



## Language tourism: The drivers that determine destination choice intention among U.S. students

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### ABSTRACT

Travel for educational learning represents a growing sector in the international tourism context. Specifically, language tourism develops communicative competence in acquiring foreign languages, and understanding its potential is a relevant topic to which little scholarly attention has been given. This study tries to fill this gap by analyzing the drivers that influence behavioral intention when choosing a travel destination for learning language skills. This research proposes a language tourism model that includes the direct influence of consumption values with a mediating role of perceived beneficial image. The empirical application is performed on the basis of a sample of U.S. university students to evaluate their interests in travelling to Spain to learn Spanish. A Partial Least Squares regression was used to evaluate the measurement model and contrast the hypotheses. The results provide insights for destination management organizations (DMOs) into tourists' value perceptions, presentation of destinations, and serve to increase their visibility among countries.

### 1. Introduction

Learning new language skills represents a huge potential for the workforce in global marketplaces (Redondo-Carretero, Camarero-Izquierdo, Gutiérrez-Arranz, & Rodríguez-Pinto, 2017). Despite the dominance of English as a world language, the ability to speak other languages increases the competitiveness of workers in the global economy (Iglesias, 2017; Leslie & Russell, 2006; Russell & Leslie, 2004; Strezovska & Ivanovska, 2012). English is the most widely studied language, following a broad concept in education systems called Teaching English as a Foreign Language (TEFL) that reflects the learning demand framework (Richards, 2002). In the last years, a growing group of private and public schools have adopted new policies and techniques to enroll children in bilingual language learning programs. Specifically, countries such as the USA include native Spanish-speakers in dual-language programs working on high academic and cross-cultural competence (Linton, 2004). In addition, travelling to foreign countries to improve communicative skills is generally accepted as one of the best forms to do so by academics and professionals. It is known as language tourism (Castillo, Rodríguez, & López-Guzmán,

2017; Redondo-Carretero et al., 2017). In this sense, this type of tourism represents a growing sector in the international tourism market (Drozdowski, 2011; Noonan & Rizzo, 2017) that generates positive economic and socio-cultural impacts (Son, 2003).

Beyond the idea of holidays being linked to tourism, individuals who travel for business or training purposes are also considered tourists. Specifically, the student travel market has grown in recent years, as the number of students enrolled in study abroad programs has increased (Castillo et al., 2017). This growth is focused mainly on enhancing study abroad for young students in exchange programs, who represent an important segment in the tourism market (Kim, Hallab, & Kim, 2012). Language tourism is a healthy sector with great growth potential that belongs more broadly, to the domain of educational tourism, which represents a way of learning languages in an informal way (Abubakar, Shneikat, & Oday, 2014; Donaldson & Gatsinzi, 2005). However, despite the relevance of combining professional and touristic activities for educational purposes, tourism literature contains little research in language and educational tourism (Jason, Ahmad, & Azhar, 2011).

The three most widely spoken languages in the world are Chinese,

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Spanish and English (UNWTO, 2017). Among them, Spanish is the language spoken in the greatest number of countries, most significantly in Spain and South and Central American countries. Spanish is a language spoken by 447 million people, and > 21 million students have chosen to learn Spanish as a foreign language, of which almost 8 million are from the USA (Instituto Cervantes, 2017). Among the Spanish speaking languages, Spain is the country that receives the largest number of international tourists. Presently, Spain is in second place in the UNWTO (2017) international ranking with > 75 million international tourists last year. It receives language tourists mainly from Germany, the USA and France. However, notwithstanding the importance of Spain in the global tourist sector, the number of tourists who travel to Spain to learn Spanish could be much higher. In countries like the USA, Spanish language has the largest enrollment by far among languages being offered in the majority of schools and universities. Thus, language tourism in Spain presents a potential for growth in the coming years (Redondo-Carretero et al., 2017).

Motivation for language tourism is an important area of study, and knowing the drivers that influence behavioral intention regarding the choice of travel destination for language learning is beneficial for marketing strategy (Drozdowski, 2011). An underlying consideration is the analysis of both direct and indirect forces that influence the drivers that lead to behavioral intentions (Lam & Hsu, 2006). It is generally accepted that perceived beneficial image plays a relevant role in travel decision-making (Baloglu & McCleary, 1999; Echtner & Ritchie, 1991; Kim et al., 2012). Most studies focus on image attributes of a destination without considering which components may influence travel behavior. Psychologists argue that such components are value driven. Thus, values should be studied in marketing research (Ramkissoon, Nunkoo, & Gursoy, 2009). In this sense, consumption values are presented as alternative elements that motivate visitors to choose one or another travel destination. Consumption values are multiple beliefs that directly affect the understanding of visitor behavior (Sheth, Newman, & Gross, 1991). In addition, the mediating nature of perceived beneficial image between consumption values and destination choice should be considered, as visitors evaluate their own image when choosing a future place to travel (Ramkissoon et al., 2009). Perceived beneficial image of the destination is defined as a function of consumption values that influence travel behavior. However, the image of a destination is a concept whose measure has been widely criticized (Beerli & Martin, 2004). Thus, it is believed that the additional use of consumption values in tourism destination choice presents a way forward in marketing research, influencing choice directly and indirectly through perceived beneficial image (Chon, 1991; Moutinho, 1984; Phau, Quintal, & Shanka, 2014; Tapachai & Waryszak, 2000).

