

Cooking unforgettable experiences: sensory marketing in slow food restaurants

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Mariana Alves Santos

EIDO, Universidade de Vigo, Vigo, Spain

Ana Dopico-Parada

*Department of Business Organization and Marketing, Universidade de Vigo,
Pontevedra, Spain, and*

Pablo Cabanelas

*Department of Business Organization and Marketing, ECOBAS,
Universidade de Vigo, OdC, Vigo, Spain*

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Abstract

Purpose – This study aims to investigate the impact of gastronomic sensory experiences on customer intention to revisit. The paper analyses if sensory perception is positively related to experiential value and attempts to verify if customer satisfaction is positively related to post-purchase behaviour.

Design/methodology/approach – The paper adopts a quantitative approach through structural equation modelling for analysing the data collected from 416 respondents in Portugal, a country well-known for its gastronomy.

Findings – Sensory perception positively impacts the experiential value in its functional and emotional dimensions. Furthermore, immediate customer satisfaction induces positive post-purchase behaviour regarding slow food restaurants.

Practical implications – This study provides practical guidelines for managers to monitor customer satisfaction by applying sensory marketing techniques. Furthermore, slow food advocates for environmentally sustainable practices, social welfare and the preservation of biodiversity and local culinary traditions.

Originality/value – Slow Food restaurants must remain authentic and sustainable to develop a traditional gastronomic experience. Sensory marketing is a marketing practice that uses senses to improve customers' emotions and dining experiences. Although there are studies applied to the restaurant sector, there are hardly any applied to slow food.

Keywords Multisensory marketing, Customer experience, Experiential value, Post purchase behaviour, Slow food, Sustainability

Paper type Research paper

1. Introduction

The business environment has changed dramatically in modern markets, and this transformation affects the overall efficiency and competitiveness of companies (Isaac *et al.*, 2023). Customers are exposed to multiple stimuli provided by the respective brands to attract and retain them (Nayeem *et al.*, 2019); e.g. several modernist chefs have paid more attention to food or drinks aromas in enhancing their guests' multisensory dining experiences (Spence, 2022). This exposure to experiences has become an alternative to differentiate products and brands from competitors (Nayeem *et al.*, 2019), and to build customer loyalty (Andreini *et al.*, 2019).

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Youssef and Spence (2023) called it the “experience economy”, and it is a response to those customers who value the power of experiences.

In a service industry like the restaurant industry, managers have an extra advantage in experience marketing because the industry’s nature allows a dialogue to be established with customers, providing personal experiences directly (Amin and Tarun, 2019). For instance, marketing practices has seen a clear shift towards a more experiential relationship with customers, and many brands are trying to harness the power of experiential events; this change has led to a growing interest in delivering immersive, multisensory experiences (Youssef and Spence, 2023). However, few experiences can awaken all senses as restaurants do. Although most service industries employ one or more of the five senses, restaurants can employ all five senses or multi-senses (Kumar *et al.*, 2020). So, restaurants are moving from being food provisioners to places where visitors can experience new stimuli to increase their satisfaction. Despite this idea being particularly important in slow food restaurants, which aim to challenge the fast-paced life we are immersed in, there are still few studies applied to this niche, when customer satisfaction largely depends on memorable, pleasurable, attentive, and sometimes extraordinary experiences in this industry. Therefore, the challenge for marketers and researchers is to identify which experiences can leave the most favourable impression on customers and encourage them to develop a positive attitude and behaviour towards the brand (Amin and Tarun, 2019).

This research intends to be a signpost for the restaurant sector by highlighting the noticeable lack of research focused on applying sensory marketing principles in Slow Food restaurants. Despite the existing body of literature addressing various aspects of the service industry, few studies have specifically targeted the application of these marketing principles within the Slow Food movement; this oversight reveals an area ripe for exploration and potential innovation (Chang and Cheng, 2023; Isaac *et al.*, 2023; Silaban *et al.*, 2023). By bridging this gap, we aim not only to enrich academic discourse but also to furnish practitioners with insights that can catalyse transformative changes within the restaurant landscape. In this sense, the paper results serve as a valuable guide for managers of Slow Food restaurants, who share the philosophy of promoting a more intentional and mindful approach to food, thereby contributing to a healthier planet and community. By focusing on offering high-quality meals prepared with fresh, locally sourced, and sustainably produced ingredients, Slow Food restaurants can attract environmentally conscious consumers, enhancing their satisfaction and loyalty. Furthermore, the Slow Food dining experience emphasizes the enjoyment of flavours, the company of others, and an appreciation for the craftsmanship behind each dish, contrasting sharply with the fast-food experience, which prioritizes convenience and speed (Petrini, 2013). Our findings can assist managers in attracting this mindful consumer base while reinforcing their commitment to quality, sustainability, and the uniqueness of the culinary experience, ultimately resulting in positive impacts for both their businesses and the community.

In alignment with this pursuit, this paper aims to understand the impact of gastronomic sensory experiences (including vision, hearing, taste, smell and touch), on the consumer’s intention to revisit, as it can become a differential strategy that needs more scientific testing. This objective is also complemented by two sub-objectives: first, the paper analyses if sensory perception is positively related with experiential value, and second, it assesses if customer satisfaction with the experience is positively related with post-purchase behaviour.

