

Luxury Tourism Consumption in the Accommodation Sector

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The specific sector of luxury tourism is constantly growing, sustaining a steady and significant growth rate despite the crisis. What emerged, particularly in relation to this industry, was a real democratization of luxury, where the product/service chosen and purchased is not only seen as desired and desirable, but it is also a possibility to occasionally allow the best for oneself. Despite the different luxury tourism travel typologies, a central and common element to all typologies appears to be the experiential one, which is entirely consistent with what has been indicated above. The luxury hospitality sector is also moving in this direction, assigning equal importance to different needs: on the one hand, there is a focus on style, comfort, service, and pampering, and on the other hand, there is a search for a connection with the territory, and an effort to propose full emotional and intense tourism experiences.

luxury tourism

brand

Destination Brand Love

loyalty

brand identification

1. Introduction

Nowadays, the analysis and study of tourism as a phenomenon does not concern that which is exclusively geographical and economic, as it also focuses on psychological aspects relating to the choices the tourist has made. An in-depth analysis and description of the phenomenon should combine and integrate different areas without forgetting important psychological factors such as the satisfaction (or dissatisfaction) of the tourist, the intentions and motivations behind the tourist's behavior, the decision-making processes, and the personal traits of each individual ^[1].

A knowledge and analysis of tourist behavior are important elements with a double value: it both contributes to the success and better performance of the tourist service/product, and it is useful to tourist consumers, as it simplifies the organization of holidays, and contributes to a greater awareness that tourist goods are designed and conceived ad hoc, based on their expectations, requests, and needs ^{[2][3][4]}.

However, it is also important to emphasize that other factors play an important role in the process of choice and purchase. For instance, values have a strong influence upon the choice of tourism brands and products ^{[5][6]}, as do the motivations behind the decision-making process. Several studies have highlighted the role of one's self-concept and personality as crucial elements for decision-making, attitude changing, one's perception of innovation, and risk-taking. Expectations, attitudes, perceptions, satisfaction, trust, and loyalty are additional factors that should not be underestimated when describing this specific consumer behavior. Regarding loyalty, for example, it

was found that there is no lasting loyalty without trust ^[7]. McKercher, Denizci-Guillet, and Ng ^[8] argued that consumer confidence in the tourism sector had unique and special features: tourist consumers may be loyal to providers of tourist products, to the same tourist products, or to the real experiential, for particular types of holidays.

In recent years, the process that has characterized the tourism industry is the branding process ^[9]. Branding a tourism destination means offering place values or assigning a whole series of tangible and intangible attributes to the destination, that characterizes and distinguishes it from others. As repeatedly stated, this process incorporated both purely physical characteristics of a destination, and more abstract elements, such as emotions, feelings of trust, consistency, and a defined set of expectations ^[10].

For the tourist consumer, this process represents and develops a real promise relating to the tourist experience; that it will be memorable in all aspects. This experience is supported by the idea that it was ad hoc designed, considering tourists' needs, desires and expectations. In addition, as it offered an all-round service, it contributed to the creation and consolidation of a pleasant and stable memory, which will then encourage the feeling of loyalty, as well as a desire to return to the same destination. For any tourist, the destination it is essential for creating an identity that is engaging and competitive; therefore branding needs to reflect the experience that is promised, without betraying either the nature of the tourist destination, or the expectations of tourists-consumers.

The role of destination branding assumes a lot of significance, as evidenced by Hankinson ^[11], who identified four different functions carried out by this process: (1) destination brand as a means of communication, and a presentation of the product/service, which symbolizes a specific property; (2) destination brand as a symbolic identity that is linked to desires, needs, and more generally to the emotions of the tourist consumer; (3) destination brand as a representation of added value; and finally (4) destination brand as a relationship with the customer, which must be attentively cared for in order to make it stable and loyal.

Among the concepts and contributions that are linked to destination branding, there is, for example, the construct of territorial marketing. In recent years, this concept has highlighted how the strategic and functional marketing of a territory and/or destination is not exclusively based on the physical characteristics of the territory, but rather, is dedicated to the valorization of its potential, which also applies at a cultural and economic level ^[12]. A territorial marketing campaign aiming to merge lifestyles, personality, culture, and values, with all the accommodation facilities and experiences offered by a destination, is a process that has created a specific territorial identity, which is difficult to replicate, is more competitive, and forms a closer connection with the tourist consumer ^[9]. Therefore, territorial marketing is presented as being capable of producing and generating destination branding, and it represents a resource for stakeholders and tourists.