For these reasons, the primary objective of the current study is to analyze the drivers of destination choice intention by language tourists who travel abroad in order to improve the development of tourism marketing strategies. This research aims to contribute to language tourism literature by an empirical application based on the interest of Spanish learning by U.S. university students. In this sense, the direct influence of consumption values on behavioral choice, and the mediating role of perceived beneficial image, have been analyzed in the context of language tourism in Spain. This paper is organized into several sections beginning with the literature review, which is followed by a description of the research method. The results will then be presented, followed by a discussion section, conclusions. Finally, implications, limitations and further research are considered.

## 2. Literature review and research hypotheses

### 2.1. Language tourism

Language tourism is defined as a study abroad experience that includes activities that heighten the language learning process and include culturally oriented activities (Bergin, 1992; Wissot, 1970).

Language tourism is a type of cultural tourism that includes, for example, gastronomic, religious, museum and theatre activity (Castillo et al., 2017). Language teaching is an ever-changing field, as new foreign language teaching and learning methods are being innovated (Kalantzis & Cope, 2016; Richards, 2002). Language tourism presents a unique characteristic, as it is informed by resources that differ from others. Unlike other “natural” resources, language is enriched as much as it is expanded.

In spite of significant changes in the language travel market since the 70s, many authors agree that language tourism has garnered little scholarly attention (Bergin, 1992; Cohen & Cooper, 1986; Iglesias, 2017; Shu & Scott, 2014; Wissot, 1970). However, attention to the student travel market is growing in the field of tourism research, especially in the context of study abroad and exchange programs (Kim et al., 2012; Redondo-Carretero et al., 2017). Notwithstanding relatively little research in this area, educational tourism has been found to be directly relevant to decision-making in management (Donaldson & Gatsinzi, 2005; Jason et al., 2011; Shu & Scott, 2014).

Researchers suggest several motives for travelling for language learning, among them: educational, cultural and ancestral. First, travelling for educational purposes to learn a foreign language has been defined as the primary motivation for travel (Cohen & Cooper, 1986; Drozdowski, 2011; Llewellyn-Smith & McCabe, 2008; Noonan & Rizzo, 2017; Redondo-Carretero et al., 2017). The educational system generally values and promotes the study of foreign languages at schools and universities (Russell & Leslie, 2004). Castillo et al. (2017) suggest that language tourism should be included in the transversal educational system. Presently, students can choose different forms of educational travel: cultural trips, language exchange, short courses, study tours, internship programs, including undergraduate- and graduate-level programs. Any of these forms offers students a touristic experience for recreation (Donaldson & Gatsinzi, 2005; van't Klooster, van Wijk, Go, & van Rekom, 2008). Language tourism is a kind of tourism where education and leisure go together (Uriely, 2001), and it has been defined as a typology in educational tourism (Iglesias, 2015). Learning a new language, along with recreational activities such as cultural altruism, fall under educational tourism. Educational tourism is any type of travel program outside a given environment whose principal motive is to experience new learning. It is a kind of service learning achieved by combining education and tourism (Abubakar et al., 2014).

The second, motivation for travel is to understand the culture of the foreign country (Roberts, 1992). Van't Klooster et al. (2008) highlight the importance of educational travel programs to increase cross-cultural competencies and to enhance levels of international understanding. Noels, Pelletier, and Vellerand (2000) suggest that cultural value is obtained from contact with members of a second language community, for which social interaction is crucial (Iglesias, 2017). Dörnyei and Csizér (2005) point out that intercultural contact and language attitudes are related. Kim et al. (2012) suggest that globalization and technology have increased the sensitivity and desire of young people to know world cultures. It is important that tourism activities are always linked with the culture and traditions of a host country, and they must be based on respect (Kennett, 2002; Li & Cai, 2012; Ryan, 2002). The synergy between tourism and culture determines language tourism's specification as a type of cultural tourism that is based on intangible linguistic resources (Noonan & Rizzo, 2017; Redondo-Carretero et al., 2017). In short, language tourism is focused on language as a cultural resource (Kennett, 2002).

A third motivator is the interest in learning the language of an ancestral homeland. Language reflects identity; i.e. where individuals come from motivates an interest in pursuing cultural heritage (Drozdowski, 2011). This author highlights that the main motivation for many tourists who travel for language learning is rooted in their interest for their homeland. Individuals travel to countries from where their ancestors migrated to search for their language and cultural roots (Linton, 2004; Timothy, 1997). Thus, language tourism demonstrates

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