

Perceived Quality of the Service Experience and Delight : What Impact does this have on the Loyalty of Spa Guests at Thalassotherapy Centres ? The Case of TUNISIA

¹Fatma BAKINI, ²Hajer MACHERKI

¹Professor of Higher Education at ISG Tunis, University of Tunisia

²Contract Teacher, FSEG Mahdia, University of Monastir

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.47772/IJRISS.2026.100300495>

Received: 24 March 2026; Accepted: 30 March 2026; Published: 14 April 2026

ABSTRACT

In a hyper-competitive environment where offerings are becoming increasingly commoditised and consumers increasingly demanding, the search for new levers of differentiation, beyond functional quality and adaptation to new trends and marketing innovations, is proving essential. Hence the importance of an experiential approach that highlights the central role of the overall customer experience, integrating emotional, relational and symbolic dimensions.

Research in the field of health and wellness tourism is the cornerstone of our research work. Several studies have shown that the factors influencing spa customer loyalty vary mainly according to region and cultural factors. However, the experience of an innovative, appreciated and memorable service, enabling consumers with a real need for emotional, symbolic and spiritual relief to rediscover their enchantment, proves to be an important factor.

Motivated by the managerial deficit, this article aims to study the effects of the novelty dimension of the perceived quality of the consumer experience of a wellness tourism service on spa customer loyalty: the case of Tunisia.

A model combining cognitive and experiential variables (sensation seeking, variety seeking, need for stimulation and delight) is proposed to explain intentions to return to the location.

We followed a hypothetical-deductive approach based on a quantitative questionnaire survey. Data were collected in centres across Tunisia, from north to south. Statistical tests and structural equation modelling were used to study the effects of the perceived quality of the wellness tourism service experience and to test the research model.

The results made it possible to explain and analyse the novelty dimension of the perceived quality of the service experience and show that it provides more intense positive emotions, even delighting customers. In addition, the explanatory power of the affective component (delight) in relation to satisfaction in building spa customer loyalty was clearly demonstrated.

The article also provided a series of practical recommendations for implementing marketing programmes that emphasise innovation in the experiential quality of the offering and target delight as the best tool for building loyalty.

Keywords: Perceived quality of experience – delight – loyalty – wellness tourism.

RESUME

Dans un contexte hyperconcurrentiel où les offres sont de plus en plus banalisées et les consommateurs de plus

en plus exigeants, la recherche de nouveaux leviers de différenciation, au-delà de la qualité fonctionnelle et l'adaptation aux nouvelles tendances et aux innovations marketing s'avèrent primordiales. D'où l'importance d'approche expérientielle mettant en évidence le rôle central de l'expérience globale vécue par le client, intégrant des dimensions émotionnelles, relationnelles et symboliques.

La recherche dans le domaine du tourisme de santé et bien-être constitue la pierre de voûte de notre travail de recherche. Plusieurs études ont montré que les facteurs influençant la fidélité des curistes varient essentiellement de la région et des facteurs culturels. Or, le vécu d'une expérience de service innovante appréciée et mémorisée permettant de ré-enchanter un consommateur avec un vrai besoin de soulagement émotionnel, symbolique et spirituel, s'avère un facteur important.

Motivée par le déficit managérial, cet article se propose d'étudier les effets de la dimension nouveauté de la qualité perçue de l'expérience de consommation d'un service de tourisme de bien-être, sur la fidélité des curistes : le cas de la Tunisie. Un modèle alliant variables cognitive et expérientielles (recherche de sensation, recherche de variété, besoin de stimulation et ravissement) est proposé pour expliquer les intentions de revenir sur le lieu.

Nous avons suivi une démarche hypothético-déductive s'appuyant sur une étude quantitative par questionnaire. Les données ont été collectées dans des centres s'étalant du nord au sud de la Tunisie. Des tests statistiques et des analyses par équations structurelles ont été mobilisés afin d'étudier les effets de la qualité perçue de l'expérience de consommation de service touristique de bien-être et de tester le modèle de la recherche.

Les résultats ont permis d'expliquer et analyser la dimension nouveauté de la qualité perçue de l'expérience de service et montrer qu'elle procure des émotions positives plus intenses jusqu'au ravissement des clients. Aussi, le pouvoir explicatif de la composante affective : ravissement vis-à-vis de la satisfaction dans la formation de fidélité des curistes, était bien mis en évidence.

L'article a fourni, également, une série de recommandations pratiques pour la mise en place de programmes de marketing soulignant l'innovation de la qualité expérientielle de l'offre et ciblant le ravissement comme meilleur outil de fidélisation.

Mots-clés: Qualité perçue de l'expérience- ravissement-tourisme de bien-être fidélité.

INTRODUCTION

Health and wellness tourism in Tunisia represents a sector with significant potential for future growth within the global tourism industry, where competition is becoming increasingly fierce. Consequently, the stakes are high for our country, Tunisia, given its ranking as the second most popular international destination after France for thalassotherapy and spa centres.

This industry offers an experiential service combining hydrotherapy, body treatments, relaxation and a sensory atmosphere, with the aim of creating perceived value, satisfaction and customer loyalty through a holistic and personalised experience. However, Tunisian thalassotherapy and spa centres currently operate on a management model based solely on medical grounds.

As a result, the concept of experience in this sector remains neglected despite the experiential nature of the field. At best, the concept of experience is limited to sensory aspects. Indeed, in order to maintain their position as challengers in the long term and strengthen future competitiveness, Tunisian centres must adopt original and relevant approaches that promote the development and improvement of their offerings.

Several studies have demonstrated the strategic importance of loyalty, through the concept of customer satisfaction in service organisations (Reichheld and Teal, 1996; Miguel-Dávila et al., 2010). However, this one-dimensional approach continues to reveal its limitations in terms of explanatory power. More recent studies (Smith, M., & Puczkó, L., 2020; Anaya-Aguilar et al., 2021; Ardani et al., 2021; Huang et al., 2019; Su et al., 2011) have demonstrated the effect of various other factors on loyalty behaviours.

This research therefore aims to analyse the effect of the perceived quality of the service experience on spa guests'

loyalty and to examine the mediating role of delight in this relationship.

