



## Understanding tourism loyalty: Horizontal vs. destination loyalty<sup>☆</sup>



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### HIGHLIGHTS

- We highlight a change in the study of loyalty taking a tourists-centered focus.
- We identify differences between the background of destination and horizontal loyalty.
- We consider some new explanatory factors of horizontal loyalty.
- We apply a comprehensive analysis with 6964 tourists from 17 European countries.
- A well-known European destination, Canary Islands (Spain) is investigated.

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### ABSTRACT

Tourism loyalty is a key topic that has been covered in literature mainly from a very homogenous perspective. This study analyses horizontal loyalty (consumer's loyalty divided among several destinations), and explains the background factors that affect this behaviour (cognitive, affective and overall destination image; information sources; motivations; socio-demographic characteristics; previous behaviour; conative loyalty). The paper also identifies the differences between the explanatory factors of horizontal loyalty and one-single-destination loyalty. Applying a comprehensive analysis with 6964 tourists from 17 European countries in the context of Canary Islands (Spain), the study provides interesting recommendations for destinations with a view to better designing marketing activities and improving their coopetition strategies and competitiveness.

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## 1. Introduction

Traditionally, research into loyalty in a tourist destination context has focused its attention on how a destination relates to tourists to try to establish lasting and beneficial relationships with them. However, less attention has been paid to the study from the perspective of tourists and how these relate to destinations. In

order to allow destinations to be able to improve their marketing strategies and tourist loyalty, a change of focus is absolutely necessary (Font & Villarino, 2015; Nordbø, Engilbertsson, & Vale, 2014). “Service-dominant logic”, as articulated by Lusch and Vargo (2006), claims for a customer-centered focus, where the context of creating value takes ground in networks of networks (destinations and tourists in this case). Focusing on tourists and how they establish their loyalty relationships with different destinations will help to understand how destinations should relate to both tourists and competitors, and it may be beneficial to foster coopetition between tourist destinations to improve competitiveness of the same.

Increasing competition among tourist destinations is an increasingly significant trend (Mariani & Baggio, 2012). This is accentuated by a larger number of holidays, albeit shorter ones, per individual, together with the unstoppable growth of the number of

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destinations in the market and the development of their offer (UNWTO, 2013), which make this change in focus even more necessary in the analysis of tourist loyalty. While some tourists may be loyal to a single destination, there are a large number that share out holidays between different destinations, which may cooperate and/or compete with each other. In the current tourism scenario, destinations are forced to increase their competitiveness, and literature shows that collaboration and cooperation between tourist destinations (Fyall, Garrod, & Wang, 2012), as well as the development of loyalty (Pike & Page, 2014; Weaver & Lawton, 2011) are relevant strategies for destinations in achieving competitive advantages in the long term. Therefore, it is necessary to further analyse this phenomenon.

Loyalty is a construct that has been tackled in literature in a very homogeneous way and all the different ways in which tourists can show their loyalty have not been contemplated. According to McKercher, Denizci-Guillet, and Ng (2012), most studies on loyalty in the tourism industry focus on a single unit of analysis (e.g., a single destination), and apply similar indicators, which shows a lack of conceptual and methodological innovation. Specifically, according to these authors, from the consumer perspective, one can speak of the existence of horizontal loyalty (HL) where tourists can be loyal to more than one supplier occupying the same level within the tourism system. Thus, tourists can show their loyalty to several destinations at the same time.

The study of HL, which is hardly explored in tourism literature, requires an alternative methodological approach and suggests a better knowledge of the tourist and an answer to the following questions: What profile do tourists with HL have? What factors really explain the differences between HL and single-destination loyalty (DL)? In literature, serious efforts have been made to investigate the factors that influence customer loyalty (Han, Hyun, & Kim, 2014), but there are no studies that analyse the factors that determine whether a tourist is loyal to multiple destinations. Thus, the objective of this research is to segment tourists according to the way in which they manifest their loyalty to tourist destinations and to analyse whether or not the factors that determine HL are the same as those that determine DL.

## 2. Loyalty and cooperation as strategies for improving competitiveness of destinations

The study of competitiveness has been a dominant paradigm in twentieth-century industry (Kylänen & Rusko, 2011), and in the field of tourism destinations it has been defined as the ability of a destination to attract potential tourists to its region and to be able to satisfy their needs and desires (Enright & Newton, 2004). According to Dawes, Romaniuk, and Mansfield (2009) tourist destinations compete for a time allocation of the traveller during a particular trip or for being the traveller's choice through consecutive trips. Thus, destinations are connected to each other through the decisions of tourists.

