Do Blue Flag promotions influence tourists' willingness to pay a price premium for coastal destinations?

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ABSTRACT

The Blue Flag is a popular eco-label in tourism. This study aims at examining the effectiveness of Blue Flag promotion on tourists' willingness to pay a price premium to coastal destinations via two online experiments. Study 1 shows (n = 152) that the Blue Flag stimulates higher willingness to pay a price premium for coastal destinations directly as well as indirectly through self-congruity and destination brand identification. Study 2 (n = 160) used a new sample to enhance external validity and generalizability of the Study 1 findings. Study 2 shows that destination brand quality and destination brand identification serially mediate the effect of Blue Flag promotions on the tourist's willingness to pay a price premium. The findings suggest that destination managers should deploy the Blue Flag Logo in destination promotions to enhance self-congruence, destination brand identification, perceived destination quality, and the tourist's willingness to pay a price premium.

1. Introduction

The United Nation World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) 2030 Agenda, specifically Goals 8, 12, and 14, acknowledges the urgency of implementing the UN's 17 Sustainable Development Goals (UNWTO, 2020) in tourism. Destination brands utilize the Blue Flag certificate for environmental protection and sustainable destination brand campaigns (Barbulescu, Moraru, & Duhnea, 2019). Accordingly, destination marketers put significant efforts into attaining of the Blue Flag certificate. A total of 4831 beaches, marinas and tourism boats received the Blue Flag across 50 countries in 2022 (blueflag.global). The certificate would appear to contribute coastal destination sustainability, destination brand image and destination competitiveness, in general (Dodds & Holmes, 2020; Klein & Dodds, 2018) as well as the tourist's intention to visit the destination, in particular (McKenna, Williams, & Cooper, 2011; Sipic, 2017).

Despite acknowledging the significance of Blue Flag accreditation to the tourism industry, research on whether destinations can benefit from Blue Flag marketing campaigns is lacking (Bucar, Hendija, & Katic, 2022). The extant tourism research has mostly been focused on coastal management and the tourist's attitudes towards the Blue Flag (e.g., Fraguell, Marti, Pinto, & Coenders, 2016; Lucrezi, Saayman, & Van der Merwe, 2015; Merino & Prats, 2022a). Capacci, Scorcu, and Vici (2015)

state that Blue Flag certification has influenced international travel flow within Italy, but has not had any impact on inbound travel. Klein and Dodds (2018) argue that the Blue Flag could be useful for destination marketing, but they provide no empirical evidence to support this suggestion. According to Dodds and Holmes (2020), the Blue Flag signals destination quality, destination differentiation and destination loyalty. Despite being used in marketing campaigns, there is no consensus on whether Blue Flag promotion influences tourists' behavioral responses towards coastal destinations (Castillo-Manzano, Castro-Nuno, Lopez-Valpuesta, & Zarzoso, 2021). The aim of the research is two-fold. Firstly, investigating the effect of Blue Flag promotion on the tourist's Willingness to Pay a Price Premium (WPPP) for coastal tourism destinations and secondly, identifying the underpinning mechanisms of that response. Specifically, the study examines whether self-congruity, Destination Brand Quality (DBQ), and Destination Brand Identification (DBI) mediate the effect of Blue Flag promotion on the tourist's WPPP. Online experiments were employed to test such effects using two tourism destinations awarded with Blue Flag certification. We selected destinations that are popular in terms of the Blue Flag awards and international tourist arrivals. Study 1 assessed the effect of Blue Flag promotion on the tourist's WPPP and the underpinning mechanisms behind this effect via self-congruity and DBI in Marmaris, Turkiye. Study 2 involved examining the robustness of the Study 1 findings as well as

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the mediating effect of DBQ on the relationship between Blue Flag promotion and WPPP in Malaga, Spain.

The current research makes three contributions to tourism literature. Firstly, it involves investigating whether the Blue Flag acts as a signal for influencing the tourist's WPPP for coastal destinations based upon the signaling theory (Connelly, Certo, Ireland, & Reutzel, 2011). Hence, the study determines whether coastal destination brands should promote the Blue Flag as a sustainability signal for motivating the tourist's WPPP. This is important, because the visitor's WPPP is a growing marketing challenge for coastal destination brands (Lucrezi & Van der Merwe, 2015). The Blue Flag award has the potential for promoting sustainability (Lissner & Mayer, 2020) and eliciting WPPP; however, theoretical and empirical research supporting this proposition is lacking (Halkos & Matsiori, 2012; Sipic, 2017).

Secondly, the research investigates whether Blue Flag promotion contributes to symbolic consumption of coastal destination brands. Consumers select brands for satisfying their basic (functional) and higher (psychological, social) needs (Tangsupwattana & Liu, 2018). When doing so, destination brands evoke symbolic (i.e., self-congruity, destination brand identification) and functional (i.e., quality) benefits (Nam, Ekinci, & Whyatt, 2011) for them. Symbolic benefits (i.e., visiting a destination with Blue Flag certification) can facilitate self-expression (Roy & Rabbanee, 2015; Tan, Salo, Juntunen, & Kumar, 2019), social identity construction (Stokburger-Sauer, Ratneshwar, & Sen, 2012) and thereby, influence the tourist's WPPP (Wijnands & Gill, 2020). However, to our knowledge, no research has tested this assumption within the destination branding context.

Thirdly, the study determines whether Blue Flag promotion contributes to the perceived quality of the coastal destination brand. As prior research has indicated that consumers pay higher prices for quality products endorsed by ecolabels, understanding of the tourist's attitudes towards DBQ and WPPP is crucial for destination marketers (Dekhili & Achabou, 2014; D'Souza, Taghian, Lamb, & Peretiatko, 2007). Hence, the study examines whether DBQ and DBI serially mediate the effect of Blue Flag promotion on the tourist's WPPP.

2. Theoretical background and research hypotheses

2.1. Ecolabelling & The Blue Flag

Ecolabeling refers to a certification program for environmental protection (Basu, Chau, & Grote, 2003). Brands acquire eco-labels to protect the environment as well as to promote the brand's sustainable image (Ferreira & Fernandes, 2022). In the tourism domain, ecolabelling refers to a certification program for protecting the destination's environment (Fairweather, Maslin, & Simmons, 2005; Sasidharan, Sirakaya, & Kerstetter, 2002).