2. Literature review

2.1 *Slow food*

In 1986, Carlo Petrini created the Slow Food concept aimed at neutralizing fast-food chains or simply resisting the “McDonaldization” of food (Petrini and Pollan, 2001). Defenders of this concept refute many aspects of the modern capitalist economy and promote a multidisciplinary approach to sustainable food production and consumption through more balanced and slower

rhythms of life (Dias *et al.*, 2021). Overall, the philosophy behind Slow Food is that eating is an agricultural act in which informed consumers make better decisions and become co-producers of good food. It defends the right to consume healthy food while respecting the planet, conserving regional, traditional and artisanal cuisines, techniques and products, maintaining food heritage, promoting fair trade, and protecting biodiversity always in harmony with ecosystems and with gastronomic pleasure in mind (Petrini, 2013).

In this regard, corporate and customer awareness has seen an upsurge in ecological and sustainability practices. This trend is particularly evident within the broader hospitality industry, where restaurants are taking significant strides in adopting sustainability initiatives (Hu *et al.*, 2010). The food industry is increasingly adopting practices related to sustainability in gastronomy, e.g. through eco-gastronomy, a close concept to Slow Food philosophy, which establishes connections between the dish and the planet. This concept fosters an attitude not only capable of preserving the taste of food, but also considering the cultivation and valorisation of local products (Freixa and Chaves, 2015).

The Slow Food movement conceptualizes food through three interconnected principles: good, clean, and fair (Petrini, 2005). “Good” is undoubtedly a very subjective characteristic; it means pleasant, quality, tasty and healthy food. “Clean” encompasses the notion of production that does not harm the environment. “Fair” symbolizes equity for consumers and producers; affordable prices for customers and good working and remuneration conditions for producers (Slow Food, 2023a). However, despite its growing visibility around the world, with Slow Food being present in 160 countries, contributions from the academic and scientific community to understand its multiple impacts are still modest (Dias *et al.*, 2021).

2.2 Overview of multisensory marketing

Multisensory marketing represents a shift from conventional marketing activities, reliant on needs, information retrieval, and product evaluation, to a marketing strategy centred on enhancing experiences (Isaac *et al.*, 2023). It is a business practice rooted in experiences, possible by the five sensory modalities: taste, smell, hearing, vision and touch (Fong *et al.*, 2023). Some of the most successful organizations use the five senses in creating their brand image, and new technological developments and research has appeared in literature to help organizations create an experience suited to their business and customers (Khandelwal *et al.*, 2020). Research in the field of sensory marketing suggests that products can be evaluated or judged based on their appearance, feel, smell, taste and sound, which further influences customer behaviour and indirectly affects purchasing intentions (Wörfel *et al.*, 2022).

Lindstrom (2005) explains that sometimes, unconsciously, we store our values, feelings, and emotions in memory banks. It is then possible to metaphorically compare that memory to something like a standard video, that is, a kind of recording made up of an image track and a sound track; however, for humans this has at least five tracks, image, sound, smell, taste and touch. These five tracks contain an unimaginable quantity of data with a direct influence on emotions and everything they imply. Thus, sensory marketing produces a message that evoke customers through senses when they think about products or services (McCole, 2004; Schmitt, 1999; Yuan and Wu, 2008).

2.2.1 Sight marketing. Vision is considered the most common sense when choosing goods or services and crucial for customer identification with the brand (Hultén, 2011), becoming the most studied modality (Wörfel *et al.*, 2022). The domain of vision causes a need to experience products and services, as human opinion is quickly conditioned by what is seen (Hultén, 2013). The visual sense is used in various ways and dominates other senses in the customer’s purchasing decision (Pawaskar and Goel, 2014).

Visual stimulus encompasses the brand’s image strategy, and can be worked through colour, graphics, fonts, packaging and its visual identity (Hultén, 2013). Colour is considered the most important element of the visual sense, as it is used to evoke emotion, express personality, and stimulate brand association (Nagarjuna and Sudhakar, 2015). In the food and

beverage sector, the influence of colours is readily apparent and distinctly defined. Therefore, selecting the right colour scheme is crucial in enticing customers to a restaurant, ensuring their comfort throughout the dining experience, and encouraging them to return for more (Chemah *et al.*, 2019).

2.2.2 Sound marketing. When we hear a word, we attribute meaning to it, we even try to perceive the physical characteristics of the source of the sound – either animate (human, cat) or inanimate (box, robot) (Krishna, 2012). As Lindstrom (2012) points out, it is the use of the perception that the customer has through hearing that leads a brand to develop an eminent image. Sound is very effective in getting the customer to create new images and thoughts, confirming that listening has a percentage of 41% in brand building.

It was proven that music had the purpose of inducing certain attitudes and behaviours in customers, such as awakening the purchase (Milliman, 1982). For instance, customers can stay longer and even spend more than expected in a store if they like the music (Bitner, 1992). Thus, sound can provide multiple sensory experiences to everyone, through different forms of sound expression such as the voice or even a simple jingle (Pawaskar and Goel, 2014). Then, it is advisable for restaurateurs to dedicate time to curate a music playlist that aligns with their restaurant's identity, considering genre, artists, and release years (Chemah *et al.*, 2019). Similarly, the location of the kitchen significantly impacts the restaurant's ambiance, as cooking sounds enhance the dining experience; it would be unfavourable to separate the kitchen from the dining area (Chakravarty, 2017).

2.2.3 Smell marketing. The sense of smell is also essential for living an experience and is a determining factor in human decision-making. Brands began to use smell as an activator of relationships, emotions, and feelings with their customers, since smell does not present advertising saturation and has direct communication with memory and is still a new concept as a sensory marketing application for most companies (Grisales and Claudia, 2019). Smell is the only sense that we cannot turn off; people can close their eyes, cover their ears, not touch anything, and not put anything in their mouth, but smell remains an essential element of the air we breathe (Kotler, 2010). The feelings created by fragrances, whether pleasant or not, are associated with creativity, culture, learning, emotion, and psychology (Wright, 2006). Furthermore, odours can also be used to produce lasting customer memories and relationships with brand loyal customers. We can remember aromas with 65% perfection after just three months, while the visual memory of a photograph drops to around 50%; on average, a human can remember about 10,000 scents (Batey, 2010).

