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The Relational Benefits and the Quality of Services in Tourism

Summary

In a very competitive environment, it is highly important to identify the indicators that exert a major influence on customer satisfaction and loyalty. Based on the current relationship marketing concept of relational benefits (Gwinner, Gremler, Bitner, 1998; Hennig-Thurau, Gwinner, Gremler, 2002) and destination quality (Blazquez-Resino, Molina, Esteban-Talaya, 2015), a conceptual model was built.

The present paper aims to analyse empirically the model that reflects three different types of relational benefits perceived by tourists as well as the benefits obtained by the tourist destination in term of satisfaction and loyalty. This study tries to identify whether relational benefits have a more important effect on satisfaction and loyalty than quality. As a result, we observe the role of relational benefits as an antecedent of customer satisfaction and the effect of the latter on tourist loyalty.

Key words: relational benefits, destination quality, tourism services, customer satisfaction, loyalty.

JEL codes: M31

Introduction

Today tourism is the main sector of the economy in many countries because of its positive social, cultural and economic effects. In this way, many countries aim to benefit from this industry by providing adequate funds and infrastructure in an attempt to meet the demands of tourists. In this sense, highly developed markets were confronted with an intensification of global competition caused mainly by the increasing deregulations of the market. Having to compete for the same number of tourists brings a host of benefits from the development of a loyal customer base. Despite the fact that the experiential nature of tourism provides a unique context for the development of customer loyalty and that the tourism industry has pioneered loyalty programs such as frequent flyer or hotel loyalty cards (Conze et al. 2010), destination marketing organisations seem to lack a strategic intent to develop long-term relationships (Murphy, Pike 2012) and relatively little attention has been paid to the issue of visitor loyalty in tourism literature in general (Oppermann 2000).

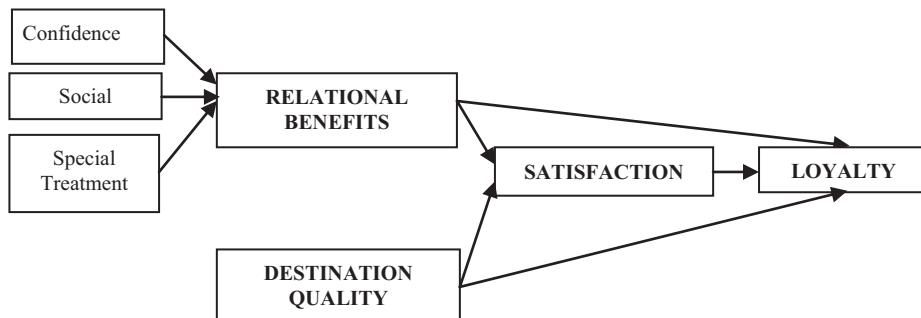
Relationship marketing by maintaining long-term relationships and high quality destinations through satisfaction shapes loyalty. We may find in the literature that customers who enjoy special benefits from long-term relations manifest a higher level of satisfaction and the benefits gained from special treatment are associated with loyalty in a significant way (Ju, Yen, Gwinner 2003). There are publications which are focused on relational benefits in the tourism industry (Chen, Hu 2013; Bilgili, Candan, Bilgili 2014; Chao, Chen, Yeh 2015; Yen et al. 2015; Ryu, Lee 2017).

The goal of this article is to empirically verify the model of relational benefits, destination quality and their impact on the satisfaction and loyalty of tourists.

The starting point for the development of the model originated from the results of the research of Service-Dominant Logic in tourism. Blazquez et al. (2015) found that destination quality had an important effect on satisfaction and loyalty but what happens when we consider relational benefits? Are relational benefits more important than quality from the customer perspective? Based on the results of this study, a new model was built and tested. The basis for this model was the assumption that customers must experience some benefits from their relation with the service provider (Gwinner et al. 1998) and they also expect high destination quality. The tests examine that the structural model has adequate explanatory power and that has a predictive capacity in the estimation values. The stability of the proposed model was also assessed.

