

Experiential Marketing and Purchase Intention of Ecotourism Experiences: Z-Generation Case

Sónia Nogueira¹, Marília Durão^{1,2}, Luís Pacheco¹, Makhabbat Ramazanova¹ and João Carvalho¹

^{1, 3, 4, 5} Portucalense University REMIT, Porto, Portugal

² University of Aveiro, GOVCOPP, Aveiro, Portugal.

snogueira@upt.pt

mariliadurao@upt.pt

luisp@upt.pt

ramazanova@upt.pt

joao.carvalho@upt.pt

Abstract: Consumers are more willing to invest in experiences with relaxation and stress reduction. Tourism, a pivotal driver of the economy, and its associated activities hold significant potential for experiential marketing. It is particularly evident in the growing interest of tourists in natural settings and experiences related to nature, fostering an environment conducive to the expansion of ecotourism. Consequently, an exploratory study was conducted with the following research question: How does experiential marketing relate to consumer satisfaction, loyalty, word-of-mouth, and intention to purchase ecotourism experiences, explicitly focusing on Generation Z? - The results indicate positive correlations between experiential marketing and satisfaction constructs, consequently establishing a link between satisfaction, loyalty, word-of-mouth promotion, and purchase intention. Thus, the findings provide valuable insights into the behaviors of ecotourism consumers and how experiential marketing can facilitate the development of more effective marketing strategies to enhance tourist satisfaction.

Keywords: Ecotourism, Experiential Marketing, Genz, Loyalty, Purchase Intention, Satisfaction, Word-of-Mouth.

1. Introduction

Consumers have become more discerning regarding destination conditions increasingly mindful of the impact of their choices on the environment (Soshkin and Calderwood, 2022). Consequently, new trends in tourism sector demand include ecotourism, outdoor activities, and rural tourism (WTO, 2022). As a result, most companies are under pressure to invest in certified products and services while providing clear, transparent information (Quynh, Hoai, and Loi, 2021). Ecotourism segment has experienced significant growth both in domestic and international markets. Nevertheless, there is a need for more statistical data. This study, therefore, examines the correlation of experiential marketing with satisfaction, subsequently exploring its impact on loyalty, word-of-mouth, and purchase intentions related to ecotourism experiences from the perspective of Generation Z consumers. Given the scarcity of research on the relationship between experiential marketing and ecotourism (Quynh, Hoai, and Loi, 2021), this study aims to provide a theoretical contribution to the existing literature. It seeks to offer a practical contribution that will enable marketing managers in ecotourism-oriented companies to comprehend better the effectiveness of strategies employed within this domain.

The central research question is: How does experiential marketing correlate with consumers' satisfaction, loyalty, word-of-mouth, and intention to purchase ecotourism experiences? To address this, we have formulated the following research questions: (1) do sensory experiences (SENSE) positively correlate with satisfaction with ecotourism experiences? (2) do affective experiences (FEEL) positively correlate with satisfaction with ecotourism experiences?; (3) do cognitive experiences (THINK) positively correlate with satisfaction with ecotourism experiences; (4) do physical experiences (ACT) positively correlate with satisfaction with ecotourism experiences?; (5) do relational experiences (RELATE) positively correlate with satisfaction with ecotourism experiences?; (6) does tourist satisfaction with ecotourism experiences positively correlates with loyalty; (7) does tourist satisfaction with ecotourism experiences positively correlates with word-of-mouth (WOM); and (8) does tourist satisfaction with ecotourism experiences positively correlates with purchase intention.

Section 2 presents the literature review, and section 3 discusses the methodology. Section 4 presents the results that are then discussed in Section 5. This section also includes some practical insights for marketing managers in ecotourism. The final section offers the paper's conclusions, limitations, and opportunities for further research.

2. Literature Review

Existing literature on the relationship between experiential marketing and ecotourism, especially concerning Generation Z, requires further exploration (Quynh, Hoai, and Loi, 2021). Generation Z, encompassing individuals born between 1995 and 2012, shows a preference for global travel, low tolerance for delay, seeks immediate responses, and values peer opinions over conventional advertising campaigns. This generation is deeply accustomed to the internet and technological advancements. They are skeptical toward traditional marketing methodologies, favoring platforms like Instagram and YouTube, and are discerning regarding products and services endorsed by influencers. Thus, exploring the behavior of this growing generation (in domestic and international markets) concerning ecotourism is interesting.