One of the most renowned strategies in olfactory marketing within the food industry involves employing artificial scents to entice customers. A notable example is Starbucks Coffee's decision to roast coffee beans in-store instead of relying on external suppliers. This practice diffuses the aroma of freshly roasted beans throughout the environment, enhancing the sensory experience for patrons (Medina, 2017). The concept of slow food takes a different approach, it emphasizes natural aromas from the careful preparation of authentic dishes, using fresh ingredients and traditional methods (Slow Food, 2023a).

2.2.4 Taste marketing. The perception of flavour is perhaps the most multisensory of our everyday experiences. The latest research by psychologists and cognitive neuroscientists increasingly reveals the complex multisensory interactions that give rise to the taste experiences we all know and love, demonstrating how they depend on the integration of signals from all human senses (Spence, 2015). The use of taste in brands' sensory experiences is achieved through its association with other senses, since taste is one of the senses that stands out most emotionally in cohabitation with other senses (Rupini and Nandagopal, 2015).

However, taste is the most difficult sense to incorporate for most brands, and consequently, and it becomes the least explored sense in sensorial branding (Lindstrom, 2012). However, Gobé (2002) associates the acts of eating and drinking with happy emotions and positive memories, which is why branding should not neglect taste. The sense of taste contributes to the construction of an incomparable brand image, thus being an effective method for differentiation from competitors (Lindstrom, 2012). For example, the characteristics of

flavours are among the most important differentiating factor for restaurants. Some of the dishes can be designed based on much-loved traditional dishes, thus evoking childhood memories in the minds of customers, the portions can be followed by “from-farm-to-fork stories” including the origin of the ingredients and preparation methods to increase credibility and authenticity (Chemah *et al.*, 2019). In this sense, in slow food restaurants, flavour is particularly significant, as the dishes are celebrated for their authentic and unique taste that reflects local culture and tradition (Slow Food, 2023a).

2.2.5 Touch marketing. As it is the oldest and most primitive, touch is the sense with the greatest contribution to our survival and evolution (Praddep, 2010). In the event of a failure of the other senses, the solution would be touch (Lindstrom, 2012). Tactile perception is a different sense, as it is not located in a specific area of the body. The skin is the largest organ of humans, and we can “feel” any part of the body through the skin, whether through the hands, fingers, legs, head, face, chest, and so on (Wright, 2006). When customers touch products, their attitude and behaviour is positively affected (Peck and Wiggins, 2006). Brands use the tactile sense because it translates the physical component of the human being, linking information and sensation about a given product to both a tactile and psychological experience. After touching a certain product, customers become more likely to buy it (Rupini and Nandagopal, 2015).

In the restaurant sector, to enhance customer experience and foster a sense of welcome, restaurateurs should prioritize offering personalized and passionate dining experiences. One effective strategy could involve waiters and/or chefs engaging with customers on a more personal level, such as through handshakes, during their visit. This gesture not only promotes a warm atmosphere but also has the potential to encourage impulse buying, spur unplanned purchases, and increase the likelihood of patrons becoming regular customers (Chemah *et al.*, 2019).

2.3 Experiential value

The concept of experiential value is composed of emotional and functional values (Ihtiyar *et al.*, 2018; Nadiri and Gunay, 2013; Yuan and Wu, 2008). Functional value is defined as the perceived utility gained from the ability of an alternative to perform functionally, utilitarianly, or physically (Sheth *et al.*, 1991). A service acquires functional value through the possession of important functional, utilitarian, or physical attributes; that is, it can be measured in a profile of choice attributes. From another perspective, functional value can be described as the cognitive or financial reward that the customers gain from the product or service (Yuan and Wu, 2008). On the other hand, emotional value is defined as the perceived utility acquired from the ability of an alternative to arouse feelings or affective states (Sheth *et al.*, 1991). A service acquires emotional value when it is associated with certain feelings or when it precipitates or perpetuates these feelings, thus, emotional value can be measured in a profile of feelings associated with the alternative (Sheth *et al.*, 1991). It refers to the feelings and emotional reactions that customers obtain during and after the experience (Yuan and Wu, 2008).

2.3.1 Relationship between experiential value and multisensory marketing. Regarding experience in the context of the product, Schmitt (1999) approaches experiential marketing through five different types of strategic experiential modules: sensory, affective, thinking, behaviour, and relational. The application of an interdisciplinary approach to experiential marketing allows a better understanding of the complicated nature of consumers’ desires, motivations, and needs (Akel, 2022).

Although there is considerable discussion about consumption and its physical/metaphysical aspects, experience cannot be ignored when developing a comprehensive understanding of consumption, particularly in today’s markets. The current customer profile requires an assessment of consumption as a complete experience, with emotional and functional drivers of consumption. Therefore, the goal of experiential marketing is to focus on customer experiences (Ihtiyar *et al.*, 2018).

Several studies show a relationship between experiential value and experiential marketing (Ihtiyar *et al.*, 2018; Nadiri and Gunay, 2013; Pham and Huang, 2015; Salomão and Santos, 2022; Yuan and Wu, 2008). When delving deeper into the topic of experiential marketing, it should offer emotional and functional value to the customer (Schmitt, 1999); furthermore, this argument is overlapped with each type of experiential marketing experience from a product perspective. In this context, Berry *et al.* (2002) added that an experience can bring emotional and functional values to customers.

