experience (Agapito et al., 2012; Krishna, 2012). Sensory information evokes images, memories, emotions, and feelings (sensory symbolism) related to events that have occurred in the past (Solomon et al., 2014; Classen, 1997).

Visiting heritage sites is one of the main components of travel (Packer & Ballantyne, 2016; Timothy, 2018), and visitors' experiences have become the focus of tourist attractions (Packer & Ballantyne, 2016). Consumers show a growing interest in the deeper meaning of places, their local identities, and their connections to the destinations they visit (Timothy, 2018), and the literature recognises a fascination with historical attractions, where opportunities to relive the past have become critical to understanding tourist experiences (Bonn et al., 2007).

The rise of sensory approaches in academic disciplines, especially in the tourist field, has fostered several exciting research opportunities in visitor experience at heritage attractions (Rahman et al., 2016; Davis & Thys-Şenocak, 2017). It focuses on the comprehension of the embodiment paradigm over the cognitive paradigm, with especial interest in specific sensescapes, or through a holistic, multisensory approach (Cohen & Cohen, 2017). Timothy (2018, p.178) emphasises that *"heritage tourism experience is determined by people's personal connections to the place they visit rather than the innate historical attributes of the site or object itself. This unconventional view of heritage tourism is unique but illustrates emerging new ways of thinking about supply, demand and the visitor experience."*

2.2 The Sensorial Experience at Heritage Attractions

In the field of heritage, the paradigm shift from an information-centric approach (Marshall et al., 2016) to a hedonic visitor experience (Calver & Page, 2013), the latter guided by the exploration and analysis of heritage sites through the senses, opens new paths for the interpretation, understanding and the experience of the visit. This transformation provides a richer narrative about historical places and heritage sites (Davis & Thys-Şenocak, 2017), facilitating *"the opportunity of establishing a personal connection with the heritage"* and a *"sensory experience of felling the past"* (Marshall et al., 2016, p.36).

The physical environment projects a set of stimuli that can influence its visitors' behaviour (Bonn et al., 2009). The atmosphere of the monument or other heritage attraction is the result of this interaction. Visual communication is still dominant in today's museum and other historical and cultural sites. The supremacy of vision, or "visuocentric exhibition paradigm" (Miotto, 2016, p.1), often a result of the care for the preservation of fragile and potentially irreplaceable collections, has relegated to the background the value of other senses in the process of heritage interpretation, limiting the understanding of its narrative (Miles, 2017). This issue has been taboo, especially regarding touch (Bembibre & Strlič, 2017). However, the haptic sense and the implications that the ability to touch objects provides for visitors have drawn increasing attention in studies focused on understanding the museology experience (Wilson et al., 2018; Jelinčić & Senkić, 2017; Comes, 2016; Allen et al., 2013).

Research on the use of new or interactive technologies as tools to intensify visitors' experience and their engagement with history has been growing and enriching, with remarkable contributions, both for a better understanding of consumer behaviour and for the adoption of new management practices (Chalmers, 2017; Cantoni et al., 2016; Marto et al., 2019; Pettoello, 2016; Bec et al., 2019; Timothy, 2018). These technological tools make it possible to navigate historical attractions and cities (Meschini & Ippoliti, 2015), monuments, archaeological sites and museums (Pettoello, 2016), evolving into interactive, multisensory displays, generating more complete experiences (Bonn et al., 2007; Timothy, 2018; Cantoni et al., 2016), assisting in heritage management and its preservation (Bec *et al.*, 2019) and enabling the *"creation of integrated systems for the management of cultural resources to be enjoyed through experiential paths"* (Sepe, 2015, p.713).