The Denmark-based Foundation for Environmental Education awards the Blue Flag for beaches, marinas, and tourist boats. For coastal destinations, Blue Flag applicants must comply with 33 criteria regarding environmental education and information, water quality, environmental management, site safety and services (blueflag.global). The Blue Flag award contributes to the UN's Sustainable Development Goals, because it motivates travelers to engage in protecting the destination's eco system (e.g., reducing carbon footprint, supporting local green activities, informational board in beaches) and creates awareness about sustainable tourism (Castillo-Manzano et al., 2021; Geldenhuys and Van Der Merwe, 2014; Lucrezi et al., 2015).

2.2. Self-congruity

Self-concept refers to individuals' subjective evaluation of themselves, whilst self-congruity refers to the matching between their self-concept and perceived image of the product or brand (i.e., destination brand) (Bosnjak, Sirgy, Hellriegel, & Maurer, 2011). In other words, self-congruity is the people's subjective assessment of the similarity

between self-image and brand image.

Different types of self-congruity exist based on four types of self-concept: actual, ideal, social, and ideal social (Sirgy, Grewal, Mangleburg, Park, & Chon, 1997). The foremost pertains to how individuals actually see themselves, whereas ideal self is about how they would like to see themselves. Social self pertains to how people think others see them, whilst ideal social self refers to how people would like to be seen by others (Sirgy, 2018). Actual and ideal self-congruity are deemed to be more relevant to this research as they influence tourist behavior (Ekinci, Dawes, & Massey, 2008; Ekinci & Riley, 2003; Hosany & Martin, 2012). In the tourism destination context, actual self-congruity is the degree of match between the tourist's self-image and destination brand image, whereas ideal self-congruity is the degree of match between their ideal self-image and destination brand image.

2.3. Destination brand identification

Brand identification is drawn from social identity theory, which states that individuals define social identity by associating themselves with specific reference groups (Tajfel & Turner, 1986). Social identity is constructed when people comply with group norms (So, King, Hudson, & Meng, 2017). Such identification results in affinity with the social group ('in-group') that people wish to associate with and distance from those they do not wish to do so ('out group[s]'). Social identification with a specific social group enhances the individual's self-esteem (Bergami & Bagozzi, 2000).

Brand identification is a subcategory of social identification, which signals individuals' belongingness to social groups via associating themselves with a brand or purchasing it (Berrozpe, Campo, & Yagüe, 2019; Liu, Chiu, Wang, & Wen-Shiung, 2020). Brand identification is a key driver for strong customer-brand relationships (Kim, Han, & Park, 2001; Tuškej, Golob, & Podnar, 2013). Despite the importance of brand identification for the guest-host-relationship in tourism, understanding of such a relationship has received scant attention in the destination branding literature (Berrozpe et al., 2019; Kumar & Kaushik, 2020). From a tourist's point of view, destination brand identification occurs when tourists associate/disassociate themselves with a specific social group or have willingness to visit a destination favored by that group (Ekinci, Sirakaya-Turk, & Preciado, 2013).

2.4. Destination brand quality

Quality is difficult to define as it involves individuals' subjective evaluation of goods and services (Gartner & Ruzzier, 2011). Perceived quality is "the consumer's judgment about a product's overall excellence or superiority" (Zeithalm, 1988, p. 3). Tourism scholars suggest that perceived quality is a salient component of consumer-based brand equity and destination competitiveness (Tasci, 2018). According to Kim, Han, Holland, and Byon (2009), destination quality is the overall value of a destination. From a tourist's perspective, DBQ refers to reliability and safety of the destination's products and services (e.g., infrastructure, accommodation, hospitality services, and/or amenities) (Tran, Nguyen, Tran, Tran, & Huynh, 2019). Aligned with Kim and Lee (2018), DBQ is the tourist's judgments about the overall excellence of the destination's products and services.

2.5. Willingness to pay a price premium

A price premium is achieved when consumers are willing to pay more for a brand than its alternatives (Netemeyer et al., 2004). WPPP reflects that the brand is powerful and competitive in the eye of the consumer (Augusto & Torres, 2018). Price premium is associated with brand equity and brand loyalty (Li, Li, & Kambele, 2012; Casidy & Wymer, 2016). Tourists will pay a premium price to appreciate the destination product quality and sustainable brand image (Birdir, Unal, Birdir, & Williams, 2013; Pulido-Fernandez & Lopez-Sanchez, 2016).

2.6. Research hypotheses

2.6.1. Blue Flag promotion and willingness to pay a price premium

Prior research has found that tourists pay a price premium for sustainable tourism products (Jurado-Rivas & Sanchez-Rivero, 2019). For example, Nelson, Partelow, Stabler, Graci, and Fujitani (2021) argue that 'green' certification schemes influence tourists' willingness to pay more for eco-friendly hotels. Lissner and Mayer (2020) state that Blue Flag certification promotes sustainable cruise boats. Likewise, we expect that the Blue Flag Label promotes a sustainable destination image and fosters the tourist's WPPP. Hence, the more tourists appreciate the destination's compliance with the environment friendly regulation, the higher the willingness to pay more. Accordingly, we propose that:

H1. Blue Flag promotion has a positive effect on WPPP.

2.6.2. Self-congruity as a mediator between Blue Flag promotion and willingness to pay a price premium

Symbolic product benefits influence the consumer's willingness to purchase (Aw, Flynn, & Chong, 2019; Gbadamosi, 2015). Since the Blue Flag signals the destination symbolic benefits and eco-friendly tourist image, it is likely to stimulate self-congruity and symbolic consumption behavior (Ekinci et al., 2008; Gazley & Watling, 2015). Self-congruity has desirable outcomes, such as self-expression, positive attitudes towards brands, and purchase intentions (Aguirre-Rodriguez, Bosnjak, & Sirgy, 2012). He and Brown (2013) show that actual and ideal self-congruity determine tourist satisfaction. Ekinci and Riley (2003) support that actual and ideal self-congruity influence the consumer's purchase intentions. Usakli and Baloglu (2011) find that self-congruity influences the tourist's intention to revisit and recommend destinations. Moons, De Pelsmacker, and Barbarossa (2020) demonstrate that actual and ideal self-congruity are positively associated with willingness to pay more for ecotourism products. Likewise, Blue Flag promotion enhances the tourist's self-congruity and in turn, triggers higher WPPP for sustainable destination products and services. Accordingly, we state that:

H2. Self-congruity mediates the relationship between Blue Flag promotion and WPPP.