The International Ecotourism Society (TIES) defines ecotourism as responsible travel within natural areas dedicated to preserving the environment and prioritizing the local population's well-being (TIES, 2015). Consequently, ecotourism involves the adoption of the following guiding principles: (a) reduction of negative impacts on the environment; (b) conservation of destinations; (c) cooperation with local authorities and people; (d) visitors planning and management; (e) long-term monitoring programs; and (f) creation of infrastructures that consider harmonization with the environment, minimizing the use of fossil fuels and conserving indigenous plants and wildlife (Wood, 2002). Ecotourism facilitates the reduction of the ecological footprint, enhances social impact within destinations (Soshkin and Calderwood, 2022), and contributes to preserving natural areas designated for ecotourism attractions. Moreover, it generates economic benefits for the local community and authorities engaged in ecotourism management (Clarkin and Kähler, 2023).

The ecotourism market is dynamic, continually evolving to align with tourists' preferences and motivations. It emerges as a support system for companies dedicated to promoting experiences, fostering the local environment, and generating social value. Operators are encouraged to augment the value of their products by prioritizing the maximization of tourists' satisfaction and needs (Roseta, Sousa, and Roseta, 2020). The experience offered becomes integral to visitors' lives, evoking profound inner emotions. Beyond merely providing a service, the customers' sense of expertise is significantly heightened (Lin et al., 2009).

The evolution of consumer trends has significantly influenced the shift in the marketing paradigm (Batat, 2019). Consumer emotional engagement enhances sales and fosters loyalty, strengthening a brand's image and positioning (Batat, 2019). In this context, experiential marketing emerges as an essential tool, creating effective and personalized marketing strategies capable of positively impacting consumers while nurturing stronger relationships between consumers and companies (Dieguez, 2020).

Portugal ranked 16th (down from 12th place in 2019) and stands among the most competitive and appealing destinations for global tourism investment (Soshkin and Calderwood, 2022). Within ecotourism, experiential marketing is tailored to engage tourists and local communities by offering unique value-based experiences that encourage repeat consumer engagement (Quynh, Hoai, and Loi, 2021). Consequently, experiential marketing is a strategy that cultivates consumer loyalty and leads to personal recommendations. Companies must explore alternative emotional connections with consumers (Medina, Riesco, and Tejero, 2021).

The theoretical Strategic Experience Module (SEM) of experiential marketing comprises sensory experiences ("SENSE"), affective experiences ("FEEL"), cognitive experiences ("THINK"), physical experiences ("ACT"), and relational experiences ("RELATE"), initially proposed by Schmitt (1999), was tailored to suit ecotourism experiences. The impact of these constructs concerning satisfaction, loyalty, word-of-mouth, and purchase intention was examined. In other words, experiential marketing aims to cultivate comprehensive, integrated experiences that encompass these characteristics, allowing consumers to engage through their senses, emotions, thoughts, actions, and relationships. The SENSE construct specifically targets consumers' senses to create sensory experiences via touch, sight, taste, hearing, and smell. This strategy is frequently employed by the tourism and hospitality industry (Köse and Akyol, 2019). The FEEL construct focuses on evoking consumers' feelings and emotions to create affective experiences, ranging from mild positive perceptions of a brand to intense emotions of joy and pride. The THINK construct targets consumers' intellect, aiming to generate cognitive and problem-solving experiences that creatively engage customers, appealing to both their convergent and divergent thinking through surprise (Schmitt, 1999). Cognitive experiences can be elucidated in tourism through tourists' curiosity (Köse and Akyol, 2019). The ACT construct, another construct outlined by Schmitt (1999), involves physical experiences that introduce alternative ways of doing things, alternative lifestyles, and interactive encounters. The RELATE construct focuses on experiences that involve the interaction between individuals, placing them within a social context (Schmitt, 1999). It's important to note that a negative perception

of the experience leads to dissatisfaction, causing tourists to lose interest in revisiting the destination and negatively influencing the experience's recommendations (Köse and Akyol, 2019).

Satisfaction is closely linked to repeated purchases and positive recommendations to others, which are primary loyalty indicators (Köse and Akyol, 2019). Satisfied consumers tend to continue their purchases and are highly inclined to spread positive word-of-mouth. Within tourism marketing, these recommendations hold significant weight as they are considered highly reliable and among the most critical sources of information sought by potential tourists (Chi and Qu, 2008; Oppermann, 2000). Purchase intention represents the likelihood of consumers being willing to buy a product. It is a tool to gauge consumer demand for future products and assess how marketing strategies will impact sales (Morwitz, 2014).

