# Visitors' Perception of Tourist Attractions in a Green Protected Area: The Case Study of the Peneda-Gerês National Park

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## Abstract

Experiences can be subjective and internal responses, characterized by sensations, feelings and cognitions, but also behavioral responses evoked by stimuli. In the tourism context, the destinations promoters aim that visitors enjoy experiences considered pleasant and, ideally, memorable, because, in this way, increase the probability of revisit and recommendation. The protected green areas have gained a greater projection mainly from the beginning of the twentieth century. They are privileged places both in terms of tourist enjoyment and the attention of academic research. This interest is considerably increased taking into account the global health situation that makes this type of areas as more recommendable for tourist practices. The territory chosen in this case study is Peneda-Gerês, the only national park in Portugal that enjoys a certain international reputation. It is the only park in the Iberian Peninsula that integrates the Pan-Parks network, a network of excellence where only the best parks in Europe are included. The research objective was to analyze the experience and perceptions in terms of satisfaction, recommendation and revisit. In methodological terms, a netnographic research was decided considering the comments and evaluations made by visitors of this green area in TripAdvisor, a famous social platform for travelers. Twenty-two tourist attractions were identified, and all their comments were considered ($n = 834$) in a 3-year period. Firstly, it was possible to draw a basic profile of the visitor and to conclude by their high satisfaction resulting from the transmitted evaluations. A content analysis was also performed to categorize visitor perceptions into four major categories: sensory, emotional, behavioral and intellectual, which were further subdivided according to the types of references extracted from the visitors' comments. Satisfaction and recommendation were other perceptions that could be found in the comments. Through the results, it was possible to observe that the visitors' perception focuses mainly on a more sensory and affective component.

## 1 Introduction

Any visitor wishing to visit a tourist destination in general or a tourist attraction in particular is faced with the dilemma of only being able to assess the quality of the experience after visited or experienced it at least once. Before Web 2.0, this situation was minimized by the opinion of family or friends, through "word of mouth". As a result of the evolution of the Web, with the search and sharing of information, tourism experiences were being shaped to new realities (Park & Nicolau, 2015). Web 2.0 and its applications have brought a greater interaction among internet users, enabling the dissemination of information quickly, at the distance of a click. The possibility of visitors able to freely comment on their consumer experiences (with those comments being instantly available) was one of the effects of globalization. Some platforms such as Booking, Expedia, Airbnb or even social networks allow people to evaluate through a scoring system, as well as give written feedback about that experience. This is one of the reasons why these sites have become very popular (Filieri, 2015).

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With the use of the internet, platforms such as TripAdvisor have emerged, giving focus to tourist destinations and their attractions. TripAdvisor allows, for example, visitors to post comments and make assessments about the experiences they had in the tourist attractions of a tourist destination. This phenomenon allows internet users to have access to such information, which may become a determining factor in the process of revisiting and recommending to family, friends and others, in general.

Online comments have become very important, from the point of view of service providing companies as well as for customers, they are considered "the best and most reliable sources of information, influencing in a determinant way the consumers' purchase process" (Amaral et al., 2015, p. 48). Currently, companies, whether in the tourism industry or not, also give importance to these ratings and comments, encouraging their customers to make them, because it is a way to monitor the quality of services to improve and build even more customer loyalty.

In terms of literature, there is already some research (Amaral et al., 2015; Arruda et al., 2020; Filieri, 2015; Hu & Chen, 2016; Ye et al., 2009) that tries to understand and study these comments and ratings, focusing on the determinants and motivations of the evaluations made by tourists and how they can be useful to others. However, these studies have been substantially based on quantitative information, such as rankings and number of comments on user-originated content management websites. However, tourists' evaluations go beyond the assignment of a ranking, as they have unstructured comments, whose contents have not been the object of analysis. This work aims to make a more holistic approach, analyzing the comments, understanding the quantitative part, but mainly the aspect of the unstructured content. This work aims to make a more holistic approach, analyzing the comments, understanding the quantitative part, but especially the unstructured content aspect.

Nature-based tourism is a niche with growing popularity in tourism markets (Holden, 2016), which corresponds to an increased research interest (Vespestad & Lindberg, 2011). The experience in nature by tourists is mainly based on the esthetic qualities of the landscape and the wild environment, i.e., places with few human intervention (Holden, 2016), which are very stimulating aspects for the senses. As such, they have a high impact on the emotions felt by tourists and whose perception should be analyzed for a better understanding of the experience in natural areas.

Therefore, we chose to analyze the perceptions that tourists had on the tourist attractions of the Peneda-Gerês National Park (PGNP), present in the TripAdvisor platform. PGNP was chosen for being the only national park in Portugal. Natural areas with protection status are more attractive, with the name "national park" having the greatest effect on attracting tourists (Reinius & Fredman, 2007). On TripAdvisor platform, 22 tourist attractions were identified, 13 of which have a more cultural aspect and 9 a more natural one. We analyzed all the comments of the attractions of the PGNP in the last 3 years, from July 2018 to June 2021. The PGNP, the only national park in Portugal, is a reference associated with nature tourism. It has a vast and rich heritage, not only biotic natural heritage, but also historical, cultural and religious heritage, with the Gerês brand having its own identity that has been acquired over the last decades (Martins, 2020; Martins et al., 2021).

Thus, it was sought to characterize the experiences that tourists had in these tourist attractions. In addition, we sought to analyze in these comments the perceptions in terms of satisfaction, recommendation and revisit. Therefore, our study had as main constructs the experience (comprising 4 dimensions according to some studies), the satisfaction, the recommendation and the revisit. We tried to find these perceptions in the comments that the PGNP visitors left in their TripAdvisor comments.