2.6.3. Destination brand identification as a mediator between Blue Flag promotion and willingness to pay a price premium

Brands can be facilitators for constructing and expressing social identity (Lam, Ahearne, Hu, & Schillewaert, 2010). Extant literature shows that when consumers utilize social and psychological benefits via associating themselves with a particular brand, their willingness to develop a relationship with that brand is enhanced (Elbedweihy et al., 2016). A destination brand featured with a Blue Flag logo is a symbol of sustainable tourism and protecting destination environment. Intentions to visit such destinations could facilitate the tourist's belongingness to a particular social group (Ekinci et al., 2013). Hence, the inclusion of the Blue Flag in the destination's marketing communications can stimulate tourists' social identity via associating themselves with a social group that cares about a sustainable destination environment.

Consumers with stronger brand identification exhibit outcomes such as brand loyalty, brand commitment, and willingness to pay more (Underwood, Bond, & Baer, 2001; Berrozpe et al., 2019; Liu et al., 2020). As stated by Augusto and Torres (2018), consumer brand identification can strengthen the consumer-brand relationship and the brand's capability to charge a price premium. Based on the above arguments, it would be reasonable to state that Blue Flag promotion positively influences the tourist's DBI and in turn, WPPP (Berrozpe et al., 2019). Thus, we propose that:

H3. DBI mediates the relationship between Blue Flag promotion and WPPP.

2.6.4. Serial mediators: self-congruity and destination brand identification

Brand identification is different to brand self-congruity (Kumar & Kaushik, 2020; Liu et al., 2020). In the tourism context, self-congruity refers to the tourist's self-identity whereas DBI pertains to their social identity (Ekinci et al., 2013). Hence, brand identification occurs via associating social-self with brand image, whereas self-congruity occurs via associating actual or ideal self-image with brand image.

Consumers exhibit their self-image, lifestyles and social identity via symbolic consumption of brands (Bhattacharya & Sen, 2003; Merk & Michel, 2019; Red II et al., 2012; Tangsupwattana & Liu, 2018). Sustainable consumption – a form of symbolic consumption - allows consumers to construct their social identity or exhibit their social status (Moons et al., 2020). Consistent with social identity theory, brands are facilitators for constructing and maintaining self-concept and social identity (Bhattacharya & Sen, 2003). Given that brands transfer symbolic meanings, opting for a specific brand not only associates/disassociates individuals with a particular social group (Slater, 1997), but also, satisfies the consumer's self-identity and self-consistency needs (Lam, Ahearne, Mullins, Hayati, & Schillewaert, 2013). Similarly, tourists prefer to visit destinations with the Blue Flag for accomplishing socially approved norms and self-consistency needs (Huang, Zhang, & Hu, 2017). The extant literature shows that the stronger the consumer-brand identification, the higher the acceptance of a price premium (Augusto & Torres, 2018). Considering the above argument, we propose that:

H4. Self-congruity and DBI serially mediate the relationship between Blue Flag promotion and WPPP.

2.6.5. Destination brand quality as a mediator between Blue Flag promotion and willingness to pay a price premium

Consumers favor brands not only for satisfying their symbolic needs, but also, for functional ones (Coelhom, Bairrada, & de Matos Coelho, 2020). Perceived quality of the product that conveys functional benefits of the product positively influences the consumer's WPPP (Beneke, Flynn, Greig, & Mukaiwa, 2013). Blue Flag certification signals the quality of the destination products and satisfies the tourist's functional needs (e.g., reliability, safety). Previous research supports that destination quality influences destination brand image (Kim & Lee, 2018), the tourist's attitudes towards the destination (Dedeoglu, 2019) as well as WPPP for sustainable tourism products and services (Pulido-Fernandez and Lopez-Sanchez, 2016; Jurado-Rivas & Sanchez-Rivero, 2019). Given that the Blue Flag is the most recognized quality award for sustainable tourism products, we expect that including it on the destination's advertisement will most likely enhance perceived quality of the destination and in turn, influence the tourist's WPPP. Accordingly, we hypothesize that:

H5. DBQ mediates the relationship between Blue Flag promotion and WPPP.

2.6.6. Serial mediators: destination brand quality and destination brand identification

Consumers face challenges when assessing product quality. They often rely on extrinsic signals for assessing it when there is asymmetric information. Accordingly, brands employ well-known quality certifications, such as ISO9001, CE marking in Europe and FDA certification in USA (Clever Compliance, n. d.) to influence the perceived quality of the product. Capacci et al. (2015, p. 88) state that "tourism destinations increasingly use signals that certify and communicate the quality provided in order to gain a competitive advantage over competitors". The

Blue Flag is one of the most recognized quality symbols in tourism. Those destinations with its certification signal higher perception of destination quality (e.g., cleaner sea water, safer beaches) compared to their competitors that have no Blue Flags (Merino and Prats, 2022a, 2022b).

As discussed earlier, social identity theory posits that individuals tend to construct their social identity via associating themselves with a social group, organization and/or brand. The Blue Flag award can help tourists identify themselves with a social group who value good quality products and care about a clean environment. Hence, we expect that DBQ motivates consumers to identify themselves with the destination brand that has good quality attributes and sustainable images, which, in turn, enhances WPPP (Farzin et al., 2022; Torres, Augusto, & Wallce, 2018). We propose the following hypothesis:

H6. DBQ and DBI sequentially mediate the relationship between Blue Flag promotion and WPPP.

As shown in Fig. 1, we posit that Blue Flag promotion influences WPPP directly (H1), and then, through self-congruity (H2), DBI (H3) and DBQ (H5). As discussed earlier, the research model includes two serial mediators: self-congruity - DBI (H4) and DBQ - DBI (H6).

To test the above hypotheses and examine the effect of the Blue Flag on the aforementioned variables using experimental research design. In a typical experimental research, all the environmental conditions are controlled to make sure that the only difference between the control and treatment group is the manipulated variable (Viglia & Dolnicar, 2020). In our case, we manipulated the independent variable: a destination advertisement with and without Blue Flag promotion. Accordingly, the control group included a destination image and narrative without the Blue Flag Logo, whilst the treatment group included the same destination narrative, destination image with the Blue Flag Logo and a narrative of Blue Flag certification. We also conducted a follow up experiment to examine the robustness of the study findings. As can be seen from Fig. 1, Study 1 tested the effect of Blue Flag promotion on WPPP by using an image of Marmaris, which is a popular seaside resort in Turkiye, as stimuli. Also, Study 1 examined the mediating role of self-congruity and

DBI on the relationship between Blue Flag promotion and WPPP. Turkiye was chosen due to a number of reasons. Turkiye has the third highest number of Blue Flag awards in the world in 2022 (blueflag. global) and she was ranked fourth in terms of international tourist arrivals in 2021 (UNWTO, 2022).