Several empirical studies applied in coffee shops and fast-food restaurants have proven a positive association between experiential marketing and experiential value (Ihtiyar *et al.*, 2018; Nadiri and Gunay, 2013; Salomão and Santos, 2022). However, the centre of interest for this research is to prove the relationship between the sensory module and the experiential value. Therefore, the following hypotheses were proposed to examine the relationships between sensory perception and experiential value:

H1. Sensory perception is positively related to emotional value.

H2. Sensory perception is positively related to functional value.

2.4 Customer satisfaction

In today's increasingly competitive restaurant business, management must prioritize customer satisfaction within their strategic approach to outperform competitors (Suchánek and Králová, 2019). Enhancing customers' motivation to return necessitates constant efforts from restaurant management to foster the overall positive customer experience (Chun and Nyam-Ochir, 2020). Satisfaction thus plays a crucial role in shaping customer behaviour and influencing managerial decisions within the food service industry (DiPietro and Levitt, 2017). Thus, customers' satisfaction could be understood as the overall assessment of their experience in the restaurant in terms of price, food quality, and service (Lo *et al.*, 2024).

In most sectors, satisfaction is dependent on how customers perceive whether the service experience met, fell short of, or exceeded their expectations (Ashworth and Bourassa, 2020). When execution falls short of what is desired, the organization weakens its corporate image. Customers become satisfied when execution meets or even exceeds their desires and the organization is seen as a complement to customer satisfaction levels, as satisfied customers become loyal customers and are the most important source of promotion of an organization (Warde, 2017). In other words, satisfaction is seen as the reaction of customers to the product they expect, and the comparison between the performance of brands with expectations (Lemon and Verhoef, 2016).

2.4.1 Relationship between customer satisfaction and experiential value. An aspect related to customer satisfaction is precisely its connection with experiential value. There are several studies that have proven that experiential value directly and positively affects customer satisfaction (Ihtiyar *et al.*, 2018; Pham and Huang, 2015; Van Dat and Tran, 2020), which means that customers with high experiential value tend to give positive satisfaction ratings. As a result, two hypotheses were deployed:

H3. Emotional value is positively related to customer satisfaction.

H4. Functional value is positively related to customer satisfaction.

2.4.2 Relationship between customer satisfaction and post-purchase behaviour. Post-purchase behaviour is the phase in which the level of customer satisfaction or dissatisfaction is analysed after the product or service has been used (Kotler, 1998). Therefore, it is argued that this step is vital because it evaluates all the effort credited by the organization and marketing professionals in each product and can also produce evaluations that positively or negatively affect a company, often in a way that cannot be changed. As a result, organizations must try to

understand if their customers are not satisfied so that appropriate measures can be applied to improve their services and increase their sales (Bojanic and Reid, 2010).

There are numerous studies that have analysed how customer satisfaction can have an impact on post-purchase behaviour (Hasan *et al.*, 2021; Ihtiyar *et al.*, 2018; Ma *et al.*, 2022; Mili and Soto, 2023). In this context, the post-purchase behaviour is measured in some studies by the following variables, which we will analyse, i.e. word of mouth (WOM), intention to revisit (IRV), and intention to pay more (IPM).

Word of mouth communication is a process in the form of providing recommendations both individually and in groups for a product or service and aims to provide personal information (Keller and Kotler, 2012). Additionally, customers will enthusiastically encourage people within their social circle to adopt a behaviour when their experience is beneficial or pleasant. Thus, WOM refers to positive or negative customer reviews and (re)purchase behaviour of other individuals (Ihtiyar *et al.*, 2018).

Purchase intention indicates the degree of perceptual persuasion necessary for an individual to repurchase from a given supplier of goods/services and, therefore, this behaviour reflects future transaction behaviours. Intentions are the greatest interpreters of individual behaviour, as they allow each individual to incorporate all applicable factors that may influence them (Ihtiyar *et al.*, 2018). When customers realize that they made a good choice and that the product met their needs and desires, with the service they expected, this leads to a positive impact on their future purchase intention. Any dissatisfaction in any of the determinants of customer satisfaction can reduce their future purchase intention (Nadiri and Gunay, 2013).

Additionally, an alternative way to examine customers' behavioural intentions is to focus on their intention to pay more as a post-purchase path (IPM). This concept is defined as the maximum price that a customer intends to pay and relates to positive or negative customer reviews and affects an organization's profitability (Byrd *et al.*, 2016).

Although recent findings support the notion that there is a positive relationship between customer satisfaction and post-purchase behaviour, only limited studies have been conducted in specific markets and industries, for example, the hospitality and tourism industry (Ihtiyar *et al.*, 2018). Thus, three hypotheses were developed to test the relationship between customer satisfaction and post-purchase behaviour:

H5. Customer satisfaction in slow food restaurants has a positive effect on WOM.

H6. Customer satisfaction in slow food restaurants has a positive effect on IRV.

H7. Customer satisfaction in slow food restaurants has a positive effect on IPM.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research context

This research deals with slow food restaurants in Portugal. Despite Slow Food restaurants being present in various regions of Portugal, they are most common in six, namely, Alentejo, Algarve, Alto Minho, Lisbon, Porto, and Arcos de Valdevez (Slow Food, 2023b). The restaurant industry plays a significant role in Portugal's economy, contributing to job creation, tourism, and GDP results. Thus, tourism consumption in the Portuguese economy was equivalent to 15.8% of GDP (9.8% in 2021), with the restaurant sector being one of the main contributors to tourism GDP (INE, 2023).