3. Methodology

This exploratory research involves studying a specific situation at a particular time to elucidate the connections between the variables (Saunders, Lewis, and Thornill, 2019). The objective is to explore the relationships between variables associated with experiential marketing and satisfaction concerning ecotourism experiences. Additionally, it aims to explore the correlation between this satisfaction and factors like loyalty, purchase intention, and WOM.

An adapted scale from Lin et al. (2009) and Köse and Akyol (2019) was adopted to assess experiential marketing within ecotourism experiences. The study focused on Schmitt's (1999) five strategic modules: sensory experiences (SENSE), affective experiences (FEEL), cognitive experiences (THINK), physical experiences (ACT), and relational experiences (RELATE). To evaluate ecotourists' perceptions regarding experiential marketing strategies in ecotourism, a scale comprising 25 items was created composed of five items for the SENSE and FEEL modules, three items for the THINK module, five items for the ACT module, and seven items for the RELATE module. Table 1 provides a summary of the scales used to measure the constructs. A 5-point Likert Scale was consistently applied (1 = completely disagree to 5 = completely agree) to gather responses.

Table 1: Scales used for the constructs of the conceptual model

Construct	Items	References
SENSE	S1. The landscapes are very beautiful.	Adapted from Lin et al. (2009)
	S2. Ecotourism destinations are very attractive.	
	S3. The ecotourism surrounding environment is wonderful.	
	S4. The food at local restaurants is delicious with fresh ingredients.	
	S5. The surrounding sounds (animals, waterfalls) are striking.	
FEEL	F1. The whole atmosphere of ecotourism destinations makes me feel happy.	Adapted from Lin et al (2009); Köse and Akyol (2019)
	F2. Ecotourism experiences allow me to escape the pressures of everyday life.	
	F3. The atmosphere of ecotourism destinations makes me feel comfortable.	
	F4. Overall, ecotourism experiences give me positive feelings.	
	F5. The activities promoted in ecotourism destinations are fun.	
THINK	T1. Ecotourism experiences inspire me to reflect.	Adapted from Lin et al. (2009)
	T2. Ecotourism experiences stimulate my curiosity (e.g., discovering ecotourism destinations learn about fauna and flora).	
	T3. Ecotourism experiences make me think about my lifestyle (e.g., being more environmentally conscious).	
ACT	A1. I shared my ecotourism experiences with family and friends.	Adapted from Lin et al. (2009)
	A2. The activities promoted by ecotourism destinations attract me.	
	A3. I would like to continue exploring other ecotourism activities.	
	A4. Ecotourism experiences make me want to change my lifestyle.	
	A5. Ecotourism experiences improve my social life with others (friends, family).	
RELATE	R1. The scenery of ecotourism destinations (landscapes, animals, architecture, attractions) makes me want to take photos for future memory.	Adapted from Lin et al

Construct	Items	References
	R2. I want to buy some souvenirs related to ecotourism destinations. R3. Participating in activities promoted by ecotourism destinations represents my enthusiasm about ecotourism. R4. Participating in activities promoted by ecotourism destinations allows me to exchange experiences with other people with common interests. R5. The choice of ecotourism destinations reflects my personal taste. R6. Ecotourism experiences bring me closer to my family members or friends. R7. Ecotourism experiences remind me of the importance of cultural diversity.	(2009); Köse and Akyol (2019)
SATISFACTION	ST1. I made the right choice by opting for an ecotourism experience. ST2. To what extent did the ecotourism experiences meet your expectations ST3. Considering your ecotourism experiences so far, how satisfied are you?	Adapted from Bruner (2019)
LOYALTY	L1. I will say positive things about ecotourism experiences to other people. L2. I will recommend ecotourism experiences to anyone who asks me. L3. I will encourage friends and family to purchase ecotourism experiences. L4. I consider ecotourism experiences as my first choice. L5. I intend to return to an ecotourism destination in the coming years.	Adapted from Zeithaml, Berry, and Parasuraman (1996)
WORD-OF-MOUTH	W1. I will recommend ecotourism experiences to my friends. W2. I'm going to convince my family to buy ecotourism experiences. W3. I posted photos of ecotourism experiences on social media. W4. I will say positive things about ecotourism experiences online and/or to anyone who asks me.	Adapted from Bruner (2019); Quynh, Hoai and Loi (2021)
PURCHASE INTENTION	I1. I would like to purchase ecotourism experiences. I2. I am considering purchasing an ecotourism experience. I3. I hope to purchase ecotourism experiences. I4. I plan to purchase an ecotourism experience.	Adapted from Chen et al. (2016)