We followed the recommendation by Winer (1999) and Lynch Jr. (1982) to enhance external validity and generalizability of the research findings. Accordingly, we included multiple studies with different respondents and destination brands to replicate the Study 1 findings as well as testing a new hypothesis. Consequently, Study 2 involved investigating the serial mediating role of DBQ and DBI on the relationship between Blue Flag promotion and WPPP. In order to achieve behavioral realism in the experiment, respondents were directed to a real destination webpage created for the experiment. For Study 2 Malaga - a popular seaside resort destination in Spain - was used. Spain was chosen because she has the highest number of Blue Flags in the world in 2022 (blueflag.global) and was ranked third in terms of international tourist arrivals in 2021 (UNWTO, 2022).

3. Study 1

For Study 1, the aim was to determine whether Blue Flag promotion fosters WPPP directly (H1) as well as indirectly through self-congruity (H2), DBI (H3) as well as jointly (H4).

3.1. Method

For this study, a between-subjects experimental design was applied as shown in Fig. 2 Respondents in the control group viewed a mock advertising banner of Marmaris, including a beach pin and Marmaris logo. The treatment group saw the same advertising banner as well as the Blue Flag logo and the description of the Blue Flag. Before being exposed to the advertising banner, the control group read a short description of Marmaris, whereas the treatment group read the same description and the Blue Flag description. Both descriptions were taken from the official websites (gomarmaristurkiye.com; blueflag.global) to
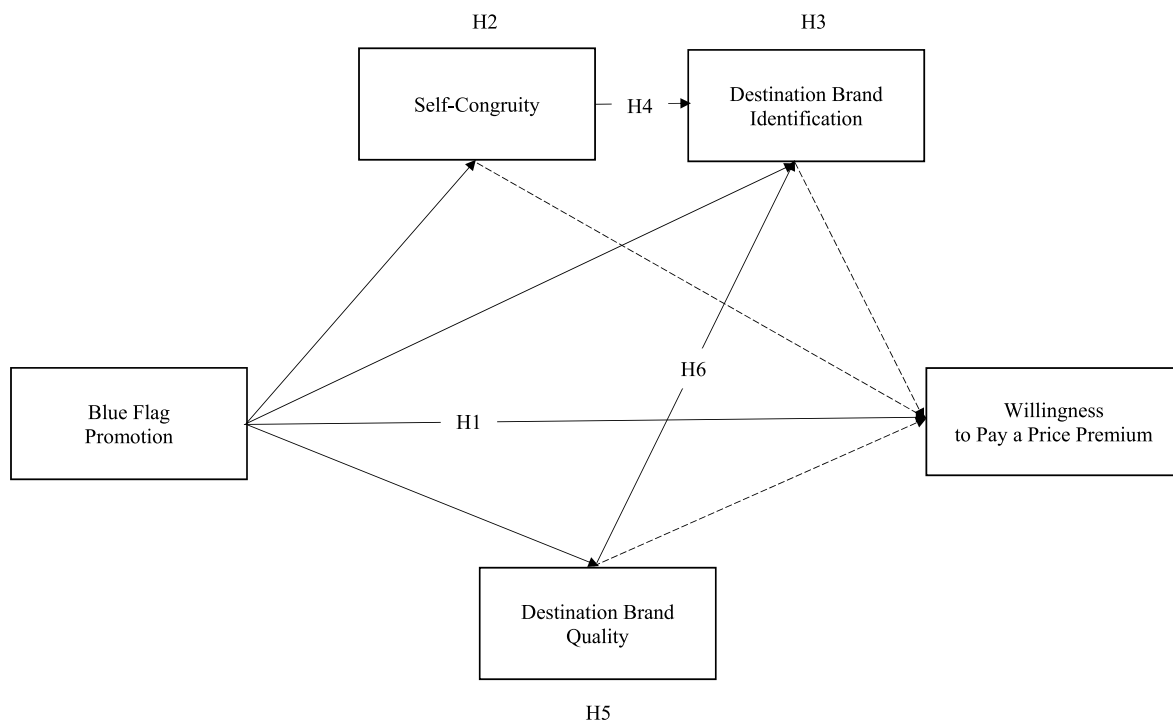

Fig. 1. Research model.

Fig. 2. Stimulus for study 1.

provide basic information about the destination and the Blue Flag certification.

The measurement scales have been adopted from previous research. Respondents' familiarity with the destination was assessed with three-items ($\alpha = 0.92$) (e.g., "I recognize Marmaris as a tourism destination") taken from Mikhailitchenko, Javalgi, Mikhailichenko, and Laroche (2009). WPPP for a destination was measured with three items ($\alpha = .89$) (Netemeyer et al., 2004), self-congruity with six items ($\alpha = 0.96$) (Japutra, Ekinci, & Simkin, 2019), and DBI with three items ($\alpha = 0.91$) (Ekinci et al., 2013) (See Appendix 1). Respondents in the treatment group also assessed whether Blue Flag certification is associated with Marmaris. A 7-point Likert-type scale (1 = strongly disagree and 7 = strongly agree) was used for all measurement items. The final part of the research instrument included socio-demographic questions (i.e., age, gender, and household income).

We pre-tested the research instrument with 46 participants (Female 52.2%, $M_{age} = 48$) recruited from Prolific. ac, which is a reliable crowdsourcing platform for social experiments (Palan & Schitter, 2018). Respondents reported that Blue Flag certification is strongly associated with Marmaris ($M = 5.96$). The results also confirmed clarity of the stimulus, reliability and validity of the measurement scales.

For the main study, 152 British people aged 18 years or older were recruited via Prolific. ac in May 2022. Equal numbers of participants were randomly assigned to the control and treatment groups. The sample size for each group exceeded the minimum number of people (20 per cell) required for experiments (Simmons, Nelson, & Simonsohn, 2016). We utilized an independent sample *t*-test for testing the main relationship and the PROCESS macro model for serial mediation, with 5000 bootstrapped samples (Model 6, Hayes, 2018).