By combining insights from experiential marketing and the literature on consumer emotions, this study pursues a dual objective: The first is theoretical, as it aims to enhance our understanding of the emotional determinants of loyalty in tourism services; the second is managerial, as it seeks to provide managers of thalassotherapy centres with concrete levers for action to design distinctive and sustainable experiences.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The shift from an approach based on functional performance to one focused on creating memorable experiences for the customer represents a profound transformation within the service sector. This evolution is part of the development of the experiential approach, according to which individuals seek immersion in a variety of experiences rather than the mere consumption of finished products or services. They no longer wish to distinguish themselves by what they buy, but rather by what they experience (Cinotti 2007); consumption is thus transformed into an act of producing experiences and identities, rather than a destructive act (Cinotti 2007, Filser 2002, Firat and Venkatesch 1995).

As such, the concept of perceived quality of the service experience emerges as a fundamental construct in the overall evaluation of the offering. This quality is examined through its novelty dimension, in terms of sensation seeking, variety seeking and the need for stimulation, which represents the affective component of perceived experience quality strongly associated with the experiential approach. According to previous research, this evaluation often affects satisfaction and consequently customer loyalty

However, several recent studies have highlighted the limitations of this approach, which is considered insufficient to explain long-term customer loyalty.

In this regard, the concept of customer delight emerges as a powerful determinant of loyalty, in that it represents an intense emotional response following the evaluation of a service experience perceived as exceptional and unexpected.

Towards an experiential approach to consumption

For many years, consumption and consumer behaviour were dominated by the functionalist approach. This approach can be seen in the work of Carù and Cova (2006), who adopt a cognitivist perspective aimed at maximising individual utility whilst respecting time and budget constraints and relying on information (Aurier and Passebois, 2002; Chakor and Boubker, 2009). The consumer is also an emotional being who seeks to satisfy their need for pleasure and enjoyment by consuming symbols. This justifies the increasing importance of the concept of lived experience in explaining consumer behaviour in a postmodern context (Meyer and Schwager 2007; Chakor and Boubker 2009; Rather, R.A. 2021). Thus, individuals are defined by what they experience rather than by what they buy. Consumption therefore transcends its destructive aspect to become an act of creating experiences, identities and images. The 'experience' thus becomes the key element (Addis and Podesta (2005) (Chakor and Boubkr, 2009; Walls 2011; Ali.F. and Kim.W. G. 2022). Customer experience in the service industry. As such, the experiential approach is presented as a source of emotions and sensations that shapes the consumer's identity rather than merely meeting their needs (Filser, 2002; Cinotti, 2007, 2015; Lemon and Verhoef, 2016). It is defined by Holbrook and Hirschman (1982) as: 'The subjective state of consciousness involving a variety of symbolic meanings, hedonic responses and aesthetic criteria'.

In our research, we will focus on the concept of service experience quality, which is assessed primarily in emotional, holistic and subjective terms, in contrast to service quality, which is assessed in cognitive, specific and objective terms.

The service experience

Holbrook and Hirschman (1982) defined the service experience as: 'The subjective state of consciousness involving a variety of symbolic meanings, hedonic responses and aesthetic criteria'. It is a strategic construct

that goes beyond the technical efficiency of the service insofar as it draws on emotions, sensory perceptions, human interactions and cognitive dimensions to create an overall experience. In this context, tourism and leisure, as service industries, provide fertile ground for the development of an experience-based management model, in which experiential benefits are regarded as the central element of the evaluation and satisfaction process (Otto and Ritchie, 1996)

Otto and Ritchie (1996) emphasised the importance of the service experience, considering the quality of the service experience as the new measure of service. They defined the service experience as the psychological environment represented by the personal subjective reactions and feelings experienced by consumers whilst using the service (Otto and Ritchie, 1996; Schmitt 2019; Ali F. and Kim W. G. 2022; Kim, J., et al. 2024).

Perceived quality and dimensions of a service experience

Service quality is defined as the quality of those service attributes that are under the provider’s control. However, the quality of the service experience, in addition to the attributes provided by the provider, also involves attributes occasionally contributed by the consumer. It reflects the emotional responses to consumers’ socio-psychological needs (Chan and Baum 2007; Klaus and Maklan 2013; McColl-Kennedy et al. 2019; Becker and Jaakkola 2020; De Keyser et al. 2020). The evaluation of service experience quality is essentially affective, holistic and subjective (Otto and Ritchie). Based on a consumer survey across three tourism service sectors, Otto and Ritchie (1996) developed a service experience quality measurement scale comprising four factors: hedonic, peace of mind, involvement and recognition.

Table1:Components and dimensions of the service experience

Dimension	Exemple
Hedonism	Excitation, Enjouement, Memorisation
Interactivity	Meeting people, Being part of the process, Having a choice
Novelty	Evasion, doing something new
Confort	Physical comfort, Relaxation
Security	Personal security. Security of goods and property.
Stimulation	Education and information Challenge.

Source: Otto, J. E., & Ritchie, J. R. B., 1995, “Exploring the quality of the service experience: A theoretical and empirical analysis”, In T. Swartz, D.

Recent research into experiential service quality has highlighted three variables that play a key role in shaping the perceived quality of the experience, namely: hedonism, novelty and control (Otto and Ritchie, 1996; Duman, 2002). However, research on the pursuit of novelty remains scarce, particularly in terms of defining the components of novelty generally linked to the consumer’s personal needs, namely: the need for stimulation, the search for variety and the search for sensation.

Delight

The concept of consumer delight emerged in response to the limitations of traditional models of satisfaction, which had long been regarded as the primary determinant of loyalty. According to the theory of expectation confirmation, satisfaction resulted from the gap between perceived performance and initial expectations (Oliver, 1980). However, several studies have shown that satisfied customers do not systematically exhibit repurchase or recommendation behaviour, thereby calling into question the explanatory power of satisfaction alone. Thus, attention has gradually shifted towards the role of emotions in the consumer experience (Westbrook & Oliver, 1991), introducing the concept of ‘customer delight’, defined as an intense emotional response resulting from an experience that significantly exceeds expectations, combining surprise and heightened pleasure. Delight thus emerges as a distinct and stronger state than satisfaction (Oliver, Rust and Varki, 1997). Recent research aligns with the logic of customer experience management, where the focus is no longer on mere functional satisfaction but rather on designing experiences with high emotional value that are memorable and generate lasting emotional attachment. As such, it has emerged as a major strategic lever for differentiation and the creation of competitive

advantage, particularly in sectors where the experience is paramount (Arkadan et al., 2024; Gao et al., 2025). In this context, and in relation to the concept of novelty seeking, the latter constitutes an important antecedent of consumer delight insofar as it is closely linked to Mehrabian and Russell's (1974) typology of excitement-seeking and refers to the pursuit of excitement through original and innovative experiences, thereby generating positive surprise and heightened emotional stimulation (Oliver et al., 1997; Torres & Kline, 2013). Consequently, an experience characterised by novelty and unexpectedness enhances the pleasure felt and promotes delight (Kim et al., 2012; Skavronskaya et al., 2020). Hence our proposal :

The degree of perceived novelty sought in a thalassotherapy and spa experience may influence the consumer's sense of delight.