The population of this study includes a total population of 540 students from the 2nd and 3rd year at Portuguese Universities with management and tourism degrees, national ecotourism consumers from Generation Z. Convenience sampling was used to select the individuals, mainly due to the impossibility of identifying all the individuals in the larger population. A sample of 104 valid questionnaires was obtained in person. This approach is appropriate when obtaining a random or representative sample is difficult due to time constraints and financial or logistical issues.

A quantitative methodology was employed, using a survey questionnaire for data collection. The participants responded based on their personal ecotourism experiences. The questionnaire was disseminated in person from June to September 2023. In the initial section, respondents were asked to assess the significance of factors related to experiential marketing, satisfaction, loyalty, WOM, and purchase intention following the scales presented in Table 1. A 5-point Likert scale was used (1 – Not important at all to 5 – Very Important). The subsequent section focused on profiling each respondent (gender, age, marital status, type of place of residence (rural or urban), county of residence, and academic qualifications).

The conceptual model is thus introduced, stemming from the core question: "How does experiential marketing influence consumers' intention to purchase ecotourism experiences?". This model is based on Schmitt's (1999), and eight research hypotheses were formulated (as depicted in Figure 1). These hypotheses aim to provide

insights into the correlations of experiential marketing on satisfaction with ecotourism experiences and its influence on loyalty, WOM, and purchase intention.

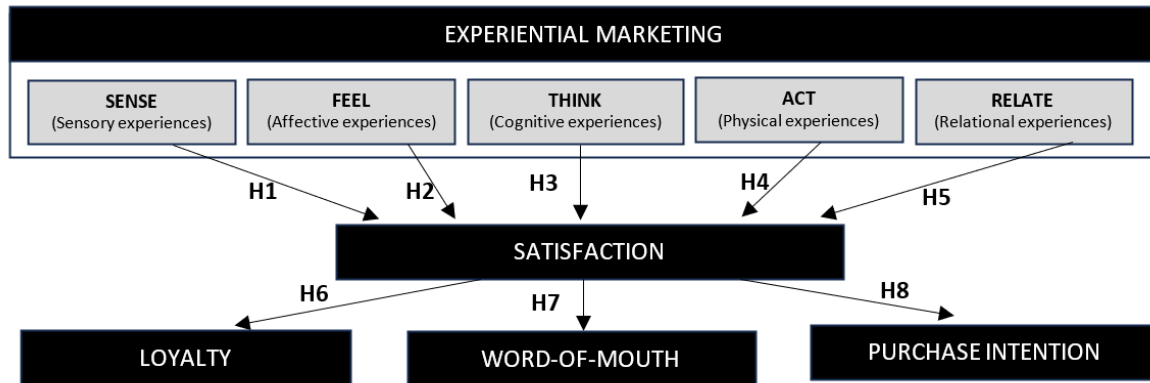


Figure 1: Conceptual Model

This study aims to test whether there is a positive relationship between each strategic experiential marketing module and tourist satisfaction with ecotourism experiences, formulating the following hypotheses:

- H1: Sensory experiences (SENSE) positively correlate with satisfaction with ecotourism experiences;
- H2: Affective experiences (FEEL) positively correlate with satisfaction with ecotourism experiences;
- H3: Cognitive experiences (THINK) positively correlate with satisfaction with ecotourism experiences;
- H4: Physical experiences (ACT) positively correlate with satisfaction with ecotourism experiences;
- H5: Relational experiences (RELATE) positively correlate with satisfaction with ecotourism experiences.