Consistent with other studies, Gnoth ^[13] suggested that a brand identity which is truly representative of a territory, is one that evaluates cultural, social, natural, and economic aspects. Kladou et al. ^[14] also provided their interpretation of the concept of destination branding, linking it to the more specific concept of place identity. In this sense, the place brand is described as being expressive, that is, capable of transmitting and fully expressing the destination's culture; reflective, or capable of contributing to the enrichment of the tourist destination with new

meanings and symbols; relatable, that is, capable of allowing the tourist consumer to see themselves and identify with the brand, finding their own personality, lifestyle, values, and expectations reflected back at them; and finally, being able to impress, that is, capable of creating “impressions” with emotional meaning that are stable and useful for consolidation in the consumer’s mind.

Moreover, in recent years, people have been witnessed exponential growth in the luxury tourism sector, which is an effect of massive globalization and changes to consumer behavior ^[15]. The desire for luxury, which has always been common among all individuals, seems to be established as a fundamental criterion in the process of choice and in the act of purchase ^[16]. According to the theoretical literature, luxury is defined as a product or service that has very particular effects and characteristics: the simple use of a product, or experiential participation in a service, confers consumer esteem by satisfying and focusing upon psychological and functional needs ^{[17][18]}.

Further contributions underlined the symbolic nature and specific social and cultural significance of luxury consumption, including the tourism and hotel sectors. Due to the complex nature of luxury hospitality, there is a call for further research to understand the underlying structure of the luxury hospitality experience, to identify antecedents and consequences of luxury customer experience, and to develop marketing and management strategies for the industry. Wiedmann, Hennigs and Siebels ^[19], for example, stated that personality, social, functional, and financial characteristics are the main motivations behind the consumption and choice process; conversely, in their contribution, Sung et al. ^[20] focused on the link between these luxury brands, specific satisfaction in terms of utilitarian benefit, and symbolic meanings for the tourist consumer; and finally Lee ^[21] linked luxury brands to psychological and social aspects, especially of a relational and social nature.

The specific sector of luxury tourism is constantly growing, sustaining a steady and significant growth rate despite the crisis. What emerged, particularly in relation to this industry, was a real democratization of luxury, where the product/service chosen and purchased is not only seen as desired and desirable, but it is also a possibility to occasionally allow the best for oneself ^[1]. Despite the different luxury tourism travel typologies, a central and common element to all typologies appears to be the experiential one, which is entirely consistent with what has been indicated above. The luxury hospitality sector is also moving in this direction, assigning equal importance to different needs: on the one hand, there is a focus on style, comfort, service, and pampering, and on the other hand, there is a search for a connection with the territory, and an effort to propose full emotional and intense tourism experiences. The contemporary luxury traveler is no longer interested in classic destinations and locations, but in engaging, new, and unique destinations, where experiences, images, and memories are factors that matter. For these reasons, analyzing this specific kind of tourism allows stakeholders, territories, and the scientific community to be more aware of the implications facing this sector.

2. Extending the Theory of Planned Behaviour to Predict Tourism Behaviour

In this entry, assuming tourist behavior is a form of consumer behavior means extending the Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB) ^[22] to predict tourism behavior.

This theory is applied in a lot of studies relating to the tourism sector. Ajzen and Driver ^[23], for example, in their analysis relating to leisure activities, identified that behavioral, normative, and control beliefs constituted the foundation for certain views, subjective norms, and perceived behavior control. Their study also showed that participation in specific recreational activities is profoundly influenced by what friends and family members think, or from the awareness of having enough resources to actively participate in activities.

Han and Kim ^[24] also emphasized the importance of individual components in their study of determinants of choice for green hotels, supporting the TPB model in a lightly extended version. The authors argued that adding individual dimensions was congruent with the TPB model, and carried a better explanation of consumer and tourist behavior.

3. The Application of Self-Regulation Theory in the Tourism Sector

The Theory of Planned Behavior, even if useful and complete in its interpretation of consumer and tourist behavior, has been repeatedly criticized for having underplayed consumer actions as a simple reaction to other significant behaviors, without considering that they could depend on the adaptation process ^[25]. Between the formation of an intention, and the moment in which the actual action is performed, a set of subprocesses with motivational and cognitive components occur. In this sense, self-regulation theory, as proposed by Bagozzi ^[26], could explain the defects and criticisms of the TPB, as it deals with the study of the relationship between attitudes, subjective norms, intentions, and behaviors, while similarly considering cognitive, emotional, social, and volitional subprocesses.

An innovative element in this model was the introduction of the desire variable, a motivational component that contributed to action fulfilment, starting with the formation of a favorable and positive attitude ^[27]. This element is evident during the luxury product choice and purchase process, which includes the tourism sector. The consumption of luxury goods represents the most striking example of a type of consumption having a double value, one that is more of a hedonic type than a utilitarian type ^[28].

