

# A multisensory approach to responsible management in community-based tourism: a case study in Hong Kong

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## Abstract

This research discusses the relevance of a holistic approach to sensory stimuli based on endogenous resources as a contribution to responsible management in community-based tourism. The first stage of a case study based on Yim Tin Tsai (Hong Kong) was used as an exploratory approach to assessing the sensory potential of this offshore island. The village has been the subject of growing interest from visitors in experiencing the cultural, religious, and nature-based assets of the area following community involvement in the village development. This process was initiated after the island became abandoned due to residents' migration, resulting in the revitalization of the area. Findings from the first stage of the empirical research focusing on visitors' multisensory-informed experiences in the village are discussed, managerial implications of the proposed approach are depicted, and the second stage of the case study is outlined.

**Keywords:** community-based tourism; multisensory stimuli; tourist experience design; responsible management; sustainable tourism; Yim Tin Tsai

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## 1. Introduction

In a context where the negative impacts and consequences of tourism are being increasingly obvious in travel destinations (Goodwin, 2016; Milano, Cheer, & Novelli, 2019; Nunkoo & Gursoy, 2019), current research advocates that one of the aims of responsible tourism management should be to promote the sustainable use of local resources by ensuring its long-term use and enjoyment, as well as to encourage responsible interactions between stakeholders, and to consider ethical issues (Frey & George, 2010; Goodwin, 2016; Laasch & Conaway, 2015; Manente, Minghetti, & Mingotto, 2014; Spenceley et al., 2002). Accordingly, community-based tourism has been highlighted as one approach to cater for a more sustainable tourism industry (Blackstock, 2005; Blapp

& Mitas, 2019). In addition, recent tourism research has been discussing the managerial implications of a holistic approach to sensory stimuli based on endogenous resources to conceptualize and communicate unique multisensory destination experiences by involving different stakeholders and focusing on local assets in a responsible manner (Agapito, Almeida, & Campos, 2016; Agapito, Valle, & Mendes, 2014; Kastenholz, Carneiro, Marques, & Lima, 2012a). This line of research has strong links to contemporary research trends related both to the relationship between design science and tourism design (Fesenmaier & Xiang, 2017; Tussyadiah, 2014) and creative tourism (Duxbury & Richards, 2019).

The present research uses a case study in Hong Kong with the aim of reflecting on the relevance of a holistic approach to sensory stimuli based on endogenous resources as a contribution to responsible management in the context of community-based tourism projects. Yim Tin Tsai, a community with salt pans, is a small offshore island in Sai Kung. This village was established by the Hakka Chan clan and the main economic activity in the past was salt production. Notwithstanding, after the villagers migrated to urban areas and overseas, the village was abandoned. Recently, due to community involvement, the salt fields were resurrected and the project earned a UNESCO distinction for conserving this industrial heritage landscape and educational resource. This process has increased the interest of individuals to visit the island to experience the cultural, religious, and nature-based assets of the village (Sai Kung District Council, 2011; Su, 2018; Wan, 2004).

The first section of this study is dedicated to literature search on community involvement in tourism and the relationship between sensory stimuli, tourist experience design, and responsible management in community-based tourism projects. Secondly, the first stage of the case study in the context of a community-based tourism approach in Yim Tin Tsai will be presented. Subsequently, the multisensory-informed experiences reported by visitors in the village will be discussed and preliminary insights into opportunities for a multisensory approach to responsible management in the context of the community-based tourism project under study will be depicted, as well as indications for future research. Practical implications of the proposed approach to community-based projects will be outlined.

## **2. Theoretical background**

### *2.1 Community involvement in tourism and responsible tourism*

Responsible management is considered as an approach that is related to the concept of sustainability through the management of the triple bottom line domains (economic, socio-cultural, and environmental), and is linked to the responsible integration of ethical concerns and balanced interactions with stakeholders (Laasch & Conaway, 2015). This managerial approach has been transferred to tourism based on the need for the tourism industry to provide not only better experiences for visitors, but also beneficial business opportunities for locals in addition to better quality of life through improved and balanced socio-economic benefits and the management of natural assets (Goodwin, 2016; Manente et al., 2014; Spenceley et al., 2002). According to literature, responsible tourism management should focus on the best managerial practices in tourism destinations and organizations that contribute to: a) increase competitive advantage; b) assess, monitor and disclose impacts of tourism development; c) ensure involvement of communities and the establishment of relevant economic linkages; d) encourage natural, economic, social and cultural diversity and; e) promote the sustainable use of local resources by ensuring its use and enjoyment in a long-term view (Frey & George, 2010; Spenceley et al., 2002).

