



Repeated behaviour and destination loyalty



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HIGHLIGHTS

- Tourists' "stated" loyalty to a tourism destination (Sardinia, Italy).
- A multidimensional framework and comprehensive definitions of loyalty.
- Stratified survey data collected during the low and high seasons of 2012.
- Logit to estimate factors influencing probability of a return and recommend.
- Past loyalty as a significant factor that positively influences future behaviour.

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ABSTRACT

This study analyses tourists' stated loyalty to a tourism destination within a multidimensional framework and with various definitions of loyalty. The empirical data were collected via a survey administered at the end of a trip at the main ports and airports on the island of Sardinia during the low and high seasons, in 2012. A logit specification is employed to estimate the factors influencing loyalty, defined as both the unconditional and conditional probability of returning to Sardinia. The empirical findings highlight that overall satisfaction and several satisfaction items are key determinants of the stated loyalty. Also, the past loyalty to the destination is a significant factor that positively influences future behaviour. The same factors also affect recommendation to visit the destination.

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1. Introduction

Customer satisfaction has become an important challenge for destination managers, as the capacity to attract tourists is a main focus of marketing strategies. Tourism loyalty to a certain destination is a key issue in tourism management because repeated visitors represent an important business opportunity for tourist destinations (Oppermann, 2000). Thus, an adequate assessment of the determinants of tourists' loyalty is required to identify which factors influence the probability a tourist will revisit the destination in the future.

The relationship between loyalty and repeated behaviour has been analysed in several studies. As Polo Peña, Frías Jamilena, and Rodríguez Molina (2013) report in their literature review, first time visitors are more likely to be attracted by major destination attractions, hence satisfying their novelty-seeking motivations, while repeated visitors tend to engage in niche social and cultural activities. In their study, Polo Peña et al. (2013), through a SEM, find that "functional perceived value" is the most valued determinant when consumers are using the services for the first time, whereas the "affected perceived value" is the most important determinant for repeat consumers. In a comprehensive literature review on destination loyalty, Sun, Chi, and Xu (2013) note that the number of previous visits to a destination is often employed as an indicator of tourists' familiarity with a destination, which is a key factor influencing destination image formation and appeal. During the visit to a destination, tourists have the opportunity to experience the

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amenities and attractions of the local area, and it is likely that a positive experience will influence the likelihood of a return visit. At the same time, previous experience at a destination may not fully capture overall commitment to a repeated behaviour in the future: a first purchase does not necessarily imply future commitment (Assael, 1984; Sun et al., 2013; Yoon & Uysal, 2005). Therefore, for a tourism destination, it is important to understand which additional elements may influence consumer loyalty. This aspect is taken into consideration by Chi (2012), who, within an integrated framework, assesses the relationship between satisfaction and first time versus repeated visitors. The author finds that repeat visitors denote a higher probability to revisit compared with first time visitors, and a previous visit better explains the relationship between satisfaction and loyalty.

Another way in which a tourist's loyalty to a certain destination can be incentivized is the recommendation of the destination to friends and family (Chi, 2011; Prayag & Ryan, 2012). Positive word-of-mouth to others in the tourists' place of origin is regarded as an important factor that enhances the destination image and thus the tourism flows to that location (Marrocu & Paci, 2013), although some mixed results have also emerged for certain destinations (Sun et al., 2013).

The aim of this study is to analyse how motivation, satisfaction, vacation characteristics and individual controls influence tourists' loyalty as well as to what extent past behaviour affects future commitment. In the present paper, destination loyalty is analysed using the concept of *stated loyalty*, meaning the willingness to revisit the destination in the future, as declared by the tourist during her/his current trip. In this respect, we distinguish between the unconditional intention to revisit the destination in the future and the conditional commitment to visit again, provided that certain conditions are satisfied.

Another important aspect analysed in the paper is whether the factors that affect the likelihood to revisit also influence the probability of recommending the destination to relatives and friends. An in-depth investigation is also provided on the relationship between repeated behaviour (i.e., the number of times they visited the destination in the past) and loyalty predicted probability. Operationally, it allows us to estimate the likelihood threshold of repeat visitation that makes tourists attached to the destination.