## 2  Theoretical Framework

Web 2.0 has led to greater interaction between users and a greater sharing of information and ideas. Additionally, the word-of-mouth has evolved: It has become electronic and is called electronic-word-of-mouth (e-WOMS). The digital word-of-mouth has become so popular that it has become an important factor in the sale of products and services (You & Sikora, 2014), fact by which companies give extreme importance to content in digital format, promoting their products with influencers. Therefore, e-WOM is the new way to influence behavioral intentions. With digital came the possibility of creating communities and groups of belonging on certain tastes or profiles on a global scale (Litvin et al., 2008).

In the business sector, this sharing of information and evaluation makes it possible to raise awareness of the products and services provided by companies, as well as to influence potential customers to purchase these products and services. In this sharing of information published on digital platforms, the comments made through user-generated content (UGC) are in a format of short free texts, where there is the possibility of assigning a rating on a pre-defined scale and sometimes the possibility of sharing photographs and/or videos as a way to validate these comments.

According to the literature, the quality of the information appears as a predictor of purchase intentions (Filieri, 2015; Lee et al., 2008; Park et al., 2007). There is a set of factors that internet users pay attention when read comments to make a decision, namely: (a) updated information (usually the most recent evaluations are the ones that appear first),

(b) understandable information, (c) relevant information, (d) accurate information and (e) valuable information (beneficial for the reader, providing indications on the choice of the product, both positive and negative). In short, the information should be as complete as possible (Cheung et al., 2009; Filieri & McLeay, 2014; Park et al., 2007). As a rule, there are two main ways of analyzing comments: (1) based on the analysis of the ranking seen in the scaled evaluation carried out by internet users (this can be broken down into three types: negative, neutral or positive, the latter being the easiest to analyze and process) (Sayfuddin & Chen, 2021); (2) understand the written part of the commentary which can be analyzed according to relevance, value of information, accuracy of information and its update/the level of trust the information offers (Taecharungroj, 2022). This second way form is much more difficult to analyze suggesting an interpretation of the comments and the assessment of their quality.

The content platforms emerged in the tourism sector. Visitors can share information about a product, service or tourist experience, assigning a quantitative assessment, giving written feedbacks that can be positive, negative or even neutral. On these platforms, the traveler "evaluates, creates and shares content related to various aspects of their vacation, mainly accommodation, restaurants, entertainment, products and tour operators" (Amaral et al., 2015, p. 50). The entities that manage these tourism resources have an updated feedback about the viability of the service and the need to change any shortcomings during the provision of services (Litvin et al., 2008). Usually, the users who make the comments refer the type of experience, allowing those who read them to perceive an image about that tourism offer. This sharing of information "gives potential customers access to updated information about the tourism offer, but also information about the experience, creating a base of initial expectations and consequently allowing them to make a more informed decision" (Amaral et al., 2015, p. 49). These digital platforms have gained a tremendous positive reputation so that the management entities linked to tourism stimulates the creation of comments about the products as also use the same comments in order to promote the products. According to the literature, the comments left by visitors are a way to influence the decision-making process of all stages of planning to a tourist destination, encompassing the before, during and after the visit (Park & Nicolau, 2015).

Some examples of such internet-generated content management platforms in the tourism sector are Airbnb, Booking and TripAdvisor, which have achieved worldwide projection, with a large number of followers and participants who actively contribute. Many potential visitors consult the comments and the votes/valuations of a given tourist destination before making the final decision and preparing the trip. In the specific case of TripAdvisor, the platform allows internet users to make comments and evaluations on various aspects of the tourism offer, including flights, restaurants and attractions of tourist destinations.

There are several studies that investigate TripAdvisor comments, especially in the restaurant/gastronomy field. The potential visitors/customers seek information about the taste of the food and the type of service provided. In the restaurant field, the literature points out that a satisfied customer produces a positive comment to five friends or family members. However, if the customer is dissatisfied by posting a negative comment, it spreads very quickly and can become viral if digital media is used (Gopaul, 2014). Positive comments are considered a predictor of customer loyalty as well as recommendation of restaurants to others. This perception is generated in comparison with the image that the customer had initially projected, according to their expectations. If the performance found in the service and the quality of the food meets expectations, then the customer will project in the comment a neutral evaluation. If it exceeds the expectations, the evaluation will be positive and there will be the propensity to return and to recommend, otherwise, if it frustrates the customer expectations, the comment will have an evaluation in that sense (Chemuturi, 2007) and consequently the reputation of the restaurant will be in question. The same happens in the context of tourist destinations in general and their attractions in specific (Ali et al., 2021).

## 2.1 The Experience in Tourism

The term experience can have several meanings (Martins, 2018). The most usual definition corresponds to the act or effect of experiencing, being a knowledge acquired by practice, through the sensations of the senses. According to Schmitt (2011), the various definitions can be grouped into two categories: (a) definitions that refer to experience as knowledge accumulated over time; and (b) definitions that consider experience as ongoing perceptions and feelings and direct observation.

The concept of experience can acquire quite different characteristics according to each science, depending on the object of study and the context, as is the case of marketing and tourism: the client experience (Gentile et al., 2007), the consumer experience (Tsai, 2012), the service experience (Hui & Bateson, 1991), the product experience (Hoch, 2002), the consumption experience (Chaney et al., 2018), the purchase experience (Kerin et al., 1992) and the brand experience (Brakus et al., 2009; Zarantonello & Schmitt, 2010). Experiences are not mere evaluative judgments about the product or brand (e.g., "I like this product" and "I like this brand"); experiences include specific sensations, feelings, cognitions and behavioral responses triggered by specific stimuli in the consumer (Schmitt, 2011).

The concept of experience also differs from motivational and affective concepts, such as involvement, brand attachment or customer satisfaction. Involvement is based on the needs, values and interests that motivate a consumer toward an object, e.g., a brand (Jeon & Yoo, 2021; Schmitt, 1999). In the case of experience, it does not presuppose a motivational state. The experience can happen when consumers show no interest, or even if it has a personal connection with the brand (Barnes et al., 2014). Moreover, brands, with which consumers are highly involved, may not necessarily be brands that evoke more intense and memorable experiences (Şahin et al., 2011).

