

**“THE MODERATING EFFECT OF TOURIST’S INVOLVEMENT ON
THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN DESTINATION’S IMAGE AND ITS
FUTURE BEHAVIOR”**

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“THE MODERATING EFFECT OF CUSTOMER’S INVOLVEMENT ON THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN CUSTOMER PERCEPTIONS AND ITS FUTURE BEHAVIOR”

Abstract

Building on the services-marketing literature, the present study develops an innovative model for evaluation of the effect of customer perceptions on the loyalty intentions of customer. The study then explores whether market heterogeneity affects this relationship by performing a latent cluster analysis in the tourism industry. Three major clusters of tourists emerge—according to the tourists’ involvement. The results show that there are significant differences among these segments in terms of the effects of a destination’s image on tourists’ intentions to return to a destination and their intentions to recommend it to friends and relatives.

Keywords: customer perceptions, loyalty, market heterogeneity, involvement

TRACK: Relationships and services

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1. INTRODUCTION

The recent tourism literature reflects increasing interest in the behavior of tourists (Sirakaya and Woodside, 2005; O’Leary and Deegan, 2005; Petrick, 2004; Baker and Crompton, 2000). In general, these studies are sustained by premises developed within the literature on services in general (Hallowell, 1996; Taylor and Baker, 1994; Rust and Oliver, 1994; Zeithaml, Berry and Parasuraman, 1996; Cronin and Taylor, 1992; Anderson and Sullivan, 1990; Boulding et al., 1993; Ruyter et al., 1996), as well as from the literature on consumer decision-making behavior in tourism (Woodside and Dubelaar, 2002; Um and Crompton, 1990; Woodside and Lysonski, 1989; Mathieson and Wall, 1982).

One argument of the first stream of research (Storbacka et al., 1994; Anderson and Mittal 2000) is that identifying the antecedents of tourists’ loyalty (perceived service quality, satisfaction, value, and so on) enables managers to develop strategies that will increase loyalty. The relationship between the image of a destination and the loyalty of tourists is also important—because it has been shown that the image of a destination is a critical factor in influencing tourist satisfaction (O’Leary and Deegan, 2005; Cai, Wu and Bai, 2003; Abdullah et al., 2000; Kandampully and Suharatanto, 2000). On the other hand, consumer decision-making literature acknowledges that understanding travel decisions require an analysis of effects of social and psychological factors (Mayo and Jarvis, 1981), where choice of destinations is one of many travel related decisions the tourist has to make (Woodside and MacDonald, 1994).

Despite the abundance of studies in this area, there has been little consideration of how such relationships are affected by the individual characteristics of tourists (Kim et al., 2002; Zins, 2001, Gwinner et al. 1998) and market heterogeneity (Sun, Wilcox and Zhu, 2004; Mittal and Kamakura, 2001). In view of the relative paucity of studies in this field, the present study therefore aims to analyze the influence of market heterogeneity – based on a psychological characteristic of the individual – on the relationship between the destination’s image and tourist’s evaluations and future behaviour.

2. CONCEPTUAL MODEL

Most of the literature on tourist loyalty comes from studies of consumer behaviour in service settings (Riley et al., 2001). This has been a growing area of interest in recent years (Andreassen and Lindestad, 1998; Zins, 2001), with two major contributions of note having been made: (i) the disconfirmation paradigm (Oliver, 1980; Oliver and Desarbo, 1988); and (ii) proposals based on cognitive psychology (Folkes, 1988). Both of these approaches have focused on predicting consumer behavior.

According to the disconfirmation paradigm (Oliver, 1980), loyalty depends on the level of consumer satisfaction. There is plenty of evidence to support a cause-and-effect relationship between loyalty and satisfaction (Taylor and Baker; 1994; Taylor, 1997, Rust and Oliver, 1994; Tam, 2004), as well as significant evidence identifying service quality as an antecedent of customer satisfaction (Cronin and Taylor, 1992; Zeithaml et al., 1996; Bitner and Hubbert, 1994; Spreng and Mackoy, 1996; Caruana, 2002; Sureshchandar et al., 2002; Tam, 2004; Yi and La, 2004). Similarly, Woodside and Dubelaar (2002) link micro and macro evaluations of the destination with the future behavior of the tourist, such as its willingness to recommend and revisit the destination. The other main stream of research in this area—the cognitive psychology stream—has focused on analyzing the relevance of cognitive schemes in buyer decision processes (Andreassen and Lindestad, 1998). On this regard, a recent contribution by Sirakaya and Woodside (2005) provides an extensive qualitative review of the tourism decision-making literature.