3.2. Results

Manipulation checks: Before running the main analysis to test the proposed hypotheses, we performed a series of manipulation checks. Independent sample *t*-test results indicated that there was no statistically significant difference between control and treatment group in terms of familiarity with Marmaris (*M-control* = 3.24, *SD* = 2.10, *M-treatment* =

3.69, $SD = 2.12$, $t(150) = 0.035$, $p = .19$). The treatment group reported that the association between the Blue Flag and Marmaris is strong ($M = 5.77$, $SD = 1.09$).

Respondents' Profile: In study 1, the participants were almost equally distributed in terms of gender. The majority of them were aged between 26 and 35 (27.6%), with an income level of $20,000–39,999 (38.2%) (See Appendix 2).

We conducted an independent samples *t*-test to examine whether the participants' WPPP for Marmaris differed between the control and treatment group. The results reveal that the treatment group ($M = 3.65$, $SD = 1.14$) had much higher WPPP than the control group ($M = 2.89$, $SD = 1.19$), $t(150) = 0.69$, $p < .001$). The PROCESS macro analysis confirmed that the total effect of the Blue Flag promotion on WPPP (c') is stronger ($\beta = 0.43$, $SE = 0.17$, $p = .01$), thus supporting H1 (See Table 1).

In order to test the effect of Blue Flag promotion on self-congruity and DBI, we conducted an independent samples *t*-test to examine whether the control and treatment groups' mean scores were different. As expected, the results reveal that participants in the treatment group had higher self-congruity ($M_{TG} = 3.84$, $M_{CG} = 3.30$, $p = .01$), and DBI ($M_{TG} = 2.40$, $M_{CG} = 1.85$, $p = .01$) than the control group. The results support that Blue Flag promotion had a direct impact on these variables.

H2 states that self-congruity mediates the path between Blue Flag Label promotion and WPPP. Table 2 shows the mediating effects of self-congruity and DBI on the relationship between the Blue Flag and WPPP.

Table 2
A Serial Mediation Analysis of Self-Congruity and DBI on the relationship between Blue Flag and WPPP.

Indirect Effect(s) of Self-Congruity and DBI on WPPP	Effect	SE	BootLLCI	BootULCI
Total Indirect Effects	.34	.11	.1280	.5691
The Blue Flag → Self-Congruity → WPPP	.20	.08	.0520	.3782
The Blue Flag → DBI → WPPP	.08	.05	.0013	.1922
The Blue Flag → Self-Congruity → DBI → WPPP	.06	.03	.0086	.1369

Table 1
Model summary information for the serial mediator model.

Antecedent		M1 (Self-Congruity)				M2 (DBI)				Y (WPPP)		
Consequent												
		Coeff.	*SE*	p		Coeff.	SE	p		Coeff.	SE	p
X (The Blue Flag)	a_1	.54	.20	.009	a_2	.32	.15	.04	c'	.43	.17	.01
M1 (Self-Congruity)		–	–	–	d_{21}	.43	.06	<.001	b_1	.37	.07	<.001
M2 (DBI)		–	–	–		–	–	–	b_2	.25	.09	.004
Constant	i_{M1}	3.29	.14	<.001	i_{M2}	.44	.23	.05	i_Y	1.21	.24	<.001
		$R^2 = .05$				$R^2 = .30$				$R^2 = .37$		
		$F(1, 150) = 7.02, p = .009$				$F(2, 149) = 32.08, p = <.001$				$F(3, 148) = 29.18, p = <.001$		

The results show the hypothesized relationship to be statistically significant, thus supporting H2 (Effect = .20, 95% CI: 0.0520, 0.3782). The unstandardized indirect effect of the Blue Flag on WPPP through DBI is also statistically significant and hence, H3 is also supported (Effect = .08, 95% CI: 0.0013, 0.1922).

The serial mediation analysis results suggest that the Blue Flag is positively associated with WPPP through self-congruity and DBI, thus supporting H4 (Effect = .06, 95% CI: 0.0086, 0.1369). That is, self-congruity and DBI serve as partial mediators between Blue Flag promotion and WPPP.

4. Study 2

The aim of Study 2 was to examine the external validity of the Study 1 findings with a new consumer sample and destination brand as well as testing H5 and H6. As aforementioned, for Study 2, Malaga in Spain was used as the new stimulus and perceived DBQ was measured in addition to other variables used in Study 1 (See Appendixes 1 & 3).

4.1. Method

Similar to Study 1, a between-subjects online experimental design was employed. Study 2 involved exploring the participants' response to a destination website created in order to maximize the experiment's behavioral realism. Accordingly, we introduced two destination websites for Malaga. The control group viewed an image of the city and its official logo. Respondents read a short description of Malaga that was adopted from the Malaga Tourist Board's official website (visita.malaga. eu). The treatment group saw the same image of Malaga as well as the Blue Flag, description of Malaga, and a description of the Blue Flag (Appendix 3). The measurement scales appeared after a while viewing the destination image to make sure that the participants had enough time to read the description of Malaga and the Blue Flag. We also checked whether the manipulations were appropriate using a pre-testing study with 46 participants recruited from an online survey platform: prolific. co. Participants agreed that the destination websites were realistic (Control condition: n = 24, M = 4.42; Treatment condition: n = 22, M = 4.36) and the Blue Flag was highly associated with Malaga (M = 5.27). The pre-test results confirmed the appropriateness of the destination websites for the experiment.

For the main study, a total of 160 participants were recruited in July 2022, who were 18 years or older residing in the United Kingdom. Equal numbers of participants were randomly assigned to the control and treatment groups using Prolific. First of all, respondents rated their familiarity with Malaga. Then, they were directed to the destination website created. Having visited the Malaga website, they read the

description of the city, the Blue Flag description and rated the same statements about self-congruity, DBI and WPPP used in Study 1. Finally, respondents were asked to rate DBQ with a four item-scale adopted from Buil, de Chernatony, and Martinez (2008) (See Appendix 1). We tested the research hypotheses through an independent sample t-test and PROCESS macro serial mediation analysis with the 5000 bootstrapped samples (Model 6, Hayes, 2018).

4.2. Results

Respondents' Profile: The sample was evenly divided between males (49.3%) and females (50%). A large portion of the respondents were 26–35 years old (31.3%) and received a household income between $ 20,000 and $39,999 (32.5%) (See Appendix 2).

