TOURIST DESTINATION LOYALTY: A CASE STUDY OF ROME

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Abstract. Destination loyalty is the intended behavior of the customer who can put into effect the pleasant sentiments they have for a destination that allows them to revisit, repurchase the services, and refer the destination favorably to their surroundings. This circumstance is fairly common in the management of many touristic destinations, and it has been developed into a topic that is available for many innovative analyses. This study investigates the factors that affect and shape the loyalty between foreign tourists and the city of Rome. In order to assess destination loyalty, a data collection was implemented. The main objective is to identify not only key factors increasing destination loyalty of foreign visitors, but also the main aspects demotivating repeated visitations, in connection with the socio-economic characteristics of tourists. The results of this study could represent important entry points for public decision makers and tourism operators to improve the attractiveness of the city of Rome, with the goal of increasing destination loyalty and tourist arrivals.

1. Introduction

Borders between countries have been removed in many industries due to globalization, and various sectoral changes and advances have occurred. In contrast, the tourist industry has welcomed several innovations due to these adjustments to its creative organizational structure. Additionally, the ease of travel has expanded tourism activities, and with these increased activities has come increased competition among destinations for a larger slice of tourism revenue. As a result, tourist destinations aimed to draw more visitors to have more income until the realization that having loyal customers would bring more benefits than gaining more new customers (Pfeifer, 2005). Thus, the term "loyalty'' started to take center stage in the travel industry. In the context of tourism, destination loyalty refers to a traveler who returns from a destination, shares his/her great experiences, and encourages his/her friends and acquaintances to do the same (Almeida-Santana & Moreno-Gil, 2018). Although there is a wealth of research into customer loyalty in the larger marketing

sector, it has received scant attention in tourism literature (Oppermann, 2000). Since 1956, more than 3,000 publications have been written on the subject of "customer loyalty" (Cossío-Silva et al., 2019), yet only a small number of researchers have looked into the issue of repeat visitation and have developed preliminary tourist loyalty typologies. Moreover, limited attention has been spent in research on the perspective of tourists in terms of their relationship with destinations, while past studies have focused mainly on how destinations establish relationships with tourists. When it comes to the recent international scenario in the tourism sector, Europe emerges as the most popular continent with nearly 900 million international arrivals recorded worldwide in 2022, closely followed by Asia and the Pacific regions (UNWTO, 2023). In this context, it becomes essential to delve into the specific case of Italy, where a total of 109 million total arrivals were observed in 2022, according to ISTAT. Interestingly, Italy witnessed a considerable reliance on domestic tourists, with the international market accounting for nearly half of the total arrivals. This emphasizes the need not only to attract more international tourists, but also to implement effective destination strategies aimed at cultivating a loyal tourist base. It is noteworthy that Italy plays a prominent role in the European tourism landscape (Celardo & Iezzi, 2017), ranking as the fourth most visited country in Europe in 2022, according to EUROSTAT. By examining regional preferences, the statistics provided by ISTAT shed light on the popularity of specific destinations in Italy, with the Lazio region securing the fourth position in terms of total arrivals. Furthermore, when analyzing the number of nights spent by tourists in various cities across Italy, Rome emerged as the frontrunner, underscoring its significant contribution to the national economy. Finally, an examination of arrivals in Rome in 2021 by origin reveals that a majority of tourists came from Italy, followed by 20% from other European Union countries. Notably, the United States accounted for the highest number of nights spent in Rome, closely followed by France, according to ISTAT. These insights collectively emphasize the need to explore and implement effective strategies to enhance destination loyalty and capitalize on the potential of international and domestic tourism markets. Thus, the objective of this study is to analyze destination loyalty and to explain the background factors that affect repeated visiting, implementing a field survey on 1,000 tourists in the context of the city of Rome (Italy).

2. Literature Review

Customer loyalty has become a significant consideration for businesses, as they recognize the importance of retaining existing customers rather than solely focusing on acquiring new ones. Oliver (1999) defines loyalty as the commitment to repeat

purchases or endorsements despite external factors or competition. Customer loyalty significantly impacts the performance of service companies and it is often seen as a key competitive advantage. Studies have shown that a small increase in client retention can lead to substantial profit growth (Lam & Shankar, 2014; Bowen & Chen, 2001).