H1-a: The more the thalassotherapy and spa experience is perceived as varied and able to meet consumer's need for variety, the more delighted the consumer will be.

H1-b: The more the experience is perceived as emotional and sensation-inducing for the consumer, the more delighted the consumer will be.

H1-c: The more the thalassotherapy and spa experience is perceived as unexpected, exciting and stimulating, the more delighted the customer will be.

Satisfaction

Customer satisfaction is a concept often linked to post-purchase evaluation, arising from a comparison between initial expectations and the perceived performance of the product or service; it is "a judgement that a product or service provides a pleasant level of fulfilment related to consumption" (Oliver, 2014). According to Azis and Wibawa (2025), satisfaction is a psychological construct associated with a feeling of pleasure or contentment following the fulfilment of needs and expectations, directly influencing the consumer's future behaviour. In this vein, although it is often perceived as the result of cognitive factors, satisfaction also depends on affective responses, particularly in the service sector. Satisfaction thus appears to depend on utilitarian evaluation (focused on external stimuli) and hedonic evaluation (focused on internal stimuli) (Johnson and Zinkhan, 1991; Parasuraman, Zeithaml and Berry, 1994; Dabholkar, 1995; Mano and Oliver, 1993; Price, Arnould and Tierny, 1995) . In the context of experiential marketing, the concept of perceived quality goes beyond the functional performance of the service to encompass an overall assessment of the excellence of the experience, whilst integrating cognitive, emotional and sensory dimensions. Or, alternatively, a subjective interpretation of all the interactions experienced during the service encounter (Zeithaml, 1988). In this sense, the perceived quality of a service experience acts as a direct antecedent of satisfaction (Richard Oliver, 1977 ; Rather and Camilleri, 2022 ; Rita et al., 2023 ; Kim and Lee, 2024), hence our proposition :

The perceived quality of a thalassotherapy and spa service experience is expected to have a direct positive effect on consumer satisfaction.

H2-a: The more the thalassotherapy and spa experience is perceived as varied and able to meet the consumer's need for variety, the more satisfied the consumer is likely to be.

H2-b: The more the experience is perceived as emotional and sensation-generating for the consumer, the more satisfied they will be.

H2-c: The more the thalassotherapy and spa experience is perceived as unexpected, exciting and stimulating, the greater the consumer satisfaction will be.

1-6 The link between satisfaction and delight

Oliver et al.'s (1997) model posits that delight is a state of arousal triggered by unexpected consumption and positive affect, whereas satisfaction is the result of disconfirmation and positive affect. From this perspective, different antecedents lead to distinct experiential outcomes. The proposed model highlights the affective aspect of the definition of satisfaction. According to Rust and Oliver (2000), consumer delight is conceptualised as a

positive surprise that confounds expectations, generating highly arousing emotions, whereas satisfaction merely involves the exceeding of expectations. The difference between the two concepts therefore lies in surprise (Oliver et al 1997, Rust and Oliver 2000); delight appears to have a more pronounced affective component than satisfaction.

In this context, the literature on satisfaction and delight reveals differing views regarding the roles of satisfaction and delight. Some believe they are independent, whilst others believe that heightened positive emotions, such as delight, could complement the concept of satisfaction (Oliver, Rust and Varki 1997). Indeed, if delight is considered a function of expectations, then customer satisfaction will be the logical antecedent to their delight (Torres and Kline 2006). However, if we consider a needs-based model such as that presented by Schneider and Bowen (1999), satisfaction could be associated with the fulfilment of certain needs, whilst delight could be associated with the fulfilment of higher-order needs (Chitturi et al., 2008).

Thus, delight and satisfaction are two related emotional experiences, yet they differ in terms of their intensity and emotional scope (Roberts-Lombard, M., 2025): delight is regarded as an extreme, exceptional and often unexpected form of satisfaction, which deeply engages the emotions and sometimes even the spiritual or aesthetic dimensions. It is the extension or transcendence of satisfaction when the latter becomes ecstasy, wonder or awe (Lu, Liu, Lai & Yang, 2017; MAV, 2020). Hence our hypothesis:

H3: Consumer satisfaction is hypothesised to have a direct positive effect on delight.

Loyalty

The concept of loyalty is constantly evolving. As a strategic issue for businesses, it often refers to a customer's lasting attachment to a brand or supplier, influenced by factors such as satisfaction and trust. This evolution is particularly evident with economic development, especially in a digital context. According to Oliver (1997), it is defined as

A deep commitment on the part of the consumer to consistently repurchase or patronise a preferred product, service or brand in the future, despite situational influences or marketing efforts that might provoke a change in behaviour'.

Loyalty can be broken down into behavioural (repeat purchases), attitudinal (emotional preference) and composite approaches, according to Oliver's sequential model (1999) (Kim and Yum, 2024). Linked to experiential management, customer loyalty goes beyond simple transactional logic to transform it into highly memorable emotional experiences. This approach, stemming from the seminal work of Schmitt (1999) on the strategic management of experience, has gradually evolved towards the concept of 'experiential loyalty'. In this sense, the traditional determinants of loyalty, such as satisfaction and trust, are transformed into a sense of belonging through meaningful personalised experiences (Kim and Yum, 2024).

The Link Between Satisfaction, Delight and Loyalty

The concepts of satisfaction, delight and loyalty are often conceptualised in marketing literature as fundamental, interdependent constructs that help explain the formation and consolidation of a lasting relationship between the customer and the company. These concepts are often approached from a dynamic perspective, insofar as cognitive evaluation tends to evolve towards more intense emotional responses, which are likely to shape the consumer's future behaviour. Consumer satisfaction is often linked to the cognitive aspect of evaluating the consumer experience, following a comparison between initial expectations and the perceived performance of the product or service. When positive, this evaluation fosters the development of favourable attitudes towards the brand or company, which is thus considered a key determinant of consumer loyalty (Rather, R. (2021); Loureiro, S., & Kastenholz, E. (2023)).