In this context, Goodwin (2016) advocates that the development of community-based tourism projects is a way to focus benefits directly on local regions and achieve sustainable goals. Accordingly, community-based tourism encourages responsible management in tourism (Frey & George, 2010; Goodwin, 2016; Spenceley et al., 2002). Whilst community-based projects can encompass different forms of community participation, from spontaneous to coercive, “community participation is a desired objective in the tourism development process” (Tosun, 1999, p. 115). Indeed, community-based tourism focuses on the involvement of the host community in the process of planning and sustaining tourism development aiming at generating a more sustainable industry (Blackstock, 2005). Moreover, the rationale goes beyond the idea of a supportive community, as the tourism industry relies on locals’ involvement considering their role as employees, local businesspeople, as well as on the impact of residents’ attitudes towards tourism (Blackstock, 2005, Gursoy, Jurowski, & Uysal, 2002; Kastenholtz et al., 2012a; Teye, Sirakaya, & Sonmez, 2002; Ribeiro, Pinto, Silva, & Woosnam, 2017).

Projects involving community participation imply a form of voluntary action in which individuals balance the responsibilities of citizenship with new opportunities and challenges (Tosun, 2000). This approach is based on an empowering and educational process “in which people, in partnership with those able to assist them, identify problems and needs and increasingly assume responsibility themselves to plan, manage, control and assess the collective actions that are proved necessary” (Askew, 1989, p. 186). Hence, host communities are engaged in designing their future community and maximizing the socio-economic benefits derived from tourism for the community (Inskeep, 1991; Mitchell & Reid, 2001; Tosun, 2000). Accordingly, the involvement of the host community has been established as an ideology of tourism planning (Prentice, 1993). Therefore, a participatory approach in tourism development as a form of responsible tourism management (Goodwin, 2016) could contribute to operationalizing the principles of sustainable tourism, since it underpins opportunities for locals to gain better and more balanced benefits from tourism (Tosun, 2006).

Accordingly, the process of working cooperatively with others on matters of mutual concern implies a mobilization of endogenous resources (Til, 1984). Despite the barriers highlighted by several authors, others consider that the community-based approach is the best solution to achieve sustainable tourism development (Okazaki, 2008). Okazaki stresses that this idea is based on the fact that: a) local events and issues have a direct impact on tourist experiences; b) local community (people and resources) are part of the destination image; c) public involvement is key in the preservation of community’s natural environment and culture, while encouraging a more balanced income from tourism; and d) projects in the context of tourism should be linked to the overall socioeconomic development of the community in order to maximize their feasibility and long-term maintenance (2008, p. 512).

Often, community-based projects are developed in the countryside, which is rich in endogenous resources (Duxbury & Richards, 2019; Kastenholtz, Carneiro, & Marques, 2012b; Sebele, 2010). Rural capital can be natural (e.g. wildlife populations), built (e.g. rural settlements.), or social and cultural (e.g. cultural traditions). Typically, rural capital assets represent an amalgam of these three main types of resources and tourists both receive satisfaction from countryside experiences and the impact on the countryside capital (Garrod, Wornell, & Youell, 2006; Kastenholtz et al., 2012a).