Shifting our perspective from businesses to destinations, it becomes apparent that while customer loyalty focuses on individual preferences and satisfaction, destination loyalty examines the broader allure and enduring attractiveness of a specific place to a diverse range of visitors. McKercher and Wong (2004) describe destination loyalty as the extent to which tourists demonstrate a strong attachment, preference, and commitment to a specific travel destination, leading to their intention to revisit and recommend it to others. Although destination loyalty research draws on concepts from product and service loyalty literature, it recognizes the unique characteristics of the tourism industry. Factors such as familiarity with the destination, overall satisfaction, visitor sociodemographic traits, and motivations influence the desire to return (Kastenholz et al., 2006; Oppermann, 2000). Contentment alone does not guarantee loyalty, as travelers may prefer to explore new places (Oppermann, 1999). Studies on this topic can be categorized into expectation-dissonance paradigm and cognitive psychology approaches, both focusing on tourist satisfaction (Castro et al., 2007). Another key element that is connected to destination loyalty is the "image", which has a significant interest in conceptualization (Chon, 1990; Gallarza et al., 2002; Moreno-Gil & Martín-Santana, 2015), and it can be defined as a comprehensive perception involving both cognitive and affective evaluations (Baloglu & McCleary, 1999; Carballo et al., 2015). While the cognitive component of destination image pertains to the beliefs and information that tourists hold regarding the attributes of a destination, the affective component of the image, on the other hand, relates to the emotional feelings and responses represented by the various characteristics of a place. Although several studies have identified the image as one of the determinants of destination loyalty (Bigne et al., 2001; Chen & Tsai, 2007; Faullant et al., 2008; Loureiro & Gonzalez, 2008; Prayag & Ryan, 2012; Prayag, 2008), there is still no consensus on the strength and the direction of these relationships. Many authors predominantly focus on measuring cognitive image (Chen & Tsai, 2007; Chi & Qu, 2008; Prayag & Ryan, 2012) or utilize general image attributes (Bigne et al., 2001; Campo-Martínez et al., 2010; Loureiro & Gonzalez, 2008), while paying less attention to measuring affective image attributes (Zhang et al., 2014). The inclusion of the affective component, as suggested by Prayag and Ryan (2012), could provide a better understanding of the relationship between image and loyalty. Destination image plays a crucial role in the overall consumption experience, satisfaction, and repeat visitation. A positive destination image creates favorable expectations and experiences for tourists,

leading to higher levels of satisfaction and an increased likelihood of repeat visitation (Bigne et al., 2001). When tourists perceive a destination positively based on its image, they are more likely to develop a sense of loyalty and exhibit behaviors such as repeat visits and positive recommendations (Machado et al., 2009). It encompasses impressions, information, beliefs, values, and emotions associated with a destination (Jenkins, 1999; Bigne et al., 2001).

Another factor that influences people's decisions to travel for leisure is motivation, which has been widely examined in earlier studies (Sun et al., 2013). "Push" and "pull" factors can be used to categorize these motives (Crompton, 1979; Dann, 1977). Internal motives (push), according to Dann (1977), are connected to the desires of tourists and include the desire to escape, rest, acquire prestige, engage in sports, and socialize. The attraction of the location and its historical, cultural, or natural features, however, are pull forces. Thus, it is clear that individuals' motivation to travel can directly affect many factors in the process until they return home, either negatively or positively (Petrick, 2002a; Petrick, 2002b). Looking at prior research, it can be said that also socio-economic profile has a high influence on loyalty (Petrick & Backman, 2001; Petrick, 2005). Age and income are the basis of these differences. According to Correia, Zins, and Silva (2015), older tourists are more likely to seek to revisit a destination than younger ones. On the other hand, when it comes to income, these authors argue that tourists with higher incomes are less likely to be loyal. Lastly, word of mouth (WOM) has a significant impact on destination choice and subsequently, destination loyalty. WOM is the earliest form of communication, and it serves as a non-commercial means of verbal communication among consumers interested in a particular company, product, or service (Woodside & Deloizer, 1976). Positive WOM communication about a destination can enhance its reputation and credibility, influencing potential tourists to consider visiting.

3. Data and methods

In order to achieve the proposed objectives, fieldwork was implemented through a structured questionnaire that included socio-demographic, behavioral, motivational, and image variables. The questionnaire used was adapted from Almeida-Santana and Moreno-Gil (2018)[1]. The questionnaire combined sixteen closed questions. The numerical scales used are from 1 to 10, with 1 being the minimum value and 10 being the maximum. Concerning the destination image, its three components were evaluated (cognitive, affective, and overall image). For the

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[1] The structure of the form was not changed, but some adaptations were implemented to the questionnaire in order to take into account the specific nature of the destination analyzed.