A satisfied customer often demonstrates an intention to revisit the destination and tends to recommend it to others, ultimately contributing to loyalty. As noted in the study by Wu and Tseng (2015), greater customer satisfaction typically leads to greater customer loyalty. In other words, their findings confirm that customer satisfaction is positively correlated with loyalty, and this correlation is relatively strong (Wu and Tseng, 2015). Additionally, recommendations from other individuals have emerged as a significant source of information for potential consumers. A contented consumer tends to influence WOM positively; they are more likely to share their experience with others through discussions with friends and family or by posting positive comments online (Quynh, Hoai, and Loi, 2021). Considering the nature of the data (numerical data such as range and ratio) and the necessity for a normal distribution within the sample data, parametric tests are deemed appropriate. Considering this, three more hypotheses were developed:

- H6: Satisfaction positively correlates with loyalty in ecotourism experiences;
- H7: Satisfaction positively correlate with word-of-mouth in ecotourism experiences; and
- H8: Satisfaction positively correlates with purchase intention in ecotourism experiences.

Non-parametric tests were also used to analyze categorical data since the sample data deviates from a normal distribution (Saunders, Lewis, and Thornhill, 2019). To ensure the adequacy of these statistical analyses, the sample data's normality was assessed using the Kolmogorov-Smirnov test. The internal consistency of the scales was verified through Cronbach's Alpha (α). The formulated hypotheses were tested using Spearman's correlation coefficient (Field, 2009).

4. Results

The sample comprised 104 respondents, with a majority of 76% being female and 24% male. The average age of the respondents was 21 years, and the majority were predominantly single (90.5%). Geographically, most participants resided in rural areas in the northern region of Portugal, with approximately 37.2% from the district of Viana do Castelo, 31% from the district of Braga, and 9.3% from Porto. Regarding academic qualifications, the respondents were primarily individuals pursuing degree programs. Descriptive statistics summarize the main findings in Table 2.

Table 2: Descriptive statistics

Construct	Items	μ	σ	Total μ
SENSE	S1	4.69	.464	4.3673
	S2	4.45	.621	
	S3	4.20	.768	
	S4	3.92	.856	
	S5	4.57	.650	
FEEL	F1	4.37	.738	4.3635
	F2	4.55	.695	
	F3	4.30	.749	
	F4	4.52	.653	
	F5	4.09	.739	
THINK	T1	4.19	.751	4.0865
	T2	3.98	.776	
	T3	4.09	.826	
ACT	A1	4.35	.620	3.9404
	A2	3.78	.859	
	A3	4.30	.695	
	A4	3.56	.954	
	A5	3.72	.864	
RELATE (Relational exp.)	R1	4.47	.710	3.8393
	R2	3.43	1.121	
	R3	3.52	.892	
	R4	3.69	.837	
	R5	4.07	.686	
	R6	3.75	1.012	
	R7	3.94	.868	

Construct	Items	μ	σ	Total μ
SATISFACTION	ST1	4.52	.539	4.2051
	ST2	3.65	.679	
	ST3	4.44	.537	
LOYALTY	L1	4.43	.571	4.1288
	L2	4.32	.672	
	L3	4.18	.721	
	L4	3.40	.981	
WORD-OF-MOUTH	W1	4.18	.693	3.8918
	W2	3.75	.890	
	W3	3.62	1.192	
	W4	4.01	.806	
PURCHASE INTENTION	I1	3.81	.777	3.7837
	I2	3.80	.874	
	I3	3.87	.837	

μ -mean
 σ -standard deviation

Sensory experiences (SENSE) have an average score of 4.3673, which indicates that ecotourism consumers hold a positive perception of the sensory experiences offered by ecotourism. Notably, items such as S1 (beautiful landscapes), with a score of 4.69, and S5 ("The surrounding sounds are striking"), with a score of 4.57, have the highest averages among the sensory experience-related statements.

The average score for affective experiences (FEEL) is 4.3635, indicating that ecotourism experiences evoke positive feelings among the sampled consumers. The items that obtained the highest averages within this domain were F2 ("Ecotourism experiences allow me to escape the pressures of everyday life") with a score of 4.55, and F4 ("Overall, ecotourism experiences give me positive feelings") with a score of 4.52.

Cognitive experiences (THINK) obtained a global average score of 4.0865. The items T1 ("Ecotourism experiences inspire me to reflect") scored an average of 4.19, and T3 ("Ecotourism experiences make me think about my lifestyle") received an average of 4.09. These items achieved the highest averages.

Physical experiences (ACT) present an overall average score of 3.9404. The items with a higher average score are A1 ("I shared my ecotourism experiences with family and friends") with 4.35, and A3 ("I would like to continue exploring other ecotourism activities") with 4.30.