The empirical analysis is based on data collected from face-to-face surveys at the main ports and airports on the island of Sardinia (Italy) during April–October 2012. The representative sample consists of 1461 face-to-face questionnaires successfully completed at the end of the trip, administered to both national and international tourists. We investigate the factors that influence the tourists' stated loyalty measured by three alternative indicators: first, the “unconditional” probability to return in the future to the destination; second, the probability to return in the future “conditional” to the activation of further low cost connections during the low season; third, the probability to recommend the destination to others.

The contribution of this work to the existing literature is manifold. First, this study provides various definitions of loyalty, and it analyses the probability to recommend a destination to others. Second, unlike other studies in the field, the wider time span of data collection allows one to take into account seasonal variations, covering both the high and the low season. Third, a multidimensional construct is considered, where customers' likelihood to be loyal depends not only on the standard motivation-satisfaction factors but also on the previous visits, the vacation characteristics and several individual controls. To this aim, a probabilistic specification is employed to assess cause-effect interrelationships based on empirical data rather than on a

hypothetical construct as pursued in the commonly used structural equation modelling (SEM).

The empirical findings provided in this study give destination managers, the local government and policy makers valuable information to formulate private and public development and marketing strategies, especially for repeated visitors, but also to uncover tourist behaviour. This latter aim may provide insight into specific tourism segments.

2. Literature review

Zhang, Fu, Cai, and Lu (2014), linking the destination image literature to the tourism loyalty literature, identify three main definitions of loyalty in the field of marketing: attitudinal loyalty, behavioural loyalty and composite loyalty. This classification was first introduced by Jacoby and Chesnut (1978). The first definition comprises customer attitudes toward a good based upon her/his perceived value and tourists' intention to recommend the destination to friends and family. The second definition looks at the actual tourist behaviour, such as patronage or intention to revisit the destination, while the third definition is a mix of the previous two. Tourism loyalty analysis is a key issue in tourism management (Oppermann, 2000). In fact, loyal tourists are likely to spend more time at a destination, better promote it and consume more goods, although the relationship may also be non-linear. In addition, they face lower marketing costs than first time visitors (Shoemaker & Lewis, 1999 cited in Zhang et al., 2014). In the tourism literature, revisit intention and destination suggestion are the most used measures for tourism loyalty (Zhang et al., 2014).

The literature highlights several factors that drive individuals to visit or revisit a destination. Typically, psycho-centric and risk averse individuals tend to choose the vacation destination based on either their own or their friends' and family's past experience. They perceive an emotional attachment to the destinations and desire to revisit those previously enjoyed (Chi, 2012; Gitelson & Crompton, 1984; Kemperman & Joh, 2003; Kyle, Absher, & Graefe, 2003; Moutinho & Trimble, 1991; Shamsub, Albrecht, & Dawkins, 2006; Silvestre, Santos, & Ramalho, 2008). Satisfaction is regarded as one of the main factors that drive tourists to return to the same destination, as suggested in one of the seminal works by Oliver (1980) and supported by several empirical studies (Alegre & Cladera, 2006; Alegre & Cladera, 2009; Diaz, Palau-Saumell, Forgas-Coll, & Prats, 2014; Frías-Jamilena, Del Barrio-García, & López-Moreno, 2013; Gen-Quing & Hailin, 2008; Gursay & McCleary, 2004; Juaneda, 1996; Kozak, 2001; Kozak & Rimmington, 2000; Lau & McKercher, 2004; Petrick, 2004; Ployhart, Van Iddekinge, & Mackenzie, 2011; Prayag & Ryan, 2012; Prentice & Andersen, 2000; Um, Chon, & Ro, 2006). Yoon and Uysal (2005) provide a detailed overview of multidimensional satisfaction with a tourism destination. Tourists develop expectations about their visit and are satisfied if the actual visit meets or even exceeds their expectations. Moreover, visitors tend to compare their actual visit with other destinations having similar characteristics and return for money. The relationship between tourists' reference price and their perception of transaction value has been identified as one of the most important measures for the evaluation of overall value, for gaining a competitive edge and as indicator of repurchase intentions (Al-Sabbahy, Ekinci, & Riley, 2004; Petrick & Backman, 2002; Sanchez, Callarisa, Rodriguez, & Moliner, 2006). Therefore, destination uniqueness together with its degree of competitiveness become further factors affecting overall satisfaction. On the whole, it emerges that tourists are likely to revisit those destinations they were highly satisfied with. Hence, satisfaction may be used as an important indicator for destination managers to evaluate the probability of return (Petrick, 2005).

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