Brakus et al. (2009), within the scope of the study of consumer experiences, after extensive analysis of the scientific literature from various areas, identify the dimensions of the experience associated with the brand. They created a scale whose objective would be to measure in a more holistic way and to what extent a consumer has a sensory, affective, behavioral and intellectual experience. The authors conducted several exploratory qualitative studies to determine whether the conceptualization of brand experience would be in line with the representations of consumers who experienced the product and/or service. The authors created a scale to measure the experience associated with the brand, based on a set of four dimensions of experience: (a) sensory dimension that refers to the way of appealing to the five human senses, through sight, touch, sound, taste and smell; (b) affective dimension that manifests itself through the feelings and/or thoughts of consumers, with the aim of creating affective experiences that vary their intensity; (c) behavioral dimension that seeks, through body experiences, lifestyles and interactions, to enrich the consumers' lives, showing the consumer other ways of getting alternative lifestyles and different interactions; (d) intellectual dimension that appeals to the creativity and innovation of the consumer, possessing the ability to create cognitive experiences. These dimensions can be evoked nominally or in group. In this sense, a company that wants to provide a good experience to its consumers must first formulate a mental module concerning the areas that can affect the consumer's senses. In fact, there are companies whose primary objective is to provide experiences, for example, Odisseias and Cool Gift, currently the two main brands in the market of experiences in voucher form. Another example of companies that sell experiences is Starbucks, which sells not only coffee, but an experience around the consumption of the coffee itself (Marques, 2012). This scale has been tested in tourism by Barnes et al. (2014) and Martins (2018).

Over time, the lasting experiences, stored in the consumer's memory, may affect consumer satisfaction as well as their loyalty (Morais et al., 2004). According to Brakus et al. (2009), the experiences can also occur indirectly, for example, through advertising, marketing communications or websites; they can also occur in an unexpected way, not assuming that there is a motivational state, because it can happen when consumers show no interest.

Within tourism, one of the important studies done on experience was that of Barnes et al. (2014). The authors (2014) sought to determine which dimensions of the experience had the greatest impact on the visitor, using an experience model and a variety of destinations. They conclude that visitors are primarily driven by sensory experiences, which suggest an underlying desire to satisfy hedonic needs. However, despite the prominence of sensory experiences, the study reveals that affective experiences are very important in certain circumstances, and "travel agents and tourism providers should focus more on sensory aspects of visits and to design tourism experiences from a sensory and affective perspective" (Barnes et al., 2014, p. 137). They also considered that behavioral and intellectual experiences seem to be more difficult to achieve in tourism.

The conclusion that the authors draw from this information, like Arnould and Price (1993), is that the entities involved in the tourism sector should give special focus on sensory experiences highlighting the touch, images, sounds, tastes and smells, and entities related to tourism should seek mechanisms that provide hedonistic tourist experiences. This implies that "the design of tourist experiences should provide scope for individuals to learn and to be challenged, and to develop new, social perspectives on life" (Barnes et al., 2014, p. 137). The authors suggest that the profile of the destination experience (brand) is likely to vary according to the specific destination, and the specific experiences that characterize a destination's tourism offer should be carefully selected. In conclusion, they considered that experience is a significant determinant of attracting tourists to that destination and that satisfaction plays a key role in the further processing of tourist experiences.

## 2.2 Nature-Based Tourism Experiences

Natural areas, with or without protection status, are territories of important and growing tourist demand. The users and the activities in these places are varied and depend both on aspects intrinsic to the visitors and on the biological, morphological, landscape and functional aspects of the natural areas. As a starting point, it can be established that nature-based tourism encompasses human activities carried out within the scope of a visit to a natural area outside the person's ordinary neighborhood (Fredman et al., 2012). Although the definition of nature-based tourism is broad, it is possible to find some consensus around certain constituent elements, such as learning, leisure and adventure in natural settings (Tangeland & Aas, 2011). In operational terms, leisure activities in protected areas can be enjoyed free of

charge or as products promoted by operators and entertainment companies (Tangeland & Aas, 2011; Vespestad & Lindberg, 2011).

Generally, it is considered that visitors to natural areas look for special places, with esthetic beauty and possessing characteristics and qualities that are opposite to urban territories, where many tourists come from (Holden, 2016). Indeed, natural areas provide experiences of beauty and serenity, as opposed to an increasingly urban and commercial world (Schroeder, 2002). From a leisure perspective, activities in nature are characterized by considering the natural world as an object and subject of experience (Ried Luci et al., 2018). Vespestad and Lindberg (2011) consider that experiences in nature can be observed from four perspectives: (i) search for authenticity or the "return to nature", (ii) search for fun, (iii) search for sensations to achieve psychological or physical goals and (iv) enjoyment of nature as symbolic meaning of culture.

In a parallel approach, Schroeder (1996) in a reflection on the ways in which people experience natural spaces states that they can be emotional, imaginative and inspirational experiences. This author emphasizes that an experience has the capacity to arouse emotions and motivate actions. In this way, he considers that the value that the tourist attributes to the experience and the emotion is inseparable concepts. Therefore, the stronger the emotions, the greater the value of the experience for the tourist.

Knowing that the esthetic aspects and the authentically natural or little humanized character of the landscapes are crucial for nature-based tourism (Holden, 2016), sustainable management of this type of territories is particularly sensitive. In fact, the tourist use of natural areas occurs in a relationship of forces that can be contrary. If, on the one hand, visitors value a reduced human intervention, the excess of tourist attraction undermines this value requirement. Therefore, it is extremely challenging for managers of natural areas to encourage the appreciation and learning of natural and cultural heritage while seeking to manage and safeguard these resources in the long term, minimizing negative impacts and optimizing positive impacts in social, cultural, ecological and economical levels (Eagles et al., 2001). Understanding the experience gained by visitors will be essential to obtain the best knowledge that supports decision-making in sustainable management of natural areas.