However, several recent studies have shown that satisfaction is essential but not sufficient for consumer loyalty, particularly in highly competitive environments where offerings are often similar. This highlights the importance of the concept of 'customer delight', insofar as it reflects a more intense emotional response resulting from an

experience that far exceeds the consumer’s expectations. It thus differs from satisfaction through the effect of positive surprise, thereby generating an exceptional emotional state that strengthens brand attachment (Mangini, E. et al 2019; Bai et al 2021; Loureiro & Kastenholtz 2023; Lopes, L. et al 2024). In this regard, several studies suggest that the relationship between these three concepts can be conceptualised as a progressive process, insofar as satisfaction forms the cognitive basis for evaluating the experience, whilst delight acts as an emotional lever that strengthens consumer loyalty (Loureiro & Kastenholtz 2023; Lopes, L. et al. 2024)

Hence the hypotheses :

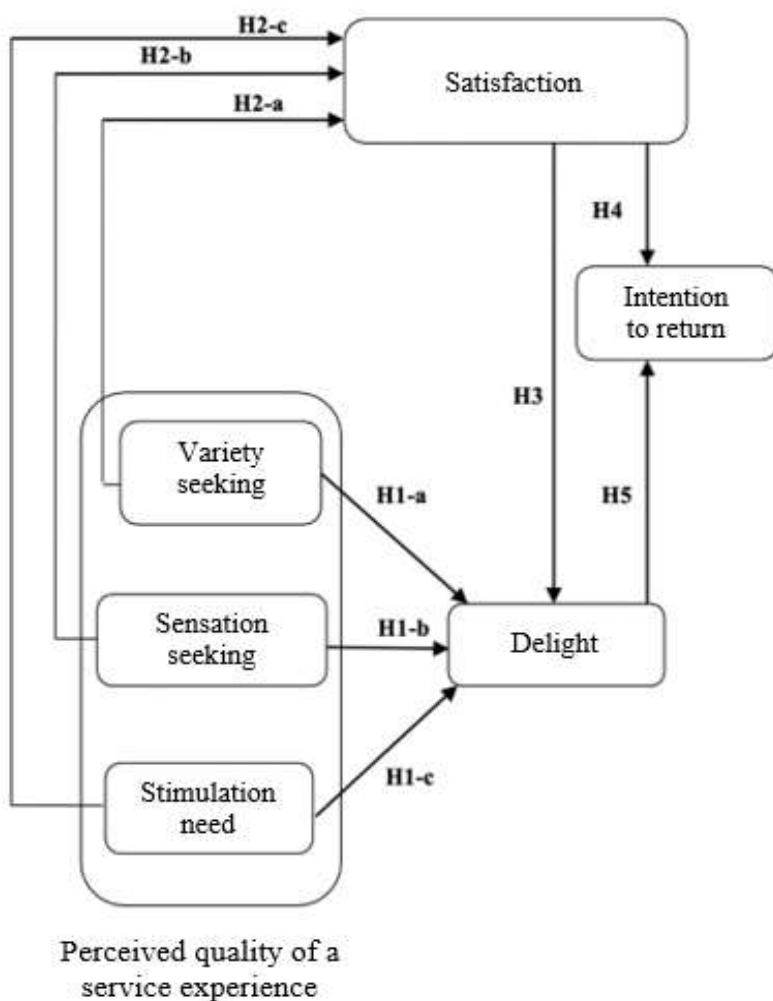
H4 : Satisfaction may have a positive and significant impact on the intention to return to the thalassotherapy centre.

H5 : Delight may have a positive and significant impact on the intention to return to the thalassotherapy centre

Conceptual model and hypotheses

Our study aims to examine, within an explanatory model, the influence of the components of perceived quality of the consumer experience of a thalassotherapy and spa service on consumer loyalty, via its impact on the quality of the relationship between consumers and the service provider (Figure 1). In this way, the components of the relationship (satisfaction and delight) act as mediators between the components of perceived quality (explanatory variables) and consumer responses (variables to be explained).

We have adopted a postmodern approach, insofar as this aims to re-enchant consumption. We will focus on the means of re-enchantment, particularly the novelty of the experience in terms of the search for sensation, the search for variety and the need for stimulation.



(Figure1) Conceptuel model

Research methodology

In this stage, the general traditional framework proposed by Churchill (1979) was followed, whilst taking care to incorporate the comments and developments made regarding this procedure and to adapt it to current statistical analysis tools (Cohen et al., 1990).

We used a non-probability quota sampling method tailored to the exploratory context and the lack of an exhaustive sampling frame of clients at thalassotherapy centres in Tunisia. This approach ensures a diversity of profiles.

For our research, the timing of data collection is crucial: immediately after the experience, when emotions are still fresh, and measurements of delight would be more reliable.

Our sample was determined by applying the rule of 5 to 10 observations per item, i.e. 180, consisting of customers who having lived an experience in thalassotherapy centres in Tunisia.

An initial shortlisting process for the centres was carried out based on selection criteria specific to this study, namely:

- (1) The centre has been open for three years or more
- (2) The centre offers at least one package combining thalassotherapy and spa treatments in the form of specific cures of treatment target by this study

Choice of Field

Research in the field of wellness tourism lies at the heart of our research work. Several reasons underpin our choice:

- * Wellness tourism is undergoing rapid development and has strong potential for future growth within the global industry.
- * The stakes are high for Tunisia following its ranking as the second most popular international destination.
- * The field is experiential in nature, thus highlighting the need for research into the concept of experience.

The aim is to examine how a tourism service experience can meet consumer needs in terms of the search for variety, sensation and the need for stimulation. What is the most appropriate managerial approach for wellness tourism to build customer loyalty by delighting them through the provision of experiences that evoke a sense of novelty?