Finally, relational experiences obtained an average score of 3.8393, with the items with higher averages being R1 ("The scenery of ecotourism destinations makes me want to take photos for future memory") with 4.47, and R5 ("The choice of ecotourism destinations reflects my personal taste") with 4.07. Regarding the other constructs, the satisfaction construct presents an average of 4.2051, the loyalty construct presents a mean score

of 4.1288, the WOM construct achieves an average of 3.8918, and the purchase intention construct attains an average of 3.7837.

Cronbach's Alpha was used to test the scale's reliability. It ranges between 0 and 1, considering 0.6 as the cutoff point for acceptability (Field, 2009). As observed in Table 3, all constructs exhibit Cronbach's Alpha values higher than 0.6, indicating an acceptable level of reliability.

Table 3: Cronbach's Alpha

Cronbach's Alpha (α)			
SENSE	0.683	Satisfaction	0.666
FEEL	0.878	Loyalty	0.799
THINK	0.680	WOM	0.741
ACT	0.693	Purchase intention	0.919
RELATE	0.725		

The Kolmogorov-Smirnov test (Table 4) was employed to assess the normality of the data distribution, considering a sample size exceeding 50 elements. The significance levels (sig) of each variable were examined. If the sig value was more than 0.05, the null hypothesis (H0) stating that "the data follows a normal distribution" was rejected (the sample did not follow a normal distribution). The sample data did not follow a normal distribution based on the test results.

Table 4: Normality Test

Kolmogorov-Smirnov ^a		
	Statistic	Sig.
SENSE	.127	<.001
FEEL	.139	<.001
THINK	.175	<.001
ACT	.178	<.001
RELATE	.119	.001
Satisfaction	.171	<.001
Loyalty	.113	.002
Word-of-mouth	.111	.003
Purchase Intention	.208	<.001

As the aim is to analyze the relationship between two variables, Spearman's correlation coefficient was used (Field, 2009), as depicted in Tables 5 and 6.

Table 5: Correlation coefficients experiential marketing and satisfaction

			Satisfaction	
Spearman's Rho	SENSE	Rho	.581**	Sig. 0.000
	FEEL	Rho	.498**	Sig. 0.000
	THINK	Rho	.409**	Sig. 0.000
	ACT	Rho	.518**	Sig. 0.000
	RELATE	Rho	.400**	Sig. 0.000

** . Significant correlation up to 0.01. N=104.

Table 6: Correlations with satisfaction

			Loyalty	WOM	Purchase Intention
Spearman's Rho	Satisfaction	correlation coefficient	.650**	.479**	.463**
		Sig.	0.000	0.000	0.000

** . Significant correlation up to 0.01. N=104

Considering the results, the formulated hypotheses can be accepted: SENSE positively correlates with satisfaction (H1), FEEL has a positive moderated correlation with satisfaction (H2), THINK has a positive moderated correlation with satisfaction (H3), ACT positively correlates with satisfaction (H4), and RELATE has a positive moderated correlation with satisfaction (H5). Furthermore, the results suggest that tourist satisfaction with ecotourism experiences positively influences loyalty (H6), has a moderate positive effect on word-of-mouth (H7), and has a moderate positive impact on purchase intention.

5. Discussion

The findings confirmed Smith's (1999) study, demonstrating that Schmitt's (1999) experience constructs influence the satisfaction derived from ecotourism experiences.

In this way, the proposed conceptual model, through the descriptive analysis of these constructs, allowed us to conclude that the sensory (4.3673), the affective (4.3635), and the cognitive (4.0865) experiences emerged with the highest average ratings. On the other hand, the less favorable emphasis was on relational experiences (3.8393) and physical experiences (3.904), aligning with similar conclusions presented in the study by Wu and Tseng (2015).

The results support all eight hypotheses within the model. Specifically, (H1) sensory experiences indeed correlate positively with satisfaction within ecotourism experiences. This corroborates findings from (Köse and Akyol, 2019) that emphasize how ecotourism senses influence tourists, including visual observations of landscapes and architecture, local cuisine tasting, and nature's sounds.

The SENSE construct specifically targets consumers' senses to create sensory experiences via touch, sight, taste, hearing, and smell. This strategy is frequently employed by the tourism and hospitality industry (Köse and Akyol, 2019). The findings also underscore that affective experiences positively correlate with satisfaction within ecotourism experiences (H2), indicating that ecotourism experiences generally evoke positive feelings among the sampled consumers. This suggests that an ecotourism destination's overall atmosphere influences consumers' feelings and emotions, subsequently impacting their satisfaction. Therefore, managers of ecotourism destinations should emphasize ensuring consumers' comfort, delight, and entertainment through the activities and experiences offered.