The independent samples t-test results indicated that there was no statistically significant difference in the mean scores of familiarity with Malaga between the control (M = 5.35, SD = 1.33) and the treatment groups (M = 5.32, SD = 1.39, t(160) = 0.019, p = .88). We also conducted an independent samples t-test to examine whether the participants' WPPP for Malaga differs between the control and the treatment group. The results indicate that respondents in the treatment group (M = 3.50, SD = 1.19) had stronger WPPP than the control one (M = 2.66, SD = 1.01, t(160) = 1.40, p < .001). The PROCESS macro analysis confirmed that the total effect of the Blue Flag on WPPP (c'), (β = 0.34, SE = 0.15, p = .03), thus providing additional support for H1 (See Table 3).

We conducted an independent samples t-test to examine whether participants evaluations on WPPP towards the destination, DBQ, and DBI differ between the control and the treatment group. The results reveal that participants in the treatment group had greater WPPP (Mc-WPPP = 2.71, Mt-WPPP1 = 3.45, p < .01), destination brand quality

Table 4
Serial Mediation Analysis of Self-Congruity and DBI on the relationship between Blue Flag promotion and WPPP.

Indirect Effect(s) of Self-Congruity, DBQ, and DBI on WPPP	Effect	SE	BootLLCI	BootULCI
Total Indirect Effects (Model 1)	.51	.12	.2887	.7976
The Blue Flag → Self-Congruity → WPPP	.35	.10	.1635	.5770
The Blue Flag → DBI → WPPP	.10	.05	.0127	.2075
The Blue Flag → Self-Congruity → DBI → WPPP	.07	.03	.0240	.1361
Total Indirect Effects (Model 2)	.50	.11	.2969	.7170
The Blue Flag → DBQ → WPPP	.24	.07	.1111	.3986
The Blue Flag → DBI → WPPP	.18	.07	.0551	.3276
The Blue Flag → DBQ → DBI → WPPP	.07	.03	.0257	.1299

Table 3
Self-congruity, DBI and DBQ: Model summary information for the serial mediator model.

Consequent												
Antecedent		M1 (Self-Congruity)				M2 (DBI)				Y (WPPP)		
		Coeff.	SE	p		Coeff.	SE	P		Coeff.	SE	p
X (The Blue Flag) (Model 1)	a₁	.81	.21	<.001	a₂	.39	.21	.02	c'	.33	.14	.02
M1 (Self-Congruity)		–	–	–	d₂₁	.36	.16	<.001	b₁	.43	.06	<.001
M2 (DBI)		–	–	–		–	–	–	b₂	.25	.07	<.001
Constant	i_M1	3.16	.15	<.001	i_M2	.47	.22	.03	i_Y	.91	.19	<.001
		$R^2 = .09$				$R^2 = .26$				$R^2 = .49$		
		$F(1, 160) = 15.93, p = <.001$				$F(2, 159) = 28.57, p = <.001$				$F(3, 158) = 50.89, p = <.001$		
		M1 (DBQ)				M2 (DBI)				Y (WPPP)		
X (The Blue Flag) (Model 2)	a₁	.61	.15	<.001	a₂	.49	.17	.004	c'	.34	.15	.03
M1 (DBQ)		–	–	–	d₂₁	.30	.08	<.001	b₁	.40	.08	<.001
M2 (DBI)		–	–	–		–	–	–	b₂	.38	.07	<.001
Constant	i_M1	4.57	.11	<.001	i_M2	.21	.40	.60	i_Y	.25	.35	.48
		$R^2 = .09$				$R^2 = .16$				$R^2 = .41$		
		$F(1, 160) = 15.93, p = <.001$				$F(2, 159) = 15.46, p = <.001$				$F(3, 158) = 36.63, p = <.001$		

(Mc-$_{DBQ}$ = 4.58, Mt_{DBQ} = 5.16, $p < .01$), and destination brand identification (Mc-$_{DBI}$ = 1.64, Mt-$_{DBI}$ = 2.20, $p < .01$) than the control group.

We also conducted serial mediation analysis (Hayes, 2018, Model 6, n = 5000 bootstrapped samples) to check the effect of the sequential mediator in the proposed model. As shown in Table 4, the bootstrapping analysis confirmed that the indirect effect of Blue Flag promotion → self-congruity → WPPP is statistically significant (Effect = 0.35, 95% CI ranging from 0.16 to 58), which supports H2 and the indirect effect of Blue Flag promotion → DBI →WPPP is statistically significant (Effect = 0.10, 95% CI ranging from 0.01 to 0.21), which supports H3. The indirect effect of the Blue Flag → self-congruity → DBI → WPPP was also statistically significant (Effect = 0.07, 95% CI ranging from 0.02 to 0.14), which supports H4.

As can be seen in Table 4, the results indicate that the indirect effect of the Blue Flag → DBQ → WPPP is statistically significant (Effect = 0.24, 95% CI ranging from 0.11 to 40), which supports H5. Since the indirect effect of Blue Flag promotion → DBI → WPPP is statistically significant (Effect = 0.18, 95% CI ranging from 0.06 to 0.33), H3 is confirmed. The results also confirm H6, as the indirect effect of the Blue Flag → DBQ → DBI → WPPP is statistically significant (Effect = 0.07, 95% CI ranging from 0.03 to 0.13). When we added the tourist's familiarity with the destination to the model as a covariate, the results did not change.

To sum up, the findings support that Blue Flag promotion has positive effects on DBQ and DBI, which in turn, foster a greater WPPP. Also, DBQ and DBI serially mediate the relationship between Blue Flag promotion and the tourist's WPPP for a coastal destination.

5. Discussion and implications

The present study provides rare empirical support for the effect of the ecolabelling promotion (i.e., The Blue Flag) on the tourist's WPPP for coastal destinations through an experimental research design. To the best of our knowledge, this is the first experiment aimed at examining the potential mechanisms underpinning the effectiveness of Blue Flag promotion in destination branding contexts. Hence, the implications pertain to the advancement of knowledge on quality certification in tourism and sustainable destination brand management.

As the study findings support the effect of Blue Flag promotion on tourists' WPPP, the results corroborate the recent literature that advocates the use of the Blue Flag for environmental certification, marketing symbol and destination branding. For example, Capacci et al. (2015) revealed that Blue Flag certification attracts international tourist flow to coastal destinations. Lucrezi et al. (2015) concluded that tourists and destination managers have a positive attitude towards the Blue Flag as it is a symbol of destination cleanliness and safety. Geldenhuys and Van Der Merwe (2014) acknowledged the environmental impact of the Blue Flag, but they concluded that investigating the effect of Blue Flag promotion on the tourist's decision making was limited. Pencarelli, Splendiani, and Fraboni (2016) stated that were potential benefits of Blue Flag certification for marketing communication and favorable destination brand image. However, none of the previous studies established the effect of Blue Flag promotion on tourist behavior through experimental methods (Zellmer-Bruhn, Caligiuri, & Thomas, 2016). Hence, our study has addressed this limitation within coastal destination brands.

