



The role of social identification and hedonism in affecting tourist re-patronizing behaviours: The case of an Italian festival

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ABSTRACT

Since the 1990s Europe and other continents have been organising a significantly larger number of festivals with the objective of stimulating tourism and exploiting potential economic opportunities. The prominence of these events has led to intense competition between festivals in attracting visitors and it has become important to analyse factors which might influence attendees' retention. Drawing on existing literature on retail and service sectors, this study aims to identify the role played by emotions, hedonism, satisfaction, and social identification in mediating the effects of environmental factors on attendees' re-patronizing intention. This study includes an on-site survey of 449 visitors attending an Italian festival gaining in popularity, and analyses data using a structural equations model. Results suggest that hedonism and social identification are key-facilitators between environmental cues and attendees' re-patronizing intention.

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1. Introduction¹

In recent years, festivals have become prominent events in many cities throughout Europe and elsewhere. Reasons for this proliferation may lie in a series of inter-connected factors such as new approaches to urban management, the use of culture-led policies to positively restructure wealth creation, structural changes in economic production, and the progressive culturalisation or symbolicisation of traditional economic sectors (Quinn, 2005; Scott, 2000). All of these factors have led to a re-conceptualisation of festivals as an effective strategy for cities to adopt in order to gain several potential economic, social, and cultural benefits (Frey, 1994; Gursoy, Kim, & Uysal, 2004; Long & Perdue, 1990; McKercher, Mei, & Tse, 2006; Quinn, 2005). For example, festivals are considered to play a crucial role in improving the image of the host city in a relatively short period of time (Getz, 1991). They are also thought to enhance both the appeal and attractiveness of a destination to tourists (Kim, Borges, & Chon, 2006) and to increase visitor satisfaction (Bigne, Sanchez, & Sanchez, 2001).

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This proliferation of festivals has increased the level of competition between different cities wishing to organize festivals and attract potentially interested visitors. It seems increasingly important, therefore, to understand which features of a festival enhance its attractiveness and increase attendees' retention. Several previous studies in the field of tourism have investigated what might induce people to attend a festival. Such research has highlighted different factors like individual motivation (Crompton & McKay, 1997; Dewar, Meyer, & Li, 2001; Formica & Uysal, 1998), satisfaction and perceived authenticity (Chhabra, Healy, & Sills, 2003), cultural consumption patterns (Prentice & Andersen, 2003), and environmental value and motivation (Kim et al., 2006).

Drawing also on previous literature on retail and service atmosphere (e.g., Baker, Grewal, & Parasuraman, 1994; Baker, Parasuraman, Grewal, & Voss, 2002; Bitner, 1992; Richardson, Dick, & Jain, 1994), this research study focuses on the role of environmental features and cues in enhancing a festival's attractiveness and its attendees' retention. For instance, Lee, Lee, Lee, and Babin (2008) showed that positive environmental cues lead to positive attendee behaviours: if the programme content is interesting, staff are polite and professional or if the overall environment of a festival is pleasant, attendees' re-patronizing behaviours will increase.

Lee et al. (2008) also showed that the relationship between environmental cues and customer behaviour may be mediated by other potentially significant variables such as emotions. The present study aims to evaluate the role that hedonism and social

identification play in mediating the effects of relevant environmental factors on attendees' re-patronizing behaviour. Hedonism represents consumer returns such as enjoyment and playfulness (Babin, Darden, & Griffin, 1994; Holbrook & Hirschman, 1982). Since events are experiential, intangible, and emotionally-charged contexts (Colbert, 2007; Lovelock, Patterson, & Walker, 1998), the level of hedonism perceived by attendees during a festival experience may be a key variable in explaining their behaviours. The present study also investigates the potential mediating role played by attendees' social identification, or the sense of connection that a festival's attendees feel with other visitors (Bagozzi & Dholakia, 2006; Tajfel, 1978). The suggestion is made that the greater the degree of identification with a particular social group – i.e. other festival attendees – the more customers will be disposed to return to a festival.

The present study examines the case of the *Festival della Filosofia* (Festival of Philosophy), which is held every year at Modena, Sassuolo, and Carpi, three neighbouring cities located in the north of Italy. The study includes an on-site survey of 449 visitors attending the Festival of Philosophy and analyses data using a structural equations model.

The article consists of four sections: the first explains the theoretical background underpinning the study, the second illustrates methodological decisions, and the third presents data and findings. The final section discusses the results and their implications.