assessment of the cognitive component of the image, 26 items were used; a 6-item semantic differential scale was used for the measurement of the affective component of the image; a Likert scale from 1 to 10 was used to measure the overall image. With regard to motivation, 20 items were used. The target population of this study consisted of potential tourists, aged 18 and over, who visited the city of Rome. The survey was implemented through computer-assisted personal interviewing (CAPI). A non-probabilistic sample of 1,000 individual tourists' was selected in a period between February and June 2023, with respondents participating in the survey on the basis of their voluntary engagement. The data collection was implemented by administrating an online questionnaire (implemented on the Google Forms platform), in three different famous zones in the city center of Rome, including *Piazza di Spagna*, *Pantheon* and *Colosseum*, to meet with the target and ask their personal contribution to the study. After completing the fieldwork and having implemented quality controls on data, we performed (1) chi-squared tests and (2) a binomial logit analysis with the R software. Two groups of tourists were differentiated, those who are loyal[2] to the destination and tourists who are not.

4. Results

Regarding the first section of the questionnaire dedicated to socio-economic characteristics, an equal distribution of 50% male and 50% female respondents participated in the study, indicating a balanced demographic distribution among the respondents. The largest age group among the participants was in the 18-24 range (38%), followed by the 25-34 age class (33%). Notably, tourists from the United States constituted the largest proportion, representing 8% of the total visitors, followed by Germany (7.5%) and Spain (7%). When examining prior travel experiences, 47% of the respondents had visited Italy before the interview, with a significant 85% of them having already explored Rome. Milan and Florence also emerged as popular cities among the participants. Respectively, 69% and 63% of respondents who had already visited Italy went to these destinations. As for the motivation part of our analysis, it is clear that much of the core of tourist motivation stems from the desire for new cultures and places to explore, relaxation or a break from responsibilities, and last but not least, entertainment in general. The affective component of Rome's image, on the other hand, is perceived as a moderately authentic and healthy destination. However, there is room for improvement in terms of sustainability. Moreover, Rome is not viewed as a quiet or gloomy destination;

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[2] A tourist can be defined as being loyal to a specific destination if at least one or more visits to the same destination are observed.

instead, it is seen as an active and stimulating destination, capable of instilling happiness and joy among its visitors. Concerning the cognitive component of the image, while Rome is perceived as less clean and equally crowded compared to respondents' preferred destinations, it excelled in other appealing aspects such as lifestyle, climate, family-friendliness, gastronomic variety, and historical-cultural attractions. The overall image of Rome was highly positive, with ratings predominantly falling within the range of 8 to 10. A substantial majority of respondents (95%) expressed a willingness to recommend Rome to others, further indicating their satisfaction. Moreover, a significant proportion of participants indicated a strong likelihood of revisiting the city within the next two years. These findings underline Rome's allure as a desirable tourist destination, attracting a diverse range of visitors and fostering destination loyalty. In the analysis of factors influencing the revisit intentions of tourists in Rome, Chi-squared tests have been implemented on loyalty and (1) age, (2) income, (3) no. of trips made in 2021-2022 outside the country of residence, (4) use of social media and (5) level of studies. The estimation of the Chi-squared tests shows that age, income, and past experience are associated with destination loyalty (*p-value* < 0.01). In line with Correia et al. (2015) and Almeida-Santana and Moreno-Gil (2018), the greater the age of the respondents, more likely they are to be loyal to a destination. In line with the previous references, it was observed also a strong relationship between the average income level and loyalty, where a greater purchasing power facilitates repeated visits to the destination. The results also show that the greater the number of holidays of more than four days (past experiences), the greater the probability there is a loyal tourist. The variables of social media usage and level of study were found to be not significant, even if in the literature (Gruen et al, 2006; Almeida-Santana & Moreno-Gil, 2018) the use of social media has proved to be significant for destination loyalty. In order to fulfill the objective of this study, three binomial logit models have been estimated, with loyalty as the dependent variable and motivation (20 items), cognitive image (26 items) and affective image (6 items) as independent variables. The motivation to know new and different places has, as expected, a negative influence on loyalty (Table 1), where repeated tourists tend to have a low need to search for something new. In fact, non-loyal tourists are travelers who mainly prefer to constantly discover new destinations, rather than revisit the same place. Attending cultural events affects loyalty in a positive way, indicating that tourists who actively engage in cultural activities during their visit are more likely to develop loyalty towards the destination. This suggests that cultural events can enhance the overall experience and create a sense of attachment to the location. The positive influence of sharing the holiday experience with friends on loyalty indicates that WOM communication plays a significant role in destination loyalty. When tourists share positive experiences with others, it not only reinforces their own connection with the

destination, but also potentially attracts new visitors. On the other hand, enjoying and spending time with family and friends affects destination loyalty negatively, indicating that tourists who prioritize social interactions during their trips may have lower levels of loyalty. This suggests that when tourists prioritize personal relationships over the destination itself, their loyalty may decrease at the same time. This result highlights that the destination's ability to provide an enjoyable experience for both tourists and their companions is crucial for fostering loyalty.

