Does Tourist's Engagement Influence Destination Loyalty? An Analysis of Turismo do Centro de Portugal

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PURPOSE

Nowadays, the tourism market is facing several challenges and becoming an even more competitive environment. Destination competitiveness is flourishing not only because of the impact on destinations due to the tourism growth but also due to COVID -19 restrictions. The need to have a distinctive factor for destinations is now more critical than ever, and destinations should aim to create a relationship with tourists to ensure the experience is memorable and that tourists repeat the visit and make positive recommendations about the destination to others. This need suggests the usefulness of tourist engagement to achieve their goals ultimately. So, this study aims to understand how the engagement between tourists and the tourism destination can influence tourists' destination loyalty, namely their willingness to recommend the destination to friends and family and their intention to repeat the visit. This research explores Centro de Portugal (a relevant destination in Portugal) as the loyal destination.

RESEARCH METHODS

Researchers use a quantitative data collection method to tackle the hypotheses and deliver answers for the literature gaps using a self-administered online questionnaire. We use previously validated scales to develop the questionnaire (Chen and Rahman, 2018; rather and Sharma, 2017; Yoon and Uysal, 2005), obtaining 256 valid responses. The proposed conceptual model is analysed using multiple linear regression analysis.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Our results shed light on how tourists' engagement (Rather and Sharma, 2017) can positively influencing destination loyalty. Results suggest that enthusiasm and identification predict repeated visits (Yoon and Uysal, 2005), while absorption is negatively associated with it. Enthusiasm and interaction are predictors of willingness to recommend (Chen and Rahman, 2018), as enthusiasm ($\beta= 0.443$) is the one that influences the most the willingness to recommend, and interaction ($\beta= 0.269$) positively influences the dependent variables. Globally, tourist engagement has a higher association with willingness to recommend than with repetition of the visit.

IMPLICATIONS

The literature points out the need for further research in tourism engagement (Rasoolimanesh et al., 2019; Villamediana-Pedrosa et al., 2020) and its link influencing destination loyalty, and our research intends to address this concern. Our findings suggest that destination marketing should focus on specific tourist engagement dimensions, such as enthusiasm and interaction (So et al., 2016), and special attention to absorption since it has a negative influence. Managers can develop a specific and superior

offering to delight tourists and create a sense of belonging to the destination, increasing tourists' engagement and improving their positive brand image. Reward programs can help incentivize tourists to become engaged with the tourism destination, leading to recommendations and word-of-mouth. This study also provides suggestions for future research, namely the study of the impact of the COVID pandemic on the relationship between tourists and the tourism destination and why the dimension absorption is negatively associated with repetition of the visit.

KEYWORDS

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