4. The Emerging and Predicting Role of Customer Brand Identification

The construct of Customer Brand Identification has recently emerged as a very important construct in both the hospitality and tourism sectors. It could be defined as the psychological state of a customer who has perceived, evaluated, and felt a sense of belonging with a brand ^[29]. As a matter of fact, identity is an important issue for each individual, both from an individual and social perspective ^[30]. Since consumers need to build their sense of self (self-definition), they usually satisfy their need in their relationships with brands through expressing themselves, identifying, and relating to them ^{[30][31]}. The higher the identification with a brand or organization, the more satisfied the customer will feel with the companies' offers/services, making them prone to consuming and purchasing their goods. In turn, this will lead to positive outcomes, including positive word of mouth, willingness to try new products/services, resistance to negative publicity, intensity of consumption and so on ^{[32][33]}.

5. The Brand Loyalty as Outcome and Goal of Tourists' Behaviours

Destination brand loyalty has emerged as one of the most vital strategic elements of tourism marketing that is linked to organizational performance, and more specifically, to the reputation of the destination in many countries and tourist locations. It is possible to measure the degree of a tourists' loyalty to a destination by examining their specific intentions to revisit that destination, and their desire and willingness to positively recommend that place or site [34][35]. According to Pike and colleagues [36], brand loyalty represents the level of attachment to the destination, and is one of the main goals of territorial marketing.

Customer loyalty has been highlighted by many scholars as an important driver of continued stability and growth in any organization [37][38][39]. The success of a destination is strongly linked to the degree of satisfaction and loyalty it generates in customers/consumers. One of the most important and significant drivers of loyalty is customer satisfaction, but there are also some important predictors that have yet to be studied. The success of a destination is strongly linked to the degree of satisfaction and loyalty it generates in customers/consumers. One of the most important and significant drivers of loyalty is undoubtedly customer satisfaction, but there are still important predictors that have yet to be studied. Word of mouth, and recommendations to others (especially significant others such as family and friends), play very important antecedent roles [35]. The satisfaction derived from the purchase, previous desire, or even a positive attitude towards the completion of the purchase, are important predictors of this outcome.

6. The Concept and Theory of Brand Love Applied in the Luxury Tourism

Brand love is a recent concept which is studied a great deal in the field of consumer behavior. It is generally defined as "the degree of passionate emotional attachment a satisfied consumer has for a particular trade name" [40] (p. 81). One of the main theories that is debated, which describes this phenomenon, and is the most suitable for understanding consumer behavior is Sternberg's [41] Triangular Theory of Love, which interpreted this emotional attachment and divided it into three factors: intimacy, passion, and decision/commitment [42][43][44][45].

In the context of consumer behavior, passion could be described as a deep emotional involvement that a consumer feels towards a product/service. This involvement also generated a profound relationship that often resulted in a sort of separation distress from the object of love, which persisted and remained stable in the consumer's mind. The intimacy factor, on the other hand, was closely linked to the emotional investment in the relationship, and to the brand's ability to understand the customer; when the customer consumer experienced the feeling of brand love towards a product/service, they firmly believed that the brand understood them, that it fully satisfied their needs and expectations, and that it was well linked to his personality, lifestyle, and values [46]. Finally, the last factor, is that of decision/commitment, which refers to the cognitive decision taken by the consumer.

Recently, hospitality and tourism literature have paid increased attention to brand love because of its influence on several aspects of marketing. It affected positive word of mouth (WOM), repeat purchase intentions, resistance to negative information about the brand, resistance to switching brands, and willingness to pay a premium price [44][47]. There are several contributions that have dealt with this phenomenon in tourism.

Tsai [48], for example, identified brand love as one of the most powerful tools that achieve customer loyalty in the hotel industry, claiming that it prevents the customer from switching to a competitor.

An interesting variant relating to brand love, when applied to the tourism sector, is the concept of Destination Brand Love. This construct is supported by countless studies [49][50] which identify how the construct and sentiment of brand love could be well linked to an entire destination, thus properly supporting the principle that destination branding has important consequences.

For example, Albert et al. [46] identify 11 different dimensions of Destination Brand Love; passion for the brand, desire to maintain the relationship for a long time, perceiving the brand to be congruous with the self, dreams, memories, pleasure, attraction, uniqueness, trust, and declaration of affect. Likewise, Bergkvist and Bech-Larsen [51] had identified similar sub-factors. These factors allowed researchers to detect how powerful the effect and influence generated by the Destination Brand Love could be: it had a strong influence on tourist consumer satisfaction, but it also triggered a profound effort towards action, and a strong and constant loyalty to a destination.

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