Measurement of constructs

The measurement of perceived quality was carried out by developing a set of items based on the AFFEX scale developed by Otto (1997) and Otto and Ritchie (1996) and adopted by Duman (2002). Our choice is also justified by the existence of items comprising a subjective experience, the presence of strong psychometric properties, and finally the suitability of these items for measuring the satisfaction and enjoyment generated by the thalassotherapy and spa experience. Our scale for measuring the perceived quality of the service experience comprises 9 items. The concept of satisfaction was measured using instruments that were both cognitive (based on the disconfirmation paradigm) and affective. In our case, given the lack of a dominant scale in use, we chose a short two-item scale in order to limit the number of questions in the questionnaire. As for delight, it was measured in the literature in two forms: either considered as an emotion, in which case it is measured as either a discrete or continuous emotion, or conceptualised as an extreme level of satisfaction and measured as such through satisfaction scales. (Oliver et al 1997, Vanhamme and Snelgers 2003, Finn 2005, Vanhamme 2008). In this context, Oliver (1997) measured the concept of delight using a three-item scale. Kim et al (2015) measured

delight using the three items from Finn (2005), to which three additional items were developed based on subsequent qualitative research describing delightful experiences with products or services (Arnold et al, 2005), and which are consistent with the literature in terms of the conceptualisation of delight (Plutchik 1980, Oliver et al 1997, Finn 2005): For our research, we adapted this delight measurement scale used by Kim et al 2015.

Finally, to measure the intention to return, we adapted the conative loyalty scale used by Kim et al (2015), which consists of four items.

Data collection

This stage involved two phases : distribution and collection of the questionnaire. The survey was conducted across Tunisia from north to south (Tunis/Djerba/Zarzis). A pre-test was carried out with a small sample of 50 respondents.

RESULTS

The measurement model

The data from the survey were subjected to exploratory factor analysis. We therefore verified the number of dimensions using principal component analysis, applying a criterion of eigenvalues greater than 1 and a factor loading of at least 0.50. The results of the exploratory and confirmatory factor analyses demonstrated that most of the measurement scales selected for this study retain their original structure. The model measuring satisfaction across two dimensions fits the empirical data well. The conditions of reliability, convergent validity and discriminant validity are met.

Model fit and discussion of results

In order to assess the quality of fit of the specified models to the survey data, we selected a number of indices recommended by the marketing literature and data analysts. An examination of the values of these indices leads to the conclusion that the estimated model exhibits an acceptable fit. Such results mean that the model should not be rejected. In this context, the RMSEA value is below the recommended threshold of 0.05. Indeed, this index is based on the analysis of deviations from a perfect fit. It represents the level of ‘misfit’ per degree of freedom. Its value is generally considered adequate when close to 0.05, acceptable if below 0.08, and acceptable from 0.1 onwards. The same applies to the GFI and AGFI, which measure the quality of the model’s fit to the data. These indices allow us to assess the relative proportion of variance-covariance explained by the model (GFI), adjusted for the number of variables relative to the number of degrees of freedom (AGFI). Values greater than 0.9 are considered acceptable for these two indices (Evrard, Prasert & Roux, 2000). The CFI value is also acceptable. This allows a factor model to be compared with a null model, whilst offering the advantage of being more appropriate in the context of exploratory models. For this index, a value greater than or equal to 0.9 is generally considered acceptable. The same applies to the IFI and the NNFI, which allow us to assess the improvement provided by the tested model compared to the baseline model, whilst taking into account the model’s parsimony. We present below, for each exogenous variable, the percentage of variance explained by the linear relationships. The purpose of analysis of variance is to determine whether one (or more) explanatory variable(s) has (have) a significant influence or not on one or more variables to be explained (Evrard, Pras and Roux, 1997). This percentage is obtained by subtracting the square of the standardised coefficient from 1 of the disturbance associated with the latent variable (Bentler, 1990; Roussel, Durrieu, Campoy and El Akremi, 2002). The higher the R^2 , the more we can conclude that the exogenous variable is well explained by the other variables associated with it. Thus, our model has the advantage of satisfactorily predicting the majority of the predetermined variables to be explained.

The R^2 indicator, reflecting the percentage of explained variance, shows largely acceptable values for all the endogenous variables in the model. Analysis of the R^2 values shows that our structural model allows us to predict a large proportion of the variance in consumer responses. Following the estimation of the fit of the overall model to the measurement model, it is possible to estimate the model parameters and test the causal relationships.

Tableau2 : Pouvoirexplicatifdumodèle

	R2(SMC%)
Satisfaction	36,7
Delight	80,2
Intention to return	60,8

Tableau3 : Estimation des paramètres dumodèlestructurel

Empirical relationships	Estimated value	P
Satisfaction<--variety seeking	0,755	0.000
Satisfaction<--sensation seeking	-1.105	0.144
Satisfaction<--need stimulation	-0.41	0.188
Consumer delight <-- variety seeking	0.075	0.314
Consumer delight <-- sensation seeking	0.343	0.000
Consumer delight <-- need stimulation	0.003	0.845
Consumer delight <--Satisfaction	0.136	0.010
Intention to return <--Satisfaction	0.056	0.620
Intention to return <-- Consumer delight	0.502	0.085

Validation of hypotheses

* Hypothesis H1: Examination of the statistical parameters shows that the concept of delight is well explained by the perceived quality of a service experience; the role of perceived quality as a predictor in the formation of this construct is justified by the R² value (SMC) of 0.802. Taking into account the components of perceived service quality in terms of novelty seeking would improve our understanding of the antecedents. In this sense, examining the specific role of each component of perceived quality in the formation of delight proves useful. The value of the structural coefficient for the relationship is high and highly significant for the ‘sensation-seeking’ component (0.749). However, the values of the structural coefficients for the other two components – ‘variety-seeking’ and ‘need for stimulation’ – are low or even mediocre (0.095; 0.010). Consequently, hypothesis H1-b: ‘the more the experience is perceived as emotional and sensation-generating by the consumer, the more delighted they will be’, is validated. The other two, H1-a and H1-c, are not.

*Hypothesis H2: Based on the values of the structural coefficients, we observe a significant relationship between the ‘search for variety’ component of perceived experience quality and satisfaction, with a value of 0.712. However, the relationship with the other two components – “sensation seeking” and “need for stimulation” – remains insignificant, hence the validation of Hypothesis H2-a.

* Hypothesis H3: Delight is only partially explained by satisfaction (SMC = 36.7%). However, perceived quality in terms of thrill-seeking contributes much more (80.2%) to explaining delight. The relationship between satisfaction and delight is

significant given a structural coefficient of 0.181; we can therefore conclude that Hypothesis H3 is validated.

* Hypothesis H4: The structural coefficient is not significant (0.056, p = 0.620). Contrary to our expectations, satisfaction has a negative effect on the intention to return. Consumers do not base their decision to return to the venue of their consumer experience solely on satisfaction. Hypothesis H4 is therefore not validated.

*Hypothesis H5: The structural coefficient is significant = 0.502 and p = 0.085. The more delighted the consumer is with their experience at the thalassotherapy and spa centre, the more likely they are to return to that venue. Hypothesis H5 is therefore validated.

