

THE REVISITIALIZATION OF THE QUERENÇA MARKET: EXPLORING THE VISITOR EXPERIENCE

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ABSTRACT

Within the paradigm of the experience economy, the literature has recently focused on the importance of creating the conditions to provide individuals with positive, meaningful and memorable consumption experiences. The consumption experience model proposed by Pine and Gilmore, which is based on four dimensions – entertainment, aesthetics, education and escapism – has been operationalized and adapted in several settings. This study presents the results obtained from the analysis of participants' experiences at the Querença Market, from the perspective of visitors. This initiative is part of a pilot project for territorial intervention – the *Querença Project* - which was implemented by nine young graduates in the region of Algarve, Portugal. Through a diversified offering of products and cultural and nature-related activities, based on the co-creation process with the local community, it was possible to revitalize the traditional village market, which became extinct 70 years ago. The results of the questionnaires presented to visitors of the market highlighted the multi-sensory nature of the event, which is related to the wide diversity of sensory stimuli associated with food, agricultural products and human interaction. Visitors described an overall positive and memorable experience, emphasizing the dimensions related to “aesthetics” and “entertainment.”

Keywords: Consumption Experience, Experience Economy, Rural Areas, Querença Market

JEL Classification: M39

1. INTRODUCTION

The consumption experience has been a theme addressed in many studies and in several academic fields, suggesting that there is great potential for the application of the concept (Carù and Cova, 2003; Walls *et al.*, 2011). Many authors agree that consumer experiences are inherently personal, influenced by individual and situational factors, and thus, composed by different, but interrelated dimensions, such as the following: sensory, intellectual, emotional, physical/behavioral and social (Bitner, 1992; Holbrook and Hirschman, 1982; Schmitt, 1999; Schmitt and Simonson, 1997).

From the view that environmental conditions can be created in order for individuals to have unique, positive and memorable experiences, the beginning of the 21st century has witnessed a scenario in which management and marketing managers, whether in the convenience and shopping goods market, the leisure and tourism areas, or the non-profit sector are focused on enhancing experiences for individuals (Walls *et al.*, 2011). This idea is based on the experience economy paradigm, which was disseminated by the work of

Pine and Gilmore (1998). Accordingly, the resulting theoretical framework proposed by these authors for the management and marketing of consumption experiences is composed of four dimensions that are considered to be crucial to a rich and meaningful experience – entertainment, aesthetics, education and escapism –, and it has been operationalized by other researchers over time (e.g., Oh *et al.*, 2007; Kastenholz, Loureiro, Marques and Carneiro, 2012).

Particularly, the experiential marketing approach to areas that are dealing with social problems, related to desertification and to the progressive exodus of younger people to urban areas, should center on carefully facilitating rich, positive, and diversified experiences by achieving balance in preserving endogenous resources, residents' quality of life, visitors' quality of visit, local providers' benefits and, consequently, aiming at local sustainable development (Kastenholz, Carneiro, Marques and Lima, 2012; Lane, 1994; Manente and Minghetti, 2006).

This is the case of the rural village of Querença (Loulé), situated in southern Portugal. Between 2001 and 2011, the village reduced its total resident population in 3.68% and it had a decrease of 50% in the group of young people, between 15 and 24 years old (INE, 2012). The region is experiencing a generational crisis, with one of the highest levels of aging in the Loulé council, compounded by a dispersed population, including individuals who live in complete isolation. The majority of its active population works either in the city of Loulé or on the coast. In Querença itself, in addition to craftsmanship, traditional agriculture is prevalent, even though it is perceived as a complementary activity that generates only small surpluses for sale (Alves and Fernandes, 2011; Vicente, 2006).

In 2011, the revitalization of the local market, which had ceased operating 70 years ago, was developed as part of a pilot project of social intervention named *Querença Project*, which engaged young graduates in the process of enhancing the natural, cultural and social resources of the region. This traditional market uses the experiential marketing approach and is co-created in a setting that offers local products, and cultural and nature-based activities, through a process involving the local community and visitors. Hence, the Querença Market is a local event of a social and economic nature that seeks to satisfy the domestic needs of the population and strengthen social cohesion, and to articulate the local products and traditions with the needs of consumers by providing the conditions for positive consumption experiences to emerge (Fernandes, 2013).