The current study also responded Tolkes (2018), who called for experimental research for assessing persuasive communicating strategies and sustainable messaging in tourism. According to Bernini and Cerqua (2020), there is no general consensus about the effectiveness of Blue Flag promotion and its impact on tourism demand. That is, while some studies have found evidence that people value of the Blue Flag, this was not the main reason for paying a premium price for coastal destinations (e.g., Lucrezi & Van der Merwe, 2015). Others have suggested that the Blue Flag has a positive impact on the international tourist flow to seaside destinations (e.g., Capacci et al., 2015). Hence, the present study adds to this debate that Blue Flag promotion positively influences the tourist's WPPP for coastal destinations.

Another contribution of the study is that, this research involved investigating the underpinning mechanisms of Blue Flag promotion on tourist behavior. The findings have revealed that such promotion indirectly impacts on WPPP through self-congruity, DBI and DBQ. This work enhances our understanding of how to improve the tourist's WPPP for sustainable coastal destinations (Duran-Roman, Cardenas-Garcia, & Pulido-Fernandez, 2021). Symbolic consumption of tourism destinations has recently received attention from marketing scholars (Ahn, Ekinci, & Li, 2013; Nam et al., 2011). The results of the study show that the Blue Flag provides both symbolic and functional benefits to tourists. Previous research (e.g., Buyukdag & Kitapci, 2021) highlighted that brand self-congruity has a positive impact on consumer-brand identification. The current research confirms that Blue Flag promotion has a positive impact on self-congruence and DBI and therefore, fosters higher WPPP for coastal destinations compared to other destinations without the Blue Flag. Since brands help consumers to articulate their identities, consumer brand identification has been a significant topic for marketing researchers (Lam et al., 2013; Sihvonen, 2019; Stokburger-Sauer et al., 2012). The market is a symbolic arena in which consumers construct their identity (Holt, 2002). We confirm that tourists transform the symbolic meanings of the Blue Flag transferred through marketing communications to manifest their identity within the destination branding context.

Furthermore, the present research has revealed that The Blue Flag signals functional benefits of the destination brand. That is, it can enhance perceived quality of the destination brands. This result corroborates the previous studies that have suggested that sustainability labels can serve as a quality symbol (e.g., Merino & Prats, 2022a, 2022b; Schaufele & Hamm, 2017). The current study has also provided deeper insights into how destination brands can leverage their functional benefits (i.e., DBQ) to achieve higher WPPP. Prior research has suggested that eco-labels can act as a symbol of quality. Aligned with these studies (e.g., Fraguell et al., 2016), the present research has provided evidence that utilizing eco-label awards, such as the Blue Flag, can denote that coastal destinations comply with quality standards. However, the findings challenge those of Kim and Lee (2018), who elicited that promotions and advertisements have no impact on perceived brand quality.

5.1. Managerial implications

Utilization of eco-labels, such as the Blue Flag, can help destination brand managers to develop understanding of the drivers for WPPP in tourism. We recommend that coastal destination managers should highlight both symbolic and functional benefits when promoting destination products and services. Using eco-labels in destination marketing communications can reduce tourists' asymmetric information about destinations in order to influence their WPPP. It has been found that the Blue Flag can provoke perceived similarities between the tourist's self-concept and destinations to satisfy their self-congruity needs and stimulate WPPP. Hence, destination marketers should use the Blue Flag to create symbolic brand value in order to strengthen the tourist-destination brand relationship.

On the one hand, increasing tourists flow to particularly coastal tourism destinations has brought negative impacts on coastal destination environments. On the other hand, travelers have become more concerned about environmental issues when making holiday decisions. Hence, tourism destinations should continue to adopt eco-friendly practices (e.g., eco-labels) (Bucar, Van Theenen, & Hendija, 2019). Accordingly, Destination Management Organizations can utilize Blue Flag certification to achieve sustainable destination management goals and reduces the negative impact of over tourism (Bucar et al., 2022). Hence, Blue Flag certification can help tourists to comply with environmental practices and associate with social communities (i.e., environmental communities). Also, Blue Flag promotion enhances tourists' emotional attachment to destination brand communities and destination

brands. Hence, such promotion can be used to reinforce the tourist's identification with the destination. Accordingly, Blue Flag promotion on social media could facilitate consumers' social interaction and integration with brand communities to enhance customer brand identification (Lee & Hsieh, 2022). Destination marketers should utilize the Blue Flag for destination positioning and differentiation in competitive markets. Coastal tourism destinations managers could target those tourists who would like to experience higher quality of tourism products and services, if they would like to encourage tourists to pay a higher price for their holiday. Also, investment in eco-labels, with the purpose of quality improvement, can help to build brand identification over time.

5.2. Limitations and further research directions

The study limitations concern the lack of a moderator, considering only one type of eco-label, and the attitude-behavior gap. Firstly, this study considered only mediators for the effects of the Blue Flag on tourists' WPPP. However, there could be some potential moderators (i. e., environmental concern) that strengthen these effects. There is increasing public environmental awareness and consequently, environmental concern, particularly in coastal tourism destinations (Campos-Soria, Nunez-Carrasco, & Garcia-Pozo, 2021). This may translate into a more favorable response to tourism eco-labels for various reasons. One could be that tourists cannot easily obtain environmental information on alternative tourism products. An eco-label certification can become an effective means to assess the environmental performance of competing products in comparative terms (Buckley, 2002). In sum, the evidence suggests that, such a scheme can engender higher belongingness to the destination, and implies superior tourism DBQ than for unlabeled arrangements, which both lead to greater WPPP.

Secondly, for this study, the Blue Flag was considered as being the most famous and widespread eco-label in the tourism industry. However, sustainable eco-labels in this industry are not confined to it. For example, the European Eco-label for Tourism Accommodation (ec olabel.eu) is given to accommodation entities based on performance criteria in various environmental areas. Hence, one future research direction would be to apply the proposed model to the different sustainability certificates, thereby increasing the generalizability of the findings.