## *2.2 Sensory stimuli and responsible management in community-based tourism*

Sensory elements have been highlighted as a key dimension of tourist experiences and deemed as a contemporary topic of interest in the study of tourism (Agapito, Valle, & Mendes, 2013; Agapito et al., 2014; Cohen & Cohen, 2019). The relevance of a holistic view on multisensory stimuli in the context of a managerial approach to tourist

experiences is supported by multidisciplinary research (environmental psychology, human geography, anthropology, philosophy, neuroscience, sociology, and anthropology) on the role of the five external senses (vision, hearing, smell, touch, and taste) in human perception, memory, and behavior (Agapito et al., 2013). Indeed, this approach highlights the importance of considering multisensory information in the process of designing environments, which can facilitate positive, satisfying, and memorable tourist experiences to emerge (Agapito, Pinto, & Mendes, 2017; Gretzel & Fesenmaier, 2010; Mossberg, 2007).

Moreover, empirical studies have recognized that destination experiences may be associated with multiple bundles of sensory impressions related to unique sensescapes, which can be themed with the aim to responsibly marketing tourist experiences (Agapito et al., 2014; Gretzel & Fesenmaier, 2003; Kastenholtz et al., 2012b). This line of research recommends a holistic approach to sensory stimuli, rather than an ocular-informed approach, based on unique assets that characterize destinations and that can contribute both to design and communicating perceived distinctive multisensory tourist experiences by involving and benefiting different stakeholders (Agapito et al., 2014, 2016). As such, this approach follows the application of science design to tourism, which according to Fesenmaier and Xiang contributes to “improve people’s lives as well as their travel experiences” and thus also their well-being, by providing a contemporary “basic logic for conducting research and designing tourism places” (2017, p.4) in an innovative and creative fashion. This research strand advocates the importance of external stimuli in framing experiences in a consistent way by highlighting cues that help visitors to individually perceive their experiences as distinctive and meaningful (Ooi et al., 2005; Scott, Gao, & Ma, 2017; Sotiriadis & Gursoy, 2016; Tussyadiah, 2014).

In this vein, creative tourism is an emergent field in tourism that links the experiential paradigm in tourism management, as well as the destinations’ concerns for developing sustainable tourism, with the growing demand of a tourist segment that is keen to develop their creativity and learning in diverse cultural contexts. In fact, following the definition propose by Richards and Raymond (2000) focused on the importance of creative tourism for developing tourists’ creative potential through active participation in activities and learning experiences based on the destinations visited, UNESCO stresses that this form of tourism is related to “a travel directed toward an engaged an authentic experience, with participative learning in the arts, heritage, or special character of a place, and it provides a connection with those who reside in this place and create this living culture (2006, p.3). Whilst focused on people, local identity, and culture, this approach has been especially addressed in rural areas and small cities, where communities are directly involved in the development of tourism (Duxbury & Richards, 2019).

Particularly, travel destinations located in the countryside are characterized by a rich and vulnerable collection of endogenous resources, such as nature-based and cultural assets, which can be addressed with the aim of designing distinctive multisensory tourist experiences (Agapito et al., 2016). Whilst tourists increasingly demand unique experiences, local destinations call for innovative offerings and communication strategies, which are addressed to consumers who relate to the identity of the destination and contribute to sustainable local development (Kastenholtz et al. 2012b; Lane, 2009). Hence, the efforts of consistently targeting tourists’ profiles based on sensory-informed experiences corresponding to the destination development goals (Agapito et al., 2014) encourage the integration of the local community and the optimal use of rural resources in the planning of the overall destination experience. A simulacrum of sensory stimuli based on vulnerable local resources can also be utilized in virtual environments and interpretation centers aiming to preserving resources while ensuring vivid and engaged interactions between people, resources, places, and environments. These processes can benefit the stakeholders involved in a sustainable and creative way (Agapito et al., 2016).

This idea is in line with strategies related to community-based tourism that, if properly managed, can boost the preservation of endogenous resources and increase local benefits through participation in tourism activities while enhancing coactively the perceived value of the tourist experience itself (Duxbury & Richards, 2019; Saxena, Clark, Oliver, & Ilbery, 2007; Sebele, 2010). Similarly, this managerial approach can contribute to the process of preserving the socio-cultural identity of local communities, as well as boosting the sense of place and local pride, which is key for sustainable development (Manente et al., 2014). This approach can also contribute to the place making of the destination (Duxbury & Richards, 2019), both from the perspective of the organic bottom-up approach (local initiatives) and the top-down involvement (e.g., local government) in the planning and marketing and management decision-making process (Lew, 2017).