Figure 1

Proposed conceptual model



Source: Authors' own work.

This paper contributes towards a conceptual understanding of the role of the different aspects of relational benefits (confidence, social and special treatment (economic) benefits) and destination quality in the context of satisfaction and loyalty of tourists – a new approach to the main indicators of satisfaction and loyalty.

Relational benefits from the perspective of destination quality, satisfaction and loyalty – literature review

This literature review explains the general theoretical framework from earlier empirical studies and defines the model constructs (relational benefits: confidence, social and special treatment, quality of the destination, satisfaction and loyalty).

Relational benefits

In the literature (Calvo-Porrá, Faiña Medín, Montes-Solla 2016), we can find that relational benefits include three elements (categories) – confidence benefits, social benefits and special treatments benefits (Gwinner et al. 1998) defined from the customer's point of view.

Confidence benefits

Confidence is a benefit that occurs in a situation where a relationship with the service provider has been established (Gwinner et al. 1998; Hennig-Thurau et al. 2002). This category refers to the customer perception of reduced uncertainty and comfort related to the relationship (Gwinner et al. 1998).

Social benefits

The starting point for social benefits are social interactions between the customer and the employees of the service provider (Berry 1995). They focus mainly on the relationship itself rather than on the result of the transactions (Hennig-Thurau et al. 2002). Wilson (1995) defined the concept of social benefits as the degree of mutual personal friendship and liking shared by the buyer and seller. Similarly, Gremler and Gwinner (2000) discovered a positive relationship between enjoyable interactions, satisfaction, loyalty and word-of-mouth communication. Jones, Mothersbaugh, Beatty (2000) found that the relationship between satisfaction (based on the core service) and loyal behaviour (repurchase intention) depends on the strength of the relationship. Therefore, the source of the social benefits are the social bonds which are developed during interpersonal service encounters.

Special treatment benefits

The concept of special treatment benefits also has an economic element (Hennig-Thurau et al. 2002). The customer achieves benefits through lower costs of participating in the relationship – e.g. price reductions (discounts), quantifiable rewards as well as individual treatment in terms of faster service or additional individualised services (Gwinner et al. 1998). The literature includes some critical opinions on the economic aspect of special treatment

benefits in as much as such rewards may not be able to build customer loyalty (Roehm, Pullins, Roehm Jr 2002). At the same time, as Berry (1995) argues, they do not build any competitive advantage.

Destination quality

Another factor in our model is quality. Previous articles have attempted to identify the most important attributes of the destination. It was found that quality (Correia, Miranda 2008) and image (Bigne, Sanchez, Sanchez 2001; Chen, Tsai 2007) have the most relevant influence on whether or not a destination is revisited or recommended.

Quality could be analyzed from the customer or service provider point of view. In this research, quality is presented from the tourist perspective. From the customer's point of view, quality is the assessment of the services experienced relative to expectations. The perceived quality – the important factor in creating customer loyalty – is a subjective criterion (Bilgili et al. 2014).

Quality is one of the important factors that help destinations in a decade of hard competition – not only on the national market but also internationally – to attract tourist by creating traveller perceptions of quality.

The quality of the destination is defined as whether or not the travel experience was positively perceived on the whole (Murphy, Pritchard, Smith 2000). Therefore, the tourism experience proposition (TEP) requires analysis of the perception and assessment of tourists that subsequently allows the key factors to be identified (Blazquez-Resino et al. 2015).

Satisfaction

Another dimension in the presented model is satisfaction. Satisfaction from a relationship marketing point of view is the source of an organisation's success (Gołąb-Andrzejak, Badzińska, 2015). Customer satisfaction in the context of this study is cumulative customer satisfaction (Oliver 1980) – based on the total experience of the goods or services offered at the destination. Cumulative satisfaction is a more fundamental indicator (Anderson, Fornell, Lehmann, 1994).