Against this background, this study aims to analyze the consumption experiences of visitors to the Querença Market (Loulé, Portugal) using the proposed framework of Pine and Gilmore (1998). Accordingly, the specific research objectives are to characterize the consumption experience of visitors to the Querença Market and to understand the elements or features that contribute to creating the conditions that enhance their consumption experiences.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Consumption experiences have been recognized as a particular economic offering, occupying a central role in society and holding a *premium* position on the four-stage-continuum of the progression of economic value, after commodities, goods and services (Pine and Gilmore, 1998). Indeed, current research shows consumers' preferences for experiences and stories, and hence, being engaged, when interacting with products and services (Holbrook and Hirschman, 1982). Therefore, the consumption experience generates more value for consumers when it encourages individuals' engagement and co-creation between the provider and the consumers (Poulsson and Kale, 2004; Prahalad and Ramaswamy, 2004).

Although experiences are personal, existing in the mind of an “individual who has been engaged on an emotional, physical, intellectual, or even spiritual level” (Pine and Gilmore, 1998:99), they can be partially managed in order to engage individuals. Managerial implications result from the fact that engaging consumers in positive physical and social aspects facilitates positive emotional states, satisfaction and loyalty to environments (Bitner, 1992), in which consumers are more likely to spend time and have more responsible consumption interactions (Kastenholz, Carneiro and Marques, 2012; Walls *et al.*, 2011).

According to Pine and Gilmore (1998), consumption experiences are differentiated on two levels: a) the extent of the consumers’ participation – passive participation *versus* active participation, and b) the degree of the consumers’ connection to the event – absorption *versus* immersion. Accordingly, these elements are combined in a framework based on four components: entertainment, aesthetics, escape and education. The “entertainment” dimension is considered to be the more passive domain, because the consumer mainly observes the activities and/or the performances of other individuals (e.g., attending a concert). The “aesthetic” realm requires an immersion experience resulting in the contemplation of the environment, and for that reason, the individuals’ participation is somewhat minimized (e.g., viewing the landscape). The “aesthetics” dimension is hence couched in the environment, i.e., it relates to the consumers’ interpretation of the physical environment around them. In the “education” dimension, the experience is active and absorptive, and the consumers play a leading role in the co-determination of their experience (e.g., a gastronomic class). Finally, the “escape” component entails high individual engagement, which may lead to meaningful and memorable experiences that contribute to the consumers’ personal development (e.g., a gastronomic workshop with locals).

Taking into account that the boundaries between the proposed dimensions are not inflexible, ideally, a consumption experience should be managed from the perspective of a “sweet pot”, i.e., an amalgam of all of the strong features of the consumption experience that are related to the different experience domains. Nevertheless, specific realms tend to be dominant at specific events, a characteristic that can be analyzed with managerial purposes (Oh *et al.*, 2007).

The absence of an appropriate scale for measuring the four realms proposed by Pine and Gilmore (1998) has faced some criticism. To address this limitation, Oh *et al.* (2007) developed a scale that is considered to be reliable and stable to analyze the proposed theoretical framework by Pine and Gilmore (1998) in the bed-and-breakfast sector. Afterwards, this scale has been adapted and tested by several researchers in other sectors, such as the following: cruises (Hosany and Witham, 2009), events (Park *et al.*, 2010), wine-based tourism (Quadri-Felitti and Fiore, 2012) and rural tourism (Kastenholz, Loureiro, Marques and Carneiro, 2012).

In addition, because experiential approaches outline the importance of hedonic consumption for individuals, the idea of devising the right multi-sensory environment is seen as contributing to value creation for both customers and organizations, which leads to more positive individual outcomes (e.g., positive affective associations, satisfaction, long-term memories, loyalty, and behavior) (Brakus *et al.*, 2009; Gentile *et al.*, 2007). As a result, sensory stimuli (visual, aural, olfactory, gustatory and tactile) have been highlighted as a crucial tool for marketing and managing unique and appealing holistic consumption experiences (Krishna, 2012; Schmitt, 1999). Furthermore, empirical studies stress the importance of the sensory dimension of consumer experiences when compared with other components (e.g., physical, intellectual, emotional, and social), highlighting sensory stimuli as key in engaging and co-creating value with consumers, as well in clarifying brand identity and brand image (Gentile *et al.*, 2007; Krishna, 2012; Schmitt and Simonson, 1997).