The present research explores the influence exerted by the image of a destination—a highly cognitive construct—on the future behaviour of tourists, using service quality and satisfaction as mediating variables (Andreassen and Lindestad, 1998; Bigné *et al.*, 2001). The study is based on two premises. The first is that *market heterogeneity* plays an important role in

the relationships among image, satisfaction, and loyalty—because it has been demonstrated that various market segments display substantially different behaviours (Kamakura and Russell, 1989; Mittal and Kamakura, 2001). The second premise is that *image* plays an important role in services that are complex to evaluate—such as tourist destinations. In these cases, the image of the service can be a significant factor in conditioning customers' perceptions of quality and satisfaction—and their consequent future behaviour.

Perceived image as an antecedent of service quality and customer satisfaction

Image can be understood as the general impression that a tourist has about a destination (Rynes, 1991). Image has been identified as a relevant factor in a customer's final evaluation of a service (Bitner, 1995; Grönroos, 1984). There is wide agreement among scholars concerning the influence that the destination's image exercises on the future behaviour of tourists (Ashworth and Goodall, 1998; Mansfeld, 1992; Bigné et al., 2001; Chen and Gursoy, 2001).

On this regard, the service literature has established a definite relationship between image and perceptions of service quality (Flavian et al., 2004). However, the relationship between customer satisfaction and image has not received much attention from researchers. This is because they are typically analyzed with other constructs—such as perceived value, perceived quality, and customer loyalty (Abdullah et al., 2000; Kandampully and Suharatanto, 2000). However, this relationship has been considered in some earlier works in this field (Grönroos, 1984) and, more recently, it has been explored in several service industries (Selnes, 1993; Bigné et al., 2001; Zins, 2001). Andreassen and Lindestad (1998) have concluded that this relationship is indirect and is mediated by service quality. Moreover, they found that its influence is larger when the tangibility of the service offering decreases.

Bloemer et al. (1998) contended that the link between image and future behaviour is still a matter of debate, although they identified service quality and customer satisfaction as possible mediators between the two constructs. These authors considered that image influences customer's expectations, and that these play a decisive role in service quality and customer satisfaction.

In contrast to these somewhat equivocal results, the service literature has demonstrated the critical role played by perceived quality and customer satisfaction when it comes to influencing the future behaviour of customers (Taylor and Baker, 1994; Rust and Oliver, 1994). Zeithaml, Berry and Parasuraman (1996) attempted to integrate all the empirical results of preceding research by suggesting that customers' future intentions can be collected into four major categories: (i) referrals; (ii) price sensitivity; (iii) repurchase; (iv) and complaining behaviour. Some studies that have analyzed the relationships among service quality, customer satisfaction, and future behaviour have limited the concept of loyalty to repurchase alone (Cronin and Taylor, 1992; Anderson and Sullivan, 1990), whereas other studies have included the provision of recommendations or referrals (Boulding et al., 1993; Ruyter et al., 1996). In the tourism industry, various studies have used these same variables to explain tourist's loyalty (Baker and Crompton, 2000; Petrick, 2004; O'Leary and Deegan, 2005; Cai, Wu and Bai, 2003; Bigné et al., 2001; Beerli, 2002).

Market heterogeneity

It has been difficult to demonstrate the exact nature of the relationship between the perceptions of customers and their future behaviour (Sun, Wilcox and Zhu, 2004; Mittal and Kamakura, 2001). Apparently contradictory findings have been obtained—many of which might be explained by the fact that the individual characteristics of customers have been neglected. In this context, Mittal and Kamakura (2001) have contended that customers who display different personal characteristics also display differences in their future behaviour—despite having similar levels of satisfaction with their providers. In this regard, the marketing concept of *segmentation* is important. Segmentation presumes the existence of heterogeneity among customers in the market, and has received considerable support within the tourism literature (Decrop and Snelders, 2005; Yuksel and Yuksel, 2002). Segmentation is usually based on demographic, socioeconomic, and psychographic characteristics—all of which have been shown to be associated with differing consumer needs and preferences (González and Santos, 2003). Although other contributions have identified certain segmenting variables that can be