Loyalty

Loyalty is treated as one of the key relational outcomes (Hennig-Thurau et al. 2002). Loyal customers give the company many benefits such as increased revenue (Reichheld 1996), the possibility to estimate the level of sales and profits (Aaker 1992), increased sales of additional goods and services (Clark, Payne 1994; Reichheld 1996), reduced customer turnover (Reichheld, Sasser 1990) and a source of free advertising through recommenda-

tions (Reichheld et al. 1990; Reichheld 1996; Zeithaml, Berry, Parasuraman 1996), which in turn leads to lower costs (Jarvis, Wilcox 1977).

Methodology

Data collection

In order to achieve the aim of this paper, a personal structured questionnaire was conducted. The population relevant to this study consists of tourists who revisited Spain for leisure during the previous 12 months. The final total of useful questionnaires was 451. The gender ratio of the respondents was 46% male to 54% female, and the 25-44 age bracket accounted for 58%. Most respondents had finished higher education (66%) and were employed (61.9%).

The operationalization of constructs

A comprehensive review of the literature related to each of the constructs was carried out. A destination quality scale was developed by adapting the scales used by Zabkar, Brencic, Dmitrovic (2010) and Blazquez-Resino et al. (2015). A total of four items related to quality or the evaluation of resources were included. For this research, the relational benefits scale was developed by the modification of measures from Gwinner et al. (1998) and Hennig-Thurau et al. (2002). This study measured three dimensions: confidence benefit, social benefit, and special treatment benefit and each dimension was composed of three items.

The tourist satisfaction refers to the evaluation of the destination based on all encounters and experiences. In this sense, based on previous studies (e.g. Bigne et al. 2001; Chen, Tsai 2007), satisfaction with the destination was measured by means of two variables in order to estimate the overall evaluation of the destination and the tourist's choice. Finally, tourist loyalty was identified as a construct composed of attitudinal and behavioural dimensions (Oppermann 2000). Thus adapted from previous studies (eg. Baker, Crompton 2000; Chen, Tsai 2007), destination loyalty was measured as a one-dimensional construct composed of four items: intention to visit in the future and positive word of mouth recommendation. All the constructs followed the recommendations of Churchill (1979). All variables were operationalized in reflective way and measured by using a seven-point Likert-type scale, ranging from "Totally Disagree" to "Totally Agree". The model was empirically tested using Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modelling (PLS-SEM) as this was more suitable for both predictive applications and theory building. The PLS model was computed using the Smart PLS 3.0 statistical software application (Ringle, Wende, Becker 2015).

Results

The data analysis proceeded according to a two-step approach: measurement model and structural estimation model. To analyse the measurement model, it is necessary to assess the reliability, convergent validity and discriminant validity.

Table 1
Reliability of items

| Factor | Indicator | Factor Loading | <i>t</i> | Cronbach α | Rho_A | Composite Reliability | AVE |
|---------------------|-----------|----------------|----------|-------------------|-------|-----------------------|-------|
| DESTINATION QUALITY | DQ1 | 0.811*** | 45.518 | 0.817 | 0,842 | 0.877 | 0.641 |
| | DQ2 | 0.832*** | 41.746 | | | | |
| | DQ3 | 0.820*** | 33.231 | | | | |
| | DQ4 | 0.737*** | 23.967 | | | | |
| CONFIDENCE | Conf1 | 0.912*** | 103.587 | 0.895 | 0,897 | 0.935 | 0.827 |
| | Conf2 | 0.933*** | 105.003 | | | | |
| | Conf3 | 0.884*** | 58.218 | | | | |
| SOCIAL BENEFITS | Social1 | 0.878*** | 52.348 | 0.874 | 0,901 | 0.921 | 0.796 |
| | Social2 | 0.893*** | 60.010 | | | | |
| | Social3 | 0.905*** | 81.922 | | | | |
| SPECIAL TREATMENT | Treat1 | 0.811*** | 33.832 | 0.738 | 0,758 | 0.848 | 0.651 |
| | Treat2 | 0.774*** | 25.282 | | | | |
| | Treat3 | 0.835*** | 49.390 | | | | |
| SATISFACTION | Sat1 | 0.972*** | 223.873 | 0.942 | 0,942 | 0.972 | 0.945 |
| | Sat2 | 0.972*** | 212.940 | | | | |
| LOYALTY | Loy1 | 0.882*** | 64.615 | 0.911 | 0,913 | 0.937 | 0.789 |
| | Loy2 | 0.852*** | 45.584 | | | | |
| | Loy3 | 0.905*** | 56.676 | | | | |
| | Loy4 | 0.913*** | 88.764 | | | | |