However, according to Mariani, Buhalis, Longhi, and Vitouladiti (2014), in a highly competitive tourism sector, pure competition is not the only tool for destinations to achieve sustainable competitive advantages. The term co-opetition is understood as cooperation and simultaneous competition between companies (Luo, 2007) and destinations. This approach to cooperation, introduced during the last decades (Kylänen & Rusko, 2011), has changed and will continue to change the economic landscape (Fyall & Garrod, 2005; Jorde & Teece, 1990). Thus, co-opetition has important political and management implications, and influences the marketing of tourist destinations and their potential benefits for all the stakeholders involved.

But while the focus on ways of competing in destinations has

changed, the study of the development of loyalty has continued to have a very homogeneous traditional approach (Zhang, Fu, Cai, & Lu, 2014). This is especially important because of the fundamental role that loyalty plays in the competitiveness of a destination (Weaver & Lawton, 2011). The need for a rethinking of tourism loyalty has been suggested in order to better understand this phenomenon and discover subtle relationships and acquire a more complete understanding of tourism (McKercher et al., 2012).

### 2.1. Conceptualisation and importance of loyalty

Since the 1930s, the study of loyalty has been one of the concerns of academics (Rundle-Thiele, 2005). According to Oliver (1999), loyalty is a deep commitment to buying a product or service again in the future, which causes repetitions of the same brand despite situational influences and marketing efforts that have the potential to provoke a change in behaviour. Developing customer loyalty has become an important marketing strategy because of the benefits associated with retaining existing customers (McMullan & Gilmore, 2008): loyal customers represent not only a stable source of income but also act as channels of information that informally connect networks of friends and other potential travellers to a destination; they are less sensitive to prices, showing a greater willingness to pay; and also the cost of serving this type of tourist is lower (Lau & McKercher, 2004; Oliver, 1999; Oppermann, 2000; Reichheld & Sasser, 1990; Shoemaker & Lewis, 1999).

Traditionally, the conceptualisation of loyalty has adopted three main approaches (Jacoby & Chestnut, 1978; Moore, Rodger, & Taplin, 2015): behavioural, attitudinal, and an approach that integrates both attitude and behaviour (Rundle-Thiele, 2005). However, Oppermann (2000) argued that in a tourism context, loyalty research should emphasise the behavioural approach, which in addition to being the most frequently used by researchers (Zhang et al., 2014), allows to keep questionnaires to a manageable length (Rivera & Croes, 2010). Thus, the final benefits that a loyal tourist brings to a tourist destination are largely motivated by their behaviour.

The first studies of loyalty already analysed this behavioural approach (Oliver, 1999). From this perspective, loyalty is usually measured as the number of times a product is purchased, or a destination is visited (McKercher et al., 2012). Thus, the tourist destinations compete for repeated visits of the tourists. Under this approach, the greater the number of times a tourist visits a destination, the more loyal he will be considered.

Although there is a great deal of research on loyalty and its connection with marketing strategies (Sivadas & Baker-Prewitt, 2000), fewer studies have analysed loyalty to tourist destinations (Moore et al., 2015), and approaches that integrate several destinations visited by tourists alternatively (Rivera & Croes, 2010).

### 2.2. Horizontal loyalty

Although one-to-one loyalty relationships, where consumers are loyal to a single brand, are desirable, it seems that consumers are often loyal to more than one brand (Felix, 2014). This specific expression of loyalty has been tagged by the literature as multi-brand loyalty (Jacoby & Kyner, 1973; Oliver, 1999; Olson & Jacoby, 1974), divided loyalty (Sharp & Sharp, 1997; Yim & Kannan, 1999); dual loyalty to the brand (Cunningham, 1956); polygamous loyalty (Dowling & Uncles, 1997) multiple loyalty (Passingham, 1998) or transferred loyalty (Pearce & Kang, 2009). In addition, these relationships have been empirically demonstrated in different sectors, such as recently in the tobacco (Dawes, 2014) and mobile telephone sectors (Quoquab, Yasin, & Dardak, 2014). Loyalty to multiple brands, in non-tourism contexts, has been

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