3.2 Data collection and sampling

In September 2023, a survey was conducted among customers aged 18 and over in Portuguese Slow Food restaurants. The restaurants were selected for having official affiliation with the Slow Food movement, a minimum of two years of operation, and menus focused on local and

seasonal ingredients. The questionnaire, administered over a three-month period, included two parts: the first incorporated statements measuring various constructs with a seven-point Likert scale (from 1 = strongly disagree to 7 = strongly agree), while the second part gathered demographic information. Customers were invited to participate in the survey immediately after their dining experience.

Participant anonymity was ensured to minimize response biases and reduce social desirability bias; neutral, non-leading language was used to avoid acquiescence and halo effects; balanced Likert scales with clear distinctions between options have helped mitigate central tendency and extreme response biases; and respondents were asked specifically about their most recent visit to a Slow Food restaurant. Furthermore, following [Podsakoff et al. \(2003\)](#), we assessed common method variance at both the exploratory and confirmatory levels because the data for both the predictor and criterion variables were gathered by a single person. Results indicate that method biases were not an issue.

The research was disseminated online through a snowball approach across all districts of Portugal. To ensure that data collection represented real and recent experiences, filter questions were applied so that only individuals residing in Portugal who consumed meals in Portuguese Slow Food restaurants and were aged 18 or over. After eliminating questionnaires that did not fit the target population and filter criteria, the final sample resulted in 416 people. Using the G*Power 3.1.9.2 software, sample power was validated (F test > linear multiple regression: fixed model, R^2 deviation from zero) with the following parameters: $\alpha = 0.05$; $f^2 = 0.10$, number of predictors = 6. The software identified a sample power ($1 - \beta$) result of 0.99981, translating into less than 0.01% chance of having a type 2 error in this study ([Cohen, 2013](#)). The next step was data analysis through Structural Equation Modelling (SEM), using the Partial Least Squares method in the SmartPls4 software.

Regarding the sociodemographic profile of participants, although there are more female than male respondents, a balance between genders was found, given that the Portuguese population is slightly made up of more women than men ([Pordata, 2023](#)). On the other hand, the three age bands with the greatest weight were from 26–35, 36–45, and 46–55 years old. Additionally, most respondents had a degree or at least had completed secondary education and were working. Further details can be found in [Appendix 1](#).

3.3 Item specification

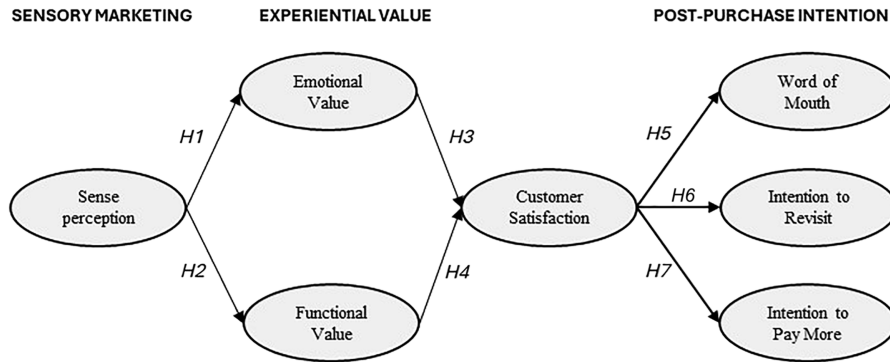
For the items that assessed sensory perception (10 statements, previously used by [Nadiri and Gunay, 2013](#); [Schmitt, 1999](#); [Yuan and Wu, 2008](#)), experiential value (6 statements, applied by [Mathwick et al., 2001](#); [Nadiri and Gunay, 2013](#); [Sweeney and Soutar, 2001](#); [Yuan and Wu, 2008](#)), customer satisfaction (2 statements from [Nadiri and Gunay, 2013](#); [Oliver and Swan, 1989](#); [Yuan and Wu, 2008](#)), Word of Mouth (3 statements, previously used by [Nadiri and Gunay, 2013](#); [Zeithaml et al., 1996](#)), intention to revisit (2 statements, applied by [Nadiri and Gunay, 2013](#); [Zeithaml et al., 1996](#)) and finally the intention to pay more (2 statements, coming from [Ihtiyar et al., 2018](#); [Zeithaml et al., 1996](#)) a Likert scale was applied. This choice is aligned with previous research using the items mentioned above.

All variables went through the process of translation and back-translation from English to Portuguese to ensure full understanding by interviewees. Before publishing the research, a pre-test was carried out, in which ten individuals were interviewed after completing the questionnaire, evaluating whether their understanding converged with the original meaning of the items. There were no reports of inconsistencies related to the original statements, thus establishing the face validity of the instrument.

4. Analysis of results

4.1 Measurement model assessment

[Figure 1](#) reflects how items relate to the research model. The relationships between the construct and its measurement instruments (indicators or items) can be reflective or formative.



Source(s): Authors' own creation

Figure 1. Structural model

In marketing research, reflective indicators are the most common (Diamantopoulos and Winklhofer, 2001). Scales from the model applied in this investigation are reflective, as the components that constitute the variables are interrelated, and the shared information enables the measurement of the construct (Diamantopoulos *et al.*, 2003).

Appendix 2 includes factor loadings, essential to enhance the accuracy and validity of the factors identified in the factor analysis. Those items with a factor loading below 0.7 should be eliminated (Hair *et al.*, 2017), thus ensuring that only the most relevant and reliable ones are included in the analysis. For sensory perception, it was necessary to eliminate items S1, S5 and S8 due to their low factor loading; the remaining were maintained.