The findings further demonstrate that cognitive experiences positively correlate with ecotourism experience satisfaction (H3). This emphasizes that consumers are notably influenced by how these experiences engage their thoughts, stimulating their curiosity regarding the lifestyles and cultural aspects of the ecotourism destination.

Likewise, the construct of physical experiences shows a positive correlation with satisfaction within ecotourism experiences (H4), suggesting that the activities in which consumers engage within the ecotourism experience and their interactions with their family and friends affect their satisfaction levels. This indicates that physical experiences associated with ecotourism may encourage participation and engage consumers. Consequently, managers of ecotourism destinations should create activities that attract tourists and actively encourage their participation, fostering a sense of involvement and enjoyment. Finally, the correlation between the relational experiences and satisfaction with ecotourism experiences (H5) is positive, which underlines the importance of enhancing the relationship between tourists and the local cultures.

Satisfaction, an extensively studied concept in marketing, exhibited a positive correlation with loyalty, WOM, and purchase intention, thus playing a pivotal role in the performance and success of any tourist product or service. As reported in other studies (Wu and Tseng, 2015), if a tourist positively perceives ecotourism experiences after the experiential phase, this leads to greater tourist satisfaction (H6). This reinforces that a positive experience during ecotourism significantly contributes to overall satisfaction, influencing their likelihood of returning and engaging in future ecotourism activities. Within ecotourism, experiential marketing

is tailored to entertain tourists and local communities by offering unique value-based experiences that encourage repeat consumer engagement (Quynh, Hoai, and Loi, 2021).

As also found in previous studies (Quynh, Hoai, and Loi, 2021; Wardi, Abror, and Trinanda, 2018), the current investigation highlights that respondents often engage in ecotourism experiences based on recommendations from family and friends. This emphasizes the influence of tourist satisfaction with ecotourism experiences on positively influencing WOM (H7).

The greater the satisfaction, the greater the intention to purchase and engage in ecotourism experiences in the future, thus revealing a positive relationship between satisfaction and purchase intention (H8), as reported in other studies (Chi and Qu, 2008)

Consumer emotional engagement fosters loyalty (Batat, 2019), and marketing strategies can positively impact consumers and create stronger relationships between consumers and companies (Dieguez, 2020).

6. Conclusion

Ecotourism comprises products, services, and experiences where consumption creates memories and unique encounters (Quynh, Hoai, and Loi, 2021). These experiences are sold based on the sensations, emotions, and cognitive benefits they promise to provide (Batat, 2019). Tourism managers must recognize that the value of ecotourism offerings encompasses the entire lifestyle associated with the ecotourism experience. Implementing experiential marketing practices is an advantageous mechanism for promoting and enhancing this ecotourism segment.

Following experiential consumption in ecotourism, the outcomes of this experience significantly influence tourists' subsequent behavior, determined by the positive or negative perceptions they have acquired. A positive perception steers tourists toward satisfaction, revisiting the destination, engaging in positive recommendations (WOM), and exhibiting loyal behaviors. A satisfied customer frequently leads to repeated purchases and favorable recommendations, critical indicators for tourist business managers and destination authorities.

The proposed conceptual model allowed us to conclude that sensory, affective, cognitive, physical, and relational experiences positively influence tourist satisfaction with ecotourism experiences. Moreover, it was supposed that satisfaction with ecotourism experiences has a positive influence on loyalty, satisfaction with ecotourism experiences has a positive impact on WOM, and satisfaction with ecotourism experiences has a positive influence on purchase intention.

This study offers a significant theoretical contribution to the existing literature and provides practical insights that may benefit marketing managers in ecotourism. The findings suggest a deeper understanding of the most effective strategies that align with consumer preferences, potentially fostering an increased demand for ecotourism experiences and reinforcing competitiveness within the industry. Nonetheless, several limitations may be identified. The scarcity of information and data on ecotourism in Portugal hinders the depth of the analysis, as this topic remains relatively underexplored. Additionally, time constraints restricted the expansion of the sample size. As an exploratory study, these limitations need addressing and present opportunities for further research developments.

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