*** $p < .01$ ($t_{(0.01; 4999)} = 2.576$); ** $p < .05$ ($t_{(0.05; 4999)} = 1.960$); * $p < .10$ ($t_{(0.10; 4999)} = 1.645$).
Source: Authors' own work.

As given in Table 1, the loadings of all the items on the factors were significant, contrasting their *t*-values and greater than 0.7 (Bagozzi, Yi 1988). The results of Cronbach's alpha, rho_A and compound reliability (see the Table 1) showed values which exceeded the cut-off point of 0.7 (Churchill 1979), which suggests satisfactory internal consistency. The convergent validity was adequate because all AVE were 0.64 or higher and exceeded the 0.50 cutoff. Finally, discriminant validity was tested. Cross-loading showed all indicators loads on their constructs greater than on the other factors. Fornell and Larcker (1981) criterion also supported the discriminant validity.

The significance of structural paths was tested using bootstrapping technique with 5000 samples. The results (see Table 2) lead to the affirmation that the satisfaction of the tourist with the destination is more closely linked with the relational benefits, mainly confi-

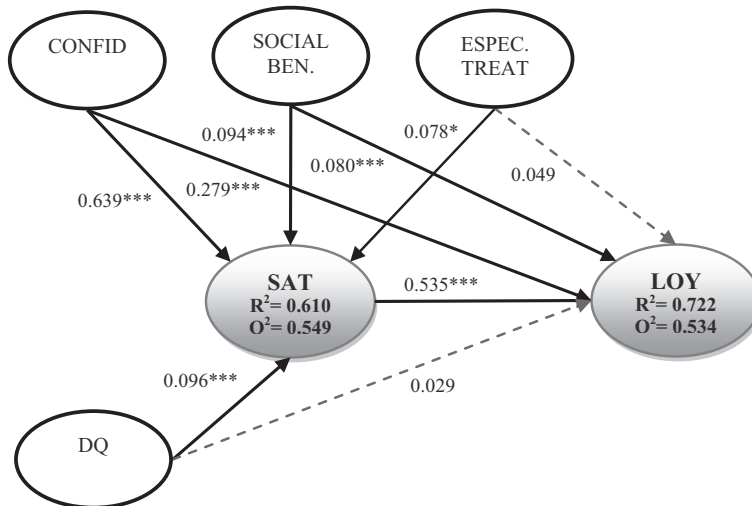
dence, than with the resources that the destiny offers. Specifically, confidence appeared to be a superior influence ($\beta = 0.639, p < 0.01$) on satisfaction than perceived quality ($\beta = 0.096, p < 0.01$). Satisfaction is also significantly affected by social benefits ($\beta = 0.094, p < 0.01$) and special treatment ($\beta = 0.078, p < 0.10$) and special treatment ($\beta = 0.078, p < 0.10$).