The literature recognises that despite the growing interest in the role of the senses in the experience of visiting heritage attractions, there is still a lack of research in the multisensory field, demonstrating a great understanding of the opportunity to explore it in different contexts (Marto et al., 2019; Rahman et al., 2018; Bender et al., 2019). The generality of research still seems to be very much focused on the consumer experience mediated using technology in museums and exhibitions and on intangible heritage (Bembibre & Strlič, 2017; Davis & Thys-Şenocak, 2017; Matteucci, 2013; Walter, 2017; Jalis et al., 2014). There is a gap in the level of research that addresses the role and relevance of the five senses in shaping the experience in other heritage contexts, such as historic cities, archaeological sites, and historic buildings (such as castles, churches and cathedrals and monuments) (Bender et al, 2019; Rahman et al., 2016; Rahman et al., 2018). Focusing on research on the visitor experience can elucidate how visitors engage with different heritage attractions, which may have implications for managing these heritage structures (Willson & McIntosh, 2007). Empirical and holistic studies on the topic are scarce, especially in understanding the sensory experiences visitors associate with heritage attractions, specifically historical monuments.

3. Research Methodology

3.1 Empirical context

The Silves Castle is a military fortification that dates to the Muslim period, between the 8th and 9th centuries. Classified as a National Monument, it is the second most visited tourist attraction in the Algarve, south of Portugal, and has been experiencing a significant increase in visitors (TP - Algarve, 2019). Managed as a visitor attraction located in the country's most relevant tourism destination, it offers a set of facilities that aims to increase its attractiveness.

3.2 Study Design

A qualitative method through exploratory research (Creswell, 2002; Babbie, 2016) was adopted, and data were collected using semi-structured interviews (Babbie, 2016) and in situ focus groups (or "site-specific focus group") (Duarte et al., 2014, p.386). This study explores the sensorial experience at heritage sites through the visitor's perspective, making semi-structured interviews an appropriate methodological option (Kastenholz et al., 2012, Blumenthal & Jensen, 2019; Chen et al., 2020). It allows the interviewee to express their perceptions and interpretations about events, experiences, and memories in an open way (Creswell, 2002; Pardal & Lopes, 2011). The focus group technique is useful to capture collective reflections on the relationship between individuals (the visitors) and space (the castle), which justify its application in situ (Duarte et al., 2014; Chang et al., 2010; Pabel & Pearce, 2015).

Data collection took place in the touristic 2019' high season (June and July). To get familiar with the visitor attractions and the visitors' profile, researchers made several previous visits to the site and met with professionals in the field. This practice was relevant to design the sample profile, which included visitors concluding their stay at the monument at different times of the day. With the agreement of the participants, interviews and focus groups were recorded. Following the non-probabilistic sample for convenience and the data saturation criterion (Bryman, 2016; Blumenthal & Jensen, 2019; Babbie, 2016), 21 semi-structured interviews and three focus groups of 13 participants were carried out with visitors. Families were chosen to participate in the focus groups as *"interactions between family members constitute an important element of engagement with tourism sites, leading to enhanced value creation"* and (Melvin et al., 2020, p.1), and it *"tends to enrich their experience through providing, memories, learning and entertainment"* (Melvin et al., 2020, p.9).

Transcribed data were imported into the QSR NVivo 12. A categorical analysis was performed to organise and classify the data into conceptual categories to underpinning the research objectives (Bryman, 2016). Following Vala (1997), the categorical analysis process included the (1) constitution of the corpus for analysis from the transcription of interviews and focus groups; (2) the definition of categories which were created deductively (based on pre-coding established on the theoretical framework of research) and inductively (since new categories and subcategories emerged from the empirical data) (Creswell & Poth, 2018); and (3) the identification of units of analysis and units of register. A descriptive and interpretative analysis was carried out, and results were triangulated (Decrop, 1999).

4. Results and Discussion

The sensory impressions of visitors to Silves Castle who agreed to participate in this study were analysed based on four subcategories: the most salient senses associated with Silves Castle, the senses related to the Castle, the importance of the five senses in their visiting experience, and the intensification of the sensory visiting experience.