Table 1 – *Estimated binomial logit model of destination loyalty and motivation items.*

Items	β	S.E.	p-value
To know new and different places	-0.137	0.511	0.008
To attend cultural events	0.255	0.045	< 0.001
To tell friends about the holiday experience	0.143	0.035	< 0.001
To enjoy and spend time with family and friends	-0.127	0.044	0.004

Only the significant items after a backward elimination have been reported in this table.

With respect to the determining factors related to the image of the destination, only the cognitive image resulted in affecting destination loyalty, while all 6 items of the affective image were not significant. Concerning the cognitive image, there is an inverse relationship between loyalty and the items "Rome offers greater personal security" (Table 2) and "Rome is cheaper for holidays". The greater the value that the tourists apply to these attributes, the lower the probability of them to show loyalty. This means that while security is not a determinant in the revisiting choice of tourists, affordability represents for loyal visitors a key factor of retention. On the other hand, there is a positive relationship between loyalty and the items "Rome is more accessible", "Rome offers greater political and social stability", "Rome is less crowded" and "Rome is more exotic". Even if security is negatively associated with loyalty, political and social stability of the destination emerged as an influencing factor of tourists' fidelization. Accessibility also emerged as one of the key factors of the image influencing the loyalty for the city of Rome, together with the suggestive and evocative atmosphere of the city.

Table 2 – *Estimated binomial logit model of destination loyalty and cognitive image items.*

Items	β	S.E.	p-value
Rome offers greater personal security	-0.148	0.039	< 0.001
Rome is cheaper for holidays	-0.099	0.036	0.006
Rome is more accessible	0.153	0.043	< 0.001
Rome offers greater political and social stability	0.125	0.040	0.002
Rome is more exotic	0.236	0.043	< 0.001

Only the significant items after a backward elimination have been reported in this table.

5. Conclusions

This study proposes valuable insights into the drivers influencing destination loyalty within the specific case of Rome. These factors were analyzed through a questionnaire administered to a non-probabilistic sample of potential tourists, with a large sample size that allowed consistent conclusions to be drawn. The results allowed us to identify the existence of variables and items influencing loyalty that could be taken into account by managers and public decision-makers in designing marketing strategies for the city of Rome. The analysis of socio-economic characteristics revealed significant correlations between age, income, and past travel experience with destination loyalty. Older tourists with higher incomes demonstrated a greater propensity for loyalty. Additionally, tourists who had engaged in multiple trips outside their home country exhibited higher levels of loyalty too. These findings align with existing research, highlighting the impact of demographic and economic factors on tourist behavior. The study also shed light on motivational factors, indicating that tourists with a preference for novelty and new experiences may exhibit lower levels of loyalty. Conversely, those who actively participated in cultural events and shared their holiday experiences with others, displayed a stronger inclination towards destination loyalty. These findings underscore the importance of providing unique and culturally enriching experiences to foster loyalty, as well as the significant role played by WOM communication in shaping perceptions and loyalty. The examination of cognitive and affective components of the destination image revealed intriguing findings. Rome was perceived as an active and stimulating destination, capable of evoking happiness and joy among its visitors. Its historical and cultural attractions, lifestyle, and gastronomic variety were regarded as particularly appealing. However, respondents also noted concerns about crowding and cleanliness compared to their preferred destinations. These findings suggest the need for effective crowd management strategies and initiatives to enhance cleanliness perception, ultimately contributing to tourists' satisfaction and loyalty. The results of multivariate analyses further supported the influence of motivation and image on destination loyalty. Notably, tourists who prioritized personal relationships over the destination themselves displayed lower levels of loyalty, underscoring the importance of providing enjoyable experiences for both tourists and their companions. Perceptions of personal security, cost, accessibility, political and social stability, crowd levels, and the evocative nature of Rome were found to significantly impact destination loyalty. These findings emphasize the necessity of addressing these factors to increase loyalty among tourists. In conclusion, this study provides valuable insights into the complex dynamics of tourist destination loyalty in the context of Rome. Even if the study involved a non-probabilistic sample of tourists, making it impossible to extend the results of the analyses and limiting the

implications of the research, the outcomes of this study represent a key starting point for future research in the field of destination management. The findings underscore the importance of nurturing loyalty among visitors, as it offers numerous benefits for both the destination and its stakeholders. By capitalizing on Rome's strengths and addressing areas of improvement, the city can position itself as a premier tourist destination, fostering long-term success and growth in the competitive global tourism industry.

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