Some studies on the experience and expression of perceptions by visitors of protected areas can be found in the last 25 years. Schroeder (1996) sought to identify the main attributes recognized by visitors in natural areas, having fundamentally detected positive feelings, with beauty being the most mentioned attribute, along with feelings of serenity and peace and the characteristics that nature allow in terms of isolation sensation and contact with wilderness. Air quality, water purity and the local population are also recognized as positive attributes. In another study, Schroeder (2002) compiled the results of 6 surveys based on open-ended surveys on the perception of natural areas, in a time frame of about 15 years. The most valued environmental characteristics were identified, with emphasis on aquatic elements, geological phenomena, viewpoints to the landscape and atmospheric aspects such as light and temperature. Vegetation and aspects of human intervention and occupation are also detected, for example, paths, roads or recreational spaces. Several meanings, values and experiences were also found, the main ones being: the natural character (little or no human intervention), beauty, amazement, serenity, excitement and a sense of refuge and isolation. Conti and Lexhagen (2020), in the analysis of the experience, through publications on the social network Instagram, detected that the appreciation of the experience in natural areas, by the visitors, and mainly based on esthetic aspects coexisting with other values: hedonic (multisensory involvement and fun), relational (experience sharing), emotional and knowledge. A similar study in terms of purposes and methodology is that of Abrahams et al. (2022), considering glaciers and using the analysis of user-generated content on TripAdvisor. Most of the perceptions collected referred to aspects such as satisfaction with the visit, accessibility and weather conditions, concluding that most tourists consider more superficial issues of tourist appeal and leisure rather than environmental and climate concerns. The appreciation of the esthetic component of landscapes is also identified in the study by Zhang and Xu (2020) who found that this element is essential to create the desire to revisit. Loyalty to a natural area is also assessed through a sentiment analysis using TripAdvisor reviews for a park in Canada, in order to understand experiences at various park locations and the effects on revisiting the park (Mirzaalian & Halpenny, 2021).

## 2.3 PGNP as a Tourist Destination

As a tourist destination, protected areas seek to convey rewarding experiences to visitors. These experiences and impacts also affect local communities at many levels (economic, social and cultural) as well as environmental risks (Martins, 2020). In Portugal, tourism in protected areas has become a national focus, especially since the twenty-first century: first with the National Strategic Tourism Plan (PENT) and currently with the Tourism Strategy 2027. Within the axis valuing the territory of the Strategy 2027, the aim is to economically enhance the natural and rural heritage and ensure its conservation, having as priority projects the "development of nature tourism and rural areas through projects of economic enhancement and active management of natural and rural heritage, which includes the national

network of protected areas, biosphere reserves and Geoparks recognized by UNESCO, particularly in the context of promoting the brand Natural.PT" (Turismo de Portugal, 2017, p. 55).

Within the protected areas, the PGNP stands out, both in terms of supply and demand, as a benchmark for nature tourism. By association with an enormous botanical diversity, in PGNP, there are a set of natural habitats that support a rich and varied faunal community, with several endemic species, rare or of limited distribution in Portugal, deserving of highlight at national and international level. Likewise, it has a vast heritage of historical and cultural nature, enhancer of attraction and development of tourism activity (ethnography, gastronomy, historic villages, megalithic, medieval castles and pillories, "Espigueiros" of Soajo and Lindoso, among others).

Currently, the PGNP, compared to other protected areas at the international level, possesses a set of factors that enhance this region as a tourist destination of excellence. In fact, it has a permanent technical staff, a management plan in place, good access conditions (e.g., roads and signposting) and accommodation for tourists, among others (Martins, 2020). In fact, in most developing countries, national parks lack the infrastructures that the PGNP already has (Martins, 2018). In this aspect, it was sought from early on, especially from the 1980s, to know, study and classify the PGNP's heritage, material and immaterial, through the inventorying of the archaeological, architectural and ethnographic heritage of the territory, in addition to the natural heritage, considered tourist attractions.

With regard to tourism demand, this territory, in recent years, has recorded a high growth, as a result of the projection and its identity in national and international terms. In addition to its tourist attractions, over the years, the PGNP has obtained some conservation statuses both nationally and internationally, which gives it greater visibility and projection. This protected area forms a group with the Spanish Baja Limia—Serra do Xurés Natural Park, constituting, since 1997, the Gerês-Xurés Transfrontier Park. In 2009, the cross-border park was considered by UNESCO as a World Biosphere Reserve (Transfrontier Biosphere Reserve "Gerês-Xurés"). At national level, regarding the PGNP, it also has the status of Site of Community Importance (Council of Ministers Resolution No. 142/97 of 28 August). Also at national level, the PGNP, in 2010, the International Year of Biodiversity, was considered one of the 7 Natural Wonders of Portugal, in the category of Protected Areas (Martins et al., 2021).

Therefore, we aimed to analyze visitors' perceptions regarding the tourist attractions of the PGNP that were included in the TripAdvisor platform, namely regarding experience, satisfaction, recommendation and revisit.

## 3 Methodology

The study of the perceptions and the experiences expressed by visitors to the PGNP was carried out using a qualitative approach. The concrete method used fits into the concept of netnography established by Kozinets (1998) as a qualitative method developed to investigate consumer behavior using the internet. Netnography is being consolidated with regard to tourism research (Tavakoli & Wijesinghe, 2019). For this, we used the comments written by visitors on the TripAdvisor social network. This is a highly reputable platform, with two decades of existence, with ratings and comments on tourist attractions and infrastructures, being the largest online community of travelers (Valdivia et al., 2019). The use of user-generated content as a source of information about the perceptions of visitors and users of tourism services has been gaining expression, as evidenced by the analysis conducted by Prayag et al. (2018). This is a methodological option perfectly justified and used since the beginning of this century (Hall & Valentin, 2005), especially in exploratory studies and case studies. The qualitative approach to collect and analyze visitors' perceptions finds validation in authors such as Schroeder (2002) who considers that the study of the value of experiences lacks qualitative methods, as these allow a better understanding of emotions and feelings than the use of closed questions or mere quantification of cases. The tourist experience in natural areas accentuates the richness of meanings and senses, being fundamentally subjective and hence the qualitative option (Ried Luci et al., 2018).