Findings suggest that it is admissible to state that Silves Castle's visit enables a multisensory experience for its visitors. However, it was observed that the way the environment is currently structured reveals no intentional stimulation of all senses.

From the visitors' perspective, it was possible to identify that the monument's physical component, mainly through visual stimuli, had the most significant impact on the visiting experience. This result is in line with the studies presented by Pearce et al. (2013), also in the context of visiting monuments, and Mateiro et al. (2017) regarding natural parks. For both, the visual component had a more significant impact on the analysed attractions' visiting experience. In Silves Castle's context, this result stems from its physical characteristics, such as the reddish color of Silves sandstone and its structural dimension, and its location, which allows contemplating the landscape of its surroundings.

The touch is also evidenced by the texture of the material used in the construction of the fortification. The sounds associated with this experience encompass various elements such as the nature surrounding the monument, other visitors, and the stillness of the place. The garden's aroma emerges as the central stimuli for the sense of smell, which also has nature as a reference. Taste, on the other hand, was the least stimulated sense. Some associations between the past of the place and its sensory stimuli can be verified in the interviewees' speech. However, emerges the need to promote more sensory clues to contribute to the intensification of the monument's sensory experience, making possible, mainly, its historical and temporal contextualization. Simultaneously, the use of visual and auditory stimuli was the most cited as an alternative for sensory enhancement, but also as alternatives to arouse the imagination of visitors. The smell also appears as an option to recreate references to the past using herbs and plants. From the interviewees' perspective and sensory associations, arrows the need to explore the physical environment of the Castle and emphasised its sensory attributes so that the visitor's experience encompasses multiple sensory dimensions (Gretzel & Fesenmaier, 2010; Rahman et al., 2018; Agapito & Chan, 2019).

5. Conclusion

Regarding the role of the senses in the formation of experience in the context of heritage attractions, more specifically historical monuments, the outcomes showed how the Silves Castle's physical component, mainly through visual stimuli, had a more significant impact on the visiting experience. The results clarify the aspects that contribute to design meaningful tourism experiences and highlight the potential of managing the sensorial dimension in heritage sites. This study appears with relevant insights for the management of this type of resources in tourism destinations, not only in Silves Castle's specific case but also with the potential to be considered in the management of other heritage sites open to the public.

Contributions to knowledge

Although the sensory dimension is already recognised as having a pivotal role in developing memorable tourist experiences, the theme is still recent. It remains little explored, especially in the heritage context. This work contributes to clarifying the role of valuing the sensory dimension of the experience of visiting heritage sites and presents relevant suggestions for the management of the stage where the tourist experience takes place.

Implications for management

This study identified relevant sensory clues that allow the establishment of a connection between the monument and its visitors and improve this heritage site's sensory experience. The conscious and articulated management of sensory stimuli can increase the perceived value and, therefore, the satisfaction with the experience, making it more memorable. Managers of heritage attractions should devote themselves to understanding and exploring which physical and immaterial elements - ambient factors and design factors - affect the visitors' experience, attitudes, and behaviours. They should assign their efforts to highlight the sensory cues intrinsic to each site to provide a connection between the monument and its visitors (Bender, 2020). In this concerning, since artefacts are crucial for the process of interpretation of these historical sites, its preservation should be a concern for the managers of this attractions, in articulation with the use of interactive technologies, which can ensure active and engaging interactions, integrating people, resources, places, and environments (Cantoni et al., 2018; Agapito & Chan, 2019).

Limitations and future research

This study has a few limitations. Since meaningful sensory experiences play a significant role in encouraging visitors' positive behaviour and contribute to forming long-term memories of these experiences, future research should employ longitudinal studies, within larger samples at different times of the year and engaging the diverse stakeholders involved. Other heritage contexts should also be investigated, including post-experience surveys, to measure the sensory experience's impact on visitors in the long term and capture the sensory cues most impactful on the visitor's experience (Agapito et al., 2017; Lv, et al., 2020).

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