2. Theoretical background

2.1. Festivals and the issue of attendees' retention

The term festival covers a multitude of events (Bowdin, Allen, O'Toole, Harris, & McDonnell, 2006). Smith (1990) defines the term as the celebration of a specific theme to which the public is invited for a limited period of time. This celebration can be held annually or less frequently, and includes single events. Arts and cultural festivals, in particular, involve the celebration of themes relating to creative activity or arts and cultural areas (e.g., poetry, painting, philosophy, opera, photography, etc.). Over the last two decades, festivals have increasingly been considered as effective tools for urban policy and are aimed at halting the decline of a geographic area, positively regenerating its image, or increasing both its appeal and attractiveness to tourists (e.g., Getz, 1991; Kim et al., 2006; Quinn, 2005).

In order to exploit a festival's potential benefits, festival planners and managers have to manage all the activities involved in the creation and development of a festival efficiently. In particular, they have to adopt strategies which are the most effective in increasing customer retention. Repeat attendees, in fact, represent a key asset, because they are likely to speak more positively about the festival than occasional visitors, pay less attention to offers by competitors, and are more tolerant of low levels of satisfaction (Hume, 2008; Keaveney, 1995; Petr, 2007). However, although it is generally agreed that loyal customers can play a crucial role in the long-term survival of festival organizations (Andreasen & Belk, 1980; Rentschler, Radbourne, Carr, & Rickard, 2002), what still remains in question is understanding the predictors of customers' re-patronizing behaviour and intention (Hume, 2008). Following Oliver (1999), a re-patronizing intention can be defined as a pledge to re-purchase (re-patronize) a product (service) in the future, despite situational influences aimed at causing switching behaviours. Several researchers have investigated the potentially relevant role of loyal customers in supporting organizational success in art and cultural contexts – such as the Festival of Philosophy analysed in this study (Grappi & Montanari, 2009; Hume, 2008; Petr, 2007; Rentschler et al., 2002). Cultural industries, in fact, represent complex, experiential,

and emotionally-charged contexts (Colbert, 2007; Hume, 2008; Lovelock et al., 1998), and may “not easily align to the current understanding of repurchase intention” (Hume, 2008, p. 42). Furthermore, the variety seeking theory (McAlister, 1982) suggests that consumers are often driven by the need for novelty and variety in their consumption choices. Variety seeking refers to “the tendency of individuals to seek diversity in their choices of services or goods” (Kahn, 1995, p. 139) and typically appears within the context of switching among options. It is possible that this is especially relevant in cultural consumption contexts (and, in particular, in festival patronizing behaviour) since novelty seeking may represent a central component of attendees' motivation (Jang & Feng, 2007).

Therefore, with these considerations in mind, this paper aims to analyse the main predictors of festival attendees' re-patronizing behaviour. It proposes a comprehensive model which, drawing on extant literature on retail and service ambience, identifies the role played by emotions, hedonism, satisfaction, and social identification in mediating the effects of environmental factors on festival attendees' re-patronizing intention. The study focuses on three objectives:

- 1) to identify the role played by environmental cues on attendees' re-patronizing intention, the dependent variable of the model;
- 2) to analyse the mediating role played by emotions experienced during the festival consumption experience and the level of hedonism perceived by attendees;
- 3) to examine the role of two key-variables: attendee satisfaction and social identification.

2.2. Environmental cues

Environmental theory defines environmental cues as stimuli which may influence emotions and feelings that consumers experience within an environment, and suggests that these emotions and feelings affect behavioural outcomes (Isen, Means, Patrick, & Nowicki, 1982; Liljander & Strandvik, 1997; Mehrabian & Russell, 1974). For example, the atmosphere of retail environments is considered capable of influencing pleasure and arousal responses, which in turn affect customer approach and avoidance behaviours toward stores (Davis, Wang, & Lindridge, 2008; Eroglu, Machleit, & Davis, 2001).

This study focuses on the role played by a festival's environmental cues in affecting its attendees' experience and behaviours. The term festival cue represents each specific environmental component characterizing the festival, such as the location of the festival, information and facilities available, range of merchandise, promotional material, or personnel. All the environmental cues of a festival work together to shape the general festival ambience (Lee et al., 2008), and therefore may affect, for example, the way attendees perceive a festival (Darden & Babin, 1994; Lee et al., 2008), their satisfaction, and their loyalty (Lee et al., 2008). Therefore, festival cues play an important role in affecting customer perceptions and behaviours, and it is important that festival managers understand these variables in order to enhance positive customer responses (Bitner, 1992). According to Lee et al. (2008), a festival's environmental characteristics can be divided into three broad categories: ambient conditions, space/facilities, signs, and symbols. This study borrows from previous research on retail and service atmosphere (e.g., Baker et al., 1994, 2002; Bitner, 1992; Chang & Wildt, 1996; Richardson et al., 1994) and festival environment (Lee et al., 2008) focusing on the following cues relevant in affecting a festival attendees' experience: programme content, staff behaviour, locations and atmosphere, information and facilities, hotel and restaurant offer, and souvenir availability.

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