Thirdly, this research is prone to the attitude-behavior gap in sustainability destination marketing research (Hibbert, Dickinson, Gossling, & Curtin, 2013), referring that the fact that positive attitudes are not necessarily transferred into real behavior in the environmentally sustainable tourism context (Juvan & Dolnicar, 2014). Whilst we attempted to increase behavioral realism through designing a destination specific website, future research should seek to measure actual behavior.

Finally, the current study provides empirical support for the effect of Blue Flag on tourists' WPPP based on the signaling theory and underlying mechanism behind this effect. However, additional research using other methods (e.g. in-depth interviews, Focus Group Interviews or projective techniques, Conjoint Analysis) could be helpful to support the results and enhance our understanding of the relationship mentioned in this study.

6. Conclusions

Despite ecolabelling being a valuable environmental certification in tourism, the effectiveness of ecolabelling promotion on tourist behavior has not been fully explored. While existing research mainly relates to qualitative evaluations and econometric analysis, we exploit experimental research to investigate the effectiveness of ecolabelling on the tourist's WPPP. The study involved using The Blue Flag, which is the most recognized eco-label in the tourism context. The results of the study have shown that Blue Flag promotion stimulates higher willingness to pay a price premium to coastal destinations directly as well as indirectly through self-congruity, DBI and DBQ. Also, self-congruence-DBI and DBQ-DBI serially mediate the effect of Blue Flag promotion on the tourist's willingness to pay a price premium. The findings suggest that destination managers should utilize Blue Flag Logo in destination promotions and destination branding.

Credit author statement

Ali Selcuk Can, Ph.D.: Conceptualization, methodology, formal analysis validation, writing – original draft. Yuksel Ekinci, Ph.D.: Conceptualization, review and editing. Setenay Dilek-Fidler, Ph.D.: Data collection, writing literature review, and review.

Impact statement

The findings of this study are valuable, particularly for coastal destination brands' marketing communications. The research reveals that Blue Flag promotions are effective at influencing tourists' willingness to pay a price premium for visiting coastal destinations. The study shows that tourists are willing to pay more for visiting coastal destinations with the Blue Flag logo, that signals self-congruity and brand identification. Thus, the Blue Flag promotion can provoke perceived similarities between the tourist's self-concept and destinations that stimulate willingness to pay a price premium.

Furthermore, the current study reveals that perceived destination brand quality and brand identification sequentially mediate the effect of Blue Flag promotion on the tourist's willingness to pay a price premium. Therefore, destination brands should effectively communicate information about the quality of destination products and services in their advertising. Destination marketers should also pay special attention to tourists' social identities when communicating destination marketing messages.

Declaration of competing interest

None.

Appendix 1. Measurements, Descriptive Statistics, Reliability and Factor Loadings

Item No.	Item Description	Mean	S.D.	Skewness	Kurtosis	Cron. Alpha	AVE	Factor Loading
Self-Congruity (SC)						.96	.84	
SC1	The typical visitor of X is consistent with how I see myself.	3.72	1.41	−.23	−.76			.85
SC2	The typical visitor of X is a mirror image of me.	3.21	1.52	.09	−1.0			.82
SC3	The typical visitor of X is similar to me.	3.62	1.48	−.28	−.88			.82
SC4	The typical visitor of X is consistent with how I would like to see myself.	3.74	1.47	−.16	−.76			.85
SC5	The typical visitor of X is a mirror image of how I would like to be.	3.45	1.53	.01	−.93			.84
SC6	The typical visitor of X is similar to how I would like to be.	3.59	1.56	−.02	−.92			.89
Destination Brand Identification (DBI)						.94	.90	

(continued on next page)

(*continued*)

Item No.	Item Description	Mean	S.D.	Skewness	Kurtosis	Cron. Alpha	AVE	Factor Loading
DBI1	When someone criticized X, it feels like a personal insult.	1.86	1.12	1.41	1.42			.90
DBI2	If a story in the media criticized X, I would feel embarrassed.	1.89	1.15	1.36	1.23			.91
DBI3	If someone praised X, it would felt like a personal compliment.	2.07	1.28	1.28	1.27			.88
Destination Brand Quality (DBQ)						.95	.87	
DBQ1	X offers very good quality of tourism products and services.	4.86	1.10	−.11	.31			.87
DBQ2	X offers tourism products and services of consistent quality.	4.86	1.07	−.20	.64			.86
DBQ3	X has reliable tourism products and services.	4.90	1.12	−.33	.55			.86
DBQ4	X offers tourism products and services with excellent features.	4.85	1.12	−.16	.17			.90
Willingness to Pay a Price Premium (WPPP)						.88	.81	
WPPP1	I am willing to pay a higher price for having a holiday in X.	3.33	1.34	.12	−.60			.87
WPPP2	I am willing to pay a lot more for a holiday in X.	2.74	1.26	.48	−.49			.85
WPPP3	The price of a holiday in X would have to rise substantially before I would choose a different destination.	3.17	1.40	.06	−.80			.70

X: Marmaris in the first study, Malaga in the second study.

Appendix 2. Demographic Information of Participants

		Percentage Study 1 (n = 152)	*Percentage* Study 2 (n = 160)
Gender	Male	50.0	49.3
	Female	50.0	50.0
	Other	.0	.7
Age	18–25	.6	.7
	26–35	31.3	27.6
	36–45	23.8	23.0
	46–55	18.8	25.0
	Over 55	25.6	23.7
Annual Household Income	Less than $19,999	18.8	15.8
	$20,000–39,999	32.5	38.2
	$40,000–59,999	26.9	24.3
	$60,000–79,999	13.8	11.2
	$80,000 or more	8.1	10.5

Appendix 3. Study 2 Stimulus

Control Condition	Treatment Condition
"Malaga is a popular seaside resort on the Mediterranean coast of Spain, famous with its sunny beaches, monuments with centuries, its diverse museums, natural beauties, and numerous beach bars. The destination is for those who want to the enjoy the turquoise sea and golden sands and try a wide variety of leisure activities for all tastes."	"The Blue Flag is a world-renowned eco-label trusted by millions around the globe. Its mission is to promote sustainability in the tourism sector, through educating travelers about environmental issues, environmental protection and other sustainable development practices. Marmaris has been awarded the Blue Flag for its 18 beaches, one of which is D Maris Beach Bay, as shown below. Malaga is a popular seaside resort on the Mediterranean coast of Spain, famous with its sunny beaches, monuments with centuries, its diverse museums, natural beauties, and numerous beach bars. The destination is for those who want to the enjoy the turquoise sea and golden sands and try a wide variety of leisure activities for all tastes."

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