Lastly, a number of sensory studies in tourism have highlighted the importance of multisensory-informed experiences for tourists with sensory disabilities and, thus as a contribution for managing more inclusive tourist experiences (e.g. Cantero, 2018; Dann & Dann 2012; Richards, Pritchard, & Morgan, 2010; Small, Darcy, & Packer, 2012).

### **3. Methodology**

To carry out this research, a case study approach was followed based on a single case (Yin, 2004). According to Stake (1995), data were aggregated by using both secondary and primary data to describe the case under study. With regard to secondary sources, brochures, web pages, news, previous studies, and official documents on Yim Tin Tsai, Hong Kong, were consulted. These sources, alongside with overt observations conducted on the island in 2018, were used to collect statistics and to describe existing resources and activities, as well as tourism and community involvement dynamics in the village.

In terms of primary data, a self-questionnaire was administered to a group of 27 local and non-local scholars and students visiting Yim Tin Tsai in mid-May 2018 as the first exploratory stage of a larger study performed in the village. The questionnaire was presented to participants at the end of their visit to the island. The instrument included a section dedicated to demographics, five open-ended questions (Agapito et al., 2014) based on direct elicitation (Gretzel & Fesenmaier, 2010) to capture the five sensory domains regarding the visitors' experience, as well as one open-ended question to assess perceived emotions.

Sensory categories were extracted through the automatic option for word counting of NVivo. This was followed by a manual process of aggregating words or expressions that were related to a meaningful sensory impression, having as reference the external five human sense (sight, hearing, smell, touch, and taste) and existing literature (Agapito et al., 2014). Manifest content analysis, which focuses on elements present and countable (Berg, 2004), was first conducted by the main researcher and further verified by a second researcher. The reported words or expressions by the visitors were amalgamated into meaningful categories in light of literature search. The resulting sensory impressions and emotions obtaining at least 10% of respondents' references were retained for further analysis (Agapito et al., 2014). Frequency analyses were performed to examine the perceived experiences from the sampled visitors on Yim Tin Tsai Island.

### **4. Findings**

#### *4.1 The case of Yim Tin Tsai: community involvement in tourism, local resources, and stakeholders*

Located on a small offshore island of less than one mile square in Sai Kung (Hong Kong), Yim Tin Tsai is a traditional Hakka village of the Chan clan, which has existed for more than 300 years. Yim Tin Tsai is different from a traditional Chinese-style village as it is a Catholic community. Furthermore, in the early years, villagers of the island lived on farming and salt-making. Hence, the name of the village “Yim Tin” means saltpan. In the 1920s, there were nearly 300 residents on the island. Because of the adverse situation of rural life in recent decades, all villagers have migrated to urban areas and overseas countries to make a living. While the village was abandoned in the 1990s, some members of the Chan clan who share the same cultural identity grouped together and contributed to the rejuvenation of their ancestral village. Recently, with its increasing popularity, Yim Tin Tsai has become a tourism destination. Since 2013, the number of visitor arrivals on the island has reached about 25,000 to 30,000 per year, and the figure peaked at 37,000 visitors in 2016 when the historic saltpans were listed in the 2015 Asia-Pacific Heritage Awards by UNESCO. Following these efforts, government approval for public sale of the salt production unit is now pending. This indicates an increased effort in community participation in the context of tourism development process (Sai Kung District Council, 2011; Su, 2018; Wan, 2004). Apart from the religious events and school activities, the current visitor activities on the island include cultural and ecological-based guided tours (Figure 1).

**Figure 1:** Guided tours to the saltpans in Yim Tin Tsai



The stakeholders involved in the cultural heritage tourism in Yim Tin Tsai include the design and management party (Joint Committee of Development of St. Joseph's the Great Chapel of Sacred Heart Parish), visitors, villagers, and the local government. The members of the joint committee include representatives from the Catholic Diocese of Hong Kong, the Sacred Heart Church (Sai Kung), the Salt and Light Preservation Centre, and the Yim Tin Tsai Village Committee. Most of the representatives are also members of the Chan clan. Villagers living overseas return to the island once a year to participate in the annual meeting to discuss development matters in Yim Tin Tsai. The government is not involved actively in the tourism activities and development of the island except for the provision and improvement of basic facilities, such as the pier and a public toilet. However, the

tourism authority has initiated a three-year art and culture program from late 2019 by investing about HK\$24 million on the relevant construction and events on the island.