Table 2
Path Coefficients and Significance

| Path And Variables | Path Stimates | <i>t</i> | P-Value | Confidence Interval* |
|------------------------------------|---------------|----------|---------|----------------------|
| Confidence → Satisfaction | 0.639 | 15.845 | 0,000 | 0.558-0.716 |
| Social Benefits → Satisfaction | 0.094 | 2.733 | 0,006 | 0.027-0.162 |
| Special Treatment → Satisfaction | 0.078 | 0.078 | 0,065 | -0,006-0.159 |
| Destination Quality → Satisfaction | 0.096 | 2.680 | 0,007 | 0.023-0.164 |
| Confidence → Loyalty | 0.279 | 5.692 | 0,000 | 0.183-0.374 |
| Social Benefits → Loyalty | 0.080 | 2.682 | 0,007 | 0.025-0.142 |
| Special Treatment → Loyalty | 0.049 | 1.055 | 0,065 | -0.040-0.139 |
| Destination Quality → Loyalty | 0.029 | 0.982 | 0,326 | -0.031-0.086 |
| Satisfaction → Loyalty | 0.535 | 10.320 | 0,000 | 0.431-0.631 |

* Bias Corrected.
Source: like in Table 1.

Figure 2
The Structural Model



*** $p < 0.01$; ** $p < 0.05$; * $p < 0.10$.
Source: as in Figure 1.

The structural model evaluation consisted of assessment with the coefficient of determination (R^2). The results suggested that the structural model has adequate explanatory power, as it explains 61% of tourist satisfaction and 72% of loyalty to destination. Additionally, Stone-Geisser's predictive relevance (Q^2) was developed. The results (Figure 2) show that the values are positive, indicating that the model has a predictive capacity in the estimation of values. The goodness-of-fit (GoF) (Tenenhaus et al. 2005) of the entire model was 0.72 and exceeded the cutoff value of large effect. We also used the SRMR statistic as an adjustment measure (Henseler, Hubona, Rai 2016). SRMR value was 0.061, meeting the recommended criterion of ≤ 0.08 (Hu, Bentler 1999). Figure 2 shows the explained variance of each of the endogenous constructs and the path coefficients (β) between the different constructs.

If we delve deeper into the results and consider the indirect effects (see Table 3), destination quality and special treatment showed a significant impact on loyalty through satisfaction.

Table 3

Indirect Effects

| Specification | β Standar | t | p-Value |
|---|-----------------|-------|---------|
| Destination Quality \rightarrow Loyalty | 0.051 | 2.548 | 0.011 |
| Confidence \rightarrow Loyalty | 0.342 | 8.709 | 0,000 |
| Social B. \rightarrow Loyalty | 0.050 | 2.562 | 0.010 |
| Es. Treatment \rightarrow Loyalty | 0.042 | 1.837 | 0.066 |

Source: like in Table 1.

Conclusions

Academics and tourism professionals need to have a clear understanding of the factors that lead to tourist loyalty in order to create a strategy for marketing and destination management (Su, Hsu, Swanson 2017). Past research has pointed out perceived quality and customer satisfaction as factors influencing the likelihood of revisiting a tourism destination (e.g. Baker, Crompton 2000; Chen, Tesai 2007; Zabkar et al. 2010).

The results of this study have shown that relational benefits are significantly related to satisfaction and loyalty. Overall, relational benefits showed a greater effect than perceived quality, demonstrating that relational benefits are an important factor for the tourist satisfaction and loyalty to a particular destination. These results agree with previous studies, which found that relational benefits can influence the results of satisfaction (Su, Li, Cui, 2009; Ju et al. 2003) and customer loyalty (Chang, Chen 2007; Lee et al. 2014). Specifically, confidence benefits proved to be the most important category in eliciting satisfaction among tourists, followed by social benefits and special treatment. This result was consistent with Gwinner et

al. (1998). On the other hand, although perceived quality shows some impact on satisfaction, it is less significant than confidence.