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1. Setting

The village of Querença is part of the Loulé municipality, which is located in the region of the Algarve, Portugal. The territory is rich in cultural, social and nature-based resources, as it is part of the Natura 2000 network. Since this village has experienced a progressive decline in its population, resulting in some social problems, the *Querença Project* was founded in 2011, the objective being to revive the village of Querença. A partnership between the Manuel Viegas Guerreiro foundation (non-profit organization), public and private local organizations and businesses, the municipality, the University of Algarve and the local community aimed to enhancing the value of the region's natural, cultural and social resources, and attracting educated young persons to live and engage in sustainable initiatives in the community for nine-month periods (Alves & Fernandes, 2011; Fernandes, 2013).

One of the central initiatives of the project was the revitalization of the traditional Market of Querença, which had ceased operating 70 years ago. The event takes place on the last Sunday of each month, based on specific themes. In addition to the agricultural products and handicrafts, several activities, such as workshops, are organized as part of the market. From October 2011 to June 2012, nine iterations of the event took place, following the model implemented by the *Querença Project*. Currently, the event is organized by the parish of Querença, Tôr and Benafim, and it returns to a local institution of social solidarity (Fernandes, 2013).

3.2 Instruments and data

An online survey created in *google drive* was used to collect the data, and it was implemented during September and October of 2012. The selection criteria for the target population were: visitors aged 18 years or older who had participated in at least one of the nine iterations of the Querença Market that took place between October 2011 and June 2012, and visitors who had voluntarily provided their email addresses during the activities featured at the event. From the 118 emails sent in a three phase process, 106 responses were considered valid for the analysis.

Four groups of questions were aimed at analyzing the four realms of the consumption experience, the sensory component related to the consumption experience and sociodemographic information. In its development, the questionnaire was subjected to a pre-test involving 10 visitors. Once collected, the questionnaires were subjected to minor adjustments regarding vocabulary and design. The first group of questions was adapted from Oh *et al.* (2007), Park *et al.* (2010) and Kastenholz, Loureiro, Marques and Carneiro (2012): 16 items were used to measure the four realms of the consumption experience at the Querença Market; three items to analyze the "memory" variable; four items to measure *arousal*; two items to examine future behavioral intentions; and one item to evaluate overall satisfaction. The second group used the five items suggested by Agapito *et al.* (2012) to assess the contribution of each one of the so-called five senses to a positive consumption experience in the Querença Market. All of the items were measured by a five-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). The third group included an open-ended question that allowed visitors to freely express the sensory impressions related to their experience at the Querença Market ("Please recall your experience at the Querença Market. What did you see, touch, taste, smell and hear?"). The fourth group of questions was aimed at collecting sociodemographic information.

3.3. Data analysis methods

Descriptive statistics were implemented in the analysis of the data. The Cronbach's alpha coefficient was performed to verify the internal consistency of the items (Hill and Hill, 2008) used to analyze the constructs related to the consumption experience, which were adapted from Oh *et al.* (2007), Park *et al.* (2010), and Kastenholz, Loureiro, Marques and Carneiro (2012). These analyses were implemented using IBM SPSS 20.0 (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences) software. The frequency analysis of the words related to sensory impressions mentioned in the open-ended question was conducted using the software IBM – SPSS Text Analytics for Surveys 4.0. With respect to the free expression responses, words/expressions were included in the analysis if they were referred to by at least 5% of the respondents and corresponded to at least 3% of the total of the words mentioned (Reilly, 1990).

4. RESULTS

Of the total sample, 65% of the respondents are female and 35% are male. The average age of the participants is 35 years with a standard deviation of 11 years. The respondents are predominantly employed (75%) and single (52%), reside in local municipalities (Loulé: 36%; Faro: 25%) and had visited the market three or more times (54%).

The items adapted from the literature to assess the four dimensions of the consumption experience proposed by Pine and Gilmore (1998) seem to be reliable, because all of the measures have a Cronbach's alpha higher than 0.7 (Table 1). The results reveal that the frequencies that are higher in the response categories of “strongly agree” and “strongly positive” (higher than 80%) are related to the aesthetics dimension (“Just being there was very pleasant” [98.1%]; “I felt a real sense of harmony” [91.5%]) and to the entertainment realm (“The activities of others were fun to watch” [86.8%]; “Watching the activities and the environment was captivating” [83.0%]).

