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Research Paper

Determinants of trust towards tourist destinations

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ABSTRACT

Trust has become a relevant concern for tourist destinations. Partly because of the novelty of the research on trust in the tourism literature, there are several open questions regarding the antecedents of trust towards a tourist destination. In this research, we suggest that reputation, and cognitive and affective evaluation of a destination, are relevant antecedents of trust. Trust towards a tourist destination is understood as a multi-dimensional construct, including local inhabitants and public and private institutions that are honest, benevolent and competent. This paper used a non-probabilistic sample of 750 tourists based on quotas, proportionally distributed among the main tourist destinations in Chile. After testing the psychometric properties of the scales developed for this study, a structural equation model was estimated and it was found that trust is a consequence of the reputation of the destination, as well as the cognitive and affective evaluation of the tourists. The paper concludes by emphasising the importance of these findings for the tourism industry, and outlines recommendations to reinforce trust relations with tourists.

1. Introduction

Tourism is one of the most dynamic sectors of Chile's national economy. Tourism represented 3.5% of the country's total exports of goods in 2014 (Servicio Nacional de Turismo (SERNATUR) (2015)). Chile's geographical and cultural diversity supports a high-volume flow of foreign and domestic tourists interested in visiting different tourist destinations. 'Tourist destination' means a place to which people travel and where they choose to stay for a while in order to experience certain features or characteristics: a perceived attraction of some sort (Buhalis, 2000). Each tourist destination in Chile strives to highlight its physical and human qualities to attract the attention of potential visitors.

Since trust is an important antecedent of tourists' intention to travel to that destination (Mohammed, 2016). On the other hand, trust is a key quality for success in managing the marketing of tourist destinations (Choi, Law, & Heo, 2016). Thus, trust towards a tourist destination is understood as a multidimensional construct (Wang, Law, Hung, & Guillet, 2014), and a relevant antecedent in predicting tourists' intentions to travel (Mohammed, 2016). In this sense, research affirms that trust towards a destination influences specific components inherent in individual behavior, such as attitudes (Ba & Pavlou, 2002; Kim, Kim &

Kim, 2009; Sichtmann, 2007; Teo & Liu, 2007), perception of risk (Kim, Kim, & Shin, 2009; Teo & Liu, 2007; Yousafzai, Pallister, & Foxall, 2003), satisfaction (Chang, 2014; Lee, Kang, & McKnight, 2007; Singh & Sirdeshmukh, 2000), commitment (Eastlick, Lotz, & Warrington, 2006; Ha, 2004; Mukherjee & Nath, 2003), loyalty (Chen & Phou, 2013; Lau & Lee, 1999; Mechinda, Serirat, Anuwichanont, & Gulid, 2010; Sirdeshmukh, Singh, & Sabol, 2002), and even the tourist's attachment to a specific destination (Chen & Phou, 2013) and intention to return to it (Su, Hsu, & Marshall, 2014), which enable the retention of tourists (Lertwannawit & Gulid, 2014).

Despite these multiple positive effects, little tourism literature explores how trust is built and what factors determine people's trust towards a tourist destination. For example, some studies argue that trust is the result of the image and personality of the tourist destination (Chen & Phou, 2013) or the result of its image alone (Loureiro & González, 2008).

On the one hand, previous research has shown that organizational variables, such as corporate reputation (Johnson & Grayson, 2005), may also determine trust towards a tourist destination. However, evidence assessing these associations is notably scarce. On the other hand, some studies have demonstrated that trust towards a tourist

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destination is the result of image, measured as cognitive awareness of a tourist destination (Chen & Phou, 2013) or general attitudes towards a tourist destination (Loureiro & González, 2008). Although the definition of image has been debated, there is a certain consensus about the importance of the cognitive-perceptual component (Alhemoud & Armstrong, 1996; Baloglu & McCleary, 1999; Beerli & Martín, 2004; Crompton, 1979; Fakeye & Crompton, 1991; Fridgen, 1984), the emotional-affective component (Milman & Pizam, 1995), and the global-attitudinal component present in most of the current definitions of image (Echtner & Ritchie, 2003; Hallmann, Zehrer & Müller, 2015; Mazursky & Jacoby, 1986). It is worth noting that despite the importance of the aforementioned components of image and the bulk of management research emphasising the importance of the three components in multiple organizational dynamics (Morrow Jr., Hansen, & Pearson, 2004), they have not been considered together as an antecedent of trust towards a tourist destination. In order to fill this gap in the tourism literature, this paper presents a model explaining trust towards a tourist destination as a result of reputation, cognitive evaluation of the destination and the affective evaluation of the destination.

The theoretical framework most relevant to the study constructs – trust, reputation, cognitive perception, and affective evaluation – will now be presented. Next, the study hypotheses and present the methodology will be established, along with an explanation of the construction of the scales and the antecedents used in collecting the data and establishing the sample profile. Then the results will be presented and their support for the hypotheses examined in order to establish the conclusions, implications for management, and potential limitations of the study.

2. Literature review

2.1. Trust in a tourist destination as a result of its reputation

Most of the literature on trust in the area of tourism and hospitality focuses on a specific sector, such as tourism suppliers (Álvarez, Casielles, & Martín, 2009; Macintosh, 2002), hotels (Bowen & Shoemaker, 1998; Lovell, 2009), airlines (Forgas, Moliner, Sánchez, & Palau, 2010), or restaurants (Oh, 2002). Few of the studies published focus on tourist destinations as recipients of tourists' trust, the topic of this study's analysis.