Having the PGNP territory as background, we identified all tourist attractions of the region that were on the TripAdvisor platform. We recognized, within the territory, 22 attractions: 13 of which are cultural attraction and the remaining 9 are natural attractions. In order to obtain a representative sample of visitors, a 3-year period was established for data collection, to obtain (all comments made from 01-07-2018 till 30-06-2021), at the same time, data on experiences before and during the pandemic of COVID-19. A total of 834 comments was collected. Although fewer natural attractions were identified, it is possible to verify (Table 1) that the number of comments is much higher than the cultural attractions. While the natural attractions are the waterfalls (Tahiti with 112 and Arado with 102) and the Pedra Bela Belvedere with 166, the cultural attractions are the Soajo's "Espigueiros" with 72 comments and the Sanctuary of Nossa Senhora da Peneda with 66 comments.

The reading and extraction of information from the comments were performed using the content analysis technique and the codification technique. It followed the concept and method presented by Corbin and Strauss (1990) called open source. With the reading of the comments, differences

**Table 1** Tourist attractions identified in TripAdvisor inside the Peneda-Gerês National Park

| Tourist attraction name | Attraction type | f | % |
|---|---|---|---|
| Pedra Bela Belvedere | Nature | 166 | 19.9 |
| Tahiti Waterfall | Nature | 112 | 13.4 |
| Waterfall Plow | Nature | 102 | 12.2 |
| Portela do Homem Waterfall | Nature | 89 | 10.7 |
| Soajo "Espigueiros" | Culture | 72 | 8.6 |
| Nossa Senhora da Peneda Sanctuary | Culture | 66 | 7.9 |
| Lindoso "Espigueiros" | Culture | 58 | 7.0 |
| Castro Laboreiro Castle | Culture | 50 | 6.0 |
| Soajo "Espigueiros" | Nature | 27 | 3.2 |
| Pitões das Júnias Waterfall | Nature | 19 | 2.3 |
| Pincães Waterfall | Nature | 18 | 2.2 |
| Fafião Natural Lagoons | Nature | 16 | 1.9 |
| Santa Maria das Júnias Monastery | Culture | 11 | 1.3 |
| Thermal Park | Culture | 7 | 0.8 |
| Cava da Velha Bridge | Culture | 6 | 0.7 |
| Lindoso Castle | Culture | 5 | 0.6 |
| Ermelo Monastery | Culture | 3 | 0.4 |
| Castro Laboreiro Church | Culture | 2 | 0.2 |
| Vilarinho das Furnas Museum | Culture | 2 | 0.2 |
| Soajo Pillory | Culture | 1 | 0.1 |
| Assureira Bridge and Mill | Culture | 1 | 0.1 |
| Cabril Eco Rural | Nature | 1 | 0.1 |
| Total | | 834 | 100.0 |

*Source* Self elaboration based on TripAdvisor reviews (TripAdvisor, 2021)

and similarities were found, assigning conceptual labels to the various excerpts. The various similar expressions were grouped forming categories and subcategories. The procedures consisted of three major phases, according to the organization established by Bardin (2016). First, a pre-analysis of all comments was performed to select those that presented written comment component and exclude those that by some lapse did not refer to attractions located in the geographic area of study. In a second phase, the data were coded and aggregated in a scheme of categories and subcategories that were being created as the texts under analysis provided information. This coding had as framework constructs the Experience, Recommendation, Satisfaction and Revisit. In the last phase, data processing was carried out using a specialized content analysis software, namely the Dedoose program version 8.3.35 (SocioCultural Research Consultants, 2015).

When analyzing the visitors' comments, we sought to identify records regarding the experience construct, in the 4 dimensions according to Brakus et al. (2009) and Barnes et al. (2014): behavioral, intellectual, affective and sensory. Therefore, by reading the 834 comments, a set of attributes that were associated with these dimensions was identified.

## 4   Findings

The sample of visitors of the PGNP ($n = 834$) collected over 3 years can be characterized in general terms (Table 2). The overwhelming majority are visitors of relative proximity with 72.1% coming from Portugal and 18.9% from the European continent, of which 25.9% are from Spain, which borders the Park. From the total number of national visitors, it can also be seen that 44.6% are from the two metropolitan areas of the country (Lisbon and Porto) which may indicate an urban profile in most visitors. In terms of gender, there is a majority of male visitors (50.7%). Regarding the traveling company, it is clear that these are accompanied visits, especially as a couple (33.1%) and family (22.7%). The satisfaction expressed quantitatively is very high, with an average score of 4.39 in a maximum of 5 points in which 88.3% of the visitors stated their visits as very good or excellent. Finally, in relation to the date of the visit, it is perceived that most experiences, at least 74%, occurred in the pre-pandemic COVID-19 period.

The 834 comments analyzed provided the recognition of 4582 references that were grouped into category and

**Table 2** Sample characteristics (n = 834)

| Gender (%) | | Place of residence (%) | | Traveling company (%) | | TripAdvisor reviews (%) | | Year of visit (%) | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Male | 50.7 | Portugal | 72.1 | Couple | 33.1 | Excellent (5) | 54.7 | 2017 | 1.6 |
| Female | 39.7 | Europe | 18.9 | Family | 22.7 | Very good (4) | 33.6 | 2018 | 35.5 |
| Unknown | 9.6 | America | 4.0 | Friends | 11.5 | Average (3) | 8.9 | 2019 | 36.9 |
| | | Asia | 1.3 | Alone | 1.4 | Poor (2) | 1.7 | 2020 | 23.0 |
| | | Africa | 0.4 | Business | 0.4 | Terrible (1) | 1.2 | 2021 | 3.0 |
| | | Oceania | 0.1 | Unknown | 30.9 | | | | |
| | | Unknown | 3.2 | | | | | | |

*Source* Self elaboration based on TripAdvisor reviews (TripAdvisor, 2021)

subcategory codes. The first grouping of references was made considering the four constructs under analysis: Experience, Recommendation, Satisfaction and Revisit (Table 3). Clearly, the majority of the references are related to perceptions expressed about the experiences had in the PGNP (73.8%).