Most of the respondents claim to remember many positive aspects of the Querença Market (93.4%), and most believe that they will not forget their experience at the event (84%). The respondents are also satisfied with the organization of the event (95.3%). Furthermore, the majority of visitors state that the experience was interesting (88.7) and stimulating (81.1%). While in general, the participants are satisfied with the market organization (95.3%), 52.8% of the participants mention the intention to return to the market in the near future, and 67% are willing to recommend it to other people.

Table 1 - Analysis of the visitor experience at the Querença Market

Constructs/items	% Agree+ strongly agree	Median	Cronbach's Alpha
Education The experience stimulated my curiosity to learn new things The experience has made me more knowledgeable I learned a lot It was a real learning experience	73.6% 70.8% 69.8% 61.4%	4 4 4 4	0.89
Aesthetics Just being there was very pleasant I felt a real sense of harmony The market was elaborate and meticulous The market was very attractive	98.1% 91.5% 64.1% 22.6%	4 4 4 3	0.72
Entertainment The activities of others were fun to watch Watching the activities and the environment was captivating I enjoyed watching activities performed by others at the market I enjoyed being one of the visitors at the market	86.8% 83.0% 78.3% 35.8%	4 4 4 3	0.76
Escapism I was completely immersed in this market I felt I was at a totally different place and time at this market This market made me feel like I was in a different world I could imagine I was a different person at this market	66.0% 55.7% 37.8% 28.3%	4 4 3 3	0.85
Arousal My experience was interesting My experience was stimulating My experience was exciting My experience was enjoyable	88.7% 81.1% 51.9% 50.9%	4 4 4 4	0.78
Memory I remember many positive things about this market I won't forget my experience at this market I have wonderful memories about this market	93.4% 84.0% 55.7%	4 4 4	0.83
Intention to revisit I will revisit this market at the next date or the following	52.8%	4	-
Intention to recommend I will recommend this market to other people	67.0%	4	-
Overall satisfaction Overall, I am satisfied with the market organization	95.3%	4	-

Source: Own elaboration

When asked to what extent the different human senses contributed to a positive experience at the Querença Market (Table 2), 91.5% of the respondents strongly agreed that the sense of taste contributed the most, followed by smell (81.1%), touch (68.0%), sight (28.3%) and hearing (17.0%).

Table 2: Contribution of the five senses to a positive experience

Senses	Agree + strongly agree	Median
My sense of taste was stimulated (flavors)	91.5%	4
My sense of smell was stimulated (smells)	81.1%	4
My sense of touch was stimulated (textures)	68.0%	4
My sense of sight was stimulated (colors, objects...)	28.3%	3
My sense of hearing was stimulated (sounds)	17.0%	3

Source: Own elaboration

When asked to freely express the sensory impressions associated with their experience at the Querença Market, the participants recalled sensory impressions (Table 3) related to gastronomy (18%), agricultural products (17%) and people (12%).

Table 3: Sensory impressions related to the visitor experience

Sensory impressions	% of the 365 mentioned words	% of respondents
Gastronomy (bread, cakes, sweets, charcuteries, ice cream)	18%	39%
Agricultural products (honey, seeds, aromatic herbs, fruit, vegetables)	17%	35%
People (families, local people)	12%	32%
Animation (folkloric group, <i>tuna</i> , music, theater play)	7%	18%
Textures (agricultural products, cork, wool, wood, water)	6%	14%
Nature (land, landscape, dew, mountain range, water)	5%	12%
Beverage (tea, distilled spirit (<i>aguardente</i>), liqueurs, cocktails)	3%	10%

Source: Own elaboration

5. DISCUSSION

The adaption of the scale proposed by Oh *et al.* (2007) based on the experiential theoretical approach by Pine and Gilmore (1998) seems to be appropriate to analyze an event such as the Querença Market. Accordingly, the main finding is that “aesthetics” and “entertainment” are the dimensions that prevail in the consumption experience at the Querença Market, as perceived by visitors.

The “entertainment” component is related to the nature of the event itself, which people want to enjoy, the social component being one of the strong pillars of the project. The “aesthetic” domain is classified as passive immersion in the physical environment. This form of experience is encouraged by the location of the event, which differs from the urban scenario (Quadri-Felti and Fiore, 2012). In addition, diverse sensory-informed activities are offered during the market in an open area characterized by nature and historical heritage, and surrounded by a mountain range landscape. This result is in line with other studies conducted in rural areas, in which the aesthetic experience is highlighted (Kastenholz, Loureiro, Marques and Carneiro, 2012).