linked to customer satisfaction and future behaviour (Ho, Park and Zhou, 2004; Sun, Wilcox and Zhu, 2004; Senguder, 2003), such studies have been relatively rare. Similarly, there is limited evidence in the literature supporting the notion that customer heterogeneity affects the nature of relationships between providers and customers (Bolton, 1998; Danaher, 1998; Garbarino and Johnson, 1999; DeSarbo, Jedidi and Sinha, 2001).

An important psychological concept in the marketing literature that is relevant to consumer behaviour is the concept of 'involvement' (Van Kehoven, Wijnen and De Wulf, 2002). The 'involvement' can provide a means of segmenting markets in terms of 'highly-involved' tourists and 'low-involved' tourists (Longfellow and Celuch, 1993). The involvement might lead certain tourists to repeat the same type of holidays, but not in the same destination (Bello and Etzel, 1985; Oppermann, 1997). Alternatively, the complexity of a tourism offer might allow certain consumers to repeat their stay at a particular destination. Taking the above arguments into account, we will continue under the following working premise: "different levels of 'involvement' determine the existence of different latent segments in the market".

As a result of the above discussion, the following working hypotheses are presented:

H1: The intensity of the relationship between the destination's image and service quality is moderated by the tourist's involvement.

H2: The intensity of the relationship between the destination's image and satisfaction is moderated by the tourist's involvement.

H3: The intensity of the relationship between service quality and satisfaction is moderated by the tourist's involvement.

H4: The intensity of the relationship between service quality and tourist's future behaviour is moderated by the tourist's involvement.

H5: The intensity of the relationship between satisfaction and tourist's future behaviour is moderated by the tourist's involvement.

H6: The intensity of the relationship between the destination's image and tourist's future behaviour is moderated by the tourist's involvement.

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Scope of the study

Data were collected by means of personal interviews performed by trained interviewers during the first semester in 2005. The population was defined as the tourists who visited a large city in the south of Spain. From this population, a random sample was selected. The sample was representative of the whole population in terms of country of origin and month of visit. We collected a total of 1029 valid questionnaires, from which a 51,8% are male, and a 77% are under 45 years old. In addition, for a 49,7% of the sample is the first visit, while a 51,7% are spaniards and a 29,5% are Europeans.

Measurement tools

To capture tourist's involvement we adapted Ganesh, Arnold and Reynolds (2000) proposal, which distinguish between personal (3 items) and situational (3 items) involvement. Global image is measured by a single individual item, since we aim to explore how it relates to other constructs rather than focusing on it. Following Carman (1990), the present study estimated service quality directly using a single item that compared customers' perceptions against their expectations. The present study estimated customer satisfaction with a single general item, in accordance with previous research in the field (Fornell, 1992; Spreng et al., 1996; Bigné et al., 2001). The construct of 'future behavioral intention' was estimated with two items—(i) intention of repurchase (to return to destin); and (ii) intention to provide positive recommendations (Cronin and Taylor, 1992; Homburg and Giering, 2001; Parasuraman et al., 1991). All these items are 5-degree Likert-type.

Data analysis

Initially we assess the reliability and validity properties of the involvement scale, by means of an exploratory factor analysis and *Crombach's* alpha. Then, we test the developed model by conducting a path analysis. Next, we follow a latent cluster analysis in order to examine the role of tourist's involvement, using three socio-demographic characteristics as covariates: tourist's previous experience in the city (1 = has visited before; 0 = otherwise);

tourist's age (1=under 45; 2= 45-54; 3 = otherwise); tourist's nationality (1= Spaniards, 2 = Europeans; 3 = otherwise). After identifying the latent segments, we explore the differences in terms of tourist's involvement by performing a multi-group analysis. Three software packages were used to apply these techniques: SPSS 14.0, AMOS 6.0, and Latent Gold 4.0.