Table 1 shows the analysis of convergent validity, internal consistency, and discriminant validity (Fornell and Larcker, 1981). As all AVE values were greater than 0.5, it can be confirmed the convergent validity (Henseler *et al.*, 2009). Additionally, results confirmed the internal consistency of the analysis because all composite reliability (CR) values were greater than 0.7 (Hair *et al.*, 2017). On the other hand, all Cronbach alpha values were considered good

Table 1. Convergent validity, internal consistency and discriminant validity

Constructs	AC	CR (rho_a)	CR (rho_c)	AVE	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Intention to pay more	0.928	0.930	0.965	0.932	0.966						
Intention to revisit	0.789	0.834	0.903	0.823	0.769	0.907					
Customer satisfaction	0.960	0.961	0.974	0.926	0.688	0.704	0.963				
Sensory perception	0.807	0.818	0.859	0.512	0.553	0.417	0.606	0.685			
Emotional value	0.953	0.953	0.970	0.914	0.667	0.645	0.824	0.680	0.956		
Functional value	0.833	0.933	0.893	0.737	0.451	0.447	0.512	0.344	0.490	0.859	
Word of mouth	0.929	0.932	0.955	0.876	0.687	0.730	0.896	0.580	0.803	0.536	0.936

Source(s): Authors' own creation

or very good (Hair *et al.*, 2017). Finally, all the square roots of the AVEs were greater than the correlations of the constructs, therefore, the results confirmed that there is discriminant validity (Fornell and Larcker, 1981).

The analysis of the PLS algorithm found that when excluding items with factor loadings below the reference values, it was noticed that the SRMR presented was 0.083. Although this value is not less than 0.08, it was close to it (Henseler *et al.*, 2016a, b). In turn, the value of the NFI indicator was greater than 0.09, showing a good fit of the model (Lohmöller, 1989). Finally, the RMS Theta indicator was below 0.12, also showing a good fit of the model (Henseler *et al.*, 2014). Regarding the VIF values (Table 2), all hypotheses revealed a value lower than 5, showing acceptable values (Hair *et al.*, 2019); it demonstrates the absence of multicollinearity.

Table 2 includes the structural model results. The evaluation of the degree of explanation of the variance of emotional value, R^2 0.463, allowed us to conclude that sense perception explained 46.3% of the variance in emotional value, considered a weak effect (Hair *et al.*, 2019). The R^2 for functional value was 0.119, that is, sensory perception explained 11.9% of the variance in functional value, considered a very weak effect (Hair *et al.*, 2019). When evaluating the degree of explanation of the variance of customer satisfaction (R^2 0.695), it is possible to conclude that the two latent variables tested, emotional value and functional value, explained 65.6% of the variance in customer satisfaction, suggesting a moderate effect (Hair *et al.*, 2019).

Regarding post-purchase intention, the degree of explanation of WOM (R^2 = 0.803) allowed us to conclude that the latent variable customer satisfaction explained 80.3% of the WOM variance; considered a substantial effect (Hair *et al.*, 2019). When studying the intention to revisit (R^2 0.496), it can be said that the latent variable customer satisfaction explained 49.6% of the variance of the intention to revisit, a moderate effect (Hair *et al.*, 2019). Finally, when evaluating the degree of explanation of the variance of intention to pay more (R^2 = 0.474), it can be concluded that the latent variable customer satisfaction explained 47.4% of the variance of the intention to pay more; a moderate effect (Hair *et al.*, 2019).

To complete the analysis of Table 2, the calculation was carried out in Bootstrapping's SmartPLS4 to evaluate the structural coefficients and their respective p -values. As p -values were lower than 0.005, all hypotheses were accepted.

5. Discussion

The first specific objective was to analyse whether sensory perception is related to experiential value. Hypotheses 1 and 2 demonstrated that sensory perception positively influences

Table 2. Structural model results

Hypotheses	VIF	Standard deviation	p -value	Conclusion
Effect on emotional value (R^2 0,463)	1.000	0.0033	0.000	Supported
H1. Sensory perception → Emotional value				
Effect on functional value (R^2 0,119)	1.000	0.062	0.000	Supported
H2. Sensory perception → Functional value				
Effect on customer satisfaction (R^2 0.695)	1.315	0.047	0.000	Supported
H3. Emotional value → Customer satisfaction				
Effect on customer satisfaction (R^2 0.695)	1.315	0.060	0.0018	Supported
H4. Functional value → Customer satisfaction				
Effect on WOM (R^2 0,803)	1.000	0.024	0.000	Supported
H5. Customer satisfaction → Word of mouth				
Effect on intention to revisit (R^2 0,496)	1.000	0.056	0.000	Supported
H6. Customer satisfaction → Intention to revisit				
Effect on intention to pay more (R^2 0.474)	1.000	0.046	0.000	Supported
H7. Customer Satisfaction → Intention to pay more				
Source(s): Authors' own creation				

experiential value in both its functional and emotional dimensions among slow food customers. This finding aligns with [Schmitt \(1999\)](#) and [Yuan and Wu \(2008\)](#), which emphasize the role of sensory stimuli in enhancing customer experiences through multi-sensory engagement. For example, the visual stimuli during food presentation in dishes in an elaborate way makes the difference; aesthetically pleasing visuals significantly enhance perceived quality, boosting experiential value ([Wörfel et al., 2022](#)). The confirmation of [Hypothesis 1](#) is consistent with previous findings in coffee shops and fast-food settings (e.g. [Nadiri and Gunay, 2013](#); [Salomão and Santos, 2022](#)). However, it was contradictory with other studies that suggests that context plays a more significant role in these outcomes ([Ihtiyar et al., 2018](#); [Yuan and Wu, 2008](#)), indicating a need for further exploration. Similarly, while our findings for [Hypothesis 2](#) align with existing literature ([Ihtiyar et al., 2018](#); [Salomão and Santos, 2022](#)), discrepancies were observed in coffee shop studies ([Nadiri and Gunay, 2013](#); [Pham and Huang, 2015](#)), it underscores the complex nature of sensory marketing and its variable effectiveness across different environments.