CONCLUSION

Although some hypotheses have been rejected, our conceptual model can be validated for variables related to the consumer’s perception as well as their evaluation of the experience. The components of perceived experience

quality generate stronger emotions, to the point of delighting the consumer. Similarly, a delighted consumer evaluates their service consumption experience positively. Consumer delight is more closely linked to the sensation-seeking component of perceived quality, whilst satisfaction is linked to the search for variety.

In fact, delight is a sense of excitement triggered by a surprising, meaning-generating experience that occurs when hedonic needs are exceeded, whereas satisfaction is the result of the positive emotional response to the fulfilment of utilitarian needs. No significant effect was observed regarding the link between satisfaction and the intention to return. From this first set of hypotheses, we can deduce an overall positive impact of the perceived quality of the service experience and consumer delight. The second set of hypotheses relates to the testing of the overall model. The results are, in fact, acceptable. The convergent and discriminant validity, as well as the reliability of the model, have been clearly demonstrated. Regarding the structural model, the statistical analysis of the data validates a large proportion of the hypotheses. The perceived quality of a service experience, comprising three dimensions (sensation-seeking, variety-seeking and the need for stimulation), has a significant influence on the consumer's state of delight, thereby highlighting the highly emotional nature of this experience. The perceived quality of the experience is also linked to satisfaction. Delight, for its part, is linked to the intention to return. Furthermore, the relationship between delight and the intention to return is strong. As for satisfaction, it has a positive effect on delight; here, satisfaction is at its highest level,

In fact, delight refers to satisfaction at its highest level; however, it has no effect on the intention to return. The explanatory power of delight on the decision to return to the venue of the experience is quite clear. Our objective was therefore to test the conceptual model according to the principles of the structural equation modelling method. The results showed that the perceived quality of the service experience in thalassotherapy centres, in terms of sensation seeking, variety seeking and need for stimulation, positively affects consumer delight as well as satisfaction. More specifically, consumer delight is primarily influenced by the 'sensation-seeking' dimension of the perceived quality of the service experience. Whereas satisfaction is influenced by the 'variety-seeking' dimension. Regarding the variable 'intention to return', delighted customers demonstrated a higher intention to return. Finally, although it forms an essential foundation of the loyalty-building process, satisfaction alone is not always sufficient to guarantee lasting consumer commitment. In a context where consumer experiences are increasingly emotional, delight-or the intense sense of wonder felt by the user-plays a crucial differentiating role.

In this sense, whilst satisfaction primarily operates at the cognitive and affective levels, delight enables us to go beyond these levels by triggering a deeper, unforgettable emotional response that reinforces attitudinal loyalty; intense experiences or moments of ecstasy strongly influence the intention to return and contribute to the emergence of a more pronounced and lasting loyalty. This justifies the increasing focus on creating distinctive and memorable experiences able to generate delight and consolidate customer loyalty in the long term.

Consequently, and from an experiential perspective, loyalty no longer rests solely on perceived quality or functional satisfaction, but on the ability of a brand or a venue to provoke sustainable emotional delight.

BIBLIOGRAPHIE

1. Addis, M., & Holbrook, M. B. (2001). On the conceptual link between mass customisation and experiential consumption: An explosion of subjectivity. *Journal of Consumer Behaviour*, (1), 50–66.
2. Addis, M., & Podestà, S. (2005). Long life to marketing research: A postmodern view. *European Journal of Marketing*, 39(3–4), 386–412.
3. Arkadan, et al. (2024). Orientation vers l'expérience client : Modèle conceptuel, propositions et orientations de recherche. *Journal de l'Académie des sciences du marketing*, 52(10).
4. Arnold, M. J., Reynolds, K. E., Ponder, N., & Lueg, J. E. (2005). Customer delight in a retail context: Investigating delightful and terrible shopping experiences. *Journal of Business Research*, 58, 1132–1145.
5. Arnould, E., & Price, L. (1993). River magic: Extraordinary experience and the extended service encounter. *Journal of Consumer Research*, 20(1), 24–45.
6. Aurier, P., & Evrard, Y. (1998). Élaboration et validation d'une échelle de mesure de la satisfaction des consommateurs. *Actes du 14ème congrès international de l'Association Française du Marketing*, Bordeaux, 51–72.
7. Aurier, P., & Passebois, J. (2003). Comprendre les expériences de consommation pour mieux gérer la

