

## Perception

Perception is a dynamic search for the best interpretation of the available evidence and knowledge. The problem of perception, according to Carterette and Friedman (1974, p. xiii), 'is one of understanding the way in which the organism transforms, organizes, and structures information arising from the world in sense data or memory'. Indeed, as mentioned by these authors, perception is a rich, diverse and difficult field. It involves going beyond the immediate evidence provided by the senses. For that reason, it is important to distinguish between sensation and perception (Goldstein and Brokemole, 2017). Sensation is often described as an elementary process that occurs right at the beginning of our sensory system; perception is a much more complex process, involving high-order mechanisms such as interpretation and memory. In fact, 'everything that involves understanding how we experience the world through our senses comes under the heading of perception' (ibid., p. 6). Interestingly, perception is understood as a broad construct through a psychology lens, and simultaneously perception is a very individual and personal construct as it depends on how each of us understand the reality based on our experience. It is based on this latter perspective that Hentschel, Smith and Draguns (1986) conceive perception as (1) an event over time rather than as an instantaneous reaction to outside stimulation; and (2) an event whose roots are to be found beyond the restricted confines of awareness, often closely intertwined with the observer's private world of memories and emotional experiences. In fact, perception might be understood as a complex, relativistic, multiple and dynamic construct.

Thus, perception has been at the centre of tourism research for decades, particularly related to the consumer behaviour field, intertwined with behavioural concepts such as destination image or motivation, among others. Therefore, based on Hirsch and Levin's work (1999; cited in Rodrigues, Correia and Kozak, 2012), it is advocated that the construct of perception might be considered as an 'umbrella construct' (UC) used to encompass and account for a diverse set of phenomena. It is a catch-all concept that arises most frequently in academic fields lacking theoretical

consensus that will inevitably have their validity seriously challenged (Rodrigues et al., 2012). Perception is a construct based on a combination of elements that organize a large body of knowledge that is totally theory dependent. That is, nothing exists without a sensemaking activity embodied in a frame of reference (for more information on the UC, see Rodrigues et al., 2012). The table highlights the main characteristics of UCs, with perception as an example. The meaning of perception can be recognized as a UC, based on a combination of elements that contribute to organizing a large body of knowledge. Perception as a meaning, within tourism studies, is not a solid block of thinking; it is present in various important concepts within consumer behaviour theory applied to tourism, as will be further discussed. These other concepts are 'seen' as 'theoretical extensions' underpinned by perception as the main construct.

### *Main characteristics of umbrella constructs (UCs), such as perception*

Definition	Characteristics
Hirsch and Levin's (1999) broad concept or idea used loosely to encompass and account for a set of diverse phenomena	<p>The dynamic of UC takes place between two forces: <i>umbrella advocates</i> (theory) and <i>validity police</i> (measurement)</p> <p>The field needs the two types of forces to remain both relevant and scientific</p> <p>The construct progress is based on dialectic between relevance and rigour, openness and discipline, conceptualization and operationalization</p> <p>Consensus on how to operationalize the construct is rarely achieved</p> <p>Based on a combination of elements to organize a large body of knowledge.</p> <p>Unifier among researchers in order to organize an academic field</p> <p>Necessary for establishing intellectual linkages among otherwise isolated researchers</p>

*Source:* Rodrigues et al. (2012, p. 134, adapted from Hirsch and Levin, 1999).

It is grounded on the assumption that perception is a UC with which several other concepts

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interact; they reinforce one another through 'perception' as the theoretical umbrella. It is in this line of thought that perception is intertwined with various other behavioural concepts within tourism consumer behaviour theory. In fact, external vagueness denotes the difficulty of drawing a dividing line between perception and other close mental concepts. For now, it can be viewed with motivation and destination image as two examples, among others.

Regarding the construct of motivations, Correia, Oom do Valle and Moço's (2007) study offers an integrated approach to understanding tourism motivations in terms of the causal relationships among the push and pull motives and the way these constructs contribute to the overall perception of tourist destination, based on Crompton's (1979) model (cited in Correia et al., 2007). According to Correia et al. (2007, p. 77), 'the conclusion that perceptions are determined by personal and interpersonal motives (push motives), and also by the way tourists perceive destination attributes (pull motives) can be drawn'. Other authors are in line with this assumption; in fact, it is based on intrinsic and extrinsic motivations that tourists build their perceptions. Seemingly, regarding the concept of destination image, perceptions lie at its heart. For instance, the first definitions stated that through travellers' perceptions we can learn more about how land qualities become tourism resources, meaning that tourists' perceptions allow us to become connected to a destination (for more information about destination image definitions, see Rodrigues et al., 2012). Years later, destination image was defined as perceptions of individual destination attributes and the holistic impression made by the destination. These are examples to further understand how perception is entangled with the concept of destination image.

It is important to fully understand that tourist perception is a central concept for understanding tourism product awareness based on experiences. As is well known, tourism products are a composite of tangible and intangible elements based on an activity at a destination. Tourism products are genuinely based on tourism experiences. Intangibility, heterogeneity and inseparability are the main characteristics of service products. In fact, tourism product is underpinned by impressions, interpretations, perceptions, sensations and meanings. More simply put, the tourism product is grounded on

perceptions rooted in experiences within this 'industry of dreams' framed by the experiential age. Because of this, measuring tourist perceptions is of utmost importance and has become part of tourism consumer behaviour research.

Regarding measuring tourist perceptions, semiotics offers the best framework. One of the first semiotic models proposed was that of Peirce (1931). Peirce propose a triad of relations to understand perceptions: the representamen (representation or sign), the object and the interpretant. The representamen refers to the perceptions that someone is able to attribute to a sign. The object or referent is the thing the sign stands for. The interpretant (meaning) is the sign created in the mind of the perceiver or the reaction caused by the object in the perceiver (Andersen, 1992). For these, a sign requires the concurrent presence of these three constituents. Overall, semiotics is the study of signs, signification and signifying systems. Eco (1976) defined semiotics as everything that could be taken as a sign. Furthermore Eco (1976) argues that semiotic theory provides a method to investigate how sounds, gestures or objects may function as signs, as well as how a sign may be produced and interpreted, with this interpretation being the resulting perception. This perception could be derived and moderated by culture; therefore, signs have different meanings within different socio-cultural contexts (ibid.).

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