Loyalty to rural tourism destinations: a causal study of determinants using a transactional and relational marketing approach

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Goal and objectives of the dissertation

Rural tourism is a multidisciplinary research field of significant import that has seen a quantitative increase in its literature, although causal studies in destination marketing are still missing. A deepening of this subarea of research can result in a better understanding of the behaviour of rural tourists, resulting in a more effective and efficient management and marketing of rural tourism destinations and associated companies.

In the current context of competitive markets, relationship marketing stands out as a strategy capable of ensuring the continuity of organisations through strategies based on establishing long-term relationships, which

seek to foster customer loyalty. This research studies the determinants of loyalty to rural tourism destinations, based on a literature review and previous studies (Campón et al., 2012, 2013a, 2013b), which found that past researches lacked a relational marketing approach. For this reason, this research seeks to integrate a transactional marketing focus with a relational approach, in a structural model.

The general objective (GO) of this doctoral thesis is: 'the proposal of a research model of the factors that generate loyalty to rural tourism destinations. It seeks to enrich a transactional perspective on marketing with a relational approach, based on theoretical justifications'.

The specific objectives (SO), arising from the general objective, are:

SO1. To reach a deep knowledge of the scientific literature related to this topic.

SO2. To identify the methodologies and causal models used for this type of studies.

SO3. To study a structural model proposed on the basis of the literature review.

SO4. To empirically test the structural model and the research hypotheses proposed.

SO5. To highlight the theoretical and practical implications of the results.

SO6. To offer recommendations to develop rural tourism destination loyalty.

This thesis offers a proposed model that seeks to be comprehensive and integrative. Within this model, a transactional submodel is delineated, which includes the variables 'image', 'quality' and 'value'. In addition, the model incorporates a relational submodel, which contains 'trust', 'attachment' and 'mixed satisfaction'. This last variable encompasses satisfaction with relationships with tourism providers and local residents, as well as satisfaction with destination attributes. The results of both submodels point to the result variables of marketing as overall satisfaction with, and loyalty to, rural tourism destinations. The main novelty of this proposal is its focus on filling an important gap in the literature by including a relational perspective in this kind of model, which has mainly been approached through transactional marketing.

Methodology

The study was developed in Spain, a country where rural tourism has experienced exceptional growth in recent years from the supply and demand point of view (Hernández et al., 2011). A quantitative methodology through on-line survey was used. The sample universe was composed of people who engage in rural tourism with some frequency (i.e. at least once every two or three years). The fieldwork was carried out from April to June 2013, gathering a non-probabilistic convenience sample of 464 rural tourists.

The theoretical model assessment was conducted using structural equation modelling

(SEM). SEM is configured as the only multivariate statistical method that allows researchers to test causal relationships between dependent and independent variables simultaneously (Martínez-López et al., 2009). Given that this study is exploratory – since it introduces some novelties that need to be tested – and has a complex structure, the use of Partial Least Squares (PLS) was identified as a suitable technique for its resolution, according to Hair et al.'s (2011) specifications.

Results

The results of the proposed model indicate a moderate to substantial explanatory power for overall satisfaction and moderate power for loyalty. In regard to the transactional submodel, the contributions of image and quality in overall satisfaction are verified in the context of rural tourism destinations. In addition, in this submodel, the great importance of affective image is proved in the construction of destinations' image, as well as the necessity of incorporating, in this context, not only value dimensions related to functional aspects but also emotional features. These valuations demonstrate the positive results of the relational submodel's contribution.

With respect to this relational submodel, it can be said that the proposed model explains a large part of the explained variance of the variables trust, attachment and mixed satisfaction. In addition, a discreet role for trust and the significant weight of mixed satisfaction stand out.

In short, the results reveal that, in the context of rural tourism destinations, transactional models need to be enriched with relational variables, such as trust, attachment and other relevant emotional and affective aspects.

Theoretical conclusions

The main theoretical contribution of this research is to show that traditional models used to study loyalty to tourism destinations and similar contexts – generally including constructs such as image, quality, value or satisfaction – are incomplete because they do not incorporate a relational perspective. This study on rural tourism contexts proves that

relational variables have a reasonably significant impact on overall satisfaction and loyalty. These results are consistent with Chen and Phou's (2013) affirmation that emotional and relational ties exist between destinations and tourists. Therefore, the relevance of developing studies about destination loyalty from the relational point of view is quite significant.