The escapism dimension was the one that obtained a lower level of concordance, meaning that, in general, the individuals were not completely absorbed in the activities, a process requiring active participation. Therefore, despite the existence of themed workshops at the market, they did not seem to fully engage visitors, which can partially be explained by the short duration of the event (approximately three hours) and by the fact that some of the participants found themselves in a place that was too close to their everyday life.

Overall, the participants were satisfied with their experience at the Querença Market, and they claimed that their experience was interesting and stimulating. However, only slightly over half of the visitors (52.8%) are willing to return to following occurrences of the event. One possible reason for this finding is that the market is not yet perceived as having the potential to continue to be surprising in the future. In fact, the surprise factor is an important aspect in facilitating memorable consumption experiences and loyalty (Tung and Ritchie, 2011).

With respect to the sensory component of the consumption experience, the senses of taste and smell were the most referenced by visitors as contributing to a positive experience at the Querença Market, which suggests the importance of gastronomy to the event. This idea is somewhat confirmed in the open-ended answers, where the most mentioned words/expressions related to the market regard gastronomy. This sensory impression is also highlighted in other studies on consumption experiences in rural areas (Agapito *et al.*, 2014; Gretzel and Fesenmaier, 2010; Kastenholz and Lima, 2011).

Curiously, it is worth noting that the senses of sight and hearing are the least cited as enhancing the visitors' experiences. Although some studies show that the sense of sight is not significantly predominant in consumption experiences in rural areas, the importance given to sight by the respondents has tended to be higher than in the present study (Agapito *et al.*, 2012; Gretzel and Fesenmaier, 2010). Nevertheless, the focus on the senses of taste and smell in this research is not surprising, because the specific event under study is a market, which is especially centered on local products related to food and to other non-visual senses.

The same idea applies to the haptic sense, because the participants considered that touch highly contributed to a positive experience at the Querença Market. Conversely, empirical studies on visitor experiences concluded that touch-based stimuli are those that are the least optimized by rural managers and marketeers (Agapito *et al.*, 2012, 2014). This finding can be somewhat explained by the fact that, at the Querença Market, the visitors have the opportunity to touch food-related products and to participate in workshops focusing on hand-based work and on experiencing textures. Also, the clear reference to people, particularly to local people, as a sensory impression, confirms that the project is focused on community interaction. In fact, recent research stresses the importance of the social dimension for positive visitor experiences that endure in the memory and contribute to the sustainability of local destinations (Manente and Minghetti, 2006).

6. CONCLUSION

This study followed the experiential approach suggested by Pine and Gilmore (1998) in their framework for managing consumption experiences, which is based on four dimensions. The research intended to characterize the consumption experience of visitors to the Querença Market and to understand the elements or features that contribute to the creation of the conditions that enhance their consumption experiences.

Although the event is most related to "aesthetics" and "entertainment," more than 50% of the participants associate educational and escapism characteristics with the Querença Market. This suggests that the physical environment and the social component of the

project are strong elements, though because the other features are also present at the event, the idea of the “sweet pot” proposed by Pine and Gilmore (1998) can be managed in order to enrich consumer experiences. From a managerial perspective, the educational and escapism features should be enhanced, because these are the dimensions requiring a higher level of participation and immersion, and they are engaging processes that facilitate positive outcomes such as long-term memory and loyalty (Oh *et al.*, 2007; Tung and Ritchie, 2011). Furthermore, efforts should be put into the existing workshops and related activities with a view to providing the most appropriate conditions to most effectively encouraging repeat visits.

Under the experience economy paradigm, it is also important to analyze the way in which consumers physically interact with the different environments (Krishna, 2012; Pine and Gilmore, 1998; Schmitt, 1999); such is the case of the Querença Market. Indeed, this event can be associated with particular sensory qualities that can be used to reinforce the event brand, alter the product offerings, as well as consolidate the communication strategies with the help of new technologies. In fact, the visitors revealed that certain sensory impressions were the most prevalent in their consumption experiences, in particular: “gastronomy” (bread, cakes, sweets, charcuteries, ice cream), “agricultural products” (honey, seeds, aromatic herbs, fruit, vegetables) and “people” (families, local people). On the one hand, the Querença Market should dynamically focus on creatively facilitating unexpected experiences through stimulating different senses. On the other hand, because the market is not predominantly perceived as visual, there is an opportunity to enhance the experiences of sensory impaired people and to continuously co-create experiences with visitors and locals (Agapito *et al.*, 2014).

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