*4.2 Sensory-informed tourist experiences in the village*

Of the total of visitors in the village who participated in the questionnaire, 59.3% are females and 41.7% are males. The sample includes 44% of respondents from Hong Kong, 30% from Mainland China, 11% from Macau, 7% from the UK, 4% from Canada, and 4% from Vietnam. The average of ages is 29.7 years old, with a standard deviation of 12.609 (minimum: 18 years old; maximum: 72 years old).

**Table 1:** Sensory impressions reported by visitors (% of respondents reporting each impression)

<b>Sight</b>	<b>%</b>	<b>Hearing</b>	<b>%</b>	<b>Taste</b>	<b>%</b>	<b>Smell</b>	<b>%</b>	<b>Touch</b>	<b>%</b>
Salt	63.0	Birdsong	66.7	Salt	51.9	Flowers/plants	44.4	Salt	44.4
Sea	40.7	People	37.0	Roast chicken	44.4	Sea	37.0	Heat	37.0
Church	37.0	Boat	33.3	Vegetables	37.0	Local Gastronomy	29.6	Wood	22.2
Green	18.5	Waves	22.2	Local gastronomy	37.0	Salty	22.2	Tree	18.5
Hakka	18.5	Wind	18.5	Sweet	29.6	Air	14.8	Plants	18.5
Houses	18.5	Dog	18.5	Local beverage	22.2	Chicken	14.8		
Trees	18.5	Guides	11.1	Bitter	18.5	Sulphur	14.8		
Flowers	11.1	Sea	11.1	Local fruit	18.5				
				Fresh	18.5				

The content analysis of the open-ended questions, through which tourists were asked to report their sensory-informed impressions show that, of the total of sensory-based words or expressions (280), the sense of taste collected the highest number of impressions (74), followed by sight (61), hearing (59), smell (48), and touch (38). In line with previous research conducted in rural areas that focus on community involvement, the sensory impressions related to local gastronomic experiences are also predominant in this study (Fernandes, Agapito, & Mendes, 2015). Additionally, considering the variety of sensory impressions reported related to different senses, it seems that perceived experiences in the village under study are multisensory in nature, and not dominated by the sense of sight.

As can also be observed in Table 1, the sensory impressions rated with the highest percentage of responses (% of respondents) are: “hearing: birdsong” (66.7%), “sight: salt” (63.0%), “taste: salt” (51.9%), “smell: flowers/plants” (44.4%), and “touch: salt” (44.4%). Hence, specific assets that are unique to the village are mentioned by visitors, such as “Hakka” culture, “church”, local gastronomy, and nature-based assets. Worth noting is the fact that “salt/salty” is mentioned in relation to four senses: vision, smell, taste, and touch, which evidences the key role of this local asset in the village (salt pans) to the visitor experience.

The participants in the questionnaire expressed that they felt “happy” (51.9%), “relaxed” (29.6%), and “peaceful” (25.9%) after their visitor experience (Table 2). The reported emotions are positive and in line with tourist



experiences related to local destinations with strong community involvement. In particular, the acknowledgement of being “inspired,” “interested,” and “in communion” suggests that the visitors may have a positive attitude towards being involved with the community and local culture.

**Table 2:** Perceived emotions reported by visitors

<b>Emotions</b>	<b>% of respondents</b>
Happy	51.9
Relaxed	29.6
Peaceful	25.9
Comfortable	22.2
Excited	18.5
Hot	18.5
Inspired	18.5
Interested	18.5
Amazed	14.8
In communion	14.8

## **5. Discussion and conclusion**

This research discussed the relevance of a holistic approach to sensory stimuli based on endogenous resources as a contribution to responsible management in community-based tourism and analyzed the multisensory-informed experiences reported by visitors in a village in Yim Tin Tsai (Hong Kong). These preliminary reflections highlighted the potential of the proposed approach to enhance the tourist experience, to make the tourist experience more inclusive, to contribute to heritage conservation, and to boost local identity, sense of place, and place making in the context of community-based tourism.