Practical application

Theoretical results have important repercussions in professional settings. For an effective and efficient management of rural tourism destinations, tourism products need to be based on quality criteria and the projection of strong destination image. Moreover, stakeholders operating in these contexts, including clients, entrepreneurs, managers and local people, have to become involved. These actors' roles need to be coordinated and planned by managerial entities.

The results of this research show that efforts to improve destination image and their perceived quality run the risk of being fragmented strategies if they are not complemented by emotional and relational aspects. These last have emerged as important factors in achieving a competitive advantage for rural tourism destinations. Hence, tourism managers need to strengthen the application of tools such as events that foster relationships between tourists and destinations. In addition, it could be of interest to implement loyalty programmes – in many cases linked to loyalty cards – which offer such rewards as discounts in places attached to the programme, discounts for advance contracting or special deals coinciding with important dates or events.

Consequently, rural tourism destination managers and entrepreneurs need to be aware of the relevance of relationships within their marketing strategies, since these ties are a key element in encouraging the loyalty of their clients. Loyalty promotes the profitability of the value these tourists contribute over time and, thus, creates a significant socioeconomic impact on the territories it encompasses.

Content of dissertation

This doctoral thesis is structured into eight chapters.

Abstract of chapter one

The introductory chapter begins with a presentation of the topic under study, that is, the relationship marketing and the possibility to generate loyal rural tourists as an interesting strategy for rural tourism destinations. The theoretical and practical justification, research antecedents, general and specific objectives, and the structure of the dissertation are exposed.

Abstract of chapter two

The theoretical discussion begins in the second chapter. First, the foundations of relationship marketing are examined. Next, some general issues in tourism destination marketing and the implementation of a relational approach in this context are addressed. Finally, customer loyalty as the main aim of relationship marketing is presented, and its strategic implications for tourism destinations are highlighted. In short, this is a theoretical chapter that defines one of the most outstanding research topic of the recent decades: the relationship marketing and customer loyalty, and their application to tourism.

Abstract of chapter three

The third chapter is dedicated to a literature review supporting the theoretical basis on which the theoretical model is constructed. It provides a synthesis of the results of the literature review. A total of 89 scientific articles about the determinants of loyalty to tourism destination and similar concepts were identified. The results point out that satisfaction, image, quality and value are the main antecedents of loyalty, while relational constructs as trust or commitment are less taken into account. Then, these constructs are individually explained. Also, a review on the loyalty construct is presented.

Abstract of chapter four

The fourth chapter contextualises the study in the rural tourism sector. After presenting some conceptual and evolving issues in Spain, the

discussion focuses on providing some ideas about specific research conducted in marketing. It finishes with a reflection on the possibility of developing relational strategies in rural tourism destination contexts.

Abstract of chapter five

After presenting the theoretical framework, the literature review and the tourism context of application of this research, the fifth chapter addresses the theoretical model design to be tested and research hypotheses. In short, the present work aims at providing a strong theoretical support to the hypothesised model, which should lead to theoretical and practical contributions to the knowledge of relationship marketing and loyalty applied to tourism destinations, and in particular, to rural environments.

Abstract of chapter six

The empirical part of the thesis begins in the sixth chapter. This details the research approach adopted, methodology used, data collection technique implemented and procedures for data analysis. Specifically, the research adopts an exploratory approach, using a quantitative methodology through an on-line survey. The results are analysed with PLS technique for structural equation models assessment.

Abstract of chapter seven

The seventh chapter presents an analysis and discussion of the empirical results obtained. After a preliminary descriptive data analysis, the discussion centres on assessing the proposed structural model, after which the results are presented. The measurement model assessment reveals good results. With regard to the structural model assessment, overall satisfaction becomes a good link between transactional and relational submodels as antecedents of loyalty. Moreover, affective and emotional aspects emerge as relevant factors. Relational features present good results in rural tourism context, but with a relative impact, considering the importance of the relational approach.

Abstract of chapter eight

Once addressed the theoretical and empirical part, the eighth and final chapter contains conclusions and final reflections on this research. First, the main conclusions obtained are shown, trying to give response to general and specific objectives. Next, this chapter stresses the theoretical and practical implications of the results of the research, along with their limitations and suggestions for future research.

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