4. ANALYSIS OF RESULTS

Structural model

The results of the path analysis without considering the market heterogeneity (including the whole sample) are presented in table 2. As can be observed in table 2, considering the whole sample, a destination's perceived image influences both service quality and tourist satisfaction. However, service quality is an antecedent of tourist satisfaction. In addition, service quality and tourist satisfaction are mediators and significant determinants of the intention to revisit the destination or to recommend it to friends and relatives. This evidence is consistent with previous results in the tourism literature (Bigné et al., 2001) and in the services literature (Zins, 2001; Andreassen and Lindestad, 1998). Our results confirm that there is a strong indirect relationship between a destination's image and the future behaviour of tourists, moderated by service quality and tourist satisfaction. In general, the model adjustment is satisfactory.

Market heterogeneity results

The present study speculated that significant differences in the path analysis could be explained by the personal characteristics of tourists (Homburg and Giering, 2001). As noted above, a latent cluster analysis was performed in which, initially, the number of segments was unknown. The basis for segmenting the market is the tourist's involvement (personal and situational) —a psychographic feature of tourists. Following the Bayesian Information Criteria (BIC), the optimal solution identifies three segments (table 1). According to these results, the market could be divided into three latent segments (depending on their personal and situational involvement). The first cluster is the largest (45.58%), collecting those tourists who have a high personal involvement (4.14) and low situational involvement (2.31); this cluster is formed by Spaniards (98.5%) who have formerly visited the city (62.6%). The second cluster in size collects the 40.48% of the sample, tourists who display high personal involvement (4.22) and average situational involvement (2.90); profiling foreign tourists (99%), with no previous visit (73%). The third cluster (14.94%) represents tourists who have high levels of both personal and situational involvement, which its profile is 53% spaniards, 28% Europeans, mainly with a former visit (77%).

Once the clusters had been identified, a multi-group analysis was performed to investigate whether there are significant differences among them in the proposed model. As can be observed in table 2, there are significant differences among the clusters regarding the relationships proposed in the model.

Cluster 1 – national tourists which are highly involved with traveling but not so involved with the city (situational) – are prone to recommend the city if their perceptions regarding service quality, satisfaction, and image are high. Cluster 2 – foreign tourists which are highly involved with traveling but not so involved with the city (situational) – are more likely to recommend as well as come back to the city, supported by their satisfaction with the experience. Cluster 3 – tourists which are highly involved with traveling and also with the city (situational) – are very likely to recommend as well as come back to the city, supported by their image and service quality perceptions of the destination.

According to this finding, the research hypotheses are confirmed.

5. DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

Tourism literature has examined extensively what are the reasons that influence tourists in their destination choices, as well as the stages in the process of tourist behaviour (O'Leary and Deegan, 2005; Petrick, 2004, Reid and Reid, 1993). Recent studies contend that the traveller's decision-making process is influenced by a number of psychological and non-psychological or external variables (Sirakaya and Woodside, 2005). According to Woodside and Dubelaar (2002, p.120), "tourist's decisions and behaviours represent a rich mosaic of relationships among multiple set of variables" (demographic, psychographic, micro and macro

evaluations, and future intentions), which complexity justifies the need for further research on the topic.

Following Sirakaya and Woodside's (2005) guidance for further research regarding traveller's decision making, our research aims to test two specific propositions (first and sixth) raised in their article. The first considers that choices of destinations are affected by a number of psychological or internal variables, provided that decision-making styles are individualistic (Sirakaya et al., 1996). Continuing on this stream of research – initiated by Chen (2003) –, the major contribution of this article is confirming that the market is not only affected, but also heterogeneous in terms of tourist's psychological variables (specifically involvement). The second proposes that different segments might have dissimilar methods of approaching problem solving and the decision-making (Sirakaya and Woodside, 2005). Our results focus attention on the potentially critical importance of a psychological variable and provide credence to backward segmentation theory in tourism research. To date, there have been few studies of the influence that the personal characteristics of consumers might have on future behaviour. The present research makes a significant contribution to the literature on the topic because it explores the influence of a psychographic feature of consumers (involvement). Results have confirmed its relevance.

6. LIMITATIONS OF RESEARCH.

The limitations of the present research provide opportunities for further investigation. It would be desirable to include a comprehensive study of the destination's image, considering both affective and cognitive components to achieve a complete picture of this construct. It can be speculated that the image's loadings on the loyalty chain might increase significantly if affective components were present. Similarly, increasing the size of the sample would allow confirmation of the distribution of the latent clusters and would provide more individuals to allow generalization of the present results.