The preliminary empirical results of this first stage of a larger study suggest that the visitor experiences in the village are multisensory-informed and not dominated by visual impressions. This finding is in line with previous research focused on experience designed and developed in rural areas (Agapito et al., 2014, 2017). Worth noting is the fact that gastronomic impressions (taste) related to local cuisine gathered the highest number of references from visitors. Additionally, other specific assets that are unique to the village were highlighted, such as “Hakka” culture and religious and nature-based assets. The predominant asset of the village – salt (salt pans) – is mentioned by participants as a multisensory resource, which can be seen, touched, olfactorily experienced, and tasted. In terms of the implications for management, the visitors' perspective suggests that opportunities regarding the process of stimulating different senses by focusing on local assets (e.g. gastronomic and cultural and nature-based), such as creative workshops focused on unique resources and led by villagers, could be addressed in the future to increase the value and recollection of the experience in visiting the destination (Agapito et al., 2017; Duxbury & Richards, 2019; Sidali, Kastenholz, & Bianchi, 2015).

The findings also suggest that the current tourism strategy in the island provide visitors with the conditions for a positive experience to emerge. In fact, participants expressed feeling “happy,” “relaxed,” and “peaceful” after the



experience, as well as “inspired,” “interested,” and “in communion.” This result points out that visitors may have a positive attitude towards being involved with the community and local culture, which is in line with the community-based tourism approach that is being developed in the destination. Moreover, short-lived emotional bonds (*communitasque moments*) can contribute to enhancing tourist experiences by making them more active, immersive, and memorable (Lugosi, 2008). It seems that there is scope for responsible consumption in the island, while respecting “the cultural, social, environmental and economic context of the local community” (Manente et al., 2014, p. 4). This is in accordance with an existing increasing demand for responsible tourism (Goodwin & Francis, 2003) and current interest of tourism providers in adopting a responsible management approach, which can promote a more sustainable use of local resources by ensuring its use and enjoyment of present and future generations (Frey & George, 2010; Spenceley et al., 2002).

Furthermore, the focus on a holistic approach to the sensory stimuli in the village could encourage a more inclusive experience for visitors. Indeed, the use of multiple sensory stimulations (both corporeal and virtual) has the potential not only to boost the experience for all visitors in general but also for sensory impaired tourists in particular, while continuously co-creating experiences with visitors and locals (Agapito et al., 2013; Dann & Dann, 2012). Moreover, diverse sensory modalities can be used in virtual environments, which can focus both on educational and promotional aims in the context of disseminating the endogenous resources and identity of the village. This could be a form of contributing to preserving the village’s distinctive assets while minimizing potential future issues related to overtourism (Milano et al., 2019) in this off-shore island. For example, an interpretation center could be designed and developed outside the island with the aid of technology by incorporating symbolic aspects linked to intangible heritage and local identity, as well as sensory stimuli unique to this village, targeting both tourists and the local community.

This research argued that since as responsible tourism is a duty of local destinations and should be centered on people and local contexts (Goodwin, 2016), a holistic multisensory approach management to community-based tourism can contribute to boosting local identity and place-making, whilst valuing the tourist experience itself. Still in an exploratory stage, this empirical study focused on the reported sensory-informed experience from visitors to the island. Considering that diverse tourism actors can develop a sense of ethical and moral responsibility that can contribute to change behaviors and lead to sustainable tourism development (Bramwell, 2008), in a second stage of the study, stakeholders in the island that were identified through the analysis of the secondary sources will be included. Qualitative methods will be utilized to explore the different stakeholders’ perspectives regarding to what extent a multisensory approach can aid responsible management in community-based tourism projects, such as the one in Yim Tin Tsai. In order to do so, all dimensions within a responsible tourism management approach, as identified in the literature review, will be considered in the second stage of this research.

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