According to the literature reviewed, the references related to the construct of Experience (Table 4) were distributed by the dimensions Affective (45.9%), Sensory (33.9%), Behavioral (17.4%) and Intellectual (2.8%). The greater weight of the Affective and Sensory dimensions, which together total 79.8% of the references, is in line with the literature (Barnes et al., 2014; Martins, 2018).

It is important to detail the references for each of the dimensions in order to better understand their scope and relative weight within the respective dimension. Starting with the affective dimension (Table 5), it can be seen that most of the references (66.3%) are expressions of emotions

felt in relation to the experiences during the visits to the attractions. The vast majority of the emotions expressed consider the admiration (39.6% of the emotions), for instance "a breathtaking view" or "a wonderful landscape" and the esthetics (37.7% of the emotions), with references like "beautifull place" or "nice houses". With some relevance are the references related to tranquility (7.5% of the emotions), for example "I found peace", curiosity (4.2%), such as "an interesting place" and spiritual (3.9%) like "a magical place". Almost all references to emotions were positive, with a residual number of negative emotions such as fear, sadness or aggressiveness. Another category that had several references in the Emotional dimension is the Valuation of the immaterial with 18.0% of the references. This category considers references that value the natural character (40.9%), the historicity of the places (30.8%) and its authenticity (28.3%). Examples of this references are, respectively: "contact with the purest nature", "a village lost

**Table 3** Content references distributed by constructs

| Category codes | References | % |
|---|---|---|
| Experience | 3380 | 73.8 |
| Recommendation | 735 | 16.0 |
| Satisfaction | 432 | 9.4 |
| Revisit | 35 | 0.8 |
| Total | 4582 | 100.0 |

*Source* Self elaboration based on TripAdvisor reviews (TripAdvisor, 2021)

**Table 4** Experience construct content references distributed by category codes

| Experience category codes | References | % |
|---|---|---|
| Affective | 1551 | 45.9 |
| Sensory | 1147 | 33.9 |
| Behavioral | 589 | 17.4 |
| Intellectual | 93 | 2.8 |
| Total | 3380 | 100.0 |

*Source* Self elaboration based on TripAdvisor reviews (TripAdvisor, 2021)

**Table 5** Affective dimension content references distributed by category codes

| Category codes | References | % | Ratio references/total (%) |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Emotions** | 1028 | 100.0 | 66.3 |
| Admiration | 427 | 39.6 | |
| Esthetics | 388 | 37.7 | |
| Tranquility | 77 | 7.5 | |
| Curiosity | 43 | 4.2 | |
| Spiritual | 40 | 3.9 | |
| Pleasure | 20 | 1.9 | |
| Affectivity | 18 | 1.8 | |
| Adventure | 16 | 1.6 | |
| Fear | 14 | 1.4 | |
| Sadness | 3 | 0.3 | |
| Aggressiveness | 2 | 0.2 | |
| **Valuation of the immaterial** | 279 | 100.0 | 18.0 |
| Natural character | 114 | 40.9 | |
| Historicity | 86 | 30.8 | |
| Authenticiy | 79 | 28.3 | |
| **Relationship with others** | 124 | 100.0 | 8.0 |
| Overcrowded | 78 | 62.9 | |
| Hospitality | 25 | 20.2 | |
| Appreciation of solitude | 21 | 16.9 | |
| **Safety** | 94 | 100.0 | 6.1 |
| Negative | 79 | 84.0 | |
| Positive | 15 | 16.0 | |
| **Cost** | 26 | 100.0 | 1.7 |
| Negative | 17 | 65.4 | |
| Positive | 9 | 34.6 | |
| Total | 1551 | 100.0 | 100.0 |

*Source* Self elaboration based on TripAdvisor reviews (TripAdvisor, 2021)

in time" and "unique constructions, typical of Minho". In third place, with 8.0% of the total references of the affective dimension comes the category relationship with others. Within this category, 62.9% of the references are negative perceptions about the presence of a large number of other visitors at the sites, for example "too many people". The weight of this subcategory may be reinforced by the existence of references (16.9%) that appreciate positive aspects of loneliness, such as "you will be alone in the world". There are also 20.2% of references that value the hospitality, i.e., the positive interaction with the local community. The last two subcategories of the Emotional dimension also deserve to be highlighted: Safety (6.1%) and Cost (1.7%). Although with a small number of references, their importance lies in the fact that most of their references are negative perceptions, especially in the poor safety on some waterfall trails and the need to pay to access parking or circulation in the park.

In terms of Sensory dimension (Table 6), two categories are clearly demarcated: Senses (48.1%) and Functionality (37.8%).

In terms of senses, vision collects the most part of the references (77.4% of the senses), which largely refers to generic descriptions of the landscape and details of watercourses and animals. There is also some expression in the sense of touch, which considers references such as the perception of atmospheric or water temperature. In relation to the Functionality category, most references are made in relation to pedestrian access (41.9%) and road access (35.5%) to attractions. It is important to mention that of the total 182 references to Pedestrian access 63.7% are negative and the remaining positive, i.e., emphasis is given to the difficulty of traveling the paths. As far as Road access is concerned, the situation is inverse as of the 154 references, 68.2% are positive. The remaining two subcategories of the Functionality category were also labeled in positive and