In addressing the second specific objective—assessing the relationship between customer satisfaction and post-purchase behaviour – [Hypotheses 3](#) and [4](#) confirmed that experiential value positively correlates with consumer satisfaction. This supports [McCole's \(2004\)](#) assertion that emotional engagement is vital for fostering customer loyalty, which is, in turn, facilitated by sensory marketing that activates consumers' perceptions and directly influences their emotions through products and services. Furthermore, [Hypotheses 5](#), [6](#), and [7](#) demonstrated that immediate customer satisfaction leads to positive post-purchase behaviour. Our findings echo previous studies, which similarly conclude that enhanced experiential value leads to greater satisfaction and loyalty ([Ihtiyar et al., 2018](#); [Nadiri and Gunay, 2013](#); [Pham and Huang, 2015](#); [Salomão and Santos, 2022](#); [Yuan and Wu, 2008](#)).

5.1 Theoretical implications

Many studies have been conducted to delve deeper into customer perception, including sensory perception, across various contexts and sectors. This research focuses on the underexplored realm of Slow Food restaurants, aiming to understand how different stimuli impact customer perceptions and behaviours in this specific setting. By applying a tailored theoretical framework, the study investigates the relationship between sensory marketing practices, immediate customer satisfaction, and post-purchase behaviour in the context of Slow Food dining. This approach is supported by previous studies ([Ihtiyar et al., 2018](#); [Nadiri and Gunay, 2013](#); [Salomão and Santos, 2022](#); [Yuan and Wu, 2008](#)), but it distinctly addresses the nuances of the Slow Food movement, highlighting its unique attributes.

Thus, this research reinforces the theory that sensory marketing practices result in immediate customer satisfaction through experiential value, which in turn leads to positive post-purchase behaviour. Moreover, it emphasizes that in Slow Food restaurants, this immediate customer satisfaction is particularly influential in fostering increased brand loyalty, repeat purchases, and positive word-of-mouth recommendations. These findings underscore the crucial role that sensory experiences play in shaping customer perceptions, preferences, and actions specifically within the Slow Food context.

Furthermore, this investigation makes a significant contribution to the marketing literature by offering new insights derived from applying the theoretical model deployed to Slow Food restaurants. This not only enriches the existing body of knowledge but also opens new avenues for future research in this area, encouraging further exploration of the interplay between sensory marketing and consumer behaviour within the unique context of Slow Food dining. By highlighting these specific dynamics, this study sets the stage for deeper understanding and potential applications in related fields.

5.2 Managerial or social implications

From a managerial standpoint, this research serves as a valuable tool in formulating actionable strategies for managers to effectively gauge and enhance customer satisfaction using sensory

marketing tactics. Notably in Portugal, where rich cultural traditions intersect with modern business practices, some managers remain unfamiliar with the notion of sensory marketing. Consequently, they may lack a comprehensive understanding of the profound implications this marketing approach holds for their industry.

What's intriguing is that Portugal, with its vibrant culinary scene and centuries-old artisanal traditions, offers a unique backdrop for exploring sensory marketing's potential. Yet, despite this rich sensory heritage, some managers are yet to harness its power in the realm of business. It is recommended that these managers abstain from presuming that consumer decisions are solely driven by the utilitarian aspects of a product, such as its quality and price. This presumption, as evidenced by this study, is not entirely accurate. Instead, customers often respond deeply to sensory stimuli, whether it is the aroma of freshly brewed coffee or the tactile experience of testing out a new gadget. For instance, Slow Food restaurant managers could enhance the dining experience by incorporating the aromas of local herbs and spices into their restaurants, or by using texture-rich materials in their table settings that evoke the feel of traditional dining. By tapping into these sensory triggers, businesses can create more immersive and memorable experiences for their customers, ultimately fostering greater loyalty and satisfaction.

Beyond, focusing on the social level, Slow Food advocates for environmentally sustainable practices, social welfare, and the preservation of biodiversity and local culinary traditions; thus, the implementation of sustainable food practices contributes to the correct economic growth of this sector. For example, managers could engage customers through sensory experiences by hosting tasting events that highlight local production, allowing consumers to see, smell, and taste the unique flavours of their region. This not only showcases the sensory richness of local cuisine but also emphasizes the importance of sustainability in their dining choices, also demonstrating cooperation with their business ecosystem. This study could have a positive impact on society by encouraging non-slow food restaurant managers to also apply more sustainable eating practices as they realize that current consumers are increasingly supporting the definition of a more sustainable and ecologically conscious future (Ismail *et al.*, 2023).

5.3 Limitations and suggestions

A limitation of this study was that an item associated with the auditory sense had to be excluded; therefore, in the next study it is advisable to include more than one item per sense to keep in the analysis all senses affecting sensory marketing. Since sensory perception is part of one of the five experiential modules of experiential marketing, future research should study how the remaining perceptions (affective, thoughts, behaviours and relational) can also be important for restaurants. Additionally, while this study was conducted in Portugal, findings may be extrapolated to other countries with similar contexts, i.e. Spain and Italy, where rich cultural traditions intersect with modern business practices. In these nations, restaurateurs may face similar challenges regarding their familiarity with sensory marketing. Therefore, the implications and advantages of this marketing methodology could be relevant and applicable to industries operating under analogous cultural and economic conditions.