- relation client. *Décisions Marketing*, (28), 43–52.
8. Azis, M. Y. J., & Wibawa, B. M. (2025). Comprendre l'expérience et la satisfaction des clients dans les hôtels et complexes hôteliers de luxe : Une revue systématique de la littérature. *Jurnal Kajian Ekonomi and Bisnis Islam*, 6(11).
 9. Baker, D. A., & Crompton, J. L. (2000). Quality, satisfaction and behavioral intentions. *Annals of Tourism Research*, 27(3), 785–804.
 10. Becker, L., & Jaakkola, E. (2020). Customer experience: Fundamental premises and implications for research. *Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science*, 48, 630–648.
 11. Bello, D. R., & Etzel, M. J. (1985). The role of novelty in the pleasure travel experience. *Journal of Travel Research*, 24(1), 20–26.
 12. Bentler, P. M. (1990). Comparative fit indexes in structural models. *Psychological Bulletin*, 107(2), 238–246.
 13. Berman, B. (2005). How to delight your customers. *California Management Review*, 48(1), 129.
 14. Boulding, W., Kalra, A., et al. (1993). A dynamic process model of service quality: From expectations to behavioural intentions. *Journal of Marketing Research*, 30(1), 7–27.
 15. Bourgeon, D., & Filser, M. (1995). Les apports du modèle de recherche d'expériences à l'analyse du comportement dans le domaine culturel : Une exploration conceptuelle et méthodologique. *Recherche et Applications en Marketing*, 10(4), 23–.
 16. Bowden, J. L. H., & Dagger, T. S. (2011). To delight or not to delight? An investigation of loyalty formation in the restaurant industry. *Journal of Hospitality Marketing & Management*, 20(5), 501–524.
 17. Carù, A., & Cova, B. (2006). Expériences de consommation et marketing expérientiel. *Revue Française de Gestion*, 162.
 18. Chakor, A., & Boubker, A. (2009). Le marketing expérientiel : Une nouvelle démarche pour une valorisation de l'expérience de consommation : Cas du centre commercial Mega Mall. *Actes du 7ème Colloque International de la Recherche en Marketing*, Association Tunisienne du Marketing.
 19. Chan, J. K. L., & Baum, T. (2007). Motivation factors of ecotourists in ecolodge accommodation: The push and pull factors. *Asia Pacific Journal of Tourism Research*, 12(4), 349–364.
 20. Chitturi, R., Raghunathan, R., & Mahajan, V. (2008). Delight by design: The role of hedonic versus utilitarian benefits. *Journal of Marketing*, 72(3), 48–63.
 21. Churchill, G. A., Jr. (1979). A paradigm for developing better measures of marketing constructs. *Journal of Marketing Research*, 16(1), 64–73.
 22. Churchill, G. A., & Surprenant, C. (1989). An investigation into the determinants of customer satisfaction. *Journal of Marketing Research*, 19, 491–504.
 23. Cinotti, Y. (2007). Conceptualisation d'un loisir expérientiel. *Actes du colloque international IPAG/NBUS*, Paris.
 24. Cinotti, Y., & Decroly, J.-M. (2015). Typologie des innovations de service dans l'hôtellerie, 131–141.
 25. Cova, B. (1996). The postmodern explained to managers: Implications for marketing. *Business Horizons*, 39(6), 15–23.
 26. Cronin, J. J., Jr., & Taylor, S. A. (1992). Measuring service quality: A reexamination and extension. *Journal of Marketing*, 56(3), 55–68.
 27. Crottet, et al. (2008). Measuring guest satisfaction and competitive position in the hospitality and tourism industry: An application of stance-shift analysis to travel blog narratives. *Journal of Travel Research*.
 28. Dabholkar, P. A. (1995). A contingency framework for predicting causality between customer satisfaction and service quality. *Advances in Consumer Research*, 101–108.
 29. De Keyser, A., et al. (2020). Customer experience and service quality: A systematic review. *Journal of Service Management*, 31(3), 423–447.
 30. Duman, T. (2002). A model of perceived value for leisure travel products (Doctoral thesis, The Pennsylvania State University).
 31. Evrard, Y. (1993). La satisfaction des consommateurs : État des recherches. *Revue Française du Marketing*, 53–65.
 32. Evrard, Y., Pras, B., & Roux, E. (1997). *Market : Études et recherches en marketing*.
 33. Fick, G. R., & Ritchie, J. R. B. (1991). Measuring service quality in the travel and tourism industry. *Journal of Travel Research*, 30, 2–9.
 34. Filser, M. (2002). Le marketing de la production de l'expérience : Statut théorique et implications

- managériales. *Décisions Marketing*, 28, 13–22.
35. Finn, A. (2005). Reassessing the foundations of customer delight. *Journal of Service Research*, 8(2), 103–116.
36. Firat, A. F., & Venkatesh, A. (1995). Liberatory postmodernism and the re-enchantment of consumption. *Journal of Consumer Research*, 22, 239–265.
37. Fornell, C. (1992). A national customer satisfaction barometer: The Swedish experience. *Journal of Marketing*, 56(1), 6–21.
38. Gao, M. (2025). Research on consumer brand loyalty from a happiness economics perspective: A review. *Advances in Economics, Management and Political Sciences*, 228, 115–122.
39. Gao, et al. (2022). How firms can create delightful customer experience? *Journal of Business Research*, 147, 477–490.
40. Giese, J. L., & Cote, J. A. (2000). Defining consumer satisfaction. *Academy of Marketing Science Review*, 1, 1–34.
41. Holbrook, M. B., & Hirschman, E. C. (1982). The experiential aspects of consumption: Consumer fantasies, feelings, and fun. *Journal of Consumer Research*, 9(2), 132–140.
42. Johnson, M., & Zinkhan, G. M. (1991). Emotional responses to a professional service encounter. *Journal of Services Marketing*, 5(2), 5–16.
43. Jones, T., & Taylor, S. F. (2007). The conceptual domain of service loyalty: How many dimensions? *Journal of Services Marketing*, 21(1), 36–51.
44. Kao, Y.-F., Huang, L.-S., & Wu, C.-H. (2008). Effects of theatrical elements on experiential quality and loyalty intentions for theme parks. *Asia Pacific Journal of Tourism Research*.
45. Klaus, P., & Maklan, S. (2013). Towards a better measure of customer experience. *International Journal of Market Research*, 55(2), 227–246.
46. Kim, P. B., et al. (2016). Different or similar choices: The effects of decision framing on variety seeking in travel bundle packages. *Journal of Travel Research*.
47. Kim, J., & Yum, K. (2024). The influence of perceived value, customer satisfaction, and trust on loyalty in entertainment platforms. *Applied Sciences*, 14(13).
48. Kim, et al. (2024). Efficacité du marketing d'influence : Une méta-analyse. *Journal de l'Académie des sciences du marketing*, 53(1).
49. Kumar, A., Olshavsky, R., & King, M. F. (2001). Exploring alternative antecedents of customer delight. *Journal of Consumer Satisfaction, Dissatisfaction and Complaining Behavior*, 14, 14–26.
50. Kumar, A., & Rajesh, I. (2001). Role of interpersonal factors in delighting customers. *Marketing Management Journal*, 11(1), 49–57.
51. Ladwein, R., & Ouvry, M. (2007). Entre recherche et production d'expérience dans les environnements commerçants : L'expérience vécue.
52. Ladwein, R. (2005). L'expérience de consommation et la mise en récit de soi et la construction identitaire : Le cas du trekking.
53. Lee, T. H., & Crompton, J. L. (1992). Measuring novelty seeking in tourism. *Journal of Travel Research*, 19, 732–751.
54. Lee, Y. K., Lee, C. K., Lee, S. K., & Babin, B. J. (2008). Festivalscapes and patrons' emotions, satisfaction, and loyalty. *Journal of Business Research*, 61(1), 56–64
55. Lemon, K. N., & Verhoef, P. C. (2016). Understanding customer experience throughout the customer journey. *Journal of Marketing*, 80(6), 69–96.
56. Loureiro, S. M. C., & Kastenholz, E. (2023). Customer experience, satisfaction and loyalty in tourism. *Tourism Management Perspectives*.
57. Lopes, L., Mangini, E., & Esteves, S. (2024). Value co-creation, delight, satisfaction and loyalty in tourism experiences. *European Journal of Tourism, Hospitality and Recreation*.
58. Mangini, E., Ahrholdt, D., & Gudergan, S. (2019). Enhancing loyalty: When improving consumer satisfaction and delight matters. *Journal of Business Research*.
59. Mano, H., & Oliver, R. L. (1993). Assessing the dimensionality and structure of the consumption experience: Evaluation, feeling, and satisfaction. *Journal of Consumer Research*, 20(3), 451–466.
60. Ma, J., Scott, N., & Ding, P. (2013). The antecedents of delight based on cognitive appraisal theory. *Annals of Tourism Research*, 42, 359–381.
61. McColl-Kennedy, J. R., et al. (2019). Customer experience journeys: Logic and practices. *Journal of*