**Table 6** Sensory dimension content references distributed by category codes

| Category codes | References | % | Ratio references/total (%) |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Senses** | 552 | 100.0 | 48.1 |
| Vision | 427 | 77.4 | |
| Tact | 80 | 14.5 | |
| Combination | 21 | 3.8 | |
| Hearing | 18 | 3.3 | |
| Taste | 4 | 0.7 | |
| Smell | 2 | 0.4 | |
| **Functionality** | 434 | 100.0 | 37.8 |
| Pedestrian access | 182 | 41.9 | |
| Road access | 154 | 35.5 | |
| Tourist signaling and information | 64 | 14.7 | |
| Infrastructure | 34 | 7.8 | |
| **State of conservation and cleanliness** | 94 | 100.0 | 8.2 |
| Heritage | 70 | 74.5 | |
| Environmental | 24 | 25.5 | |
| **Spatial Perception** | 56 | 100.0 | 4.9 |
| Negative | 42 | 75.0 | |
| Positive | 13 | 23.2 | |
| Variable | 1 | 1.8 | |
| **Insertion with nature** | 11 | 100.0 | 1.0 |
| Total | 1147 | 100.0 | 100.0 |

*Source* Self elaboration based on TripAdvisor reviews (TripAdvisor, 2021)

negative aspects. The Tourist signaling and information obtained 64 references, of which 67.2% refer that there is no signaling or information or that when these exist they are insufficient. In terms of infrastructures, 76.5% of the 34 references are positive (Table 6). Still in the Sensory dimension, the state of conservation and cleanliness category is also registered, where most of the 94 references (74.5%) are related to Heritage and the remaining are Environmental. Within each subcategory, it was noted positive and negative references, being that in heritage terms, most consider a positive state of conservation or cleanliness, while in environmental terms, there is a tie between positive and negative perceptions (Table 6). The remaining two categories show low results and refer to Spatial Perception aspects, i.e., perceptions of the size of the spaces and integration with nature, with considerations on the existence of animals at the visiting sites.

The references in the behavioral dimension are exclusively about the activities reported by visitors during their visit to the park (Table 7). The most referred activity is the mere contemplation of the landscape or the specific existing attractions (45.7%), which can be associated with taking photographs (9.3%). Also with expression is the water leisure (19.0%) practiced in the waterfalls, as well as the sun baths (2.4%) and water sports (0.8%) in the same places of visit and even the realization of walks (11.5%) (Table 7).

Finally, regarding the intellectual dimension, the less expressive in terms of total references, it brings together two aspects: expression of knowledge about the attractions (61.3%), for example, "first century example of Roman engineering" and comparison with other places outside the Park (38.7%), for instance "reminds of Yosemite Park in California" (Table 8).

The recommendation construct was operationalized with references expressed by visitors that seek to influence the behavior of individuals who could potentially become visitors of the park (Table 9). From the total of 735 references that can be included in this construct, it was found that more than half (54.4%) are direct incentives for the readers of the comments to visit the park attractions. Concrete examples are: "strongly recommend" or "come meet". Also directed to the same potential visitors, 21% of the references to recommendations on practical aspects were found. These are the cases of "bring suitable shoes" or "leave the car before the belvedere". These are suggestions and indications for those who will visit the site, and although they differ from the direct incentive recommendations, it is assumed in them an indirect incentive for the view. About 22% of the references within the recommendation construct are critical manifestations of aspects considered negative in the sites visited, some of which work as a disincentive to visit, for example "I don't recommend" and others are warnings for

**Table 7** Behavioral dimension content references distributed by category codes

| Category codes | References | % |
|---|---|---|
| **Activities** | 589 | 100.0 |
| Contemplation | 269 | 45.7 |
| Water leisure | 112 | 19.0 |
| Walk | 68 | 11.5 |
| Photography | 55 | 9.3 |
| Meals | 45 | 7.6 |
| Rest | 19 | 3.2 |
| Sun | 14 | 2.4 |
| Water sports | 5 | 0.8 |
| Itinerary | 5 | 0.3 |
| Total | 589 | 100.0 |

*Source* Self elaboration based on TripAdvisor reviews (TripAdvisor, 2021)

**Table 8** Intellectual dimension content references distributed by category codes

| Category codes | References | % |
|---|---|---|
| Knowledges | 57 | 61.3 |
| Comparison | 36 | 38.7 |
| Total | 93 | 100.0 |

*Source* Self elaboration based on TripAdvisor reviews (TripAdvisor, 2021)

**Table 9** Recommendation construct content references distributed by category codes

| Category codes | References | % |
|---|---|---|
| Encourage | 400 | 54.4 |
| Criticism | 162 | 22.0 |
| Practical | 161 | 21.0 |
| Environmental | 12 | 1.6 |
| Total | 735 | 100.0 |

*Source* Self elaboration based on TripAdvisor reviews (TripAdvisor, 2021)

**Table 10** Satisfaction construct content references distributed by category codes

| Category codes | References | % | Ratio references/total (%) |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Effect** | 261 | 100.0 | 60.4 |
| Reward | 202 | 77.4 | |
| Disappointment | 36 | 13.8 | |
| Surprise | 23 | 8.8 | |
| **Qualitative appraisal** | 171 | 100.0 | 39.6 |
| Positive | 163 | 95.3 | |
| Negative | 8 | 4.7 | |
| Total | 432 | 100.0 | 100.0 |

*Source* Self elaboration based on TripAdvisor reviews (TripAdvisor, 2021)

specific conditions of the view that are not necessarily attempts to discourage, for example "not suitable for children".

Regarding the Satisfaction construct, two categories of references were considered: the one that considers the effect and the one that groups references about the qualitative appraisal (Table 10). The effect category, with 60.4% of the references of this construct, brings together the effects felt after visiting a particular tourist attraction. These can be reward, i.e., expectations before the visit were fulfilled (e.g., "It was worth it"), disappointment, i.e., the perceived reality did not exceed expectations (e.g., "It is not worth the visit")

and surprise when the visit to the attraction was not planned and surprised the visitor (e.g., "I was not expecting it"). The categories reward and surprise together represent 86.2% of the references of effect that are perceived as indicators of satisfaction, so that the references of negative satisfaction only come from the 13.8% of the disappointment category. The qualitative appraisal category means a complement to the quantitative evaluation expressed by each TripAdvisor user and maintains the positivity already enunciated, because 95.3% of the references are positive, as for example, "This was excellent".