In terms of involvements for city tourism managers, the existence of different segments of tourists implies a need for different actions—if the objective is to maximize the number of returning tourists to a destination by increasing the unofficial sales force spreading positive word-of-mouth recommendation about the destination, thus attracting new visitors.

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APPENDIX

Personal Involvement Battery

- Travelling is important for me.
- Travelling makes me feel good.
- Visiting new places and cities is important for me.

Situational involvement Battery

- Before making the decision of visiting Seville, I have evaluated and compared different alternatives.
- I have thought carefully the advantages and disadvantages of travelling to Seville.
- After choosing Seville, I have talked about the suitability of this choice to my friends and relatives.

Table 1. Latent cluster analysis						
Bayesian information criteria (BIC)				Three-Clusters Solution		
Model	Likelihood	N° of parameters	BIC		Personal Involvement	Situational Involvement
1 cluster	-3614.53	18	7352.81	Cluster 1°	-3.3753	-2.6299
2 cluster	-3525.60	21	7195.57	Cluster 2°	-3.2439	-2.2485
3 cluster	-3513.73	24	7192.44	Cluster 3°	6.6192	4.8784
4 cluster	-3504.21	27	7194.02	Wald	2.2438	5.3031
5 cluster	-3497.42	30	7201.08	p-value	0.015	0.00
				R ²	0.1524	0.3844
Cluster Profiles						
				Cluster 1°	Cluster 2°	Cluster 3°
Cluster's Size				44.58%	40.48%	14.94%
Personal Involvement (mean)				4.14	4.22	4.99
Situational Involvement (mean)				2.31	2.90	4.99

Table 2. Multigroup Analysis (Standardized loadings, t-values)				
	Whole Sample Model	Cluster 1 Model	Cluster 2 Model	Cluster 3 Model
IMG → SQ	0.32 (9.83)	0.20 (5.7)	0.31 (3.98)	0.40 (3.13)
IMG → SAT	0.17 (5.97)	0.20 (5.0)	NS	NS
IMG → REF	0.26 (7.03)	0.20 (5.7)	0.29 (3.69)	NS
IMG → RET	0.22 (6.32)	0.20 (4.0)	0.24 (3.23)	0.31 (2.79)
SQ → SAT	0.64 (18.56)	0.60 (13.0)	0.48 (5.20)	0.78 (8.34)
SQ → REF	0.09 (7.33)	0.10 (2.6)	NS	0.53 (3.55)
SQ → RET	NS	NS	NS	0.60 (2.97)
SAT → REF	0.30 (7.20)	0.20 (4.0)	0.26 (3.01)	NS
SAT → RET	0.18 (5.51)	NS	0.25 (3.23)	NS
R ² (REF)	0.27	0.20	0.18	0.41
R ² (RET)	0.11	0.02	0.13	0.35
Adjustment measures: X ² = 6.72; DF = 1; GFI = 1.00; AGFI = 0.93; RMR = 0.02; RMSEA = 0.07				
Multigroup Adjustment Measures				
	GFI	RMR	RMSEA	ACVI
Unconstrained	1.00	0.00		90.00
Structural weights	0.96	0.07	0.05	109.82
Structural covariances	0.94	0.08	0.06	145.93
Structural residuals	0.82	0.13	0.09	298.44
Critical Differences Among Groups (t-values)				
	Cluster 1-Cluster 2	Cluster 1-Cluster 3	Cluster 2-Cluster 3	
IMG → SQ	NS	NS	-3.40	
IMG → SAT	NS	NS	-3.20	
IMG → REF	NS	-1.96	NS	
IMG → RET	NS	NS	NS	
SQ → SAT	NS	2.60	3.80	
SQ → REF	NS	1.96	NS	
SQ → RET	NS	2.40	2.90	
SAT → REF	NS	-2.00	NS	
SAT → RET	2.5	NS	-2.00	

NOTES: IMG: Destination's Image; SQ: Service Quality; SAT: Tourist's Satisfaction; REF: Referrals of destination; RET: Return to the destination; NS: non significant.