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(The Appendix follows overleaf)

Table A1. Participants demographics (absolute and percentage)

Variable	Options	N	%
Gender	Female	220	52.8
	Male	196	47.1
	None of the options above represent my gender	0	0
Age range	18–25	45	10.8
	26–35	124	29.8
	36–45	98	23.6
	46–55	93	22.4
	56–65	44	10.4
	More than 65	12	2.9
Education	Elementary school	23	5.5
	Middle school	42	10.1
	High school	141	33.9
	Bachelor’s degree	151	36.3
	Postgraduate	1	0.2
	Master’s degree	53	12.7
Professional situation	Doctorate	5	1.2
	Employee	330	79.3
	Self-employed	57	13.7
	Unemployed	3	0.7
	Student	14	3.4
	Retired	12	2.9
Gross annual income	≤5.000 euros	17	4.1
	Between 5.001 and 10.000 euros	12	2.9
	Between 10.001 and 13.500 euros	15	3.6
	Between 13.501 and 19.000 euros	54	13.1
	Between 19.001 and 27.500 euros	86	20.7
	Between 27.501 and 32.500 euros	85	20.4
	Between 32.501 and 40.000 euros	76	18.3
	Between 40.001 and 50.000 euros	33	7.9
	Between 50.001 and 100.000 euros	25	6.0
	≥100.000 euros	7	1.7
District	N/A	6	1.4
	Aveiro	17	4.1
	Beja	10	2.4
	Braga	15	3.6
	Bragança	5	1.2
	Castelo Branco	5	1.2
	Coimbra	5	1.2
	Évora	10	2.4
	Faro	16	3.8
	Guarda	5	1.2
	Leiria	5	1.2
	Lisboa	154	37
	Portalegre	6	1.4
	Porto	108	26
	Região Autónoma dos Açores	10	2.4
	Região Autónoma da Madeira	13	3.1
	Santarém	8	1.9
	Setúbal	9	2.2
	Viana do Castelo	4	1
	Vila Real	5	1.2
	Viseu	6	1.4
Source(s): Authors’ own creation			

Table A2. Items and factor loadings

Item	Factor loading
S1- Materials associated with the service (such as pamphlets/statements, menus) are visually appealing and getting attention	0.415
S2- The internal and external decoration was attractive and attention getting	0.662
S3- The establishment emanated a pleasant and interesting smell	0.658
S4- The tastes of the products matched my expectation	0.658
S5- The flavours of the products were typically regional/local and difficult to find in other restaurants outside this region	0.477
S6- The products offered for eating were fresh	0.655
S7- The containers in which the products were delivered were clean and practical	0.688
S8- The auditory (music) system offered relaxing and pleasant atmosphere	0.476
S9- The furniture in the establishment was comfortable	0.795
S10- The texture of the establishment's furniture was pleasant	0.794
VE1- I enjoy being in this establishment	0.962
VE2- This establishment makes me feel good	0.969
VE3- This establishment makes me revisit it	0.937
VF1- The products offered by the establishment are reasonably priced	0.916
VF2- In this establishment I receive a good price/quality proposal for the products.	0.913
VF3- This establishment is economical	0.741
SAT1- I am satisfied with my decision to get some products/visit here	0.954
SAT2- Taking everything into consideration, I really liked this restaurant	0.973
SAT3- Taking everything into account, the establishment's service meets my expectations	0.961
WOM1- I will say positive things about this restaurant to other people	0.952
WOM2- I will encourage friends and relatives to visit this restaurant	0.915
WOM3- I will recommend it to someone who seeks my advice	0.940
IR1- I consider this restaurant as my first option	0.880
IR2- I intend to continue eating at this restaurant soon	0.934
IP1- I will continue to buy products from this restaurant, even if the prices increase slightly	0.964
IP2- I don't mind paying more for the benefits I currently receive from this restaurant	0.968
Note(s): Italic numbers indicate those items deleted as their factor loading are below 0.7 (Hair <i>et al.</i> , 2017)	
Source(s): Authors' own creation	

About the authors

Mariana Alves Santos is currently pursuing a doctoral degree in Economic Analysis and Business Strategy at the University of Vigo (Spain). Her current research interests encompass the fields of marketing, consumer behaviour, and corporate strategy. Recently, she debuted with a publication that delved into these areas of interest, and since then, she has expressed her intention to develop and participate in further research.

Ana Dopico-Parada is Associate Professor of marketing at the Faculty of Communication at the University of Vigo. She has published articles in journals such as *Journal of Retailing and Consumer Services*, *Revista de Administração de Empresas* or *Foods*. She has participated in various public research projects and published papers in international conference.

Pablo Cabanelas is Assistant Professor of Marketing at the University of Vigo (Spain) and Adjunct Director of ECOBAS. He also belongs to the UNAM and UdG (México) faculty in the post-graduate studies. His current research interests are value creation, customer experience and relationship marketing. He acts as Associate Editor in *European Research on Management and Business Economics* and *Journal of Business and Industrial Marketing*. His research has been published in different journals such as *Industrial Marketing Management*, *Journal of Business Research* or *International Marketing Review*, among others. Pablo Cabanelas is the corresponding author and can be contacted at: pcabanelas@uvigo.gal