It is also important to mention that the construct Revisit, with less than 1% of the total of all analyzed references (Table 3) considers only the expressed and direct references of the revisit to the place as a promise (e.g., "to come back" or as something that has already happened (e.g., "I repeated the visit"). As it is an open comment in which no direct question was asked about whether the visitor intends to return, it is perceived that this value is residual.

## 5 Conclusions

Web 2.0 brought new platforms such as TripAdvisor where it became possible to search and share information about travel, hotels, restaurants and even tourist destinations and their attractions. The electronic-word-of-mouth has become part of people's daily lives, with the sharing of experiences and other perceptions, which can decisively influence the decision-making process (Amaral et al., 2015). In order to create visitor loyalty, it is necessary that stakeholders and other entities responsible for tourism destinations take into account these perceptions and experiences of those who visit it. It is therefore essential that visitors have memorable experiences that lead to a high level of satisfaction, so that they can revisit and/or recommend the tourist destination to friends and family (Park & Nicolau, 2015).

Therefore, we carried out this study using the experience construct and its 4 dimensions identified in studies such as Barnes et al. (2014): Sensory, Affective, Intellectual and Behavioral dimensions. In addition, we seek to find other perceptions, namely Satisfaction, Recommendation and Revisit' constructs.

The visitor experience in the PGNP is essentially the enjoyment of a natural space combined with cultural elements illustrating, above all, rural life. The activities carried out are, firstly, contemplation of the landscape and specific attractions, secondly rest and leisure in a water environment and, to a lesser extent, active tourism with hiking. These findings are in line with the conclusions of Holden (2016). The primacy of contemplation activities indicates a more superficial experience, based on esthetic and visual characteristics present in the territory. In fact, the analysis of the

references of the affective and sensory dimensions confirm this perception, corroborating the existing literature, namely Abrahams et al. (2022), Barnes et al (2014) and Martins (2018). In the expressed emotions, esthetics comes in second place with 37.7% of the total references, while visual references represent 77.4% of the total senses references.

This way of using the territory for tourism purposes is clearly satisfactory for the vast majority of visitors to the park. In fact, the average score assigned to the attractions is very high (4.39 out of a maximum of 5 points) and the readings of the content analysis in several parameters point to a positivity pole, particularly at three moments: (i) The satisfaction construct is composed by a strong positive qualitative appraisal (95.3% of the qualitative appraisal references) and by an overwhelming majority of references that recognize that pre-trip expectations were met or exceeded; (ii) in the affective dimension, about 98% of the expressed emotions are positively recognized as well as it is attributed, by visitors, a positive expression to intangible aspects such as natural, historical and authentic character; (iii) the recommendation construct presents robust results in which 75.4% of the references are of encouragement or sharing of practical aspects for future visitors, i.e., positive recommendations that are only made by those who, effectively, feel satisfied with their own experience. Satisfaction and desire to revisit have strong associations with the affective dimension (Mirzaalian & Halpenny, 2021; Zhang & Xu, 2020).

Nevertheless, negative perceptions were detected and can be grouped into two areas. On the one hand, the displeasure with the excess of visitors in certain attractions of the park, particularly in the waterfalls to enjoy the water. This concern, although visible over the 3 years of analyzed comments, seems to gain greater expression and relevance in the experiences carried out during the COVID-19 pandemic period, something that is understandable given the personal health fears and the need for social distancing. However, this is a paradoxical issue, as the critical comments regarding the overcrowded situation are accompanied, in many of the cases analyzed, by references of direct encouragement to new visitors, i.e., the same visitors express a desire for solitude and tranquility in tourist attractions but with their favorable comments encourage an increase in demand (Eagles et al., 2001; Schroeder, 1996, 2002). The second domain concerns the negative perception regarding safety and signage of the pedestrian routes, visible in the sensory dimension in terms of negative functionality of the pedestrian accesses and in the critical recommendations about access difficulties. A predominantly recreational vision of the territory is denoted in a relevant part of these negative perceptions, in which the terrain conditions could hypothetically be modified and artificialized to meet the mobility and enjoyment needs of visitors. This perception is

consistent with the relatively superficial, esthetic and visual experience that a significant part of visitors have in this territory (Abrahams et al., 2022).

The analyzed perceptions have practical interest for the management of the PGNP, as they allow a deep understanding of the experience performed, described and characterized by its visitors. It proves the high satisfaction with the experiences provided but also makes clear important aspects that should be considered in the management of this green area. The control of tourist flows is a central issue in the management of this type of territories, something that is confirmed in the perceptions analyzed. The creation of infrastructures and better access conditions enable the experience on the one hand, but at the same time, boost tourist flows, increasing the feeling of overcrowding (Tverijonaite et al., 2018). It is the responsibility of the managers be aware when making decisions about a balance between visitor numbers and the environmental effects allowed (Ghazvini et al., 2020).

There is a need to better manage the expectations of potential visitors, providing better information in the process of pre-travel to the park, in order to raise awareness that an attraction fundamentally of nature has inherent limitations that prevent an optimal transformation for tourist enjoyment. For managers, knowing negative feelings makes it possible to identify aspects of the experience where the destination may have failed and, in the most enthusiastic feelings, to identify aspects that allow to stimulate the revisitation and attraction of new visitors (Mirzaalian & Halpenny, 2021). In the extreme, one can talk about a greater challenge that will be to rethink the tourist experiences toward a greater involvement and immersion in nature and culture of the territory.

Finally, it is considered that the methodology developed and applied in this study has great applicability in other protected green areas, as a form of in-depth evaluation of visitors' experiences. However, it could be expanded to question specific aspects that an open platform like TripAdvisor does not allow. For example, some of the users of this platform could be interviewed directly to understand the motivations for visiting this park, as well as obtain elements to draw a more complete profile of the visitor.

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