- Business Research, 116, 237–248.
62. Mehrabian, A., & Russell, J. A. (1974). *An approach to environmental psychology*. MIT Press.
 63. Ngobo, P. V. (2000). Satisfaction des clients et part de marché de l'entreprise : Un réexamen au regard de récentes avancées théoriques. *Recherche et Applications en Marketing*, 15(2), 21–41.
 64. Oliver, R. L. (1980). A cognitive model of the antecedents and consequences of satisfaction decisions. *Journal of Marketing Research*, 17(4), 460–469.
 65. Oliver, R. L., Rust, R. T., & Varki, S. (1997). Customer delight: Foundations, findings and managerial insight. *Journal of Retailing*, 73(3), 311–336.
 66. Oliver, R. L. (1999). Whence consumer loyalty? *Journal of Marketing*, 63, 33–44.
 67. Otto, J. E., & Ritchie, J. R. B. (1996). The service experience in tourism. *Tourism Management*.
 68. Otto, J. E. (1997). The role of the affective experience in the service experience chain (Doctoral dissertation, University of Calgary).
 69. Parasuraman, A., Zeithaml, V. A., & Berry, L. L. (1988). SERVQUAL: A multiple-item scale for measuring consumer perceptions of service quality. *Journal of Retailing*, 64(1), 14–40.
 70. Park, C. (2004). Efficient or enjoyable? Consumer values of eating-out and fast food restaurant consumption in Korea. *International Journal of Hospitality Management*, 23, 87–94.
 71. Pine, B. J., & Gilmore, J. H. (1998). Welcome to the experience economy. *Harvard Business Review*, 76(4), 97–105.
 72. Pine, B. J., & Gilmore, J. H. (1999). *The experience economy*. Harvard Business School Press.
 73. Price, L. L., Arnould, E. J., & Tierney, P. (1995). Going to extremes: Managing service encounters and assessing provider performance. *Journal of Marketing*, 59(2), 83–97.
 74. Rather, R. A. (2021). Customer experience and loyalty: Mediating role of satisfaction. *Journal of Retailing and Consumer Services*.
 75. Rita, P., et al. (2023). Une analyse des sentiments exprimés dans les restaurants étoilés Michelin. *Revue européenne de gestion et d'économie d'entreprises*, 32(2–3).
 76. Roussel, P., Durrieu, F., Campoy, É., & El Akremi, A. (2002). Méthodes d'équations structurelles: Recherche et applications en gestion. *Économica*.
 77. Rust, R. T., & Oliver, R. L. (2000). Should we delight the customer? *Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science*, 28(1), 86–94.
 78. Schneider, B., & Bowen, D. E. (1999). Understanding customer delight and outrage. *Sloan Management Review*, 41(1), 35–46.
 79. Souca, M. L. (2014). Customer dissatisfaction and delight: Completely different concepts, or part of a satisfaction continuum? *Management & Marketing*, 9(1), 79–90.
 80. Schmitt, B. H. (2019). The concept of experiential marketing: Foundations, developments, and future research. *Journal of Interactive Marketing*, 45, 1–13.
 81. Steenkamp, J. E. M., & Baumgartner, H. (1992). The role of optimum stimulation level in exploratory consumer behavior. *Journal of Consumer Research*, 19, 434–448.
 82. Torres, E. N., & Kline, S. F. (2006). From customer satisfaction to delight: A model for the hotel industry. *International Journal of Contemporary Hospitality Management*, 18(4), 290–301.
 83. Valette-Florence, P. (2001). Aspects conceptuels et opérationnels de la fidélité à la marque : Une enquête empirique. *Journal de Recherche Commerciale*, 53(2), 75–84.
 84. Vanhamme, J. (2001). L'influence de la surprise sur la satisfaction des consommateurs : Étude exploratoire par journal de bord. *Recherche et Applications en Marketing*, 1–31.
 85. Vanhamme, J., & Snelders, D. (2003). What if you surprise your customers... Will they be more satisfied? Findings from a pilot experiment. *Advances in Consumer Research*, 30, 48–55.
 86. Vanhamme, J. (2003). La relation surprise-ravissement revisitée à l'aune du marketing expérientiel. *Recherche et Applications en Marketing*.
 87. Wakefield, K. L., & Blodgett, J. G. (1994). The importance of servicescapes in leisure service settings. *Journal of Services Marketing*, 8(3), 66–76.
 88. Watson, D., & Clark, L. A. (1988). Development and validation of brief measures of positive and negative affect. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 54(6), 1063–1070.
 89. Westbrook, R. A., & Oliver, R. L. (1991). The dimensionality of consumption emotion patterns and consumer satisfaction. *Journal of Consumer Research*, 18(1), 84–91.
 90. Li, X., & Petrick, J. F. (2008). Tourism marketing in an era of paradigm shift. *Journal of Travel Research*,

46, 235.

91. Yoon, Y., & Uysal, M. (2005). An examination of the effects of motivation and satisfaction on destination loyalty: A structural model. *Tourism Management*, 26, 45–56.
92. Yi, Y., & La, S. (2004). What influences the relationship between customer satisfaction and repurchase intention? Investigating the effects of adjusted expectations and customer loyalty. *Psychology & Marketing*, 21(5), 351–373.
93. Yu, T., & Dean, A. (2001). The contribution of emotional satisfaction to consumer loyalty. *International Journal of Service Industry Management*, 12(3), 234–250.
94. Zajonc, R. B. (1984). On the primacy of affect. *American Psychologist*, 39(2), 117–123.
95. Lu, Q., Liu, Y., Lai, I. K. W., & Yang, X. (2017). Awe: An important emotional experience in sustainable tourism.
96. Mondes & Voyages. (2020). L'expérience touristique mémorable: Une approche par le produit alimentaire emblématique d'une région, (116).