In addition, this study supports the view that confidence benefits, social benefits and tourist satisfaction can enhance tourist loyalty. The researchers contend a strong relationship between relational benefits and customer loyalty (Hennig-Thurau et al. 2002; Chen, Hu 2010). Gwinner et al. (1998) found that confidence benefit, social benefits, and special treatment benefit have a significant correlation with loyalty and positive word-of-mouth. As in previous research (Chang, Chen 2007; Lee, Ahn, Kim 2008), confidence benefit was the most important type of benefit in terms of loyalty. Social benefits still showed a positive correlation with loyalty (Hennig-Thurau et al. 2002; Gremler, Gwinner 2000; Chang, Chen 2007; Yen et al. 2015). However, unlike previous studies (Ju et al. 2003; Lee et al. 2008) special treatment benefits were not significantly associated with loyalty.

This study has some important managerial implications. Providing superior service quality can succeed in gaining a competitive advantage (Chen, Hu 2013), although destinations must develop and take care of value relationships beyond what is provided by their core service in order to remain competitive. Effective strategies to create long-term relationships can generate benefits beyond the core service.

In this sense, tourist confidence has become a fundamental element. Tourists no longer merely look for safe destinations, but also make sure that they live up to their promises. Additionally, the emotional aspects of the relationship with the tourist, oriented towards the personal recognition of tourists and the development of a friendly rapport (Ju et al. 2003), are extremely important. Social benefits create pleasure and comfort for the tourists, providing added value and allowing the customers to develop emotional attachments. In tourism, it is commonplace to use loyalty/reward programs to offer special treatments to regular customers. However, these benefits have a limited impact on achieving true loyalty (Ryu, Lee 2017). In tourism destinations, consumers are more interested in trust and social benefits than in the rewards provided.

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Korzyści relacyjne i jakość usług turystycznych

Streszczenie

W bardzo konkurencyjnym otoczeniu niezwykle istotne jest zidentyfikowanie czynników mających zasadnicze znaczenie dla zadowolenia klienta i lojalności. Opierając się na istniejącej koncepcji marketingu relacji i korzyściach relacyjnych (Gwinner, Gremler, Bitner 1998, Hennig-Thurau, Gwinner, Gremler 2002) oraz jakości miejsca docelowego (Blazquez-Resino, Molina, Esteban-Talaya 2015), został opracowany model koncepcyjny. Niniejszy artykuł ma na celu empiryczną analizę modelu odzwierciedlającego trzy różne rodzaje korzyści relacyjnych postrzeganych przez turystów oraz korzyści osiągnięte przez turystę wyrażane w satysfakcji i lojalności. Niniejsze opracowanie stanowi próbę zidentyfikowania, czy korzyści relacyjne mają większy wpływ na satysfakcję i lojalność niż jakość. Jako rezultaty obserwujemy rolę korzyści relacyjnych jako czynnika poprzedzającego satysfakcję klienta, której efektem jest lojalność turysty.

Słowa kluczowe: korzyści relacyjne, jakość miejsca docelowego, usługi turystyczne, satysfakcja klienta, lojalność.

Kody JEL: M31

Реляционные выгоды и качество туристических услуг

Резюме

В весьма конкурентной среде особенно существенным является выявление факторов, имеющих основное значение для удовлетворения клиента и его лояльности. Основываясь на существующей концепции маркетинга отношений и на реляционных выгодах (Gwinner, Gremler, Bitner, 1998; Hennig-Thurau, Gwinner, Gremler, 2002), а также качества места назначения (Blazquez-Resino, Molina, Esteban-Talaya, 2015), разработали концепционную модель. Цель статьи – провести эмпирический анализ модели, отражающей три разных вида реляционных выгод, воспринимаемых туристами, и выгод, достигнутых туристом, выражаемых удовлетворенностью и лояльностью. Настоящая разработка – попытка выявить, оказывают ли реляционные выгоды большее влияние на удовлетворенность и лояльность, чем качество. В качестве результатов наблюдаем роль реляционных выгод как фактора, предшествующего удовлетворенности клиента, результатом которой является лояльность туриста.

Ключевые слова: реляционные выгоды, качество места назначения, туристические услуги, удовлетворенность клиента, лояльность.

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