From the theoretical point of view, it is universally accepted that trust can be defined, in a relationship between two parties, as the certainty perceived by one party that its exchange partner has integrity and reliability (Sirdeshmukh et al., 2002). Consumers' trust is a very significant issue for the tourism and hospitality industry, since this trust is an important antecedent of the consumer's satisfaction and loyalty (Kim, Chung, & Lee, 2011; Orth & Green, 2009). From the specific perspective of a tourist destination, trust can be considered as a multidimensional construct (Bordonova & Polo, 2004; Flavian, Guinalfú, & Gurrea, 2005; Wang et al., 2014;) and also as a 'meso' concept that acts not only between individuals but also between individuals and institutions (Rousseau, Sitkin, Burt, & Camerer, 1998).

Creation and strengthening of this link between tourists and a tourist destination must involve the tourists' experience through personal contact with the different products and services related to the destination (Crotts, Coppage, & Andibo, 2001; Hyun, 2009; Kim H.B., 2009; Kim T.T., 2009; Wu & Chang, 2006). Personal contact with 'the destination's inhabitants' is especially important – inhabitants must be welcoming (Lewis & Weigert, 1985; Pizam, 1999; Vogt & Fesenmaier, 1995) – as are the place's public and private institutions (Kim, T.T., 2009; Kim H.B., 2009; Nunkoo & Smith, 2013; Nunkoo, 2015; Nunkoo, Ramkissoon, & Gursoy, 2012; Styliadis, Biran, Sit, & Szivas, 2014; Vázquez, Suárez, & Biaz, 2005), which should be honest, benevolent, and competent (Hosmer, 1995; Mayer,

Davis, & Schoorman, 1995; Sanzo, Santos, Vázquez, & Álvarez, 2003). Specifically, trust towards a tourist destination can be defined as a multidimensional construct, including the local inhabitants and public and private institutions that are honest, benevolent and competent (Marinao, Torres, & Chasco, 2012).

'Reputation' influence the tourist's process of choice (Petrick, 2011), facilitating the process of choosing a destination because it has a positive effect on reduction of risk and individual insecurity (Loureiro & Kastenholz, 2011). It can be defined as a result of consistency between what an organization promises its customers and its real fulfillment of this guarantee (Hart, 1988). It is a synthesis of the opinions, perceptions, and attitudes of the place's different interest groups, including tourists, individual or collective hosts, and the community as a whole (Christou, 2007). Further, reputation expresses not only that the place is consistent with its history but, above all, that it performs fulfilling the promises that the place has made in the past. From the perspective of tourism and hospitality, enjoying a good reputation can mean that a tourist destination receives increased visits and longer stays from tourists (Ledesma, Navarro, & Pérez-Rodríguez, 2005).

The effect of reputation on trust has been argued from various perspectives. From the ethical point of view, corporate reputation is a very important antecedent of the consumer's trust (Stanaland, Lwin, & Murphy, 2011). The management perspective suggests that suppliers' good reputation will sustain purchasers' trust better in the long term (Wagner, Coley, & Lindemann, 2011). The business and industrial marketing perspectives also propose that suppliers' corporate reputation will have a strong effect on purchasers' potential trust (Bennett & Gabriel, 2001). Taking these antecedents into account, in the context of tourist destinations, we propose the following hypothesis:

H1. The better the reputation of the tourist destination, the more trust tourists will place in it.

2.2. Cognitive antecedents of trust in a tourist destination

'Cognitive perception' is the set of beliefs, ideas, and impressions that individuals have regarding a tourist destination (Crompton, 1979). It is objective or 'rational' knowledge that tourists acquire about a place from the quality of the physical characteristics of its environment (Baloglu & McCleary, 1999). In the marketing literature, cognitive perception is defined as a set of mental structures and processes that consumers develop and store after receiving a series of stimuli, and from which they carry out their purchasing decisions (Peter & Olson, 2006), including choice of a tourist destination (Young, 1999).

To achieve the tourist's favorable perception, the destination must be able to provide a good combination of public and private services (Gallouj & Savona, 2009), characterized by comfort and convenience of its 'facilities' (hotels, restaurants, etc), safety of the 'environment' (public order, means of transportation, road signs, etc), and interest and uniqueness of its historic and cultural 'events and attractions', such as folklore or local customs (Choi, Chan, & Wu, 1999; Hernández-Mogollón, Folgado-Fernández & Duarte, 2014; Kim, 2014).

Since the trust a tourist places in a specific destination consists of his/her certainty of the destination's integrity and reliability, this trust will be tied to the tourist's cognitive perception of the inhabitants, facilities, environment, and attractions. This argument has been confirmed by studies demonstrating that people's trust in institutions depends on their cognitive perception of those institutions (Morrow Jr., Hansen, & Pearson, 2004). Sociology, in turn, considers trust as a result of individual or collective cognitive patterns among people (Lewis & Weigert, 1985; Williams, 2001), a view also endorsed by the marketing perspective (Nicholson, Compeau, & Sethi, 2001), and by interpersonal management (McAllister, 1995). It is thus important for any tourist destination that the tourist have a positive cognitive

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